The following is a transcript of an interview with Les Murray on my radio programme, “And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda,” recorded at 8 TOP-FM studios, Darwin, N.T., on TUESDAY, 14th August, 1984. Small alterations have occasionally been made in the interests of clarity. I would like to thank the Literature Board of the Australia Council for its generous support of Les’ Top End visit.

DH: Welcome to the Top End and “Waltzing Matilda” Les.
LM: Thank you very much.
DH: It was our good fortune to have you in Darwin only twelve months ago — your first visit to the Territory for some twenty odd years. Did that visit have an impact on you and on your poetry?
LM: Oh, yes it did. It was interesting to come back and see things from the point of view of one who now had a bed and some money to spend. The first time I was here, I was sleeping over near the Administrator’s house on a cliffside, watching the lightning of the monsoon build-up out to sea. I had no money at all, so I had a completely different view of Darwin in 1961.
DH: You wouldn’t survive in Darwin these days, without money.
LM: I get that impression, yes. My visit last year did have an immediate impact, of course. I went home and wrote a poem about the Kakadu wetlands.
DH: How did that come about?
LM: Well, we went out in the marvellous machine, an air boat which has an aircraft engine mounted on the back of an aluminium frame, and it sort of skims over the water, barely touching, not disturbing the environment but making a fearsome noise.
DH: Do you feel the need, in your poetry, to keep associating yourself anew with different parts of Australia? Do you find that important?
LM: Oh yes. I like to keep plugging into various parts.
DH: As is now common knowledge, your spirit home is Bunyah, just north of Sydney. But what other places are significant?

LM: Sydney, I suppose. I have lived there for a long time. I went to university there in 1957, and I got detained. A long detention. I haven't escaped back home yet. But as you say, my spirit country is up on the north coast of New South Wales, at Bunyah, between the Myall Lakes and the Dividing Range, the Barrington Tops.

DH: One of the interesting aspects of your work in recent years has been the response of critics. For the best part of two decades now, you have been regarded as a major Australian poet. But in the last five or six years, a growing number of critics — and I am one — has referred to you as one of the major poets writing in English today. That notion seems to be taking hold. Has the world stature of your verse had any substantial effects on either your poetry or your movements?

LM: I was going to places more, I think, a few years ago, than I am now. I used to go overseas a lot on the Commonwealth Literature circuit — various universities in Europe, in particular where Australian Literature is being studied. Of course, there was a time, when I went to Sydney University, when Australian Literature wasn't taught at all — nor was it in any other Australian universities. Yet it was taught at the University of Toulouse, in France, and also, to some degree, in Leningrad.

DH: It would have been Prichard, I guess, Prichard and Lawson?

LM: That sort of thing, yeah. They still sell well there. In the period since, many universities in Europe have taken up Australian Literature. It is rather hard to say why. Partly it is because they want a frontier literature, they want the sense of some place outside of Europe. But, with America, you get the political concomitant, as well. I guess, in looking at us, they want an innocent America.

DH: Australian Literature over the last two decades has certainly been a growth industry. Your first collection, The Ilex Tree (with Geoff Lehmann) was published in 1965. That was the exact year, I believe, that we had the first chair of Australian Literature (at Sydney university). So you were at the beginning of this expansion.

LM: In 1965, getting a book of verse published in Australia was supposed to be a big achievement. We went to the ANU press and suggested that they publish our book. They had never
published a book of verse before. They were hushed and reverent about the very idea, they checked our manuscript out with Alec Hope and he said it most certainly should be published, and so it was. But it was represented to us as such a big deal that we weren't given any royalties. About five years later, the big boom in Australian poetry books started.

DH: One imagines that that has made life easier. The boom must have had the effect of encouraging you in your poetry, in the last decade.

LM: Yes. I haven't had any trouble publishing books, or publishing in magazines. I gradually got up the courage to start sending things out overseas and getting them published there. It has simply been a natural development.

DH: Have we reached the stage where writers can survive on the strength of their own writing and work around literature?

LM: Only because we are a subsidised industry, with Literature Board Fellowships. You couldn't make a living without the Fellowships. In fact, you would have less chance now than perhaps five or six years ago. I remember that at one point I was making almost half an income out of writing. I now make slightly more money out of it, but those earnings are now about one third of an income, because inflation has gone ahead faster than the fees you get.

DH: And yet your most recent collection, The People's Other World (1983), sold out in only a few weeks.

LM: Yes, sold out in seven weeks, mostly because the publisher underprinted to blazes. I said, "Print four thousand of these, I think we can run down the average Australian novel." Oh no, no, couldn't do that. So they printed a thousand and it was gone in seven weeks. They have now printed three thousand, and that's nearly gone. I think some Australian poets can easily match the sales of a novel — and why not? Australia is a good market for poetry; Australians buy a lot of poetry.

DH: Approximately what sort of money are we talking about. What might you get for royalties?

LM: My tax man might be listening. I suppose all up, royalties and fees and that sort of thing, comes to about $ 8,000. As I said, five years ago that was half an income.

DH: It's still a rather grim story for the Australian writer, then, as the Australian Society of Authors has been telling us for years.
Let’s move to the poetry shall we? For many years you have been stumping for the relevance of poetry in the twentieth century, saying that poetry is needed in these troubled times. Would you care to elaborate on that? In what way do you think poetry still has great relevance to people?

LM: Oh, it is an essential thing! It’s spiritual food. You can’t take too much of it, but you need to have it, or some equivalent of it in your life to some degree. This I wouldn’t have to argue with an Aboriginal audience at all. But a white audience might think that it is irrelevant. The idea that poetry causes things to happen I worry about a little bit. You know that it can have polemical and effective uses. But, ultimately, poetry like any other piece of art is a meshing between the conscious and the unconscious, between dream and reason. It needs to contain both. And polemical verse will usually start either by being too intellectual, too much reason and too little of the dream, or else it will be bad dreams. The polemic I fear is bad dreams.

DH: That’s interesting, because your verse has been undergoing change recently, tending to move away from the public role of the poet.

LM: I think the public role of the poet is perpetual anyway. There is always going to be a need for some poetry in society. And, frankly, gradually over the years I’m getting more interested in art, and the universal.

DH: Where does that leave your Republic?

LM: I’ll tell you where it leaves it. When I achieved the Republic inside my head, I gave up writing about it. I think that’s what happens. I think the Republic comes to different people at different rates. You get that sense of personal independence and equality with the rest of the world, and you stop thinking about it. That is the real Republic.

DH: That’s fascinating. In other words you don’t regard, say, Republican legislation, as being important?

LM: It’s important, it’s just not to be done by me. Nobody elected me to do it. I don’t believe in rule or even leadership by people who have not been elected.

DH: Is the “vernacular” part of your Republic still important?

LM: Oh sure, yes. That is more of a cultural idea than a political idea. Politics was always the smallest and least important part of the idea, as far as I was concerned. It was about culture,
about human adaptation to the country, to the country of Australia. This had too often been badly misrepresented from left, right and centre, and all those other political positions.

DH: Your position at this point is the more interesting because, if you consider some of the other major writers in Australia today, such as Bruce Dawe, Patrick White, Thea Astley and Judith Wright, it is clear that they have taken up a more radical position. They have moved in an opposite direction to you.

LM: I had my dabble in that. Yet to some extent I was always very wary of it, because I realised that in the political area all performances become command performances. You start getting recruited for various causes. And I have got a bad habit of being able to see both sides of most questions. If I had any faith in astrology, I'd say that, yes, I really am a Libra! I was born under that sign. On the other hand, during the Vietnam war, it was more or less a command performance that you had to write your Vietnam war poems, sooner or later. And mine turned out to be the most equivocal under the sun, because I could see on the one hand and on the other hand. The only thing I was sure of was that Australia shouldn't be there.

DH: You have suggested that one of your last public statements was in your novel in sonnets, The Boys Who Stole A Funeral (1980). Is it your last major public statement?

LM: Well, it was full of people's polemics, of various types. Right at the heart of it, you will always find that there were people who had no particular axes to grind, being ground good and hard by people who had. Ultimately, I am on the side of those who have no axe to grind and are being ground. There was a fellow who, more or less instinctively and without explaining it to himself, did a good deed for someone who was dead, and everybody wanted a slice of the reasons. They kept trying to put reasons onto him and he kept trying to wash them off, and he ended up in the bush in a sort of delirious state where he had several visions. The book was a ballad really; it is a story about two young fellows, unemployed in Sydney, who steal an old man's body out of an undertaker's freezer and take it north into the mountains for burial. They do this because the old man wanted to be buried back in his own family country, his own sort of tribal country. I mean, people of both black and white persuasion up my way, and quite often they are hard to distinguish, have these very complex family ramifications, family networks and beliefs that you ought to be buried where you come from.
DH: Speaking of black and white, is the issue of convergence of black and white cultures still an important one for you?

LM: It is something I grew up with. There are an awful lot of ways in which the Aboriginals and whites in my part of the country have very similar habits and attitudes and ways; for instance, a loyalty to large extended family connections. Often, they have those cultural preferences because they are the same people. There are some Scotch people who settled on the Manning River in the 1850's who are now all black. The Lobban family, for example, haven’t got any white members anymore. It turns around like that. My brother-in-law is driver/batman to Mum Shirl, Shirley Smith, and she counts about eight thousand relatives. I think she has adopted a lot of them, out of general goodness of heart, but many of them are blood relatives and she constantly visits them. I know exactly how that works. The bush works like that too. You try to, say, set a folk museum in a bush town and you immediately run into what I call the O'Hennessy principle — which means you have got to accept the donation of exhibits from all the families from around, and if you offend the O'Hennessy’s, say, by not taking their exhibits, you are going to be in big trouble. They are going to be an enemy of your enterprise for the rest of time.

DH: The most obvious change in the more recent poems is away from public thoughts to a much more internalised poetry.

LM: Yes, but it is also universal. I’m looking at things that are constant, all over the whole world, although Australia is always in there because it is the source of my imagery, and my difference, I suppose, too. I am one person in this English-speaking poetry world who writes from this particular landscape. And I wouldn’t dare to write about another one, because I don’t know another one. Unless you know another place enormously well, you are writing tourist verse.

DH: Right. One of your recent poems that very obviously develops this idea is “Equanimity”. Would you regard this poem, for example, as being at the heart of your new direction towards the universal?

LM: Yes, I would. I have always had that direction; it is just that for a while I got polemical. I was out of step with everybody. I mean, the time for polemics was during the Vietnam war. So, Murray, you muffed that one! I had a few things to say
afterwards. Just couldn’t get my cultural cues right. Then I got sick of polemics, because I had said enough — I had boiled my cabbage enough times. So I moved on.

DH: There seems to be a fairly obvious contrast set up in People’s Otherworld between the people you refer to as, and I quote, “the other world of action and media”, and this very crucial internal world, the world from which “all holiness speaks”. It is “the continuous recovering moment”.

LM: It’s grace, yes! It is just the ordinary observation of grace around the place, the way the trees are shaped. My wife pointed out to me one day that all grace is one; you know, the grace of a good action, the grace of a shape of a tree, or the grace of somebody’s walk. They are all the same thing. And I began to ponder on that. As I have often said, my wife hires me to write her poems for her. She is musical and doesn’t really believe in words, you see. I knew that one would issue in a poem, and it is a poem as much as anything else about the common life in Australia, the suburban life which used to be so despised by Australia’s intellectuals.

DH: Presumably, this exploration of grace is one part of what you once labelled in an interview, some years ago, “high matters”?

LM: I am writing at the moment about the mystery of why animals come to humans for help.

DH: I have always delighted in your determination to run counter to much traditional Australian writing, which is fairly morose, poignant. Yours is so full of celebration. But now, could we say, investigation rather than celebration?

LM: Oh, celebration at the same time, often. With me celebration is an inbuilt habit; I am that way disposed. Australian literature? Yes, you are right. It is often depressive, isn’t it? That is a colonial survival, I think, a habit of self-trust, of self-hatred, a feeling that we are not measuring up to some standard that is kept elsewhere. That is really the notion I opposed with the republican idea. My idea was really a decolonising idea. It is cultural, it is not practical.

DH: You mentioned present subjects. What are some of the subjects that are important to you at the moment, that you want to pursue?

LM: Animals, for one. I have written a lot about animals lately. The mystery of animal speech. Of course, I grew up on a farm and I
speak pig, I speak dog. I call them languages, the seven or eight calls that an animal makes that you understand, the various different cries that they make. I thought that, yes, in a way they are words. They are great words that we have to express in thousands of words. We do all the detail, the definitions and the detail. I got to writing about that. What have I written about lately? "The Dream of Wearing Shorts Forever".

DH: That poem, for the record, will be published in the "Wet" (December 1984) *Northern Perspective*. What of metaphysical issues?

LM: Well, lots of metaphysical issues. I got interested in interest. Not money interest, making money on investments, but in being interested in things. Curiosity, that set of human emotions. People who talked about being bored, or being interested, over the last about two or three centuries. Interest is very much an aristocratic or intellectual attitude. I suspect nobody in the middle ages was bored, because the very term didn't exist — or it existed only in Latin. I realised that it is one of the great joys of many human beings to be interested, and they feel absolutely deprived when interest is not there. Boredom is agony. It is interesting that Dante didn't put lack of stimulation into his *Divine Comedy* as one of the tortures in hell. It wouldn't have occured to him the. It would occur to us now as one of the tortures. And then I thought, from my habit of seeing everything from several sides, yes, that has its disadvantages too, because if you are the ruling class in the society and you get bored with something, then you drop it. This can cause a great deal of trouble. The Aborigines at the moment have the misfortune of having the white man very interested in them. Which comes after the misfortune of having the white man not interested in them. It is a bit hard to say which is the worse disaster.

DH: I know that, quite recently, you have been editing an Oxford collection of Australian poems. Could I ask you a little about that? We were talking about it yesterday, and you mentioned that a few oddities, discoveries if you like, turned up. Could you elaborate?

LM: I had been skimming Australian Literature, large amounts of it, reading old books, practically getting dust on the lung from reading nineteenth-century Australian verse. And finding that what survives is nearly always the vernacular stuff, rather than the high formal verse of the time. The high formal verse of the time is almost all dead. There is just the odd exception, such as
Ada Cambridge. You find a few live poems in a person like that. Also, I’ve been reading all sorts of odd volumes, including risque ones like *Robust, Ribald and Rude Verse in Australia*. Partly, it is dirty poems, but not very dirty. It has got “The Bastard from the Bush” in it, which is going into my anthology by the way. This is one of the best known poems in Australia, yet has never been in an official anthology. I’ve found at least four versions of it, which is an interesting story in itself. I ought to write a thesis on it. I found a marvellous poem by a chap called Arthur Davies, and his poem, “West Paddocks”, is in the Jindyworobak Anthology for 1941. It absolutely annihilated everything else in the book, for quality. How could I not have heard of this genius, a marvellous poem. I began to ask around, and people said that he used to work in the ABC in Brisbane, and was an alcoholic. He was transferred to Melbourne, and died there. I enquired further. Oh, yes, Arthur Davies, he was the man who founded Hal Porter’s career. Hal based his whole style on him, style of life and of writing. I can sort of see that, too. I must find more poems of his. I haven’t found any yet, but I am going to go on a big Arthur Davies hunt. Doing an anthology is a great comfort really, you see what has happened to past reputations and you think, ah, yes, that puts it into perspective. A chap like Francis Letters, who was the first Professor of English at the University of New England. I went through his books of verse the other day and found two splendid poems. Now he is a man who has totally been forgotten. He had a small reputation at one time and it is now gone, completely gone. I found a marvellous poem of his, called “Inglorious Miltons”, which is about how the minds of people who don’t write are often as complex and culturally enlightened and fascinating as people who do manage to put it on the page. And another one called “Miss Jinks”, which is on a similar sort of subject, about the profundity of the mind of a lady who in most ways was rather like William Blake. Except that Blake put it on paper. It fits my kind of politics very nicely, that. But also my instinct about people.

DH: Speaking of your own style of politics, we both know that arranging an anthology these days is to try and survive in a bag full of serpents. It’s a selection nightmare.

LM: Since 1956, and the first Penguin Anthology of Australian Verse, there has been this tendency to apportion space to poets in terms of their relative importance. Old Jim gets five poems
because Mary has got four, excetera. This juggling of reputations, this fine-tuning of how important writers are, is irrelevant to poetry. Another thing that happened is enormous slabs of critical introduction to the poet, biographical introduction, all this sort of thing, which I think is intended as padding to protect people against the shock of poetry. It is almost as if the anthologist is frightened of poetry. Prose is the norm and poetry is the exceptional stuff you have got to present but also legitimise, with prose commentary. . . I'm not going to have any of that damn prose at all. I'm going to have about one page of introduction, and all the biography readers will get is the year of birth, a hyphen, and the year of death, if applicable. I am not worried about personality cult and careerism and that sort of thing.

DH: What poems of your own will you include?
LM: I might. . . . I don't know. If I did give myself three, they would probably be “Broad Bean Sermon”, which I suppose is as much as anything else about the principles of selection in the book, all sorts of different beans. The poem, “Equanimity”, we were talking about. And if I go a third one, it will probably be the one about Newcastle, called “The Smell of Coat Smoke”.

DH: I guess one of the unfortunate things about selecting from the Murray list is that magnificent poems like “The Buladelah —Taree Holiday Song Cycle” and “Toward the Imminent Days”, are simply too long?
LM: Yes, they are too long. I couldn’t give myself that much space and still say that I was modest. I am not giving very many people that much space. One person I am, that will please you, is Frank McNamara. He has never had a guernsey in the anthologies before. He is getting OQ'Convict's Tour of Hell”, which will be about eight pages, and a couple of others.