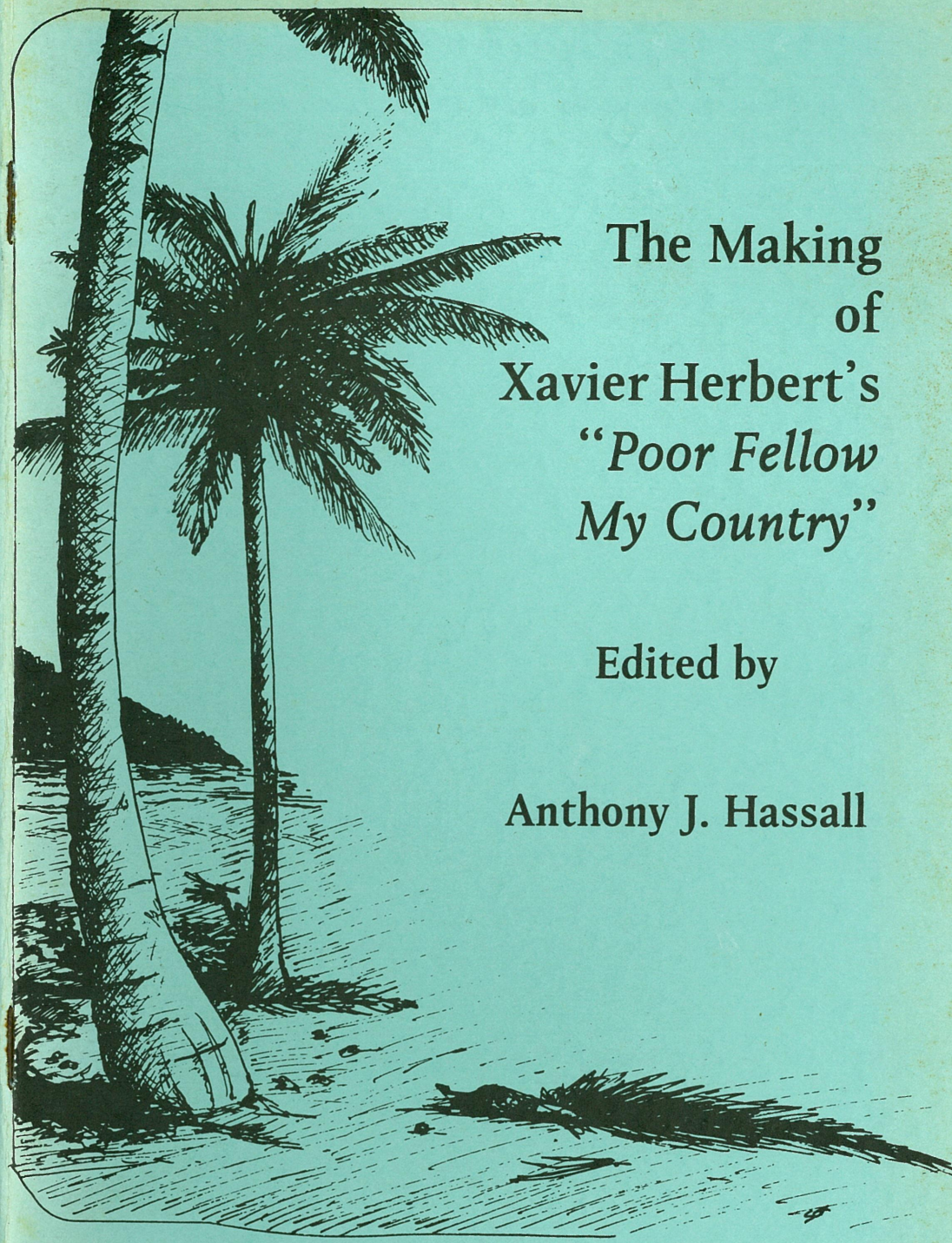

The Making of Xavier Herbert's "*Poor Fellow My Country*"

Edited by

Anthony J. Hassall

Foundation for Australian Literary Studies 1988

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INTRODUCTION

On Friday 17 October 1975 the English Department of the University of Newcastle sponsored a Forum to mark the publication of Xavier Herbert's long-awaited novel, *Poor Fellow My Country*. In anticipation of the publication, the author had been invited to the University as Writer-in-Residence. He was joined for the Forum by two academics, each of whom had played a significant role in the writing and publication of the book: Dr Laurie Hergenhan, Reader in English at the University of Queensland and Editor of *Australian Literary Studies*, and Professor Harry Heseltine, then at the University of New South Wales and now at The Australian Defence Force Academy. The academics spoke first, describing their relationships with the author and their contributions to his book. Xavier Herbert then spoke about the writing of *Poor Fellow My Country*, and the support and encouragement of his scholar/critic friends. What emerged was a fascinating story of a literary collaboration that began warily and almost by accident, but that eventually helped to ensure that a large and ambitious book, to which — as his avowed *magnum opus* — the author had devoted nine years of his writing life, reached its audience in the form that its author intended.

The critical fortunes of *Poor Fellow My Country* have been mixed in the twelve years since its publication. It has been widely read, like Herbert's other books, it has stirred the conscience of Australians about Aboriginal culture and the taking of the land, and it has attracted continuing academic attention. Because of that attention, and the growing number of requests for access to the tapes of the Forum, they are now being made available in printed form by the Foundation for Australian Literary Studies. Some editing has been necessary to convert the talks from spoken to written form, but the changes have been kept to a minimum, and the sense of occasion has been preserved as fully as possible. I would like to thank Laurie Hergenhan and Harry Heseltine for their help in preparing the talks for publication. Xavier Herbert gave his support to the project before his death.

Townsville, December 1987 Anthony J. Hassall

I DR LAURIE HERGENHAN

I am going to talk about my association with Xavier during the writing of his book and I will be quoting from some letters he wrote to me during that writing.[1] And I want to begin by answering the question Xavier asked of one of his own characters Billy Brew during the writing of the novel: "How the hell did he get in to it?" Well I got into it with the publishing in *Australian Literary Studies* of a piece by Xavier called "The Writing of Capricornia." I had read in the Sirius edition of *Capricornia* a brief extract about how Xavier had written that novel, and my interest was immediately whetted; I believe he submitted it to a London publisher, and was knocked back with the words: "How dare you Sir submit to us a novel dealing with the sexual relations between white men and black women." I thought if I could get hold of that, it would be a scoop, and I thought of writing to Mr Herbert. I looked him up in *Who's Who* (I had heard of 'Orrible Herbert, as he calls himself), and I thought he could only say, "How dare you sir," or "Go to hell." But Xavier was very cooperative and very pleased to have that published, and I was too. That is how we started writing to one another, desultorily at first. And he told me that he was writing another novel. In my naivete I said I looked forward to reading it. His reply was, "O Jesus! you might come to say to yourself when you come to realise the significance," and how right he was. Well what happened was that gradually I found myself visiting the artist's workshop, seeing not the end result but the building up of the work as it went on, something of how and why it was done. I was offered in a way an adventure, a sharing in this creation. Of course when you read a novel you get the end result and you immerse yourself in it, and you don't often pause to see how it is done, but I think it is the concern of the scholar (and it can deepen its enjoyment and its wonder) to immerse yourself in a novel, to live yourself into one, and yet at the same time to try and see how this wonder has been brought about. Tony Gibbs has already mentioned the split between writers and academics in Australia.[2] "Aco's" as Xavier calls them, can be grudging, they can tell writers where they went wrong, and what they should have done. From Xavier's point of view he was working on a gigantic task in isolation, walking a

tightrope in his book, writing out of "a fear of failure," writing and sustaining the work. There was a terrible dedication and a great effort in sustaining what he's done, a monumental novel. He wrote a piece in *Overland*, called "The Agony and the Joy," and those two emotions are buried deeply in the novel, over a long period of nine years. What he wanted, I think, in writing to me — he may correct me later — was some confirmation of the worth of this gruelling dedication, and some identification with the unremitting struggle he was having with it. What he had when he was writing was an audience of two. And here I would like to make a reference to Xavier's wife Sadie, who of course was number one in the audience. Sadie can't be left out of this. Xavier wrote to me that writing the novel was like acting to the limit on a stage, where the audience comprises two persons, one who is hundreds of miles away, who applauds a week or so after the event, and the other on the spot, who comes in from the kitchen for a peep. He did mention to me something about Sadie's role in writing the novel, and he said: "I fought her for years over her criticisms, on the grounds that she would not give reasons for her judgements. Nevertheless she was always right, she would simply say, 'I like it, or I don't like it;' I'd groan, 'but for Christ's sake why?' and all she would say to that is 'I've told you not to mention that man's name in my house."' As Xavier sensed my willingness to become involved, he called me — he gets these words out of the air, or out of somewhere — "the one just sod in Sodom." And that got me into some trouble, because he published it — and I wanted it to be published — and it came out in *Overland* as "the one just god in Sodom." Well I had to send in a correction, "for god read sod." I told this story to the *Bulletin* literary editor, Patricia Rolfe, and she was intrigued by it. Then it came out in the *Bulletin*, and I was "the only god in Sodom." Well I started off as that, and then I became "a wailing wall", and "a watcher", and eventually "a patron." Something that took me a while to get accustomed to. I didn't like being called a patron for some reason, it reminded me of patronage. In the course of my talk I will show how I came to accept what Xavier meant by patronage, and how I came to understand it too, but it was something that I drew away from.

In 1971 I moved from Tasmania, where I had been editing *Australian Literary Studies*, and went to Brisbane. I was then within a thousand miles or so of Xavier, and eventually I did go to visit him, taking advantage of a conference in Townsville, and he invited me to read the novel as far as he'd gone, about halfway through. What a terrible thing, I thought, if I found that I didn't like it. For over a week I began to live in the world of *Poor Fellow My Country*. There was a created world there. There were tragic scenes, there were violent scenes, and there were also scenes of great comedy; as Harry Heseltine has said, very truly I think, Xavier is one of our best comic novelists. I think there are only two outstanding ones, Joseph Furphy and Xavier Herbert. I found in reading the novel that it was no chore after all, it was a delight. I read on the front verandah of Xavier's home in Redlynch, with this pile of manuscript, and I found myself chuckling aloud over characters, Kitty Wyndeyer, Fay MacPhee who used to get on the telephone exchange up in Port Palmerston, and there was lots of fun; there were characters like Queenie Peg-Leg and King George, but you don't laugh aloud over some of them. And I found this very pleasant, and also very moving: but behind all there was the inevitable undertow of tragedy as it went along. Xavier kept on working all the time I was reading. He had a tin shed out in "the back yard of his wife's house," as he calls it, and he used to withdraw out there and work away as I read on the front verandah, Sadie would go about her chores. I had to say something about the novel — I wanted to say something about the novel — and I called it an "edifice," which is very inadequate: but what I meant was that I had the sense of a very vast, noble structure, and I responded to that as well as to the other things. Well, I got immersed in reading the novel — I had one week to do it — and somehow I just finished it the day before I had to fly back to Brisbane, so that in the end I had to tell Xavier and Sadie to keep away while I read it. They were coming up to the verandah porch, and I would say, let me get on with it. I didn't want to be drawn away from it. I finished it, and then I remember Sadie as a sort of celebration putting on a record, we also had a drink, and the recording was "There were too many Chiefs and not enough Indians in that house." It was typical of the fun that Xavier and Sadie have. Well from then on I read the novel as a serial. Xavier used to send me down chapters as he wrote them and some of the

chapters — many of the chapters — were very long, so it got round in the end to sending me parts of chapters, and I looked forward to them very much. The interest in a serial, of course, is partly in what will happen, how will Xavier control all this. I had seen the vast cast of characters, the number of themes he had going, the way the novel moved around Australia, the major part of it, and I wondered how will he keep it all together, and what will be the inevitable end? I knew it would be inevitable, but I didn't know what it was. One of the great interests for me was what I learned of the art of the novel through being led into the workshop. I don't want to be pretentious about this. I do love novels, I do like studying them, and as I say it gave me an opportunity. I want to talk briefly about what it meant to me, to have this experience, and have something to say of it. Randolph Stow has envied the "fierce ingenuity" of the plot that Dickens has, and I think Xavier Herbert has too. Fierce, I think, in the sense of energy and fertility of invention, but also fierce in the sense of the patience to invent. That is part of the agony I think that Xavier went through. He did say at one stage: "my trouble is that I take up an impossible story, then have to make it plausible. It is my challenge to me, that only now do I see the labour it entails, telling a thumping lie, then talking myself out of it." Well, of course, this is the art of contrivance, where you have to manipulate or contrive, and yet not be seen to manipulate or contrive.

Something else that interested me as I followed the novel through was what I could call, I suppose, the transporting of characters around, which is a rough way of putting it. The novel does move around Australia, as I mentioned, and it has a numerous cast of characters. One of the problems is to get them into position, into patterns, for the dramatic scenes, for the dramatic events, and for the development of the story. You have got to get them into groups, and you have got to regroup them. You have got to disperse them, and this is something, I think, that is played down in the appreciation of a novel, and in the appreciation of what goes into the writing of a novel. When Dickens' notebooks were published, some people found that Dickens wasn't concerned with the symbolism and with the social criticism that modern critics are so concerned with these days. I don't want to play those things down — they are there. But Dickens wasn't so

much concerned with that, as with the plotting, with moving his characters around in the way I've tried to indicate. And it must be a tremendous job, especially when you have a teeming world of so many characters. I want to give an example of this moving around of characters, that I found so fascinating. This is an example of where one of the characters has to go to Sydney, which might sound simple, just send him off to Sydney, but it wasn't as simple as that. At the end of one chapter, I was left wondering what would happen next, and Xavier said: "evidently that worked, for with the last section you were puzzled." And to quote: "What's the bastard (F.X. of course) going to do next?" He goes on: "character plus circumstances are necessary, one must never forget circumstances, which are creatable by the novelist; circumstances reared up and started something that spurred the dramatic plot anew. I'm not finding the packing — I had used the word 'riches' — I'm not finding the packing in of riches easy. I'm taking Jeremy to Sydney, of course. I just couldn't hustle him off there, his common-sense would prevent him from wanting to go. He is driven by circumstances, the circumstances go back a long way, as they must always, in the fake logic of the novel, [and by fake Xavier means of course the wonderful contrivance of the novel], they must always go back. Nevertheless, there must be additional new circumstances. Still I must hold him for a while, without harping on his reluctance, but by showing him and diverting from him the things that belong to the future [sic]. So it has to be linked back with things earlier in the novel, it has to foreshadow things going on, and you have to hold him at a stop, before you get the smooth [sic] of the character. So, he says, I'm able to handle the preliminaries of the mad escape, and have it happen quite suddenly, with logic. That is section one. I did the arrival at Sydney airport superbly, but messed up the intervening times. How valuable is the flight down did become tremendously important, because it just wasn't a plain, matter-of-fact flight down, things happened on the way. In a novel like Xavier's things do happen all the way, you can't afford to lose time. If a character is travelling, he is not just sitting there in a train or a plane looking out the window, if he is, what he sees, and what he's feeling, must be a part of the novel.

Another example of this dispersal of characters, and keeping them on tap, keeping them working at the same time, is a character called Pat Hannaford. Pat Hannaford ends up in a marvellous episode of the novel, after the bombing of Port Palmerston, which in a way is Darwin, but which is not Darwin. Some reviews say, "why not call it Darwin?" It is not Darwin. Pat Hannaford ends up getting some characters away by finding an old train engine, and getting it going, in a rum sort of way. And one could almost say Pat Hannaford was in it primarily for that, but he wasn't. Pat Hannaford was in there for many reasons. But this part of the plot is essential. Getting these characters away from Darwin, and getting something else moving, and the very way of getting them going is a whole episode in itself. Another thing I noticed in reading the novel was the way Xavier let the story go its own way, he didn't want to force it, he was prepared to wait, and nine years is a long time. He was prepared to wait, to change. He drafted the novel in three parts. He used to start off on prescription pads —he is a pharmacist — and he used to put some jottings in some small pads, and then he'd have three drafts of the novel. And I want to give an example of this spontaneity that Xavier allowed for in writing the novel, and which must have required tremendous patience. I return to this character Billy Brew, with whom I started my talk. "At the moment I'm writing — almost finished it — about a donkey teamster I once knew. No. I recreated him and his donkeys. He wasn't a bit like Billy Brew. He was actually a simple old thing, who trudged up and down the land with a huge wagon and about five hundred donkeys. But I've made an odd fellow out of him. Why? Because I loved those donkeys of his. I just saw them, loved them, seemed to forget them, now they've become a reality that never existed, involved in the most fantastic things. Lately I have been torn to pieces by the things that Billy Brew has done, the brave, the mad things, torn, because I want to know how the hell he got into it, he wasn't in the first writing at all, how did he get into the last?"

To get towards a conclusion: there are many elements in the novel, as we all know, and I felt that sometimes there were at least three or four voices or people in Xavier writing to me, and he wrote me one fascinating letter in which he talked about this. He talked about the story-telling child, a chattering Alfie — of course

Xavier is called Alfred Xavier Herbert — so we had the chattering Alfie, and the disciplinarian Max. Max is from "the maximum opus". "I see the vision of the piece in hand," he says, "Alfie saw it in a flash, he inspired me with the rush of words that amounted to babble. I now have to wait until Max is ready to take over, and the most careful literary handling. The only trouble is little Alfie dancing up and down because he wants to tell another part of the story. Alfie is the hardest bloke to deal with, not the ponderous Max. I suppose really I should call Max 'Xave', since Max is a word and 'old Xave' the other part of me that's doing it." Well, early in the piece, when I wrote to Xavier, he made a reference once to Max howling at the door and I thought Xavier was a dog-lover, but it was the opus calling him back to work.

I want to talk briefly about things connected with the novel, two things: the runs Xavier used to do at Redlynch, and his — I was going to say fiddling with electricity — but I think he would come down rather hard on me about that, because it wasn't fiddling at all. Some people may have seen Xavier on television, running miles between the towering cane up in Redlynch, and one might have wondered why he did it. Well he did it for exercise, obviously; as he says, sitting in a deck chair for long hours you need some exercise, but he did talk about the wizardry of the run, and in running he found that he could do what he called his dreaming. When he'd be looking for a new vision to start another chapter, some words, he would run, and he would find that it would come with the run. And he'd sometimes say, I've found what I wanted to start a new piece . . .

At the time it was being written, and afterwards, I felt that *Poor Fellow My Country* is an outstanding novel, warts and all, and that only Xavier Herbert could have imagined and written anything like it. Sometimes he encouraged me to send my comments on chapters by telegram, which is really putting the pressure on. On one occasion, I think it was regarding the chapter in which Prindy meets Barbu, I wired him that it was "rich and strange," trying to suggest the effect on me of something like what Xavier has called "a larger [and one might add, stranger] than life quality: of his fiction. And "rich and strange" remains my main impression of *Poor Fellow My Country*.

II PROFESSOR HARRY HESELTINE

I find that I am subject to a range of rather curious and not entirely happy feelings this evening. I'm made immediately unhappy by the immense swag of notes that Laurie Hergenhan produced from his inside pocket. I have one rather nasty piece of paper with two or three headings jotted down. I hope that I shan't disappoint you too much after the very well-structured talk that Laurie has given you. If a little shame is one of the feelings that passes through me at the moment there is also very great pleasure. It is simply pleasant to be sitting with two very good friends on the platform here tonight. Laurie has long been a friend of mine now. Xavier is a much shorter acquaintance, but I hope by now an equally good one. I had thought that we were going to have a kind of coffee table discussion with a few further friends, but there are a great many more of you than I had anticipated. Laurie, as I say, has been a long-standing friend of mine, and he is a much more long-standing friend of Xavier's than I am.

You can tell that Laurie is a much better literary scholar than I am; not only does he get letters from Xavier, he keeps them, and can quote them in public. I have got some letters from Xavier; I throw them into drawers, and I will keep them for my own personal benefit in the years to come. I may even let Laurie see them if he ever wants to publish them in *Australian Literary Studies*. So I don't propose to give you the same sort of talk that Laurie gave you, and trace out my relationship with the publication of *Poor Fellow My Country*, but what I do want to take up is the sort of issue that Tony pointed to in his opening remarks.[3] We are three, four friends sitting here tonight, as individuals, but also as representatives we form a kind of exemplary gathering. As Tony said, the spectacle of two academics and one creative writer on the same stage together, with all the appearance of harmony at least, is a rare one indeed in Australian literary culture. It is the relationship between academics and writers that I want to say something briefly about this evening, and lead my remarks to a more close comment, in the end, on *Poor Fellow My Country*. Tony was right in saying that until quite recently the relationship between academics and writers in Australia has at best been

strained, and sometimes physically violent. Xavier won't know this — I'm sure he won't remember it — but my first contact with him was, shall I say, at least strained. Years ago I was putting together a collection of Australian writings, and I wanted to use a chapter from *Capricornia*, the one about the end of the great war. The publishers of the anthology wrote to Xavier and asked could they use it, and he said "I have never heard of this Harry F. Heseltine, I suppose she's another academic, but she can have it." I have since proven to Xavier that he was wrong in his estimate of my sex at least, I don't know how else he estimated me at the time, or even now.

Not much later I was invited to speak to a novel at a book-launching in Sydney, an Australian novel by quite a well-known Australian writer. I got up and said what I hoped were some graceful, and what I believed to be some true things about the novel. And for my pains I was greeted by a blast about academic criticism, when the author herself got up to speak. (That narrows the range of possibility as to identification, and I won't narrow it any further.) But even then — that was about six or seven years ago — there still seemed to be some sort of gap, an almost unbridgeable gap on occasions, between writers and academics in this country. And the reason for that, I think, was not simply the sort of reason that Laurie has proposed, that academic critics have a tendency to dissect, to pull apart, to seem to reduce to a kind of deadness the living work that any writer produces. I don't believe that that is, or should be, the end result of good academic criticism. I also don't believe that the dissecting, analytic desire and drive in academic critics is the only, or perhaps the main, reason why there should seem to be — in this country in particular — such a distance between academics and writers. I think the reason for the distance can be fairly sheeted home to the academics.

On behalf of my profession I here pronounce *mea culpa*, a fairly strong one; and back it up with what was to me a very forceful paragraph which I came across two or three years ago, when I was reading Geoffrey Serle's book *From Deserts The Prophets Come* as a result of some lectures he had given in a

course of Australian Studies at his University (which is Monash in Melbourne). In his preface to the book he has this to say: "Another reason," he says, "for teaching the course and writing the book is that I deplore the attitude of nearly all teachers in Arts faculties at Universities who happily tolerate a situation in which more than 95% of their graduates depart without more than a nodding acquaintance with the life and work of one or two of Australia's best writers and painters, without having read or even heard of the major works of scholarship which have been written around them. And most of these graduates become teachers. In this and in other fields the Universities are still too preoccupied with their great task of transmitting the world's learning, and are paying inadequate attention to their additional duty to study the immediate civilization to which they belong." Now those are sentiments of Geoffrey Serle's with which I heartily concur. It seems to me that Universities in any country, at any time, and any place, have two great functions: to transmit the body of the world's learning, the best, as Arnold would have it, that has been thought and said in the world, in any language at any time, and that is an undeniable responsibility of Universities; at the same time, I believe, particularly in the humane disciplines, the Universities have a responsibility, as Serle would say, to study the immediate civilization to which they belong. And it seems to me that in large measure that has been a fault of omission on the part of Australian literary texts, we very carefully and conveniently push them off into a separate pigeon hole. They are Australian literary courses, which are rather poor relations of the rest, where the great writers, it is thought, are to be found and studied.

It seems to me that the ideal kind of relationship — intellectually — between writers and academics in any country is one of fruitful tension. I don't believe that back-slapping between all concerned is the proper relationship. The personal friendship that has grown up between myself and Xavier I regard as a purely personal benefit, and not one I'd regard as a professional necessity, one that all Australian writers or all Australian academic critics should feel that they should try to develop and cultivate. But proper tension, a fruitful tension, an understanding at least, of what both sides are trying to do. And I think that in Australia at

the moment, the movement to that understanding is probably more the responsibility of people in English Departments than it is of the writers themselves. Unfortunately I have never been so placed that I have been able to bring to bear any sort of policy influence at all on any English Department anywhere in this country. So my sentiments remain personal sentiments, and have had no practical or theoretical effect on the way that English and Australian literature is taught at tertiary level in Australia. The sort of influence, if any, that I can have — or somebody like Laurie Hergenhan can have — is less, I think, through the minimal weight we carry on University committees than through the writing that we do. The intention and resolve — and, as far as possible, the practice — of continuing to write as well as we can about the best works that our own nation's literature throws up to us.

And that was the original motive that led me to want to try to write about Xavier Herbert. I started to write about him long before I'd ever met him, and one of the things I tried to do in writing about Xavier before I met him, and before *Poor Fellow My Country* swam within my horizon, was a deliberate, as it were rhetorical tactic. As I say it seems to me that certainly in the organization of our English Departments, and probably in the intellectual organizations as well, there is an unhappy kind of compartmentalization between English literature and Australian, and that Australian literature has a kind of double standard applied to it. Not simply a double standard that English is necessarily better; but that somehow or other Australian is *other*, and that you bring to bear on it a certain kind of less demanding pressure, less demanding critical expectation, than you would on works by writers overseas (England, America or elsewhere). So one of the things I tried quite deliberately to do in my monograph on Xavier (which, as I say, I wrote before I met him) was to assert by implication that Australian writers of the first grade are of equal interest, and have the same kind of creative impulse, as writers anywhere else in the world. I don't believe that that is to destroy the national basis of Australian writing. It is to give it a proper kind of pedestal from which it can be viewed. And for that reason I quite deliberately introduced into my monograph on

Xavier some analogies and some comparisons which were, I think, in themselves intellectually and critically appropriate, but also served implicitly a quite conscious rhetorical function as far as I was concerned. In talking about all of Xavier's novels up to that point (*Poor Fellow My Country* had not then been published), I deliberately introduced a comparison with the canvases of Brueghel. Now that seemed to me to be a perfectly apt comparison, but its rhetorical value seemed of at least equal importance. In talking about Xavier's characterisation I introduced a comparison to Dickens. I did not suggest, and indeed I do not know, whether or not Xavier had read Dickens, and had deliberately imitated him. All that I was trying to do was to suggest that it was worthwhile — and indeed possible — to think of a writer of Herbert's stature in the same breath as somebody like Charles Dickens. In trying to come to grips with what seemed to me to be some of the quite extraordinary and very central psychological problems of *Capricornia* — as opposed to its value as saga, or national description — I deliberately introduced some Freudian considerations. In talking about that very strange — and I think Xavier would say perhaps one of his favourite — works, *Soldiers' Women*, I again went to a comparison from painting, suggesting Le Douanier Rousseau as one means of getting to grips with the quality of the work that was on Xavier Herbert's page. Again I think what I tried to do in the monograph was to introduce — not blatantly, but quite deliberately, and in some number — a set of comparisons that would suggest that a writer, an Australian writer, of Xavier Herbert's standard, and of his richness of creativity, was properly to be thought of, and properly to be understood, in the same breath as, and in the same context as European creative writers whom everybody up to this point had been prepared to recognise as of the first stature.

When I came to try to write about *Poor Fellow My Country* — and I have written about it privately, and for publication on three or four occasions by now (I feel that if I were to say anything about it in detail this evening, I would probably repeat myself rather boringly) — but when I did come to write about *Poor Fellow My Country* I found myself under a much greater sort of personal pressure than I had been when I was writing the mono-

graph. I was under the pressure of immediate surveillance, as it were, by the formidable author, and I found myself gripped by the book in a much more immediate way perhaps than I had been by anything else that Xavier had written. What I have published about the book so far has been in much less deliberate and less considered rhetorical terms than what I had to say about Xavier in the monograph and elsewhere. Which is not to say that I found the book any less fascinating, any less rich or demanding in nature. I heartily concur with what Laurie Hergenhan has had to say about the importance and value of *Poor Fellow My Country*, not only to Australian fiction in the 1970s but to the whole history of prose and narrative in this country since 1788. You have probably heard a great deal more of what Xavier has to say about the book, than anything that I have written about it, over the past weeks. And quite properly Xavier — at least in those public announcements that I have caught up with — has been much concerned with the theme of the book, the theme implicit in the title *Poor Fellow My Country*, made explicit in its dedication to My Poor Destructed Country, and in almost every major incident and episode. But I think one of the things that interests me as an academic student of the creative process — and here I come close to Laurie Hergenhan's interests — is not only the theme, which seems to me to be vital and dominant and central, not only to the book, but to all the sense that all of us have of ourselves as individuals and Australians, one of the things that fascinates me about the book is its extraordinary narrative complexity, at the same time as it has extraordinary narrative unity. Laurie Hergenhan has tried to suggest to you in his remarks the simple practical craft difficulties that the novelist has in moving people around, and in dealing with the vast numbers of people that appear in *Poor Fellow My Country*, a cast of something over 70 major characters. And what Laurie has said seems to me very admirably put, and to help one get a more complete sense of the craft skill of this book than I certainly had previously. The only point I think I'd want to add at the moment to what Laurie has said about the structure, the construction of *Poor Fellow My Country*, is that not only is the narrative admirably put together, admirably managed in terms of straightout storytelling, it does seem to me to hold together with extraordinary emotional intensity by virtue of certain repeated motifs, certain repeated kinds of episode and repeated images.

Now I don't know how many of you have had the opportunity to read or get to the end of this enormous book. Could I just ask you how many of you have? There is no shame in not having got to the end of it yet. It takes a good lot of reading, and not all of us have the opportunity to read it on the front verandah of Xavier's house in Redlynch. But those of you who have got to the end of it will remember the last great and moving scene which involves the drowning of Rifkah, the beautiful Jewish refugee, who comes to the Northern Territory in the late 1930s along with some other refugees from Nazi Germany, and makes a considerable impact on the life of the major hero Jeremy Delacy, and all the other people that she comes in contact with. At the very end of the novel, in the closing scene, Rifkah and Pat Hannaford (the communist train driver that Laurie was talking about) were both drowned in the river — remarkably — in the scene in which Prince Phillip is giving a speech about ecological conservation in the middle of the Australian outback. It is a scene remarkable in itself for its extraordinary balance of comedy, satire, and in the end of intensely tragic feeling. But what makes it more remarkable at the end of this nearly 1,500 page novel, is that it is simply the last in a sequence of major and extraordinary events involving the total immersion of major characters in water. Sometimes they emerge with new birth to a new baptism, and sometimes they are led to their deaths. And what I thought I would like to do to finish off my contribution to this evening's gathering would be to read you just one of those great scenes from the central part of the book. A scene in which Sergeant Cahoon — a sergeant of police who believes himself, and indeed wants himself, to be the father of the adolescent hero of the novel, the half-caste boy Prindy — Cahoon wants to be his father, but in fact almost certainly isn't — in his role as sergeant of police is leading Prindy back into jail. Prindy has a neck collar on, and they are going to cross over a river in flood on a narrow slab of shallow rock with deep water on one side, and a waterfall going down into perilous and lethal depths on the other side. Cahoon is in company with an Aboriginal policeman Jinbul, and as they approach the river-crossing they put twelve feet of chain from Cahoon to Prindy, and from Prindy to Jinbul. And I think that the scene that I want to read to you now —and to complete what I have to say — I hope will encourage those of you who haven't begun to read the book to read at least as

far as p. 977, and will encourage those of you who have got that far to get through to the end. This is the section then that I want to read to you:

> "There was much less mist this morning; at least hereabouts, where the atmosphere was warmer. Down towards the Rainbow Pool it was well enough blanketed. Here it was only in rags, ripped out of pockets by the racing water, touched by the rising Sun into shreds of rainbow that went swirling away, no doubt to build the solid rainbow of the Pool. Jinbul, dismounting to do his master's bidding, looked away towards the Pool, warily, it seemed. Not that there was anything sinister about the scene. The sound of the water was like laughter, in which was faintly mingled music, which was the carolling of butcher-birds somewhere back amidst the limestone masses.
>
> Getting the things from his saddle-bag, Jinbul locked the length of chain to Prindy's collar, to do so hauling the boy's head down quite urgently, and locked a handcuff to the other end. He was about to lock the other cuff onto his slim black wrist, when Cahoon snapped, 'Onto your ankle . . . and round the stirrup, too.' He leered at Prindy, adding: 'See'f he's smart enough Snake Man to pull a horse over.' Prindy smiled back at him.
>
> Jinbul did as told when he was mounted again, cuffing his skinny right shin to the stirrup-leather. The horse objected to begin with, because the length of sawtooth ratchet left over was raking its flank like a spur. Jinbul had to pull it round so that it raked his moleskin-clad leg.
>
> 'Right!' said Coon-Coon when all was set. He rode ahead, with Prindy behind him, Jinbul behind again, each separated by the regulation length of chain, which would be about a dozen feet, or two fathoms, as chain-measurement is properly designated and which was appropriate since they were embarking on what might be called an aquatic venture. The spare horse, carrying the little gear they'd brought along, came last, on a lead lashed to Jinbul's saddle.
>
> They went splashing in to make the crossing. It was never deeper than to the horses' knees and mostly not much more than hock-deep, even though the strangely iridescent limey water swept over the ledge with the same smooth strength everywhere. Here was practically no rough, the rock mass having been worn smooth as a weir by the wash of ages. No trees at all on the crossing. There were biggish trees upstream a bit, but down only the permanently dwarfed and hump-backed things, just now but shivery islands of foliage. Immediately over the ledge the water was not so deep, as

could be seen by the swirling weeds there and whiskery masses of moss. The deep was over another ledge.

It was out about the middle that the Pookarakka, that time while crossing slung broken-legged on a pole, had tried to do his famous disappearing trick again. Here the water was knee-deep. They reached it. Was it the fact that the horse Prindy now was riding had taken part in that event which caused it to play-up now? Whatever it was, the beast's rearing jerked Coon-Coon's manacled hand and startled *his* horse, causing him to yell above the watery din, 'Hey .- . . what's goin' on?' He swung round, to see Prindy sliding out of his saddle on the off-side, that is the down-stream side, the right. He wheeled his horse round, to the left, the only way he could. That slacked the chain. Prindy took a flying leap over the ledge. He probably wouldn't have heard Coon-Coon yell, 'You treacherous little bastard!' With both chains tautening, what began as a dive ended with a gutser. He went down. But almost on the instant, Coon-Coon, taking a grip on his end of the chain, jerked him up again, this time so that he floated on his back.

'Haul him in!' Cahoon bawled at Jinbul.

Jinbul had to lean well over to reach his chain. As he did so, Prindy grabbed his end of the chain, jerked. Jinbul, already almost overbalanced, came flying out of the saddle. His startled horse reared, slipped, could not recover its footing, since shackled to its rider, fell on its side, with helpless Jinbul half under it.

Cahoon, fairly screaming now, moved back to lend a hand. 'You bloody little bastard . . . I'll belt Christ out of you for this!'

The Little Bastard was only a small yellow face with wide grey staring eyes.

What with the pouring water and the dragging weight downstream, the fallen horse hadn't a hope of rising, especially with the led-horse performing behind.

Cahoon went first to the led-horse, slipped the clip of the lead-rope, then swung back, yelling at Jinbul, who was lying on his back, flapping the water to keep his head up, 'Pull your foot out, *mungus*, and slip the stirrup-leather off the catch-bar.'

The stirrup-leather was only semi-attached, for the very purpose of easy release of a rider pinned by his fallen horse. However, it meant being able to bend sufficiently to slip a hand under the saddle. Jinbul, looking strangely grey of dusky face, only kept beating the water with his hands, calling back to his master, 'Break him my artch-bone, I stink, Boss . . . .'

He had to say it a couple of times before Coon-Coon heard, when he howled, 'Jesus bloody Christ!' and this without any of that breast-striking.

Coon-Coon dismounted, leapt off the ledge, braving the fallen beast's thrashing hoofs, flung himself on its belly, tore up the saddle-flap, snatched at the girth-buckles. The horse went mad again with release of the pressure of the girth, tried to rise. Coon-Coon stilled it with a boot in the guts. He had yet to free the surcingle. He was a bit slower with this, bawling curses over the strap. Then the surcingle gave. Pressure of water against the upraised flap and the pull of Jinbul beyond, tore the saddle away. Jinbul went with it, and Prindy ahead of it, all with a jerk that pulled Coon-Coon over the horse's slippery wet body and after them all.

It was all so swift. There in a moment were they all, out in smooth shining water, riding the long swell of it, past the hunchback trees that bobbed to them as if in deference, while they looked back in astonishment at the distance-dwarfing horses that stared as astonished at them.

Strangely quiet out there, the only sound a sort of continuous hissing, but beyond it somewhere a growing roar. Perhaps it was this that roused Coon-Coon from what appeared to be a stupor of unbelief. He yelled at his Man Friday, 'Get the chain round a tree!' Several biggish ones were coming up. He himself struck out across the current, to make sure of their being caught. But Jinbul, the grey-faced, accepting the inevitable, had sunken eyes only for what lay further ahead, a dark line, a thin lip, and instead of striking oppositely, went drifting after. So they missed the tree, all of the trees. Cursing, Coon-Coon saw the staring, not only of the black eyes but the grey, and turned to look. Plainly it was a lip, quivering as if with suppressed laughter over the presumption of little men who thought they themselves so powerful, over the retribution always the due of traitors. But blind as he must ever be to the realities of the Unknowable, he saw it as a rock, and screamed 'A rock, a rock . . . let's get to each side of it . . . swim, man, swim!'

No need to swim. As the lip opened to reveal the maw, those on the extremities of the chain were swept around as if sucked from both sides, leaving the chosen one, the mid-link of this magic chain, to fetch up against what for a fact was a shelf of rock even if serving as a laughing lip.

Prindy, slammed up against the lip, looking over it, saw it all. So near were they, the wanted ones, measured by man's reckoning, a couple of fathoms, plus a half for that outstretched three-striped arm and a bit more for the leg with its whipping saddle attached — and yet as far as Eternity, as could be seen by the agony of death in

those eyes, blue and black, gazing up at him in the long, long, little moment it took for their engulfment.

No, they were not gone clean away. There were their Shades hovering.

The maw was like the throat of a flower, shining with light, to trap unwary creatures — like *Gwangu*, the Fly-catcher. The Shades hovered down inside like insects digesting in the false nectar that had trapped them.

The Sun rose up and up.

The water was falling.

Bits of sugary marble peeped.

The sky was vivid blue, with white clouds sailing.

A straw-necked ibis came sailing along from where the flooded billabongs would be, saw, croaked with alarm, turned and went flapping back. A flight of white cockies, heading down from the Sandstone glimpsed, shrieked, wheeled and went screaming away eastward towards Catfish.

The Sun climbed up. The water fell.

Suddenly the chain on the right hand slackened. That meant being jerked sideways, dragged along the slippery rock a little way to the left, till the taut chain jammed in a crevice. It could be seen, silvery in the green whiskers. Now there was only one ghost below.

It was a long while before Prindy dared to haul in to see which it was had left him. It would have been that of the late Tracker Jinbul, because the handcuff was fairly wide open and a rag of moleskin hung on the saw-tooth projection like bait on a hook from which a fish has broken free.

How long would Daddy-o Cahoon's Shade be in taking itself off? Where would it go to? He might be right now with his Old Jesus, but what about Old Tchamala, and Old God, who it seemed was a Jew — and Coon-Coon called Jews Sheeny Bastards?

What were the thoughts of the small executioner, as he lay against the marble lip, with hair now flying golden in the breeze, while he was chained by the neck to a dead man who probably had loved him?

Then Daddy-o went with suddenness that caused the chain to jerk out of the cleft. Prindy wasted no time in pulling in this time, because it was getting hot there with the Sun directly overhead and

the water steaming and beginning to stink. But he stopped dead when a waxen hand appeared, outstretched as if in waving farewell, giving a blessing, or Heiling Hitler. He stared at it for a long while before he dared again. First the handcuff, well back on the black-haired wrist. Then the buttoned cuff of a khaki sleeve. Then the sleeve with the three chevrons of the sergeant who might have become an inspector. Then rags of cloth and flesh.

Who could trust the hand of Coon-Coon close enough to grab, even if it had no more than a torn-off arm behind it? Prindy could only keep it at a distance, and stare.

The problem was suddenly solved by a rush of wings. Prindy looked up, to see a brown white-breasted osprey diving to grab what he mistook for a fish. The buggers would often snatch one off your line. The long black talons seized it, raised it to the limit of the chain, which snatched it back, so that it came hurtling down and struck the hard rock — *Crack*! It was the cuff that struck. The lock was sprung. The manacle opened. The arm pulled by the waiting Shade drew the hand out of it, down into the maw. It was gone so quickly, that the osprey, hovering for another strike, whistled in protest. Prindy looked up to meet its angry yellow eye."[4]

III XAVIER HERBERT

After all the nice things these men have been saying about me, I feel that I can stand up like Mohammad Ali and say "I am the greatest, I am the King." I have made a point of never reading anything that was written about me, or looking at any pictures, or listening to anything for many years, so that I do not get involved. I have never had the experience of listening for a considerable time to people who took so much interest in what I have done. Part of one's job, at least the way I do it, is to detach yourself from this rather terrible job.

How I became a Novelist, I don't know. I thought it was a bit of a joke at first. I found I had talents quite late in my life. I was 24 when I began to write, and thought I could make use of it simply to have an easy living. One could write — I was successful from the very beginning, writing short stories. I have written somewhere that I was a product of mining people in Western Australia, where I was born — they were all prospectors in those days — and you could go anywhere and dig out a bit of gold, and as a descendant of them, I reckoned that this suddenly discovered talent of mine was a means of getting a bit of gold easily. Before long I found I was involved in this terrible thing, and for me it has been a terrible thing. It is now just about fifty years since I took it up. I am hoping to give it up now. I would say I am clever enough to do that. I have never had such an experience of having two people discuss my work in such a way, and then finally recreate it. I've never heard anyone read me in all my *life*, and to see that scene again that I created, and to hear it read with such almost passionate voice as he went along, sitting here it involved me terribly. Perhaps for the first time in my life I have felt a reward for it. But as I have said it was a terrible task, and I was always glad to get away from it, and felt that there were two people — there was me, the sane man, and this other creature the crazy novelist. But listening to Professor Heseltine, I was moved to think that one had translated a scene — something, a dream, that was what it is, something that someone had dreamt, translated it into words and it had been taken up by another person. I don't think I have ever consented to read it before. I only considered myself.

But that wasn't what I set out to say, it was only that this strange experience made me want to laugh at first — I actually want to cry now. It is a strange, terrible thing, and I should try and say a little about how I came to know these two men. Laurie Hergenhan (as he said he was the editor of *Australian Literary Studies*) wrote to me asking me did I have any copy of the speech I made on the writing of *Capricornia* at the Adelaide Arts Festival. In those days I used to memorize my speeches. I think I could do it now, but it is a terrible job, I wouldn't want to do it again. So I had a typescript of it. Nobody else wanted it, as it was some years afterwards. I was very interested that the speech should be perpetuated, because it was when I met this Sadie of mine. She put me into a garret in London, and got me to write *Capricornia*. That is how it came about. It is a very romantic story, and I wanted it perpetuated. I sent this to Laurie Hergenhan, who published it, and we began a correspondence. He had written to me from the University of Tasmania. He was an "Aco," as he said I call such people, and I had this attitude of the so-called creative writer towards the academics. It is really the novelist who has it — it is wrong to speak of other creative writers — simply the novelist I think. It is born of fear. The novelist is afraid of the scholar, because of misbehaviour of the scholar, and because the novelists are powerful as individualists; whereas the scholars naturally have to — well they are sane enough to — exist in coteries, in their schools, whatever individualism they have. These fierce and terrible people, novelists, who live in fantasy, live climactically in fantasy in their work, and when they come out of it they can't live in anything else but climax. Usually they have a coterie of people to go to, people that they know won't do them any harm, and they go out and perform before them much to the delight of their following. Or sometimes they go amongst one another and tear one another to pieces like wild animals, if somebody is watching them. Now they are very hard people to get along with, and I was the same, I do know, I traced my history in the matter. Quite early in my career, I was asked to deliver a lecture at the University of Sydney, and I wrote back a flippant reply, to get out of it, and actually I wanted to get out of it because I was afraid to do it, I wasn't equipped to do it. Instead of being honest enough to say so, I wrote this flippant letter which is still, I understand, used against me; and plenty of the rest of us have done it.

Because this was Dr Laurie Hergenhan, Reader of English, I began to get at him in between my writing, too, when I had nothing better to do. One does tend to use such writings as pipe-openers, or filling in time. If you can't write at this time —you attack somebody in a letter — it means very little. I endeavoured to be as mean as possible to Laurie, and as clever as possible of course, exercising my skill, and Laurie was brought to a point of anger, finally, which was quite justifiable. I pushed him to the very point of showing his anger, and it was there that one would give the "coup de grace," as one could imagine it, or pretend it was anyway, actually a cowardly blow it was really, but something stopped me from doing it, and I wrote a mild letter next. And from then on there developed a friendship. And I discovered the reason for it. The need was this, that — the more one writes in my kind of writing (I guess it would be in all sorts of writing — no, the novel is the most difficult form of any sort of art), the more one has to do better and better, and you become more and more afraid. That doesn't only go for me. It goes for every other writer I have known. Some own up to it. I know some writers who write to me, very eminent writers, who do have, towards the end of their work, absolute agony, and that is why I wrote this thing for his, no for somebody else's magazine. I think it was called "The agony of it and the joy." There was the joy in what you had finished, but it is sheer agony doing it.

Now with the unconscious wisdom that is required for this kind of work — much of it is dream work, one lives very much very close to one's sub-conscious processes — I wanted to know the value of this work, as it went on. It is a very vast book. It is supposed to be the longest novel ever written in one volume. I had no idea how long it was, not actually until it was counted by the printer. I knew it was getting very long, but I dared not stop in it, because the novel has its own value. I had fought against publishers always on that ground, knowing that one edits oneself to the very limit. But the thing is that at such a stage with such a work, was it worth it? I had to have someone to turn to.

Now whom? You wouldn't turn to another writer because you couldn't trust one. That would be wrong because writers are

hypercritical, that is, your peers are hypercritical of what you do, understandably. To have any sort of coterie, well they would be only too glad, and flatter you, perhaps unconsciously, but they would be no judges of it. This Sadie of mine, about whom Laurie Hergenhan spoke, was the most valuable critic. She could only say "yes" or "no". You see that was the great difficulty, to get her — I used to quarrel with her about it — but she would say, "I don't like it." That was the end of it. In the building up of my work she came to this point, that she would not read anything until I had finished it. She would listen to me when I wanted to talk about it, with the greatest of patience. Sometimes I would come to her and say would you like forty winks — so I would begin to talk about what I wanted to, and then she would go to sleep, and when she went to sleep I knew then that it was becoming repetitive, and that I had got what I wanted. She would simply go off to sleep. But she would not read this thing.

As a matter of fact the first reader I had was Laurie Hergenhan. Sadie leapt into it as soon as she found that Laurie Hergenhan was reading it — it was time that she got to it too — but she did not know that it was finished. It is a good idea — don't read a thing until it is finished. Now I was able first to write to Laurie. —He came to Brisbane, and in the course of his duties he went up to the new James Cook University in Townsville. Then he thought it was next door to Cairns — it is not really at all, my dentist happened to be down there, and I got him to pick him up, and bring him up to my place, it is quite a long way, over 200 miles —and when he saw this vast thing, he wanted to read it. He stayed with me, not actually at the house, at a hotel, so that he wouldn't be too close. He used to eat with us, and sleep at the hotel. He tackled this thing, really under difficulty, because I was still against his reading it, and against his accepting it. So much so that he had to be quite angry about being left to read it, as he said before, but he didn't mention he became quite angry and slammed the door, and said leave me alone, I want to read it. Which was a very good sign. He said it was about half the book — I think it was more than that — and I hadn't even taken a carbon copy of it, although I was doing the last draft of it. That was the feeling I had, what is the good of taking a carbon copy of something that you don't know that you can do.

Well, after he had read it I said I wanted no criticism, no comment, just was it worth writing. He said "yes". He described it to some editors, and he insisted that we take a photostat copy of it in case we lost it in a cyclone or something. It was just sort of lying about, this vast amount of paper. Well after that I wrote for Laurie, I had an audience. I reached this point — it's no good saying that I feel sure that I could not have gone on with it — but as I feel that I found this man, I had to go on with it because I had found him. He was my audience, and that simplified it.

So I was able — although it was at least two or three years, I think Laurie came in about the sixth year, it went on for nine years — I was able to write it to him as I did it, piece by piece, as I had written it, in a serial form. And it became, in spite of all the difficulties — as he said, I would discuss it — I was amazed, at what he was reading to you from extracts from my letters: I had no idea that I analysed what I was doing in such a way. Well, that was this God-given gift of having what I called a patron — surely that was patronage. He didn't comment on it, he didn't criticise it, he simply took it. And I am sure that if he had got bored with it, he would have said so. And so it went on until the end. Well, what are we going to do at the end of it? That was as far as Laurie was concerned, as much as he could do, to read it. He did say that it must be published. What are we going to do about publishing a book so long? I thought it was half a million words, and I had deliberately avoided numbering the pages, in the ordinary way, page after page. I numbered it in chapters. And whether by accident or design, I used to miscount the pages, sometimes they would be twenty out, I don't know why. Also I used a couple of typewriters at different places, and I used all sorts and sizes of paper. The idea was to give it away, I didn't want to face any commercial publisher, it was beyond commercial publishing, I thought. I got the idea first, I think, that we should give it to the University of Queensland Press, which is quite a good one, give it to them to do what they liked with it; that is, to publish it in its entirety of course, not to interfere with it. But if it became a commercial success, that is, if it was turned out in such numbers that they would not be able to handle the distribution, they could give it back to me for re-publication by someone else. It just

happened it was just too big for their University Press. They would be out of business for a couple of years I think, their books are small books, in spite of the fact that they are very good publishers. That left us without a publisher altogether.

But Harry Heseltine had written this monograph about me. People had told me about this man, Harry Heseltine. Don't forget I've lived a long way away. I've always lived remotely. I have spent most of my life in Northern parts. One is out of touch with these things, and I had work to do. Over the years, people used to come to me at times and take photographs, and they told me that I had a friend in this man. But I didn't take much notice of them, because I had given up reading reviews for many years. And then this thing happened, he sent me a copy, and the publisher sent me a copy, my wife read it and said I ought to read it, and Laurie Hergenhan did. I wrote to Harry himself to thank him for it, and I said that I would get around to reading it sometime. I told him that I had written another book. I think I wrote one letter to him in Sydney about a preface for *Capricornia*, a re-publication of that, a reprint of it. Our other correspondence was from Britain. He had gone there on study leave, for some reason or other, and then (that wasn't meant as a joke by the way) he apparently didn't like it very much, because he said he would be glad to come home, especially for "another Herbert," as he put it. He didn't understand anything about it at that time, I'm sure. He came home, and I finished the book in October. I became quite ill after that. I had never been ill in my life; but I did go to the pack after that long nine years of slaving. I didn't care much at all, the book was just lying about. It had been to the University of Queensland where they had read it, and been intimidated by it.

Then something moved me to right old hurts, I should say then on New Year's day 1974, I decided to read Harry Heseltine. I thought it unfair to read the monograph, since he had written so many things about me, my wife had always collected these things and put them away somewhere, so I rooted them out, and they were all in high-class magazines, *Meanjin* and such things. I got them out, and read them, and was astonished that someone was so well-disposed to me. As I say one was becoming detached from

the world, living in that strange world, that world of fantasy, not caring a damn what anybody thought, because you didn't dare to. People would only confuse you with criticism. I found that out early. Here was years of writing about me, by a man who was interested in my work. And after I had read everything that my Sadie had kept for me, I then read the monograph, and was fairly staggered because here was a man who had given so much, he had written about all my work up to that time. Such interest in a person that he didn't know! I of course detached myself as the Writer, and lived as the Man. This was the Man reading about the Writer. It was astonishing to me. So I wrote to him, and I asked him would he read this script of mine, this vast script, for a fee, said I, and I didn't want any comment, any criticism. Actually I said it to him in a reply, but that was after. I should say that he replied to me promptly to say that he would read it for the love of it, or the love of me (it was), because he gave up his long vacation to read it. He, his wife and daughter read it together, apparently day in and day out for a vast length of time. I did say to him that I wanted no comment, as I had to Laurie Hergenhan. The best way to get truth about these things is not to let anybody write you letters, but to send you a telegram to say "yes" or "no," that is all you want. Anybody who sends me telegrams that run to more than one word I always suspect them; so "yes" or "no". Well one day a telegram arrived saying "yes." Should it be published, that was all, should it be published? I wanted to know. And back came a telegram "Yes, Yes, Yes."

Well it went on from there. I acquired an agent in the meantime. I never wanted agents, but this man from Curtis Brown got hold of me. I had quarrelled with him many years ago, and they were doing something about the film rights of *Capricornia* and I felt that I was not dealing with them as literary agents but as film agents, and I permitted that. This man was very businesslike and wanted to make business out of it, and he got Harry to write a report on it, which was submitted to Collins. All publishers had been interested, quite a lot of publishers had been interested, and had written to me, but particularly Laurie Hergenhan used to come down from Brisbane quite often, and he had contacted people, and talked about it, and what Australian pub-

lishers. I had only thought in terms of Australian publishers because I had given the Imperium away from the time of writing *Capricornia*, when they wanted it carved up. They wanted me to make three books out of *Capricornia*, three separate novels. There was always the dirty expression, what is to me a dirty expression "how long is it?" They always asked Laurie Hergenhan, or they asked me, and I didn't reply. Laurie used to say "I don't know." But that was quite true, because he didn't bother to count it either. But Collins grabbed it, and they grabbed it with this edict from Harry Heseltine, that it must be published in its entirety or not at all. And this report of his was sent to their boss in Britain, Sir William Collins, who took it — that is the amazing thing. I had quarrelled with the Imperium, all those years, and mocked at Collins. And I thought when Sir William Collins used to come to the country every now and again, I had some special privilege, in that he had so many authors — as I said the "hacks in his stable" — and I wasn't one of them. Well, that was my attitude. And suddenly I found there was this attitude of these people taken on the word of Harry Heseltine, and the thing that he had written.

Well, there it is, the strange magic that was at the back of this impossible work; because I regarded it as utterly impossible to publish. I wrote it because I had to write it; but I did not write it to be published. Well, that is silly of course, you should write for other people, you should not do anything, any great thing anyway, anything worth while doing, any big thing, you shouldn't do it unless it is for someone else. There was first of all this Laurie Hergenhan who came out of the blue to be my patron, when I so badly needed one. And then, after that, the critic Harry Heseltine. And these two people were people of quality; everybody knew that from the beginning. Why Laurie Hergenhan's opinion was valued, when he spoke of it as an editor, was that he is a scholar. And at the same time in the same way, Harry Heseltine's verdict of it in criticism was valued because he is a scholar. That is the great, important thing that has brought me into this University, to make that liaison between the novelist and the scholar (it doesn't matter about the other creative writers because they are not that *mad*).

As I have kept on saying, it is the scholar who ultimately finds your quality. If you have quality as a writer, it is the scholar who finds it. The opinion of the regular professional critics, of the public, these are transient things, things following fashions. But not the verdict of the scholar. Where would the likes of myself be, ultimately, without the scholar's verdict. So, speaking to you, I regard this as a tremendous honour, because I stand before scholarly people, whom I have mocked before, out of fear (and who probably have an attitude towards me, and my life), out of fear of stupid, violent reactions, instead of this proper liaison we should have. But I would like to repeat, in finishing, what I have said about this magic thing — one got trapped into this amazing task, some of which you have heard — I actually haven't read the book.

I had all sorts of purposes in it. Primarily, the purpose to tell a story — one had to tell a story — but to tell a story for a purpose. One should have a purpose that serves one's fellows, not merely to entertain them. There was that magical thing; there was the finding of this man Hergenhan, at the time when I really needed a friend, as I needed a friend never before in my life. And then again in finding the man Heseltine, and I could never have been published under any circumstances, I am sure, but for this miracle of finding him. I want to pay my homage to these two men. Now, they can both stand up and take a bow.

NOTES:

[1]It is more than 10 years since this piece was given as a public talk from rough notes which I did not preserve. On looking through the transcript recently I was very much aware, painfully at times, that it is more suitable for oral presentation than print. I have decided, however, to leave it pretty much as it was, as a record both of an occasion and of a long association with Xavier Herbert, no matter how imperfectly that association is conveyed. What does come through for me is the great fascination which both Xavier the man, and the writing of the novel had for me. Xavier could be a bore, but in his letters and in conversation he could when he wished be enthralling and very entertaining. I have altered some details, but nothing of substance, in the interests of clarity and readability. The ending of the talk was partly reformulated because it had not been recorded.

Laurie Hergenhan November 1987

[2]Professor Tony Gibbs chaired the Forum. In introducing the speakers he referred to a tradition of hostility between writers and academic literary critics in Australia.

[3]The Chairman's introduction by Professor Tony Gibbs.

[4]Xavier Herbert, *Poor Fellow My Country* (London: Collins, 1975): 977-981.

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