

The
Saints in Glory

Chester Eagle

Books by Chester Eagle

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Who could love the nightingale? (novel, 1974)
Four faces, wobbly mirror (novel, 1976)
At the window (novella, 1984)
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The Saints in Glory (story, 1991/2009)
Othello's Rage (memoir, 2009)

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The Saints In Glory is published by Chester Eagle, 23 Langs Road Ivanhoe 3079 Australia, operating as Trojan Press. Phone is (03) 9497 1018 and email address is cae@netspace.net.au

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First (mis)published by *Overland* magazine in 1991. First published electronically in 2009. Design by Vane Lindesay, DTP by Karen Wilson. Cover image is by Rodney Manning.

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It's the last month of their last year at university. Most of them are teacher trainees who've gone through on generous scholarships, and they've been given their first appointments. Some are keen to start, some are unsure. Others have no intention of facing the classroom, and spend a lot of time discussing ways of breaking the Education Department's *bond* – revealing term!

A question hangs over their heads. What's it going to be like? When they're together, even those who don't care for each other, they inquire, 'Where are you going?' or, for those who swear they won't be teaching, 'What are you going to do, then?' These questions are asked not so much to elicit information as to determine the extent of apprehension or certainty in the other; fear and regret lose some of their power when shared.

A week before the last of the parties that will bond them in this time of dispersal, a number are gathered at Keith's place. Someone has brought the new Karajan recording of the B minor mass, and has it on the gramophone, very loudly. Most of the group gathered in the house and garden take no notice, but the conductor's tempi are annoying for Keith. He grumbles occasionally through three sides, but the chorus *Cum Sancto Spiritu in Gloria Dei Patris* makes him get up angrily. 'This bloke must have a train to catch,' he says. 'He's rushing it, it's meaningless. It's terrible!' When the side ends he says, 'Please don't play any more. When we've had something to eat I'll put on a decent recording. I don't want to play it now, not on top of that!' He gestures with disgust.

Some hours later he pulls out the Hermann Scherchen recording of the same music. The first rock and roll records are infiltrating their city, but this generation of students, especially those destined to be teachers, think they're subversive. Blackboard jungle! High culture hasn't yet been condemned as élitist; they are a generation whose mission it is to improve ...

Johann Sebastian, mighty Bach! Scherchen takes the chorus in which Karajan offends at a measured, stately pace which grips the young people and stops them talking – except Keith, who says, 'This is the right way to do it. The beat in every bar is a step forward. They're going somewhere. This is Bach's conception of entering heaven. Isn't it fantastic!'

And it is: faith will always prevail, or at least impress, and the young people are gripped by this sturdy, relentless, apparently simple music from an age of faith. *Cum Sancto Spiritu in Gloria Dei Patris*: the Catholics among them, and there are several because those generous scholarships allow the sons and daughters of working class Catholics to go to university too, the Catholics know these Latin words, and the vision they embody ...

... of an all-powerful divinity reigning in unimaginable splendour, throned in radiance, attended by his son who died for man's salvation, and by the Holy Spirit, the dove of peace; and about them flights of angels, their wings quivering in the brilliant air; and about them, too, the saints and martyrs whose lives on earth have earned them a place beside God's throne; and

approaching them, soaring above the fearful darkness at the bottom of which is hell, damnation and eternal punishment, are the saved, the blessed, the fortunate, led by angels and welcomed by archangels as they march, exultant, humble and desperately relieved, to their positions in the everlasting stasis of redemption and God's glory!

Amen! In the concluding bars the conductor alters the beat by not so much as a fraction, but manages to draw some extra conviction from his musicians so that, as often in Bach, at the moment of ending, the purpose, the destination of all that's preceded comes clear. 'The saints in glory!' Keith says to his friends, and no one can find anything to add to, or dispute, his claim.

The last party's held at Frank Tate Hall, a mansion converted to house female teacher trainees. The young men are in suits or quality slacks and coats; no one lacks a tie. The young women are in gowns of aqua, magenta, rose, buttercup yellow ... colors forbidden to males and expected of the 'opposite' sex. They dance in the spacious rooms of the former home. Louis Armstrong's trumpet pierces the house and penetrates the garden via the open doors. *Oh wenna saints*, says big black Louis, *Oh wenna saints, oh wenna saints go marchin' in* ... A line forms and the dancers swing in loops and curves through the staid rooms. *Oh how I wanna be ... innat number ... wenna saints go marchin' in!* As soon as the record's finished the needle's dragged back so the bouncing, swaying line, the chain of energy that joins

them, isn't allowed to break. The gravel voice, the fat lips, start up again. *Oh wenna saints ... oh wenna saints ... oh wenna saints go marchin' in ...* When the song's put on a third time they're cheating because it's midnight by the hall clock and the education lecturer who acts as superintendent and chaperone is at the bottom of the stairs, acting her roles as Patience and Forbearance. They're singing it now, as the superintendent moves near the gramophone to make sure it doesn't get a fourth run, they're singing along with Louis: *Oh how I wanna be innat num-bah ... when the saints go marching in!*

It's over. Some of the young women go upstairs. Groups gather in the drive, the front garden, near the gate. Headlights of cars come on, engines start. They belong to the night now, and the future.

The group that were at Keith's a week before stand in Dandenong Road. There isn't much traffic. Then a strange thing happens. Barbara, a music student, clasps her hands in the approved lieder fashion, and sings:

Du holde Kunst, in wieviel grauen Stunden.

It's Schubert's *An die Musik*; she's dedicating herself. They look at her in amazement, rather wishing she'd stop. Nick, a swarthy fellow with restless eyes, says, 'Oh Christ Barb, give it a break! It's like a bloody hymn!' She turns so the last line is directed straight at him:

Hast mich in eine bessere Welt entrückt.

She sounds the final ‘t’ crisply, as she’s been taught to do, then says to her unwilling audience, ‘All right people, I needed to do that. Now I need a taxi.’ Nick says something and she says, ‘Oh shut up Nick, you’re tone deaf anyhow.’ A taxi comes. Most of them want to head off for coffee in Saint Kilda, but Nick thinks he’s had enough for the night, so he finds himself sharing the taxi with Barb, despite the tiff. He sits in the front with the driver, she’s in the back. They wind down their windows and wave as the cab heads off to ...

... the life of a singing teacher for Barb, and thirty years in the opera chorus, backing up John Brownlee and Sena Jurinac, Ronald Dowd and Kiri Te Kanawa, at the edge of glory but never its focus.

And Nick, who wasn’t a bonded student, finds his way to a job with a magazine based in Honolulu, does well, becomes manager of the group, sees holes in its accounting methods, takes advantage and is jailed for embezzlement.

Another taxi’s hailed for four of them, Keith takes three in his car. They find a sleazy place in Fitzroy Street. It’s exciting to plunge downwards, socially. The respectable years are ahead. They drink coffee. Keith surprises them by asking for grilled flounder, never mind the Frank Tate supper. Another boy has a mixed grill, two of the girls have toasted ham sandwiches – the fare that’s offering. They talk about the thousand things they’ve talked about already, then ask themselves what they’ll do next, trying to make the night more exciting

than it is. Bill says they can go back to his place, near the beach in Brighton. They talk about this on the footpath of derelicts and prostitutes, making up their minds. Five say yes, Sigrid, Neil and Jane say no. There's a muddled conversation about taxi sharing, and in the end they decide they need separate taxis, so the group, knowing how out of place they are, and feeling good about it, stand under lights, despatching, as the taxis come ...

... Sigrid. Who wins a scholarship to study German literature and history at Freiburg, but goes first to London to see the British Isles. She meets an Australian boy, an agricultural science graduate, and they travel together, using as a base a flat in Marble Arch. It has two bedrooms, and she won't let him into hers despite the fact that he's distracted by her and says he'd like to marry. Troubled by the situation, she says she'll make a decision when she gets back from visiting Freiburg, where she'll meet her teachers, plan her course and find accommodation. She visits the ancient university city and meets a young German who's doing post-graduate study in nuclear physics. He's engaged to a German girl in another city, but he and Sigrid are attracted to each other. One gloomy day, as they walk by a lake, they discuss their feelings and decide they're going to marry. They go back to town and buy two rings, which they exchange at the edge of the water, at the spot where they reached their decision. Relatives on both sides are perplexed and indignant. Angry letters are written, the German family are amazed to find

themselves with the wrong daughter-in-law, but the young couple are serenely confident that what they've done is right.

... and Neil. Who takes up his teaching appointment in Omeo, an old mining and cattle town in the Gippsland mountains, where he finds that his modest abilities as a footballer make him good enough to captain the local side, which he leads onto the field each Saturday, the number 1 on his back meaning that in a district starved of entertainment he's the town's most discussed figure, something which amuses him as a twist of fate for a man who's always preferred to be withdrawn.

... and Jane. Who hasn't done very well in her course, and is given a primary teaching position in a remote settlement where, lonely and isolated, she falls in love with a married man who won't make the commitment her passion demands. When she sees it's hopeless, she drowns herself. A non-swimmer, she takes a boat out on a lake not far from his farm, and eases herself over the side.

The five whose destinies remain to be unfolded go back to Bill's. 'At bloody last!' he says. 'Thank Christ I'm here!' He uncorks a bottle of Bundaberg rum and fills a Kraft cheese tumbler. 'Down the hatch!' he says, and downs it before offering the bottle around. Only Paula accepts, Paula, who's going to teach in the town where she was brought up, and laughs when others say they'd hate to make their first mistakes in front of people

who know them. She sips once or twice, then puts the glass by her chair, forgotten.

With rum inside him, Bill tells stories. About being lost in the bush. About falling down an abandoned mineshaft and having to get back up again. About snakes, and the characters he met around the countryside with his grandfather. When the bottle's well down, and he's been told he's repeating himself, he stands up. 'I'm off to bed,' he says. 'Do what you like, but don't wake me up, and don't finish off the rum. Paula!' She laughs at him and he goes to his bedroom, goes to the Northern Territory in his leather jacket and army boots, taking the geiger counter which he hopes will find him a mountain of uranium and a fortune beyond the spending power of a normal man.

Keith searches through the piles of records – the house seems to be inhabited by several tastes – until he discovers Ginette Neveu's recording of the Sibelius violin concerto. They listen, Paula, Keith, Roger and Eileen, drifting towards the edge of sleep, pulled back to consciousness by the intensity of the playing. Keith cries in the slow movement. He tells them the violinist was killed in an air crash. They lift their heads to listen, then droop again, half concentrating, half drowsing. When it ends they don't feel like speaking. The night's exhausted them. They notice that the uncurtained window is no longer black. The pink light of dawn is stealing into the sky. They decide to walk.

When they step outside they smell salt water, and head in that direction. A few minutes later they're sitting on the sea wall and, even in the weak light, Paula, who's in ultramarine, and Eileen, in magenta, seem brilliant beside the sludgy sea. 'I'm glad we did this,' says Paula. 'It's beaut. And I'm glad we didn't plan it. It's best to just let things happen.' Keith takes off his coat. She thinks she knows how to read him. 'You don't agree, Keith, do you?' He smiles. 'I've always been a planner, an organiser, until now, but I think it's pretty limiting. Maybe I'll break out, now I'm through. Maybe I won't be able to.' They look at each other. It hits them, having outlasted the night, that something, quite a lot in fact, is behind them. 'Let's walk up the beach,' says Eileen, and Keith jumps onto the sand. 'You go,' says Paula. 'I want to sit here a bit longer.'

Roger and Paula are silent for a minute, then he takes her hand. She presses herself against him and rubs his shoulder. They've been out together a few times but whatever makes love flare up between two people hasn't happened. 'I really care for you,' she says. 'We're not to lose track of each other. When you get home, promise you'll write to me.' He promises. They look along the beach to see the others disappearing around the end of a line of bathing boxes. Eileen will take up her appointment in a Wimmera wheat town with a rail line down the middle of the main street, will marry a policeman who has a farm outside of town and will live on the farm, bringing up four children; and Keith, so

serious and so keen to break out, will pay off his bond and get a job as a colonial administrator in New Guinea. He'll write hair-raising letters about his encounters with tribal and de-tribalised New Guineans, and he'll die when the light plane he's chartered crashes into a shrouded mountain.

'You are going to write to me, aren't you?' Paula says. The sun's tipping the horizon behind them and the air's full of light. It makes her blond hair blaze and he thinks she's never been more beautiful. The color of the sea's becoming richer and deeper, and her gown seems unnatural. They walk back past Bill's place, where the outside light's still on, to a main road where they hail the last of their night's taxis. He drops her off in Prahran, picks up his stuff from his college, and has himself taken to his train. He fills in the long journey reading *Crime and Punishment*.

His brother meets him at the terminus, in farming clothes. Roger is still in his suit. 'How're you feeling, now you've finished?' says his brother. 'I don't know how I feel,' he says. 'I've been up all night. Ask me when I've had a decent sleep.'

He goes to bed early and sleeps like a log. It's the sheep that wake him in the morning, the smell of them hitting his nostrils, the dust they kick up drifting through the window. Sheep, he thinks, all my life these bloody sheep. When they're not being castrated and having their tails cut off they're being driven to the shearing shed or they're being carted away in trucks that drip piss

and smell of shit, to be sold. His father and two dogs are pushing the mob along the lane, his brother will be ahead, opening and closing gates. I'd better get up and help, he thinks.

For a fortnight he immerses himself in the life of the farm, and their little town. Then he remembers that he's promised a letter – and he remembers the circumstances, the parting, when he made the promise.

Which now he keeps.

Paula teaches, marries, brings five children into the world, lectures, goes into local politics, becomes president of her shire, enters state parliament on a big by-election swing, then consolidates the seat. Her party becomes the government, and she's a minister. In a bout of factional wrangling she loses this position, but not her dignity. She's widely admired. At the next state election, the government – her government – just scrapes home. They're terrified of a by-election. She tells the premier that she has to resign her seat because she's got cancer and it's beating her. Her resignation creates headlines, and a few days later there are more headlines, because she's gone. It's a big funeral; the premier, the opposition, her colleagues and the prime minister are there. In the days that follow her burial, the indecencies of the power struggle are kept out of sight, quelled by respect for her absent spirit. Another strange thing happens: she has what might be called a political resurrection, a secular triumph over death. Both parties

put up women candidates claiming to represent Paula's views on everything she's stood for.

Roger, knowing none of this, wonders if he'll ever see her again; he has a feeling that most of those he's been close to in the last four years are lost to him now. He's not sure that it's a worthwhile thing to do, but he finds his mother's writing pad, goes to his room, and begins, as now this story ends: 'Dear Paula ...'