

Robert Handicott

THE DISCOVERY

A "Sailing Camp". The Burdekin.
A dozen city boys begin
To tackle the erratic pride
Of sullen servants, wind and tide.
Shins barked, calves chopped, they mess in boats,
Each mishap etching mental notes,
Till Captain flags his bold decision:
A daring downstream expedition.
The fleet cast off with whoop and cheer.
Three weary hours they tack and veer.
Then rising hunger recommends
A sandbank where the river bends.
The boats are beached; the sailors scout
For fuel, and break their rations out.
But one, cast in a Crusoe role,
Explores the lonely littoral.
Protruding from wet sand he spies
Suggestion of a precious prize.
He digs it free and finds intact
The long-neglected artifact:
A pickle jar of amethyst.
How easily his glance had missed
This relic from the world before
The far-off 14-18 War!

"What fossiker or jackaroo,
Swagman or cattle-duffer, threw
The empty bottle to the stream
Of time and chance? How could he dream

The useless thing he cast away
Would surface to the light of day
As buried treasure in an age
Recovering its heritage?
And how imagine," muses he,
"The turn-up of a lad like me
Exchanging comforts never guessed
For 'roughing it' and 'well-earned rest'?
. . . And yet, the jar alone survives.
It has no power to summon lives
Except in thought: the hand that threw
Is gripped in earth, and empty, too.
The landfall and the lot of man
Seem little changed, for all we plan;
Night's no less dark; and all we know
The circle of a campfire glow."

A sudden flap of sail recalls
The boy to present rituals.
First Grace is sung, then food enjoyed
By bodies trimmed and spirits buoyed.
The pelicans of afternoon,
The cloudless sky and sixpence moon,
The canefields crowning distant banks,
Compose each mind to silent thanks.
Upstream, the bridge, meccano neat,
Has shouldered off the haze of heat;
In silhouette, a northbound train:
A line of ants expecting rain.
A fresh wind bids a fast return,
New skills to master, light to learn.
An ecstasy of who we are
Floods one boy, with his pickle jar.