

# SELF PORTRAITS



Selected and introduced by  
**DAVID FOSTER**

**SELF PORTRAITS**, selected and  
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AUSTRALIAN NOVELIST, DAVID FOSTER, takes us beneath the surface of a selection of interviews of well-known Australians recorded by Hazel de Berg and now held in the Oral History Collection of the National Library of Australia. In his irreverent introduction Foster gives a very personal and astute reading of the qualities and characteristics of these Australian writers.

Discussing his final selection Foster concludes he had 'one of the most recently born deceased writers in the collection in the person of hard drinking gaolbird playwright Jim McNeil (b. 1935) and one of the oldest in popular bushman/yarn spinner Ion Idriess (b. 1890). I had the left-wing Wilfred Burchett, Laurence Collinson and Stephen Murray-Smith, and on the right, Maie Casey. I had, in fact, the man who had been denied a passport and the wife of a Governor-General. I had a seaman in Alan Villiers, a humorous columnist in Ross Campbell—both, it seems to me, under-rated writers—someone I'd never heard of but who sounded mighty interesting (Evadne Price, war correspondent and astrologer, b. 1896), a woman who once owned perhaps the most beautiful house in my own rural district (Berrima poetess Grace Perry), a sometime friend from my Canberra days (David Campbell, who was friendly to everyone), a man I first met, believe it or not, on a windswept outlier in the North Atlantic (that connoisseur of islands, Stephen Murray-Smith), the author of *Nemarluk, King of the Wilds*, which was the first literary prize I ever won (for a primary school composition, age ten: Ion Idriess), the mother of my sometime editor Martin Johnston (Charmian Clift), the man who worked so hard to implement Public Lending Right for us Australian authors (travel writer Colin Simpson), broadcaster and father of the more famous Jack (poet John Thompson) and newspaper man Rohan Rivett.'

*The cover illustration is a self portrait by David Campbell painted on the back of a National Library envelope. From the Pictorial Collection, National Library of Australia.*

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## Foreword

In 1989 the National Library of Australia published a complete catalogue guide to the Hazel de Berg collection of oral history recordings. These recordings, prepared by Hazel de Berg over a twenty-seven-year period, form a major component of the Oral History Collection in the National Library.

If that catalogue was intended to enhance access by scholars and others to the de Berg recordings, this book by Australian novelist David Foster takes us beneath the surface of a selection of fifteen of the de Berg interviews to give a very personal and astute reading of the qualities and characteristics of some redoubtable Australian personalities. Appropriately, Foster's selection is made from the many writers who are represented in the de Berg collection. His introduction, subtle and sensitive in its interpretation of each of his subjects, offers a persuasive argument for the value of oral history: 'in listening to the tapes, I had the illusion I was in the presence of living beings.'

As part of its commitment to make available rare and unique materials held in the national collection, the National Library is delighted to publish this book by David Foster which provides an unusual and imaginative insight into the value of the oral history medium and which creates a sense of the personal qualities of selected Australian writers, now dead, who would otherwise live on only through memory and the printed word.

Warren Horton  
*Director-General*

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## Introduction

*The lyrebird is a de Berg. She records  
The sound of men and of birds.  
The Ku-ring-gal live in their rock carvings  
And a note or two of the lyrebird.<sup>1</sup>*

The largest institutional oral history collection in Australia is held in the National Library in Canberra. Much of this collection is due to the pioneering efforts of Hazel de Berg, who, over a period of twenty-seven years, from 1957 to 1984, made almost 1300 recordings, chiefly of Australian artists and writers, though politicians and scientists are represented too. A distant cousin of David Campbell, the poet of the Monaro, Hazel de Berg was not herself a scholar of literature or art. At the beginning of her undertaking she could perhaps be described as no more, if no less, than a lady from the eastern suburbs of Sydney with a good reading voice. Her original commission, and her introduction to tape recording, began with Talking Books for the Blind. In 1957 Mrs de Berg was asked by Ken Bruce, founder of Talking Books for the Blind in New South Wales, and himself blind, to read, on tape, for the benefit of the blind, the tale of *A Man Called Peter*. Since Hazel de Berg knew Mary Gilmore personally, she thought it appropriate to persuade Dame Mary to add to her next undertaking, a reading of Mary Gilmore's poem 'Old Days, Old Ways', some comments as to why Mary Gilmore had written the poem. This was followed by Dorothea MacKellar reading 'My Country', an interview with Judith Wright, and in the words of Mrs de Berg herself, 'I just went on'.

It is not my intention to focus on the de Berg collection as such. The catalogue to the de Berg collection, with a fine introduction by Tim Bowden, was published by the National Library in 1989.<sup>2</sup> Bowden's introduction adequately discusses the technical and orally historical aspects of the collection. I will mention only that, in general, Hazel de Berg permits her subjects to speak as they incline, and expunges her own (few) questions from the tape by hitting the pause button whenever she asks one. As Pauline Fanning, in her commentary on the collection in 1970, remarked,



[When recording people prominent in public life] Mrs de Berg is not sufficiently well informed to know what questions to ask, and furthermore, she has so edited the tapes as to eliminate the questions she asks. This results in the recording being in monologue form, with no indication as to why or how the person interviewed was prompted to speak on a particular topic.<sup>4</sup>

This idiosyncratic approach in fact creates rather fewer difficulties with writers than with politicians. My brief, in compiling this book, was to consider only that portion of the de Berg collection dealing with writers, and since writers may be judged by what they have said and written, and perhaps ought to be, it does little harm, I believe, to let them ramble on to their hearts' content, as a great many of them did.

The interviews of the fifteen writers I chose ranged from a fearsome 231 minutes, in the case of Ion Idriess—producing a transcript seventy-eight pages long—to thirty minutes and ten pages, respectively, for Charmian Clift. Not being especially well-read, and anyway unacquainted with the work of several of the writers I had chosen, I set about my task, in the first instance, by seeing what the local library had to offer, while at the same time reducing and editing the transcripts of the tapes to a tractable and roughly equivalent length. With Murray-Smith, Collinson, Jim McNeil, David Campbell (surprisingly) and Evadne Price, there were no holdings in my local library, and so I duly repaired to the Petherick Reading Room at the National Library in Canberra. The point I want to emphasise is that I did not listen to the tapes until after I had read and edited the transcripts. This might seem the wrong sequence in which to have done things, but I had to wait for cassette copies to be made for me, which took some time, and in the end I had cause to congratulate myself that this was the order in which things worked out. It made me more fully appreciate the value of an oral history collection. In reading the transcripts I was doing what most of us do when we research anything; in listening to the tapes, I had the illusion I was in the presence of living beings. And that they were all, in fact, dead, gave the experience an eerie quality.

Last Sunday, as a staunch sabbatarianist, I put down *The World of Charmian Clift*, bid the weeds farewell, donned walking boots and headed off into the National Park of which I have the good fortune to live on the verge. Consulting my standard two inches to the mile map, I often try to guess what a particular firetrail I mean to explore will resemble. I size up the contour lines and the angles of the watercourses, and try to form a visual concept of the terrain. And, of course, any such picture I form is always a composite of what I have previously seen out there, so that I never fail to be surprised by what I actually find. Many features of the landscape the map won't give me anyway. It won't tell me that below The Ruins firetrail is a wonderful stand of ironbark, nor that in the Meryla Pass, so high and far from the coast, is a huge cabbage tree palm. I don't expect this. More worrisome, in theory I could work out the view from any compass point, while in fact I never can. It's never quite as I imagine. And while the Kangaroo River, on the map, looks just like the Shoalhaven, they are so totally

different I am sure I could tell, blindfold, which side of the watershed I'm on. I don't want to labour the point, but a living voice is a landscape of which the transcript, in print, is the merest map.

In principio erat Verbum et Verbum erat apud Deum, et Deus erat Verbum.<sup>1</sup>

Whose, then, is the voice that you surely hear as you read what I am writing now? I wonder is it mine. I suspect it is not. The distinction between silent reading and reading aloud, incidentally, is less profound than might be supposed. When we read silently, the visual signal is transmitted through the auditory centres of our brain. So we literally cannot read without, as it were, hearing a voice. I would guess, offhand, that we attribute a voice to what we are reading, in the absence of further information. Various aspects of syntax and style and vocabulary and incidental knowledge serve, no doubt, as clues, but whatever we propose is limited by experience. If you have never heard me speak—and, for the record, I speak in a broad, nasal drawl that appalled me, when first I heard it on tape—I doubt you could come up with the right voice to fit my prose. Maybe this doesn't matter.

Maybe it falsifies all that we read.

Last June, after a session in the Petherick Reading Room, I walked by the lake from the National Library to the National Gallery, and found myself in front of a Sumerian clay ration list, one of the treasures of the British Museum, and dated to about 3200 BC, or within a couple of centuries of the earliest known writing. Of all early scripts cuneiform is thought to be the oldest, and the earliest texts from Uruk are all temple inventories. Iraqi priests, it appears, invented writing, and who can dispute that here is the *sine qua non* of civilisation to date. But in our enthusiasm for writing, let us never forget that what writing does is to reduce a voice, the words of god, man or demiurge, to a comparatively featureless map. In writing, what Jahwe says to Moses (what Bel says to Abram), looks exactly like what Moses says in response. But it's not only what God says that is important; it is the tone of voice He uses to say what He says that guarantees our obedience. To a verifiable extent, writing diminishes language, and peoples unencumbered by written expression have—if I dare generalise from what I have heard in the Top End of our Northern Territory—an astonishing range of vocalisation and a wonderful speed and range of oral effects, that any stenographer would be hard-pressed to transcribe.

The fifteen transcripts, though accurate as transcripts go, were much of a muchness physically. That is, they all looked the same, though some were longer than others. And because they all looked the same, they all sounded the same in my head. I heard a woman's voice—I don't know whose it was—when I saw a woman's name, but that was all.

On the other hand, when I actually heard the tapes for the first time, I met fifteen human beings. And now I can't read the transcripts as I read them initially, for I see people now. Somehow, listening to a voice facilitates the process of visualisation. The

words, to be sure, are the same, but my interpretation of those words has altered. So much of the weight we place on words is based, not on their content, but on the impact of the voice (and beyond the voice, the whole individual) that delivers them to us. Saints have a greater impact than poets, even when they're saying the same thing. One might even claim there are two kinds of history, oral history and ancient history, insofar as that when we rely on a piece of writing alone, we concoct a voice, to which we duly respond, on the basis of our preconceptions. I would say it is imperative to avail ourselves of the human experience of listening to a voice, if the opportunity is available. Then, when we can validate the voice in the transcript, we can turn to the transcript. To quote a contemporary neurologist on the topic of global aphasia, an affliction which renders its victims incapable of understanding words as such:

Speech—natural speech—does *not* consist of words alone, nor (as Hughlings Jackson thought) 'propositions' alone. It consists of *utterance*—an uttering forth of one's whole meaning with one's whole being—the understanding of which involves infinitely more than mere word recognition. And this was the clue to aphasiacs' understanding, even when they might be wholly uncomprehending of words as such. For though the words, the verbal constructions, *per se*, might convey nothing, spoken language is normally suffused with 'tone', embedded in an expressiveness which transcends the verbal—and it is precisely this expressiveness, so deep, so various, so complex, so subtle, which is perfectly preserved in aphasia, though understanding of words be destroyed.<sup>3</sup>

I can imagine aphasia to be no great disadvantage in listening to the Idriess interview, inasmuch as there were whole slabs, whole half hours of it, of which I could understand scarcely a word. My compliments to the transcriber. Indeed, old Jack, at age eighty-four—stomach rumbling, thumping the table, and experiencing considerable difficulty with his dentures—seems to have disconcerted his interlocutor to the extent she neglected, this once, to hit the pause button, and so, fortuitously, I was able to hear the lady herself in action.

Hazel coyly declines to give her year of birth in the catalogue, but I can date her to around 1915, as she has the same Christian name as my mother. She has a pretty broad Australian accent, actually. 'Lismore' she pronounces 'Lismāwā' rather than 'Lismōwer' in the Irish mode. (It's an island off Mull, in the Inner Hebrides: I sailed past it on my way to St Kilda.) Hazel de Berg's voice is the kind of voice—unaffected, no nonsense—I associate with episodes of 'Blue Hills'.\* Knowing only that she came from Sydney's eastern suburbs, I might have imagined her a bit more posh—and that would have been my mistake. In this interview she adopts, or attempts to adopt, a firm tone with Idriess, which is necessary to rein him in, even marginally, and she seems a bit exasperated by his increasingly suppositious chronologies. There are long silences,

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\* The popular soap opera 'Blue Hills' was written by Gwen Meredith and broadcast on ABC radio from 1949 to 1976.

during which the ticking of a grandfather clock can be heard, over the creaking of Jack's kitchen chair. It's a real comedy turn, and Jack's extremely high-pitched voice, interspersed with much breathless cackling, would not sound out of place on a Goon Show. Jack's kelpie barks in the background for ten minutes at one stage, when his sister comes in.

It was difficult, in editing Idriess, by virtue of the sheer size of his interview, not to make him sound even more desultory than he was. To a large extent, he has discomfited Hazel and myself as he discomfited his editors before us.

We've discussed the advantages of an oral history collection; now let's be honest and admit that we do not wish to be recorded for posterity as a garrulous and slightly ga-ga octogenarian—and I think that's fair comment, but you can read the original transcript and decide for yourselves. Evadne Price, eighty-one when interviewed, also likes to talk and seems to have confounded fact with fiction. It may be a diagnostic feature of the ageing fiction writer's mind. In any event, I intend to be watching out for it.

In his heyday, Idriess sold literally millions of copies of his books in Australia. *Lasseter's Last Ride* was in its 34th printing in 1973. When Idriess died (at the age of eighty-nine), Colin Simpson wrote of him,

he had, as it were, let down the sliprails—and a lot of other literary nags, myself included, came into a pasture that was ours by right—but we had been fenced out by a convention that only the books of overseas writers were worth reading.<sup>6</sup>

Well, I don't know that Idriess' books are worth reading anymore, and the public seems to have decided likewise. I'm not so sure 'nag' is not the right word for him, *pace* the *Spectator* blurb on the back of the A&R Classic ('simple, virile style comparable with Hemingway at his best').

Is that *Ernest* Hemingway we're talking about? Here's a typical example of Idriess:

'It's a strange thing,' said Blakeley slowly. 'Utter barrenness lies before us and yet it might hold wealth untold.'<sup>7</sup>

But when Idriess relies on his ear and his memory, he strikes a truer note to my mind:

'How much you want longa these feller spears?' inquired Taylor.  
'Two pound, seventeen tchilling an' five bob!'<sup>8</sup>

It's not hard to see why Jack's in the stack at the Bowral Library these days. And it's not because of his crass prose style.

'I would not be a wild nigger,' thought Taylor . . . 'for all the tea in China.'<sup>9</sup>

In a recent article, Clement Semmler of Bowral quotes Colin Roderick as having said of Idriess, 'Above all, he created a demand by the Australian public for Australian books.'<sup>10</sup> I can accept this, but of all the writers I have selected, Idriess is by far the

most maladroit, the most inept, the most in need of editorial help. Even in his interview, he comes over as a bushman of no exceptional linguistic skills. I can't accept that a man of the people needs to write this badly. On the other hand, he did have tales to tell and interesting tales they were. Oh well, the books sold, and I guess that must prove something.

Like Idriess, Alan Villiers began his working life at sea. Alan stayed at sea, but he kept a log as a youth, and he'd written many books about his voyages by the time of this interview.

And who can believe we won't be seeing sailing ships again, after this Oil Age interregnum? Whatever else they may be, Villiers' records are invaluable historical documents. And his life strikes me as at least as exciting and adventurous as that of prospector Ion Idriess, and furthermore, Villiers is a consummate writer, a first rate stylist, whose every sentence has a calm, masculine majesty and poise.

But the sailing-ships were interesting always. They had only to stand quietly still at their berths, and let the bay breezes orchestrate their maze of rigging.<sup>11</sup>

I would rank Villiers with Moorehead and Rölls in the forefront of Australian non-fiction writing, but he also belongs with Melville, Conrad, Masefield, Lubbock, Marryat; the seamen-writers. He tells us himself why life at sea under sail tends to ameliorate writing.

At sea . . . the seaman had time to think but not to write. He had to think through things. His duties . . . insisted upon integrity of character. The nature of his watchkeeping caused him to be a reflective person. He had need . . . to make decisions . . . most clearly conveyed in minimal and incisive prose.<sup>12</sup>

I was impressed by the strong West Country accent this second generation Australian had acquired. It was apparent from the outset of the interview, as Villiers introduced himself, over the muted hum of London traffic, as 'Alan Villierrrrr', rolling the r's from the side of his mouth like the old sea dog he was by that age (sixty-seven). It recurred throughout the interview ('foreignerrrrr', 'theirrrr', 'beography') and I had to admit it was the right voice for him. I dare say he delivered a lot of postprandial monologues in his time, and I'd have paid to have listened. I wouldn't have been disappointed, either; when Villiers drops his fruity, histrionic baritone into a lower register to describe that 'hog-bellied big brute of a four-masted barque' the effect is exciting. It's pure poetry, the only such example on all fifteen tapes. None of the poets read their work at all well. Villiers runs close, at times, to the reef of a pantomime version of Long John Silver, but you somehow feel that this is the real thing — or it would have been laughed out of the Royal Navy, surely.

It's hard not to envy Villiers. Isn't his the career all us midlife crisis victims yearn for? 'Cause it sure as hell ain't Laurie Collinson's.

## I N T R O D U C T I O N

Let us now move from a seaman with no formal education to an intellectual prodigy, in Grace Perry, schoolgirl extraordinary, mother and wife who practised medicine, wrote poems, edited *Poetry Australia*, and expended a great deal of energy attempting to educate the Australian public in matters poetic. A doer, it seems, forever shouldering responsibility—editor of this, president of that—that many a writer is only too happy to leave to others more versed in social skills. Interviewed at age forty, Perry speaks—a slightly old fashioned girl perhaps, somewhat arch and waggish—intelligently, fluently, with never an um or an ah, but when she reads a few of her own poems (as she does, towards the end of the interview), she assumes a highly artificial, somewhat soporific, slightly liturgical, ersatz sing-song, which betrays the ongoing struggle we Australian writers had in finding our own intonation. But I believe that struggle has been won. For comic emphasis, Dr Perry slips into a country woman's accent, and she also possesses a schoolmarmish, pedagogical bedside manner for lecturing. All her volumes of poetry are held in the Moss Vale Library, presented by the authoress herself. I read only one of them, *Journal of a Surgeon's Wife*.

Perry's poems I find precise, subdued, domestic, suburban, and of a sad, cryptic intelligence;

eyes searching through sheets of water  
for high windows and wintersun<sup>13</sup>

They convey well the desolation of the Colonial spirit, and made me reflect—not for the first time—how appropriately this modern 'poetry'—with its struggle for rhythm and metre and its enervating struggle for rhyme—suits Antipodean ends.

I am another body  
granted loneliness  
and new land  
I wish I could uproot  
the last of the English grass  
and go away  
here are crimes that do not trudge in irons  
hopelessness without rope's end  
or cut of whip<sup>14</sup>

I was all set to praise what reads in transcript as a wonderful impromptu lecture to aspiring poets, but listening to the tape persuades me Grace read it.

From surgeon's wife to surgeon's daughter, and proud of it, brings us to Maie Casey. Born, as she was, a Ryan, I was disappointed though hardly surprised to hear her pronounce Australia 'Orstralia' and to see her declare (in 1962), 'Our national character is basically that of our ancestors from the British Isles' and (concerning British class distinction), 'these distinctions . . . are as inevitable as the social structure of insects and it would take a long time to alter them. They can readily be rejected by youth, yet are returned to as the individual grows old.'<sup>15</sup>

It would be a straightforward, indeed congenial, task to ridicule Casey's memorabilia ('Blanche was the only member of the family to inherit the deafness of both parents; this came upon her early, making her inner life a little more secure'<sup>16</sup>); but I shall content myself with the melancholy observation that there seems to be an insatiable readership for her work, judging by the Moss Vale Library date stamps, which, needless to say, exceed those in my own Macmillan hardbacks. Maie Casey is interviewed as an 'artist' as well as an 'author'.

Let but a lord once own the happy lines  
How the wit brightens and the style refines!<sup>17</sup>

A different experience of life in London to that enjoyed by Maie Casey (who hobnobbed with Queen Mary) is offered by Laurence Collinson. What a loser, as my daughters would say. Having read his transcript, I would have forgiven Laurie a catch in the voice towards the end of this catalogue of poverty, opprobrium, ill health, lost opportunity, British contumely and Australian indifference, but he delivers his colloquy in a slow, measured, reflective, slightly ponderous tone, in a normal, educated Australian accent. Collinson was born in Yorkshire and returned to live in London at age thirty-eight in 1963, but he still regarded himself as an Australian. Indeed, he was awarded a two-year Australia Council Fellowship in 1974, back in the good old days. He has a persistent glottal interjection, a habit of going 'äh'—with a very short vowel sound—followed by a pause, presumably for thought. He pronounces 'denigrate' as 'deenayegrate'.

Let us gobble while we may!<sup>18</sup>

I read Collinson's three collections of poetry chronologically—his one novel is not even held in the National Library—and I must say it was a poignant experience to witness this literary coming-out. His early sonnet sequence *The Moods of Love*, notwithstanding a strong dose of the Housmans,

The first exclaimed: 'I love you so,  
your absence makes me weep';  
the other watched the rivers flow;  
'The sea is very deep.'<sup>19</sup>

contains so many references to one-night stands (and this in Melbourne in the 1950s) I had my suspicions about Laurie even then, suspicions that *Who Is Wheeling Grandma?* (1967) did nothing to allay. Still, I wouldn't have said anything. He was a Communist, true, but his left-wing sympathies are less evident from his poetry than his erotic predisposition. It was with relief, for his sake, that I picked up *Hovering Narcissus* (1977), his final collection, and read, in the blurb on the inside back cover (which he wrote himself, wouldn't you say),

## INTRODUCTION

he is now earning a living as a psychotherapist, using transactional analysis as a basic system, and resides fairly contentedly as an Aussie expatriate in Bloomsbury, whence he occasionally ventures to watch film thrillers or to contribute to the cause of gay liberation.<sup>20</sup>

Hooray. And the poems reflect it:

From the remorseless cabins of his body  
love reeks; and I exult that from seeds of excrement  
I breed poems.<sup>21</sup>

Housman never could have said that, though he probably would have liked to have. Contrast with Collinson's the career of another bearded, Jewish, homosexual, politically-aware poet from the USA (Alan Ginsberg). You've got to be born, not just at the right time, but in the right place, it seems. And you can emigrate to the wrong place, too. That's a continuing problem for us Australian writers. Where else could a Nobel Laureate in Literature (Patrick White) go to his grave with such a long face?

All three Collinson collections were published by *Overland*, run by Collinson's friend Stephen Murray-Smith. They'd been members of the Communist Party of Australia together. I can still remember the mutual disconcertion when Murray-Smith and I first met—as two Australians—not just on St Kilda, the most isolated British Isle, but in St Kilda's most remote valley, Gleann Mor, among the neolithic beehive ruins, with just a few kittiwake nests between us and Newfoundland. He was with the captain of the army landing craft, for a day trip. I was part of a two-week working party from the National Trust for Scotland. Eyebrows were raised among us experts, when it was learned the new interloper proposed to write a book, based on his four-hour visit. I'd never heard of him nor he of me, but he wore his St Kilda Club tie to the National Book Council dinner at which my novel *Moonlite*, based in part on my St Kilda experience, won a gong in 1981, and he was disappointed I hadn't worn mine, though in fact I never owned one—never wear a tie.

To give him his due, his projected book concerned not just St Kilda, but Pitcairn Island and Tristan da Cunha too, all of which he had visited, and he knew the Bass Strait islands well. I don't think the book ever got written, which is a shame. I'd have read it, for the same reason I'd read Alan Villiers; Murray-Smith was a scholarly man, and a born lighthouse keeper, and from 1962, when he spent his summers on Erith Island, in the Bass Strait Kent Group, he could make the claim (and did) that while living there he was 'the most northerly Tasmanian'. But I think his time got taken up with lecturing and editing.

Out of my study window right now I can see the old Erith coal mine in the Morton National Park.

Murray-Smith had, like me and many others, a lifelong fascination with small island communities (Antipodes in miniature?). As he writes, in his commentary on the Bass Strait voyages of Canon Marcus Brownrigg:



It seems more than likely that, as with other communities of not dissimilar origins (Tristan da Cunha, Pitcairn Island), a group morality had grown up, and was being enforced, as a necessary condition of the community's survival as an entity . . . We may look back now and perhaps reflect that the vision of a novel community expanding in autochthonous prosperity and pride was foredoomed—by divisions and uncertainties in that community itself, but above all because of relentless (and sometimes well-meaning) external pressures.<sup>27</sup>

Some sea miles to the south of the outlier St Kilda is the West Hebridean Island of Barra, a rugged and windswept place at the head of The Minch. It was from Barra that Jim McNeil's father made his way to our shores.

Murray-Smith, a bulky man, makes his study chair creak, and he speaks to Hazel in a pleasant, urbane voice with just a hint of a Scots burr ('mother'). In contrast with Grace Perry, his remarks concerning editorial policies for *Overland* sound quite extemporary. An environmentalist before it was fashionable, he was a conversationalist, and a lecturer, and, like Grace Perry, the kind of literary figure no literary culture can do without.

The islands south of the Peloponnese enjoy a climate milder than those off the west coast of Scotland, but they share with the latter an allure, to Australian eyes, the Bass Strait islands never can, being home to a mature culture, and thus a place in which Australians, still half alien in their own land, can quickly feel at ease. Well, at ease in some respects. It was to the islands of the Aegean that beautiful Kiama-born Charmian Clift went to live (from London) with her dashing novelist husband George Johnston, as part of the Hellenic catastrophe in three acts (Surfeit, Hubris, Retribution) their lives eventually became. But someone has written on that recently, and as their late son Martin was a friend—though a committed city dweller, so I didn't see him much—I won't dwell on it. Martin never spoke to me of his parents, and I never broached the subject with him.

In his obituary for Charmian Clift—for reasons detailed in her interview, the family eventually returned to Australia—Allan Ashbolt writes,

As a columnist she found, I think, a role eminently suited to her witty and humane outlook. She was never a literary lady in any snobbish or even academic sense; she was always closely bound to the life of the normal suburban citizen, and in these weekly essays [in the *Sydney Morning Herald*] she displayed an extraordinary capacity for widening the intellectual and emotional horizons of ordinary men and women . . . She went straight to the human essence of any problem, straight to what a situation would mean in human happiness or human suffering.<sup>28</sup>

Her widower speaks of 'unprecedented public tributes and the months-long spate of private and deeply felt testimonies of sadness and loss which followed my wife's death.'<sup>29</sup> By suicide. I can remember, as a young science student, reading Charmian's

columns in the *Herald*. They certainly made an impact on me. If they seem unexceptional today, it is because Charmian Clift pioneered, in this country, a certain type of frank, intimate, intelligent women's journalism that has since become the norm, in the work of Anna Maria Dell'oso, Ruth Ostrow and their ilk. All the glossy magazines are full of this kind of writing now, but it was unusual (at least in Sydney) in Charmian's day, and very welcome too. As one of her grieving readers says of her, 'She had a quality in her writing that left her readers feeling that they had not so much read an article, as spent a few minutes with a valued friend.'<sup>25</sup>

Clift has an attractive voice, full, resonant, unhavering, seductive. She was made for talkback radio, but it wasn't invented then. To my ear, she sounds too English, considering her Wollongong schooldays. Such a voice in Sydney in 1991 would be considered over-refined, Pommified. And in her fiction, though this is more than competent, she does affect the voice assumed by Maie Casey as a birthright. 'Will our pub be old and wooden, my heart?' inquires architect Charles Cant, a 'handsome, urbane, successful' person (blurb). 'And shall we have an enormous double bed, with embroidered pillow shams and nice phallic brass knobs at the corners?'<sup>26</sup> And the narrative is similar, dispelling any hint of satire in the dialogue.

You could hardly go anywhere any longer without having extravagantly to examine coloured lumps of rock.<sup>27</sup>

Clift, in her interview, explains that she is no longer sure if she's a novelist. Well, she wasn't a bad English novelist, though doubtless the strain of having to choke her own accent to propitiate her British publisher disappeared when she wrote for the *Herald*. She will be remembered as a pioneering journalist. Here she is on Australian expatriates, from one of those weekly columns of hers:

Lately the present batch of Australian expatriates—the Australian Londoners—have been articulate in defence of their expatriation. Australia, they still say, is a cultural desert. They feel themselves to be less expatriates than 'cultural refugees' from the chase after the quid and the G.N.P. They feel in Australia a sterility, a barrenness, a paucity of ideas . . . .  
Fifteen years ago, when we were saying the same things . . .<sup>28</sup>

Another Australian who made the voyage to London in search of literary credibility was John Thompson, a frustrated poet who, as he laments in his interview, never really got his act together. He is probably best remembered today for his anthology of Australian verse and his sons, actor Jack and ABC journalist Peter. Like Ross Campbell, Thompson was trained in the Classics, and he actually speaks some Latin in his interview, as does Jim McNeil. It's a very handy language to any writer of English. Thompson has a wonderful voice, the classic antediluvian ABC version of BBC English. Despite a Won Casey-style idiosyncratic pronunciation of a certain consonant, Thompson was employed as an ABC announcer, thus putting his years in Britain to some use. His poetry (which includes poems written in Dorset dialect)

bespeaks perhaps a sheer lack of time and practise ('Ah me, the word at best reveals/ Half of what an artist feels'<sup>29</sup>), but Thompson did sterling work for the ABC Arts Unit, preparing the way for contemporary broadcasters like Robert Dessaix and Andrew MacLennan.

Here is an excerpt from Thompson's poem 'Three Dawns Ago':

Three dawns ago I heard a lark  
 And cannot find the place again  
 .....

I did not mark it with my eye  
 But by my pleasure and my pain,  
 Pleasure, because the song was glad,  
 Pain, for it breathed of English sky  
 And English earth, and left me sad.  
 I felt that sky and earth belong  
 To me, and lost them with the song.<sup>30</sup>

As one who came to love, in England, the song of the English skylark myself, I recall a similar feeling of ambivalent outrage, on hearing an English skylark in northern Tasmania. This was a couple of years ago.

I also heard an English blackbird, deep in the forests of the Lower Franklin.

Like John Thompson, travel writer Colin Simpson spent many years working for the ABC as a producer/broadcaster. He too has the correct, plummy ABC voice of his generation, automatically assumed when 'on air'—even if it is only Hazel de Berg's microphone. 'Year' becomes 'yeäh', 'anyhow' 'anyhō'. Simpson was sixty-six when interviewed, and projects the weary, wry, blasé, dour, unemphatic note of the elder statesman, which, of course, he was. He'd put you to sleep, though, as a lecturer. When he mentions the Himalayas, he offers both pronunciations consecutively. For some reason, I see him as an elderly Scotsman. But it was Simpson who sussed out the world for the benefit of the Australian armchair traveller, and he provided the motive force and did most of the groundwork in the matter of Public Lending Right for Australian authors. Every Australian writer with books in the Wingecarribee Library owes him a great debt. Without editing, publishing, lobbying, broadcasting, a vital literary culture, such as we enjoy in Australia today, cannot exist.

Simpson, like Clift, was born in the country, Hill End in his case. He had a lot of social foresight. In *Adam in Ochre* (1951) he says, regarding Aboriginal land rights, 'Must the culture of a good Australian society be an utterly homogeneous one?'<sup>31</sup> A short answer to which would be no, Asia is far too close. And the peripatetic Australian country boy made good *par excellence* is scapegrace Wilfred Burchett, an Asia expert. Self-confessed 'nonaligned radical', harbinger of Pilger, prodigious autodidact, Burchett, I am sure, will some day receive his due, in his homeland, as a figure of historical prominence and a major influence on contemporary journalism. It was Burchett, who, more than any other writer, first alerted Australia to Asia. Prior to that, he had alerted us to Germany. It was Burchett who wrote a book called *Vietnam*

*Will Win* in 1968. It was Burchett who initiated the practise, now standard, of interviewing enemies in time of war. Saddam Hussein on TV would be inconceivable before Burchett. It was Burchett who repudiated Western jingoism, to the point of being described in the *Los Angeles Times* as

a man of great and intense Communist feeling for Asia, with wide experience in the Communist Far East.

But above all . . . a man of malevolence towards the West . . . and possibly the most significant Communist political agent in the Orient in the past 20 years.<sup>62</sup>

Well, perhaps after Glasnost, we can take another look at Burchett.

Politicised, as so many of his generation were, by an impoverished Depression childhood in rural Gippsland, candlelight scholar of *The New Popular Educator*—studied after a day spent clearing virgin timber—the youthful Burchett became secretary of the Poowong Discussion Club before heading north to cut cane. At twenty-five, back in Gippsland, he took time off delivering produce to the Melbourne markets to attend meetings of the anti-Fascist Writers League. A self-taught linguist, he was so adept in French, Spanish, German, Italian and Russian, that, on landing in England with the intention of fighting in the Spanish Civil War—an ambition in which he was thwarted—he found a job with Cooks Travel Agency, was assigned to prewar Berlin, and was able to report back to Melbourne—in letters to the editor, initially—the monumental wrong-headedness, as he saw it, of Menzies' appeasement policy. And, as usual, he was right.

It is not a bad thing to become a journalist because you have something to say and are burning to say it.<sup>61</sup>

Wherever the subsequent action was, Burchett was there, rooting for the underdog. China, Indo-China, Korea, Cuba, the Soviet Union. Almost alone, and at great personal cost, he dared to utter the truths that undermine the muscle flexing in times of war. But, in order to do this, to become what he became, he bid the Gippsland forests (frontiers of a greater battle still now) farewell, and ceased to be a citizen of any one country. At fifty-nine years of age, his voice, over the Paris traffic, is English. 'Cheshear', 'Herosheema', 'Waugha in Ashia', 'Boodapest', but, poignantly, he does pronounce 'valleys' and 'mountains' (in the context of Dien Bien Phu) with a flat Australian 'a' ('ow'). He speaks dispassionately, his voice sonorous, deep, orotund. In his concern for the underdog Burchett verged, at times, on treachery, and perhaps he overstepped the mark. I am not concerned to judge him politically. Following Toynbee, I believe that Marx, through his militant anti-Christianity, fatally perverted his ecumenical socialism; but at least Marx built a creed in which an honest man could believe, and the demise of his system has left what looks like Self-Interest alone in the field. This is not a situation in which any writer can take long term comfort.

As a journalist, Burchett is first class, always interesting, industrious, topical.

I would like to nominate him as one of the great Australian writers, but he is more than that. Burchett, surely, is a citizen of the ecumenical civilisation that does not yet exist. And that he achieved what he did from an indigent rural background on the periphery of the Western World, with no formal education, and with no social advantages of any kind, makes me wonder if we really need all these universities and all these schools of journalism. Professor Eysenck would love him, well no, perhaps not: better stick with Luther Burbank.

Wilfred Burchett was the first war correspondent to enter Hiroshima after the Bomb. By sheer coincidence, also present with us today is the first war correspondent to enter Belsen after the holocaust. Both could fairly be described as Australians, though nothing in Evadne Price's interview suggests that she was, to quote from the Virago Modern Classic reprint of her novel *Not So Quiet* (which she wrote under the *nom de plume* Helen Zenna Smith), 'born at sea, off Sydney, Australia to English parents and educated in New South Wales and England.' Indeed, as you will see from her interview, Price has convinced herself, by age eighty-one, 'I was born in Sussex in England . . . but I'd never been to Australia and always at the back of my mind was a sort of hankering for Australia.' Quite. She actually returned to Australia in 1976 and died here. A strong-minded, composed, effusive and somewhat arrogant old dear, who giggles like a girl at her own, rather excellent, jokes, she has the accent I would describe as the British/Antipodean equivalent of mid-Atlantic; a common accent, actually, among women of her generation, and still to be heard in Perth and Adelaide.

I don't really know if I can believe now Evadne's claims to her monumental output, though Barbara Cartland has shown it can be done. Evadne claims to have written 'about a thousand television scripts', 'about 150 paperbacks for the Glamour Library', 'about thirty or forty hardbacked novels' and, perhaps less contentiously, the eleven Jane Turpin books for children, the Astrology page in *She* magazine (for thirteen years), a number of plays for the theatre, including numerous London successes, and the book for which, as Helen Zenna Smith, she is remembered: *Not So Quiet*, a tale of female ambulance drivers in the First World War, first published in 1930, cribbed largely from Winifred Constance Young's war diary (since gone missing) and originally proposed, by publisher to hack, as 'All's Quaint on the Western Front' by Erica Remarks, a sort of louche response to Remarque's great classic which, perhaps fortunately, fell by the wayside. *Not So Quiet* actually won the Prix Severigne, and would appeal, I am sure, to contemporary admirers of the work of Elizabeth Jolley.

'Oh, pass the ruddy Maggie-Ann.'

'They've made me a heroine, one of England's Splendid Women, and I'm shaking with fright, I can't hold the wheel.'<sup>34</sup>

*Not So Quiet* contains some staunch feminist sentiment ('Why is it that women in authority almost invariably fall victims to megalomania?<sup>35</sup>'), the mandatory hint of lesbianism, premarital heterosexuality, and a trenchant loathing for the Blimps back home who prodded the youthful cannon fodder forth. The heroine—and the word is

here appropriate — undergoes a horrific ordeal. Evadne followed up with four opportunistic sequels, not based on Winifred Constance Young's war diary, none of which succeeded. In the last of them, the heroine, Nelly, opens an upmarket shelter for derelicts. *Not So Quiet* is a popular novel, of mass appeal in its time, and if a literary culture needs its Murray-Smiths, then it also needs its Helen Zenna Smiths. Evadne would have packed them in at Spoleto, and Dinny O'Hearn would have loved her. A very witty old lady, and as she says herself, 'I've always had this phenomenal memory.'

Yet another war correspondent was Rohan Rivett, whose book *Behind Bamboo* (1946) first revealed to the world the atrocities of the Burma Railroad, and what it meant to be a Caucasian prisoner-of-war of the Japanese. This experience will never be forgotten by those who underwent it, any more than the Jews who suffered under Hitler can ever forgive Belsen. But words are not experiences, and as the last survivors of the German and Japanese death camps cease their existence in our midst, a new generation must come to terms with these powerful ex-foes grown powerful again. And writing, if it cannot convey a voice, cannot convey an agony.

Who never ate his bread in sorrow,  
Who never spent the darksome hours  
Weeping and watching for the morrow  
He knows ye not, ye gloomy powers.<sup>46</sup>

Rohan Rivett, who, unlike Burchett, came from a patrician Australian family, went on to become an influential and widely-respected newspaper man (editor of the *Adelaide News*) and director of the International Press Institute. He wrote, as he thought, better books, but never a more successful one than *Behind Bamboo*. It fell to this Queens and Balliol man to record one of the most painful and significant chapters in Australian/Asian relations, and he did his duty manfully, considering the pressure he was under and his literary inexperience at the time. And someone had to do it. Following his release, he actually started writing the book in the Raj Bhavan in Calcutta, as a guest of Lord Casey, then Governor of Bengal. Maie wouldn't have brought his tiffin up herself, but she'd have made damn sure someone else did.

Stephen Murray-Smith's father was away in Calcutta half of every year when Stephen was a boy. The family was in the Indian horse trade. I myself spent time in Calcutta, in 1982, researching the novel I wrote after *Moonlite; Plumbum*, edited, in part, by poet Martin Johnston, Charmian's son. So alien is the place from Australia, it's hard to imagine all these Ozlit connections.

Rivett found he couldn't sleep in the double bed of the Marquis of Wellesley suite, where Maie had put him; he had to get out and lie on the floor.

He was interviewed in 1971, aged fifty-four, and I found his voice very interesting. This grandson of Albert Deakin and son of Sir David Rivett speaks modern Australian, surely one of the first ever to do so, in his elite circles. He is fluent, vigorous, and highly colloquial, and his a's are so broad as almost to be Afrikaans: he pronounces 'parson' as 'paarson' and describes *Behind Bamboo* as 'written from the

haart." Clearly a raconteur and skilled conversationalist, Rivett obviously never felt he had to prove a thing. His years as a prisoner-of-war, his years at Oxford, his years in the newsroom, permit him, as a blue-blood Australian, to speak exactly as he chooses. Without affectation, he has turned aside from the accents of the Caseys, the Thompsons and the Simpsons, to speak in the style of the workers, in the accent that brought another Oxford man (politician Bob Hawke) some subsequent success. Rivett's best-known book, despite the odd jarring note to modern ears ('On the whole I like the Thais better than any boongs I've seen'<sup>37</sup>—but cf. Idriess, *Horrie the Wog-dog*), is guaranteed immortality, but it may well be Rivett's contribution to the Australian accent that constitutes his greatest achievement.

Ross Campbell was an Ormond and Magdalen College man, but he didn't have Rivett's social status, he was a scholarship boy. Campbell describes himself, in his autobiography *An Urge to Laugh* as 'prone . . . to see the world reflected in the mirror of books'.<sup>38</sup> An incipient stutterer ('um-ah-er-ah' is an habitual appoggiatura), racked with insecurities and apparently possessed of a monumental sense of cultural inferiority, Campbell ascribes the demise of his scholarly ambitions—for like John Thompson, he was a Classicist—as due to the instruction he received at the hands of his tutor at Oxford, one C.S. Lewis. Campbell seems to have wasted a lot of time after coming down from Oxford, eventually drifting into journalism, where editors didn't really know what to do with him. Frankly, with such a background, he was bound to become a humorist. He describes having seen his co-humorist on the *Daily Telegraph*, Lennie Lower, 'sobbing over his typewriter'.<sup>39</sup>

Campbell's humour is gentle and affectionate, heart-warming really, religiously suburban. His marriage, his family and his vocation all came to him somewhat late in life, and he felt blessed by them all. On tape, he sounds an endearing character, shy, self-effacing, always laughing at himself. A bit hysterical. Too loud. Terry Thomas in his bumbling, ineffectual, as distinct from caddish, guise. Probably a former man-about-town, the one all the girls laugh at but like. His voice is nasal and he sounds a great deal younger than his sixty-four years. I believe he belongs with Lennie Lower as a comic writer who deserves to survive, and therefore will. Like Charmian Clift, he pioneered a certain kind of column, or essay, but no one else I can think of writes as gently as he did. There is more malice in humour these days, and that, I suppose, is no-one's fault.

Campbell, in his autobiography, describes his difficulties in pronouncing words he had not heard spoken, but only learnt from books. I can relate to that. I can also imagine C.S. Lewis only too happy to correct his pronunciation. No wonder he spoke so diffidently.

What a relief to meet with a Cambridge man now, after all these Oxford chaps. David Campbell published a few stories, but *pace* his mentor Doug Stewart's encomium ('surely this book is on its way to becoming an Australian classic, if it hasn't become one already'<sup>40</sup>—Oh why must they do it?), Campbell was a poet, and a poet pure and simple.

Four eagle-nests in the one tree:  
A country rich in poverty.<sup>41</sup>

Despite what the McNeils say about them, the Campbells are a nice clan, really. That absence of malice in Ross Campbell's humour has its counterpart in David Campbell's poetry, but here it has been transfigured into an anagogical and lyric love for the people and the landscape of the Monaro:

I'm ambling through Goulburn as cool as a trout  
Though the chestnut is bucking and titting about  
(Hey Jack, give the grog and the women a rest!)<sup>42</sup>

Campbell had no fear of the countryside. He was born in Adelong and worked the land his life long. Campbell had no fear of other men, either. He'd been to Cambridge, his father was a doctor, and he was a tough man physically, a good footballer in his youth, and a pilot in the Second World War. He had a big broken nose, and treated other men with that warm charm that only a man very sure of himself can have. And why not? He'd written great poetry and women adored him. At his best, he provides our moderns with their link to the *Bulletin* school of bush ballad writers, for Campbell was a true ballad writer. He can distil a border ballad from a billycan of gumnut tea, and attains, at times, a purity of diction and image that is rare in any generation. He was a great poet, though of a narrow range.

So he acquired  
A racing chariot  
And a girl with honey-coloured hair  
To keep him from despair,  
Yet woke at four  
To tread the mind's treadmill  
With his mad wild woman  
Much as before.<sup>43</sup>

I'm sure contemporary feminists might shy at Campbell's rhetoric, but give him half an hour with them, and he'd soon have them settled down. Leonie Kramer edited his collective poems.

David Campbell wasn't very fluent in his interview, heaps of ums and ahs, long silences; trying to get it right, I suppose. The smoking that may have killed him had given him a deep, mellifluous voice, and he speaks in an accent as British as Wilfred Burchett's. A modest man, he stumbles over his own reading, though his speed and fluency pick up markedly after lunch. He was suitably enchanted to learn that Hazel was a distant cousin, and you can hear a fly buzzing past the mike, the same fly, over and again. Campbell pays it no mind.

A problem arises with the transcription of interviews like Campbell's, for attempts to render them grammatical tend to falsify them utterly. To quote the



remarks of an oral historian fully sensible of the problem (though I cannot agree with the distinction drawn here between speech and prose, as I see speech as asymptotic to prose):

The spoken word can very easily be mutilated in being taken down on paper and then transferred to the printed page. There is already an inevitable loss of gesture, tone, and timing; and some deliberate changes will be needed to cut out pauses and distracting hesitations or false starts in the interests of readability. Much more serious is the distortion when the spoken word is drilled into the orders of written prose, through imposing standard grammatical forms and a logical sequence of punctuation. The rhythms and tones of speech are quite distinct from those of prose. Equally important, lively speech will meander, dive into irrelevancies, and return to the point after unfinished sentences. Effective prose is by contrast systematic, relevant, spare.<sup>44</sup>

In any event, the solecisms in this poet's speech may serve to underscore, for young folk, the value of the discipline of writing.

Jim McNeil. For years I had a class in creative writing and drama at Berrima Gaol. My wife, Gerda, still works there, and worked for years at Goulburn, the state's maximum security institution. We talk gaol in our house, and we can endorse Peter Kenna's introduction to McNeil's *Collected Plays* in which he states:

I believe that, as refuge from the violence taking place in prison . . . he invented another world from which, safely and at his leisure, he could examine violence for what eventually he decided it was: a reaction to fear and despair. Within this context he was able to stand apart from it, forgive it in himself and others, and finally create plays wherein he could evoke pity for it. This is what lifts his works into the realm of art. Unfortunately for that art, when he was released from prison and leading a full emotional life he no longer needed that refuge . . . To tell the truth I was somewhat afraid of him . . . I made sure we never disagreed.<sup>45</sup>

Many men who would never otherwise write find the time and the need to do so in prison. From what I have seen, McNeil's work is by no means exceptional (I'll let you into a secret now: anyone who can talk can write), but what distinguishes him from many a prisoner whose work I have admired, is that he was able to finish what he began, and this, in prison, is most unusual.

Obviously, love poetry takes on a practical function for prisoners, and beyond this, drama is fully reinvested with its cathartic qualities. In my time, we wrote and produced some superlative pantomimes. I was never able, though, to convince the boys of how desperately the punters want to hear what they have to say. I rarely got a finished work from any of them. It is my belief, incidentally, that artists and criminals

are natural blood brothers (Jim McNeil, Wilfred Burchett), which is why, perhaps, this culture of ours produces so many writers.

McNeil, afflicted with laryngitis (heavy smoking? yelling and shouting?) coughs and sniffs throughout his interview, deep, tough, intelligent, cynical. He exhibits, for Hazel's benefit, a complacent relish in violence. At one point he says to her, 'You don't hand your penis in at the gate, love' but because the transcriber omits the 'love', you can't really sense from this, in print, the patronising charmless indifference McNeil exhibits towards Hazel, who was either patently unimpressed by him, or more likely, unattractive to him. He was living with Robyn Nevin at this stage. Eight years later he died a derelict alcoholic.

Peter Kenna has a high opinion of McNeil's drama, and I must confess I've never seen it staged, which is like reading a transcript instead of listening to a tape, I suppose. I guess he was world class as a prison playwright. Violence, sex, drugs and gaol are his subjects, and if you like Joe Orton you'd probably like Jim McNeil. He wrote one acknowledged masterwork (*The Old Familiar Juice*), stuffed up a couple of others, and soon lost interest in the whole silly business. Like Wilfred Burchett, he was something of an autodidact as a boy, one of those secret lovers of literature. Reader turned writer, by dint of exigency, even as Rohan Rivett perhaps.

Which brings us to the end of this short exordium. Have any themes emerged, would you say? Australia as a prison, as a penal settlement, as a cultural desert, as a place to be escaped from when young, if perhaps returned to in old age? Things have surely improved. Australia as a colony? Nothing has changed. The struggle towards an Australian accent is apparent in the tapes. World war, Depression served as stimuli later generations have had to do without (so far). Our forerunners had the great themes: we have the time and money.

Australians are all too conscious of manifold deficiencies. As adolescents on the world stage (or perhaps, young adults still in the parental home), we alternatively strut and cringe, as adolescents, if not young adults, should. But adolescents have their strengths too—vigour, idealism, depth of feeling. What we must not do is to take too seriously the strictures of the old men about the place. And early development is not to be rushed through, whatever they may say. Too earnest a desire for overseas praise, has always been a threat to us here. You're behind the times, they tell us; but that's just what the old geriatric says to the man in his prime of life, ay.

Sure, we have deficiencies. Our ignorance, the lack of intelligent conversation among us, our scanty *savoir-vivre* have led to a certain social superficiality. Expect us to produce no Prousts. There are, however, boons in deprivation, and we have a lively, mordant vernacular. Our humour is all our own, I think. We know we are still half in exile, and stare towards other lands with loathing or longing, depending on our predisposition. But progress is certainly being made, and every one of the fifteen writers I have selected has contributed towards it. Burchett's understanding of Asia, Villier's comprehension of James Cook, David Campbell's ballads—to mention but a

few of my own favourites—are these not major works by major writers? And in the limit, who cares if they're Australian or not. I have dreams that Australia may some day—through catastrophe—become the repository of Western culture, rather like the city of Harran in north-west Mesopotamia, where the Babylonian culture survived for a thousand years after it had disappeared elsewhere. Think of the National Library of Australia, in those circumstances. Canberra would become a kind of Jerusalem.

Dream on. But whatever happens to Australia in the world, and however well or badly we may fare, certain aspects of relations between writers and the wider community will never vary. In 1961 Hazel de Berg compiled a forty-five minute tape of people who had personally known Henry Lawson.<sup>16</sup> I should like to conclude this introduction with some recollections of Henry made by Amy de Vere McCullum, a nurse of Lawson's:

Henry wasn't really a very happy person, except at intervals. He used to get violently hilarious at times but very very depressed at others and very unhappy, and I suppose it was typical of the artistic temperament that those extraordinary fluctuations took place. It wasn't really a mental hospital, but it was for working people who were breaking down, to get them early enough to prevent the breakdown. Henry wasn't mental, but he wasn't normal, of course. If he'd been normal, he wouldn't have written—normal people don't do they?

David Foster  
Bundanoon, NSW, November 1990.

## INTRODUCTION

A few words about my selection process: Of the 1290 separate recordings in the Hazel de Berg collection, no fewer than 498 are listed in the catalogue under the following categories: Authors, Australian; Biographers—Australia; Children's literature, Australian; Dramatists, Australian; Historians—Australia; Journalists—Australia; Novelists, Australian; Poets, Australian; Radio writers—Australia; Television writers—Australia; Women authors, Australian; Women dramatists, Australian; Women historians—Australia; Women journalists—Australia; Women novelists, Australian; Women poets, Australian.

I did not consider, for the purpose of this cento, geologists, physicists, medicos or their female counterparts, the specialist nature of whose writings might render them unsuitable to a lay audience.

Many writers were interviewed more than once, or appear in more than one of the above categories in the index; nonetheless, the sheer number of interviewees was daunting, especially to one who was not himself among them. I suppose the process of elevation to a canon, or 'golden roll call' cannot be regarded by any practitioner of the art form concerned entirely uncynically. What prompted Hazel de Berg to interview a particular writer, once she had exhausted her own presumably limited personal contacts, must remain obscure to us. Certainly, I had never heard of the majority of the writers in the Hazel de Berg collection. Of course, I am not one of those naive folk, the butt of advertising agents everywhere, who suppose that because I have not heard of a commodity it is therefore without merit. I find entering any second-hand bookshop a terrifying experience for this reason. I should add I am not myself trained in Literature.

It was the policy of the National Library, a policy in which I gladly acquiesced, not to consider any living writer from the de Berg collection. Living writers should be left to get on with their work, and it is not possible, before a writer's death, to speak of that writer's opera *in toto*. Eliminating writers who had not yet died (to my knowledge) left only eighty-two. Writers, it appears, are a comparatively long-lived breed. It must be all that fresh air and abstemiousness.

I then eliminated those who merely read from their works or those who spoke only briefly on a specific project. This, unfortunately, deprived me of Katharine Susanna Prichard, Henrietta Drake-Brockman, Hal Porter, Alan Moorehead and Eleanor Dark, who was the wife of our family doctor in my home town of Katoomba. Norman Lindsay was interviewed as a painter and spoke at length of his factitious paintings, alas, and not of his delightful novels. I also felt obliged to eliminate writers who had posed restrictions on access to their interviews. This eliminated, among others, Dymphna Cusack, A.H. Chisholm and Marjorie Barnard.

I was now left with fifty-one writers and these I reduced, on editorial considerations, to thirty-eight, by eliminating those who spoke to the point, that is, those whose interviews amounted to fewer than ten pages in transcript. I thus lost George Johnston, Cyril Pearl, C.P. Mountford, the redoubtable Xavier Herbert, Eve Langley, Nettie Palmer and Dulcie Deamer.

I was now beginning to wonder if I might not have to go back and devise some

alternative criteria for exclusion, as I discovered, to my trepidation, I had only six women of a total of thirty-eight. But this I cannot entirely be blamed for, as far fewer women than men are represented in the de Berg collection.

In my penultimate cut, I eliminated many who were not actually born in Australia. This may seem harsh but I think it justified, at least for present purposes. The term 'Australian writer' has become too broad of late: clearly, if my friend and colleague Randolph Stow, who lives and writes in Britain, continues to be regarded as an Australian writer, then my friend and colleague Elizabeth Jolley, *ipso facto*, is not. I thus lost George Farwell (UK), Harry Roskolenko (US) and Douglas Stewart (NZ) but I wasn't unduly displeased by the names that remained to me as I seemed able to select (arbitrarily now) a good cross-section of a wide variety of writers from among them, if disproportionately fewer women (not my fault, after all) be overlooked. I had one of the most recently born deceased writers in the collection in the person of hard drinking gaolbird playwright Jim McNeil (b. 1935) and one of the oldest in popular bushman/yarn spinner Ion Idriess (b. 1890). I had the left-wing Wilfred Burchett, Laurence Collinson and Stephen Murray-Smith, and on the right, Maie Casey. I had, in fact, the man who had been denied a passport and the wife of a Governor-General. I had a seaman in Alan Villiers, a humorous columnist in Ross Campbell—both, it seems to me, under-rated writers—someone I'd never heard of but who sounded mighty interesting (Evadne Price, war correspondent and astrologer, b. 1896), a woman who once owned perhaps the most beautiful house in my own rural district (Berrima poetess Grace Perry), a sometime friend from my Canberra days (David Campbell, who was friendly to everyone), a man I first met, believe it or not, on a windswept outlier in the North Atlantic (that connoisseur of islands, Stephen Murray-Smith), the author of *Nemarluk, King of the Wilds*, which was the first literary prize I ever won (for a primary school composition, age ten: Ion Idriess), the mother of my sometime editor Martin Johnston (Charmian Clift), the man who worked so hard to implement Public Lending Right for us Australian authors (travel writer Colin Simpson), broadcaster and father of the more famous Jack (poet John Thompson) and newspaper man Rohan Rivett. Most of my selection, to my surprise, proved to be Melbourne people by origin. I don't know what this proves.

If there is a bias, it may be towards men of action: Murray-Smith was a commando and David Campbell played international rugby, for if I must listen to writers talk about themselves, give me the crims and the war correspondents, please. In fact, as I say, my final choice was really only fifteen from thirty-eight, and I thought it wiser, for the most part, to choose better-known writers (ie, those I had heard of), whose works might be better known to readers as well, or at least, more accessible, in being still in print. All but five of the fifteen authors I have chosen—and the poetry of Thompson and Collinson is out of print—were represented in my local rural library of Wingecarribee Shire, NSW, and in some cases, well represented. Colin Simpson has almost twenty books on the shelves there and in constant demand, while Idriess (less in demand these days) fills half a stack in the roof of the Bowral branch.

## INTRODUCTION

There are just three novelists and I am a novelist, but non-fiction writers in this country complain, with justification, they don't get a fair go. Many of our finest writers have not been writers of fiction; indeed, before 1972 and the institution of the Australia Council, it was scarcely possible for an Australian writer lacking independent means to contemplate a career in fiction writing. And frankly, it's still hard going. I doubt the Wingecarribee Library does as good business as the Video Ezy outlet, and its patrons are perceptibly older.

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## Notes

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3. *Ibid.* p. xi.
4. 'In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.' John I, i.
5. Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*. London: Picador, 1986. p. 77.
6. Colin Simpson quoted in Clement Semmler, 'Chronicles of the Great Inland', *Australian*, 29–30 September 1990, p. 4.
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9. *Ibid.* p. 145.
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12. *Ibid.* p. 90.
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14. Grace Perry, *Journal of a Surgeon's Wife and Other Poems*, p. 149.
15. Maie Casey, *An Australian Story*. London: Michael Joseph, 1962, pp. 20–1 and 93–4.
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17. Samuel Butler (1612–80), *Hudibras*, quoted by William Hazlitt (1778–1830) in his essay 'On the Aristocracy of Letters' in *Table Talk*. London: Oxford University Press, 1901, p. 283.
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20. Laurence Collinson, *Hovering Narcissus*.
21. Laurence Collinson, 'Himn' in *Hovering Narcissus*, p. 18.
22. Stephen Murray-Smith, *Mission to the Islands*. Hobart: Car & Fiddle Press, 1979, pp. xviii and xxiii–iv.
23. Allan Ashbolt quoted in *The World of Charmian Clift*. Sydney: Ure Smith, 1970, pp. 9–10.
24. George Johnston, 'Introduction' in *The World of Charmian Clift*, p. 9.
25. *Ibid.*
26. Charmian Clift, *Walk to the Paradise Gardens*. Sydney: Collins, 1989, p. 5.
27. *Ibid.* p. 1.
28. Charmian Clift, *The World of Charmian Clift*, pp. 56–7.
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30. John Thompson, 'Three Dawns Ago' in *Thirty Poems*, p. 12.
31. Colin Simpson, *Adam in Oebre*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1967, p. 194.
32. Tom Lambert, 'The Channel for Hanoi's Viewpoints', *Los Angeles Times*, 26 February 1967, Section G, p. 1.
33. Wilfred Burchett, *At the Barricades*. Melbourne: Macmillan, 1981, p. 59.
34. Helen Zenna Smith, *Not So Quiet*. London: Virago, 1988, pp. 57 and 34.
35. *Ibid.* p. 61.
36. Goethe, in a translation by Carlyle, quoted by Rohan Rivett in *Behind Bamboo*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1947, p. 111.
37. Rohan Rivett, *Behind Bamboo*, p. 366.
38. Ross Campbell, *An Urge to Laugh*. Sydney: Wildcat Press, 1981, p. 24.
39. *Ibid.* p. 89.
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41. David Campbell, 'Kelly Country' in *Collected Poems*, p. 164.
42. David Campbell, 'Chansons Populaires' in *Collected Poems*, p. 87.
43. David Campbell, 'Single Apartments' in *Collected Poems*, p. 147.
44. Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 230.
45. Peter Kenna, 'Introduction' in Jim McNeil, *Collected Plays*. Sydney: Currency Press, 1987, pp. vii and viii.
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Wilfred Burchett  
(1911–83)

Paris, 21st April 1970

Hazel de Berg collection  
National Library of Australia  
Tape no. deB 494



I'M WILFRED BURCHETT. I was born in Melbourne on 16th September 1911 but I really grew up, or the early part of my childhood was spent, in Poowong in South Gippsland, until the age of eight. Then I went to Ballarat and I went to school in Ballarat, first to the Pleasant Street State School, then the Ballarat High School. My father was a farmer but combined farming with building houses and that seems to have been the lot of my ancestors for about two or three centuries, anyway, in England before they came to Australia; they built houses and combined building houses with farming.

My people arrived in Australia, actually, in 1854. I grew up on the farm in Poowong. I think I created a bit of a sensation because I very often used to ride a cow to school where other children were riding ponies; but I left [the school at Poowong] when I was eight and went to Ballarat and continued primary schooling at the Pleasant Street State School in Ballarat and then afterwards at the Ballarat High School, until I'd just turned fifteen. At that time, that was just the beginning of the Depression years, it was really the pre-Depression years but as my father was in the building business, it struck the building trade earlier than others and he went bankrupt, so that meant I had to leave school and go and earn my living.

I was interested in political affairs, even international affairs, at rather an early age, because my father, who in those years was quite conservative, in fact he stood once as the Nationalist Party candidate for Ballarat but he was very interested in international affairs. He was a member of the League of Nations Association and he guided our thinking in those terms, in the terms of internationalism I would say.

At school I didn't do anything very remarkable. I usually got fairly high marks in mathematics and also in composition and essay writing and, oddly enough, in French—the French language.

For a time I worked at the building trade, although, as I said, the building trade was hit before the rest of the other sections of the community, and I did learn to become a fairly good carpenter and a fairly good bricklayer; but then, a few years later, about 1928, 1929, the building trade ran into a really deep depression and just one day I rolled up my blankets and I left home and went roaming round the countryside looking for work. I could do a few things from my background in South Gippsland. I was a pretty good milker and I could dig potatoes and things like that, and so I wandered around for a rather long time, really, doing odd jobs, and at one period I spent some months living up on the Murray River near Mildura, just under a gum tree, at a place called Bruce's Bend, and I really did just live off catching fish and eating them and sometimes exchanging them for a bit of flour or something else, and this was a very important thing in my life, as a matter of fact, because I always, from that moment on, I felt that then I'd reached rock bottom and I knew I could actually live. I could go and catch a rabbit or catch a fish, and that there was nothing anyone could do to me that could take that away from me.

I did have a feeling in those days that I would like to have communicated some of my experiences, good and bad experiences, to other people but it really didn't get into some formalised sense that I thought of writing. I didn't start writing for a long time

afterwards because my experiences were very sort of mixed ones. When Australia started to move out of the Depression, then I worked again at the old trade, the building trade. I earned some money and during those years when I was up on the Murray River I continued to plug along with learning French and learning some other language as well, just from a book I'd taken with me, and eventually I went to Europe. I really went to Europe in early 1937 because I was so very upset about what was going on in Spain and I had a vague idea that I ought to be going over and helping the Republicans, especially after the Nazis and the Italians came into the war in Spain, but due to various misadventures I didn't get to Spain but I got a job with a tourist agency which eventually led to my going into journalism at the time of the most terrible pogroms against the Jews in November 1938. This was again one of these accidental things. It so happened that by that time I spoke German fairly fluently, and I went in and for about four months I had to do with trying to save some of these people, get some of these people out, starting with my own brother-in-law. In the meantime I'd married in London. I'd married a German girl of Jewish origin whose brother was arrested and put in the concentration camps. In fact I managed to get him out and he is now in Melbourne, a very prosperous manufacturing chemist. And I managed to get quite a few more people out by various devious means, but this brought me into contact with the harshest realities of what was going on in Germany which other, even accredited, correspondents there never saw, and when I came back to Australia—I brought my wife back to Australia because I wanted to have our first child born in Australia, by that time that was July 1939, end of June, beginning of July 1939, and I found the atmosphere in Australia—let's say the attitude in Australia towards Germany—was quite wrong, the level of information was quite wrong, it was the period when fairly highly-placed people were saying that Hitler was a man of peace. It was the post-Munich period when everybody was sold on the idea of peace in our time, Hitler was being presented as a good, decent, God-fearing person who built very good roads on which motor cars could travel very fast, the trains ran on time, everything was clinically clean, and for me this was a very shocking contrast to what in fact I'd experienced, and I started writing letters to the newspapers. The letters weren't published but then, when war broke out in August or the beginning of September 1939, a lot of editors started to remember this chap who'd been bombarding them with letters and whom they could describe as the last Australian who left Berlin or something of this sort, and so they asked me to start writing articles and that's how I became a journalist—which I feel—I feel there's a moral in this, I think it's not a bad thing for somebody to start to become a journalist because he's burning to say something; anyway, perhaps a writer, because a journalist has to go through a definite formation of experiences but as a writer I think that is probably the most important thing, that he is burning, there is something inside him which is burning to come out.

Yes, I started to get articles published in the press and then—I was quite convinced, of course, that Japan, once the war started, that Japan would also come in, by the logic of things, also by my own reading, and on my way back to Australia I'd

come through New Caledonia, and for some reason or other I think there was a strike and I was held up in New Caledonia for a couple of weeks, and I was very impressed by Japanese activities there at that time, talking with some of the French people there. So I wrote a couple of articles drawing attention to this, the danger of Japan coming into the war and of New Caledonia being used as a base, perhaps, from which to attack Australia, and these articles attracted some attention and a publisher, Cheshires, asked me would I consider going over and doing a book for them on New Caledonia. It was their first venture into book publishing and it was my first book, the first book they published, the first book that I wrote. I did that, and then the Department of Information had also been interested in my articles about Germany, so they asked me to join them, actually as a language expert because I monitored Axis broadcasts in various languages, in German and Spanish, Italian and so forth. But I got very tired of just sitting at a desk and listening to these things, I wanted to be in the centre, and on the basis of my book which had been accepted I managed to raise enough money to go up to China, Chungking, because I was absolutely convinced that Japan was going to come into the war and, of course, a couple of months after I got to Chungking, the very week that my book came out about New Caledonia, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbour.

By that time I'd written quite a number of articles in the Australian press as a freelance, I didn't work for any particular paper, and then the London *Daily Express* got interested in these articles once the war extended into the Pacific, and it was in Chungking that they approached me and I became their correspondent for the rest of the war, throughout the whole war in Asia, first of all in the China-Burma-India theatre and then in the Pacific with the American fleet in the Pacific and the marines and later on, when the British fleet came out, with the British fleet. I was the first non-Japanese to enter Hiroshima after the bomb was dropped, and after that I went back to Europe and became the correspondent in Berlin for the London *Daily Express* in the first post-war years.

I had mixed feelings in going into Hiroshima. Like everybody else I was terribly glad that the war had ended, that was my first reaction, and before having gone there I thought, as everybody else did at that time, that the A-bomb was just one bomb bigger than other bombs and if that had played a part in ending the war, then that was all right with me, but my feelings did change when I got to Hiroshima and saw that this was a bomb in fact used exclusively against civilians, it was a civilian target, it was just—the ones that I saw actually die in front of my eyes in an improvised hospital on the outskirts of Hiroshima, these were practically all women and children and I felt—I began to change my mind as to whether this bomb should have been used or not, and the further I got away from it, the more I felt this way inclined, that this was a wrong thing to have done, to have used this bomb.

I had written a couple of other books during the war, one after I was wounded, I was in hospital for about three months and I wrote a book in hospital, also published by Cheshire, it was called *Bombs over Burma*. It was more or less an account of the

Burma campaign, and I think that reflected my own feeling that, if the West wanted to win the war in Asia, then they had to give the Asian people full independence, and this *Bombs over Burma*, while it was rather critical of the British attitude of trying to get these people, stimulate enough enthusiasm among the Burmese to fight against the Japanese without giving them something they could fight for, and then I wrote a book about—I got to be very friendly with General Wingate and his attitude, of course, coincided with my own. His attitude was, if we're going to get the people of Asia to help us get rid of the Japanese, we have to promise them independence, and he would not go into Burma until he had the authority from Churchill to promise the Burmese people that if they cooperated in getting rid of the Japanese, no question but Burma would have its independence after the war, and on that basis I was able to give my fullest support to Wingate, and that was my third book.

At the end of the war I wrote another book called *Democracy with a Tommygun* which was rather along this line, that the only way was the end of colonialism and give people a stake in their own future and this was the only way we were going to have friends after the war in Asia.

In Berlin I continued writing for the *Daily Express*. Beaverbrook's policy at that time, on the two questions in which I was most interested when I was in Berlin—one was to keep a sharp eye on any re-growth of Nazism or any sort of protection of the old German monopolies and so forth, the second thing was a policy of friendship towards the Soviet Union, partly because of Beaverbrook's own personal friendly relations with Stalin during the war, when Beaverbrook went over a couple of times as Minister of Aircraft Production and Tank Production and they got along famously together, because they were both ruthless pragmatics who wanted to get results and get them quickly. So I had no problems in my reporting from Germany for those first years, until the Cold War started. Now, my view of things then was, and still is now, that Germany need never have been divided, that Germany could have been neutralised—that was a concept, Germany could have been neutralised but not divided, and I think that with all the mistakes that Stalin and Molotov made at that period, the mistakes on the Western side were even worse. And I said that, I wrote that, and that started the beginning of my sort of division from—my difference of opinion, anyway, sharp difference of opinion, although the *Daily Express* for a long time agreed with my view on this and I was encouraged by the editor to keep writing in this way, even if they couldn't publish all the stuff at least they wanted to be informed about it; but then there was the Berlin airlift and things got to the point where I could no longer be a correspondent in Berlin and write and publish even a proportion of what I wanted to say.

Then when the Korean War started, actually two things happened. The first thing was that China—in China the Communist forces, Mao Tse Tung, won a civil war and set up a republic. Well, from that time on, I knew a number of the personalities, Chou En Lai, for instance, quite well, and I had a yearning to go back and have a look and see what is this great new thing that has happened in China, a great new historic thing, perhaps more important than atom bombs and all sorts of other things,

and I started from October 1949, when the People's Republic was set up in Peking, I started trying to organise a trip to China and eventually I got there early in 1951.

I left Fleet Street journalism completely for a time, went back for a few months in Australia, actually to speak on the Stockholm Appeal against the atom bomb, and I think it's understandable that I had very special feelings in a campaign to ban the atom bomb, having been the first one really to see the results, the first one from the Western world. And then I went to China with the intention of writing a book, and I did write a book which was called *China's Feet Unbound*, a symbolic sort of title, and while I was in China—I'd intended only to go for a few months, three or four months—while I was there the news came through that it had been agreed to start ceasefire talks in Korea. Now, the newspapers continually referred to me as 'Burchett, the man who reported the Korean War from the other side' or 'from the Communist side'. This is factually not correct. I went to Korea after the ceasefire talks started and I reported from Panmunjom—Kaesong and Panmunjom—on the ceasefire talks. And I went down—I thought it would last three weeks or so, in fact it lasted over two years, the talks, and I wrote what I considered were correct and objective reports. I reported on what were the Korean-Chinese proposals at the talks and what were the American proposals at the talks, and one can find very many tributes in the American press, even the most conservative press, confirming that what I wrote was factually correct. However, I've got into a lot of strife about that ever since, because I reported from what was considered the wrong side of the 38th parallel. But in this respect—this has resulted in a lot of my troubles with the Australian Government. If the Americans, for instance, applied the same principles, they would have to deny passports to people like the assistant managing editor of the *New York Times*, Harrison Salisbury, who went to Vietnam while America was at war with Vietnam, went to Hanoi, wrote what some Americans consider very damaging reports because he said civilian targets were being bombed and the official story was that they were not.

From Korea, I stayed on throughout the whole of the ceasefire talks which as I said took about two years, and then there was another six months during which the prisoners of war were exchanged, and there were some political talks. Now, at the end of that period it had been agreed that there would be a Geneva conference to discuss peace settlement in Korea, and then tacked on to the end of that was also to discuss a ceasefire in Indo-China. I didn't know anything at all about Indo-China but I decided that before going to Geneva, I would make an effort to go down into Indo-China and find out what on earth this war was about, and I did. I went almost directly from Korea, I went to Peking and there I made contact with the North Vietnamese, with the Viet Minh in those days, and they arranged for me to go down, and I went down to the Viet Minh headquarters and met for the first time Ho Chi Minh. In those days nobody knew whether Ho Chi Minh existed, he was a sort of a legendary figure, but to my great astonishment, a few hours after arriving at the base this chap with the wispy beard turned up and we had long talks, I had long talks with him and with the present Prime Minister, Phanh Van Dong, and others, and we went over the whole situation in

Indo-China. They explained their position to me, they showed me on maps what the military position was. It so happened that it was at the start of the beginning of the battle of Dien Bien Phu, and one of my most vivid memories of that visit was, I'd heard the name Dien Bien Phu several times on the radio, a little transistor radio, coming down by train from Peking, and I asked Ho Chi Minh what it was, 'The French are talking about some big action that they are carrying out at Dien Bien Phu, what is it?' and he had a sun helmet there on the table, and he turned it upside down and he said, 'Dien Bien Phu is a valley, the French are in that valley, the best troops they have in Indo-China are all down there. Our troops surround the rim of the mountains. The French will never get out.' And that was the image, of course, which I kept. At that time Dien Bien Phu was being presented as a French initiative. I went directly from there to Geneva, and of course, at that Geneva conference the Korean part ended very quickly, and it mainly discussed Indo-China and finished up with the 1954 Geneva Agreement.

After the Geneva conference, which lasted three months, I decided to go to Vietnam, Indo-China, because I was interested in seeing how these agreements were going to work out. For two and a half years, I lived in Indo-China, in Hanoi, and I travelled around. A couple of times I went to Saigon, I went quite often to Laos and Cambodia, and watched the developments there. Well, of course, the elections didn't take place and it was obvious that we were going to be stuck with an Indo-China problem for a long time, and then I thought, well, I'd been working for years on the perimeter of problems. I'd worked in Germany, which was a divided country, I'd worked in Korea which was now a divided country, I'd worked in Indo-China and Indo-China was divided, and I thought that probably the only settlement really would be in the power centres, that the interesting place to be would be either in Washington or in Moscow, that you would have to have settlement, so by that time I'd lost my Australian passport, or lost my British passport because the Australian Government had refused to give me another one, so I went to Moscow. I transferred to Moscow. Now, normally I would have liked to stay, say, one year or one and a half years in Moscow and then one year, one and a half years in Washington, and try and see these problems from two sides, but because of the severe limitation of my movements due to the fact that I didn't have a passport—I only had a bit of paper, what they call a *laissez passer*, which just simply identified me and permitted me to leave Vietnam, that's all I had, so I stayed on in Moscow. I really thought that once I got to Moscow and got in touch with the Australian Embassy, then I would straighten out this problem, get a passport and have quite normal conditions of work and travel, but I started my fight, and I still don't have a passport.

During the period in Vietnam I wrote two books, one called *North of the 17th Parallel* and the other called *Mekong Upstream*. The first one dealt in an historical way with the development of the Vietnam independence movement and with the Geneva Conference and developments since, and the second one, *Mekong Upstream*, dealt in a rather similar way with Cambodia and Laos. Then I went to Moscow.

One of the first things I did in Moscow, I started getting interested in space developments because I arrived there in May of 1957 and it seemed to me, just by reading scientific reviews—I had studied some Russian so I could read the newspapers and magazines—that they were quite advanced in space developments and I started writing articles about it which didn't attract very much attention until the first satellite went up, and I'd written one article just one week, I think, before the satellite was sent up, for the *Sunday Express*, back to my old *Daily Express*–*Sunday Express* connections. They were fascinated with this because they thought I must have had some deep inside knowledge that the Russians were going to send a satellite up, which wasn't correct, but I did follow space developments very closely, and the Russians were happy about this and so I was given the first interview, the only interview, I suppose, with Gagarin when he came back. My father was there, and my father presented him with an Australian boomerang with the hope that whenever he went up, like the boomerang he would return. Unfortunately it didn't happen, Gagarin was killed.

That book had a very great success, it was published all over the world except in Australia, and then the same thing with the second Soviet spaceman who went up, Titov. I had a long talk with Titov after he came back and went off to see his parents who lived away out in Siberia, and then I did a third book on the Soviet Union, more or less on the virgin lands, Siberia and so on.

But then about 1962, I kept hearing very disturbing reports of what was going on in Vietnam and I started going back, from 1962 I started going back one, two, three times, I think, in '62 or '63 anyway, and I realised that a civil war was developing, a fighting war was developing there, and I began to spend more and more time in South-East Asia because I was deeply sympathetic to the long long struggle of the Vietnamese people for independence, it had gone on for 2000 years against the feudal Chinese, the Mongols, the feudal Chinese again and then in more modern times, the French, the Japanese, the French again, and it seemed to me quite clear that the Americans were replacing the French, so I got deeply involved in that struggle. I kept going back, and in the end, in 1963, late in 1963, I went into the areas controlled by the National Liberation Front for a long period, I spent altogether about five months with the guerillas, and that was the first of four visits I made into the liberated areas, really to try and understand how that war started, what it was all about, what the perspectives were, what was going on, and then when the war was taken to North Vietnam and the bombings of North Vietnam, I went to North Vietnam many times and I wrote a number of books based on those—lots of articles and a number of books. I think the first one was called *The Furtive War* because nobody talked about it, nobody knew, and my job was to try and pinpoint it, how did this start? where did it start? when did it start? what was the background to it? and that was *The Furtive War*, and then there was another one called *The Inside Story*—I'm afraid these are not my titles, publishers never agree with my ideas for a title, they always put their own—*The Inside Story of the Guerilla War*, and a third one which has come out more recently, just called

*Vietnam Will Win*, a rather ambiguous title, my own title was *Why the Viet Cong Wins* but anyway, that's that.

I got very deeply involved, journalistically involved, in that war. I still think it was an absolutely unnecessary war, the Vietnamese people have had a terribly raw deal, and that there was a great historic confrontation between what I would say are genuinely nationalist forces and perhaps the last attempt—I hope—to impose some form of new colonialism or new imperialism on people fighting for their independence.

In '65 I switched my base from Moscow back into South-East Asia, actually in Cambodia, on Phnom Penh, I switched my base there and kept it there until a few months ago, really, that is to say until June of 1969, but in May 1968 I came to Paris because the conference had started on the Vietnam war, a conference to try and get a settlement of the war, and as I'd followed the thing through for so long I felt that my place now was here in Paris at this conference. In June of 1969 I closed down my base in Phnom Penh and brought my family here to Paris.

I've written a great deal over the years, perhaps the thing I like doing most is writing. I have to do some other things to make my living, like make TV films now and again, things like this, but my heart is not really in film making although I have made a number, a dozen or so films which have done quite well, but I like writing.

The last book I did—I should say the last but one now, but the last but one was this book *Passport* which was proposed by a Melbourne publisher, by Thomas Nelson, once the fight started in Australia about my passport. They asked me to do an autobiography. I was really not very happy about doing an autobiography because I felt it was much too early to be writing memoirs. However, we compromised with a sort of partial biography, that I would write about some of my early years in Australia, which I was quite pleased to do, and about my reporting in South-East Asia. My title for the book actually was *Reporting*, just *Reporting* but they, I must say with good public relations sense, insisted on the title *Passport* although there was only one chapter, the last chapter in the book dealt with the problem of my passport, but now, as things have turned out, I had this most quite fantastic odyssey back into Australia on the question of my passport and I've written two more chapters about this which really now justify the title of *Passport* for the book.

If I was somewhat diffident about writing my memoirs at this period, it's because I felt that I have in store still a lot of interesting experiences. I may be getting up statistically in years but I come from a very long-lived family, an active family, and I think that where the hotspots of the news are, on the international front, there I would like to be. I think I would like to say one thing here: that I have been able to carve out for myself a situation fairly unique for a journalist, one that I know many of my other colleagues envy me for, that is to say, nobody can tell me where I have to go, what I have to do, what sort of story I have to look for. I decide that for myself, and that's been my situation during most of my journalistic life except for the war years when, of course, I was a disciplined war correspondent and had to go where my editor



wanted me to go, that was quite a normal thing and I considered myself more or less subject to the same sort of discipline as a soldier; the newspaper said, 'Go to that front,' I went to that front. But I've always—I started as a freelance, and immediately the war was over, almost immediately, I reverted to that freelance sort of status. In other words, there's no government, there's no political organisation or there is no editor who can tell me what I have to do, what cause I have to take up, where I have to go. I decide that for myself, and that's a marvellous situation to be in, that's a form of journalistic independence which is hard to come by but if you can get it, then it's marvellous.

Of course, I tend to choose the situations where there's some cause to be defended, the underdog if you want to put it that way, the underdog in nations; some people think I've chosen my causes ideologically but this is not correct. I went to China, for instance, when it was Kuomintang China, a very severely anti-Communist China. I went to China because China, one thing that was clear, China was a victim of aggression by Japan. I supported the Burmese, not only in their war against the Japanese but also in their independence struggle against the British, not that the Burmese had anything to do—there was nothing ideological about it, it was a national struggle, and I think if anybody took the trouble to look through the twenty-odd books I've written, they would probably find one sort of thin red line running through them all, and that is that I have always supported people who've been engaged in fights against—well, against aggression, against bigger powers trying to impose their policies on them, and I've always been on that side. I think that is a fair statement.

As far as the future is concerned, I think I would always like to be there where these great dramas are being played out, that is to say, where people are fighting for their rights and where they need a helping hand from a journalist with experience of those sort of fights, and I think that in doing that, in performing that role, that I'm serving the best interests also of—well, of my own country, of Australia. I think that at some point in Australian development, probably some government or some Prime Minister is going to be even bound to stand up and say, 'Well, in those days we had an Australian there who was defending the rights of the Vietnamese people,' or whatever other people it happens to be.



David Campbell  
(1915–79)

Canberra, 7th October 1967

Hazel de Berg collection  
National Library of Australia  
Tape nos deB 329–30

I AM DAVID CAMPBELL. I was born on a sheep station out of Adelong, New South Wales. I had two younger—I had one younger sister and two older sisters. We lived on a property which was really very isolated in lots of ways, so that when people came to visit us, we were likely to sort of disappear behind elm trees and look at them from an unusual being, really, though we were—I remember the first time that we were brought into the sitting room to sort of say goodnight to my father—we had a very good nurse called Leah, and I expect we were—and my father was very good with people, but he would, with children I think he felt that my mother got on well enough with us and he was busy, so he rather disregarded us, and then Leah took us in and we shook hands with him for the first time. He used to sit at the top of the table when we were allowed to sit inside, and he would tell stories about Dr Johnson and he'd have the overseer and a couple of jackaroos sitting there, he was rather overawing, I think, so that Dad talked and he had numerous stories which he told. He was likely to tell them more than once, and some of them were very very good and, of course, we had our own way of retelling his stories sometimes to one another. My mother sat at the other end of the table and didn't say very much but she was—what she did say, she used to talk about the north-west a lot, she came from Binnaway and her mother was a Blackman who was related to Hazel de Berg who is doing this recording, and she used to tell us marvellous stories about a fellow called Sheppard, John Sheppard, who was a relation of ours who used to drive his four-in-hand, she said, over a five-bar gate, which I find very hard to believe now but we believed it then. And she did create a feeling, you know, of really great men doing things, pioneers, and of my grandfather, whom she loved very much and who we knew only slightly but what we knew of him, we loved, and this became almost a myth in mind, of these characters, and then also on Sundays she used to read us the Bible, which was probably a good thing, I don't know, I know at school I always won the Bible prize, that was about all I ever won, but every year I won the Bible prize.

I think I was fairly dull until I was seven. Then I remember that I became—then I really began to enjoy being on the land, we used to ride, we all had ponies and I remember our mother saying—looking at us with absolute distaste because we wouldn't get on these horses, immediately this was a sort of dare so we got on our horses and we were all thrown off, but from then on riding horses became one of the most important things we did and we used to ride bareback and we used to ride out, for the last gate home we used to take the bridles off and gallop home without any bridles on, we used to think this was—and we used to particularly do this when there was any friends of our parents around so that we could astonish them. I have written a bit about this in my book *Evening under Lamplight* but I found, strangely, when I was writing this book that, although I used a lot of the incidents of my childhood, the people gradually changed, or the people did change in my mind and very very few of the stories in these very small short stories actually took place. The best story in that book, I think, is *The Archway* and my mother did hack through a wall at one stage with a pickaxe to insist that, you know, something be done to enlarge a room, but it was in this one instance

that I—and I expect sort of memories that I've sort of three-quarters forgotten, that I was able to write that particular story.

I don't think there's very much else about my childhood that is of much significance. I think the first thing, the thing at school—I remember going to school and seeing a boy sitting on a trunk and thinking, you know, how lonely he looked and feeling rather sorry for him, when I first moved into school, and within about three weeks, he was getting on with everybody and I found myself very lonely. I remember having a lot of trouble with Latin, but at that stage I expect football was the thing, so I decided I'd be a—footballers became very important in my life, and I used to play with the junior teams and then I'd hang around cadging a game from the higher teams, so I'd usually end up having two games in a day. I don't know if this was very good for my imagination but I used to lie in bed, I used to actually play the whole game of football in my mind. I remember there was always a fellow called Murray Prier kicked off. At these times I used to do most dashing deeds!

At one stage, later on, I thought, Well, I've wasted most of my schooldays without—you know, I concentrated much more on football than on doing anything else, but I realised later that I enjoyed this and my mind was left fairly much alone, having not really studied very much. I remember once I was in a rowing crew and a friend of mine, Doug Lamb, was the captain of boats and he had a girl called Dany McPhillamy, and I told him after the race that I'd got about three-quarters of a way through this thing and that I'd suddenly begun to think that it would be pleasanter to be lying on the beach with Dany McPhillamy, and Lamb said, 'Any more of those thoughts, Campbell, and you're out of the crew.' I expect this was the beginning, you know, of thinking of other things besides sport.

After that I went over to Cambridge and it did suddenly come into me that there were other things in life besides this and I felt extraordinarily—well, I expect I suddenly realised how much I had to learn. I remember writing a long list of how much I had to learn. I seemed, and I think I probably was, very much behind most people of my age at that time. I did though, I think through the help of John Manifold, suddenly begin reading Roy Campbell, and I'd always read Banjo Paterson before that, we used to scoff at poets at school, the best poetry shouldn't be really censored, so that young boys are not allowed to read poetry, it is something that they can read when they get a bit older and then it will make it more important for them perhaps when they come to it. I think things are different nowadays, but that certainly was the case at school, we all scoffed at poetry and thought sport was everything.

I studied history for the first year at Cambridge and didn't like it and in the exams at the end of the year, I was answering—had to do a long paper and I only half answered one question which was 'Comment on Keats' statement "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, that is all ye know"', and, on the strength of this essay, I take it, Dr Tillyard who was my—who was a tutor at Jesus College, swung me over on to English literature and became my tutor, and from then on I decided I'd be a poet and that was my ambition and what I wanted to do in life from then on.

At that stage I did write two very rough bush ballads that John Manifold got published for me in the *Cambridge Review* at that time, and Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch said, you know, 'Who is this fellow Campbell? He is a poet.' This came back to me and I thought, Christ, I'm made. It was about four years from those two poems before I could write another poem but I was always determined that I would. I think probably at that stage I owe more to John Manifold than to Dr E.M.W. Tillyard, more than I can say. John at that stage used to walk around Cambridge with a large black hat, looking as if he'd just stepped straight out of Paris. You'd go to his digs and you would drink Benedictine and listen to Mozart, and this was really, you know, I felt I was a bit in at that stage. Well, it was my first experience of the literary world, anyway. I began to love, as John did then, Roy Campbell, I also got to like very much the early fifteenth-century poets, particularly the anonymous early poets, and then Elizabethan lyrics, began to see some way of bringing Banjo Paterson and these early poets together, to—well, it seemed to me a way in which I could move. It took me a long while to do anything along this line but this was gradually—it gradually opened up a way for me.

Of course, about that time, too, I began, having despised Yeats—I always find that very often poets that you find hard to get into at the beginning then become the ones that you like best. I gradually got to love Yeats' later poetry and he became by far the most important influence in my life, all through the war, for instance, I read nothing but W.B. Yeats.

Then I returned to Australia. I had found when I went to England rather that I was something in exile, anyway, and had so much to learn, and of course, when I came back to Australia, I felt for about the next three years also an exile, back in my own country. I think this is possibly—I believe Alec Hope felt somewhat the same way as this when he came back, you feel slightly alienated. It took me a long while, and it wasn't really until the war—I always had the idea that I would write but I think, at that stage, I really had very little to write about, so that from my point of view, when I became a pilot in the air force it gave me something to do, it was something I enjoyed doing, and it was in 1942 that I really wrote something that was worthwhile, I think and that was 'Harry Pearce', 'The Stockman' and a few poems which I think did do that thing of coupling early English poetry and the Paterson tradition and making something of it.

It was through these poems that I sent in and was astonished to find were published in the *Bulletin* that I dropped into the *Bulletin* one day and met Douglas Stewart, who was so enormously generous not only to me, but I think to a number of poets at that time, and he—I can't think of anybody who I owe more to than I do to Douglas Stewart for encouragement and real criticism. When I sent him a bad poem, he'd say, 'This is bad,' and he'd tell me why, and I think his influence on me and probably on most of us at that time was extraordinarily good. He would take infinite pains to write long letters to you and how he found the time I don't know. A lot of people say that he encouraged a Georgian school of poetry and I think this is nonsense.

Rosemary Dobson is not a Georgian poet, Judith Wright is very very far from being a Georgian poet, she is a metaphysical poet, Douglas Stewart's influence, I think, at that stage, on Australian literature and, as far as I'm concerned for myself, was really splendid, and luckily for me, I became a friend of his then, and we used to go fishing together, and since then we have been very good friends and I find him an extraordinarily wise man and a man of integrity, of the type of integrity which is very unusual to encounter. Douglas Stewart, one of his things was that he made you look at things in the third person, look at things objectively and encourage you to write outside of yourself rather than look in, and I always know the sort of thing that Douglas Stewart will appreciate and which he won't appreciate. This is part of his integrity, all integrity of this sort leads to perhaps a slight limitation, he is so much himself that the more intimate sort of self-revelations that, for instance, Lowell is writing today and which I'm beginning to find very interesting, are not the sort of things that Doug Stewart would appreciate but I think it's been very very good in his own poetry, he had a rather sentimental father, I think, and he has avoided personal lines in his own poetry.

I got married right at the beginning of the war, I was on a cadet course at the time and I was the first cadet to ever get married. Of course, all the cadets raced out after that and got married, too, but we had two children during the war, John and Raina, and then seventeen years later we had another child called Andrew, who is terribly lucky because John and Raina are almost parents to him too and he's very much loved by all of us.

After the war my father had a place just five miles out of Canberra looking over Canberra, at that stage you could look over Canberra and not see it from where we were, you could just see the hills beyond it, and after my father's death, I took over this property which was only a small one, and I thought, If I'm going to write, to be on the land is probably the thing for me to do. From then on, I expect, set up a sort of fight between work that was essential to do on the land, going round your lambs, if you wrote something and then went round and found a couple of ewes down with their eyes pecked out, well you felt pretty neglectful, so that there was a certain fight between these things but, of course, through that I got my poetry as well, through the experiences from this particular place, Wells Station, just out of Canberra. Doug Stewart said, 'Well, you've got so many poems out of it you won't get any more,' and while I was there, I kept on getting poetry out of it. This wasn't so much poetry about the land but it was about the way I was—well, really it was a sort of praise, it's what I think poetry is, there's a Rilke poem in which he says this thing and that thing happens in life, what do you do?, and the poet says, 'I praise.' I think that this is very very true that this is what a poet does.

I think perhaps the poem in which, if I have brought Elizabethan and the Banjo Paterson traditions together at all, 'Windy Gap' is perhaps the one in which I do, and it also is the one in which I felt that in spite of death and so-and-so, one praises, and that is one of the poems of my own that I like best.

When I first wrote poems which now seem extraordinarily simple to me, I used to have the feeling that they were a gift, that I was writing—that I was almost dictating something that was given to me, probably coming up from my subconscious. I should think this was a type of cheating, so I've never mentioned it to anyone, but I found out later, after reading a book of criticism by Day Lewis, that this was a fairly normal experience with poets. After hearing this, I found that I was unable to write a poem for about another six months after that. Some poems you get, they seem to be gifts, you are given a first line and you work on them and they come out easily and straight. What I do like in a poem, one of the few things I liked when I was at school was geometry, and I used to be able to apply the angle ABC to the angle XYZ and have a feeling of satisfaction at the end where you said 'QED', the thing is whole. This is something that I have liked in poetry, this is why I like sonnets, that you do have a completeness and form. Nature at any rate goes for form, it doesn't create a hare or a rabbit, if you like, with ragged ends, the form is complete, and I think this is something that is important in any type of creation.

Going back to the Australian ballad and the Paterson tradition, the extraordinary thing I found with them was that women were very very seldom mentioned except in a romantic way, and it did seem to me odd that this should be so. In my poetry, I've written a certain amount of love poetry and in my next book it is, you know, turning towards that sort of poetry rather than country poetry.

I moved from Canberra to Bungendore and for the last two or three years I've been thinking of writing, but thinking of reading much more widely, doing a certain amount of editing and moving towards a different sort of poetry. There is a stage, I think, where your original impetus has gone and you have to turn towards something else. I'm very interested in the poem in several statements, one by Alec Hope which talks about 'the brutal mouth of song', a statement of Auden in which he says that poetry is disenchanting because it tells the truth, and then reading *Hamlet*, you get such things as 'I'll lug the guts into the outer room', and along with this, I've been reading Lowell with his enormously candid—so candid that it becomes terrifying—statements about the immediate world he lives in. This is the sort of poetry that I hope I'm moving towards and I think I have written but not published much of, on this line, but Bruce Dawe does this, who I think is the most important young poet writing today, and Bruce Dawe is dealing with the Vietnam situation and is able to deal with the city and personal life in a different way, I think, than Australian poets have done it before except perhaps Slessor.

With this idea of mine of, well, the idea that is gradually being expressed here, I think, it does seem to me that as you bring more experience into your poetry, or this is what I hope to be able to do, it does seem to me that it is not a contradiction of what I've done earlier, it is taking these into account and then saying, as Rilke said, 'I praise.'

I've talked a little already about getting gifts, where you will get a first line and then you have to really settle down and work like hell on it, sometimes it will come out without a stop and sometimes you've got to put in perhaps weeks, and sometimes

years, before you get the right—before you complete the poem with all the words right. I myself prefer to write poetry—or I don't know that I prefer to write but I find that when I can write it, it's usually in the early morning, and it isn't a bad idea, if you get an idea, to stay in bed and work on it. People very often say you should write this sort of poetry and that sort of poetry, and your intellect also says you should write this sort of poetry or that sort of poetry. We are all frustrated that we are not all Shakespeares. Sometimes your intellect can be completely wrong and push you off on lines that won't be fruitful for you, but I think it is important that you try these lines anyway. When you find that a line has run out, I think it is probably a good idea to sit down and write something like a nursery rhyme or a bit of humorous verse, which frees you up again and then you can be ready to—there's no doubt about it that, having written one poem, you're more in the frame of mind to be able to write a second one; if you've had a dry patch, write a nursery rhyme and then from that you'll probably get the beginning of a sort of new creative impetus. As I said, I have been reading very widely, which is sometimes—it's important just to read one poet, I think particularly when you're young, to read one poet and read him thoroughly and you will be influenced obviously by him, but it will—it doesn't get you into a state of indigestion. Then I think there are periods when you should read very widely, and then perhaps, when you have assimilated all these sort of things, all these poems, or digested them, then you will come out with something perhaps new to say, so that for the last few years, or a year and a half anyway, I did some editing for the *Australian*, which I found tormenting and exciting—you were always looking for new people and I think I only one, a woman called McLean who wrote one really important poem, I think. I think she is a poet but none of her other poems came up to this particular one, but I found this was exciting, going around—Bruce Dawe I suddenly discovered for myself then and found out what an extraordinarily good poet he was, and at that stage I wasn't thinking about my own writing so that I was able to go out and find out who I liked, who was writing today, and then from this, I think, Geoffrey Dutton gave me the job of editing a book for Sun Books and, well, it still hasn't come out yet but in it my idea has been to give a great deal of space to the leading poets, such as Judith Wright and Hope and Doug Stewart, McAuley and so on, whether this will be—well, it was the only way to go. All the other anthologies you find them covering twenty years. Doug Stewart's, which was a very good book and a very generous one but he had eighty-eight poets, I don't agree that there would be eighty-eight poets who will last, so it seems to me that the anthologist should take the side of time a little and try and give a—put down in his book what he thinks will last, and that's what I've tried to do at any rate in this Sun Book for Geoffrey Dutton.

I said a bit earlier that my mother talked about the north-west and that it became something of a myth to me. One of our—one of the traditions that grew up in my family was that my great-grandfather, Daniel Blackman, was the first man to cross the Blue Mountains before Lawson, Wentworth—as some schoolchild said, Woolworth. I've just learnt over lunch today that Hazel de Berg is a cousin of mine and that James



Blackman, who was the father of Samuel Blackman, was also her great-great-great-grandfather, so this was very interesting and a reason for celebration, and the first time I met Hazel was a number of years ago when she was just beginning these recordings, and she's gone on doing them and with—it has become more and more recognised that these are very very important in this country, and today for the first time it is being recognised that this will become a national thing, that will be carried on, there will from now on be a national recorder. Hazel is now the national recorder, and from now on, from today on, this will be something that will be carried on by the National Library of Australia, and I feel that we should really drink a toast to James Blackman, who came out here, who was our common ancestor and came out here in 1801 with his wife Elizabeth.

Well, as the final thing I've got to say, I've got a Belfast housekeeper here at the moment called Annie King, and she was saying on her way to Sydney to meet her boyfriend the other day, she said, 'Well, we'll soon be under the sod, you've got to live life while you can,' so I wrote this epitaph to her which goes:

Beneath this sod lies Annie King,  
To hell with God, she's had her fling.

These tapes have been dedicated by Hazel de Berg to our common ancestor, James Blackman who arrived in Sydney Cove in 1801 with his wife Elizabeth on the ship *Canada*, with a letter to Governor King which said that he was good at agriculture and skilled in handicraft.

Since then, my son John has married a seventh generation Australian who is a direct descendant of Governor King, and my granddaughter is eighth generation, descended from Governor King.



Ross Campbell

(1910–82)

Sydney, 24th January 1974

Hazel de Berg collection  
National Library of Australia  
Tape nos deB 735–6

I AM ROSS CAMPBELL, I am a journalist, I've specialised for the last twenty years or so in humorous columns, I've also produced a great many books. I'm what they call a literary editor in part of my time. I have also done a good many of the routine odd jobs of journalism, that is, reporting and interviewing and so on. I reported the arrival of the first platypuses to New York, for example, but I'm primarily what they call a humorous columnist.

Several books, three books, have been published of collections of articles and columns of mine. The first one was called *Daddy, Are You Married?* and another one, a similar one, was called *Mummy, Who Is Your Husband?* Both of them were composed of things I'd written for the *Sunday Telegraph* in Sydney and the *Australian Women's Weekly*. There is also a third book called *She Can't Play My Bagpipes* which is rather different in nature. It is contributions I wrote for the *Bulletin* magazine, let's say the humour is not so generally rather domestic in tone. Those are the only books that I've ever had published. I did once write a fragment of autobiography but nobody wanted to publish it, so that's still in manuscript.

I suppose I didn't ever become at all known as a writer much until I was about forty or a bit over, when I started writing these very slight columns about domestic family life. I started it in the *Sunday Telegraph*, a paper which gave me a lot of encouragement and the whole organisation that I worked for there, they were the first people who really encouraged me to do this light writing on any scale.

This started because—well, I was working for Australian Consolidated Press which then published the *Sunday Telegraph* and the *Daily Telegraph* newspapers for both of which I was writing, and their main magazine was the *Australian Women's Weekly*. Now, the *Australian Women's Weekly* was edited then and for many years afterwards by Esmée Fenston, who was a marvellous journalist and a very much beloved woman and she suggested that I might try writing a short column sort of thing for the paper and well, I started it and she encouraged me to go on and I've been doing it ever since. She is dead now but I'm still functioning for *Women's Weekly*. In *Women's Weekly* I usually write about—actually I'm not really restricted at all. I don't write the literal reporting of family life which goes into the *Sunday Telegraph*. I write usually about matters which are I think of fairly general interest. I don't write very profound pieces there or indeed anywhere.

Well, yes, I'm afraid that I regard it as a good day's work if I do one of these things. That is to say, they're only about 450 words long but one has to think about it a good deal. That is considered a very small darg or output for a writer but I usually write—I would write these columns at least twice, sometimes three times, I used to write everything in longhand and then type it out and then retype it, I mostly do it straight on type and then do crossings out and so on and then do it again, but it's always at least twice and sometimes three times. I don't feel terribly worried about that, although it's a slow form of work and of course it's not suitable for people who have to work in a great hurry like journalists for afternoon newspapers and critics who have to review a play the same night. I was rather impressed once, when I was

working in New York, to hear that contributions to the *New Yorker* which kept a very high standard of magazine writing, were commonly written up to five or six times. Of course, one result was the extremely smooth and polished general texture of the writings they got, but you've got to work at it if you want it to be smooth.

I have been told that I'm an economical writer and I think it is true that I try not to waste words and I do go through and frequently cut out words. I'm inclined to cut out adjectives and adverbs if they don't seem to be serving any purpose. I think I may have picked up that idea from reading that Maupassant used to go through his short stories and remove all the adjectives.

For the *Sunday Telegraph* for a long time I've done a column which really is based on my own family life. It started more or less by accident, I experimented. I must say I've been, of course, very fortunate in my wife, who is an ex-journalist and has always helped me to stock things which might be written about. I suppose I must have written thousands of these columns. I can remember, you know, the thing of children being sick, young children always seem to be being sick at the table and in bed and these appalling emergencies were a regular part of our life. I remember writing something once about my son, he was sick in an explosive way after eating a pudding called Spotted Dog which is full of raisins and these raisins were all over the wall and it was a pretty sordid scene but of course you've got to take those things as they come, and I wrote something about that and people said yes, they liked that because that was exactly what happened at their place, and there it is.

I've always been very much connected with books and literary matters although I haven't written very much in the way of literature outside what I've told you about. I can't write novels, I tried to do it in my youth but I just haven't got the inventive capacity and I don't write poems though I read quite a lot of them, so these grammatical and—I've reviewed books for a very long time, I've reviewed thousands of books, although I'm not really a literary critic, I'm more a writer of what they used to call *causerie* or talks, rather giving people an idea of what the book is about. I don't do very much of the more analytical type of criticism.

Journalistic writing, there are certain things about it which make it different from, well, academic or learned writing, the main thing is that you haven't got a captive audience, you haven't got people who've got to read you, if what you are saying doesn't hold their interest they will drop off at the end of the first or second or third paragraph. You've simply got to keep them reading and that is one of the basic skills and it is not always very easy to acquire, it is a matter of tactics. I think you've got to be a person who is easily bored so that you can know when you're boring other people. It is also desirable in journalism, of course, that you should be telling the truth, I suppose, that you shouldn't be misleading people, but it doesn't matter what you say if they don't read you, the first essential is that you've got to keep them reading. I think those are the two main rules in journalism, you mustn't bore the customers and you mustn't mislead them.

I was born in Kalgoorlie in Western Australia, where my parents were among

those thousands of Victorian people who went over there, or they and their families went over there during the gold rush or gold boom, rather, not rush. Their families were not looking for gold, they were in the businesses that were—I think my mother's father was managing a brewery in Kalgoorlie. I went to Scotch College in Melbourne on scholarships—I was one of these very adept exam-passing children—I got various scholarships to the school and then to the university, and I grew up in Melbourne in the 1920s and 1930s.

I knew at the university a number of people who became quite well known as writers, later, Alan Moorehead for example was a friend of mine at the university. He went to England in 1933, the same year when I went over there to Oxford, only he went there and got a job on the *Daily Express* and rapidly made quite a name for himself in Fleet Street. He became a very well-known war correspondent. There was also Graham McInnes who was at school with me and at university, at Ormond College in Melbourne, he was an interesting person. He has written a number of books, you may know of one called *The Road to Gundagai* and another called *Humping My Bluey* about his life in Australia, although he spent most of his adult life abroad in London and then in Canada, where he became Canadian ambassador to the United Nations, when he died a couple of years ago, no, I'm sorry, not the United Nations, to UNESCO in Paris. He was a very vivacious and unusual person and he was the son of the novelist, Angela Thirkell, and he was living in Melbourne at that time. I used to see quite a lot of him when I was in England and also Alwyn Lee, Cyril Pearl were both young, rather—what shall I say, Bohemian characters in Melbourne at that time.

At [Melbourne] University, I was living in at Ormond College and this was the first time I've ever lived away from home and it's always a very exciting experience to a young person, to have that freedom. I didn't—I think I was a pretty frivolous student, the period I'm speaking of was the early days of the Depression and there was a great deal of arguing and speculating going on in all universities about the economic problems of the day and a great deal of political activity, some of my friends became communists and some became zealous Labor Party people and some were conservatives too, not so very many, but I didn't get very much involved in all that. I was rather more of a good time character and I used to enjoy the society of the girl students. I can't say that I was a great hit with them but I certainly was interested in them, and we used to have dances every month and parties constantly going on, a lot of those undergraduate things, I suppose they go on at all times. Certainly at Ormond College, one person that greatly impressed me was a remarkable man called Barney Allen who was the classics tutor there and he was an austere witty man. I think it was under him that I became exceedingly interested in Greek and Latin literature and I've always remained so ever since. If I write in a somewhat economical way, that is one of the reasons.

I studied English there and I came first in my year in English language and literature and that was—when I got the Rhodes scholarship, that was the subject

I elected to take at Oxford, rather regrettably, I think. I did not have much success over at Oxford. When I say I didn't have much success, I'm thinking in the rather special terms that they have at Oxford. There is a tremendous snobbery there about taking first class degrees or what they call a First, and at the time that I'm speaking of, the 1930s, it was very hard indeed to get a teaching job of any real value or of a very attractive kind unless you had taken a first class degree. I exaggerate a bit, perhaps, but I got a very mediocre sort of second class degree and I never was—the Oxford English school concentrated a great deal on Old English and Middle English and I was never interested in Old English or in Old English grammar and I think that is possibly one reason why I didn't do so well. I think I had lost some of my aptitude as a student because I was getting older at that stage, I think when I left Oxford I was twenty-five and I was not the same zealous little student, I was spending too much time on other things such as hanging round and talking to people and quite a lot of drinking. I don't mean that I was a sot but we used to spend a lot of time, we used to waste a lot of time, at Oxford, and so I couldn't say—the only thing I really valued from my years at Oxford, in the academic sense, was that I was a pupil of C.S. Lewis who was an amazing man, certainly the most brilliant scholar of a literary kind that I've ever had any contact with and a man of tremendously powerful, critical mind, in fact perhaps too powerful. I think he may have given me a bit of an inferiority sense, you know, being constantly exposed to the criticism of a man who certainly was immensely learned, in medieval literature particularly, one of the leading figures in the world in his field. He has written books which are still widely used in universities. I'm afraid this rather made me feel pretty small and I don't think I've ever really got over it. I don't think that is necessarily a good state of mind for a person to be in. I am very critical of my own writing, I rewrite and I think I do know when it's bad and try to do it again or improve it, and part of the background to this is that for a couple of years I was exposed every week to the criticism of this extremely acute—I wouldn't say at all severe or unkind person, he was a jovial, rather like a fat jovial medieval monk, but he just had this—not only an enormous background of learning and knowledge but a very quick and sharp razor-like mind, and it does make you cautious, critical of what you're saying, when you have got to face a man like that. I still don't know whether on balance it was good for me or not but I think that one of the few theories I've got about writing is that writers of a spontaneous and creative kind, where their writing just wells out of them, are not usually people who have been exposed to a very rigorous university education. In English literature, the outstanding examples would be Shakespeare and Dickens, I think. The tremendous spontaneity and fecundity that you get in creative writing with those, of course they were people of immense natural gifts, but the university-educated person, I mean, you get someone like Milton. Now, he wrote very much less and of course he was a magnificent poet but you notice there is none of that rushing freedom that these other writers had and he was, of course, one of the best classical scholars that England ever had, certainly in his time, an immensely

educated man. I think it is possible for writers to have perhaps too much education or it may be that even without the education, they would have been that sort of writer anyhow, an inhibited writer—this is just a thought by the way.

I left Oxford trailing clouds of inglorious glory, I suppose you could say. I had a great deal of difficulty in getting a job. I went back to Melbourne and I was wandering about there for three months and could not get any job at all. I finally moved to Sydney and went into newspapers, got a job on the *Daily Telegraph* newspaper and I have remained as a journalist in Sydney ever since except when I was at the war, but I was in journalism, I suppose, for about three years, three or four years, before I got into the war. I was not one of those very heroic characters who rushed to the colours at the first sound of the bugle in 1939. I went rather slowly and reluctantly, I finally went into the army in 1941.

I had been doing various kinds of journalism, I had been working for a while on the *ABC Weekly*, a paper which was started by a friend of mine, Sidney Deamer, but I really couldn't say that I'd found any sort of journalism that suited me and then the war just pushed everything of that sort completely out of my mind, I was in the army for a year, then I transferred to the air force and I was in the air force for about four years, three or four years. I transferred to the air force because I was very bored with the army. I was attached to Victoria Barracks in their public relations place and I didn't enjoy it very much. The air force provided excitement and very interesting activity. I was mad on flying, although I never qualified as a pilot. I did six months' training in Canada like many other Australians, I went to England and I was in Bomber Command, I trained there and did a tour of operations with Bomber Command, in the last year of the war that was, and after that somebody seemed to have heard of my name as being one of the more bookish members of the air force because I was summoned—after I'd finished my flying operations—I was summoned to London to help in the preliminaries for part of the official war history that dealt with Australians in Britain in Bomber Command, and I spent a year there connected with the official war history. I was no good at it, I very quickly found that I was not one of Nature's historians and I used to make use of it largely to enjoy myself in London, where a number of friends of mine were working and living at that time, Cyril Pearl was one, King Watson, Peter Gladwin, all old Sydney friends, and it was there that I met Ruth, my wife. She was in London working for the *Daily Telegraph* in their London office, just after the war. She was from Sydney, and that's what led to all this literary domesticity we've been talking about.

We were married in 1946. Now, I had been connected with newspapers, apart from my war service, for about seven or eight years then, and I hadn't really—you couldn't say I'd made any direct use of my academic work. I sometimes think that there is a very different situation today or certainly in the 1950s and 1960s for returning Rhodes scholars because so many new universities have been founded in Australia. There are so many more opportunities waiting for people with that sort of experience. It all seems very remote, that drifting and not exactly aimless but stagnant period.

I say it was stagnant, I don't mean to say that I didn't enjoy it because when you're young at the time, even if the place is economically in a bad way, you always have something entertaining to do.

Today there are more universities in Australia and they need many more people, so people coming back from academic work abroad don't step into that sort of vacuum that I found.

As I've said—I'm sorry if this sounds like a hard luck story, it's telling how it was—I went to the war, after the war I went to New York City where I joined the staff of the *Sydney Morning Herald* there. It was there that my wife came over from London to New York and we married. I kept on working for the *Herald* for about six or seven years, one of their so-called feature writers, writers of general articles. I don't think—I didn't really suit the *Herald* or the *Herald* didn't suit me. They were very nice and polite and so forth, but I never got any—I never seemed to strike any individual note there, I never established any kind of personal character in my writing there. It wasn't until I went to the *Daily Telegraph* when I was forty-two, I think, forty-three, that I began to feel that the sort of writing that was natural to me was acceptable to them, and I was encouraged to do it. They were very congenial people, I found, who didn't take journalism too seriously. Sir Frank Packer, the head of Consolidated Press, is a man with a considerable sense of humour and this, of course, was very important to me because he—and not only he but his editors—were goading me on to all sorts of pranks. They called on me to give a sort of light relief to their papers and magazines and from my point of view, that was very congenial and indeed, it was the opportunity of my life and I only regret that it came so late. I do feel that from the time I went to Oxford until the time I went to the *Daily Telegraph*, a period of some—let me see—twenty years, that I had all sorts of interesting experiences but as a writer, I didn't satisfy myself, I didn't find what I felt was the right thing for me to be doing. To use the modern cliché, I hadn't found my identity. I don't like using that phrase if I can avoid it!

Talking about this feeling of rather marking time, I'm only referring to my work, my writing. In private life, I regarded myself as being very fortunate, certainly in my marriage and my children, I have a very happy family life, although I married relatively late, I was thirty-five when I married. I was a young single man before the war, living mainly in fairly raffish newspaper society, a great deal of party-going and so forth but of a very frothy nature and I really didn't settle down, shall we say, until after the war. On that side I was very fortunate although, as I say, I do look back with some regret on almost twenty years of false directions or not quite finding what I wanted to do.

If I had got that first class degree at Oxford, I would probably have become an academic, Professor Campbell I suppose. Whether I would have enjoyed it on the whole as much as what I was doing, is very much open to question. I don't know that I would ever have fitted in very completely to the academic life, publishing learned books and so on. Perhaps it was all for the best.





Maie Casey  
(1892-1983)

Sydney, 15th November 1967

Hazel de Berg collection  
National Library of Australia  
Tape nos deB 336-7

THIS IS MAIE CASEY TALKING. I was born Ryan and my given names were Ethel Marian Sumner but fortunately my mother decided against any of those names and I was called Maie, m-a-i-e. I was born at 37 Collins Street in Melbourne in the house of my father, a surgeon, opposite the Melbourne Club. Very few people in these days, of course, are born bang in the middle of a principal street and spend much of their young life there.

As far as drawing and writing go, of course all children practically write and draw. I mean, it's a natural form of expression which unfortunately becomes tortured out of shape a little later on by too much instruction, very often, because anything that stems really from a person themselves is really better left alone. Anyone who has a continuous desire to draw or paint finds their own kind of way of doing it and doesn't really require to be influenced by other people, just as if you're writing a letter or something difficult, you keep right away from other people's efforts at writing letters or drafts of anything, you've got to do it for yourself, I think.

I had one brother who was eight years older than I was and who went away, really, when I was about seven to school in England, so I really didn't know him until years later when I liked him very much indeed, and he was rather interested to discover a sister. He was a very clever fellow and a great fellow, really. His name was Rupert Ryan, he had a very distinguished career and he finished up as a Member of Parliament in Australia, though he spent a great deal of his life out of Australia because of wars and because he was High Commissioner in Cologne after the First World War, and then Deputy High Commissioner at Cologne a bit later on, and went on to a kind of international life for a long time, but you could find him in *Who Was Who*, I expect.

One matter of interest, I think, was that my mother who was always, I suppose, ahead of her time decided when I was three or four that I should learn to speak French. Most of her contemporaries thought this was quite idiotic but I had a Swiss nurse from Neuchâtel in Switzerland from the age of four, for a good many years, and this is something of immense importance, I think, because I've since discovered—or even now I'm discovering—that for the next twenty years, to be able to speak French is of prime importance in our Australian development, for several reasons. French is the second language of most of the European countries and it is the second language of the countries to our near north, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam—in twenty years' time, probably more and more people, highly educated or educated people, will speak English but for the time being they only speak French, and more and more Australians have really got to be able to speak one of the other great universal languages beyond English.

I shared a governess as a child with the Mitchell girls. The Mitchell girls, their father was, I suppose then, a QC—no, to begin with a QC, and he was married to a Morrison. Well, the Morrison family of Victoria were quite a famous family, one of them became very well known in China, and nearly all of this particular family were very distinguished people, and I had lessons with them, which kept me pretty firmly in

my place, because they were all very intelligent and I had to smarten up most of the time, to keep going, you know?

As far as writing and painting go, as I said a bit earlier, all children write, they've got to write when they're having lessons, anyway, and I used to like writing essays very much and we had a very good governess who taught us, a Miss Davidson from Melbourne who was a really great woman and who was a perfectionist, and also taught one to think straight. She said if you can think clearly about anything, you can express yourself clearly, it's only when you haven't thought the thing out clearly that you wander round in a maze of words, so all of us really learnt a great deal from her. We had a very poor time from her if we didn't at least try to. She taught one to organise one's mind, and as far as writing goes, of course, as I say you have to write, everyone has to write, it's one of the two forms of communication and you've got, if you're going to survive, really, in many ways you've got to be able to do it fairly thoughtfully, anyway.

As far as looking at things, when you draw as a child, you have to look in order to draw and once you take delight in looking, and in looking at people's faces and the differences in their faces and the difference of everything you see, it becomes a part of your life to observe very carefully all the time. It's an instinct, really, it isn't a thing you make yourself do. Some people do things from an intelligent approach and some people do things from instinct. I happen, fortunately—because it's less trouble that way—I fortunately do most things from instinct.

One of the advantages of living as I did until I was fourteen in Collins Street, Melbourne, was that my father being a surgeon, I had very often access to his patients, because his surgery was practically through our dining room, so many of his patients I had personal contact with, which I found very interesting, and sometimes my father used to say, 'This is a nice little coot, Tom'—he called me Tom because he had no idea, he wanted nine sons—'This is a nice little coot and he's not very happy, have a word with him, try and make him feel a bit better,' so I used to try, anyway.

At some period of my childhood, anyway, we spent in the country, in the Mornington Peninsula and I really liked that better, of course, than I really liked the city. I liked that very much indeed, I liked horses, I liked this unique place that we went to, and I liked, really, being by myself. One interesting thing about being in the country and by oneself, really, was that all children, I think, are sensitive and all children get unhappy for some real or imagined reason, and I remember saying to myself very early in life, 'I'm going to like places better than people, because people can hurt one,' but of course, that wasn't what I did in the end, because I like people very much indeed, but I went through a period when I thought, Don't let me touch people, let me only touch things and look at things and places.

When I was fourteen I went to school in England, St George's, Ascot, a school that Winston Churchill had been to, it was a preparatory school for boys, and that was very interesting, really, because none of the girls in the school had ever met an Australian before and they expected me to be a bit more peculiar than in fact I was. I enjoyed it but anyone who has been to a boarding school goes through a particular

period of adjustment, I think. I'd been fairly spoilt before that, I think, and I got fairly firmly put into my place, which was extremely good for me, as indeed I suppose it is for every child or growing person who shares life with a lot of other people of their own age. You become much more humble in your approach to yourself, anyway.

Yes, I liked geography and history, geography because unless you know what sort of place people live in, you don't know what kind of people they're likely to be, they are conditioned by their surroundings, and of course geography is also part of history. The history of all the countries is conditioned by the soil from which they spring, and sometimes I hear nowadays that people don't learn geography, which seems to leave out a part of the basis of life, really. And geography is anyway interesting because it does open up a field of unknown places.

To go back to the beginning, my father was an Australian, his father had come out to Australia in 1839 and he was an Irishman from Kilkenny called Charles Ryan, and my father's mother was English, she was the daughter of a rather interesting man called John Cotton who was a Fellow of the Zoological Society in England and was much interested in history and was a very good drawer and painter, and his daughter Ellis Ryan\* was one of the distinguished flower painters of Australia, but my father, as indeed the whole of the Ryan family, seemed to have inherited more strongly the Irish characteristics than the English, in that they all had a strong Celtic streak in them which is a bit freer flowing, perhaps, than the streaks in people who have been brought up, certainly in the south of England. That is probably because England is a very small place with a good many people in it and they have to protect themselves, therefore they wall themselves in a bit more than the Irish who are less numerous people living in a reasonably large island. Mind you, I think the English are a very very great people and I'm constantly grateful for the streak of English I've inherited through my mother's side of the family. For the rest, I've got bits of Irish, bits of Cornish and bits of Welsh but the English side straightens and tightens up the whole thing, I think. Of course, nobody can really tell what they are made of. One thing I'm quite certain, anything that we ever do that is of any value is something for which we owe a debt to our forebears. We should be immensely grateful for what we inherit, we can do a certain amount with what we inherit, we've got to inherit something in the first place, and I think we've got to be immensely grateful for, if you like, the behaviour of our forebears, for their attitudes of mind, their capacity and desire for work, all these things do pass on, are inherited, I think. We are not, I think, as a whole nearly grateful enough for what we do inherit.

As far as writing goes, everyone I suppose writes for a different reason. Some people, novelists, say they hate writing novels and yet they do them superbly well. As far as I'm concerned, the only reason I want to write or have ever written is that I felt it as a personal need, not in me but a need for some degree of recording. For example, the first book I was associated with, which was *Early Melbourne Architecture* published in

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\* Marian Ellis Rowan (1848-1922)

1953, six of us got together in order to photograph and record buildings in Melbourne that were quite certainly going to be demolished fairly soon, because the movement was on, and this was one of the first books in Australia seeking to record certain of the earlier architecture of any city, I suppose, and it's been a most valuable thing because—a most valuable book, really, because if we hadn't had these 200 photographs with comments and a certain amount of writing, the smallest possible amount of writing to explain anything, nothing would ever have been known that any of these buildings existed at all or their history, and they are part of our history, our very very short history, and the reason that I was interested in doing that was that it seemed to me there was a need there, therefore I was only too happy to contribute, as I did, with a very distinguished bunch of five other people, towards this.

As far as the other book, *An Australian Story*, is concerned, that again was a need because our own children hadn't known my mother and father and there was much in our past that I thought really ought to be recorded and at least passed on to them. I knew they probably wouldn't be interested in it for a bit, because only at a certain time of life, as a rule, does one become interested in that sort of thing, but anyway, it seemed worth doing and it seemed also that other people, beyond one's children, might take an interest in it, because it was the story of a period, if you like.

I must make clear at this point that I'm only a weekend writer and only a weekend drawer or painter. It's the only time I ever have to do that sort of thing, and the occasional thing on the backs of envelopes in aircraft—I can't really be considered seriously, I think, as anything but a weekend worker at that kind of thing. As far as the books I've written, I've written them entirely at weekends and as far as drawing, that is true, I hardly ever do it otherwise, never have, simply because I've been married to a very active man and have had an extremely active life, and I just simply haven't had the time, it was quite impossible, even to get a weekend that I could sit and write a book in or contribute towards writing a book.

As far as writing a book is concerned, I suppose everyone who writes goes about it in a different way. The moment one conceives the idea of doing it, or the need perhaps in your own mind that this particular sort of book should be done, perhaps as a tribute to people, as a tribute to human performance and character—it's never just to write, it's got a purpose, otherwise I don't think I'd ever try to do it at all, but having decided that this perhaps should be done, one then maps out the compass of it and then one thing, serendipity, leads to another, but it is fairly well organised in thought in one's mind before I, for one, begin. I don't just sort of make it up as I go along, entirely. That's all, I think, due—this kind of mapping process—is due to Miss Davidson who taught me as a child, who tried to teach me at least how to organise my mind, the thing had to be thought out and couldn't be woolly or fluffy or incoherent. No two people agree about that but I don't think they are myself.

I've never kept a diary, it's nearly all memory plus reinforcing your memory by a bit of study, a bit of homework, sources that might be able to reinforce your memory.

As far as my third book, *Tides and Eddies*, my husband has always kept a diary

and for dates, I could refer to what he has written, but as for building the flesh upon the skeleton, that's memory and nothing really has been invented by me at all, it's perfectly correct, all of it, that I'm absolutely certain of. It's a sort of—one remembers the things that are important, I think, whether the same things are important to any two persons is another thing. The things that seem to you yourself to be important are the things that you always do retain, I think.

The reason for writing—again I'm only talking about myself—is really because of the need. Recently, as the wife of the Governor-General of Australia in Canberra, I have—we have been able to hang a painting of William Dampier, the navigator and meticulous observer, who was the first Englishman to visit Australia, in 1688, and the first man to describe in detail the condition and appearance of the natives, 'the poor winking people of New Holland who were forced to blink their eyes because of the abundance of flesh flies. They have no houses but lie in the open air without any covering, the earth being their bed and the heaven their canopy.' The long sweeps of the north and west coastlines of Australia are lightly fringed with European names, Flemish, German, Dutch, French, Wessel, Arnhem, Joseph Bonaparte, Levecq, Hautmann, Abrolhos, Zeewieck, Dirk Hartog, D'Entrecasteaux, Esperance amongst them, but at that time little appeared to attract the stranger because of dangerous reefs, hostile natives and few signs of water even by digging. The early navigators turned away from the land. The colonisation of the great continent came later from the south-east and through another race, and this of course was the beginning of this fantastic occupation of this great continent which had lain undisturbed by other than its own race for goodness knows how many millions of years, and we are all here through this very late discovery of this great continent.



Charmian Clift  
(1923–69)

Sydney, 8th June 1965

Hazel de Berg collection  
National Library of Australia  
Tape no. deB 105

THIS IS CHARMIAN CLIFT. I am an Australian. I was born in a little town called Kiama on the south coast of New South Wales. My father was English and he came out to Australia as a very young man, I think mostly because he hated the class system of England and he found Australia wide and wonderful and free. My mother was Australian of rather mixed ancestry, and they married, I think, in 1912. I was quite a late arrival in the family; that is to say, my parents weren't young when I was born.

I had a very happy childhood in that particular way Australian country kids do. I think particularly kids who live by the sea, in that we were very poor but we never felt poor, because we had the beach—I suppose it was my nursery and my playground too, and I was lucky in that I had parents who loved books, who loved music. The only thing was that we were very separate, quite alien in a way, and I think that's stayed with me all my life, in that we didn't have cousins and grandmothers and all the usual paraphernalia of people who had been born into a community where their ancestors have lived for a long time. In a sense, that has always stayed with me, I think I've always been on the outside looking in a little bit.

I've written ever since I could remember, I think. I can't remember learning to read and I can't remember learning to write. My mother used to write poetry which she always tore up and threw into the fireplace, and so I suppose I get my particular talent (if it is a talent) from her. When I was eight, I wrote a book of poetry, an exercise book, and illustrated it myself.

I can remember the first book that I really enjoyed at the same time, I mean apart from nursery rhymes and things, was also in that year when I was eight, and I read *A Yankee at the Court of King Arthur*. I can remember sitting in the back yard on the wood block, next to the tin shed that was the washhouse, and I can remember that the grass was tall and I can remember laughing my head off about the adventures of King Arthur.

Soon after that my father, who believed in excellence in all things, gave me Laurence Sterne and said, 'Read that and you're educated.' I read it and I loved it, although I didn't understand it at all, and that love stayed with me too.

So we always had books, and I was encouraged to write, but I never knew that a writer was something one could be in the way one could be a schoolteacher, for instance. I think my parents wanted me to be a schoolteacher. I think they thought I would be safe, and I didn't want to be safe at all.

So my childhood was happy and busy, and my adolescence was very unhappy, because by that time I wanted to get out of the small country town. I went to high school in a bigger country town, but by the time I was thirteen, I think I wanted desperately to get away from school, because I knew that what they were teaching me there wasn't what I wanted to know at all, and I wanted to get out into the big bad world and do—I didn't know what I wanted to do, but like most kids with any sort of creative ability I wanted it to be big, I wanted it to be enormous, I wanted to see the world, I wanted to do something, I didn't know what, better than anyone else could do.



At fourteen I left school and I went to a business school. I left school much against my parents' wishes. I went to a business school and learnt to type as a way of getting out into the big bad world and taking a job, so I took a job when I was fourteen, still writing all the time but only for myself, because no-one had ever said, 'You should be a writer,' and again, as I say, I didn't know that was a thing one was. Books existed and I loved books but I never thought that authors earned a living. I don't know how I thought they did it—in spare time, perhaps, as I did.

I seem to be harking back to childhood quite a lot, but the older I grow, the more I realise how I draw on it all the time, those very important formative years, and sometimes one thinks now, Oh, if I'd done that, this would have been different, and so on, but I do think it was tremendously happy and tremendously valuable.

I could go on for a long time about that, about the sort of family we were, and the fact that in this isolation and in those days and the fact of being rather an alien family in this small town, we cultivated our own amusements. We were very much at home all the time, so we read and we wrote and we painted and we drew, my brother and sister and I, but by the time I was fourteen my sister had gone away to Sydney to be trained as an artist, she was going to East Sydney Tech, and this to me was a tremendously romantic thing. I wanted to do that, too. Well, of course, there wasn't very much money for the other two of us once she had been sent away. The Depression was on—it sounds like the old Australian story, almost—so I knew that unless I went on with school, which I didn't want to do, I would have to make my own way in whatever it was.

Now, as I said, I was writing, and I didn't know that that was what I would eventually be. I had a girl friend in this small country town, at this time, and together we dreamed up the most glamorous plans. We were going to become nightclub singers, that was one, and we practised all Saturday afternoon on her balcony with the *Boomerang Songster*, singing Blues combinations that were probably terrible! I think my dearest ambition—and this went with the nightclub singing—was to have a long lamé gown, long earrings, and a white car with red upholstery. I never achieved any of those ambitions at all.

Then I thought, of course, too, that I wanted to be a film star, not an actress—I hadn't thought in terms of acting—I wanted to be a film star. At another time I wanted to be a dancer. But always, as I recall it, everything I thought of was rather in an exhibitionist sort of way, but my ambitions, as I said, were very large. The only thing I could do about them at that time was to become a stenographer in a garage where I kept the books, pumped petrol and so on. That lasted for a year or so, until I grew very bored with it, because that wasn't getting me any closer to Sydney and the big bad world. Then, again on the large scale, and although Dr Kildare hadn't been thought of then, I had been reading a novel about nurses and glamorous doctors, so I thought I would become a nurse, so I became a probationer nurse at Lithgow Hospital. Now, I found that intensely dramatic, intensely exciting, except that at

sixteen I couldn't stand discipline so I crawled out of a window one night and fled.

What happened next in my life—oh, I went back to my small hometown where my mother, of course, received me back as sweetly and reasonably as ever, and patched up my bruises and said, 'Well, never mind, think again what you really want to do.' Well, at this time a rather odd thing happened. My sister had taken a photograph of me on the beach and she had sent it, without my knowledge, to a magazine which was running a Beach Girl Quest, and I won it, which gave me a little bit of money, enough money to come to Sydney, and so with £20—£25, I think it was—in my pocket, I came to Sydney on the search for glamour. This is a country girl's search. I think country girls always dream of the big bad city and glamour in that sense.

I did a little bit of modelling around the place. I got a job as a theatre usherette at the Minerva Theatre, which was then a straight theatre, and I hung around backstage, and all that was marvellously exciting too. Then because of a series of things, I went back home for a while, and then finding that I hadn't made the grade on the stage and so on—there was a war on by this time—I thought, Now, that is it, here is my big stage, set for adventure, and what I will do is to join up. And I did, and I spent a total of 1110 days in the army, first as a gunner on anti-aircraft batteries, which I loved actually, because that was dramatic enough for me and I felt very important. Later on I was transferred to Melbourne to LHQ and I had a commission and was allowed to live out, so one of my ambitions was achieved. I had a little flat of my own, and in a strange way the army gave me my chance to write, because someone discovered that I liked writing, and the Ordinance Corps were running their own little magazine at this stage, and they asked me to write it for them, which I did, and found that I could do it very well, and I loved doing it. Then I began writing short stories, and someone told me where I should send them and I began having short stories published, so the strange thing of joining the army actually brought about all sorts of wonderful things for me.

After the war, I knew very definitely that I wanted to write, and the editor of the Melbourne *Argus* who had seen these little magazines offered me a job on the *Argus*, which I took. And of course this was in a way the most wonderful period of my life, because I was still very young and I was still young enough to be seeing all this in the terms of a novel and as great drama, and myself in character as it were, and this was furthered by my meeting with George Johnston who had been my favourite war correspondent and author for some considerable time. We married in 1946, both left the *Argus* and came up to Sydney. I knew by this time I was a writer and of course George encouraged me very much indeed. At this point I should have taken wings and started to fly but at this point also, of course, I was involved in having children, and for many many years I had this dual thing, the frustrations that are inevitable with any creative person being tied and bound and at the same time struggling, beating one's head against a wall to do what one wants to do. I think those are terribly difficult years for any young woman and for a young woman who wants to write or paint or anything else, even more so.

However, in that time I did collaborate with George on a novel called *High Valley* which was quite successful, and I began doing some radio work, radio scripts, which I could do at home.

We left for England in 1950. At the time I left Australia, I wanted desperately to leave. I didn't like Australia a bit. It had to me that very nasty feeling of post-war, I thought it was money-grubbing and greedy, all the values I thought were important didn't seem to be there any more. Besides, also, I still had that childhood ambition to go further and see more, and whatever the big thing was, it wasn't here in Australia for me, I knew that then.

So we went to England and I was terribly happy to go, and I remember sailing out and waving goodbye to the Harbour Bridge and thinking, I'll never see that again! Of course, I did see it again, but at that time I didn't think so.

I liked England, I was very happy in London, excepting that again there was the feeling of being bound and constrained, held by little children in an apartment or taking them to school or bringing them home or walking them in parks, and I felt that I was an outsider looking in, never part of it, never part of the London I wanted to be part of, because I wasn't free. However, again I did some writing, and collaborated on another novel with George, a novel called *The Big Chariot*. I did very little work of my own because I didn't have time, also in a sort of sense, in some peculiar sense, I felt at that time I was losing my identity completely, I wasn't quite sure who I was; nothing was happening in the way I wanted it to happen, until one day George resigned from the job he had in Fleet Street as a newspaper man and we went to Greece, and this was a big enough thing. It seemed very romantic, very audacious, and audacity carried us along for a little bit. We went with a year's living money, two typewriters and the two children, and for a year we got along on the strength of our own audacity, and we lived poor and we lived hard, we lived on beans, we made do with things, and everything was romantic and everything was wonderful, and the Greek light was everything everyone had ever said it was. So the first year passed in this sort of way, and we collaborated on another novel which was called *The Sponge Divers*. Actually, of course, that was a phoney collaboration because I was beyond the stage where I could collaborate any longer, I wanted to do my own work in my own way. This was probably very egotistical but most writers have this. In any case, I didn't have time because I was the one who had to learn the Greek and I was our interpreter and I was our cook, and I had this awful problem on my hands of two small children who were lost and bewildered and lonely in a foreign country, and it took about a year to adjust all that. Then I found that I was going to have another baby, and this plunged me back into a long long tunnel which I thought I'd just got clear of.

Our second year in Greece was very different from the first, because all the brave plans didn't quite come off, it was so much harder than one had ever thought it was. However, with a new baby, we had enough money just to buy a house; this was on another island, we had changed islands by this time. We bought that house and we stayed in it for ten years, and I think that after that second year we began to really

build a life for ourselves and it was a wonderful sort of life, in a way. For the first time in my life, apart from the time when I was a very young girl, I found time to do my own writing, I found time for a social life, I found time to look after my family properly. The days are very long there and life is very easy, very wonderful. Of course, we were about the first foreigners who lived on that island, and later, winter after winter and summer after summer, others came drifting in, buying houses, and there began to be established a foreign colony—I don't like that word 'colony' very much but I can't think of anything else to call it—a foreign colony composed of people who wanted to write and people who wanted to paint, drifters and exiles from all over the world. I think practically every country, every nationality, was represented there. It was a weird sort of way to live, until finally I think I began to feel like an exile myself. I hadn't until that point, because in spite of the fact that one was alien again, on that island for the first time I didn't feel like an outsider looking in, because I had built something for myself that was mine.

This sort of life is, as they say, fabulous, it is idyllic, it has so many things to recommend it, and of course for the children it was wonderful beyond belief. They never knew they were foreign. They were a little ashamed of us for being foreign but they didn't feel foreign themselves. But eventually one runs out of creative nourishment, I think. We were not taking in so much any more. We'd taken it in. I think we'd given out too much, too. We weren't very capable of giving anything out any more. Also, it never came off in the grand manner as one had so fondly dreamed. We were living precariously still, from year to year. With children growing up, all this sort of thing becomes very difficult, also their education to be considered, and then finally, as costs of living rose and rose because the foreign colony got more and more and more fashionable—more and more people, film stars, all sorts of people, began coming there, and our cheap little island that was ours was ours no longer.

Then we both—and this is quite strange—began to get homesick; that was after about fourteen years away from Australia, thirteen or fourteen years. We began thinking about Australia, I think first for the children and then because George was writing a book called *My Brother Jack* which made us think about Australia and talk about Australia, and try to remember Australian slang and so on, and through my own children I kept going back to my own childhood and my own beach and the sort of happiness I had then.

Finally—in some trepidation, admittedly—not quite sure, thought it was time for us to come back again. By this time I'd written four books alone, two travel books and two novels. I didn't feel that staying in Greece I had anything more to write about and I needed desperately to discover or rediscover something. I think George felt the same way, too.

So last year we both came back and brought the children with us. Coming back here, which in a sense is coming back to civilisation as far as I'm concerned after being away from it for a very long time, I find myself fascinated with more immediate forms of communication as newspapers and magazines, television, for instance, which I had

never seen before. I have always written, again excepting the time when I was a young girl when I could write all night if I wanted to, weekends or whatever, all my writing life I have been chained to a domestic situation that made me in a sense be a very disciplined person about writing. I write at certain set hours, I've always had to. When I was very young and had babies it was at night, but it couldn't be all night because I had to get up very early in the mornings. I've always had to allow myself so many hours a day when I was at my typewriter and I would like to say that that has always been sacrosanct—I mean, that was the general idea of it but it can't be, of course, with the demands of a family.

I write very slowly, I always have done, and the last novel I wrote, which was in Greece, took a terribly terribly long time; this was something to do with the fact of running out of creative nourishment because I ran into an absolute writing block, and it took me about three years, in little jumps, to finish that book, which was very bad.

Back here I find myself involved for the first time in a very very long time in deadlines, in writing urgently. This involves even stronger disciplines than I've ever faced before. In a way I enjoy it, I find it terribly demanding, but because I write a weekly newspaper piece, that piece must be in on time; because I'm involved in writing for television, those scripts must be ready on time. This means the family in a sense have got to go by the board slightly, which I don't think hurts them, I think they're all the better for it, they are more self-reliant, but I know that I myself am writing faster and better than I ever did because of this. I think a great deal of writing is to do with the more one writes the better and faster one can write. That doesn't mean that I believe in sloppy writing. I go over every draft, over and over and over, I sometimes make five drafts, six drafts, of everything I do before I'm satisfied.

For someone who came back to this country in such trepidation, I have found it fascinating, in fact it seems to me that this is the big thing I set out to find when I was a very young woman on the other side of the world, and perhaps I wouldn't have found it coming back if I hadn't been on the other side of the world. I think there is something involved in that, too.

Australia has changed a very great deal in fifteen years. I find it an imminent country. It is not so much to me what has happened as what is happening. I think that at any moment—this from conversations with all sorts of people, I don't mean just creative people—that something is about to bloom, something indigenous, something quite wonderful, something that is unmistakably ours, and it is so exciting for me to be part of that movement, even if it is an unconscious movement, towards something, something that is mine as well as theirs, something that is very very Australian.

As far as being a writer is concerned, since I've come back I'm not at all sure that I'm a novelist at all. Up until this point, I've not had a chance for very many years to be anything but a novelist. It's not that I won't write novels again, I think perhaps I will, but there seems to me there is so much to be done here, so much in the newer forms of communication. I think so much needs to be done in television, which at the moment is in a pretty sad plight here. I think there is so much needs to be done to resurrect our

film industry, which at the moment scarcely exists. I can see all sorts of things ahead in the theatre; I think I'd like to write a play. I know I'd like to write a film, I am writing television. I think that the more of us who can put our talents into these various media of this age and of this time, the sooner we will get towards a stage of establishing a culture in Australia that is real and that is indigenous. Anyway, I intend to experiment very much, and what is exciting is that it is all here to do. One mustn't be rigid about things. I think I want to go ahead and explore every exciting possibility that this country offers.



Laurence Collinson  
(1925–86)

London, 1st May 1970

Hazel de Berg collection  
National Library of Australia  
Tape nos deB 473–4

THE HUNGARIAN UPRISING caused many heartaches and many splits and all sorts of difficulties among the leading and not-so-leading Communist Party members in Australia, particularly, at this time, as far as I was concerned, in Melbourne. Among those who either left or were expelled were Stephen Murray-Smith and Ian Turner and because Stephen had been editing the *Realist Writer* at the time, he continued to edit it, only now, or just previously, it had become known as *Overland*, which is of course still functioning as a well-known Australian literary journal. My own membership of the party had lapsed rather well before this time, so I've never really felt that I excommunicated myself. I had in fact wanted to continue my membership, if only out of a sort of loyalty to a cause in which I believed as a reasonable cause. I never felt the great mystique that many communists think the party possesses or that many anti-communists feel is the outrageous thing about the party. To me, socialism, which I understand is the aim of the Communist Party, merely means the putting of all the resources of society to a rational use, taking everything out of private hands and—well, rationalising it to the greatest good for the greatest number of people. It does not to me mean the repression of various sections of society, it doesn't mean murders and executions and all the propaganda activities that give communism the ugly face that it often appears to have. It is simply a more orderly and more rational way of life, and to the extent that I believe this is still possible, to that extent I think I am still a communist, even though I have not now for many years been a party member or even involved in party activities.

However, this is a digression. Stephen, as I said, continued as editor of *Overland*, although there was an attempt to take it from him and make it a party magazine. However, he resisted this and I think his resistance has really proved beneficial, not only to the magazine itself but also to the Communist Party, because it has provided a platform, an independent platform, for many radical ideas, and usually a very sensible platform, as well. It has also, of course, by being independent, extended its range of subject matter and contributors, so that one can still write on almost any subject in *Overland*, which one would certainly not have been able to do if it were still an organ tied to a particular platform.

After several years teaching, I'm not sure of the exact number of years, I had been living away from home for a large part of this time but my father developed cancer, which was not diagnosed early enough for proper treatment, and it seemed to me necessary then to stay at home. I felt certainly I could not leave at this particular point, although my mother and father did not understand the seriousness of the situation, but I was a good friend of the doctor who was our GP and through him I was able to follow every aspect of the case. It was very much of a strain, and I applied to go to some other kind of work with the Department, and fortunately I had a sympathetic headmaster, whose wife had herself recently died in similar circumstances, and he sent me for an interview to the Publications Branch of the Department, and within a few weeks

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\* The first tape in this interview was blank.



I had settled down as a member of the editorial staff with the Publications Branch of the Victorian Department of Education, a job which I enjoyed, I think, for about two years.

With me in the job after I'd been there, I think, about a year was Ron Simpson, another poet and a very good one, and also working very close to us in the Department of Agriculture, on the other side of Treasury Place, was Peter Mathers whose novel *Trap* has attracted so much attention and who is such a very good writer. The three of us frequently used to have coffee at one of the nearby shops and discuss various matters of literary or other interest.

Ron Simpson was a member of a sort of unorganised group of poets who included Vincent Buckley and Chris Wallace-Crabbe, Alexander Craig and one or two others. The names are all in the volume *Eight by Eight* which came out about 1962 or '3, at any rate I'm sure it's on the library shelves. It was a collection to which all eight members contributed eight poems of his own choice too. This was a very friendly little group despite the fact that most of us had ideas that were radically different from each other about poetry. I had been somewhat wary of—I can't say joining because it wasn't a group that one really joined—perhaps belonging to, because of the presence of Vincent Buckley who had reviewed my first book in extremely unfavorable terms. That was the book *The Moods of Love*. However, closer acquaintance with Vincent modified, I think, both our opinions of each other, and I do look back on this bit of disorganisation as being an example of the sort of group that is valuable to writers. We used to discuss each other's work on the most critical terms. I'm just remembering that David Martin also was a member of this group. David was formerly very committed to the left, and I think he and I were probably the only two of this group who really were, not extreme in our views but certainly much further left than the other members; but we all used to meet, and nobody had any hesitation in criticising anyone else, and although it may have hurt a little now and then, we knew that it was not done to punish or to deliberately hurt (or to hurt deliberately), so we took it in the spirit in which it had been intended with, I think, beneficial results to all of us.

Now, about this first book of poems: I had, together with David Martin and one or two others, been part of Stephen Murray-Smith's group of literary advisers for *Overland*. Stephen had been greatly encouraging and I had written quite a lot of poetry, publishing it in *Overland* and in other places, and one of the things Stephen wanted to do was to publish books, and *The Moods of Love*, if I remember correctly, was the first and I think one of the most successful books that he did in fact publish under the *Overland* imprint.

The poems in *The Moods* go back many years, I think I probably rejected all that I had written up to about my middle twenties but a lot that I had written after, up to that present time I'm talking about, went in, which I think perhaps I shouldn't have done because a lot of it was highly emotional, rather badly stated and to some extent I could not but agree with Buckley's assessment of the book, at least after I'd had time to let his criticism settle down a little. The book is, as you'll see, divided into three

parts, what I call the social poetry, the personal poetry—that is, poetry about people—and love poetry. It was in *The Moods* that I published the long collection of sonnets which gave the book its name. These were the result of a very passionate, frustrating love affair that I had been having and which had ended in one way disastrously, because I developed a chronic asthma which simply would not go away and put me into hospital, and no treatment seemed at all effective. It obviously had a psychological rather than a physical base. I had been suffering from asthma since about the age of, I think, seven or eight, and I connect my attacks very much with the complex between my mother and father over the various problems of finance and, well, the more material things that can arise when one half of a marriage acts very impulsively, particularly with regard to money and gambling, while the other longs for a settled-down life with everything given its place and security being the main object. My asthma had not been particularly bad in recent years and I thought it had more or less disappeared, but this love affair brought it back very severely and it only started to go away long after—a number of weeks after the hospital had given up all hope of being able to treat it, and had sent me home; but I saw the hospital psychiatrist at his home, and told him something of my personal life, and almost miraculously, I think, from that day the asthma started to fade away. I can't say that one was the inevitable effect of the other but it seems very much like it.

What did happen was that my illness had drawn me closer, and perhaps I had unconsciously intended or hoped it would do so, to the friend I was in love with, and we did then have a relationship that lasted a couple of years, although I think that on my side it was much stronger than on the other. The facts of this relationship are set out in the sonnets in a mildly disguised form. They are also set out in a play that I wrote called *The Selda Trio* in a very disguised form, but given the clues I have offered, the play can I think be understood on this basis as well as I hope on its own level. *The Selda Trio* was the first play of mine that received any general sort of recognition. To my astonishment, when I got home one evening, or it may have been when I woke up one morning, I really can't remember, my father pointed out a piece in the paper which gave the winning entrants of the competition that had been conducted mutually by General Motors Holden and the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust. My name was among the prizewinners and it really was the last thing I had expected to see. The other winners, I think, have more or less drifted away from writing, except Alan Seymour who of course became even more prominent—no, this is wrong, he was prominent even then, because *One Day of the Year* had already been recognised as a very fine play and produced widely, and I was pleased for that reason also that I found myself in Alan Seymour's company. Alan, by the way, also having become a close friend over the years.

The success that *The Selda Trio* had in the competition led me to become more hopeful about the chances of production. I had been writing plays for a long time now and a great many had been discarded. This was the first sign since my earlier youth that I had written something in which other people could be interested, and I looked

forward to a production. It was understood that the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust would, because they had been the judges and they were, of course, the organisation presumably devoted to the establishment of Australian drama, that they would in some way get the play a production. However, it took a long time but I did finally discover that this was one of their least interests.

I have felt, and do still feel, that the way to help an indigenous drama to establish itself is to give the playwright time to work, time to write, and also to help with production. Showing international companies, supporting opera and ballet, worthy as these may be and important as these may be, are surely subsidiary to the idea of creating a real Australian drama that can be recognised as such by the people for whom it was written. This I think the Trust has failed to do, and it is obvious from the state of current drama in Australia that it's something that still requires to be done, irrespective of the grandness of the Opera House or the ballet performances that are given, and I say this as someone who loves ballet particularly. But writers must be encouraged, and you can only do this in one real way, and that is by giving them security for a time in which to write.

However, *The Selda Trio* opened. Some people thought it was very—oh well, shall we say a very good play, other people thought it rather dull, some people thought it sentimental. There were a number of reactions, but in general the press did not attend, although invitations were sent. I found this happened quite often in Australia with plays put on by groups that are—who are, shall we say frankly, amateurs even though their ability might be near or of a professional standing. The critics would much rather review a play that has come hot from Broadway or the West End with an almost totally overseas cast, and give themselves lots of space in which to do it, than to go out to the suburbs and review encouragingly or critically or in some way to show that they're interested, an Australian play that may be part of the Australian heritage eventually. I don't think I'm alone in thinking in this way, and the history of Australian drama, even from its very basic starts, basic beginnings, indicates this. One just thinks of the various unfortunate dramatists who were even unluckier than I was in the 1900s, in the 1920s. I'd better not keep on that tack because it is something which I—yes, it's a chip on the shoulder with me!

But the play did lead to other things, happily for me. I was invited to a UNESCO-sponsored drama conference in Adelaide at the time of one of the Festivals so that I was given a trip to Adelaide, accommodation and various enjoyable activities, completely free of expense to myself, and I was fortunately able to persuade my editor to let me go for that week, on the grounds that it would be useful to have a member of the staff there, and I'm very grateful to him that he let me go without any hesitation.

This drama conference was a very exciting event. It had a number of playwrights there and a number of producers, people from television and radio and the ABC generally, and some very exciting ideas sprang from it. At the conference were people like Richard Beynon and Oriel Gray and Oriel's husband John Hepworth and a number of other people, but the one person in particular I have reason to remember is William

Stirling who was a producer for the Australian Broadcasting Commission, both radio and television. Will spoke on the platform as I did myself, but he made an appeal. He said words to the effect that, Here are all you writers, busy about the stage and so on, but you've yet to come to terms with television, which is going to be one of the most important outlets for dramatists in the future. If any of you care to submit a play to me that might be suitable, I can assure you it will receive very earnest consideration. Will told me much later that I had been the only playwright of all those present, and there must have been a dozen or so, who went away, wrote a television play and showed it to him, and in fact he liked the play so much that he managed to persuade the ABC to produce it with him as the director.

The play, called *Uneasy Paradise*, was televised I think about the year after the conference, and it brought me a number of good notices and encouraged me to continue further with this particular aspect of drama. I did write one half-hour comedy series for commercial television, that is to say one episode of a comedy series, and I did a couple of very brief film scripts for a commercial company that was turning out material for one of the government departments. I also did an adaptation of a Noel Coward play for the ABC—I can't remember the title of it, but I mention these further little jobs simply because I was trying to raise enough money to come abroad and they all helped me to do so. However, in the field of serious writing I had no further luck.

When I tried to write more plays for the ABC, they had to go through a gentleman who was more or less in charge of drama, and my encounters with him were things I prefer not to recall. He had so little feeling for what people were trying to do. He was obviously very much afraid of putting anything on to the screen or over radio that might be misconstrued. This of course has been a defect in all Australian art, except perhaps painting, in that the Australian public are regarded as somewhat infantile and not available to receive ideas of any maturity, so that everything must go through some sort of mill in order to make the ideas more palatable. This of course can be seen at its peak in the censorship of books that here in London are regarded as nothing special in the way of radicalism or pornography or whatever you like to call it but are quickly seized by the Australian Customs and forbidden to enter the country. Until this sort of thing ceases, I don't think Australian literature, drama or some of the other arts are likely to go very far, because it is only when the writer, particularly has complete freedom to say what he wishes that we are going to obtain a mature literature. That same freedom of course is also granted to the would-be reader or viewer, he doesn't have to read or view if he doesn't want to, and need not be protected by people who are so full of feeling for him that they want to even prevent him looking at covers.

I had been intending to come to London for a number of years, I'd even booked a passage before my father became ill but naturally his death postponed the trip for several years, because I was unable to leave my mother in that particular situation. However, I did make the break finally and landed in London in April 1964, and have been here ever since. I had come full of hopes. I had a very small amount of money

behind me, mostly, I regret to say, due to the good nature of my cousin Eric, who saw with me that the trip was important to me. There is much said about expatriate Australians and I do regard myself as an expatriate, not as an Englishman, although I was born here; but how is an Australian writer who wants to go on writing in certain forms, particularly that of drama, to earn a living in his own country? This is almost totally impossible in Australia unless one does a very large amount of hack work, and even then only a very tiny number of writers can benefit. Although the conditions in London may not be much better generally for writers, at least one is aware that the opportunities are so much greater, one has made the breakthrough and also one is constantly receiving new ideas, constantly watching new plays, constantly reading new books, seeing the best of television, and all of it unhampered by the restrictions that are imposed on Australian citizens.

In regard to the writing side of my life, the one cheerful note during those first miserable—that first miserable year [in London], was that Will Stirling asked me for a script which he could do as a sort of final script before he left the Australian Broadcasting Commission. It was to be a poetry script, possibly based on my book *The Moods of Love*, and it was to be a vehicle for his wife, who had been and still is a television actress, and I put together a number of poems with various links, and it was produced by the Australian Broadcasting Commission in a special television arts program with, I think, probably some success, because it was also repeated.

The whole six years I have spent in London have in general been fairly depressing years. I was not very happy at the job I had, although it brought in enough money to keep me going with the various responsibilities that I had.

Another enjoyable event during these recent years was the publication in 1967, exactly ten years after my first book of poems, of my second collection, which was called *Who Is Wheeling Grandma?* The title is something of a gimmick but I'd noticed in England that titles were very important, and the title is not altogether different—or, it does arouse some of the emotions that the book contains and I think is comparatively relevant. This book was again, thanks to Stephen Murray-Smith, published by *Overland*. I don't think it has gone as successfully as the first one but the edition may all go in time. It's a much more spare, much more austere book than the earlier one. I think I perhaps took too much note of my previous critics and left out a considerable amount of material that was perhaps more emotional than need be, but at the same time I don't think this is a bad thing. I have, I think, learned to be much more controlled in language, or in the language of poetry anyway, and not to give way to those passionate excesses that do mar many parts of *The Moods of Love*. This isn't to say that *Grandma* is by any means a perfect book. It is not; but it contains a number of poems that I still like.

During this period I applied for more jobs than I can enumerate, all with—failing always to get one, although I was close on a number of occasions. I tried two or three times for an Arts Council grant, with failure again. I'm not sure why this is,

I think perhaps because I submitted too much work rather than not enough, and the work varied in quality. Perhaps if I had submitted only one or two plays and a few poems, I may have been more successful. But it does seem to me in general that the Arts Council, not to mention the various other bodies which are responsible for publishing work of writers or producing the work of dramatists, do to a large extent choose their—the people to whom they present their benefactions on the basis of personality—they have to have a fairly, what can I call them, enjoyable personality, something that radiates instant friendliness, or seems to indicate instant and universal knowledge, and also to people who have friends in influential places. Perhaps I'm being a little too denigrating here, because for one of my applications I did have Arnold Wesker as a sponsor but even Arnold they turned down in this particular instant.

I had one English television credit, and while rehearsals for this were going on, I mentioned to the story editor that I had another idea for a play about Zionism. As Thirty Minute Theatre's speciality is plays with social or political subject matter, this instantly appealed to them and they commissioned me to write it, and I did, and it was subsequently produced under the name of *Love in Israel*. It got several good reviews, or reviews that are good by English standards, but was attacked fiercely in the *Jewish Chronicle* as being a complete misstatement of the position of Israel in the world. This is a subject that interests me very greatly, because although I am, and in fact never have been except as a child, a practising Jew, and I think all religions are nonsensical, the emergence of a new state is something that does interest me, and the fact that I am supposed to be in some way associated with this new state by the mere fact of having been born a Jew, is something also that troubles me, and it was really about this that I wrote in this particular play. I feel very strongly that the Arabs who were in Palestine should not have been dispossessed in the manner in which they were, and also that it is possible for Jews and Arabs to live together in some sort of harmony. This of course is a position which is to some extent supposedly held by Zionists in words but not in actions, and of course, as I wrote this play really to counter my own feelings of abhorrence at the way the English Jewish intellectuals rallied round the cause of Israel during the Seven Days War, I naturally expressed what I felt much more strongly than perhaps was wise. Nevertheless I am, as I said, satisfied with what I did, but so far there have been no more engagements although I am constantly bombarding the television studios with ideas for plays and series and whatever else it is they are prepared, perhaps, to accept.

I've made a number of useful contacts who may be helpful in the future, and the mere fact that I'm saying this seems to me to indicate what the situation is in this country, that one needs to make so-called useful contacts and to use every known means to influence these people; instead of just sending the work and having it looked at objectively for what it is, one needs to show the people that one is someone whose work is worth producing. This seems to me totally foreign to the writer as a creator. I really cannot consolidate the two opposite ideas in my mind. I do the thing but hate

doing it, but I know it has to be done. Perhaps it's good for me to do it, I don't know.

Apart from these plays, I've had a number of poems published in various magazines and anthologies in both England and Australia, and I must say I earn more by poems sent to Australia than I ever earned by them being published when I lived there. I think this is because several newspapers have recently taken to publishing poetry, and they pay quite well. So, too, does Grace Perry's little magazine to which I have reason to be grateful. These small sums, slender as they may be, have been extremely useful at moments that they were received.



Ion Idriess  
(1890–1979)

Sydney, 25th November 1974

Hazel de Berg collection  
National Library of Australia  
Tape nos deB 792–4



I AM ION LLEWELLYN IDRIESS, known to all my bush friends as Jack because in my day there were no Ions in Australia, that was what my schoolboy mates called a Little Lord Fauntleroy name. When I was a lad, there were no telephones, let alone wireless, let alone the moving pictures, let alone motorcars or flying engines. Some of my mates outback used to call me Mad Jack for some of the things I used to do, and the natives used to call me—that is, the Aborigines—Cyclone Jack because they reckoned . . . what's the native name for a cyclone? Anyway, no matter, but they reckoned I was a cyclone because I was too lazy to step out of my own shadow.

At Lismore, we lived three miles out of town in a little house there right in front of enormous scrubs that were all over Lismore in those days, the cedar forests. The men were hauling the trees to the pits and sawing them into planks with crosscut saws, which was how they sawed planks in those days. [From Lismore we went to Tenterfield, then to Broken Hill.] I went to a big public school in Broken Hill which was, of course, a great city to me. As boys there, before they'd take us as boys, to help us in our future career and help the mine in developing its chemists, we had to go to the Broken Hill Technical College, that is, the Broken Hill School of Mines, and work there at night time, learning assaying and chemistry and metallurgy and physics. Physics in those days was a science just coming in. Physics is now one of the main sciences, I understand, it enabled the builders of the ships to the moon to make their planes.

I left Broken Hill because of typhoid fever. And worse luck, I survived it. I was only a boy, but Mumma caught it, of course, nursing me, she didn't want me to go to hospital. Anyway, Mumma caught it from me, and she died. I finally recovered and I ran away from home then, I wouldn't stay in Broken Hill any longer. I went to sea.

My main recollections of being at sea was the universe. The whole bloody sky used to come down and here was me up in the crow's-nest in the lookout. It was a paddle-wheeler, a paddle-wheel steamer, up to Newcastle was our first port of call and then up the Hunter River in that boat. All my memories of the sea was that you always got better tucker than on land, but the quarters were cramped.

Just walking about the streets was interesting in those days. I used to like to go to the mining museum and look it over, studying as best I could all the minerals in the cases that I didn't know and hadn't met out in the bush while working for the [Broken Hill] Proprietary where I saw a lot. [After I left the ship] I wanted to get out to some mining place and start out prospecting, but I didn't have any cash to do that, let alone for a boomer plant. So I took a train and I got a job on a way-out selection for the magnificent sum in those days of five shillings per week and tucker, from daylight until dark. I suppose I was on the road about twelve months or a bit more, that was all.

I heard a rumour that there'd been opal found at a place way out in the bush called Lightning Ridge, and away I was after it then. I carried a swag to Lightning Ridge.

I camped down on the bank of the Namoi. Anyway, I had a fifty-mile tramp

ahead of me, and about the middle of the day it was pretty hot, and I saw a cloud away at the far end of the road, coming towards me, pretty rapidly. And as it come, I heard the bull horn, every now and again this blasted bull horn was coming along the road, and the cloud of dust was coming faster and faster and bigger and bigger, then the sound of voices, and a banjo going hell for leather. Of course, it was Cobb and Co's coach from Lightning Ridge to Walgett, and as they come along they were all yelling and singing, and they waved their hats and yelled. I stood aside and got smothered with dust as I waved back.

It was all heavy timber, Lightning Ridge in those days, and a new rush, shafts were going down as men were coming every day. Quite a lot of shearers used to come there. I followed a shed when I went broke and got a beginner's pen and I put in eight months there and didn't get a solitary stone, that's what we called opals, stones.

It was a tent town. When it came to be a bit civilised, they stripped the stringy bark trees and made huts. Then you had a real palace, if you had a hut.

I might have been close to twenty [at that time] but I'm a bit doubtful if I was. Born in 1890.

I left in 1910 to go to Queensland. I landed up at Nigger Creek, on the Wyldé River, which was a big tin-mining population at the back of Cairns. I was there quite a while, made a living at tin, the usual way, pick and shovel and sinking a shaft; sometimes driving a tunnel. From there I took the boat up to Cooktown, the Cape York Peninsula, there was bush goldfields way up the peninsula, right out in the wilds, and about thirty miles out of Cooktown, about thirty to sixty miles away. That's how I got right out into the back country, and from the east coast right away across to the west coast, that's 2000 miles of bush. Of course that was heavily populated with the wild folk in those years.

We got on very well by understanding the Abos and their point of view and we were never badly harmed by them. They did try to get us in the night time and they'd perhaps spear a horse or two every now and then.

From there I heard of a new rush in West Australia, and of all places in the world, I doubled back to Brisbane, which was the quickest way to civilisation, and to go to a new rush, a prospector must be quick. Gold was the main attraction over there.

I went to Broome, the most fascinating district in all Australia. It was a fascinating place, this mixed town, and there was work about. There's a bit of romance in pearl thieving, it was all there and there was all the different coloured races there, all lively, nothing subdued or anything about them, all were what we call cheeky which our white people are naturally born to be, damn cheeky; all self-assured and all making good money; and always something doing in all sorts of ways. There were questionable lanes, you had to be pretty careful. All sorts of queer-looking craft and of course, the wonderful pearling fleet would always be there. It was a happy life. By Jove, I am sorry the damn wars broke up that interesting part of life in Australia, like they did the old Darwin, just the same, and Thursday Island. They were a romance out of the proper book of romance — Thursday Island, Darwin, Wyndham and Broome in particular,

the port of pearls. There are some nights I remember, but a lot I don't. The Malay girl: for some strange, unexplainable reason, she thought me not too bad either. Beautiful, shady coconut palms, with glorious shadows, and the stars coming through the branches up above.

Some inconsiderate damn Turk threw a jamtin bomb over the trenches at Gallipoli and a few splashes from that dirty thing got in my wrist and stayed there. A nasty wound it was, too, and I was going to write books for a living, when the gold mining was finished, I'd written my first book and made a name for it. I'd been cornered and hooked, and as they say about bullocks, the yoke had been put on me thoroughly and trimmed my wings for wandering alone, so I had to write books or find pearls or gold or something for the hungry little mouth that was soon going to be coming over in Sydney, see. I was forty-two when I come out of the bush and came down to Sydney with a shammy of gold . . .

I was outside Cooktown at this tiny place called The Laura where I strayed in those days, with a bridge over the Laura River. I let my horses go and said to the local storekeeper, there was a bush store there, 'There's my horses, they've been good to me. I think I'm coming back, I can choose whether I die like a dingo beside a hollow log and die happy, or whether I put the other half of my life in the city, and know both the bush life and the city life.'

The first time I went round New Guinea were trips with recruiting boats. New Guinea is another continent, you know, and it's surrounded with hundreds of thousands of islands; it's an enormous place, there's 10 000 islands crossing the top of the Strait alone, and another 10 000 up in that Coral Sea. It's an enormous area, those islands, what we call Indonesia, and New Guinea is the largest island in the world. I really think it's a continent because there's a doubt now, Iceland which is a little bit longer is a number of floating islands. At least, that's what geographers are saying.

That was the first time I went, part of the way up the Fly River. The Fly River tribes never evolved enough to make arrows with steadiness, accuracy, straight aim, speed and force, enough to go through the armour, so they invented a cuirass against arrows, and apparently a good one. What the hell was I talking about?

Prospectors and missionaries never got on well. For instance, I thought a hell of a lot of those lovely grass-skirted little girls, all the prospectors did. Anyway, where was I? What he was interested in [MacFarlane—the Wandering Missionary] of all things in the world, meeting me, a prospector, who had done so many writings for the *Sydney Bulletin* on outback topics and that sort of thing, he was interested in literature, Australian literature, to build up an Australian literature, and he wrote many short stories and interesting articles about the islands which the old *Sydney Mail*, which was a very good magazine down here, it should never have gone out of print, it was very good but it was fifty years before its time, like the old *Lone Hand* was, too; he wrote many—and by God, they were good—articles. One reason was, they were all fact. Truth is stranger than fiction, you know, I've proved that in my life many and many a time.

I started to write books then, and I used to send down articles to the *Lone Hand* and the *Sydney Bulletin* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

You can call me a liar, I suppose I'd do the same myself if I didn't know any different, other men have been called liars for the same. Your pick would go through and there'd be a little road embedded in this sandstone, alive, thirty, forty, fifty, 100 feet below, in the solid rock. How those toads—they'd live for a few moments afterwards—how they got there and were still alive, nobody could ever imagine. Anyway, that's something quite apart.

[I was] married, and working as a freelance journalist in competition with all these trained journalists of Sydney. I thought it was absolutely ridiculous but there was nothing I could do. I went down—I'd been a member of the Wharf labourers' Union in Thursday Island, I'd helped to load every ship that landed at Thursday Island on those occasions when I went there to fill up the tuckerbags, and I thought I'd certainly be eligible for the union down here. By Jove, no.

Anyway, all I could use was the pen. The very thing that I thought was my ignorance was what gave me a livelihood and a quick and easy one, because I knew so much about the islands and interesting people in the islands, and our own great big continent and the wild places which weren't known of here. I could sell any paragraphs and articles that I wrote, and then stories with facts in them. So it's funny how life turns out at times.

No, wait a minute. While we were still on the island, one day I saw the tip of the logbook of the [inaudible] in the sand. I picked it up and I thought, 'Struth, I could write some pars on this, while I'm looking for a boat. And I used to sit on that peak every day, spying out for some pearling lugger to come along, you see. Well, I sat up there with a lead pencil and I started scribbling, day by day, a diary on the island.

I got back to Sydney and a bird man, he's very well known now, Alec Chisholm, wild and woolly, bad-tempered, but absolutely mad enthusiastic at his job. I've seen him sitting up a tree, boiled by the sun, frozen by the night cold, with a silly lookin' photograph machine in his hand taking a stupid looking picture of a mother bird with her squawking young, hours and hours of numb misery. Anyway, intellectual men do those sort of things, they tell me, at times. That's Alec Chisholm the bird man and he looks like a bird, too.

I scribbled out this book. I would have gone barmy with my barmy mate [Charley], because when the gas got into his stomach he used to be turned into a madman. We used to catch fish there, by the way, so big they broke the fishing line we had. I got to Sydney some time after we'd been taken off the island, a Japanese pearling schooner came along and took me off. Charley wouldn't [come]. He said, 'Why should I go back to bloody civilisation? They've done nothing good to me, they've only made me a bloody slave and a flamin' hungry one at times. I'm happy here. I like the fish. I like those tiny birds at the waterhole, the big open sky, and I can do what I bloody well like. Why should I work and slave up among wild niggers and wilder white men,

looking for bloody gold which I might never find. To hell with you, you go back with the Jap if you like.' Which I did, my oath.

Well, this chap, the birdman bloke, he was then the editor of the Sydney *Telegraph*, he was a bigshot, one of the big men of the city, and I wrote up to tell him about a funny little bird I'd seen hopping about up there. Chisholm didn't know that bird so he wrote to the *Bulletin*, 'This mad bloody wanderer who sometimes comes down to Sydney and writes things, will you send this letter to him?' So I got this letter, saying when I came to Sydney to come and see him [and tell him] whatever I knew about this bird. He spoke to me and I told him about where I'd come from and about the island, and he said, 'You ought to write a book.' I said, 'I have written a book, I wrote it up on the peak of Hammock Island. There you are, it's here.' He took me straight across the road to Angus & Robertson's, right up the stairs, still holding on to my arm, and away at the end was our lovely old Miss Betty, she was a dear old girl, boss of all the young girls, and even in those days they needed a boss. She was a lovely old girl.

Beside her was standing a great big long giant of a man with a great big black Ned Kelly bloody beard and a very austere, severe, distrustful-looking countenance. Chisholm ran me up beside him and said, 'Here you are, George, I've got your dream, what you wanted, at last. The great Australian novel.' I looked at this bloke, and this was George Robertson of Angus & Robertson, the founder and all. I told him my little story and I said, 'I'm bugged if I know whether it's a book. I reckon it is. What do you think?' He said, 'I've read many a bloody story like that.'

Mind, I'd just come down from the bush, down in the city I suppose I looked—of course, they thought us bushies were, you know, half nuts.

Anyway, he took the manuscript to read. [Eventually] he said, 'I'm a bit interested in that awful manuscript, it really is.' Mind, I fully accepted that, because it was written with a stub of a pencil up on top of a bloody hilly peak out in the wild bloody sea. He said, 'One condition.' So I said, 'Yeah?' And Chisholm said—he was true blue, he was very keen on Australian literature—'No conditions.' 'No conditions, with a manuscript like this?' he says. 'Look here, young fellow,' and he spoke to me, 'no book would ever sell, particularly in our Australia, unless it's got love in it. It must have love.' I said, 'What do you think I could do, make love to a tomtit or a tiger shark?'

So I went home, and I thought it out. So I brought in a girl from Cairns and it's just like a love story written by a young lad, sandwiched in between primitive, red hot stuff, you see.

The end of that story: some years after, when I'd published five or six books—the big man was a true blue man, the big man with the whiskers, George Robertson, he admitted to all and sundry, including the press, that it was he that ruined *Madman's Island* and said, 'Now, I'm going to try and rejuvenate it.' And he did. He let me cut out all the women then, and put it on the market in a new edition, and it sold and it's been selling ever since.

[All of my books—] they're all bloody fact. They're all simple human life experience of the times and environment of that day and this wonderful continent of ours.

I never liked writing. I'd sit down feeling grumpy and narked but I'd know beforehand what I was going to write about, it had been part of my life so it was simple to sit down and put it at the point of a lead pencil. If I'd ever what I call written a book, I would have really written books. I've never liked writing. I did it when I had to, because I had a little girl and we was going to get spliced and I had at least to guarantee her tucker. It didn't matter about mine, I could get mine anywhere on the continent, but she certainly wasn't going to be a bush girl and she wasn't going to come with me, wandering the bush, looking for gold. I was forced to decide to be a freelance journalist.

I didn't like it. It kept my nose to a form and a desk, like a grindstone. I wanted the pick and shovel, which doesn't sound as romantic or ambitious as pen and ink, but the pick and shovel meant the open air for me, wild country, the chance of gold, silver, pearls.

I did not decide to settle down. That's one thing the girl could not get from me. I wouldn't give up entirely. When she wouldn't come out to the bush wandering with me. I was going to go, but make sure that half of every year, or one year out of two, I'd work at some civilised thing, which in this case was writing books, to keep her and a sort of home for her down here in the city, which I did do, and I'd go to the bush. Six months out of every twelve, I'd be out in the bush. One year out there and one year in Sydney. To get new material out there, I knew the public liked new stuff so I kept them as best as I could informed of what Australia was doing in the wildest places, a different place each trip and then back with the manuscript which would be written on the spot, among the people I was writing of, and then back to Sydney to have it typed, the publishers used to type it and publish it, and after the big Christmas sale, away I'd go and the wife would have twelve months tucker and more besides, the publishers used to look after her as long as I'd be away. She could have whatever she liked, not over the odds but practically whatever she liked sort of business. So that was off me conscience and I was free to go where the hell I liked, me own master from the time I got into train or ship or car, because I went mostly by car after I got spliced. It took me out to the wild places ever so much quicker, saving the time for running around and getting material . . .

I finish the damn thing, then it's off my mind, then I go and get thoroughly well drunk, to get the bloody thing off my mind. But I go through it afterwards, revising it, that's the only thing I like, the editing of the thing. I go through it only three times and bring it down easily readable.

It's always been that when you hand it typed to the publishers, their editors and their brainy people finalise it so it can be printed but that couldn't be so in my case, it didn't matter how clever they were, from all the universities in the world, because the brightest university reader didn't know what it was like crossing a flooded river with

wild blacks on the other side, and of course whirlpools in the bloody sea, he didn't know about quicksands, he didn't cross a desert for 200 miles with only the water you carried and a couple of horses, how could he describe those things? So I insisted that I do that one, and I wanted the editorial staff to do it too. And whatever I okayed in theirs, that was to stay, and many parts where naturally they had made errors, I corrected that, and it succeeded marvellously.

They'd pick one of the artist men on the staff of A & R, what's his name there, oh, a real good sort of rough and ready Australian artist, but a much better artist than he ever got credit for. Chaps like that, there was better artists and better writers, but they were too soon for the country, there wasn't your population nor the people educated to Australian books who had the money, even six shillings, that was big money in those days, especially for a book, especially for Australian books. These poor men and women, decent poets, of course they've always had the worst end of the stick, but many tried and died and went to their graves quite unrecognised, quite unknown. It was just that bad luck of being born generations before your time. Now, every bloody would-be—every aspiring writer is born into a paradise.

I never would have got help, a bloke like me, something that just strayed in out of the bush. In those days I was completely unknown, like that saying of Henry Lawson's, 'that bastard from the bush'.

It was the adventurous side that I thought people knew nothing about down here, and there was such a little population, which meant such a little buying population for the publishers who published these books, to publish more. You see, I'd had an interesting life and knew different parts of the continent. So every one of my books are about a different part. One would be in Central Australia, another one at the Cape York Peninsula, another one would be in the Gulf Country, another one would be in the East Kimberleys, another one would be in the port of pearls, everywhere they are, so the public who liked my books, each year they could depend on getting life in some wild part of Australia they knew nothing about and was quite different from the other parts. That was one of the secrets of my success, but the writers who wrote up the reviews never seemed to tumble to it. You see, from five million people we're going up to fourteen million people, and when every shilling counted and there'd be so many people after one job, there weren't too many people to throw away six shillings to buy a book.

You see, out of those books we'd only get a royalty, and many writers put in at least twelve months' work, some writers it takes them three years to write a book, and the library buys say six copies and the royalty from those would be sixpences, that would be twelve sixpences for six years work. That was okay, that was quite right but then they had the right—well, they didn't have the right but they could lend out those books for a hundred years, putting a bit of paste on them now and then when the fingers of readers had worn them to pieces and a bit of red cloth put on the cover, they could lend a book 10 000 times and they used to charge a fee for each book for the lending. Well, they could get ten, twenty, thirty, forty, 100 thousand fees on the one

book whilst it was in demand. Well we would put in three years' work over that book and we would get sixpence out of it. And that carried on for all those years. So all writers who were striving in Australian literature to make a living if they could or at least to build up a literature for future generations, they were getting nothing and their work was going for nothing. So the Australian writers, you can understand we were absolutely bloody astonished when it took bloomin' politics to bring it [Public Lending Right] to us. Labor brought that with Whitlam, and I don't vote for Labor, but it was Labor that brought us this great relief, and justice, too. Why the hell didn't the bloody Liberals, they must have had the same money for all those years, they never gave us a bloody penny for our bloody work. What did they do with all that money?

I say that getting this money, it's wonderful for the future and the chances of Australian writers, but my heart bleeds thinking of all those wonderful writers in years gone by, who broke their hearts for bloody well nothing. If they had it now, it would give them a chance to carry on, with tucker and above all a chance to write. That's what I'm sorry for, all those good old writing friends of mine, those generations that have gone.

Anyway, I've had a wonderful life, it's been a real battling life, and by Jove, I wouldn't mind it all over again, because I think this world, and particularly Australia, is wonderful and there's all sorts of interest in it for all those people who think of the wild bush and looking for gold and finding great stands of timber and that sort of thing, although that may have just gone in the last few years, there's many things in this Australia of ours that's going to be found out and discovered and going to take place in the unlimited years to come, to interest anyone.





Jim McNeil  
(1935–82)

Sydney, 6th December 1974

Hazel de Berg collection  
National Library of Australia  
Tape no. deB 805

I AM JIM MCNEIL and I have written three plays, *The Chocolate Frog*, *The Old Familiar Juice* and *How Does Your Garden Grow*. At the moment I'm on parole for ten years. I've got a \$7000 literary grant and my play *How Does Your Garden Grow* is showing at the Nimrod Theatre. I wrote *How Does Your Garden Grow* in Bathurst Gaol, following upon seeing a painting done by a boy that lived in the cell next to me named Robert McKinnon, and he had seen another couple of prisoners pluck a flower growing out of the wall in the gaol, and he painted two prisoners, one of them holding a flower. He called the painting *How Does Your Garden Grow*, and he gave me the painting, and it hung in my cell. After I'd looked at the painting for a couple of months, I decided to write a play about the painting. This is my third play.

My cell was 11 feet by 9 and I had a cupboard and a chair and a table and a bed, and a typewriter and some paper that friends on the outside had sent in to me, and I wrote on that paper. Next door to me was Robert McKinnon, the young painter who painted *How Does Your Garden Grow*. And I had a toilet, so did Robert, and we used to pump the water out of the toilet. He'd pump the water out of his and I'd pump the water out of mine, by shoving a lavatory brush into it, and then we'd have a clear pipe and we'd talk to each other through the toilets. It was called getting on the phone. Robert would paint and I would write, and as I wrote *How Does Your Garden Grow*, I'd write a page and then I'd read it though the toilet to Robert to see what he thought of what I'd written, and he'd tell me and I'd make changes. We sort of wrote it together through our toilet bowls in Bathurst Gaol.

I rewrote—I'd originally written a play something like it at Parramatta Gaol, I'd written about seventy pages of a play, and when I got moved from Parramatta Gaol, the officers tore the play up, left me only two pages, and so when I got to Bathurst and got my property, I found I only had two pages of that play left and of course, I threw them away. Then I settled down to write again, and with the inspiration of the painting that Robert McKinnon did, I changed that play and turned it into *How Does Your Garden Grow*. It took me three weeks to write it, through the toilet with Robert.

Since I'd already written plays and they'd been on all over Australia, people knew I had written plays, and I was accepted by the authorities. However, anything I wrote, I had to hand it to an officer and it was sent into head office of the Department of Corrective Services for censorship, to see whether it was approved or not, and a couple of times I've had it sent back, a couple of my plays, because I wrote things that were not approved, so I had to write every play with an eye to the censor. That's why my plays are almost understatements. They were really understatements, and now that I can look at it objectively, in the outside situation, it was a good thing; it was a good discipline for me. I was prevented by the need to write for a censor, I wasn't allowed to indulge myself, which turns out to be a good thing because I was an angry little swine, and I would have overdone it, had I had my way, and so it was a really good discipline.

I got it out to the Nimrod Theatre, it just went through the Department channels, and once approved, the Department posted the plays to theatre people outside. In the case of *How Does Your Garden Grow*, they posted it to Katharine

Brisbane, who publishes my plays, she is Currency Press, and then she passed it on to the Nimrod Theatre, and John Bell, who directs the play. You've got to put it through the Department, and they send it out if they approve it.

I get paid for the play, of course. I get money out of it, not a great deal, but I'm earning money now, and for the first time in my life recently I filled in a taxation return. I've never done that before. I might not do it again, either, if they want money off me.

I walked down from the theatre yesterday to buy a tin of paint, because I wanted to paint a pipe at home, and there was a pub across the road and I thought, I'll just have one drink, and I went in, had a drink, and a voice said, 'Jimmy McNeil,' and there's an old bloke, you know, an old drunk, seventy-six years old, his name is Taffy, and everyone had a beer in their hand but Taffy was sitting without a beer, and he's seventy-six years of age. And he said, 'Jim'—you know. So that cost me \$10, just to go in for a drink. I didn't mind, because I like old Taffy, but that's the state of things. No-one has got a quid.

When I saw the play in the theatre here—very interesting, because I'd never seen plays, it's incredible, if you've never seen a play. I suppose it might be different for someone who's seen a lot of theatre, but to write a play when you've never been to a theatre and then to go to a theatre and see every word you wrote, it's a marvellous sense of power. You say, 'God, they're doing everything I said! What I told them to say, they're saying.' You feel a little bit omnipotent because they've got to do exactly what you wrote. I hadn't realised that until I saw the play, that everybody is doing what I said to do. I said, 'Now I know how God feels—do this and do that.' It's a really happy time. I keep popping back to look at the odd scene to get the feeling again, it's very nice after being ordered around for years by the swine in the gaol.

It's very good the way it's been done with John Bell's direction but it's not quite—in fact, it's about half right and half wrong. I tried to talk, you know, poke my nose into the rehearsals, and made a bloody pest of myself, and the director finally threw me out. But I realise now, no-one will ever do the play properly. Brenda, the homosexual, the boy playing it doesn't understand, they're never going to get a director who understands because you've got to be there, you have to have lived in gaol, you see, to know what it's really like, so it's never going to be done properly unless it's done by someone who's spent as much time in gaol as I have.

I was born in Melbourne in St Kilda, lived in a street called Charles Street when I was a little boy. My mother, her name was Josephine Hennessey and she was born in Ireland and my father was Douglas McNeil, he was born on the Isle of Barra in Scotland. I grew up during the war when all the Yanks were in St Kilda and the Australians were in the Middle East, and that's when I started to steal because there were no Australians at home. You couldn't buy cigarettes for love nor money, and Mumma used to sit at home waiting for a telegram to see about my brothers who were at Tarakan in the islands. I was the man of the house when I was about nine years old, it was all women waiting for telegrams, and the streets full of American soldiers having

a good time with the women. I started to steal, and rob Yanks, at about the age of eight, perhaps younger.

My two elder brothers were both in the air force, and they were in the islands up there. My father was in the army, he'd been in the first war and somehow or other he got himself into the second war, I don't know how he did it, but he was fourteen in the first war, he was in France when he was fourteen and a half. He was gassed and that, but he still managed to get into the second bloody war and he didn't get killed, he dropped dead of a heart attack, in uniform. One of my brothers came back wounded.

I was sent to school, but I never went. Very rarely did I attend school, because I didn't like having to say Hail Marys before every lesson. I didn't like being belted by nuns and Christian Brothers, because I didn't know my Latin, which I still remember—Ad Deum qui laetificat juventutem meum, quia Tu es Deus fortitudo meo.

I remember that because I got it flogged into me, but I didn't like being flogged to learn Latin, because I liked Oscar Wilde and things like that. I liked Omar Khayyam. And I used to wag school and go down on the beach and hide in rowboats and read my books. I wanted to know about a lot of people. The family said, 'You'll never get wise.' I educated myself in the things I wanted, you know, and to do it I had to wag school nearly all the year. While the other kids were learning 2 and 2 make 4, I was reading 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol' and having a good time for myself. I've got no formal education but I had a very good education in my own way, in the things I wanted to know.

In those days the lending library was the big deal; all we had was the radio and the big thing on radio was 'The Search for the Golden Boomerang' and 'Dr Fu Manchu', that was all we had, and of course there was the public lending library—not public, it was a commercial library. Mumma used to send me, she used to love a bloke named Swinnerton, all these historical romances Mumma used to read, and she'd send me to the library to change her books. I was a little bloke and, of course, I started to get books for myself. I was only a little fellow but I used to attend the adult lending library and I used to read *Huroc the Avenger*, I liked that, I got that out of the library about ten times, and I found Oscar Wilde on the shelf and had a look, and I read *The Soul of Man*—I was reading that stuff when I was ten, all because Mumma sent me to the library. I used to lay at home when the other kids were playing cricket, I'd be reading Bernard Shaw or something.

I come from a Catholic family very much like Peter Kenna's *Hard God*, you know, He is a hard God. I came from a very fanatical religious family, Catholics of course. Mumma was pretty religious. She got married again when I was sixteen, she remarried to get me a father. She died while I was on remand, when I got the seventeen years. Of course, I wasn't allowed out for my mother's funeral. And when my brother died about three years ago, I wasn't allowed to attend his funeral either. I was considered a very dangerous individual by the Department. Christ knows why, I'm a little, skinny bloke, but they thought I was a dreadful fellow.

I joined a ship called *Corinda* and it sailed to Brisbane and back to Melbourne,

and one day I went ashore in St Kilda, came home to St Kilda, and I went down to the Greyhound Hotel with a friend and his girl, and because his girl was with him we went into the lounge, and there were two young ladies sitting there and of course I had a go at both of them and finished up with one of them, her name was Valerie, she came from Gippsland in the bush, which suited me, to have a bush girl, and we got married, just like that, and I had to leave the sea again. We got married. She was pregnant, of course. We got married because she was pregnant. We got married at Sacred Heart Church and all the rest, but Douglas was well on the way and he was born in 1958, or '57, I forget; yes, '57 he was born, and we were married just before he was born. I just kept going to gaol for one thing and another but I always got out long enough to fill her in and go back to gaol while she had the pregnancy and the child, and I'd come out of gaol and fill her in again and she'd have another child, so I've managed to do about sixteen years gaol and have six kids at the same time, which I think is not a bad trick.

After I got married, I was a knockabout, you know. Knockabouts are people who usually don't work, they don't care what government is in, they get a quid. There are various ways of getting a quid, you steal it or you twine it, we used to call it a twine; you'd cheat people; you'd get a quid without working, it's all illegal but it's not too illegal, except in later years when I got a bit angry with going to gaol all the time for nothing, so I ended up getting a gun and doing armed robberies, which I found very quick and very profitable until the day a policeman pointed a gun at me and I had to shoot the policeman, which was a good idea as he was about to shoot me, you see, so it was bad luck for both of us because I ended up with seventeen years, but it's still better than letting the policeman shoot me. And here I am, out again, and I don't need a gun any more, I don't need to steal any more, so it's all been worthwhile. When I say I've finished the seventeen years, I did more than seven because you spend months on parole and remand and trial and it doesn't count in your sentence, I did eight but I'm on parole now, when I say I've finished I mean I've been released but I'm still under sentence until 1984, when my parole finishes and Big Brother is supposed to arrive. I feel he's arrived already.

The last time, with this big sentence, I was sent to Parramatta Gaol, and I just wanted to escape, you know, but they had a debating and discussion society. It was called an experiment in rehabilitation, and they called them the Resurgents, with some connotation of coming back, resurgence, and instead of escaping and all that rubbish, I was persuaded to join this debating society and people from outside used to come in and debate and they'd make an audience, so I got into this debating and discussion. Prisoners discussed penal problems with people in authority, people from the Salvation Army and the Prisoners Aid and things, and I wrote this *Chocolate Frog* because no-one listened to the prisoners, they used to come in a very patronising, condescending way and have these discussions that never worked because they didn't listen to the prisoners. I got so frustrated, I said, 'If they can't hear what we're saying, we'll just have to make them see what we're saying,' and so I wrote this—I didn't even know it was a play—as a sort of visual message, a visual statement about what gaol is like,

examined it closely, the inside morality as related to the outside morality, because everyone condemns the criminal code in gaol, especially the distorted moral code in a gaol. The truth is, we learned it outside, not inside, and we just apply it to the inside conditions. It's the very same morality. In gaol you see how rotten it is, and that's why I wrote *The Chocolate Frog*.

*The Chocolate Frog* is simply about the prison morality, the informal laws of gaol, and I had to do it by having two experienced prisoners in a cell and introducing a third prisoner who'd never been in gaol, a boy who'd been to university and who lived in all the democratic illusions that you might like, and I just showed what a shock he gets, the average person, what an awful shock he gets when he goes to gaol. I just showed it by putting in this first-timer and throwing him into conflict with people who'd been in gaol all their lives. I just showed the conflict there. I called him Kevin, and in the play they called him Kevin from Heaven because he brought some good tobacco with him. And there was Tosser, who was a real character, just pinched again on escape from Bathurst, doing sixteen years this time; and Shirker, who was called Shirker, of course, because he wouldn't work in an iron lung. Shirker and Tosser in the play really gave it to Kevin, because morality is all a lie, and if you saw *The Chocolate Frog* you would see how the experienced crims—how the intrusion of this young fellow from outside turned them against each other, and they start arguing and fighting with each other because they're all living a lie in gaol with their moral codes and their rules, just as people outside, and this religious great lie about how immoral they are. When it's put to the test, we have all got our little skeletons in our own little cupboards. It's like a tin of condensed milk, gaol, everything is so concentrated. Prison is the best way to show what is wrong with the outside. That play was really about the outside world.

It's called *The Chocolate Frog* because that is rhyming slang. It means 'dog', and a 'dog' in gaol is the same as a criminal outside. Outside, if you break the rules and break the laws, they call you a criminal. Inside, if you break the informal laws and rules of the prison society by being an informer mainly, you're called a dog. 'Dog' is analogous to 'criminal', and a dog is very badly treated, and blamed, and harshly judged and ostracised, exactly as on the outside a criminal is harshly judged and blamed and badly treated and put into a pigeonhole called a gaol. It's exactly the same process, judgment and blame, and the prisoner has learnt outside, he doesn't learn inside. They simply apply this mad revenge imperative that society has. When they get into gaol, they apply it to their prison environment. It's the same principle of blame and revenge that people treat what they call criminals with, outside.

To get that play on was hard and it involved a little trickery. No prisoner had written a play before, and if there is no precedent, the authorities get paranoid. Frank Hayes was a director of probation and parole and I approached him and he approached the Commissioner of Corrective Services and there was much ado about *The Chocolate Frog*, whether a prisoner could write a play and have people see it, and it was finally decided no, no prisoners could put a play on, but they said you may have a playreading. It wasn't even a play, they said, 'You can have it read.' No-one called it a

play in that time. And so some people were invited in, mainly sociologists and people mainly from within the Department but a couple of outside people came in, independents, and they all turned up in this little room at Parramatta Gaol, where they were going to hear this thing read, a sort of dull exercise, but I'd decided differently, and decided to take the chance, and so when everyone had sat down for the playreading, someone pulled back a little curtain and there I'd set up a mock cell with bed and cupboard, and there were my players, fellow prisoners who had learnt the script, and no-one could do anything about it because there were people from outside sitting there, and the governor of the gaol glared at me, the parole officer glared at me, but it was too late. I smiled, and sat there, and under their noses I put the play on, and they weren't pleased, but it was too late to stop it. Once people saw it, they liked it, and went outside and told other people, and the authorities were stuck with it then, because everyone wanted to come and see *The Chocolate Frog* in gaol, and people kept ringing up, and the authorities sort of broke down under the pressure and said all right, so *The Chocolate Frog* ran at Parramatta Gaol for months and months, and finally a man came from the Arts Council, named Malcolm Robertson, who was a theatre director, and he said, 'This is a good play. I'd like to take it outside,' and the authorities were stumped again, because it was so reasonable, and so the play went on outside with a professional cast at the Q Theatre in Sydney. Since then, it has been performed in every state of Australia and it's won about six Drama Festivals, and of course they couldn't stop me writing then. So I wrote *The Old Familiar Juice* and that too has been on all over the country.

The second play was *The Old Familiar Juice*. As I said, I like Omar Khayyam, I always read Omar Khayyam, all my life. I like him and when I'm feeling down, I just read Omar again, and I was walking past a chap named Jack in Parramatta Gaol and he said, 'What have you got there, Jimmy?' and I said, 'Omar,' and he said, 'I hope you're not an Omar-sexual,' you see, and I said 'That's not a very funny joke,' but I thought to myself, 'I could put that in a play,' so I wrote this play, again about homosexuality in prison, not really about homosexuality but with the theme, it was the peg I hung the story on, to justify. People hate specially the aggressive homosexual in gaol, so I called him Bulla and I just wrote the last line first, where he had a boy drunk and helpless and was about to corrupt him, and the other chap in the cell says, 'What are you doing?' and Bulla says, 'I'm doing fifteen years,' and that's the name of the game. They give him fifteen years, what is he supposed to do, cut it off? So when the people outside say, 'These disgusting homosexuals,' they want to remember that they've given them fifteen or twenty years, and you don't hand your penis in at the gate, you've got to carry it with you, and besides that, you know, it's not so much the sexual thing as that every man, he needs affection even more, he needs to give it. If you lock men up together, there is just no outlet, and yet you've got this natural need to give affection somewhere, and you just explode if you don't find somewhere to put it, and so this is what happens in gaol, of course, that homosexuality is rampant, but it's not for the dirty-minded reasons that people, the press and that, put on, it's because men have to

give and they need a bit of love. If you take them away from women for fifteen years, ten years, then they're going to find another way, and they do. So do I. Now you'll think I'm awful, eh?

The Nimrod is run by Ken and Lilian Horler and John Bell, and Ken Horler is also a barrister, he is firstly a barrister and secondly he runs a theatre, and he is a director, but he represented me at the extradition hearing in Sydney and he got me bail. I'm the first bloke I ever heard of who got bail on an extradition hearing, but I got bail to go back to Melbourne on my own two feet, which I did. I flew down to Melbourne, I was pinched again, I was always having to go back to this re-arrest, even though I went back on my own and appeared, I had to go through this bullshit, arrested again, you know. Your bail is up and you're put back in the cells, and there I was, I flew all the way from Sydney to appear and they grabbed me with their large, nasty hands as though I'm trying to escape when I just flew down in a jet plane to be there. So I found myself in the cells again. But when I went into the court, Ken Horler was there and another barrister named Brian Bourke and it was pretty quick, it took about six minutes and I was on bail again, and I got a plane the same day back to Sydney, and here I am still in Sydney drinking lots of whisky.

Katharine Brisbane is, I suppose, the queen of the critics in Australia. She is also a good friend of mine. She sort of adopted me while I was in gaol, and she really fought tooth and nail to get me out of gaol, and finally she did, with other people. I had a lot of people who really worked their hearts out for years to get me out. Katharine Brisbane, of course, is one. She publishes my plays and she is a very dear lady, I love her.

About the future? Oh, I'm right now—I never really was—I was what you call a desperation job, most of us are desperation jobs, we steal and we rob because you're really not qualified to get a quid, I just was never suited to work in a factory, it just didn't appeal to my nature at all, and if you lack the education—the only education I had was the literary education I gave myself, I never learned how to be a business executive or to get a quid, and having my nature I wouldn't work in a factory, so the only way to get a quid was to steal it, which I did for years, but nowadays—it's what they call finding yourself, I've found out that I'm a writer and so I don't have to steal any more, I don't want to, I'm not interested in crime of any kind, so I'm just going to write and write and write.

I'm very happy today, naturally. Every morning I wake up and there's no bars on the window, which is good, and I sometimes think I'm dreaming again, but I'm not. I'm out, and I'm in love again, I've got a nice little lady named Robyn Nevin who acts in the play, and we live together in sin, which is beautiful, in a little house in Surry Hills, and Robyn has a little girl aged six, so I've got one kid back, and I couldn't be any happier and I wouldn't change one day of my life today, and the rest of it, as far as I can see, is going to be very nice. I'm going to write very nice and very good plays, because now I've learned to write, and I've got so much I can write about. I think I've got more in my experience than any other playwright in the country, I don't know



SELF PORTRAITS

anyone else that's got the experiences I've got or the stories I know, you know, not theory, I've seen them and I've lived them. It's just an inexhaustible mine, I can just pour them out forever till I die, which means of course that for the next ninety years, or more I hope, I'm going to really enjoy myself, and if I can give a bit of happiness to other people, that will make me enjoy it more. I like to hear 'em laughing, and they laugh every night in the theatre, and that makes me happy to hear 'em all happy.



Stephen Murray-Smith  
(1922–88)

Melbourne, 21st November 1969

Hazel de Berg collection  
National Library of Australia  
Tape nos deB 426–8

MY NAME IS STEPHEN MURRAY-SMITH and I was born in Melbourne in Orrong Road, Toorak on the 9th September 1922. My father was a Scotsman who came out to Australia just before the First World War, served in the 59th battalion of the AIF as a lieutenant, and at the time I was born he was a toy importer in Flinders Lane. My mother, Alice Maud Margrett, was the daughter of Stephen Margrett, the thirty-first child of thirty-two children of his father, Henry Margrett I think, born—my grandfather, Stephen Margrett, born in Cheltenham, England and brought up there by his eldest brother, Charles Margrett. My grandfather was an exporter of horses to India. I was in a sense born into a—born with a silver spoon, I suppose. My father at this time must have been earning—oh, I don't know, at a guess I'd say £600 a year. He married the daughter of a rather wealthy man. My grandfather, Stephen Margrett, made a lot of money taking horses to India during the First World War, when of course there was a great demand for army horses, and the big sociological movement, probably, for my family, and I always look at my family as my mother's side, because my father's side were buried back in Scotland. The only thing that that's left me with is a kind of high consciousness of Scottish origins at one remove and in my early days, in my school days, a distinct sense of Scottish nationalism—not that Smith is a very distinguished Scottish name, but we tagged Murray onto it—at least my mother did—because, this is what's sociologically interesting, I was born into a family which was very much, in the terms of the early 1920s, upwardly socially mobile. The key move had been made during the war years, or perhaps just before the war, from north of the Yarra to south of the Yarra. Only someone who lives in Melbourne, or perhaps lived in Melbourne in those days, would know how important this was.

It was the ambition of every ambitious Toorak mother at that time, particularly those who were anxious to improve the kind of social status of their families, to send their sons to Geelong Grammar, with the sons of the professional classes and the sons of the squattocracy and all that, and I was duly accoutred out in short trousers and Eton collars and blue caps, and sent down to Geelong Grammar in 1934, where I had, I suppose—I was at Geelong Grammar from 1934 till 1940, of those years, six or seven years, probably five or six of them were the most miserable of my life, not including the years in which I was under fire from the Japanese. The unhappier I was, I suppose, the more I read, the more omnivorously. It wasn't a bad library there and I also used to get books down from Myers Junior Library that used to exist at that time. Prior to that, before I went to Geelong Grammar, I used to be an omnivorous reader of comics—my parents were in no sense intellectuals and there were relatively few books in the house, and I doubt my parents ever read any of the books, but I found things to read, both before I went and particularly after I got to Geelong Grammar, and reading was an escape and a solace and some kind of an antidote to homesickness, I suppose, and Geelong Grammar was a big enough, inefficient enough, liberal enough school as I've already said, to have quite good libraries and not to be absolutely, eternally obsessed with what every bloody boy was doing every bloody minute of the day.

I gradually became known at school, I suppose, as an amiable eccentric and

something of a minor egghead, or perhaps even a major one within the framework of the school—it wouldn't have been very hard to become a major egghead, really, in the framework of the school, although it's very important, and only fair to say, that we did have at that time a number of very good masters, both academically and politically. We had people like J.C. Nield, not that he ever taught me particularly, but he founded Koorngong, perhaps the only progressive school that Australia's seen; we had young Russell Ward, I remember him telling me about Byron and Byron's anti-authoritarian attitude, in his study at night, me and my friends; that was a marvellous thing, to be told that with a number of expletives added, to be taken into the confidence of an anti-establishment schoolmaster; Manning Clark briefly, he never actually taught me, he taught some of my friends, and he was down at the time; Darling himself was a kind of anti-authoritarian, an authoritarian anti-authoritarian; and there were other masters there. We were probably very fortunate, probably much better [masters] than we would have got in a state school or probably any other private school, it is one of the reasons why, if I'd had money enough and if my own son had wanted to go down to Geelong Grammar, as I think he expressed some interest in, I would possibly have thought of sending him despite my political principles.

I left school at the end of 1940 with a remarkable academic achievement in my final year of four third class Honours in Leaving Honours, I don't know that anyone else has ever got four third class Honours, it's a kind of consistency of academic endeavour which I admire even to this day; and went to the university, having sat unsuccessfully for a Trinity scholarship, and did my first year, a very lonely person indeed, commuting backwards and forwards from the university to my grandparents' house in Toorak. I don't think I even knew that such a thing as a Student Union existed, certainly I knew nothing much about clubs, and I had very few friends, if any, at the university; a very lonely year and, of course, one was concerned and obsessed, if you like, with thoughts of what was going to happen. I joined the army, I think, 29th December 1941, VX69849, and shortly after that went to Caulfield, and then I volunteered for a special organisation which a Major came along and appealed for volunteers to.

As it happened, joining the commandos—a word which we didn't like, it was used later in the war—joining the commandos was a very good thing, it of course kept me out of Changi and it kept me out of the Burma railway. It's much better to be a commando, or an independent company man, and be charged with the responsibility of no matter what action you took part in, in fact if possible escaping unscathed than to be a poor bloody infanteer and just have to storm Japanese machine-gun posts, and we did stay—we had an interesting war, went to New Guinea from Wilson's Promontory in April '42, were the first Australian airborne unit flown over in civil airliners, flown over to Wau in May 1942, spent the best part of a year over there, most of it quite cut off, part of the time the airstrips themselves blown up, quite cut off from the rest of the Australian army, patrolling and occasionally fighting. I was no great hero, I suppose. I was a Bren gunner, and we took part in a raid about 30th June, I think, 1942, on

Heath's Outpost in—there's a full account of this in my own kind of journal I wrote during and just after the war and it's deposited in the Australian War Museum. It was an experience in some ways I'm grateful for—a very unhappy one.

I came back to the university and spent '45, '46, '47 finishing an Honours degree in history and pure history, getting extremely interested in politics. I maintain I'm the only person I know of who with complete bona fides has been within the same twelve calendar months a member successively of the Liberal Party, the Labor Party and the Communist Party, but that was a measure of the rapidity of my political development, if you like, based perhaps on my preceding anti-authoritarianism. And my anti-authoritarianism and anti-officer attitude in the army can be traced from my war journal aforesaid.

I became a member of the Communist Party, I think, about September 1945 and remained in the Communist Party for thirteen years.

I graduated at the end of '46 in history; I still had a year of three years available, and in '47 I spent this doing a Diploma of Education which I disliked intensely. It was going back almost to primary school in many respects, and we resented it and bucked against it, and I didn't do well and I scraped through, very rebellious, and during this time I got caught up with my wife, Nita Bluthal, whose parents were Polish-Jewish immigrants. Nita was born in '27, came out at the age of twelve which would have been, I presume, '39. Her father kept a store, and still does, in the Victoria Markets, selling coats. They lived in a terrace house at Garton Street, North Carlton, and quite a lot of the young public school communists of this particular generation, or some of them, were very much attracted by the radical young Jewish girls from university, high school and the like, particularly, of course, there was some kind of a parallelism between Ian Turner and Amira Gust and myself and Nita Bluthal. Nira and I got married about the same time as Ian and Amira Turner. We got married on 6th February 1948, just after Nita had turned twenty-one—she turned twenty-one on 21st January—on the 17th January. Her parents, I think, were not informed until after the wedding, she said it would be useless. Mine were informed but relations by this stage over politics and Nita were such that they were not invited to the wedding nor would they have come.

We took ship on the *Strathaird*, I think in February 1948 and arrived in London in April. Our desire was, of course, as enthusiastic young communists, to get over to the Soviet Union. We couldn't make it, they didn't want us, but we did manage to get to Prague where there was already a small Australian colony of our own generation in the International Union of Students.

I got to Prague in 1949 and worked there in Telepress, a communist international news agency—shortly after in 1951 or '52 [it was] closed up in one of the purges—worked in Telepress until 1951, making many good friends and enjoying ourselves very much, although of course there was much we did not see that we were urged to see, and came back to Australia in 1951 as Australian correspondent for Telepress. It closed up fairly soon, within six or nine months. Took a job at Essendon High School

for about a year and then received an offer to work as organising secretary for the Victoria Peace Council. I spent the next six years working as State and later National Organising Secretary for the Victorian and the Australian Peace Council, again an experience I'm glad to have had, although perhaps I stayed too long at it.

The important thing for me in this period was my involvement with the Realist Writers group, which was led very largely by the Communist Party. The writers—Frank Hardy, Ralph Duboisier, Eric Lambert, Bill Wannan, myself, Jack Coffey as the secretary, Ian Turner and a number of others. It was by far the most vigorous and active literary group in, probably in Australia at the time, and produced a hell of a lot of work. It established the Australian Book Society which in its day was very important, *Overland* came out of this group, with the encouragement of Judah Waten; he wasn't in the group because he was regarded as a lapsed communist at the time, God help us all. We had our—the most interesting ideological and political arguments were probably held in and around the Realist Writers group, we enjoyed ourselves, and we started producing a few books and magazines and things. I remember actively buying up copies of the *New York Times* offprint of the Krushchev secret speech and distributing them round the Communist Party; so when the actual—when Ian Turner was expelled from the Communist Party in 1958, and I resigned the following day, after many years of attrition which were extraordinarily wearing, mentally and physically in many ways, there was a twofold dislocation—there was a literary one and there was a political one. I had to get out of the Peace Council and I was very lucky at the time to see advertised a job for research officer of the Victorian Teachers' Union.

Ian and I had to decide what to do with *Overland* and we decided to fight for it, and the Communist Party and the Realist Writers group claimed it was theirs and I claimed it was mine. There was a series of very horrible meetings and screaming matches, Ian and I had pinched all the cards and hidden them, all the subscribers' cards and all the records and everything, so eventually, with some organisation and a lot of friends like David Martin and others, who shared our political line and were also involved in the Realist Writers group, we got *Overland* and we've kept *Overland*, I'm glad to say, although, of course, its role changed.

I worked for the Victorian Teachers' Union for two or three years, and gradually decided I'd better finish my academic work, finally becoming a fully paid-up member, if you like, of the university staff as late as 1966, but still finally getting there, and very pleased and glad that I did.

I suppose one of the major kind of intellectual influences that's grown on me in the sixties has been an increasing dedication to the cause of conservation and environmental concern in its broadest kind of perspective. I now feel that rather than a dedication to any kind of dogmatic political views, investigation and promulgation of the broad conservationist message is one of the most important things I can do.

I'm asked how I run *Overland*. I think I should perhaps say that it was founded in 1954. I'm now preparing our forty-third issue, which of course means we have not been producing our four issues a year. Who cares? Except perhaps our readers, who are

kind enough sometimes to protest. I am editor and owner, owner of course stems very largely from this big in-fighting ten years ago when I had to establish that I was owner and not the Realist Writers group or the Communist Party. I perhaps am slightly bureaucratic in some ways, but on the other hand, the editor of a magazine has to be an editor. It is to some extent an authoritarian job. I think I can claim, however, to have been able to delegate a fair bit of responsibility in certain areas. Barry Reed, the librarian, has taken over all poetry editing from me. This is a big weight off my mind intellectually. Organisationally, of course, it's not much less than before, because instead of having to fight myself to read manuscripts and return them, accept or reject them, I've now got to fight Barry to get his acceptances and rejections and his mailings of manuscripts done. It's not very much help organisationally to decentralise, it can be more work in the long run, but I've got the advantage of a lot of comradeship, and we try and have meetings, we do have meetings after every issue, criticising and planning. Vane Lindesay the artist, who is in charge of our design—I always maintain that the final decisions in terms of design and layout and everything else are mine, but I don't think there's ever been a case in which I've had to—had frontal confrontation with any advisers in any area, and I've had a lot of loyal support from people like David Martin, Vane Lindesay, Barry Reed, John McLaren, Ian Turner, who has occasionally edited the odd issue for me or taken—he's away this year, but when he is here, he—last year, for instance, and I think the year before, he took all the responsibility for the actual getting of the material to the printer, marking up much of it, a big job, for correcting proofs and for layout, and for seeing it through the press, an enormous part of the work. He hasn't been here to do it this year. What will happen in 1971, when I expect to be away myself, is not yet clear. In many ways *Overland* is an impediment, you grow to hate the chains you rivet on yourself. I often think of how Conan Doyle grew to hate Sherlock Holmes but couldn't escape from him. On the other hand it's the old age pensioners who send in the \$5 and \$10 to keep it going. It's for many people from all over the place, and all different kinds of people, who are writing every day almost to say something nice about the magazine, and it's the pleasure when every now and then, perhaps every second or third issue, you print something which you think is quite outstanding and which you would not be able to print if *Overland* hadn't existed and if you were not alive. I'm thinking of something that came in only a few days ago, Dorothy Hewett's obituary on Katharine Susannah Prichard,\* which I asked her to do. I wired her a day or so after Katharine's death and asked her to write this obituary, a full length obituary, an article really, and she wired back saying if she could be honest, and I wired back saying, 'That's why I asked you.' We have a very fine obituary of Katharine Prichard, saying a lot of things that needed to be said for a long time but which could perhaps hardly have been said while Katharine was alive, and I think that if *Overland* didn't exist and if I didn't exist, that would not have been written. This is a kind of creative satisfaction you get out of editing a magazine which does make it

\* Dorothy Hewett, 'Excess of Love' in *Overland*, no. 43, Summer 1969-70, pp.27-31.

worthwhile. If you haven't got the talents to be a writer, a novelist, a poet, a playwright or something of that kind yourself, this is one way you can get, I think, a genuine measure of creative satisfaction.

I do a lot of my own writing in various forms. I do a certain amount of academic writing and historical writing. I've just finished editing an edition for Penguin Books, for the Penguin English Library, of the original edition, the original version of Marcus Clarke's *His Natural Life*, with an introduction and notes and all that kind of thing. It's taken me far more time than the 200 miserable quid they offered me was worth.

As a historian, my interests range much wider than educational history. My colleagues in education wonder why an educationalist should be interested in Bass Strait. They might even wonder why an educationalist should edit a literary magazine. Academics might well wonder why an academic should undertake such an undignified occupation as being pleased and amused to take part in quiz programs. I don't believe that facts matter very much but I'm always prepared to do a certain amount of playing, particularly if I'm paid for it.

My own writing is serious. I have always blessed the fact that not only can I read quickly, as I explained earlier but that I did have some training as a journalist, and that I do write quite quickly, not as quickly now as I used to, mind you, probably scholarly impulses here slow me up a bit as well as age, but I write quickly, I write straight on to a typewriter and I seldom write drafts.

Hazel de Berg has asked me what standards I apply to the editing of *Overland*. Is that what you're asking, Hazel? We've always had a soft spot for demotic writing, for the person with something to say rather than the facility to say it well. However, as I've grown older and perhaps more experienced, I've become more and more suspicious of this as a line. Good writing is important, form and content are, as we were taught in the Communist Party, indissolubly linked.

On the other hand we've had a rather irreverent streak about us and perhaps a willingness to give the relatively untutored a go, which I think has been part of *Overland* and I hope will remain part of *Overland*. At the moment we don't want to be lumbered, we've always been a bit conscious of being lumbered with just the old Australian nationalistic realism kind of thing, a rather sad and sorry remnant of the great days of socialist realism in Australia, which we might like to date from Frank Hardy's *Power without Glory*.

I still remain very fond of Furphy and Lawson and Frank Dalby Davidson and many others, and at the same time try to find a meeting place and a way of transmuting towards the demands and needs of the present day. This is what I'd like *Overland* to be able to do. We are not self-consciously intellectual, although on the other hand, I think one of the big jobs is to make people think, and to make sure that people aren't ashamed of the actual adjective 'intellectual'. We need a great deal of intelligence and, indeed, intellectual thought, on the left, where *Overland* has always and still does stand.



We are in fact probably the only established literary magazine, apart from the so-called underground magazines, the rather peripheral and evanescent magazines that appear in roneoed form and so on, we're the only established literary magazine that in fact is trying to appeal to the new poets, the new socially critical, but socially critical in a quite different way than we were, poets, and we are, I think, making some headway here and getting some recognition among a section of the younger writers for in fact doing this.



Grace Perry  
(1927–87)

Sydney, 9th October 1967

Hazel de Berg collection  
National Library of Australia  
Tape nos deB 292–6

**T**HIS IS GRACE PERRY. I was born in Melbourne in 1927. Due to my father's rather itinerant profession as a journalist, we moved from capital to capital. I spent six years in Melbourne, then another six or seven in Brisbane before finally coming to live in Sydney.

I guess I began to write verse when I was about eight, or as soon as I could write anything else. While I was at school I had in all three books published, I even forget their names now. The second one was *I Live a Life of Dreams* and the third *I Am the Songs You Sing*. Of course, these days I do my best to deny all knowledge of any such goings-on whatever, but at that time I regarded it all as rather fun. I used to get a lot of fan mail from troops, and people had nothing else to do but read poetry, in those days apparently there were more of them than there are now. It's a thrill still, occasionally, to get a letter from someone who knew about me in those days. Just this year, for example, I got a letter from an American who said he bought one of my books in Noumea in 1944. This was quite a link with the past which I'd long ago thought better broken.

During these years, an organisation was formed in Sydney of which I had the audacity to be the president, and we had links with some other organisations of a similar nature in the other states. If I mention some of the names that were concerned with me in this you may realise they are not all unknown to you. There was Laurie Collinson, who came down from Brisbane, Thea Astley was in Brisbane at that time, whom you now know as a novelist, Peter Shrubbs who later published in the *New Yorker* and is now on the staff of Sydney University, and myself and a few others whose names I've forgotten. Laurie at the time had an office or flat or whatever you care to call it, it was a room, in the building in Sussex Street where my printers, Edwards & Shaw, are today. He used to keep a skull on the window ledge and when we'd go along on a Saturday afternoon there'd be a rather fat-bottomed woman with her skirts tucked up scrubbing the stairs. This is an image which has remained with me, as an indication of the prospective poverty of poets in this nation. It was something that made me even more determined to do medicine and for not altogether altruistic reasons.

In this rather mixed frame of mind I remained, at the same time of course I'd taken a degree in music and was teaching at Holy Cross at Bellevue Hill, and then came the leaving year when it was do or die. Either I got a good enough pass to get into the faculty of medicine or I should have to do something else. I always liked to have two strings to my bow. In rather typical style, I'd gone along and assured myself of a job teaching jazz at Albert's College of Music for what seemed to me a fantastic amount of money, and being the cunning child that I was even in those early years, I had said I would not take up my appointment until the Monday following the date when the leaving results were to come out. I needn't have been afraid because the day of the *Herald* along came five reporters with their little cameras and cameramen not so little, into our very tiny 12 by 12 living room at Waverley, and they set about asking me questions and taking my photograph, and during a couple of days it appeared in five local newspapers that these events, even at that time, completely

unimpressed me and it was rather a joy to get rid of the boredom of having to answer their questions when I was able to look at my watch at about 10 am and say, 'I'm sorry, gentlemen, I have to leave you now. I'm expected at the ABC to do the Australia Day broadcast. Good morning.'

I had a reasonably low opinion of the state of Australian literature in those years. I guess I was something of a cynic. All my childhood the house was full of reporters and writers and people talking about the great books they were either writing or had written and couldn't get published and all that kind of thing. Quite close to where we lived was the man who was probably the last of the Bohemians, Roderick Quinn. He lived in a little house in Waverley with an old lady called Mrs Cassidy, and I used to go and visit him sometimes in the evenings, and he'd be sitting hunched over his little kerosene heater rubbing his white hands to try and get them warm, with a big woollen scarf around his neck, and telling me stories of Victor Daley and the bailiffs and the time they buried Henry Lawson, and all these other legends of the good old days of the *Bulletin* and the men who made it. This had quite a profound impression on me, in probably the wrong direction. I couldn't see that all this poverty was really essential or had anything whatever to do with the business of writing. I didn't approve of the Lawson attitude that the rich and the educated shall be educated down. Quite early in life, these ideas became definitely formed. To me it was another irony of our time that when poor old Rod Quinn, who was on some kind of a pension and managed to exist from various of his friends' charity, died finally, he was given a state funeral, and the street was full of big black cars and people turned out and stood on the footpath, and they took off their hats and they stood there being most reverent and circumspect.

During the years of medicine, I continued to write from time to time, I showed what I was doing to Professor Howarth, he took me along once to the English Association, but I confess that I was still rather young and I think if you took a tideline of the age there, it would be somewhere mid-fifties or beyond. I didn't feel I could find what I was looking for among all those august heads and solemn declarations about the literature of several centuries past. I therefore worked in private. I know that working in private is not necessarily a good thing but it did mean I had plenty of time to do what few poets these days bother to do, and that is what I considered to be an adequate apprenticeship.

After I graduated to the clinical years, I got myself elected to the Students' Council and I went round making election speeches and all this kind of thing—I needn't have really bothered, because it was a rather hilarious idea that a woman should represent medicine anyway, and I became one of the editors of the student paper and I organised some of our balls and whatnot. In the following years, I acquired one husband, two houses and three children in roughly that order, and in 1953 I began my own practice in Fivedock in Sydney. I always thought that at some stage, I would devote more time to writing when the time became available, but as no doubt so many other women do, I thought I had plenty of time—you know, there's always tomorrow and we're younger than we really think. It wasn't until I had a very serious

illness associated with the birth of my third child that I realised it was already later than I thought.

I've arranged it now so that I write four days a week and do medicine for three days, but beyond this I've also tried to do something about my wider ambition for the future of poetry in Australia. My first move in this direction was to go along to the Poetry Society, which at that stage met in a little poky room up a long flight of stairs in George Street, and I offered to produce for them a publication. The basic conflict was that I wished to produce an international magazine, one that would bring Australian writing to the knowledge and appreciation of people everywhere and, at the same time, make our Australian writers aware of how other people worked and how other people thought. After three years, I was advised to begin my own publication. I had already established South Head Press for the purpose of publishing books of verse and in fact, the first book we released, a book of Bruce Beaver's called *Sea Wall and Shore Line* was ready for distribution, so that in one way the mechanism was already quite clearly established, and it was with considerable ease, therefore, that we began *Poetry Australia*. This issue now currently printing completes our third volume, and represents, I suppose, some kind of achievement, because in our pages we've not only represented young writers — we've had special issues for young people, we've published work by all the major Australian writers, but you will notice that in our own overseas issue a year and in our other issues from time to time, we are given the first world rights of notable overseas poets, the outstanding example this year, of course, was the new Ezra Pound canto which gained a lot of publicity both here and abroad, but probably less notable but more important is the fact that poets like Enright, Kirkup, Haines and Lee Johnson, the various New Zealanders, are prepared to give us world rights of their work for first publication. We are essentially a first publication periodical, anything that appears in our pages is appearing there for the first time, and we do not ask to be judged by local standards.

I notice still a double standard when it comes to reviewing books of verse, which I deplore. It would be an interesting exercise, I think, to ask some of the major American reviewers some time to review some of our books, and see what happens.

I feel a little guilty sitting here talking like this, because some of the things I'm saying are things which I haven't ever said before. Perhaps it's the fact that you're just going to bury these in some archive that gives me the courage to say them, but you see, there is more to this plan than meets the eye; I have said already that I wish to educate the Australian writer, I wish to bring to the attention of the Australian writer what is being done elsewhere, not only in the discipline of the English language but also how people are thinking, what themes and techniques they are using, in other languages, as far as we are able to ascertain this, and then apart from educating the writer, which of course is all very well as far as it goes, the other thing that I have attempted to do is to educate the reader or the audience. Now, the ways we have tried to do all these things are many and varied. For example, I have organised now in this town, at intervals of two years, three literary festivals for the North Side Arts Festival. In this I was rather a

pioneer. I sort of dreamed up the idea. I started the first creative writing summer school, also for the Arts Council. It was held in East Sydney Technical College in January, and I have already arranged the one for next January, so that again here, we've started something. I daresay now that with or without me these schools will be held every year, and this is what I like to see. It's not much satisfaction if you have to go on every time propping up the thing with your own poor bones, because there's a limit to the amount of weight these poor bones can stand.

Then, during the March term at Sydney University, I arranged a series of lectures that were held weekly for thirteen weeks called 'Signposts to Poetry'. This was probably the first attempt at comparative studies of contemporary literature in this town. The lectures, as you may imagine, were poorly attended, but those who did attend received them most enthusiastically. There is not enough of this work being done, there is certainly not enough of this work being printed.

Last Sunday I gave a lecture on the future of Australian poetry where I introduced a group of young writers' work that I hope soon to be published in book form, and I was quite amused and gratified at the response that it got. Admittedly I started off back at Charles Harpur and led them up to it rather gradually, leaving out the last twenty years quite tactfully and skipping off to foreign places, so that then the impact of the new work would be even more astonishing, but this was a little theatrical gambit which I felt—you know, the curaway technique of the movies—which I felt was justified for the result it achieved, and this is more or less the state we are at now.

I can't really explain how I work [at a poem] except to say that in the beginning, I'm interested now to look back on this fact, in the beginning I would tend to write the one short poem. It may have been written somewhere, fairly complete in the first instance. Usually I write the poem and then put it away for a week or two till I can look at it with the grey dispassion, shall I say, of yesterday's clothes and it's no longer a personal thing, an appurtenance or an extension of my own physical being, and I see it with what faults it may have, and then I go over it and I read it again. In this interval the poem either grows or shrinks, it doesn't stay the same. Sometimes I think, What a lot of garbage! and of course, that's the end of that. Other times the poem may present a challenge, it may be finished up to a point and may need further work, but initially the poems were mainly short, then I found that the short poem was not enough to contain the idea which would spill over into various directions, into more than one, and now the usual way of work is to do a series of say six or seven poems on the one theme, usually the progressive thing, taken in the order in which they come the poems are usually going somewhere, but this is not always so and I do not always keep all of them.

There's one other rather odd way I have of working, and that is that I tend to write two things at once, usually very different. For example, if I'm doing a very formal thing and the poem always dictates the form for me these days, I've rather given up worrying about which way it will come out, I tend to let my subconscious figure it out for itself first, sometimes it doesn't do it very well and needs some external

guidance later, but in the initial draft I usually let it come, and if the main thing I am working on tends to be formal, then I will find that at the same time I do something thoroughly informal, more or less parallel, on two bits of paper being worked together.

This makes me think about where I fit into what is being done in verse. If you consider the main streams of work in the past fifty years, not necessarily in Australia, the currents that have acted either in attraction or repulsion or combination, and if you take the ones up to twenty years ago, say, being active traditionalism or free verse experimentation or symbolism that came from the French, I don't know that I fit wholly into any of those categories. If you look closer at the movement of the last twenty years in the confessional poetry, the projective verse or the deep image category, I have a sneaking suspicion that I would like to be placed in the realm of the deep image, this is a way of expanding the language which is probably what I'm trying to do, if I were to stop and think about it. I like the idea. The image that arises from the unconscious generates powerful emotions beyond the reach of logic or analysis, you know, a bit like the stone dropped in the big pool. I don't know whether this is valid, I'm no critic, I have no intention of ever writing criticism for the rather dangerous reason that I do have some views, but this is the way I see it. The work of mine that pleases me most is the work in which I do deal exclusively in images and some of the poems which please me most are those which have just one expanded or continuing image. I don't always work like this, as I say there's no real rule or limit to it. Perhaps there should be, perhaps I should put up my fixed categories and decide, 'Today I shall do such-and-such, but I lack this kind of mind and this kind of discipline. I'd rather just follow and see where it's going as long as it is in fact going somewhere. Sometimes, of course, I feel that all we are doing here is scratching about in the dirt and going about in ever narrowing and narrowing circles and one day no doubt we shall come face to face with ourselves and it will be a horrible surprise, but nevertheless, I hope I'll be there to see the day come.'

Finally, a few of my ideas on writing. To be editor of *Poetry Australia* just now is like sitting in a wheatfield on a hot summer day. I hear the wind but I can't really single out the individual stalks that will remain long after harvest. Nevertheless, of course that's precisely what I'm trying to do, to be a poet one needs the six P's—the pencil, the paper, the perception, the passion, the persistence and the unshakable persuasion that the poem is in fact possible and attainable. Pencil and paper are freely available in this country, and many writers suffer from a high teeter of misguided belief, but the other ingredients are not so easily obtained. I usually give the classic advice to young writers, you know—'If you can, stop, and if you can't, make the best of it,' but unfortunately many are unwilling to stop and yet unwilling to put in any effort to make the best of it. I try to advise them to get in step with the present but above everything, to be fully themselves. Many of us never really succeed in being fully ourselves, in living completely and freely in all the rooms in our bodies and personalities, without any divisions, high walls or closed doors, so it's futile to attempt to be something or someone else, if we erect a false facade it will soon be recognised

there's no supporting solid structure, and the poet above all else who attempts this may move from front to front like a sleepwalker on a deserted movie lot, but the reader of the work will soon realise that there is no-one at home. But thanks to the complexity of the gene system, each self is different, so that anyone truly himself must of necessity produce work that is at once fresh and challenging.

I believe that a poet must be a professional, having alertness to standards here and elsewhere, and an appreciation of ideas—after all, the lion is probably no more than an assimilation of sheep—and striving continually for that polish and craftsmanship that only the years of experience can bring.

Also under this heading come formalities of presentation. The thumbnail dipped in tar typed on paper of dubious descent is no real help, and some things, of course, at first glance put me off. If the page is sprinkled with a generous rain of exclamation marks I've got the impression that an inadequate person is trying to compensate by pretending the words have more meaning than they can hold, and over-use of capitals does the same thing to me. Then there are the odd shapes of outlines, the typography and line structure. Now, being a doctor I have an aversion to unnecessary cruelty to lines and stanzas. Lines amputated or forced into unnatural positions, splintered for the sake of empirical form, the abbreviated word and the toe-tripping inversion are not what I like to see.

It is important to me that the particular poem could not have been written in precisely the same way fifty years ago, each generation, after all, inherits the language to rework and make new to the best of our ability.

I don't imply chasing newness to create sensation or abandoning all things old as stale, but certain words and expressions have become so worn out that they've lost their original significance. One day I might even make up my dictionary of non-words, notably, you know, some adjectives have become so overworked in relation to a particular noun that in our minds they're embodied in a word and no longer add anything, and to me the word is not the word, it is more than the word, it is the sum total of all the associations, the permutations and combinations of response aroused, therefore the word can't possibly be the same to you as it is to me. There are words and there are non-words, a word such as 'scratch', even standing by itself, makes one itch at the very sound but, you know, saying, 'She's so pretty,' has no meaning at all. It's the business of poets to use words that mean something. This is not to say they need to employ a special secret language, rather they must employ the words of common currency and everyday speech, words in their ordinary order, in such a way that the poem functions as an efficient machine, with no essential bits missing or loose members or redundant parts to foul up the mechanism.

Again, I say it must be stripped so that we can see the muscles work, being particular that each is working to its maximum capacity at all times and that all joints have a free and full range of movement. No defects or abnormalities, no outgrowths or excrescences, to obstruct the action and detract from the unblemished integument and the general sense of wellbeing.



What is required of the poet, in my opinion, is the precise opposite of the blotting paper syndrome from which we all suffer, that passive absorption of the excess ooze from foreign pseudo-cultures emanating from the mass media outwards. To mention only to dismiss it, the kind of inner circle poetry that in places is undeservedly popular, poems written to special people about special things—I confess I do this occasionally also, but I feel that you place the reader in the position of a keyhole listener at the confessional, caught in the act and left out of the conversation. I don't subscribe to the school that considers the theme is everything, that if only you had a theme big enough, encompassing the grand abstractions, the basic elements from the collective unconscious of the race, shall we say, then you'd be a major poet overnight. A poet may touch life at any point, it's not the gesture itself that matters at all but the method of the touching.

I'm not looking either for a poet who is a salesman, although some of the poems we've printed are certainly selling something like the Henry Beesel in the Canada issue. We may not agree with the sort of ideology behind it, but it's nevertheless an effective poem.

Essentially, I suppose, I'm quite unoriginal. I'm just looking for the inward thoughts of our generation, but here particularly, here in our intellectual isolation, some general frame of reference is needed to place writers in the mainstream of world thought, an awareness of what is presently being achieved by other writers elsewhere. Yet, even here, given the similar background, the same landscape, no two writers can ever stand upon the same small hill to see the world. Each has his own inescapable background and his own bright vision, thank God, leading to his own private departure.



Evadne Price  
(1896–1985)

Sydney, 13th May 1977

Hazel de Berg collection  
National Library of Australia  
Tape nos deB 996–7

**M**Y NAME IS EVADNE PRICE. What is my profession? Well, that's rather hard to say, because I have done so many things. I will perhaps call myself a jack of all trades or a jill of all trades, but coming down to what I am now, looking back I'd call myself an entertainer.

I have been writer, playwright, I've written radio scripts and about a thousand television scripts for myself and as I'm a journalist I've had to do all that impromptu writing and war correspondent as well, and I wrote the Jane Turpin books for children, eleven of them, and they proved very popular and then I go from the ridiculous to the sublime and I wrote *Not So Quiet*, a story of women at war which became a best seller, and got a French literary decoration, and about 150 paperbacks for the Glamour Library published by News of London first, and they were sold, these little Glamour paperbacks for ten pence each. Of course today they couldn't possibly do that because of all the expenses. Most of the hardbacked books I've written became magazine serials first, which is very good and it does help publishers to publish you, because they get this big advertisement through the magazine and that helps to sell the book.

I have written plays. I have had about six London successes. One of them was not such a success, it only ran three months, but my most significant was *The Phantom Light* at the Haymarket Theatre, which ran nearly two years and then went on tour all over England and earned just as much money on tour with the Haymarket hallmark behind it as we made in two years. It made an awful lot. I don't know whether today that would happen. *Once a Crook*, a comedy thriller written with my husband, Ken Attwill, had two long runs. It opened at the Aldwych Theatre and it was marvellously reviewed and we were blitzed out of that because the London blitz was just starting, and we transferred to the New Theatre in the height of the blitz, and often when the show was going on they would clear the theatre and you would get down to the shelter and we had Gordon Harker, the great comedian playing and every time he opened his mouth his face was so funny he didn't even have to speak the author's lines before they laughed.

I should have added this in my hardbacks. I've written about thirty or forty hardbacked novels and many were serialised in magazines and my favorite is *Escape to Marriage* published by Herbert Jenkins.

If it's anything I enjoy in writing it is plays. I am always thrilled with getting out a play because I don't think that the average new play writer pays enough attention to the technique of it. You should have an explanatory first act, and then everything happens, your second act has got to be brilliant and your third act as quick as possible to get the characters off the stage and get to a lovely finale, and if you go by that recipe it's pretty good, and that's what I want to do.

I am often asked what, as a woman reporter—I was a woman reporter in the war and they ask me often—what is my biggest memory. I was the first woman reporter in the world into the Belsen horror camp after it was relieved, and I got there quite by accident. I had come up from Paris because they said it was time that I did something with the British Army. I had been working with the Americans and when people ask

me why I liked working with the Americans it was the food, gorgeous butter and beautiful food, and when we went up to the British camp you were immediately put on that awful wartime marge that was rancid and shocking. So I got up to this press camp and I went out in a jeep, a little driver from Birmingham, he told me he was from Birmingham, and we got lost because the country was laid bare and we were simply lost, and then there was the most ghastly smell, and I said, 'What is that awful smell?'—it was simply ghastly. And we followed the smell and arrived at the Belsen camp. I went to the gates and I said, 'I'm Evadne Price the war correspondent of the *People*,' and they said, 'Oh come in.' I showed them my pass and in we went and I said to the little driver, 'Ask them to look after you,' and then I went in and it was a Scottish Regiment as far as I can remember, and they asked me what I wanted to do and I said, 'I want to see the camp.' I don't think I'll say anything about it. Shall I? Well, piles and piles of dead bodies, I've never seen anything like them at all, it was simply ghastly and in the trenches were these dead bodies which, the people at Belsen camp were German women with pitchforks trying to put them into order and that's what the troops had made the women do in Germany and they were pitching them into order, and that was horrible enough, to watch that, and when you came out, I was shown around the camp and I was shown a great pile of children's shoes, about six feet high and quite a long thing, children's shoes, and these were the children, that before they killed anybody and threw them into these trenches they took everything they could that would be valuable from them, and Irma Groetz I think, was the woman's name and she was a beautiful blonde girl of about twenty-three and she was imprisoned and the sergeant said, 'Would you like to go and see her?' and I said, 'If I can trust myself I'd like to go,' and I went and this woman said, 'Heil Hitler' when she saw me and I said, 'Don't you say that to me. You just stop all this nonsense with me because I am in such a mood after having seen all these children and hearing that if a baby cried in the camp you killed it and threw it on the fire.' The most dreadful things, they came out at the Nuremberg Trials, I'm not telling you anything that wasn't public afterwards, and so she was quite defiant and she—the sergeant came in and he said, 'You'd better go now Miss Price, because I'm listening to this and I'll slosh her one in the minute if we have any more nonsense,' and she said, 'Heil Hitler,' and I just went and I knocked her flying. We got out quickly.

I was born in Sussex in England and I have travelled all over the world, but I'd never been to Australia and always at the back of my mind was a sort of hankering for Australia but I didn't see how I'd ever get there, and I got here last year and I've only been here about eleven months, and I haven't really formed any opinion of Australia yet, except that everybody I meet seems wildly entertaining, which of course I love. I'm married to an Australian, Ken Attiwill, the author, who was born in Adelaide.

I am 'the ace astrologer of England.' That's what they call me. I really am not but that's what the magazine calls me, and I've been doing the Astrology page on *She* for thirteen years, if you can imagine that, and *Vogue* knew this, they'd been reading me in *She* and they said they wanted somebody to do this light kind of thing, and I said, 'On

condition, I'll come, but I do not want to be asked out to astrologers' lunches, because they all know more than I do and I am a psychic astrologer, which nobody'—you see astrology is a mathematical science and if you bring the psychic into it the astrologers don't like it at all. I should imagine you could bring the psychic into mathematics, because I can't even add up the housekeeping, you see. But the point is that they have been asked by the Astrological Society here if I would be their guest of honour at a luncheon and they said, 'She won't do anything like that,' because I don't want to lose my humorous style of astrology.

It's extraordinary and I know that you will believe me when I say this, I don't believe in fate and that you die or are born at a certain moment, but I do believe that in your life there are certain milestones that you have to negotiate and how you negotiate them is going to affect your future. I mean, the thing is too big for the greater mind, the mind God, or anybody, the one in power, the one in power over us, it's too big to concentrate on one little insignificant human being, so there's a trend and I think all the people of my generation born within the ages of one, well say, go up to ninety, I think we will meet again. I think you meet the same lot of people. That's my own theory. Whether you're right or whether you're wrong I don't know. That's why you know somebody. You and I have met before, I feel that too, and you looked very like you look now too, when I met you before. As soon as I saw you in this room you interested me. Now, you don't do that with a stranger unless they are so ravishingly and gloriously beautiful that you can't—but do you feel you've known me? You see, I think so.

I was the story teller of Channel 8—the little astrology when I began it was very nice and I've never liked astrology tremendously at all, because it's such hard work, but the Midland pathologist had been the story teller before me. I forget his name now, and now and again they'd have some big celebrity coming in, always a man, and they told stories that had the lowest rating of any program in the Midlands and one day this boy, Kit Plant, Kit came to me, he was doing the story teller program and he said, 'How quickly can you learn a story Evadne?' and I said, 'Very quickly,' and he said, 'A fifteen minute one?' So I said, 'Well I don't know.' He said, 'Do you know any?' and I said, 'Yes I think so.' He said, 'Can you get me one ready for Tuesday night. The Midland pathologist can't come and I can't get anybody else?' so I said, 'Yes I'll come'. Now there's a most famous story, subsequently it was a Walt Disney film. It was called *Greyfriar's Bobby* and it was the story of the little Scottish dog who lay on his master's grave for seventeen years in all sorts of weathers and became a tourist attraction, and I read this story, and when I went to Glasgow for something, went out to have a look at the grave and I could see the whole thing, and so I went home that night. I was working in London, and I sat down and I wrote the story of *Greyfriar's Bobby* and I started—This little stray dog, and I started with the man who'd found him and I went right through and I got him on to the grave and I got him killed, he was killed by a car I think, I'm not sure of that now. Anyhow I wrote the story and I gave it a psychic twist and I remember my end that was 'and so people come to see the grave and there

are Scottish people who have the extra sense and sometimes they can see the little dog sitting up and washing himself and shaking his head, because he is alive and he knows his master is alive too.' And it was so marvellous this story, that the cameramen were crying, it was so wonderful and so Reg Watson wasn't doing the program, he was the Head Producer by now, but Kit came to me and he said, 'Do you know what I think, Evadne? I think you're the greatest actress of this generation,' and I said, 'I don't think so, I don't think I'm a good actress at all, I think I talk too much and get carried away too much,' but he said, 'This is the most beautiful story I've ever known,' and they engaged me then and there, the poor Midland pathologist never got his—and there I was and I told fifty stories and I felt I couldn't go on. Fifteen minutes was an awful long time to be—yes, I wrote, all mine. No, that's about probably the only plot that wasn't mine too. No I wrote them all and I—and then we were living in Sussex, Ken and I then and we had a dog who died, a lovely red setter and all the village used to see him sitting—we buried him on a hill so that he could look over, and he and the shepherd's dog were great friends and the shepherd's dog was killed too, and they say they could see the two dogs playing and you know these people are not imaginative enough to think this out.

I had a play, yes I wrote it, *The Phantom Light*, and Gordon Harker was the star and Edna Best was in it. After the first act on the first night Ken and I sat in a box, I've got a picture of it somewhere and we look so absurdly young, smiling at the people. I wasn't smiling, I was—had a fixed grin on my face, and at the end of the first act I said to Ken, 'I'll slip round through the pass door now and tell Gordon that I think it's going to be all right,' and as you go through the—do you remember me telling this story at your Book Club and this girl said she saw the back of the theatre, the well-scrubbed little flight of teak stairs—anyhow I went onto the landing and in my evening dress, and I walked down to, it's about that much, about six stairs, and on there I saw a funny little man in a queer costume and I thought what's he doing in my play? This costume, it's old world, and as I passed I said, 'Good evening, the show's going well isn't it?' and he smiled a broad grin at me, didn't speak, and I thought that's funny, because when I looked back he'd gone, and I went into the dressing room and Macqueen Pope, the theatre historian was there and Gordon and I said, 'It's going very well Gordon,' and I said to Macqueen Pope, 'Popey, you write all about theatres, as I came down the stairs through the pass door there was a funny little green man there,' and Popey said, 'Did he smile at you?' and she said, 'My God we're going to run,' and we ran two years, and this ghost of the Haymarket, somebody always sees him on a first night and if he scowls at you your show's off within two weeks and if he smiles at you you run two years.

I've written all kinds of novels because I just want to see if I can do anything. I must tell you about the first thing I wrote that really made me money. It was a book called *Not So Quiet*. Now, at that time I had only written eleven books called Jane Turpin, which were all about a little girl called Jane and the most popular things. I get letters to this day, asking where they can buy them, but they're all out of print.

Anyhow, the agent rang me up and she said, 'Evadne'—she knew I was out of work—and she said, 'Evadne will you go along and see this man, Albert E. Marriott, he's a new publisher, he seems to have packets of money and he wants you to write a book. He wants you to do a satire with humour on this book.' I said, 'What book?' and she said, 'I don't know but go along and see what he wants. This might be something very good for you,' so I went along and met Mr Albert E. Marriott, and Mr Marriott said—had a cover made, a jacket and had '*All Quaint on the Western Front* by Erica Remarques'. He said, 'That's the jacket of the book.' He said, 'I've got that out and I want you to read—have you ever read a book called *All Quiet on the Western Front*?' and I said, 'No, I never have,' and he said, 'It's THE big best seller of the moment,' and I said, 'Well I haven't read it,' and he said, 'Well, here's a copy of it. Go home and read it tonight and if you can write a comedy skit on this it will be published. I've got everything going to publish this book quickly, it ought to go out, it ought to make a fortune. Come back tomorrow'—because this was Friday night—'come back tomorrow and we'll see about it.' Well I went home on Friday night and I read this book and I've always had this critical faculty and I thought anybody who writes a skit on this book wants their brains dusted. I went back next morning and I told Mr Marriott that. I said, 'You must be insane, thinking that you are going to get away with this wonderful book, you must be mad. Money is lost before ever you get the book into print. Nobody would—and I wouldn't try to be funny about this. This is a message to the world. What you want to do Mr Marriott, is to get an experienced author who could write the woman's war book of the trenches.' He said, 'Fine, you do it for me.' I said, 'Listen, I don't know anything about the war at all. I'm not old enough to know anything about the war. I only know it's nasty and it's on and I'm taking it back now—I don't know anything about it.' He said, 'Good, we'll get you a pseudonym.' I said, 'They wouldn't take a book on the war by Evadne Price,' and he said, 'We'll get you a pseudonym. I'll think out one by the morning, I know you can do this. I'm a great admirer of your work. I've read articles by you in *Punch*'—I'd had one—and I think that you're a marvellous writer and you've got great potential,' and I looked at him in a very old-fashioned way and I thought he's mixing me up with somebody else but I do need the job, so I said, 'May I think it out?' and he said, 'Yes, think it out. Get hold of a woman who was in the war, you must know one, you must know one.' Now, suddenly—'if you can give me 20 000 words by Monday morning on this I will give you £50.' I thought, Oh lovely words. I need this, I need this, so I said, 'All right, Mr Marriott, I'll have a go at it,' and on the way home, you see the agents were closed, it was Saturday so I couldn't consult them about it at all, I go home—no I don't, I go standing waiting for a bus and I thought, I suddenly remembered a girl who had been at the Club, at the Actresses' Club, dressed in the uniform of a WAAC and I thought, that's funny she would be the one to give me the story. I couldn't think of her name and there was a man called Robert Brasher who had a restaurant in Soho and he used to have the actresses from the Club when they were out of work, washing up dishes and waiting on people, cheap little restaurant. Now I hadn't been into

Brasher's restaurant for about a year. I go along there and she's there and she hasn't been there, this woman, she hasn't been there for about a year herself, and I said, 'Oh, just the girl I wanted to see,' so she said, 'Why?' and I said, 'You were a WAAC weren't you?' She said, 'I beg your pardon. Don't insult me. If I was a WAAC I'd be about thirty-five by now or forty,' and I said, 'But I've seen you in your uniform, a picture.' She said, 'That was in a show called *A Temporary Gentleman*,' and I said—I think I had a tear rolling down my cheek at this moment—she said, 'What is it, what's the matter, kid, tell me?' So I said, 'Well it's this way,' and I told her the whole story and she said, 'Oh, I think I can help you. I do know a woman, a great friend of mine who was a WAAC and she lives in Grosvenor Place and she's very rich and she might be able to help you.' I get the address and I go off to this woman who is quite charming and said, 'Yes, I was a WAAC. Certainly I'll help you, what do you want?' And I said, 'A loan of your diary,' and she went and produced it from a—and she said, 'This is it. Have a look at it and see what you can do,' and I said, 'I'll give you any money you want, if I sell it,' and she said, 'I don't want anything,' and she did turn out to be a very rich woman, and so there I am and I go back and I read this thing, the diary, and I sat down and I wrote my 20 000 words and I ring up Heath & Co., my agents now and tell them the story and they said, 'Bring the 20 000 words down here. He's not getting his hands on that until he gets a contract through,' and from that moment they took it over. I got the contract, I never got my £50, he had taken—I had typed out this with a carbon, he took the carbon down to the *News of the World*, and they sold it to the *News of the World*, the serial rights, for £5000 straight away, before I'd got my £50, and it's very important, this £50 that was never paid over. We sold it to Paramount, this book, I'll show it to you anyway—and they shelved it because they had a film called *War Nurse* and they wouldn't use it. They paid me not to have the film made, £20 000 that little lot, and this book is now in every big war library of the world, it's called *Not So Quiet* by Helen Zenna Smith. I am Helen Zenna Smith, and it's up—I'll let you have a look at it in a minute.

The Australian rights were in this and they sold, all over the world. It was even in Japanese. The publisher by this time had amassed a great deal of money and finally there was a tremendous sale of the book, they used to have girls in ambulances driving army ambulances around London with 'Prize £5000' novel and all that sort of thing. This man was a genius but he couldn't go straight and all the publishers in London were jealous of him. What he did with this book is nobody's business, and the money rolled in, and then finally he absconded when he was found out about the Queen Mary thing, which, he was daring, he was like a daring crook. He was selling Queen Mary's memoirs—oh, haven't I done that yet? Well, Albert E. Marriott overreached himself. He somehow laid his hands on some Buckingham Palace notepaper and he wrote a letter authorising him to sell Queen Mary's memoirs and he took this to the *Daily Mail* and in some queer way, I don't quite understand how anybody could be so silly, they gave him an advance of about twenty or thirty thousand pounds, and then he fled the country, and the *Daily Mail* at this time had no idea that Marriott was the crook. He



turned out to be a Borstal boy and a crook, his real name was Netley Lucas, and the *Daily Mail* thought that they were chasing, that he was Helen Zenna Smith, they had no idea it was me at all, nobody knew that it was me at all, and the *Daily Mail* chased him and they caught him and he was imprisoned and this thing, trial came on because my contracts were the firm's assets and all the people who had debts, he hadn't paid for all the office furnishings, he hadn't paid for anything at all, and my contracts were the firm's assets and so this great big court case a year later came on, and the judge was Lord Chief Justice Maugham—I think that's right—anyhow he was Somerset Maugham's brother, and there was I, terrified, with Audrey Heath, the agent, shaking, and she was so frightened of me running away she kept me living with her for a week before the thing came on. I was scared stiff. I've never been so frightened of anything in my life and we finally land in court and then I don't see the counsel until a minute before, he came and said, 'Oh hello, we've got a good case, you'll be all right,' and I'm terrified, and they go and then finally the people who want their money say, 'May we have—we would like to call Helen Zenna Smith,' and Audrey says, 'Courage, courage,' you see and I've always fallen in love with Maugham. Lord Chief Justice Maugham said, 'I think this gifted lady has suffered enough. The whole point about this is, it rests on a point of law. She never received the £50 that he agreed on and that broke his contract with her, so her contracts were never the property of Mr Marriott.' Isn't that an extraordinary story? I just sat back and by this time—you see the joke about this is I had spent the money as it came in. I had a mink coat, a car, I bought a Rolls Royce, I went mad, and Ken couldn't stop me, and so I had no money and this man got up and said, 'I apply for costs.' He wanted the money and I pulled his black gown and I said, 'You can't have any money, I've spent it all.'

I wrote the Jane Turpin series and they, to this day, they are regarded as an anthology of what children's books should be. I have never had any ambition about books, about writing books. My ambition, writing plays yes, I love writing plays, but books, I've never had any ambition and I can't go wrong. Well, I'm a very lucky person. I really have superlative luck over everything connected with my career.

Wonderful, isn't it? I feel this, in this life I think everybody has opportunities of some kind. Are you courageous enough to take it? I have often seized an opportunity because I open my arms to them, but you could go like that and bar them. You make your luck.



Rohan Rivett  
(1917-77)

Melbourne, 10th October 1971

Hazel de Berg collection  
National Library of Australia  
Tape nos deB 544-5

MY NAME IS ROHAN DEAKIN RIVETT, I was born on the banks of the Yarra in 1917, and I've lived in Melbourne for a large part of my life. My grandfather came out to Australia as a young man from Norfolk in the 1870s and my maternal great-grandfather arrived here some forty years earlier than that, so one way and another the family has been in Australia for more than a hundred years. My grandfather's stock was Huguenot stock, which had migrated to Norfolk during the French troubles, and he came out as a Congregational or Unitarian minister and went to Tasmania where my father was born in 1885. My mother was the second daughter of Alfred Deakin, one of Australia's early prime ministers.

Albert Rivett was one of Sydney's most remarkable parsons, he spent his early period as a minister in Tasmania and in the bush towns of Victoria up on the River Murray, in Yarrawonga and then Beechworth and finally in Albury. He came to Sydney in 1920 by which time the impact of his radical paper, which under various names but usually the *Independent* or the *Murray Independent* had caused a great deal of upset to the establishment of those days. Already he was on the black list of the *Sydney Morning Herald* and other papers of the plutocracy, because he never ceased to attack what he regarded as the exploitation of the poor, the old and the needy, in the interests of the small select group of the very rich in both Sydney and other towns where he worked, and he left a radical heritage of iconoclasm, asking questions of the most awkward kind, to all his seven surviving children.

My mother's father, on the other hand, was a brilliant young lawyer and writer who wrote leaders for David Syme's *Age* in the 1880s and 1890s, and was a Victorian state minister. He then became immensely interested in the idea of Federation in Australia and he was, with Parkes, Forrest, Kingston and the others, one of the founders of the Australian Federation in 1900, in fact he was the key Victorian figure, and he became the second prime minister after a couple of years during which Barton led the Commonwealth, he became the second prime minister in 1903 and was three times prime minister from then till 1910, when his health began to fail and he eventually retired from politics very shortly afterwards.

Albert Rivett's eldest son David was a youngster who did very well at Beechworth School and won the only Victorian scholarship to Wesley College in 1900, and spent three years there before going on to the tutorship of Sir David Masson, one of Australia's great scientific figures, in 1903 at Melbourne University, and under Masson he achieved a great deal of academic success, and won the Victorian Rhodes scholarship in 1907. In those days, in Masson's laboratory at Melbourne University, he met Stella Deakin and they came to an arrangement whereby in fact both had made up their minds that they were going to marry in due course. He went away to Oxford on the Rhodes scholarship, she came over with her aunt in 1909–10, they both worked in Europe as well as at Oxford, and when he came home in 1911 they were married in Melbourne.

I was a war baby like so many other Australians, and a few years after the war my younger brother was born, and we lived then at the university where my father had

become Professor of Chemistry, in succession to his old teacher Sir David Masson. We lived in the university grounds, in a very pleasant rambling old house built in the 1870s, with enormous gardens and a cowshed and horse paddock and that sort of thing, and it was a very pleasant childhood. We moved from there in 1927 after my father had been appointed chief executive officer of Stanley Bruce's new conception for Australian development and use of science in Australia, it was called the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research. It was born in 1926, Sir George Julius was the first chairman, my father was the chief executive and the next chairman, and the third member of the governing trinity who ruled this organisation was Dr A.E.V. Richardson, until then director of the Waite Institute in South Australia. Julius, Rivett and Richardson ran CSIR from its inception in 1926 until their death or retirement in 1949.

My brother and I both went to school at the usual age of about six, but I went at nine to Wesley College, which had been my father's old school, and my brother went there later on. And I was at Wesley from 1926 to 1934, when I matriculated. I first started writing when I was still a schoolboy at thirteen, when my father was appointed scientific adviser to the then prime minister, J.H. Scullin, and went to Britain, first of all to look at a number of matters which CSIR wanted to obtain information from Britain and Europe, and secondly as scientific adviser to Scullin at the then Imperial Conference, which was held in the latter months of 1930, and while I was over there, the Australian cricket tour, headed by William Woodfull, a great Victorian hero of mine, was in progress and we won back the Ashes, and the great Donald Bradman made his world record total of 974 runs. So I started writing about this tour, and I wrote a long descriptive cricket book of about 80 000 words, describing every match of the tour, giving a thirteen-year-old's impression. It was very brash, very naïve, but on the whole I've written much worse things since.

I had been some time in the army when they opened up the 'Voice of Australia', and an old teacher of mine, Professor McMahon Ball, joined Sir Keith Murdoch in charge of this organisation, and he asked me if I would drop out of the army for a few weeks and go up to Sydney and help E.W.H. Stanner, well known at the Australian National University, and a veteran newspaper man called Magill, who had worked on most continents in the world, including Latin America, to open up the 'Voice of Australia' broadcasts, which were then going not only to the European countries—both the occupied countries and the enemy countries—but also to Japan and the surrounding countries. We began this service from Australia in August 1940.

In December 1941 with the Japanese sinking of the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, the war suddenly became desperately urgent and Mr Scott, who was then in charge of British Information in Singapore, and Commander Proud in Australia, who had a role in the intelligence service in Singapore, came to Australia to recruit likely people to help them in their problems of information and reporting the war from Singapore, and I was asked if I would volunteer to go over there as the Japs came down the peninsula towards Singapore. So I flew over in December and for the last eight weeks before

Singapore fell, I was there working as news editor and war correspondent of the Malayan Broadcasting Corporation, based on Singapore, and of course, in due course the Japanese invaded the island and I was at General Bennett's headquarters the morning after they came ashore. Things were pretty grim, and the following morning, or two mornings later, they captured our transmitter halfway across the island and it was useless for the Malayan Broadcasting Corporation to pretend to continue, they had no outlet whatever, couldn't make themselves heard. By this time we were down to a skeleton force—from being originally about seventy people we were down to fourteen. I'd been left in charge, and the remaining fifty-six personnel, including most of the seniors, had been evacuated, so the last dozen or so of us were put on a ship called the *Siang Wo*, an old Yangtse River cargo boat, and on this, on the night of the 11th February, we left Singapore and attempted to make our way down the straits to Java, hiding up during the day along those atolls and islands and trying to make speed at night. This, of course, was fraught with a great deal of uncertainty; in fact it was a hopeless game, and on Friday the 13th we were duly bombed and sunk by Japanese planes, as were at least forty other ships that day, because the Japanese had total control of the air, they could come down to masthead height and more or less handle their bombs on to your deck, so the chances of escape were very small. Fortunately there was no-one killed; we were disabled and we had no rudder, which was blown off the ship, part of the rear of the ship was lost but we managed to beach her on Banka Island, or some hundreds of yards off Banka Island on some rocks, and we all rowed ashore under cover of the darkness, and there was no loss of life at that stage. However, that night at midnight the Japanese came ashore on Banka and it was agreed at the hotel that the officers and everyone concerned should surrender. Seven of us refused to do that and went off through the jungle, with no arms, I think, except a revolver, one among the seven of us, and what gear we were carrying or could put on our backs. We went off through the jungle for seven days trying to dodge the Japanese patrols, which then honeycombed the island and set up watchtowers at intervals across the swamps and tin lines of which Banka is made up, and after seven days we managed to buy, with my watch, a foul old sampan of uncertain seaworthiness and with a very tiny sail, and on this we set off down the Banka coast, crossed over and went down the Sumatra coast towards Java. We were finally captured on Java after fourteen days, on March 7th, captured by the Sundanese who are the people dominant in eastern Java, and handed over to the Japanese who had landed there some days earlier, after being marched all night by our captors, handed over at dawn to the Japanese, all having the quiet certainty that we were about to be shot on the spot. However, next day we were handed over to the guards proper and brought to a place called Serang. When we were taken finally to Batavia, now called Jakarta, I'd come down from my weight on leaving Singapore, which was around 11 stone 2, or 156 pounds, I'd come down to 7 stone 13, 111 pounds, and this would be quite representative of the fate of most of the people captured in Serang at that time.

We were in the bicycle camp, as the Dutch barracks in Batavia had been called,

we were there for a period of about six months from April until October 1942. Conditions varied between very poor and quite tolerable, and in October '42 they announced they were taking us over to work on a railway, which was absolutely true.

We began work on the railway, which was taken from a point about forty miles from Moulmein called Thanbyuzayat, and from Thanbyuzayat the railway was cut through the jungles and across the swamps and the hills of Burma to the Three Pagodas Pass, and this distance of 113 kilometres from Moulmein, forty kilometres to Thanbyuzayat and another seventy-three to Three Pagodas Pass, saw the deaths of many hundreds of Australians who simply went under to the tremendous pressures of overwork, under-nourishment and the usual tropical ailments which assail work forces in any part of the tropics, specifically beriberi, dengue, malaria, dysentery and allied fevers and bowel complaints. The Japanese in every case gave the reason of death as beriberi or malaria as the case might be, the real reason for nearly all the deaths, I'd say ninety-nine per cent of the deaths, was malnutrition. If the boys hadn't been starved, they wouldn't have died, but as they were starved, they died in a way that was not only rather heartbreaking but terribly frightening.

We were taken away from the railway after it had been completed in '45, and in the last days before when the atomic bombs were being dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, we were being marched through Bangkok and by train and on foot were taken up to a place called Nonpaduk where the Japanese assembled some 3000 allied officers with the plan that if the armies of Field Marshal Slim came across the border from Burma, these officers were to be shot, so that there would be no danger of them joining Slim's forces or making nuisances of themselves to the Japanese. They had just herded in the last of us, which included my group, into this camp when, of course, the Emperor confounded all the predictions and expectations by endorsing a surrender. We came back via Calcutta, where Norman Carter and I were guests of Lord Casey, then Governor of Bengal, and we stayed with him in Government House; and Government House, Calcutta, after the prison camps and railways of Burma and Siam was quite a contrast. I think actually it was so much a contrast that I couldn't sleep in the big double bed I was given, which was in the Marquis of Wellesley suite, a very famous and luscious suite there. I got out of the bed every night after five minutes and lay on the floor and went sound asleep.

All the time we'd been in prison camp, fellow-prisoners, especially Australians, had been coming to me and saying, 'We hope you're keeping a note of all this, we're counting on you to write our story.' Because I was one of the few newspaper men or journalists who had any knowledge of the camps, in fact I was the only Australian war correspondent taken prisoner in that area and there were only, I think, three journalists among all the prisoners on the railway. So in Calcutta on the way back, the editor of the *Statesman*, the Indian newspaper, asked me if I'd write three articles and I sat down at a typewriter at Government House and banged out three articles about the prison camps for which I received the large sum of, I think, £300, which astonished me. I didn't realise he was syndicating them all over the world, and they appeared in

America and across Europe and elsewhere, and when I came home, September 12th 1945, the Melbourne *Argus* editor said, 'Are you well enough to write anything about it?' and I said, 'Oh yes,' so I then sat down and every day I wrote an article for about twenty days, and the *Argus* ran this and syndicated it throughout Australia and New Zealand and one or two other places, and this really was the basis of a book I then wrote in the following weeks called *Behind Bamboo*, which was dictated at high speed from the notes and old diaries I'd smuggled out of prison camp and from camp to camp during our various trips, which had been hidden by fellow-prisoners, some of them carried in people's bandages round their legs, others in the false bottom of our medical chest, and others against my stomach and other parts when the Japanese were searching us, because they never quite got down to a total skin search and they didn't find any of these, because you were up for a very bad beating and possibly for being shot, if you carried written notes. With these, and with the aid of a remarkable woman called Mrs Lough, who was a daughter of the proprietor of Zeeko's Business College, *Behind Bamboo* was written between October and late November in a matter of about six weeks, the original length was 140 000 words. We cut it back, with the aid of Beatrice Davis of Angus & Robertson to about 107 000 words, and it was the first book to appear in any country about the Japanese prison camps and the history of the Burma-Siam railway. It was published in May '46. The first edition was sold out in forty-eight hours, the second edition was sold out even quicker, and it had sold 40 000 copies in hardback before the end of that year. It was subsequently reprinted through the fifties and up to 1961 it had sold over 120 000 copies in hardback, and they brought out a paperback edition which also sold ten or twelve thousand copies.

Looking back now, twenty-six years after that was written, I think I've written much better things since. I have never written anything nearly so widely read or articles that were so publicised across the world, but it had immediacy, it was written from the heart, it was a pouring out of frustrations bottled up within one for three and a half years, and it finally was to tell one's own countrymen and people elsewhere what the boys had gone through and what had been suffered by those who hadn't come back—7000 Australians, many hundred Americans, many thousands of Dutch and Indonesians and more than 20 000 British—and it was to give their folk, particularly their own relatives and loved ones, a picture of the lives during the three and a half years of total silence, in which their career, their future, their everyday living had been blacked out and unknown to the western world. The book was written at a frightful speed and it has all the faults of a book written helter-skelter, but it did have, I think, a certain immediacy and authenticity, simply because it came straight out of one at a time when you were still fairly emotionally involved in the deaths of the people who had been closest to you over a period of forty-two months.

I worked with the Melbourne *Herald* for Sir Keith Murdoch through '46 and '47 in China and '48. In 1951, Sir Keith Murdoch came over to England, and on one of his visits he rang up one weekend and said, 'What was I doing on the Sunday,' and I said, 'Oh, I was free,' and he said, 'Could you drive me around, I want to see some friends in

Surrey,' so I went into Claridges and picked him up. People always say you get to positions in all organisations by intrigue and climbing over dead men's shoulders and kicking people in the back and so on, but I was a very happy war correspondent and I was a very happy foreign correspondent, I was a very happy member of the Melbourne *Herald* cable service and I thought I was a writer and a reporter, and editing was right outside my field of ambition and interest at that time, [but] a couple of weeks later I became the editor of the Adelaide *News*, which was the sole evening paper in South Australia. [Murdoch] visited Adelaide every two or three months for a day or two, or I flew over to see him in Melbourne. Then his son was still finishing at Oxford and didn't come for another year, and when he came over I was fairly well established on the paper and we were making a lot of money, and his inclination—although it must have been very difficult for a man of tremendous ambition and drive himself—his inclination naturally was to listen to somebody who seemed to be making money for the firm and for the family, so I had a great deal of independence, probably more than I realised, and this went on until late in the fifties when we began to differ about many things. In July 1960 I wound up as editor of the *News* and I think again that I was immensely lucky to be given almost total control of what appeared in the editorial columns of that paper from December '51 to July '60.

I was approached from Zurich by the International Press Institute, which is an organisation today of about 1600 editors, about 1300 editors and proprietors throughout the non-communist world, the free world, the non-totalitarian world, devoted to trying to preserve freedom of the press and trying to spread the ideals of democratic newspapers in Asia, Africa and other parts of the world. They asked me if I would succeed the then director, who was the first and founding director of this organisation which had been formed in 1949–50 in New York by nineteen world editors, including Ham Campbell, related to Ham Campbell of the Melbourne *Age*, who was the Australian founding father. When I got back to Australia at the beginning of 1964, the question was: Could one make one's living as a freelance and try and write the books that I had no opportunity for attempting to write during the forties and fifties and early sixties?

It seemed to me that the job of those of us who had been engaged in any way in the Pacific struggle with the Japanese and with the whole business of Australia becoming part of Asia and the Pacific rather than being a satellite of a European power, in fact the whole transition of Australia between its position as a colony and dominion before 1940 and as an independent Pacific country in the fifties and sixties, that this demanded that those with any contacts with Asia and the Pacific area should try and involve their countrymen in some sort of interest. At school, my generation, previous generations and even some of the kids going to school after the thirties, in the forties and fifties, had had drummed into them such irrelevancies as the British War of the Roses and the ups and downs of the Tudors and so on, all of which seemed to me of minor importance compared with what was happening in the twentieth century in China, Malaya, among our Indonesian neighbours and in our area, and to try and



persuade Australians to stop looking always towards Europe, particularly to London, or towards America, towards New York, Washington and San Francisco, and to think in terms of the Indonesians, Chinese, Japanese, Indians, Pakistanis with whom they were surrounded. This seemed to me to be a sort of heritage we owed to the boys who had died in the Pacific war in the forties, and I suppose this has been the main actuating force in my own writing and thinking and broadcasting, television and so forth, from the time I came back from the war towards the end of 1945 until today. So for twenty-six years I really have been a propagandist of closer relations with the people we live among, as distinct from the feeling that when you go abroad the world begins on arrival in London, a philosophy which seemed to dominate the thinking of our prime minister of so many years, Sir Robert Menzies, who really literally flew over the intervening countries every time he went abroad.

Unless one is Jon Cleary or my friend West or one of half a dozen others, one doesn't make a living in Australia in the sixties by writing books.

There are a couple of books to which I contributed during this period. One was *Australia and the Monarchy*, which was one of the first books produced by Sun books in paper cover. I think they sold 20 000 copies of this, and people like Zelman Cowen and Geoff Dutton and many others contributed to this, and I wrote a chapter about the migrants and their attitude to Australian or British royalty, in which I learnt a lot. I joined also in the production of a book Angus & Robertson got out. This was called *The Journalist's Craft*. It was edited by Lindsay Reville and Colin Roderick and about twenty Australian journalists contributed. They asked me to write the introductory chapter to explain what it was all about, to set the scene of the Australian press in the sixties, and one again learnt a great deal from this. My contribution was only four or five thousand words but I spent a lot of time on this and it enabled me to think and look back reflectively on the nine years' editing in Adelaide, and to try and place the role of the various partners in a newspaper—the reporter, the subeditor, the compositor, the circulation people, the advertising people and so on—in some kind of perspective, and also to show the role of the proprietor in Australian newspapers today, and again, one educated oneself probably far more than those who read the book.

About 1967–68 Oxford University Press approached me and asked me if I would contribute to their series, the world series they were then producing in paperback on a formula of 128 pages with maps, diagrams and illustrations, devoted to each country in the world. They had published fifteen of these, the sixteenth was Australia, and over nine months I knocked it together. Of course, the problem is not to write 128 pages, which is only some forty or fifty thousand words about Australia, the problem is to condense a little about the country that is vital into forty or fifty thousand words. To do it adequately, you'd need half a million words, so you've got to give a little of history, a little of geography, a little of the economy and look forward to the future, which occupies—the way they planned the series—a great portion of the book. You're not concerned so much with the past, you are much more concerned with the present as pointing to the future. This was an exercise in condensation such as I'd never

had before, because you were dismissing great areas of Australian history and great areas of Australian life in two paragraphs, that was the only way to write the book. This was published in 1968. I was in Britain when it came out, and it has been very well received.

At the same time and just afterwards, I was writing for Angus & Robertson a book called *Writing about Australia*. This didn't begin as a book, it began as four lectures which I was asked to deliver to launch the Foundation of Australian Studies, a new foundation opened at the University College of Townsville in 1967. Since then they have become annual lectures and there have been five series. Mine was the first. I tried to talk about factual writers in Australia, putting aside the novelists, dramatists and poets, but those who dealt with facts, and tried to give a picture of some aspects of Australian life or of Australia in any time between Governor Phillip's landing in 1788 and the present day. The lectures had a fantastically good reception in Townsville where I had an audience of several hundreds every night, but the book itself is not quite outdated, although the lectures were given nearly five years ago, it's not quite outdated by the fact that I drew immense strength from educating myself to some extent on the writers of the past, particularly the nineteenth-century writers in Australia whose thoughts and visions and concepts of Australia and its future have a great bearing on the sort of Australia our children are going to live in through the seventies, eighties and nineties of this century, and that's about as far ahead as any human being with any kind of humility dares to look. This book, *Writing about Australia*, was the last book I finished and published.

I've been engaged for most of the past four years, with the aid of a Commonwealth Literary Grant and help from the Dyason Foundation in Melbourne, on a biography of my father and his work with the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research.



Colin Simpson

(1908–83)

Sydney, 14th January 1974

Hazel de Berg collection  
National Library of Australia  
Tape nos deB 732–3

MY NAME IS COLIN SIMPSON. I was born 4th November 1908 in the Sydney suburb of Petersham. My mother was a nurse, she later came to have her own private maternity hospital, after she'd trained at Crown Street. She sold the hospital when I was about six years old and we went to live at Hill End, outside Bathurst. My father didn't come with us.

I had nearly all my primary schooling in the little goldmining town of Hill End which was later discovered by the artists, but when I came down and I said I came from Hill End, people said, 'Where's that?' They'd never heard of it. I came down and did one or two — I think a final year, in Sydney and then I — my mother had ideas that I should go to Newington College which is quite one of the great public schools but there was not a chance of my going to Newington College. It was a fine idea, I liked it but we had no money for me to go to Newington College, so I started off at Hurstville Junior Technical School and it took me about three weeks to decide that — I quite liked the woodworking and stuff but I didn't want to be a craftsman or an electrical engineer or something, which seemed to be the thing that everybody was being in those days, so I got myself out of that and into what seemed to be the next best thing, nearer to what I wanted, which was a commercial school at Kogarah and I learnt shorthand and bookkeeping and business principles, which I detested pretty much, and I didn't have any languages, I never learnt any languages at school at all, English was my best subject. I left that school at Kogarah with a reference from the headmaster saying, 'This boy will make a good journalist,' and a letter of introduction to his friend Mr Lewis Dear, who was managing editor of the *Daily Guardian*, and I went and saw Mr Dear who told me I had to start as a copy boy and they didn't want any copy boys anyway, so I got myself a job in advertising.

I was handling accounts, I remember one was Lactagol for expectant and nursing mothers, I barely knew what an expectant mother was, and this agency had decided to send a couple of their younger executives, not so young as me, up to the university. Perhaps they felt it would be nice to be able to tell their clients that their account was being handled by a university-trained man, so I heard about this and said, 'Can I go?' and they said, 'Oh yes, I suppose so.' I said, 'What subjects will I have to take? I could do English,' and they said, 'Oh yes, I suppose that's all right,' and I said, 'Psychology.' There used to be a lot of stuff written about the psychology of advertising so that seemed all right to them, they didn't realise that it embraced Philosophy 1 and a lot of stuff about logic and things like that. Anyhow I did eighteen months of this before I got too busy to continue, and it was a complete eye-opener. I liked the English lectures particularly but I felt, when I knew so little, should I be learning to read Chaucer in the original, should I be spending all my time listening to expositions about comic characters in Shakespeare's *Love's Labour Lost* or something like that, so I occasionally used to skip lectures and go over to the Fisher Library and find all sorts of authors that I'd never heard of, and read them and read magazines like the London *Mercury* and try and give — and it was quite an eye-opener and it began — my sort of proper reading began with this sort of thing, university experience and contact and people I met there,

too. Anyhow, I moved from that agency to another one and then the Depression came. The other agency wasn't doing at all well and I was warned that I could be laid off. By that time I had started to freelance and write pieces for *Smith's Weekly* which was a newspaper-type magazine, what they call first impressions, aphorisms, light verse, joke ideas, that kind of thing, and the editor Reg Moses rather liked this stuff and said, 'You know, there might be a place on the staff for you,' so when I heard that this advertising agency could disappear, I said, 'What about it?' and it turned out—not really, there wasn't a place on the staff but how would I like to work on the *Daily Guardian*, which was run by the same management, there was no position, and I said all right and within half an hour I was on the *Daily Guardian* as a sort of junior reporter. I was twenty and again, as in radio later, they threw you in and you taught yourself to swim. I think in about six months I was radio editor or something, I knew nothing about radio, then I became sub-editor and special writer and I moved to—they started a Sunday paper and I moved to that, and after that I seemed to be with Sunday papers until *Pix* was started with Tom Gurr. I started *Pix* and became associated with Sunday paper magazines, started a thing called *Fact* in which we—one of the stories I was proudest of there, I broke the story of Ern Malley.\*

After eighteen years of journalism, I left to go to the ABC in 1947. I was not on the staff of the ABC and couldn't afford to be, because the director of Drama and Features, whom I was working for, was only getting £1000 a year. I was getting £22 which was slightly more, and I had dropped from £25 a week in journalism to come into this new medium. The ABC wanted someone mainly to write documentaries. They gave you no training in this sort of writing, you more or less taught yourself. I soon found, and I had joined them only about a matter of a month or so and tapped out a Christmas play which they also wanted, and they rang up on Tuesday and said, 'Can you leave for North Borneo on Saturday and retrace the track of the death marches?'

I knew nothing then of what had actually occurred on these death marches but it was Australia's greatest prisoner-of-war tragedy, in September 1943 there were 1800 prisoners-of-war at Sandakan in North Borneo and only six of them came out alive. Some of them were United Kingdom personnel but mainly they were Australians. Anyhow, we flew to Borneo. Out of that I wrote a documentary for the ABC called 'Six from Borneo', because these six survivors we managed to round up, to bring them to Sydney to rehearse them doing their own parts, which were played into the show, their

\* In 1944 two Australian poets, James McAuley and Harold Stewart, fabricated a poet and his 'life-work' to find out 'whether those who write and those who so lavishly praise this kind of writing' could 'tell the real product from consciously and deliberately concocted nonsense'. They submitted the work to the editors of *Angry Penguins* for an 'opinion of their worth'. The poems were enthusiastically received and subsequently published in *Angry Penguins* where Ern Malley was ranked as 'one of the two giants of contemporary Australian poetry'. The two poets later confessed to the hoax stating their motives had been to 'debunk what was regarded as a pretentious kind of modern verse-writing'. 'Ern Malley, Poet of Debunk', James McAuley and Harold Stewart, *Fact*, 25 June 1944, p. 4.

own experiences, and then—it was a very grim story, when I came back I said, 'How am I going to do this without tearing the hearts out of the relatives?' and they said 'Well, go ahead and write it,' which I did, and then they were frightened to put it on for about six months, and then when the script was—it was an hour-long show and they published the script, I think—I don't know of any other documentary script that the ABC has published but they published this, it was on sale for sixpence and is now, I believe, something of a collector's item.

Most of the features I did for the ABC were documentaries in a program called 'Australian Walkabout'. I would go to different places, the ABC usually left it to me. Sometimes they said to me, 'We want a feature about—' Bathurst, for instance, was the first one and then there was Lismore and some in Tasmania, but then they would say, 'We want some out of Queensland,' or, 'We want some out of Western Australia,' and they would leave it pretty much to me where I went and what I got because I—well, I had had some previous experience in Queensland as a newspaper man, I knew I could go to the Gulf of Carpentaria and the Norman River and get a feature on crocodile shooters, I knew I could go to somewhere else and get one on sugar, and to Thursday Island and get one on pearl-diving because I'd been to Thursday Island earlier as a newspaper man. So I did a lot of these 'Australian Walkabout' features, then there was a large expedition, I think it is still the biggest scientific expedition that has ever taken the field in Australia. It was sponsored jointly by the Smithsonian Institution of the United States and the Australian Government, and pictorial rights were held by the *National Geographic Magazine*, which meant that I couldn't take any photographs but since I had very little interest then in taking photographs at all, that didn't matter, and anyhow I secured them free entry to this expedition. I flew in and joined it at a place called Oenpelli in Arnhem Land. It was called the Arnhem Land Expedition. The leader was C.P. Mountford, it had a number of American scientists of some note, anthropologists, ornithologists and fish men and it had some Australian scientists, like the anthropologist F.D. Macartney, and it was a very good team and it did, I think, a lot of very good work which has been published.

[I left the ABC and] decided I wanted to go into publishing. I couldn't very well offer to join Angus & Robertson or somebody so I looked round for a small publisher who might want my kind of person as some sort of junior partner and I picked on a man called F.H. Johnston, not another Frank Johnston who was also a publisher, but Frank H. Johnston who also runs a travel agency now and he said, 'What do you think we ought to publish?' He had published a few books, and I'd contributed to one of them, and I schemed out a book which was to be called 'Australian Walkabout' and it would—I would use all the experience I'd gained doing these Australian documentaries which were called 'Australian Walkabout' and he thought this was quite a good idea but he said, 'It's a bit big to me, I think we'll sell it to Angus & Robertson,' which he did and we got a contract from them to write it, and I began to write it and I began on the Arnhem Land section, about the Arnhem Land expedition, and after I'd done 25 000 words I was still writing about the Aborigines and I'd become quite fascinated

with the Aborigines and I was researching the Kakadu tribe, which has vanished, in Arnhem Land and what Baldwin and Spencer had found out about it and I went on writing, and Frank Johnston thought this was crazy, he thought no-one wanted to read a book all about these blackfellows, but I decided the book would be about the Aborigines and I also decided that they were not dying out, and I think this was the first statement before Professor Elkin said so, before Professor Stanner said so, that they were in fact not dying out, they were starting to increase.

Anyhow, I went on with this and I couldn't think of a title for it. I've always paid a lot of attention to titles. I knew what I wanted. I wanted a title of three words with a universal image in it, with one word that was quite relevant to the Aborigines, characteristic or indicative of something of them, and I wanted the 'K' sound in the title. 'K' has more impact than any other consonant in the language, I perhaps had come across this in advertising but I knew that Kodak was a psychologically, scientifically coined trade name. You forget a lot of brand names but you would not forget Kodak because of this 'K', it nailed it into your memory, the 'K' at each end nailed it in. I wanted this so it came up, it took me about six months and one night I said to myself, "Adam in Ochre", and I went in to my wife and said, 'I've got it, that's it, "Adam in Ochre", and she said, 'Yes, that's good,' and another leading author, it was old Jack Idriess, Ion Idriess, said, 'Oh, I wouldn't call it that, nobody will know what it means, I wouldn't call it that.' Anyhow, I did call it that. The book came out in 1951 and it was in part a report on the Arnhem Land expedition and of going to some other Aboriginal places outside of Arnhem Land—Melville Island, the Delissaville settlement—and the middle section of it was a novella in which I sort of reconstructed the life of a man and wife in the Kakadu tribe when the white man was just coming. White men do come into the end of it when there is tragedy, shooting, and it did very well. It became a bestseller, it had excellent reviews, so I seemed to be right from the start sort of established as an author, if it were possible to live by writing books. I had an advance of £300, it wasn't very much, from Angus & Robertson.

I wrote about two and a half books on New Guinea. The third book was a sort of grab bag of pieces that didn't fit into the other books and was also concerned with such places as Fiji, where I covered fire-walking, the New Hebrides where I had been early, not for the ABC, and that was called *Islands of Men*. It possibly would have been better had I called it 'Adam of the Islands' because the 'Adam' series of books—*Adam in Ochre* was followed by *Adam with Arrows* and then *Adam in Plumes*. Anyhow, I thought that three books about primitive people were perhaps enough for the time being, or enough anyway, and that perhaps it was time, if I was going to continue writing books, that I moved in on the more civilised tribes, and a journalist who'd been in Japan with the occupation forces told me how much he was interested in and liked the Japanese people.

Now, I still didn't have the sort of money for air fares or to sustain myself for any length of time and I went to Qantas, the airline that was then operating to England

and to Japan and said, 'I want to do a book about Japan, will you carry me?' And their public relations man decided that they would and then I said, 'I must go twice, once in the spring and once in the autumn,' and they said, 'Oh well, we can give you lots and lots of folders and brochures about what it's like in either, we could give you lots about the other season,' and I said, 'No, I don't do that. I write from what I experience, what I see, so it's two trips or I don't want to go at all.' So they puzzled about that and agreed to take me in the spring and in — first in the autumn and then in the following spring, this was 1955 and 1956. They gave me—they helped a little with hotel accommodation but I soon began to go broke before I got nearly as much material as I wanted, and I ended up staying out at an army camp where I was able to stay because in order to go to Borneo I had had to become accredited as a war correspondent. I should have perhaps mentioned that I was probably the last card in the pack as a war correspondent, I became a war correspondent thirteen months after the war was over.

The book that I wrote has several titles, it is best known, and it sold most, under its Australian title, which is *The Country Upstairs*. We were down here and Japan was up there and so I thought of this offbeat title, *The Country Upstairs* and thought, This is too offbeat, and threw it away. No, wait a minute, I rather like it, come back. I decided to use it. It didn't work, of course, for Britain, where the book was also published as *A Picture of Japan* or for America, where the United States edition had the title for which I disclaim all responsibility, *Japan: An Intimate View*. I was never in the country long enough to be intimate with it but a kindly review in the *Sydney Morning Herald* said it provided an astonishingly intimate picture of Japan and the American publishers pounced on that and it had this title, *Japan: An Intimate View*. When they published my book *Wake up in Europe* they called that *Europe: An Intimate View* for no better reason. Anyhow, this book did extremely well and I am in process at the present time of not so much revising it as rewriting it, extensively revising it if you like, and extending it, adding to it, because so much of it is now out of date, which is not surprising when you think it started in 1955. It has sold more than any other book of mine, it has sold with the overseas editions about 70 000, which is a great many for an Australian book to sell.

I still wasn't able to sustain myself entirely by writing books and I went back to my first job, advertising, rather than to journalism. I found that advertising paid pretty well.

*Wake up in Europe* did very well. As to the actual writing, I made notes as I went along. I always try to make my notes on the spot and one of the principal difficulties is reading them afterwards because you make them in buses, in tourist coaches that are jolting along and in trains, then I think you get a sort of immediacy of impression. I've never been one to sit down at night after dinner and write up the day, as it were. No, at night you should be doing something else anyway and you write as you go along, in cars, and if it's possible to write, however badly, you write just these notes. You never write anything more than these notes, you never attempt to write any finished stuff at all, at least I don't, and you take pictures constantly and you try not to worry about the



film cost too much, because I do rather make it a welter the way I shoot pictures, using the camera, as I say, as a notebook, many of them with no intention of being illustrations but, of course, some you hope, this one I could use. Anyhow, I came back and it's a matter of then settling down at home, we live in the suburbs at the end of a blind street, which is good, with some bush around it, it's a quiet location, I have a sort of sunroom which has become my study/office, if you like, and there I write, and I write during the day and at night also, I write and I write. I don't write fast and I usually rewrite. I don't write a whole outline. I've got an idea of what I want to do, sometimes I draft a bit of an outline of what I want to do, I alter it as I go along. What I have done with my publishers, against their will, and this would happen against any publisher's will, I have more or less made them edit my stuff and have it set as I go along, they've never, since I think the New Guinea books anyhow, had a complete manuscript from me. On a couple of occasions I've had them printing before I'd finished writing, they'd started printing the book before they'd got the last piece of manuscript.

Anyhow, this book *Wake up in Europe*, I proposed to follow with another book called 'The Four Corners of Europe' in which I would do Spain and Greece and the Scandinavian countries and Russia in another book, and I set out to do the travel for this and I actually went to those four corners and then I came back and I sat down and I started to write the Spain part and I thought, No, this won't do, I can't cram into one book. I'd crammed the other countries in without any great trouble but I felt I couldn't do it this time, I think places like Russia daunt you a bit, that you're going to make it one quarter of a book, and the same with Greece, so I decided to write four separate books which rather cut across the idea that Europe is still one country, or the four corners of one country, to Australians, but anyhow I decided this was all I could do although I hadn't been long enough in Spain and only a few days in Portugal, to really sustain a book on that country, but I managed to write one, I called it *Take Me to Spain*. It sold quite well. This was followed with *Take Me to Russia*. I was in Russia—I didn't go back to Spain but I realised I couldn't write about the Soviet Union on that very brief experience I had of it on that first trip, so I had to—I went back and I also went back to the Scandinavian countries and spent some months there, and I went to Greece and spent about five months in all in Greece. Now, the Scandinavian one was called *The Viking Circle*. It was a very hard one to title, that, and it included Finland, which is not a Viking country but nevertheless, it seemed to be the only inclusive kind of title that would work. The Russian book was called *Take Me to Russia* here and was called *This Is Russia* in England, perhaps *This Is Russia* suggests a book more definitive than that book is, since it is a—but it's fairly—it gives you a fair idea of what Russia is though not of all the Soviet Union but it does take in the Central Asian Republics of the Soviet Union, Uzbekistan, Tadzhikistan, places like that, Kazakhstan, which have fascinating places like Samarkand and Bokhara.

The Greece book I called *Greece: The Unclouded Eye* because of what seemed to me to be a challenge implicit in the subject. I think the difficulty here was best expressed

by Sir Maurice Bowra, who is quite authoritative on Greece, who wrote: 'Almost everything Hellenic has been so transfigured by centuries of admiring worship that it is difficult to see Greece with unclouded eyes,' and this is difficult, and I wrote in the book, following this quotation from Bowra, 'It goes on all the time, this process of presenting an idealized, glamoured-up Greece. We are so conditioned and permeated by it that objectivity can sound like blasphemy, whereas exaggeration passes for appreciation. It is so pervasive and beguiling that I cannot be at all certain that the shimmering mist of the Greek mirage will not creep into this book and break the promise in the title, *The Unclouded Eye*.' So I tried to give an idea of what the Athens of Pericles was really like instead of what people tend to write of it as being like. This involved a lot of research but with Greece, as with Russia, you cannot come to the country and hope to have any real understanding of it unless you are prepared to go into its history and get its background and see where you are, when you are in the present, I mean, you're following on, how did this present country come about as a result of this past and, of course, in the case of Greece's past it's so much the past out of which our own western civilisation has derived that it becomes particularly important for anyone.

Most years I have managed to produce a new book, I think it is rather much to do but I have had to do it. In the time that I've been writing, that is writing books, which goes back to 1950 so it is twenty-three, twenty-four years, one naturally notices changes and it is true that it is now perhaps a little easier to live by writing books but not—shall I say, it shouldn't be easy but the writer, I still think, it seems to me is under-rewarded. One thing that may come as a surprise is that when I was a relatively unknown author with, say, *Adam in Ochre* to my credit, the publishers were printing and selling first editions of 20 000 copies of my books. This doesn't apply today, 10 000 is as much as you can expect the publishers to undertake or as much as I can and very few authors get an edition of that size, very few indeed, so why was it 20 000 then? It may be that there were fewer books then but I think that possibly more books were bought, and yet today I am sure that more books are read, with your increasing standard of education, I think we read more today but that doesn't mean to say that we buy more and we are in the position—you see, I've written, say, sixteen or seventeen books. Anybody can read every word that I have written without buying a single copy of any of my books. What you do is, you go to your neighbourhood public lending library, and about eighty-five per cent of Australians can do this, there is a public lending library within reach of some eighty-five per cent of the population. Now, this naturally means that they are more inclined to borrow than they are to buy, this is natural. It should be understood that I feel that libraries are a grand thing, I couldn't have written my books without the books that have been available to me though lending libraries, I couldn't afford to have bought all of them, particularly a book like *Greece*. I bought, mark you, more than I had previously bought because I realised what was happening in this field and how an injustice was being done to authors, and so I became interested in what is called the Public Lending Right and that is the right of an author to be recompensed when his book is publicly used by being lent from a library,

and as millions and millions of books are used, and all the author gets is one royalty payment when the library buys that book which it lends out to scores of people, perhaps hundreds of people, and this makes it very difficult for the author to exist.

I became interested in the Public Lending Right—I realised this position only after I had joined the Australian Society of Authors, before that I was in this position, that I went up to the local library when *Adam in Ochre* had been out about a year and they said, 'You know, we still have a long waiting list for your book *Adam in Ochre*,' and I was flattered. It didn't occur to me that this I could not afford, no, and they expected me to be flattered, this was, 'Look what you've done, look how popular you are.' When I realised what was happening, I interested myself in this, read a great deal about it, all that had happened in England where the Society of Authors there had been after it for about twenty years, I even read the parliamentary debates in the House of Commons about it, and found out what was being done in Scandinavia where it—Swedish authors have it, Danish authors have it, I don't see why Australian authors shouldn't have it. Anyhow, I don't want to go on about this but we have been, in the Australian Society of Authors of which, at this time, I'm now one of the two vice-presidents, we have been campaigning for Public Lending Rights for about five years and it now seems that we have achieved it or at least we've achieved the government's agreement that it is our right and that we should get it. We have the government's commitment, unequivocally I would say, to grant this to authors, that is the Labor Government that was elected in December 1972, it was promised by the now Prime Minister Mr Whitlam that if he came to government he would do this and he has since affirmed that he will, since he became Prime Minister. The chairman of the Public Lending Right Committee of the Literature Board, Professor Geoffrey Blainey, who is also chairman of the Literature Board, has said that he hopes that the first public lending right payments can be made in March this year. Anyhow, Professor Blainey has said that the Australian Society of Authors has achieved the Public Lending Right.

People say, 'You have almost the ideal job, you can travel and write about it, very few people are as fortunate, to have a life like that.' This is true. It's not quite as true as some would have it because it is a very good way of living but you sometimes rather tend to forget how good it is because you have to work too hard at it, in other words, it would be nice not to have to work such abominably long hours. 'Do you have to do this, why do you have to, why can't you do it a little more quickly?' I don't know, I've never consciously set out to write what is called a bestseller. I don't think you do that, what I try to do and the formula is very simply stated, though it is quite difficult to achieve, I set out to write the kind of book that I would like to read before I went to a place or if I couldn't go there, in lieu of going there, because I do recognise this, that I suppose the majority of my readers are armchair travellers. Many of them write and say, 'I've been to so-and-so with you,' so I think one recognises this. Now, I like the travelling.

*Writing is hard work.*



John Thompson  
(1907-68)

Sydney, 5th October 1966

Hazel de Berg collection  
National Library of Australia  
Tape nos deB 178-80

THIS IS JOHN THOMPSON. I was born, they tell me, in Kew, Victoria, but we spent our early boyhood, my brother and myself, in a house in Malvern, and then we moved to another house in Malvern. My father was a dentist and he was a kindly man. My mother came of a wealthy family. The literary influence in the family was entirely centred in my grandfather, who had been a schoolmaster. I enjoyed reading always, from quite young, and I was fortunate, I think—and I think this applies to a lot of people—in having a good deal of illness when I was a youngster, nothing very serious, I never had polio or TB or anything like that but I did spend a considerable amount of time at home or in bed with gastric upsets and things, and this gives one very much to reading. Also, it tended to breed a certain loneliness. I didn't much care for school games and things.

There was a schoolmaster at Melbourne Grammar School called Digby Giles, we called him 'Spuddo'—I talked about him in a television program—and he was a man who loved poetry, and I think I'd begun to read a bit of poetry but I think that the way he taught it, he didn't really teach it, he would simply read the set texts to the class and read them in this funny voice: 'Tht Agneth Eve, ah bitter chill it warh, the owl for all hih featherth with a cold.' That's how he used to read it and everybody laughed at him, but he read this stuff with feeling, and it got across certainly to me. I don't know, to some of the others, whether it did but I think that I—I can't recall just exactly when I started to write verse myself but I found this, once I did start it, quite an absorbing thing and all through my teens and later teens, when I was at the university, I used to spend hours every night sitting in front of a sheet of paper trying to get inspiration, and very little came out of it, I suppose a certain feeling for rhythms and verse and the sound of verse, I used to always chant these bad verses that I wrote.

It was, I think, in that time—I always think you could talk for a long time about this—that one's situation wasn't easy. There was virtually no Australian literature available or what was available was abominable by the standards one was getting in the Melbourne education at private schools, which was very much an English-centred education; the literary education was all European-based, English-based, and one grew up with the feeling that the place in which poetry was written was England or Italy. This was all part of the whole complex of emotions that one was brought up in at that time. It may well have been more a Melbourne thing than a Sydney thing. I think that Fitzgerald and Slessor growing up here, although they wrote very much in an exotic vein, seem to have been happy enough, they felt that it was all right. They didn't seem to have this tremendous pull to get abroad to Europe and England, back to the great nests of art, that I did, although other people like Patrick White and many many painters all fled for their lives as soon as they could possibly get the opportunity, and this is what happened with me.

I started to try and write prose and I wrote a couple of short stories and then tried to write novels, and for years after that I tried to write novels, but in the meantime I felt I'd simply got to get away again, I'd got to get out. The family were very good. My

grandfather gave me the fare to England and they helped me with a bit of dough, and I went to England and lived there for seven years and didn't really work for my living for quite a while, and tried to write and went to live down in the country and half worked, half wrote, half worked for my living and half wrote on a farm for some years.

Then later, that sort of petered out, I couldn't sell any novels. I got a book of poetry published. Geoffrey Keynes liked the work when I met him and he introduced me to a chap at Methuens and they published a little first book in 1935 which was well reviewed, of course it didn't make me any money, I think they paid me £5 for it or something. I really made no impact at all.

We came back [to Australia] and settled down and I joined the ABC and became an announcer. When I first started announcing for the ABC in Perth, they used to get letters saying, 'Who the hell is this awful foreigner that you've got?', because essentially my voice had become extremely upper-class English. It was a perfect BBC voice—I didn't realise this until one of the technicians made a recording of my voice some months after I'd joined the ABC and I listened to it and here was this tremendous BBC voice coming out with the bad R's.

But then the talks began to get into a fearful mess. The war, of course, had started by this time and we were all reserved in essential occupations, that sort of thing, and the trouble with the talks was that the Talks Officer had been embezzling money and he was suspended for a time, and so I went to the manager and said—obviously they weren't going to return him to his job; what they did with him, as they did with all the embezzlers, homosexuals and others in those days, was to send him to Tasmania eventually, the sort of long shadow of Van Diemen's Land recurring! And so I went to old Con Charlton, who was manager, and said, 'Look, for heaven's sake, you've got to do something about the talks. Let me take it over.' So he said, 'Yes, that's a good idea.' So we fixed it up and I became in charge of talks. Altogether we spent three years in Perth and I was Talks Officer, and then I got into the army. I got whizzed out of the army just before V-P Day, just before the collapse of the Japanese, because they'd run out of war correspondents. So I went up to New Guinea and reported the Japanese surrender at Rabaul. And then I had a fascinating short period up there [in Java], and wrote a little prose book.

During the war, of course, and during this time since we got back to Australia I had written a fair amount of poetry and had a second book published in about 1943, and I'd written things like 'Transcontinental' and 'The Traveller' and a number of lyrics and things. I kept on writing poetry. I've always written it intermittently, you know; you can't force it. I don't know, in different circumstances or with a different impetus, I might have never bothered much with prose and have written far more poetry than I did. I feel I've had a broken-up sort of career as far as poetry goes, long periods of discouragement or feeling that I wasn't getting anywhere with it, or turn to prose and forget about it, and I think this was a mistake. I think that poetry is the thing that I should have stuck at all through. The result is I've got a small body of

verse which I'd stand by. I don't think I've ever published anything, or very little, that I wouldn't be happy enough to keep, that's reasonable, but I very much regret that I haven't written a great deal more.

Of course, the book about Java, that was only a small book, was published in 1946. We got it out fast. It was called *Hubhub in Java*. It didn't sell very much, the big booksellers didn't put it on their shelves at all. The book of verse that was published during the war was called *Sesame*. The next book I published about the middle of the 1950s was called *Thirty Poems* and the last book I published was called *I Hate and I Love*—*Odi et amo, quare id faciam nescio*, of course, from dear old Carullus. I didn't put it in quotes so critics generally didn't pick up the fact that it was a quotation because they'd never heard of Carullus, and one critic reviewed the thing as love-hate poems, which really isn't what was meant at all.

At any rate, the broadcasting took up, I suppose, most of my writing energies and I enjoyed this.

I'd begun in the Talks Department doing sort of features, a literary magazine program, literary and musical magazine programs called 'Quality Street', which is still remembered nearly twenty years afterwards. It became my full time work each week to pick out the very best I could find of poetry, oratory, prose, wit and music, songs and that sort of thing, you see, and we made these programs. I did seventy-five of them, I did it for a year and a half, and then they started the Features Department. This started with a fantastic character, one of these fantastic Englishmen who came out and worked for the ABC. Englishmen could always get a job in those days with the ABC and a good one, but I was very fond of him. He had the famous name of Theo Mathew. We started doing documentary-type feature programs, literary, biographical programs, all this sort of thing, and the ABC sent me across on an exchange to London for six months to the BBC. I did a lot of travelling around for the ABC in the years.

Now looking back all over this, this start in Australia and travelling around, I feel that I've seen such fantastic changes in Australia, it's changed so fast, that it would take a long chapter to describe it. The whole atmosphere is sort of geared to go, in fact it's going, and it seemed to start in the thirties with isolated struggling younger writers like Mudie and Ingamells, who weren't so frightfully good perhaps, except occasionally. People cottoned on to what Slessor was doing. And then you got this great spate of writing, of verse writing, because I think it is the thing that is remarkable.

I say to everybody that at the time we compiled the *Penguin Book of Verse*, Slessor and Howarth and myself, in 1958, there were sixty living Australian writers who had made valid contributions to, I think, world literature. It might in some cases have been only a couple of poems but in others it was quite a considerable body of very very good verse, and I have said—and I don't think it is extravagant—that looking at this, say, fifty years hence, I may be wildly wrong but I think if you compare the writers who came up during and after the Second World War in this big surge of national feeling that made this country look something like a nation for the first time, and with

a feeling of where it stood in the world, if you knock Shakespeare out of the Elizabethan galaxy and then compare the Elizabethan writers—when the population of England was about eight million and the population was about ten million during the Second World War, nine or ten million, you can compare them not unfavorably. There are poets who to this day are not taken much notice of, like Kenneth Mackenzie and Max Dunne and, of course, Judith Wright and the other good girls writing, and people like Blight coming up and so on, doing these extraordinary poems, here and there, extraordinary poems written by Eric Rolls—people, most unlikely people, delicate lyricists like David Campbell and John Manifold and so on, writing superb poems. Manifold's 'Learmonth Elegy' is among the best three or four elegies in the British language, the English language—a wonderful thing.

I think a lot of them probably haven't written as much as they would have if they hadn't come up through a difficult thing, making their way; but these are the pioneers and the ground is prepared for a very great poet indeed now. What the next impetus is going to be is interesting. I think Judith Wright put her finger on this and I go along with this—I'm not sure whether I didn't think of it independently or whether I picked it up from Judith, but the next thing, the thing that might produce a great poet, might be good relations with Asia—that we are a white people, almost free from the colonialist taint that colours all relations between Asia and England and France and Holland and Portugal and the rest of them. But we have been a colonised lot, we have been a colony, we've never been an imperial power. We really haven't got any drive towards imperialism. If the good things in the Australian character could come up to the front—not the stupid flag-waving and sabre-rattling rubbish that goes on—we're in a unique position to be able to go out to and with Asia, and I think this might happen.

The situation for young writers is very very much better, the whole atmosphere is encouraging now whereas the whole atmosphere was totally discouraging forty years ago, and I think you see this all around you. You get young people like Rodney Hall bursting with intelligence. A lot of his work so far I don't think is frightfully good but he's written at least one masterpiece. And a young man called Les Murray, he's about twenty-eight and he's written two or three things that are absolutely superb, you could put them alongside almost anything.

There was a slump in the middle fifties, I think. There is an academic group around who are going counter to the thing that is developing out of Judith and perhaps out of some of my stuff and out of Slessor's stuff. Where the real immaturity lies in Australian literature at the present time is among the critics and among the academics. You get writers who are almost completely overlooked, like Bruce Beaver with his novel, *You Can't Come Back* is it called? just published the other day; and Ken Cook who wrote a novel called *Wake in Fright*. They're not pretty stories but, by Jove, they're good and my bet is that they will stand as monuments of this period of our development far above the arty-farty stuff of men like Porter and White, and Alec Hope, too, for that matter, who is a wit—he's hardly a poet, he's possibly a great wit;



this is my view of him. I'm putting it down because I don't think you'll find it from anybody else, and this is a considered opinion. It might be just rather interesting to see later on if this holds.

As for myself, I haven't written much the last two or three years in the poetry way. I published the book a couple of years ago which was more or less a collected work, called *I Hate and I Love*. This was almost ignored, this book, forty years' work, and I found this extremely discouraging. It quite surprised me, I didn't realise how hurt I would be by it, but I find that writers are. David Campbell's beautiful last book of verse was practically ignored by the critics or was written down as triviality, you know and it was so much better than anything else that was published in the same year that it's just nobody's business to go into that.

Finally, what has meant a great deal to me and Pat, too, to my wife, lately has been the fact that we've got ourselves a cottage down in the country, up in the high country. I like cold weather, I like wind and rain and clouds and the sort of sunsets we used to have as children in Victoria, and the sort of sunsets you get in the murky English weather, and the cold wind and the hot fire, and I'm torn between the two worlds, this quiet country and sitting by a fire with the wind blowing outside, and writing; and being busy with people and travelling around. I'll never get reconciled to this thing. The ideal life for me would be to chop and change between the two. But this place down at Bundanoon, one acre of ground but with beautiful surroundings, and we've been planting trees, I'm getting a tremendous kick out of this. I think I'll get some poetry out of it before I finish. I've already got one little poem out of it called 'The Magpies' and I like that one. We go down every weekend to the country and friends come down usually. It's halfway between Canberra and Sydney, and when I pull out of the city life and go and live, as I would like to, in the country—when of course I will start to hanker for the city life, I suppose, and we'll make forays on Canberra and Sydney, and I suppose I'll be able to combine two sorts of life to some extent.

Now I've been asked how do I write a poem. Well, there's no royal road. It's a question I can't answer except by a whole lot of different instances, different examples. Essentially, you begin—an idea flashes into your mind and you make a note, I make a note and I go from there, but I have had some extraordinary experiences. I had one period when I wrote more poetry than at any other, for what seems to have been about six weeks in London. I was very lonely, all my love affairs had fallen apart and I had had a squabble with someone, and I was alone living down in Chelsea near the old church. My whole pattern of life, if there had been such a thing, disintegrated and I ate when I felt like it and went to sleep and woke up when I felt like it, and lived alone in this little room and somehow my mind seemed to be all sparked and I kept getting ideas, and I was writing three or four poems a day for what seemed like weeks. Out of this period I kept about eight or perhaps ten poems that I wrote over this period, finishing up with a long one called 'Awakening' which is a young man's poem—it was published in my book in England—but this was an extraordinary experience and I used to go up a little cafe. I was walking down Church Street one day and I noticed my big

feet swinging away beneath me like that and I went back and almost immediately wrote a poem called 'Today when walking in the street, I looked down each long leg (or something), to the big pendulums of my feet,' and that seemed to me a good poem. It came out of the blue and I had this feeling, as I was sort of—it wasn't automatic writing by any means but I felt that I was in the grip of an emotional liberation that went on.

Then quite differently, when I was working with the ABC in Perth in the early years of the Second World War, I got summoned to Sydney for a talks conference, and so I went then first class in the transcontinental train, and it took about five days to get across to Sydney, and we went across the Nullarbor Plain, and it was fascinating going across this great, great plain and then back again. When I got back to Perth I thought to myself, You could write a poem about that plain. Then I got into the army, and after having served in the army in Perth for a while, I got sent to Sydney to go to a radar school, and we went in a troop train across the Nullarbor, and perhaps it was then that it occurred to me, My word, there's a poem in this, and quite unexpectedly, after being some months in Sydney we were given leave and sent back right across the Nullarbor again on leave, and I began to make notes on the train and the stations and the type of landscape and the sand and things. I'd never done this before but I was thinking of this thing, and again when my leave was over I made much more careful notes and really thought about this thing, might even have had a phrase or two; but just outside Perth as you go into the Darling Ranges there is an extraordinary outcrop of rock, and you suddenly feel that you've hit the hills, and you go past these rocks. There, in the first stanza of that poem called 'Transcontinental'—and I got across to Sydney and I was simply put in charge of a radar mechanism, and I had a cabin in which I used to sit most of the day, and I wrote this poem day after day, a few lines at a time, in the cabin, locked up in this cabin; and the whole thing grew. It's quite a long poem, about 120 lines, and it's possibly, I think, the best constructed poem I've written, of length, you know. It's extremely well knit together, it grows and comes to its climax and there are some nice onomatopoeiac effects and all sorts of things. I'm pleased with the poem, but this was done quite deliberately and thoughtfully and so on.

Then there are other poems, like when we came back from England and went to live for a few weeks in the Darling Ranges, the extraordinary contrast from the green and softness of England to the harsh old old old antique earth of Western Australia started me off, and the first lines of 'The Traveller' came like that. Then it got itself written: this is the poem about the division between—of an Australian mind between Australia and the old world, you know. The last part of it—the first version of it was a little forced, the end, later I worked over it and I think improved it, but there is a slight forcing in the end of that poem. It's a pity. I don't know whether you perceive it but I think there is. It was slightly worked out, it was slightly forced out, it was hard to do. It took me a long time to write, I didn't write it quickly, it took a couple of years, I suppose, of thinking it over and gradually building it.

Then, again in the army, I got off on leave one Saturday afternoon, and I knew that Pat and the child Peter were not at home and the house would be empty and there was no hurry, and I walked home through the cemetery, dawdled through the cemetery, and I got two ideas like that—I hadn't written a poem for months and I got two ideas. I had nothing to write them down with, and you must put a jotting down because they're like waking dreams and they're gone in a moment, and I put my head down and I sort of held on to my head and I hung on to these two ideas, almost running to get home, and I got home and grabbed the paper and scribbled them down, and I'd finished both those poems by the end of the afternoon. These were the one, 'Sometimes we look around and see the bulge of buried things', that one, and the other one about, I think, about little boys—'You'd best ask Peter', that one—you remember? And I did them and they were both completed, and I've always kept them, I've always thought that they were all right—that same afternoon, almost before they got home, I think. But this was very unusual for me.

Ken Slessor was once actually paid to write light verses for *Smith's Weekly*, and it was part of his job and he turned it out, but this is almost unique in Australian history, for a poet to be paid to write poetry. Of course, in the ABC the relations inside a department like the Features are very nice, and our director Paul O'Loughlin and the others have got a feeling for literature and they feel that if you produce something good it's worth it, you see, and nobody—nobody above us would obstruct this view, either; Semmler and Neil Hutchison and so on, they're cultivated men and they recognise that this is so. No freelance writer could have lived as I did and spent so much time on a poem. On a good day I might get ten lines written but that's exceptional.

I once said to Ken Slessor, years ago, we were having a drink and he said, 'What have you been up to?' and I said, 'Oh, I'm working on a poem, I wrote three lines last night.' 'By Jove,' he said, 'three lines? That's good!' This is the slowness—'Slowness is beauty'—with which poetry gets written. Sometimes you get a rush and you might do a few lines quickly, sometimes they come; occasionally you'll look at lines you've written—very occasionally—and say, 'Good heavens, how could I possibly have written that?'

There is a poem of mine called 'Biography', which is not really—I don't regard it as an autobiography at all, it's a biography. Certainly there are personal things in it, but it's not about me, it's about the growth of a person. That's how I see it. And there are lines there that astonish me, I don't know where they came from, I feel as if I can't have written them, you know? I think most poets feel this.

I think that what we really do need in Australia at the present time, and only time will show if our leaders will catch up with us, we do need a tremendous injection of money and help and propaganda and support, scholarships and so on, for young people gifted for the arts and for writing, and there are many objections that can be advanced against a system of public patronage but nevertheless, great art has occurred with patronage in the past, and to get as much time as I have available to me to write, say, a radio poem, it does pay off and we'll get enough out of this, however extravagant

it might seem—and they're far from being extravagant—but I think the advantages would entirely outweigh the others, and only time will show if they've got enough sense to try and do this. I'm certain that if you could free young people to travel and to mix and not have to worry about where the next penny is coming from, that we would get a tremendous amount out of it. I think we've got to do it. This is the movement of modern society. There's a big agitation going on at the moment—I'm tied up in it and all the authors that I have any regard for are tied up in the thing and trying to push this through, and as a matter of fact, if we did it we wouldn't need to spend so much money on armaments because we'd be a more civilised people.



Alan Villiers  
(1903–82)

London, 1st April 1970

Hazel de Berg collection  
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MY NAME IS ALAN VILLIERS. I was born in North Melbourne, in Victoria, of course, back in 1903, the second son to a young fellow of those days; his name was Leon Joseph Villiers, and he was a first generation Australian. He was quite a thinker, although a self-educated man, and a writer and something of a minor poet. There were many minor poets in Victoria and in New South Wales and Queensland and so on, in those days, and as children we met some of these. My mother, I should have said, was Ballarat Irish and her name had been Hayes. She was an enterprising young woman, too.

My father died in his very early forties from cancer, in the Melbourne General Hospital, and there were still six kids, and of course life was a bit rough. It seemed a good idea to take myself off to sea and I was heartily in favour of that project anyway—until I got there, and then I found that it was a very rugged life indeed.

I went to sea first in an old barque called the *Rothesay Bay*. She'd been a Scots deepwaterman, and when I joined her she'd been sailing for some timber merchants in New Zealand and Australia for a number of years, and she'd also sailed the South Pacific and across to California or across to the west coast of Chile sometimes. Anyway we went to New Zealand. There were six boys as cadets on board. We traded across mostly to New Zealand and back to Sydney with sawn timber, and picked up general cargo around the coast of Australia, gypsum, I remember, at Edithburgh, to a place called Whangarei in New Zealand.

After a while I joined another ship, a barque called the *James Craig* that belonged to old Jones\* there in Hobart. Murchison was the master of that, he was a fine fellow, and by that time, it was after the First World War and Depression was setting in and life was getting even more rugged in that it was difficult to find a ship at all, and so I had to go off on a limejuicer.

Now all this time, I wasn't there because I was going to write about it, I had no intention of writing anything except the odd letter home at the end of voyages. I meant to become a professional seaman and become a master of a Cape Horn ship, and that was it, and to do that I had to serve first a minimum of four years in deepwater square-rigged ships of that type, to get a second mate's ticket and start again from there. So I went on an old limejuicer, she went from Williamstown with five and a half thousand tons of grain. She was a hog-bellied big brute of a four-masted barque, damn thing—poor ship, it really wasn't the ship, unfortunately she had a dreadful fellow as master, one of these characters who've spent the whole of his time in Melbourne living ashore in a pub there down at the bottom of Hunter Street somewhere with some trollop, and so he neglected the ship and there wasn't enough to eat on board. So I realised that this was more or less standard limejuice practice, and I began to wonder what had I stuck myself with. So I found myself having to go with foreigners, first a Peruvian, joined in London, a Peruvian four-masted barque and she had what were called chequerboard watches, two watches, as with the standard type of sailing ships, and one was black and

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\* Sir Henry Jones (1862–1926), pioneer of fruit-canning in Australia and founder of IXL.

the other was dark; I was in the dark one. The blackfellows were pretty nice fellows, most of them American negroes, magnificent seamen, and the dark fellows were Scandinavians and Peruvians—not many Peruvians—and Germans.

Then I went to Finland and I stayed with the Finns for a long time. I did keep my own personal diaries of these voyages but I did not intend to write anything at all, and I came into that really in Tasmania by joining, not a sailing ship—I'd had to give that up because these Finns were very good, and the Peruvians too, but the Peruvians didn't pay anything, you worked for your food and lucky to get it, and the Finns paid thirty shillings a month for an able seaman. Well, you see, with that kind of money you could not ever accumulate enough to go and finance yourself through the Navigation School and it didn't make sense. So I was in Tasmania, and a Norwegian ship came in there and this ship was going down to the Ross Sea. Now this was a secret business at the time, it was the pioneer pelagic whaling expedition into the Ross Sea, and the chap in charge was a pretty nice Norwegian from Sunndals Fjord, named Carl Anton Larsen. Now, I could understand Norwegian because I'd had to learn Swedish in the Finnish ships. I had to learn either Finnish or Swedish, and if you've ever tried Finnish you'll know jolly well that I chose Swedish, and I did. Now, Swedish was near enough to Norwegian. As I say, this vessel came into Hobart because Amundsen had used Hobart as his back base for his South Pole jaunt, and he'd told old Larsen in this ship that there were a lot of good fat big whales down there in the Ross Sea, which was quite right. Anyway I applied for a berth on board this whaling ship, her name was the *Sir James Clarke Ross*, and old Larsen signed me on. So down I went to the Ross Sea.

Now this seemed to me to be worth writing about because it was the first time that what one might call the common man, the common seaman, was able to get into the Antarctic at all, because up to that time it had been covered entirely by expeditions financed by their leaders, chaps like Shackleton and Mawson and Scott and Amundsen and the rest, and naturally they had had to sew up all the writing in order to help pay for their ships and all these expensive things. Not in this case, nobody thought that whaling, I suppose, modern whaling, was worth writing about, so I just quietly took along some paper, that's all. I was signed on as a whaleman with a share in the oil which was very very little. I wrote some articles on this that were run in the Melbourne *Herald*, if I remember rightly—maybe it was the *Sun*, and one paper in each state, originating with the Hobart *Mercury* because I'd come from Hobart, and to my great astonishment some optimistic person, a woman of all things, in some place called Indianapolis in Indiana wrote to me, having seen these articles and she wrote one of these cheerful American letters that I wasn't accustomed to receiving, never having had one in my life before, I was about twenty-two by this time, and she said, 'Look fella, how's about doing a book here in Indianapolis, Indiana?' and so forth and so on. A book? Well, it was her idea, so I sat down and wrote a book. Of course I didn't realise that one might have taken a little more time and have thought through the thing, and indeed have learned a lot more about whaling, which was a surprisingly interesting subject. Anyway, that's how I came into writing.

Having begun in that way, I fetched up for a while and I worked for the Hobart *Mercury*, but my eyes had been opened by this strange incident from the United States. The book incidentally was also published in England, and by Norwegians and a few other optimists. Now, one day I was in Melbourne and I met a captain I'd been with in a Finnish ship. Of course, he was a Finn, a Swedish-speaking Finn, and he had a magnificent big four-masted barque called the *Herzogin Cecilia*, and he told me that he didn't want to but he had been more or less manoeuvred into the position where he had to race from South Australia to the English Channel with his big four-masted barque against a beautiful old Scots clipper called the *Rittenbörn* job and I joined this *Herzogin Cecilia*. Now this time I really joined as AB, of course, because she was a working ship and that's the way to join, you couldn't join any other way, no passengers, I didn't want to be a passenger because that's not the way to learn anything. The book that I'd sort of roughly thought of doing was on the side, so I began to keep my log and so on, and actually it turned into a very interesting voyage. We were ninety-six days round the Horn from Port Lincoln to Falmouth for orders, and then around to Cardiff, and to our great astonishment and intense despondency, a young woman stowaway, a South Australian schoolteacher she was, turned up in the hold when we were about a week out and we couldn't get rid of the bloomin' woman; so there she was. But you know, we came back into the Channel, the silly newspaper fellows, they got a hold of this story, girl stowaway on board—now, the fact that she was on board made this national and indeed, international news—not the race, which was of interest to seamen. And that gave me what we might call a bit of a break, and so this book went extremely well. I called it *Falmouth for Orders*, and I took a little while to write that one. It became a non-fiction bestseller in the United States.

Then I wrote a book called *By Way of Cape Horn* and that also was a non-fiction bestseller in the United States. It wasn't in the British market, because it was published very expensively by a publisher who had what I think, and thought then, was the erroneous idea that this was a special interest subject and therefore it called for beautiful books but very expensive, and of course they'd only sell about a couple of thousand. In the States, the thing sold a hundred thousand, because people were human and these were human stories—I hope, and they were obviously real.

With this money from the success in America and elsewhere, I bought the full-rigged ship *Joseph Conrad*, and I sailed her to Australia where I was born, around the world, round the Horn and so on, of course, and covering old James Cook's tracks as far as I could and did. I went through the Coral Sea and so on, but I didn't stay inside the Barrier Reef like he did, he could have that; and I went around the Horn, but I didn't go to windward as he did, I went down the leeward from the western to the eastern, that's an easy downhill way. The *Conrad* brought me along then to about thirty-eight, and I had to sell her at the end of that long voyage.

Then I went down to Arabia and I sailed with the Arabs in the Indian Ocean, in the Red Sea, in the Persian Gulf, with the Ammanites and the Kuwaiti mainly, and I became then very interested in this Eastern seafaring, which of course dated back to



biblical times, and to step back into biblical history was just quite fascinating. So I wrote about that. I wrote a book called *The Sons of Sinbad*, which has become now, of course, almost a classic in that field because it's unique; nobody else did such a thing, and now nobody else can.

Anyway, the Second World War had come along. Now I was in the Naval Reserve, because I'd been at sea quite a bit, and so I thought, well, I'd better get to England—it was in the Royal Naval Reserve, it wasn't in our Australian navy—I'd been turned down for that at the age of thirteen. I got back to England in due course and I fetched up finally, as the war went on, in various special missions, one around up to Kirkeness and Persamo with the Fleet Air Arm, taking a bunch of Swordfish on a raid there. And then on to the Normandy landings from Anzio and so on, and got in at the end of the Pacific war, if you could call that a Pacific war, there wasn't anything pacific about it, but thank God the Japanese packed it in, and I had to stay round for a while because my landing ships were very useful for rehabilitation, and also for trying to find lost people. I went up into far-up rivers in Sumatra and round the islands of the East Indies and we found five British people, that's all.

Now this filming, I got interested in: in Tasmania there was a young fellow named Ronald Walker who was a colleague on the Hobart *Mercury* and he was a good photographer. He said to me one day, 'Look, old boy, it's all very well, you're writing a few books and you're making some record available for the future on these sailing ships. What about a film?' So we went across to South Australia and we joined a full-rigged ship called the *Grace Harver*. Now she was a shocker, she was beautiful but she was a bitch. She killed people, she always was killing people, but she was photogenic; not only that, she had jobs because the crew had run away, so we joined that ship and made the film. I got interested [in film] that way. Walker who started the film, unfortunately she killed him on the way to Cape Horn. It was winter and we were long—about fifty-five days trying to get to Cape Horn and pass the blasted place, and he was killed, so I had to learn about film photography.

When I had a subject, I kept on writing something from time to time; of course, at the end of the war I found most of my books were out of print, but I soon picked up the pieces. My books began to be translated more and more, into German of course, because they were very interested, in Polish, in Dutch and in Scandinavian languages and in Portuguese and Spanish, and even—and also in Italian and some other languages.

Also I was interested in biography, people like, of course, Captain Cook. Now, Captain Cook—God knows, a lot has been written about him and some of it magnificent, especially the books by Dr Beaglehole published by the Hakluyt Society here in London, those wonderful big volumes, a four-volume set sold for about £30, I think, and it's jolly well worth it, too; but people don't walk around carrying a four-volume set that weighs about five pounds to read about old Cook. This is something to study but not to carry. So I thought there had not ever been a study of Cook making sense of him as a great sailing ship captain, which he was, and if he

weren't, too bad—he'd never have dared to come on the east coast of Australia, because remember, he was about the two-hundredth sea captain to wander round the Pacific: why should it only be he who came to the east coast? It was because he had the guts and the competence, and because he'd been brought up the hard way on the Yorkshire coast and the coast of East Anglia where not knowing where he was could kill him and his ship, when he was younger. And so when he had finished his work in Tahiti, he didn't let that besot him and his crew, but he went down to the southward to find the eastern side of the discovery of Tasman which had been on the maps for years but so little known of it, he came across New Zealand—he sailed around the lot. Now, that's a job, in a little full-rigged ship as the *Endeavour* was, she was called a bark, b-a-r-k, but she was a ship square-rigged on each of her three masts, and that's a difficult ship to sail, but he'd been brought up in that type, so he goes right round New Zealand, way down to 45, 46, 47 south, gets a good running survey of the lot and a more accurate—as much as he could, and then of course, it was easier for him and more practical and more sense to turn to the eastward and run for the Horn and get the hell out of there, out of that not publicised nor glamorised South Pacific then, the glamour has come since, and it's rather false anyway. He went then to find the faceless side of Australia. Now Australia had been on the maps for years without a face. The south coast, the west coast, the northern coast—no east coast whatever. Well, damn it all, there must be an east coast there, and if you sailed to the westward from New Zealand, you'd come on it, you'd come on something, even if you only came on the backside of the west coast, you'd come on whatever was there. But because it was difficult, because the challenge to do that came at the end of long voyages from Europe, the others hadn't—the one who came nearest was Bougainville, after the great Portuguese of course, Quiros and Torres, who sailed from Peru; Bougainville was a landsman and he was not a sea captain. He told his blokes in that frigate to go into the Coral Sea, and they said, 'Oh, for God's sake, please, my dear Count Bougainville, don't do that, it's dangerous!' And of course, it's very dangerous, and they got in and they soon got mixed up with reefs, and these blokes induced old Bougainville to turn and get out of it, which he did. Now, otherwise he was within a couple of days of the north-eastern coast of Queensland; he'd have come on it first.

Old Cook came across the southern end of the Tasman Sea and he came on—he should have come on the east coast of Tasmania but he was blown away, I suppose, by some lousy southerly buster, God knows there are enough of them around, and he came on the south-eastern corner of the mainland and he sails up and plots the lot, and of course, we know he got on a reef in the Coral Sea, anybody can do that, there's enough of them. I got on one, too, the one I got on was charted but I still got on it—because you see, a sailing ship coming out of a lagoon where there are reefs and things can be caught by a set across the mouth of the lagoon and pushed sideways, and you're on the darned reef before you can do anything. I was towing, I was sailing, there was very little wind but I still got set on a horn of this rotten reef on an island called Wye in the Louisiades, and I had to carry out an anchor, but thank God my ship was iron, this was

the *Joseph Conrad* and she belted the corner off the reef; she was a well built ship! Old Cook's was wood, and we know she nearly sank.

Well, so I was interested in Cook and I wrote these things, or tried to, in a book that was a study of him, of Captain James Cook, that's all. Of course I'd been studying Cook for many years, and so when it came to writing the book I just figured out the plan, the general plan, to make sense of Cook when there was no longer any knowledge in the world of the sailing ship tradition which had been his, and was also mine, of course. It was not difficult to write about Cook. I sat down and I wrote the book after forty years of learning something. The actual writing of that book took me not more than three months and I had it all worked out, and I just simply sat down and wrote the book. I knew what I wanted to say, I had thought through to what I wanted to say, and I said it as well as I could.

At the moment, of course, I'm still busy writing. A steamer goes along by her power and the grace of God but a sailing ship goes by the grace of God and the skill of man; and so it is always dramatic and can be fascinating.

It's interesting to look back. I can remember quite clearly as a child, I suppose about four or five years old, walking with my father from Spencer Street down to the Victoria Docks and going round and looking at these beautiful sailing ships. I remember one day we saw I think it was five Loch sailing ships from Glasgow, Loch Line square-riggers, all Cape Horners, alongside in the Victoria Dock at once. I was fascinated. I loved the sound of the wind in the rigging, because it seemed to be challenging and—music. It was music, and it was music that struck a chord somehow in me. But I didn't know I'd pick up the chord. I did, thank God, and I stayed with it.

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DAVID FOSTER was born in Katoomba in 1944. He trained as a scientist at Sydney University, the Australian National University and the University of Pennsylvania. Since renouncing a promising career in science he has written twelve works of fiction and has been the recipient of a series of Literature Board grants. His books include *The Pure Land* (which shared the first *Age* award for the best Australian book of the year, 1974), *Moonlite* (winner of the National Book Council Award for Australian Literature, 1981), *Testostero* (1987) and most recently, *Mates of Mars*.

He has lived in the Southern Highlands of New South Wales for the past fifteen years with his wife and children.

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