



Mother's question

Chester Eagle

Books by Chester Eagle

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

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Mini-mags

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departure (memoir, 2006)

Mozart (memoir, 2007)

Travers (memoir, 2007)

The Saints In Glory

(story, 1991/2009)

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(memoir, 2008)

Keep Going! (memoir, 2008)

Who? (memoir, 2008)

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Othello's Rage (memoir, 2009)

One Small Step (memoir, 2011)

Castle Hill (memoir, 2011)

Chartres (memoir, 2011)

The Plains (memoir, 2011)

Four Last Songs (memoir, 2011)

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Freedom (a reflection, 2011)

Men In White (a reflection, 2011)

An Airline Suite (story, 1989/2013)

Cooper's Creek (reflection, 2013)

An Opera Suite (story, 1990/2013)

A Short History of

Australia (reflection, 2014)

Gippsland's first great book

(essay, 2015)

Emily at Preston (memoir, 2015)

These fields are mine!

(reflection, 2015)

Mother's question (memoir, 2016)

An answer (memoir, 2016)

In my first memory of Mother, she is silent. I am lying across her lap, or I may be on her knee. I am two years old, and we – Father, Mother and me – are at the front gate of our farm, *Sunnyside*, later *Nairana*, at Finley New South Wales. My brother Travers must be there but I am not aware of him. I'm aware of little beside myself. Father's our driver but he's not in my view so he must be closing the gate behind us. It's only a few paces from our car, a 1927 Chrysler¹, to the Finley-Deniliquin road, but I don't know that. All I am aware of is Mother nursing me, and a large river red gum (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*) beside the car and shading it. I must have passed this tree before but I'm not aware of having done so. This is the first memory that I can recall. My consciousness has no earlier point than this.

I don't have a second memory of Mother, I have thousands of them. The river red gum, however, recurs a handful of times throughout my life. I showed it to my children when I took them back to see the farm I'd told them about in our bedtime story-telling; to the great love of my life when I wanted her to see where my life began; and to my Chinese friend Chunjuan when I showed her the farm she'd read about in one of my books. More of the red gum later.

Mother poured herself into me, her second child. Strangely enough, she didn't regulate or control me. She did what Father did in a different way, his Eagle-family way: she gave me almost complete independence,

fettering it only with her high expectations. Mother expected good things from her boys, not so much a matter of marks at school, though Mother, an ex-teacher, expected us to do well, but her wishes were aimed higher. When I became a teacher, as I did on leaving university, Mother expected me to rise to become the state's Director of Education. That would be high enough. Mother took it for granted that I would do the job well. Nothing less would be in harmony with the character she assumed I would become. Virtue, which Mother sought with a passion, was more than morals, or even manners; it was public performance, it was what you were seen to be doing and what you would be seen to have done when your days were over. Mother seemed very old to her child but she was young and fallible, and had always been so. I nosed around the cupboards, wardrobes and cabinets when I was small, discovering things Mother had put away or Father had put down. I became curious about a tea cup and saucer, white with a slim green line around the rim and a green handle. I liked this cup and asked Mother why there were no more of them. She told me that soon after she and Father had moved to the farm, she was entertaining guests in the lounge room, in the front section of the house, and she was carrying a tray across from the kitchen, a detached building at the rear, but when she got to the back door of the front section, a sudden wind had blown the wire door around, it

banged into the tray, Mother dropped the tray, and almost everything on it got broken.

This happened before I was born, but looking back on it, decades later, I realise that Mother never told me whose afternoon tea was thus disrupted – the names of the guests – or what cups she'd bought to replace the broken ones, which I assume had been a wedding present. Whose present had been smashed in this way? Forty-something years later I found a similar cup in a shop in Richmond and felt I was repairing something in Mother's life and mine when I brought it home. I have it still, and friends drink from it without knowing what it is. Indeed, what is it? It's a reminder, of course, and I think it's also an attempt on my part to repair some damage done before my time but mysteriously within my ken. Mother tried so hard for me that I should be able to do something for her, even when it's impossible.

I am a Depression child, and we are poor, though this is to some extent disguised by living on a farm: Father can kill a sheep to give us meat, and there are fruit trees and something of a vegetable garden, though neither Mother nor Father are natural gardeners. One day we are sitting at the dining table, eating lunch (which we call dinner) and Father picks at some greens, wanting to know what's on his plate. Mother says she's been told that young nettles, before they develop their sting, can be cooked and eaten. Father says they're not to appear on our table. A few days later Mother tries

again with marshmallows, another weed. Father overrules her again. He wants proper food.

It's about this time that something decisive happens. I might be five, or nearly six. I have lunch with Mother and Father, sitting at our table, which can be extended. My brother Travers must be in Finley, at school. I eat whatever Mother puts in front of me and when I'm finished she says I may leave the table. I go out and sit under the grape vines that climb over a frame of poles and wire that Father's made. He hangs a water bag there, in the shade. For some reason, or possibly no reason, I go back to the house, intending to enter the dining room. I go to the door where Tim, our dog, likes to sit, moaning if there's music on the radio. I'm so used to Tim's ways that his 'singing' never surprises me, but it always amuses me. He's not there so he must be with Father in the paddocks. I'm about to enter when I'm stopped. Mother hasn't left the table, isn't washing the dishes, hasn't even stacked them. She's at one end of the table, hands over her eyes, and she's crying. Sobbing. I feel a chill go through me, and I stand very still. Why is Mother crying? Normally she's on top of everything, amazingly industrious. I know it must be something that's arisen between her and Father, something beyond my understanding. My parents are ever so good to me. I can think of nothing to do but to go away. I'm not big enough to ask what's wrong, and I certainly can't ask Father, because that would be

telling on Mother, to whom I'm loyal. But I'm loyal to Father too: I must be, and I am. I wander away, I 'play' – strange word – and I forget.

Except that I haven't forgotten. Seventy-six years later, I'm still wondering, and wondering too how it's affected me over the years in between, for I've never lost sight of that moment. What did it tell me, what did I learn? I'll never know, but it's one of the reasons why I'm writing today.

I speak of Mother as if she was constant, but she changed as the years went on. Of course. She played tennis at the Wells' home, in Finley. She acted in plays, again in Finley, at the School of Arts. I don't think I ever saw Mother on stage but I know she sees things dramatically, as Father does not. By the time I marry, Mother has begun to dry out, but she gives me and my fiancée Mary money to buy things for our house. We get a rug for the bedroom (long since worn out) and a Danish chair for the lounge (twice recovered but comfortable as ever). The birth of our son Aston makes all the difference: Mother is reborn. She adores the child and wants to look after him whenever we're going out, or away. We decide to make a trip to Innamincka, in a far corner of South Australia, and Mother's horrified. What if the car breaks down, or we get lost? What will happen to her grandson then? We tell her not to worry, all will be well, et cetera, but Mother isn't appeased. She wants us to write to her from every town

we pass through so that she knows how far we've got. And if she doesn't hear from us she'll get an aeroplane, or possibly a helicopter, to search for us. We give suitable assurances, but we'll have the little boy with us; he's to be part of the mission too. And he is; we stay with friends in Ballarat who have a purple bath; he's happy in it, taking no notice of its colour. We camp on a track west of Nhill, and he's happy enough, but when we pull down the tent after breakfast and pack it in the car, he's anxious. He doesn't have a home! He gets in the car, and then in his child-seat in the back, a secure place which he knows is his. I wonder whether or not I'll tell Mother about that!

Mother, had I but known it, had begun to change before this. When I was about to get married, Mother had a word to Mary while I wasn't around. The patterns of a marriage, she told her, are set at the beginning. On your first or second morning, she told Mary, who's about to turn twenty-one, tell Chester that you'd like a cup of tea. He'll get it, and that will become part of your marriage. If you make tea for him, you'll be doing it all your life. I hardly need tell my readers that I made tea in the early days of our marriage and for the following seventeen years. But she also said to Mary, on the last occasion of seeing her before she moved to Canberra and out of my life, that it was good for a couple to grow old together; Mary passed this back to me, although we were doing the opposite.

Father was a burden to Mother in his last years, needing her to do many things he couldn't do any more. Buttons. Shoelaces. Finding things he thought lost when they were at the edge of his vision, exactly where he'd put them minutes before. Mother was loyal and didn't chide him as she might have done. The attention and concern she'd once focussed on her children were available for him. Friends suggested that she put him in a home and have time for herself, but she told them she couldn't do that. 'I've got to look after him. He needs me.'

His needs were considerable. Although he was a generous man and surprisingly far-sighted despite a limited education – Barham primary and post-primary school till the age of fourteen – he'd always made himself secure and now he couldn't do it any more. Where were his slippers? He wanted to read the paper. When Mother cooked, Father would eat everything on the table, even if she'd cooked enough for two meals, mid-day and evening. He didn't notice that he was overstepping the mark, because, as a farmer, he'd set his own marks for himself. Going into town meant putting on a suit, or something decent, at the least, whereas on the farm he could be what he liked. Very late in life, when he was in a nursing home, Father hated people fussing about him with meals, medicine, or anything they thought he ought to do. He knew he needed looking after but he didn't like it. I visited him

one evening, rather later than usual, when the staff were putting people into bed. Father was a heavy man, so they employed a lifting machine. This meant putting straps around his ankles, his wrists and his waist, then using a lever to lift him and swing him around. He was in the air, above his bed and being lowered when I came into the room. Father looked at me sadly. 'I wasn't like this, up on the farm.'

Father had worked very hard, on the farm. He'd hired workers from time to time, but did most of it himself. Marriages worked differently in those days, or certainly on farms. The woman was responsible for the house and children, the man for everything surrounding them. Women were both dis-empowered, and central. Did this make them vulnerable? Yes. Was Mother equal to it?

A resounding yes. She was not by nature a country woman. Her ideas of housekeeping had been shaped partly by her Bendigo parents and partly by her reading; the plays she'd acted in had taught her middle-class English ways. It used to amaze me that Mother, every morning in the season of living room fires, would clean out the ashes in the morning and then, with a bucket of white kalsomine solution, brush the black fireplace until she'd made it white again. In my eyes, this was plain silly but Mother, getting up off her knees, would say that it was what she'd been brought up to do and if 'other people' didn't

agree, they'd just have to accept that she was going to maintain her standards. These included putting butter knives on the table even if her menfolk ignored them, or only allowing tomato sauce bottles on the table if they'd been made respectable by wrapping them in white. I sense myself becoming satiric in mentioning these things, so I'll quote a passage from the book I wrote about my childhood, years later, when I was fifty.²

He knows he is central to his mother's life because she will sacrifice for him. One night, lying in bed, he hears his parents talking. Mother wants to send him away because education is important and the local school is limited. Father says it will be costly. Mother says she means to do it, and if necessary she'll pawn her wedding ring. Father refrains from observing that this won't cover a term's fees, sensing, as he must, the passion behind the words. She wants her boy to be more than the farm boys and village kids he goes to school with. She believes in him. He is deeply touched. He turns side on in bed, as if this will more clearly identify the voices as whispers of his future. Mother names a cousin who is going away to school. It has to happen for her son.

It was the all-important turn in my life. Nothing was ever the same again. I went away to school, to university, became a teacher and later a writer. The line is straight from Mother's decision to where I am today. It's not possible to consider this without some ambivalence. It's in the nature of motherhood to be unselfish, self-sacrificing for the good of the child but by the same token motherhood also involves an element of living one's life through the lives of one's children. The reader may remember, as I have never forgotten, Mother's aspiration for me to become Director of Education for the state of Victoria. This desire of Mother's led to a quirky change of direction when my first book was published: *Hail & Farewell!: An Evocation of Gippsland* (Heinemann, Melbourne, 1971). Mother was immensely proud of this event, and was only momentarily put out by my announcement that although, financially, I needed to go on teaching, my main focus hereafter would be on my writing. Within a few days Mother had drawn up lists of her numerous friends. *These* would buy the book; *these* would ask their local library to buy a copy; and a third category would simply *read* the book no matter how they came by it. I thanked Mother for her efforts on my behalf and made no further inquiry.

By the time I am speaking of, Mother was back in Melbourne. This was not an easy transition. It began with the death in a car crash of my brother Travers, who

had been going to take over the farm. (I have spoken of this in *Travers: a memoir of my brother*.³) Father put the farm up for sale, and sold most of it fairly quickly. He retained two paddocks for a few years as a way of retaining his link to the land. He even proposed buying a house in Finley, and Mother took me to inspect one that he was considering. It was on the never-never side of the railway line, bleak, without character, a dismal choice if ever I saw one. Father must have been desperate to think of it. I agreed with Mother, and she prevailed. They bought a Federation/Californian hybrid in Caulfield, the suburb where her sister Gladys had lived for years, and the move was made. Perhaps I should call it the change, because Mother was where she belonged, at last, yet this was not an easy situation either.

The flats in Caulfield where Mother's sister Gladys had lived for some time were to be pulled down. Gladys still had Della, her eldest, living with her, though Jill, the younger daughter, was married. Mother suggested that Glad could live with her and Father, until Glad had saved the deposit she would need to place on a home. They moved in. Mother told me, on the phone, that it was working well. The kitchen was shared, and each night Mother and Glad considered everyone's needs and decided which couple would eat first, and which would wait till later. Knowing what Mother and Glad were like I wondered how this would work. Why didn't they take it in turns to cook for the four of them?

There came a day when I needed to call for something before I went home for dinner with Mary and our children. Whatever brought me to the house was quickly settled and I sat in the lounge with Father. He was reading Melbourne's then-afternoon paper, *The Herald*, a broadsheet, and he was sitting next to the reading lamp, the paper hiding his face. I found myself listening to the voices in the kitchen. The question of going first or going second was being discussed. This involved the time needed for cooking. Mother announced that she and Norman were having steak. A nice piece of fillet from a butcher she named. And a little salad with it, which she could prepare while the steak was cooking. Gladys said that she and Della were having chops. And boiling a potato or two, which would take no time at all. Until that evening I don't think I had ever thought of the choice between steak and chops as a distinction between the well-off and the poor, but that is what the sisters' voices conveyed from the kitchen. Mother was asserting the authority of steak while her voice, her consideration for her sister's needs, denied that the assertion was taking place. Gladys was just as bad. The very word 'chops' was an expression of humility, of second-rateness, which she most certainly didn't feel, though she was excruciatingly aware of being in the inferior position and of resenting it, though that also had to be hidden.

It wasn't; it was in her voice, just as Mother's position was in hers. So who would cook first, and who go second? They haggled. Listening to it made me squirm. Father lowered his paper for a moment. His eyes caught mine. Our minds engaged. He saw that I saw as he did, and raised *The Herald* again. Shortly after, I said goodbye to the four of them, and drove back to Ivanhoe. The sounds of home were pleasing.

Yet not all was rivalry. *That* was a product of being too close. Mother had meant well, and when, a year or so later, Gladys got a house of her own and moved out, all was well again. The sisters gave each other strength. They also supported their oldest sister Ella, then living in a house at Maldon, in central Victoria. Ella's life had been more adventurous, and varied, than her sisters' lives, but she'd never married. Years earlier she'd been engaged, but had broken it off, though she wore the engagement ring all her life. The man she'd been engaged to never married either, and when he died, he left her the house in Maldon in his will. Ella moved in, but her sisters felt she needed a certain amount of looking after, which they determined to provide. So, once a month, Mother and I drove to Maldon to take Ella some cake or biscuits, to do a little shopping for her, to check the cleanliness of the house, and to give her company. Gladys and her daughter Jill did the same on the alternate fortnight. Ella's house, a pleasing old cottage, was only a hundred metres from the Maldon

hospital, which had a wing for elderly nursing home people and I sensed that Mother and Gladys found comfort in knowing that their sister would be looked after when she couldn't do it for herself.

That time came and Ella moved up the hill, not without some drama when she disappeared from her hospital bed, to be found an hour or two later at the door of the empty cottage where she'd lived for years. I must presume nurses or local residents took her back to where she now belonged.

Despite all this, Mother blossomed, if that word can be applied in old age. She still worked for charities, had friends call in, kept house for Father, and wrote endless letters to friends around the world. Mother's hallway at Xmas time was lined by cords and strings, each of them straddled by countless cards, and if anyone inquired about one of her friends, Mother would swiftly pull down the relevant card and read the message written thereon. I think I only understood this after the second of my return visits to the farm house where I'd grown up, three miles west of Finley.

My first return was with Mary and our children, whom I'd been telling stories about my life on the farm. I showed them place after place, each of them bringing to life a story which they'd heard as they lay in bed at night, ready to go to sleep, a readiness I could detect in their voices when one or the other asked, 'Tell us about the farm, daddy.' That was the first visit. The second

was when I took the love of my life to see the same place. I was writing *Mapping the Paddocks* at the time, reading bits of it to her, and profoundly enjoying the searching process of rediscovering the things that had made me. We drove there in her commodious car, had tea with the lady of the farm in her new house, got permission to go to the old place, drove there and stopped.

I saw it for the first time. It was gaunt. Pioneering. It was simple, built with early bricks, made of local clay burnt on site. I looked at my love. I saw she found it hard to believe that I'd emerged from what she saw. Years later, I took my Chinese friend Chunjuan to the farm; I showed her the red gum at the gate where one turned off the Deniliquin Road to enter. I took her to see the channel where Mother and Father had taught me to swim. How small it was. I took her to see the paddock that I'd mapped, all those years ago. I pointed to the roof and chimneys of the old house, peeping over the pepper trees that characterised our farm. It was new and strange to her, but to me, on this last visit, it was heroic. Mother, I think, had always felt embattled there. Had I been embattled too?

No. I loved walking, and sometimes working, this farm of Father's, and the home was unimpeachably secure. Nothing could go wrong where Mother was. Mother was love and security, she was ambition and common sense. In hot weather and cold, she was there, functioning. She was more than a woman, she was

a principle, an embodiment of all that was best. She had made that of herself even on a Finley farm, and now, back in Melbourne at last, she was surrounded by friends. Mother was rarely intimate; she needed a room, a meeting, a shop, a stage or a hall to be most herself, and when she was what she wanted to be she was happy. Mother, like many women, had to make everyone around her happy before she could be happy herself, but in those years of retirement – Father’s retirement – she was, I think, happy at last. Father travelled widely, but they rarely travelled together. He went to Europe, Russia, America, and most of the Pacific islands, while Mother visited England and the west coast of America to see a relative, but for the most part she was happy with her life and work in Caulfield. Her home had a big porch, a big entry hall and it had also great warmth for the friends and relatives who visited or stayed. But nothing lasts forever. Father had a stroke. He recovered. Another. He found it hard to do up buttons and tie or untie shoelaces. And much more. He became a burden. Mother needed looking after herself, but she had to look after him. His demands were considerable. Friends said she should put him in a home, but she refused. It was her duty to look after him, and she wanted to.

At considerable cost. It ended when she broke her hip, falling as she brought in a basket of washing from the line. Father, deaf and reading the paper, didn’t hear

her calls. The man next door came in. I was overseas with my son and daughter. We came home to find the two of them in different hospitals. I had to take over, sell their house, invest the money, and manage their affairs. I did this as best I could for two years, then Father died. I took Mother to New South Wales to inter his ashes. This was done. I spoke at this ceremony, honouring my father as he joined the many Eagles in the Barham cemetery. How many times had Father driven us across the plains to reach the people and places of his childhood. How many times had Mother been with him, sitting together in the 1936, and then the 1950, Ford, with their little son in the back seat behind.

Mother's decline began soon after she returned to Melbourne. I won't detail her difficulties in that last year. She too had to move to a nursing home. I couldn't fault the place but Mother hated it. She couldn't do anything and it frustrated her when she thought she should be doing good. Once she surprised me with a question I'd heard scores of times before. She said to me, as I sat beside her bed, 'What happened to John Sykes? How's he getting on?'

All I could say in reply was, 'I don't know Mother. I think he did Medicine at uni when I did Arts, but I lost track of him then, a long time ago.'

It was a long time ago. In my first year at Melbourne Grammar I was placed in 5B because I hadn't studied Latin or French at my country school. I began them

that year, in 1946. I enjoyed studying these languages. Languages made sense to me. I did well. One afternoon, at Aunt Glad's then-flat in Caulfield, shortly after the year's final exams, Mother said, 'Chez: how did you get on this year?' I told her that I'd come equal top of my class. She was very happy; the sacrifices of sending me away hadn't been in vain. 'Who came equal with you?'

'John Sykes.'

'Tell me about him!'

I knew next to nothing about John Sykes. He was a day boy and I was a boarder. He was quite clever. I'd rarely spoken to him. I knew nothing about his family. I didn't feel any rivalry towards him. I didn't feel anything much at all about him. He was there, he was all right, I didn't mind him, I didn't think about him, really. But as my years at school and university went on, Mother asked me again and again, 'What happened to John Sykes? How's he getting on?' and I never knew. We were both promoted to 6A, we did reasonably well, we went to the senior school and, as I told Mother, I had an idea that he'd gained entry to the Medical faculty, the most prestigious and difficult-of-entry faculty at that time. Beyond that, I knew nothing. I knew quite a number of medical students because they, like me, were residents of Trinity College, but none of them ever mentioned John Sykes, though he meant something to Mother which I never understood. Perhaps he was in some way a measure, for Mother, of

what had been achieved by sending me away to school, but who knows? I can't say.

One afternoon I got to Mother's nursing home about five-thirty, on my way home from the part time job I'd taken to supplement my income in retirement. Yes, retirement. I was at last free of teaching and able to concentrate on my writing. This was a blessed time. Mother sat grumpily next to her bed. Her dinner would arrive soon. 'What's the use of all this?' she demanded, waving a hand at the ward she was in. 'What's the good of it all?'

I felt her situation keenly, but began the speech I felt I had to make. 'Mother, you've spent your life doing good for people. Your family first, then the people you know, like the people of your town, then all the good causes you've worked for all your life.' I started to list them. 'The Far West Children's Health Scheme, the Red Cross, the CWA, the Brotherhood of Saint Laurence ...' but she cut in. 'Oh what's the good of you?'

She was angry. I was amused. I got up. 'I'll go home now Mother and get myself some dinner. I'll see you round about the same time tomorrow.' She said something grumpy but I couldn't catch her words. I left. I slept, and then, at 7am, the time I normally got up, the phone rang. It was the nursing home. Mother had died in the night. I got there as quickly as I could. She'd been restless, even disturbed. They'd sat with her, and

she'd settled down a little. They watched, and she grew quiet. They thought she was sleeping. She was, perhaps. In the morning they found she couldn't be woken. She'd gone in the night. I made arrangements for her funeral, in Saint Stephens Uniting Church, Caulfield, her sister's church. The minister, after questioning me about Mother's life (she'd had no personal contact), gave an excellent eulogy, and I read some passages from *Mapping The Paddocks*: Mother in her prime, Mother in the days when she was setting an example to the world. She was cremated, and I took her ashes to Barham to put them in the lawn cemetery with Father's and Travers's ashes, as she had requested. The Barham cemetery is surrounded by black box trees, with river red gums not far away, Father's country: Mother could hardly have been more loyal. Again I spoke, and once again I was amused to have as audience some horses that were pastured in the paddock surrounding the cemetery. They must by now have been very familiar with the graves and the people that came and went, visiting those lying silently there.

I returned to Melbourne, I returned to my part-time work, my friends, my music and my writing, but even now, twenty-five years later, Mother's question still irritates my brain: what's the good of you? She was so angry when she said it, angry with herself, with life, and with me.

'What's the good of you?'

What do I say to that?

I can't answer your question, Mother, so I turn it back to you. What good did you give me, Mother? I think I have an answer. You gave me the world, Mother, and now, appreciatively I trust, in my own old age, I give it back to you.

¹ Readers of *Mapping The Paddocks* (see below) may notice that what was once a Chevrolet has become a Chrysler; the need for this correction was pointed out to me by Father after reading my book in 1985.

² *Mapping The Paddocks*, Chester Eagle, McPhee-Gribble/Penguin, Melbourne, 1985

³ *Travers: a memoir of my brother*, mini-mag, Trojan Press, 2007)

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