

## AN EVENING WITH XAVIER HERBERT

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..... It does warm my heart to have so many people to talk to as friends. I want now to get friends as I never did in my life before. I lived a life of isolation because of what I had to do. And now, as I say, I want friends and it's beautiful to see such a lot of people and different people. I was born in nineteen-one, which was the year of the foundation of the Commonwealth. I was born five months after it, into a nation. The Commonwealth of Australia was founded by idealists, actually by the Australia Felix people, the people who believed in Australia Felix, the happy southland. Those people who know their history know they got fed up quite early and cleared out, but the idea went on and developed this Commonwealth of ours and people. It's been taken from us now of course. The name has been removed, which is a shame because the word means Commonweal, the common good. And so I was born into a nation that was established for the common good. And that lasted for 13 years, until the year 1914. So we lived in this Commonwealth as I say till the age of 13 when that war between the Kaiser of Germany and the King of England broke out and we, being a Dominion of Britain, were automatically at war. At the time the Prime Minister, a man named Fisher, was an Englishman and quite an idealist, a labor man (they had a Labor Government). But because he was English and his motherland was involved in this thing, he pledged Australia to the last man and the last shilling. Now my mother who was anti-war from the beginning, used to sing songs that I think came from the I.W.W., that those who picked the quarrels be the only ones to fight and such things, until this step-brother of mine went to the war. And as soon as he did that my mother became what is called a sooler, that was the name given to people who drove other people off to war, and she sooled so hard that she sooled my old man off too. Now there was the Gallipoli campaign. There was the coming back of the men as I saw, the first men who came back from Gallipoli, bitter about their defeat for they saw it as a defeat. Later on the establishment seized it --- these men formed a thing called the RSA, the Returned Soldiers Association --- and it was done to defend these men who were thrown into the discard because they were no use --- they were wounded or sick or something like that. They formed this thing to protect themselves. But again somewhere about 1922 the establishment began to see that this could be a dangerous organization, a subversive organization, and they formed this Returned Soldiers Imperial League of Australia as it was --- Returned Soldiers, Sailors, Imperial League of Australia. You can see how the word Imperial has got into it. And when you hear me talking like this don't imagine that I am radical or political or anything. I'm telling you what I witnessed as a little boy --- and saw this tearing apart of things, saw this true Commonwealth of ours, the Commonweal that we had lived in for 13 years go truly down the drain. And to see what happened after the war - the destruction of men, the meanness that crept into everybody followed then by the depression. We had - even if we did not use the last man - we certainly used the last shilling and we got the last shilling by borrowing it from Britain.

Now the writing business. Why did I come to write when I had no apparent interest in it whatsoever? I did a scientific course in Western Australia at a Technical College. There were no universities there. And because of the ignorance of what one could do in science and the fact that the only scientists that I had known in early days were druggists, and in those days the druggist was truly a chemist --- I became a pharmaceutical chemist and soon as I qualified I went to Victoria and went to Melbourne, decided to do medicine. While I was studying medicine I saw the squalor for the first time in my life. Because West Australia was so near the frontier. It's a great desert of a place. We always had the desert at our back door -- the frontier was at our back door. The only unfortunate people in the land were the aborigines, more unfortunate there, by the way, than anywhere else in Australia. Niggers as they were called there. And I saw these people starving from early childhood. I grew up very close to them because they were used for their cheap labour. They used to get 6d or something for working all day. I was actually nursed as a child, got rid of actually as a sick child as I was, to an old man who was known as King Billy of the Murchison -- Don Willik was his name. I never found that out till after reading Daisy Bates who knew Don Willik. I was nursed by that old man for 6d a day if he got that, or perhaps it was only a bit of food. I'd like to think that he sung the truth into me about the aboriginal people. I've always been interested in aboriginal people because we were building this wonderous society of ours without any thought for the people that the land was stolen from. As I said they were called niggers. They were not regarded as humans. They were just simply subhuman people whom you could actually kill without getting into any serious trouble. And a lot of people did kill them of course. And everybody was killing them with starvation. Well that stuck in my little gizzard somewhat. There was something wrong with the system somewhere. Then I went in my 20's, I was 21 when I went to Melbourne, and I saw that there were slums. I had never seen slums in my life before and I didn't believe there were such things in this Commonwealth of ours. And after the war there were all sorts of things that were wrong. For one thing there was a great deal of venereal disease as brought in by our gallant soldiers. It wasn't their fault. It was our gallant allies who gave it to them ... the French. And I was in the medical profession and I used to work in a large hospital. I had to work at night in a venereal diseases clinic. And these things all mounted up in my mind, and I also found that people knew nothing of the wilderness. These people in Melbourne were living in a European camp. That's all it was. It was that they had first transferred a piece of Europe and made a very nice place out of it. But they didn't know anything about Terra Australis. In those days people didn't travel about as they do now. But they were all terribly interested in it when I talked about it, about the closeness of it. I then gave up medicine, decided to write and the simplest way, not knowing my way about in it, was to crash into journalism. And I came to this city (I was going to say Sydney as if I weren't here) but when -- I came to Sydney and lived for a year here and saw again this same ignorance in spite of the fact that Sydney of all places, if you get up on something high, or even if you get up on one of the Heads, you look back and you can see Terra Australis as you can't from any other city in Australia which usually has some hills or something behind it. And I found that the people were always interested in it. They were interested in aborigines. What one told them of that --- they had imagined the aborigines had died out. When I knew them there were vast numbers of them about. But it wasn't known that the same cruelty, the same everything was still going on in the country. The frontier was still there. And that

is back say to 1926 was the year that I spent in Sydney. It was then that I decided I must go back to the frontier and interpret it to my fellows. The attitude I had was one of cynicism. By that time and having gone to the university and met a lot of smart boys for the first time, I began to --- one had to knock the place. Jack Lindsay, the son of Norman Lindsay, came out in 1928 and made the pronouncement that "this is a moribund hole. I'm getting out for good." And he did get out for good. I registered that in my mind, that I thought it was a good idea too. But I went around looking to go back, I thought I was going back to my birthplace, but because I didn't know the north eastern part I went up into North Queensland up onto Cape York Peninsula, across to the Gulf and right across the country and I discovered new fields. Matter of fact you could go across to the Philippine Islands for £12 and down on a cattle boat and I did have ideas like that of going and beating my way around because I had been living an adventurous life. The curious thing about it as I think about this odd destiny thing --- instead of that I went to all the trouble to come down to Sydney where I took a boat, there were one class boats called Billy Hugheses in those days, a washback from immigrant days, and quite good ships. And it was there that I met this lady as everybody knows, this Sadie. And she had been here. She is English - English born of Polish Jewish stock. She was a married lady, had sent her husband here in a good Jewish fashion to make her fortune for her. And they do say of Jews that, or at least I remember saying, Zangwill - (he was a great Jew himself) that why Jews are so clever with money is that every Jew is a gambler - but mama always takes away the winnings and he has to go and earn some more before he can gamble again. I got on this ship on the 23rd of August 1930 and being a colonial lair --- with nobody to see me off, I looked around, taking my pick of the girls first that I looked over - that being an old Australian custom - and I saw, I saw this handsome young lady weeping into a bunch of flowers and thought "that's the gal for me." The thing began there. It wasn't as easy as I thought. But there was all this strange fatal business of finding for myself a somebody who was interested in what I did. I was suspicious of women because of my half-sister and my mother who were really tough guys and also Australian women generally as I knew them. And here I had, what Jewish women are, of course, one of the mothers of Israel - and she began to read this book of mine which I had sketched and then began to type. I used to give it to her in pieces. And she didn't like it. She was very discreet about it but ---. Now, I took the thing to Britain. We parted there, she went to her own people and curiously enough she introduced me to them when we landed at Waterloo Station, coming up from Southampton --- curious thing to do and the Jewish people looked at me a little oddly and this is what she said to them as she told me afterwards. "I'm worried about that young man and what's going to happen to him in this great city." Because I was just the wild colonial boy of course. And that was the curious thing you see, the protectiveness of a Jewish woman. Well I went there with a fair amount of money and was not long in wasting it, getting rid of it in the old Australian fashion. And then just as I was about to go to West Africa because I had seaman's papers through knocking about, and was going to take a ship to South Africa and get out, this Sadie of mine stopped me and put me in a garret in North London. Then I became nostalgic. There was this dreadful climate, there was this sense of failure of mine, this talking about my own country, not as a bad country now so much as a mad country. We are madder than we are bad and this sort of thing came out. And she used to say, "why don't you write about such things?" But of course I had this attitudinising, this cynicism. But, well out of it -

to try and break the story down somewhat - out of it came that book "Capricornia" I wrote in 1932, rather too quickly I think. That's what's wrong with "Capricornia" it was written too quickly and this other one perhaps what's wrong with it is that it's written too slowly. This was written because, as I say, this woman discovered in me this love of the land and having written "Capricornia" I was settled down then as a lover of my own country and there was nothing for it but to come back. I came home with such joy that I kissed this land that I was cursing before, and eventually I was able to import my Sadie. Then I proceeded with the most difficult task of all, I suppose, to publish the thing. Oh, I omitted to say this - that I gave the script to publishers in England, one particular Jonathan Cape who were very big at that time. And they said it was like a great Dutch painting. I don't know what they would say about this last one because this last one is seven times the size of "Capricornia". But they said that it would have to be cut down, it was too Australian, and they decided that three good novels would be made out of it. And I had the effrontery to say I thought in terms of one great one. Now this does not mean that I liked the book because I have called it for a long time my bastard son. It's been following me around for too long and I do hope that it is got rid of by the new work. Well the war came along, another war. I saw that we were caught in somebody else's war again. Those of you who are old enough to remember know that again we were declared as at war because the King of England was at war with Uncle Adolf and there was no two ways about it. Menzies announced this on the radio. We had not ratified the treaty of Westminster which was signed in 1932 and ratified by every other Dominion. Strangely to say, Australia did not ratify it until 1949 when it was done by Dr Evatt. We were still a Dominion. Still had only Dominion status. This curious thing happening in this country which we believed was free, Commonwealth and all sorts of things. It was not. The other Dominions had to declare war on Germany. But not ourselves. We were just dragged into it. I saw that we were dragged in. I had no time for Hitler at all, but to me it seemed to be a war between Hitler and Stalin as an obvious thing. The Jewish thing was a terrible thing of course particularly to me because of my Sadie. But I reckoned the Jews who had been in that sort of thing before, probably not so bad as that, that they would be able to get out of it. In my belief we should not have been in this war again. And this was a hard thing for me because I had seen my father and brother go as heroes. I'd seen other people go as heroes. And my own brother came to me as soon as the war broke out and said what about it? And he enlisted on the first day. But I could not in spite of the fact that I had lived adventurously, go away and leave my country because the Japanese were obviously were going to be dealt with sometime. And I kept out of it until the Japanese war, as I call it. Now in doing this, after the war instead of going back to the Northern Territory - - back to Darwin which had been destroyed, we went into North Queensland which still was and still is fairly wild and I spent most of my time in the bush, all the time working towards this end which was to write. What I'd write I didn't quite understand at first, until suddenly this thing "poor fellow my country" occurred to me. I guess it was that I realised the tragedy, at last I realised the tragedy of our nation. That our nation was stillborn. It lived 13 years and died. The national capital is the mausoleum for it and this had sunk into me. I don't appreciate the applause very much. That's probably a very smart remark, but it is to me a great tragedy that one has to say that about one's national capital . . . that there was this feeling which all of us had - this wanting to belong, wanting to have this perfect thing and believing that we had it, believing that we were the freest

and most hopeful people in the world. I say I was heading for something until suddenly I remembered the cry of the blackman when he is deprived of his country. It's I think universal. It certainly is in the whole of the north, that when you put a blackman in goal, or some old fellow who's been in goal and they won't let him go home as they used to, or put them in a leper station or somewhere where they feel fated, they start howling. And the howl is in their lingo which is translated always 'poor fellow my country' and it means I am sorrowing for my country. Actually more than that. I am sorrowing for my country which is sorrowing for me; so close is the kinship. And there was the kinship I was developing. I was sorrowing for my country which was sorrowing for me.

And so it was that I came to write this huge book, supposed to be the longest novel ever written --- in spite of the fact it seemed mad at first . . . that this is the tragic story of our stillborn nation, of this terrible thing that we had believed in, that we were given above all people on earth an island continent. The first thing we did of course was to bring the wrong people into it. But that could have been adjusted I suppose. There was our ill-treatment of the native people. But everything went wrong all along the line, but deep in all of us there has been this feeling that we had something. At the same time we used to moan because of our isolation. And our isolation was the very thing that was our blessing. If only we had had the sense to realise that the old world was an old world - a dirty old world, and that all the other places to which people went from it, the other colonies were all crowded together with all sorts of different people. Whereas we started off with a more or less homogenous people and there was the chance of something if it were possible to have such an ideal. Whether it was possible or not I don't know, but it simply did not come off. But within myself - and I go back again to my beginnings of growing up on the edge of the beloved wilderness. I did not hate the wilderness, I knew it was a place that if you walked out too far you were going to die in it. But it was something that was there, that belonged to us, something that we would tame eventually, and out of which we would establish something which would be a credit to the world. What is the good of a community that is just stuck within itself? . . . but that would be a credit to the world. And what the world needs above all things is a group of people, a community of people which they can follow. The only people that I can see that have ever done it are the Jews, and they have done it of course with the great difficulty of having to live amongst other people. Even their attempt now to do it in a way of their own is resisted by others. But that's because of the ancient world and its ancient hatreds. We had that chance, I believe, and in myself there was this sense of loss, of disappointment that finally made me write this book, to take 9 years over the writing of it. Whereas the other one "Capricornia" it took me 3 months to get a go on, and then 6 weeks to finish it. As I said it was written too quickly. I was making a joke once about this one's being written too slowly. It had to be written so that every page of it was something that contained an expression of my purpose. And my deep purpose was to say to my countrymen "this is the reality". Either let us get rid of it and give ourselves away. Let us go back to colonialism as we are fast doing. It is only too obvious that our beautiful Commonwealth is disintegrating, that even the name has been taken from it now. They speak of the Australian Government. There is no longer this beautiful thing the commonweal, the common good. There is a fake thing called Australia which is a federation of colonies, not even British colonies anymore. They are a hotchpotch of immigrants and when I say that I am not talking about people who came lately, but going back to our

beginnings, because we have never been anything but immigrants. And each place is taking on more and more of a colonial system. But the people who rule from afar now are anybody, anybody with money, anybody who will come. As I said to Sir William Collins, quarrelling with him about this book, I have never been published by the imperial publishers before. But nobody else was capable of producing this big book of mine except the biggest publisher in the world which is Collins. They call themselves Collins Aust. And I had to point out to him that he was an absentee landlord and that the curse of our country, not the first curse, but the second curse of our country is absentee landlordism. The first curse is our supineness, that dreadful thing that makes us accept them. And as I said to him you've got to understand this. People are going to say that Herbert went back to the imperial master, "all a talk, after all the years of fighting against it". But the reason why I have let you publish me is this: that the lousy bastards my own countrymen, who can't dig a bloody hole in the ground without getting somebody from outside to pay for it, set up the machinery, and they will be glad to get down in the hole and dig it like slaves and then mess it all up by pretending that they are not slaves; and that is the set up between you and me, I said to him. And you've got to understand it because I am going to state it.

Now I come to the end of this. I say it to you again that this is, I think, the end of my life even. It is certainly the end of my literary career. That the whole of this thing seems to be to me a compulsion for a purpose, I must say farewell to you, or let's put it in an aboriginal way. The aborigines of a large part of the north say mummuk. If you are going to come back they say mummuk yawarra. Actually translated it means "I go, I come back". Now I'm taking a great risk because people like Nellie Melba and others use to do it quite often . . . . .

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