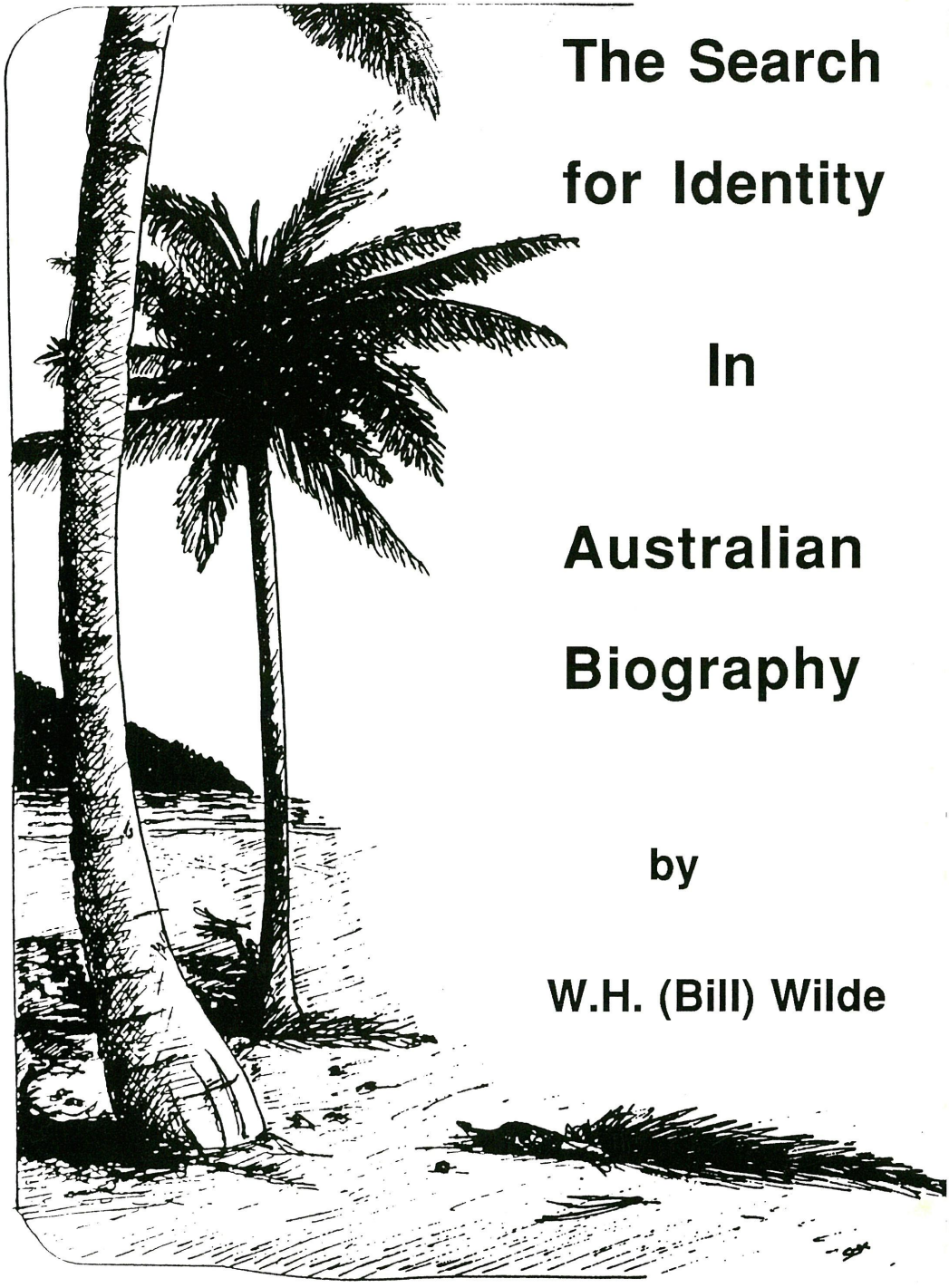

The Search for Identity In Australian Biography

by

W.H. (Bill) Wilde

Foundation for Australian Literary Studies
1991

The Colin Roderick Lectures: 1990

THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

by

W.H. (Bill) Wilde

FOUNDATION FOR AUSTRALIAN LITERARY STUDIES
1991

ISSN 0817-5659
ISSN 0725-6744

The National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
Wilde, W.H. (William Henry).
The search for identity in Australian biography.

ISBN 0 86443 384 0.

1. Biography (as a literary form). 2. Australian prose literature – History and criticism. 3. Australia – Biography – History and criticism. I. James Cook University of North Queensland. Foundation for Australian Literary Studies. II. Title. (Series : Monograph (James Cook University of North Queensland. Foundation for Australian Literary Studies); 21). (Series : Colin Roderick lectures ; 1990).

A820.94920094

PREFACE

My first meeting with the name Colin Roderick was at the beginning of 1946. The war had ended and among my demobilisation papers was a voucher for ten pounds which I was instructed to use on "tools of trade" that would equip me for my return to civilian life. I remember feeling relieved that I was not in the earth-moving business – I doubt if the voucher would have run to a pick and shovel; it certainly wouldn't have gone far towards a truck or a bulldozer. I eventually used it on books. Among them was *The Australian Novel* by one Colin Roderick. I bought it because there was a chapter in it on *The Pea Pickers* by Eve Langley. While I was in hospital during the war a lady from the Red Cross had given *The Pea Pickers* to me to read and I had enjoyed it very much. When Colin Roderick said in his final sentence, "It is an outstanding piece of literature, destined to a long life in the Australian world of books", I knew that I had happened on a critic whose opinion I could trust. The intervening years have shown me nothing that causes me to change that opinion. I say to-day as I said almost forty-five years ago – "Colin Roderick knows what he is talking about."

So I am very much honoured to have been invited by Professor Hassall to deliver the 1990 Colin Roderick lectures for the Foundation for Australian Literary Studies.

Because my discussions in these lectures will focus on Identity I believe it appropriate to remark that the establishment of the Foundation for Australian Literary Studies here in Townsville almost a quarter of a century ago has given James Cook University and the Department of English within the University their own particular identity in the Australian literary scene. The Foundation and its work are known and appreciated by scholars and writers all over Australia.

CONTENTS

Chapter 1

THE SEARCH FOR THE IDENTITY OF BIOGRAPHY ITSELF

In my topic "The Search for Identity in Australian Biography" I have used the word "biography" as a convenient abbreviation for the whole range of biographical writing – memoir, autobiography, biography, and autobiographical and biographical fiction. In the second lecture I shall discuss some of the literature that helped to *create*, or at least to *illustrate*, the particular identity of the settlement experience in colonial Australia and the identity of that well-known decade, the 1890s. In the third lecture I shall examine some of the problems of identity raised by the autobiographical fiction of three of our notable women writers – Henry Handel Richardson, Miles Franklin and Eve Langley. In this first lecture I should like to discuss briefly the present search for the identity of biography itself.

The past few decades have brought a continuing and lively discussion about the nature of biography and about the techniques used in writing biography. Growing disenchantment with the time-honoured traditional style biography has led to considerable experimentation with new and sometimes quite radical biographical techniques.

Some of those techniques have won dramatic applause but when the initial praise of certain reviewers and critics has subsided some people have begun to question whether those new-style biographies have succeeded in presenting the properly-documented and fully-substantiated account of the subject that is recognised as being at the heart of biography. While acknowledging that their literary sensibilities have been pleasantly titillated by the imaginative and innovative techniques used, they have been left to wonder whether their demands of biography have been fully satisfied. Put succinctly, and a trifle colloquially, they have begun to suspect that the baby may have gone out with the bathwater.

From the Middle Ages until well into the Nineteenth century biography remained reasonably constant in form and substance with most literary historians looking upon that famous Eighteenth century pair, Samuel Johnson and James Boswell, as the progenitors of modern biography. Most literary historians would also agree that modern biography itself, or "New Biography", began early in this century with Lytton Strachey, who, with his iconoclastic and ironic wit, his deliberate selection of colourful detail and his brief but sweeping delineations of character, well and truly set the cat among the long-settled pigeons of traditional biography. In the half century or more since Strachey, who also introduced Freudian-style psychoanalysis into biography, there has been almost continuous disagreement among biographers about the art or craft of biography and about the techniques used in the *genre*. Two of the major areas of disagreement have been about the validity and effectiveness of what could be called psychobiography and the legitimacy or otherwise of what is referred to as existential biography, that is, biography that uses the technique of fiction.

Biography seminars occur with great regularity these days in our literary calendar in Australia. I have been to many, over the years, and am not too sure that I am much wiser for the experience. But I have been left with considerable sympathy for the young, would-be biographer who is attempting to come to grips at the present time with the true nature of the *genre*. I wonder, sometimes, with all the argument and counter-argument, with all the insistence of off with the old and on with the new, whether we are not running the risk of losing our capacity to see the forest because we are spending too much time and energy looking at the individual trees. Surely the aim of the biographer should be the same to-day as it has always been – the faithful recording of a human life? The singers and the accompaniment may change, but the song surely remains the same. Nobody would deny that there is a continuing need to reappraise technique and to even question the substance of biography. It is my belief that technique should not come to be considered more important than substance, my belief that the *end* should not be sacrificed in the quest for newer and cleverer *means*. The fact that there is so much discussion about biography does mean, however, that the *genre* is very much alive and we should be grateful for that.

Because of the present disputation, however, the new biographer will certainly not find his task easy. Called upon to make his choice of a biographical technique I think it highly unlikely that he will select the well-trodden path of the traditional biography – that orderly, factual, linear narrative, usually proceeding from birth to death of the subject, with the

author neither unduly prejudiced for nor against his subject and intent on pursuing his narrative without undue eccentricities of style or focus. If the new biographer is not aware of it himself he will be well informed through the literary journals and critical newspaper reviews that the traditional biography is now *passé* – an out-of-date curio fit only for the glass cases of literary museums. Perhaps, stubbornly believing that the traditional form suits him and his subject well enough, he will go ahead regardless. If so he will reap the reward for his obstinacy soon after publication day. What he has believed to be an authentic, factual, comprehensive, even scholarly account of his subject's life and times will almost certainly be adjudged dull, colourless, pedestrian and boring. He will be chided for having explored only the external realities of his subject's life and berated – often quite viciously – for having failed to "get at the truth", that is, come to grips with the innermost being of his subject. That "getting at the truth" is not something that unduly obsessed the traditional biographer, largely because he has usually acknowledged that there are barriers to his understanding of the deepest *psyche* of his subject beyond which all he can call on for assistance is, as the least harmful, an educated guess, as the worst, unbridled intuition. But from Lytton Strachey on, or from Freud, Jung and company on, both educated guesses and unbridled intuition have been paraded under the more respectable guise of psychobiography. Popular though psychobiography immediately became, many writers and critics resisted it believing that the biographer should not permit himself the luxury, through psychoanalysis, of what is still essentially an educated guess, nor permit himself even one moment of unsubstantiated credulity no matter "how brilliantly it may illumine [his] darkness or solace his ignorance." (De Voto). Psychobiography, said one opponent, Bernard De Voto, finally comes to light not with facts but with interpretations – which is, he believed, just another name for theory – and theory, he concluded rather harshly, is often nonsense.

But with, or without, the benefit of psychology and psychoanalysis most biographers have long told us, and continue to tell us, that the biographer does not – indeed cannot – possess a sufficiently intimate knowledge of his subject to allow him to portray with any more than a reasonable hope of accuracy the innermost being of that subject. Proust, who made exhaustive attempts at such portrayals in an easier *genre*, fiction, was convinced that the innermost reality of a person is something of which the person alone is aware and of which the biographer can only be *unaware*. Mark Twain always felt that biographies can only be "the clothes and buttons" of the person; the true account of the inner being of a person can never be achieved. Samuel Johnson was convinced that the only person

who could truly write the life of a man was one who had "eaten and drunk and lived in social intercourse with him". Imagine how many biographies and biographers that would have ruled out down the years. Robert Gittings, biographer of Keats and Hardy, asked himself the same despairing question that biographers for ever and a day have put to themselves about their work – "Did the Keats that I conceived ever exist?" Virginia Woolf, who maintained that the central problem of biography was how to weld together the "granite-like solidity" of truth or fact and the "rainbow-like intangibility" of personality or character, said of her attempt to portray the painter and art critic, Roger Fry:

> What a curious relation is mine with Roger at this moment. I who have given him a kind of shape after his death. Was he like that? [I feel] as if we together [have] given birth to *this vision* of him.

Brian Matthews asked much the same question about his Louisa Lawson:

> The face that turns towards you at last need not be the face of the subject; or only the face of the subject. It can be – indeed is more likely to be – a composite, a new entity that has grown slowly and almost unnoticed out of your experience of being immersed in the life of the subject.

If I could continue this list of doubting biographers, in, I hasten to add, a descending order of magnitude I would have to say that I, too, have had much the same qualms. Is the Mary Gilmore who actually lived the same person of that name in my book? I strongly doubt it. Certainly they are identical in all material aspects but whenever I have attempted to enter into the heart and mind and soul, to assess attitudes, analyse motives, investigate the deepest intuitions of the Mary Gilmore who actually lived, I firmly believe that I have entered into the unknown and the unknowable.

And yet, in the generations ahead, people will never know the *real* Mary Gilmore; they will only know the Mary Gilmore who exists in my book. The very act of writing about a real person instantly changes him or her, because of the words used, into only a limited image of the actual. All that the biographer ultimately can do is to substitute for an actual human being an image of that human being. There is, as Philip Toynbee observed, "even a Johnson's Johnson who is different from Boswell's Johnson." This is the never-to-be-remedied *cri de coeur* of every biographer

– to know that he or she can only reproduce an image of the actual. And, of course, it is equally as devastating for the readers of biographies to know that of the many great people of the past they can only know what the biographers have told them.

Although I am then, as you can see, and like the other biographers I have mentioned, strongly convinced that any attempt to "get at the truth" of a human being, to completely and accurately depict his innermost being, will be blessed with only partial success, I am also convinced that our new biographer is not going to be talked out of the attempt. How then will he go about ? He must attempt to make the leap from the known, external facts to the unknown internal reality. That is the leap that now seduces almost all biographers. Gittings, who doubted the success of his own leap in the case of Keats, nevertheless strongly approves of attempting it. As, of course, does Virginia Woolf, and Brian Matthews, and so do I. Gittings quotes Keats on biography:

> They are very shallow people who take everything literal. A man's life of any worth is a continued allegory – and very few can see the Mystery of his life.

The biographer is thus required to take the literal, factual truth of the events in the life of his subject, to see beyond that factual truth into the "Mystery" of his life, to unravel the "continual allegory" that Keats declares life is. But even Keats confesses that "very few eyes can see" into that mystery. Proust, Twain, Gittings doubt that it can be done at all. Yet it has to be attempted. It is for the biographer like the mountain is for the climber. It has to be attempted simply because it is there. And this is the paradox of modern biography. It was born, as biography has always been born – in the factual – but it can now only be seen to be aesthetically complete and wholly satisfactory for both biographer and reader when it leaps into the speculative, the allegorical and symbolical. It seems then that biography has finally taken its place alongside the other literary forms – poetry, fiction and drama – that have all followed the same path.

By what device does our new biographer attempt that mighty leap? Almost certainly by one or other of psychobiography or existential biography. The rapid advance in and wide use of psycho-analysis since Strachey has given to-day's biographer a new and powerful tool to use but it is a tool for experts only. It can be disastrous when ineptly applied. That is true both in psychiatry and biography. In psychobiography the biographer appropriates to himself an authorial omniscience that allows

him to establish his own norms of conduct. Those norms then become the immovable psychic authority against which the biographer attempts to measure the attitudes, motives and behaviour of his subject. The conclusions he then draws from his comparison of his subject with the norm, provide him with his psychograph of the true self of the subject. At its best, and skilfully used, psychobiography can certainly provide a valuable key to the subject's *psyche*. But its effectiveness stands or falls, of course, on the degree of psychoanalytical skill, experience and knowledge of the individual biographer. Much as generalisations are dangerous I think it would be fair to say that most biographers, if asked to expand on their qualifications as psychologists and psychoanalysts would only be able to answer like the girl who, when applying for a position as children's nurse, declared that her qualifications lay in the fact that she had once been a child herself. Allied to the question of the biographer's degree of psychological skill and experience is that of the validity of the initial psychic authority established by him. Because it is a largely subjective authority its validity is highly questionable yet it can never be properly questioned, since the only thing that can be ranged against it is an equally subjective appraisal of its validity. Therein lies the psychobiographer's ultimate fall–back position. "How can you say I am wrong" – he says – "when it is only your opinion that you are right in saying that I am wrong. It is a matter of one authority's word (yours) against another's (mine)." In psychobiography, as I see it, the biographer decides that there will be a game, then frames the rules of the game himself and sets himself up as judge and jury on all the decisions as the game is played. All that the subject is allowed to do – no, *compelled* to do – is to play. To put it in another way, as that arch-enemy of psychobiography, Bernard De Voto, put it – for the psychobiographer the white rabbit is always in the hat. All that the psychobiographer has to do is to pull it out with a smile of reassuring omniscience.

I shall demonstrate in the third lecture the supreme egotism of the psychobiographer – myself – when I give you my theory of the causes of the sexual hysteria exhibited by Sybylla Melvyn (that is, Miles Franklin) in *My Brilliant Career*. With no psychological knowledge of, or training in, the sexual phobias of women I shall, nevertheless, be quite unconstrained in my efforts to account for those phobias in Miles Franklin. I shall simply be plying the usual trade of the psychobiographer.

It seems that the so-called existential biographer attempts to achieve a similar result by recourse to fiction, because in fiction he can take the *actual* and fashion it to the shape he needs. He is free, for example, to invent or imagine events or situations that will accurately reflect the very

subtleties, nuances and intimate depths of his subject that he wishes to have exist in him. Fiction can also remove the discordant incidents which crop up in every person's life and which can destroy, if left there, the validity of the biographer's interpretation of his subject. Existential biography, as Brian Matthews so aptly says in *Louisa*, is telling the truth but telling also "what ought to be the truth and what ought to have been the truth" – that is, telling not what *did* happen but what the biographer believed ought to have happened.

I draw your attention to the well-known conversation between the biographer and the novelist in Robert Littel's "Truth is Stranger" article. The novelist tells of his attempts at biography and how he became frustrated at his failure to fashion a satisfactory "artistic whole" of his subject. So he turned to fiction "where nobody but myself knew all the facts and where I was free to change, invent, and eliminate them so as to correspond with only one truth – the truth inside my own head."

Although our new biographer will probably opt, then, for one or other of these techniques to interpret his subject he will almost certainly have to make use of other long-standing biographical devices to assist him in that interpretation. He will, for example, attempt to see his subject in the context of the age and society that helped to form him. It is customary for the biographer to try to understand what kind of life his subject was allowed or compelled to live by the political, social and economic environment in which he was placed. When the subject has lived through a number of significant historical periods the biographer's research will prove to be an exhaustive and exhausting business. Dame Mary Gilmore, for example, lived for almost a century, from childhood in the pioneer days of the late 1860s, young womanhood in the turbulent radicalism and nationalism of the 1890s when William Lane's vision of utopian socialism led her to the New Australia settlement in Paraguay. Later there were two world wars and a world-wide depression in between, then the cold war between East and West that, with its deep distrust of Communism, and its resultant harassment of countless thousands of innocent individuals, also affected her deeply. Her life and personality were influenced by all of those events. To understand her one had to understand both the events and the effect they had on her. Perhaps one practical hint that I could offer any potential biographer would be to choose for his subject one who died young. Another piece of advice would be not only to read plenty of biographies but also to read plenty of reviews of biographies. If he wants to win golden opinions about his work he will take note of the fact that most modern reviewers and critics are impressed only with biographies which make an entertaining and exciting narrative out of the subject's life,

although, oddly enough, people's lives mostly assume a form inappropriate for a successful narrative. If he has chosen existential biography he will, of course, have no problem providing that narrative, for he will have fiction to assist him. He will, if he is wise, make great use of the anecdote, for anecdote makes not only entertaining reading but also possesses a structural completeness that is both artistically satisfying and ideal for narration. If the anecdote happens by some lucky chance to be a first hand account of some event in the subject's life so much the better but there is no great inconvenience if it is not. Fiction, the existential biographer's tool, has a remarkable capacity for synthesising fragments of second or third hand evidence into apparently first hand accounts and, if he is lucky, which is in most cases, no one but the biographer and the dead subject can be any the wiser about the authenticity or otherwise of the anecdote.

Let me give you an example of the way the biographer to-day is browbeaten by reviewers into existential or fictional biography. There was recently a review in the *Canberra Times* by its long-established book reviewer of three historical biographies. Under the headline "Biographies with about as much life as dried pork", the reviewer said that what he would like to do with these biographies which he had read with what he described as "mild boredom", was

> to take one dull paragraph after another and turn it into a scene, to flesh out the characters with personal details, descriptions and accounts of their actions, to emphasise the story more, to reshape the material so as to introduce an element of plot.

If we look at the terminology of his complaint we can see, in the phrases "turn it into a scene", "flesh out the characters with personal details", "emphasise the *story* more", "*reshape* the material" and "introduce an element of *plot*", that what the reviewer is really regretting is the lack of fiction in those biographies.

I can give you one example where there is this reliance on the fiction mode in *Louisa* but I cannot help suspecting, knowing Brian Matthews as I do, that he probably had his tongue well in cheek when he wrote it. Legend has it that Louisa was sitting on a log in the bush when Peter Lawsen (Larsen) made his proposal of marriage. Here is the way to "turn it into a scene", "flesh out the characters with personal details", "emphasise the story more". Matthews is, in fact, using fiction to

synthesise second and third hand evidence into an apparently first hand account of an event that occurred a century and a half ago.

> That evening. He appeared out of the gathering dusk, pick and shovel over a shoulder, and stopped uncertainly near the young woman sitting miserable and solitary. Only the extraordinary azure of his eyes gave any hint of his distant ancestry. For the rest, his skin was burnt to a brick, his brown hair coarse with dust, and his clothes bedraggled and dirty . . . Peter Larsen was not tall, but he was powerfully built – square of shoulder, thick muscular arms and neck, angular jutting chin neatly bearded; a face nearly stolid were it not for the almost delicately straight nose and the subtle, just detectable dilation of the nostrils with emotion. Before the Australian sun had done its work, his skin had been an opalescent white through which the blue cartography of veins showed fragilely at temple and wrist and across the backs of his practical hands.

This kind of fictitious narrative is, of course, harmless enough and it is perpetrated in thousands of books by countless writers every year. But it is blessed with no great distinction that I can see which is why I wonder how the Canberra critic could find such concocted narration so much more satisfying than traditional reportage. Nobody could possibly argue with the idea that biographies should combine research and scholarly integrity with art, imagination and readability or that biography is basically about life, character and human interest. That the biographer should attempt to penetrate the private meaning of even the most public life and should attempt to present the whole sense of the person he is discussing is also beyond question. But that he has to enclose *all* in the apparatus of fiction, in a contrived narration dominated by *scene, story, plot,* is much more questionable. No one can read that little scene from *Louisa* without experiencing a sense of irritation that the biographer has felt the need to become, also, the omniscient observer, to comment on the "almost delicately straight nose" and "the just detectable dilation of the nostrils". It strikes a false and artificial note and certainly does nothing to convince me of the credibility of what is basically a contrived piece of narration.

There are plenty of people even in to-day's relaxed and progressive approach to biography who feel that fiction and biography should never be

mixed. Catherine Bowen who wrote *Adventures of a Biographer* (1959) suggests that if they are, the fiction parts should be printed in red – red for danger or red as a warning to readers perhaps – and the factual, biographical parts in black. That device would certainly present a problem with Peter Carey's brilliant *Oscar and Lucinda,* which has won a variety of substantial awards and has been publicly applauded both as a work of fiction and of biography, one critic asserting that it ought to have carried off a biography prize as well as the Miles Franklin award for fiction. One wonders whether there have not been two *Oscar and Lucinda*' s printed, one in red for those who, quite rightly, saw it as the splendid novel that it is, and the other in black for those who believe it to be a work of biography.

If we accept such twin assessments as those we have finally reached the point of denying the long-held belief that biography and fiction *do* differ in the very stuff of which they are made — denying that the truth of fact and the truth of fiction, although without doubt both a kind of truth, are incompatible.

A year or so before *Oscar and Lucinda*' s success, Brian Matthews's biography of Louisa Lawson won most of 1988's non-fiction awards. It was acclaimed as a brilliant biography, one critic stating, with total euphoria, that *Louisa* had set a completely new standard for biographies, despatching all future traditional biographies to the literary scrapheap. One can well understand his enthusiasm. *Louisa* is refreshingly innovative in technique and wonderfully informal in tone. The technique of an alternative biographer is not, however, entirely new. Werner Fuld's *Walter Benjamin,* published in Munich in 1979, has similar authorial interventions in the text; an abrasive narrative *persona* intervenes in a variety of ways to disrupt the continuity of the biographical narrative. This is not a device that can be used again for a long time in Australian biography. Brian Matthews has done it first – and scooped the pool. Imitators will be derided – as they should be. If traditional biography were to be replaced on a permanent basis by *Louisa*'s scheme of an alternative text and an alternative biographer (a variation I suppose on parts printed red and parts black) we would simply be substituting one kind of stereotype for another.

I would describe *Louisa* as, in some ways, borrowing a phrase from the world of advertising, a "Clayton's" biography, that is, a biography that seems to be a biography when often it is not – a situation which Brian Matthews confesses to in the book.

There is a "Clayton's" biographer, the *alter ego,* Owen Stevens, whose voice is heard alongside the real biographer's, but whose pronouncements are never properly vindicated or rebuffed by the real biographer. And there is a "Clayton's" text, the alternative text that runs

mostly parallel to the main text but which is really never allowed to add in any definitive or significant way to the main text. And that is despite the avowed purpose of both the alternative biographer and the alternative text. Matthews tells us that the *alter ego* is to introduce "speculative and other kinds of debatable or ambiguous material" which are to be "conjured with in various ways without corrupting the biographical narrative with tendentious and questionable stuff". The "speculative" stuff is, however, never really more than just introduced, never really "conjured with", never really weighed or valued in regard to its significance in the overall biographical portrait. It has clearly come from the "too hard" basket, an indispensable item of furniture in every biographer's study. In *Louisa* the real biographer keeps well away from that basket but Owen Stevens rummages around in it to his heart's content and introduces its contents into the alternative text. Unfortunately there it sits largely unremarked. Perhaps if this "speculative" material had been seriously considered by the real biographer it might have added considerably to our knowledge of Louisa herself. And yet, overall, the speculative material does not live up to the promises of the opening chapter. It is not as "evaluative daring and innovative in judgment" as we are told it will be. Some of it is pretty tame stuff and one wonders why the real biographer simply leaves it floating there, choosing to remain uncommitted about its biographical importance. The alternative text is, thus, in my opinion, a device that allows the real biographer to settle himself comfortably in the cocoon of divested responsibility. Brilliantly written and cleverly contrived, *Louisa* certainly deserved its success, part of which was due to its well-timed appearance. Its unconventional approach came like a breath of fresh air into a rather flat contemporary biographical scene and Matthews's ingenuity, imagination and willingness to take a risk all paid off handsomely. But even he must have entertained some doubts. His first choice of publisher, one of our strongest publishers of biography, turned *Louisa* down. No doubt their faces are still a trifle red. My opinion of *Louisa*, a highly entertaining book, is that it tells us as much about Brian Matthews as it does about Louisa Lawson.

Finally then if I could leave our new biographer with one simple piece of advice it would be to take note of the following wise words from Marchesa Iris Origo.

> I would say to the young biographer, who has upon his desk his first intriguing pile of papers, to examine them, if he can, with an almost blank mind: to let them produce their own effect. Later on

> the time will come to compare, to sift and to draw conclusions; but first he should listen without interrupting. Sometimes then, as he deciphers the faded ink, a phrase will stand out which reveals the hand that wrote it. He may see, as suddenly as, at the turn of a passage, one comes upon one's own image in a mirror, a living face. Then, in this fleeting moment, he may perhaps reach a faint apprehension – as near to the truth as we are ever likely to get – of what another [person] was like.

Implicit in those words is the age-old fundamental truth – it is the subject who is at the heart of biography, not the biographer.

The other word in the title of these lectures that requires some elaboration is "identity". As I have just attempted to indicate in my comments on biography, real identity is not easily established, in fact, may never be established. Identity, like beauty, is apt to lie in the eye and the prejudice of the beholder. How otherwise, for example, do we explain the differing identities bestowed on a man by, on the one hand, his mother, and, on the other, by his mother-in-law. Why, as another example, do so many Australians view the bushranger Ned Kelly and the Jolly Swagman with a taste for stolen mutton, as folk heroes when many others don't see them that way at all? I would identify Ned Kelly as a brooding, malevolent individual, made that way largely by his Irish convict ancestry and by the intense hatred he had inherited from his racial and religious background. Unless one is a zealot with the same conditioned outlook as Ned had I can't see how it is possible to identify him as a hero. It is equally as difficult, of course, to condemn him for it was true of all of his social and economic class, and especially those of Irish racial and religious backgrounds, as it was of the convicts in general, that they were "more sinned against than sinning". In the final analysis, while I admit that there were many compelling reasons that made him do what he did, I cannot come even close to hero-worshipping Ned. One obvious reason for that is that he was a murderer. But most of all, I think, because of the attitude reflected in that alleged last remark of his before he was hanged – the famous "Such is Life" comment. To me it's an unheroic, passionless, philosophical shrug of the shoulders about the enigma of life itself – and from one whom many have pictured as filled with flaming passions and extraordinary megalomania. The stolid "Such is Life" is no better, even it is a trifle more literary, than the abnegation of personal commitment that one senses in the popular modern philosophy, "that's the way the cookie crumbles",

or "that's the way the mop flops". I would personally then, not identify Ned Kelly among my folk heroes although there have been many good trees cut down to support his claims. Even that likeable and wise man, Douglas Stewart, tried to invest Ned and his gang and their murderous activities with an epic kind of grandeur. I am puzzled, too, about our national obsession with the "jolly swagman". I am, as no doubt you all are, well apprised of the alleged reason for his suicide – that it was his ultimate gesture of defiance towards the authorities trying to apprehend him. I think it was in a book about Baudelaire that suicide was defined as "the only heroic action open to modern man". What about, I humbly suggest, the much more heroic action, and certainly the much more Australian action, of "soldiering on"? And surely the swagman's demise must go down, anyway, as the most notorious example in our country's history of cutting off one's nose to spite one's face. Anybody who thinks that he has gained any kind of victory, even a moral victory, over his enemy by jumping into a watery grave, is, in my opinion, no moral or intellectual giant. I believe that his mates in the swaggie fraternity would have been much more direct. They would have said, quite bluntly, that the Jolly Swagman was not the full quid – in to-day's parlance about seventy cents in the dollar. Another aspect of his identity that I would also question is how he ever came to be described as the "jolly" swagman. However sunny his personality may once have been I'd say that he had very little to be jolly about in the end. Struggling for breath in the murky depths of a billabong is not an uproariously funny situation to be in. And finally, I wonder what another Paterson creation, "Saltbush Bill", or those real, authentic rogues of English literature, the Defoe or Fielding rogues, would have thought about their antipodean cousin. I think the latter would have shaken their heads in disbelief and scheduled him for a long stint of in-service training in the Defoe School for Rogues, where he would have been taught a *real* trick or two. Like jumping out of the billabong triumphantly brandishing the jumbuck and demanding a reward from the squatter for saving his precious sheep from drowning. Defoe had a couple of well-worn maxims that naive characters like the Jolly Swagman would have been taught to mark, learn and inwardly digest. For example, as the True Born Englishman said in Defoe's *The Shortest Way with Dissenters,*

> No man was ever yet so void of sense
> As to debate the right of self-defence

Drowning oneself would, in the Defoe School, have been regarded as a very suspect means of self-defence. Another piece of Defoe advice was that:

> He that will lie in a ditch and pray may depend upon it that he will lie in the ditch and die,

No doubt the School for Rogues would have translated that into antipodean slang, something along the lines of,

> He that will jump into the billabong with the jumbuck and drown may depend upon it that he has pulled the wool over his own eyes – or may depend upon it that he has not only had the chop but also lost the chops.

We have, as a nation, always admired ingenuity and quick-wittedness, especially when it is used by smaller fry against the Establishment. I can't see that the Jolly Swagman exhibited either of those qualities and I am, as I said, quite lost as to why he should have a spot for himself among our folk heroes. Unless, of course, it is simply another exhibition of our well-known national taste for irony.

Still on the subject of "identity" I would like to make another more serious, less facetious observation – how literary works, accepted and characterised as factual, even to some extent biographical, can produce varying interpretations of the identity of the social phenomena from which they sprang – how one can, in fact, *reveal* and another *conceal* identity.

Marcus Clarke's *His Natural Life* could, I believe, be truly regarded as the *biography* of the Convict System. By the time *His Natural Life* had been written for serial publication in the *Australian Journal* 1870-72, and revised for book publication 1874, the Convict System was over and it could be begun to be seen in perspective. Clarke not only had the benefit of this hindsight, he also had access to a wealth of convict records – diaries, letters and official reports. The fact that he listed the records and other sources he had consulted in an appendix to the novel gives an air of authenticity to the work. That kind of validation seldom, of course, accompanies fiction, even historical fiction; it is more in keeping with academic treatises; indeed it was once obligatory in what used to pass for biography. Clarke maintains, and uses his Appendix of sources to confirm, that the events he recounts, the scenes he describes – sensational and bizarre though they sometimes seem to be – are all factual or at least factually based. It is especially interesting to trace Clarke's attempt to confer even more verisimilitude on the book version of the novel. He changed the beginning and the ending of the serial version reducing the original long prologue of 40,000 words to about one twentieth its size.

The serial version had concluded with hero, Rufus Dawes, escaping from Norfolk Island to survive and prosper, ultimately to return to England. Clarke had the later book version conclude with Dawes drowning while escaping. Only in the romance, then, was the innocent (or the guilty for that matter) allowed to escape the System. In real life there was no escape. That had always been the message of the System itself – and it was certainly the message of *His Natural Life*. These two changes concentrated almost the whole of the experiences undergone in the novel on the System and on Rufus Dawes within it. All the most horrible features of the System are carefully and authentically described – the cruelty, the floggings, the sexual debasement, the murders, the suicides, the cannibalism. Their effect is greatly intensified because Dawes, hopelessly enclosed within the System, becomes the figure on which the total brutality is focused. In spite of the contortions of plot as Clarke plays with the readers' hopes for the eventual reclamation of Dawes, those contortions never really distract from the main strength of the book, its minute examination of the psychological impact of the System on the innocent victim. In that examination the System consistently and convincingly takes the central role throughout. That is why I see *His Natural Life* as the biography of the Convict System and why I see it as establishing the real identity of the System. I would, however, strongly dispute the claim that Rolf Boldrewood's *Robbery Under Arms* provides us with the true identity of the bushranging phenomenon in Australia. Boldrewood certainly looked upon himself as an authentic chronicler of the Australian scene, claiming in the Preface to the novel to have based it on a solidly factual approach. He may point, by way of proof, to the inclusion in his book of the barely disguised bushrangers, Ben Hall (Wall in *Robbery Under Arms*), Mad Dog Morgan (Moran in *Robbery Under Arms*) and Frank Gardiner (Lardner in *Robbery Under Arms*), and to actual exploits such as the bailing-up of the Eugowra gold escort and other similar events. But, in contrast with *His Natural Life*, this injection of historical facts and personalities does little to create the air of authenticity and realism that Boldrewood was seeking. *Robbery Under Arms* never becomes a biography of bushranging – it is never more than a glamorised adventure story about gentlemen bushrangers. The truth of Boldrewood's book is severely compromised by his reliance on the conventions of the romance.

In the novel the bushranger, whether in the guise of the glamorous, mysterious figure of Captain Starlight, or the solidly decent but misled Dick Marston, is seen as a romance hero rather than a criminal. And the bushranging itself is romantically coloured also. The illicit activities – rustling, hold-ups, shootings – are portrayed as exciting and daring

adventures, devoid of spite and viciousness. Shots *are* certainly exchanged but nobody expects to hurt anybody – so nobody is really at fault when a bullet occasionally finds its mark. Clearly this is where realism disappears from *Robbery Under Arms*. I wonder, for example, would the three policemen killed by the Kelly gang at Stringybark Creek have agreed that it was all just bad luck, all good clean bushranger fun that unfortunately went wrong. Nor is there in *Robbery Under Arms* death by hanging for the guilty Dick Marston. He is reprieved and, of course, ultimately gets the girl as well. The parallel is with the serial version, the romance version of *His Natural Life*, but not with the final form of Clarke's novel.

Thus Clarke's *His Natural Life* shows literature revealing the true identity of the phenomenon – the Convict System – from which it sprang, whereas Boldrewood's *Robbery Under Arms* distorts the identity of the bushranging phenomenon which it purports to illustrate.

Chapter 2

1. THE SETTLEMENT EXPERIENCE IN COLONIAL AUSTRALIA

A major phenomenon of the colonial period, and a rich source of biographical writing that both searches for and ultimately illustrates the identity of the phenomenon from which it sprang, is the Immigrant or Settlement experience. The most basic and original form of Immigrant or Settlement literature was the Handbook or Guidebook. Astute British publishers became aware quite early of the possibility of profit in providing intending emigrants with practical information about the Australian colony. Since much of that information was available only from the experience of those who had spent time in the colony it was a type of writing that was biographically based. The first guide books were largely documentary, containing advice of a practical, utilitarian nature on the conditions existing in the colony and the essentials for success in the immigration experience but they also contained some personal and biographical detail, mostly the writer's subjective response to the situation and environment which he was describing.

Among the first such documentary books was ex-convict David Dickinson Mann's still well-thought-of descriptive and statistical *The Present Picture of New South Wales*, published in 1811. The remarkable success a few years later (three editions in four years) of William Charles Wentworth's dryly titled *A Statistical, Historical and Political Description of the Colony of New South Wales*, which aimed through its enthusiastic account to promote the colony and encourage immigrants of all classes, led to a great burst of similar migrant handbooks. James Atkinson's *An Account of the State of Agriculture and Grazing in New South Wales* (1826), Peter Cunningham's *Two Years in New South Wales* (1827) and Robert Dawson's *The Present State of Australia* (1830), although not biographical works *per se*, contained a strong autobiographical flavour. Atkinson (father of novelist, Louisa Atkinson), was a practical farmer in

the colony; Cunningham was a surgeon who had made four trips to the colony in convict ships as well as spending two years and a considerable amount of his money in the colony; and Dawson was chief agent of the Australian Agricultural Company, and later a prominent landowner on his own behalf. All three had much to contribute from their own personal experiences. Later Guide books, although still offering similar practical advice – for example, shipping information, what to bring in terms of capital and equipment and what the agricultural and commercial prospects were – became more colourful and exotic, the advice and information frequently interspersed with autobiographical or quasi-autobiographical incidents.

The peak of the Guide book period came in the decades 1830 and 1840, coinciding with the peak of the bounty systems of immigration. At its best it is exemplified in the work of the Sidney brothers, Samuel and John. Samuel, who was never in Australia, flourished under the deceptive pseudonym, "A Bushman", and was the driving force behind the collaboration. His brother, John Sidney, spent six years in New South Wales and his experiences and observations formed the basis of the 1847 volume, *A Voice from the Far Interior of Australia.* Its success led to their best-known and most influential guide book, *Sidney's Australian Hand-Book: How to Settle and Succeed in Australia* (1848), which sold several thousand copies within a year, and a weekly, later a monthly, journal called *Sidney's Emigrant Journal,* published 1848-50. The Sidney guide books and others offered the first real hints of the identity of the settlement experience. Not always strictly honest, however, they tended towards an over-enthusiastic evaluation of the colony, as some immigrants found to their cost. They were the first in a long line of books that gradually built up the idyllic Arcadian image of Australia that Coral Lansbury in her 1970 work, *Arcady in Australia,* felt was the somewhat fallacious view of the country implanted in the minds of would-be immigrants.

Several of those who were to become the best-known chroniclers of the settlement experience in the mid-century period had actually progressed from the guide books *genre* to autobiography and thence to fiction, or autobiographical fiction. Thomas McCombie, for example, published a series of short factual accounts of Australian life in a contemporary magazine before writing the novel, *Arabin: Or, The Adventures of a Colonist in New South Wales* (1845); Alexander Harris wrote much of his own personal story in *Settlers and Convicts* (1847) before giving freer rein to the imagination in *The Emigrant Family,* two years later in 1849; William Howitt wrote *Land, Labour and Gold* (1855), which, based on his

diaries and letters, was one of the most accurate and comprehensive of the many similar accounts of colonial life, before turning it into fiction in *Tallangetta, the Squatter's Home* (1857). The time lag in these cases is interesting. Two years was about the length of time needed to bring about the transformation of the documentary – dutifully accurate and mainly factual – to the novel or romance, much more imaginative and lively, and, of course, much more popular and profitable.

Examining these works and the works of other writers such as Mary Vidal, Louisa Meredith, Charles Rowcroft, Catherine Helen Spence and John George Lang, Frederick Sinnett in *The Fiction Fields of Australia,* published in the *Journal of Australasia* in 1856, was moved to complain that Australian novels of the time were "too apt to be books of travel in disguise". But to criticise contemporary creative writers for being captivated by the amazingly rich source material offered by this new land is surely to harbour totally unrealistic critical expectations. It might well have seemed to Sinnett that the incidents and experiences announced in the chapter headings of McCombie's *Arabin,* for example, 'A Night in the Australian Bush', 'The Abode of a Settler', 'A Bush Party' and the incidents of Harris's *The Emigrant Family,* for example, 'The Dying Bushranger', 'The Stolen Cattle' and 'Depredations of the Savages', do appear to substantiate his travel-book gibe, yet these experiences were, if not the staple of, certainly common enough events in Australian bush life. Of all these works, both documentary and fiction, I want to single out only Alexander Harris's twin books, *Settlers and Convicts* and *The Emigrant Family,* partly because they are the best of the *genres,* autobiography and autobiographical fiction, and partly because the two of them combine to give us what I am prepared to call the "biography" of the settlement experience in colonial Australia. It is customary to regard Harris and Charles Rowcroft as the main commentators on the settlement experience. Unlike Rowcroft, who fashioned his largely fictional *Tales of the Colonies* (1843) out of a mere four years' experience in Tasmania, 1821-25, Alexander Harris spent, as the subtitle of his *Settlers and Convicts* (1847) suggests, sixteen years labouring in the Australian bush as a timber worker and owner and builder of his own station. Rowcroft's book, subtitled *The Adventures of an Emigrant*, purports to be the review by an emigrant, one William Thornley, of his twenty years' experience in the colony. Although the link between *Tales of the Colonies* and the emigrant guide-book can been seen in the conclusion where Thornley offers his life in the colony as "a model of the individual process of emigration and proof of the success certain to follow prudence, industry and perseverance", it is essentially

romance fiction. Rowcroft was, as John Barnes has said in his *Henry Kingsley and Colonial Fiction*, "plagued by what he considered to be the necessity of adventures". Thus he subjected Thornley to the whole array of colonial calamities and dangers. That, in itself, is not necessarily a basis for criticism but the extravagant adventures themselves and not the personal account of the hero's struggle to survive them become the *raison d'etre* of the work. Thus the character or identity of the settlement experience is not truly and accurately pictured nor does *Tales of the Colonies* have the validity of the memoir or autobiography.

In *Settlers and Convicts* Harris's stated intention was "to announce an idea of facts as they occur in Australian everyday life". The motive – and motif – of the work is thus, quite clearly, identification of that everyday life. Harris presents both a detached factual yet intensely personal account of the Emigrant Mechanic's life in the bush. Initially he spends some time in Sydney where he is soon acquainted with the viciousness of the Convict System. Then he becomes a carpenter in the Five Islands (Illa Warra) district, after that a sawyer and cedar cutter, first along the Hawkesbury River and later as far north as the Manning River. His attempts to join the ranks of the squatters lead him to the "Australian prairies" of New South Wales where he discovers a good "run" and sets up his own station. As the years pass there are the inevitable accompaniments to the colonial bush life – brushes with bushrangers, blacks and the convict system, with cattle stealers, greedy squatters, bushfires and floods. Finally after marriage and parenthood and years of running his far-out station the Mechanic returns to England. The autobiographical strength of *Settlers and Convicts* lies in Harris's capacity to convey to the reader the exact kind of man that he is, not only through the introspective musings of the narrator himself but through his reactions to events and incidents in the narrative. We know before he meets the problem of the blacks, for example, how he will react to it. A pragmatist with an instinctive sense of compassion and fair play he sees both the Aboriginal and the settler's points of view and seeks individual solutions to individual situations, wasting no time on complex philosophical approaches that are totally impractical in the hair trigger environment of frontier life. Harris himself is ever-present in the narrative, a character whose strengths, weaknesses, prejudices and fears are so sensitively portrayed that it is remarkably easy to feel that we are reading a work of genuine personal reminiscence.

To sustain my argument that *Settlers and Convicts* with some help from its associated autobiographical novel, *The Emigrant Family*, provides us with the essential biography of the settlement experience, I would point

to the serious and detailed examination it makes of both the practical and philosophical problems and dilemmas of the settlement experience. Among other things, it describes and criticises the land regulations, the iniquities of the convict system; it discusses the moral and religious needs of the population and the mishandling of the Aboriginal situation. It includes advice and guidance for potential migrants, ranging from the best method of becoming a squatter to the provisioning of an outback station. The strange and often stark landscape is also effectively and sensitively described as is its effect on the settler. There are also, just as with the Convict System in Clarke's *His Natural Life*, all the striking features of colonial life, including the varied and ever-present hazards of the Bush itself in frontier times.

The Emigrant Family, while reinforcing with plentiful illustrative anecdotes all that *Settlers and Convicts* had shown two years earlier, suffered somewhat from the author's necessity to include the romance element. When Harris deserts, in his own words, "the simple copy from actual daily life" and attempts to fashion plot and character which will, again in his words, "interest the lovers of romance", he becomes, unfortunately, not much different from the usual romance writer. But the fictional *The Emigrant's Family* (1849) did help to usher in a new half century which saw the documentary and autobiographical momentum slow considerably as writers strove to incorporate their observations in mainly fictional form. The gap that existed in kind between Harris's *Settlers and Convicts* and the archetypal settler romance of the second half of the century, *The Recollections of Geoffry Hamlyn* by Henry Kingsley, which viewed Australia as a pastoral Eden populated by emigré English gentlemen and women, has been so well documented by a host of critics that I don't propose to expound further on it, except to say that I think *Geoffry Hamlyn* had quite a bit that was good in it and I think that Joseph Furphy's derisive dismissal of it as "exceedingly trashy and misleading", is itself rather misleading and somewhat unfair. Trashy or not, *Geoffry Hamlyn*, published in 1859, certainly influenced the direction of Australian fiction for the remainder of the century.

The semi-fictional, semi-factual picture of life on the land in Australia in the latter part of the century is continued in the novels of Rosa Praed who was brought up on a station in the Burnett district, inland from Maryborough. When she was seven the massacre by Aborigines of the Fraser family of Hornet Bank station led her father, Thomas Murray-Prior, later a Queensland politician, to leave the district. At 21 she married Arthur Campbell Praed and they lived on his station on Port Curtis Island for

several years before moving to England to live. There she established herself as a popular novelist and dramatist, returning to Australia for only one visit, some twenty years later. She wrote nearly fifty novels or collections of stories, twenty or so having Australian associations, as titles such as the following indicate – *An Australian Heroine* (1880), *The Head Station* (1885), *Australian Life. Black and White* (1885) and *The Romance of a Station* (1889). Where the title was not recognisably Australian she usually added a sub-title to specify the Australian content, e.g. *A Novel of Australian Life* or *A Story of Australian Life*. She also wrote the predominantly autobiographical *My Australian Girlhood* (1902).

Throughout her long life and in spite of her active participation in the sophisticated cultural life of Europe and England she remained deeply responsive to her Australian experiences, making great use of memories of scene and incidents that she had observed or heard of as a girl and young woman in Australia. Thus station life, the Bush, society and politics form the background to her novels and help to identify the life style of the Bush in late colonial times.

Her intention was, in her words, to depict "certain phases of Australian life in which the main interest and dominant passions of the persons concerned are identical with those which might readily present themselves upon a European stage, but which, directly and indirectly, are influenced by striking natural surroundings, and by the conditions of being inseparable from the youth of a vigorous and impulsive nation". In her novels "the persons concerned" that she speaks of in that quote are usually young women and a strong autobiographical flavour is observed in her depiction of them for they mostly reflect some aspect of her own nature and character and undergo similar mental deprivation to that which she had experienced as a young woman in the bush. Maud, in *The Squatter's Dream*, for example, is driven almost to despair by the drab insularity and monotony of station life. In her autobiography, *My Australian Girlhood*, Praed reflects on the similar feelings that she had when she was a young wife on the Port Curtis Island station. Although Praed theorised that she was attempting to replace the melodrama of some of the earlier Australian fiction with a realistic portrayal of colonial life, in practice she relied heavily on the stock clichés of the romantic novel. Yet her writings do reflect, most strongly, the deadening impact of bush life on the women of the day, that reflection arising from the truth of her own experiences. There would have been, throughout the second half of the nineteenth century and in the early years of the twentieth, many Australian women who would

have borne frustrated and miserable witness to the truth contained in Praed's account of bush life.

Henry Handel Richardson and Miles Franklin, also contributed with their biographical fiction to the picture of the colonial settlement experience, although not as, in the case of the earlier writers, from their own prolonged participation in it.

Richardson's *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* broke the long-established pattern of settlement literature which, being mostly success stories, was part of the Utopian vision of this new land. Richardson chose the opposite approach denying that utopian version. Hers was a story of failure, an account of a human life breaking down under the stress not only of its own intellectual and spiritual ferment but also of the pressures of the colonial environment that offered material advancement and achievement but withheld, because of the disadvantages and hazards of its crude, raw harshness, the full emotional and spiritual satisfaction that might have followed from that material success.

Miles Franklin in the biographical *All That Swagger* and the *The Brent of Bin Bin* novels looked back nostalgically on the dynasties established by the pioneer pastoralists, dynasties that she charted from the 1830s to the 1930s. In *My Brilliant Career* she provided an extension of the picture offered by Rosa Praed of the life of women in the settlement experience. In that autobiographical novel she gives three perfect cameos of that experience — the life of women at the prosperous Caddigat station where their role was to maintain within the homestead a gracious life-style more in keeping with the rural aristocracy of England than Australia; the second, a view of the other side of the coin, the grim, physically-demanding and soul-destroying existence of the women on small and impoverished selections; and the third, the emptiness and frustration that filled the lives of the young, talented girls in the isolation of the Bush.

2. THE 1890s

By the 1890s, the colonial period in Australia was virtually at an end and an era of radicalism and strident nationalism had begun. It was a time, said Patricia Rolfe, the biographer of the *Bulletin*, "when the shell cracked and the native born emerged". By the Nineties the population balance had certainly shifted dramatically in the native-born's favour. The 1861 census revealed that just over fifty percent of the population had been born in the United Kingdom, whereas the 1891 figures showed that seventy-five percent had been born in Australia. Thus 3 in every 4 were Australian-born when the legendary decade began.

Whether the Nineties was such a definitive decade (a belief quite early cemented in place in Australian literary and social history) has been much questioned in recent analyses of Australian literature and culture. But in spite of the questioning there is undoubtedly a substantial body of evidence to support Vance Palmer's concept of a legendary decade, without parallel in our brief history. Equally as convinced as Palmer have been writers such as G.A. Taylor with his *Those Were the Days* (1918), A.W. Jose with his *The Romantic Nineties* (1933), Randolph Bedford with his autobiographical *Naught to Thirty-Three* (1944) and Norman Lindsay with *Bohemians of the Bulletin* (1965). Their accounts like that of Palmer's *The Legend of the Nineties* (1954), were suffused to some extent by the rosy glow of retrospection as they reflected nostalgically on a hectic and vital period that saw the first electoral success of the working man's political party, the achievement of Australian nationhood through the federation of the States and the birth of a distinctive Australian literature, in the *Bulletin* under Archibald and A.G. Stephens. That literature reflected and affirmed in story, sketch, bush ballad and lyrical verse, nationalistic pride, egalitarianism, utopianism, republicanism, male chauvinism and the importance of the Bush. Its distinctiveness has long been said to have been summed up by Joseph Furphy's now famous description of his novel, *Such is Life*, published in 1903, "temper democratic; bias offensively Australian".

The debate about the legend of the Nineties (or the myth) still goes on but I don't propose to participate in it. I want to look briefly at the writing of the period, writing that did not, like the literature of the Colonial period, seek to *discover* the identity of the period but rather to

create that identity, or at the very least to *confirm* and *illustrate* the identity that the literature believed existed. That literature has often been accused of having brought into being a concept of the Australian national character that is invalid, exaggerated, or at least one-sided. But the view of the Australian national character that emerged from the Nineties, the product largely of the literature of the day, is still for many people the only real image of Australia and Australians that there has ever been. That image may not, almost certainly does not, exist to-day but it is still, for many, the source of whatever national identity we have ever had.

I should begin by pointing to the role of the *Bulletin* in *shaping*, not merely *illustrating*, the identity of the period. When the Nineties began, the *Bulletin*, founded in 1880 by J.F. Archibald and John Haynes, had become one of the country's most popular magazines with a weekly circulation of more than 80,000. Beginning as economically and racially isolationist and politically and culturally anti-British, it had, in the Nineties, become more positive about its demands for the Australian people, advocating republicanism, democratic franchise, land taxation, state education, penal reform and "A United Australia and Protection against the World". But its most conspicuous stance was the cultural chauvinism that it encouraged among its writers and its most conspicuous creation – in a magazine identified by many regular and idiosyncratic features – was the idealised bushman stereotype. Late in its first decade it had christened itself the Bushman's Bible, largely, one suspects, because of Archibald's own personal enthusiasm for the Bush and Bush life, an enthusiasm not fully shared by all his writers. The stereotype bushman appeared in the *Bulletin*'s pages in various heroic or worthy forms – one week as the Lone Hand (Archibald's name for the rugged individual of the Bush or the diggings) standing up to the Fat Capitalist in a Livingston Hopkins cartoon; at another time as Paterson's Man From Snowy River or Clancy of the Overflow; or as Steelman or Mitchell in a Henry Lawson story; or as a selection battler from Steele Rudd. The *Bulletin*'s celebration was of the bushman rather than the Bush, the Bush being mostly seen as the testing environment in which the fine qualities of the bushman were brought out. But, spelt with a capital B, allegedly because of Lawson's insistence, the Bush began to appear as far more than a mere geographic entity, a place on the map. It took on the personality of a living thing, often harsh and unforgiving, but something uniquely Australian nevertheless, something that the people could recognise and claim as their own, something that was born of the interaction of the land itself and the labours of generations of white settlers, who were mostly native-born.

Under Archibald and Stephens the *Bulletin* fostered the conviction that if a truly worthwhile way of life were to be possible in this new land, it would not, could not, be built in the cities that were infected with the dross and evil of the old world. It, Utopia itself, could only be built in the Bush with a capital B. Archibald constantly urged his writers to look "up-country", to the Bush, for their material. Contributors to the *Bulletin* in the 1890s included many names now established in our literary folk lore – Paterson, Lawson, Will Ogilvie, Barcroft Boake, Edward Dyson, Steele Rudd, Joseph Furphy, Barbara Baynton, Mary Gilmore. "The Man from Snowy River" was first published in the *Bulletin* in 1890, following on from the success of "Clancy of the Overflow" in the 1889 Christmas issue under the signature of one who called himself "The Banjo". Lawson's poetry and prose had found an even earlier outlet in the *Bulletin*, his republican and radical poems, "A Song of the Republic", "The Army of the Rear" and "Faces in the Street", appearing in 1887 and 1888. Dyson's wonderfully whimsical story, "A Golden Shanty", was published as "A Profitable Pub" – an equally apt title in my opinion – in the Christmas issue of 1887. Barbara Baynton's grim story "The Tramp", which strips away any romance from Bush life, was published in 1896.

Both Archibald and Stephens, however, took their emphasis on things Australian far beyond the one subject of the Bush ethos. In the literature that appeared in the famous Red Page, the distinctive outside page of the magazine, they attempted to idealise many facets of the Australian experience and to convince their readers that a whole new political and social future was not only possible in this country but was in fact, almost here for the taking if Australians had the character and confidence to reach out for it. Not everyone, of course, shared the *Bulletin*'s viewpoint. Even on the matter of interpretation of the Bush there was argument, as the so-called *Bulletin* debate in 1892-93 about the true nature of Bush life – about the identity of the Bush, in fact – revealed. Some, like Lawson, clearly believed that writers were betraying their literary integrity when they fabricated an idealistic picture of the Bush simply to foster or further the arousal of nationalistic pride. It was Lawson's opinion that such writers far exceeded their proper functions, becoming myth makers – not myth interpreters – creating myths that they then presented as substance. The *Bulletin* debate ultimately boiled down – a process much favoured by Archibald – to the question of the responsibility of writers to describe and interpret their subjects truthfully and realistically – pretty much the old literary confrontation between Romance and Realism.

Lawson's own view of the Bush and Bush life and of society in general – a jaundiced view, according to Paterson and others – arose out of the harsh circumstances of his early life and experiences. His autobiographical article, "'Pursuing Literature' in Australia", shows how much he, too, is intent on imprinting his own kind of identity on the Bush experience, just as Archibald and Paterson were imprinting theirs.

> [I] saw selectors slaving their lives away in dusty holes among the barren ridges: saw one or two carried home, in the end, on a sheet of bark; the old men worked till they died. Saw how the gaunt selectors' wives worked and toiled. Saw elder sons stoop-shouldered old men at 30. Noted, in dusty patches in the scrubs, the pile of chimney stones, a blue-gum slab or two, and the remains of the fence – the ultimate result of 10 years', 15 years', and 20 years' hard, hopeless graft by strong men who died like broken-down bullocks.

In such recollections, in the many stories he wrote about the Bush, and in the poems of the *Bulletin* debate – "Up the Country", "The City Bushman" and "Poets of the Tomb" – he attempts to demolish the Arcadian image of the Bush that was widely held. The outback was not, he declared, a landscape of shining rivers and sunlit plains, peopled by fulfilled and contented men and women living exemplary and worthwhile lives. It was a callous, vindictive and unpredictable land, parched and scorched for long periods, flooded in between. Most of its inhabitants were poverty-stricken, work-worn, battling incessantly against natural disasters, voracious banks and greedy absentee landlords. Dip into Lawson as often as you like but you'll search in vain for Arcadia. He left out of his story, "The Union Buries Its Dead", as he laconically tells us, those two traditional Arcadian images, the golden wattle and the equally golden concept of mateship, because of the simple fact that neither was present. Such romantic appurtenances may exist in the romance of Arcadia. They certainly did not in Lawson's Bush.

Lawson was not the only demolisher of Australian Arcadia. True to his statement of a "romance but a grim one" in the bush, Barcroft Boake in his "Where the Dead Men Lie" pictured the outback "strangled by thirst and fierce privation" and its people in thrall to the absentee "Moneygrub". Even the normally romantic and cheerful Will Ogilvie was depressed by the

ghosts of "Abandoned Selections", mute reminders of past failures and tragedies.

> I stand by your fenceless gardens
> And weep for the splintered staves;
> I watch by your empty ingles
> And mourn by your white-railed graves;
> I see from your crumbled doorways
> The whispering white forms pass,
> And shiver to hear dead horses
> Crop-cropping the long gray grass.

Deflatory in a different way is Victor Daley's ironic "In Arcady". Daley had no fear of the traditional Bush hazards – heat, privation, poverty, discomfort – but "Up Country" life offered a much greater threat – death from total boredom.

He begins:

> The brown hills brood around me, crowned with gums
> of sombre sheen;
> They look like drowsy giants all in smoking caps of green.
> There's not a voice familiar, or a face that's known to me:
> The Lord He knows, but I suppose that this is Arcady

And he concludes:

> There's rest and peace in plenty here, and eggs and milk
> to spare'
> The scenery is calm and sane, and wholesome is the air;
> The folk are kind, the cows behave like cousins unto me...
> But please the Lord, on Monday morn, I'm leaving Arcady.

To sustain the Arcadian image on the other hand came Banjo Paterson and his cohorts who sang lustily and reverently of the Bush with a Capital B. Paterson's response to Lawson in the *Bulletin* debate were the poems "In Defence of the Bush" and "An Answer to Various Bards" which acknowledge the presence of the minor irritants of the Bush (dust, heat, flies etc.) and even the darker calamities (droughts, floods, death) but point to other compensations – "the vision splendid of the sunlit plains

extended", the camaraderie of the Bush, the romance of the outback life as against the monotony and tedium of city existence, and delight in the Bush's physical beauty. Paterson's creation of that particular identity goes *on* and *on*, with feeling.

> At dawn of day we could feel the breeze
> That stirred the boughs of the sleeping trees,
> And brought a breath of the fragrance rare
> That comes and goes in that scented air.
> For the trees and grass and the shrubs contain
> A dry sweet scent on the saltbush plain.
> For those that love it and understand
> The saltbush plain is a wonderland.
> A wondrous country where Nature's ways
> Were revealed to me in the droving days.

In his own particular brand of rich prose A.G. Stephens, another strong moulder of the identity of the Nineties, supports Paterson's view.

> There are not wanting adumbrations of the Beauty of Australia – glimpses of the secret enchantment in which the strange feline land – half fierce, half-caressing – holds those who have listened to the gum trees' whispered spells or drunk the magic philter of landscapes flooded with Nature's opiate tints.

Paterson and Stephens both convey the idea that there are some unfortunates who are congenitally insensitive to the appeal of the Bush. The great majority of Australians are, according to Paterson, instinctively attuned to the spirit of the Bush. They are of the Brotherhood. The few, who are not, are to be pitied, and pilloried. "Lawson", says Stephens, "hates the bush; he is blind to its beauty, deaf to the cheerful strain heard continually through the sighing of the wilderness. His six months' journey to the Queensland border in 1892 – the basis of all that he has written of Australia's 'outback' – was like the journey of a damned soul swagging it in Purgatory". "Lawson", he charges, "will never comprehend the Bush, because he is not in tune with it, does not feel it." The spell of the Bush was also felt strongly by city people – perhaps even more strongly by them than by those who actually lived in the Bush. Distance lends

enchantment, certainly. There has always existed in man a natural yearning for the simple life where satisfaction and fulfilment are thought to be automatically endowed – they come with the territory, so to speak. The present movement back to the Bush, with young people leaving the cities to bring up their families in the Bush, has not only been caused by the difficulty of buying homes in the cities but by the belief that the quality of life is better in the Bush. Such a feeling was also prevalent in the Nineties and the early part of this century.

Melbourne poet, "Furnley Maurice", expresses that yearning for the enhanced version of life that the Bush appears to offer in the envious and regretful remarks of the city clerk, who only glimpses the wonder of the Bush life on his once-a-year visit to the Melbourne show.

> Why didn't someone tell me 'ere 'twas too late to learn
> This life with its fire and vigour, by brake and anguished burn
> Gorgeous and ghastly and rare,
> Flourished out there, out there?

An extension of this increasing attraction to the Bush and reverence for it is seen in the attitude of the poet, Bernard O'Dowd, who envisaged the Bush (with a *very* capital B) as the matrix of Australia's future greatness. His long poem, *The Bush*, sees Australia of the future as a temple of "freedom and glory", awaited down the ages by all who "toiled for truth" and "fought for liberty". The life force of that future greatness, O'Dowd believed, would be the Bush, the combined physical and spiritual entity of the land itself. The Bush would be the major shaping instrument of Australia's spirit and outlook. Francis Adams had a similar feeling. He found "all that is genuinely characteristic in Australia and Australians springing from this heart of the land [i.e. the Bush]."

The feeling that the Bush is an inspiriting, almost sacred power, voiced by these writers in this period, has carried on through much of our literature. It is present in "Furnley Maurice's" poem, "The Gully" and in the poetry of John Shaw Neilson, Douglas Stewart, Roland Robinson and most of the Jindyworobaks, in the writings of Mary Durack, Patrick White, Randolph Stow, Les Murray, Geoffrey Lehmann and dozens of others.

Coinciding with and complementing the idealisation of the Bush in the literature of the Nineties came the Heidelberg school of painters, Roberts, McCubbin, Streeton and Conder, whose work also added significantly to the nationalistic tone of the period. Although not

concerned exclusively with the Bush, the Australian Impressionists often painted scenes and incidents from Bush life. McCubbin's *The Lost Child* (1886) and *Down on His Luck* (1889), which had the swagman as its centrepiece, as well as *Bush Burial* (1890), illustrated, in the Lawson manner, the hardship and melancholy of pioneer life in the Bush, while Tom Roberts, with *Shearing the Rams* (1889) and *The Breakaway* (1891), was more in tune with Paterson, conveying the vitality and manliness of outback activities. The Australian landscape, too, was interpreted afresh by the artists of the period, more emphasis being given to the pastel haziness of sky and mountains and to the sense of lightness and space. It was, in its own particular way, an idealisation of the special beauty of the Australian scene and an identification of that beauty.

On the other features that were part of the particular identity of the Nineties – nationalism and radicalism especially – there was much more general accord among the writers. Paterson although not as obsessed as Lawson with the inequalities and injustices suffered by the lower orders, was often openly radical in his verse, given, of course, that his vision of "Faces in the Street" would have been less stark from the elevated comfort of his upstairs city office than Lawson's would have been at the interface on the pavement.

In "A Bushman's Song" Paterson speaks out for the ordinary bush worker, the drover and shearer, against the squatter and the absentee landlord,

> I asked a cove for shearin' once along the Marthaguy;
> 'We shear non-union here,' says he.
> 'I call it scab', says I.

He is critical too of the absentee landlord who takes over Kiley's Run after it falls into the bank's hands.

> The owner lives in England now
> Of Kiley's Run
> He knows a racehorse from cow;
> But that is all he knows of stock.
> His chiefest care is how to dock
> Expenses, and he sends from town
> To cut the shearers' wages down
> On Kiley's Run.

The most passionate voices raised in objection to the inequalities in Australian life, especially in the context of the depressed labour market that followed the collapse of the boom of the 1880s and the failure of the union strikes in 1890-91 and 1894, were perhaps those of Lawson and William Lane. Lawson's radicalism dated from the late 1880s when rural prosperity vanished and Bush people were forced into the cities to do labouring work and men like him waited at four o'clock in the morning outside the *Herald* office striking matches to read the newly-posted Employment columns from that day's paper. Twenty years old, Lawson dreamed, he said, of "dying on the barricades to the roar of the Marseillaise". His radicalism was expressed in his poems of social and political protest such as "The Watch on the Kerb", "Faces in the Street", "Freedom on the Wallaby", "Second Class Wait Here" and "The Army of the Rear". In his autobiographical fragment he told how all his life he worked for the Cause (with a Capital C) – "Australian Unionism and Democracy".

Leon Cantrell, whose volume on the 1890s in the *Portable Australian Authors* series, has been valuable in counterbalancing the exaggerated earlier versions of the Nineties, but which, like most attempts at balancing, sometimes succeeds in sending the scales dipping down too far, sees the *Bulletin* as not being as zealous in its radicalism as it has sometimes been credited (or debited) with. I think it is a fair comment. The *Bulletin* had to survive commercially so there was need for some restraint in its choice of targets. The same restraint certainly did not bother the arch-radical of the day, William Lane, who, when threatened by Brisbane capitalists with the withdrawal of advertising from his newspaper, the *Boomerang*, promptly sold the newspaper and took on the editorship of the *Worker* so that he would not be gagged.

Lane had come to Australia from America and England in 1885, a strongly confirmed radical socialist, with the intention of establishing socialism in Australia by way of the federalisation of the trade union movement. By the middle of 1890, guided by Lane and W.G. Spence, that federalisation was well under way, bushworkers and shearers joining hands with tradesmen from the towns and cities and seamen on the ships. The great "Phalanx of the Unskilled", as Lane called it, was forming into an army, inspired by the propaganda from radical newspapers, including the *Boomerang* and the Queensland *Worker* in Brisbane, and their Sydney counterparts the *Worker* and the *Australian Workman*. The war came too quickly for the unions, however, and capitalism, protected by an abundant supply of labour in the depressed years of the early 1890s, easily withstood the challenge. During the strike years, 1890-91, Lane was editor

of the Queensland *Worker* and wrote a novel in 1892, *The Workingman's Paradise*, another propaganda weapon to arouse the militant spirit of the Unionists.

In the Preface to the novel – the proceeds of which were to go to aid the families of the strike leaders gaoled in 1891 he declared that it was his intention "to explain unionism a little to those outside it and Socialism a little to all who cared to read, whether unionist or not". The central characters in the novel were a Queensland bushman, Ned Hawkins, and a Sydney dressmaker, Nellie Lawton. The pair were supposedly modelled on two young socialists of the time, Mary Cameron (later Dame Mary Gilmore) and her supposed fiancé, Dave Stevenson, nephew of Robert Louis Stevenson. *The Workingman's Paradise* runs the whole gamut of the social deprivation experience to which Lane believed the working class in Australian cities such as Sydney was subjected. Blatantly propagandist, the novel was rapturously greeted in the ranks of the unions where it was almost a compulsory purchase along with one's union ticket. Disappointed with the failure of the strikes of 1890-91 Lane decided to leave Australia with a group of frustrated unionists and their families to set up a utopian socialist community (New Australia) in the wilds of Paraguay. In the pages of the Journal of the New Australia Association Lane reflected, in emotive rhetoric, on the dismal prospects facing the worker in Australia and the glorious alternative in the Paraguay. He offered his readers "the Creed of Humanity" – Utopian socialism, and through it "a new religion, a new faith, a new ideal".

> We wish to speak a word of hope to those who are weary and sick at heart with long struggling against unjust conditions . . . those who have struggled all their lives through the deserts of despair only to see their bravest efforts defeated and their fondest hopes crushed by the cruel necessities of a corrupt and dying civilisation. Perhaps within the breasts of those who see no hope of reform except from the solidarity of the workers, and no hope of that solidarity while conditions compel us to sell ourselves and each other for bread, we can wake a fresh hope and make them feel like having another try for the right way out before giving up in despair.

Lane's shining vision of utopian socialism produced a missionary glow in thousands of Australians of all classes. Not all of them went to Paraguay which soon degenerated into a fiasco, chiefly because human nature proved unequal to the purity and intensity of Lane's dream. Radicalism and the fight for social justice did not, of course, vanish with Lane's departure. The increasing success of the political wing of the radical movement – the Labor Party – throughout the Nineties was considerable recompense to those thwarted and frustrated by the failure of the more revolutionary concepts of Lane and others like him.

The final aspect of the Nineties that I wish to discuss, and to my mind the most striking feature of the decade, was the upsurge of Nationalism that occurred, culminating in euphoria on the part of the people, if not the politicians, on the achievement of Federation. Cantrell believes it to be a misconception to regard the Nineties as the great nationalist phase of our history but his opinion goes against the weight of historical evidence. H.M. Green, for example, is one literary historian who defined the spirit of the Nineties as "fervent democratic nationalism". Most others would agree about the presence of nationalism in the period; perhaps they would not all agree that it was totally healthy. To some the nationalistic mood was much too self-consciously aggressive, too truculent and strident in its attempt to throw off the yoke of colonialism and replace it with an equally narrow and chauvinistic Australianness.

The "waspish little guerilla" (Vance Palmer's phrase for the *Bulletin*) spoke of the danger of "old, corrupt England" destroying "the young innocence" of Australia and degrading this country to the status of an English province. It deplored the 1888 centenary of British settlement celebrations declaring that the official speakers, almost all of them "foreigners", had said a great deal about a little island in the North Sea and virtually nothing about the great continent in the southern oceans. By 1894 it was proclaiming at its masthead, "Australia for the Australians", a motto that had nationalistic as well as racist overtones. Lawson wrote scathingly of "Australian groveldom" before the old corrupt powers of Europe and called on the "Sons of the South" to decide between "The old dead tree and the young tree green". You can see similar sentiments in this further passage of A.G. Stephens's purple prose:

> Here, away from old world feuds and enmities, we breathe an ampler ether, a diviner air, than the denizens of the old country, steeped in hereditary prejudices. We refuse to be saddled with the

> antiquated forms and institutions which in England make misery and retard progress.

Rhetorical and emotive as it was, much that Stephens said and wrote was a sincere effort to assist the expansion and development of those nationalistic stirrings that, even when expressed in their rawest, crudest forms, simply indicated the depth of patriotic feeling that existed in the land. Tom Inglis Moore in his *Social Patterns in Australian Literature*, quotes an historian, A.G. Thompson, writing on the *Bulletin* and Australian nationalism, who said, rather aptly, that, before the Nineties there were Australian nationalists but there was not yet an Australian nationalism. Stephens was one of many doing his best to remedy that deficiency. In "For Australians", published in the *Bulletin* in 1899, just before Federation, he wrote with nationalistic fervour:

> It is the duty and should be the pride of every father and mother and teacher of Australian children to intensify the natural love of Australia and to point out in how many ways Australia is eminently worthy to be loved – both the actual land and the national ideal . . . there is no land with more beautiful aspects than Australia, no ideal with greater potentialities of human achievement and human happiness. Australia may never be a great country; but it will be the fault of the people, not of the land, if it is not one of the best countries in the world to live in and die in.

In the first issue of the *Boomerang* in 1887 William Lane wrote:

> We are for *this Australia*, for the nationality that is creeping to the verge of being, for the progressive people that is just plucking aside the curtain that veils its fate.

And Joseph Furphy in *Such is Life* offered, in his inimitable fashion, his imprimatur on the validity of our nationalistic aspirations:

> [The landscape] unveils an ideographic prophecy, painted by Nature in her Impressionist mood, to be

> deciphered aright only by those willing to discern
> through the crudeness of dawn a promise of majestic
> day.

Federation was, of course, the crowning achievement of the nationalistic surge of the Nineties. That achievement was both slow and difficult and not everyone at the time was convinced of its wisdom. But, in the euphoria of the moment of national unity, most doubts were put aside and the writers of the day rejoiced even while they voiced some uncertainty about the future.

The alternative futures were presented by O'Dowd in his well-known sonnet "Australia":

> Last sea-thing dredged by sailor Time from Space,
> Are you a drift sargasso, where the West
> In halcyon calm rebuilds her fatal nest?
> Or Delos of a coming Sun-God's race?
> Are you for Light, and trimmed with oil in place,
> Or but a Will O'Wisp on marshy quest?
> A new demesne for Mammon to infest?
> Or lurks milennial Eden 'neath your face?

George Essex Evans had no doubts. Inspired by the love and patriotism of its people, Australia of the future, he said, would be assured of greatness.

> E'en as the restless blue
> Circles her sleeping mountains, silence-bound,
> Our hope, our faith, our love shall gird her round
> With fealty true,
> Whilst from the old-world wrecks which strew the ground,
> We build anew.

Perhaps A.G. Stephens deserves the final word. All his own love and hope for this country and all the love and hope of many Australians like him were bound up in his heartfelt two word summation of that Federation day, 1 January 1901. It is at last, he rejoiced, "Our Country".

So, despite all the controversy that has existed and continues to exist, about the true identity of the 1890s, I believe that the literature of the time can be trusted - it told it as it truly was.

Chapter 3

PROBLEMS OF IDENTITY IN THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL FICTION OF HENRY HANDEL RICHARDSON, MILES FRANKLIN AND EVE LANGLEY

Two of these works of autobiographical fiction – *The Getting of Wisdom* by Henry Handel Richardson and *The Pea Pickers* by Eve Langley – were written long after the events supposedly recorded in them. In Richardson's case it was a retrospection of twenty-five years; with Eve Langley about fifteen. In both cases I believe it reasonable to suspect some deliberate distortion of the actual events, if for no other reason than the natural human wish to remould things "nearer to the heart's desire." In Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career*, however, the attitudes exhibited are the spontaneous reaction of the writer at about the time that the events were occurring. That, of course, does not rule out distortion, but if it is there, it occurs naturally and spontaneously rather than deliberately. Spontaneous reactions are themselves notoriously unreliable, the old adage telling us of doing things in haste and repenting at leisure. What I am suggesting is that anyone who decides to interpret autobiographical fiction as the complete key to the identity of the author is likely to be misled. Even authentic autobiography – as opposed to autobiographical fiction – cannot, automatically, be accepted as reliable evidence about the identity of the author – for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is vanity, the desire in most of us to be well thought of, or the desire for privacy, the dislike of having our souls bared to public scrutiny. If I had to choose between the two – autobiography or autobiographical fiction – in order to discover the real identity of the writer, I would, I think, choose the fiction. When the writer has the advantage of the *persona* or mask, I think he is

more likely to leave clues to his real self. That other Wilde, Oscar, agrees with my view. He believes that man is least himself when he talks in his own person. "Give him a mask," said Oscar, "and he will tell you the truth." The mask is perhaps, then, the most genuine of the faces that the artist presents to us.

Dorothy Hewitt is another who suggests the presence of distortion in autobiography:

> "It seems to me that in order to write autobiography the writer *invents* . . . a character and follows that character through a series of events that appear to make up a life."

Paul John Eakins in *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (1985) goes further:

> "The self that is the centre of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure."

There has been so much discussion down the years about Henry Handel Richardson's *The Getting of Wisdom* that there would seem, on the surface, to be little left to say, but I still find one aspect of its supposedly autobiographical account of Henry Handel Richardson as a schoolgirl not yet fully explained. Why did she bestow on her fictional schoolgirl self, Laura Rambotham, *all* of the problems that she suggests that she, as Ettie Richardson, suffered in her education at P.L.C. Melbourne in the 1880s, yet give Laura *none* of the successes that Ettie Richardson had? I believe that this quite definite distortion of the true situation is deliberate and that it reveals something of the identity of the mature woman – and artist – Henry Handel Richardson. All critics have drawn attention to this distortion, noting, for example, that Henry Handel Richardson in *Myself When Young* and in various interviews given in her lifetime, had always seemed vague and hazy about the achievements of her own schooldays. Most have accepted this attitude at face value, attributing it either to modesty or reticence and probing no further. Thus there has been general acceptance of Richardson's own comment about *The Getting of Wisdom* – that it contains "a very fair account of my doings at school and of those I came in contact with." I don't agree that it does. I believe that *The Getting of Wisdom* gives a deliberately slanted view of Ettie Richardson's schooldays. The questions is – how much slanted and why? As to "how

much slanted" let me give a sample of Richardson's school achievements, few if any of which are credited to Laura Rambotham. Richardson's mother sent her to P.L.C. because she was immensely proud of her daughter, who, she felt, had exceptional gifts – a fine memory and a facility with words and music which could benefit from a disciplined, systematic education at what was widely recognized as Melbourne's finest academic school for girls. Arriving at P.L.C. in April 1883, Ettie was placed in the lowest grade, Grade 1, but after only three months was promoted to Grade 2. At the end of that first year she won the Bible study and English prizes, came second in History and was awarded the Headmaster's Prize for Tennis. At the beginning of her second year, 1884, she skipped another class and won the annual prizes in Music, French, Latin, Geometry and Trigonometry. That year's College magazine mentioned her as a musician of great promise. Her third year produced a similar crop of prizes – five – and she represented the School at tennis. At the end-of-year school concert she gave a piano solo of the last two movements of a Beethoven sonata and a song, composed by her, was sung at the concert. In her next year, 1886, she won the school's most prized award in music, the Senior Music Scholarship. That is by no means a full list of her school successes but it is sufficient to indicate the esteem which she won during her school career. Why are none of these school successes given to Laura Rambotham? We do know, of course, that Ettie Richardson could also be an intense and, at times, difficult girl who made enemies more easily than friends. But, on balance, it would have to be said that when a schoolgirl has considerable musical and academic talent and quite significant sporting prowess, her position among her peers (and the school staff) is usually reasonably comfortable. It would seem unlikely for her to be snubbed, ostracized and scorned by either the teachers or her fellow pupils. Her school career could be expected to be normal and conventional, given, of course, the occasional crisis. I believe, that in giving Laura none of those talents, none of those successes, and in emphasising only her apparent incompatibility with staff and pupils, Henry Handel Richardson is attempting to construct an *image* of herself when young – an *image*, in fact, of the *artist-in-embryo* – that would complement or match the *image* of *herself* as the mature, adult artist. Because the artist is, in the eyes of the mature Henry Handel Richardson, part of the true elite, she needed to create in Laura an image of her young self at odds with and in contrast to the ordinary stereotype of the growing girl, at odds because she, Laura, possessed particular talents and characteristics that destined her for the *extra*-ordinary life of one of the artistic elite. Henry Handel Richardson did not want her own school

successes – which, to some extent, are themselves part of the ordinary stereotype – to spoil the image of the *extra*-ordinary girl, Laura, destined to rise above such stereotypes.

Laura's oddness and inability to fit in with the ordinary life of the school are the keynote of the book but almost every example of oddness is slanted towards demonstrating that it is predictable behaviour, if one could only interpret it correctly, of the writer-in-embryo. She shows, for example, Laura's capacity for imaginative interpretation of history and geography. Laura does not know the dates of Elizabeth the First's reign but she knows what London looked like in the days of Elizabeth. She does not know the height of Mount Kosciusko but she has seen and marvelled at the view from its summit. The artist's enhanced capacity for observation is also demonstrated, when Richardson has Laura view the expulsion of the girl, Annie Johns, through the eyes of the dramatist. She demonstrates too, the embryo writer's developing affinity with words in Laura's instinctive reaction in the English lesson to the word "eleemosynary". On that occasion the class was swept with gales of laughter. When the teacher questioned the laughter there was this exchange:

> "It's Laura Rambotham, Miss Snodgrass. She's so funny . . . She said it was blue."
> "Blue, what's blue," snapped Miss Snodgrass.
> "That word. She said it was so beautiful . . . and that it was blue."
> "I didn't. Grey-blue, I said," murmured Laura, her cheeks aflame.

Laura's oddness is also apparent in her attitude to the obsession of the other girls with romance and marriage. One of the day scholars in her class was engaged to be married to an older man, a doctor. This girl was looked up to by the class with "tremendous reverence, as one set apart, oiled and anointed". She had reached the goal, the goal on which all the girls' eyes, except Laura's, seemed to be set.

The author, in her comments, indicates that Laura cannot be subject to the marriage stereotype because it may limit her participation in the greatness of her artistic future.

> And here again Laura was a heretic. For she could not contemplate the future that was to be hers when she had finished her education but with a feeling of

> awe: it was still so distant as to be one dense blue haze; it was so vast, that thinking of it took your breath away: there was room in it for the most wonderful miracles that ever happened; it might contain anything . . . it was impossible to limit your hopes to one single event, which, though it saved you from derision, would put an end, forever, to all possible, exciting contingencies.

While this was seen by the mature artist, Henry Handel Richardson, as a suitable attitude for the artist-in-embryo (Laura) to have, it was not the way Richardson herself behaved as a young woman and not then a member of the artistic elite. It is clear from the biographies that Ethel Richardson was the positive driving force behind the marriage to the somewhat hesitant young Scottish academic, George Robertson. This discrepancy in attitude between the artist-in-embryo (Laura) and Ettie Richardson as a young woman is additional evidence that Laura and Ettie are not the same person.

As *The Getting of Wisdom* clearly indicates Laura was virtually an outcast at school; equally obviously from her meritorious achievements at school Ettie Richardson could not have been such an outcast. Laura spent weeks, months, whole terms as an outcast, fighting a long and desperate struggle to fashion a kind of *modus vivendi* that would get her through the tedious and hated ordeal that was called an education. She withdrew behind her defences and became a sly tactician, keeping her real opinions to herself, expressing only those that tallied with the ones outlined by the other girls. The short-cut to regaining some kind of bearable position was to "conceal what she truly felt." But she did not relinquish her own sense of values. She believed that her way, different as it was from the others, had a right to existence. The getting of wisdom appears to be, then, learning to understand one's own self as well as the selves of others. But, while in the book her creator allows Laura some perception of what makes up her fellows – and neither Laura nor the author is impressed by what she perceives of them – she only allows Laura the occasional hope that her apparent oddness and incongruity may in fact be a sign of something truly and extraordinarily valuable in the end. Laura never fathoms quite what it is a sign of but the reader is led by the author to grasp that what sets the lonely schoolgirl apart from the rest is her artistic sensitivity. We are told, quite directly, that Laura will one day take her place, *as her creator has done*, satisfied and fulfilled among the artistic elite.

When she sets off at the end of the book, after graduation, in a joyous sprint down the street, it is as if she is shedding, with her hat, gloves and heavy school leather bag, the uniformity that her education was supposed to have stamped upon her. She is clearly wiser for the experience but there is no trace of conformity in her to the ideas and standards she had met at the school. She is still herself. What the future holds she has no idea but it will be a future different from that of her room-mates, Mary Pidwall (M.P.) who was going to "take one degree after another" but, we are told, soon married and settled down in her home town and had numerous children, and Mary's friend, nicknamed Cupid, who "went a-governessing and spent the best years of her life in the obscurity of the bush". Of Laura's *future* – and it is Henry Handel Richardson telling of her own *present* – we are given this picture of happy fulfilment.

> In Laura's case, no kindly Atropos snipped the thread of her aspirations: these, large, vague, extemporary, one and all achieved fulfilment; then withered off to make room for more. But this, the future still securely hid from her. She went out from school with the uncomfortable sense of being a square peg, which fitted into none of the round holes of her world; the wisdom she had got, the experience she was richer by, had, in the process of equipping her for life, merely seemed to disclose her unfitness. She could not then know that, even for the squarest peg, the right *hole* may ultimately be found; *seeming unfitness* prove to be only another aspect of a *peculiar* and *special fitness* . . . many a day came and went before she grasped that, often times, just those mortals who feel cramped and unsure in the conduct of everyday life, will find themselves to rights, with astounding ease, in that freer, more spacious world, where no practical considerations hamper, and where the creatures that inhabit dance to their tune: the world where are stored up men's best thoughts, the hopes and fancies; where the shadow is the substance, and the multitude of business pales before the dream.

There are indications, however, that Laura has no greater capacity for human communication with the world at large at the end of the book than she had at the beginning. If we can believe the diaries and known events of Henry Handel Richardson's later life neither did she. She spent long periods of her life in seclusion in England and seemed to have a strong dislike of meeting and being with people. Her husband established and maintained for her a quiet and comfortable environment in which her dedication to her writing was allowed to be pre-eminent. There were no children from the marriage and devoted though they seemed to be her husband did spend long periods away from home. There were many indications in her diaries, too, of long-sustained blackness of mood and periods of deep depression. The question one is left with is whether the life of the artist in the "true elite" offers sufficient recompense for the separation it brings from the normality of ordinary life.

In *The Getting of Wisdom*, then, I do not accept the usual version of identity – that Laura Rambotham is the schoolgirl, Ettie Richardson. I see Laura as the writer Henry Handel Richardson in embryo. But that embryonic writer did not actually exist as we see her in the book. Laura is the *image* of what the mature Henry Handel Richardson believed, with the hindsight of twenty-five years, *ought* to have been herself when young. It is a case, I believe, of remoulding things nearer to the heart's desire – or perhaps nearer to the mature artist's perception of the proper fitness of things.

* * * * *

Although the future seemed bright enough for Laura at the end of *The Getting of Wisdom* there was no such comfortable certainty in the future that faced Sybylla Melvyn in Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career*. The confusion of Sybylla's emotions is as great at the end of the novel as at the beginning. Sybylla and her creator are of the same mind about the bleakness of the future.

> My ineffective life will be trod out in the same round of toil . . . I am only an unnecessary, little bush commoner, I am only a – *woman*.

By comparison with Sybylla, Laura's adolescence seems almost trouble-free but they did share, with differing intensities, several aversions and ambitions. Laura's rejection of marriage, as we have seen, was not a truly positive thing. Marriage was unwelcome because it might limit the future. There were so many other exciting paths to take and marriage might close some of them off. For Sybylla, however, marriage was the most horrifying of all prospects. To one would-be suitor, English jackeroo, Frank Hawden, who was shortly to inherit a fine estate, she responded:

> If ever I *perpetrate* matrimony the participant in my *degradation* will be a fully developed man.

And later to her grandmother she claimed that:

> The idea of marriage . . . seems to me a lowering thing . . . it would be pollution – the lowest degradation that could be heaped on me! I will never come down to marry any one!

And also,

> Marriage to me appeared the most horribly tied-down and unfair-to-women existence going. I laughed at the idea of love and determined never, never, never to marry.

This horror of marriage, in *My Brilliant Career*, has often been attributed to Sybylla's observation of the fate of her mother. She saw how a once beautiful, refined young woman from a well-to-do family had changed, through marriage, into a careworn drudge on a parched dairy farm with a drunkard for a husband and a regular procession of children to care for.

> It was for this that my mother had yielded her youth, freedom and strength; for this she had surrendered the greatest possession of woman . . . A woman is but the helpless tool of man.

Sexuality is, to Sybylla, the greatest threat to women, because it lures them into marriage and slavery. Yet there is obvious ambivalence in her attitude to sexuality. With Harold Beecham, on two occasions she almost

surrenders to it; then it was "something wild and warm and splendidly alive that one could feel, the most thrilling, electric and exquisite sensation known." But on each occasion "my old spirit revived and my momentary weakness fled" and sexuality quickly resumed its normal guise – "the reptile lust", "the curse of Eve", "the wolf" lying in wait.

Intuitively aware of the danger, she has conditioned herself to keep out of its way. Thus she avoids physical contact – "I cannot bear the touch of anyone – it is one of my idiosyncrasies." But that was only with men. She slept with her arms around her sister, Gertie; she embraced her Aunt Helen often and she clasped her tiny baby sister Rory "in my arms that I might feel something living and real and warm." She also has her Aunt Helen's experience to reinforce her conviction that sexuality is the snare that initially entraps women, leading them to ruin, the loss of their freedom and individuality. At eighteen Helen had fallen for a dashing soldier, married him, but was deserted after only a year. Now separated, her life was, in the light of those days, wrecked. "Neither a wife, widow, nor maid", all that is left to her is the aimless, sequestered life at Caddaget. In Aunt Helen's words the only real love is the *friendship* love of one's fellows – "the hot, fleeting passion of the man for the maid," she tells Sybylla, "is wrongfully designated love."

When Sybylla is touched by a man her defences react instantly. Frank Hawden, trying to compel her to listen to his advances, takes her by the wrist.

> With my disengaged hand I struck him a vigorous blow on the nose and wrenching myself free, sprang away, saying, 'How dare you lay a finger on me. If you attempt such a thing again I'll make short work of you.'

Stung by the blow, Hawdon roars at her, "You fierce, wild, touch-me-not thing!" When she agrees to become secretly engaged to Harold Beecham he approaches to kiss her:

> As Harold stooped with the intention of pressing his lips to mine I quickly raised the whip and brought it with all my strength across his face.

Interestingly enough, several of Miles Franklin's later heroines react similarly. In *Prelude to Waking* the heroine throws a coal scuttle at a

young suitor; in *Ten Creeks Run* Milly Saunders rejects a would-be lover by attacking him with a hat-pin, the same fellow having been shot at by a girl he did manage to seduce. In justifying Milly's reaction her creator asks rhetorically and melodramatically,

> Who can estimate the anguish of a high-spirited maiden when awakening to the electrifying passion of first love to find the reptile lust confronting her?

Bernice Gaylord in *Gentleman at Gyang Gyang* reacts to a man attempting "just a little caress" similarly. Or rather her creator reacts for her.

> No matter how touching [desire's] pretensions or ravages might seem, she knew it for the wolf it was; when stripped of its false glow, as cruel, as selfish, as relentless as the breath of the Arctic.

These furious responses to such run-of-the-mill interfaces between male and female require some interpretation if we are to understand the true identity of Miles Franklin. Some have seen them as a by-product of her aggressive feminism but while that may well be true of the novels of maturity where, as Douglas Stewart says, she is "hammering away at some indignant suffragette philosophy", it could be scarcely be true of the nineteen-years-old creator of Sybylla. Yet there was plenty of incipient feminism in Sybylla.

> As a tiny child I was filled with dreams of the great things I was to do when grown up. As I grew it dawned upon me that I was a girl – the makings of a woman. Only a girl . . . It came home to me as a great blow that it was only men who could take the world by its ears and conquer their fate while women . . . were forced to sit with tied hands and patiently suffer as the waves of fate tossed them hither and thither, battering and bruising without mercy.

But there is more to it than feminism. There is clearly a deep personal, psychological, even physiological, basis for her intense rejection of sexuality. The introspection of Sybylla is so vivid in its anguish that it is easy for the reader to believe that she is the *persona* or mask of the author

herself. The constant repetition of her awareness of her differences from other girls leads one to feel that, from whatever cause or origin, there were forces at work in the personalities of her and her creator that they neither desired nor controlled. Very early in the novel Sybylla confesses to the anxiety her attitude was breeding in her.

> I got lost, grew dizzy, and drew back appalled at the spirit which was maturing within me. It was a grim, lonely one, which I vainly tried to hide in a bosom which was not big or strong enough for its comfortable habitation. It was as a climbing plant without a pole – it groped about the ground, bruised itself, and became hungry searching for something strong to which to cling. Needing a master hand to train and prune, it was becoming rank and sour.
>
> Was I mad as mother had said. A fear took possession of me that I might be. I certainly was different to any girl I had seen or known. What was the hot, wild spirit that surged within me?

When Harold Beecham asked her to say that she would be his wife she could not bring herself to use the word. "The word wife", she tells us, "finished me up". She couldn't explain her feelings to him.

> With his orthodox, practical, plain commonsense view of these things he would not understand. What was there to understand? Only that I was queer and different from other women.

Oddly, the one day when she emerged reasonably fulfilled from an encounter with a man was when Harold Beecham, angered by her flirting with Archie Goodchum, seized her and, in the words of the text

> drew me so closely to him that through his thin shirt I could feel the heat of his body and his heart beating wildly.

They argue violently and she throws his engagement ring down in the dirt. They fling insults at each other and, pleased with herself, she stalks off. Knowing how successfully she has hurt him, however, she repents, feels

ashamed, goes back to him to make her peace, She suggests that they start afresh.

> "How do you mean to start afresh?"
> "I mean for us to be chums again."
> "Oh, Chums!" he said impatiently. "I want to be something more."
> "Well I will be something more if you will try and make me," she replied.

Concerning the incident just past she told him that she liked it so much "I wish you would get in a rage again." That night as she undressed she found "on soft white shoulders and arms – so susceptible to bruises – many marks, and black". Reflecting on it all she concluded "It had been a very happy day for me." Perhaps there was in Sybylla something of the shrew, Katharina, who needed to be tamed before she could love.

An indication of the difficulty down the years in interpreting the psychological and emotional problems of Sybylla is that no really direct confrontation had been made by critics with her attitude of near sexual hysteria until Colin Roderick did so in his *Miles Franklin: Her Brilliant Career* (1982). He believes that Miles Franklin's witnessing as a young girl the dead body of her baby sister had a catastrophic effect on her. The image of the dead infant became somehow related with childbirth itself and thus with the sexual act. This aroused in her an hostility to marriage and a paranoid fear that marriage, entailing as it usually did, sexuality and childbirth, could, in fact, lead to death. As a corollary to her fear of and hostility towards sexuality came an antipathy to the male and a resentment of her own femaleness. This led to violent opposition to the normal sexual order and to the customary characterisation of the biological and sexual role of woman. Overwhelmed by these childhood fixations she became terrified of sexual consummation and its resultant conception and death. Roderick believes that if Miles Franklin did not truly realise the nature of her dilemma when she put it into print in *My Brilliant Career* she did come to recognise it in later years but was never able to overcome it. I don't want to play the role of psychobiographer above and beyond the psychobiographer himself but I find it difficult not to offer a variation of Roderick's ideas. No matter what gloss is put upon sexuality and procreation there is no doubt that, from the female viewpoint, there is a good deal of physical discomfort and even indignity involved. This is especially true in the animal world, the world of the farmyard with which the growing girl, Miles Franklin, would have been familiar. The sexual

coupling of cows, horses, pigs, poultry – all farm animals – would have been an everyday sight to her. All of those couplings offer a situation of physical inferiority as far as the female is concerned. The birth of animal offspring, sometimes accompanied by crisis, strain and physical intervention of farmer or farm labourer, brings even more physical discomfort and indignity for the female. Miles Franklin was, too, the eldest child. Thus she would have watched her mother go through numerous pregnancies and even if she did not witness the resultant births she was always in close proximity and would have been aware of the dangers, discomfort, pain and turmoil involved. While all of this is the normal process of life and accepted as such by most people, a young, impressionable and fastidious nature, visualising this as the future irrevocably mapped out for her, might well have become devastated by the prospect. Let me remind you again of the terms Sybylla uses – "degradation" and "pollution". These words convey a strong sense of distaste and revulsion, a sense of being defiled. It is not so much fear, as Roderick suggests, but horror and disgust. A horror and disgust so powerful in fact that it forbade for Miles Franklin, as it did for Sybylla, any prospects of a complete female-male relationship.

Whatever the difficulties that stood in the way of Miles Franklin following the traditional path of the day for women – marriage and a family – they were never resolved. She went to Sydney, worked as a journalist, became involved in the Australian feminist movement through association with Rose Scott and Vida Goldstein. She went to America in 1906, five years after *My Brilliant Career*, partly to escape the unpleasant family reactions to the book, partly to escape to the more liberal environment available there and in Europe. She did volunteer work in the First World War (War, she claimed, was the "lunacy" of the male) and did not return permanently to Australia until late in 1932 by which time three Brent of Bin Bin novels had been published. She lived in Sydney unmarried, continuing to write her stories of pioneer times on the land. She remained true to Sybylla's furious statement to her grandmother – "I will never come down to marry any one."

* * * * *

Much has now been revealed of Eve Langley's life by Joy Thwaite's biography, *The Importance of Being Eve Langley*, published a few months

ago. Prior to its appearance our knowledge of Langley had come mainly from her two autobiographical novels, *The Pea Pickers* and *White Topee,* from the occasional, brief biographical accounts that had appeared in newspapers and journals, and from Meg Stewart's films following her macabre and lonely death in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales in 1974.

The Pea Pickers, Langley's first novel, submitted in manuscript under the pseudonym, "Gippsland Overlander", shared the S.H. Prior Memorial Prize in 1940 with Kylie Tennant's novel, *The Brown Van,* later titled *The Battlers,* and Malcolm Ellis's biography of Lachlan Macquarie. It made a considerable impact at the time, Douglas Stewart praising it as "a most delightful novel . . . the most original contribution to Australian literature . . . since *Such is Life.*" Frank Dalby Davison said it contributed something "fresh" to Australian literature and would long be cherished. Hal Porter described it as a "superb and haunting work". Much of that early enthusiasm has dissipated with the years although Angus & Robertson have reprinted it every eight to ten years, a sure indication that it has continued to appeal to successive generations of readers. Some modern criticism has tended to relegate it to the so-called *passé* nationalist tradition of Joseph Furphy and Miles Franklin and has objected to its elaborately discursive prose style which often overwhelms the narrative. *White Topee,* Langley's second published novel, appeared in 1954, with the author continuing the story of herself as Steve Hart but introducing the bizarre motion that she, Eve Langley, was Oscar Wilde reincarnated. Much less successful than *The Pea Pickers, White Topee* failed to attract readers because of its shapelessness and complexity, its endless self analysis and its persistently morbid reactions to the mutability of life. Strangely enough *White Topee* is more likely to be accepted, in this post post-modernist age, as a work of genius than it has ever been at any time in the past.

Both autobiographical books, written years after the events contained in them and with their author's hopes for a happy and productive life already in ruins, manage to create and communicate all the joyful enthusiasm, youthful ardour and painful uncertainty of those earlier years. This is especially true of *The Pea Pickers.* When she began to write in 1938 the story of those enchanted summers of 1925 to 1928, Langley was already beginning to experience the personal disasters, the premonitions of which appear in the book. By the time the novel was published in 1942 she had been committed to the Auckland Psychiatric Hospital in New Zealand where she remained for seven years. Her marriage was over, her

children were in church orphanages, and she, herself, inhabited a friendless twilight-world of dangerous introspection that led her ultimately to her conviction about herself and Oscar Wilde. She changed her name by deed poll to Oscar Wilde in 1954, the year that *White Topee* was published, and fully adopted the Oscar Wilde identity, dressing in a man's suit, a long fur coat, a white topee, and black, highly-polished shoes similar to those worn by nurses. Photographs of the time, which she sent to Angus & Robertson, show off her bizarre masculine attire and also indicate the physical ravages that time had wrought. The slim, attractive, tomboyish-looking girl of twenty had become an obese, oddly-dressed, middle-aged woman whom only her own now unbalanced emotional and intellectual self could have borne to contemplate. She returned to Australia in 1956 and later settled into a hermit-like existence in a small shack which she called "Iona Lympus" in Katoomba, New South Wales. There she lived, with an occasional absence such as a disastrous trip to Greece and a year's visit to New Zealand, until her death from a heart attack in 1974, a death made even more horrific by the fact that her body lay undiscovered for several weeks and had been preyed upon by rats.

The portents of her later physical and mental disintegration had been evident to some extent, as I said, in *The Pea Pickers* and *White Topee*, but because the books themselves were written after that disintegration had actually begun it is difficult to know whether the possibility of that disintegration had, in fact, been apparent to her in those far off summers of 1925-28, or whether she was using her knowledge of herself, many years later, to describe symptoms of a psychological malaise that may or may not have been present in those earlier years.

In *The Pea Pickers* Eve and her younger sister June, calling themselves Steve and Blue, dress as men and go off to lead an itinerant casual labouring life in Gippsland, southern New South Wales and northern Victoria. Their male role-playing began as a cheeky, rather daring adventure for those days, their disguises being easily penetrated, and their true identity revealed, however, whenever necessity required it. With Eve (Steve) this adoption of a male *persona* sprang from a long-held and deeply-felt dissatisfaction that she had been born a girl. Very early in the novel Langley expresses these opinions about her own identity:

> I knew that I was a woman but I thought I should have been a man,

and

> I knew that I was comical but I thought I was serious and beautiful. It was tragic to be only a comical woman when I longed above all things to be a serious and handsome man.

Her protests against the intellectual and emotional restrictions imposed on her because of her womanhood occur frequently in *The Pea Pickers*.

> "O, it is painful," she said, "to be a woman; to long for love and fame, for the immortality of all things, for love and the unborn and the dust of all countries, to be caught and held. Forever".

Like Sybylla Melvyn, but for distinctly different reasons, she sees marriage as the particular trap for women to avoid, much as they are drawn to it. She and the chief love of her life, Macca Howlett, whom she meets in Gippsland, discuss marriage constantly. If it could exist in an idealised, romanticised form, free from the restrictions of, as she says, the inevitable "procession of perambulators", she would desire it.

> I should like . . . to marry and live in a house that would look over the sea; and all night I would lie with my head on the arm of my love and listen to the water's broken voice on the shore.

It is the personal commitment to the practicalities of marriage that deters her. She especially fears the loss of individuality that such a commitment would bring. "I don't want," she tells Macca, "anything to leave a trace on me. I want no change at all, in myself."

In her unpublished manuscripts – mostly autobiographical accounts of those Australian summers and of the later unhappy events of her life in New Zealand after her marriage to New Zealand artist, Hilary Clark (a most unfortunate choice on her part) she returns time and again to this theme of marriage.

In "The Victorians" she writes:

> Why should I marry? . . . I feared marriage. One was then dictated to. Ordered about. Commanded by an inferior being, I thought. Alone I ruled my world,

> alone I rode as I liked and talked with whom I wished.

Reflecting again in "The Victorians" on her bad luck at having been born a girl she complained:

> O, to be a man, to wander the earth forever, to meet all manner of men, and love humanity, rather than man . . . Horrible, horrible mistake of birth! . . . The pain of childbearing, the miserable matrimonial walls.

In another unpublished manuscript, "The Land of the Long, White Cloud" she describes a period spent with her sister June after June's first baby was born. She is appalled at June's new domestic status, at her abject surrender of all their youthful dreams of freedom and independence. June, now bereft of all personal individuality, has become a mere housewife and mother, obsessed by the endless trivia associated with looking after a baby, a husband and a house. June has, she claims, an hermaphrodite mind – she is being broken "on a wheel that almost imperceptibly turns both ways at once," she is "being torn by the desire for two existences." Yet, as *The Pea Pickers, White Topee,* and the later events of her own life were to prove, Eve Langley was herself caught on the same wheel, torn between the desire for the same two existences.

The attempt to stifle one desire – that desire to be a woman and to be loved – by adopting the aggressively masculine pose of the Gippsland days was never more than partially successful. In the novels, but not in life, her sexuality is one trap that she does successfully evade. Her two youthful loves in *The Pea Pickers,* the brief affair with Kelly Wilson and the long-maintained, almost religious passion for Macca, perish on the battlefield of her own sexual tensions. She wanted sexual fulfilment but she feared that in gaining that limited fulfilment she might lose much else that she valued. Sexual fulfilment removed from her, for example, the control of her own destiny. What she offered Kelly Wilson and, later, Macca, was, as Joy Thwaite describes it, "the purest of passions, love in a platonic and poetic dimension." Kelly failed altogether to be satisfied by that. Feeling, he said, like a bottle of yeast that must soon explode, he took himself off to where the explosion would be welcome. Macca, understanding her complications all too well, knew that the problems he would confront with Steve were beyond his solution, beyond any man's.

He decided that, with Steve, the safest course would be to accept only "the pure emotion of the mind." The other kind of love he could get from "the girl in Bairnsdale" and to satisfy his simple ambition "I just want to enjoy life and be happy," he settled in the end for the comfortable daughter of a cattleman.

The complexity of Steve's dilemma pervades both *The Pea Pickers* and *White Topee*.

> I leaned against a sandy bank . . . My impatient blood and my poor bewildered mind fought for the meaning of these years. There was no directness in them. No one spoke the truth to me about anything; no one save the Buccaneers [i.e. her friends, the Colemans], and their truth was that sex and marriage were the only real things. No, I wanted poetry and love of the earth, I wanted morning, noon and night spent *purely* with the one I loved. But don't talk to me of sex, I said. I fear it. I only know that there is beauty.

One of the things that she believed she would lose, with her virginity, was her communion with the land that she loved.

> Drunken with joy and love, I walked beside him, my strong limbs scarcely able to move, so stumbingly thick were they with the mystical glory of life and love, and that untouched and unhoped for portal of sex. My heart and mind swam ignorantly around in these circumscribed ecstasies, knowing that there was a gate through which all could pour, but not daring nor desiring to flow through it and lose the beauty of the earth. I felt that the earth loved me for my virginity and would be with me while I kept it.

Another loss, and perhaps one could again equate her a little with Sybylla and Laura, would have been that of her artistic powers. From that same virginity, came, she believed, her creative strength, her capacity to ultimately be revered, to be famous for her art, her poetry. Early in *White Topee* Macca proposes marriage but she refuses him.

> "And so, in the end," she says, "we could not agree to marry, because I wished only to be alone and worship the past for the sake of it, and poetry."

Later she ponders her complicated self.

> I was lonely and I was unloved. And worse, far ahead into the future my soul struggled and saw no end of it, no end for ever to my thirst for love. Because, you see, I didn't really want to be loved. Not at all. What I really wanted was to be a man, and free for ever to write and think and dream. I had the utmost contempt for love, and a very real fear of it . . . I would rather have wandered the earth and written for ever than bothered about love.

If outbursts such as those from her autobiographical novels seem to reveal to us the true identity of Eve Langley we receive something of a shock when we see how persistently she pursued disastrous love affairs in real life. And, of course, those disastrous love affairs and the equally disastrous marriage in which she found herself trapped may well account for her determination to relive in her autobiographical fiction the joyous but painful obsessions of her young womanhood. In real life her sexuality and desire to be loved overwhelmed all her plans and ambitions. Her casual sexual affairs are said to have disgusted and alienated her sister. Douglas Stewart told Joy Thwaite that when he first met Eve Langley in New Zealand she had "an entourage of male admirers." After Macca, she entered a *de facto* relationship with Ray Johnston, a twenty-year-old ex-jockey from Melbourne and lived with him for three years but refused to marry him, lest she turn him into "a typical husband" from whom she could not escape. She also had a brief affair in Gippsland with a magnificent looking Italian, Jim Camelli, her "golden camellia". He wanted to marry her and take her to Paris but she again resented the fact that he made her feel "feminine and unhappy". She would have agreed to go as his companion or mate but as Joy Thwaite says, "any other alternative was unacceptable to her, a betrayal of her dedication and dreams." Her sister Blue (June) had married and gone to New Zealand in 1930, taking their mother also. Eve Langley followed in 1932. In New Zealand she shed her identity of Steve Hart, resumed her own name, Eve, and exchanged the bushman's attire for normal feminine clothes. She had a disastrous and prolonged affair with

another Italian, a car salesman, Luigi Rinaldi. In it all her sexual restrictions and cautions were jettisoned – "the Knight, Rinaldi", she wrote (he was actually a sordid, drunken philistine) "the Knight Rinaldi held me in his thrall and I was in chains night and day."

From him she contracted gonorrhoea and fell pregnant. The baby, for whom Rinaldi took no responsibility, survived for only a few months. All that she was left with, she told Douglas Stewart, was shame and anguish. Worse was to follow. In 1936 she met Hilary Clark. They married a year later. He was 22, Eve 32. It was a tempestuous and erratic courtship, Clark striving to avoid entanglement, Langley working feverishly to ensure that he did not escape. Ultimately, of course, she trapped herself. They had no money and she was soon caught up in the dreaded "procession of perambulators" with a daughter and two sons. Clark, at best a part-time husband, left her to the confusion of child-rearing and house-keeping with little money and under the worst circumstances. She proved as poor at those domestic tasks as she had predicted in *The Pea Pickers*.

The brief-lived success of *The Pea Pickers* (she received £100 as her share of the Prior prize) helped momentarily but in 1942, when all that was required for committal to a mental hospital was the signature of two general practitioners and one relative of the patient, she was placed in the Auckland Psychiatric Hospital as a mentally defective. There she stayed until released by her sister in 1949. Her sexuality (the affair with Rinaldi and her marriage to Clark) had proved in the end to be exactly the disaster visualised in her writings. It had destroyed not only her art (none of her later manuscripts were accepted by her publishers) but also her *psyche*.

In this discussion where I have been referring to Eve Langley's sexuality I have meant heterosexuality. There has, of course, been conjecture, in the light of her male *persona* and dress and in her adoption of the identity of Oscar Wilde, that she was homosexual, an hermaphrodite or a transvestite. Joy Thwaite who has had the most complete access to all Langley's diaries, letters, journals and personal records and who has interviewed the many people close to her – including her husband Hilary Clark, her sister June and numerous friends and contemporaries, dismisses that conjecture, believing that whatever homosexuality existed in her was "confined to the lovingly imagined and satisfying world where she allowed herself to operate as a male." Joy Thwaite considered that Langley's occasional fantasies about women in her books "were almost certainly an expression of intense appreciation of their aesthetic beauty allied to her own craving for a masculine identity." Perhaps the closest she came to a

lesbian relationship was with her sister June. *The Pea Pickers* contains numerous references to June's beauty, which totally captivated her. But, overall, she reacted to June more as a fond, older brother, which, of course, her male *persona* allowed her to do. It has been suggested that her obsession with Oscar Wilde and her adoption of his identity contains within it some evidence of her own homosexuality. In Wilde, an homosexual and a great literary artist, she clearly found what she believed to be for her the perfect identity, an hermaphroditic figure with whom she could feel complete affinity on that score, and one famed also for his artistry, the summit also of her own life's ambition.

But to return to *The Pea Pickers* and *White Topee*. There is another, more passionate love story in those books, the story of Eve Langley's obsession with the Australian countryside. You might recall that she maintained her virginal state in *The Pea Pickers* because "the earth loved me for [it] and would be with me while I kept it." This single-minded reservation of her deepest self – in Joy Thwaite's words – her "pantheistic dedication" – was the worthiest thing she could offer to prove her worship of the Australian earth. Exaggerated and unbelievable though her accounts of her reactions to human love sometimes are, there is never a false note to mar the lyric quality and intensity of her prose when she tells of her love affair with that earth. It was her only true, abiding love – even Macca was to fade as her mind lost its grip on reality – but her delight and her pride in the natural loveliness of her land was with her until the end. From *The Pea Pickers* comes this passage:

> What loveliness was abroad that night! I trod the hill of yellow grass; the land was veiled in the blue smoke of the still-burning bush-fire that was wallowing in red seas from some desolate shore to the end of its journey. Above the dry grass the blue smoke wandered and in the mystical twilight I cried, "O Patria Mia!" and my naked brown feet kissed the dear earth of my Australia and my soul was pure with love of her.

From that lyricism to the more pragmatic but equally devotional.

> Macca, I'd like to buy a bit of land here, put up a bark hut on it, and work the soil of Gippsland till I die . . . I should like a bit of land and some stock to

> drive slowly to the Bairnsdale sale yards every week or so, and I would become soaked in the old traditions of Gippsland . . . Gippsland, Gippsland I love you. I want to make you immortal and die in you and be loved by you.

Although, unlike the poet, Keats, whom she revered, Eve Langley did not die young, her *psyche* itself did not survive much beyond those magical Gippsland summers. Looking back on them as she wrote *The Pea Pickers* she anticipated and mourned that premature loss. Life's transience, its mutability, has troubled the poetic soul more than most things down the centuries. And nowhere has the sadness of transience been more powerfully expressed than in the poetry of Keats. The seeming permanence, the stasis of his "Ode to Autumn" gives way inevitably to the destructive force of time in his "Ode to a Nightingale". There is, in her recall of the Gippsland summers, as she wrote her two novels, only the sadness of the fickleness of that apparent stasis of youth, for the grim actuality of the future was already with her. The most dolorous note of her ultimately dolorous autobiographies is of the transience that transforms joy and youth into sorrow and age. It is not only Eve Langley's fate of course. It is the fate of Everyman, but that was of little consolation to her!

> Gazing at Blue I felt the anguish of life's brief poetry.

> To him [Macca] I had nothing to say. Only, I looked night long into his white face saying "This is a Greek Urn [echoes of Keats] that will pass away with time. Therefore, O eyes, look your fill and tremble with the coming sorrow, for life is flying."

> "Oh, stop talking," I was crying inwardly, "because the gold of the poplars is all that's going to remain to me of these years, when I have fled from here. The bitter smell of the walnuts is going to be the tomb in which the thought of all of you will be, and whenever winter comes in an alien land, I shall smell them, and you will arise to torture me, for you are part of my youth . . . Time is flying, and we are going with it . . . into what. Into what, O God? I don't want marriage, or love, or fame really,

> in my very soul. I only want to sit and behold beauty forever and know that it will never die."

Let me stress, finally, Eve Langley's remarkable literary achievement and, in so doing, emphasise that what we have been looking at in her writing is a desperate struggle to establish and understand her own true identity. Her biographer sums it all quite beautifully for us.

> Without formal education [Eve Langley] had little in the way of access to any artistic or literary community. She was totally without urban sophistication . . . intellectual stimulation sprang largely from her own imagination. Thus her life was destined to become an extended novel in which she, as Steve, and later as Oscar [Wilde] was the only fully realised character. She lived her chronicles directly and committed them to paper exactly as they had occurred. The dividing line between fact and fiction grew more and more ephemeral. She became her own most intensely imagined artistic creation – and this was a potentially dangerous practice. At times it coloured and dislocated her control over her life. Her characters thus, are not "fictional" in the usual sense. She observed, recorded, lived, loved and created in the one action. This *is* fiction; but it is autobiography transmitted into fiction. [Eve Langley's] sense of life and literature was simultaneous.

When biographical writing achieves, as it does in Eve Langley's superb but ill-fated creations, the sense that life and literature *are* inextricably interwoven, it is difficult, I believe, to imagine any higher artistic achievement.

JUST RELEASED

JENNIFER STRAUSS, *STOP LAUGHING! I'M BEING SERIOUS: Three Studies in Seriousness and Wit in Contemporary Australian Poetry*

A refreshing new reading of the works of poets who are not the most predictable of companions, Judith Wright, John Forbes and Chris Wallace-Crabbe.

RECENT TITLES

ANTHONY J. HASSALL Editor, *The Making of Xavier Herbert's "Poor Fellow My Country"*.

A fascinating story of a literary collaboration that helped ensure this large and ambitious book reached its audience in the form the author intended.

NICOLA TAREHA, *The Legend of the Leap.*

A concise account of the origin and local versions of the Legend of the Leap used in Thea Astley's *A Kindness Cup.*

COLIN RODERICK LECTURES:

JULIAN CROFT, *The Impulse to Federation in Three Australian Writers.*

An original reappraisal of Joseph Furphy, Christopher Brennan and R.D. Fitzgerald in the light of nationalist sentiment in Australia from the 1890s and 1930s.

VAL VALLIS, *Heart Reasons, These . . . : Commentaries on Five Australian Poets.*

Informal, informative, perceptive and uniquely personal, these commentaries on five Australian poets reassert the importance of reading poetry for pleasure.

BRIAN MATTHEWS, *Romantics and Mavericks: The Australian Short Story.*
A searching re-evaluation of the stories of Miles Franklin, Louisa Lawson, Barbara Baynton, Thea Astley, Vance Palmer and Hal Porter.

DOROTHY GREEN, *The Writer, The Reader and the Critic in a Monoculture.*
1. The Writer
2. The Reader
3. The Critic

Three provocative discussions of literature in society from a prominent Australian Critic.

BRUCE BENNETT, *Place, Region and Community.*
A refreshingly original account of the influence of locality in Australian Literature.

A.D. HOPE, *Directions in Australian Poetry.*
1. The Past
2. The Present
3. Past into Future

A sympathetic overview of Australian poetry from Australia's most distinguished poet.

CHRIS WALLACE-CRABBE, *Three Absences in Australian Writing.*
Three new essays from one of Australia's leading poet/critics.

CLEVELAND BAY NEW WRITING SERIES

No. 3 **R.G. HAY**, *Love and the Outer World.*
A first collection from this Rockhampton poet.
"It grabs my heart": Nancy Keesing, *Australian Book Review.*

No. 2 **ANTHONY HUNTINGTON**, *Behemoth*
PETER KIRKPATRICK, *Water Music*
The first published work of two exciting new writers.

MARK O'CONNOR, *Selected Poems.*
(Published in association with Hale & Iremonger.)
A new selection of the best poems from this award-winning poet.

BIOGRAPHIES

CHERYL FROST, *The Last Explorer: The Life and Works of Ernest Favenc.*

1. Early Years in North Queensland
2. The Queenslander Transcontinental Expedition
3. Sydney in the 1880s
4. Expeditions to the Gulf and to the Gascoyne
5. Short Stories and Novels: the 1890s
6. Last Years in Sydney

A scholarly account of Ernest Favenc, writer, explorer and North Queensland pioneer.

ANNE McKAY, *Percy Fritz Rowland.*

LORNA McDONALD, *H.A. Kellow.*
Authoritative biographies of two distinguished North Queensland writers and educators.

AND IN THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH MONOGRAPH SERIES:

ROSS SMITH, *Fanny Bertram: 'The Structure of Mansfield Park'.*

ROGER PARSELL, *In the Wild with Samuel Butler; or, A Man of Three Centuries.*

Obtainable from:

Foundation for Australian Literary Studies
Department of English
James Cook University of North Queensland
TOWNSVILLE Q 4811