

Objects of Desire

**A Collection of Short Stories**

by

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The Exegesis and Portfolio

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## **Table of Contents**

<b>Abstract.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Statement of Originality.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Exegesis.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Objects of Desire.....</b>	<b>33</b>

The stories in this collection, 'Objects of Desire,' fit somewhere between memoir and fiction and they have been mostly inspired by recollections of the Upper Murray area in which I was brought up in the 1950s and 60s.

I think they provide a different view of Australian childhood from a period in part of the country which has not otherwise been examined or celebrated except in a superficial and sentimental way. Its ethos, while representative of the conservatism of the time in Australia, had particular qualities, often parochial and insular, but also reflective of peculiar freedoms that the region enjoyed. The at times stifling nature of small country towns has often to be weighed against their more relaxed physical qualities. The area also had a polyglot quality due to European immigration, while the seasonal influx of itinerant harvest workers introduced a volatile dynamic.

My research has involved contact with sources who have supplemented my memories with often surprising recollections of their own. At times the stories I have written seem to have anticipated incidents which other people's anecdotes later confirmed. At times too, I should add, visits I paid to the area in the last two years have challenged prejudices I held.

I have dwelt at length in the exegesis on Harry Taylor, a survivor of the New Australia settlement, who passionately pursued his liberal views in the newspaper which he invigorated when he settled in Renmark. I have been more than intrigued by the endurance of his beliefs in the face of what I imagine to have been the indifference, even then, of the community which he so nourished.

Access to archives of *The Murray Pioneer* subsequent to Taylor's passing, and from the time I lived there, attribute a quaint feel to the period. It is perhaps the fate of

all popular journalism to be ridiculed by time, but, lacking Harry Taylor's crusading spirit, and in a society where so much was thought best hidden or left unspoken, his descendants, like the region's local historians, were almost strenuously faithful to their audience's expectations.

The sense of loss and futility or defeat which attends many of these stories is less sentimental. It comes from personal experience but also from what may be read between the lines of the area's local chroniclers. In a sense I think the stories are representative of the spirit of the place and time, and of the gulf which lay, as in New Australia, between innocent ambition and its fulfilment. It was impossible to grow up there and not be marked forever.

## **Statement of Originality**

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made.

I give consent to this copy of my portfolio being made available in the University Library.

Reg Taylor

9<sup>th</sup> December 2010

The stories of fictionalised autobiography in the manuscript, ‘Objects of Desire,’ accompanying this exegesis are loosely but not consecutively linked and their themes, rather in the way in which the research for this exegesis has been pursued, have been explored intuitively.

At times my research has been satisfied in unexpected places: during a recent visit to the Upper Murray area, for example, I was reading Robert Dessaix’s ‘Twilight of Love.’ I had reached the point where the narrator, in the German town of Eichenstrasse, wonders at first if, ‘Perhaps up there above the petunias was where Turgenev had offered Dostoevsky a cutlet...’<sup>1</sup> before reproving himself: ‘But what did it mean even to think like that? Turgenev had never sat up there in the air above those petunias, he had never lived *here* at all. *Here* is always *now*. How can it be anything else?’<sup>2</sup>

I had spent the day driving in the area surrounding Renmark (though I could have chosen half a dozen of the small towns favoured at some time by our family’s presence) before doing a tour on foot of the place where I spent several years when I was young.

It was a worse than melancholy experience.

The American writer, Donald Justice, in a poem, ‘On the Death of Friends in Childhood,’ suggested that if those friends are ever to be met again it will be, ‘in the deserted schoolyard at twilight.’<sup>3</sup> But even that small mercy demands that landmarks like it will still be available for inspection. In my walk that day I’d discovered that the

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<sup>1</sup> Dessaix, Robert. *Twilight of Love. Travels with Turgenev*. Sydney: Picador. 1984. P. 33

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

<sup>3</sup> Hall, Donald. *Contemporary American Poetry*. Hawthorn, Vic: Penguin. 1984 P. 112

schoolyards and almost all other points of reference had either disappeared or been so changed as to make recognition impossible. Worse than that, Dessaix's narrator confirmed the simple truth that I finally had to accept, and explained why sentimental journeys fail. The past just isn't there.

As well, even those symbols of it that remain are falsified by change. In the Riverland's case, since original architecture was so little valued – and, admittedly, so rarely memorable – attempts to cash in on nostalgia in the 70s and 80s of the last century led to quaint and inaccurate attempts at restoration of the original, or to its representation in contemporary form.

In so-called 'Settlers' front bars, the subjects of photographs from earlier days, standing pick-and-shovelled before some unremarkable monument or modest public work, look faintly uneasy. Lacking the sense of vindication or gloating satisfaction that a massive dam or the body of some strung up wretch might lend them, it's as if they're already aware that the future will have little time for their walk-on status in an imminent past.

In retrospect, it was as if the Riverland I knew was forever attempting to assume the laminexed trappings of 'Town.' Everything was always, if unwittingly, temporary. It betrayed, I realise now a fundamental lack of confidence, for which people were forever and overweeningly trying to compensate. The story, 'Beautiful Ettie,' in part reflects on a process by which the memory of Renmark's most distinguished citizen has been almost totally erased from the town.

In my original proposal, I said it was sad that the white people who supplanted the Aborigines in the area relied on makeshift or dubious myths to illuminate their own occupation of it, while living in a state of permanent hunger for material change that

disowned any heritage at all. That might have been facile. And yet the overriding impression left on me by ‘A Man called Possum,’<sup>4</sup> a widely read memoir of its author’s encounters with a man who lived as a recluse for more than fifty years in the area, is of sadness for someone who lived such an alienated life for so long. Despite the writer’s – admittedly not very best – attempts, there is really nothing romantic in his account of the man’s existence.

In a weirdly ironic way, Possum’s experience parallels that of the last indigenous leader in the area, Nanya, who escaped from police custody after killing a man in 1862. Thirty years after this event he and a small tribe of natives were discovered living in the bush and captured in a manner which local chronicler, G. (Arch) Grosvenor, suggested, ‘did little credit to the whites of the day’.<sup>5</sup> Of course the Aboriginals’ tragedy was far greater than that of Possum’s, but each was a relic whose continued existence was dependent on the indulgence of a much greater society around them.

In the same volume just quoted, in one of the crasser salutes made to the town’s history in the 1970s, it was noted that ‘a popular establishment of the Renmark Hotel, the Nanya Lounge, perpetuates the memory of this famous native’.<sup>6</sup> But it is perhaps appropriate that part of the hotel should be such an eponymous beneficiary, since the town’s history and the hotel’s are so closely linked.

The building, whose three-storey Art deco façade has been relatively unchanged since the 1930s, is still the most significant structure in town. If some forces had had their way though, it would not even have been built. When Renmark was first

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<sup>4</sup> Jones, Max. *A Man called Possum*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson. 1987

<sup>5</sup> Grosvenor. G. (Arch) *Red mud to Green Oasis*. Adelaide: Raphael Arts. 1979. P7

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.



established it was intended to be ‘dry,’ and even after a licence had been eventually granted for a hotel to be established, sections of the populace fought on against it.

The fascination with alcohol and its prohibition (or perceived over supply and consumption) in Australia’s early history of white settlement could provide substance for a thesis in itself. Temperance advocates seemed to have come from nearly all of the church groups as well as the Labour Party, who, having first tried to block the granting of a liquor licence, then attempted to restrict its activities as much as possible, before trying to straddle the hotel’s board with as many of their members as they could; a striking example, surely, of the dangers advocates of the working class can represent to its members.

The wowers’ campaign against the hotel could not be accused of being faint hearted or lacking in stamina either. In 1896 a Congregational minister preached his case from the pulpit against the legalised sale of liquor, while also denouncing card playing, whist, chess and draughts and any other vitiating pursuit he could put a name to, and as late as November 25<sup>th</sup>, 1921, *The Murray Pioneer* quoted a Temperance Alliance Representative visiting the town who recorded his distress on seeing, ‘drunken men reeling about all over the place.’<sup>7</sup> Which begs the question of whether the more zealous opponents of alcohol were so vindictive or just unrealistically well intentioned.

Presumably the feelings of the town’s best known citizen, Harry Taylor (to whom I am not related) were ambivalent on this matter. A survivor of the New Australia and Cosme settlements, he was abstemious by nature, but this had to be weighed against his liberal philosophy and his pragmatic awareness of the financial

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<sup>7</sup> Gurr, Y.M.. *The Renmark Hotel, 1897-1997* Berri: J.C. Irving. P. 92 (*The Murray Pioneer*. August 13<sup>th</sup> 1920)

benefits the town stood to gain from the hotel. He tip-toed around his principles while regretting that so much of the hotel's income came from the sale of drink.

Taylor was an extraordinary figure. Before I began this research I imagined that he and his newspaper, *The Murray Pioneer*, would be fair game. He was a loyal lieutenant of William Lane's, and like his general left South America to take the reins of a newspaper. I expected him and his paper to offer parallel evidence of Lane's political apostasy. I thought too, that since Taylor's living descendants in the town were seen as very much members of the town's establishment when I lived there, that Taylor himself, once he'd outgrown the first flush of youthful idealism, would have lapsed into the crusty kind of conservative he was destined to become, a velvet gloved reactionary of the old Adelaide Club kind; all the more unforgiving of social change in his case since he would have been so isolated from a position where he could resist it. I anticipated, in a sense, being able to lay at least part of the blame for the Riverland I knew at his feet.

In fact I discovered that he was a far more appealing and sympathetic human being than his mentor, Lane, tempering religious and political zeal with tolerance and humanity. He was a man of enormous energies, involved in almost every significant public enterprise in the town for the rest of his life, and a champion of its agricultural industries. It would be easy to portray him as some dilettante dabbling in good works from the safe haven of privilege, but in his refusal to allow the parochial to dominate his newspaper completely, or to avoid airing opinions that might – and did – cost him readership and advertising revenue, he showed that he retained much of his crusading zeal.

Taylor might have belonged to that section of the Paraguayan colony who were enjoined in what Gavin Souter in *'A Peculiar People'* called, 'a flight of idealism – a

gorgeous but fragile butterfly which could not abide the noise and smoke of a sixpenny restaurant,<sup>8</sup> (and part of a larger group soon indiscriminatingly united ‘in rumours, slanders, quarrels and fisticuffs,’)<sup>9</sup> but somehow he escaped being tainted by the colony’s failure.

Taylor’s own writing is described as having, ‘the classic polished style of late nineteenth-century writing...’<sup>10</sup> with literary and philosophical influences including Bernard Shaw, John Ruskin, H.G. Wells, William Morris and Leo Tolstoy. His memorial of Lane may verge on the turgid: ‘In the unbounded devotion which he inspired in the breasts of simple men, he was, more than any man I have ever known, like One of whom it is recorded that at his behest his disciples left all and followed him,’<sup>11</sup> but I find it hard not to be affected by his moral intent.

According to Gobbet and Saunders, when Taylor arrived in Renmark in 1905 and bought the struggling local newspaper, the town had a simplicity that he found endearing. ‘Taylor thought it “a sleepy hollow” – but liked it all the more for that’,<sup>12</sup> and he was inspired by what he saw as the spirit of cooperation and good fellowship among its fruit growers.

My own memories of the town’s shortcomings are still too familiar for me to reconcile with those impressions, and they seem to deny all that must have been squalid, primitive and desolate when he first arrived. He was young enough to cope with inconvenience no doubt and largely ignore it, but I find it hard to see how long any Arcadian, sylvan or just rustic associations would last in the middle of a heat wave, or

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<sup>8</sup> Souter, Gavin. *A Peculiar People*. Sydney. Angus and Robertson. 1968. P. 15

<sup>9</sup> Souter, Gavin. *A Peculiar People*. Sydney. A & R. 1968. P. 85

<sup>10</sup> Gobbet and Saunders. *With Lane in Paraguay. Harry Taylor of The Murray Pioneer*. Rockhampton. CQUP. 1995. P.59

<sup>11</sup> Gobbet and Saunders. *With Lane in Paraguay. Harry Taylor of the Murray Pioneer*. Rockhampton. CQUP. 1995. P. 123

<sup>12</sup> Gobbet and Saunders. *With Lane in Paraguay. Harry Taylor of the Murray Pioneer*. Rockhampton CQUP 1995. P. 16

some sulking dust storm of the kind that frequently possessed the town even when I was young, or its stretches of bleak and arid windswept winter days. (One of its leading citizens went broke in the 1980s while attempting to sell sites on a marina he had established under a sub-tropical flag.) I do not know how his encomiums of the town's citizens prevailed in the face of references elsewhere to sly grog shops and public drunkenness that are expressions of despair.

Perhaps it was all transformed by Taylor's nature, his positiveness, his optimism, his confidence in the venture he had just undertaken. Perhaps to question him is to underestimate the sort of sanguinity he shared with one of the New Australian seceders, an 18 year old lad, who, it is recorded by Souter, 'stowed away on a ship and eventually worked his passage over 30,000 miles via Argentina, Chile, Germany to England, where he informed a member of the Press that he did not regret the loss of 60 pounds he'd paid to go to New Australia, as "he had had whips of fun for his money"''.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps Taylor had whips of fun as well.

Then, as now, too, the river could have been the living, breathing metaphor that uplifted him. Still I am intrigued and perplexed by his presence. One increasingly reads references to his passion, his erudition (how many other people in such places could speak three European languages other than his own?) his courtesy – qualities that sound out of place in the community of Renmark that I knew. Perhaps there were more and higher minded members of the educated classes in those days. Taylor was apparently very impressed by the 'new chums,' who settled there, "'rattling good fellows" who maintained Old World courtesies and amenities.'<sup>14</sup> I recognise that a part of the narrator in 'Beautiful Ettie,' hungers after Taylor's vitality and drive, but still I wonder what

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<sup>13</sup> Souter, Gavin. *A Peculiar People*. Sydney. A&R. 1968. P.117

<sup>14</sup> Gobbet and Saunders. *With Lane in Paraguay. Harry Taylor of the Murray Pioneer*. Rockhampton: CQUP 1995 P 16

struggles like-minded men and women must have undergone to maintain those courtesies and amenities, and from what meanness they must have had to avert their gazes to maintain their faith.

By inference, with Taylor's passing, or his era's, it is as if a kind of moral and cultural vacuum replaced the spirit of him and his kind. From my own observations community spirit is still strong there, and perhaps it always is in country towns, because people are able to invest their naturally benevolent instincts into projects where the needs and benefits are obvious. But in the time I was there the prevailing ethos was anything but socialist and egalitarian. Social divisions were marked; the poor tended to be poorer and more obvious than their city counterparts (and still are, if the concessions granted to the holders of several rural seats after the recent Federal election are accepted as evidence), while the well off had both an exaggerated sense of their own stature and an intolerance of any non-landholding, non professional or non commercially successful intruder who tried to ingratiate themselves in their midst.

Of course it wasn't new: as far back as 1897 there was proposal among a group of residents to form a 'Settlers Club,' independently of the Hotel, 'so that gentlemen could drink quietly rather than with those whose behaviour was rough, and language coarse and sometimes obscene.'<sup>15</sup> But small town snobbery of the most exquisite kind was rampant when I lived there. While my parents clung to a form of gentility they were doubtless the targets of small town gentry, whose ability to impale their victims on the altar of faint praise would have done Edna Everage proud.

Evidence of the prevailing political climate is perhaps best illustrated by the local constituency being represented, as far as I know, by exclusively conservative candidates for the last forty years, while for nearly all of that time the increasingly

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<sup>15</sup> Gurr. Y.M. *The Renmark Hotel 1897-1997*. Berri: J.C. Irving & Co. 1997 P. 22

wistful and greying face of the same Labour opponent has appeared on telephone poles, in mute appeal for the same handful of votes.

By the time I lived in Renmark the nature of *The Murray Pioneer* had changed completely too. The paper was still in the hands of the Taylor family, but Harry's son, Gilmore, was apparently happy to pass over the reins of editorship to an outsider, and while both Gilmore's sons subsequently retained a strong involvement with the newspaper neither seemed to want, or feel qualified, to take on the editor's role.

The archives that I was invited to access from the 60s have an unpretentious, gossipy, and occasionally arid air. There are front page headlines devoted to the minutiae of fruit growing, while reports of serious accidents have the feel of reporters making the most of an overdue chance to get their teeth into something juicy.

The court reports contain dumbfounding charges and penalties for activities including the crime of consorting with female aborigines. The advertising still finds room for quack nostrums. The unashamedly titled 'Gossip' pages, are full of coy, if not always happily worded references to the innocuous doings of local identities.

Some of the references are an indicator of the time that has elapsed since they were composed; others are evidence of the area's remoteness; some are paradigms of the newspaper's sense of responsibility, of their respect for their readers' perceived needs, their desire to see reflected in the paper the face they think most sympathetically represents the town.

The editor of *The Murray Pioneer* at that time, and for more than twenty five years, was Arch Grosvenor. He was certainly no radical, though in his own modest and non-inflammatory way he did campaign for the preservation of local environmental and historical landmarks, and he was good for the paper's circulation figures.

He was also the author of a number of books on the history of the area.

On first, and second sight, his ‘*Red Mud to Green Oasis*’<sup>16</sup> is typical of local historians to whom the adjective ‘worthy’ could be applied. His record of the town, written in a severely journalistic and remorselessly fitful style and according a new paragraph to almost every sentence, it is at times exhausting to read. The title of the book itself is not seductive. And yet he has a sly humour, a puckishness – in referring to the dissolution of a cricket club in town he says, ‘I had just been made a life member of the club, so I immediately became a life member of a defunct club – a distinction I still hold’.<sup>17</sup> This now more forgiving reader finds his self deprecating and diffident irony, and almost unconscious drollness all the more engaging for their not being quite successfully expressed. Some of the anecdotes, pregnant with possibilities, seem beyond criticism. Grosvenor reports that in 1947,

‘A young fellow went out the back of the Methodist Church as the service ended to see if the kettle was boiling and found the hall ablaze. He rushed back to the front of the church and interrupted the minister in the middle of farewelling his parishioners: “The hall’s on fire,” he cried. Shall I call the brigade?” Then someone noticed a lion ambling along the other side of the street...’<sup>18</sup>

As far back as 1896, M. Ella Chaffey, the wife of one of the Chaffey Brothers, wrote a children’s book,<sup>19</sup> supposedly set in Renmark, which is fascinating if only as a social and historical document. I’m not aware of any literature of substance being produced by anyone native to the area. Most of the books apart from Grosvenor’s that have their roots there belong to the kind of folksy, well meaning and sometimes syntactically eccentric genre of local historians. You have to admire their dedication but the products of their labours are almost strenuously respectful. The air of public spiritedness attending such ventures, of unpretentious self denial even in the claim to

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<sup>16</sup> Grosvenor, G. (Arch) *Red Mud to Green Oasis*. Adelaide: Raphael Arts. 1979 P. 20

<sup>17</sup> Grosvenor, G. (Arch) *Red Mud to Green Oasis*. Adelaide: Raphael Arts 1979 . P 102

<sup>18</sup> Grosvenor, G. (Arch) *Red Mud to Green Oasis*. Adelaide: Raphael Arts, 1979. P. 96

<sup>19</sup> Chaffey, M. Ella. *The Youngsters of Murray Home*. 1896. London: Ward, Lock and Bowman.

authorship – as if that would breach some ethical boundary, or by its whiff of immodesty betray a breach of good taste – ensures that the narratives provide dutiful records of not very memorable events. Yet, just occasionally, the innate reverence for the subjects of their research is betrayed by the recall of events that are safely enough distant to be gently mocked. In her history of the nearby town of Berri, Mrs L.M.

Andison says,

‘Race meetings were held twice yearly at the Winkie Park course. Their most ambitious programme was attempted on 23<sup>rd</sup> October, 1923, when Lord and Lady Forster, Governor General of Australia, consented to attend the race meeting. Souvenir programmes were printed, the Loxton Band was engaged, and all special arrangements were made. The day came – wet, cold and blustery. The bandsmen tried to shelter behind the few cars parked nearby. The cornet player left his instrument on the ground for a moment. When he was asked to play the National Anthem, his cornet was found squashed flat in the mud. He did not play, he wept. (To add to the miseries of the committee they made a loss of forty five pounds on the day.)’<sup>20</sup>

In such moments, in the author’s awareness of the absurdity of the situation, the links, however tenuous, between such literary sources and actual events, make one feel the loss of a world they celebrate. Nostalgia – for want of a better word – has helped soften the tone of some of my stories, I’m sure.

In revisiting the original proposal which I submitted for this research, outlining my area of interest, I found in it references to the parochialism and insularity of the Riverland. They were qualities typical of the 1950s in Australia, exaggerated – and in some ways to be fair relieved – by the area’s isolation, since in surroundings that were in many ways idyllic we enjoyed extraordinary freedoms. Sentimentality alone can’t be held accountable for attributing a lack of cynicism to the time, while there was an undeniable respect for institutions and an absence of serious crime. But it was full of contradictions: citizens could walk the unlit streets at night – assuming they had any

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<sup>20</sup> Andison, L. M. *Berri, Hub of the Murray*. The Advertising Printing Office. 1953. P 115



reason to – without fear of being molested, but domestic violence and sexual abuse flourished and were perhaps just better hidden than now. My story, ‘Something about Religion,’ is in part about the furtive nature of sexual expression of that era, while focusing particularly on one of its victims. The wowser spirit – which is arguably still alive and well in Australia, except that censorship and moral oburgation are now less overt and target other heresies – demanded that the most irreproachable sexual behaviour be practised within the neck-to-knee confines of guilt.

The tall poppy syndrome flourished there, expressing itself in a kind of sour and churlish mockery that effectively smothered aspirations which didn’t conform to the status quo, and ensured that even successful businessmen need be discreet in their display of wealth. That meant, almost as compensation, that the modestly affluent tended to live lives screened, and in a sense immune from the vulgar gaze, leaving the epitome of small town gentry, doctors and dentists, free to lob tennis balls from one end of their backyard courts to another on weekends, immune from apprehension that the victim of some recent malpractice might be planning a legal riposte.

There was an incestuous nature to individual towns too. The small communities, though linked by road, were sufficiently distanced from each other for them to have assumed a kind of San Marino principality status. Communication between towns was restricted, even though they were rarely more than ten or twenty kilometres apart. The state of roads, the efficiency of vehicles, the necessity of having to catch ferries to cross the river in many places, made trips time consuming, while journeys to Adelaide were seriously planned pilgrimages into risky territory.

If the towns lacked the centuries of unrelieved separation that makes villages and provinces of Europe even now vociferously insular, they had all enjoyed sufficient periods of independent settlement, sometimes from people of diverse ethnic

backgrounds to develop their own sense of identity and antipathy towards near neighbours. No love was lost between them, sporting rivalries were intense, and relationships, romantic or otherwise, formed independently of a local pool of candidates, were viewed with caution.

‘Something about Religion,’ touches on that. A specific kind of grim mystique was associated with one of those towns, Loxton, and its population; many of them descendants of First World War internees, who openly growled at each other in their old languages in public and (it was said) slaughtered pigs in secret on their farms.

I had forgotten until I began the story how much influence the Church still had in our youth. I have already referred to the baleful gaze that its collective representatives seemed to have turned upon everything from the frivolous to the blatantly immoral in the history of Renmark. But I think that my brother and sister and I were among the last generation who were brought up understanding the importance of ‘being good,’ if only as a kind of insurance policy against our consignment to the least appealing of after-life verities.

On a more temporal level I had also forgotten how not only inter-town rivalry but its sectarian counterpart flourished within and between the river towns themselves. I used to think that almost everyone went to one of the churches dotted around each town (and perhaps they did) and that was on top of the rallies organised by fly-by-night Bible bashers, who hired a hall for a night or two to do their spruiking in without even declaring whose side they were really on. The Church’s almost total loss of influence since makes the faith that sustained and inspired people like Harry Taylor seem immeasurably distant. Part of my fascination with him comes from the unashamedly Christian ethics he maintained in his personal life, and which he saw as a necessary ingredient of any healthy community. The Church also instilled in him during his

upbringing an unquestioning acceptance of the responsibilities people in his position must accept. Gobbet and Saunders suggest that,

‘when he embraced socialism it was only by seeing it as the practical implementation of Christian belief. When he preached cooperation...he believed he was acting as Christ himself would have done’.<sup>21</sup>

On a purely secular level Taylor supported local cultural activities too, and his son Gilmore was happy to inherit the duties of patronage. By the 1970s Arch Grosvenor could quite unsentimentally and candidly record however, that: ‘Renmark has had a number of successful art groups from its early days, but most, like the choirs, dramatic groups and an Eisteddfod, have folded up with it no longer necessary for people to arrange their own entertainment.’<sup>22</sup>

When I was young the cultural landscape was probably not yet that bleak, but the apogee of musical and theatrical activity was reached in yearly musical productions of Gilbert and Sullivan, and most other intellectual or imaginative pursuits tended to be shamefaced. Artistic aspirants or social critics had a choice between leaving or taking refuge in drink. Sometimes, I thought – and still do – that my own mother (and she was no intellectual) existed however unpretentiously on a small cultural atoll, separated from her like-minded friends in other towns by straits of indifference.

I would have to admit that in revisiting the Riverland recently, my observations, however superficial, suggested that the nature of the place may have changed again. I suppose the reasons are obvious. Improved transport and roads have made the area less remote and its towns better acquainted. Rivalries still exist between them but populations float now. It is a clichéd observation but television, the Internet, shopping

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<sup>21</sup> Gobbet and Saunders. *With Lane in Paraguay. Harry Taylor of the Murray Pioneer*. Rockhampton. CQUP 1995. P. 36

<sup>22</sup> Grosvenor. Arch. *Red Mud to Green Oasis*. Adelaide: Raphael Arts. 1979. P137

chains, have brought everyone including the inhabitants of country towns closer and flattened out idiosyncrasies.

I suspect that in the process even the small variations in local vernacular – to which I've tried to be faithful – would have been ironed out. Though the result may have been to make most places, amorphously and impersonally perhaps, more like everywhere else, people in the Riverland are at least less gauche than they once seemed and surely were. If my visit was implicitly patronising they were well placed to decline the favour.

Since it is so brief and its legacy so enduring, childhood often seems like the overnight guest's luggage for which its owner has never returned.

Speaking of a pilgrimage that he'd made on his own to the Riverland (and to the scenes of some of his triumphs on the football field, I would have thought) my brother once made the rather melancholy observation to me that, 'I looked around and tried to think of something good that had ever happened to us there.'

Angst filled, and unfair, perhaps. I think the stories I have written reflect something of that spirit though. I have read with a kind of jealous incredulity so many memoirs (like, for example, and enjoyable as it is, Hugh Lunn's<sup>23</sup>) which seem to be bathed in a glow of modest middle class comfort. But in an era where patched pants were a stigma rather than the fashion statement they later became, we spent most of our childhood in poverty which was all the more embarrassing because it couldn't always be concealed. We grew up adept at hiding emotions and unpleasant truths, while we were haunted by our mother's memories of a more leisurely childhood in surroundings far lusher than ours.

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<sup>23</sup> Lunn, Hugh. *Over the Top with Jim*. St Lucia, Qld: UQP 1989

In referring to those of the original complement of settlers in New Australia who moved to Cosme, Gavin Souter charmingly, if charitably observes, ‘It is one of life’s great mercies that most things may at any time be started again – even fresh starts.’<sup>24</sup> And Gobbet and Saunders noted Taylor’s ability ‘to turn defeat into victory,’<sup>25</sup> with his episodes of ‘brain fag’ being always succeeded by renewed bursts of energy.

Our own father’s history in the Riverland might be seen as a series of reverses prompting fresh defeats. From near necessity we moved from town to town, which left us with a legacy of alienation, a sense of never quite belonging to any particular place, which still persists. It might seem paradoxical that my brother and I share a fascination still with the Riverland area, and that he and I are most at ease with people from similar country backgrounds, drawn from what used to be called the lower end of the social scale. But we keep revisiting it, as if to complete or become reconciled to unfinished business, even if, as in the story, ‘A Happy Ending,’ we’re blowing on the stone cold coals of the past. Perhaps it’s our version of the ‘Paraguayan claw.’<sup>26</sup>

In the stories following this exegesis the narrator conveys a persistent sense of alienation. His efforts in ‘The harlot of our Dreams,’ to enter the so-called bohemian world of Sydney, find him instead on the fringes of a more or less benevolent society of petty criminals. The male protagonist in ‘An Extraordinary Girl,’ is offered, too late perhaps, the opportunity to make the sort of fresh start Australian settlers sought in Paraguay in 1900, and the story’s conclusion is tinged with portents of a similarly unhappy outcome. ‘A Happy Ending’ leaves the narrator stranded in old but estranged territory, knowing he can never really return to it again.

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<sup>24</sup> Souter, Gavin. *A Peculiar People. The Australians in Paraguay*. Sydney: A&R 1968 P 104

<sup>25</sup> Gobbet and Saunders. *With Taylor in Paraguay*. Rockhampton: CQUP 1995. P11.

<sup>26</sup> Souter, Gavin. *A Peculiar People. The Australians in Paraguay*. Sydney: A&R 1968 P 234

The narratives may represent a wishful and egocentric attempt to clear the decks, of experiences that, after all, weren't unique. The frustrations of the school teacher in the story 'Objects of Desire,' were not uncommon then, I'm sure. Cultural as well as ethnic refugees abounded. All the best intentions behind the settlement of soldiers after World War Two resulted in many cases in men with no knowledge or natural aptitude for horticulture being allowed, or allowing themselves, to plunge into debt from which they had no hope of emerging. In Cooltong, a small community outside Renmark, for example, alcoholism was almost the norm, and suicides like my uncle's were recurring events.

Again, I am haunted by an analogy that may be drawn with the Paraguayan experiment, and the old lady who said to Gavin Souter, 'There was a lot of fine young men who came to Cosme and New Australia – all wasted!' <sup>27</sup> I think my stories are coloured by a sense of the futility many settlers felt. Even to leave the magical, if sometimes duplicitous, river was to enter parched and dreary country whose proximity haunted us all. Any expedition heading north from there could be condemned to its own company until it reached the Gulf of Carpentaria. A half fanciful parallel strikes me with the post apocalyptic settlement in John Wyndham's, 'Chrysalids,' <sup>28</sup> with the Riverland as another Waknuk on the verge of the Wild Country, and the Badlands far beyond.

In one of Robert Morley's beguiling memoirs he recalls being a member in his youth of one of three or four travelling Shakespearean companies, who between them, 'raked and combed and harrowed the British Isles and planted in the breasts of the children and

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<sup>27</sup> Souter, Gavin. *A Peculiar People. The Australians in Paraguay*. Sydney: A&R 1968 P.276

<sup>28</sup> Wyndham, John. *The Chrysalids*. Ringwood, Victoria. Penguin. 1970

adults who watched them an abiding distaste for the works of the master.’<sup>29</sup> That highlights one of the mistakes teachers can make I believe, which is to attempt to raise students on literary icons. Apart from the fact that for the uninitiated the gap between them and classical literature can seem unbridgeable, there is an implied demand for unconditional reverence in its instruction that young audiences intuitively reject.

I realise now that I was fortunate to have parents who ensured, whatever our home’s material shortcomings, that their children had access to books. The selection was catholic and most, if not all, may have come from external and largely English sources, and led to us reinventing our world on their exotic terms, but that is common to children everywhere.

At high school such exposure as we had to works of Australian literature tended to be restricted to a non contemporary diet of 19<sup>th</sup> Century writers who seemed almost duty bound to celebrate the dour, dogged, dreary and routinely defeated; an unfair criticism of the individual writers no doubt, but a fair impression of the cumulative effect they had.

I don’t know if it was ever fair for the works of post-War Australian writers to be stamped with ‘the dreary, dun-coloured off-spring of journalistic realism’<sup>30</sup> description which Patrick White pettishly awarded them in his essay ‘The Prodigal Son.’ But it was a relief to be introduced in my teens to the lyrical iconoclasm of first White’s and then Hal Porter’s imaginative prose.

Then, in the 1970s and 80s, when he was enjoying some sort of critical renaissance, I discovered the novels of Martin Boyd. It wasn’t just the unapologetic elegance of his style, rescued from whenever it threatened to trespass into the outright

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<sup>29</sup> Morley, Robert. *More Morley*. London: Robson Books. 1978 P214

<sup>30</sup> Heseltine and Tick, Ed. *The Writer and the Modern World*. Melbourne. Cheshire. 1962. P 117.

sentimental by his incisive wit, which so appealed. It was the discovery from his semi-autobiographical novels that not everyone in the nineteenth century in Australia was engaged in some pyrrhic battle with the elements. Boyd might have exaggerated just how leisurely his family's life was, of course. He was a writer after all. Brenda Niall<sup>31</sup>, in her biography of Boyd, discovered that the source of the a'Beckett luxuries lay in their inheritance of an ex-convict's fortune – a rather gritty verity upon which Boyd did not dwell. She refers to one version of his autobiography, where he claimed to be ignorant of whether his father's brothers had to work for a living, when he could hardly have avoided the knowledge. Yet in the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the bulk of Australians did live in greater comfort than their European counterparts, and however idealised Boyd's account of his family's lives might have been, their freedom to enjoy civilized pursuits would not have been unique. It was a revelation for me to learn that his upper class protagonists were able to escape the worst of the summer in late nineteenth century Australia by migrating south to the hills outside of Hobart for a month or two – but what could be more sensible?

It is slightly disturbing for me to read in further comments Niall made to, 'a pattern, evident in most of his (Boyd's) novels in which the women are the strong ones, both in action and endurance, and men are weak, passive, even infantile.'<sup>32</sup> It is a quality obvious in the collected stories of another writer I admire, Dylan Thomas<sup>33</sup>, while one of my own stories, 'The Colour Question,' an ostensible search into the narrator's racial antecedents, is more about the effect women have on men early in their lives. Nearly all, or at least all the female protagonists of the stories that the narrator finds sympathy with, are extrovert, decisive, dominant. He does admire and depend on

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<sup>31</sup> Niall, Brenda. *Martin Boyd. A Life*. Carlton, Vic. Melbourne University Press. 1988

<sup>32</sup> Niall, Brenda. *Martin Boyd. A Life*. Carlton, Vic. Melbourne University Press 1988. P. 76

<sup>33</sup> Thomas, Dylan. *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Dog*. London. J.M.Dent & Sons. 1965



them, if so often failing to establish a rapport with women with whom he has little in common except on a most elemental and unequal footing. Even the little girl, Karen, in ‘Something about Religion,’ holds out the promise of strength to which the narrator is ultimately unable to cling.

I have used the first person throughout most of these stories. By this method, a not always reliable narrator has the freedom to make observations for which the writer need not necessarily be held to account. While relieving him or her of the burden of omniscience it also, paradoxically, demands a transparency for it to succeed, I believe; for the reader to accept the offer of the writer’s confidence, and though the first person use might be repetitive, it is the form I most trust in myself.

Near the beginning of this work I suggested that the themes of both the exegesis and the stories following it had been intuitively explored. It wasn’t a boast: while readers bewitched by the apparent artlessness of Gerald Durrell’s ‘My Family and Other Animals’<sup>34</sup> might have felt let down by the revelation in Douglas Botting’s biography, that he (Durrell) ‘quite calculatingly took in the ingredients of his childhood, and rang the changes on them...’<sup>35</sup> it is an ability in other writers that I envy. I am, however mistrustful of larger, agenda shaped pictures that neglect invention.

If only because of my age my bibliography has had to be compiled almost randomly, certainly selectively. An exhaustive list of influences would be monumental. I have been attracted to the ironic, which allowed people like Lawson to launch, at his best, savage attacks on society in the name of restraint, and its picaresque servants, the Sam

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<sup>34</sup> Durrell, Gerald. *My Family and Other Animals*. Rupert Hart Davis. London. 1956

<sup>35</sup> Botting Douglas. *Gerald Durrell. The Authorised Biography*. Harper Collins, 1999. P. 227

Wellers<sup>36</sup> of literature who allowed creators like Dickens to air their more mordant predilections.

Even if it might lead to a charge of self pity, I am comforted by the way Hemingway, in his short fiction, holds nothing in emotional reserve. I am fascinated by the conflict between anger and anguish in Hal Porter and in the satirist, Barry Humphries and I admire the wit of writers like Evelyn Waugh which allows them to get away with almost anything. I like the seeming artlessness of an Isherwood, and the feel of Narayan's novels which convey the sense that the writer has approached his desk each day in the same pleased state of anticipation as his readers.

I have been increasingly attracted to the perversity of writers who might be described as reactionary. Sometimes I wonder if all strong social critics and satirists must eventually become so labelled if only because they place themselves outside the mainstream of public or popular critical opinion to air what are fundamentally expressions of dismay. I have been influenced by Kingsley Amis and his deliberately provocative and qualified-to-the-hilt style. Objectionable as he might often be, his prose is saved by his infallible eye for the minutiae of human behaviour and his own almost reluctant celebration of its comedy. While any attempt to emulate the prose style of Henry James would now be untenable, I realise too that I have been drawn to the weighted rhythms of his prose.

Among the authors I have listed a number of Italian writers whom I've read in the original. Since I can't claim to be fluent in the language their inclusion may seem pretentious, and perhaps it is. But I have been influenced by them and by the Italian language itself. I dislike flat and uncaring prose and try to make mine pleasing to the ear. In my limited acquaintance with them, Italian writers seem far more attuned to the

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<sup>36</sup> Dickens, Charles. *The Pickwick Papers*. Chapman and Hall. London, 1837

musical possibilities of prose than their English speaking counterparts, and while using irony to telling effect, are less likely to use it to sledge hammer effect, or as a barrier against emotion. In my limited exposure, and somewhat in the tradition of their country's best film makers, Italian writers like Giovanni Arpino, Giovannino Guareschi, Ignazio Silone and Niccolò Ammaniti seem effortlessly able to engage their readers in intimate and teasing discursions, from which epiphanies sometimes disturbingly emerge.

I do not expect from anyone living at that time the opprobrium that Norman Lindsay earned through his too accurate or misrepresentative portrayal of members of his family in 'Redheap,'<sup>37</sup> since I have generally only acceded to historical incidents and figures an ambit claim status for their inclusion, and I have not had to make sure as Hal Porter claimed to have done, that his characters either didn't read books or were dead. I have been grateful for the assistance that skeletons of the once living have lent to fleshing out their truly fictional sisters and brothers, but historical research overall opens doors to tantalising possibilities and ambiguities that may be more rewarding than parent facts. In the artfully ingenuous conclusion to one of Alice Munro's stories, referring to the possibility of amateur historians investigating the death of one of her characters, she says – 'And they may get it wrong, after all. I may have got it wrong. I don't know if she ever took laudanum. Many ladies did. I don't know if she ever took grape jelly.'<sup>38</sup> It is perhaps just the job of writers to remember when and where they've been seduced.

At the beginning of this exegesis I suggested that the past can't be physically rediscovered, and that the sentimental journey always fails. That the places of our youth

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<sup>37</sup> Lindsay, Norman. *Redheap*. Faber and Faber, London. 1930

<sup>38</sup> Munro, Alice. *Selected Stories*. New York: Random House 1996 ('Meneseteung') p 497

can survive such unwise explorations at all is thanks to our memory's effortless suppression of such ventures, and to the past's recall on the printed page.

And that can be unreliable. Already I've found myself dabbling in historical references to which I've had access, searching for what I think hasn't been recorded or only uneasily conveyed. In the end of course, any version of the past will be refashioned on those terms. But having said that, everything in these stories is true. It has just lent itself to invention.

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