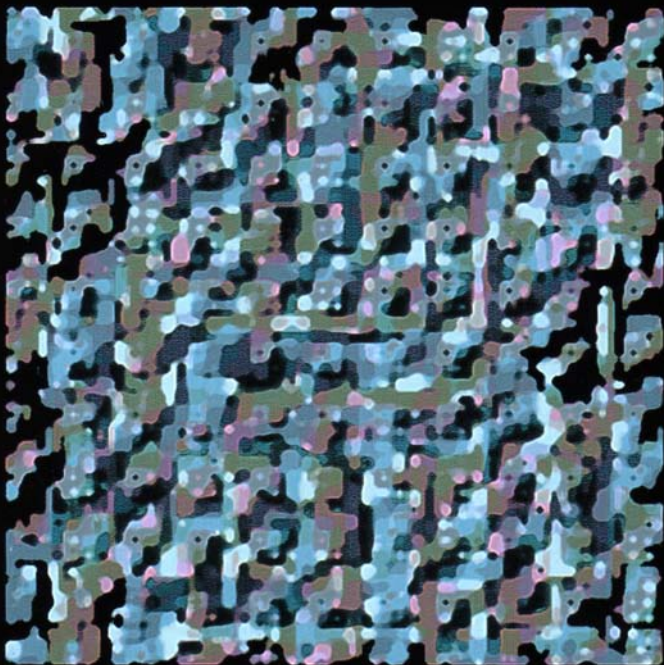


TRAVERS

a memoir of my brother



Chester Eagle

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**Chester
Eagle**



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Travers was my brother, and I never knew him very well. He was killed in a car accident in 1956, so most of those who knew him are dead, or perhaps in that stage of long-distance recall which gives sharper memories than I can provide. Alas, if there are such people, I wouldn't know where to find them, so I can only give you what I know.

Travers was my brother, and six years older, so we always had that gap between us, a gap which, as many of you will know from your relations with your own siblings, is something that both (or all) parties need in order to give themselves privacy, some space for independence. Travers was my brother, but he'd gone to school in another town when I entered Grade 4, then I went away to Melbourne, and by the time he came home, ready to take up our parents' farm, I was in eastern Victoria, teaching, so we were never doing the same thing at the same time, never looking at the same part of the world in the same way ...

With a few exceptions. I shall try to put them down now, to see how much I can find.

Travers was my brother, and he was less concerned with his own thoughts than I was. When he was at school and I was at home on our farm, I had hours and hours with my own thoughts, playing and imagining by myself. We had a mouse plague one summer, and they crowded into our shed, where there were full of wheat, oats and barley. Father tried to stack the bags to keep the mice away, but there was no stopping them. They were there in thousands, and they smelt. I stayed away

from the shed. One afternoon my brother brought three other boys home from school; they had a drink of cordial, courtesy of my mother, then they went to the shed, armed with shovels for turning over everything in sight, and sticks to beat the mice. They turned over everything and they chased the mice. I stood in the yard, watching. Mice ran under the windmill, across the tracks of the car and tractor, into the sheepyards, into the pigsty, under the legs of the horse trough, into the haystack, into the old blacksmith's shop, under the various bits and pieces of agricultural machinery we had protected by greater or lesser degrees of shelter. The boys yelled as they walloped fleeing mice and I watched in amazement. It seemed very cruel to me, though I certainly saw the purpose of it. Who cared about mice? They'd eat you out of house and home, as Father said. The boys had a great time, then they gathered back at the house, had another drink, said goodbye to Mother, and left. Not Travers, of course, he stayed, but I don't remember him saying a word, afterwards, about the slaughter he'd organised. I guess the mice returned to the shed after a few hours; as far as I'm aware they don't count the cost of a few of their number missing.

I went to school in Melbourne. Travers came to Melbourne too, working for a stock and station company, and boarding with a woman who had rooms for young men in Malvern, not far from my school. Travers said he'd take me to the football, and did so on a handful of occasions. Once we saw Essendon beat Collingwood;

on the train back to the city Travers discussed the defeat with some people wearing scarves, or buttons, that showed their allegiance to the Pies, the black and white club. We had magpies on our farm, and mudlarks, smaller birds with the same colours. Collingwood was still, in those days, a highly successful (because fanatical) working class Catholic club and they'd won more premierships than any other team. They'd somehow created a tradition out of nothing, and they were feared. On the train back from Essendon that wintry afternoon Travers talked with these Collingwood people about whether the club should continue the struggle to win this year – that year – or work on developing a side for the year to come.

I thought they were silly, but then I wasn't as passionate as they were.

Another day Travers took me to a grand final. Essendon was playing Melbourne. The game was not far from starting when I decided it might be best if I went to the toilet. Off I went, and I came out of the concrete stairwell just as everyone stood for the national anthem. Things seemed different with the crowd solemnly upright, and the music resonating against the mighty stand. I couldn't see my brother. I didn't know where my seat was. The anthem was played while the players stood in two ranks, and watery sunlight cast shadows behind everything it touched. I stood, more lost than I've ever felt before or since, and then, when the anthem ended, the shouting had died down and this

mighty crowd resumed its seats, all was clear to me. This row. Along here. There he was, and the rough young man he'd brought as well. I slipped along the seated row of onlookers, settled in my seat, and said something to Travers' companion, who was pouring beer into a mug. 'Needn't say anything about this,' Travers murmured to me, and I nodded. I was in school uniform, which meant that I was subject to school rules, of which there were plenty, mostly to do with the behaviour expected of a gentleman, and they were in adult clothes, so they could do as they liked, and really, I didn't care who drank beer, because Essendon got ahead and stayed there for a runaway win. I had dinner that night at Travers' boarding house and it seemed to me that the young men at the place were lost souls, working at low-level jobs, but not studying, the contents of their minds no better than the pages of Melbourne's lowly newspaper, *The Sun*. After the dinner, which finished with custard, I remember, Travers took me back to my school. As I left him and walked in the gate I fumbled in my pocket for the *exeat* (He may go out!) which I hoped was still there.

It wasn't long before I was going to the football – if there wasn't a school game, which took preference over everything else in the universe – with my peers, not needing my brother any more. He left his city job and took another in a country town, still as a stock and station agent, then he announced that he was returning to the farm. He and Father would run the farm together,

and he'd gradually take over. Mother said he needed to get married, and Father said that when he did they'd build another house on the property, but at a distance, of course, for Travers and his wife ...

... when she was found. He was a good mixer, danced well, and was instinctively well-mannered. Facially, he resembled Mother as I resembled Father, but his personality was easier, less powerful, than theirs. He regarded my deep-set individualism as appalling and wondered why I read so much, was happy on my own, and didn't instinctively put other people at their ease, as he did. He matured early, both physically and socially, yet he hadn't married. Mother and Father saw that he was fond of a young woman from another town called Judy, and when father came back from a trip to the United States he brought presents for both of us. He consulted us before he left, and I told him that I would like a recent recording of the string quartets of Beethoven. Father asked for details and I gave them to him. Travers said he'd like it if Father brought back something for Judy. Father came back with the quartets, which delighted me, and a handbag and some cosmetics for Judy. The handbag was ghastly. It was made of tiny squares of shiny steel, it glittered, and it had nothing of the elegance which wealthy Europeans required of their possessions. The girls I knew at university would have looked at the thing with scorn – but maybe the Americans thought it was smart, and maybe Father had been the wrong man to be given the job of buying

for a young woman. He knew about farming, cricket, machinery ... but not the way to soften a woman's heart. As I carried my quartets back to college that afternoon I wondered what Judy would say when presented with the horror. I knew I wouldn't be around, and was glad.

Travers didn't marry Judy. They went separate ways, though I'm sure, given my brother's courtesy, that they would have parted with understanding. Years later, Mother showed me a front page from an old copy of *The Sun*, with a photo of a newly married couple, and something written on the paper by hand. The words had been written by a young man who had been a friend of Travers in those years; he had red hair, I remembered, and he'd become a priest. The bride was someone both he and Travers had lusted after, and here she was, the writing said, married to someone else. The shared understanding was a rueful joke. They'd both missed out ...

I was away, and didn't see any of this. I was teaching in a remote corner of another state, absorbed by my work and my newfound district. It was exciting, it was difficult, and really I had no room in my mind for Travers. He'd always been better at managing than me. Then came the time, in November 1956, for Melbourne's Olympic Games. I travelled to the city, knowing my parents would be down. I had a drink with Father at his club, I went back to East Melbourne, where I was staying. In the small hours of the night, I heard the phone ringing. All sorts of strange things happened

at the East Melbourne house, but I was in the same room as the phone, so it was up to me to answer. To my amazement, it was Father. Travers had been killed in a car crash. Father would get a taxi, pick me up, and take me to where Mother was staying with her sister. I dressed, and I stood in the street. The taxi came, and it took Father and me to my aunt's. 'How'm I going to tell your mother this?' Father said as he rang the bell.

One of Father's friends, a wealthy man, provided a driver and a car for us to go to New South Wales. We travelled a well-known road in a mood of strangeness, dislocation. The accident had happened on the edge of a town not far from ours. Father knew the young man who'd been driving, and thought he was a show-off, a lair. We went to the Police Station, Father and I. Mother sat in the car. The policeman, who was like the young men who'd stayed at the boarding house with my brother in Malvern, was tactful, then he asked us if we would like to see the body. Father at once said no. 'We'd prefer to remember him as he was,' he told the policeman, and then he said it again to me. I accepted this. I was not at all keen to see the battered body of my brother. They'd failed to take a bend, the policeman told us, and went straight on. 'Until a couple of weeks ago, they'd have been all right, but they' – the mysterious *they* who do most of the awful things in this world – 'put in some new steel poles, and there was one right in the way of the car. Travers was thrown out, one passenger was slightly injured, and the driver escaped okay.' He went

on. ‘We got him to hospital, unconscious, but he died shortly after.’ Father signed a form. We went back to the car.

I’ve often thought of the next minute. I’d been brought up in a small town, so I might have known. Father and Mother too. Perhaps they had to go to the bottom of the pit of the experience if they were ever to get over it, or learn to manage it in their minds. Our driver, an employee of Father’s friend, had simple orders – take us home. He took us on the road which Travers had travelled in the opposite direction only a few hours before. The car was still there, smashed against a telegraph pole and the local kids, the very sort of kids my brother and I had gone to school with, were there by the dozen, scrambling over the wreck, picking up scattered bits as souvenirs, tracking skid marks, chattering, and, of course, living the crash again in all their childish vitality. Mother cried, ‘Oh no!’ and wept. Father went stiff. Our driver speeded up slightly, though not so much as to underline the obvious. None of us looked back. We got to our town quickly enough, then to our farm. Friends were waiting, with lunch prepared, on our own table. We sat, the friends sat with us, and our driver. ‘You’ve got arrangements to make,’ one of Mother’s friends said. ‘You’ve got to do it all quietly, then you have to sleep. You’ll need to talk, eventually, but not just yet. You’ve got the shock to deal with, first.’

Early the next morning I was woken by the sound of a lawn mower – one of the push variety – cutting

the grass outside my window. Father apologised. 'Sorry for the noise. I couldn't sleep. I needed to do something.' We got breakfast; our driver was a model of quiet courtesy, sitting beside Father, eating bacon and eggs. Travers' things – his hat, his boots – seemed to be everywhere. An hour or two passed. I sat myself in the lounge beside the fireplace writing to friends to tell them what had happened; I remember still, today, a feeling that I had as I wrote to them that I was telling myself with each and every letter the awful truth that I hadn't yet internalised. Travers would only finally be dead when I got cards or notes from these friends expressing their sympathy, their grief.

I finished my letters, and went to my room at the front of the house. There was a photo of Travers on the mantelpiece which I wanted to turn around, but didn't, because it would be disrespectful. Then I saw a car coming to our house between the two lines of trees. Someone had heard ...

The car was driven by a young woman on her own. She got out, nubile, wearing a quality frock, and a billowingly wide-brimmed hat. I went to the door to receive her and she introduced herself: she was the wife of the man who'd been driving the car which crashed into the pole. She'd come to tell my parents how sorry she was ...

I called Mother, who came, and asked the young wife in. I went for a long walk. I think now that this was rude of me, and that Travers would have told me that

I should have sat with Mother and her visitor in order to make the young woman know that her intentions in visiting to make the apology which her presence was certainly implying were respected. Travers, I'm sure, would have stayed, but I didn't think of that. I went into the paddocks which he, and I, and Father had worked, and it seemed that I was surrounded by the infinity into which Travers had disappeared. He was gone.

The next afternoon, we returned to Melbourne; the day following, Travers was cremated. I stood behind my parents, but Mother, knowing that I was there, reached for my hand and brought me beside her. I shared the grief that she and Father shared.

I went back to East Melbourne after the service, when Mother and Father had returned to New South Wales, and the farm they would not be passing on to their eldest son, to the house which would not, now, be duplicated for Travers and a wife who never materialised. I sat around the East Melbourne house for a day, listening to music with people who dropped in; it was a sort of bohemians' club, forever open. I listened with those who were there, saying little, then I caught a train to the east of the state, but couldn't face work for a few days yet. I stayed in my room as much as possible, listening to more music. Travers had never liked the music I liked, but I wasn't trying to recreate him in his own taste, but rather to soothe myself. The psychic shock was intense; someone who had been there was there no longer. Something had gone missing

from the air. I filled the gap with music. I knew a lot of music but my choice narrowed down to two, and I played these pieces over and over, in the morning, the afternoon, and, more quietly, because the people on either side of me were in their rooms by then, at night: Heinrich Schutz and Richard Wagner. The Schutz music was his *Musicalische Exequien*, most especially a movement where a distant voice answers a choir with the simple words, repeated, Selig sind Die Toten. Blessed are the dead. I didn't think the dead were blessed, they wouldn't resurrect, they wouldn't be in the presence of the lord because there was no lord, but the fact was that Heinrich Schutz had believed those things and they had given him a comfort he'd expressed in his music, so I was playing it to borrow the comfort though not the beliefs that gave it. To some extent any of us who are part of a tradition are in this complication, and there's no escaping it. We are all of us heirs to much that we couldn't countenance were it to be proposed, fresh and new, today.

And Wagner. This is not so simple. It was *Parsifal* that I was playing, and to this day I'm not quite sure what the opera is about, or why it divides listeners so sharply. Perhaps the discomfort it causes can be put down to two things, both of them the same thing, probably: the fact that the central mystery of the Christian rite is transferred from the church, or cathedral, to the stage; and the fact that the agent of mankind's redemption – Wagner was as caught on the need for redemption as any Christian – is

a sort of holy fool. An innocent, but ignorant. There is a long dialogue towards the end where Gurnemanz, who is old and wise, instructs the younger man. This is the passage I played in deepest need, over and over, as I reconciled myself to a world without my brother. The Good Friday music tells us that there is redemption in the air for the whole of mankind, and even the grasses in the field, and the flowers, have expectation.

The world outside my room looked just the same as it had a week before, when I'd made my way to Melbourne, and my brother, as far as I knew, was working fruitfully on the farm. I was now, although it took me a long time to grasp the fact, an only child, a very different way of being from having an older sibling. I married eventually, though fairly late, and when my wife and I had our first child, Mother – my mother – changed. It's conventional to say she became a grandmother, but this meant that her stiff propriety, a rather formal, dutiful mansion, became a household of continuity and love. A miracle came over her, as wonderful as the change in my wife, and in myself. Travers had been Mother's first child, and now, in the next generation, there was another first child to be loved and looked after. Mother filled out, flooded with love. In becoming selfless, she became most herself. I saw this, and was sorry that I had taken so long to marry, and that I had not seen the same miracle caused earlier by my brother and the wife he never had. As Father grew old, he told me often that he wanted to be buried with the rest of his family, in

New South Wales, and that he wanted Travers' ashes in the earth with his. Mother agreed, and I saw that she too would lie with them. Where else? The Murray River country, with its meandering anabranches and its long forests of red gum, had no particular appeal for her, but she was certain that she too must lie where her husband and eldest son were lying. My own marriage had ended by the time these things came to pass, but they made me aware, when they happened, that deeper currents than we can understand are moving us in directions we might not necessarily have chosen. We play our part in events, but they are always larger than ourselves, because we are only a part of a much larger whole, and even so simple a thing as recalling a brother long lost to me makes me aware of how different everything became when he died and how different everything would have been if he'd lived.

We lost each other, my brother and I, when he went away to school in northern Victoria and I, a little later, went to school in Melbourne. The last time we were in the same world of growing up was before we made those fateful excursions, when we both went to the same little school in the same little town on our two bicycles, riding in and out every day. There were two years of this, or possibly three. Irrigation came to our district in that time, and this meant the Mulwala Canal cut through farms, bringing water. On a hot day, when we were riding home from school, the water was very tempting. Travers and I would often stop for a drink at

Hamilton's Bridge, where a road crossed the water. My brother always had friends, and on one particular day there were two of them, and we stopped, all four of us, at Hamilton's Bridge, and the boys said they'd like a swim. Travers and the other boys stripped off their clothes and plunged in the water. I wasn't a good swimmer and I stayed on the bridge. As I sit here writing I can see the three boys jumping and splashing, swaggering along the footwalk beside the bridge where the water bailiffs – that was what they were called – added boards, or took them out, to raise or lower the level of the stream. The upstream side of Hamilton's Bridge was the best swimming spot for a long way, and the boys made the most of it. I see the three of them with their hair wet, wiping their faces, their buttocks, their developing but still almost hairless bodies, and beyond that I see their confidence, their natural nakedness as they played in the water and on the boardwalk, until they'd had enough and it was time to pick up their bikes again.

It's a moment of no meaning to anyone else but if I look down the years to the time when my brother was alive, that's when I feel closest to him and I can't help wishing that I could go back to Hamilton's Bridge, and see him swimming, splashing, calling out, hopping in and out of the water, about as happy as anyone could be.

Travers

To write about a mother, sister, father, brother, is one thing; to write about an absence is harder. What would our lives have been like if the one that died had managed to live on, affecting us in all the normal ways? The question can't be answered but this memoir is an attempt. The narrator's brother is felt most keenly in his absence. Our only immortality is in memory, and its span is brief.