



There's His Majesty!

Chester Eagle

Books by Chester Eagle

Hail and Farewell! An evocation of Gippsland (non-fiction, 1971)

Who could love the nightingale? (novel, 1974)

Four faces, wobbly mirror (novel, 1976)

At the window (novella, 1984)

The garden gate (novel, 1984)

Mapping the paddocks (non-fiction, 1985)

Play together, dark blue twenty (non-fiction, 1986)

House of trees (reissue of *Hail and Farewell!* 1987)

Victoria Challis (novel, 1991)

House of music (stories, 1996)

Wainwrights' mountain (novel, 1997)

Waking into dream (novel, 1998)

didgeridoo (stories, 1999)

Janus (travel pieces, 2001)

The Centre & other essays (essays, 2002)

Love in the Age of Wings & other operas (librettos, 2003)

Melba: an Australian city (essays, 2004)

The Wainwright Operas (librettos, 2005)

Oztralia (essays, 2005)

Cloud of knowing (novel, 2006)

Benedictus (essays, 2006)

Central Station Sydney & other operas (librettos, 2006)

The Sun King & other operas (librettos, 2007)

The Well in the Shadow (literary essays, 2008)

All the Way to Z (memoir/essay, 2009)

This Enchanted World & other operas (librettos, 2009)

Running The Race (novel, 2010)

A Mob Of Galahs & other operas (librettos, 2011)

The Pilgrims (novel, 2012)

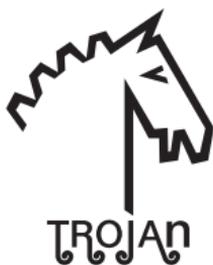
Swinging Doors (novel, 2013)

the roar of existence (novel, 2015)

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

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There's His Majesty! is published by Chester Eagle, 23 Langs Road Ivanhoe 3079 Australia, operating as Trojan Press. Phone is 61 3 9497 1018 and email address is cae@netspace.net.au

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Mini-mags

- Escape* (story, 2004)
Hallucination before departure (memoir, 2006)
Mozart (memoir, 2007)
Travers (memoir, 2007)
The Saints In Glory (story, 1991/2009)
So Bitter Was My Heart (memoir, 2008)
Keep Going! (memoir, 2008)
Who? (memoir, 2008)
At Baldy's Feet (memoir, 2008)
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)
The Camera Sees ... (memoir, 2011)
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)
Of his Place and Time (memoir, 2016)
There's His Majesty! (memoir, 2016)

I was writing recently about the effects of my parents' decision - my mother's really - to send me away from our farm in New South Wales to school in Melbourne. It was a life-changing decision. Here is a little of what I wrote.

I come home from Melbourne one term holiday and Mother gives me a list of things to get at Sammons Edwardes store. 'And while you're there, Chez,' she says, and I know something more important, more *Mother*, is about to show itself, 'Go into the Ladies department and say hello to Lola Gatley. She's engaged to ... I don't think they've set a date for the wedding yet, but it can't be far off. Before Christmas I'm sure.'

I say I will. I get the supplies Mother's asked for, then I carry my basket, bag, or whatever it is, into the Ladies section, and there is Lola. Her father is our butcher, I've been in his shop often enough, now his daughter's getting married. I am, perhaps, seventeen; Lola's the same age as me. She was with me in classes at Finley State and then Finley Rural School. There is something lovely, because ever so trusting, about her. Her face is round, with a dainty chin, and her hair is fine and blond. It's tied with a small and simple ribbon. 'Hello Chester,' she says, 'how are you getting on at school?' I tell her all is well, though that's

not entirely true, then I ask about her coming marriage, and I wish her well.

If there is a conversation in my life that I would like to have had recorded and played back to me now, as I write, it is this one. It only lasts a couple of minutes, and I'm sure it's trite and obvious, but it is a parting. Though Mother has sent me away to Melbourne, I remember the people I was at school with in Finley, and I still feel part of them. Lola's about to be transformed by accepting the life of a rural woman, partner to a man, and I'm headed somewhere else. The boys at Melbourne Grammar are far more ambitious than Finley people, and the weddings I see coming out of Saint Peter's chapel have a glamour and an air of social triumph not to be seen in Finley. Yet Lola is curious, and truly wants to know what I've been doing, where I'm going, and what it's been like for me. I'm humbled, I'm admiring, and I feel that what she's doing is a triumph too, or at least an assertion, perhaps the only one she will ever make, perhaps the first of many if her man's not strong, or successful ... Life's a gamble, and she's about to make her play; has, perhaps, made it already by committing herself, by saying yes.

I leave the shop with my confidence untouched, but feeling also a sense of loss, and I never see Lola again.

I should perhaps have been ready for this because it's happened before. On an earlier return to Finley, a year or two after I go away to school, I go to Finley one day when Mother needs groceries. Mother's conversations with her friends hold little interest for me, so I tell her I'll go for a walk and meet her back at the car at such and such a time. I walk past the hotels, Gatley's butcher shop, the post office, and I reach Finley school. It's a strong, low building and aesthetically it stands up well. It's a little after midday and the sun is pouring down. I walk further to the road – there are practically no buildings – which separates the school from the show- and footy-ground, opposite. There's no shade on either side of the road and I spot, from some way off, someone digging. I get closer, and it's Norman McNair, a boy one year younger than myself, brother of Bruce McNair, who was in the same class as me. I ask Norman what he's doing. He points to the holes he's dug, and to a box containing little trees in tubs, or tins, which he's about to plant. His father's on the school committee and when the head teacher buys some trees to shade the western side of the playground, as they may in fifteen or twenty years, McNair senior volunteers his son to plant them. Norman's doing it now. I hold the top wire of the fence as we talk. Norman is a quiet fellow, and he answers my questions politely. What's Bruce

doing? How is Ted English, the teacher? What sort of trees are you planting? (Sugar gums, Eucalyptus Cladocalyx) And so on. I tell him I've to meet my mother, and I move on. It's only later, as I get near the car in Murray Street (cars are never locked) that I realise that Norman, for all his quiet politeness, has spoken to me as an outsider. I've moved away from his world and, for all my questions and comments about things we still have in common, I am, in some way, and for Norman, never coming back.

The strange thing is that, sitting here writing, I feel a wish to assert that, in some other way, I've never left. How can both be true, if they are?

This is something I need to explore. I'm eighty-two, and I don't expect to come back once I'm gone; how can I say I've 'never left' when leaving things behind is endless? I was a child, once, and I'll never know that stage again. The two separations I've described, from Lola Gatley and from Norman McNair, came about because I left Finley school for a famous, and Mother hoped *better*, school in Melbourne. I veered away from the vernacular to study French and Latin. Grammar imposed itself on language in my mind. With the likely exception of a bank manager's daughter, the boys and girls I went to school with had been battlers, progeny of struggling parents. I moved to Melbourne, put on a navy suit and, regardless of what was happening inside

me I joined those who were wealthy, cultivated, socially desirable, or possibly all three. Something of England's class system had been re-created in Australia, however feebly and however temporary its construction. I knew where I now belonged, or thought I did, and nobody could claim to out-rank the group I was part of. This new pride accorded well with my Eagle family pride, but, regardless of where I now was, I had stepped away from what I'd been, and had left a lot of people, and their way of life, behind. The next step was taken when I went to university, and found common class with people from other famous schools, male and female. The differences that had divided us – navy blue for Grammar, pale blue for Geelong, red for Scotch, and so on – united us when we took up residence in college. The next step would be to take on the world, but there was plenty of time to relish our youth before moving on. University was a fascinating place.

It was meant to resemble, or at least have things in common with, the universities of the old world, meaning, primarily, England, but extending to France (the Sorbonne!) and Germany. Learning had clustered in Europe and that transferred well to Australia, with its handful of cities separated by days of travel. Going to university was still something special, and meeting new people, as one did all the time, was exciting: the world grew a little bigger with every encounter. Each was a possibility because they – we – were young, and

headed somewhere good, exciting, new, promising ... the world was wide! My college was fond of ceremony – inducting the new, farewelling the old, maintaining links between those who'd brought honour to it and those in it now, with their heads down over books, or talking far into the night about the ideas brimming in their minds. The only way to keep your place in college was to pass your year, so the dining room and the hallowed halls held only those who'd been successful; it was a heady atmosphere!

Strangely, and just as the young think that only the old ever die, most of us lived with such intensity that it felt permanent to be where we were. Yet we were so casual. The college had two telephones for students, each, by occupying a booth between two buildings, making it clear that they hadn't always been where they were. Once there had been none at all, and communication had been by letters, or hand-written notes. But now – then – there were two phones, and if you were near them when they rang you were expected to answer. Picking up the phone, you might hear a strange voice say, 'Can I speak to Ken Mason please?' and you would say something like, 'I'll see if I can get him', whereupon you would put the phone down and walk into the space near the oak tree looked upon by three residential buildings, turn yourself towards Ken's room, if you knew where it was, and yell his name a few times.

Your duty was done. If you were of courteous disposition, you might tell the caller that his man should be along in a minute, or you might go away without looking back. If Ken Mason didn't respond? The phone might sit off the hook for long enough to cause somebody, at some later time, to replace it, making it available for another call. Does this sound strange? It was normal for the group of young men I belonged to, years ago. What happened to all the young Ken Masons, and those callers who did or didn't get to speak to their man? Ah! That is what I wanted to talk about. Where are they all? What bonded them when they were together, then? Then! That was the time, those were the days ...

College men – *men*, we called ourselves – were young, and though almost everything we did was a step in the progress to what we were going to be, and though our ambitions were high, because the college was a place where ambition belonged, we lived in the present to a degree that amazes me when I look back. Young people, all travelling, all moving, but still only in the early stages when, or so it seemed, we were travelling together. In setting out, we were close to each other, still a group of some sort, not yet at the stage when paths diverged and each of us had to realise, to face the fact, that each path led to a destiny which was ours alone. Each of us owes God a death, says one of Shakespeare's soldiers, and, deity or not, what we know

is that we will all die alone, eventually and somewhere. The beginning of our journey, of all those journeys, is somewhat illusory because the feeling of togetherness can't last, and yet it becomes ever more important as the journey goes on.

Being on a journey – and it's one of my metaphors for life, a common one you must agree – means that change is inevitable. Since we're all going to different places, we acquire friends and lose them; we become familiar with certain circumstances, or places, and then we change them. Or most of us do. There's no avoiding it. I've lived in the same house for forty-eight years, and though the house has changed little, there are different people around me, blocks of flats that weren't always there, new homes going up, new shops selling new goods in the shopping centre nearby. You may think you are resisting change by remaining as you were but change changes you by the simple device of making you out of date. Get around that if you can!

Somewhere in this process we make friends, and somehow – it's easy enough – in the same process we leave people behind. We may understand this, or it may come as a surprise. I'm thinking of Lola Gatley and Norman McNair. I feel the same tenderness toward them as I did when I was seventeen and fourteen. I've never seen them since those days so I've never been forced to think of them differently. This isn't always the case.

Take Jim Blackmore. When I started to teach at Bairnsdale Tech. (formerly School of Mines), he was already there, a man of sixty. He taught Social Studies to junior classes. As I found to my cost, there were no syllabuses. Anyone taught anything they could get away with. I was too young to devise a good curriculum, so I improvised. So did Jim, but he was shrewd enough to keep his students challenged. It was said that he'd run some sort of business school in Adelaide, and had retired to Raymond Island. This required him to row across the narrow Macmillan Strait, tie up his boat, and catch the school bus. At the end of the day he rowed himself back to his house on the island. If he wanted a drink at the Commercial Hotel, he got someone, a fellow teacher or possibly a taxi, to drive him to the boat. None of us ever saw his wife, although I did visit him, once only, on Raymond Island, to be shown a small, neat house in which one room was Mrs Blackmore's and another was Jim's. The rest of the house they shared. I was young enough to accept this without question. I wasn't interested in domestic arrangements because I was learning to teach and Jim had so much to show me.

He was fussy about language and when he heard trade teachers stumble over words they didn't understand he would pull the word apart and explain its derivation, leading on occasion to little homilies on ancient customs or beliefs in the British Isles. I admired this. It was the

sort of thing I'd never bothered to investigate in my school and university days. If I was to be a good teacher I must follow Jim down this road. He had also a way of asserting his authority without raising his voice. He gave the simplest students simple things to do and praised them when they managed to succeed. I remember him telling the staffroom one afternoon that he'd put two sheets of paper and a pin in front of everybody in 2CD (we had ability grading) and asked them to pin the pages together in the most suitable way. 'Whaddaya mean?' they wanted to know, and Jim had told them, 'That's for you to work out!' Robert Day, a far from bright boy from Paynesville, had hit on the procedure. He pushed the pin through both sheets of paper but made sure that the point of the pin lay settled *between* the two pages so that nobody's finger could be pricked.

I was scornful. They were supposed to be learning about society. I took this to mean political systems. Why was he wasting time on pins? Jim was amused. 'It's a problem. It's within their grasp to solve it. When one of their own number works out the proper thing to do, they can see it. They're learning from each other!' No grand schemes for Jim. He was playing with their ignorance and this had the effect of making the students respect him. They hushed when he entered a room. He listened quietly to the trade teachers, smoking a cigarette. He was fond of these, had a beer or two or a glass of port, then got himself back to his boat and

rowed himself across the water that separated him from his home. People occasionally wondered why someone so gifted had left Adelaide but he said nothing about that, claiming he'd found an ideal place for retirement, and it suited us to accept him as he presented himself.

Years passed and Jim grew older. There was a night when he was found in his boat, confused and well away from his landing place. Then we heard that he was in hospital in Melbourne, having shock treatment. Shock treatment! I had a feeling that the ground was moving under my feet. How would that affect Jim? I visited him in hospital next time I was in Melbourne. He was cheerful and told me he was looking forward to getting back to work. But the principal of the school advertised his position and when I protested about this, he told me that 'Mr Blackmore' had been acting strangely on the school bus. Parents had complained that he'd been pressing cigarettes into the backs of the hands of students sitting near him. 'Parents have been showing me these burns,' said the principal, and I was left with no case to argue. A new teacher would be taking over his classes, she'd been appointed and was ready to start. Jim?

Jim would return to Raymond Island, and we wouldn't be seeing him again. But, small towns being what they are, I did. My car was parked outside the Commercial Hotel and I saw Jim crossing the road. I called to him and he came over. He was weak and

uncertain. Worse by far, he was fawning. I'd always looked up to him and he was flattering me. I was important! I wanted to hear about his treatment and what the doctors had diagnosed, but he told me he was well again, just a little bit weaker, and was enjoying his retirement. I felt ashamed to be treated as a superior being. What on earth was wrong with Jim? Had the shock treatment done this to him?

It had. All he could do was fawn and flatter. I was relieved when he walked on. I started the car and moved it somewhere else before I did my shopping. It was a pointless action but I felt I couldn't pick up my life from the point where Jim had left it. He'd pushed me into thinking harder, much harder, about language. He'd listened to me theorising about our young people's intellectual shortcomings and his questions had pushed me into revising my ideas about what they did and didn't need to know. Had he disgraced himself in Adelaide, years ago? Had he hidden himself away on Raymond Island and picked up a simple job at the one-time School of Mines to give himself and his wife an income? Had he ...

He'd failed me, in the end, but he'd succeeded in driving me forward on my own path, and I can still feel a modicum of pleasure when I recall the time when I looked up to him. I was in need of role models in those days and Gippsland, for all its variety, didn't have many for people of my sort.

I was in Gippsland, I felt, to educate, and thus improve, its young. They were my responsibility. Those who had already made a place for themselves in its limited world were a backdrop for my efforts, and I think I saw them as some sort of local colour, useful, to me, mainly as a way of understanding the limitations of the people I taught. I blush at telling you this! I had a lot to learn. I learned it over time from hundreds of people, all in their individual ways, but none was more influential, however unprepossessing, than Sid Merlo.

I wrote about Sid and his family in my first book, *Hail & Farewell! An Evocation of Gippsland*, so I'll treat him only briefly here. I met him because I persuaded Sid's wife Berta that she should move their son John from the Tech School where he was in one of my classes, to the High School which I thought would suit him better. To do this he would need to catch up on a missing year of French; I said I would coach him, and I did, once a week, at the Merlos' tiny but hospitable home in Frances Street, close to the Roman Catholic church. Wednesday night suited the Merlos and suited me. I would knock, be warmly welcomed, chatter over the television for half an hour, then spend an hour or two with John and his French book. Then more television – Graham Kennedy's 'In Melbourne Tonight', a generous supper brought in by Berta when Kennedy was signing off, and then we would talk for a while before I went home. Sid's earnings as a house

painter were modest, though increased by Berta's hairdressing, something she did by appointment in her home, and they wanted for very little. More than that, they were rich in what mattered most: family love. I was frequently surprised by how much they knew, though their knowledge was so unobtrusive that I was curious to know how they came by it. Each of them not only listened, and observed keenly, but they put everything together in their minds, and once again they did this in the most unobtrusive way. They had a daughter and two sons, whom they loved and looked after with an attentiveness I recognised from growing up in my own family. The family was a unit, and intensely loyal. They spoke to each other without the sullen silences or inattention I saw elsewhere. Their manners were as natural as the manners of the Eagle family, a standard I'd learned in New South Wales. I gathered that Sid had grown up in a now-deserted mining settlement in the mountains to the north which I had begun to explore in my little Volkswagen; Sid listened to my accounts of these trips with interest and amusement. He saw that much of my exploring was done in the catchment of the Nicholson River, and involved driving through the once-mining and now timber settlement of Bullumwaal, then following the track to Mount Seldom Seen (I was becoming a collector of names!) where there were a couple of huts in the shadow of Mount Baldhead. I was in awe of this mountain, and all the

more so when Sid told me the story of the Wainwright family who'd lived between the trunks of two trees felled by their legendary but impossible father. Giles Wainwright, the tree house, the disappearance of the father and the cloud of suspicion that gathered over his sons, intrigued me and I could feel that for some reason I had yet to discover I had stumbled on a story that was to become central to my life. I listened to whatever Sid could tell me about the Wainwrights, their dwelling and their ways and I wanted to know more. I got maps and I searched. Occasionally I found relics – a rusting battery (rock-crusher) or the caved-in remains of a mining shaft; a dredge abandoned in the middle of a stream – I heard and over-heard stories, and I saw place-names on maps in places I thought had never known a white man.

Dawson City intrigued me, a mining settlement, long-abandoned, on the Haunted Stream, which ran off the eastern edge of the mountain that was the focus of my mind. Sid said his sister had lived there once, in the mining days, and he'd take me there. 'Just a bit of a walk.' Sid, his son John and I set out one Saturday morning in the VW, equipped by Berta with sandwiches and a thermos of tea. I knew the road but I didn't know where to stop the car and start our walk. Sid said he'd show me, and he did. We rounded a corner and there, not far to our north, was the mountain I'd learned to recognise when I saw it from the back of the school where I was teaching, from various points on

the Princes Highway, from Mount Sugarloaf and from Seldom Seen, a long outline of blue, rising to the east before lowering its broken nose to look into the valley we had come to explore. ‘There’s His Majesty!’ Sid announced. ‘Over the side and down to the bottom!’

We scrambled down to the Haunted Stream. What had once been a track followed it around a bend or two. Sid took his bearings, and stopped. Then he started kicking leaves and debris beside the track until he showed his son and me a flat spot, more or less square. ‘This is where my sister lived,’ he told us. ‘She and’ ... he named her husband ... ‘had a little shack right here.’ I was amazed. The bush had done what the bush does so easily. It had wiped out all trace of human effort. There were no signs and no sounds. Settlement had vanished. ‘So there you are,’ Sid said. ‘You’ve seen it.’ It amused him but it had humbled him too. He set off back up the slope we’d come down, with John and me following. It was harder going up, needless to say, but we pushed on quickly because thunder was rumbling and we had no wish to get wet. When we got to the car we ate our sandwiches and drank our tea, watched over by His Majesty a little way to our north, and then we set off to go home ...

... except that the mountains had once been Sid’s home, in the days when his mother ran the Brookville post office – in the days when there *was* a Brookville and there were scores of miners digging, scratching and

poking about whenever they found traces of gold to lure them on. Sid had emerged from that secluded world to the larger scene of Bairnsdale, a town that I had scorned, to begin with, and then, slowly enough, had come to regard as my base for the exploration of *life*, the great abstract that engaged us all. His Majesty? A blue mass, rising slowly from west to east, once well-known to the miners of the area, and now remote, except for the young teacher that I was, searching for some central meaning to my life, and finding it in a place I'd never heard of, or dreamed of, when I was appointed to a place about which I knew nothing.

The emptiness had been filled by much driving, exploring in a car, and by the anecdotes, yarning and occasional scraps of guidance of the most modest, the humblest man you could meet, a simple family man with a loving, dedicated wife who watched *In Melbourne Tonight*, had visitors, had Sunday morning drinks and food with regular friends, relatives and visitors, two people who knew most things that were going on in their town, and had taken me in because I was tutoring their son. It was simple, it was a miracle. Sid was amazed that I wanted to know the world he'd grown up in, I was amazed that a man who thought he was nobody could contain so much. Looking back on it today, I am even more amazed than I was when it happened. As a writer I have come to believe – though you may reasonably think this ridiculous – that books

search me out, find me, and take me over. They enlist me in their service. I exist so that they can be written. Let us put this line of thought aside. It may or may not be so. The best of friends, the dearest of men, came into my life somewhere about 1958 and didn't leave my life until he left his own, in 1984. I dedicated my first book to Sid and Berta, with a quote at the front. 'Poor young fella, he never knew what life was.' This referred to a young man of perhaps eighteen who had begun to play football with Bairnsdale, go to parties and rush about in cars ... until he was killed in a crash. 'He never knew what life was.' I put Sid's words at the front of my book because they applied to me as much as to the boy, dead on the highway. He died, and I lived long enough to learn, with an unlikely master's aid, what life was.

Vale, Sid Merlo, best of friends, best of men.

Not all our friends enrich us. Some of them use us to their advantage, leaving us when we've been pillaged. I stayed long enough at my Bairnsdale school to become head of department. I wasn't really committed to this, probably because nobody had helped me achieve competence as a teacher, and I was still stupid enough to think that it was every man for himself when it came to survival. I say this now with shame. Schools were awful places when I started my 'career'. People wanting a job went to the departmental headquarters in Melbourne and filled in a form or two, then went wherever they were directed. Thus my school acquired

Tony Barlow, a military man from England. He would teach social studies as Jim Blackmore had done. He dressed neatly enough though I never saw him wear a tie that didn't look like a club tie of some sort. How many clubs had he belonged to in England? He told us that he and his wife were planning to settle in Australia and he'd come ahead to find out what the place was like. She'd follow when he'd found work and a good place to live. Something hollow in the confidence with which this was said suggested that he hadn't yet found a place she'd like. As the weeks passed I became aware in some instinctual way that he was far from sure that she'd be joining him. Why would she? He didn't belong in Gippsland, for all that he pretended to be curious. My curiosity about Gippsland was far greater than his, and why wouldn't it be? He was a worried man, and this meant that he was always setting out to please. He called the principal 'Sir' and even managed to give my first name a tinge of rank, something I detested. Yet he forced me to be polite because he was polite to me. He was so anxious to be thought well of that he caused me to wince whenever he was friendly, and that was all the time. He needed the job, he needed the money, he needed to convince his wife that she should join him. He never talked about why they were apart. East Gippsland was so far from England that I felt sorry for him.

This left me open. He asked my advice. He wasn't a bad teacher but it didn't come naturally to him. If he

tried something I'd suggested, he told me how it went over a drink at the Commercial, where teachers from our school liked to gather. He was so polite. A couple of times he dropped in at my home to return a book, or something of the sort. This caused me to make a pot of tea and begin a conversation. I was as polite as he was, and felt trapped by it. It became clear that his wife was resisting him. Something about the way he told me that he'd asked her *when* she was coming told me that the question was really *if*. I felt sorry for this ex-military man with his coats that looked like school blazers, in a country that wasn't his, hoping for a signal from his homeland which, it became clear, was never going to arrive.

He left us at the end of the year to return to England. He was full of thanks. He'd never belonged, and he must have known it. Nobody would miss him, and I never understood how it was that we found him stranded among us, but we'd done a certain amount to accommodate his needs. If you'd asked me, I would have said I wished him well, but if you asked me what that would mean, I'd have had no idea, beyond some reconciliation with his wife. What sort of person was she? What had separated them by half the world? I had no idea.

One of the reasons why I was unable to give Tony Barlow more support and sympathy was that I was busy digging myself deeper into the ways of Gippsland,

an area geographically distinct from the rest of the country and all the more absorbing for that reason. I was getting to know its places, its extremes and the moods of its various locales. Students at my school came from Benambra or Wulgulmerang in the north, from Noorinbee near Cann River, from farmlets along the Bonang Highway, from settlements in the Tambo Valley and even, marvellously remote, the lighthouses at Gabo Island and Wilson's Promontory. They flocked in to Bairnsdale, the central town, for school terms and dispersed when holidays came. That dispersal was a wonderful thing, as I knew from my own days as a boarder in Melbourne, returning, by northbound train, to our farm in New South Wales. Australia was huge, thinly settled, and something of its mystique attached to these peregrinations of school-age children. I did two Wilson's Prom walks in my Gippsland years, in the days before Christmas, with another teacher called Don Adams. We walked to Sealers Cove and to the lighthouse, where we were kindly received by Mr and Mrs Dodemaide, who kept the lighthouse visible from the sea. Their son Peter was a student at the Tech. where I taught, though he was somewhere else on the day when Don and I walked in. Fifty years later, and by then a farmer in South Australia, he rang me on my Melbourne number which he'd somehow obtained, to say that he was sorry he hadn't been there when Don and I reached the southern tip of the Prom, with its

views of Rodondo Island and other islands out to sea. He had only to mention the places of his boyhood to bring back to me the affections scattered far and wide that I had felt for people and places in those years. Gippsland had given me a third stage in growing up, in discovering what the world was like before committing myself to a response, first as a teacher and then as a husband, father and writer, in that order. Places had made me as much as people, but places needed people to bring them alive, and I was fortunate in those years to have such a widespread acquaintance. The Prendergasts came down from Benambra, the Balhorns from Gabo Island, and so it went, across the length and breadth of Gippsland. As I got to know the region, I got to know its people. They belonged, and as I engaged with the region, exploring, listening, I also came to belong, and yet I knew that I would leave one day. I would surely return to Melbourne, and perhaps go further. The world was wide, and I still hadn't been to its edges. What was I doing? I'd come from the land, I'd been in the city, and now the landed/farming side of me was being reinforced, finally established, before I returned, married, to Melbourne and my life as a teacher followed by the writer I was steadily becoming. I needed other friends to make me the writer I wanted to be. Gippsland gave me a base in that part of the world that isn't concerned with writing, painting, singing, dancing and the rest. My Gippsland friends

had established me. I moved back to Melbourne, secure in mind. I was a good teacher and I'd soon become a better one. I had the makings of a writer in me, now I had to acquire the outlook that makes one loyal to the art before the subject matter. To express things well, one may have to manipulate them, manoeuvre the subject matter so it's forced to reveal itself, something most people, institutions and social practices try to avoid. The writer sits in a different relationship to friends than others do. And writers, at the time that I am thinking of, needed publishers.

I can't remember why I gave my first book to Dennis Wren, the man in charge of Heinemann Australia. It may have been because Stephen Murray-Smith, editor of *Overland* magazine, was one of their advisers. I sent Heinemann the manuscript of my first book and waited. I waited a year. Their editor sent me a couple of encouraging notes. Finally she told me that they would decide their yearly publishing program on a certain day and that I should be in the office to hear the result. That was forty-five years ago. I wouldn't do it today, but on the day and at the hour I was there to see the editor, Bridget Everett, all smiles, coming down the stairs with a contract in her hand. They'd accepted my book. I worked on it with Bridget – and that's a story in itself – but of equal interest for me was that I met Dennis Wren, Heinemann's Australian boss. It was he who got my book out and in the shops, but not long after that he was

sacked by people from the London office who came out to investigate his propensity for publishing Australian books that wouldn't sell, back in England. Dennis and his wife, Dee, set up Wren Publishing, working from home on the Mornington Peninsula. I stayed with Heinemann, but when its new chief jibbed at making a decision on my second book, and said it would have to be sent to London, I found Dennis in the phone book. He wanted writers, send it down!

When it was published (*Who could love the nightingale?*, Wren, Melbourne, 1974), it had a cover showing the moon pushing into a cloudy night. 'My son's a photographer,' Dennis told me. 'Out of work. He showed me a folio of pictures and I bought that one. Fifty pounds.' (We were already in the decimal era.) 'He needed it. I knew you'd like it.' I didn't have much choice! But the book did no worse than most, and I got another Commonwealth Literary Grant for the next book, *Four Faces, Wobbly Mirror*. Dennis said he'd read it, and since I was renting a holiday house on the Peninsula with my family over January, why didn't I drop in and hear what he thought? I did this, we drank a lot of wine, he wanted changes, and I thought his suggestions were stupid. I gave the book to an editor I'd worked with at Heinemann, and she agreed with Dennis. The book moved too slowly at the start. It had to be tightened. I read it again and she was right. I went through every word of the first eighty pages, cutting

wherever possible, and learning, learning, learning. It wasn't what I wanted to say that mattered, so much as what the reader needed to be told so that his/her imagination could do the rest. Dennis wouldn't have put it that way but his instinct had told him much the same thing.

My revision was done, I re-submitted, and sensed that Dennis had other things on his mind. If I got to see him any time after 11.30 am he offered me a whisky, and had one whether I joined him or not. He undertook to do a book written and illustrated by Clifton and Judith Pugh about the death of a wombat. I arrived for an appointment one morning to find that the Pughs were booked in for the same time. 'No matter', said Dennis, 'come and join us. We're just about to have a whisky.' He'd hardly lifted his glass before Judith Pugh attacked him over something to do with their book. It was an alarming blast and it rattled the publisher. He tried to get control of the gathering by introducing me, but I was sitting next to his secretary and he got our names mixed. Chester I remained but I was given the secretary's surname, to the amazement of the secretary and the scorn of the Pughs. I attempted to make conversation but the Pughs knew what they wanted and they hammered Dennis for a decision. I escaped back to work with only one whisky in my system.

The next time I called in, Dennis told me what was bothering him. He'd contracted a book that would

lift the lid on some well-placed person's underworld connections, but one of the typesetters had read the proofs and taken the matter to their boss. The thing was libellous, this man said, and printers were as liable under law as writers and publishers. The books had been locked away and Dennis, who therefore couldn't sell them, had been presented with the printing bill which he couldn't pay. 'What'm I going to do about that?' he asked. I didn't know. He poured himself a whisky.

A fortnight later I was in Katoomba with my family. We saw copies of *Four Faces*, *Wobbly Mirror* in the bookshop window. I was immensely relieved. Just in time! The book was well reviewed but the publishing business was by now in the hands of receivers who closed it down. Instead of royalties I got a pile of two hundred (I think) copies for one dollar each, and gave them to friends. Such is the luck of writers in the commercial system. I never saw Dennis again.

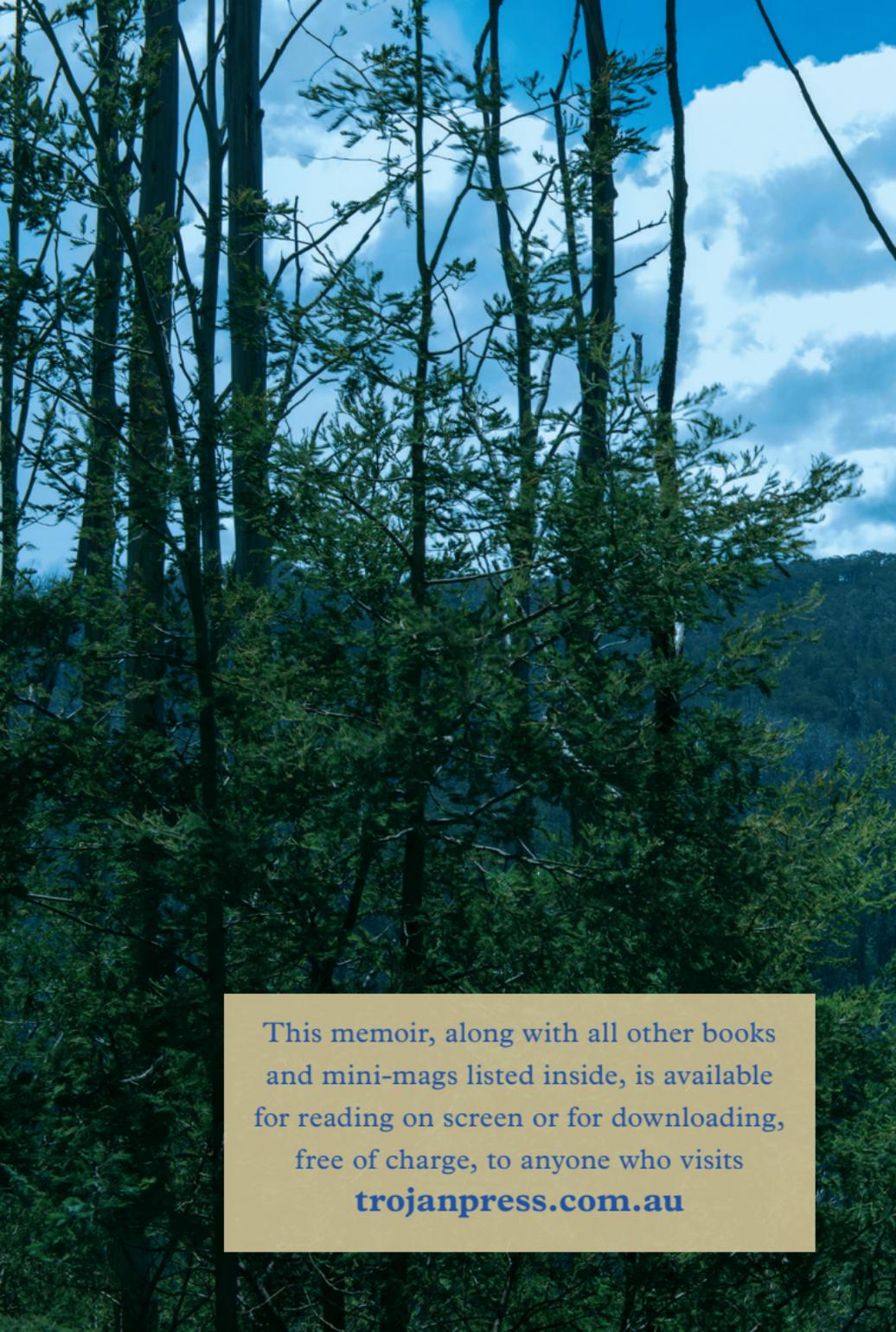
I have one more figure for you to meet. I cannot give him a name although it may be that he uses the name that I use for myself. He is not so much the writer as the figure behind the writing of all my books. He occupies a part of my mind that the rest of me cannot enter. He's invisible, yet his presence is strong. I can't start anything without him, though he appears only when he's ready. I say 'he', but he's as female as male in endlessly correcting what I want to write or say. He has

a better memory than I have. If I remit something from the real world he transforms it into an aesthetic version before he lets me write it down. Once I start a book he stays close. He knows that when I sit down at the end of the day I'm hoping for guidance and he waits until I'm reading a book and sipping a glass of red, or he may keep me waiting until my mind's on a wave of music before he whispers what I want. When I hear the words he's giving me I scramble for biro and paper and write them down. Sometimes it's several lines and sometimes it's only an idea, but I set it down faithfully because it's never long before he retreats to silence. I take a look at it, accepting even if a little surprised, and I put my note – my communication from the other presence in my mind – on the chest of drawers near the entry to the room where I do my writing. Sometimes I put the note next to the computer, or even on the keyboard that I'm using now. So long as it's there in the morning!

I never question what he whispers in my mind. I know better than that! Once, he started me on the book that became *Wainwrights' Mountain*, saw me get a few pages done, then went away to think for seven months, and perhaps to test my faith in him. I was patient, and when he came back he had the solution, and he took me, a chapter at a time, to the book's amazing end. He produced angels, he eliminated gravity from a vital spot on the earth's surface, and I believed him because I knew he knew what he was doing. He did much the

same when I was writing *Victoria Challis*. Impossible things began to happen and I thought my *doppelgänger* was out of his mind, but he made me write on until I could see the sense – his sense – in what he was dictating.

I think you know who and what I mean, dear reader, and I hope you're as grateful as I am for what he sends us. We'd be lost – or we'd be nothing – without him. I can't explain him. Sometimes I think he's able to be found in the real world but most of the time I think he's only an inaccessible, non-dirigible part of my own mind. When I was a young man, trying to create a belief system out of the world around me, a world free of any Christian or other religious overlay to give it meaning, a secular world therefore, but inhabited with whatever it is in the religious spirit that's valid, I went into the mountains with Sid Merlo, looking for a manifestation that could be seen of whatever spiritual forces have power on our lives, and Sid called 'There's His Majesty!' when he was looking at the mountain that was, for me, the residence of meaning, of force, of abstract, numinous considerations that spoke silently but wanted to be heard. I'm not trying to tell you that the mountain tells me what to write but I feel – only *feel*, there's no provable connection – that something active inside me is connected to something outside, and that this link that I don't understand has to be guarded if I'm to go on.



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