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FROM HER FRIENDS
Vance Palmer
Acknowledgments

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The most remarkable feature of Vance Palmer’s adult life was the subordination of his private concerns to the public interest. There was in his behaviour an authentic selflessness that made him during many years the doyen of the entire Australian literary community. Yet, if no writer of his generation was more altruistic, none was more reticent. From his personal conduct he seemingly strove to efface all marks of the inner pressures of his being. Only towards the close of his career, in some fragments of autobiography, did he begin to open the door on his basic contract with the world. For the rest, living with few of the visible signs of passion, he dedicated his energies to the public welfare of his country, to its civilization and its culture.

Such behaviour, comparatively rare in the creative artist, may seem to bespeak, at best, a diversion of Palmer’s powers from their true end in literature; at worst, an imagination lacking the obsessive force and thrust of the major artist. Some such belief lies at the heart of every adverse judgment of Palmer’s work: that there is a fatal discrepancy between the honourable and, as it were, public intentions of his books

1
and the severely muted passion which informs them. Even so sympathetic a reviewer and close a friend as Stephen Murray-Smith could not fail to sense this fundamental dilemma. Writing in Overland after the death of both Palmer and his wife, he noted that "A great many fine and moving things have been said about Vance and Nettie Palmer in recent years." "I don’t need to add to the encomiums at the moment," he continued, "but I would like to suggest that here are some enigmas of unusual complexity waiting to be resolved. Why did the Palmers subdue their personalities and adopt an almost mannered reticence in their work?"

In that question are resumed the chief problems posed by Vance Palmer's life and writing. To be sure, the two dozen odd books of fiction, drama, verse, and belles lettres that he left behind must finally be allowed to proclaim their own nature, quality, and merit. Nevertheless, some acquaintance with Palmer's direct experience of the world, the emotional and intellectual problems that he encountered, will go far in creating those circumstances wherein the books can be heard both clear and true. The simple facts of Palmer's life, for instance, indicate that his novels have too often been subject to inadequate or inappropriate critical tests. The same facts point to an intimate relation rather than a divorce between his writing and his concern for public culture. They suggest that the disinterested altruism of his conduct stemmed from hard won conviction rather than poverty of imaginative resources. They reveal a psychological experience of real depth and complexity, and of a kind to give rise to important literature. They demonstrate that the apparent poise and serenity of his behaviour were not achieved without struggle; that they were in effect the badges of honour of what may rightly be thought of as one of the heroic careers in the literary history of twentieth century Australia.

1885 – 1905

Edward Vance Palmer was born at Bundaberg, two hundred miles north of Brisbane on the Queensland coast, on 28 August,
1885. In a family of nine, including five sisters, he was the second youngest. His father, Henry Burnet Palmer, was a schoolteacher, Australian by birth. His mother, whose maiden name was Jessie Carson, was the daughter of a bookseller in Dublin. Although there was little of what is conventionally thought of as Celtic in Palmer's temperament, he did remember his maternal grandmother as one of the dominant figures of his childhood years:

I hung around my grandmother, going with her for walks and sitting on the wooden chest beside her bed while she ate her breakfast. In spite of the lack of room she kept mainly to herself, rarely taking part in the family life; this was partly her instinct for independence. She spent most of her day in bed, sitting back among the pillows with her white nightcap tied under her chin, not even reading or knitting but looking out of the window with her bright abstracted eyes. I was fascinated by her talk which was full of strange, rich words that came out with an energetic twisting of her thin old lips. There was no beginning or end to her stories, and often they were incomprehensible, but they called up a background of purple hills, mist-covered bogs, tinkers camped by the roadside, soldiers marching across country in the night. Sometimes of tiny, green-coated people who came out by moonlight to play tricks on farmers, especially on those who did not leave milk by their doors. I did not believe there were any fairies in the world about me, but I was firmly convinced they lurked behind every clump of bushes in this Ireland Grandmother had left behind.2

An unwillingness to admit superstition into his immediate environment (at the same time as he acknowledged a kind of natural magic in the world) was an attitude that Palmer carried into his adult years; it may be, too, that he first acquired his writer's love of words and story telling from his Irish grandmother.

Of his own parents, his father seems to have been easily the stronger influence on the young Palmer. The schoolteacher, himself a reviewer for various small Australian journals, introduced into his home that rather prim respect for literature
which was a feature of nineteenth century middle class culture. He also insisted on the Palmer family's social superiority to the farming population they lived among: “Wherever it might be, my father was never at home with his neighbours. To him the storekeeper and the local policeman were alike ‘peasants’, though he used the word without contempt.” These attitudes were far more significant in Palmer’s development than any of his grandmother’s story telling. Much of his adult life constituted an attempt to identify himself with the working class; yet whatever success he attained was characterized not only by patent sincerity but some sense of strain and conscious effort. Perhaps, too, it was the upright father who aroused in the young Palmer the fear of death as some kind of punishment. In later years he consciously overcame the fear, but it may have left as its legacy the curious timidity which sometimes assailed him in the face of new and unknown experience. In any case, the recurring need throughout Palmer’s fiction to work out the relation of fathers to sons is incontrovertible testimony of the deep-seated importance it bore in his own life.

One thing of value that he acquired from his father (and his father’s father — a remote and powerful figure in Sydney) was the love of reading and literature. Dickens was an especial favourite; later on, Henry Lawson. Again, because his father frequently moved from school to school, Palmer saw a good deal of outback Queensland, mainly in the southern part of the state. The values that he held to throughout his career were not merely those he had discovered in the Australian writers of the 1890’s; they were those he had actually seen in operation around him during the same period.

Some time between 1898 and 1900 it was apparently decided that Vance’s education required some more settled discipline, for he was sent to board with the Watson family at Ipswich and enrolled at Ipswich Boys’ Grammar School. Palmer was an eminently normal high school student. Temporarily losing his enthusiasm for reading, he poured his energy and imagination into sport, particularly cricket and Rugby football. A radio broadcast of 1949 recreates this period of his life with a fond nostalgia:
It may seem strange but, while I've forgotten much that was important, there are physical sensations that come back to me over the years with pure pleasure like a bar of remembered music. There was that first jump, for instance, flying over a high log on a barebacked horse, knowing if he struck with his front hooves I'd probably go over his head and break a limb; I can bring the sensations of it up at will. There were certain innings I played at cricket, feeling myself at the top of my form, able to clip an over-pitched ball through the covers with certainty. There were certain games of Rugby football, too, that are as real to me as if they'd been played yesterday; games when everything went right, when I took the ball cleanly from the scrums and whipped it out to the three-quarters to set them moving in unison.6

Some other aspects of his school life were calculated to cloud the healthy animal spirits of the growing boy. Shortly before Palmer's enrolment at Ipswich Grammar a scandal had arisen concerning the suspected homosexual relationship of a teacher with one or two of the local choir boys. The master was forced to resign, but the memory was not erased from Palmer's mind. Years later he was to write, "This man's figure threw such a shadow on my first days at school, and even now affects me with so definite a sense of evil, that I cannot ignore him in any account of my youth".6 The horror of the experience was soon dismissed from the surface of Palmer's imagination by the visit to the school of one of the great Australian schoolboy idols of the time, the cricketer Victor Trumper:

For myself I carried Trumper's remembered figure around with me, as an image of some kind of human perfection. It didn't belong to the cricket-field alone: it could easily be transferred to other areas of life, such as scholarship or adventure. . . Trumper's figure acted as a foil to that of the sinister [teacher], for the question of what evil was and where it came from was never far from my mind. Earlier I had connected it with cruelty, particularly to horses.7

To a large degree, Palmer's career as a writer can be viewed as a continuing effort to grapple with the opposing modes of
behaviour represented to his youthful mind by Trumper and the sadistically homosexual master. The Trumper-like figure normally occupies the foreground of the fiction: the positive epitome and dashing vindication of all that is decent and good. Nevertheless, the sinister presence is also there, either embodied as a recognizable personality or to be detected as a disquieting force pressing against the marked sexual rectitude and desire for moral order which characterize so much of Palmer’s work.

In another important respect, Palmer’s high school days helped to lay the foundations of his skills as a writer of fiction. He learnt to identify and cherish the precise detail capable of defining people and places. In a piece entitled “On Boundaries”, printed in the Melbourne magazine Fellowship in 1921, he spoke of the curious sensations engendered in his adolescent imagination by crossing a state boundary from Queensland to New South Wales:

> Whenever I hear people talking about boundaries I always think of a line I used to cross as a boy, when going over to play cricket in the neighbouring township. It was a purely immaterial line, marked by nothing except a blazed gum-tree at the side of the road, and it would have been easy to drive past without noticing that you had crossed the border into New South Wales. We never did, though: the boundary was too real to us: and our eyes were always quick to detect the tree that marked the end of our world. Then we would halt for awhile to taste the queer emotions that came from standing with one foot in Queensland and one in New South Wales... On the other side of the line everything seemed different—the houses, the people, the landscape, even the fowls. Some of the differences were probably imaginary... Yet the customs of the people were certainly different. The boys paid school-money and went early into long trousers. They lived in houses built of stone and brick, with floors almost on the level of the ground. They brought strange tags into their speech... It was all very novel and exciting, but we were glad to get back in the evening to the consolation of the trees, houses and customs we knew. 

In that record of early adventure are to be found a number of
the characteristic virtues of Palmer's mature writing: the highly developed sense of place, the comfort to be derived from what is known in the bones and the heart, the belief in the possibility of achieving unity in diversity.

In spite of an undistinguished scholastic record, at the end of his high school years Palmer could probably have gained entry to Sydney University. The desire, however, for further formal education was not strong. On the other hand, the notion of becoming a writer had never been completely lost sight of — had, in fact, been reinforced by a visit to Ipswich from "Banjo" Paterson (lecturing on the Boer War) and the acquaintance of the son of Barbara Baynton. The notion now strongly reasserted itself, along with vague adolescent aspirations towards high adventure. Adventure was to elude him for several years yet, but, deciding against the University, the youth essayed all that was practically possible in a world whose farthest horizon was Sydney, and sought employment in Brisbane. For a short time the sixteen-year-old worked as secretary to a doctor, whom he soon discovered to be totally blind and a complete fraud. Since the old charlatan's business was conducted almost entirely through the post, Palmer's chief responsibilities were to open the mail, read letters, and take down replies. Twice a day, as well, he had to bank the doctor's cheques. The main compensation in working for this old man (who is almost certainly the model for McNair in The Passage) lay in the proximity of the School of Arts Library. Only two hundred yards away from the doctor's office, it reawakened in the youth all his love of great literature. For a while he immersed himself in George Moore; then Tolstoy, Balzac, Stendhal, Flaubert, and Turgenev. Of Turgenev he said that, at the time, he excited him more than any of the English writers he was discovering. As well as devouring the great English and European novelists, Palmer was also beginning to read the Sydney Bulletin. Through it he came upon one of his lifelong local idols, A.G. Stephens. "I read every word that A.G. Stephens wrote", he later recorded; "I sought out the works of writers he mentioned".9

Stimulated by his reading, Palmer now started to write,
and was soon having his articles accepted in local magazines, especially *Steele Rudd's Magazine*, edited by A.H. Davis in Brisbane. Soon enough the aspiring writer met the author of *On Our Selection*, Davis, indeed, offering Palmer a job as editorial assistant, an offer which never came to fruition. More significantly Davis encouraged his protégé in the idea that if he wished seriously to pursue the profession of writing, Australia was no place to do it in. Already imbued with the urge to travel, Palmer probably required only the slightest persuasion to adopt Davis's suggestion. "In the end," he later wrote, "I accepted his view that Australia was no place for a writer and pinned all my hopes on escape to London."  

1906 – 1911

By the time he was twenty, by dint of saving and self-denial, and with the encouragement of seeing several of his pieces accepted in London, Palmer was ready to go. Throwing up his job as "an invoice-clerk in an obscure warehouse", he sailed from Sydney in late 1905 with little more than his fare in his pocket. He was, to be sure, the proud owner of an ancient dress suit given him by his grandfather as a farewell gift; but on his arrival in England he was compelled to relinquish even that piece of finery, handing it over to a cabin steward in lieu of a tip. For the next two years his financial status was scarcely to improve. Taking a small room in Bloomsbury, he settled down to the task of making a living through freelance literary journalism. A living of a sort he contrived to make, but one hardly calculated to assist his development as a serious artist. His earliest work was "a kind of literary beachcombing, gathering fragments for obscure publishers — *The Proverbs of Japan, The Proverbs of China, The Potted Policy of Parnell*".  

There must have been real toughness and grit in Palmer's make-up to sustain him through this lean time. Perhaps the mere fact of being in London provided him with a sense of adventure fulfilled. Perhaps, too, he could lose himself in what was still the romance of actually being a professional writer. Certainly he could draw strength from his memories of home,
his sense of Australia as the irrevocable centre of his allegiances. Quite deliberately, Palmer had gone to England to acquire the professionalism of writing, not to be permanently absorbed into its culture. Always, not too far in the back of his mind, was the belief that whatever talent he possessed must be used for and within his homeland:

Looking back now, it seems strange that a young outsider should have taken so seriously this vision of a closed, invulnerable Europe to which the surrounding world was only a menace. My loyalties were fixed: I had no intention of making a home in London. To me it was a gloomy, friendless place; even the Australians who migrated there were largely people to be avoided. The name of Dingo Dell, given by Barbara Baynton to one of their meeting places, seemed an apt one... Even the English countryside did not attract me greatly. I could find delight in the magic of a bluebell wood, but I saw most things in terms of literature, and the villagers of Hardy’s novels were not as near to me as the peasants of Tolstoy’s... As for earning a crust, I had found that possible on an earlier visit by studying the weeklies and magazines and sending them the kind of thing they were in the habit of printing. Like a mouse in the wainscot I had lived in a Bloomsbury back-room and had stored up provender for the return home.13

Such a light hold did England have on him that by 1907 Palmer was ready to resume his wanderings. It may have been too, that he felt the need to counteract his tendency to look at things in terms of literature by seeing more of the actual world. For whatever reasons, he set out to return to Australia through Siberia and Japan. He has left only fragmentary accounts of what in those days must have been an extraordinarily arduous journey. While in Russia, Palmer set out on a pilgrimage to Yasnaya Polyana, but near Tula was forced to turn back. He was, thus, disappointed in his hope of meeting Tolstoy, one of the great masters of his life. He remembered, however, travelling in a train full of Russian soldiers and being made aware of that community of ordinary folk that was to become one of the touchstones of his mature creed:

Many years ago, long before the Revolution, I remember
travelling in a post-train in Russia, and a platoon of soldiers
got in just before midnight to travel to another station a
couple of hours away. Passing along the corridor, I saw
them sitting with their rifles between their knees, listening
with absorbed attention while the black-bearded sergeant
read to them. I found out he was reading a tale from
Poushkin.

Probably few of those soldiers were literate, but they
could listen with interest, in a crowded train at midnight,
to the words of one of their country’s greatest authors.

But that was because they had grown up in an atmosphere
of folk-tales and traditional peasant-culture. We haven’t
that primary asset. If we, in this country, lack the ability
to read and write we have nothing to fall back on, nothing
to stimulate our imaginations or give us a sense of values.14

Certain scenes from Finland also stayed in Palmer’s mem­
ories, particularly a lost opportunity of taking a sauna bath:

It is many years since I first became acquainted with the
Finnish sauna. Those were days of youthful adventure, and
I was staying at a village on the coast with a couple of
returned immigrants from America, people I had met on
a small boat sailing to Finland from Hull. The sauna
was one of several in the thick woods surrounding the
village. It was a long, log-built cabin by a lake, and during
the afternoons one watched sweating people emerge at
intervals from the heated interior to plunge into the icy
water, then hurry back for a further spell of baking. There
was a sober intensity about them as if they were going
through a familiar ritual.

I was invited to share their entertainment, but somehow
I shied away from the experience.15

The incident and its conclusion typify a significant element in
the pattern of Palmer’s life. Adventurous to a point, he was
yet liable to hold back from final immersion in whatever
experience had for the time being engaged his attention. This
quality of his living, it has sometimes been felt, is also translated
into his writing as an unwillingness to pursue the consequences
and implications of his invented fictions to their necessary
limits.
In any case, Palmer was sufficiently resourceful to reach Vladivostok, whence he took ship, along with a hundred Manchurian coolies, to Japan, and so back to Australia — meeting on the last leg of his trip one of the celebrated novelists of the day, Jack London. Back home, he worked for some time as tutor and bookkeeper on a cattle station in the Maranoa district of Queensland, but the days of his adventuring were not yet done, and the Southern hemisphere could hold him no longer than the Northern. By 1910 he was back in London.

His second visit to London seems to have been much happier and literally more rewarding than the first. Living now in Gray’s Inn Road, he found himself much more fully accepted into the literary life of the city than previously. There were still Australian friends, of course; he met the cartoonist Will Dyson for the first time in 1911 and spent occasional Sunday evenings with other expatriates in the home of the Gulletts, a pair of hospitable Australians living permanently in London. More importantly, he was also moving in the company of men who were at the centre of the literary world. There were Cecil Chesterton, Darrell Figgis, R.H. Middleton, Hilaire Belloc. But Palmer’s particular group — or the one that he recalled most vividly and often in later years — was assembled around the *New Age* and its brilliant editor, A.R. Orage:

My lucky entry into this group was due to a short sketch, “Rough Faring”, and for a long while my life moved around the central point of these Monday gatherings. Orage usually dominated the talk, presiding at the head of the table, as G.K. Chesterton said afterwards, “as publicly as Dr. Johnson in a coffee house”. But he had no tendency toward monologue: his warm, brown eyes moved from one to another of the group and kept conversation flowing. At his elbow sat Beatrice Hastings, an extremely handsome and brilliant woman whom Katherine Mansfield came afterwards to regard as her dark angel...

But there were never gaps around the table for long. The portly figure of T.E. Hulme, the philosopher, was usually in its place; Ezra Pound came regularly, a shy, modest young man, speaking little except in side-comments to his neighbours; Wyndham Lewis slipped in unobtrusively...
with a drawing under his arm. Other casual attendants were Herbert Read, Bechofer Roberts, Paul Selver, and Richard Curle, the biographer of Conrad. The talk was sometimes political, but usually concerned with literature.

Though these gatherings were stimulating, what helped me most in my work was private contact with Orage. His eyes as he read over a piece of writing were alive, responsive, and austere. He could be warm in his praise, but his criticism went directly to the point.¹⁶

The company of Orage and his circle was one of the genuine rewards of Palmer's English experience. He could hardly have expected to find a group of equal talent and vitality, so able to put a cutting edge on his own mind, had he remained in Australia. In particular, his association with the *New Age* probably helped to set his political and social attitudes. The magazine was an organ for consciously radical comment, very much *au fait* with the Fabian and other Socialist critiques of English life which were current at the time. Palmer’s friendship with Orage, his slight acquaintance with Shaw, must have helped shape the liberal humanist ethos which was the keystone of his understanding of the world.

On at least one occasion Palmer sought to pursue his political education beyond the bounds of theory into practice. For two weeks he deliberately submerged himself in some of the worst slums of the East End:

Inspired by Jack London’s *People of the Abyss*, a book that made a sensation at the time, I tried a little venture of my own into the Abyss, staying at one-night fourpenny lodging-houses and Salvation Army shelters: it was a nightmare I have never forgotten. Sometimes, in the wake of a strange smell, memories of that fortnight still come back to me. There was the loathsome food, the foul bedding, the sense of physical and moral decay in the very air.¹⁷

As with Palmer’s refusal to share in the sauna bath, there is something deeply representative in his exploration of the East End. It is impossible to question the integrity of his motives, yet the actual experience of the common man was something
in which he had little immediate share; he had to go in search of it. In spite of his repudiation of his father’s aloofness from his fellows, he never quite escaped from the older Palmer’s middle class decency.

1912 – 1929

The desire to plunge into the world rather than observe it which could sometimes override his reticence took Palmer wandering again in 1912. In that year he crossed the Atlantic, travelled down through the United States, found himself in the middle of a revolution — in Mexico — and by 1913 was back in Australia. In Melbourne he renewed his acquaintance with Will Dyson. He also sought out Nettie Higgins, an attractive and brilliant graduate of Melbourne University, whom he had met some years earlier and with whom he had corresponded. The pair were of an age, and had discovered they had many interests and sympathies in common. When they met in London, some months later, they knew they were in love. Vance and Nettie Palmer were married on 23 May, 1914. So began the most famous partnership in Australian literary history, and for Vance a personal relationship from which he would draw steady strength for the rest of his life.18

Immediately after their marriage the Palmers lived in a small fishing village in Brittany, but the idyll was abruptly ended by the outbreak of the Great War, which forced them to return to London. During the first year of the war Vance tried to think of himself as essentially uninvolved: this was strictly a European struggle in which an Australian need have no part. Besides, a baby was on the way (Aileen, born in 1915), and his first two books of any serious pretensions were in the press. The collection of short stories, The World of Men, and the book of verse, The Forerunners, were both published in London in 1915. At the age of thirty and after ten years’ apprenticeship to his trade, Palmer was ready to make a career in his art. But 1915 was not a good year for an Australian in London to try to lay the foundations of a literary reputation. Further, Palmer was more and more feeling himself drawn into the war:
It is hard to suggest now how that short fired at Sarajevo affected people who had come to think of conflict in terms of ideas: how it made their minds turn over, forced them back on fundamental beliefs and loyalties, broke up old relationships. I can remember how, still wanting to regard the war as a European affair, I was affected by three lean, uniformed figures, in leggings and Australian hats, sauntering down Charing Cross Road.\textsuperscript{19}

He felt that if he had to fight, he would rather be in the Australian than the British Army. He was concerned, too, for the safety of his wife and baby daughter. So once again he retreated across the world to Australia, to the country where, in a crisis, he believed he belonged:

I can very well remember the delight with which, coming home from Europe in 1915, I picked up, in Adelaide, an Australian weekly containing a long poem about Ginger Mick. The vivid slang and clever rhymes seemed as fresh as a new fern frond bursting from the ground, and Ginger Mick himself a true “original”... I must admit that I can’t read it now without being flooded by the emotions of those days. I had been away for some years and was coming back to a new Australia, an Australia facing the challenge of war for the first time. And the breezy vernacular verse seemed an assurance that it was all right; that the country was meeting, in a high spirited, mettlesome way, all the changes and chances War might bring.\textsuperscript{20}

If the verses of C.J. Dennis were immediately inspiriting, the Melbourne of 1916 seemed to the Palmers rather less so. They found it full of a spurious jauntiness, given over to Philistine values. Still, they contrived to make the best of such literary life as they found. For a time during that year they shared a house at Hawthorn with Hugh McCrae; they went to Repertory and Literary Club meetings. Vance prepared an edition of Furphy’s \textit{Such Is Life}, published pieces in the \textit{Bulletin}, and (forecasting his role in the Australian literary community during the next four decades) became secretary of the Australian Authors’ and Writers’ Guild.

Still he could not feel easy in his conscience. After vigorously
campaigning against conscription in both referenda, he enlisted on 2 March 1918 in the Fourteenth Battalion, A.I.F. After training at Broadmeadows, near Melbourne, he was sent overseas, embarking on 31 August 1918, and arriving in England on 14 November, three days after the Armistice. Too late to see any combat, he was able to stay on in Europe for some months before being discharged in Melbourne on 4 November 1919. Palmer made use of the spell between the armistice and his discharge to visit both France and Ireland, sending back reports of his impressions to several Australian magazines. His vision of France was sharpened by post-war emotion but was based on lasting belief: “It is truer even than five years ago that every real patriot has two countries, one of them France.”21 His favourable response to Ireland equally grew out of fundamental attitudes towards civilized life:

Personally, what I liked about Irish life was its democratic character. It is easy for the stranger to feel at home there. . . This may not have anything to do with democracy in the political sense; but then no one has discovered what democracy is in the political sense.22

The Saturday evenings that Palmer spent in Dublin with AE and other writers were among the last European experiences he was to enjoy for a decade. Although he moved around Australia a good deal, he spent the 1920's entirely within his homeland. This first prolonged sojourn in Australia since 1905 saw him steadily assuming the role of the versatile man of letters, the kind of writer to whom most others sooner or later turned for encouragement and advice. From 1920 on, books with Vance Palmer’s name on the title page were regularly appearing in the bookstores. In 1920 itself his second volume of verse, The Camp, was published; in 1924 The Black Horse and Other Plays. From 1920 to 1924 he produced five novels, some of them commissioned, some pseudonymous. Books like The Shantykeeper’s Daughter and The Boss of Killara represented work that Palmer regretted, but the condition of the professional writer in post-war Australia was, as he discovered, far more precarious even than in pre-war London —
especially for a man who now had a wife and two small daughters. Thanks largely to his own personal involvement in the situation, Palmer evinced an increasing concern throughout the 1920’s with the economic, practical aspects of book production and their relation to the achievement of a worthwhile national culture. This concern, outlasting the twenties, became one of Palmer’s constant preoccupations. Tom Inglis Moore once remarked that Vance Palmer was the only Australian writer he knew who, without private means, refused to take a job lest it interfere with his true vocation of writing. The tribute was just and generous; but for all that, Palmer did not relish the insecurity such dedication involved, and he did all he knew to improve not only his own lot but that of writers throughout the Commonwealth.

In the 1920’s the professional writer’s survival depended so heavily on literary journalism that he was left with hardly the time or the energy for serious creative work. The Palmers’ solution to the problem was typical. In 1925 they went to Caloundra (on the Queensland coast just north of Brisbane) with the intention of staying for a few weeks’ holiday but stayed instead until 1929. During that period it was Nettie who devoted herself primarily to the task of being family breadwinner, writing thousands of words every week for papers around Australia. Vance was thus freed, for the first time in his career, to concentrate solely on his serious work. The opportunity was not squandered. Important and constantly improving work flowed from his pen, culminating in 1930 with the publication of *The Passage*. Vance’s debt to Nettie in those years was great; yet it was also, one suspects, his closeness to the natural world which stimulated his creative powers. Throughout his life Palmer seems literally to have found the kind of spiritual refreshment in nature which is one of the central themes of his imaginative literature.

One of the few urban amenities that the Palmers must have regretted at Caloundra was the theatre. Vance in particular had a passion not only for viewing plays but for writing them and actually helping to get them produced on a stage. He saw the drama, with its necessary co-operation and teamwork,
as a vital agent in bringing to life that complete Australian civilization which was his dream. Fittingly, before his removal to Caloundra he took part in one of the most significant and bravest experiments in Australian theatre history. In 1922 and 1923 both the Palmers had been intimately connected with the Pioneer Players, a group of amateur actors organised by Louis Esson and Dr. Stewart Macky with the express intention of fostering and producing native Australian drama. The ties between the Palmers and the Essons had always been close, but Vance’s interest in the Pioneer Players sprang from more than personal loyalty: he was himself an Australian dramatist. The company produced several of his plays during 1922–23, and on at least one occasion Palmer himself appeared onstage— as a convict in Stewart Macky’s John Blake, an adaptation of one of Price Warung’s convict tales.

In his family, friends, surroundings, and growing reputation, the 1920’s were a good time for Vance Palmer. Nevertheless, as he surveyed the wider patterns of Australian life he could not subdue feelings of distaste, even alarm. Looking back in later years on that decade, he saw it as a crucial and unfortunate period in Australia’s development. He saw it specifically as the beginning of the end of the Utopian idealism which he liked to think had animated Australian life in the 1890’s, and which up to 1914 seemed to have some genuine chance of realization:

Australia was passing through the aftermath of its first real encounter with the international world, and there was a good deal of social chaos. Dreams of a happy continent that would be left alone to discover its own path to freedom and fulfilment were being ploughed under: the controversies that raged violently had their roots in the Russian revolution, the organization of One Big Union, the struggles in Ireland — the Romanoffs, the Syndicats, the Boyne. Assuredly the West was rebuilding its fatal nest here, and, though most of the conflicts being waged so bitterly were not merely “reflected troubles” but were implicit in Australian life, they were rarely stated in our own terms or directed with an eye to our particular realities.24

The basis of the trouble, he believed, was economic:
I think that when Australian historians of the future look back to that period between the wars, they will decide it was a bad one — a period marked by a mushroom growth of industry and a quick accumulation of wealth by some, but marked, also, by a worship of showy success and a deviation from our true line of development.

The change that he sensed spreading through Australian life seemed to Palmer to have its genesis in the cities. Melbourne, for instance, he found to be largely given over to commerce and philistinism. His analysis of the situation, printed in *Fellowship* in March 1921, may be as much the nostalgia of a bush-bred Australian for a vanishing past as an objective account of the contemporary actuality. In any event, it displays the seeds of an historical myth which was to provide Palmer with a distinctive means of analysing Australian life and literature:

The cities have conquered for the time being, and that vast tract we call the Bush has been pushed into the background. Such civilisation as we have has become urban. Melbourne and Sydney stand for Australia nowadays. They provide the politicians and their policies, the artistic and literary ideals, the Utopias, and the national characteristics: and because they have no roots it is natural that all their products should have a second-hand flavour... Picture theatres, gramophones, motor cars and villas are universal, and with them you can build a modern suburb in a week, — one that, like the mule, is without pride of ancestry or hope of posterity...

I believe that the dominance of villadom and of its shadow is not a good thing. In many obvious ways it can be shown that the crowding of people in a few big cities is bad, but every argument that is used against it in other countries has triple force in Australia. The older cities have a native art and culture that prevent them from being overwhelmed by the cinema, the jazz dance, the cheap scientific reprint, and the megaphones of the publicity agents: we have nothing. Our life would be richer and more stable if there was a closer connection between the coast and the centre of the
continent. Politics, literature and social institutions would take on more reality. \(^{26}\)

1930 – 1938

In Australia, as all over the world, the 1920’s came to an end with the Depression, a phenomenon which would find its way into a good deal of Palmer’s later writing. As the thirties opened, however, his imagination was more directly stirred by the prospect of an overseas trip for the first time in ten years. Leaving Nettie in command of the family in Melbourne, he set out in 1930 for a brief visit to England and Europe. Paris provided the spectacle of the last flowering of the “lost generation”. From the perspective of 1935 he reported it in these terms:

> When I was here [in Paris] five years ago the left bank of the Seine was swarming with writers and near-writers, and the cafés of Montmartre echoed with literary quarrels, conducted mostly in high-pitched American voices... A school of young American writers was growing up in the shadow of Joyce, Ezra Pound, Ernest Hemingway. \(^{27}\)

In London there was broadcasting for the B.B.C. (on the subject of “Civilized Australia”); there were new friends to meet — notably Henry Handel Richardson. *The Fortunes of Richard Mahony* was one of the enduring admirations of both Vance and Nettie. Together they were responsible for introducing the trilogy to the esteem of their countrymen. To meet the author of a novel which was both classic and Australian must have been for Palmer a tremendously exciting and rewarding occasion.

Overall, however, the 1930 trip did not count heavily in the sum of his life’s experiences. By 1931 he was back home, ready to take his family on another of the excursions to coastal Queensland which so refreshed his spirit and invigorated his writing. In 1932 the Palmers spent some months on Green Island off Cairns, returning to take up residence at Kalorama in the Dandenongs in November of that year. On the way south they met, in Sydney and for the first time, a friend who was to remain close to Vance for the rest of his life — Frank Dalby Davison. Their first contact, brought about by the
admiration of the beginning writer for the established one, was representative of the role that Palmer had assumed in the literary community by the 1930's. Katharine Susannah Prichard, Marjorie Barnard, Flora Eldershaw, Brian Penton, Frank Wilmot: there was scarcely a writer of any seriousness with whom the Palmers were not in touch. By personal acquaintance or through a voluminous correspondence they had become the fountainhead of wisdom, encouragement, and advice for aspiring literary artists throughout the Commonwealth.

Palmer was all too aware of the widespread human misery which had come in the wake of the Depression. Nevertheless, the early and middle thirties were probably the most amply productive years of his whole career. *The Passage* had been awarded first prize in the *Bulletin* novel competition for 1930, together with the Australian Literary Society's medal for the best Australian novel of the same year. That work was followed in rapid succession by *Daybreak* (1932), *The Swayne Family* (1934), *Hurricane* (1935), and *Legend for Sanderson* (1937). *The Swayne Family* shared first prize in the Melbourne Centenary Competition; "The Sea Hawk" was outright winner in the short story section of the same competition. During these years also, two collections of short stories appeared: *Separate Lives* (1931) and *Sea and Spinifex* (1935).

The last book in this flurry of publication, *Legend for Sanderson*, had been finished in Spain, for in 1935 the Palmer family had again gone abroad. Nettie set down the reasons for the adventure in her *Fourteen Years*:

Now that the book [*The Swayne Family*] is finished we've been talking of going to Europe for a year or two. There are all sorts of arguments for it. Old friends to see, old threads to pick up, old places to visit, like the fishing-village of Brittany where we lived when we were first married. Then the girls are both ready for a break, an extension of their experiences — A. just leaving the University, H. nearly finished with school. Besides, as V. says, the Europe we knew has since been badly battered by the war of twenty years ago; it may be obliterated by the next.28
So by the English spring of 1935 the Palmers were back in London together for the first time in twenty years. Nettie soon crossed over to Paris to attend a Writers' Conference, leaving Vance to set up house in Bloomsbury. Later in the summer they moved to a home in Sussex, borrowed from an old friend. Throughout their stay there were the usual visits from Australians abroad — Leslie and Coralie Rees, Brian Penton, Stewart Macky. There were the usual literary conversations — with Christina Stead and (for Nettie on a visit to Cambridge) the Leavises. For Vance there were long talks with Edward Garnett about Lawson and Furphy, the latter in connection with an abridged edition of *Such Is Life* he was preparing. And there was writing to be done.

In order to live cheaply and quietly, the family moved to Spain in mid-1936, and for several months Vance was able to work steadily on *Such Is Life* and *Legend for Sanderson*. But in July Spain was thrown into turmoil by the outbreak of the Civil War. The family was persuaded by the British Consul in Barcelona to leave the country while transport was still available. Nettie rejoined her second daughter Helen, who had earlier made the journey back to Melbourne; Vance followed after several months; Aileen stayed on in Europe.

Both the Palmers were deeply engaged with the Spanish Civil War — not least because Aileen was now an interpreter with the Republican forces. Beyond the unavoidable emotional strain, they cared passionately about the political principles involved and could see the Spanish conflict as foreshadowing a wider and more disastrous conflict (Vance was usually an astute political observer except, sometimes, of situations right underneath his nose). Nettie in particular worked on many committees, striving to wake Australians to the issues that were being fought out on the other side of the world. Vance, too, made his contribution, addressing, for instance, a meeting of five hundred people at Transport House in Sydney on 24 December 1936, in aid of the Spanish Relief Fund.

As the world situation worsened with the waning thirties, Palmer’s whole creative spirit seemed to suffer a kind of paralysis. After *Legend for Sanderson* he published no new novel for
a decade, while his own unhappy awareness of his barrenness did nothing to make the condition more supportable. On several occasions he revealed his plight to Frank Dalby Davison. On 4 July 1937 he wrote in these terms:

I feel myself that I’ve been a slacker this year: merely kept the wolf away by talking about books and moving-pictures. Somehow it seems hard to work in town, though other people do it: it must be that the impulse is lacking. My mind spends most of its spare time in brooding on the state of the world: things really seem heading for a first-rate smash, and most people are intent on shutting their eyes to it. But if they’re insulated against present and impending horrors how can they be open to literature and art? And what is the use of inventing little fairy-tales for them?

The restraint of tone is characteristic, but the force, the intensity, the despair are not to be mistaken. He wrote again to Davison on 9 February, 1938:

... It’s damnably hard to recapture that urgency and creative heat, as the years go on, that makes writing come comparatively easy, without too great a conscious effort at concentration. I know I’ve been kicking myself, in the last year, as the days went by with nothing done. But somehow it’s always been hard, when leisure came, to concentrate. I’m desperately concerned, inwardly, at what’s happening abroad: particularly in that corner of a foreign field where my own personal affections are so deeply involved that some vital part of me would die if the worst were to happen. One tries to hide these private fears, even from oneself, but they affect the inner energies and make life just a business of filling in the days. It shouldn’t be so, of course: but there you are! Perhaps the barren fig-tree will fruit again in happier days.

The same letter goes on to reveal even his withdrawal from the company of other writers:

Myself, I see very little of writers these days. There are not many in Melbourne, for one thing: and, such as they are, they don’t seem to have many common interests. Sometimes
I meet Len Mann, whom I like well... Louis Esson I also see occasionally... And there's one young writer, Alan Marshall, of whom I have great hopes. But on the whole the people I meet are mainly interested in science or political movements.30

1939 – 1959

By the end of 1938 Palmer had sufficiently regained his spirits to contemplate accepting the editorship of a projected literary review. And when the disaster he had so long foreseen at last struck home on 3 September 1939, although by no means a complete man again, he was yet able to meet the challenge with renewed energy and with responses appropriate to the crisis. For some fifteen months during 1943–44, for instance, he worked in the Department of Labour and Industry, writing propaganda to boost morale and promote the war effort on the home front. More significantly, the onset of the Second World War goaded Palmer into revitalized creative activity. The very real danger of defeat after the Japanese entry into the war and the fall of Singapore forced him to examine more thoroughly than ever before the exact nature of the values he and his countrymen were endeavouring to defend. There was no point in fighting, he believed, unless one knew and cherished what one was fighting for. Consequently, the 1940's kindled in Palmer's spirit the urge to delve into the Australian past in order to establish the worth and nature of its present. He had always been proudly aware of his own place in a continuous literary tradition and had tried to transmit something of his heritage into his own art. Now he undertook an inspection, much more explicit and factual, of Australian social and cultural history, in order to determine the nature of the tradition to which he was so firmly attached. The tangible result of this new impulse in Palmer's creative life was a series of books destined to fill a unique place in the history of Australian belles lettres. In 1940 National Portraits appeared, to be followed in 1941 by A. G. Stephens: His Life and Work, the monograph Frank Wilmot (a tribute to an old
friend and fellow-artist) in 1942, *Louis Esson and the Australian Theatre* in 1948, *Old Australian Bush Ballads* (with Margaret Sutherland) in 1951. The culmination of Palmer’s direct artistic concern with the development of Australian culture was *The Legend of the Nineties*, which appeared in 1954, the result of fifteen years’ study and preparation.

During the war years, too, Palmer had discovered an immensely practical and powerful way of creating an audience for serious literature of all kinds; and the presence of a sensitive and sympathetic audience was, for him, just as essential an ingredient of real civilization as the production of fine works of art. During the 1930’s he had already done some broadcasting. From 1940 onwards his voice went out over the national network of the Australian Broadcasting Commission with a regularity that scarcely faltered until his death. His scripts covered a wide variety of literary matters, but it was through his review programme, “Current Books Worth Reading”, that his voice became familiar to thousands of listeners throughout the nation. These talks, broadcast every second Sunday morning, probably did more than anything else to make Palmer known to a wide popular audience as one of the foremost and most reliable critics in Australia. He took seriously the responsibility thus laid upon him. Preparing each of the “Current Books Worth Reading” scripts involved reading four or five volumes of varying kinds; he never gave way to the temptation to skip or skimp, in a word to lose faith with those who trusted him.

While the habit of national broadcasting brought Palmer wider public acknowledgment than he had ever known before, during the 1940’s he was also able to plead the cause of Australian writing with some frequency before the more limited and (presumably) more discriminating audiences provided by the universities. It was during this period, indeed, that his long sustained efforts to promote a viable Australian culture impinged on the official awareness. In 1942 he was appointed to the place on the Advisory Board of the Commonwealth Literary Fund left vacant by the death of Frank Wilmot. His ability to help Australian writers through this form of federal
patronage was made even stronger in 1947 when he became Chairman of the Board. In practical terms, his occupancy of that position from 1947 until 1953 represented the pinnacle of Palmer's power to influence Australian culture.

Such was his prestige in those years that he was chosen to represent Australian writers at a Writers' Conference in New Zealand in 1951, and in the following year there were serious moves to have his name included in the Royal Honours List. Palmer rejected the proposal in a letter to a close friend, Clem Christesen (the editor of Meanjin), dated 1 August 1952:

It seems to me that the idea of benefit accruing to literature by some writer getting an official award is fantastic: literature can only benefit by writers showing a certain unworldliness about public recognition and putting their honours into their work. I admit that my attitude to the whole matter is affected by subterranean national feelings, perhaps political ones: in other circumstances I might be as proud to sport a ribbon as any civil service head or brass hat.31

The letter catches Palmer in a characteristic mood. In 1950, Frank Dalby Davison, writing in Walkabout magazine, had contrived to catch his characteristic appearance and manner at the stage in his life by which he is probably best remembered:

appearance? A figure of medium height and build, clad except on formal occasions in fresh-looking sports clothes — in invariably brown tonings — usually with a blue shirt and a bow tie, and crowned with a dark velour hat, the brim tipped up a little behind and down a shade at one side. Add a walking-stick to the crook of the left elbow, a curly pipe to the mouth, and a peep of coloured handkerchief to the breast pocket and you have him as you might see him come walking down the street. As he came close you would notice bright blue eyes and a deeply tanned skin.

If you spoke to him you would be answered in a rich, quiet, well-modulated voice and be engaged by a ready smile and ready courtesy; not a show of manners, but something coming from innate friendliness and inner poise that the buffetings of life have not been able to disturb.

Conversation, if you walked a little together, would incline to move between the arts in general, literature in
particular, and the world of public affairs, illustrated — so to speak — by comments and queries on persons engaged in these. In the give and take of talk you would begin to get glimpses of the effect of years of wide reading, considerable travel and foreign residence, extensive personal acquaintanceships both local and overseas, a wide knowledge of the Australian rural and urban scene, and a lifetime of reflective observation. Nothing you said would be passed over; from whatever lean store it came its most interesting implications would be taken up in reply.

Palmer has plenty of hot coals inside him, but he is meditative and gives the impression of detachment. He is a hard and regular worker; but he is methodical in the use of his time, and once away from his desk gives the impression — unwittingly, I dare say — of a man of large leisure.32

In spite of the success that seemed to be shining on his career, the late forties and early fifties were still not especially happy years for Palmer. Perhaps he was saddened by the fading of so many of the hopes and aspirations he had seen kindled — especially among the young — during the war. Perhaps, too, he regretted that such kudos as came to him reflected his reputation as a critic and public figure rather than as a serious novelist and short story writer. Certainly, he felt that the years were fleeting by and that he still could not recover from the paralysis of will and spirit which had begun to oppress him in the late 1930's. More and more frequently he would retreat with Nettie to "Tree Tops", the house he had bought at Caloundra. Sometimes sea and earth and fresh air would work their old magic and he would start to write again. It was at "Tree Tops" that he composed his first post-war novel, Cyclone. On 24 September 1946, Nettie could write encouragingly of the book's progress to Clem Christesen:

Vance has just got deep into his novel & surpassed all the quotas & dates he set for himself. We're both very well & nothing's wrong with me except that I'm lazy... this floating fishing world, where we meet almost nobody except the storekeepers & fishermen we used to know here long ago.33

26
Cyclone appeared in 1947, the same year as Hail Tomorrow, Palmer's last published play. They were followed in 1948 by Golconda, the first novel of the trilogy which was to be his last and major work.

To his general dissatisfaction with his own state of mind was added in the early 1950's the livelier distress caused by one of the most painful episodes of his whole career. On 28 August 1952, during a debate on the Estimates in the House of Representatives in Canberra, S.M. Keon, a Labor Party member from Victoria, alleged that the Commonwealth Literary Fund was coming under undue Communist influence. Vance Palmer was among those directly named in the attack. He was immediately defended in the House by the Prime Minister, R.G. Menzies, who said of him, "I regard him for his distinguished work and for his sheer honest and continuous work on the committee." The Prime Minister's remarks notwithstanding, the issue continued to be aired, W.C. Wentworth, a Liberal member from New South Wales, adding to the charges against the alleged Communists and "fellow travellers". The battle continued in the columns of the Australian press, finally to subside by the end of September. There can be little doubt, however, that Palmer's resignation from the Advisory Board in 1953 was a direct outcome of the whole unhappy affair.

Although he emerged from the Commonwealth Literary Fund squabble with his personal honour and integrity unblemished, the issue of Palmer's political allegiances cannot be ignored in any account of his career. Clearly, he did have close connections with a number of radical organizations, and counted among his friends many left-wing writers and Communists. Nor did he ever attempt to hide the socialist cast of his thought or his longstanding interest in Russian affairs. Yet there seems no reason to suppose that he was ever a member of the Communist Party or even that his strongest concern with the social organization of mankind was of a party-political nature. His attitude towards both party politics and Communism was formulated as explicitly as ever it was in a letter he wrote to Frank Dalby Davison on 2 September 1939, the eve of the Second World War:
I've been thinking about what you said in reference to the C.P. — your attraction toward a party that has its base in some social philosophy. But though Marx and Engels had a social philosophy, I'm afraid the C.P. is only a political party, like any other, and not a very inspiring one. In the last seven or eight years, particularly, its policies have been based on expediency and have led nowhere. . . The influence of the comintern in foreign policies has, it seems to me, been short-sighted and irresponsible. . . It's a pretty bad record really, and not merely a matter of mistakes which are human, but of disloyalty and lack of any central principle. I haven't yet lost hope in the Russian experiment, but to be guided by people who have such small experience of self-government, who are so naive about the outside world, seems to me a disaster. And to listen to the jesuitical arguments of some communists, and to watch their ingenious way of achieving quite trivial ends, is enough to make one despair . . . Personally, I think we have to rely on our democratic tradition, which isn't merely a bit of hokum, but is worth defending and developing.35

Politically, Palmer was the product of an era when the exercise of simple goodwill and decency could hold out the promise of a better life for all mankind. His middle and later years thrust on him the necessity of accommodating (not always successfully) his straightforward beliefs to the increasing complexities of the twentieth century world. A few words sent to Clem Christesen on 25 February 1957 can stand with some justice as a paradigm for his whole political career. They represent his response to the Hungarian Uprising of October 1956:

. . . Things are not going to be so easy in the liberal world since Hungary. It seems strange, in a way, that after the brutalities of recent years, people should be so affected, but, in this case, I think, there is a vague sense of human betrayal. Forty years of the classless state — and yet this!36

Wounded as he undoubtedly was by the Commonwealth Literary Fund affair, Palmer refused to retreat into himself. In 1955 he went overseas for the last time, attending, perhaps
with deliberate refusal to repent, a World Peace Assembly at Helsinki. There he revelled in the opportunity to meet foreign writers, and revived memories of almost half a century earlier. A brief stay in London, too, was full of romantic nostalgia. But 1955 was not merely a year of memories. It saw the publication of Palmer’s third and best collection of short stories, *Let the Birds Fly*. His mind, in addition, was maturing the rest of the story begun in *Golconda*, to be completed in *Seedtime* (1957) and *The Big Fellow* (1959).

The composition of these two novels was a major pre-occupation, once arrived back in Australia. In spite, however, of this large scale creative effort and of some serious ill-health, he undertook a Commonwealth Literary Fund tour of Queensland in the latter part of 1957. By the end of 1958 *The Big Fellow* was finished, and Palmer could look forward (with some trepidation) to the tribute number of *Meanjin* that Christesen was preparing in honour of both Vance and Nettie. In the meantime he worked on his new play, *Prisoner’s Country*, returning to his old love, the drama, with revived interest and enthusiasm. “I’ve been so deeply involved in a play this last while,” he wrote to Christesen on 11 April 1959, “that most things just pass over me. I find playwriting much more demanding than most forms of work: it won’t let you alone day or night.”

For all that, in the same month of April he found time to visit Adelaide and lecture on Australian literature. On his return to Melbourne he succumbed once again to the ill-health which had persisted in recent years: in June he was sick with bronchial influenza. He seemed, however, to be making a satisfactory recovery, to be looking forward to the formal dinner that was planned for August, on the occasion of the publication of *The Big Fellow* and his own and Nettie’s seventy-fourth birthday. His sudden death at his home in Kew, at about 3.30 p.m. on Wednesday 15 July, came as a profound shock to all who were close to him:

On that day [writes Christesen] he had been in a particularly cheerful mood, quick to respond to questionings about the autobiography he was writing, expansive (for one so reticent when discussing his own work-in-progress) about his new
As he turned from refuelling the slow-combustion stove he suddenly collapsed. Death was instantaneous.\textsuperscript{88}

The funeral, conducted by the Reverend A.M. Dickie, was held on 21 July. The valediction was spoken by Arthur Phillips. "We have known a man of great goodness," he concluded. "We shall not forget."\textsuperscript{39}

NOTES TO CHAPTER I

2. Vance Palmer, "Ancestors", \textit{Meanjin}, XVIII (1959), 141. This, together with the other autobiographical articles that Palmer contributed to \textit{Meanjin}, is the source for much of the information about his early life.
4. For this information I am indebted to Mrs. H.M. Green, the daughter of the late Major Watson, of Ipswich.
5. From a radio talk, "If I Were a Youth Again", broadcast over the national network of the Australian Broadcasting Commission on 11 December 1949.
7. Trumper's visit is dealt with in the same script, which recounts some of Palmer's boarding school experiences.
9. National Library 1174, Box 11. The quotation is from another typescript, entitled "Dr. Wallace", which was to form a further section of "Intimate Portraits".
17. From a radio talk, "English Life Today", broadcast over the national network of the Australian Broadcasting Commission on 13 January 1956.
18. Nettie Palmer's life and work in themselves deserve a separate book; the partnership of Vance and Nettie deserves another. The scope of the present
study virtually necessitated sole concentration on Vance’s career, at the cost of an account of their joint lives, which no full-scale biography could afford to omit.


20. From a radio talk, “C.J. Dennis”, broadcast over the national network of the Australian Broadcasting Commission on 7 September 1943.


29. Vance Palmer to Frank Dalby Davison, 4 July 1937. Addressed from Fawkner Mansions, Punt Road, S. 1, Melbourne.

30. Vance Palmer to Frank Dalby Davison, 9 February 1938. Addressed from Fawkner Mansions, Punt Road, S. 1, Melbourne.

31. Vance Palmer to Clem Christesen, 1 August 1952. Addressed from “Ardmore”. The letter is in the *Meanjin* files, like all the correspondence to Christesen from the Palmers cited in this study.


37. Vance Palmer to Clem Christesen, 11 April 1959. Addressed from 7 Ridgway Avenue, Melbourne.


CHAPTER 2

Sketches
Verse
Drama
1915-1924

THE WORLD OF MEN

Palmer’s first serious book was a collection of twelve sketched published in 1915 under the title of The World of Men. He has been encouraged in this kind of writing by A.R. Orage, the editor of the New Age, who, in accepting one of the pieces for his magazine, had written on 19 August 1913:

Dear Mr. Palmer,

I like your sketch very well indeed & shall be happy to publish it. I really can’t understand why you are not making your fortune except that you have not yet struck a new form in your sketches. One could say of a Kipling, Harte, Cunninghame Graham sketch that it was theirs unmistakably; they have an accentuated personal manner; but so far I couldn’t be sure of singling out one of your sketches. For a while you ought to confine yourself to your unique experiences & reflections, — those which are exclusively your own. They cannot fail to be interesting. Forgive me this note, & send me some more sketches. After one or two in the N.A. you will not find yourself less known.

Yours sincerely,
A.R. Orage

32
Astute editor though he was, Orage failed to realize that Palmer’s work already did own a personal manner, though not, to be sure, an accentuated one. Probably Orage’s ear was attuned to the wrong influences; Palmer never wished to model his work on that of Kipling, Harte, or Cunninghame Graham. In one respect, however, Palmer did follow his editor’s advice, and with some profit. Of the pieces which make up *The World of Men*, eight are set in Australia, based largely (one suspects) on his experiences in western Queensland in 1908–9; the other four spring from his adventures in the Far East or Mexico.

Looking back on his first book, Palmer expressed some reservations about its quality. Based on a young man’s experiences, it lacked, he felt, the exuberance proper to a young man’s talent:

> As a reaction against my magazine work I was deliberately undramatic. No tense scenes, no surprising climaxes! They were experiences remembered in a detached tranquillity. But because of this slightly “old man” pose the actual writing seems to me a bit heavy now. I was only in my twenties at the time — I hope I’ve grown younger since!12

In pointing up the undramatic detachment of *The World of Men*, Palmer very precisely identified one of its chief qualities; in speaking of its “old man” pose he was indulging in some unnecessary self-deprecation. A rather elderly earnestness does sometimes mar Palmer’s prose, but not in his first book. *The World of Men*, on the contrary, impresses itself as a quite striking set of exercises in controlled technique, displaying a method, tone, and texture which ally Palmer with some of the formative figures of modern prose fiction. Indeed, one may regret that he abandoned the mode of writing of his first serious artistic experiment, leaving it to stand as a highly wrought minor model for major work never thoroughly attempted.

The actual relationship that *The World of Men* bears to the whole canon of Palmer’s fiction is that of a tentative statement of themes, materials, and attitudes which, in a different mode, would come more and more to the centre of his attention.
There is, for instance, a marked insistence on a peculiar type of Australian landscape — the cattle country of western Queensland, which forms the setting for such sketches as “The Hermit”, “Brede”, “Father and Son”, and “The Long Road”. In all these, certain features of the environment are selected and shaped into one of the dominant visual and emotional images of the whole book. Always, in these Queensland sketches, human action takes place in a wilderness of mulga ridges stretching away to a distant horizon. The emptiness of the landscape is characteristically established near the beginning of “The Galley Slave”, a piece dealing with a group of men engaged on sinking an artesian bore:

On the highest point outside, a towering derrick reared itself above the stunted mulga, and day or night there was nothing to be heard but the rattle of machinery, the slow grunt of the walking-beam, and the steady plunk of the drill, which bit into solid earth at the rate of a foot an hour. We were boring for the water that the withered ridges did not hold in any satisfying quantity, and it was desolate work. Thirty miles away there was a homestead; fifty further on there was a township; but from the top of the derrick nothing could be seen save a wilderness of grey-green mulga, and the carrier who brought the mails and stores was the only reminder of a world that held things other than flies, heat, and twelve-hour shifts.

A similar, desolately oppressive landscape dominates all the Australian sketches of The World of Men. Normally it is parchingly hot, but even when, as in “The Hermit”, the earth is deluged with rain, it does not lose its inhospitality and loneliness.

The whole point of these stories lies not in the evocation of landscape for its own sake but in the behaviour of the human beings who, for one reason or another, live on its surface. The World of Men, in the perspective of Palmer’s whole career, can be seen as an extraordinarily representative title. It is the human situation which primarily engages him; a masculine society which his imagination most readily grasps. Only one woman enters significantly into his first book — the half-caste
daughter in “The Hermit”. In nearly all his major fiction Palmer was more immediately at ease in dealing with masculine than with feminine behaviour.

*The World of Men* fastens, for its basic theme, on the response of the lonely, isolated man to his natural environment. Granted the quality of the landscape that Palmer is at pains to establish, it is not to be wondered at that his solitary heroes are distinguished by an almost neurotic misanthropy. Many of the sketches of *The World of Men* can best be thought of as thumbnail portraits of outback eccentricity. Joe the hermit, resenting the temporary intrusion of the coach passengers; the seeming cheery cook in “The Galley Slave” going off to the nearest shanty for a week’s binge when his nerves finally crack; the defeated drover in “The Long Road”; these are the characteristic human materials of *The World of Men*. Nor is Palmer’s fascination with the lonely circumscribed by the Australian bush. “The Light”, for instance, focuses on the life of Van Goyt, a Dutch lighthouse keeper in the East Indies. Through both choice and necessity, Van Goyt retires from human contacts until his only pleasure is in the detailed measurement of the natural world:

One thing on which he spent great pains was his periodical letter to headquarters. It embodied observations upon the current and the character of the channel, and suggestions for the improvement of the light. On clear days he would take the dinghy and explore the reef, making soundings to put on his private chart, and gazing down through the clear water to examine the formations below. He had little knowledge of natural history, but he supplemented it with any stray information that came to his hand, reading in the lantern-room during his nights on watch, when there was nothing but the snore of the surf on the reef outside to distract his attention. (p. 40)

“The Light” concludes with a sentence which clinches the kind of interest that Van Goyt and his blood-brothers throughout *The World of Men* held for their creator:

One could only reflect that, perhaps, the tin-roofed turret was not different in essence from those other sanctuaries in
which monks, artists, and careful hoarders of the single
talent find refuge from a world too complex and big for
them. (p. 41)

The later Palmer certainly would not have subscribed to
the theory of art implied in those lines, but his interest in the
solitary man never left him — the man solitary because,
somehow, defeated. In *The World of Men* he had neither the
space nor the inclination to probe the motives of his characters
very deeply; he was content to present a sharply observed
profile of a tiny segment of behaviour. Yet insofar as he does
allow himself to speculate about the isolated oddity of his
characters’ lives, he most frequently associates it with some
peculiarly damaging defeat. That defeat may be an accident
of nature, like the fatal fall from a horse in “Father and Son”.
Or what seems like an unpredictable disaster may be repre­
sented as springing from some unacknowledged weakness in
an individual. Such an insight is the point of the quite subtle
study, “The Long Road”, which deals with a stockman who
once allowed a herd of cattle to stampede at night, killing his
best friend. Or the fault may be held to lie entirely within a
man. That is the judgment entered against the Russian revolu­
tionary who is the subject of “A Lost Leader”. For a brief
moment some twenty years before the story opens, he had
played a significant part in history. Somehow, however, his
whole life had remained blocked at that time, leaving him
useless and alone on the west coast of Japan. Whatever the
cause or quality of these defeated lives, they hold in embryo
a subject which was to grow in importance as Palmer continued
to write fiction.

“Droving’s the devil”, says an old stockman in “The Long
Road” (p. 33); and he might well be voicing Palmer’s view
of the whole human condition in *The World of Men*. Particular
men may crack under the strain of existence, but for all man­
kind life is something to be endured. This fairly desperate view
resulted in some of the unique techniques of *The World of
Men*; it also set Palmer searching for some positive beliefs
which might make life tolerable. In 1915 he had barely begun
to find them, let alone test them. Nevertheless, certain hints point in the direction of a good deal of his later thinking. In this respect, two stories dealing with aboriginal life are especially interesting: “Under Which King?” and “The Great War”. Both address themselves to the conflict between traditional tribal loyalties and culture and the attraction of the young bloods to the ways of the white man. Palmer's immediate sympathies are without doubt with the ageing chiefs who seek to preserve the communally binding traditions. Targan, the rejected old chief of “Under Which King?”, is presented in terms which unmistakably command assent to his way of life:

This stern old man with his tattered shirt, his skinny legs, and his towzled mop of white hair was the fragile repository of a spirit as implacable as any that ever fought against the easy acceptance of injustice or corruption. Watching him start out over the ridge with his boomerang in search of game, his dogs and his gin trailing behind him, one forgot his fugitive kingdom and the incongruities of his clothing. He loomed a mysterious and isolated figure against the sky. (p. 12)

Targan finds a parallel in the ageing aboriginal king in “The Great War” who stirs up trouble with a neighbouring tribe in order, paradoxically, to preserve the fading customs of his people. “Poetry, romance, the love of known places,” wrote Palmer, “all the realities that full men live by, seemed to be incarnated in his frail body” (p. 20). The rest of his career in fiction can, in large measure, be regarded as an explication of that text. As his work matured, Palmer was no longer content with increasing refinement of his understanding of solitude; he came to use his fiction as a means of discovering ways of binding men together in community. There is a revealing sentence towards the end of “Rough Faring”, a piece obviously based on his own passage from Vladivostok to Japan in the company of a crowd of coolies cramped into the squalid third class quarters of a small steamer:

The qualities that all men have in common are immeasurably more important than the superficial differences which
separate them, but that truth does not ram itself home into the brain of a sick man watching Manchu coolies playing dice. (p. 48)

It must have been an appreciation, conscious or unconscious, of the fact that the sort of writing represented by *The World of Men* could never fully do justice to the most vital concerns of his imagination which led Palmer to abandon many of the technical skills he had developed in his first book. Its cool and sophisticated detachment could not easily have been made an amenable medium for the warm sympathy with struggling men which became the goal of so much of his fiction. That he came untutored to such detachment seems unlikely. In coupling Palmer’s name with those of Kipling, Harte, and Cunninghame Graham, however, Orage was on quite the wrong track. The English editor was perhaps not to know it, but the primary influences behind *The World of Men* were almost certainly Australian. It is impossible not to sense Barbara Baynton’s *Bush Studies* in sketches like “The Hermit” or “The Long Road”; in the harsh portrayal of bush life, in the sometimes brutal directness of the prose. The other writer significantly behind *The World of Men* is Henry Lawson. Palmer had read him early. From him he would have learnt the value of economical statement — none of the pieces in *The World of Men* is more than four to five pages long. He would have learnt, too, the kind of imaginative truth which can be achieved through a deliberately undramatic presentation of the material, stripped almost bare of obvious story line. He would have learnt the trick of pitching such narrative as was needful in the low-keyed manner of the yarn.

There are, however, certain features of *The World of Men* which, combined with its learnt elements, give the work a quality all its own. The chief of these is a deftly managed, self-effacing irony. The irony of *The World of Men* begins most obviously in its comedy (another aspect of his imagination which Palmer, with some loss, was willing to excise from his later work). The half-hearted battle between the two native tribes in “The Great War”, for instance, is consistently presented in a comic light, as is the feud between Targan and
Prince Albert in "Under Which King?". The mysterious uneasiness of the little horsebreaker of "The Holy Terror" in the company of other men is explained in a comic denouement — the horse lover is also a horse thief, and spends most of his time in the solitude of jail. In other stories the comedy is absorbed more into the prose, to produce some oblique judgments on the characters involved. Part of "Rough Faring", for example, is given over to an ambiguously sympathetic account of a little Moscow doctor apparently quite out of his depth in the Far East. The concluding paragraph brilliantly crystallizes the ambiguity in a clinching aphorism:

And there on the other deck was the little doctor, walking up and down, his short legs plodding busily, for was it not necessary to walk four miles a day to keep absolutely fit? He had a woman on his arm and talked energetically with his hands and his voice about the land that was now blue on the skyline. I had nothing but goodwill for the honest fellow with his cap, tweeds, and canvas shoes, and his round face beaming with good health and shaving-soap. Such as he are the salt of the earth — but salt, thank God, is only a condiment. (p. 49)

Of all the sketches of The World of Men, "A Mexican Patriot" depends most heavily on irony of both word and situation. Opening with the quiet deflation of "The landlord had said he would wake me before dawn, but no Mexican was ever quite as good as his word" (p. 42), the story develops as the debunking of a Mexican guide. The conduct of the piece relies on the discrepancy between the Mexican's remarks and his behaviour as he approaches a skirmish between government and revolutionary troops. The incident is almost certainly based on Palmer's own experience in Mexico in 1912, but the identity between Palmer and the narrator of the piece is irrelevant to its artistic success. The same point can be made of the other eleven pieces, all of which are told by a first person narrator who, in biographical terms, is probably to be equated with the author himself. The impressive feature of Palmer's use of the technique is the thoroughness with which he has suppressed his own personality and related the narrator to the
demands of each story rather than his own memories of the original episode. Only in "Brede" is the narrator actively involved in the central situation. Usually he is a passive spectator, perfectly placed to make good the coolly realistic prose through which Palmer renders his themes of the loneliness and smallness of individual lives.

To speak of the underplayed realism, the ironic detachment, the controlled narrative technique of *The World of Men* is to associate it with some of the makers of modern fiction. The appropriate names to invoke—and they may be invoked without too great a sense of extravagance—are Stephen Crane or Hemingway or the Joyce of *Dubliners*. Yet what finally gives the book its own individuality is suggested by a phrase in "The Long Road", when Palmer writes of "that touch of irony in his voice that a man uses when speaking of things he has known to the core and stripped of all illusion" (p. 33). The prose of *The World of Men* was well designed to deal with experience stripped of all illusion. Palmer’s imagination, however, demanded that things known to the core be treated with love as well as irony. That is perhaps why he abandoned the method of his first book, regardless of the cost to his contemporary reputation, in favour of the manner of his later novels.

**THE FORERUNNERS AND THE CAMP**

Even while he was exercising the competence displayed in *The World of Men*, Palmer was experimenting with other literary forms which might more fully embody his personal vision. In the same year as his first book of prose, he published his first book of verse, *The Forerunners*. It must be said that, while it is possible to see what Palmer was trying to do in his verse, poetry did not provide him with a means of liberating the central concerns of his imagination. His interest in the form was shortlived, tentative, and never really satisfactory. *The Forerunners* contains thirty-three poems, almost all dealing with some aspect of outback Australian life. A number seek to realize the same harsh and brooding horror of the bush which had found its way so convincingly into *The World of*
Men. In the poems, however, the mood is imprisoned within highly simplified verse forms and a melodramatic diction. Too often the result is merely a hollow pretentiousness of statement and feeling, of a kind to be found in "Dawn and Dusk":

> When I rode back from Deadman's End
> I watched the veils of night descend,
> The haggard trees together clung
> And whispered in an alien tongue,
> And all the nameless things that stirred
> Had no good wish or friendly word,
> All through the darkened bush they ran
> To spread abroad their hate of man.

A similarly synthetic melancholy is to be found, in greater or less degree, in "Brenede", "The Deserted Place", "Lament", and "Requiem".

Elsewhere, however, Palmer takes a more cheerful view of his material, responding to the bush more in the manner of a Paterson or a Will Ogilvie. "September" is a mildly pleasant evocation of the natural loveliness of the bush in springtime; other poems celebrate the ethos and social virtues of the human beings who people it. "The Pathfinders", for instance, is a direct tribute to the men who opened up the land to white habitation:

> Rich towns shall flourish on the hills that hold them,
> Bright dreams shall quicken from their wandering dust,
> And till the end our reverent minds shall fold them
> In storied chambers free from moth and rust:
> The fealty pledged, the kingdom given in trust.

Admiration for the pioneers achieves one of its most adequate realizations in the title poem:

> Sowers of fire, the dawn's forerunners,
> We seek the bivouacs of the young,
> Our fealty pledged to unborn chieftains,
> Our blood aflame with songs unsung.

As well as these generalized affirmations, there are some poems in *The Forerunners* which serve as reminders that their author was himself a young Australian away from home. Pieces
like "The Lights of Home" and "A Song of Return" take personal nostalgia as their immediate subject:

There's a snug little home I know in the goodly land that is mine, 
There are brave mates waiting to grip my hand at the sliprail bars, 
And we will gather at nights and spin yarns over the wine, 
And sing together the old songs, shut in with the hills and the stars.

In several other poems ("The Ride", "The Hour of Memory") the arcadian sentiment is intensified by the infusion of romantic love; in others ("Youth and Age", "The Silver Horsemen") it is moved, through the agency of some rather stilted symbolism, in the direction of allegory.

Clearly, The Forerunners is based on some simple and severely limited data: deliberately stock responses to an Australian homeland. Unfortunately, Palmer had neither the appropriate technique nor, one suspects, the basic talent to transmute such intransigent material into genuine poetry. He relied exclusively on the simplest of verse forms (the four line rhyming stanza is the staple), which demand lyrical lucidity if they are not to fail entirely. In The Forerunners Palmer revealed his potential achievement as a poet: as a lyric singer of the great human commonplaces. The self-consciously "poetic" diction, the stilted syntax, the slackness of the poems themselves precluded success in this most difficult of literary modes.

Some advance in accomplishment is manifest in The Camp, which followed The Forerunners five years later, in 1920. The seventeen poems which make up the book retain some of the themes of the earlier work; they also register the progress of Vance's wooing of Nettie and his response to the First World War. "Spring in Europe" effectively renders love's ardour through a neatly balanced structure. A thirty-line celebration of the burgeoning northern spring is set off against the closing two lines:

O noisy birds, be still!  
My love's a world away.6

The final poem in the book, "The Wanderer to His Love", is likewise a direct address to Nettie.
It is the war, however, which is the chief subject of *The Camp*. The title poem itself is an account of the conditions and consequences of military training, with its enforced mingling of many different social types and the hope of some utopian future to justify it all. A work of five verse paragraphs of irregular metre and rhyme, the title-poem is notable for the technical freedom it displays in comparison with the verse of *The Forerunners*. Several other pieces bear witness to the greater freedom in technical experimentation. “Romance”, for instance, uses the sonnet form to formulate a distinction between false and genuine patriotism. Generally, however, such superiority as *The Camp* enjoys over *The Forerunners* depends on a more expert handling of the same resources. The desired power of simple emotions is now more readily achieved through the substitution of a plain, direct language for the false poetics of the earlier work. The intensification of feeling is guaranteed, at the best moments in *The Camp*, by some quite subtle rhythmical variations on established metrical patterns. The best testimony to this increasing poetic skill is the poem “The Farmer Remembers the Somme”. Substantively, it is important as an early instance of a recurrent theme in Palmer’s writing — the deep psychological malaise induced by participation in the war. In itself, it is one of Palmer’s few exercises in dramatized versification, and, on most counts, stands as the best poem he ever wrote:

Will they never fade or pass!  
The mud, and the misty figures endlessly coming  
In file through the foul morass,  
And the grey flood-water lipping the reeds and grass,  
And the steel wings drumming.

The hills are bright in the sun:  
There’s nothing changed or marred in the well-known places;  
When work for the day is done  
There’s talk, and quiet laughter, and gleams of fun  
On the old folks’ faces.

I have returned to these:  
The farm, and the kindly Bush, and the young calves lowing;
But all that my mind sees
Is a quaking bog in a mist — stark, snapped trees,
And the dark Somme flowing.

The most and the best that can be said of Palmer’s achievement in poetry was recorded by Hugh McCrae in a Red Page review of *The Camp* for the Sydney Bulletin. Describing Palmer as “a shepherd of Theocritus, his cheek darkened with sun and rain — a man who finds happiness in country roads and pastures, living innocently and extolling the world about him in songs of natural joy”, McCrae went on to sum up *The Camp* in these terms:

Most of Vance Palmer’s poetry is written from the heart; that is to say, although an intellectual, he holds the balance between passion and percipience so that the scale inclines a little always in favor of natural life. Neither book nor brain will baulk the song of his blood. McCrae quotes with approval such poems as “The Dandenongs” and “Easter”, but not Palmer’s own favourite, “These Are My People”. It asserts the poet’s identity with the common people:

They bear the brand of wrecked hopes and loveless toil and sorrow, Ironic gods have shaped them to the metal beasts they tend, There’ll be little care for beauty in the world they build to-morrow But these are my people, and I’m with them to the end.

THE BLACK HORSE AND OTHER PLAYS

In spite of a growing capacity to handle poetry, Palmer had sufficient insight to realize that the ends he proposed to himself were not best served by that form. After *The Camp* he published no more books of verse, but he continued to explore the possibilities of self-expression outside prose fiction. In 1924 appeared a volume of four plays, *The Black Horse and Other Plays*, all of which had been given stage production. All are one act in duration, quite short, realistic in manner, and set in the favourite
environment of Palmer’s early writing — the outback cattle country. The composition of these elements into a successfully unified dramatic text was a task in some ways as alien to his talent as the writing of genuinely first-rate verse.

In two of the plays he tackled the technical problems created by their brief time span by concentrating on a vigorous single action. “The Black Horse” reveals a station owner, his wife, and son at a crucial (indeed fatal) moment in their history. The events of “The Prisoner” are also designed to throw stress on suspense and violent emotional response. The plot turns on the tensions generated in a group of opposed characters isolated by a flood in a remote shanty. In the other two plays, dramatic interest is diverted away from action onto mood and tone. “Travellers”, at least in intention, is a comic revelation of snobbish social attitudes, again intensified by the isolation of its characters. “Telling Mrs. Baker”, a dramatization of Lawson’s famous story (for which Palmer received the author’s express permission), aims at creating the mood of disaster rather than its manifestation in action. Two drovers, forced to give some account of their boss’s death to his widow, gallantly lie about his reputation in order to save her feelings.

Any of these strategies could have led to a properly realized one-act play. Unfortunately, the success of Palmer’s actual scripts is only limited and mixed. In none of the plays does he seem capable of handling the major convention he adopted, that of a full and literal realism. The creation of a satisfactory short play within a setting which insists on the paramountcy of the actual world calls for a skill in plotting and a finesse with dialogue which Palmer simply could not lay claim to. To be sure, and as always, his ear was accurate for the speeches of individual characters; but the total pattern of dialogue and action, displayed within the visually naturalistic framework, has an impact that is both crude and superficial. The realistic convention is further damaged by Palmer’s attempts to make plot and action lead to certain predetermined moral attitudes in so brief a period of time as to offend one’s sense of dramatic verisimilitude. The plot of “The Prisoner” rests on the conflicts between a cattle thief, his girlfriend, and a policeman.
In being forced to bear, at the same time, a proclamation of the outback ethos of mateship, the whole slight script is brought creakingly to defeat. The social comedy of “The Travellers” suffers likewise from being too obviously imposed. The two women from differing social classes are forced to make their reactions to the puffed-up male so overtly the medium for Palmer’s comic judgment as seriously to endanger their existence as dramatized characters.

Of the four plays in the volume, easily the most successful is “The Black Horse” itself. In the first place, it most adequately copes with the problem of setting a play in the Australian bush — an environment more immediately accessible to other artistic modes than to drama. The theatrical intransigence of the outback had already engaged the attention of Palmer’s close friend, Louis Esson. In this respect, “The Black Horse” may derive from “The Drovers”, although it is not so good a play. Palmer’s achievement depends, in large measure, on directing attention away from the natural world onto the psychological conflicts between the three principal characters—Harry and Rhoda Bain, and their son Walter. The tensions which exist between them are symbolized by the black horse, whose off-stage presence dominates the brief tragedy. The action itself takes place entirely within the dining room of the station homestead. In the course of Palmer’s most subtly developed dialogue a long history of hate and frustration between husband and wife is revealed, focused in competition for the boy’s allegiance. The mother, because of a fall from a horse she once suffered, is terrified of the tough, outdoor life of the cattleman; this is the only life which the almost brutal father considers fitting for his son. Caught in the middle of this disastrous situation, Walter overcomes his fear of horses, tries to ride the black stallion, is thrown and killed.

In “The Black Horse” Palmer did manage to combine an inherently dramatic situation with a symbolism appropriate to the play’s realistic setting and speech. Conquering tendencies admitted into the other plays, he concentrated his attention on the particular passions and motives of the characters without forcing them to utter a ready-made morality. In
effect, he produced a short one-act play of some technical accomplishment and imaginative thrust. The basic ingredients of "Telling Mrs. Baker" might appear to have offered him an equal chance of success. Here, after all, was the plight of defeated men doing their best to ennable a situation "known to the core and stripped of all illusion": precisely the kind of material which had elicited the best from his imagination in *The World of Men*. But if "Telling Mrs. Baker" demonstrates anything, it is what *The World of Men* had implied: that the finest qualities of his imagination were non-dramatic. What is needed in "Telling Mrs. Baker" is the sensibility of a J.M. Synge (whose work Palmer knew and admired), a sensibility capable of making drama out of the mood as well as the accidents of tragedy. Where Palmer could not start from an intrinsically theatrical situation, it seems, at least on the evidence of *The Black Horse*, that the special organization of his imagination prohibited him from transmuting his material into a satisfactory dramatic mould.

Palmer did not entirely abandon drama after the appearance of *The Black Horse*, but he certainly subordinated it to his other commitments, not publishing another play until 1947. As with his abandonment of poetry, his instinct was right. It seems likely that he was drawn to dramatic composition by his conscious assessment of the socially unifying role that the theatre might be able to play in the Australian community. But the actual writing of plays was not capable of providing a vitalizing link between his concern for public culture and his basic creative mechanisms. The early experiments with drama, as with verse, had had the negative value of showing Palmer that they were not suited to him. More positively, they had helped to clarify his sense of what he wanted to achieve in literature and to make him more intensely aware of the subjects he needed to write about. By 1924 Palmer had exhausted the little value that poetry and drama could have for his creative career. With whatever modifications, whatever delays, he was ready to turn back wholeheartedly to the proper path of his development, the path of prose fiction so ambiguously signalled in 1915 by *The World of Men*. 
NOTES TO CHAPTER 2

1. A.R. Orage to Vance Palmer, 19 August 1913. The letter is addressed from the *New Age* office.

2. Palmer's comment was made as an inscription in a copy of the original edition of *The World of Men* owned by Vane Lindsay, of Melbourne. It is reproduced in the introduction to the 1962 edition of F.W. Cheshire, Melbourne.


5. Palmer acknowledged his early familiarity with Ogilvie's verse in his introduction to the latter's *Saddle for a Throne* (Adelaide, 1952).


8. Palmer expressed his preference for "These Are My People" and "The Deserted Place" (in *The Forerunners*) in a letter to G.S. Mackaness dated 1 August 1940, and addressed from "Florida" in Melbourne.

Prose and Early Novels 1920-1925

THE SPIRIT OF PROSE

On 1 April 1921, Palmer read a paper to the Melbourne Literary Club on "The Spirit of Prose"; extracts from the lecture were published in the issue of Fellowship for May of the same year. Palmer's argument was directed towards the relationship between prose literature and high culture, an issue which was increasingly taxing his imagination. In his paper he stressed the immediacy and reality of the relationship, insisting on its crucial importance to Australian life:

Prose is the language of civilisation — that is, of the three-fourths of life that we spend in intercourse with our fellow-beings. Poetry is, in its nature, a solitary thing. It is not absolutely dependent on an audience. You can imagine a man writing it on a desert island, in the sheer exaltation of being alone. In our desert island of Australia, where there is no audience to speak of, many people do write it: they write it in increasing quantity. And though they would probably like to have an audience to buy their little books, that is not their first concern in writing...

Coming to Australia, it must be admitted, I think, that we have a poor record in prose. The conditions were more
favourable for poetry. Or that is putting it too strongly. The conditions were not favourable for prose...

To cultivate the prose spirit, then, is the work of civilisation. In Australia it hardly exists. There is a lot of political writing, of course, but it is conceived in the spirit of hysteria, not of prose...

Criticism, too, is in nearly as degraded a state. It has come to be an affair of coteries. This is bad for both the writer and the public...

I believe that some sort of civilisation will have to be built up in Australia if we are not to remain a meaningless jumble of incoherent creeds, cliques, classes. At the present time we are living intellectually in a state of barbarism. Poetry is not enough to alter our condition — a poetry that is read only by a small circle. We want a social life created through prose and the drama, both to satisfy our own instincts as reasonable beings and for the sake of the country as a nation...

The spirit of prose, though, is not an accidental gift to a country. It is a trained poise of mind. And it is valuable, not only for what it creates itself, but for what it saves from destruction.¹

While one may quarrel with some of Palmer’s assumptions here (that the poet may work fruitfully in isolation, for instance), there is no mistaking the passion of his utterance. “The Spirit of Prose”, in fact, provides telling evidence of the direct connection between Palmer’s public concern for culture and the basic creative mechanisms of his imagination. It may well be that his need for harmonious community had its ultimate roots in his early relationships with his father, his experience of a large family, possible disappointment in not himself having sons, even repressed anxieties about the homosexual school-teacher remembered from his youth. Whatever its psychological causes, the need was given intellectual sanction and made available to the procedures of art through the doctrine expounded in “The Spirit of Prose”. The lecture, indeed, almost seems to be the outline of a whole future career, the forecast of a programme that Palmer was deliberately setting himself as a writer. From about 1920 on he dedicated himself to the

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task of creating a civilized Australia through the medium of prose; the paper to the Melbourne Literary Club was his formal statement of intention.

The decision to cultivate the spirit of prose entailed some diminishment in what Palmer allowed himself to undertake; it led to the abandonment of poetry, a lessened attention to drama. It encouraged, on the other hand, an expansion in the range and scope of his prose writings. Perhaps recalling his final assertion in “The Spirit of Prose” that “it is valuable, not only for what it creates itself, but for what it saves from destruction”, he contributed an essay on “Trees” to the Bulletin of 27 July 1922. It is an eloquent and early plea for the preservation of Australia’s natural beauty:

We come of a generation that did not like trees. The hardy pioneer is generally represented with an axe, and to him it was less a tool than an implement of war. Trees were the enemy, and he liked to be photographed beside a fallen gum, just as a big game hunter stands with his foot on an elephant or a rhinoceros, rifle at rest and his face lit with triumph. Progress was visualised as a felling of trees, and something of the passion of a crusade invested the whole business. The younger was armed with a tomahawk on his sixth birthday, and sent forth, with the parental blessing and a few injunctions about cherry-trees, to do battle in the great war.2

Such writing represents a very direct and overt attempt to civilize the nation through the agency of prose. It had been prefigured as early as 1917 by “The Six Cities”,3 an account of the Australian capitals which Palmer had contributed to the Bulletin. It was supported by other pieces printed in Fellowship, dealing with such matters as “Australia’s Transformation”, “On Boundaries”, and “White Australia”.4 Perhaps the most eloquent essay of this kind is “The Divide”, in which Palmer achieves a Whitmanesque vision of the continent from a vantage point on the Dividing Range:

Going west from Townsville over the dividing range one reaches a point, about ten hours from the coast, where the
streams diverge, running in different directions over the continent. The most unimaginative man could not help getting a thrill here. There is nothing to see but steep ridges covered with wild scrub and coarse grass, but to the inner vision the spot is an eyrie from which one can look out over thousands of miles, watching the labors of men coming and going over Australian earth. The whole eastern half of the continent spreads itself out miraculously. Everything that crowds the foreground falls away, and the little steamers slugging down the Murray are as near as the cattle feeding down at the bottom of the ridge.

Eastward a tiny stream goes down to feed the Burdekin that finds the sea in a delta near Ayr. The mind follows its passage into sluggish, scrub-fringed creeks where sugar-cane is growing in the bends, and gangs of men have just ceased slashing it down with heavy knives and piling it in the waiting trucks...

South and west the streams run to join the Diamantina and other so-called rivers that either feed the Darling or spread out in flood-time over the sandy belts of the interior, making the herbage shoot amazingly in country that rarely knows rain... From our point on the divide it is possible to visualise all that country with its tiny, tin-roofed townships and its endless herds of sheep...

The ebb and flow of this great wave of energy that has populated the North! Men furiously drilling into the dark ridges of Mt. Isa and clearing landing-places for the aerial mail; others stealing away as silently as thieves from the Gulf towns, after an honorable residence of 30 years or so. Yet the general impression is one of ceaseless activity as one views it from the divide, calling upon memories and pictures. Beyond the horizon, or even the knowledge, of the cities along the coast, a great, creative impulse is at work — the only thing, after all, that gives this continent a meaning and a guarantee of the future. Every Australian ought to climb up here, once in a way, and glimpse the various, manifold life of which he is a part.5

More important than such direct dealings with Australian material was the development of that “trained poise of mind” which Palmer had postulated as a central attribute of the
prose writer. In the years immediately following the announce-
ment made in “The Spirit of Prose”, one of the ways in which
he strove to acquire such poise was through the formulation
of some viable literary principles. One of Palmer’s most im-
portant critical statements of the early 1920’s was “The
Missing Critics”, printed in the Bulletin of 26 July 1923. In
that article he addressed himself to a problem which con-
tinuously exercised his mind: the need for a co-operative
effort of writers and audience in the creation of culture. The
problem in Australia, as he saw it, was the inadequate attention
paid by readers to writers; the solution was the development
of independent critical minds, unattached to literary coteries or
sects:

There is practically no criticism of such literary work as
is produced in Australia, and consequently no responsive
public. A few books of merit see the light; they receive a
mechanical salute from fatigued reviewers on the daily
papers, and then they fall back into oblivion. Good writing
in Australia has never brought either cash or attention.
What wonder there is so little of it?
The lack of attention is the most important matter, for,
in spite of what may be said to the contrary, most writers do
want to know that they have an audience. . . What [their
work] ought to bring is serious attention, and an attempt on
the part of the critics to discover its special quality. . .
What is wanted is a little genuine criticism, in order that
it may be discovered what has been done in Australian
literature, and what is being done to-day. There is a big
opening for a competent critic, and even a few merely
industrious ones would be welcome.6

In later years Palmer himself went a long way towards
filling the vacuum in Australian literary life that he sensed in
1923. At the time of writing “The Missing Critics”, however,
his critical aims were more restricted and severely professional.
His immediate aim was to clarify his thinking about prose
fiction. Some of his speculations on the subject found their
way as articles into the Bulletin. In “The Narrative Faculty”,
contributed to the Red Page of 5 January 1922, he maintained
that that quality "is one asset most popular novelists have in common with the great masters of fiction", and went on to describe narrative skill as "the power to fuse events and conversations in such a way that the smooth flow of the story is not impeded... the power to bridge gulfs of time and place so that the reader is conscious of nothing but continuity". Some two years later, again in the Bulletin, he turned his attention to "Fact and Its Proper Place". The article registers some distrust of the imagination (by which Palmer here means invention) as "a very limited thing". The creative writer will do better to go to observed life for his actions and characters: "To keep vitality in his creation he needs the freshness of detail he has seen with his own eyes; but, apart from that, it is generally reality that has supplied him with the original impulse to create." In the same year, 1924, the Red Page carried another article by Palmer which made some significant modifications to the kind of realist theory of fiction to which "Fact and Its Proper Place" had apparently been tending. "Romantic Realism" argued for the admission into fiction of "a little more wonder and strangeness" than novelist: like Gissing and Arnold Bennett had allowed. Conrad is praised for "using a bridge of familiar detail to connect his very strange world with that of everyday experience, and seeming to combine realism and romance in a new way", for allowing "poetry to creep back into the novel".

NOVELS, 1920–1924

The views that Palmer was developing in these articles represented a significant modification of the kind of realism which had obtained in The World of Men. He was naturally eager to test his theoretical advances in practice. In "The Narrative Faculty" he had asked, "Can this faculty be acquired... by the sweat of the brow?" His answer: "Literary history seems to show that it can... yet it can only be retained with continual effort." The early 1920's found Palmer ready to direct the trained poise of mind of the prose writer towards the creation of works of fiction significantly different from his first serious book. The maturing of his art can be felt in the
short stories of the period; the case with the novels is, unhappily, quite otherwise. From 1920 to 1924 Palmer published five novels: *The Shantykeeper's Daughter* (1920), *The Boss of Killara* (1922), *The Enchanted Island* (1923), *Cronulla* (1924), and *The Outpost* (1924). Palmer himself was the first to admit the minimal value of these books. In an interview given to *All About Books* in 1930, soon after *The Passage* had won a *Bulletin* novel competition, he had this to say:

I've been writing for a good many years, at one level or another — novels, short stories, verses, plays. But novels — at least, if they've any serious intention — take long stretches of unbroken time, and it's only lately that I've been able to devote myself to them entirely. It isn't merely the time you spend with the pen; it's the time you need to brood over them. Of those I've written, I'd only take three seriously — "The Man Hamilton," "Men Are Human," (to be published by Stanley Paul's next month), and this one, "The Passage," which won the "Bulletin" Prize.10

That Palmer's contemporary judgment of these early novels coincided with his later judgment is suggested by the fact that he wrote two of them (*The Enchanted Island* and *The Outpost*) under the nom de plume of Rann Daly. The pseudonym may have been a covert satirical thrust at the gruelling lot of the professional writer in Australia. In any case, it seems clear that Palmer was forced into marking time in the actual creation of novels at a time when his views on fiction were ripening by the simple need to make money for himself and his family. *The Shantykeeper's Daughter* and *The Boss of Killara* were published by the New South Wales Bookstall Company. Many Australian writers of Palmer's generation owed A.C. Rowlandson, the proprietor of the Company, an immense practical debt — the titles in the Bookstall series, at 1s or 1s 3d each, sold millions of copies. Yet the purpose of the series and the public at which it was aimed could only delay the development of any serious novelist's art. All that Palmer could hope to do within the romance framework demanded of him was to sharpen the basic skills of narration and composition.

The two Rann Daly novels were published by Hutchinson,
in London. But even overseas publication did not free Palmer to write the kind of novel he really wanted to. In 1922 he had complained that “The Australian novel struggles painfully under the handicap of having to address itself primarily to a public overseas. . . No need to demonstrate what that means! It practically rules out the genuine Australian novel that takes its native setting for granted and tries to render it sincerely.”

When he came to write *The Enchanted Island* and *The Outpost* he personally discovered the bitter truth of his own words; compelled to provide spurious local colour, he chose not to betray the genuine Australian setting which compelled his imagination and placed his actions in exotic tropical environments.

No amount of explanation, however, can hide the fact that Palmer’s first essays in the art of the novel retain their interest, if at all, only because they are the foundations on which was built work of some real substance and significance. The fact is brought decisively home when it is realized that the three novels with Australian settings, published in Australia and for Australian audiences, exhibit the same weakness as the two with exotic settings, published overseas for overseas audiences. The first of the Australian novels (and the first of all Palmer’s novels), *The Shantykeeper’s Daughter*, takes place in the years immediately after the First World War. Rod Cunningham, after five years overseas as a Light Horse officer, returns to his father’s station, Windorah, in western Queensland. There he finds his father involved in a feud with a neighbour and one-time friend, Steve O’Connell. Cunningham has prospered, while O’Connell’s fortunes have declined; his homestead is now little more than a shanty and coaching station, his property has fallen into decay. Rod Cunningham’s love for Moira O’Connell, the shantykeeper’s daughter, intensifies the feud, and is itself complicated by the intervention of Flora Braddon, the widow of a nearby squatter, and by Rod’s relations with Macy Duncan. Duncan, a trapper, is in love with Moira’s sister, Mag. Arrested for illegally leaving empty cyanide tins on the Windorah run, he escapes, only to be recaptured, through, he believes, the treachery of Rod. Actually,
Rod’s sympathies are with O’Connell and his supporters rather than his father. Quarrelling with his father, he goes to the nearest township for the picnic races, where he is treated with considerable suspicion but succeeds in pleading his love with Moira. At the same time the two fathers, Cunningham and O’Connell, have encountered each other at the boundary of their properties, have argued violently, and Cunningham has been badly hurt. The near catastrophe makes the two old men see the silliness of their feud, long sustained and engendered by a minor disagreement. They are reconciled; Rod and Moira are married; Macy is set free. A sentimentally happy ending is achieved for all concerned.

Thus brutally summarized, The Shantykeeper’s Daughter is shown up as the feeble romance it is. The plot, however, does have the extrinsic interest of providing the basis for one of the first novels that Palmer himself took seriously — Men Are Human. Even his hackwork contained many of the themes, motifs, and images which would be transformed into the novels by which he must be fairly judged. Hence, though the Romeo and Juliet theme may seem to dominate the action of The Shantykeeper’s Daughter, the feud itself is of far more importance in understanding the real quality of Palmer’s achievement. The theme of a feud between two men of long-standing acquaintance was to play a major role in a great deal of Palmer’s fiction during the 1920’s and 1930’s. It had triggered off stories even before the writing of The Shantykeeper’s Daughter: “The Red Bullock” and “The End of the Feud”, both contributed to the Bulletin during 1916. The Shantykeeper’s Daughter, indeed, is simply “The End of the Feud” enlarged by placing the Romeo and Juliet romance between its beginning and its end.

The feud itself is given some living colour by its location: “Nine miles apart, with a wilderness of dark mulga between them, the station homestead and the shanty lay dreaming of their separate plans as if each was endowed with a mind and a personality.” The vision of the bush which is one of the few vitalizing images in the novel has clearly been retained from The World of Men. The ameliorating forces of human society, however inadequately rendered, are given greater
play than in the 1915 sketches. Windorah homestead itself provides a warm centre of community life. Its pepperina trees, lagoon, and night paddock reappear again and again in varying combinations in Palmer's later fiction. Yet it is not the social amenities provided by the station that Cunningham prizes most in Windorah; not even its cash value as an investment, though he controls it with a rigour that amounts to selfishness in the eyes of some of the local bushmen. The primary motivating force in Cunningham's life is a dynastic one: attachment to a single place so powerful that he cannot bear to think of it being transmitted to anybody but his male heir. Even in this sorry first novel, the father-son relation occupies an axial position, defining one of the recurring subjects of the major work.

The Boss of Killara, which followed The Shantykeeper's Daughter two years later, in 1922, repeats much of the material of the earlier novel, adds a few new items to the catalogue of Palmer's interests, and displays no real advance towards genuine creative achievement. Like The Shantykeeper's Daughter, it foreshadows a more serious work, in this case The Man Hamilton. The setting is again the Queensland cattle country, the time about the turn of the century. Chris Folkard, having inherited Killara from his father, has not lived on the property for something like ten years. Returning to the land after the failure of one of his investments, he finds Killara run down through the inefficiency of his manager, Drummond. The plot is advanced along three main lines: the attempt to bring Killara back to prosperity; a feud with a horsebreaker, Doran; a romance with Nina Joyce, the governess on the neighbouring property of Glenrowan. The matrix of the action is nearly identical with that of The Shantykeeper's Daughter. There is the civilizing influence of the station itself; the predominantly male world; the shanty (now the lair of a sexual rival for the heroine, here named Delia Byrne); the picnic races; and so on.

Additions to Palmer's novelistic apparatus are to be found in Ram Chundra, the Afghan hawker, with his corrupting influence on the aboriginal camp; a fuller use of the aboriginals themselves; and a stronger insistence on the physical hazards of
life in the bush. In this respect, *The Boss of Killara* again exhibits connections with *The World of Men*. The horse-riding accident with which the novel opens recalls "Father and Son"; the central importance of the drilling for artesian water has echoes of "The Galley Slave".

The dynastic attachment to place is continued in Folkard's growing realization of his love for Killara. With the father figure relegated to the past, however, Palmer was free to develop in more generalized terms a counterpointed motif he would frequently exploit in later work — the contrast between vigorous young manhood and old age. In *The Boss of Killara* it is embodied in the relation between Folkard and his neighbour, Cameron:

"There's a time for everything, my boy," [Cameron] said sentimentally. "The great thing is to know when to pull out and leave the pretty girls and plucky horses to the younger men. I'm glad to say I did. Since I was thirty I never lost a night's sleep because a girl was good-looking or a horse was slow. And I could have gone to the devil as easy as any of them if I hadn't taken hold of myself. I'll give you my word I could, man. I found, though, that a place could only be built up by hard work, so I put the blinkers on and stuck to it. Well, what's the consequence? I'm skimming the cream off life now at sixty-five."

"That's so," echoed one of his companions. "Love makes time pass away; time makes love pass away. The only thing that doesn't pass is a good place secured by a balance at the bank." 13

Of Palmer's three early bush novels, easily the best is *Cronulla*, not so much perhaps for any positive progress as for the elimination of some of the most vitiating features of *The Shantykeeper's Daughter* and *The Boss of Killara*. Much of the physical setting remains unchanged. The standard Palmer homestead (now named Cronulla) is still the focal point of the action. The characters are ranged in much the same pattern — two generations of neighbouring families; aboriginal camp across the creek periodically visited by the Afghan hawker (immutably named Ram Chundra); the sexually provocative
shanty slut; the final romantic love match. Within this familiar combination of materials what has been most noticeably improved is the plot. Far less is required to “happen” than in the two previous books. In Cronulla Palmer was taking his first steps in learning to transfer the undramatic perceptions of The World of Men to the larger scale of the novel. The love story between Madge Buckley and Alex Graham, for instance, is allowed to proceed at a leisurely pace, and over a period spanning both childhood and young adulthood. Granted the social circumstances of station life at the beginning of the century, their marriage is seen as a natural and necessary outcome of their long acquaintance. Even when sexual rivalry is introduced into the affair, it is done with much greater psychological realism than in the previous work. Alec’s rival is an older man, Harding, a tough and ruthless station owner who had achieved some distinction in the Australian mounted contingent in the Boer War. He is attracted to Madge out of straight sexual desire (an aspect of loving rigorously excluded from the earlier books), property ambition, the will to dominate. Yet he is no moustache-twirling music hall villain; he is, indeed, one of the most complex human beings yet to appear in Palmer’s fiction.

Characteristic of the restraint and verisimilitude of action that Palmer was groping towards in Cronulla is the climactic confrontation between Alec Graham and Harding. Graham, full of jealous hate, is riding to meet Harding when he finds him in the bush, the victim of a riding accident. Harding confesses that Madge has finally rejected him in favour of Alec. What should have been a grand melodramatic climax fizzes out into good common sense. In such a scene — where ordinary life suddenly deflects action away from the climaxes and intensities demanded by romance — lay the promise of some of Palmer’s most characteristic and valuable achievements in the later novels.

Other mature virtues can also be seen germinating in Cronulla. The early chapters of the novel, registering the childhood years of the major characters, give some glimmerings of the sensitivity with which Palmer was to treat the mind of the
young in some of his best short stories. The lyrical evocation of the ways of the drover which opens chapter 8 prefigures the novelist's deep concern for the details of honest trades and occupations. The very title of the novel, *Cronulla*, points to an increasingly profound awareness of place; the station becomes not only the focus but the very subject of the book. Of all the elements of the novel only the language fails to manifest any real advance; with rare exceptions, it retains the lifelessness of the two previous works, and so fails to endow the new features of *Cronulla* with significant existence.

Although *Cronulla* was the third of Palmer's novels to be set in the Australian outback, it was the fourth full-length work to be actually published. In 1923, one year before *Cronulla*, there had appeared *The Enchanted Island*, arguably the most disastrous work he ever put into print. Even among the other novels of the early twenties it is remarkable for its total surrender to the simple romance of polite escapism. The title of the work refers to an atoll in the South Pacific which is the milieu of a romantic idyll for which the rest of the novel is an excuse. For three weeks Nina Brayne is marooned on the atoll with Harry Bingham, the forty-year-old skipper of a trading schooner, who treats her with the impeccable morality of a badge-winning boy scout. As well as this arcadian interlude, *The Enchanted Island* contains sinister plantation managers, concealed identities, native mutinies, shipwreck. The plot is held together by the exploits of Nina Brayne, who ventures into the South Pacific from Sydney in search of her father. The man she believes to be her parent (her real father being long dead) proves to be an impostor who is involved in a search for buried treasure. Nina and Bingham finally discover the treasure (it is yet another of the enchantments of their island), but lose it to a further gaggle of villains. Love, however, proves better than money, and Nina and Bingham sail off into the sunset.

A summary of its action is even more cruelly destructive to *The Enchanted Island* than to *The Shantykeeper's Daughter*. It is indeed difficult to find any merit in the actual conduct of the novel, but even its shoddy hackwriting contains faint hints of themes that Palmer was discovering and storing away for.
his more serious purposes. Most of these depend on the fact that *The Enchanted Island* is the first of his novels in which the sea is a major element. The descriptions of the storm, for instance, are among the best passages of writing in the book; there was something in the sea, apparently, which stimulated Palmer's imagination even in the most adverse circumstances. It begins, too, to hold interest for Palmer not only as a subject in itself but as a source of metaphors through which he might understand human experience. The mate of the ship which takes Nina out into the Pacific, for example, is described as "a young man, whose sympathies flowed easily at the sight of a pretty face". Later, Delannoy (one of the villains) contemplates the burden which is imposed on him by the man who is masquerading as Jeff Brayne: "Why should he, who had all his life in front of him, be tied to this old fellow whose vitality was slowly oozing away?"

In such passing figures of speech lie the seeds of a set of images through which Palmer was later to explore his sense of life as the ebb and flow of compelling forces, existing almost independently of the individuals they animate.

That much said, little further can be advanced in favour of *The Enchanted Island*. The case of *The Outpost* is rather different. It bears the same relation to *The Enchanted Island* as Cronulla does to *The Shantykeeper's Daughter* and *The Boss of Killara*; indeed, it is probably the best essay in full-length fiction that Palmer had yet produced. For the first time in his novels his style begins to show some signs of genuine merit. In this moment of impending danger, for instance, the landscape is not only rendered more vividly than before, it is used as an emotional correlative to the action:

He rose and lit his pipe. The native constables had already finished their meal and were getting their packs and rifles ready, Notu moving about among them with careful, anxious eyes, as if he were carrying the whole burden of the expedition on his back. Far off, the peaks of the mountains shone with gold where the sun's rays caught them, and so clear was the upper air that the boles of giant trees ten miles away showed out with distinctness though the ravines below
were filled with mists that gathered together like balls of wool. High up in the sky floated small, white clouds, buoyant as thistle down, and the smell of burning wood was stimulating to the senses.

Whelan reached for his belt and buckled on his revolver. The content of this passage might suggest that The Outpost depends on adventurous excitement of an order not far removed from those of The Enchanted Island. The novel does indeed have its fair share of simple and vigorous action. It tells of the return of an Australian administrator, Faulkner, to New Guinea, after retiring from the service with a record almost legendary. On his second period of duty he is assigned to one of the ruggedest districts in the country, and the plot develops along twin lines: his attempt to bring law and order to the hill natives, and his love for Lena Cameron, the daughter of a ruthless trader irredeemably opposed to Administration interference in his affairs.

The lines of conflict are simple and direct, but The Outpost does have some qualities absent from The Enchanted Island which afford it a certain measure of adult interest. Among them is Palmer’s sense of the darkness of life in this uncivilized region of the world, of the irrational drives which underlie much human behaviour. That there was some conscious imitation of Conrad in The Outpost seems likely enough, especially when one recalls that the article, “Romantic Realism”, in which Palmer formulated some of his primary views about fiction, was based on a review of Conrad’s complete works, and appeared in 1924, the same year as the novel.

Palmer does not grasp his theme with anything like the force or subtlety of Conrad, but it does have enough weight to be genuinely present in The Outpost. The dark forces of the mind are most warmly embraced by Cameron, Lena’s father. Faulkner gains some inkling of the kind of man he is dealing with when he first sees his study:

> There was the piano, for instance, an old-fashioned instrument of some foreign make, stained and discoloured, as though it had braved the weather on a small craft. Then the dark shelves in the corner were well filled with
books. On the walls were native weapons of all kinds, and grotesque carvings in wood, most of them ugly and sinister; and Faulkner could not help wondering at the taste that chose to live in close intimacy with such things. (p. 74)

With his mixture of intellectual acuity and will to power, Cameron forces Faulkner into an examination of his own position, a moral ordeal never suffered by the heroes of Palmer's previous novels. In the long run, the magistrate's sense of duty and honour prevails, but not merely, one feels, as a matter of convention. Faulkner's attitudes approximate closely Palmer's own beliefs about the meaning and value of civilized life, and they are created out of some of the deepest levels of their author's consciousness.

Faulkner's allegiance to the orderly virtues is required to survive not only the probings of old Cameron, the rigorous physical tests of tribal uprisings, and the condemnation of what is deemed his expediency by the missionary, Fowler, and his daughter, Bertha. It has to survive a situation in which public responsibility and personal desires are brought into the sharpest possible conflict. The climactic sequence of The Outpost is markedly similar to the central episode of The Enchanted Island. Faulkner and Lena are marooned on an island at a time when it is desperately important that Faulkner should get back to the residency as soon as possible. They know they can expect rescue within a matter of days, when the mission schooner suddenly appears. Faulkner fails to act with the manly virtue of Harry Bingham:

"We'd better go," she said unsteadily. "There's time yet. I'm ready if you are."

But a madness had entered Faulkner's blood.

"No," he said stubbornly. "I've made up my mind, too, now. I'm not going."

He caught her by the waist and drew her back to him. At that moment the solid earth seemed to melt in a mist, and there was nothing real except the body held against his own, the half-shut eyes he touched with his lips. (p. 228)

The direct admission of sexuality into the portrayal of Faulkner's
character indicates a more adult intelligence being allowed to operate in *The Outpost* than in the previous novels; as does Faulkner's temporary repudiation of his duty in favour of the complicated girl who had been deliberately subjecting him to sexual provocation; as does his diminished stature in the eyes of the Administration because of his seeming negligence.

In spite of its admission of more mature attitudes and behaviour, its richer and more energetic language, its closer contact with themes of some real interest, it would be futile to accord *The Outpost* anything more than a modest competence. It belongs with the four novels that precede it in deriving its primary interest from the light it sheds on Palmer's subsequent career. In themselves, none of the five novels that Palmer wrote in the first half of the twenties made any positive contribution to his campaign to civilize Australia through the agency of prose. The genuine progress towards that end, the true cultivation of a "trained poise of mind", lay, in this period, in the short stories, the criticism, the essays, and articles. The value of the novels to Palmer himself must have been a severely practical one: they helped him to eat. Writing them showed too (and this point cannot be lightly dismissed) that it was possible to survive (if not in affluence) as a professional writer in Australia.

In terms of imaginative satisfaction, the five novels can have brought Palmer little pleasure. Compelled by his circumstances to write them, he was marking time in his practical development as a novelist at a period when his mind was conceiving the patterns into which he knew his serious fiction must fit. If they had any value for him, it must have been in his awareness that through them he was discovering themes and subjects that awaited his serious investigation. He discovered, for instance, that, in spite of the minor success of *The Outpost*, foreign environments would not serve his long term purposes. Never again did he set a novel outside Australia. He discovered, too, that within Australia his true creative home remained, for the time being at least, in the bush. There he could most readily deploy the masculine society, the family relationships, the personal hostilities, the love of place which would give rise to his first important full-length fiction. He discovered at last,
and only glimmeringly, the misty outlines of the kind of novel he knew he must write.

Yet, as a group, the novels from *The Shantykeeper's Daughter* to *The Outpost* manifest a phenomenon of singular importance for any right assessment of Palmer's creative career. In a phrase taken over from philosophy, it may be described as the principle of parsimony. Palmer's parsimony, however, consists not in any elegance of logical argument but in the repeated use of certain basic fictional components. The five early novels are remarkable, for example, for the narrow range of their nomenclature. Names like Steve, Cameron, Nina, Fallon, Ram Chundra occur again and again in different combinations. Even place names are subject to the same process. Dulacca, a tropical trading station in *The Enchanted Island*, becomes a Queensland cattle station in *Cronulla*. Bargunyah in *The Shantykeeper's Daughter* gives way to Bargunyah Dam in *The Boss of Killara*. It is impossible to believe that Palmer was unaware of the repetition; equally impossible to believe that new names were beyond his powers of invention. One is led to the conclusion that either Palmer made as much craft capital out of his inventions as he possibly could or that he was an obsessional artist of a very special kind indeed.

So lax is the language of the early novels, so economically circumscribed the conditions of their composition, it is virtually impossible to tell whether the phenomenon they exhibit is a symptom of a fatal paucity of invention or a creative obsession of the imagination: of parsimony or pressure. Nor, granted the individual level of achievement of the books, is it a matter of any urgency to do so. In 1925, however, Palmer moved to Caloundra, thus creating the circumstances wherein he could write the novels he wanted to in the way he wanted to. And even in the novels published after 1925, those to which he gave his best, the same repetitive features of incident, character type, and theme are to be found. The principle of parsimony continues to operate. An understanding of its operations may well prove indispensable in elucidating the critical issues the major novels pose. In these works, however, Palmer had evolved so personal and ambiguous a set of solutions to the
problems of writing fiction that no ready-made critical apparatus, however valuable to clarification, can assure right judgment. That, as ever, must depend on the exercise of a delicate discipline and a sympathetic tact.

NOTES TO CHAPTER 3

15. Rann Daly, *The Outpost* (London, 1924), p. 112. All future quotations from *The Outpost* are from this edition. Page references are incorporated in the text.
Living at Caloundra from 1925 to 1929, Palmer completed two novels, *The Man Hamilton* and *Men Are Human*, and began a third, *The Passage*. For all their greater seriousness and superior merit, they continue many of the themes and subjects of the potboilers of the first half of the decade. *The Man Hamilton* and *Men Are Human* especially, both being set in outback Queensland, make large-scale use of the established apparatus of station life. The station homestead and its lagoon reappear, together with the riding accidents, the picnic races, the aboriginal camps, and so on. The parsimony of invention is transmitted even into the predictable set of names in both books. *The Man Hamilton* has its Nina Byrne, Steve, Dave McEvoy; *Men Are Human*, its Duncan, Carmody, Larry, Steve.

Yet Palmer’s loyalty to the bush as setting and subject depends on something more than a desire to squeeze as much advantage as possible out of material he had already learnt to handle. Commenting in a letter to Frank Dalby Davison on *Forever Morning*, he revealed the creative purpose which animated his repeated use of outback material:
But your intentions in the book show, perhaps, too clearly you were reacting against descriptions of the bush that were sordid or serio-comic, and you wished to present a different Bush, one that you had experienced and that held your affection. That was my own intention when I wrote "Cronulla", though the book hardly seems to me a serious performance now.¹

It is probably fair to judge both The Man Hamilton and Men Are Human as serious versions of the interests that were marginally exhibited in Cronulla. Palmer further testified to his genuine interest in the bush as a subject for fiction, his wish to rescue it from its status as an Australian cultural cliché, in the interview he gave to All About Books in 1930:

Why don’t I write about our cities? Well, why don’t other people? I suppose the real reason is that they don’t interest us very much; writers can only deal with what absorbs their whole interest. And, up till now, the life of our cities has been definitely inferior to that of the country. We have a beautiful landscape, with a character all its own, and a people who have character, too; but the life of our cities is provincial and colourless.²

THE MAN HAMILTON

The narrative he chose as the framework for The Man Hamilton was one with which he was already familiar; the central story line, with several of its subsidiary elements, derives from The Boss of Killara. Opening, like the earlier work, with a riding accident, The Man Hamilton develops the relationship between the governess of one station and the owner of another. The governess has to contest her love with a rival; the station homestead continues to provide a nucleus of civilization amid the endless leagues of mulga; the usual group of pastoral workers moves through the scene. Yet there are some significant changes wrought within this familiar pattern of characters, events, locale. Nina Byrne, for instance, has to confront as her rival for Hamilton’s love no mere shanty slut or type-cast femme fatale.
She learns that fourteen years previously he had married a half-caste girl because she was pregnant, and now has a son, Steve, the same age as Denis, the lad she is tutoring. The data of the novel, the issues through which Palmer defines and tests his major characters, that is to say, are more adult and complex than any of his previous inventions. And the conclusion to which the story leads — Hamilton’s decision to go on living with his wife, Nina’s departure from Conondale station — eschews the cheap romanticism forced on to the earlier work.

The glow of a more mature intelligence is not restricted to the invented action of *The Man Hamilton*. In other respects, too, Palmer was able to demonstrate that, given the opportunity, he was capable of writing extended narrative of some real interest and value. There is, for instance, a far more integrated use of subsidiary thematic material. Drilling for artesian water had occupied his mind as far back as *The World of Men*, had provided some of the local colour in *The Shantykeeper’s Daughter* and *The Boss of Killara*. It becomes an exact symbolic gauge of the central relationship of *The Man Hamilton*. The first time that Nina becomes aware of Hamilton’s interest in her is on a visit to the well he is sinking on his property, Euroa. Thereafter, the artesian bore is made the location for many of their rendezvous, and the period of their hope and happiness is made to coincide with that of the drilling for water. The actual bringing-in of a steady flow, however, signals Hamilton’s realization that his life is tied to his son and his land rather than to Nina. The water that brings life to Euroa ironically marks the beginning of the end of their love affair. The fusion of action, emotion, and metaphor is achieved with unobtrusive success at the end of chapter 20, as Hamilton lies awake near his sleeping son, listening to the sound of the water:

> In the silence that had fallen on the camp he heard for the first time the bubble, bubble of water rising from the depths below. A warm stream of life that rose in the upper air for a moment and then sank down to cut a channel for itself, a deep and narrow channel in the hard earth!"}

In this instance, the equation between life and the ebb and
flow of water is sanctioned through the physical presence of the well. Elsewhere in the novel it is much less satisfactorily handled. The water metaphors Palmer depended on so much were already in danger of becoming inert linguistic counters, of being absorbed into the catalogue of known situations and devices which could so easily and fatally be substituted for creation.

Happily, the artistic success which marks Palmer’s integrated use of the artesian drilling does spread into other areas of *The Man Hamilton*. It can be felt, for example, in the shapely patterning of plot within the nine months’ span of the action. Here Palmer achieves an unforced symmetry of form, faintly foreshadowed in the previous books. Yet the most striking feature of the structure of *The Man Hamilton* is the reduction of events to the barest number sufficient to support the narrative framework of fiction. This minimalization of plot is something far different from the professional writer’s parsimonious eking out of a limited stock of materials. It is a major step in the process, begun in *Cronulla*, of translating the insights of *The World of Men* into the longer reaches of fiction. Overtly exciting actions are now swept away in favour of the investigation of individual behaviour and motive in terms which Palmer took to be both aesthetically valid and philosophically true. His attention now concentrates on the full interpretation of a few key scenes. The opening incident of the novel is spread over two complete chapters, and all subsequent episodes of any importance are accorded at least equal weight of analysis. A quarter of a century after the publication of *The Man Hamilton* Palmer wrote to Frank Dalby Davison, “We pay a lip-service to fact but prefer to live by our fantasies”. The novel represents a significant stage in the shift from his early realism of ironic detachment to the realism of compassion and fact demanded by his mature judgment. *The Man Hamilton* displays, however imperfectly, the serious beginnings of what was to be one of the chief tasks of all his subsequent novels: the disciplining of his imagination to the scrupulous service of fact, the exclusion from his inventions of anything that might have the remotest smell of self-deluding fantasy.
For Palmer, fact resided primarily in the countless small threads which bind the unexceptional individual to his environment. Such a concept, at least, underlies the creation of Hamilton himself, the dominant figure of the novel which bears his name. He is presented as a strong but not extraordinary figure, exercising power and authority in the world of men. He is at his best in dealing with the unexpected crisis, he commands the loyalty of both boss and employee, he is revealed to Nina at his most attractive among the team of drillers. These characteristics are placed against and checked by the slow attrition of his marriage, the sudden spurt of his love for Nina. The resulting conflict reveals to him the hitherto unconscious strength of his will:

It had never occurred to Hamilton that his life had been moulded by his own inflexible will. Things had happened to him, and he had made the best of them. What else could a man do? Although solitary he was not introspective, and his mind was always filled with concrete problems, the best position for a dam, or the value of a mob of store cattle that had been offered to him.

Yet his satisfaction in these things was not the basis of his life. That had been fixed by something that had happened fifteen years before, or rather by the attitude he had taken towards it... What had happened could not be altered, but the life arising out of it could be shaped and controlled. A sufficient task for any man, but one that he had taken simply and inevitably, realizing that it was death to go under! Death, that was, to his essential self. He had seen men "go black," as they said, and it had been forced home on him that life did not hold much when pride and honour were taken away. (p. 57)

To speak of pride and honour in the same breath as unconscious motivation must represent a problem of challenging difficulty to any twentieth century novelist; yet it was one that Palmer came back to again and again. The need to construct a morality that was at once workable and conformable to man's true nature, in fact, controlled much of his creative thinking. It must be said that the solutions achieved in The Man Hamilton
are barely adequate, yet solutions of a kind there are. They are to be found partly in the basic content of the novel, partly in the strategies by which Palmer strove to endow that content with the force of experienced life.

Intellectually, the saving phrase in his analysis of Hamilton’s will is “the essential self”. What Palmer desires for his protagonists is a wholeness of being or, using the word literally as he does in *The Man Hamilton*, integrity. Such integrity is to be achieved only through the slow growth of a man into harmony with his surroundings; it may be endangered rather than enhanced by the onrush of sexual passion. If Hamilton in the end turns from Nina, it is not from any schoolboy notion of honour and decency. He conquers that particular difficulty as the crisis approaches for his divided will: “A man couldn’t live by his devotion to ideas of honour or fidelity, he assured himself…” (p. 232). What he realizes at the actual moment of crisis is that his wholeness of being is bound up with his son and his property. These, along with all the interwoven threads of his past life, place demands on him quite as strong as and prior to those of sexual infatuation:

“If I stay,” he told himself, “it will be because my life’s here. The life I’ve made for myself!”

And at that moment he knew the decision had already been made. All evening he had been deliberately shutting the image of Nina from his mind, fearing the currents of emotion it set moving. Now he could brood on it calmly and keep his head clear. She still held the same magic for him, and he wanted her passionately, but he wanted still more to keep his own integrity. The sense of completeness without which he would be lost! A man had to live according to his own conception of himself. That was a passion as deep as any other and it would not die down when the heat had left the blood. (p. 239)

Such comment, to be sure, is not very far removed from morally conventional attitudinizing. Yet the novel does enjoy some measure of success, partly because of the mere thoroughness with which the central relationship is displayed. The empty spaces left by the minimalized action Palmer could now fill
with paragraphs of detailed moral or psychological comment. Not, of course, that there is any attempt to provide a "stream-of-consciousness" rendering of thought. The mental activity is all charted from the outside, captured in a prose logical in its structure, oblique in its relation to cerebral process. To attempt anything else would have seemed to Palmer a betrayal of the world of fact in favour of dangerously uncontrollable and self-indulgent fantasy.

Precisely because Palmer had released his novel from the demanding pressure of events, he was at liberty to invent incidents calculated primarily to reveal his characters in moments of unconscious self-revelation. The limited sketches of *The World of Men* become epiphanies capable of illuminating a whole personality. Nina's first response to Hamilton is characteristic in this respect. Set in the opening chapter, it forecasts with unassuming accuracy the whole course of the novel:

> She watched the man now, as he arranged the splints on the boy's arm and bound them with his neckerchief, fascinated by the way he excluded everything from his attention but the work in hand. She no longer took this as a personal slight. It was so obviously a habit with him, as much a part of his character as the modulation of his voice and the neatness of his clothes. She noticed that his grey flannel shirt was not buttoned, but laced to the throat with a leather cord, and that the handle of the whip he had laid down was carved carefully out of gidyah. The very atmosphere of an entirely masculine world seemed to be concentrated in these two things. She could not help picking up the whip and feeling it with her fingers. (pp. 16–17)

The language of this passage may not be very vivid, but it does point to the long term stylistic problem that Palmer set himself. His task was to find a language capable, on the one hand, of translating a personal vision into art and, on the other, of remaining true to those ordinary, unremarkable facts that he saw as our best and only defence against self-destroying fantasy. Even a style which successfully fused these aims could well seem, to the uninitiated eye, merely the product of a plodding competence. That was a risk that Palmer accepted
and to which he sometimes succumbed, not least of all in *The Man Hamilton*. That book is, nevertheless, the effective beginning of his search for a prose style which, through its transparent lucidity, might adequately embody the elusive mode of realism he made so peculiarly his own.

**MEN ARE HUMAN**

That the search was still far from its goal is all too plain in *The Man Hamilton*. Nevertheless, a start had been made, and Palmer continued to move forward in *Men Are Human*. In this book, too, he was prepared to incarnate his fresh insights in a plot already thoroughly familiar. *Men Are Human* is an unashamed reworking of *The Shantykeeper's Daughter*. Boyd McCurdie returns to his father's cattle station after ten years' absence, including service with a Light Horse regiment in the Middle East during the First World War. He encounters old friends, is involved in new relationships, but the central issue of the novel is his difficulty in settling back at Abernethy after such a long absence. The difficulty is compounded by the domineering affection of his father, the competing claims of two women, and the hatred of a socially inferior rival, Billy Mace, the half-caste horsebreaker.

Within this familiar pattern there are some significant variations. For the first time in Palmer's fiction politics begin to intrude as an element of some importance. Old, conservative Roger McCurdie has once been a member of the State Parliament; Boyd's return enables him to pursue his reawakening political ambitions. Politics, however, are still at the periphery of Palmer's fiction. They had not yet thrust far enough into his imagination to expose any difficulties consequent upon a simultaneous admiration for the personally authoritative individual and an egalitarian social ethos. That problem would emerge as a conscious issue in later writing. For the time being, Palmer's main concern was with the single human being. In *Men Are Human*, as with *The Man Hamilton*, there is a manifest endeavour to extend the range of experience in which the protagonist is involved and against which he is tested. The
power of female sexuality to influence masculine behaviour is thus more pervasively recognized than in any of the earlier work. Boyd, for instance, is uncomfortably aware of the feminine presence of his father’s second wife. Their ambiguous relationship is briefly but effectively fixed early in the novel:

Over on the other veranda he saw Ada standing in a flowered wrapper, eating a ripe fig, and the inscrutable smile in her eyes made him feel a raw boy again. The woman always seemed to see the comic side of every encounter! Yet when he came in to breakfast, she said nothing facetious as he expected.5

Far more important than Ada in Boyd’s life are the rival attentions of Barbara Day, now unhappy married to a doctor in Sydney, and Josie, the half-caste servant girl. Left for some months singlehandedly in charge of Abernethy, Boyd succumbs to Josie’s naive physical appeal, discovering that she is pregnant only when he is looking forward to permanent happiness with Barbara. Faced with precisely the problem that had confronted the young Hamilton, he makes the opposite decision. Although prepared to do all he can for Josie, he will not compromise his chance of lasting love with Barbara. Men Are Human does not, however, permit Boyd and Barbara to enjoy the happiness to be gained by mature recognition of each other’s virtues and failings. In the closing sequence of the novel Boyd is trampled to death in a stampede of cattle. All appearances to the contrary, the episode is not simply a tired Australian cliché masquerading as tragedy. In point of fact, the conclusion of Men Are Human sums up the nature and quality of the novel’s whole achievement.

Among other things, the final sequence suggests that Boyd’s death may not have been entirely an accident. After the stampede, Larry Byrne, a stockman, rouses Jeff Thorpe, the overseer of Abernethy, with news of what has happened:

“It wasn’t my fault,” he broke out. “Of all the cranky galloping pike-horns I ever handled... And it was Billy Mace’s watch. If anyone was to blame for letting the fires die down it was that infernal half-caste... Though God knows it’s me that’s got to face the old man!” (p. 261)
Mace had been Boyd’s rival for Josie, in addition to quarrelling with him about his work on the station. Yet even he is included in Palmer’s increasingly subtle vision of the complex, even tragic, patterns engendered by ordinary fact. Far from being punitively dismissed as a murderer, Mace is included in the catastrophe with all the uncertainty and ambivalence that had marked the whole course of his relationship with Boyd. Writing in the Boston Independent in 1924, Palmer had remarked, in an article entitled “Distinguished Realities”, that “a revelation of the strangeness and wonder of life cannot be achieved by an intermittent display of coloured gewgaws”. Insofar as the death of Boyd McCurdie is admitted into that strangeness and wonder it is by virtue not of any melodramatic revenge of a stage villain but as the culmination of the slow intertwining of his life with that of Billy Mace. The plotting of Men Are Human, and its necessary conclusion, attest Palmer’s continuing effort to reveal the fragile magic of everyday life even in its moments of disaster.

Before Boyd McCurdie’s life is cut short, it has been subject to many formative pressures. His individuality, in fact, is represented not as something fixed and stable, but as a continuing process in which time, body, mind, and environment all play their part. The process by which Boyd’s personality essentially makes itself known is, in formulary terms, a quest for identity. The quality of his enterprise, however, and its accomplishment have little to do with what that phrase has come most frequently to represent in modern criticism. Boyd McCurdie’s effort to know himself is of the same order as Hamilton’s: the reconciliation of humanist decencies with the chaotic impulses of the irrational mind. Like Hamilton, he starts out from some basic allegiances which give his life integrity. A series of testing incidents fragments his nature into its constituent elements, forcing him to discriminate among them. The process of fragmentation had been begun by the demands his father placed on him as a boy; it was accelerated on the battlefields of the Middle East. There he had learnt the temptations and torments of fear, aggression, power. One particular incident from the desert campaign is traumatically
imprinted on his memory:

There was that affair of the El Arish well his father was always bringing up, though the Lord alone knew how he had heard of it! A hot, sweltering day at the end of a long ride, with the men all out to it, and some of them, particularly big Quinlan, angry and mutinous when ordered not to drink till the water was tested! He had been forced to whip out his revolver and threaten to shoot the first man that drank; but how he had paid for it afterwards! Dreams of the men rushing with oaths, and big Quinlan, whom he loved more than any of them, lying dead at his feet. Or rather at the feet of that stiff automaton in uniform that was his external self! An increased sense of being one person by day and another by night — the feeling that had haunted him as a boy when he did dare-devil things to please his father! No, it was not an affair he liked looking back upon. (pp. 163-64)

The deep division in his will is even more drastically accentuated by the tension aroused through his relations with Josie and Barbara. It is healed by his decision to marry Barbara in spite of the fact that Josie is to bear his child. The restorative power of Boyd’s decision is not made to spring from any superficial need to placate popular morality. Palmer makes it clear that it derives not even from sexual desire or lifelong intimacy but out of complete mutual understanding. He permits Boyd a dream in the moments immediately before his death which figures forth the joy he is never to know:

He saw the gleam of her eyes, heard her mocking voice accuse him of dropping his bundle. It was Barbara — Barbara with the long plaits and high boots she had worn as a girl. A stream of vitality flowed from her, filling him with new life. He laughed, and the feeling of emptiness and futility snapped like a taut cord. He was ready to go on... (pp. 254-55)

To interpret the pattern of Boyd’s experience as betraying neurotic or any other kind of extraordinary intensity would be entirely to miss the point Palmer is trying to make. Boyd’s emotional ordeal, he implies, is of a piece with the great
common experiences of all mankind. It is not for nothing that this novel is called *Men Are Human*, nor that the phrase itself recurs like a leading motif in some of the most revealing passages of the book. This is the ordinary nature of man’s life, Palmer is saying: to be subject, without fuss or melodrama, to limitation, weakness, desire, to be subject to forces which may bring a man’s fulfilment and defeat together in tragic conjunction. His inspection of the lives of the McCurdies, father as well as son, was Palmer’s fullest attempt up to that point in his career to acknowledge the ambiguity and contrariety of living.

On such a view of *Men Are Human*, many of its leading concerns must be seen as culminating in the death of Boyd. The novel, however, does not end there; continues, indeed, for another thirty odd pages. The final chapters of *Men Are Human* are neither superfluous nor mere tidying up. They flesh out a theme without which Palmer’s account of the life of Boyd McCurdie would be incomplete. Old Roger’s immediate reaction to his son’s death is drunken despair. But on returning to Abernethy he is forced to face up to the rouseabout, Duncan, who has also suffered the death of a son (through a riding accident), and whose daughter, Josie, bears Boyd’s child. Duncan has always seemed such a fixture around the homestead that Roger McCurdie cannot imagine Abernethy without him; yet he is about to leave. In the end, even Josie’s baby is stillborn. Only the station remains. And, in a curious way, it is Abernethy itself, now under new owners, that assumes the centre of interest as the novel draws to a close. Men are human, they suffer and die; but the land remains unchanged, a sometimes grudging, sometimes gracious, always necessary host to the human beings who inhabit it. This sense of continuity, of the earth welcoming the generations of men, gives to *Men Are Human*, in spite of its climactic catastrophe, a sense of hope in marked contrast to the emotional desolation of the close of *The Man Hamilton*.

**THE PASSAGE**

Nothing associates *Men Are Human* more intimately with *The
Passage than its closing stress on the richness of the natural world and the rightness of man's close relation to it. In terms of achieved art, however, there is nothing in either Men Are Human or The Man Hamilton to compare with the sure control of Palmer's third major novel. Elements which for ten years and more he had been struggling with, latterly with increasing self-awareness and purpose, at last fell into the kind of triumphant pattern which bespeaks coalescence of conception and execution. Something of the elation which must have filled Palmer as he moved towards completing the novel is communicated to an entry in Nettie's diary, Fourteen Years, for 15 April 1929:

Struggling and settling into 13, Chrystobel Crescent, Hawthorn. The girls scraping into the P.L.C. well after the rolls have been closed for the year. V. is working mainly on 'The Passage,' begun in Caloundra. (For once a novel begun with its name ready beforehand, almost as wonderful as a baby born with all its teeth.)

The book emerges even more plainly as the rich harvest of the Palmers' joint lives at Caloundra in Nettie's final entry (of 19 January 1929) before the family returned to Melbourne:

Find that with half of me I'm bitterly regretting our decision to go back to Melbourne. It's necessary because of the children's schooling and other personal matters, but will we ever again find a place so rich in all that makes for happy living? Quiet days of work, with odd hours on the beaches or the flower plain; and then the breaks at the weekend — tramping up barefooted over the wet sand to picnic at Curramundi, or rowing over to the lee side of Bribie Island. There's been time to read and think, even to enjoy the company of the casual visitors who've wandered in. People don't unbutton themselves so easily in town. What long talks we've had on this old veranda, looking down at Maloney's boat coming in or watching the swans flying up the Passage about sunset.

Such glimpses into the Palmers' personal life at Caloundra confirm the impression that The Passage was, in a significant sense, a successful and complete integration of the life and
writing which had preceded it. Nevertheless, a reading of the novel itself is more likely immediately to inculcate an awareness of its differences from *Men Are Human* and *The Man Hamilton* than of its similarities. It is, for example, the first of Palmer’s serious novels to turn its back on the inland setting in favour of sea and shore. Equally, it is the first of the major novels to encompass a time span of any duration. *Cronulla* had surveyed the growing up of the Buckley family, but in *The Man Hamilton* and *Men Are Human* Palmer had been willing to return to an action which occupied no more than twelve months. *The Passage*, which follows its characters through more than a decade, represents, it seems fair to argue, his decision to extend as far as possible some of the lessons about the value of a minimalized action that he had learnt in his two previous books. The slow story of Lew Callaway’s life at the Passage, his care for his family, his love for Lena Christensen and Clem McNair, dictated the expansiveness of a long sustained action.

There are perhaps two qualities in *The Passage* which indicate most readily the fact that Palmer was now applying his imagination at full stretch to materials and attitudes he felt at last were completely under his mastery. The first is a matter which in any other writer might appear comparatively trivial. *For The Passage* Palmer invented an entirely new set of names—Callaway, Kunkel, McNair, Wiegert, Christensen, Rahilly. That he for once departed from his normally parsimonious practice in nomenclature is an unmistakable sign that his mind was engaged with his writing at higher pressure than ever before. The other symptom of his imaginative involvement is the new vivacity infused into his prose. It can be felt from the very first, well-known paragraphs:

The anchored dinghy rocked gently on the long swell. Westerly winds, coming from the land, had flattened down the sea so that not a ripple broke its smooth skin, but there was a rhythmic heaving of its bulk as if it still responded to the original movement of the tides. Above, very high up, the sky was streaked with long, unravelled threads of white that frayed out to nothing. For three days it had been blowing up there, giving the thridded heavens a cold look, in spite
of the way the sun flooded through. It had no heat in it, that sun, except at noon; it was like a silver flower that you could stare at with unblinking eyes. The crystal currents of air had taken the summer sting and glitter from it.

Lew, with one line in his hand and the other payed out over the bows, sat in the stern gazing out eastward toward the far horizon. A vast emptiness, in which nothing was visible but a white gull, searching the watery plain with quick, avid eyes and occasionally dropping with a splash! Now that the westerlies had cleared the spume and sea-mist away and the foreground was not broken by reared crests, you had the sense of looking out into immense distances. Almost into South America! Somewhere over there it lay, that strange continent, beyond where sea and sky met. When he had come out fishing with his father on such bright, miraculous mornings as a boy, Lew had imagined he could faintly see the snow-capped peaks of the Andes.8

The new concreteness and vigour of this language are immediately apparent. The search for the exactly vitalizing word and metaphor makes itself felt in phrase after phrase: "the thridded heavens", "reared crests", "the summer sting and glitter", and so on. There is, too, a rhythm moving under the syntax, keeping pace with the rhythm of sea and sky, lifting the prose into a genuinely realized image of its material. And, perhaps less expectedly, there is a finely manipulated focus of vision, so that the concluding sentences of the second paragraph do not merely suggest the immensity of the sea but evoke the vague outlines of Lew Callaway’s unattainable aspirations. It was not often that Palmer allowed himself a virtuoso display of technique. But in its own quiet way the opening chapter of The Passage is just that: an unerring exercise in controlled point of view.

The positive achievement of the opening of the novel is no longer the rare and random phenomenon that comparable sequences in Men Are Human and The Man Hamilton had been. It is repeated, often, meaningfully, and predictably, throughout the book. It is, on a great many occasions, associated with the sea. The Passage does not depend on a string of descriptive "set-pieces", but there are several such sequences which make
Palmer's new found eloquence easily available for inspection: the running of the mullet in Book I, chapter 7, the fishing expedition of Lew and his son, Peter, in Book II, chapter 12, Lew's long dive in Book I, chapter 10. Or there is Lew's return to the Passage from Brisbane in Book III, chapter 4, just before he learns of Peter's death:

Never did the twenty-mile Passage seem so beautiful to Lew as when he entered it from the bay after a trip to town. Once through the narrow mouth at Cardigan Point the slapping of the lumpy water ceased, and everything took on the stillness of a lake, tiny islands of green mangroves floating on the quiet surface as if they had no moorings, and the mountains rising up from the flat country of the mainland like shapes of glass. Flocks of swans fed on the mullet-weed in the shallows or drifted in flotillas across the wider reaches; the channel narrowed into a green lane and opened out again; there was a bump now and then as the flat-bottomed boat touched a bar of sand.

Clear as glass the water looked, except in the deeper patches where the weed grew; you could see the whiting feeding in small groups over the pearly floor and the dark shapes of flathead lying half-buried in sand. Such an enchantment seemed to hold everything in those few miles of landlocked water that even the birds hardly rose at the boat's approach, but steered quietly out of the way. (pp. 235–36)

The feature common to all these sequences is the sea. The actual, physical presence of the sea is of enormous importance in understanding the success of The Passage. Not only did it encourage some of his best descriptive writing; its actuality energized that part of Palmer's mind which dealt with the world through images of ebb and flow. The omnipresence of the literal sea forced him into examining his metaphors with greater conscious regard and stringency than he had in The Man Hamilton; it enabled him to give them force and substance in a way refreshingly new to his fiction.

Nobody has written more sympathetically or accurately of this aspect of The Passage than A.D. Hope in his article, "Vance Palmer Reconsidered". The summation of his account of the novel is remarkable for its delicate precision:
There is a pattern of life but not much that can be called a plot. But all this, I believe, is not due to timidity or incompetence in the writer. It is a deliberate method designed to bring out the real theme of the book, which deals with the relation of place to persons. Lew Callaway is the clue to the book. In himself a very ordinary person, he fills the book and dominates the narrative because he alone is so imbued with the feeling of the place, the sense of all its natural forces, the rhythms of its times and seasons... In a sense, and a perfectly literal sense, Lew represents something like the ancient classical notion of the "numen": a living person in whom the spirit of a place becomes expressive and individualized... There is no mystique or myth-making in this. Lew is just a man...  

It is worth noting that Hope speaks of the relation of "place to person", not "nature to person". One reason why The Passage can satisfactorily render the numinous relation between its protagonist and his environment in a way that the preceding novels could not lies in the much more specific location of its action. Where The Man Hamilton and Men Are Human had their setting in a vaguely delineated mulga country in western Queensland, the spirit of The Passage resides in a precisely located and deeply understood region. All the details of its setting are drawn from the environs of Caloundra that Palmer knew so well. Hence, it is not merely the sea which gives this novel its groundtone; it is the known and loved waters of the Passage itself, the flights of swans at evening, the tea-trees on the shores, combining into a unique pattern of time and space.  

In keeping with Palmer's achieved mastery over his writing in this novel, the eloquence of its style is palpably muted when attention is shifted from the objects, people, and places which sanction it. When, in Books II and III, the Passage is temporarily replaced as the arena of action, a corresponding and proper change is worked in Palmer's style; a more bustling rhythm, a hint of satire in the tone. The metaphoric language of The Passage, as well as its rhythm and tone, is made to work more energetically and purposefully than before. One whole set of metaphors is aimed at defining as closely as possible the relation of all the denizens of the Passage, and especially the
Callaways, to their little world. Again, Hope is quite right in suggesting that "Lew represents something like the ancient classical notion of the 'numen'"; but for all the natural piety with which Palmer invests him, he is not the thing itself. The difference lies in this: Lew derives his personal force not from contact with any transcendent power in nature but from his acceptance of his organic participation in the material environment. "The long dive? Yes, one of the Callaways won it," a bystander remarks at the swimming carnival in Book I; and he goes on to add, "not much hope for anyone against them! Got webbed feet — the whole bunch of 'em" (p. 87).

Throughout The Passage Palmer quite consciously enforces, through consistent analogy and metaphor, the close connection between the inhabitants of the little fishing village and the teeming animal life around them. The Wiegerts are absorbed into their surroundings almost as fully as the Callaways: "They had come to the Passage some years before, and gradually established themselves as fishermen, building their huts a stone's throw away from the Callaways and extending sheds and outhouses around them as a crab flings up sand" (p. 52). Old Tom Rahilly had lived at the Passage "since he was a boy, picking up a living in much the same way as a sea-hawk" (p. 58). Even the sadness and lack in a man's life are represented in similar terms. At the nadir of Lew's fortunes "Clem had a sense of green slime collecting on its bottom, covering its hull... That was Lew's life out there..." (p. 258). Or, before he dies of cancer, old Uncle Tony Callaway impresses his personality on the Passage almost as strongly as Lew. A seemingly casual simile reveals him as his nephew's tutelary genius: "He lay in the sun, his brown, bare legs crossed behind him like the tail of a fish, and his narrowed eyes fixed on Lew who was using his long wooden needle silently" (p. 65).

If, in The Man Hamilton and Men Are Human, Palmer had made it plain that a man's humanity resides in the exercise of his will in the face of unavoidable shortcomings, the patterned biological metaphors of The Passage make unequivocally clear what the two previous novels had merely hinted at: that the basis of Palmer's sense of man's place in the world was
scientific as well as humanistic. Men cannot hope to behave with individual decency until they have thoroughly accepted their generic status in the whole of animal creation. All the inhabitants of the Passage are conceived of, and behave, as a biological community. Palmer's increasingly vivid interest in social behaviour stimulated him to portray a more genuine society in *The Passage* than ever before. The secondary figures of this novel are not the shadowy ciphers of the previous works. Kunkel, the store owner, Rahilly, the Wiegerts, have as substantial an artistic existence as any of the major characters. Together, they form a society which is felt and known in a way foreign to books like *The Man Hamilton* or *Men Are Human*.

The basic unit of biological community, however, is the family. *The Passage* contains Palmer's first important examination of this facet of human experience, a facet to which he would devote a good deal of thought and attention in later books. The father-son relation is here subordinated to wider family issues. Lew's father walks like a ghost through the novel; but he is dead, he is in the past. The more pressing theme is the survival of the whole living Callaway family unit. Lew may be the dominant male in the group, but, with fine insight, Palmer makes his mother, Anna, the mainspring of the centripetal forces conducing to family unity. Anna Callaway was the most successful female character that Palmer had created up to this point in his career; she was also the first female character of any importance whose primary role is that of a mother. It is perfectly appropriate that what has, in terms of stress and organization, been Lew's story, should in the very end be seen through the eyes of Anna Callaway:

She sat brooding on the image of Lew her mind evoked from the night, the dark eyes so like her own, the potency of the slow-moving body, the way he drew power from the earth beneath him. He gave her a sense of her own permanence, satisfied an instinct deeper than affection. All her struggles for her family had been concerned with this: that the life she had brought forth in pain and uncertainty should throw down strong roots and not be blown away by any chance wind. Her first assurance of it had seemed to come from Fred and Hughie: now it came from Lew.
Lost in a dream of her own fulfilment she remained there, staring down at the velvet water, immobile, unconscious of time, as profoundly at peace within as the clump of dark sheoaks twenty yards away that had always been a landmark of the Passage. (pp. 287-88)

The Callaway family live, in the main, unselfconsciously and inarticulately. Yet they do act out certain moral values (of the kind adumbrated in *The Man Hamilton* and *Men Are Human*), and are required to test them in alien environments and against radically different standards. As with so much in *The Passage*, the confrontation of opposing values is principally organized around Lew. As the leader of the fishing community, for instance, he has to face the encroachment of commercial forces, represented by the land speculator, Osborne. The thematic conflict is announced early in Book I:

The Passage, where Bob and Tony had been the chief figures among a handful of drifting fishermen and oystermen, was no longer cut off from the world. Along Sully's Beach, three of four miles away, had grown a holiday-resort, with neat little red-roofed houses popping up among the tea-tree, motors threading the rutty tracks, and signboards with announcements of sub-divisional sales shooting up daily from sandhills and maidenhair gullies. (pp. 24–25)

Although clearly on the side of the fishermen, Palmer does not falsify his commitments by giving them an easy victory; the development project finally does fail, but only through its own lagging momentum. Nor does he restrict his valuation to the manipulation of plot; it enters also into the tone of the writing. A satiric flavour is intermittently but tartly injected:

How unreal Marnie had become lately, with her perky hats and powdered face! Didn't the way she chattered about Vic show that the only feelings he stirred in her was a pride in his family connections? She seemed more impressed by the biscuit-factory his father owned and the number of people he employed than by anything individual in the fellow himself! (pp. 172–73)
Naturally enough, Osborne can evoke an even more stringent tone than Marnie, who, in spite of her superficial flightiness, is one of the Callaways:

But the worst blow to the place was Osborne's own defection. He and his syndicate had quietly sold their elaborate hotel and had purchased another place on some lakes near the sea, thirty miles further north. Already their spontaneous joy in the new discovery was beginning to make itself heard. They had found a place where all the most arresting things in Nature miraculously met in an area of a few thousand acres. Mountains whose heads were in the clouds dropped down sheer into still, deep lakes that were within the sound of combers breaking on dazzling beaches. Ardlethan, it appeared, was Osborne's final reward for a life of pioneering. There, as soon as the forty-perch blocks of the three-thousand acre estate were sold, would be built a modern hydro and golf-course that would attract every pleasure-seeker in the continent. (p. 244)

The competition between conformity to the natural world and sharp commercial enterprise is given its most significant expression in the contrasting lives of the two brothers, Lew and Hughie Callaway. Where Lew is content to regulate his life by the rhythms of earth and sea, Hughie's radically different temperament demands speed and change, takes him away to temporary success and ultimate failure in the city. The contrast between their two lifestyles can be felt in the distinction between the opening of Book I, with its rendering of Lew's perfect assimilation to his environment, and the opening of Book II, which dramatizes Hughie's characteristic behaviour at the height of his success. His love of motorcars is an adequate and appropriate symbol for his psychological needs:

It was a hot Saturday afternoon in November. On the crest of a hill overlooking the city, a dense mass of people had clustered like a swarm of bees, and the air was full of a quivering excitement that increased in tensity every time a roar sounded from below and one of the high-powered cars came shooting up the white track between the trees, swinging round the hair-pin bends, and taking the final rise with the curving leap of a horse at a gate.
Dust was everywhere. It obscured the view of the town below, with its myriad iron roofs and its shining river; it drove the birds into high air; it smarted in the nostrils of the women and girls at the crest of the track, accentuating the note of hysteria in their raised voices. Another car coming! They bunched together and watched with strained eyes as the dusty torpedo shot into view, racing its hardest to knock a couple of seconds from the record of the one that had gone before it. (p. 213)

As well as rendering the directionless energy of Hughie's nature, the scene serves the further purpose of re-introducing Lew and Clem McNair after Clem's long sojourn in Europe. She returns at a critical moment in Lew's life, when his marriage to Lena is close to foundering. Her love, along with the contrasting passion of Lew's lazily sensuous wife, the demands of the other members of the Callaway family, and the inroads of the business world, provides a further means of defining and evaluating the quality of Lew's life. Clem's love, in the end, completes the integrity of Lew's being. Yet Lew's deepest sense of himself does not arise from his participation in specific events or relationships; such participation is for him the outcome of understanding rather than a means of gaining it. Self knowledge for Lew grows gradually out of the rich and prevailing texture of his day-to-day existence. He is granted an insight into the true rhythm of his being while he watches for mullet with Tom Rahilly:

It was good being with old Tom; they had always got along well together! Some sort of physical communion existed between them, and they drew their thoughts from the same current of life. When they talked it was of the things around them — the way the sandbanks shifted after every storm, the habits of birds, the exact times when the different fish appeared. Lying on the piled-up nets they waited for the slack of the tide, while overhead the late-going swans clanked by in the dark, dropping their metallic cries, and an occasional shark or ray made a flurry among the small fish in the still water.

Gradually it was being brought home to Lew that life
was less vivid and clearly-outlined since Clem had gone back to town. (p. 60)

At the heart of the clear and ordered accuracy of this description is the world “Gradually”. It is a word which occurs on a number of occasions in the novel, suggesting the focussing of its technique on the attempt to crystallize Palmer’s mature sense of life as continuous process, as slowly creative interchange between man and his environment. In his drive to do justice to his vision Palmer thrust some of the skills he had sharpened in The Man Hamilton and Men Are Human towards new imaginative boundaries. The minimalization of plot, initiated in The Man Hamilton, is pushed in The Passage almost to the limits of aesthetic feasibility. Much has been written in the twentieth century of the disappearing novelist; Palmer, it might be argued with some justice, is the only artist in fiction who has attempted to create a disappearing novel. Not only is his design implied by the style — “powerful, plain, and unpretentious” (p. 203), as Hope describes it. It is there too in Palmer’s determination that the magic of the Callaway’s ordinary lives shall not be marred by the “intermittent display of coloured gewgaws”, in the shape of melodramatic action or violent conflict. There is, indeed, only one extravagant gesture in the whole novel — Lew’s insistence on giving Peter a sea-burial; preceded by the only highly-coloured sequence — the loss and subsequent death of Peter in the paddymelon country. The funeral at least is thoroughly validated by the slow and careful moulding of Lew’s character which has preceded it; even the story of the lost child is given force and pathos by the dramatization of Peter’s last moments of consciousness through his own eyes.

For the most part, however, anything out of the ordinary, any “big scene”, is kept as far as possible out of the development of The Passage. The whole of Book I, indeed, can be said to unfold without anything at all “happening”, in the sense of some external event imposing itself on the already established lives of the characters. Its hundred-odd pages are centrally and almost solely devoted to letting the relations of Lew to his family, his occupation, his friends, to Clem and Lena grow
into a known and felt reality. Even when something does “take place” in the life of the Passage it is persistently recorded in the pluperfect tense — pushed off, that is to say, as far as possible away from the unadorned heart of Palmer’s vision. Even the first statement of the death of Uncle Tony, the very embodiment of the spirit of the Passage, is thrust into the past. “For the Passage wasn’t going ahead; nothing had happened since old Tony Callaway had died” (p. 120). The locution is altogether characteristic of the treatment of the singular, time-arresting event in the novel.

For in The Passage, as in The Man Hamilton and Men Are Human, it is the basic concept of character as process which gives Palmer’s loving fidelity to place its human relevance. Only, in the later work he had found a style which would do justice to his chosen locale, a structure which would not distort his vision of human life. Both style and structure were invisibly fused to produce in The Passage Palmer’s first full embodiment, in novel form, of the idiosyncratic mode of realism which found wonder and delight in the espousal of the ordinary. His assured control of his theme is spread throughout the book but finds its sum and centre in Lew Callaway, his first genuine triumph of characterization. Himself only barely articulate, Lew is brought to life whole and complicated by the agency of Palmer’s sympathetic prose and the interwoven revelations of counterpointed scene and observed detail. Writing of Conrad in “Distinguished Realities”, Palmer had proposed these aims for fiction:

There is no need to seek for strange and bizarre elements in order to give the proper mystery of life to the novel. Conrad’s achievement (on which so many eyes are fixed) does not lie in the use he makes of exotic settings, but in his poetic vision, his capacity to see men as trees walking. That is the real status of human beings in the world of imaginative art.10

That, too, is the status of the characters of The Passage. Living out their undistinguished lives in the created reality of sea, land, and sky, they come at last to be absorbed in a vision which, in its fusion of the scientific and the humane, may properly be described as poetic.
NOTES TO CHAPTER 4

1. Vance Palmer to Frank Dalby Davison. The letter is dated 16 December, and addressed from 12 William Street, South Yarra.


4. Vance Palmer to Frank Dalby Davison, 2 September 1954. The letter is addressed from Caloundra.

5. Vance Palmer, Men Are Human (London, 1929), p. 35. All future quotations from Men Are Human are from this edition. Page references are incorporated in the text.


9. A.D. Hope, "Vance Palmer Reconsidered", Southerly, XVI (1955), 205. Page references to future quotations from this article are incorporated in the text.

CHAPTER 5

Novels
1932-1937

INTRODUCTION

In its poetic celebration of the natural sources of man's life, *The Passage* is unique and pivotal among Palmer's novels. Never again did he seek to repeat its special triumphs of tone and mood. That is not to say, however, that *The Passage* stands outside the main line of development of his novels; on the contrary, it provided an indispensable base for all those which followed it. It is as if, having defined in *The Passage* his primary understanding of man's being, he was thenceforth freed to investigate its manifestations at the level of social behaviour. The spirit which informs *The Passage* is not always easily visible in the subsequent novels; but its elements, once earned and expressed, provide, as it were, the essential pre-condition for later creation.

The most obvious qualities of the novels which followed *The Passage* in the 1930's seem to spring from one of Palmer's earliest literary ambitions. In the radio script, "If I Were a Youth Again", he records one of his adolescent goals: "I can remember making a resolve to finish all Balzac before I was twenty, and I very nearly accomplished it." After *The Passage*
Palmer brought to his longer fiction interests which can properly be described as Balzacian. He did not create an oeuvre anything like as complete and interlocking as a Comedie Humaine; nevertheless, the novels after 1930 do provide impressive testimony to his exploration of a remarkable range of characters, occupations, classes, attitudes in the Australian society that he knew. Near the end of his life he wrote an appreciative letter to Frank Dalby Davison in which he expressed particular thanks for an article on his work that Davison had contributed to Meanjin. "It wasn’t merely the personal warmth I got from it," he said, "but I felt you understood what I was trying to do—to attack this jumbled society of ours from different levels of experience, so that one book would help to complement the other." There can be no denying that the canon of Palmer’s fiction, especially the novels, does provide a view of Australian life panoramic in its range, mosaic in its patterning, illuminating in its powers of observation. For thirty years after The Passage Palmer devoted a large part of his energy to translating the poetic vision of that work into a detailed and realistic interpretation of contemporary Australian society.

**DAYBREAK**

This Balzacian enterprise got under way with the publication in 1932 of Daybreak, the novel which Palmer himself liked best of all. The reasons for this personal preference probably lay in a quality which that book shares with hardly any other of his writings: virtuosity — virtuosity of structure, characterization, style, even plot. The action of Daybreak, compressed into twelve hours, takes place in a small hill township in the Dandenong Ranges in Victoria. The completely new milieu is, in itself, evidence of Palmer’s intention to explore the wider reaches of Australian living. For the first time he had abandoned the cattle country or coastline of his beloved Queensland.

The township of Daybreak, the centre of a small farming area, is dominated by the orchard and sawmill of Peter Nielsen, one of the pioneers of the district. A lock-out and threatened strike at the mill introduce some important themes into the
novel, but its centre of gravity is located elsewhere, in the relationship between Bob Rossiter and Harry Sievright. Sievright, Rossiter's commanding officer during the Great War, has commanded his loyalty ever since, a loyalty sorely tested by Sievright's steady psychological deterioration. The night before Daybreak opens, a crisis has occurred in Sievright's life; he has shot at Rick Lennard, the district doctor and another old comrade in arms, whom he suspects of having an affair with his English wife, Jean. At the same time Rossiter is suffering a crisis of a different kind; his wife, Mary, is in hospital expecting a baby, having lost her first several years previously. The novel's main narrative line follows the interweaving paths of Rossiter, Harry and Jean Sievright, Rick Lennard and Rossiter's sister, Dora, through a single day from sunrise to sunset. Additional narrative interest springs from the introduction of various subsidiary characters — Rossiter's Welsh neighbour, Morgan, the parson Sedley, Galt the blacksmith, Lysaght the labour agitator, Peter Nielsen and his family. The whole pattern culminates in the death of Sievright through what seems to be a shooting accident, the birth of Rossiter's son, and the averting of the threatened strike at Nielsen's property, Duaringa.

Daybreak opens in the waking consciousness of Bob Rossiter, who remains throughout the central figure, the action being viewed through his eyes until it is taken over by another character with whom he comes in contact. This and all later transitions are managed with real technical dexterity, making of Daybreak, among other things, an admirable exercise in the strategy of the multiple point of view. Within the individual characters, transitions between past and present manifest the same suave skill, excursions into earlier experience growing naturally out of the circumstances of the moment. While Bob Rossiter is ploughing, for instance, Palmer leads him neatly into contemplating the history of his relation with Sievright: “Like a strip of earth before the plough, the long history of Sievright's decline unrolled itself in front of Rossiter's mind, clouding his vision.”4 A phrase from Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony sets up a similar associative train in Dora Rossiter's
mind; or Jean Sievright, ambling through an orchard, gives her thoughts their head, just as she does her horse.

While Palmer allows free play to his characters' mental processes, he never allows the actualities of the present to be lost in a muddle of the past. Throughout Daybreak he erects very solid guideposts to the map of the present: Sievright's big house on the hill, or Rossiter's, or Duaringa, or descriptions of the changing light on the countryside as the day moves from dawn to midday, through drowsy Saturday afternoon, to nightfall. The structural technique of Daybreak, that is to say, is much more visible than that of The Passage; and Palmer had every reason to feel content with what he had allowed to go on display. There is a similar vividness in the novel's characterization which also must have pleased him. He could relish the knowledge that the authorial invisibility of The Passage was a matter of creative choice and not merely the refuge of a colourless imagination. The Callaways had owed much of their originality to their numinous quality, but the Australians who people Daybreak are "characters" more in the social, traditional sense of the term, recalling the Dickensian influence that Palmer had imbibed in his youth. None is a real eccentric, yet some of them do manifest a single-minded extremity of behaviour which allies them with the Dickens tradition. They respond sharply and predictably to the world around them. Lysaght, unable to forget the "leading" he has received in the Broken Hill mines, turns every conversation into a dialectical discourse. Carmody, the butcher, sees the world according to the promptings of his sexual appetites; despite a wife and children, he is the local philanderer. Old Nielsen's wife, recalling Uncle Tony in The Passage, is being slowly destroyed by cancer but continues to impose her will on her husband and all his undertakings: "The poor old creature's internal cancer ought to have carried her off years before, but she hung on to life like some tough-rooted tree to an eroded hill-side. It was a matter of sheer will" (p. 141).

The world of men, of social interchange, is centred on the township store, run by Mr. Anderson. Palmer had already used Kunkel's store in The Passage for similar technical and
thematic purposes, and the general store as community centre was an image he later permitted to take its place among the ciphers and inert devices of his fiction. Anderson’s store in *Daybreak*, however, does serve as a useful means of focusing the sights and sounds, the social actuality of the township, a function it shares with the pub. The fantasy life of the community finds its prism in the post office and the prying, gossiping curiosity of the old maid post-mistress. Between these poles of actuality and fantasy Palmer creates with singular completeness the characteristic texture of an Australian country town. With architectural skill of no mean order, he incorporates into the narrative of *Daybreak* such socially definitive phenomena as the cricket competition, the Saturday afternoon auction sale, the arrival of a buckjump show, the lively cross-talk of a hotel bar.

One of the major themes of *Daybreak*, growing directly out of the shared lives of its created characters, is of a socio-political nature. The spreading Depression, perhaps, was stimulating Palmer to take a closer look at matters which had been at the edge of his attention in *Men Are Human*. For whatever reasons, the fascination with environment manifested in *The Passage* becomes in *Daybreak* an investigation of property ownership. Nielsen’s Duaringa is the property with the most general economic influence in the novel:

A mammoth place, Duaringa, providing work for most of the men in the district and dominating their lives! From a small orchard it had grown into a great enterprise, absorbing the places of the struggling fruit growers around it and distributing seeds and young trees over the whole continent. Over half the world, really! Lately orders had been coming in from countries as far afield as India and the Argentine. History had been made since Nielsen first came over the ranges in his bullock-dray, carrying stores. (pp. 11–12)

Indeed, it is the lock-out and threatened strike at Duaringa which chiefly occupy the minds of the subsidiary characters in *Daybreak*. Rossiter is right to reassure Jean Sievright when she expresses fear that they may be gossiping about her: “‘And people don’t talk as much as you think. They’ve got their
own affairs to worry about — what will happen on the place here if the men decide to down their tools. That's the thing which comes nearest the bone with most of them" (p. 88).

Palmer is eminently successful in suggesting how political tensions can spread through a whole community; in adjudicating the rights and wrongs of the matter he is, so long as he is dealing with the minor characters, distinctly and deliberately equivocal. There is a planned balance of attitudes expressed in the novel which is virtually self-cancelling. Lysaght, thus, speaks for the militant unionists, Galt for the unorganised workers, Anderson for the small businessmen, and so on. Each of these is allowed to present the best of his case, but Palmer's sympathies are ultimately with the wage earners. It is, however, in his treatment of the major characters of Daybreak that he expresses most fully his sense of what the problem amounted to. Its human complexities are realized, for instance, in his treatment of Rossiter's neighbour, Morgan. Although a property owner, the small, dark Morgan is consistently imagined as a scavenger, making predatory raids into others' territory. The longest single description of Morgan occurs at the beginning of chapter 2, but its ferocity of tone is uniformly associated with its subject:

Morgan had a foolish grin on his face as he drifted over the grass, his hands in his pockets and the collar of his rusty coat round his ears. His boots were unlaced, his battered felt hat nearly covered his eyes, his trousers sagged at the loins. A thin, colourless wisp of a man, he looked as if he always slept in his clothes, and among straw. Most of his life had been spent with pit-ponies in a Welsh coal-mine, and his bleached eyes even yet shrank from the sun; their expression varied from witless innocence to animal cunning. It was a cunning linked with some dark earth-knowledge, some faculty for self-preservation when thrown among things and people unfamiliar to him. (p. 20)

The bad neighbour always hovering round the rim of Rossiter's consciousness is condemned not just because he is a property owner but because he has no true sense of his sacred duty to his land, to the earth. Dora Rossiter, Bob's sister, has
a much truer relation to the soil. One of Palmer’s long line of artist-women, she nevertheless enjoys a special vitality inherited from her crofter father, a vitality which underlies all the artistic striving symbolized in her attraction to the Pastoral Symphony. The attitudes she registers towards Bob’s small holding lay bare the sometimes obscured importance of The Passage for the novels which succeeded it: “Deep down in her, for all the flimsy and fugitive surroundings of her own life, was a stolid peasant distrust for people who worked for wages and owned no land or property...” (p. 42). She subscribes fully to the views of a German conductor she admires: “ ‘To sweeten the soil,’ he had repeated with his queer smile, ‘That is the first task. And it takes — no, not bones only. The thoughts of men working their own acres’” (p. 236). Jean Sievright, lacking this background of peasant assurance, learns from her sophisticated, urban, English milieu nothing but discontent. Bred in a metropolitan world, placing a premium on the mind, she has been exiled into a situation totally alien to her spirit. The result is her haughty rejection of the local people, her harmless dalliance with Rick Lennard.

Her husband, Harry Sievright, embodies more complex themes. He is, in fact, one of the most ambitious character portraits Palmer ever essayed, his only full-scale attempt at dealing with psychological stress pushed to the point of psychosis. To the extent that it is part of the machinery of the novel, Palmer’s handling of Sievright is quite adequate. As a study in itself, it not only depicts failure; to a degree, it is a failure in depiction. There are, to be sure, some impressive sequences towards the end of Daybreak wherein Palmer renders the action through the distorted awareness of Sievright himself, bringing alive his fantasies of power, his hysterical hatred of a kookaburra in a tree, his final collapse, and possible suicide. Where the picture is lacking is in any adequate account of the causes of Sievright’s sickness.

A strong connection is made between Sievright’s experience in the war and his subsequent deterioration; in a way, he is a full-length and extreme version of the mind which speaks Palmer’s war poem, “The Farmer Remembers the Somme”.

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Something happened to Sievright during the war, one is to understand, but just what is never made sufficiently clear. He was a man fitted for command, able to control men in a crisis, but left empty when the crisis and danger passed. Still supported by a few loyal friends a decade after the war has ended, he is incapable of constructive employment; his life simply finished in the violence of his youth.

Part of Palmer’s failure to deal convincingly with Sievright stems, one suspects, from his inadequate technical acquaintance with psychotic states. There is a further reason for his inability to validate Sievright’s crucial position in the novel. There are powerful hints that the ex-officer’s crack-up is not merely a personal affair but symbolic of the whole state of Australian civilization. The moth-ridden trees that Sievright chops down clearly lend overtones of this nature to the novel. Unfortunately the connection remains arbitrary and unsubstantiated. Nearly all the male characters in Daybreak have belonged to Sievright’s regiment, but they have survived without exhibiting any signs of a cultural neurosis which can fairly be held to be concentrated in Sievright’s extreme condition. In this particular, Palmer’s pretensions outran his understanding.

Happily, although the action of Daybreak is triggered off by the effect that Sievright has on others, its success rests primarily on the portrayal of Bob Rossiter. Rossiter may justly be thought of as Lew Callaway transferred to the land and deprived of his numen. He stands forth as a plain, unpretentious Australian, far more representative in his ordinariness than Sievright in his painful uniqueness. In his person Palmer embodies the principal theme of Daybreak: the conflict of loyalties, of various kinds and at various levels of experience. Bob’s most immediate problem, the one which is most emotionally draining, is his affection for Sievright. Untainted by dogmatic assertions of mateship, the theme is enhanced for Palmer by its source in a psychological need he had experienced personally and powerfully as a child. Bob Rossiter has a need for heroes: “Since he had been a little fellow in knickers a hero had been a necessity for him, someone who embodied his ideas of courage and nobility” (p. 239). Under the stress of war,
Sievright, enjoying his hour of fulfilment, had displaced any other hero, real or imagined, from Rossiter's imagination. Ten years later, his former officer, for all his neurotic unreasonableness, still commands his loyalty. When Sievright imperiously demands that they clear out together, Rossiter must at last decide between masculine honour and loyalty, on the one hand, and responsibility and love for his wife, on the other.

At the same time he is being forced to choose in the political struggle that is developing. Both property owner and wage earner, unwilling to become involved, he yet finds himself being urged by all the participants to commit himself to one side or the other. He is forced to adjudicate between a mate and the mob, between employers and workmen. In Bob Rossiter, Palmer portrayed a man who, through his very decency, creates his own problems. Carmody, the butcher, thinks of him as a "plough-horse" (p. 61); to Galt he is "anybody's fool" (p. 123); to Lysaght he is a useful figurehead for his protest meeting. The action of Daybreak brings Rossiter to the discovery that "Whenever he made a move in one direction he seemed to be pulled in another" (p. 79). "How was it," he asks himself, "that, wherever he turned, demands he could not meet crept in upon him" (p. 200). For Rossiter Daybreak is a painful education in the unresolvable ambiguity of the world. Pain brings him to consciousness in the opening paragraph and pursues him through most of the pages of the novel:

A thin cry of agony, coming from a distance, penetrated the soft darkness in which Rossiter's mind was sheathed. Deep down it went, like a quivering, barbed thing, ripping the veils of sleep, sending uneasy vibrations through the clogged channels of consciousness. Terror was in that cry, sheer animal terror! It spread through the night, evoking shapes more vivid than those of the daylit world, laying its paralysing touch on the will. Rossiter had often known it before, but the returning stream of vitality had dispersed it, making it an illusion. This time... (p. 5)

In a way, Daybreak represents a fresh look at the insights touched on in Men Are Human. But the immediacy of its
language, the quality it transmits of a felt experience, make this second major encounter with the ambiguities and competing responsibilities of the actual world a much more rewarding achievement. In the end, after an emotion-charged brawl with Axel Nielsen in defence of Sievright, Rossiter chooses against his friend; the necessity of political commitment is spared him by the ending of the lock-out. Nevertheless, it seems probable that he would have retreated to the safety and sanctity of his own piece of land. For underneath the thoroughly imagined social reality of *Daybreak* lies a respect for the simplest kind of relation between natural man and his environment. This respect for life itself gives point to the very title of the book. Not only does it start at dawn; in the course of its twelve hour span a new life is brought into the world. The events of the day bring about Rossiter’s final liberation from the false loyalties which threaten to strangle him, his achievement of integrity. There is a thematic rightness as well as a formal symmetry in the closing paragraphs of the novel. At nightfall Rossiter comes back in peace to the home where that morning he had awakened in pain:

As he swung along beneath the darkly-towering trees whose branches almost hid the stars, he was conscious, deep down, of being at one with himself. Something he could not comprehend had flowed in upon him during that brief space he had sat in silent communion with Sievright. What was it? . . . He did not know; he was carried along by the powerful conviction of having solved the conflicts of his mind and blood . . .

As he stood there, watching the light flicker and disappear, the sound of a movement he knew, one Dora had been playing continually of late, came floating up from the house, establishing its rhythms in his mind, laying its old spell upon his heart, renewing the life of his inner being. There was a spring in his step as he went down the dark track toward the house. (pp. 286–88)

*THE SWAYNE FAMILY*

The novel which followed *Daybreak*, *The Swayne Family* (1934),
continued Palmer’s drive to translate the poetic bases of *The Passage* into the social actuality of the Australia he knew. *The Swayne Family* is his first novel with an urban setting — Melbourne in the 1930’s. In a way, Palmer was doing for the Melbourne of the thirties what Henry Handel Richardson had done for the city of the late nineteenth century: proving its feasibility as the milieu for serious fiction. Melbourne emerges from the pages of *The Swayne Family* not as some two-dimensional backdrop to a theatrical plot but as the matrix of a densely imagined reality.

Into this urban environment Palmer projected the history of the Swayne family, centred on Digby Swayne, husband of Margaret, father of George, Dorothy, Kathleen, and Ernest. As the novel opens, Digby, a successful businessman in his seventies, is returning to Melbourne from a trip to Europe — undertaken chiefly as a pilgrimage to the grave of Stephen, a son by an earlier marriage, who had been killed during the war. Moved by his desire for family unity, he is looking forward eagerly to picking up the threads of his children’s lives. As he tries to make contact with his sons and daughters, however, they move away from him, in the inevitable ebb and flow of family relationships. Dorothy falls in love with an English engineer, marries him, and moves out of the Swayne home into her own flat. Kathleen, a graduate student in philosophy, is attracted to Carl Svenson, who owns a small property in the hills. Ernest’s art studies reveal a talent for caricature, draw him into a Depression riot, take him away to personal freedom, first in the country, later in Sydney. George has a brief success as an interstate cricketer, suffers an unhappy love affair with a girl outside his own class, and finally forsakes the career at the bar mapped out for him by his father in favour of life on his Uncle Anthony’s sheep station.

These separate lives are counterpointed against each other within the corporate existence of the family. As Kathleen’s love founders, Dorothy’s prospers; as George sinks into temporary failure, Ernest discovers his true talent. A similar sort of cross-definition prevails among Digby’s brothers and their families. Anthony, the eldest, has remained on the land, a
vigorou and sucessful old squatter. Willie, moving away from the family moderation and respectability, has become a successful printer with strong working class sympathies. His son, Barney, is one of the rising men of the Labor Party — Attorney General in the state government while still in his early thirties. Hugh, an architect who spent most of his life in America, has now withdrawn into the seclusion of deafness. Aunt Moira, invested with something of Anna Callaway’s sense of family cohesion, alone among the Swaynes retains the Catholicism of their mother:

Whatever religious feeling they had inherited from their mother (Peter Swayne was emphatic that the boys, at least, should follow him) had spread into secular channels. There was Anthony’s passion for the land, strong enough to have made him cling to some poverty-stricken holding if that had been his luck; Digby had pursued his narrow ideal of the family with monkish absorption: in Hugh’s dream of a world transformed by art, in Willie’s vague, democratic impulses, there were hints of the fragile little Sligo woman who had held with secret fervour to a faith that had isolated her from her own husband. But Moira was the only one for whom her mother’s religion had any meaning.

In its exploitation of multiple story lines, The Swayne Family bears some resemblance to Daybreak. Its time span is, of course, much less compressed, and its themes and values are less firmly settled on a single character. Digby Swayne may be the technical focus of the book, but his personal attributes — especially his bourgeois conventionality and timidity — are subjected to some quite searching criticism. The two year duration of its action, on the other hand, gives The Swayne Family greater opportunity for developing some of the interests established in The Passage: the sense of character as process and of action as an uncontrived series of events. There is only one important contrived irony in the book — when Ernest, fleeing from his father’s home, finds his identity in Jaffra, the small country town where Digby had his beginnings. For the rest, the book gains its shape more from Palmer’s elegant balancing of one character’s life against another than from the manipulation
of their individual careers into a suspenseful story. To be sure, all of Digby’s children have achieved an integrity at the end of the book which they did not possess at the beginning; but they have done so more by responding to the accidents and circumstances of their created environment than by being placed in some pre-plotted narrative.

The family saga quality of *The Swayne Family* led M.H. Ellis to suggest a comparison with *The Forsyte Saga* and to write of Palmer’s book as a comparatively conventional assemblage of well-tried fictional components. There is some truth in this view. The family material is, however, not merely a reworking of the Galsworthy formula but a development of one of the basic concerns of *The Passage*. In the later novel this basic unit of human community is put under the microscope of social analysis, tested to discover the kinds and degrees of stress that it can bear in an Australian city. The varieties of feeling between parents and children — love, affection, dislike, rejection — are examined with thoroughness and some subtlety. The special hold that *The Swayne Family* had over Palmer’s imagination is suggested by an entry in Nettie’s *Fourteen Years* for 28 May 1934. She gives a succinct summary of the themes and mode of the book:

> The theme, I suppose, has been treated often enough before, but what makes the book seem fresh and full of sap is the way it has been evoked from a living, immediate world. The family really is a family, an organism, in spite of the variety of its members, both of the first and second generations. For instance Anthony, the eldest brother, is a squatter in the Riverina, and Willie, the youngest, a democratic printer in Collingwood, yet when they meet accidentally at the races, you feel they are brothers. Similarly you feel the kinship of any two of the next generation. Yet what differences of outlook and ambition! In this, and in their complex affections and frustrations, the Swaynes are like so many families we’ve known in Studley Park and Kew.

This is accurate and useful comment on the finished novel, but it is preceded by a much more illuminating remark about its genesis:
V. has just finished ‘The Swayne Family,’ a book that, in one form or another, has been in his mind ever since I’ve known him. Curious how an unwritten novel can change, in time and setting, yet retain its original idea. I don’t think the present finished book has much, on the surface, to link it with those first few chapters of ‘His Own Household’ he showed me so many years ago. The period has been altered, with its particular problems; even the point-of-view has shifted slightly — the conflict between the generations is not seen so remorselessly through the eyes of youth. What remains is the conflict itself — the incapacity of the Swayne parents to see that the life they have built up so carefully cannot possibly satisfy their children — all different, all reaching out for some kind of fulfilment of their own.7

A book so long in gestation must have sprung from the centre of Palmer’s psychic organization. Like every novel from The Boss of Killara on, The Swayne Family seems to have begun in the protest of a son against a dominant father. Its distinction lies not only in the fact that Palmer was able to gain control of the protest and broaden it into a general examination of the forces of social authority and cohesion. It also stems, one is driven to believe, from the fact that to the central relation are made to adhere a remarkably large number of the psychologically decisive experiences of Palmer’s life. The Swayne Family represents both a fragmentation and a synthesis of the formative pressures of childhood and maturity.

Thus, it appears very likely that the portrait of Digby Swayne represents a symbolic reconciliation of Palmer’s attitudes towards his schoolmaster father. Starting from outright rejection, the finished portrait contrives to incorporate a good deal of ambiguous sympathy for the man. Palmer, himself a father, had to accommodate himself to the role which had previously aroused such hostility. The need to arrive at some sort of rapprochement with the father figure was probably further intensified by Palmer’s realization that his own adult behaviour was repeating, too closely to overlook, many of his father’s personality traits as well. The opposing drives towards
rejection and identification are accommodated into the forms of art through the invention of the slain son Stephen, for whom Digby Swayne feels intense love and guilt. Conflicting emotions are distributed in a pattern which rendered their mutual existence tolerable to Palmer’s imagination and aesthetically available to his readers.

One is aware of similar procedures at work behind the figure of George Swayne. Forced into the law (an institution designed to impose order on the community), he hates his profession, and finds some solace in his brief success as a cricketer. In particular he plays one innings for his state which brings him the same exhilaration as Palmer had enjoyed from similar exploits in his own youth. To all appearances the dullest, most conforming member of the Swayne family, George yet experiences some of the darkest, most violent impulses of them all. He suffers a destructively passionate love affair with a girl quite out of the normal class range and experience of his family, which leads him to overt acts of aggression against a rival. The blend of conformity and uneasy desire for raw experience is again probably an externalization of Palmer’s own situation. Ernest Swayne, on the other hand, springs directly from Palmer’s own early rebellion against a stultifying environment and his determination to widen the bounds of his contact with the world. Ernest’s drive to get into touch with what he takes to be the sources of vitality in Melbourne society almost certainly has its genesis in the young Palmer’s escape to London, his exploration of the East End to see how the other half lives.

In The Swayne Family, that is to say, Palmer found a use for the family unit beyond the status it had enjoyed in The Passage as both symbol and actualization of man’s place in the order of nature. In the later novel the family became a means of externalizing and dealing with the dynamic patterns of his own inner life. Such a view of the book is confirmed by the fact that the only character to remain awkwardly outside its structural framework is Miles, the chauffeur, who bears no kinship to the Swaynes whatsoever. There is some attempt to relate Miles to the main concerns of the novel through his
fantasy that he can replace Stephen in satisfying Digby’s desire for a prodigal son returned home. The attempt, however, must be deemed a failure, and Miles remains a minor excrescence on an otherwise harmoniously structured work.

Miles, like Sievright in *Daybreak*, is a returned soldier who has been permanently damaged by his participation in the Great War. He has a head injury to account for his madness and fantasies, but, as in *Daybreak*, again there is some attempt to associate his sickness with a general malaise in society. *The Swayne Family* is indeed the most socially conscious of all Palmer’s novels up to 1934, but it makes its social impact not by the arbitrary symbolism of Miles’s injury but by the judicious selection of appropriate detail. When Digby arrives home from Europe in the opening chapter he is questioned about Mussolini and the general state of European politics. As the novel progresses, he is forced to consider closing his seaside house at Mornington because of the heavy calls on his capital: the businessman is made aware of political forces through the pressures they exert on his material security. Ernest is accidentally drawn into a street brawl between the police and some unemployed workers. Out of the incident is born his social conscience, his conviction that if his art is to have any value it must immediately serve those whom it depicts. Barney, Willie’s son, is a politician born and bred, defining himself through his revealed behaviour at businessmen’s lunches or political rallies. Willie himself has actively campaigned against conscription and is observed against the background of his trade of printing. Palmer even stresses the impingement of socio-political fact on the emotional lives of the Swayne women. Kathleen’s love for the earthy Svenson, for instance, is tied to some unpleasant litigation involving Carl’s illegitimacy and right of inheritance. Everywhere in *The Swayne Family* the specifics of social organization work to shape the lives of its principal characters.

The strength of *The Swayne Family*, that is to say, derives from the fusion of Palmer’s abiding concern with the family as the basic unit of human life, the externalization of his own psychological patterns, and his increasingly direct attention
to the structure of society. There can be no question of the adequacy of the framework that he constructed to contain his themes; the prose that he created as their vehicle presents a rather more complex problem, a problem in fact at the basis of Palmer's whole aesthetic. The movement towards what might be described as the disappearing novel which was so clearly displayed in *The Passage* had been temporarily halted in *Daybreak*. The compressed action of that book, the vigour of its characters and prose, to some extent concealed the fact that, like *The Passage*, it was virtually plotless. In *The Swayne Family*, however, the pursuit of invisibility is taken up with renewed force. The novel is given shape but no plot, activity but no action; even more drastically, the poetic shimmer of *The Passage* seems to have been deliberately subtracted from its style.

In the 1940's and 1950's Palmer often liked to talk of the writer who "writes well without seeming to do so". He could easily have been describing himself. His aim apparently was the creation of a prose so totally functional and lucid that it would become, in a dangerous paradox, almost unquotable. The prose of *The Swayne Family* at its best does not seem to be there: but only because of a controlled calculation on Palmer's part, surely one of the riskiest he ever made and adhered to. The invisibility of the prose style can be explained, in part, by the fact that so much of it is given to the characters themselves. By the time he came to write *The Swayne Family*, Palmer was absorbed in another of his major aesthetic enterprises — the capturing of Australian speech rhythms in prose fiction. Just as important, however, as the high proportion of dialogue in the novel is Palmer's considered dependence on situation and incident to embody what he had to say. If poetry had found its way into *The Passage* through the muted shimmer of its prose, in *The Swayne Family* the basic strategy of fiction resides in the act of invention and selection. In *The Swayne Family* Palmer was hoping to write a novel which would compel attention almost solely through the weight and truth of what Henry James would have called its *donnée*. In that hope he was in some measure disappointed, and the price of failure was the
appearance of that dullness with which he has often been charged. Yet, for all its unevenness, *The Swayne Family* bears witness to Palmer’s unique contribution to the scope and dimensions of Australian realism.

**LEGEND FOR SANDERSON**

Palmer’s development was interrupted in 1935 by the publication of *Hurricane*, which was simply a rewriting of the Rann Daly novel, *The Outpost*, done in the hope that it might be taken up as a film script. In spite of some changes in nomenclature and some less flaccid prose, it is, in essentials and quality, the earlier work. His next significant novel was *Legend for Sanderson*, which appeared in 1937. In this book he returned to his well-loved Queensland coast, setting the action in and around Port Cowrie, a fictionalized version of Cairns. The protagonist, Neil Sanderson, is, at the beginning of the story, a young man in his early twenties, cutting sugar cane near Port Cowrie. When the cutting season ends he walks to Port Cowrie with a particular friend, a cynical European exile and intellectual named Besanck. The seaside town is the catalyst precipitating Neil’s emotions into the action of the novel. It was here that his father had known his triumphs and degradations. Old Chris Sanderson had been one of the pioneers of the region, cut to an heroic pattern, with all of his virtues and vices larger than life-size. Against this volcanic old man (who dies in a prologue to the main action) Neil carries a deep-seated resentment. Chris had deserted his wife, later going to live with Laura Clune, the proprietress of Cayley’s Hotel in Port Cowrie. Brought up solely by his prim, respectable mother, Neil has developed a neurotic hatred of his father and the woman he lived with.

One of the main themes of the novel, therefore, is Neil’s achievement of integrity through accepting the memory of his father and the friendship of Laura Clune. Another line of interest stems from his occupation. Buying a small fishing boat in partnership with Besanck, he becomes absorbed into the maritime community of Port Cowrie, both white and
coloured. His particular friends are the Jensens — old Peter built Neil’s boat some years before, and has sentimental memories of Chris Sanderson. Peter’s wife, Anna, gives Neil the motherly attention he craves; Freda, Peter’s daughter by an earlier marriage, arouses his desire through the vividness of her presence and personality. The several lines of action are brought together by a storm at sea and an illness that Neil succumbs to. The experiences that he passes through bring him to maturity; he breaks with Besanck, who decides to go back to Russia; he accepts his father for what he was and Laura Clune for what she is; he finds strength and security in his curiously unresolved love for Freda.

In *Legend for Sanderson* Palmer achieved some of his most memorable characterizations. Besanck and Laura, in particular, are created with thoroughness and flair. Characteristically, Palmer could succeed with the older woman where his portrait of Freda Jensen is marred by its dependence on stereotyped ingredients. Like Clem McNair, and Dora Rossiter, Freda is one of Palmer’s isolated artist-women, struggling with the frustrations of her personal situation. Unfortunately, Freda is limned in strokes that are altogether too crude. At her first appearance she is dressed to play Nora in a rehearsal of Ibsen’s *The Doll’s House*; her moment of self-definition is represented through the melodramatic burning of her incomplete novel. Generally, Palmer is much more adept at suggesting Freda’s qualities when he can do so at second hand rather than through direct dramatization. The moody, cynically detached Besanck, on the other hand, comes to life directly off the page. Palmer stumbles slightly with Besanck’s final decision to seek regeneration in the new Soviet Russia, but in the main he is one of the most forceful and convincing portraits in the whole Palmer gallery.

The energy which animates Besanck, Laura, and Corcoran the journalist is of a piece with a quality that Palmer ascribes to the whole of Port Cowrie. He responded strongly to the tropical contrasts between languor and violence, locating them most intensely in the coloured fishing settlement on the outskirts of the port:
A mile or so behind the port, where the saltwater creeks flowed into the estuary and dry gullies provided harbourage for empty tins and bottles, lay the scattered settlement of Luggertown. It had its own smells, its own atmosphere, its own way of life. In the shockle of huts, the tumbledown cottages half-hidden with greenery, lived the coloured folk who largely controlled the fishing, and their boats were anchored in the muddy backwaters. You were in a different world when once you passed the pyramidal dumps behind the timbermills. An easy-going, to-morrow-or-next-day world! Girls with berry-dark eyes and full busts leaned over the paling fences, exchanging gossip with friends forty yards away, youngsters scrambled with prawning-tins among the mangroves, young men sang as they dried their nets along the banks. At night there was a firefly glimmering of lights behind trellises, a thin fret of ukeleles on the warm, still air.

This luxuriant life derives its sanction for Palmer from its close identification with the sea, and comes to play a part in the novel of much greater import than merely providing some exotic local colour or even documenting another facet of Australian society. It becomes the vibrant realization of one of the competing modes of behaviour among which Neil Sanderson is required to choose.

The discrimination among various approaches to living is, indeed, one of the major themes of *Legend for Sanderson*. Fundamentally, Neil must learn to conquer his irrationally overcharged dislike of his father. *Legend for Sanderson*, that is to say, presents an extreme form of one of Palmer’s constant preoccupations, and the working-out of the young fisherman’s response to the memory of his father is delineated with real sensitivity. The quality of Neil’s emotions is authoritatively established near the beginning of the novel:

But his real life (he could see it now) had begun at that hour [after a quarrel with his father]. Something had been born in him when, penniless and stranded, he had begun to hunt for jobs and take on responsibility for his own future. This tough working-class world into which he had been thrown unprepared: he would adapt himself to it, make it his own. The deep passion aroused by that casual insult to
his mother spread through him, colouring his days . . .

Didn’t he owe everything to his mother? . . .

The trouble was it wasn’t true: at least not the emotional part of it. He couldn’t make it true, in spite of the way he had repeated it over and over. There had always been a deadness in his feeling for his mother: there was still . . .

He could even understand, writhing inwardly at his own impiety, the relief his father must have felt at breaking free from the heavy atmosphere of her affection . . .

No, it was his father who really lived in his mind, dominating his thoughts, giving heat to his imagination . . . Had his father really vanished from the earth, or would he remain alive in one corner of his mind, eternally chuckling, eternally triumphant? (pp. 37–39)

It is the continuing presence of Laura Clune that enables Neil to sustain his unreal hatred of his father. Only when Laura has nursed him through a dangerous illness is he freed from his obsession and able to win the inner harmony that is the goal of all Palmer’s heroes.

The background of Neil’s upbringing also affords subtlety and penetration to Palmer’s treatment of his relationship with Besanck. On the surface, the friendship between Neil and Besanck is an instance of Palmer’s commitment to the common notion of mateship. In its actual working-out, it is given some individuality through the admission of elements of unconscious sexuality in Neil’s attitude towards the European. They are there in his jealousy when he and Besanck meet Freda and some other girls holidaying on an island; in the frequent temperamental quarrels that flare up between them; in the nickname, “Alphonse”, that the other fishermen give Besanck. In all likelihood Palmer himself was unaware of the latent homosexuality he was building in to the relationship; nevertheless, all the circumstances of Neil’s life, especially the mother-dominated childhood, combine to give it psychological validity. Not, of course, that this is the only important element in the friendship between the two men. Besanck’s sterile intellectuality, at quite another level, provides a major test of Neil’s grasp on life.
Besanck’s cynicism, indeed, deriving from his superior intelligence, plays an important part in the general structure of *Legend for Sanderson*. Constituting a mode of conduct attractive in its sophistication, it is offered as one of the possibilities that Neil must choose among in the course of the novel. Young Sanderson finally rejects what Besanck represents, but it is not the exercise of the mind that he turns from. On the contrary, the proper exploitation of the individual’s intellectual capacities proves to be at the centre of the novel’s positive values. What is rejected is an intellectualism which declines involvement, which results in nothing but a spectatorial analysis. To such a mode of conduct *Legend for Sanderson* proposes several possible choices. Among them is the warm, unthinking life of Luggertown, dramatized at key moments in the uninhibited parties at Albert’s home. For a time Neil is drawn into this world by association with his half-caste mate, Charlie. He finds it attractive and never wholly rejects it; but he does come to realize its inadequacies for a wholly civilized man. After his illness he makes a return visit to Luggertown:

Wandering about the backwaters of Luggertown that afternoon, watching the youngsters squabbling around their prawn-nets, the women gossiping at the broken fences with their babies straddled across their hips, he felt remote for the first time from all this teeming life. Something had happened inside him (he was certain of it now) that would make it difficult for him to go back to it. There was this restlessness in his blood, this urge for a quicker rhythm than that of the tides or the slow movement of the *Kestrel* rocking at anchor behind a reef. Could he ever again be content to sit all night in a boat with a line between his fingers, thinking, not thinking, letting his body drowse, his senses open to the briny scents, the stars’ downpouring light? He stood sniffing in the mud of the backwaters. (p. 254)

Caught inextricably in the world of social man, Neil Sanderson senses the inadequacy for him of the simple relation to the natural world which brought full satisfaction to Lew Callaway. As an alternative he investigates the attractions of economic and social power, encouraged by his successful
cousin, Keith Macready. Although he is aware of his own capacity for equal success, he is repelled by the immoral arrogance of Macready, and turns instead to the vigorous class protest of Freda Jensen. His belief in the value of comradeship founded on shared occupations and need makes this line of action appealing to him, but at the end of the novel he is still not prepared to diminish his individuality by committing himself to a definite programme. He knows that he loves Freda and needs her; that there are dark and disturbing areas of the mind which cannot be ignored; that there is the possibility of applying the rational intelligence to the solution of individual and social problems; that there is a force for life stronger than any individual, to which his father gave himself and, in so doing, spawned a legend. All this he knows and tries to hold in the balanced harmony which will make him a truly civilized man.

Thus schematized, Legend for Sanderson bears the appearance of a more unified work than it actually is. In fact, the novel is broken-backed. While it is possible to perceive the connections between the themes embodied in Chris Sanderson, Besanck, Freda, Laura, Neil, they are not welded into an artistically convincing synthesis. One is left with an impression of richness in the texture of created lift; of flashes of insight more penetrating than in any previous novel; of the makings of a book which might have been the definitive realization of all that had occupied Palmer’s imagination up to that point in his career. All the major themes are there — family pieties and hates; the strength to be drawn from the natural, unconscious life of the sea; the investigation of masculine friendship; the subtle temptations of power and will; the inescapable need for the arbitrating function of the rational mind; the sense of civilized behaviour as the full and flexible response of the integrated individual to the ambiguous pressures of his society.

Palmer’s novels of the 1930’s are not fully perfected works of art, but their very imperfections suggest an imagination creatively seeking to extend the scope of its concerns, to find ever more adequate means of rendering them. The failures of these novels in large measure flow from the very profusion
of Palmer's experiments in subject and method. If nothing else, *Daybreak*, *The Swayne Family*, and *Legend for Sanderson* demonstrate that the repeated use of certain materials was not the outcome of a poverty-stricken imagination but provided an energizing basis for his art. Their wide ranging inspection of Australian society bears witness to his success in carrying out the Balzacian analysis he had undertaken. Their method and manner uncover his often neglected attempt to develop a unique mode of fictional realism. Most of all, the prevailingly compassionate attitude of these novels justifies Palmer's decision to abandon the early sophistication of *The World of Men* in favour of the frustrations, fumblings, and glimpses of success consequent upon the pursuit of a personal aesthetic. In *Legend for Sanderson* he wrote of Corcoran, the newsman, that “He cultivated irony, the weapon of the defeated” (p. 20). It was a mode of expression that Palmer was determined to avoid. While he often wrote of failed lives, he never wrote of them with malice or a sneer. His sense of human community forbade it; as did his self-appointed task of civilizing Australia through the agency of prose. For *Daybreak*, *The Swayne Family*, and *Legend for Sanderson* all contribute significantly to that long-range purpose. In the novels up to *The Passage* he had been seeking to crystallize his vision of the fundamental principles of human life and morality. Thereafter his aim was to make of his fiction a model, at once reflective, analytic, and exemplary, of the society he hoped to civilize.

**NOTES TO CHAPTER 5**

2. Vance Palmer to Frank Dalby Davison. The letter, which was almost certainly written in April 1959, is addressed from the Hotel Rundle, Adelaide, South Australia.
3. Palmer expressed the preference in an interview given to the *Queensland Times* on 11 September 1958.

6. Ellis's opinion is recorded in a review of the novel printed in the Red Page of the *Bulletin* for 5 December 1934.


Ten years elapsed after *Legend for Sanderson* before Palmer published another novel, and when *Cyclone* appeared in 1947 it did little to enhance his reputation. In itself, it is a slight tale of the north Queensland coast, competent but undistinguished; in retrospect, it can be seen as a determined effort by Palmer to lift his creative imagination out of a long fallow period by returning to themes and forms in which he had previously enjoyed some success. So determined an effort, indeed, that *Cyclone* is the first of his novels to repeat the setting of its predecessor. Like that of *Legend for Sanderson*, the action of *Cyclone* takes place in and around Port Cowrie. The events of the later novel, however, are more closely related to those of *Daybreak* and *The Swayne Family*. The time is the Depression thirties; the central relationship, that between three friends, all soldiers and comrades in the First World War. Brian Donnolly helps Ross Halliday to run a small trading vessel between Port Cowrie and Carney's River, some eighty miles to the north. Clive Randall, the third of the “Three Musketeers” and a sleeping partner in the shipping venture, runs a jewellery shop in the town. A threatened cyclone brings to a
head the tensions lying beneath the friendship of the three men. Like Bob Rossiter in *Daybreak*, Donnolly has to choose between loyalty to Halliday and loyalty to wife and children. The affair between Randall and Bee Halliday is forced to a resolution.

The cyclone, when it finally sweeps down the coast, purges the human conflicts it has both intensified and symbolized. The “Gannet”, with both Halliday and Donnolly aboard, is caught directly in its path and destroyed. Halliday, an emotionally defeated man, is killed; Donnolly survives, to be restored to his wife and children. He is rescued by Randall, the only person in Port Cowrie who owns and flies an aeroplane. Woven through this major action is the story of Tod Kellaher, Donnolly’s brother-in-law, his involvement with the sustenance workers camped on the showground, and their threatened clash with some of the bullying leaders of Port Cowrie’s business life. Through plunging into the common experience of his countrymen, Tod hopes, like Ernest Swayne, to release the creative talent that Corcoran, the newsman who first appeared in *Legend for Sanderson*, has detected in him.

The structure of *Cyclone*, as well as many of its issues, bears a strong resemblance to that of *Daybreak*. Most of its action is compressed into a twelve hour span through which are developed several simultaneous narratives. The entire plot is encompassed within an Easter weekend, whose symbolic implications are deliberately if unobtrusively exploited. The experiences leading up to the cyclone, and the cyclone itself, make of Donnolly a new and more mature man. He literally returns to life from the sea; he is found on the beach by Randall, his unconscious urge towards life asserting itself even when consciousness has gone:

And then at the next strip of beach, Randall stopped dead, hardly daring to believe his eyes. Three hundred yards away a big figure was moving towards him, head down — a ragged figure that rolled in its walk yet kept doggedly on, feet lifting painfully from the sand at every step as though ploughing through snow. There could be no mistaking that fair head and sun-darkened torso, those powerful shoulders that could so easily lump a two-hundred of flour across a
twelve-inch plank; yet, for the time, the oncoming figure seemed stripped of everything individual. It was life itself that was driving on through the sand; blind, battered, yet moving to some pulse in its secret core.¹

_Cyclone_ rises spasmodically to images like this: dramatically realized and powerfully representative. Yet its total impact is disappointing. There is nothing the matter with the craftsmanship of the book; it simply lacks the quickening power of an imagination confidently at work.

**THE GOLCONDA TRILOGY — INTRODUCTION**

For all that, in the perspective of Palmer’s whole career, _Cyclone_ served its purpose. For the three novels which followed it constitute, in their achieved success, his major fictional opus. They are, of course, the Golconda trilogy: _Golconda_ (1948), _Seedtime_ (1957), and _The Big Fellow_ (1959). In spite of the decade’s gap between first and last, it is as a single and concerted work of art that the three books are properly to be judged. Together, they make up the story of Macy Donovan, a man who rises from an obscure union organizer on an outback mining field to be Premier of his state.

Palmer takes up Donovan’s career immediately after the First World War, when Golconda, a huge mountain of silver and lead, is being opened up to production. Situated in a remote desert area of Queensland, Golconda has been pegged out by a small group of fiercely independent prospectors, who cling to their claims in defiance of the large companies who are beginning to take an interest in the field. Donovan, brought up in the Maranoa district, has drifted into Golconda carting water. A chance meeting with Frank Mahony, a union organizer from the coast, sets him on his true path. Enlisted by Mahony as the local union organizer, Donovan soon becomes one of the most powerful men on the field; he can influence Keighley, the strongest of the company managers, as well as Christy Baughan, the prophetic old gouger who had been one of William Lane’s companions in the New Australia and Cosmé ventures. Only three people resist Donovan’s charm: Dora
Venn, the school teacher, May Varnek, and May’s daughter, Neda. May, a robust woman who has spent most of her life in outback Queensland, remains obstinately unimpressed by Macy’s growing self-importance. Neda is the most complex version of the artist-woman that Palmer ever tried to create. Now in her late teens, she passed a year of her childhood with a tribe of aborigines, and her whole being is drawn towards the primitive landscape of Golconda rather than towards its inhabitants. Macy is strangely attracted to Neda, though there is little of sexual desire in his attitude towards her; his principal sexual conquest is of Carita, Keighley’s wife, on the night that the new picture theatre is opened at Golconda.

His position on the field consolidated, Donovan goes to the coast to ask Mahony for advice and further instructions. There he finds Mahony discharged from his job and in disgrace for having embezzled union funds to settle his gambling debts. Disillusioned by the downfall of his hero, rejected by Carita Keighley, Macy seeks consolation in a prolonged drinking bout. Returning to Golconda, he discovers that May Varnek has died and Neda is living at a desert water hole with a young Italian bird catcher, Farelli. Neda, however, soon tires of the relationship and returns to Golconda, where she stays only long enough to carve a statue for her mother’s grave. In the meantime, a jobless and disoriented Mahony has come to the field looking for work. He is employed by Joe Comino, an unscrupulous Greek on the way towards prosperity, but soon falls desperately ill with pneumonia and is nursed back to health by Dora Venn. Donovan wins pre-selection as the Labor Party candidate for the Golconda electorate in the forthcoming state election and gains the seat. Along with the pioneering phase of Golconda’s history, the first stage of Macy Donovan’s career has come to an end. The closing of a chapter is signalized by the death of Christy Baughan as Macy prepares to fly to Sydney, leaving Mahony married to Dora Venn. On the same plane as Donovan goes Neda Varnek, aiming for Sydney and a career in art.

*Seedtime* takes up the story two years later. Donovan has been to a political conference in Sydney, where he has discovered
that Neda is again living with Farelli. Returning to Brisbane, he gives himself over to another period of violence, during which he is stabbed in a brothel brawl by an Italian cane-cutter he mistakes for Farelli. Taken to St. Monica’s Hospital by an old Golconda associate, Brian Hegarty, he comes into contact with the rest of the Hegarty family. There is Judy, a nurse at St. Monica’s, her brother-in-law, Dr. Hugh McCoy, who runs the hospital, McCoy’s wife (and Judy’s sister) Sandra. Another of the Hegarty sisters, Florence, is to marry Hugh’s brother, the lawyer Frank McCoy. Kitty Hegarty, the oldest of the girls, has mothered the whole family, including the two boys, Brian and Vern.

Macy Donovan’s progressive entanglement with this intricate family web is one of the chief interests of Seedtime. Young Judy is the first of the sisters to be attracted to him, out of a mixture of hero worship and political sympathy. But it is the more mature Kitty whom Macy marries; their mutual love is finally established at a seaside scene at Coulter’s Head, where the McCoys have their family home. Coincident with the account of Donovan’s personal affairs is that of his political development. A major conflict arises over a strike in the cane-fields which has been endorsed by the railwaymen. Donovan challenges his party chief and Premier, Lambert, and is soundly defeated. Hastening back to Golconda to tend the grassroots, he stops at the centre of the strike and makes an inflammatory speech to the strikers. In his audience is the young Italian who had knifed him, now a fervent admirer. Mistaking Macy’s metaphorical injunction to “put a bit of dynamite into your activities” for literal advice, he blows up some railway rolling stock. Unwittingly, Donovan becomes the overnight villain of the Brisbane press.

Back at Golconda, he discovers great social and industrial changes. Personally, he is received into the warm family circle of Frank and Dora Mahony, and their son Peter. The outcry against his part in the strike dies down, he wins the Golconda seat with an increased majority, returns to Brisbane in triumph, and is even reconciled with Lambert. The happiness of his wakening love for Kitty Hegarty is marred only by the
news of Mahony’s death, due to a further attack of pneumonia. As he prepares for his wedding, he can look forward to an assured career in politics. Judy, reconciled to her loneliness, leaves Brisbane to make her way in the Flying Doctor Service.

There is a lapse of something like twenty years until the opening of The Big Fellow: until, that is to say, the months immediately after the Second World War. Donovan, at fifty, is at the height of his power. Temporary leader of his party and Premier of his state, sure of achieving permanency in these positions, he is indeed the Big Fellow. Two sequences of events, however, one private, one public, are about to undermine his seeming security. Neda Varnek comes back into his life, after many years abroad and achieving some success as a sculptress. She asks Donovan to help Leo, her son by Farelli, who has been committed to a state institution for a minor offence. Macy’s reviving attraction to Neda makes him increasingly aware of the flaws in his marriage to Kitty.

At the same time as Donovan’s personal life is being subjected to such stress, his political career is coming under scrutiny. There are suggestions of corruption in the sale of certain government mines at a time when he was Minister for Mines. Brian and Vern Hegarty, both well known for their sharp business practice, are also involved in the scandal. The Royal Commission that Donovan institutes finally clears his name, but by now his whole political career has been placed in jeopardy. Ironically, the work of criticism has largely been carried out in a newssheet called The Beacon edited by Monty Seyler, a returned serviceman and close friend of Peter Mahony, whom Donovan has virtually adopted.

The episode, indeed, so severely damages Donovan’s status in the Labor movement that he loses pre-selection for the Golconda seat. At the same time his private affairs have taken a disastrous turn. At Neda’s request he has gone one night in search of Leo, whom he discovers in the act of breaking into a picture theatre. In a moment of panic Leo crashes a heavy wrench onto Donovan’s head, flees with his companion in a stolen car, and is killed in a smash. Neda, retreating into her personal isolation, quits Queensland altogether. Macy is
left with Kitty, both bringing drastically diminished expectations to what their future life together may hold. The close of the novel sees the two of them back at Golconda. Macy, pondering his defeat, can still look forward to a career in a wider arena. He will forsake state politics and seek office and power in the federal parliament.

The history of Macy Donovan, it may be supposed, was suggested, at least in part and in outline, by that of E.G. Theodore (1884–1950). Theodore made his start as a union organizer in the Queensland mining districts, rose to power in the Labor movement and the state government, eventually becoming Premier. He too was accused of malpractice in certain mining transactions which became the subject of a Royal Commission. He, in fact, moved from state to federal politics. Yet the trilogy should not be thought of as primarily the fictionalized biography of a particular Australian politician. Even at the political level, the created figure of Macy Donovan synthesizes a great deal of significant Australian experience. More generally, the eight-hundred-odd pages of the Golconda trilogy represent the summation of nearly everything Palmer had tried to achieve in the novel form.

With singular thoroughness he incorporated in the pages of his last three novels the themes and techniques which had compelled his imagination for thirty years and more: the family; the processes of personality; mateship, politics, and civilized community; the vision of the natural basis of human morality; the panoramic concern with Australian society — they are all there. So, too, are the methods he had evolved for delineating his view of the world: the invisible efficiency of the prose; the exactness of observed detail; the characteristic control of time and tense; the clusters of natural images; the willing dependence on the rhythms of Australian speech; the deliberate refusal to dramatize private and public tensions. And, it must be said, the typical weaknesses are there as well: the parsimony of invention; the undue reliance on counter words and ideas; the spasmodic tendency to lapse into the flaccid language of cliché.

Yet the faults are only blemishes on a large and impressive
fabric. For the most part, the familiar themes are treated with fresh vigour and insight. The examination of family and political life, for instance, has an astringency unprecedented in Palmer's novels. Some of the political data, in particular, are quite new to Palmer's range. *Golconda* is the first of his books to deal with a mining community; the representation of a state Premier as a fictional hero, rare enough in the whole canon of Australian social realist writing, adds a new perspective to Palmer's achievement.

**GOLCONDA**

While the novels of the trilogy share certain characteristics, each is allotted a particular emphasis, a particular angle of vision. The distinctive feature of *Golconda* is, thus, its large and impersonal perspective. The novel opens with an aerial vision of the great metal mountain, as an American oil man and an Australian geologist fly into Golconda:

Through the drowsy afternoon the plane droned on like a deliberate hornet, lost in upper air. Far below, the mulga ridges stretched in mossy folds, league upon league, without a landmark to catch an inexperienced eye, though here and there light-grey threads of sand that meant something to the pilot showed through the bronze and dullish green. He had done the journey before, pioneering the route for a company that hoped to run a regular service. Soon, he knew, they would be coming to more open country, seas of Mitchell grass and gibber plains, with an occasional station roof glittering like a speck of mica. Then would rise the long metallic hump, where some past convulsion had forced a fragment of the old continent's frame through the soft rubble that covered it.³

This opening paragraph establishes both the tone and the point of view which will dominate *Golconda*. It is the mountain itself, untamed and inhuman, which is the pervasive presence in the novel. All human activity takes place, both literally and emotionally, against the background of the ore-filled hill. One of the chief functions of Neda Varnek in *Golconda* is,
through her artist’s sensibility, to make actual Palmer’s sense of the mountain’s brooding mass:

Even the mountain lost majesty in full daylight. The girl knew the look of it best at night, lying in her bunk on the veranda and gazing at its outline. Then it was massive and powerfully alive, its roots buried deep in the earth’s core, its crest among the stars. Somewhere in its heart a generative heat seemed to smoulder: out of the top of it the girl saw emerging the heads of the people she knew — her mother, Macy Donovan, Gessler, the woman from the sly-grog shanty — and it was thus she always moulded them. (pp. 72–73)

The opening of Golconda, that is to say, is far more than a mere tour-de-force. It initiates the sustained attempt to incorporate individual behaviour into a larger natural order. Even when the focus of attention moves from the mountain to the human beings who are uncovering its wealth, the same impartial tone is maintained. In this novel, Palmer’s fascination with the patterns of Australian society finds new power and dimensions. Eschewing the measuring and quantitative devices of the professional sociologist, Palmer nevertheless contrives to demonstrate, with both clarity of outline and density of detail, the growth of a community from its crudest beginnings to the moment when, shedding its frontier trappings, it can manifest all the apparatus of a permanent settlement — school, theatre, cemetery, surveyed building sites, assured water supply, and so on.

The chronicle-panorama of Golconda is vivified by the host of minor characters who swarm through its pages. Christy Baughan, Paddy the Bulltossor, McVeigh, Gessler: all are endowed with living flesh, blood, and sinew. Christy sits on his claim at the top of the mountain, dreaming of the past and William Lane, prophesying his ideal community. Paddy the Bulltossor brings a raw Irish drive to the narrative; McVeigh, the eccentric ex-Light Horse trooper, is a successful, if minor, version of Palmer’s First World War veteran. Yet these characterizations are not gratuitous “vignettes”. They are essential to the mosaic patterning of Golconda which makes
it such a splendid piece of imaginative sociology. Structurally, they are focused and integrated through the figure of McClintock, the one-armed Scot. The last of the long line of Palmer’s sociable storekeepers, which stretches back to Anderson in *Daybreak* and Kunkel in *The Passage*, McClintock serves the same purpose as his predecessors: he provides a channel through which the unique experiences of individuals can be transformed, through talk and social traffic, into communal possession.

Standing between the minor characters and Donovan himself is Frank Mahony. Mahony’s role in the novel is, partly, to act as a counterpoint to its protagonist: as his fortunes decline, Macy’s rise. Yet in his own right he enjoys a richer created life than most of the denizens of the mining town. One of his great formative experiences was participation in the Great War; indeed, he regularly discusses his later experience (both personal and political) in the language of combat and active service. Social life for Mahony is a conflict between classes, even individual existence is a struggle to survive. In his efforts for his union, Mahony is more than competent; his personal life is less successful. His private failures — in an early marriage, in his love of gambling — bring about his public downfall. In this respect, Mahony’s individual history is a version *in parvo* of one of the great themes of the whole trilogy: the inextricable interweaving of private and public experience.

Palmer makes of Mahony a credible amalgam of high principle and indifferent practice. It is important that the admirable qualities of the man should be stressed and should in the end, though diminished, prevail. For Mahony provides Donovan with his first image of achievement. Donovan, indeed, is introduced into the novel through Mahony’s eyes. Just arrived on the field, the union man is looking for a local organizer when he comes upon a two-up game. It is controlled by Macy Donovan, who has just attacked Joe Comino for cheating:

> From twenty yards away, Mahony watched him with
the cool, appraising eye of one whose job it was to weigh men and make decisions about them. A cocky young fellow, he thought, a small town big boy, one who had always found his capacities sufficient for the small tasks they had to face. Yet a fellow of some power, a fellow who had been used to handling the rough crowds of two-up rings, and probably taking the lead in other matters. There might be possibilities in him. Genuine vitality radiated from his brown eyes, his crisp, curly hair, his thick springy body. And there was that smile of his, cheerful and full of simple vanity as a youngster's. The hard hide of a tough had not yet grown over him. (p. 27)

Mahony’s appraisal is an accurate one, and throughout his career Donovan retains something of that early ingenuous delight in his direct, physical control over other men. Even within the pages of Golconda, however, the necessary processes of change begin to mould his understanding of the world and himself into more subtle and sophisticated forms. The chance meeting with Mahony is the prime agent in his development. Through his admiration for Mahony, he is led into a political career, discovering that he can exercise an emotional as well as a physical control over other men. He is made devastatingly aware of his capacities at his last rally before the general election, when his spontaneous eloquence saves the meeting from the imminent disaster threatened by the overpowering tedium of the Party member from Brisbane:

The cheers and laughter that sounded through the building, the way the audience rose to him, assured Donovan not only that he was home and dry, but that he had a secret spring of life he could always count upon. It wasn’t words that gave you control of a crowd; it was something that lay behind them. He didn’t have to go looking for power: it was in him; he could tap the spring and it would flow out when the need arose. (p. 257)

Palmer recognizes the dangers of Donovan’s gift, the demagogic temptations it will place in his path. After a scene in which he is humiliatingly rejected by Carita Keighley, Macy goes to a newsreel cinema, where he sees Mussolini strutting across the screen:
Donovan rose and went out into the street, a renewed vigour in him. Something had been set in motion that restored him to himself and there was a fillip in the bright lights, swarming crowds, roaring buses. His feet had recovered their lightness, his spirit its ebullience. He found himself humming a tune under his breath, the tune that had accompanied the marching boys on the screen. Glancing sideways at him a passing woman smiled faintly: he stopped humming and broke into a laugh. The faint smile was still on her lips when, a few yards ahead, she looked back over her shoulder. He quickened his step and caught up with her.

(p. 172)

In the person of Macy Donovan, Palmer makes a large-scale assault on a problem to which all his previous novels had been leading him: the tensions generated by a simultaneous regard for the values of individual expression and those of egalitarian democracy.

In the course of Golconda Donovan is drawn steadily out from under the shadow of the impersonal mountain into the world of politics. His private life, however, remains darkened with frustrations and conflicts, some of which will not be resolved until The Big Fellow. His brief success with Carita Keighley is destroyed by her later cool rebuff; his relation to Neda Varnek is troublingly ambiguous to his own understanding; his need for a hero is jolted by the discovery of Mahony’s fallibility. Just as Golconda concludes with the metal mountain already ravaged of its integrity, with the settlement at the end of its pioneering phase, so it leaves Macy Donovan with his basic gifts and weaknesses defined in depth and in detail, ready to descend on Brisbane and a more complex world of men and women, of politics and power.

SEEDTIME

With Donovan’s assimilation into the city, the perspectives and emphases of the trilogy undergo a corresponding change. In Seedtime special attention is paid to Macy’s first real experience of domestic living. Independent even in boyhood, he is now introduced into family life through his association
with the Hegartys and the McCoys. An important feature of both families is their Irish Catholic origin — a matter of some importance in a work which deals with the career of an Australian Labor politician in the first half of the twentieth century. Palmer does not stress the religious values of their Catholicism, but he is thoroughly alive to its social and emotional implications. The Hegartys spring from the sleazy background of a working class hotel, owned by their unkempt, promiscuous widower father. Under the motherly care of Kitty they all escape from their early environment; Judy into nursing, Sandra and Flo into advantageous marriages. Yet they retain marks of their upbringing; Kitty in her strongly developed sense of family unity, Judy in her devotion to Labor ideals, Brian and Vern in their swaggering disregard for conventional business ethics. The McCoys, on the other hand, belong more to the Catholic aristocracy of Brisbane. Settled in the state for three generations, they can play host to bishops. Gerald, the brother who elects the priesthood, studies in Rome. Hugh and Frank enter medicine and the law. The only shadow over the family is the memory of the pioneering grandfather who slaughtered a tribe of aborigines on the Dawson River, and then retired to his home at Coulter’s Head to do fiercely private penance for the rest of his life.

Macy Donovan is brought into contact with this diverse but clannish group when he is admitted to St. Monica’s Hospital. At first his acquaintance is chiefly with Judy (who, indeed, is one of the pivotal figures of the whole novel). Later, in a series of characteristic scenes, Palmer brings Donovan into association with the whole range of Hegartys and McCoys. The spectacle of the two families at home awakens in Macy a desire for a similar source of stability in his own life, a desire which is intensified when, on returning to Golconda, he finds Mahony rehabilitated through the love of Dora Venn. This newfound want is crystallized in a brief episode involving Macy, Mahony, and young Peter Mahony. The three are out in the desert country when Mahony’s truck breaks down. Macy sets out along the road in search of the nearest water. He is accompanied by Peter:
Picking up the boy he set him astride his shoulders while Mahony fossicked in his tool-bag for the book he always carried with him. There was not a whimper from young Peter. Donovan strode off with his head down, his hands gripping the boy's soft legs, his voice rolling on in a continuous patter as he improvised yarns of bunyips and bushrangers or pointed out tracks of lizards in the dust.

It was an experience for both of them and though there were no adventures on the road they were both to remember it in after years. (p. 150)

“There were no adventures on the road”: the fidelity to the ordinary is characteristic of Palmer’s realism at its best. The whole of Seedtime, indeed, is notable for its location of significant experience in a matrix of the ordinary, the unremarkable. Even in the political threads of the narrative Palmer is steadfastly anti-dramatic in his attitudes. The strike in the sugar-cane country, for instance, which is a major episode in Donovan’s political advancement, is introduced quite casually in the closing gossip of a polite afternoon party:

As they neared the gate and the row of cars Donovan found himself abreast of the Archbishop, who by now had discovered his name and wanted to know about the strike that was paralysing the mills of the sugar country. What was this talk about recruiting free labour among the Maltese settlers? And were the railways likely to be involved? (p. 86)

Out of such an offhand beginning grows one of the central issues of Seedtime, an issue which brings Donovan into head-on collision with his party leader, Lambert, and spreads his face and name over the front page of every newspaper in the state. The conclusion of the episode is handled with the same subdued coolness. It disappears, scarcely noticed, in a scene between Macy and Judy: “They had hardly mentioned [Kitty’s] name in the café two nights before, sitting there talking of the elections and the release of the young Italian and the people Donovan had stayed with at Golconda” (p. 174). The architectural skill necessary to merge one theme so blandly into another, so truthfully to commingle public and private worlds, may not display itself in technical fireworks. It is nonetheless
a powerful instrument for shaping that view of life and art which is at the foundation of Seedtime.

Palmer insists on the importance of the accidental as well as the ordinary in giving particular lives their colour and texture. The course of events during the strike, for instance, depends on the chance of the young Italian who had knifed Donovan being in his audience at the sugar town of Nathalia. Yet, while the accidental and the ordinary may seem to impose their random stamp on given moments of Macy’s life, underlying all his behaviour are the basic needs of his personality, or what Palmer had come to think of as the integrity of his being. Hence, although Macy is drawn to Kitty Hegarty only in the closing chapters of Seedtime, after first being strongly attracted to Judy, his final choice between the two sisters is felt as emotionally right and appropriate, the necessary resolution of their several relationships. Palmer has, in fact, scrupulously prepared for the final matching of Macy and Kitty from the early pages of Seedtime. Their engagement is unmistakably prefigured as Judy muses on her sister in chapter 5:

With that mother instinct of hers reaching out to take everyone under her wing, tempting her to put her hand to every pram she saw moving along the street, it was likely that she badly wanted children of her own; and the man who fathered them would have to be someone of her own race and religion (hadn’t she been holding forth against mixed marriages a week or so ago?), someone with a vitality and humour as robust as her own, someone . . . (p. 37)

Everything in their natures conspires to bring Macy and Kitty together. Theirs is the actuality which defeats the romantic fantasies that Judy has spun out of her attraction to Donovan. Judy in the end subjugates her fantasies in a bitter scene (set, like so many of Palmer’s scenes that reveal the truth, at the sea’s edge). Hers is another triumph for the principle of realism, as Palmer had come to understand it.

The men of the Hegarty-McCoy clan represent further challenges to Donovan’s understanding of himself and the world. The importance of Brian and Vern Hegarty in his life will not become plain for another twenty years. In Seedtime,
Hugh McCoy most significantly broadens Macy's range of experience. The ascetic doctor embodies masculine qualities which are quite foreign to Donovan and which he at first dislikes. As he comes to know Hugh, however, he responds to his virtues and special charm. By the end of the novel Palmer has made it quite clear that the two represent complementary rather than opposite principles, which combined in a single man might have added up to that fully civilized human being whose fragments he had been piecing together in all his heroes since *The Man Hamilton*.

In some respects, McCoy is not unlike a sympathetic version of Besanck in *Legend for Sanderson*. After a passionately angry response to the sufferings of the Irish during the 1916 rebellion, he has retreated to carefully marked-out areas of conduct:

This outrage on his race and people! This treatment of the flower of men as traitors! He had been swept by an impulse to tear off his badges and disappear into the underground world of Paris, picking up whatever kind of living he could, refusing any further allegiance, but he had mastered his emotions and kept on working. That experience had left its mark on him, shutting him in on his chosen vocation. A man had to submit his mind to discipline, not allowing it to stray beyond established fences. He was a doctor. (p. 58)

If Hugh McCoy is limited in his human contacts, his detachment leads him not to the cynicism of Besanck but to scientific altruism. Aware of the potential violence of human behaviour, he believes in the exercise of rational discipline over individual impulses so that there may be some chance of a civilized community.

Donovan is gifted with a more fundamental force, the almost unconscious drive that sends Brian Donnolly surging along the beach after the wreck of the “Gannet”. Nevertheless, Palmer does not sentimentalize Donovan’s powers of leadership, his instinctive identification with the mob. *Seedtime*, on the contrary, begins to disclose the political life as an arena crowded with self-interest, petty victories, faction fights, ideals going under to the urge for power. From none of this activity is Macy Donovan exempt. His translation from Golconda to Brisbane is not
picted as a rhapsodic triumph of egalitarian ideals. For the panoramic landscape of the mining field is substituted the crowded world of urban man. It is presented with equal fidelity to fact, a more vivid sense of the jostling interplay of human ambitions. Even Golconda itself is subject to this shifting perspective. When Donovan visits the settlement after the Nathalia affair, he realises that the settlement has moved beyond the frontier into the industrial revolution:

Golconda had greatly altered. He sniffed the change with some distaste as he took up his quarters at the weatherboard hotel in the shantytown that had arisen on the eastern bank of the river. A hell of a dump it looked. The other side was reserved for the company’s buildings and at the base of the mountain where the gougers had once pitched their tents lay a modern settlement, equipped with electricity, bitumen streets, and a good water-supply. Gardens bloomed in front of the neat cottages; the stunted timber had given way to a bowling-green and tennis-courts; the smell of mercurial dust was displaced by that of chemicals and of the coal-smoke that came from trains running on the cockspur line to Byarra. Over all towered the huge domes and derricks of the company, and from them came a low rumble like distant thunder. (p. 137)

Again, Donovan’s career is ready to move into a new phase along with the community where it began. Transferred into the fertile garden of politics, by the end of Seedtime Donovan has taken root. He is ready to grow into his own mould, to his full stature. To reveal what he becomes is the task of The Big Fellow.

THE BIG FELLOW

The Big Fellow, indeed, picks up Macy at the very pinnacle of his success. Leaping over some twenty years, the novel opens as he celebrates his fiftieth birthday, with all his ambitions apparently fulfilled. His marriage to Kitty has worked well; of his two children, Sheila is his favourite, and he hopes she will marry Peter Mahony, who has been adopted into the family
and, now a returned prisoner-of-war, is serving as Donovan’s private secretary. The boy Kevin, a slow and dogged trier, has always been closer to Kitty than his father. Donovan’s fiftieth birthday, too, has brought the promise of a long period of political supremacy. With his party leader in London and showing few signs of returning, Donovan seems confirmed in the Premiership.

It is characteristic of Palmer that he opened the last volume of the trilogy at the zenith of Donovan’s career only for the sake of exploring the disappointments, frustrations, and failures which underlie his seemingly gleaming achievement. In some ways, *The Big Fellow* is Palmer’s most subtle account of human defeat; not defeat on some dramatic or specific issue but the defeat which Palmer believed to be a virtually inescapable condition of human life. The bright hope of the novel’s first chapter becomes the ironic signpost to the erosion of much that Macy has built up in both his private and public life.

From the very outset, Donovan’s happiness at his present success is marred by a nagging doubt that it does not, after all, represent what he had wanted from life when he set out to mould his career in Golconda some quarter century earlier:

> There was very little he had striven for that he had not attained in the end, and at fifty he was as fully alive as he had been in his twenties. More alive, really. His mind could leap to important decisions with a snap, and when he took it out of the punching-ball in the morning before his bath, every organ of his big body seemed to assure him of its soundness. Yet rising out of his hidden self like a miasma was the feeling that he had not got the happiness out of life that he expected, that the real reward of achievement was missing — something he could not define but that should be there inside him, flooding him with a sense of fulfilment.

The events which make up *The Big Fellow* are designed to define the nature of Donovan’s inner defeat.

One of the immediate sources of his emotional frustration is the behaviour of Sheila and Peter Mahony. Sheila thwarts Donovan’s fondest hopes by following an American officer to
Japan, where she subsequently marries an Australian. Peter affronts his values by declining to follow a political career and, coming under the influence of Hugh McCoy, opting for medicine instead. An even more jolting check to Macy’s poise is the reappearance of Neda Varnek. Divorced from her European husband, she comes to Brisbane seeking help for her son Leo, who has been placed in a reformatory for a minor misdemeanour. Before Neda comes back into his life, Donovan has sensed that he and Kitty are moving apart; now this woman from his Golconda days provides a perfect release for his frustrations. He succumbs directly to Neda’s sexual appeal. Donovan’s ripeness for such an adventure is established in the very first scene of the novel, which demonstrates the growing sexual indifference of Macy and Kitty for each other. Now, with the rediscovery of this vivid woman from his past, Donovan is drawn into headlong emotional commitment. He and Neda are briefly lovers. Yet even Donovan’s male power cannot permanently capture Neda’s detached imagination. When Leo is killed escaping from further misdeeds, she walks out of the big politician’s life with the decisiveness and abruptness with which she had re-entered it. Macy and Kitty are thrown back on each other, if with lessened love.

Macy’s affair is conducted within the context of Palmer’s most destructive account of family life. The Catholic clannishness of the Hegartys and the McCoys stimulated him to probe thoroughly into the false emotions which can be generated by sentimental attachment to family connections. Always in The Big Fellow Donovan’s instinct for solitary action is opposed and eroded by Kitty’s unassailable belief in the importance of a united family front. Yet Donovan’s affair with Neda is played out only partly within a domestic frame of reference. The liaison is especially dangerous because it coincides with a serious challenge to his political dominance. At a time when Macy should be marshalling all his energies to the defence of his public position he is dissipating them on his attachment to a woman. Again, Palmer has taken care to display just what it is that Neda is distracting his protagonist from. The whole of the second chapter of The Big Fellow is,
thus, given over to demonstrating Donovan the politician in action with one of his subordinates.

A significant proportion of the whole novel is devoted to similar accounts of the actualities of political power and manoeuvre. The very title of the book suggests that one of its primary interests will be a political one; in particular it provides an unsentimental and many-faceted account of Labor Party politics. However strongly his own sympathies might be committed to the economic and political left, in *The Big Fellow* Palmer never allowed himself to forget that the Australian Labor Party, like all others, is composed of a heterogeneous body of individuals, all striving to put into effect their mixed and complex motives. His description of Donovan’s fellow cabinet members is characteristic of this quality in the novel:

The other eight men who sat around the table were curiously alike, not in build, but in their general ideas and the expression of their faces, though they had come from different walks in life, some from the town, some from the country. In their round, pugnacious heads, in their roughly moulded features, in their faded but challenging eyes, there was evidence of a tireless capacity to deal with matters of detail and administration or to listen to long-winded speeches in the House . . .

The attachment of all of them to Labor was sincere, though a little confused by changing circumstances: it derived mainly from the rebellious impulses of their youth, when the country had seemed to be quite definitely divided into two classes . . . The sense of being a special, official class was strong in them; yet, because of the fresh social habits they had acquired — golf, motoring, adventures in real estate — they were, on the whole, less at home with their own supporters than with the business entrepreneurs and men-about-town who opposed them. Recognition of this shadowed their minds with a faint uneasiness. (pp. 187–88)

Such a formal analysis is supported and illustrated in scene after scene in which Palmer shows politics in action: Donovan’s interview with a member of his own party, his conduct of cabinet meetings, his appearance at the Royal Commission, his visit to the Brentwood Reformatory. The important feature of
The Big Fellow, however, is not that it so accurately delineates the progress of a political career but that it so convincingly unites the political interest with the personal. Donovan's private and public experience are given as elements of a single pattern. The crucial sequence in the achievement of this fusion is the Mount Clutha scandal and the subsequent Royal Commission. The big fellow's political future is at stake; the outcome will be determined, for all practical purposes, by the nature of his personal involvements — with Kitty, with Brian and Vern Hegarty, with Peter Mahony, and, of course, with Neda Varnek.

The twin themes are further integrated by the development of a motif which had been latent in much of Palmer's earlier fiction but never before so deliberately exploited. Donovan's pervasive sense of failure stems in large measure from his imaginative attachment to the place where his career began — Golconda. Beneath the busyness of his political activity and the fullness of his family life he has been too dependent on those fantasies which can so dangerously impinge on the actual. Frank McCoy articulates the nature of Macy's relation to experience as clearly as anyone: "He's still the union boss of twenty-five years ago, still living in Golconda though he never goes near the place" (p. 105). Elsewhere Palmer himself records a similar diagnosis of the ills which plague Donovan's spirit:

Subtly he was losing his grip on time and mixing his fantasies of the past with the present. The events he read about in his paper, the complex problems of post-war immigration, the jiggery-pokery of bomb-tests and diplomatic manoeuvres, had less reality for him than that Golconda world into which he so easily slipped back. It asserted its hold both on his mind and his senses; it had not changed in the twenty-odd years since he had left it; some unconscious exercise of will on his part had not let it change. He could smell the dust of its dry air, hear the faint echo of picks on the black mountain, see the yellowish blur of light at sunrise on the bleached flat between the camp and the river. (p. 169)

The period of his life which had introduced him to Frank
Mahony and Neda Varnek had given Donovan enough impetus to take him to the top of his chosen career; now, however, that the impetus has faded his realization of his misuse of the past leaves him hollow and scarcely even effective.

Palmer's treatment of the dangers of fantasy life is distinguished from earlier versions of the theme by its incorporation not into a neurotic personality like Sievright in *Daybreak* but into the aggressively "normal" Macy Donovan. In *The Big Fellow* he brought his earlier, extreme perceptions into the ambit of the socially ordinary. Thus Donovan has a strong enough grip on a tangible, dense reality to avoid Sievright's madness, to accommodate himself to the compromises and contingencies of the world. His career ends not in the private act of suicide but in an acceptance that his fate is in no way exceptional, is in fact the common experience of all toiling men:

He had a clear vision of what their future from now on would be. For all their common interests there would always be conflict between them, deep down. They would both be conscious of the break that had driven them apart and the way she had drawn him back to her. She would never understand the sudden storms that sometimes arose in him, the blind impulses to kick to pieces the smug world in which he had become involved: she would take it as her mission to keep his blood cool and prevent him making a fool of himself. Not by argument, perhaps, but by meeting him half-way, by keeping before him an image of common sense, by repeating in her breakfast-table voice what the woman next door was saying over the back fence.

He knew where they would clash, but it did not seem to matter very much. There was a bond between him and this woman that could make light of day-to-day tensions and did not depend upon intimacies. She had not cast his affair with Neda up at him or whined about his political defeat. He could count on her standing behind him, cheerful and high-spirited, in whatever fight lay ahead. (pp. 296-97)

**THE GOLCONDA TRILOGY — CONCLUSION**

In taking Donovan back to Golconda for this insight into
his future, Palmer closes *The Big Fellow* with a forceful reminder of its integral relation to *Seedtime* and *Golconda*: the trilogy ends where it had begun. And however wide a range of material his fascination with Australian society encouraged, however broad a span of space and time his panoramic structure demanded, he undoubtedly made of the three novels a single and unified work of art. The separate elements of each novel are held together by bonds of style, attitude, and pattern. Thus each volume conforms to a repeated narrative form: each opens with an oblique approach towards Donovan through some character close to him (Mahony, Judy, Kitty), is extended into a major phase of his development, is concluded by a death (Christy Baughan, Mahony, Leo). More subtly, the three volumes are held together by a set of images Palmer had never employed so consciously or consistently before. *Golconda* opens with an aeroplane flying high over the Queensland outback; a perfect symbolic image for the detached panoramic perspective which is to dominate the book. The flying image, however, is projected through *Golconda* into the later novels. *Golconda* concludes with another flight: Macy and Neda leave for the city. The very last paragraph is focused on Neda rather than Donovan, a device which has point only in relation to the major role the artist-woman is to play in *The Big Fellow*. Just as significantly, *Seedtime* finishes with an exactly parallel scene. Judy walks out to a plane waiting on the tarmac, at once symbolizing the end of a phase in Donovan’s life and the hope which lies ahead in her own, and pointing to her role of detached and accurate observer in the succeeding volume. With the opening of *The Big Fellow*, as the focus moves further away from landscape to human beings, the flight image becomes increasingly subjective: it is now a dream in Donovan’s half-waking mind.5

Along with the images of flight, the trilogy finds its singleness in another pattern of movement. Macy Donovan’s life is fundamentally a shift from the dry inland to the fertile seacoasts. When Donovan visits the coast in *Golconda*, it is the first time he has seen the sea. *Seedtime* is divided evenly between the inland and Brisbane. As his story reaches its climax of achievement
and happiness, Macy moves within the very sight, sound, and touch of the ocean. Out of the arid, inhuman desert, that is to say, the trilogy’s protagonist steadily works towards self-fulfilment in the environment which had always most richly sustained Palmer’s heroes. The movement of the Golconda novels is from the impersonal to the personal, from the inhuman to the human. Its background is the transmutation of a metal mountain into a thriving human community. In its foreground stands Macy Donovan who, having briefly tasted fulfilment at the sea’s edge, can in the end conquer his despair in the burning interior.

And, in the end, it is Macy Donovan himself who imposes its principal unity on the work. For all the successful devices of style and structure, it is his massive presence, the developing process of his being, which gathers up Golconda, Seedtime, and The Big Fellow into a massively single work of fiction. In all his strength and weakness, in his realized complexity, he is arguably the most formidable accomplishment of all Palmer’s novels, one of the remarkable creations of Australian fictional realism. Formed out of the stuff of “the ordinary, desultory world” (The Big Fellow, p. 227), he provides a final and convincing demonstration of Palmer’s essential gift as a novelist: as Corcoran put it in Cyclone, “that power to touch on familiar things and make them shine like an old house suddenly lit from within” (p. 61). For, although he achieves great social power, Donovan is not generically extraordinary. He is more than the vehicle for a sustained radical analysis of the social and economic patterns of Australian life (though he is that). The hero of this history is the full and final distillation of all, in the novelist’s estimation, it meant to be an Australian. In his monograph on Frank Wilmot, Palmer wrote, “the story of a writer’s life is the story of his slow achievement of harmony between his ideas and their expression.” Such harmony was his, it can be fairly argued, in the Golconda trilogy.
NOTES TO CHAPTER 6

1. Vance Palmer, *Cyclone* (Sydney, 1947), p. 189. All future quotations from *Cyclone* are from this edition. Page references are incorporated in the text.


4. Vance Palmer, *The Big Fellow* (Sydney, 1959), pp. 5–6. All future quotations from *The Big Fellow* are from this edition. Page references are incorporated in the text.

5. The aeroplane and images of flight had entered Palmer’s work before the Golconda trilogy; in, for instance, *Cyclone*, and notably “The Divide” (*Bulletin*, 26 March 1925, pp. 10–11), which would seem to contain the first germ of *Golconda*.

CHAP TER 7

Short Stories

INTRODUCTION

Palmer’s novels have been valued at widely varying rates; his short stories have elicited a response much more nearly unanimous. Cecil Hadgraft speaks for most readers in maintaining that “as a writer of short stories he must rank among the Australian masters of that difficult form”. Palmer himself from time to time seems to have felt that his talent found readier and more consistent expression in his short stories than in the longer reaches of fiction. He was certainly aware of the technical and imaginative distinctions between the two forms of writing. At the outset of his serious career he applied a good deal of critical effort to defining the possibilities of the short story at the same time as he was beginning to develop his more general theories of fictional realism.

Perhaps his first important pronouncement on the short story appeared in the issue of Birth for March 1917, under the title of “The Art of the Short Story”. This, in part, is what he had to say:

Good short stories are rare, because the short story demands practically all the literary qualities. In particular it calls for a very high development of the narrative faculty.

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A fairly good novel can be written with very little exercise of this faculty . . . A character is caught in some attitude, say, kneeling at prayer or adding up figures in a ledger, and by an exhaustive catalogue of his thoughts and surroundings a vivid representation is achieved. In the next chapter he is caught in another attitude, and so on.

The short story, however, can never be static; it must be dynamic. It demands that different scenes and events be fused together in a swift flow of narrative, and that there be a unity as definite as that of a good lyric. The difference between the novel and the short story can best be illustrated by the image of a house. A novel can explore the inner rooms and the inhabitants' history at its leisure. A short story, however, must place the reader outside, raise the blind of one room for a moment and then lower it. Obviously the important thing is that the blind should be raised at the right moment, when the revealing incident is taking place.2

Five years later in the Bulletin Palmer was still asserting the same requirements for the short story: “In particular it calls for a high development of the narrative faculty, for its essence is a unity of impression that cannot be achieved by a succession of silhouettes.”3 As he matured in both the understanding and practice of his art, however, he refined upon some of the distinctions he had drawn between the short story and the novel, and came to place a higher value on elements in the shorter form other than the power to construct a plot. By 1944, when he wrote the foreword to the volume of Coast to Coast which he edited in that year, he had drastically modified his initial emphases:

We no longer demand that [the short story] shall have a formal beginning, a middle, and an end; that it shall contain a plot as easily extracted as the backbone of a fish; one able to be served (to juggle a little with the image) as an anecdote at the dinner-table. Nowadays a short story may be a dream, a dialogue, a study of character, a poetic reverie; anything that has a certain unity and the movement of life.4

Palmer, that is to say, had largely abandoned his notion of the short story as a compressed and striking narrative in
favour of a sense of its capacity to open an especially and
intensely revealing window on the inner life, a sense very much
akin to the Joycean theory of the epiphany.

Along with the increasing stress on the story as revelation
rather than anecdote went changing views about the proper
verbal conduct of the form. In his 1917 article for Birth Palmer
had demanded of the short story the formal unity and perfection
of the lyric. As his first-hand experience with the story matured
he came to insist that it bear a relation to poetry more than
merely formal. In the 1944 Coast to Coast he was, thus, arguing
that “Because of its length, the short story must move on more
delicate lines of implication than the novel. It should suggest
more than it states, lure the reader into co-operating by the
use of his imagination.” The point was made even more
explicitly in 1950, in a review of Sean O’Faolain’s The Short
Story:

... a good short story does have something the same effect
as poetry. That is to say, the words and images of which it
is composed have overtones that carry the mind far beyond
the thing said.

It can’t afford to move with the dull, pedestrian step
that you don’t object to in the novel, since it is usually
setting out for a long-distance tramp; the short story has to
cultivate a lighter step, a livelier gait, the spirit, in fact, of a
dance.

Palmer’s remarks, it may be, reveal all too exactly the
peculiar hazards to which his novels may succumb; equally,
they point precisely to the unquestionable virtues of his best
short stories. Their language has a consistent, glowing vitality,
ever paraded for its own sake, but used to find the meaning,
the feeling, the beauty, of some critical moment in an individual
life. They reveal a poetic sensibility more genuine than
anything Palmer managed to infuse into his actual verse.

The quality of Palmer’s stories at any stage in his career
tends to conform to the articulated theory of that period. The
stories, too, tend to improve the later they come in the canon;
as the concern for narrative proficiency, that is to say, gives
way to the sense of the story as the crystallization of the
poetically revealing moment. Yet Palmer never entirely abandoned his respect for narrative technique, indeed persisted throughout his career in an approach to action which perfectly united the need for incident with the desire for imaginative understanding. It was from Henry Lawson that he learnt, through the device of the laconic yarnspinner, a prime means of reconciling the necessary realism of fiction with the proper poetic texture of the short story. It was Lawson, too, who inspired Palmer to discover in the idiom of his countrymen a fitting vehicle for the insights of his stories. "My purpose in writing", he once said, "is to set down Australian rhythms." That purpose included more than accurate dramatic imitation. It included a search for a style and a tone capable of transforming an incident into an epiphany. Palmer's reverence for Lawson bore no more practical or rewarding fruit than the impetus it gave him to develop his own short stories in directions which, with hindsight, can be seen as peculiarly appropriate to his talent. "I would say”, wrote Palmer towards the end of "The Spirit of Prose", "that the foremost civilising agency in Australia up to the present time had been — no, not the Ford car — but Lawson's short stories." His own endeavours in the form continued the civilizing process with their own effectiveness and quality, and just as much in the native grain.

The high importance that Palmer placed on his short stories is attested by the extreme selectivity he exercised in choosing those he wished to retain in the canon of his serious writing. Forced in his free-lance days to turn out literally hundreds of melodramatic tales, he rigorously excluded from the collections of his mature years all but those he considered his very best. After the isolated phenomenon of The World of Men, he published only three volumes of short stories: Separate Lives (1931), Sea and Spinifex (1934), and Let the Birds Fly (1955). They contain respectively twenty-two stories, eighteen, and fifteen: fifty-five in all. Those fifty-five stories represent virtually everything that Palmer wished to keep from a lifetime's output. Between them and the major novels there are plainly many connections — of themes, materials, characters and plots. In mode and sensibility the disparity is greater,
the chief connecting work being, of course, *The Passage*, with its fusion of the poetic and Balzacian strains of Palmer's realism. Among the stories themselves there are the unqualified successes and the relative failures. But from first to last the movement is steadily towards fuller and more satisfying achievement.

**SEPARATE LIVES**

Thus the stories of *Separate Lives*, which were written, in the main, in the 1920's, have a close relation to the novels which Palmer produced during the same period. It is as if he was using the shorter pieces to give serious expression to the themes he was forced to treat so superficially in books like *The Shantykeeper's Daughter* and *The Boss of Killara*. Pieces such as "Marriage", "The Black Mare", and "A Turn of the Coin" reproduce very closely the novels' subject matter: the aboriginal camp by the lagoon, the itinerant Afghan hawker, the harshness of life at an isolated shanty, the conflicts generated in the wilderness of mulga. "A Turn of the Coin", in particular, almost exactly repeats the feud between the two old men which is one of the main narrative interests of *The Shantykeeper's Daughter*. Other stories in *Separate Lives* conform more loosely to the prevailing concerns of the novels of the 1920's; they may be thought of as Palmer's first serious efforts to translate the material of *The World of Men* out of the mode of detached irony into that of compassionate realism. Most of them are set in the bush — either in the far outback like "Tobacco" or "The Cook's Mate", or in more settled areas like "The Stump", "The Casket", or "Delaney's Bus". There are even several ("The Visit" and "The Eyes of the Children") which, with their echoes of New Guinea, recall *The Outpost*.

A few of the stories have city settings (Melbourne or Brisbane), but they are among the weakest in *Separate Lives*. Even in this first major collection, Palmer is much more likely to tap a rich vein when his stories are set near the water's edge, a fact witnessed by pieces like "Jettisoned", "The Interloper", and, most notably, "The Birthday". Yet the most striking feature
of the material of *Separate Lives* is its range. Where the novels of the period can offer virtually nothing but cattlemen, *Separate Lives* creates situations involving fisherman and manual labourer, doctor and schoolteacher, small businessman and soldier, as well as the expected gallery of station owners, prospectors, and well-sinkers.

The element common to all the stories is plainly diagnosed by the title under which they are collected. Each works out some variation on the theme of the seemingly inevitable aloneness of the individual consciousness. Sometimes (as in *The World of Men*) interest in personal solitude finds its sanction in the physical environment. “The Brigadier” and “The Dragon” are both versions, one serious, one comic, of the state of mind engendered by prolonged exposure to the harsh desert country. In “The Dragon” a prospector who has “done a perish” claims to have seen a dragon in the desert — a phenomenon explained by an illustration on a calendar which had hung over his bed during his recovery. “The Brigadier” presents a character who may be taken as an undeveloped, sentimental version of McVeigh in *Golconda*. Although he has discovered a rich cobalt deposit, his desert shyness debarsthe Brigadier from the proper enjoyment of his prosperity in human companionship.

Elsewhere, Palmer treats of other kinds of loneliness. “Faith” deals with the despair which can overtake the conscientious doctor of medicine. “The Stump” is a moving study of the isolation of a proud old man who has entrusted his whole happiness to succeeding generations of his family. “The Alien” and “The Visit” are tentative excursions into the provinces of loneliness which even man and wife may inhabit. Very occasionally the protagonists of *Separate Lives* emerge from their loneliness into a kind of joy: such an outcome is granted, for instance, to the doctor in “Faith”. More usually, however, they experience defeat or, at best, conditional survival. “Delaney’s Bus” exemplifies such a resolution at its most convincing. Larry Delaney, who now runs a mailbus after a lifetime of handling horses, has a large family of six children. The story reveals him at a moment when all the circumstances
of his life combine to ensure his defeat. One of his daughters, the attractive Ailie, has an affair with a local timber worker, who deserts her. At the same time Larry is desperately worried that he may lose his mail contract to one of his competitors, Ernie Spencer. Ailie runs away to town, there to die in childbirth, a blow that is in no way softened by Spencer’s retirement from competition. Caught between the tragedy of his daughter’s death and his saving business victory, Delaney can endure neither. He retires into the mindless, feelingless refuge of driving his bus: “It was almost a promise of surrender. A little later the old man was climbing into his seat, and with the first splutter of the engine a woolly mist descended on his mind again, warming it, protecting it, shutting out life.”

“A similar diminishment in the protagonists’ expectations and capacities characterizes most of the best stories of Separate Lives.

Technically, the volume manifests an approach to the short story closely in accord with Palmer’s critical statements during the 1920’s. There is still a rather stronger dependence on straight-out story telling than in the later volumes. Even, in several instances, the plot leads to a twist ending. Of such a kind is “The Dragon”, with its delayed revelation of the true cause of the prospector’s hallucinations. “The Red Bullock” turns on a similar plot device: a squatter, fearful lest his slaughter of another man’s bullock be discovered, has his fears assuaged when he learns of the owner’s death. In tales like “Mrs. Ryan’s Willie” and “Tobacco” the primary interest in plotting is brought to the surface through a somewhat contrived narrative irony. The former, one of Palmer’s few fictional comments on the Australian home front during the Great War, deals with the desperate efforts of a recruiting sergeant to enlist some volunteers from a small country town. “Tobacco” seems to belong to the genre of the outback hard luck yarn. A young boy is sent through flooding rain to bring back stores to a drillers’ camp. On his return it is discovered that he has forgotten the tobacco. Accordingly he makes the whole arduous journey over again, only to find that the tobacco had been among the provisions all the time. What raises the piece above the level of manipulated irony is Palmer’s
lightly stated insight that the boy's unhappy adventure constitutes his introduction into the world of men. His experience results in his admission into the values of a tough, adult, and masculine community. Andy's final action dramatizes his awakening to the stoic virtues necessary for survival in a harsh world: "In the circumstances there was only one thing to do. He slowly unfolded the American cloth and, cutting some strips off a plug with chilled fingers, lit his first pipe" (p. 214). In a not insignificant way, "Tobacco" is an initiation story, an early treatment of a theme which was to give rise to some of Palmer's best work in the form.

Even in *Separate Lives*, however, those stories are most generally successful which do not put too high a premium on the narrative faculty. "Ancestors" and "The Stump", for instance, both transfer interest from a too controlled or symmetrical story line onto matters of more genuine imaginative interest. "Ancestors" is a rare excursion into historical awareness; an Australian soldier training on Salisbury Plain is made vividly aware of the continuity of his experience with that of his English forebears. After killing a sheep while on the way to visit his relatives, he discovers that it was punishment for exactly the same act which brought his grandfather to Australia. "The Stump", altogether a subtler piece of work, traces out the workings of the self-destroying yet touching pride of old Svenson, as he glories first in his pioneering achievements, then in his daughter, at last in his grandson. In the lengthening span of his life, "he had been forced to give up one source of pride after another, conducting a strategic retreat down the years" (p. 51). The story makes fully real the intricate combination of arrogance, pathos, and stubbornness involved in that retreat. It does so by projecting the emotional issues of the story onto a physical object, the stump of a huge tree that Svenson had cut down in the full vigour of his manhood. His final defeat is symbolized by his acquiescence in the local council's desire to remove the stump, now only a nuisance and an eyesore. The technique of intensifying the emotional force of the story by transferring feeling to a tangible object is not restricted in *Separate Lives* to "The Stump". It operates as well, with greater
or less symbolic complexity, in “Jettisoned”, “The Casket”, “The Jackass”, and “The Black Mare”. The correspondence between feeling and object was later to be developed with much greater finesse, but even in Separate Lives, and especially in “The Jackass” and “The Casket”, it undeniably works to heighten and validate the pathos attaching to Palmer’s protagonists. In “The Jackass” the insane laughter of a kookaburra sums up all the despair felt by a mediocre teacher in an outback school. In “The Casket” a jerry-built coffin contradicts all the simple, honest virtues that its occupant had once lived and stood for.

“The Casket” is further noteworthy in that, apart from “The Brigadier”, it is the only story in Separate Lives to use the strategy of first-person narration. Its central character is a small farmer, set in the mould of Bob Rossiter in Daybreak. His very devotion to the land, his work, his family, has brought about his death. He has been defeated by his own virtues. The pathos of his career is tellingly rendered by Palmer’s use of a sympathetic but uninvolved narrator. His dramatic presence permits a judgment on the nastily efficient city undertaker, and so lends the tawdry funeral of the honest farmer exactly the right note of helpless sorrow. In reducing the impact of pure narrative, in subordinating situation to feeling and judgment, the invented narrator guarantees to the story the kind of off-hand intensity characteristic of Lawson at his best.

Most of the other stories of Separate Lives are less subtly calculated than “The Casket”. Yet one stands out above them all, compressing within its scope all the best qualities variously and severally displayed within the volume. “The Birthday”, of all the stories in Palmer’s first major collection, comes closest to being a kind of Joycean epiphany, a window opened briefly but brilliantly on the lives of its characters. More adequately, too, than the other stories it achieves that language of poetic sensibility which permits fiction to “suggest more than it states”. A more penetrating initiation story than “Tobacco”, it achieves the symmetrical structure of “The Eyes of the Children” without resorting to its contrived irony; it manages the emotional counterpoint of “The Stump” or
“Jettisoned” without their black-and-white contrasts of motif. It dramatizes its themes and records the rhythms of its characters’ thought and speech with unfailing rectitude, compassion, and beauty of style.

The ending of “The Birthday” has its chief male figure, Paul Darrow, disturbed by the events of the day, musing in the darkness of the night: “‘Life! . . . ’ he thought vaguely, feeling for the spade in the darkness of the outhouse” (p. 106). Such a response to a fairly gruelling set of events may seem neither articulate nor profound. Indeed, the strength and quality of “The Birthday” reside not in its characters’ capacity to know themselves but Palmer’s ability to do so. As with so much of his best writing, the total pattern of the story reveals a wider and deeper understanding than its limited protagonists are privileged to enjoy.

One of its chief patterns of thematic development is summed up in the final sentence of “The Birthday”. Darrow needs the spade in order to bury the body of a puppy which he has that very morning given to his children and which has been run over by a car. Contrasting images of life and death are central to “The Birthday”. The occasion itself celebrates the renewal of young life. The sense of human vitality is reinforced by the pregnancy of Darrow’s wife, given spontaneous joy by the gambolling of the puppy with the children, felt in the marvellous beauty of sea, sand, and sky:

After they had pattered back along the veranda he sat up and lit a cigarette, looking out of the window at the blue stretch of water and the yellow sandbank. It was early, but the tops of the tea-trees were splashed with gold. Near the entrance of the passage a man was sitting fishing in a punt, a blob of black on the pale water. A little to the right, a row of gulls was arranged along the sand, still as shapes of glass. Magic! (p. 97)

Across this idyllic embodiment of ordinary life flowering in all its piety and loveliness cuts the ugliness of sudden and violent death. Down at the beach a young man, who has brought fish to the Darrows’ cottage, is taken by a shark and
killed. The children, Peter and Dot, see his still body and are momentarily brought face to face with the fact of death. To their unformed minds, however, the death of Con Delaney is much less tragic than the destruction of their puppy. To Jessie, the Darrows’ maid, the death of Delaney is the end of everything. Weeping in the dark she reveals to Darrow a passionate involvement in life he had never previously suspected:

Jessie, leaning on the rail, with her head in her arms and her body as rigid and motionless as if it had been turned to stone! Jessie, who had seemed to have neither eyes and ears for what was going on around her! What underground current had brought her the news that made her wilt like that? (p. 106)

As doctrine, as intellectual formulation, “The Birthday” may not “say” a great deal — only that life and death are strangely intermingled, that our most ordinary experiences may unexpectedly deepen our awareness of both. It is as a finely wrought image of experience rather than a statement about it that “The Birthday” has its existence. Every detail of the story is so perfectly controlled that it disappears into the material it portrays, leaving visible only an extraordinary sensitivity to the minutiae of the moment, the intangible essence of a transient pattern of water, sun, earth, and passing human passion.

SEA AND SPINIFEX

The stories of Sea and Spinifex continue to lay bare the continuity of all Palmer’s thought and writing. Several display a direct and close relation with the novels of the period. “The Seahawk”, for instance, one of the longest and best pieces in the volume, is a variation on some of the basic material of Legend for Sanderson. Old Gundersen is another version of Peter Jensen; his grandson Chris undergoes an ordeal in a cyclone similar to Neil Sanderson’s (though for Chris the outcome is fatal); the atmosphere of the tropical township is remarkably similar to that of Port Cowrie. In the same way, “Ambergris” continues
some of the preoccupations of The Passage. There is not the same close reproduction of character and incident; but the details and quality of the small fishing community are as much those of Caloundra as anything in the novel.

More generally, practically every story in the book in some way bears on Palmer's established themes. As the title itself suggests, they are nearly all set either on the Queensland littoral or in the outback. Located at the sea's edge, along with “The Seahawk” and “Ambergris”, are such pieces as “The Dingo”, “The Present”, and “The Rainbow Bird”. The inland stories include “Johnny”, “Mameluke”, “Travelling”, “The Dark Bird”, and “The Little Duck”. They represent further variations on some of the commonplace subjects of Palmer's fiction: the aboriginal camp, the isolation of remote male communities, the personal horror that the desert can inflict on those who venture into it.

Only two or three stories in Sea and Spinifex suggest any widening of the scope of Palmer's materials. “The Mob” concerns Australian soldiers in France. Not a tale of combat, it deals with an incident at a staging point for troops being returned to England after the Armistice. The subject of “The Mob” is the power and danger of mass hysteria, together with the ability of the single strong man to rise above and control it. The motivating force in the story is a cunning little cockney who, in his ambiguous relation to decent men, has a marked resemblance to Morgan in Daybreak. “Stowaways”, too, adds some special interest to Sea and Spinifex. It is an ironic study of the changing attitudes of the passengers on a mail steamer towards a pathetic family of stowaways. At first the passengers (mainly disgruntled British migrants returning home) are full of self-righteous generosity and sympathy. The practice of unrewarded charity, however, begins to pall; finally the stowaways are treated as pariahs and as far as possible ignored. A third story, “The Trap”, also breaks out of the limits suggested by the title. It serves as a reminder that Sea and Spinifex was published in 1934, by which time Australia was well in the grip of the Depression and Palmer had overtly tackled themes of some social significance. In terms of a
characteristically symbolic technique, "The Trap" makes a minor excursion into the problems of the "haves" and the "have-nots", the repressive nature of the law, and the authoritarian personality in a society where want is a literal, physical fact.

While the two terms of its title may indicate the central range of *Sea and Spinifex*, the ydo not define thematic and emotional limits with the precision they often do in the novels. The inland stories, that is to say, do not necessarily deal with harsh experience, loneliness, defeat, and failure; location by the sea does not uniformly guarantee the happy outcome of a story. If the title of the volume has any emblematic value at all, it lies in the suggestion that the natural environment, whatever it may be, is important in a man's life; that his spiritual environment may remain unaltered, whatever his physical circumstances. Defeat and conditional survival are still the burden of at least half the stories of *Sea and Spinifex*, regardless of their setting; the rest are prepared to admit at least a slightly more complex relation between a man and his world.

Just as the material of this second volume of stories grows, in the main, out of Palmer's established interests, so the techniques it displays are often the same as those developed in *Separate Lives*. Some of his plots, for example, he continued to shape towards a twist ending. "The Dark Bird" and "Mameluke" have plots of this kind. The tragic irony of the former cannot hide the fact that its conclusion depends on a fairly desperate contrivance — the mistaken belief that a rescue plane is a bird of prey. In "Mameluke", the entire comedy hinges on the misreading of a telegram. This story, however, is in some measure saved by the narrative convention of the yarnspinner, pushing its improbabilities away from actuality into the realm of the tall story. A similar convention, with comparable results, prevails in the more serious outback tale, "Travelling".

The dominant aesthetic device of *Sea and Spinifex*, however, derives from stories like "The Stump" and "The Casket". The emotional significance of the events is projected onto and
explicated by some external object which becomes the structural focus of the whole story. Thus in “The Dingo”, the lighthouse keeper’s anxieties about his daughter’s relation to the ne’er-do-well Connolly are transferred to his anxieties about the attraction of his dog to the straying dingo bitch. The symbolic and personal narratives are accorded parallel development until the dog is poisoned and Connolly drowned. Their interrelationship is clinched in the closing paragraphs:

He looked into the room on the end of the verandah and found Maxie asleep on her side, one arm curled up over her head, her hair sprayed about her face.

For awhile he stood watching her stupidly. Then a howl, faint and mournful, coming out of the night’s silence, released some spring of emotion in him. Confused ideas flooded his mind: he had an image of something human, yet not human, cruel, yet touched with the tragedy of defeat.

“Yes, howl!” he said, going out to the verandah and addressing the hidden shape in the timber, “Howl your inside out. Once you keep me uneasy, but not now. No, I got no need for to lie awake now... Howl, you old devil — howl till the hurt go. I don’t trouble about you any more.”

In “The Dingo” the symbolic equivalences are sufficiently absorbed into the actualities of a complicated situation to produce both a formally satisfying pattern and an imaginatively convincing investigation of feeling. The same point could be made of “The Little Duck”, though with less assurance. When the method recurs in “The Dark Bird”, it arouses the uncomfortable suspicion that Palmer was allowing his great talent for the short story to be endangered by the kind of formulary writing which could weaken his approach to the novel. In point of fact, Palmer made use of the mechanisms which control “The Dark Bird” for the rest of his life; and when he is off form the result is imaginative inertia. Fortunately he did not allow his potentially bad habits to gain ascendancy in his composition of short stories, so that even in Sea and Spinifex it is possible to discern new and genuinely creative techniques as well as the incipient repetition which threatens the achievement of “The Dark Bird”.

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Some of Palmer’s most rewarding approaches to the short story can be seen at work in “Home” and “Holiday”. Neither is among the very best pieces in Sea and Spinifex, yet their very flaws help to set off those elements in them which are most potent in turning insight into art. “Home” is quite a long tale — in text as well as time span. Its ingredients have the familiar ring of the novels of the 1920’s: orphaned half-caste girl taken from the aboriginal camp to be brought up as a servant to the boss’s wife; formative years of homestead living; adolescent romance with the squatter’s son, cruelly shattered on his return from boarding school; return to the comfort of the native race. Had the material been developed at novel length, it might, at best, have proved a sympathetic study of the half-caste’s dilemma grafted on to Palmer’s favourite theme of the slowly integrating processes of personality. In fact, its quality is quite different. In effect if not in intention, “Home” exists for the sake of a single sequence — Elsie’s meeting with Don Drummond on his return from school, and the overheard conversation with a schoolmate which, in its cruel comments on her colour and manner, dispels her dreams of happiness and romance. “Home” finds its animating principle not in the long-term awareness of character as process but in the blinding moment of pain which defines it as sensibility. Hardly any of Palmer’s best stories provide a long perspective on their protagonists. They concentrate instead on the kind of brief and intense experience which is the justification of “Home”; on the flashpoint between personality and the world; on the uncertain meeting ground where the senses mediate between mind and environment; in a word, on sensibility.

“Holiday”, again not a major work, again provides a major clue towards understanding how Palmer’s imagination went to work within the bounds of the short story. Where “Home” defines the difference between process and sensibility, “Holiday” delineates the distinction in Palmer’s mind between fantasy and dream. If, in one sense, his novels may be regarded as a long campaign against the dangers of fantasy, his short stories constitute an admission of the inevitability, the power, even
the uses of dream. "Holiday" makes a brutal contrast between a girl's holiday in the dreary countryside she has forsaken and her dreams of glamour as an usherette in a city theatre. The contrast is dramatized by means of a rather crude denouement, but the essential point is the crowded juxtaposition of the heroine's dream life and her waking world. The wilful nourishment of persistent fantasies is certainly shown by the novels to be pernicious; the role of dreams in shaping the texture of our momentary experiences, it is the burden of the short stories, is not to be denied. Again and again in *Sea and Spinifex* (and later) a Palmer protagonist is likely to discover the meaning of the moment by the dream which it engenders.

The moment of exquisite pleasure or pain, the closeness of dream and waking; the twin themes find their perfect fusion in the subject that Palmer had adumbrated in "Tobacco": the initiation of the young into the adult world. The best stories in *Sea and Spinifex* are precisely those which fasten on some moment of childish or adolescent crisis. Typical of such pieces is "Monday Morning", which explores the torments endured by young Peter Collett, the son of a policeman in a country town. Bullied and teased by his classmates, especially Sid Fergie, Peter can hardly endure the prospect of going back to school each Monday morning. One Friday night, after suffering more than usually cruel treatment, he is half awakened from compensatory dreams of personal victories to hear barely comprehended news of his chief enemy:

For awhile he lay still, racked by the emotions of his dream, yet dimly conscious that something was going on outside him. The house had the silence of a place where sounds had suddenly died. Along the verandah his mother came carrying a lamp, and through the open door he saw her stop at the head of the steps, staring out into the night. The yellow light shone on her tangled hair, her grey dressing-gown, her sallow face, making her look ghostly. Peter started up in bed.

"Mum! What's wrong, Mum? . . . Something's happened."

She came to his room reassuringly.
"I didn’t know you were awake, Peter. Lie down and go to sleep again like a good boy."

"But something’s happened . . . Where’s Dad?"

"It’s all right, Peter. Your father had to go out for awhile. They’re looking for Mrs. Fergie’s little boy. They’re afraid there’s been an accident." (p. 237)

In the morning Peter is told that Sid Fergie has been killed in a shooting accident; that afternoon he is sent to the Fergie home to see the dead boy, and responds with conventional yet genuine tears. But Palmer knows that the sensibility is moved by pre- and amoral needs. "Monday Morning" ends with a devastating revelation of Peter’s true feelings:

"Everyone’s been thoughtful as could be . . . But nothing’ll ever be the same again — nothing."

The last phrase kept repeating itself in Peter’s brain when he stood on the verandah outside, talking in a half-whisper to young Ritchie and the other boys. Nothing the same again — nothing . . .

(But how terrible if it should be!)

Softly the sunlight lay on the green paddocks sloping to the creek, on the ripening oranges, on the far, timber-clad hills. And the other boys were subdued and friendly, treating him as one of themselves. The world had changed, shed its rough skin. There was no harshness anywhere — not even in the thought of going back to school on Monday. (pp. 241-42)

Two other treatments of the initiation theme in Sea and Spinifex have particular interest: "Branscombe Sisters" and "The Rainbow Bird”. "Branscombe Sisters" deals with the pangs and pains of young love. A cadet reporter is attracted to two actresses he often sees over the footlights; at last meeting one of them, he finds the experience rationally disillusioning and emotionally crushing. The story finds its special interest in the first person narration, which is infused with a quality of much greater personal involvement than any of Palmer’s previous stories in the same mode. In its hints of self-revelation it is an important forecast of one of the major features of Let
"The Rainbow Bird", on the other hand, stands in the same relation to the other stories of *Sea and Spinifex* as "The Birthday" to those of *Separate Lives*: it sums up with outstanding success the dominant qualities of the whole volume.

"The Rainbow Bird" is focused through the perceptions of a pre-adolescent girl, caught just at that period of her life when she is vividly alert to all the wonder and mystery around her and before her responses are narrowed and concentrated on sexual concerns. Just why Palmer was able so thoroughly to get inside the mind of a sensitive young girl remains to be explained; but it is unquestionable that some of his finest short stories depend on this quite remarkable ability. Nothing in his treatment of women in the novels explains or predicts the shimmeringly sensitive girls who are among the genuine triumphs of his shorter fiction.

Maggie, the central figure of "The Rainbow Bird", lives in a country town close to the seashore. At the moment that Palmer chooses to raise the blind on her life, her mind is flooded with images of the small and brilliantly coloured bird whose burrow she has discovered close to the beach. The flashing, tiny creature sums up for Maggie all the delicate promise of the world; the nestling in the burrow stirs her deeply but undefinably with its evidence of new life. As she sits at her school desk, her dreams are of nothing but the rainbow bird:

All afternoon as she bent over her slate, Maggie's mind had been filled with a vision of the bird. Blue-green shot with gold, its tail an arrow. Her hair fell over her intense, grape-dark eyes; she hardly knew what she was writing. It was the same every day now. The hands crawled down the cracked face of the clock with aggravating slowness; the teacher's voice droned on and on like a blowfly against the windowpane; the other children squirmed in their seats and folded paper darts to throw across the room. But all she lived for was the moment when she would again see the coloured shape skim from its cavern in the earth, making her catch her breath as if its wings had brushed across her heart. (p. 89)
As soon as school finishes, Maggie races away with her brother Don to the rainbow bird's nest. There she is brought face to face with gross actuality: Cafferty the Honey Man has shot the bird, destroying Maggie's vision of beauty. Cafferty's face, an image of evil, displaces the bird in her waking dreams: "Whenever she closed her eyes she could see the Honey Man's evil face, the broken, tobacco-stained teeth revealed in a grin through the ragged growth of beard" (p. 96). The assault on her sensibility is mended that night in a curious semi-conscious sequence very akin to that in "Monday Morning". As Maggie lies half awake in the middle of the night, she hears adults moving about. At first she imagines they are attending the funeral of the rainbow bird, then her mother comes in with the news that Cafferty has been injured. Her drowsy mind receives the information as she wishes to hear it: Cafferty will die. Maggie sinks back to sleep, her tender mind restored to itself, at least temporarily, against the harsh facts of the grown-up world. As the rainbow bird re-enters her dreams, the story ends on a note of exquisite lyric delicacy:

She faded away, leaving Maggie to stare up at the ceiling in the dark. But the vision of a world oppressed by a heavy, brutal heel had vanished. Her mind was lit up again; everything had come right. She could see the cropped slope by the sea, the overgrown wheel-rut, the small, round tunnel with the heap of sand in front of it. And it was the man with the gun who was lying crumpled on the grass. Above him sailed the rainbow-bird, lustrous, triumphant, her opal body poised at the top of a curve, shimmering in the sunbright air. (p. 98)

LET THE BIRDS FLY

In the years between Sea and Spinifex and Let the Birds Fly Palmer passed from the period of his most unforced creative effort through a time of doubt and sterility to final rehabilitation. When Let the Birds Fly appeared in 1955 it marked, on its own scale and in its own terms, a return to form quite as
convincing as the Golconda trilogy. It is, indeed, arguably one of the very best collections of short stories by an Australian writer in this century. Of its fifteen pieces, only two, “Serenade” and “Trochus Island”, fall below the highest standard of excellence. Of the other thirteen, several have established themselves as worthy to stand among the most accomplished of contemporary short stories in English: “Mathieson’s Wife”, for instance, or “The Foal”, or “Josie”. The whole volume transmits a sense of fresh endeavour, new discovery, alongside the mature command of a thoroughly understood form.

Palmer himself seems to have been aware that he was opening up new territory for his imagination in *Let the Birds Fly*. As early as 3 April 1941 he wrote to Frank Dalby Davison:

> I’m doing an occasional short story for a book I have in mind. I think there’ll be something new in them — I hope so — I hate the idea of being led on by some damned [virtuosity?] to do what I’ve done before. It’s so easy to repeat patterns if once you get a bit out of touch with life. And living this town life doesn’t give you quite the right relation with people.

Palmer’s hope that he was achieving something new was fulfilled in *Let the Birds Fly*, but not in the widening of the range of his material. The stories still embrace very much the same kind of social experience as had the two earlier volumes: all but one are Australian in their setting, ranging from the bush through the seaside to the city, and in their social orientation tending towards the middle and lower middle class, the independent worker, the small landholder.

The newness of the collection, more to be found in its emotional texture, is hinted at in the very title. In using *Let the Birds Fly* as his title, Palmer apparently wished to indicate that he was uncaging thoughts and feelings that had hitherto been pent up in his imagination. And it is the personal note running through the collection which gives it its distinctive tone, sets it off from the two previous volumes, and indeed from all the novels.

Nearly all the stories of *Let the Birds Fly* manifest a new willing-
ness to use scene and incident for the sake of self-exploration: none more so than “The Search”. Told in the first person, it relates an episode early in the Spanish Civil War. The candour of the style unmistakably announces thinly disguised autobiography. The narrator of the story is a foreigner living in a village near Barcelona, as Palmer had done in 1936; his sympathies are with the Republicans, as Palmer’s were. He tells of the searching of his street by a group of soldiers after a shooting incident. He is sure there are no arms in the house he has rented, and freely welcomes the searchers. To his horror, a young miliciano discovers a rusty revolver in a dusty cupboard — sufficient evidence in those times to cause real trouble. To the narrator’s enormous relief, however, the miliciano pretends to his superior officer that he has found nothing and leaves the house as quickly as he can: “He tumbled down the stairs as if escaping from some time-bomb that was nearly due to explode.”

“The Search” is as successful in creating an atmosphere of suspicion and suspense as it is in portraying the miliciano. Yet its real interest is to be found in the narrator’s self-revelation. This is his description of the discovery of the incriminating revolver:

“That place?” he said, jerking his head toward a big cupboard above the stairs. “It is locked?”

Perhaps it was. Since we had come there it had never been opened, not even noticed. Standing on a chair I tugged at the knob, which came off in my hand. Never mind, the young man indicated with a grin and a movement of the shoulders, let sleeping dogs lie! But I was anxious for a clean bill and began prizing at the doors with a pocket-knife.

(p. 60)

Even more revealing is the wordless interchange between the narrator and the searcher as the latter prepares to depart:

No going back now; he had given himself away. Thanks, comrade, my heart said; you belong, like me, to those who shy away from conflict — through softness of heart, through laziness, through sheer incapacity for pursuing things to
their logical end. How good to meet with such innocent corruption when caught in a jam! (p. 61)

Nowhere else in his fiction did Palmer make such direct acknowledgment of those qualities of his mind and imagination which could interpose themselves between himself and the highest achievement. To admit those qualities so frankly led, in “The Search” itself, to a genuine revelation of personality, and opened up the way to those deeper levels of feeling which are his concern in the other stories of Let the Birds Fly. In acknowledging barriers against full understanding, Palmer went a long way towards pulling them down.

None of the other stories in the volume, in subject, tone, or structure, is quite so immediately autobiographical as “The Search”. Nevertheless, all of them are animated by a similar spirit of surrender to the full emotional truth of the situations they portray. The whole imagination, one senses, is involved as well as the rational understanding and the technical intelligence. Hence, in a story like “Home Front”, Palmer is able to dramatize his characters and scenes with his usual economical skill; but he also instils into the story a far more personal set of judgments than he was usually able to without destroying the balance of his writing. The narrative confronts a wartime profiteer and a young army captain who has undergone severe stress in combat. Into that situation Palmer builds all his admiration for the idealistic soldier and hatred for the self-serving businessman without destroying the dramatic authenticity of scene and character. Of all Palmer’s stories none more successfully incorporates his social commitments into his aesthetic structure than “Home Front”.

There is a wholeheartedness, too, about “Greta”, equally intense but differently directed. Like many of the stories in Let the Birds Fly, it essays a theme by now thoroughly familiar to Palmer, and made explicit in the closing paragraph. As Macalister drives away from an encounter with a woman he had one-sidedly loved in his youth, Palmer brings the meaning of his experience out into the open:

But the man knew, as he drove away, that he would not
come back. The question that had seemed so important to
him once had somehow lost its significance. Life, he was
thinking, moved on in a continuous flux and its elements
merged, changed, and became something different. No use
pretending he was the selfsame boy who had gone through
that shattering experience thirty years ago; no use pretending
that anything hung on baring the truth about Greta.

“Greta,” he could not help repeating to himself as he
began the steep climb to the guest-house on the mountain.
(p. 88)

Here one can recognize a pattern similar to that of “The
Birthday”: a very ordinary protagonist grappling with matters
barely within the compass of his understanding. One can
admire, too, the toughness of mind which permits the senti­
mental obsession of the last sentence to cut across Macalister’s
rational assessment of the situation. One can further applaud
a similar admission of complexity into the conduct of the
entire story. But what is most impressive in “Greta”, what is
new, is the sense that here is a writer now prepared to open up
the locked cupboards of the past to seek whatever truths may
be lurking there, a writer who is prepared to take out and inspect
relationships of a kind he had hitherto preferred to ignore.

“Greta” touches on the physical aspects of love only briefly
and circumspectly, but there is no mistaking the powerful
sexuality which is its driving force. The laughing, generously
built Greta dominates the story as well as Macalister, in both
youth and middle age. Several other stories in Let the Birds Fly
deal with the overmastering passions provoked by sexual love.
One of them, “Last Leave”, even succeeds in making capital
out of one of the clichés of Australian fiction — the bushfire.
A young air force man and his girlfriend have spent his last
leave camping in the Victorian bush, only to be trapped at the
last minute by a crown fire, the deadliest of all. They save
themselves by plunging into a creek, emerging physically
blackened and emotionally purged. Characteristically, Palmer
finds symbolic equivalences between the power of their love
and that of the bushfire. For the moment the natural force
proves to be the more powerful:
Neither of them had any words left. It was as if the fire had not only dried up their springs of speech but all the frail tendrils of feeling and association that held them together. Where were now those green, secret places of the mind where tender thoughts grew like watered shoots? Gone, blotted out utterly, buried beneath a sediment of grey ash. (p. 34)

Comparable in its interests, more impressive in execution, is “What Is Love?” Undeservedly neglected among Palmer's stories, it traces the progress of a love affair between a school teacher and the Italian wife of a Queensland cane-cutter. As with a number of the tales in *Let the Birds Fly*, “What Is Love?” leads to a thematic conclusion that Palmer had long since worked out in the upper levels of his mind, but had not often so thoroughly imagined as to make it a convincing image of the actual or possible. After Morrison's affair with Marina has been brought to a violent close, he speculates on the meaning of the experience he has been through. The thoughts Palmer attributes to him reproduce one of the chief themes of *Cyclone*: “He had a vision of life as a blind movement in which instincts and taboos born of the long struggle for survival were more powerful than any individual need or desire” (p. 136). The idea itself is familiar enough from a very early stage in Palmer's writing. In “What Is Love?” it is fleshed out; transformed from doctrine to experienced knowledge.

But in the long run it is not Palmer's new-found capacity to deal with sexual passion which gives *Let the Birds Fly* its definitive quality. The central group of stories, on the contrary, are all concerned with childhood or adolescence. The initiation theme which ran through *Sea and Spinifex* still commands his best work; only now, the hints and clues of “Branscombe Sisters” are made more explicit in the prose. The pains and joys of initiation are authenticated in *Let the Birds Fly*, one senses, by a much more direct appeal to Palmer's own past. No story enforces the point more strongly than the one he placed at the beginning of the volume, “Mathieson's Wife”.

In connection with “Mathieson's Wife”, Palmer appended a revealing note to Allan Edwards' collection of his work,
The Rainbow-Bird, which appeared in 1957. Entitled “Writing a Story”, the appendix sets down some general observations about this form of prose narrative, and illustrates them by commenting on the process by which “Mathieson’s Wife” was composed. “Writing a Story” opens with an assertion thoroughly in accord with Palmer’s previously expressed theories of fiction: “Most good stories have not been invented; they have come from something in the author’s experience” (p. 123). The true art of invention always lay for Palmer less in “making-up” than in judiciously selecting what was already to hand. Yet it is interesting that he was moved to repeat his view especially in connection with “Mathieson’s Wife”. The fact would seem to indicate that at the time of its composition he was especially aware of his need to draw on his own past. Certainly, he goes on to use “Mathieson’s Wife” as an instance of the problems involved in making a story out of personal recollection:

The incidents and figures of “Mathieson’s Wife”, the last story in this book, had remained in my mind for many years, and I had made several attempts to turn them into a story. But I had always begun with the old parson, projecting him and his background so that he should be established in the reader’s mind before his surprising marriage to the young woman. Such attempts were all failures; the words lumbered along heavily, the narrative flagged. Then suddenly it became clear that the real theme was not the old man but the young woman he had married, and her relation to the growing boy; and that the story must open with the first meeting of these two. Also that it must be told from the boy’s point of view, since the experience was more important to him than to her. After this discovery, nothing remained but the writing! (pp. 123–24)

The article continues with some remarks which indicate that Palmer was well aware of the benefits to be reaped from a controlled point of view and other elements of sophisticated contemporary technique. But the most significant feature of his comments is surely the admission that the most urgent element in the situation was the experience of the young boy, so urgent indeed that it demanded the use of the first person.
singular. In “The Casket” Palmer had finely used the technique of first person narration to achieve a judging distance from the central events. Those stories in *Let the Birds Fly* which use the technique do so to achieve immediacy and personal involvement. The effect can be observed not only in “Mathieson’s Wife”, but in “The Search”, “Josie”, and “The Red Truck”. All seem to reveal something intimately personal about their creator.

“Mathieson’s Wife” and “Josie”, along with “The Catch”, are also initiation stories. Taking up the theme which runs through *Sea and Spinifex*, they push its possibilities yet another step forward. Where the stories in the earlier volume had been centred almost entirely on the moment of delicate or anguished sensibility, the later essays in the genre incorporate the instant of revelation within the framework of an adult judgment. Thus “Mathieson’s Wife”, while it concerns the introduction of a thirteen-year-old boy to adult passion, is told from the point of view of an adult narrator. The protagonist can both re-create his adolescent experience and place it in a more mature frame of reference.

The situation which precipitates his emotional growth rises out of the marriage of the old Presbyterian parson Mathieson to a young wife. The innocent ardour of the boy’s feelings towards Mathieson’s wife is introduced immediately and dramatically in the opening paragraph of the story:

How well I remember that morning when the fair-haired young woman who had come to live with old Mathieson made my heart jump by dropping from the mulberry-tree to the grass beside me! A rustle of the branches, a soft plop — and there she was as if she had fallen right out of a cloud. I stumbled back a pace or two and the billy of milk I was holding nearly slipped from my hand. It was partly the shock, partly the look of her as she stood laughing down at me, her blue eyes dancing and the mulberry-stains red on her lips. The blood crept up my neck, and I tried to stutter out something, but my voice lost itself in the furry depths of my throat. (p. 1)

The relation between the boy and the young woman, the
sombre nature of Mathieson, the reception of the bride into the rural community, are all given at some length. The situation is hastened to its crisis by the advent of Bob Curdle, manager of a travelling dairy, who is training a jumping horse in his spare time. Curdle and Mathieson’s wife have an affair, as the narrator discovers when he comes upon them by chance one afternoon:

Watching from half-way down the bed of the creek I saw Curdie stand back and lift his hand; the woman gathered up her reins and, putting the horse at the fence, skimmed it like a swallow. Her hair was over her eyes and she was patting her mount’s neck as she wheeled round and cantered back to where Curdie was standing: I saw her slip out of the saddle into his arms, saw him hold her there without moving. (pp. 19-20)

The paragraph immediately following is the emotional and thematic crux of the whole story:

There are happenings that fill a boy with a confused darkness he doesn’t wish to explore. Forget all about it, a voice urges him; soon enough you’ll be a man, and then nothing will have power to hurt. I wasn’t conscious of any resentment against Bob Curdie; none of the fantastic black hatred I had sometimes felt for poor old Mathieson. I could even think of him as a deliverer acting in place of me. But I was glad when the travelling dairy moved on, and the grass grew over the ring where the gin-horses had tramped their round. (p. 20)

Almost all Palmer’s initiation stories have this moment when their protagonist wishes to deny the meaning of what he has just been through. Sometimes he seeks to resolve his pain in dreams; almost always he is willing to accord something of value to the people through whom he has been hurt and has learnt. Thus, after the scene in which he discovers her with Curdie, the narrator drifts away from Mathieson’s wife — “she had floated out of my particular world and become remote” (p. 21) — yet he retains in his imagination an ineradicable image of her gaiety and spontaneous joy in life, qualities he can never repudiate:
But for a long time I dreamed of her quite often, and gradually without bitterness, as a radiant figure in the far sky. A winged horse bore her along. Careering through those boundless spaces she leapt cloud after cloud triumphantly, an aura of light round her, completely absorbed in herself and her own airy freedom, yet looking down now and then with gay benignity to the three wistful figures below—Bob Curdie, the boy I had been, and poor old Mathieson. (p. 21)

In memory, Mathieson's wife can inhabit the cloudy world of impossible aspiration from which she had appeared to leap into the narrator's life in the opening paragraph of the story. "Josie" and "The Catch" follow much the same pattern as "Mathieson's Wife". "Josie" is written in the first person plural, a device by which the speaker identifies himself with the group of country schoolchildren to which he belongs. One of their company, the little girl Josie, dies, and her playmates are forced to accept the reality of her death. The boy in "The Catch" is brought one step closer to adult living by a sudden encounter with the careless cruelty of which grown-ups are capable. He takes home a fish he has caught, expecting his mother will share his pride and joy. Instead he is greeted only with practicality and indifference:

"What is it? A nice cod, isn't it? I wonder would it keep till morning . . . . But, Leo, darling, your good shirt! Why ever did you hold that thing against it . . . you've got it all over blood and scales. See if Jessie's in the kitchen and tell her to clean it . . . then run away and change. We're going over to the hotel for dinner with Brian." (pp. 97–98)

In the pain of his rejection, Leo throws the fish away, a gesture which Palmer typically transforms into a symbolic act:

"What's that, son?" called a fisherman, glancing over from his nets. "Gone bad on you, has it?"
"Gone bad," he tried to repeat.
But there was a bubble between him and his voice. Dry-eyed, his face stony, his feelings tied in a hard knot, he watched the fish being caught up from the backwash and sucked out to sea. (p. 99)
Apart from “Mathieson’s Wife”, Palmer’s other major portrayal in *Let the Birds Fly* of the trembling and delicate responses of the young is “The Foal”. Its plot is as simple as may be. A girl wakes up in the night, hearing the faint whinny of a new born foal; next day she spends every minute that she can watching the foal and its mare; she dreams next night that the foal is killed; wakes to find it still alive and feeding from its mother. The story, that is to say, deliberately avoids overt action in favour of a feather-light account of the girl’s love of living creatures and her own stirring maternal instinct. Nowhere is Palmer’s prose more graceful, feminine almost, than in his creation of the anxieties and ecstasies of the little girl. The story opens, like so much of Palmer’s best fiction, with the main character being dragged out of sleep into consciousness of the tangible world:

A faint whinny, penetrating her dreams, woke the little girl on the veranda. When she opened her eyes it was still not quite light and the tall gums crowding the steep rise to the road loomed up darkly over the house, only leaving a pale strip of sky. Dew lay heavy on everything — the dark woodshed, the wheelbarrow by the stump, the bracken on the edge of the bush. From the spouting trickled beads of water, dimming the fly-wire that netted the veranda. (p. 62)

The elegant accuracy of this opening description is maintained throughout the story — the girl’s waking pleasure in the foal, the urgency of the dangers she dreams, to the final image which merges her private sensibility with the wider forces of which it is part:

She found herself sitting up in bed staring at the wire-netting. The terror of her nightmare was still trembling through her, but outside the daylight world was already taking shape — the dark woodshed, the blur of wattles, the stump with the axe in it. And there on the dewy rise, not ten yards away, was the foal tugging at its mother’s teats, its long legs stretched out and firmly braced, its tiny mop of a tail flicking from side to side, its head butting into the sleepy flanks as if an urge for power and mastery were
driving through it – as if it was the one thing fully alive on
the whole earth. (pp. 69–70)

The effect of “The Foal” is clearly some distance removed
from the almost explicit autobiography of “The Search”,
and what can be sensed as the emotional autobiography of
“Mathieson’s Wife”. There is, however, one story in Let the
Birds Fly even further away from the prevalingly personal tone
of the volume. The plot of “The Red Truck” seems to be more
obviously “made-up” than any other in the collection.
Certainly, it is related in the first person by an adult narrator
looking back on his youth; yet its main character and events
bear only the remotest factual resemblance to Palmer’s own
childhood. It is the story of a Melbourne footballer, famous
and captain of his team in his prime, but, as he declines from
his physical peak, driven to shady expedients which bring him
to gaol and finally to death. His son tells the story; the warmth
and love in his recollections take them out of the province of
the cautionary tale or crime-does-not-pay preaching.

Its very opening sentence, it may be, holds out the clue
to both the primary motivation of “The Red Truck” and its
nature as an independent work of art: “There wasn’t ever a
better cobber than my old man” (p. 36). “The Red Truck”
quite probably creates the image of the kind of father Palmer
always wished for but never had. More certainly it is one of his
most compressed statements about the matiness, the Australian-
ness, of the Australian male. The father is brilliantly made to
embody all the masculine sympathy, the unthinking charity
and good fellowship, the physical prowess of the prototypical
Australian. Yet he is not falsely glamourised. A hero to his
small son, the team mascot, to the crowds watching his declining
skill he is the lurk merchant, the man willing to put in the boot
when the umpire is not watching. The football games vividly
catch a major Australian social phenomenon at the same time
as they provide an image to explain the small boy’s adoration
of his father. But the strength and depth of their love is made
most real in a scene of quiet domesticity:

But now I look back it don’t seem as if I enjoyed the play
quite as much as the Sunday mornings after. That was the
time. A late breakfast and the two of us outside in the sun
of the backyard, the old man sitting on his heels smoking
his pipe and me showing him the tricks I'd taught the terrier
or telling him what had happened at school during the week
... I wanted the morning to go on for ever, with the sun
shining on the strip of yard and Aunt Peg showing off to
the men as she played catches with me by the woodheap and
Dad in his pyjama-coat looking lazy and content. (p. 41)

Moments such as this have power as scenes of idyllic remem-
brance. Yet the story owes its fuller strength to the dangers which
are recognized as looming behind the idyll. The very qualities
which give the narrator's father his immense appeal lead to his
downfall: the direct, physical immediacy of his behaviour,
his refusal to take the long view, his sentimental loyalty, his
rejection of all activity of the mind. "The Red Truck" may be
taken as Palmer's definitive short examination of the strengths
and weaknesses of what he held to be largely representative
of Australian man.

The whole performance depends for its success on the
thoroughness and accuracy of its dramatization. "The Red
Truck" is one of Palmer's longest continuous excursions into
dramatic monologue, at a level of speech far removed from his
own normal prose manner. All his fiction is full of accurately
reproduced conversational interchanges. Only in "The Red
Truck" does he attempt to make, through sustained display,
the semi-literate, brash and vital language of the Australian
worker the vehicle of an almost poetic insight. "The Red
Truck" is a late and major exhibit in support of Palmer's case
that he had spent his career in trying to catch Australian
rhythms and, through them, the essence of Australian life.

To the degree that it is thoroughly dramatized, completely
removed from its author's literary personality, "The Red
Truck" stands somewhat apart from the other stories in Let the
Birds Fly. The closing tale, however, provides an endpiece
more in accord with the dominant mood of the collection.
"Summer Picnic" gives an account of a day that two young
couples spend at the beach. In its general movement, even
in its details, it is closely related to some of the themes and episodes of *The Big Fellow*, especially in its treatment of the returned serviceman, Peter, who has his analogue in Peter Mahony. In the use of sharks as an image of evil, in its exploitation of a near drowning, the story further repeats material from earlier narratives. Nevertheless, in its prevailing mood it conforms to the delicate texture which is peculiarly the property of *Let the Birds Fly*. The emotional point of the story is the liberation of Peter from his war-bred fears and doubts by his reaction to the danger which momentarily clouds "the butterfly lightness... of the day" (p. 199). Throughout, "Summer Picnic" is concerned to capture the quality of the moment, the shifting emotional currents that run between its seven characters, its several generations. As the parents and their grown-up children drive away from their beach picnic, the story ends with the kind of affirmative image that so often, and in the face of admitted opposition, resolves the conflicts of *Let the Birds Fly*:

Leaning forward at last she turned on the wireless. Gradually the faint knocking of the engine was overlaid by waves of sound, and as the car left the sandy stretch behind and picked up the bitumen they floated into a melodic world, a world of harmony and illusion — the storm over, the pipes taking up their refrain with a thin sweetness, dancers moving out again to the green. (pp. 201–2)

Neither "Summer Picnic" nor any of the other stories in *Let the Birds Fly* poses any very strenuous intellectual challenge. To do so was not to Palmer’s purpose nor consonant with his talent. It is his special achievement in his last volume of short stories, by letting the melody of his own unguarded sensibility play through his prose as nowhere else, to have captured as on a frieze a set of moving, beautiful, and particular gestures in the dance of life.
4. Vance Palmer (ed.), *Coast to Coast* (Sydney, 1944), pp. vii–viii.
7. The remark is reported in a number of places, the earliest to my knowledge in M. Barnard Eldershaw’s *Essays in Australian Fiction* (Melbourne, 1938), p. 112. There it is ascribed to a talk Palmer once gave to a literary society, but not more closely identified.
9. Nettie Palmer wrote a letter to Dr. George Mackaness on 5 August 1931 which contains useful evidence of Palmer’s determination to exclude all but his best stories from his collections. The letter in part runs: “I am collecting a book of essays, but the collecting mostly consists of elimination. My husband’s collections of short stories are like that. His book, ‘Separate Lives’, which will be here in a few months, has rejected nearly all that he would have admitted if he had completed it ten years ago. It will contain some of the best work in any form.”
10. Palmer did complete a few stories after the publication of *Let the Birds Fly* which he might have wished to preserve, notably “The Afghan”, which appeared in *Meanjin*, XVII, No. 4 (Summer, 1958), 365–78.
12. Vance Palmer, *Sea and Spinifex* (Sydney, 1934), p. 132. All future quotations from *Sea and Spinifex* are from this edition. Page references are incorporated in the text.
13. The title is drawn from Hamlet’s lines to Gertrude, III, iv, 192–96:
   No, in despite of sense and secrecy,
   Unpeg the basket on the houses top,
   Let the birds fly, and, like the famous ape,
   To try conclusions, in the basket creep,
   And break your own neck down.
15. Vance Palmer, *The Rainbow-Bird and Other Stories*, selected by Allan Edwards, (Sydney, 1957). The selection contains thirteen stories, drawn from *Separate Lives, Sea and Spinifex, and Let the Birds Fly*. It is valuable not only for “Writing a Story”, but also for a reprinting of Palmer’s Foreword to the 1944 *Coast to Coast*, and a useful preface by the editor.
Although Palmer never composed any literary manifesto or fully articulated literary theory, he did think deeply about the bases of his art and profession. The results of such thought were more often directly incorporated in his fiction than in formal critical discourse. Nevertheless, he did leave behind a body of work sufficient to reveal his large abilities as a practical critic and to indicate something of his beliefs about the nature of literature.

His basic working principles were formulated mainly during the 1920's and 1930's, in the various essays which develop his views on fiction, realism, and the short story. His speculations about the relation of literature and society, the wider cultural implications of artistic activity have, nearly all of them, their germ in “The Spirit of Prose”. His skill and tact as a practical critic, however, were given their most sustained expression in the regular broadcasts he did for the Australian Broadcasting Commission during the last quarter century or so of his life. The “Current Books Worth Reading” scripts, with other miscellaneous radio pieces, were in their immediate intention ad hoc writing — part of the literary journalism necessary to
support the full-time man of letters. They reveal, however, a critical intelligence of acute perception and high integrity.

The "Current Books Worth Reading" talks were broadcast fortnightly; each surveyed some five or six newly published works — biography, history, current affairs, as well as the standard forms of creative literature. The bias is in the main, however, towards fiction, with adequate attention paid to contemporary poetry, and a rather quicker glance at drama. An immediately impressive feature of the scripts is Palmer's finely tuned capacity to winnow out the truly distinguished work from the immense mass of chaff that came to his attention. He had a flair for detecting the major writer, the major novel, at first appearance. His pronouncements, moderate yet confident in their tone, introduced Australians to some of the great modern works of fiction. Some of his judgments from a single year, 1941, are sufficient to make the point.

On 5 January 1941, Palmer reviewed William Faulkner's *The Hamlet*, and reported the American to be "one of the few really vital novelists writing in English at the present time". "'The Hamlet'," he added, "is a profound story of life and character, worth all the attention you can give it." On 22 June he wrote of Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*:

I don't think it is an exaggeration to say that it is the greatest novel that has appeared for some years... He has not only discovered a subject into which he can put the whole of his powers; but he has, you feel, found an inner belief for himself, something worth living and dying for.

On 6 July he singled out Walter Van Tilburg Clark's minor masterpiece, *The Oxbow Incident*: "a simple tale on the outside, but inwardly as complex as one of Conrad's, fatal, disquieting, a symbol of man's appalling capacity for error". On 7 December, in a review of Patrick White's *The Living and the Dead*, there came a recognition of that novelist's powers long before he was acclaimed by most other critics (in Australia or elsewhere): "... there is so much quality in 'The Living and the Dead' that you can't help hoping that Patrick White will one day return to the Australian scene".

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For over two decades Palmer continued to lay before his listeners the ripe fruit of his critical discrimination. Sometimes, of course, he erred either in overpraising a book which has failed to last or in underestimating one whose merits have since established themselves. Generally, however, his judgments and recommendations were extraordinarily sound. Forster and Cary were among his enthusiasms; so were Camus and Ehrenburg. Even those great writers with whom he felt profoundly out of sympathy were praised and commended for their creative powers: D.H. Lawrence, Eliot, and Huxley.

Nearly all Palmer’s broadcast criticism necessarily took the form of capsule, unargued valuations. It is a kind of intuitive criticism, proceeding by means of an unsystematic set of insights and *apercus*. Nevertheless, it is possible to discern in the whole corpus of the broadcast scripts some unifying principles, some unstated critical rationale. Thus many of the specific assessments are founded on an appeal to a set of touchstones — a set of master works and writers from the past which embody the standards to which Palmer subscribes and against which he judges the endeavours of the present. Balzac, of course, he had absorbed early, along with Turgenev and Dickens. These contributed deep and ineradicable elements to his sensibility. Writers he had come to later he admired more intellectually, consciously, and it was to these he made his most frequent appeals. His great European touchstones were Tolstoy and Flaubert. Of the English novelists, he accorded lavish admiration to Conrad. From his native tradition he acknowledged two masters: Joseph Furphy and Henry Handel Richardson. Lawson, like Balzac and Dickens, occupied a place in his imagination too deep to be comprehended by conscious admiration.

Such a set of fictional masters implies some kind of basic assumptions about the form, function, and values of fiction. And indeed his stated responses to his touchstones, together with various *obiter dicta* scattered through the radio scripts, do add up to a critical view very akin to that enunciated in the fugitive essays of the 1920’s and 1930’s, and quite in accord with his own best practice. Any critical *schema* derivable from
Palmer’s broadcast commentaries would necessarily begin with his conviction that it is the duty of fiction to concern itself, as fully as possible, with all aspects of man’s experience. It was for their comprehensiveness, their universality, that he valued novelists like Tolstoy and Flaubert. This cardinal principle was enunciated in the “Current Books Worth Reading” script for 13 April 1941:

... great novelists, like Tolstoi or Flaubert, have always dealt with the whole life of man and not merely with the spiritual side of him. They have been as much concerned with the day-to-day problems of ordinary living as with the occasional deep experiences of the soul.

For Palmer, that generalization meant, in practice, that the novelist must place primary reliance on his powers as an observer; must be prepared to find the key to his characters’ lives in the apparent trivialities of their behaviour, in the details of their occupations. No brilliance of style or structure could redeem a novelist in his eyes if he failed in his fundamental task of seeing the world as in itself it really is.

The novelist’s vision (in the quite literal sense) must not be falsified or distorted by his adherence to any theory. In reviewing Mauriac’s Thérèse on 20 June 1948, he wrote that “preoccupation with a theory of life, rather than life itself, can turn a good novelist into a mere propagandist”. In his own living, Palmer certainly subscribed to a number of theories, of various kinds; if they were present in his fiction, however, it was his hope that they would be felt not as imposed on the material but as growing inevitably out of what he saw and recorded. Such stress on the donnée of fiction might seem to require of Palmer an allegiance to a brute, undifferentiated realism. He was aware of that critical possibility, and rejected it, refusing to admire a slice of life merely because it was a big slice and had a lot of ingredients. His comment on Frank Hardy’s Power Without Glory, on 3 September 1950, is germane in this connection:

“Power Without Glory”, though full of lively and spirited writing, bears a closer relation to the work of Upton Sinclair
than to that of the great French writer [Balzac]. It shows more talent, that is to say, in the assembly of materials than in putting them to economical or imaginative use.

Palmer, in other words, was committed to the need for some kind of shaping pressure being brought to bear on the selected material, a pressure which he conceived of as operating, in part, through style and structure. Again and again his comments demonstrate his sensitivity to a lively, dynamic, and richly textured style. Equally, he was aware of the perils of a falsely inflated rhetoric, with its capacity to give a narrative an unearned importance. On 18 April 1947, in writing of Thomas Wolfe's *The Web and the Rock*, he made this remark:

This American novelist can carry you along on a tide of emotion that is almost overwhelming as Niagara... The faults of a book like 'The Web and the Rock' are obvious. The style is often turgid and grandiose... the truth is that in the world of art it is precision, form, and intensity that count.

This specific verdict has its generalized counterpart in the definition (in "Current Books Worth Reading" of 22 January 1950) of rhetoric as "that fatal vice in literature, the reproduction by the imitative faculty of feelings not innate in the person who gives them expression".

Recognizing that not all highly wrought prose need fall into the vice of rhetoric as he understood it, Palmer nevertheless maintained a considerable reserve about writing that leaned towards the technically experimental. The attitude can be felt in the regularly pejorative use of the word "modern", by which Palmer meant the wilfully subjective, the desperately ironic, the pretentiously avant garde. He could concede and respond to the greatness of a writer like Joyce; about lesser men he was prone to enter reservations. His own stylistic ideal is summed up in the phrase he used again and again of the writers he directly and personally admired: "he writes well without being seen to write".

As a formal critical theorist, Palmer cannot lay claim to any marked originality. His reputation as a critic must rest on his
practical, largely intuitive, responses to individual works of literature; in that respect, he must rate highly — probably the best critic of his kind to have operated in Australia since A.G. Stephens. Yet his critical ideas do have enough shape, however hazy, to provide a respectable foundation for his own creative work. His doctrine of realism does have some individuality in the mode and tenor of its expression. Never in his own mind a highly ordered body of intellectual doctrine, it was rather a vision which fired his own creative activity and which from time to time threw off sparks to illuminate the day-to-day work of practical evaluation.

BELLES LETTRES

It would certainly be unfair to demand a complete one-for-one relationship between Palmer’s creative work and his critical opinions. In only one area of his interests did he forge a direct link between his speculations about the writer’s task and the books that he actually produced. Closely allied to his belief that literature must confront the whole of human experience was his view that it must be shared by the whole human community. As early as 1921, in “The Spirit of Prose”, he had asserted the importance of an audience for the full development of the novelist’s art. The notion of books without readers was an affront to some of Palmer’s central beliefs. Fiction must not only take society as its domain, it must actively and directly strive to make contact with society. Of all contemporary critics he admired Edmund Wilson the most; of his predecessors in Australia, A.G. Stephens. Both were men who sought to understand works of literature not as isolated aesthetic objects but as contributory elements to the whole complex pattern of culture. Palmer was even prepared to find merit in an Australian critic earlier than Stephens, G.B. Barton: “Barton was our first serious critic: that is to say, he was concerned not merely with assessing the worth of this or that piece of work, but with cultural values as a whole and the activities of the creative spirit.”2

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In those words Palmer displaced onto Barton a critical responsibility which he came increasingly to believe to be his own. When, in the 1940's, criticism came to occupy a large part of his attention, his beliefs about the nature of literature and society impelled him to that generalized assessment of cultural values which he had lauded in Barton. Literary criticism, for Palmer, led inevitably and directly to an interest in the sociological; more accurately, perhaps, to a concern for civilization. In a radio script of 11 April 1948 he wrote of John Plesch's *Jans* that "It is what you might call a civilized book. That is to say, it comes out of a varied and many-sided culture". In Palmer's mind, one of the great tasks of criticism was to integrate particular works of literature with their nourishing civilization. Civilization he held to be an intricately patterned fabric involving all kinds of human aspirations. Yet when he looked at his own country's past and present, he was made painfully aware of great gaps in the fabric of its civilization. What became almost a slogan phrase for him in the 1940's — "the great empty spaces in our past" — advertises his determination to help fill them in.

Palmer's brand of nationalism, that is to say, is directly related to the nature and practice of literary criticism, as he understood it. The practical result of his perception of the relation was a series of books between 1940 and 1954 which, lying somewhere between technical literary criticism and professional history, can best be described as Palmer's contribution to belles lettres. The first of the series, *National Portraits*, appeared in 1940. In its final form, the book is composed of twenty-five brief biographies of important Australians. Its aim and the principles underlying the selection of subjects are clearly stated in the Foreword:

This book attempts to show the lifework of certain significant figures in our history. Significant? The word is challenging. Yet since there is no scientific test of a man's importance, I have selected these figures either because of their representative character, or because they seemed to me true pioneers, originating ideas and tapping springs that were later to enrich the national life . . .
In general the attention of this book has been concentrated on men with some creative impulse rather than on administrators or politicians. The reason is clear. History, as written in Australia, at any rate till recently, has been largely preoccupied with changes of government and the attitudes of men holding political power. This gives it a strange lack of content. To record governmental acts is all very well, but what is the life beneath this formal crust? What are the ideas, conflicts, and economic developments that have given the country a character of its own? With such an inquiry in mind, it would seem that men were of importance in so far as they contributed to this inner leavening.  

The technique of portraiture is straightforward enough. In the body of each essay the main outlines of the career are stated in direct narrative form, stress being placed on the subject's enrichment of the national life. There is usually a brief glance at his personality, or a fuller treatment of some temperamental trait responsible for his impact on Australian life. The narrative and the character sketch lead into a conclusion summarizing the nature and importance of his achievements. More variety is to be found in the introductory sequences of the portraits. Sometimes they start bluntly with a topic sentence: "The name of Alfred Deakin will always be associated with the early years of the Commonwealth" (p. 167), or "Undoubtedly the most dynamic figure in the first thirty years of Australian development was John Macarthur" (p. 1). Other chapters open with a preliminary sketch of the subject's personality. The introduction to chapter 3 ("The Currency Lad: John Batman") is typical of this kind:

An atmosphere of sweetness and healthy vigour surrounds the figure of John Batman whenever we come across it. He was typical of the new generation that, in the early part of last century, was growing up around Sydney; of the young men from whom Macquarie wanted to form a squadron of dragoons, so dashing and high-spirited did they seem when they raced along the Windsor road or rode wildly without reins through the streets of Parramatta. But he had none of the complexes that made some of them aggressive in asserting
their independence or their dignity. Physically big and powerful, buoyant in temperament, he was unaffected by the repressive influences around him. ‘Honest John’ his friend Hume called him, and the adjective meant something positive in those days. He had no social ambitions, little of that consciousness of class and status which made life such a medley of small triumphs and humiliations for other men both free and bond. There was always something of a joke about his adventurous schemes, as when, after his absurd treaty with the natives of Port Phillip, he burst into John Pascoe Fawkner’s inn at Launceston, calling out breezily:

‘Look here, you fellows! I’m the biggest landowner in the world!’ (p. 26)

Other chapters open with a brief account of prevailing social conditions. More rarely, as in his treatment of Henry Parkes or the squatter Christison, Palmer launches into a dramatically revealing anecdote. Apart from its opening, however, the study of Christison can serve as a model of the general pattern of the twenty-five chapters of *National Portraits*, not least in Palmer’s penchant for using his sketches of individual lives as pegs on which to hang some wider historical observations. The life of Christison, for instance, becomes the occasion for a capsule essay on the whole squatting period of Australia’s pioneering past. Many of the other chapters broaden out into similar large-scale canvasses.

It must be said that history so presented is liable to suffer some drastic simplifications; and *National Portraits* can never be read as the deliberated report of a professional historian in full possession of the evidence. As history, it is amateur, and for amateurs; nor, in his disavowal of the scholarly procedures, does Palmer pretend that it is otherwise. The value of *National Portraits* in historical terms is its power to generate excitement about the Australian past, to evoke an awareness of the many strands that have been woven into Australian society. Its human value is further to be found in the kinds of individual it holds up as models of behaviour; in a sense, *National Portraits* is an exemplary work. Thus, even a figure like
Cardinal Moran, whose intellectual doctrines were widely at variance with Palmer's, receives his share of sympathetic praise. For Moran's life embodied his own aphorism; "The world holds nothing more precious or more beautiful than the cultivated intellect of a man enlightened by faith" (p. 143). All the subjects of *National Portraits* are distinguished by their dedication, their public service, their contribution, conscious or unconscious, to the shared well-being of the Australian community.

Yet the values which most consistently recommend themselves to Palmer in this work are those he describes as "democratic". The word itself appears so often as to become a shibboleth, never fully analysed or submitted to rigorous definition. To be sure, the whole conduct of the book makes plain enough its meaning for Palmer: approval of group action and responsibility, alignment with the economically under-privileged, distrust of personal aggrandisement. The general outlines of Palmer's democracy are implied all through *National Portraits*, but the failure to provide a precise definition of one of its central concepts must be accounted a failure in the book.

The implicit identification of social virtues with democratic tendencies naturally led Palmer to a particular reading of Australian history. Two decades become crucial: the 1850's, with their democratizing gold rushes, and the 1890's, with their nationalist and federalist movements. Something like half of the twenty-five sketches in *National Portraits* are of men who were making their mature contributions during the 1890's. Again, this is oversimplified historiography; and, while the pattern of history to which the book subscribes is still vital to any interpretation of the Australian past, since 1940 it has been subject to some severe modifications. *National Portraits* should be thought of less as professional history than as Palmer's idealized vision of the possibilities of Australian life rendered into historical terms.

That vision inspired more books than *National Portraits*, compelled from Palmer many reworkings of his store of historical materials. Indeed, the recurrence of some of the subject matter of his belletristic writing poses a problem
comparable to that implicit in his fiction: the need to discriminate between matter that is being used with the professional parsimony of the full-time man of letters and that which has imposed itself on the imagination with the force of creative obsession. In at least three minor works which followed *National Portraits* the latter condition seems to be fulfilled. They are studies of individual men, in form rather like fuller versions of single chapters in the *Portraits*.

The first of them was *A.G. Stephens: His Life and Work*, published in 1941. It consists of a monograph length account of Stephens' career, followed by an extensive selection from Stephens' own writing for the *Bulletin* and the *Bookfellow*. The main facts of the critic's life are set out clearly and chronologically; his qualities and value as a literary commentator are discussed; a picture of the wider issues in Australian life illustrated by his activities is built up around the main narrative. The biographical material suggests in its greater fullness that Palmer had done more thorough research than he had for *National Portraits*. The final verdict that is entered on the subject of the book, while judicious, is highly laudatory:

What was the value of Stephens' work to Australia? It did not lie in his published books, which only expressed a small part of him . . . He was a journalist-critic, pouring his power into the weekly column, scattering his wit, badinage, common sense with a free hand, seeming to take letters lightly, yet, through the manly directness of his approach, making them an important and exciting part of life for his readers. His influence on the writers of his day was immense. It was not merely the penetration of his comments on published work, though this was responsible for clearing the air of much rhetoric and romanticism; it was the enthusiasm he inspired for creative work of all kinds, particularly for the adventure of capturing the tones and rhythms of Australian life in the mesh of literature . . .

Stephens' criticism was a lucky gift to the writers of his day; it has not lost its drive. The breath of life comes from his quick phrases that often achieved wit while merely aiming at justice. He chose to pioneer a field in which there was little hope of immediate reward, and Australia owes
an unpayable debt to his courage, his insight, and his integrity.4

Palmer had known Stephens in his youth, and personal piety may in part account for his high respect for the earlier writer. It also seems likely that he saw in Stephens’ career a precedent for a good deal of what he was trying to accomplish in his own critical activity. Yet his tribute is in large measure just. Although Stephens’ life and work have undergone a good deal of close inspection since 1941, and Palmer’s assessment has suffered some revisions of detail and emphasis, in essence it seems likely to stand. And nothing can take from his book the honour of being the first important study of this major Australian man of letters.

One of the features of Stephens’ life was its close association with the Bulletin of the 1890’s. Palmer’s biography opens with a general survey of the importance of that decade in the development of Australian culture, and both sections V and VI are given over to the role of the Bulletin during the same period.

Palmer was thus explicating into specific historical interest some of the implicit values of National Portraits, working his way through material which still had to find its fullest expression. More immediately, however, he produced in 1942 a monograph on the poet Frank Wilmot, who wrote under the nom de plume of Furnley Maurice. This comparatively slight piece (only thirty pages of text), commissioned and published by the Frank Wilmot Memorial Committee, is a tribute at once personal and public. For Palmer, Wilmot’s death marked the end of a long personal friendship.

The double inspiration of the study can be felt in the quality of its writing. A relaxed yet vigorous tone is only part of an eloquent charm which is rarely transmitted to the writing on Stephens but which is here established in the very first paragraph:

When I think about Frank Wilmot, as I remember him first, it is as a slim, youngish man, diffident but alert, moving through the aisles of Cole’s Book Arcade during the middle years of the first Great War. He seemed the centre of Cole’s in those days, and Cole’s the centre of Melbourne.
Coming into town, one naturally gravitated to that great bookshop, which was less a bookshop than a public walk, linking the two main streets, and attracting people into its funnel with miscellaneous diversions, from the grotesque dwarfs turning a windlass in the front to the monkeys and string band in the middle distance.\(^5\)

The speed with which the prose passes from personal reminiscence to the evocation of a whole literary milieu is a habitual trick of Palmer's method, and one peculiarly suited to his aims in *Frank Wilmot*. At the same time as he conjured up the presence of the man through his own memories and anecdotes he could create the environment that shaped him into what he was — Melbourne from the Great War through to the Depression Thirties.

The personal commentary is characteristically generous: Palmer would almost certainly have subscribed to the dictum, *De mortuis nil nisi bonum*. He was especially anxious that justice should be done when, as in this case, he had not always seen eye to eye with the man of whom he wrote. The straight-out critical commentary on Wilmot's poetry is necessarily somewhat perfunctory, yet within the space of a few pages it conveys something of its strengths and weaknesses and its development from beginnings to maturity; Palmer always had the gift for clear and well-balanced condensation. The concluding words of appraisal, as so often with Palmer, say as much about himself as they do about Wilmot:

The truth was that he had little regard for his own reputation. You could imagine him writing anonymously at the end of his life as he did at the beginning. He saw his work as a contribution poured into the common pool — the end being the erection of a culture that would water the dry soil of this country and give it a richer life. This was a task in which personalities didn't count. (p. 35)

The third of the Australian writers whom Palmer commemorated during the 1940's was another close friend, closer even than Wilmot, Louis Esson. *Louis Esson and the Australian Theatre*, published in 1948, is more original in form than *Frank Wilmot*, less personal in feeling. It consists of a series of letters from
Esson to Palmer which are linked together by Palmer's interpolated narrative. The letters are mainly confined to the 1920's, chiefly concerned with the Pioneer Players and other efforts to bring a native drama into being. Although one of the founders of the Players, Palmer was a much less significant member of the group than Esson; consequently his own impact on the printed record is the less forceful of the two. In effect, *Louis Esson and the Australian Theatre* sets out to do precisely what Palmer had praised Wilmot for attempting: to add something to the common pool of Australian culture. The book has the incidental value of adding to our biographical knowledge of Palmer himself, but, considered on its own terms, its deliberately anonymous tone makes it more valuable to the student of Australian drama than the reader of Palmer. It is the only work of indispensable first-hand materials that Palmer added to the Australian historical record.

Between *Frank Wilmot* and *Louis Esson* Palmer published a work, which, while it seems to have thoroughly excited his imagination, is yet one of the few thorough failures of his mature career: *Hail Tomorrow* (1947). He had devoted one chapter of *National Portraits* to the union leader, W.G. Spence, concentrating most of his attention on the great strikes and class struggles of the 1890's. In *A.G. Stephens* he had introduced some comment on William Lane, the leader of the New Australia venture. Now in *Hail Tomorrow* he tried to write a play which would fuse Lane's career with the making of the Australian myth during the closing decade of the nineteenth century. The idea is promising enough, Palmer had found potentially dramatic situations and characters. Yet *Hail Tomorrow* fails almost entirely.6

The play is set in the early 1890's, and is divided into four acts. The central dramatic conflict is between Alec Glover, chairman of the Central Strike Committee in Barcaldine in 1891, and William Lane, editor of the *Boomerang* and leader of the utopian community in Paraguay. The thematic conflict, of course, is between the realist and the visionary; between Glover, trying to achieve his democratic ideals within the Australian actuality, and Lane, disabled with the country,
his head full of perfect and perfectly impossible schemes of utopian society. There are further conflicts between Labor and Capital (represented by Verney, the President of the Pastoralists' Association), and among the unionists themselves. The dramatic machinery is kept in motion by Mick Cafferty, a headstrong and vacillating member of the Strike Committee who briefly sells out to Verney and his interests. The play takes the strikers from near success to complete defeat. Alec Glover is imprisoned, and William Lane prepares to sail for South America in the *Royal Tar*.

It is not in its material but in the shaping of its material that *Hail Tomorrow* fails, especially its dialogue. The speeches of virtually all the characters are hopelessly stilted and expository. Even Glover's sixteen-year-old daughter, Maggie, spouts working class slogans. The men utter the textbook sentiments of unionism with a regularity to defeat any chance of genuine dramatic life. It seems that Palmer was so absorbed in his study of the 1890's that his instinct for appropriate form temporarily deserted him.

He did finally succeed in giving his interpretation of the period its full and satisfying expression. Before he did, however, he made a further small addition to our awareness of the Australian past. In 1951 he published in collaboration with Margaret Sutherland *Old Australian Bush Ballads*. The inspiration was, of course, "Banjo" Paterson's famous collection of nearly half a century earlier. The personal colour of Palmer's interest in ballad and folklore is indicated in the Preface to his own selection:

> Most of our best anonymous songs date from the period immediately after the gold-rushes. Those were the days when our people were beginning to adjust themselves to the Australian world about them; and since men and women can never be really at home with their background till they have mirrored it in some form of art, they gave rein to their humour and imagination in ballads of the track, the selection, the shearing shed . . . Every man had a hand in shaping them.7

The best statement on the true value of this slight enterprise
comes from John Manifold, himself a distinguished expert on
the Australian ballad:

In 1949 when we first met, Vance Palmer had just finished
his work on the compilation *Old Australian Bush Ballads*. Neither of us could foresee what a landmark this book would
become.

Public interest in the sung ballad was at its lowest ebb . . .
The ballad anthologies of A.B. Paterson and Will Lawson
were forgotten to such an extent that pundits were uncon-
tradicted when they announced, "Australia has no folk-
songs." . . .

Vance refuted the whole thesis by the simple act of
publishing a baker's dozen of ballads with music, and with
a preface which implies a solid knowledge of the ballad
tradition. He included, as though absent-mindedly, a
bullocky ballad and two shearer-ballads, and left it at
that . . .

In spite of its musical deficiencies, the book struck fire from
the rising generation, and gave a focus to the vague but
genuine feelings of nationality which our academic composers
have never touched.8

It was in 1954 that Palmer published the work which at
last synthesized his cultural interest in a major period of
Australian history. *The Legend of the Nineties* is a book which in
many ways epitomizes the whole of his long campaign to civilize
Australia through the agency of prose. Developed through nine
chapters, it is his fullest attempt to organize his understanding
of the period, its issues, its personalities, above all the quality
of its shared experience. Although no more burdened with the
apparatus of scholarship than *National Portraits*, it gives evidence
of more thorough and extensive research and of a more rigorous
examination of its materials. Opening with a generalized
account of the decade and the problems it poses for the student,
the book moves on to chapters on such matters as the composition
of the population, the social idealism of the age, the emergence
of an articulate literature, political conflicts and their solutions.
It arrives at last at some speculation about the historical
meaning of the nineties and the period's continuing significance
to the Australian imagination.
The Legend of the Nineties draws quite heavily on material already incorporated in National Portraits and some of Palmer’s fugitive pieces from the 1940’s. Many of the personalities, for instance, who dominate the later book had been present to his imagination for many years. William Lane is the central figure of chapter 4, “The Utopians”. Lawson, always the key writer in Palmer’s version of Australian literary history, is a focal point of chapter 6, “Literature Emerges”. Archibald, Spence, Higinbotham, Deakin, are all allotted decisive roles in Palmer’s portrait of the age. At its best, however, The Legend of the Nineties does not merely copy old themes; it sees them in a new light, includes them in a new synthesis. Thus, while the lives in National Portraits may sometimes appear shallow and truncated, the sketches of the same figures in The Legend of the Nineties are executed, not as biographies manqués, but as the sharply defined units of the complex social fabric which is Palmer’s real subject.

The full complexity of the fabric is further indicated by the appearance in The Legend of the Nineties of material quite new to Palmer’s historical writing. A number of new personalities are woven into his interpretation: William Holman, Phil May, Price Warung. The observations of overseas visitors are effectively worked into the text, notably those of Francis Adams, Henry George, and Edward Bellamy. The Legend of the Nineties may not tighten Palmer’s hold on individual essences, but it consistently transmits an awareness of private lives reacting to public pressures, meshing with ideas, books, social and political issues, to create a civilization unique in its qualities and commitments.

Not that Palmer sentimentalizes the Australian nineties. One of the purposes of the book, in fact, is to combat the tendency (to which Palmer himself may have contributed) to see the decade as the fount of all things pure and good in Australian life. Palmer recognizes that a legend has accumulated about the period; his aim accordingly is to distinguish between legend and fact, to establish what is historically true of the period and to determine what may be culturally usable in the myths that it helped to create. With respect to the literature of
the nineties, the task is especially difficult since the distinction between legend and historical reality is a fine one. To pick one's way between the two requires the practice of that trained poise of mind which Palmer conceived of as the spirit of prose.

Since the appearance of *The Legend of the Nineties*, Australian literary historians have issued some serious challenges to Palmer's view of the decade. Nevertheless, his reading of the material still has much substantively to recommend it, and remains a classic example of the operation of an interpretative apparatus which has made possible some powerful insights into many aspects of Australian culture. The trained poise of mind is there, manifested in the opening paragraph and maintained painstakingly and unspectacularly to the final pages:

A romantic aura always hangs over the last days of a dying century for those who look back on it. It is as if the human mind was impelled to discover a special kind of life about the end of an era. And so there has grown up a legend of the Australian nineties as a period of intense artistic and political activity, in which the genius of this young country had a brief and brilliant first flowering. Something new, it is claimed, emerged into the light. A scattered people, with origins in all corners of the British Islands and in Europe, had a sudden vision of themselves as a nation, with a character of their own and a historic role to play, and this vision set fruitful creative forces in motion. (p. 9)

It is the Utopian aspiration to build a self-contained and uncontaminated community in the South Seas and the defeat of that aspiration which Palmer sees as the central historical realities of the period. Hence the appearance almost as a leitmotif of the phrases from Bernard O'Dowd's "Australia": "A drift Sargasso where the West/In halcyon calm rebuilds her fatal nest", and "a Delos of a coming Sun God's race". Hence the fascination with William Lane, whose efforts to create an ideal society at the foot of the Andes "covered the substance of the Australian dream itself, the idea of a closed continent, of building up a free community apart from the world" (pp. 158–59).

In his commitments and passion for Australia, Palmer was
a true heir of the men of the nineties whom he praised. *The Legend of the Nineties* is not the least fruit of his patrimony. Yet even in this, the culmination of his direct concern for the origins and continuing health of Australian culture, the mood is curiously muted. The prose of *The Legend of the Nineties*, like that of all his major work, remains true to his aesthetic ideals of *mesure* and restraint. Only once in all his writing on Australian civilization did Palmer allow the passion to drive through to the surface of his language, not merely to provide felt tension beneath the surface calm but to display itself with fiery lack of inhibition. The year was 1942; the occasion, the “Crisis” issue of *Meanjin Papers*. At that time, when all that he held most dear stood in the most extreme danger, Palmer allowed himself to speak out in the piece he called “Battle”. If its style is to be classed as rhetorical, then it is a true rhetoric, for, in Palmer’s own terms, the feelings were indeed innate in the person who gave them expression. This, in part, is what he wrote:

The next few months may decide not only whether we survive as a nation, but whether we deserve to survive. As yet none of our achievements prove it, at anyrate in the sight of the outer world. We have no monuments to speak of, no dreams in stone, no Guernicas, no sacred places. We could vanish and leave singularly few signs that, for some generations, there had lived a people who had made a homeland of this Australian earth. A homeland? To how many people was it primarily that? How many penetrated the soil with their love and imagination? We have had no peasant population to cling passionately to their few acres, throw down tenacious roots, and weave a natural poetry into their lives by invoking the little gods of creek and mountain. The land has been something to exploit, to tear out a living from and then sell at a profit. Our settlements have always had a fugitive look, with their tin roofs and rubbish-heaps. Even our towns ... the main street cluttered with shops, the million-dollar town hall, the droves of men and women intent on nothing but buying or selling, the suburban retreats of rich drapers! ...

This is the Australia we are called upon to save. Not merely
the mills and mines, and the higgledy-piggledy towns that have grown up along the coast: not the assets we hold or the debts we owe. For even if we were conquered by the Japanese, some sort of normal life would still go on. You cannot wipe out a nation of seven million people, or turn them all into wood-and-water joeys. Sheep would continue to be bred, wheat raised; there would be work for the shopkeeper, the clerk, the baker, the butcher. Not everyone could be employed pulling Japanese gentlemen about in rickshaws.

Some sort of comfort might even be achieved by the average man under Japanese dominance; but if anyone believes life would be worth living under the terms offered, he is not worth saving. There is no hope for him unless a breath of the heroic will around him stirs him to come out of the body of this death. Undoubtedly we have a share of the decadent elements that have proved a deadly weakness in other countries — whisperers, fainthearts, near-fascists, people who have grown rotten through easy living; and these are often people who have had power in the past and now feel it falling away from them. We will survive according to our swiftness in pushing them into the background and liberating the people of will, purpose, and intensity; those who are at one with Australia’s spirit and are capable of moulding the future.

I believe we will survive; that what is significant in us will survive; that we will come out of this struggle battered, stripped to the bone, but spiritually sounder than we went in, surer of our essential character, adults in a wider world than the one we lived in hitherto. These are great, tragic days. Let us accept them stoically, and make every yard of Australian earth a battle-station.9

NOTES TO CHAPTER 8

1. Vance Palmer, “Current Books Worth Reading”, a radio talk broadcast over the national network of the Australian Broadcasting Commission on 5 January 1941. The dates of all future radio scripts quoted in this chapter are incorporated in the text. All were prepared for the Australian Broadcasting Commission.


6. Keith Macartney presents a somewhat more favourable view of *Hail Tomorrow* in “The Plays”, *Meanjin*, XVIII, No. 2 (1959), 182–92. “Hail Tomorrow is, then, a play where the parts are better than the whole; but these parts are so good that they merit performance” (191).


Few of Palmer’s generation of Australian writers have received proper or even adequate critical attention. Insofar as they and their work enjoy any generally accepted reputation, it has risen out of some widely circulated but largely unexamined ideas about their place in the development of an Australian literary tradition. Born too late to qualify for the by now quite searching examination of the writers of the nineties, they have been left in the backwash of the exciting modernism which, appearing about 1940, still shows little sign of faltering in its momentum. Criticism of the fiction, especially, of the 1920’s and 1930’s has been left, too often, to make do with some crudely acceptable ideas about social realism, pioneering sagas, the fascination of the bush, and little else. Palmer and his contemporaries, it may properly be said, have suffered from too little rather than too much criticism.

In this general trough of inattention, Palmer’s plight has been worse than most. Even in 1929 Lucille M. Bloink could announce that “It is surely time some one began talking about Vance Palmer seriously and, as far as possible, comprehensively”.¹ It was to be another decade before her plea was in any measure answered. Until 1929 and for some years after—
wards, the case was pretty much as Miss Bloink stated it: “people mention him from time to time, and always with respect — but this sort of appreciation is too casual, too vague”. After twenty years of serious writing, Palmer seems to have been well known but little understood. Outside the company of his fellow writers, his name was usually good for a gossipy paragraph or two in the newspapers, more often concerned with some of the more piquant aspects of his life than with his literary achievement — the journey through Russia, the meeting with Jack London, the early Grub Street years in London. Even the central facts of his life were so ill and scantily reported that the first chapter of this study is the longest biography of Palmer ever to have appeared in print — and that of a man whose career is central to the sociology of Australian letters for something like half a century.

The first commentary on Palmer’s writing of any length and gravity is to be found in M. Barnard Eldershaw’s *Essays in Australian Fiction,* published in 1938. This forty-page analysis is devoted mainly to the novels but finds place for some laudatory remarks on the short stories. It also represents the first effort to view the separate works as elements in a continuing process of creation; stages in Palmer’s development are suggested, recurring themes and motifs noted. Many of the comments are so shrewd and incisive as to retain their value as permanently illuminating criticism.

But *Essays in Australian Fiction,* appearing when it did, could treat work only up to *The Swayne Family*; some of Palmer’s best books still lay in the future. After 1938 the volume of comment on Palmer’s writing did not significantly increase, but useful essays (mainly by fellow writers rather than critics) did from time to time appear. John K. Ewers, for instance, included Palmer in his survey, *Creative Writing in Australia,* which appeared in 1945. In 1948 Frank Dalby Davison contributed an important essay, “Vance Palmer and His Writings”, to *Meanjin.* Centring his discussion on the novels, Davison ranges widely among Palmer’s books, his remarks on the early work like *The World of Men* and the poetry being especially useful. A.D. Hope’s *Southerly* essay of 1955 elicited
as a reply to John McKellar’s attack, makes an indispensable contribution to the proper appreciation of the fiction.

Undoubtedly the culmination of critical endeavour contemporary with Palmer himself was the special issue of *Meanjin* (No. 2 for 1959), given over exclusively to the life and work of Vance and Nettie. It includes analyses of the several genres of his writing, tributes to his personal qualities, appreciations of his contributions to Australian culture. Almost everybody who might at that time have made a useful and perceptive comment on Vance Palmer is represented in its pages.

Since Palmer’s death, the most important criticism of his work is to be found in several histories of Australian literature which have appeared in the ensuing years: Cecil Hadgraft’s *Australian Literature*, H.M. Green’s monumental two volume work, the compendium-history edited by Geoffrey Dutton. Since these have been general surveys, they have in the main been content to work within the already established patterns of belief, recording a variety of specific modifications or additions. Their effect has, in some measure, been to harden the already set lines of response to the generation of the twenties and thirties. In conformity with this general phenomenon, Palmer’s reputation has, as it were, been codified into some half-dozen clear and easily graspable notions, notions which have enough truth in them to be at once culturally tolerable and critically inadequate.

Within this basic repertoire of reaction, the sense of Palmer’s practical contribution to the Australian community of letters has gained most widespread acceptance. Even as he enters some reservations about Palmer’s achievement in fiction, Ewers is representative in praising his practical, exemplary role in the development of the Australian novel:

> As a novelist he was one of a select band of writers who persevered at a time when the Australian novel was not readily accepted here as possessing qualities comparable with those of similar work overseas. (p. 62)

To be written down as one who, by his practical efforts, made things easier for his successors is not a fate that any serious
writer would anticipate with pleasure; nor is it one that Palmer deserves.

The element of truth in Ewers' remark was re-formulated by Frank Dalby Davison in a way more fairly and accurately to represent this aspect of Palmer's creative achievement:

Palmer got rid of our national inferiority complex by the difficult though simple-seeming method of dropping it. He just took Australia for granted — like Lawson and Furphy in their more grown-up moods. From the very beginning Palmer wrote on the sensible assumptions that Australians were human beings complete in all natural attributes, and that life here had a validity and interest equalling life elsewhere. These assumptions... for reasons it will be interesting to explore at a later stage, were difficult to make in the years when Palmer was beginning to write, and still more difficult to put into practice. (p. 12)

To have moved Australian literature significantly towards the maturity that springs from cultural independence was a creative achievement of some magnitude, and one to which formal obeisance has often enough been made. Once the cultural achievement has been acknowledged, however, ideas about the nature and quality of Palmer's writing begin to run somewhat thinner.

The standard pigeonhole to which he is assigned is the one labelled social realism, a category which has enjoyed considerable prestige in Australian literary history. It can easily be regarded as the natural resting place of an Australian writer who made a significant contribution to cultural nationalism, who took social dynamics as one of his great subjects, who held political and economic views which were often and distinctly left of centre. Unfortunately, the pigeonhole itself is so large, has been required to accommodate so many different writers of so many different tones, that the classification can claim only the crudest descriptive value. It assumes slightly greater merit when translated, as by Judah Waten, into historical terms: "His work constitutes an important link between the realists of Lawson's epoch and the realists of our time."28

The attempt to define Palmer by placing him on an historical
map has on several occasions been given greater refinement than Waten's formulation. H.M. Green, for instance, develops the notion of his straddling two eras, two traditions, in a way which takes interesting account of the tensions which clearly operated within his personal psychology:

Like several other Australian writers, of prose and verse, Palmer belongs to two historic Periods and two quite different literary worlds, and his work shows this in a curious way. There appears to have been a conflict in his nature between the nineties and modernity as represented respectively by his temperament and his will. (p. 1024)

Jack Lindsay offers a further interesting variant on the historical reading of Palmer's realism at the end of his Meanjin essay on the novels.

I have suggested that in The Big Fellow though implying the new patterns of conflict, he does not attempt to define the postwar scene where Australia becomes an industrial rather than an agricultural country and all sorts of new problems arise . . . From the 1940s a new Australia begins, which needs a new sort of treatment. Although historically based in the world of 1900–1940, Vance Palmer's work remains — through its poetic insights and its grasp of deep-reaching aspects of human development—to give expression to permanent aspects of the human condition.9

As the historical study of Australian literature develops, there seems good reason to hope that the phrase "social realism", as applied to Palmer or anybody else, will lose a great deal of its raw critical connotations, if it is not abandoned altogether. At the moment, however, and as an aesthetic description of Palmer's achievement, it leaves much to be desired.

To be fair, several critics have made serious efforts to press the concept towards some more adequate relation with the actual quality of Palmer's writing. Hadgraft, for example, rightly draws attention to the regional element in Palmer's realism both in his History and an earlier Southerly article:

Not the least of this writer's contributions is his effort to render acceptable to readers the life and atmosphere of
Queensland towns and the life of Australian families . . .
Certain parts of the Australian background, thanks to his
writings, are in a fair way to become part and parcel of
our literary heritage . . . 10
Frank Dalby Davison sees Palmer’s realism at work not so much
in a brute reporting of social fact as in a maturity and breadth
of social observation and judgment. Most commentators would
probably concur in the descriptive accuracy of both these
analyses. They would find other matters, too, where they could
reach agreement — Palmer’s skill in craftsmanship, his
competency in character portrayal, his capacity to evoke
certain kinds of landscape, his prevailing humanism (though
the detailed nature of his humanism remains sadly unexamined).

There is even something like unanimity as to the proper
ordering of Palmer’s works in a hierarchy of value. The poetry
will be fairly rapidly dismissed, followed soon by the drama.
There will be rather warmer approval for the works of cultural
criticism. The short stories will be set apart as indisputably
the best of Palmer’s writing. And, it must be said, having once
been set apart they will pre-eminently fail to be discussed,
although A.A. Phillips’ Meanjin essay constitutes an honourable
and major exception to the rule.11 Of the novels, The Passage
and the Golconda trilogy will probably be awarded pride of
place. Hadgraft, however, makes a plea (to my mind, an
eccentric one) for the earliest books; Green finds Men Are
Human much underrated; Lindsay enters a case for Legend for
Sanderson.

Yet underneath the still limited chorus of agreement about
the nature and relative merits of Palmer’s several works can
be heard a hollow, all-pervading, and sceptical “but”. Even the
Eldershaw essay, for all its sympathy, finds its epithet of
reservation:

His bent towards objectivity in character-drawing is part
of his bias towards the negative that comes from his extreme
sensitiveness to the phenomena of life. This partly inhibits
his creative gifts. It breeds in him the same respect for the
feelings and reticences of his characters as he would feel for
his friends. (p. 94)
With later critics “bias towards the negative” gives place to harsher terms. Hadgraft speaks of his “tentativeness”. McKellar, in what is probably the most sustained attack on Palmer’s achievement, characterizes his central weakness as “timidity”:

Palmer possesses many enviable powers, the power of natural description, of narrative-continuity, the power of “thinking from one’s own base”, but the one power lacking is the calling forth of the dead to life — the power of resurrection.\textsuperscript{12}

It is the coolly judicious Green who sets down the core of the common case against Palmer:

Palmer’s is a self-consistent if highly subjective world, and it is conveyed with an art that is superior to that of any member of his group and not surpassed by any other Australian novelist today: its chief lack is vitality. (p. 1034)

To lack vitality is for a novelist virtually to lack all. Yet in the face of such a widespread and reputable consensus the charge cannot easily be set aside. It must at least be conceded that the majority opinion is accurate in describing the effect of Palmer’s failures. It is inadequate in diagnosing symptoms rather than causes. What may appear in Palmer as a lack of vitality is not the failure of the normal creative energy of the novelist, it is the breakdown of a method and sensibility so unfamiliar in Australian writing as to have been regularly misconstrued if not ignored.

There have, of course, been writers ready and able to chart the true map of Palmer’s creative imagination: notably A.D. Hope and Jack Lindsay. Hope’s \textit{Southerly} essay is crucial in its establishment of the poetic basis of Palmer’s realism. Founded in an analysis of \textit{The Passage}, the argument is convincingly extended to cover \textit{Golconda} and to arrive at the final assertion that “He rejects you might say mere insight for something more profound: vision. Primarily it is the vision of a poet” (209). Lindsay, while recognizing the poetic quality of Palmer’s mind, is primarily engaged in demonstrating the intellectual vigour of the fiction. He finds in the novels conclusive evidence of a mind powerfully at work among ideas. Frankly admitting their limitations and weaknesses, he constructs a
fine case for the view that they collectively and successfully display "a rich dialectic of conflict and growth" (169). His article concludes with one of the most unequivocal defences of Palmer's worth ever put into print:

Vance Palmer, I have tried to show, is a consistently philosophic novelist, whose books come together in such a dynamic unity that in a sense from Hurricane to The Big Fellow we are reading a single narrative of human development, a Human Comedy. He is a novelist of the stature to which we cannot deny the term greatness, even if it is perhaps only in Legend for Sanderson and Golconda that all his qualities find full play in defining a complex pattern of spiritual and social change. (p. 172)

The essays by Hope and Lindsay must provide the essential bases for any future explorations of Palmer's art. It has, in a sense, been the aim of this study to suggest some of the directions those explorations may take and to go part of the way along the road (though whatever value these chapters may have will certainly be heuristic as much as definitive). Much yet remains to be done simply in providing an accurate description of Palmer's theory and practice; more in discovering the true nature of the complex personality which lay behind the somewhat aloof exterior: most of all, perhaps, in finding a language and an angle of vision apt for revealing the idiosyncratic quality and worth of his books.

Yet it is Palmer himself who should be allowed to hold out a final signpost towards the right reading of his books. On 1 May 1959, only ten weeks before he died, he wrote a moving letter to Clem Christesen in connection with the special number of Meanjin. In it can be heard the accumulated hurt and protest of a lifetime's misunderstanding:

Dear Clem,

I am sorry I read John Barnes' article. It may seem churlish to react against a piece as brimming with generosity and goodwill, but that first deadly sentence fell like clods on my coffin. And if even half the strictures on my work were valid ('limited in tone, lacking force', 'material often dull',

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In that letter he voiced his distress at all the charitable misconstructions which had been placed on his work. In another letter to Christesen, some four years earlier, he had administered a brief and private corrective. The letter is dated 20 July 1955:

Perhaps I’ve been more silent than I should have been on public questions. And perhaps my main work lacks “passion”, as you imply. But what is “passion”? I’ve seen it attributed to countless young writers who’ve got over their fever quickly. And I’ve kept some sort of fire alight for over fifty years!

This is swagger for which I ought to be struck dumb. But I’m tried of the way, over the years in Australia, the rather hysterical emotionalism of (say) Lloyd Ross, or the artificial gusto of (say) Lindsay and his young men has been taken for passion, when it’s really an attempt to induce feeling by gestures.

The steady flame which burned at the heart of Palmer’s imagination was not of a kind to throw off vivid and spectacular works of genius. Genius always demands some element of the extreme, and Palmer deliberately allowed himself to be possessed by the daemon of the ordinary. Therein lies the paradox of his creative achievement; he was the artist of the usual, the illuminator of the everyday. When his daemon deserted him, he could fall prey to all the flatness with which his critics have tasked him. When it returned, his work burned with a pale fire, nourished by a slow wisdom, a ready compassion, and a uniquely personal hold on the humanist vision of the world.
NOTES TO CHAPTER 9

2. Ibid.
4. John K. Ewers, Creative Writing in Australia: A Critical Survey (Melbourne, 1945). Quotations from Creative Writing are taken from the revised edition of 1962, and page references are incorporated in the text.
5. Frank Dalby Davison, “Vance Palmer and His Writings”, Meanjin, VII, No. 1 (1948), 10-27. Page references to quotations from this article are incorporated in the text.
9. Jack Lindsay, “The Novels”, Meanjin, XVIII, No. 2 (1959) 172. Page references to future quotations from this article are incorporated in the text.
13. In this letter Palmer is referring to John Barnes’s article, “The Man of Letters”, Meanjin, XVIII, No. 2 (1959), 193–205. Its first sentence was apparently revised in accordance with Palmer’s wishes.
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WORKS

This list contains Palmer's principal writings in book form. Within each section, titles are listed chronologically.

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*The Outpost.* London: Hutchinson, 1924. Another Rann Daly novel.

*Cronulla: A Story of Station Life.* Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1924.


*The Passage.* London: Stanley Paul, 1930. *The Passage* has been republished in 1944 (Melbourne: Robertson and Mullens) and 1957 (Melbourne: Cheshire).


*Hurricane.* Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1935. A revision of *The Outpost*, issued under Palmer's now name.
**Legend for Sanderson.** Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1937.

**Cyclone.** Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1947.

**Golconda.** Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1948. *Golconda, Seedtime* and *The Big Fellow* make up a single narrative usually referred to as the *Golconda* trilogy.

**Seedtime.** Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1957.

**The Big Fellow.** Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1959.

**Short Stories**


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**Plays**

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**Hail Tomorrow.** Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1947.

**Poems**


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