

The River

A man is driving a sign into the ground; it says New South Wales/ Victoria, and it is on the southern, or left hand bank of the Murray River. Jack, an unemployed man, approaches, a roll of blankets on his back.

Jack You got it on the wrong side, mate.
Sign man This is where they told me to put it.
Jack They told you wrong. (then, dismissing the sign)
 Where's the bridge they said was goin to be here?
Sign man Won't be long. Coupla years. Why don't you lie
 down and have a sleep?

The sign man walks off, Jack lies down to sleep. We hear a tooting, and a paddle steamer appears.

Jack That's better than walkin. Hey!

This is to the people he can see on the steamer.

Banks (in charge of the steamer) How's it goin up there?
Jack Shiddouse!
Banks What's the problem?
Jack I want to get into New South. Lookin for work.
Banks What areya like at cuttin firewood?
Jack Best you've ever seen!
Banks Come on board. I can use a man like you!

Jack clambers down the bank and leaps to the steamer. Banks hands him an axe and sends him below. The boat moves through

an endless forest of river red gums, visible occasionally as it meanders with the stream. Then we become aware of other creatures, a heron and a Murray cod.

Heron They're not going away.
Cod We're stuck with them.
Heron Worse than the black fellas.
Cod Not so dangerous.
Heron They don't know much, do they?
Cod They're not so smart. They do everything at a distance.
Heron They're cutting down trees ...
Cod I didn't know about that.
Heron Back from the water, so you don't see.
Cod I see'em well enough. They haven't got a clue. Not yet, anyway.
Heron Spread the word, that's what I've got to do. Trouble is, they're everywhere.
Cod The Murrumbidgee?
Heron The Lachlan, the Darling, all the rivers to the south. Way up into the Channel Country ...
Cod What the hell are they doing there?
Heron Running sheep and cattle, buggering everything in sight.
Cod Disaster!
Heron They're building towns.

Cod What are they?
Heron Aaaaaaaahhh ...
Crow You calling me?
Galah What's up down there?
Magpie Yodellellihoo!
Robin You've never seen a coat like mine!
Willie What about my tail?
Heron We've got a problem, guys. It's not going away.
Crow When they die I'll pick their bones.
Heron Won't work. They bury their dead.
Crow Bastards!
Heron We have to find a way to live with them.
Magpie They have to live with us!
Cod You'll live in their bloody bellies if you're worth eating.
Robin I'm safe. They won't get a meal out of me.
Heron So what are we gonna do?
Crow Ignore them.
Robin Sing! (She does so.)
Willie Dance! (He does so. The others join in to some degree.)
Heron That's nice guys, but it doesn't solve our problem.
Magpie Which is?
Heron If we can't get rid of them, we have to reduce their influence.
Magpie If they come near my nest, I'll go'em! (He whistles as if he's a missile arriving at a target.)

Robin Make them envy us.
Galah Move into the back country. There won't be many of them there. (She wheels around, and hundreds of other galahs come wheeling around her, in the air above.)
Heron That's a great show you fellas are putting on, but they'll get binoculars, they'll come out to watch you!
Galah What's so bad about that? You think we're not worth watching?

Again the flock of galahs does their spectacular fly-around, filling the air with sound.
Cocky (piqued by a display of which he's not a part) Who's putting on a show without me? Eh? If you do it again I'll leave you without a feather to fly with!
Crow Don't get aggressive. Black's stronger than white any day.
Robin (all vanity) Humans know an aristocrat by the clothes he wears!
Heron So we haven't got any ideas, we're just going to be the creatures we've always been.
Cod What did you expect?
Magpie Hello! I didn't know you were there.
Cod You're not a waterbird. You don't know much at all.
Magpie Don't be rude to me.
Cod Water's life. I can only live out here because there's water. It comes down from mountains I'll never see.
Willie How do you know that, you lazy dope?

Cod I swim in wisdom, fool!

Heron Okay, nobody's going to change. That much is clear. Our resistance, then, is to be exactly as we were?

Cod The bastards have put dams across the river. And they've brought the European carp. Get rid of them. Drive them into the sea!

Magpie Can't be done, mate. We have to defend what's left.

Cod You'll find they control you.

Robin Not while I can choose my clothes!

Willie Shut up you little cock-sparrow. You're so full of yourself you can't see the problem.

Robin I can see my waistcoat in the windows of their houses. It's a better reflection than this mud. (He looks scornfully at the river.)

Heron We need to organise ...

Galah We're organised. Left turn, everyone. Land!

There is a tremendous flutter of galahs, then they settle on the ground.

Cocky Nobody does anything without me!

He squawks, and a dozen or so cockies appear, squarking loudly as they settle in the trees.

Cocky Now, what appears to be the problem?

Cod It's these bloody humans, of the whitefella variety. They'll put a few of you in cages, and wipe out the rest. (miserably) It'll be fish farms for me

Roo (coming on with a gentle hop) It's worse on the roads. They knock you down with cars. Lights in your eyes. Bang! Bang! Bang! The only safe place is on their coins!

From somewhere among the redgum forest we hear the sound of the paddle steamer tooting, then it comes into sight, through the many thousands of trees. Banks is at the helm, with Jack beside him, pointing.

Jack Plenty of wood in there. Easy cuttin, too.

Banks I'll pull'er in.

The steamer comes close to the bank.

Jack Plenty of birds around today.

Banks Nice, aren't they?

Jack (reaching for a gun) Something for the stew pot!

He fires. The birds take to the air and after a few moments of screeching, they're gone.

Banks You silly bastard! What'd'ya do that for?

Jack Stirred'em up a bit!

Banks I like to have'em around.

Jack (looking at the bank) Hello, hello? Coupla blokes up there.

There are two men beside the NSW/Victoria sign, taking readings with a theodolite.

Jack Whaddaya doin, boys?

Surveyor There's gonna be a bridge!

Banks Is that where you're putting it?
 Surveyor Right here!
 Jack That's where I got on this boat!
 Surveyor The bridge'll lift so you can go underneath.
 Banks That's handy. When're ya gonna start?
 Surveyor Not my decision. I take my levels back to the government. They decide.
 Jack More bloody years!
 Surveyor You wouldn't be going past Echuca would you?
 Banks Climb on board!

The surveyor and his mate go down to the steamer, which paddles away, as before.

Heron (returning) You hear that? They're building a bridge.
 Cod Gloom. They'll stir up mud in the river.
 Cocky (returning to a high branch in a flurry of squawking) Noisy bastards, aren't they?
 Cod (morosely) Look who's talking.
 Heron We've only got one weapon. Make them ashamed of themselves.
 Cocky Show'em we're superior ...
 Heron I think that's it.
 Cod Ashamed of themselves? That'll be the day.

He sinks into the deepest water, leaving only a string of bubbles.

Cocky You realise that we're a mystery to them. They don't know where we come from, or where we're going next.

Robin I don't know myself, so long as there's a mirror!
 Cocky (ignoring this) Surprise is our best weapon. If we don't like what they're doing, we go somewhere else.
 Heron And?
 Cocky We've got the air. They say it's good to keep your feet on the ground. It's because they have to!
 Galah (as a huge mob circles in the sky) We've got the numbers!

In the distance we hear a couple more shots fired by the truculent Jack.

Heron They're going to wipe us out.
 Cocky No they're not! I swear by my crest of sulphur we'll be here when they've gone back where they came from.
 Heron They've acclimatised. By now, they're locals too.
 Roo (jumping on with another mighty hop) We've got to make them more like us.
 Heron How're we going to do that?
 Roo Make them forget their lions and tigers. We'll be the heraldry of their tiny minds!
 Magpie In South Aussie that's what we do ... and in the west, the swan!
 Heron True, true, now I come to think about it ...
 Roo We've been here for thousands of years. They know who came last!
 Heron Doesn't stop them thinking they're the first!

Roo We'll teach them slowly, over time.

Two more shots are heard, far away, followed by the tooting of the paddle steamer.

Heron Teach that mob humility? Let me know when you're gonna start!

Galah We're only safe in the sky. All up, boys and girls, in the air!

There is a tremendous flurry of birds, with the mob of galahs leading the way, then all the others joining them. Wings flutter, and they call to each other as they move aloft. The viewpoint of the audience moves with them, until the scene has altered to become an aerial view of the river, with all its anabranches breaking away and rejoining intermittently.

Heron They never see it as we do.

Magpie If you can't see something, you can't know it.

Crow Caaaaaa! Caaaaaa!

Galah Pessimist! We can do better than that!

Again the galahs break into an orgy of squealing sound, which stirs the cockatoos to join in, coarsely but with raucous vitality. All the other birds do their best to beat the cockatoos and galahs. The magpies calls are the most noticeable.

Roo (still on the ground) Excuse me. Do you need some local knowledge?

Surveyor (who's back with his mate to help him) No thanks, mate. All we have to do is peg it out, and the builders

can get underway. I wouldn't hang around if I was you. Some of them do a bit of shooting.

We hear the sound of guns as the roo disappears.

Cod (out of sight in the river) And there you bloody have it.

Heron (still in the sky) Fish and frogs. We haven't run out of them just yet.

Crow (high above) Caaaaaa! Caaaaaa!

Magpie Quardle quahdle quardle quahdle waah!

Heron No political sense, my fellow birds. They won't be organised. Look at those bastards down below!

Builders are erecting a bridge over the river at incredible speed. The central section lifts, and the paddle steamer passes through, tooting with vigour.

Banks Great day for the river people. Two states are joined!

Jack Not all that good, ya know. If you and I can get across, so can the cops.

Banks You want to keep a jump ahead, do you Jack?

Jack It's the best policy, in any walk of life.

Banks I'd say the best policy's to stick to the middle, where the water's deepest. You're less likely to strike trouble, there.

Galah Boring bastards, they only talk about themselves. Everyone ready? There's a flood out near Moulamein. Balranald's going to be next!

The mob of galahs wheels this way and that, sorting out its direction for the move, then it moves away with its squealing lingering after it's gone.

Heron They don't give a stuff. So long as they've got somewhere to go.

Robin Eternal optimists, that's how I see them.

Heron (looking down) Hello, are you still there?

Robin Me, and Willy, and a few others, we keep in the bushes. It's amazing how much trouble you avoid by keeping out of sight.

Willy We give a lot of cheek, but we don't do any harm.

Heron I might come down and join you.

As the heron comes to the smaller birds, the audience's view of the river reverts to the way it was at the opening; that is, on level terms, and close.

Willy (warning the heron to keep at a distance) I've got my nest in there. Couple of little ones.

Robin Chirp, chirp, chirp, all they want is food.

Willy I was the same, once, then I grew up to be a bird!

Heron That's our fate, my friends. There's no avoiding that.

Roo Unless you're me! Those fellas still around?

Heron No. You've got your five minutes clear.

Roo (jumping on) Made up your mind yet? What're we going to do?

Heron It looks like we're going to share. They're going to change everything until they wake up one day that they're wrecking it.

Roo And then?

Heron They'll say, we should have left it as it was.

Roo Too late!

Heron Depends how long it takes them. They'll save what they can if they wake up in time.

Roo And if they don't?

Heron I'll take to the air again, I suppose.

Roo And me?

Heron You'll hop out of the way. As long as you can. There's no guarantees, are there.

Roo Absolutely none at all.

Heron It's a wonderful river. It's a lesson to us all.

Roo It's life. Who needs anyone to explain.

Heron I love it from the air, but I'm not a high flier by nature ...

Roo If you're not, what am I?

Heron You're a clod-hopper mate, as these whitefellas say.

Roo They're clever, as you must have seen.

Heron We can only hope they're clever enough to know what's good for them.

Roo That's asking a bit too much, I think.

Heron And I don't think we can settle for less.

Roo (looking up) Looks like things've dried up at Balranald. The mob's coming back!

Heron They're flying heavily. I think they're pretty well fed.

Roo Want to go and greet them?

The heron agrees, and the two of them watch, applauding, as a vast flock of galahs settles near the river. Even the cod indicates his welcome with a string of noisy bubbles.

This libretto is a response to the area (Barham, NSW, facing Koondrook, Victoria) where my father grew up. Returning to Barham always gives me an uncanny sensation of connecting with a time before I was born. It is as if, by returning, I am accepting my place in a continuity which is greater than any individual life.