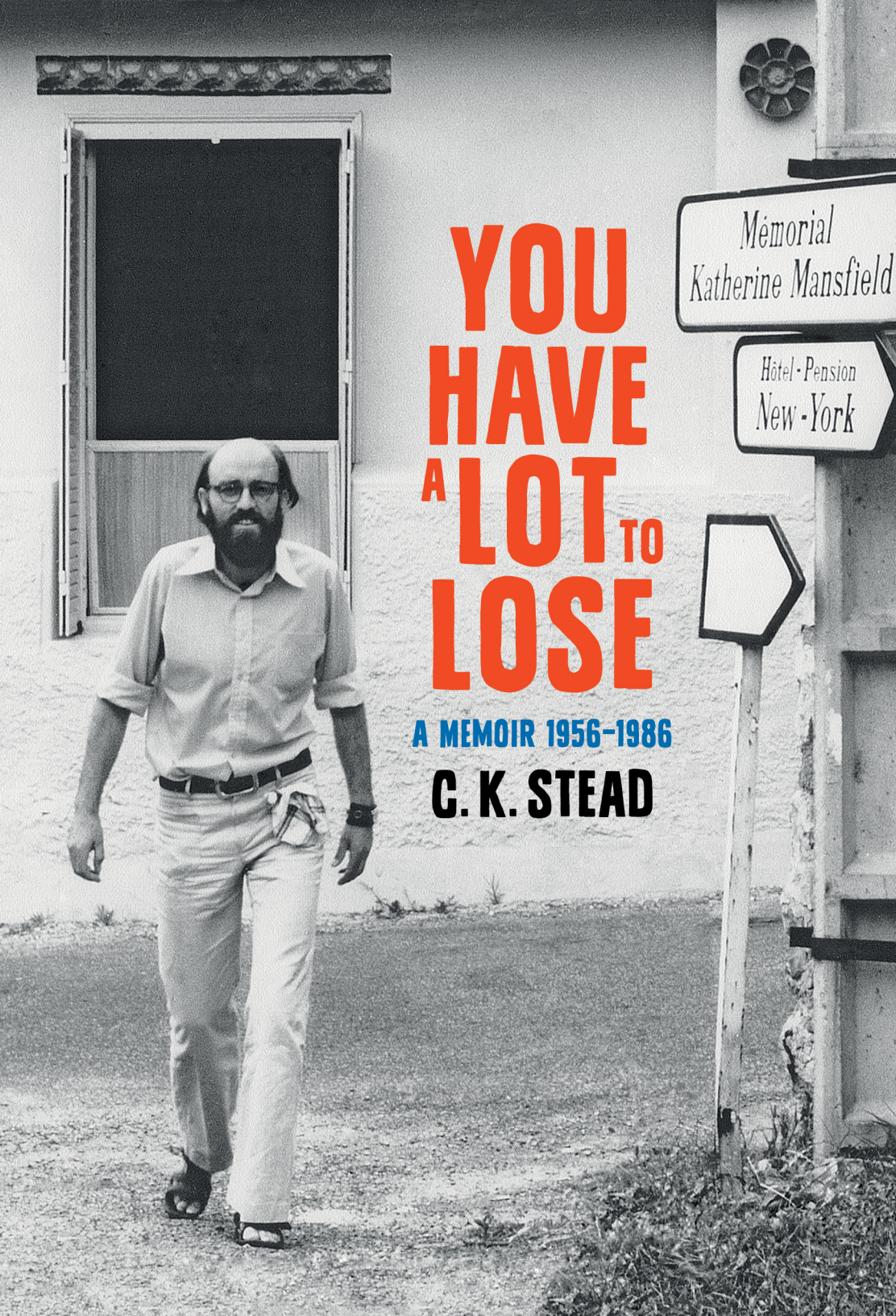

YOU HAVE A LOT TO LOSE

A MEMOIR 1956–1986

C. K. STEAD

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AUCKLAND
UNIVERSITY
PRESS

For Kay with love

The path is narrow
the tide is beginning to run
and the sun
makes light of it.

Note by Way of Introduction

This is an account of myself from the end of *South-West of Eden*, when I first left New Zealand at the age of twenty-three, to my leaving the University of Auckland to become a full-time writer at the age of fifty-three. During all of those thirty years I had been writing – and that work and the responses to it figure here. But there was always in my mind the hope I would reach a position sufficiently secure to allow me to be a writer only, with employment obligations to no one but myself. So these are my years as graduate student, teacher, professor, but equally as poet, critic, and fiction writer. In part it is the record of one struggling to get out – but out of no bad place, and managing pretty well right where he was. If there was conflict between the writer and the academic, and between a commitment to New Zealand and temptations to be somewhere else, these seem not to have been destructive. They were just my life – even an expression of my temperament – but also in some ways illustrative of New Zealand and its place in the world during those years.

This is a literary biography – a story of books and how they come about, of teaching and learning, of writers and how they interact with one another. It is a truthful account of my experience of those thirty years; nothing is deliberately misrepresented. But I have left things out, most often in the interests of economy, but sometimes for reasons of discretion, or privacy. There are significant people in my life who don't figure in these pages. I claim to be a truthful recorder, not a comprehensive one.

After the end of my university employment there is another thirty years of my writing life, a further story which may have to tell itself, and perhaps has largely done so in my books published since 1986.

1.
Booloominbah and Beyond

'Overseas'

At the beginning of 1956, aged twenty-three, one year married and with a first-class honours MA from the University of Auckland, I was appointed to my first academic job, a temporary lectureship in English at the University of New England (UNE) in Armidale, New South Wales. The salary was £1,200 p.a., so at a stroke I had become what my father called 'a thousand-a-year man' – his measure of something distinctly better than merely a working wage, and which he had possibly never achieved himself. UNE had been established in 1938 as a college of the University of Sydney, but in 1954 it had been granted autonomy on condition that it undertook all the extramural teaching for the state of New South Wales, and a large part of my work would be dealing with students at a distance, setting and marking exercises, occasionally visiting outlying areas to hold weekend schools.

So Kay and I packed all our belongings, as you did then, said our goodbyes, and a sad farewell to our little £3-a-week glassed-in flat on Takapuna Beach, and set sail for a three-day journey from Auckland to Sydney on the P&O liner *Orsova*. It would be my first experience of 'Overseas'.

I thought of Australia, as everyone who didn't know it well did (and perhaps does), as unstratified, democratic, egalitarian. In fact it was rife with divisions, rankings and snobberies – Catholic and Protestant especially in those days, which meant roughly Irish stock and English stock, poorer and richer, lower and upper castes.

The university too seemed to be divided – especially between 'before 1954' and 'after 1954', the 'before' being appointments made when UNE was only a college of Sydney, lecturers now considered rather shop-soiled and out-of-date; the 'after', younger staff, better qualified academically. In the September before my appointment H. W. Piper, the university's 'Foundation Professor' of English, had opened his inaugural (public) lecture: 'I have today the duty and the honour of delivering the second inaugural lecture to be given in this University and the first from the Faculty of Arts.' Previously, as a college of Sydney, Armidale had no professorial chairs and consequently lacked the status that went with them.

Along with this distinction went an element of social, and even military, snobbery. The new Vice-Chancellor, R. B. (later Sir Robert) Madgwick, though the son of a Sydney tram driver, was an Oxford DPhil, and had been an army officer, a colonel. Professor Piper (Herbert, but known to his colleagues as 'Pip'), also an army officer, Rhodes scholar and Oxford graduate, had come from Adelaide with his intensely 'social' wife Marie – a pretty and ample blonde with perfect pink and white skin, by whom he appeared to be dominated, and with whom he was deeply in love. He once, in an untypical and unguarded moment, explained to me that watching Marie sleep had made him realise that in 'Composed upon Westminster Bridge' (which begins 'Earth has not anything to show more fair') Wordsworth had really been writing about watching the woman he loved sleeping. I thought (though of course didn't say) that this was touching but mistaken – an example of reading *into*, rather than reading what was there on the page.

Professor Piper exists in my mind as a semi-comic figure, partly confused with the absurd Professor Welch in Kingsley Amis's first

novel *Lucky Jim*, just then becoming a best-seller, in which I found something of myself in the trouble-prone character of the young lecturer at a provincial university, Jim Dixon. Although the parallel with Dixon's professor was no doubt quite unfair to mine, it was enhanced when Piper requested (almost, I felt, commanded) that Kay and I should join his Scottish country dancing group – a near-enough parallel with the fictional professor Welch's enlisting his staff, including the reluctant and musically dyslexic Jim Dixon, in music-making. Apart from the Pipers and the Steads the dancing group included the wife of Armidale's mayor, two games mistresses from a local ladies' college, the very queenly Professor of Philosophy Denis Grey (whose inaugural lecture would be remembered for declaring a 'lifelong dedication to passionate celibacy'), and a botanist whose father owned a brewery in Tasmania and who possibly had the product on tap.

Country dancing was a kind of social engagement; and it's true that when Mrs Piper – Marie – saw me slightly inebriate and jolly at a faculty occasion, she crooned, 'I thought you were a solemn young man, Mr Stead. If I'd known you could loosen up like this, I would have invited you to our Left Bank party.' But since the party was already over and gone, and if there was another she had by that time forgotten my talent for 'loosening up', our relations remained distant and formal, seniors to juniors. The only other encounter I remember with the lovely Marie was when Kay and I were invited to the house for dinner and she mentioned that she knew New Zealand's then Governor-General, Sir Willoughby Norrie, '. . . rather well, actually', and asked, in a sort of artificial contralto, 'How *is* dear Willoughby?' – a question that might have elicited, inwardly, one of Jim Dixon's funny faces – the Edith Sitwell face, for example, or perhaps the Martian Invader.

Armidale itself represented, at least covertly, another Australian division, the one that drew a line between kinds of political conservative, the urban Liberals and the rural Country Party. These two were (as they are still) conjoined in the federal Parliament and in

confrontation with their political enemies of the left, but were otherwise divided in style and in their degrees of conservatism: Liberals right, Country Party further right; and there were ambitions still alive among Country Party stalwarts in the Tablelands for a New State, distinct from New South Wales (which tended too often to elect a Labor government) and free of the dominance of Sydney. Getting the university at Armidale disconnected from its urban parent had been a symbolic step along the way; and the new university Chancellor, Sir Earle Christmas Grafton Page,* was a prominent New Stater. So was its Deputy Chancellor, Phillip Arundell Wright, father of the well-known and much-honoured poet Judith Wright who was born near Armidale and who had written lyrically of the region as 'my blood's country' –

> . . . that tableland, high delicate outline
> of bony slopes wincing under the winter,
> low trees blue-leaved and olive, outcropping granite –
> clean, lean, hungry country . . .

It was an open secret that Armidale Teachers' College, constructed in 1928 in Italian Renaissance style on a hill overlooking the town, had been designed, with a grand entrance and iconic columns, to be the building that might become in time the Parliament of the New State.

The New England Tablelands were grazier country and the graziers, whose scions played polocrosse and went to posh schools like TAS (The Armidale School), NEGS (New England Girls' School), and even PLC (Presbyterian Ladies' College), considered themselves a cut above the Sydney-siders who were seen as having still the smack of the old penal colony – a mix of larrikin lawlessness and forelock-tugging. So the newly independent university, despite

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* It was said his full name derived from having been born at Grafton early on a Christmas morning.

the ankle chain of its extramural responsibilities, aimed at a kind of Oxbridge equivalence. Full-time students, all of them in residence, drifted about the ample grounds wearing undergraduate gowns against a backdrop of brown grass and grey-green eucalypts, while the presence of wallabies and kangaroos, lounging or loping, the mothers sometimes snatching up their joeys and jamming them anyhow, even upside down, into the pouch, seemed to compromise the intended superior effect of the university's 'deer park'. I and my younger colleague, Margaret Bell, daughter of a doctor from Lismore in the Northern Rivers and an honours graduate from Queensland, would be largely responsible for the English Department share of the ankle chain. We might tutor the students in residence; but lecturing to them was reserved for the more senior and permanent staff.

The university's central administration building was a fine red-brick mansion, Booloominbah, said to have been in its time Australia's largest country house, built in the 1880s for the White family, and donated by Frank White to be a college of Sydney University. That was in 1938, a decade after the Teachers' College was built, and probably likewise with the New State in long-term prospect. Frank was the uncle of the novelist Patrick White ('a grazier's heir' as he would describe himself in his late memoir, *Flaws in the Glass*), whose fourth novel, *The Tree of Man*, having run through a number of reprints in the United States, was just now (1956) receiving the kind of praise in England that would get him the serious attention he had so far lacked. This was the beginning of the acclaim that would lead to his winning, in 1973, Australia's first Nobel Prize for literature.

Finally there was the division – mile-wide, world-wide – between Australians and Australian Aborigines. The only time we saw these ill-clad, shabby, brown-black and bewildered fellows in significant numbers, looking like aliens from another planet rather than, as they were, aliens in the world that had once been their own, was on a Monday morning outside the police court, where those arrested over the weekend, most often for drunkenness and related offences,

gathered to be arraigned. They lived somewhere out of town, close to the rubbish dump, where they built themselves shacks or 'humpies' of scrap iron, old water tanks, kerosene cans, and random pieces of timber. They had no running water, and the women often trudged long distances carrying it. The men looked for work on road gangs and cattle stations, but not on the railways which had a policy against employing them. In cold weather their clothes didn't seem to change and always looked inadequate. They were often to be seen walking into town in ones and twos, or occasionally, when one or another had scored some cash, riding in a taxi. But they were never on the bus – that seemed to be quietly understood and accepted. No law was needed to enforce it; any more than there had to be one saying that in the cinema they sat only in the two or three front rows.

Kay's first employment in Armidale was as shorthand typist to a public accountant and there she saw graziers' tax returns which always included an amount paid to 'Jackie'. 'Jackie' was the generic name for whatever 'Abo' was employed for 'general duties'. Thus the actual incumbent could change, or even be more than one person at the same time, without needing to be individually identified.

The university had a branch of a society that aimed at 'Aboriginal assimilation' – not an acceptable term now, but well-meant at the time; and perhaps some good things were done, some assistance given where it was needed, some small progress made towards healing the damage history had done to these people. When the novelist Kylie Tennant came that year to give the annual Commonwealth Literary Fund lectures on Australian literature, and was invited to a meeting of the Staff Wives Club, she asked what, if anything, they did for the Aboriginal people. She was told a visit to their encampment was planned. According to the story that went about later, Tennant said there was no time like the present and organised taxis and cars on the spot. I never heard how the visit went (Kay, a working woman, avoided the Staff Wives Club); but Tennant was said to have remarked that she was sorry she would not be there when the invitation she had issued for a return visit was taken up.

Awareness of 'the problem of the Aboriginal' in those days took mainly the form of embarrassment and avoidance – and I was guilty of both, telling myself it was their (Australians') problem, not mine; but it was not acute enough for the Sydney *Bulletin* (the '*Bully*', as D. H. Lawrence calls it admiringly in *Kangaroo*) yet to have abandoned its old banner, kept I suppose more out of loyalty to, and nostalgia for, its own frontier past than as a statement for the present or future, but nonetheless shocking. It read simply: 'AUSTRALIA FOR THE WHITE MAN'.

The 'New Australians'

Armidale was about equidistant between Sydney and Brisbane, getting on for 500 kilometres from each but, up on the inland plateau, almost 1000 metres above sea level; and I remember how our first long slow train journey up from Sydney began in the almost insufferable humid heat of the harbour city, and ended with us shivering, inadequately clothed for the chill of evening in the Tablelands.

There were a few hits and misses finding permanent accommodation. We spent a couple of weeks in a house whose owners, going on holiday, wanted it occupied for security. This was somewhere along the road to the university which was 5 kilometres out of town. Huge moths with luminous eyes, attracted by the lights, beat on the fly screens at night, and dogs howled in the distance. The postman came on a horse, wearing a broad-brimmed hat and riding boots. The days were beautifully clear until they turned to thunderstorms in the late afternoons, with vivid forked lightning.

Next came a small flat back in town. It had an outdoor (across the yard) bathroom with a wood-burning water heater, and housed a very large hairy spider of the kind popularly known as a tarantula, but in fact a huntsman, harmless to all but its natural prey. Finally we scored a 'modern' (i.e. recently built) flat at 93 Donnelly Street, with uninsulated wallboard partitions painted in pastel colours

(green mainly), too thin to keep the cold out in winter or the heat out in summer.

By now it was well into April and the long avenue of elms leading in to the university was turning yellow in sudden vivid patches. The days were clear and hot by midday, but at night there were the first signs of the frosts which would challenge our kerosene-burning heater, all we had to keep the cold at bay.

Our next-door neighbours at Donnelly Street were 'New Australians', as post-war immigrants were called – a German Jewish couple, Israel Getzler, lecturer in history at the university, and his wife 'Ada' (Agathe). Ada had survived in Germany, her Jewishness hidden right through the war, and she seemed still fearful of venturing out into public places. In their kitchen she conjured exotic and delicious snacks; and Israel liked to make dumplings of chicken livers fried in deep oil. It was our joke that we had together a 'garlic pact' against Australia, which was still predominantly Anglo and conservative in matters of cuisine. Israel was a tremendous talker, and the flow of ideas and anecdote, the stories, didn't stop even when he was at the wheel of his Holden, the first Australian-manufactured car. Each day, after Kay got a post in the university library, he would drive us to work, still talking. But he had been brought up in Germanic proprieties, and didn't like to speak without meeting your eye, so there was constant anxiety as he clung to the wheel with both hands while casting his eyes away from the road towards the interlocutor beside him, or even over his shoulder to the one behind.

He had been a member of the Jewish Young Guard in pre-war Germany, an admirer of Stefan George and of the poems of Karl Wolfskehl who had come to New Zealand as a Jewish refugee, and had been Frank Sargeson's friend. Israel's stories were of life in Nazi Germany through the 1930s, growing always darker and more threatening; of his family's escape, walking east through Poland into Russia; of the war spent in Siberia; and then the post-war escape westward, again often on foot.

It was with the Getzlers and Margaret Bell that Kay and I went to hear the 'world-famous' historian Arnold J. Toynbee, on a tour promoting the recently completed tenth volume of his *Study of History*, a lecture circuit that was clearly taking him to the ends of the earth. His message was that civilisations died if they were confronted by radical challenges and did not make a 'creative response' – something that could only come from an enlightened minority, usually imbued with the regenerative force of a religion. None of us was much impressed by this, and Israel, a staunch socialist, was particularly outraged by the idea that the general franchise had been a 'dilution', undermining the creative influence of the 'educated middle class'. It was this same essentially fascist idea of 'creative response' by a favoured minority that, fifteen years later, I would give to the dictator Volkner in my political fantasy, *Smith's Dream*.

Other new appointments to the university enlivened our social life. In one letter home I reported, 'an Austrian physics lecturer has arrived – bearded, fierce, intolerant and brilliant'. This was Otto Bergmann, appointed to a research post as a theoretical physicist, and we seemed to attach ourselves to one another almost at once. His doctorate was from Vienna and he had taught for a time in Ireland and then Adelaide. His temperament was restless. He drove the classic VW of the time, and we would soon be on the move with him, making visits down to the Pacific coast (where we swam at night at Valla Beach, trying not to think about sharks), up to the Northern Rivers, as well as to and from Sydney. It was with Otto that we first saw Brisbane, with its suburban houses on stilts, and Queensland's Gold Coast, then only a glorious strip of untenanted sand with a few low-rise buildings, and no hint of the real-estate dream (and nightmare) it has since become. Of that northern region in general I still have strong but rather unspecific memories of flame trees, poinsettias, bananas, pineapples, sugar cane – and the heat – and still brown water that might have hidden crocodiles.

The country we were seeing by car seemed to run on and on, its bush lacking the density and greenness of New Zealand's rainforest,

but loping and sprawling and grey-blue forever into distance, as if leisure, even in the patterns of local speech, came naturally because hurry was pointless: this was a continent not an island, and no one was going anywhere fast or getting anywhere soon. Furthermore (and further yet) somewhere in there, over there, away 'back of beyond' and out of sight, you knew was the red desert and the bones of its hapless mapmakers.

Really what we were exploring, though thousands of miles long and hundreds wide, was hardly more than the coastal strip. But even this, habitable Australia's capacity for extremes – flood and fire and drought – was something you were not quite allowed to forget. There was a documentary we all saw at the university Film Society that year, *Back of Beyond*, some of its commentary taken from Douglas Stewart's poem sequence, *The Birdsville Track*. The central image, or the one that stayed with me, was of sheep dead from drought under a tree containing, in its upper branches, the carcass of a cow deposited there during a flood.

Otto introduced us to the music of Richard Strauss, and had the complete LP set of *Der Rosenkavalier*. Sometimes he cooked for us, and this involved much careful shopping and preparation. The item which impressed and surprised me most was a grand Austrian torte which was not cooked, but somehow compounded of various kinds of imported biscuits, assembled into the right shape, and then left to absorb the brandy (and possibly also liqueurs) poured over them, to be topped finally with whipped cream.

In the last two years of the war, aged eighteen and nineteen, Otto had been conscripted into a tank battalion of the German Army. He had had some miraculous escapes from death after the D-Day landings; and in the final two weeks before Germany's surrender, was involved in ferocious infantry battles with the Russians advancing in the east. He and Israel Getzler had a language in common which, so far as I can recall, they never spoke when together; and though they were not impolite or uncivil with one another, there was a wariness between them. It was as if the

German language, if they had slipped into it, might in some way betray what they were concealing; the guilt on one side, and the pain on both. I think there was suspicion on Israel's part: was Otto telling us the full story of his war? – and this was something Otto was aware of and resented. I think too that Otto, who enjoyed verbal jokes and making light of things, considered Israel rather heavy going, too relentlessly serious. Maybe there was even a small residue – who knows? – of the anti-Semitism he must have grown up with. At some time during that first year Joyce Dunn, an Australian, joined the History Department and she and Otto were soon a couple.

On one occasion, during a visit to Sydney, Otto took me with him to visit Harry Messel, Professor of Physics there, and we were shown the computer Messel and his team had built, said to be the first in the Southern Hemisphere, a very large contraption filling one room and with ancillary components in two more. I had not at the time the faintest notion of how computers would figure in our lives, imagining this must be some sort of machine for doing mathematical calculations, and faintly puzzled that Harry and Otto should speak of it in such reverent tones, and look at it with such respect. It was on the same visit I saw, in a hotel foyer, a set broadcasting what was probably Australia's first TV programme – again without any idea of what effect this new device would have on social life in the second half of the century.

Otto and I drove on to Canberra where he had academic business to do at the Australian National University. There we ran into Bob Chapman, one of my former teachers in the History Department at Auckland. Bob was on leave working towards a PhD that would never be finished, and learning to be a psephologist, which would in time give him a television identity in New Zealand and earn him appointment as Auckland's first Professor of Politics. But at the time he still aspired to be a poet and literary critic, and had recently, together with Jonathan Bennett, edited the Oxford *Anthology of New Zealand Verse*. After a dinner in the college he invited us to his

room, with an English doctoral student, Ruth Butterworth. Hungry to exchange New Zealand news, and drinking more than enough, Bob and I reminisced and gossiped the other two into silence. At last I was silent too, and it was just Bob, running fluently on towards a peroration about New Zealand as 'the new, the better, Florence – the fulfilment of the philosopher's dream'. Nationalism, and particularly literary nationalism, was strong among New Zealanders at the time. I was infected myself, though not so badly that I didn't feel embarrassed by this excess.

Canberra is a strange, manufactured federal capital, grandiose in design and celebrating warrior triumphs – like Washington, DC, on which it is partly modelled. If it is now an adolescent hoping to grow tall and fill its adult clothes, in those days it was still an infant in a sailor suit. The grand reflecting lakes had been dug but not yet filled with water. The boulevards lacked the buildings they had been designed for. Many of the suburbs were still only sketch maps bulldozered into a scruffy, rather arid landscape.

I don't know what it was persuaded me it would be a good idea while there to call on A. D. Hope, Professor of English at the ANU. He was widely considered to be the finest living Australian poet, though for a variety of reasons his promised first full collection had been long delayed and only published the previous year. This was *The Wandering Islands*, beautifully produced and everywhere acclaimed – except in New Zealand's major literary journal, *Landfall*, where I had treated it with undisguised cool. Even though I must have supposed (and probably wrongly) that Hope would not have seen this review, it was quite out of character for me to visit a notable person uninvited. I was too shy for such literary venturing. Perhaps ease of access explains it: I simply found his office, knocked, and was commanded to come in.

I said who I was, and tried to make conversation. Nothing I said elicited much more than one-word, or single-sentence, responses. The frost was palpable, and I retreated, glowing with embarrassment. I never met him again.

On the road back to Sydney, through the repetitious scenery of brown grass and blue gums, Otto told me about a dream he'd had: Joyce was in her car driving away from him and he was running to catch up, panting, feeling she hadn't seen him, that she was departing and wouldn't be back, when all at once he turned into a kangaroo and was bounding fast through the landscape and keeping up with her.

Among visitors to UNE in that first year was Wallace Robson, an Oxford don in Australia to give the British Academy lectures. He did this with few notes and remarkable fluency, while at intervals casting his eyes up and tugging at the front of the yellow knitted sweater he was wearing, which had perhaps shrunk from inexpert laundering – pulling it down over his lower stomach, from which, however, it at once sprang back towards his waist. It was the slow movement of the eyes *up* while the hand pulled *down* I found so distracting. A year or two later, visiting Dan Davin (whose 'fine intellect' Robson had praised in conversation), I was to learn that this undoubtedly brilliant though physically unattractive blob of a man had been 'secretly' engaged to Iris Murdoch, whose novels I would soon be reading regularly, one by dependable one, as they emerged. Some years later again I was to meet her with the stammering don, John Bailey, who had replaced Robson in Murdoch's affections and married her.

Nineteen fifty-six was the year of Hungary and Suez, and we lived through those crises, from a distance and yet feeling deeply concerned and thoroughly engaged.

Doing the job

Lucky Jim Dixon's closest colleague is Margaret Peel.* Mine was Margaret Bell. There was not much likeness. Bespectacled and

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* Based, one has learned since, on Philip Larkin's friend Monica Jones, whom Amis didn't like or approve of.

dressing in arty clothes, Jim's Margaret tends to neurosis or hysteria and is constantly sending out ambiguous signals – a not wholly attractive character but one to whom Jim feels obscurely bound until, at the novel's end, her dishonesties and stratagems are exposed and he is free to win the altogether more desirable (i.e. better-looking and less 'difficult') Christine.

My Margaret was an unambiguous handsome well-formed young Australian woman, with whom I shared a task and an office. She became a friend, an ally, and often came home with Kay and me to share our meal, sometimes to take a turn cooking it, to gossip and exchange stories of our respective pasts, and share routine complaints about the boss. As the winter drew on and the nights became colder, she sometimes shared our only bed (and a toothbrush) rather than walk home in the icy night.

Margaret and I were largely responsible for first-year extramural work in English in the state of New South Wales. We set and marked exercises, sent out 'advisory letters' about set books, marked essays on them and, sometimes together, sometimes separately, conducted weekend schools, both in Armidale and in centres around the state.

In that first year there were weekend schools at Grafton, Sydney and Dubbo. In the pub that housed us in Grafton I was shown the mark, high up the wall behind the bar, where the last floods had gone through. To reach Dubbo I had to travel first to Sydney, then north-west to the town – a total of 1320 miles, as I recorded in letters home. There was heavy rain throughout the weekend, and the Macquarie River rose 23 feet in twenty-four hours. Its waters were just beginning to flow into the gutters of the main street as my train pulled out again.

I was continuing to publish poems and reviews at home, and poems in Australia (*Meanjin*, the Sydney *Bulletin*, the *Jindyworobak Anthology*). When Douglas Stewart took a poem for the *Bulletin*, it appeared with others under the heading 'Poems from the Six States', making me momentarily New South Wales' representative

poet. Allen Curnow signalled he would be taking poems (including one written in Armidale) for the *Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse* he was working on. From Frank Sargeson came information about Janet Frame, still his (free) lodger but soon to be *dis*lodged and sent to London, to make her way in the world with what consequences Frank didn't dare think too closely about. Never far from his mind was Robin Hyde's suicide there – but his patience with Janet had pretty much run out, though he was still doing all he could to raise money to assist her on her travels.

'Have you read', I asked him,

> Angus Wilson's new novel, *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes*? It creates the scholarly world in a completely convincing way and is artistically flawless – rather like a stage play in the way it's worked out to suit the movement of the plot – a perfect example of the good novelist who is not a great one. It creates the surface of life without being superficial but also without bringing you up against anything truly universal. In fact it is so sane and wholesome and tidy and well-arranged and interesting that while reading it you tend to think of the Lawrences and the Melvilles as a rather mad tiresome bunch. Wilson is a better novelist than Patrick White, perhaps even a better one than Lawrence, but not as important as either.

I sent the Wilson to my parents. As the daughter of a Swedish sea captain, my mother tended to identify with anything or anyone Scandinavian; so I thought she would find a way of seeing herself in the character of the Danish woman Ingeborg; and that my father might see himself as Ingeborg's unhappy and defeated English husband, and feel sorry for himself. So both parents might be gratified, but in quite different ways that could never be acknowledged.

Margaret Bell's and my appointments had been 'temporary', and when a permanent appointee, Harry Heseltine, was found to

begin in 1957, hers was not renewed. She was not altogether happy about this, but cheered herself up by booking a passage to London for what would be her first trip abroad. She would go, not to do further academic work, but on a working holiday. She promised she would be there to greet us in a year's time. Together with Otto, Kay and I saw her off from Pyrmont Wharf on 25 January of the new year. The Suez Canal was still closed, so her ship would have to take the long route, around the Cape of Good Hope. We would miss her. Armidale would be quieter without her.

Kangaroo

Sydney was our escape and playground. We came and went in university vacations, often by car with friends, sometimes by rail, once by air – my first experience of flight, which took us at no great altitude and in the heat of summer over some areas of bush fires, with consequent turbulence. Kay's older sister, Aileen, had married an Australian, Clem Schuller, so there was always accommodation for us in Sydney. They had one little daughter and a second was born during the summer of 1956–57.

In 1956 when the state of New South Wales announced that the Danish architect Jørn Utzon had won an international competition for the design of an opera house to be built on the Sydney waterfront, and the design was revealed in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, there was an immediate clamour – of celebration from the intellectual community, surprised and delighted that something so brilliantly avant-garde and beautiful should have been chosen; of derision and alarm from the anything-but-silent majority who, though they seldom went to operas, knew what an opera house should look like and it wasn't like this. To begin with brother-in-law Clem was with the opposers. Later he recognised that something wonderful had happened *for Australia*, and was able to change sides without acknowledging that he had ever said a word against the design or its enormous cost.

Though not a 'returned soldier', Clem had some of the qualities of the Diggers as represented in D. H. Lawrence's *Kangaroo* which I had never read before crossing the Tasman. It was surprising how much of the Australian character, and the feel of the landscape too, Lawrence had managed to capture during a visit of scarcely more than three months, and how he had made the two, man and land, interactive. He caught the flavours of Australian politics, with its extreme tendencies, left and right, and its obsession with mateship and male bonding in war and at work.

Of course Somers was Lawrence and Harriet was Frieda; and Lawrence's messianic self-importance can become, in any of his novels, almost intolerable. But *Kangaroo* is such a frank book, and so self-revealing. The scolding Frieda is constantly there in the character of Harriet, mocking Somers' intellectual pretensions, dissecting them, curbing them. She is the hectoring counter-statement to the Lawrentian grandeur. Looking outward, Lawrence caught the weird mix of rebel and conformist that I saw at least something of in Clem Schuller; looking in, he saw both his own vision of human greatness, and the ridiculousness of himself as its little ginger-bearded purveyor. And strangely, he found a corrective to his own extremism in the Sydney *Bulletin*:

> Bits, bits, bits. Yet [Somers] read on. It was not mere anecdotage. It was the sheer momentaneous life of the continent. There was no consecutive thread. Only the laconic courage of experience.
>
> All the better. He could have kicked himself for wanting to help mankind, join in revolutions or reforms or any of that stuff. And he kicked himself still harder thinking of his frantic struggles with the 'soul' and the 'dark god' and the 'listener' and the 'answerer'. Blarney – blarney – blarney! He was a preacher and a blatherer, and he hated himself for it. Damn the 'soul', damn the 'dark god', and above all, damn his own interfering nosy self.

Re-read now, far from that first Australian encounter, *Kangaroo* can seem in parts grotesque, illogical, not quite sane; but it has still the unmistakable streak of genius that was Lawrence. Alan Ross calls it 'the most intuitive and imaginatively resolved of all Lawrence's novels'.* In his memoir *Flaws in the Glass*, Patrick White writes, 'the little that is subtle in the Australian character comes from the masculine principle in its women, the feminine in its men'. If that is true, it's something Lawrence saw and represented in *Kangaroo*. The novel's last sentence reads: 'It was only four days to New Zealand, over a cold, dark, inhospitable sea.' I wasn't sure whether to be glad or sorry that when he crossed those waters he hadn't stayed long enough to write a sequel called *Kiwi*.

Digging in

Letters kept arriving, including copiously from Margaret Bell who kept her 'Dearest Steads' up to date, and in intimate detail, with her experiences as the young Australian coping with the shock of London, where she was school teaching, 'sometimes homesick for 93 Donnelly Street', but already attached to the British seaman she would later marry.

Looking through a great collection of these letters from family and friends (they were always kept) I notice a recurring manner, jocular, tending often to obscenity and self-deprecation, sometimes daft to the point of surreal, meant to entertain, but informative too, full of facts. I'm surprised to recognise how much time we all spent writing them – how conscientious we were, and how subject to guilt about delay or failure in reply. Most wrote news – what they'd been doing, what was going on around them. Among contemporaries only my slightly younger poet friend Rob Dyer, currently in Oxford on a scholarship from Auckland, wrote what I suppose could be called 'intellectual' letters. One was an account of his own

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* *The London Magazine*, July 1980, p. 17.

> . . . diligent study of Plato's *Republic*, which I have found rewarding and a thing of great pathos – to see a man so in love with beauty led on so inevitably by his own, at first tiny, mistakes to a strange world where only he and his creations can live. [. . .] My construction of sentences goes to pieces completely under his influence. I am living out in the country at the moment with nothing but Plato, Thucydides, the clothes I stand up in, and the assembly of nerves from which I profess to distil my particular lust for knowledge – not to project myself on to the world as I conceive it, but to stamp whatever are its springs and patterns of being on myself, and achieve communion in its highest form.

This was a serious young man who still seemed to be heading somewhere. But I was not altogether surprised, a little later, when the Oxford scholarship, and his work there, all seemed to fall apart and come to nothing. And in fact there had always been, at intervals, statements I thought of as 'Rob's Grand Manner', which must have made his teachers anxious if they ever encountered it. These, coincidentally, signalled that he still thought of us (I suppose I did too) as competitors:

> I am glad when I hear that the world gives you her favours, for you were ever her lover, more intimate and more honoured but perhaps less powerful than I, her priest.

This might have warranted one of Jim Dixon's faces – the Sex Life in Ancient Rome face, or perhaps the Chinese Mandarin.

It was Rob who had sent me Philip Larkin's first major breakthrough collection, *The Less Deceived*, which I continued to read with close attention, even telling Sargeson, 'of course the century has produced greater poets, but none better'. To Rob I wrote:

> Basically there is only one experience behind the half dozen best poems – a tension, not so much between desire and

> fulfilment, as between all the possibilities of a situation which resolve themselves into two opposites, both of which are 'fulfilments'. And it's the ability to hang between them, to have a foot in both camps, that makes the poet. He must never choose one side or the other. That would negate the self – it would be a death-wish.

Now that Larkin's life is known, as it was not then, one can see from that intuited summary how much of it was already visible in the poems, and how true to it they were.

Armidale fostered friendships of a strange kind, sometimes so intense they could seem, however briefly, like falling in love. One was with a young poet, Iain Lonie, my exact contemporary, a New Zealander and Cambridge graduate, lecturer in classics, who translated Euripides' *Alcestis* and persuaded me to put the choruses into semi-formal verse, which he didn't feel he could do himself. He had a wife, Jean, and a number of children, but Kay and I saw little of them – only Iain himself; and I remember the three of us spending a long evening together which we enjoyed so much we were reluctant to end it. So in the small hours we walked him home from our flat to his, and then, still not ready to go our separate ways, he walked back with us, came in for another drink and more talk, after which we walked him home a second time as the first signs of daylight were just creeping into the cold sky. Our version of *Alcestis* was performed by the University Players in the Armidale Town Hall, and later a version of it was broadcast by the ABC.*

Iain was always uncertain about his poems, and slow in writing them, but they mattered to him more than anything; and he wrote to me, after getting an appointment at Sydney University,

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* Two of these choruses survive in my *Collected Poems, 1951–2006*, Auckland University Press, 2008, pp. 24 and 511.

> You seem to have started something off again in me, the night I saw you last. Since then I've been churning out poems and receiving rejection slips from all over the place.

In the same letter he sent ten of the forty guineas the ABC had paid for our play, money which he needed more than I did, and which was more than my fair share of the work. He still had little success with poems offered to literary journals, though he was to have more later on after his return to New Zealand.

In March 1957 I wrote to Frank Sargeson about new friends, Lee and Jack Bartley – he a veterinary scientist on a Fulbright scholarship to study toxaemia in pregnant ewes; Lee an arts faculty graduate – both from Berkeley, California.

> They are both beautiful – small, healthy-looking, clean-cut, with the sort of hair and teeth that win animals prizes in shows [. . .] The weather is exciting now too – cool nights and fresh clear sunny days. We go on picnics with them in their little Morris. The landscape, which can sometimes seem so drab in the daytime, looks wonderful under the moon, especially if you have a fire and the smell of eucalypt burning.
>
> Joyce and Otto got married in Melbourne at Christmas and Margaret Bell reports from London.

It was about the middle of the year that James McAuley came to give the year's Commonwealth Literary Fund lectures. McAuley and A. D. Hope were currently the dominant poets on the scene, working together,* deeply committed to a neo-Augustan anti-Modernist poetic, not just for themselves but for everyone, and it seemed for the good of the nation. This had its parallel in Britain's Movement poets, but the Australian version, in no sense an offshoot, was more dogmatic, grimmer, more extreme. McCauley's

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* Hope's collection, *The Wandering Islands,* was dedicated to McCauley.

poems were undoubtedly accomplished, but seemed to me sterile, machine-made; and he read them, not just well, but with alarming passion, wringing blood out of stones as if his life (and lives beyond his own) depended on it.

McCauley had recently become a Catholic and was now a stalwart right-wing Cold Warrior, editor of the new (in 1956) magazine *Quadrant* which would later be revealed as secretly funded by the CIA. The favourable attention Patrick White's *The Tree of Man* was getting in London was one of the matters currently upsetting him. The book had caught on overseas, he argued, with people who knew nothing of Australia and were not qualified to judge. Hope agreed and, not mincing his words, had dismissed the novel in the *Sydney Morning Herald* as 'pretentious and illiterate verbal sludge'.

But what McCauley was most famous for, and by now perhaps wished it was not so, was as the author, together with Harold Stewart, of the Ern Malley hoax. This was a group of sixteen Modernist poems, *The Darkening Ecliptic*, written in 1943 and offered to the avant-garde periodical *Angry Penguins* as the complete poems of Ern Malley who had died of Graves' disease aged twenty-five leaving them for his sister Ethel to have published if she could find an editor to take them. *Angry Penguins* editor Max Harris published them, hailing a major talent tragically lost to Australia. The real authors then declared themselves, claiming the poems were worthless, and that they had exposed the sham that passed for poetry under the Modernist banner.

Anyone who reads the Malley poems now will probably recognise at once elements of false, fake and funny. Once you know, they're hard to miss. But it has to be remembered how much those poems were *of their time* – a time in which T. S. Eliot could publish lines like

> Midnight shakes the memory
> As a madman shakes a dead geranium

which would look entirely at home in *The Darkening Ecliptic*. Fashion is something which to a certain extent sets its own standards and imposes a degree of blindness. Also relevant is the fact that these poems came to Harris from a person claiming to be the young poet's grieving sister. Harris was hoaxed as much by the fiction surrounding the poems as by the poems themselves. Publishing them was, among many things, an act of kindness.

It was a case that became famous internationally, with pundits on both sides (but most, including Herbert Read, on Harris's) lining up to express an opinion. Ocker Australia, its anti-intellectualism given aid and comfort, enjoyed the laugh. The state of Victoria prosecuted Harris on the grounds that the poems were obscene. He acquitted himself admirably under cross-examination in court and was nonetheless convicted, which only increased, in the eyes of his supporters, the honour due to him and the hoaxers' shame. Sidney Nolan painted Ern's portrait.

This was an event in our visitor's fairly recent past which had had the effect of driving him further into the neo-classical cage he now defended as the sole and proper frame for poetry. In his lectures he insisted that poetic Modernism was a dead horse, a delusion, the literary reflection of a larger moral and spiritual decay, and offered A. D. Hope, who had himself attacked the 'shuffle' and 'vomit' of Modernism, as his example of poetic virtue and promise for the future.

I thought the hoax had rebounded on the hoaxers – more particularly on McCauley, who had written most of the Malley lines, and in writing them had released moments of casual or accidental lyricism nowhere else apparent in his work. I remember his reading clearly, but cannot bring a single line of his to mind. On the other hand there are lines of Ern Malley's I can't forget – not least

> I am still
> the black swan of trespass on alien waters.

The 'here' and the 'there'

Around the middle of 1957 I received word I had been elected to a Commonwealth exhibition to Cambridge, and even assigned a college, Trinity, and a tutor, M. G. M. Pryor. Claire Tomalin writes of receiving a telegram offering her a place at another Cambridge college, Newnham, 'No one forgets that moment'. It did seem an exciting possibility; but soon after came news I had won the Hiatt Baker scholarship to the University of Bristol. The Bristol scholarship was £450 p.a. for an initial two years, all university fees covered, and with a possible extension. I don't have an exact figure for the Cambridge one but it was not sufficiently different to decide the matter. The British Council had awarded me a free passage to and from the UK. We had lived mostly on Kay's earnings and saved most of mine so were not going to be poor – in fact planned to buy our first car and learn to drive as soon as we got to England. I liked the thought of Cambridge and the mana that went with the name and the degree. But Oxford's and Cambridge's refusal to recognise any degrees apart from their own meant that I would be technically an undergraduate, and would need to enrol first for their BA, in effect repeating what I had done already in Auckland, rather than getting straight on to the critical and scholarly work that enrolment as a PhD candidate at Bristol would permit.

Bristol's Winterstoke* Professor of English, L. C. Knights, was known in academic circles for his *Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson*; but he was better (more widely) known for an article with the ironic title 'How many children had Lady Macbeth?', which became something like a banner for the New Criticism and for the journal *Scrutiny* of which for many years he was editor. This article was an attack on the nineteenth-century habit of treating Shakespeare plays – and more widely, works of fiction – as

* It was from this title I derived the name for my character, Bertie Winterstoke, in my novel *Talking about O'Dwyer*, Harvill Press, 1999.

repositories of 'characters' who had a life beyond the text. So the question in the title would have been, to a nineteenth-century critic like A. C. Bradley, a reasonable one; and if the text of *Macbeth* did not give you a direct answer, one might be inferred by an imaginative exploration of the lady's behaviour and the 'character' it revealed. (She did, after all, talk about 'giving suck' and plucking the baby from her breast.) The reform Knights called for was an end to this kind of abstraction of 'character', 'plot' etc. from text, and a more complete focus upon the words on the page. Without the words, there was nothing; and *in* the words lay the key to the 'rich and controlled experience' which was the play.

But Knights, though formidable and important, was not the dominating presence in what by now was famous as the *Scrutiny* group. That presence was F. R. Leavis. Writing home I said Knights was one of the more brilliant of F. R. Leavis's *Scrutiny* group, 'but I think without too much of their narrowness' – so it seems I had made preliminary enquiries. Leavis was famous as an acute and demanding critic, guardian of the highest literary standards, but known equally for dogmatism and a messianic temperament that seemed to require conformity from his disciples. His declared principle was that literary criticism should be a dialogue. A. would present a proposition, to which B. would respond, 'Yes, but . . .' and offer a qualifier or an alternative. Nothing could be more reasonable. But in reality Leavis's tone and behaviour seemed to require that in response to any proposition of his, only 'Yes I see that', and 'Yes I agree', would be appropriate and acceptable.

At a time when, and in a place where, tie-less was next-to-naked, the cover shots to Leavis's books usually showed him striding about Cambridge with shirt collar wide open over lapels. I took literary criticism very seriously. Indeed, the somewhat ruthlessly analytical reviews I had been sending home to Charles Brasch for *Landfall* were taking it, or myself, perhaps too seriously. It was not that my breakdown, for example, of the elements in Alistair Campbell's poems was wrong, or even unfair; but it was unkind – and it

would have been better if I could have somehow also built into it an acknowledgement that, before cool analysis set in, I had been charmed and moved by the poems I was now taking apart*. I had grown up under the influence of T. S. Eliot and others, including Leavis himself, whose analysis of literary works was subtle, usually persuasive, often compelling. That was my apprenticeship; and I neither regret it, nor wish to unlearn its lessons. Leavis was a major intellectual force; but he was also, temperamentally, a puritan and a bully, and I was neither.

For Leavis, D. H. Lawrence was one of the greatest English writers. He described *Kangaroo* as a 'fictional experiment' in political action, and added that it represented 'with an insight and an integrity which can be poignantly affecting, the drama of his relationship with Frieda'. Milton, on the other hand, did not measure up to Leavis's high standards and was, if not banished from the canon, at least given a much lower place than hitherto. Dickens was only seen at full stretch in *Hard Times*; the rest of his work did not deserve the attention of a serious mind – until, that is, Leavis changed his (requiring his acolytes to change with him), and Dickens too became one of the giants. Virginia Woolf wrote novels of 'extraordinary vacancy and pointlessness'. T. S. Eliot was accepted as one of the great poets of the English language, but W. B. Yeats was not, or not *quite*. Nor (certainly *not*) was W. H. Auden. And Leavis seemed to reserve a special phial of bile for Stephen Spender whom he saw as the prototype of the worthless leftish London book world that posed as the life of literature.

I could of course have chosen Cambridge, though not Downing, Leavis's college, since Trinity had already been chosen, or had chosen me; but I could have put myself somewhere in range of his teaching and his influence. Bristol, however, was already my preference because it would enrol me at once for postgraduate work and leave me so much freer to pursue my own course.

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* *Landfall* 40, December 1956, pp. 355–56.

My mind now was never far (or not for long) from the thought of our departure. Once again Kay and I would have to pack everything we owned, some marked NOT WANTED ON VOYAGE to go in the hold; some, to be available at intervals, marked BAGGAGE ROOM; the rest CABIN BAGGAGE. My free passage required me to have a medical check including chest X-rays. Inoculations against diseases prevalent in some of the countries we would pass through, including smallpox, were required, and we both reacted badly to these. The effect was like a very bad flu, with temperature, muscular aches, depression – just *illness*.

Kay's fare was £158.15.0. That 15 shillings was significant enough to be tagged on to the £158 is as much an indicator of the inflation since as is the actual fare, which covered one's accommodation and meals for the nearly five weeks at sea. Only the very rich could afford to go by air; and even that was slow and complicated. It was as if every journey made you a migrant – and that was how it felt when the distances were so great and took so long. We would travel from Sydney with shore stops at Melbourne, Fremantle (the port of Perth), Colombo and Aden; then through Suez (the canal just recently reopened), into the Mediterranean, going ashore at Naples and Marseilles, calling at Gibraltar, and onward to Tilbury Docks. We would then be as far from home as you could go without being on some kind of return journey.

And yet we would not be far from home at all: we would be in England. Not that we, twentieth-century New Zealand nationalists and anti-monarchists, would have dreamed of using the word 'Home' in the old colonial sense to mean England, as it did in the conversation of some of our grand- or great-grandparents' generation. But there was a sense in which it *was* – a home to the literary mind, the source of a very large part of our education, reading, history – our law and our lore. This was not, as it was often (and is still) said to be, a kind of colonial subservience. To have two homes, like two languages, can be better than just one, and I am too old now to pretend otherwise. Undoubtedly the primacy of

the one where I spent my formative years was absolute; but the second, also formative, was hardly to be dismissed as unimportant or a burden. However subtle the rights and wrongs of the matter might be, and however delicate the national pride, I approached the thought of setting foot in England with immense excitement.

I had good academic contacts in Australia now, and was confident I could come back to an academic job if that was what I wanted. There appeared to be no obstacles, either, to my becoming an Australian writer – as New Zealanders like Douglas Stewart and Ruth Park* had done. But I was almost equally sure that if it came to choosing between *here* and *there*, the *here* would be New Zealand and the *there* England. Australia had been good to me; but I was still burdened with that naïve idealism I have described in *South-West of Eden*, about 'creating a New Zealand literature' – the idea that had been planted, not by injunction but by example, in particular that of Curnow and Sargeson. Charles Brasch, as founder and funder of our one good literary quarterly, *Landfall*, was also an important part of that literary-nationalist project.

Yet none of what these men wrote to me seemed to urge me to come home soon. Brasch had written,

> Don't throw up Armidale lightly [. . .] For almost all writers writing must be a vocation not a profession; this is a hard truth one has to face. I can't give you any good advice; but don't act hastily; and do please tell me what you think of doing.

And from Curnow:

> From all accounts your move has turned out well. It's a bleak way of putting it but I can't think of anything worse for you

* Park's 1948 novel, *The Harp in the South*, had established her as a significant figure on the literary scene. When she died in 2010 aged ninety-three the *Australian* described her as author of 'classic Australian novels'.

> than staying here would have been. There's too much fake erudition about this Department; some day there will have to be a big house-clean, we'll stop posing as savants in three centuries of Eng. Lit. & teach what we know or have time to read.

I can't have taken a lot of notice of this warning because on the eve of leaving Armidale I was writing to Sargeson that I intended to spend just two years in England and then come back to Auckland, 'even if there's no job for me'. It was early to announce this with such certainty. The '*here*' was known; the '*there*' had yet to be experienced.

Brasch, who was making a brief trip to England and had hoped to meet me there, wrote,

> So you are going to England! Alas we shan't meet for I sail again about 2 August [. . .] It's a great disappointment to be missing you; I'd so hoped to see you there. Please don't forget *Landfall*; New Zealand will always need you. This sounds like goodbye again, so I wish you the best of fortune with all my heart.

I wrote a 'Last poem in Australia', which was fond enough but certainly not suffused with regret – I was too focused on what lay ahead. A group of eight or ten people came to see us off at the Armidale station. It was a night train and we had booked a sleeper. Among those there to say goodbye were Ada (pregnant) and Israel Getzler, and Otto Bergmann (without Joyce, who had taken a temporary lectureship in Auckland). There was a lot of noise, promises of letters and meetings-again, hilarity and some tears. Otto hugged us both, the whistle was blown, we climbed aboard, were waved away and settled for the night. Next morning early, when we emerged on the station platform at Sydney central, there was Otto again, welcoming us. It was a joke and a generous gesture. He had driven through the night to surprise us and say goodbye one more time.

Two or three days later we were at sea on the *Oronsay* (from memory 28,000 tons), P&O sister-ship of the *Orsova* that had brought us from Auckland.

Postscripts:
We never saw either Otto and Joyce Bergmann nor Israel and Ada Getzler again. Otto reported by letter that the Getzler baby was a boy, born soon after we left, and would be named David. Joyce kept up Christmas messages. She and Otto moved in 1958 to Baltimore, the following year to the University of Alabama, and finally in 1962 to George Washington University in Washington, DC, where Otto was promoted to a full professorship in 1968, by which time they had two children, 'Toni' (Anton) and 'Lizzie' (Elizabeth). Joyce reported (card undated but a year when Lyndon Johnson was lighting the National Christmas Tree and the students were rioting) she had had a radical mastectomy. She died in 1977. Otto's distinguished career, with papers on particle physics, special and general relativity, plasma physics, and material science, continued until he retired in 1988 as professor emeritus. He died in 2013 aged eighty-eight.

We lost contact with the Getzlers and what I know of him comes from an obituary in the *Guardian*. He went from Armidale to Adelaide, then to London. He became an international expert on modern Russian history, arguing in several important books that the Russian Revolution need not have gone the way it did, that totalitarianism was not inevitable. In 1971 he was appointed Professor of History at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. This, the obit writer says, had been his 'lifelong dream', but he raged constantly against his country's treatment of the Palestinians, and against the settlement policies of both the Likud and the Labor parties. His marriage to Ada ended in divorce and his second wife, to whom he had a daughter, was a political journalist and peace activist. He was

a member of the Peace Now movement, and continued protesting into old age. He died in 2012, aged ninety-one.

Iain Lonie returned to New Zealand where his first marriage foundered, and his second ended tragically with the sudden death of the new wife. He lived on for some years after that, writing poems about grief and loss, and then in 1988 killed himself. His best book, *Winter Walk at Morning*, was published posthumously in 1991.