Westerly

Volume 52, November 2007

ed. Delys Bird & Dennis Haskell

Westerly Centre
(formerly Centre for Studies in Australian Literature)

University of Western Australia 6009

Australia
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Production: Quarto Publishing Services and Media Fixation
Print: Advance Press, 186 Railway Parade, Bassendean WA 6054

Cover design by Robyn Mundy of Mundy Design. Front cover, detail from a painting by Ben Joel, "Mrs Elizabeth Jolley", oil on canvas (160 x 130 cm), 1995, collection, RA Finlay-Jones, and back cover, from a painting by Peter Cienitis, "Making sense of place #4", a portrait of George Seddon, Archibald Prize finalist 2007, watercolour, pencil and conte (60 x 75 cm), both reproduced with kind permission of the artists.
WESTERLY
an annual review ISBN 978-0-9804371-1-9

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Subscriptions: $45.00 for two issues for 1 year (posted); $200.00 for two issues for 5 years (posted). Special student subscription rate: $40.00 per annum for two issues (posted). Single copies $25.95 plus $4.00 postage (single issue only). Subscriptions should be made payable to The University of Western Australia and sent to the Administrator, Westerly Centre at the above address. Overseas subscriptions: please see back page.

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PATRICIA HACKETT PRIZE

The editors have pleasure in announcing the winner of the Patricia Hackett Prize for the best contribution to *Westerly* in 2006:

Christopher (Kit) Kelen

for his poem
“Blokes”
EDITORIAL

ELIZABETH JOLLEY (1923–2007)  
GEORGE SEDDON (1927–2007)

This issue of *Westerly* is dedicated to the life and work of two valued and loved colleagues whose writing will continue to be of enormous influence in our local and national cultures as well as internationally. Elizabeth Jolley and George Seddon were each unique personalities, genuine “characters”, both involved in writing but pursuing different careers in different fields. Each was a superb essayist and in their own particular ways, a humanist thinker. Both were born outside Western Australia, although they became neighbours for a time in Perth, which was a small place in the late 1950s and early 1960s. George Seddon had spent a period at The University of Western Australia early in his academic career when he came to the then English Department in 1956 and taught there for ten years. He returned to UWA in 1988, as a research fellow in the Westerly Centre. Between 1966 and 1988 he had studied and held positions in philosophy, geology, and environmental science. He said himself that “seen from the outside, my academic career may look arbitrary and eccentric”, but he saw it as consistent. “All my life”, he wrote, “I have been driven by two passions: a love of language, and a fascination with the physical world of rocks, trees, rivers, mountains, landform”. George had an extraordinary range of knowledge. He was often called “a Renaissance man”, a title he always refused; he much preferred to be thought of as a figure of the Enlightenment, with its thirst for knowledge and its valuing of applications of reason. Only George could write about Australian landscapes through reference to the poetry of Banjo Paterson, Henry Lawson, Bernard O’Dowd, and A D Hope. When, in the late-1980s, Paul Carter came up with the idea of “spatial history”, George provided the most profound analysis of it, through his knowledge of Australian geography, Australian history, and Derrida’s philosophy of Deconstruction. He could understand perceptions of the Australian environment partly because he knew so much about Wordsworth and the Romantic revolution. Because of his vast
knowledge he was always able to place ideas and not be swept away by them. 
He was years ahead of us in recognising “our water-poverty and its 
implications”. George’s training in English made him acutely aware of the 
power of language not only to reflect reality but to determine it.

Elizabeth Jolley came to Perth in 1959 from the United Kingdom with her 
husband Leonard when he took up an appointment as University Librarian 
at The University of Western Australia. They shared a sharp wit and a love 
and wide knowledge of music and literature, particularly of the eighteenth 
and nineteenth-century. The move to Western Australia had a profound 
effect on Elizabeth and she relished the difference of its landscapes and 
climates as well as the openness of Australian life. Much has been written 
about the influences on her work, especially those of her upbringing in the 
English Midlands, her training as a nurse, and of European – in particular 
German – music and literature. Interestingly though, it seems to have been 
the experience of migration that moved her imagination and permeated her 
writing when she was finally published in her fifties. Elizabeth taught 
creative writing from the 1970s and was made a Professor of Creative Writing 
at Curtin University in 1998. She received honorary doctorates from Curtin 
University, Macquarie University, the University of New South Wales and the 
University of Queensland, and in 1998 was named one of Australia’s 100 
Living National Treasures. Her work won numerous awards. Elizabeth’s deep 
desire to own land was fulfilled in the early 1970s when she and her husband 
bought five acres of bushland with a small cottage at Woorooloo, outside 
Perth, where she planted an orchard and kept geese for a time. It was a 
treasured place for her and she was devastated when it was destroyed in a 
bushfire in the late 1990s. *Westerly* has had a long association with Elizabeth 
Jolley; and devoted a special issue to her writing in 1986. In 2007 the John 
Curtin Primeminsiter Library will publish online “The Elizabeth Jolley 
Research Collection”, which will include a brief biography and a 
comprehensive bibliography, in both PDF form and as a searchable database. 
This is the culmination of years of work by a research group at Curtin 
University of Technology and will provide an important resource for Jolley 
scholars, readers and students around the world.

***

In 2008 *Westerly* will move to publishing two issues a year; one in June/July 
which will be a mixed volume of critical work, review essays and creative 
work, as the single issue is at present. In November/December we will 
publish an issue devoted to creative writing. This decision has long been
discussed and has been prompted by the dearth of publishing outlets in Australia for creative writing as well as our desire to be able to publish more of the material submitted for publication each year.

This *Westerly* also has something extra – it comes with a special issue we’ve called *Westerly Poetry, Cleanskin* by Megan McKinlay. That publication has been made possible with the assistance of a grant from the Western Australian Department of Culture and the Arts in its “A Few New Words” initiative to encourage the publication of new and emerging Western Australian poets. *Westerly’s* call for poetry manuscripts yielded fifty-three submissions, most of very good quality. As many as eleven manuscripts seemed to us to be publishable. The decisions were made by the Poetry Editor and the Co-editors, and Megan McKinlay’s manuscript was chosen for its imaginative intelligence. It was stimulating to discover how much fine poetry was available, and we thank all the poets who participated.
GEORGE SEDDON: PIONEER OF REGIONAL ENVIRONMENTALISM

George Seddon was a complex, multi-faceted man: visionary and pedant, intellectual and activist, a literary man of letters and a scientist, a nomad and a settler, and above all, a cosmopolitan and a regionalist. Two years ago in a social setting over a glass of wine, Seddon, with his usual sense of public theatre, announced to all and sundry at the table and in a voice like that of a pompous nineteenth-century English colonial explorer: "there are only two places on earth I have not seen, namely, St Petersburg and Antarctica... (a nicely timed pause ensued) and I have no intention of ever going to Antarctica." He duly visited St Petersburg and kept his promise on Antarctica. Seddon was a peripatetic traveller but his travels served his purposes, which were invariably educational. Whatever he learned of the world (and his curiosity was insatiable) we could be sure to know also for it would find itself into his writings and lectures – at the lectern, across the table, and on the page. Yet for all his wanderings, geographic and intellectual, Seddon was paradoxically also a settler. He came to live in Perth, Western Australia, for over 40 years – half his lifetime, and many of his writings were directed at gaining a sense of his place, on the Swan Coastal Plain. This paper explores two of these facets – the regionalist and the environmentalist, the nomadic cosmopolitan who came to settle in Perth. As such we offer only a partial portrait of the man but we hope that this initial reflection on his regional environmentalism and his sense of place in Western Australia can at least shed some light on his contributions to these central concerns of our era.

Stage 1: Western Australia, 1956–71: the origins of a new approach to landscape

Seddon was born in Berriwillock in the Mallee region of north-west Victoria, and raised in Mildura before becoming a boarder at an Anglican Grammar School in Ballarat. In the Mallee he first learned to wander freely in the bush and to read the landscape. Seddon trained in English language and literature
at The University of Melbourne, beginning in 1950. In 1956 he returned from several years freelance travelling and teaching at universities in Europe, Canada and the United States, and was appointed to a lectureship in English Literature at The University of Western Australia. He discovered, much to his initial disgust, that the local bush was nothing like what he had grown to love in his home state of Victoria. Never one to disown his emotions or put them aside without reflection, Seddon enrolled in undergraduate biological and earth sciences while carrying a full academic research, teaching and administrative load in the English Department.

Seddon soon found a fascination for what science could tell him about the scratchy plants, the shadeless Banksia woodlands, the gaunt Jarrah and the lack of flowing water on the Swan Coastal Plain. He discovered with new eyes why Perth had such biodiversity but could never provide a landscape like the English one that most local residents desired. He completed his Masters of Science and doctoral thesis in geology at the University of Minnesota (1964–66), based on his work in Perth.

Seddon brought to his new scientific understanding of landscape his humanities training and perspectives. He brought the human dimension into his science by looking at the history of how Indigenous and white settlers adapted culturally to what the land and water provided. He then used his seemingly innate design skills, and developed ideas for how we could better live within the regional environment. He soon began to write about the Swan Coastal Plain and completed two classic books – *Swan River Landscapes* (1970) and *Sense of Place* (1972). He initiated a program in the philosophy of science at The University of Western Australia (1966–1970) as he began the transition to creating a new discipline that combined the sciences and the arts.

From his time in WA, Seddon’s contribution therefore was to write the first major regional environmental texts which brought together for the first time ecology, culture and city building in one purview. Despite his not staying on to see it happen, the formation of Murdoch University in the early 1970s included as one of its new Chairs a position in Environmental Studies, directly stemming from the work that Seddon had pioneered (not least because it was partly funded by Western Mining at the instigation of Seddon’s close friends, the Brodie-Halls).

**Stage 2: 1971–1990 Sydney and Melbourne**

In 1971, Seddon was appointed to the first Chair in Australia in the History and Philosophy of Science, at The University of New South Wales (1971–1974). He then moved to Melbourne to initiate new programs in
Environmental Studies and Landscape Architecture at The University of Melbourne where he was appointed the founding Director of The Centre for Environmental Studies (1974-1982). This was one of three environmental studies programs and chairs established in 1974 – the other two being at Murdoch University and Griffith University. Seddon later became Dean of the Faculty of Architecture and Planning (1982-1987).

Among his many achievements, Seddon firmly established landscape architecture as a discipline in Australia, not least through bringing many of its leading proponents from North America and Europe as Visiting Fellows and Guest lecturers in Melbourne during his time there. He also launched the journal Landscape Australia (1977-).

Not only did Seddon cross the disputed turfs and boundaries of academic professions, disciplines and departments but he made a career out of working beyond the academy in community, regional and government consultancies where he could bring this new regional environmental perspective. At The University of Melbourne between 1974 and 1987, Seddon undertook studies on environmental assessment, landscape perception, urban design and conservation planning. He took an avid interest in the contested terrains between metropolitan suburbs and arable agricultural hinterlands, or wilderness spaces, in key built-up population areas. His public consultancies included studies on the development and routing of major power stations and transmission lines through ecologically and socially sensitive areas, the energy and infrastructure needs of national parks, and bicycle plans for cities. In 1979, with Ross King and Jeremy Pike, he also wrote the first suburban history of its kind in Australia, on Hawthorn. And he had brief periods working on overseas projects including the issues surrounding the sinking of Venice.

This was a productive and global period in Seddon’s career but his lasting contribution in this era when globalisation took hold of popular culture and the economy, was to remind people that they could never escape their dependence on a regional environment, and that each eco-region needed to be understood, and loved.

Stage 3: 1994–2007 a time for reflection
Seddon returned to Perth in 1994 and took up a position in English again at the Centre for Studies in Australian Literature (now the Western Centre), with a determination to write. This era of reflection, which built on his previous work and extended its nuances and meanings, was highly productive. He published several books including: Searching for the Snowy: An Environmental History (1994), Swan Song (1996), Landprints: Reflections on Place
and Landscape (1997), Looking at an Old Suburb (2000), The Old Country: Australian Landscapes, Plants and People (2005), and his final book with Gillian Lilleyman, A Landscape for Living (2006), about the University of Western Australia grounds. Fittingly, 2004 saw the publication of a revised and reprinted facsimile edition of Sense of Place.

Seddon was a superb stylist whose best métier were perhaps the essay, the review and the lecture, where he combined and shared with others his acerbic wit, erudition, and critical enthusiasm in equal measure. He was always in demand for his perspectives on most issues that related to a region's environment. One memorable visit to Mildura organised by the Thesis Eleven Centre for Critical Theory, LaTrobe University, enabled Seddon to reflect on the landscapes of his youth, but to the best of our knowledge there is nothing in print on those years except in passing in his reflections on his years at the University of Melbourne.

His general perspective was important historically as environmentalism grew from a rather rag-tag reactive political movement to one that challenged the fundamental perceptions and approaches we were taking in our society. Seddon is clearly a reformist in his approach but he always appreciated that knowledge is multifaceted (in our stories, our language, our ways of seeing and being in the world) and that traditions can empower as well as incapacitate. He saw that Australians live on the edge of a continent we are only just beginning to understand and appreciate. In particular he challenged us to review our approaches to the environment, region by region. In The Old Country, he reminds us that settler Australians are only now learning to self-reflexively “imaginatively possess” the land and its peculiar ecosystems which we inhabit. Seddon gained a sense of urgency about this task near the end of his own life. It was almost as if his sense of his own mortality made him see the need to be more apocalyptic in his urgings and tone in his public speeches and writings. In his 2004 lecture to the Australian Planning Institute in Hobart at the time of his Lifetime Planning Achievement Award, he stated boldly:

We are still trying to learn this hard land, and it is almost too late. The cost of inappropriate land-uses are only now becoming fully apparent, although there have been warnings and lonely prophets for many years. One of the best things about Tim Flannery’s book The Future Eaters is the title. Aborigines began a process that has been carried near to completion in the last two hundred years, and there will soon be little future left to eat. Australia is by far the most fragile of the continents. The origins of
that fragility are not fully understood, although latitude and tectonic quiescence have clearly played a part. What is well established is the immense damage of the last two centuries.²

Seddon was never content to undertake critiques and diagnoses of our current predicaments but always sought to find the ways in which we can reimagine, relearn, remake our stories and cultures and the enculturated landscapes we call nature. In The Old Country: Australian Landscapes, Plants, and People, he explores the ways in which we can do these tasks, disentangling ourselves from misleading knowledges and unproductive practices without embracing new bad habits and ecological fundamentalisms (such as ecological nationalism or deep ecology romanticism etc.):

The enduring form of possession is imaginative possession, which is fed by knowledge, understanding, associations, stories and images, affections and, finally, incorporation of the environment into the self, until it becomes part of our sense of personal identity. We have yet to fully possess Australia in this sense – we have alighted rather than settled. It takes time, but we have made a beginning.³

Imaginative possession is also about the relationship of knowledge to sustainability (that is, developing ways of living in our landscapes that adapt to the core ways the ecosystems reproduce and sustain themselves) and appreciating the beauty of the life-forms themselves. Insofar as we humans continue to learn from critical reflections on our historical experience and seek to find other ways of engaging with the natural worlds we encounter and reshape, so too the possibilities of more creative forms of self-responsibility and ecological care might be found and practised. The question for Seddon is not the preservation of nature as some absolute “other” but rather the self-management of human engagement with nature. This engagement is theoretically a universal and cosmopolitan task, but in practice it is also a matter of gaining a sense of place. This demands of us, as Seddon does of himself, that we are always “resident aliens,” in but not of the cultures and places in which we live and work, contemplate, and reconstruct. An egregious error of European science has been to assume that its natural history is more developed, diverse, and complex than that of the rest of the world.

Again, this misled scientific study and delayed understanding of Australian nature. The critical epistemological point, however, is not to discard European science but to throw off the colonial blinkers of Eurocentric assumptions and methods. Australian scientific understanding of Australian
nature comes not from trying to invent an “original,” scholarly apparatus but from independent critical thinking that is responsive to local conditions in global context, and to cross-cultural and historical comparison. Critical thinking, above all, should be able to learn from its own past errors. Seddon seeks not only to understand the peculiarities of Australian nature but also to offer cultural histories of its naming, perception, and analysis. Imaginative possession is not a problem but a necessary condition and normal activity of being human.

The challenge, he argued, was to rethink nature via the ways in which we engage it in our extraction of resources, through our food production systems, and not least in our gardens - in each region - and it was to the Swan Coastal Plain region that Seddon returned.

Seddon’s contribution to Perth’s understanding of its regional environment

The writing of Sense of Place and Swan River Landscapes had an immediate impact on the consciousness of the local public but longer waves of influence in the nascent environmental sciences. Seddon’s books were pioneering in conception and methodology and therefore were returned to again and again by the first generation of environmental studies scholars – academics and students alike – throughout Australia. Seddon developed these ideas further in his essays during his reflective period back in Perth. We note here, however, six ideas that are now taken for granted as common sense ecological nostrums but that can be traced to these early works written in the late 1960s. They are presented here to show the power of his ideas and also the style of his writing which combined the academic and the poetic.

1. Treasure the foreshores of our rivers

The foreshores should be understood in an Arcadian spirit, the indigenous flora replanted and land and water left to meet with the nervous calligraphy of a natural strand. As Wordsworth said ‘Winds and waves work with a careless and graceful hand’.

The Stephenson Plan for Perth from 1955 had recognised the need to bring back the foreshores into public ownership. George Seddon was able to explain this need, both ecologically and poetically. Perth came to regard its foreshores as special places – belatedly coming to a more indigenous understanding – and now 85% are in public ownership, a rare thing in most cities. One contentious issue from the 1980s was Swan River Drive, a
planned freeway along the river foreshore from Perth to Guildford. In the debate it was common to hear the above quotation and a further Seddon piece explaining why no road should ever again desecrate the foreshore. Swan River Drive was quietly dropped from the Plan, never to be heard of again.

2. Value native plants
As described above, Seddon’s first impressions of Perth were not good:

I hated it....The country was all wrong and I felt cheated....All the plants scratched your legs. The jarrah was a grotesque parody of a tree....It was slowly borne in on me that I wasn’t an Australian at all but a Victorian.³

As Seddon learned to step sideways from the perception of landscape forged during his life in Victoria and to love as well the scratchy, shadeless plants of the Swan Coastal Plain, he began to see their beauty and their utility for landscaping:

Our gardening preferences are still English, and good Western Australian bush is dug up to plant roses. Perhaps this will change. My hope is that Perth will become more parochial and that planning for it will be minutely topical; more so and not less because the world is now our toxic oyster.⁶

George Seddon’s and Mark Wallace’s own beautiful garden in Fremantle is a place that values local plants, a source of great inspiration for him and for all those lucky enough to spend time there. They are now not alone as the policy of using native plants is far more culturally acceptable than 40 years ago when he first began to write about this, and has the full support of state agencies such as the Water Corporation and Department of Environment and Conservation. Yet, as he demonstrates in his later works, Seddon was no nativist or botanic nationalist. As a gardener he was always experimenting with plants from different parts of the world that he thought might be appropriate to local conditions. As an ecological thinker, he pondered long and hard about the contradictions and paradoxes of ecological traffic across the regions of the world, of ecological imperialism, and of the notions of feral animals, toxic weeds, and the inevitability of hybridity. In The Old Country, for example, he shows that some exotic plants adapt too well and become ubiquitous, while others can make important contributions to the ecological well-being and aesthetic design of local gardens. Seddon is a regionalist but one who always thought comparatively across time, cultures and regions.
3. “Fear the hose”

As soon as we turn on the tap in Perth we dramatically transform the environment, so it is important that the decision should not be taken lightly, nor its consequences misunderstood.7

In a time of drought this advice is readily accepted by everyone but Seddon was writing in the time of record winters. This was not a policy just for water management but for biodiversity and landscape management. It was not to be seen as sacrifice, for as Seddon pointed out, part of the stark unspoiled beauty of Rottnest is actually due to its limited water supply. Living within a much lower water budget is advice Perth should have taken earlier and if the city had learned to “fear the hose” it would be much better off in water supply terms. However the city may yet come to see with Seddon that this indeed will lead to a preferred landscape, that is also a more sustainable environment.

4. Recognise heritage – especially Fremantle

Fremantle has had a different history....The allotments were smaller than those in Perth and the holders were obliged to build to the street line along the high street whereas a thirty foot setback was normal in Perth....The outcome of these measures is a compact town that has retained a pedestrian scale.8

Seddon loved Fremantle. He loved the fact that it was limestone on limestone and he loved to walk around it. These qualities were under threat in the early 70s. Seddon was one of those who stood up to prevent the destruction of the Arts Centre which many people see as the heritage turning point in Fremantle, and later his words were regularly used to explain the special character of Fremantle during that decade’s fight to save its heritage. The retention of Fremantle’s walking scale and its striking architectural qualities owe a lot to George Seddon.

5. Stop the sprawl.

Seddon liked the fact that Perth had a Regional Plan but he warned that it did not have enough of a sense of limits. Its corridors appeared to go on endlessly to Geraldton and Bunbury. A population of 10 million, he suggested, would occupy the whole of the Swan Coastal Plain. “This is a future’ Seddon said ‘we should strenuously plan against and not for.” In particular Seddon loved the Moore River area and considered it an environment to be treasured. When a suburban development was planned
there 14 years ago Seddon was one of the first to protest. Not only because it would spoil a pristine environment but the resulting urban sprawl 90 kilometres north of the CBD would also be poorly serviced and inadequate for those who lived there. In today's terms it would be unsustainable. Two days after George died the State Administrative Tribunal handed down its 99-page decision on the Moore River proposal, declaring that it should not proceed and that from here on all new suburban development on the fringes of Perth will need to meet strict sustainability criteria. This battle was fought by many but it was Seddon's pioneering voice that first inspired and emboldened others to take up the cause.

6. Sustainable City
Seddon's remarkable ability to put complex matters into beautiful prose is nowhere more obvious than when looking at the long term future of the city. Today this is described as "sustainability" and many have grappled with what it means for cities like Perth over the past twenty years. In Sense of Place Seddon said it all 40 years ago with great simplicity:

As we move into the future with such breakneck speed, many people are concerned to take stock of our assets, so that we can plan to keep them. The major landscape amenities of the Swan Coastal Plain are the foothills and Darling Scarp at the eastern boundary; the lakes, swamps and rivers of the plain, especially the Moore and Swan estuaries and Peel Inlet; the coastline; the sea and the offshore islands. To these natural assets one should add some man-made ones, notably the vineyards of the Swan Valley; individual buildings that matter to us either for architectural or cultural reasons; some parts of the urban fabric that have achieved a distinctive character and quality that should be conserved; and by far the most important, but hardest to write of, the social fabric, all of those small complex communities within the sprawling metropolis that give it cohesion, and all the good habits and attitudes that make up a valued way of life. These are neither self-generating nor self-perpetuating; they are the products of a specific urban ecology, and their survival in a new urban regime is not guaranteed.9

Seddon's contribution to the notion of regional environments

Public policy through design
Seddon added science to aesthetics in his contributions to the discipline and practice of landscape architecture - and to both aspects he applied his thinking to policy development in the public domain.
In this he was following the early environmentalists like Paul Ehrlich who sought to bring ecological understandings directly into policy and politics. The difference with many in the environmental movement was that Seddon emphasized regional environments rather than global concerns, and he brought to the policy arena a much more sophisticated understanding of history and culture in each region, and in particular his solutions emphasized design. Simple solutions that blamed all ecological damage on too many people or too much wealth were simply brushed aside as he described how the region had special character and history but that cultural perceptions and designs needed to change if the landscape was to be managed better. In this he is both deeper in understanding the issues and more practical in showing how we can move forward.

2. Food Industries: Pastoralism and Agriculture
Seddon had a radical appreciation of agriculture that has not yet been followed, though the seeds of his ideas are bearing fruit in some places. He had little time for pastoralism, wheat, cotton and rice growing. He believed they were not sustainable in our landscape. The major ecological threats to the continent in Seddon’s view were: top-soil loss, land degradation and salinity.

Seddon spins this story – of human production and intervention on natural ecosystems – back onto itself in order to show that these practices carry with them traditions, myths and ideologies that shape the wider social imaginary of the modern Australian nation-state. The nation’s obsession with sheep and cereal cropping is rooted in a deep cultural imaginary but one that needs to be deconstructed, and renarrated with new myths, new heroes, and new economic and cultural practices that express imaginative possession of the land in ways that can be sustained. In his “Getting off the Sheep’s Back” in Thesis Eleven (August 2003), for example, he puzzles over the centrality of pastoralism to the self-identity of the Australian nation-state when its material importance to the wealth of the nation is secondary to the more significant contribution of mineral extraction. The double irony, argued by Seddon and Flannery and others, is that cloven-hoofed animals continue to cause the most extreme damage to the ecosystems of the island continent, while the conventional bête noire of mining represents a much more local and containable impact on ecological systems. It is pastoralism that is extolled in the popular consciousness of Australians, whilst it is mining that is most vociferously attacked by environmentalists emanating from the suburbs.

Two quotations demonstrate Seddons’ skilful weaving of narrative and argument about Australia’s ecological and socio-economic challenges and the political and cultural solutions to hand:
"Australia rode to prosperity on the sheep's back", the saying goes. We should have got off long ago. Sheep are vermin, like rabbits and goats, in most of pastoral Australia, and it is time to start shooting. The saying never had more than a limited and partial measure of truth; it is better rephrased as 'Australia has enjoyed limited periods of modest prosperity through the destruction by sheep of a fragile native vegetation'. From the air, sheep read like maggots; looking up from the ground, a sheep is four little mobile jackhammers, pounding to dust the thin skin of an old land that had known only the gentle limbs of the kangaroo. In much of pastoral Australia sheep have caused a loss of both vegetative cover and topsoil that is now virtually beyond our capacity to repair...about one-quarter of Australia's range and cropland has become irreversible desert.\(^{11}\)

In "Ill Fares the Land" (already cited above), Seddon develops an analysis of the enduring cultural appeal of arable and the pastoral long after the economic and ecological rationales for pastoralism can be sustained:

How have we managed to do this to our land? The answer is historical, political and cultural. The question that needed asking from the outset - is this the best, or even an appropriate, use for the land - could not be asked. It is simply what we were for. We were to be, first an outdoor prison, and then a primary producer for the mother country [Britain]. Wheat, wool, and timber were to feed, warm and house the dense population of a dominant industrial/manufacturing economy. This was the fate of all the colonies, with only minor variations. Canada and South Africa shared our fate, as did the USA until it got other ideas. Given our latitude, we might have fared better under the Spaniards, with a stronger emphasis on deep rooting crops like vines, olives, cork oaks, and other tree crops. But we would still have been primary producers, producing what the colonial home powers needed and not what we were well suited to supply. This was, and has largely continued to be, our unquestioned role. It is powerfully reinforced by other attitudes, including the political belief that the yeoman farmer who tilled the fields was the backbone of the country. The yeoman farmers and their robust and plentiful sons would also come in handy as cannon-fodder if called upon, as indeed proved the case. There was added to all this, the geopolitical concern that if we didn't use the land, someone else would come and take it from us, and they would probably be an 'undesirable shade of yellow'. Closer settlement and 'opening up the land' became a moral imperative as well as a pragmatic one. The land itself had no voice in these decisions, although it is now beginning to make itself heard.\(^{12}\)
3. Mining
Seddon had quite different ideas about mining to much popular understanding, especially in the environmental movement. He believed it had been unfairly typecast as the bad boys on the block when the process of mining itself had such a small footprint on the landscape compared, for example, to pastoralism. But most of all he appreciated the science they provided on our land. The process of mineral exploration and environmental assessment of mines had led to major new understanding of Australian landscapes and the detail of soils, flora and fauna. This science was far greater than anything conducted through government and university. It was also a much bigger contribution to the nation's wealth than most people began to appreciate.

4. Gardening
Seddon’s enthusiasm for local history and cultural heritage found expression in his loving restoration of houses in which he has lived in Melbourne and Fremantle. He has combined this with a landscape ecologist’s imaginative flair for garden design that incorporates native and exotic plants suited to local climate and soil conditions. Many a reader has benefited from Seddon’s practical handbooks and guides to vegetable gardens, historical and cultural heritage walks and house restoration. Yet Seddon was not just a practical gardener with a green thumb dispensing advice; he was a cultural theorist who saw the suburban garden and the suburban gardener’s everyday engagement with nature as the key to re-imagining Australia’s ecological future. After all, it was Seddon who first highlighted the fact that suburban gardening constitutes the largest land resource management industry in the Australian economy.

Environmentalism has not included the garden in its purview. It has mostly seen gardens as false environments that act as sources of weeds. Seddon delved more deeply into the garden seeing it as one of the strengths and weaknesses of the Australian suburban imaginary. This major engagement by Australians with nature he believed was a great cultural source of eco-knowledge that should be tapped more by scientists, and should become the frontline for examining how we manage urban water, food, and our lifestyles in general. Seddon saw that the transformation of Australian nature will be in the suburbs themselves, not least through a transformation of the nature of Australian suburbia itself.

5. Adapting to a constrained future
Environmental consciousness has grown enormously in the era in which
George Seddon wrote and taught. He shared the concern of those who saw the future as much more constrained but he did not face it with despair. He knew far too much history to despair. He knew that humans have the ability to adapt so he was always writing with this sense of hope illuminating his ideas. Rather than leaving the stark science of constraints to confront the community, Seddon was always suggesting that traditional solutions to managing regional environments should be invoked. These included more local and regional storytelling, less nationalism and more global connecting to source local innovations that could be adapted for the region. The idea of sense of place underlay all his work, which meant that we needed to simultaneously be attached to our regions but look out to absorb relevant cultural traffic and other traditions of knowing.

Conclusions
Seddon exhibited his usual imaginative flair, indefatigable energy, and irascible humour and intelligence to the very end – publishing three books and several brilliant essays in the last four years. At the same time he was travelling far and wide, from Madagascar to the Galapagos Islands, and by boat from Broome to Darwin and from the Baltic to the Black Sea on the River Danube. This essay has focused more on Seddon the regionalist than Seddon the cosmopolitan but he was both. Seddon was living testimony to the inadequacy of such dichotomous notions that to be regionalist is to be communitarian while to be a cosmopolitan is to seek the empty non-places of airport lounges and international hotels. Seddon’s international reach in his various intellectual labours was as much extensive as it was a reflection of his sharp sense of place. Reflecting on his forty years of living in Perth, Seddon ruefully noted that his writings not only record a changing city but a changing man with changing perceptions across three identifiable stages in his life (stages that we have outlined in this article):

the responses of a newcomer who became an established resident; the commentary of one who was both refugee and exile from the West; and finally, recycled, coming back to a place I thought I knew, but which in fact I have only begun to discover, because it is not at all the place I left, nor am I the man who left it."

Notes

The Old Country, 118.

Swan River Landscapes, 68.

Sense of Place, (2004), xiii.

Sense of Place, 262.

Swan River Landscapes, 67.

Sense of Place, 242–44.

Sense of Place, 196.


This quote taken from the unpublished introduction to “Getting off the Sheep’s Back” sent to Trevor Hogan by the author on 31 July, 2002.

“Ill Fares the Land.”

From an electronic version of a paper entitled “Essaying the Essay” sent to Trevor Hogan by the author on 3 March 2003.
REMEMBERING ELIZABETH JOLLEY

One day early in 1976 I sent Elizabeth Jolley a telegram saying “Congratulations! Hilda’s Wedding accepted Tabloid Story. Published soon Loose Licks.” I was living in Melbourne at the time, and together with some friends had just taken over the short story magazine started by Frank Moorhouse and Michael Wilding in Sydney. The idea was to get a mass readership for short fiction by publishing Tabloid Story as an insert in host magazines with large circulations – hence Loose Licks, the rock magazine with its in-your-face title. This was the year when Elizabeth’s first book, Five Acre Virgin, was published, but it probably had not appeared before I sent the telegram and if it had, we didn’t know about it. We’d never heard of Elizabeth Jolley, and from the quirkiness of the story she’d written, we imagined her as some groovy young thing in her twenties, not a woman past fifty with three children whose husband Leonard was the University Librarian at the University of Western Australia, and in response to the telegram could send his staff searching (in vain) for information about Loose Licks.

Two years later I met Elizabeth at the Adelaide Writers’ Festival. We had published “The owner of grief, or the outworks of the kingdom” as the lead story in our special free giveaway festival edition which had been hosted by yet another urban paper, the Melbourne Times. Unfortunately, although we had meticulously proofread the story itself, we didn’t notice the “e” missing from “Jolley,” and I was more than a little anxious when I set off for our arranged meeting. Elizabeth was impossible to miss, the tall, thin, grey-haired woman dressed in a kaftan. She was delighted to be on the front page of Tabloid Story, laughed at the misspelled name, told me she’d never been so far east before, and caught me up in her intense enthusiasm.

During the next seven years, I saw Elizabeth several times on her home territory in Perth when I flew west to go to conferences or give lectures at the University of Western Australia. What struck me at first was how hard it
was for her to get published just because she lived in the West. Over lunch at The Witch’s Caldron where new meanings hovered around her kaftan, she told me that Outback Press had accepted *Palmino* for publication, but nothing at all seemed to be happening. Every morning she woke up worrying about what to do, and by 4pm had gathered enough courage to ring, but by then they’d left the office – and knowing as I did that Outback Press was in spite of its name an inner-city Melbourne venture, I realised that by 6pm they would be down at the pub, and even if someone had been in the office of this aggressively alternative press, they would have paid scant attention to the polite enquiry from a middle-aged woman with a hesitant voice. From the vantage point of email and cheap telephone calls, it’s difficult to remember what a tyranny space really was in the 1970s. At least I could plead with Elizabeth to get an agent and point her in the direction of Caroline Lurie. In December 1980 Elizabeth wrote to thank me, and I knew she meant it when she said, “It is very nice corresponding with Caroline, it makes the writing life not so lonely! I need some one very much to help in knowing where to place manuscripts, up the present, I have been doing this on my own.”

As I came to know Elizabeth better, I was invited home for dinner and fortunately Leonard and I got on extremely well. Sharp-tongued and prickly, he cared passionately about the English language, and his ordinary speech was filled with quotations from the vast range of poetry he carried in his head, as if the life-long weakness in his body was compensated by an extraordinary capacity for remembering words. After I’d been to the Jolleys for dinner in 1984, Leonard wrote to apologise for having to retire early. “I hope we shall have the chance to meet again but for me as the Reeve says ‘The stream of lyf now droppeth on the chyme’. A marvellous image which annhilates 500 years.” Leonard was a remarkable man, and it is no wonder that Elizabeth missed him deeply. “I think I miss L. more as time goes by!,” she wrote to me in 1996 after we had met up at a conference in northern Spain, an exhilarating if exhausting trip made possible as Elizabeth acknowledged, because “Delys Bird was very kind to travel with me and look after me!” Each morning Elizabeth held court over breakfast in the small Spanish hotel where we kept re-filling our plates from the buffet as we transformed a usually brief meal into a banquet of laughter, food and talk.

Although I had less contact with Elizabeth during the years when she became famous, we occasionally met when she was touring, and exchanged cards or letters from time to time. I was always invigorated by her warmth, and when I learned that she was succumbing rapidly to dementia, I was horrified and angry at the cruelness of fate. By coincidence, I was in Perth the
week before she died and could go with Delys Bird to see her in the hospital. As I stood by her bedside, heartbroken at her loss of language, I stroked her hair and spoke aloud my memories of those long-ago years when I sent the telegram to a gifted writer who turned out to be one of the most astonishing women I will ever know.
REMEMBERING ELIZABETH JOLLEY

I was eighteen when I met Elizabeth Jolley. Fresh out of high school I enrolled at Curtin University of Technology (then Western Australian Institute of Technology) and found myself in one of her writing classes. I’d never heard of her or her work, but she was the first published writer of fiction I ever encountered. God knows what I’d expected, but I hadn’t anticipated this genteel old lady in the hippy dress and sandals. She had a lovely soft, hesitant voice, an English accent that brought the hairs up on the back of my working-class neck, and she seemed to think that the best way to win over a roomful of kids in op-shop suits and lime-green hair (or in my case, flannel shirt and Adidas Romes) was to begin the class with a few lieder courtesy of the trusty cassette player she set up on the sill of the non-opening window. Of course I was fascinated by her windswept teeth. And those granny glasses, which surely would have given even Janis Joplin second thoughts.

To be honest my initial impression of Elizabeth was in keeping with my general disenchantment as a writing student. At the time WAIT was the only Australian university offering a degree in Creative Writing and I had hopelessly unrealistic expectations of it. I must have confused this fledgling enterprise with the sorts of graduate courses available at Iowa or Stanford (where I would certainly have failed to qualify on academic grounds). These famed departments were staffed by major poets and novelists, writers that even an eighteen-year-old from Karrinyup might have heard of. But after the initial excitement I found myself enrolled in a bog-ordinary BA with a trendy seventies media bent. Sure, there was a bit of writerly stuff on offer, but up close it looked a bit naff. The academic heavyweights taught the real units – the Literature end of the deal – but creative writing was mostly left to relative minions, writers of very modest reputation and experience who wielded no power in the department. I imagine things have changed considerably with the years, but at the time this institutional imbalance really
rankled. Of course it was hardly fair of me to expect a Wallace Stegner or Malcolm Bradbury to be teaching in a provincial undergraduate course such as this. I stayed four years and am grateful for what I learnt from the experience, but there were times when I felt I'd been sold a pup. During that first class with Elizabeth, as Germans warbled away in glorious monaural from the windowsill, I can testify that mine wasn't the only face that fell.

When you're a kid you assume you're the only work in progress, that everyone above you, those you look to, have evolved to a level of angelic achievement. But the writing course, like the department and the literary culture beyond it, was still finding its way, making itself up as it went along. In terms of a publishing career, Elizabeth was likewise still finding her way. She'd published a book of stories with a local press and had some radio plays broadcast. Having written for years she was still struggling to break through all kinds of cultural, geographical and generational barriers. This was four or five years before 1983 when Penguin published *Mr Stobie's Riddle* and *Woman in a Lampshade* almost simultaneously and Elizabeth became an unlikely but indubitable western triumph. At the time it took some steel for someone like her to publish out of Melbourne, but doing so made a massive difference to her career, if not her life, and it seems fitting to me because those works were probably the strongest of her early period.

Many of the books that followed cemented her reputation, especially with the critical establishment. The Eighties seemed to belong to her in a way. She published *Foxybaby* and *The Well*, which I thought were lesser works despite their acclaim. But she was clearly enjoying herself, making hay as well as mischief, and it was great fun to watch. In time she returned to work that was less performative, and more personal. To my mind *My Father's Moon* and *Cabin Fever* are her greatest works. Here she seems to have broken free of the sly grotesqueries and masking humour that were the closest she came to a peculiar form of crowd-pleasing. After decades of rejection it must have been no small thing to risk the critical affirmation she'd come to enjoy, but in her late novels and novellas there is no daffiness, no reliance upon the familiar authorial persona. Instead something more plain and raw and austere emerges, with new confidence. Even her jacket photographs of the period have changed. Elizabeth gazes levelly at the camera, specs off, no smile, not a twinkle. In his recent tribute to her in *Indigo* Philip Salom suggests that this new direction might have cost Elizabeth critical support, which would be sad if true, but hardly surprising. Either way I can only concur with his assessment of these late works as her best. They seem to me to be the work of someone in deadly earnest, at full stretch, beyond the need of approval.
But twenty years before this stately arrival Elizabeth probably had more
determination than confidence. She was yet to be liberated and quickened
by the affirmation of readers both civilian and professional. In those early
years at WAIT, I think many of Elizabeth’s students learnt to write as she
learnt to teach – and to publish. I was only with her a year or so. But I watched
her progress with great interest, finding Elizabeth’s publishing career every
bit as instructive as her classes. With the passing of the decades she learned
and developed and flourished. She published abroad, works were adapted for
stage and screen. There were prizes and honorary degrees, endless festival
appearances. And all through this she kept up the teaching at Curtin,
becoming the exception to every unwritten rule. She was a local writer, yet a
major practitioner, a senior teacher who became indispensable to the
reputation of the institution that had fostered her. It’s hard to imagine that
when I met her, when she was still barely known, she was already fifty-five
years old.

Writing – the act itself – remains a personal mystery – Elizabeth taught
me that early. Its processes and origins are hard to articulate and are
sometimes best left to explain or conceal themselves. Whether writing can
be taught with any rigour or system or expectation will remain an
uncomfortable question. But publishing the stuff once it’s been done is
something closer to a political science. This can be learnt. The public and
procedural aspect of the writing life involves negotiations and
accommodations bewildering to the innocent arts-apprentice but hardly
unfamiliar to the employee of a government department. A peculiar suite of
skills, which have nothing to do with art, needs to be acquired in order to
survive honourably. When it came to such things as discretion, charm and
oblique professionalism, Elizabeth had no peer. She had a passive-aggressive
genius, a gentle way of patronising while appearing to be patronised,
indulging while seeming to be indulged, and I have no doubt that her years
in the academy (about which she was as scathing as she was earnest) armed
her well in this regard. She might have looked the fey old lady in sandals but
her survival instincts were keen. For someone with such an unbusinesslike
mien, she was rather good at taking care of business – and then covering her
tracks. In one form or another she saw the value in deft representation. In life
and in work, she’d had to take the long view.

I’m often asked what it was like to be taught by Elizabeth Jolley and I never
quite know how to answer because people have often formed a settled view
and they don’t like you mucking it up. On the page, in terms of the
mechanics of craft, I learnt much more at the feet of people I never met, and
I also learnt plenty from teachers at WAIT who didn’t write fiction or poetry at all. I certainly didn’t learn to write dialogue at her feet, especially not in the vernacular. For someone so musical she had a tin ear for talk unless characters spoke Edwardian or Mittel-European. Anyone less cultured must have simply sounded cockney. She was good on atmosphere, with interiors, and the natural world, good at alerting what you could do with them on the page. Some Australian and American writers have been better teachers than practitioners of their craft. Elizabeth wasn’t one of them. In my experience, particularly of those early years, her writing far outstripped her skills as a teacher. Yet the student of writing often learns despite what they’re being taught, either by defiance or by watching the teacher rather than engaging with the lesson, and I think the latter probably applies to much of my experience with Elizabeth. She had no enthralling program, no killer technique, no charismatic presentation. She did have an eccentric persona, but for a very young student this was as much an obstacle as a delight. Several of my classmates, some of whom became considerable writers, might now be glad of the experience of having been in Elizabeth’s classes, but at the time they felt they’d learnt nothing useful from her. I am likewise glad to have been in her strange orbit, yet for all my bewilderment I did learn things that are still important to me.

In the teaching of writing she focussed on the thing itself, the story or the poem before us. She didn’t entertain much talk of ideology or theory, but she did have quite a distinct sensibility that owed more to the English and German Romantics than to anything modern, let alone post-modern. Her awe for the mystery and music of language was tempered with the practicality of the artisan; and this combination had an enduring effect on me. She was rightly sceptical but not suspicious of language. She politely resisted the pseudoscientific discourse of the period. (These were the early days of semiotics, the Guisenaire Rods that preceded the total woodchipping regime of cultural studies.) When it came to music and language she was a believer, almost a mystic. She held to them as life forces, and again this was instructive, though not at all fashionable. It was also remarkably, sweetly stubborn. Elizabeth insisted upon a certain level of gravity for the writing enterprise and for whatever piece of work was at hand, whether it was undergraduate dross or Wordsworth, and if she commended you mildly on an image or a line of prose you had the sense that she’d dipped briefly into the same reservoir of respect – for nature, for human experience, and for language – she reserved for Goethe or Rilke.

She was thrifty in all things, and praise was no exception; she offered it carefully, with a sense of proportion. Despite her daily encounters with the
gormless, the mulish, the self-deluded, the shiftless, and the hopelessly untalented, she maintained a decency and respect that strike me now as heroic. I’m not just referring to her courtesy – she was courteous whether courtesy was earned or not – but to the way she gave credit for the work and intentions and efforts of others. While most of us were surely wasting her precious time she gave us full attention, she sought and fixed upon whatever flicker of promise she could detect in our generally dreadful offerings, and she offered her comments with a kind of humility and tact that seemed to belong to another time and place. I know from my own brief and undistinguished months of trying to teach, that a similar generosity was beyond me.

Elizabeth said that when she sniffed something hopeful in a piece of student writing she’d read it to Leonard for his comment. She reported on having done this with several stories of mine. I could barely picture such a scene, the idea of them bothering to spare the time – the thought of my raw prose-divots entering the strange, complex dance of their domestic world. To a boy from Karrinyup, the Jollies were much more like characters from Thomas Mann – or even Thomas Hardy, for that matter – than regular folks. When a bit of work got the nod from both of them you took it seriously – well, I did. I don’t know whether Elizabeth deferred to Leonard’s judgement or if she just liked to mask her own praise in his. The combined result translated into something measured, a nod from the board of governors.

In those early classes – once I’d reconciled myself to Elizabeth’s cultural and generational strangeness, and learnt to negotiate her scything wit and the shielding genius of her persona – I wrote my first real stories. Some were published in magazines and one I later included in my first collection. Under Elizabeth’s surveillance my first novel began life as a radio play, a form I’ve always hated and in which she excelled. The genre was her idea but the script was all my own miserable doing. After the book’s publication in ’82 Elizabeth was gracious enough never to mention its squalid origins. She understood, like nobody else, the art of literary salvage. Indeed the bulk of her publishing career was built upon it.

As a teacher she had the kind of humility that allowed her to stand aside. She didn’t feel the need, or perhaps the entitlement, to wade into your work or your fictional world with her gumboots on. She looked for what you were trying to do, not just what you’d failed to do. She did not require that you write like her or that you address her special fictional concerns. She offered respect.

Elizabeth wrote to be published. She’d spent decades trying and failing to be published and by the time I met her she’d begun to have some modest
success. She had more practical advice about the business of submitting work for publication that anyone else I ever encountered. Her ideas were pragmatic, her outlook seasoned by disappointment, by the cycles of fashion and politics and personality. She had plenty to say about endurance and self-belief, about editorial pettiness, geographical hubris and deep prejudices about age and gender. She let you know which editors to avoid, which magazines to try repeatedly; who was asleep at the wheel, who “forgot” to pay, who was an out-and-out liar, and how fickle the entire enterprise was. She was a mine of information, and a class warrior along with it. She took publishing seriously. Any interest you showed in this kind of professional development, the grubby, industrial side of writing, was eagerly rewarded with sound information. Within her teaching environment and the wider writerly ecosystem of the period, this made her exceptional.

She was not an amateur, was not content to be viewed as one. She was determined to learn what was required to have her work read widely, and she refused to be coy about being a pro. Elizabeth believed in craft – absolutely, passionately – but she also relied on tradecraft. It’s so hard to make a living as a writer, and much harder if you’re too precious to find out how publishing works. To Elizabeth this was simply good housekeeping. In sending manuscripts to editors you had to be systematic, even cold-blooded, keeping distance between yourself and the work. You had to understand the virtues of order; you did your homework about who it was you were submitting to. And there was plenty of solemn chat about clean envelopes and good staples. All this was a brisk antidote to the evasive boho insincerity about publication that often prevails. Elizabeth was a romantic with discreet but steady ambition. She couldn’t abide dabblers or pretenders.

I don’t mean to imply anything mercenary here – only that Elizabeth had good strategic impulses. Even while publishing from the wrong side of the country, she managed to negotiate the strange undertow that prevails closer to home. She had an unholy knack for wrong-footing the locally embittered or envious – always with a smile. A writer from an anxious provincial city like Perth could hardly have sought better counsel.

Elizabeth pioneered the servicing of book groups. Before the mainstreaming of book clubs, these groups were a pretty daggy but badly understood part of civilian (that is, non-professional or non-institutional) reading culture. She drove gamely all over country WA to meet isolated readers, to drink their tea, dazzle them, and answer their questions. There was a generosity about this as well as a lack of preciousness, and these readers became her first constituency. Without publicity or publisher support she developed a broad and loyal readership, folks who were rusted-on for life.
They quite rightly adored her, and she discreetly flogged them books from the back of the car while she was at it. Before her time she was a one-woman literary festival, a roadshow, returning with stories to tell, a few bob extra and an acute understanding of her audience.

Although she was modest and self-deprecating, Elizabeth did have a very strong sense of her own dignity, and of the value of her work as both teacher and writer. You failed to see this at your own peril, for when she was offended or angry, her disappointment was, despite its quiet expression, quite chilling. I can testify to this, from the day I owed up to the fact that I'd been withholding my best work from class. I'd been sending out stories to editors without showing her. In their place, to satisfy course requirements, I'd begun handing in things I knew were second-rate but good enough to pass. I was disillusioned with the broader course and anxious to make some kind of headway in what I thought of then as the wider world. The long view was beyond me.

She'd noticed the inferior work and puzzled over it and I was quick to explain, and very slow to see how she felt about it. How could it matter, I thought? Why waste good stories passing some crap unit in some mickey mouse course? What was the problem? Callow and self-absorbed as I was, I couldn't see how disrespectful this substitution was, how lacking in mutuality. Elizabeth had given of her comradely best, and she expected mine in return. She offered respect and had a right to want it reciprocated, regardless of how I felt about the degree. She'd never once made an obstacle of herself. She always kept the faith, served the work. And here I was, treating her like some tenured time-server. She was hurt and told me so in language so genteel it flew by like birdsong. I was halfway home before I began to understand what a bolloking she'd given me. In the decades afterwards, with an affectionate and vicious twinkle of the eye, it pleased her to remind me of this episode, preferably with an audience. I had to take every wild embellishment, each fictional flourish – and there were plenty of them – as my just desserts.

The launch of Elizabeth's second collection *The Travelling Entertainer* in November of 1979 was my first experience of a book launch. The Fremantle Arts Centre Press hosted a gathering of citizens from the requisite three postcodes of the day and there was the kind of Riesling on offer that has sadly since gone the way of the flagon. There were fine speeches by Ian Templeman and the author and piles of the handsome book which cost $4.50. Everyone seemed very old and venerable and alien. My girlfriend and I were excited and wildly uncomfortable. I'd written a novel myself and had begun
another. I wondered if this was what lay in store. In truth it didn’t look all that promising. We stood in line to have a book signed and Elizabeth was ebullient and tipsy and very funny. In that spidery hand, which I would recognize anywhere, she wrote the inscription:

For an intimate friend
Tim Winton
I look forward to your book
Elizabeth Jolley 14.11.79

Even at nineteen I recognised the joke. We were friendly, Elizabeth and I. In time she would dandle my children on her knee. We had friends in common, shared the same agent and corresponded fitfully. We phoned one another to confer on professional matters because in this we spoke the same language and trusted each other’s judgement and discretion. Yet warm and comradely as our acquaintance was, we were never intimate friends. Her inscription is the sort of thing you scrawl at book launches after a couple of glasses of plonk in a roomful of luvvies, with a nod and a wink and a gentle dig. This, dear boy, she may as well have said, is what lies ahead. Gird yourself. Keep your game face on. Intimate friends, won’t this give them a laugh in a few years’ time!

Beyond her circle of intimates – and she made good and loyal friends – Elizabeth was too guarded, too performative in her way, to be easily knowable. To the rest of us her battiness was an essential part of the persona. She was always kind, always funny, but later in life the routine became harder to read. She’d pretend not to remember you for a moment then drill you with some cringe-worthy detail from decades previous. With Elizabeth confusion was expected, a wily comeback only moments away. You sensed a quip in the wings, even when it finally failed to arrive. In this, I think it’s fair to say, she gave of herself what she could, as she could. Right up to the end, in person and on the page, Elizabeth Jolley kept us guessing.
MR BERRINGTON AND THE GEOMETRY OF LOVE IN ELIZABETH JOLLEY’S FAMILY HOME

As young girls in the Black Country near Birmingham, Elizabeth Jolley – then Monica Elizabeth Knight – and her sister Madelaine Winifred Knight, respectively born in 1923 and 1924, were schooled at home by their science-master father Charles Wilfrid Knight and their school-teacher Austrian-born mother Margarete Fehr, a failed regime that lasted until Monica became a boarder at the Quaker Sibford School near the Cotswolds in 1934 and Madelaine joined her there in 1938. During that time the girls moved in and out of the circles of adults with whom their parents socialised, overlapping circles centred variously on Wilfrid Knight’s immediate family, or his extended one, or on his friends and colleagues who were teachers, Quakers and/or pacifists. Often not knowing the provenance of those people, the two girls mythologised them in terms of the snippets of information they had, often not understanding who they really were until they had grown-up, and sometimes not even then.

There were perhaps a dozen of them, a menagerie of consanguineous, honorary and ersatz relatives. For example, there was the woman they might come home to find sleeping in Monica’s or Madelaine’s bed, the same woman who might be escorted back to their home by a policeman after being discovered sunbaking nude in the park or for having stolen the route sign off the tram. They thought she was their mother’s relative and called her “Anti Mote” because of Margarete Knight’s pronunciation of her name, but she was one of their father’s mother’s unmarried half-sisters, either Annie Maud or Hannah Maud Thrippleton. Such characters appear in one form or another in Elizabeth Jolley’s essays and fiction, as when she reflects that “Mothers may point at Aunty Daisy and say, ‘see for yourself the peculiarities that are bound to be repeated’ and often, in hushed and dropped voices, poor cousin Dorothy will be mentioned but no one will say exactly what Aunt Daisy did or what happened to Dorothy.” Daisy was Wilfrid’s sister and Dorothy his
father’s brother’s daughter.

Kenneth Berrington had a much greater effect on Elizabeth Jolley than the other mysterious characters who wandered in and out of her childhood. Sometime in the late 1920s or early 1930s he became a fixture in the Knight household, a presence that reoriented the family geometry, triangulating the parental relationship by the attention and admiration he devoted to Margarete Knight. Thereby Monica and her sister Madelaine came to see their parents in a new light, although at the time they did not fully understand what they saw. Some things seemed obvious to them, that Berrington came from a long-established family and had an impressive education and a distinguished war record, that he was a King’s Counsel and had money, was cultured, had savoir faire. What stood out most was how he dealt with the family dynamics. A white-faced Wilfrid Knight would default to a placatory mode when the red-faced Margarete Knight erupted into one of her outbursts. By contrast, Berrington would sidestep her demands and challenges or avoid them by withdrawing. In particular, he refused to allow himself to be positioned between the parents and the children, something that would have further complicated and politicised the geometry of the family dynamic which already involved each parent trying to enlist one or both of the girls as an ally against the other parent. He always dealt with them directly, treating them as young adults; if he was a friend of the family, they felt that he was their special friend. A comparison of him with the father was not to the advantage of the father: Wilfrid Knight was more like a self-sacrificing saint but, to Monica and Madelaine, Kenneth Berrington was more like a knight in shining armour.

In June 1940, while training to be an orthopaedic nurse at St Nicholas and St Martin’s Hospital in Pyrford, Monica Knight met Leonard Jolley, a patient with rheumatoid arthritis who was engaged to a Joyce Hancock; and she met him again in early 1943 when she started training at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Birmingham where he was a librarian at the nearby Selly Oak Colleges Library, by then married to Hancock. The three of them commenced a relationship in which the ten-year-older Jollies seemed to take a mentoring interest in her, a relationship that led to both Joyce and Monica becoming pregnant in the same year. As a result, Monica had to leave the Queen Elizabeth, becoming first a live-in domestic in and around Birmingham and then a live-in matron (with her daughter) at Pinewood, a progressive school in Hertfordshire, experiences recounted in her Vera trilogy (My Father’s Moon, Cabin Fever, and The Georges’ Wife). Leonard Jolley left his wife in July 1950 when he went to Edinburgh to become librarian of the Royal College of Physicians, Monica joining him there in September 1950,
marrying him in December 1952, later informally changing her name from Monica to Elizabeth.

Elizabeth Jolley’s two experiences of unconventional romantic/domestic arrangements complicated her relationship with her parents both when she lived at home as a child and when she was involved with Leonard and Joyce Jolley in her early twenties. The experiences of triangulation also gave her a special insight into the nature of love and relationships, as her Vera trilogy makes clear. Jolley’s further reflection on people and their needs eventually lead to the wisdom displayed in her analyses of mother-figures, as in The Orchard Thieves (1995), and of mother- and father-figures, as in An Innocent Gentleman (2001) which features a married couple and a Berrington look-alike, a student of the wife, Mr Hawthorne (called Mr H), a wealthy Kings Counsel with a distinguished war record who takes the wife to see Beethoven’s Fidelio in London...

Kenneth Berrington remained respectful and kindly toward Elizabeth Jolley until his death. Although he well might not have approved of Leonard Jolley, for his own reasons or under the influence of Margarete Knight’s animus against him, Berrington knew something about loving a difficult person in difficult circumstances. He wrote to Elizabeth Jolley on Sunday evening, 14 December 1952, a week after seeing her while she was in Birmingham (in order at last to marry Leonard Jolley, a fact unbeknownst to Berrington and to her parents but not to Madelaine who was a witness). It was snowing, and he was anticipating the “purgatory” of getting out of a warm bed in the morning when his bus would take him before dawn past 91 Hagley Road where she had last lived with her daughter and worked as a domestic. He wrote, “I have just been reading a letter from you on this subject and I hardly realised that you stayed there so long: nearly four years!” He also wrote of Madelaine who was out of work, worrying that “It is now practically impossible for a woman to get part time.” He concluded, “I hope you will all have an enjoyable Christmas + New Year. Love from Kenneth C Berrington.” Like Jolley’s fiction, Berrington’s letter focuses on cherishing and loving, whatever the complexities of one’s relationships with the other.

KENNETH CLUNES BERRINGTON

Suddenly I saw Mr Berrington crossing the street. He was still the same, his large head covered with short grey hair, his spectacles small on his large immobile face. Over one arm he had his folded rain coat and he was carrying his brief case and umbrella. He walked slowly, as an old man walks, weaving in and out of traffic as if unaware of it and unconcerned.
He seemed untroubled by the noise and the dried horse dung blowing in his face. If he was troubled he did not show it. He resembled a badger. A *Wind in the Willows* badger.

To what mortal ear could I tell all, if I had a mind? or who could understand all? Who can tell another's short-comings, lost opportunities, weigh the passions which overpower, the defects which incapacitate reason.

And then there was Mr B.

Madelaine Knight, Elizabeth Jolley's sister, once asked Mr Berrington why he continued to visit Margarete Knight, their mother, when she could be so unpleasant to him. He said, “because I do not need to, I can leave when I want, and I don’t have to come again.” Jolley wrote, “Looking back on the way she treated him towards the end I realise that it is only when people have been very close, intimate is perhaps the word, that they can hurt each other as my mother repeatedly hurt Mr Berrington.” She continued, “he was for a very long time *The Friend of the Family*. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say he was my mother’s Friend.”

Kenneth Clunes Berrington had an inflated reputation that was not of his own making. Just as Walter Fehr, Margarete Knight’s father, was not a judge or a general, as she liked to represent him, Kenneth Berrington was not a King’s Counsel, although his names might be represented as Berrington, KC. Margarete Knight conferred that status on him of her own authority — Gottfried Leiser, a German POW who visited the Knights while he was held in Birmingham, recalled her explaining the term “KC” to him by telling him the differences between and among a solicitor, barrister and King’s Counsel.

Both Madelaine Knight and Elizabeth Jolley believed the story too. Jolley depicting him that way in her essay “Mr Berrington” (33).

Berrington was both more ordinary and more extraordinary than he presented. He had an excellent education and an impressive career. When he left Pembroke College, Cambridge, he was admitted as a barrister to Lincoln's Inn when he was twenty-four. He volunteered for the army in September 1915, serving overseas and receiving three medals, being demobbed in June 1919. During World War II he sat on an Appeals Tribunal for conscientious objectors, then practiced law on the Oxford Circuit until 1948 when, at sixty-four, he became Chair of the Appeals Tribunal of the Dudley District of the Ministry of National Insurance.

He met Margarete Knight when he became a student in her Thursday-night adult-education German class at the Aston Technical College in the
early to mid 1930s. They got on well enough for her to offer him private tuition at the Knight home at 63 Wells Road, Wolverhampton. Soon he began to visit for lessons on Thursday afternoons and, later, for the Sunday midday meal. He and Wilfrid Knight would discuss the weather and the sermons at his St Paul’s Anglican Church and Knight’s Beckminster Methodist Church. Then Berrington and Margarete Knight would repair to the living room for their German lesson, or perhaps to his home at 32 Copthorne Road, two kilometres away. He soon came to be known to the family as “Mr B.”

Six years older than Wilfrid and twelve years older than Margarete Knight, Berrington was a calm, unassuming man, fastidious and reserved in his manners, taste and dress, and politically a member of the Conservative Party. No doubt he and Wilfrid Knight had serious conversations that tested their philosophical and ethical positions, and certainly he suffered political diatribes from Margarete Knight who challenged his pro-British point of view from her own European one. Likewise, twenty-one-year-old Monica Knight argued with him from her own disingenuous position which she described as that of “a solid British Patriot.” She wrote, “I shocked him considerably by suggesting that Germany should be allowed to invade Britain and become one big State – imagine the United States of Europe, if we so called ‘win’ we shall repeat history and be no better off, but if we could do something this time, what different results might be there in 50 or 60 years time. I can hardly wait for the years to go by to see.”

Reserved or shy as well as prudish, he could not bring himself to ask his housekeeper, Mrs Bartlett, to buy toilet paper for him, and so he asked Margarete Knight to do so. He also slept with his bedroom door closed and locked, as Wilfrid Knight and the police discovered the morning they found him dead in bed of a cerebral haemorrhage at sixty-nine, after he failed to visit the previous Sunday.

Berrington’s obituary said, “his interests included music, history and astronomy, and he was a fluent linguist.” He was a wide reader too, with grounding in the classics. He enjoyed Jane Austen, telling Jolley that he wanted to sit in the church pew where Austen sat, but he disliked Shaw and his plays. His study with Margarete Knight introduced him to German literature, since she used writers like Goethe for texts to translate in her German-language classes. In addition to being cultured and urbane, he was generous with his time, attention and money, playing tennis with Madelaine at his Wolverhampton Lawn Tennis Club in August of 1939 when her sister was away in Germany, and then paying her fees when she started boarding school the following year.

Berrington became Margarete Knight’s touchstone for what constituted
gentle behaviour, a worshipful attitude that Jolley mocks in “Mr Berrington” when Knight instructed her to hold her silverware like Berrington and also to speak like him: “‘Barth,’ she said, ‘and parth, you must say are, barth and parth, not bath and path’” (35). ‘Don’t make me laugh,’ I said.” In fact, Jolley says, “Mr Berrington was remarkably generous,” and that “his generosity enabled my mother to re-establish her own good taste which she had suppressed in order to fit in with the dreary surroundings in which she found herself. She had her own dressmaker, and Mr Berrington gave the impression, without actually saying anything, that he liked to see her in good-quality clothes.” She goes on, “I don’t know if my father minded. I never heard him make a critical remark. He often paid my mother compliments, perhaps putting into words the things Mr Berrington did not say.”

Berrington gave Jolley two of the fine, leather-bound, gilt-edged books his father gave him in order to teach him, she speculated, how to be a gentleman. The 1906 edition of the *Pocket Thackeray* he read at twenty-four is well thumbed, with two passages marked in addition to the ones quoted above and below: “’Tis a hard task for a woman in life, that mask the world bids them wear. But there is no greater crime than for a woman who is ill-used and unhappy to show that she is so” (124); and “Half a fellow’s pangs at losing a woman result from vanity more than affection” (152). Thackeray, it should be noted, was a lawyer who maintained a platonic relationship with a married woman whose husband forced them to abandon it.

Berrington also read and underlined passages in the copy of Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Virginibus Puerisque* [*Maidens and Boys*] and *Other Papers* his father gave him “with love” for Christmas in 1903. One can only wonder what lesson the oft-married Richard Berrington hoped nineteen-year-old Kenneth would learn from Stevenson’s attempts to advance emotional literacy. Berrington displayed passive resistance to parental hopes and class expectations. Although he complied with his father’s wish that he become a barrister when he would have preferred to be a stock broker, in other ways he did little more than only just comply. He graduated with an ordinary BA instead of the Honours degree he easily could have had, and was satisfied with his LLB when he could have had an MA as well just by paying a small fee. There were principles involved: he asked, Why should a person with a basic degree be able to present himself as having an advanced degree simply because he can afford to buy it rather than earn it? Later, he would also decline a military commission, telling Jolley’s sister that he objected to the class assumptions on which it was based, namely that mentally and morally he was assumed to be leadership material merely because he held a university degree. He chose to be a private when no one from Pembroke College would
have entered the Army below the rank of second lieutenant.

Although he did not become a bohemian, nonetheless Berrington’s conduct with Margarete Knight sometimes presented as scandalous, particularly when they went abroad together. In the summer of 1936 he took twelve-year-old Madelaine and her mother on a trip to Austria, and in July 1938 he took Monica and the mother to Germany. When asked in an interview, “Was there was any form of social approbation directed at your mother as a result of her affair...?” Elizabeth Jolley interrupted to say, ‘Oh yes, I think so. I think she had to weather neighbours’ remarks and so on.’ But that was speculative, for it seems that the idea of Margarete Knight’s being unfaithful was unthinkable to others. Any evidence to the contrary was simply disregarded or constructed benignly outside of the home.

Madelaine Knight’s guess, then and later, was that the special friendship was not a sexual one. She said her mother was always flirtatious, “but not in a sexy way ... she wanted to get their admiration, and she had this attractive personality and lovely blue eyes too ...” She said, “sex was too close for her—I think she just wanted someone like Mr Berrington to admire her enormously.” Of Berrington she said, “only a cad would have had an affair with Mother, and Mr Berrington was not a cad!”

Whatever Madelaine Knight thought, Berrington’s presence was a source of tension in the Knight household, in the 1930s, if not during the 1940s as well. For example, according to Jolley, when Margarete Knight was at Berrington’s home in Copthorne Road for German lessons, “My father prowled, white-faced, up and down the hall.” Thus, at some stage, Wilfrid Knight banned Berrington, perhaps because of the damage he thought the appearances might do to the reputation of one or more of them, perhaps because he was ashamed to think his wife no longer regarded him as her preferred companion, or, less likely, because he thought that Margarete Knight and Kenneth Berrington were potential or actual lovers. Whatever he thought, Margarete Knight was so miserable in Berrington’s absence that she was able to prevail upon her husband to allow Berrington to resume his visits.

Jolley problematises the question obliquely, via look-alike characters in one of her later novels, An Innocent Gentleman (2001), where the situation echoes the one in the Knight household. In that novel, with the permission of the husband Mr Henry Bell, Mr Hawthorne, a barrister – called “Mr H” – meets Mrs Muriel Bell who travels from Birmingham to London and, with permission or not, shares a hotel room with her there when they attend Beethoven’s suggestively named opera Fidelio. And in “Mr Berrington” Jolley encourages further speculation on the nature of the triangle, as he and
Margarete Knight do the dishes in the kitchen. Berrington singing “Mann und Weib, und Weib und Mann.” It is a line from Die Zauberflöte where Papageno the Mann is looking for a woman (Weib) to be his wife. Jolley wonders if Berrington was making “half-hidden declarations” (36).

She gives the question an added fillip, saying, “When they sat together over a text, even if it was only a grammar, it could be said Galeotto fu il libro e chi lo scrisse, but it was many years before I realised this” (34). The passage she quotes is suggestive for a number of reasons, something flagged by the fact that she has not chosen a German passage that Berrington and her mother might have studied but a quite specific Italian one from Dante’s Inferno, Canto V, line 137. Francesca explains:

We were reading one day, for pleasure, of Lancelot, how Love beset him; we were alone and without any suspicion.

During many breaths that reading drove our eyes together and turned our faces pale; but one point alone was the one that overpowered us.

When we read that the yearned-for smile was kissed by so great a lover, he, who will never be separated from me,

kissed my mouth all trembling. Galeotto was the book and he who wrote it: that day we read no further.

(Durling, lines 127-38)

The passage is about Virgil and Dante in the Fifth Circle of Hell coming upon Paolo and Francesca. The couple explain that they were condemned to be there because they had been reading the love story of Lancelot and Guinevere when, in effect, the meaning became the matter that is, they enacted the love-making they had just been reading about. The reference to Lancelot’s friend Galeotto is especially provocative, for as Galahaut in Lancelot du Lac he arranged the meeting with Guinevere, his name subsequently coming to signify a panderer.

Thus Jolley encourages the reader to speculate if the relationship between Kenneth Berrington and Margarete Knight were more like that of Lancelot and Guinevere, innocent lovers, or more like that of Paolo and Francesca, guilty adulterers. One Jolley critic said that “Mr Berrington” is an essay devoted to “Margarete’s adulterous relationship, grudgingly tolerated by her husband,” but the question can be plausibly argued either way. On
the one hand, Wilfrid Knight and Kenneth Berrington were religious men, and Berrington and Margarete Knight were solid bourgeois citizens, she with a strong dislike of being touched. On the other hand, how else to explain Berrington's buying Margarete Knight clothing, taking her and her children on long trips to the continent, and paying Madelaine's school fees. And how to explain the £63,000 he bequeathed to Margarete Knight when he died?

Those questions cannot be answered factually with the available information. In the meantime, the core question might instructively be approached another way. Remembering the opening line of Tolstoy's Anna Karenina – "All happy families resemble one another but each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way" – one could say that in a normal family Kenneth Berrington and Margarete Knight probably would have been lovers in the traditional sense of the word. But the Knights were not a normal family. They were an unhappy family in Tolstoy's terms, dysfunctional in their own way, one that makes it easily imaginable that Kenneth Berrington and Margarete Knight were not sleeping together.

Berrington might have been more like Wilfrid Knight than otherwise imagined, especially if his motive for refusing a military commission during World War I was to avoid having to order men to their deaths or to order men to kill others. The unit he joined, the Royal Army Service Corps, was noted for attracting men who were pacifists although not conscientious objectors, the latter serving in medical rather than supply units. (In this connection, it is interesting that Jolley's description of Mr Hawthorne in An Innocent Gentleman [51] says he held a commission in the Army, presumably Jolley's repeating an assumption of her mother's, or else another of Margarete Knight's military promotions.) By the time they knew each other, Knight and Berrington might have been complementary characters, the conscientious objector emphasising virtue and love for God and the pacifist justice and respect for the state.

Given the family configuration and dynamics, it is possible that Berrington's intentions toward Margarete Knight were honourable, that his generosity to her in life and in his final bequest was simply motivated, in accord with another Thackeray passage he marked: "But you see her prosperity has brought her virtues into evidence, which people did not perceive when she was poor" (79).

Berrington's bookmark lies between two pages of Stevenson's title essay "Virginibus Puerisque", at lines reminiscent of Jolley's Innocent Gentleman: "Marriage is terrifying, but so is a cold and forlorn old age" (4) and "... marriage, if comfortable, is not at all heroic. It certainly narrows and damps the spirits of generous men. In marriage, a man becomes slack and selfish,

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and undergoes a fatty degeneration of his moral being” (5). Stevenson also wrote, “Falling in love and winning love are often difficult tasks to overbearing and rebellious spirits.” The sentence continues – underlined in pencil by Berrington and notated in the margin as “more important” – “but to keep in love is also a business of some importance, to which both man and wife must bring kindness and goodwill” (119).

Berrington did not die forlorn, but neither did he follow the unheroic path of marriage. He kept in love with Margarete Knight for twenty years, a business of importance to him, as he obliquely averred by his singing of Mann und Weib. His presence in the Knight household lasted until his death because it satisfied each person’s need and so was cohesive rather than divisive. That could only occur in the first place if everyone – Berrington, parents, and children – was more or less preconditioned for such an arrangement and thereby prepared to respond positively to his being among them.

His being among the Knights had a powerful effect on Jolley and her sister Madelaine. When he died, Madelaine was devastated. She had been looking forward to Berrington’s visiting her in Winchester where she was working – he had even bought a new suit for the event. Elizabeth Jolley continued to think about him as she was writing in Australia, as shown by her essay “Mr Berrington” which she called fiction although it is more factual than any story or novel she wrote.

Years after Berrington died, Sara Ruffles, the daughter of new owners of 32 Copthorne Road, reported seeing Berrington’s ghost enter his bedroom. A few years later, her father found his dental plate in the garden, perhaps having fallen out, he imagined, when Berrington had a giddy spell and went to recover in his bedroom before dying. They were astonished by the fact that it was swaged from pure gold.

Notes

2 Elizabeth Jolley, on the last time she saw Kenneth Berrington. See Jolley, “Mr Berrington”, Central Mischief, 34.
4 “Mr Berrington”, 32, italics and capitals in original.
5 Leiser-Dößle interview 22 June 1997.
6 He is not listed as a King’s Counsel in Sainty’s authoritative List which is based
on original patent rolls in the Public Record office, nor did he maintain an office in London which KCs were required to do. Elizabeth Jolley's description of Mr Hawthorne in *An Innocent Gentleman* (Ringwood, Vic: Viking, 2001) repeats many of her descriptors of Berrington - the KC, membership of boards, playing tennis, and so on (43 and 51).

7 Elizabeth Jolley's diary entry for 23 October 1944, the underlining hers. Her father relayed the United States of Europe idea as being that of a Stuart Morris, Chair of the Peace Pledge Union, whom he heard speak at the YMCA on 8 November 1939 (Letter from Wilfrid Knight to Elizabeth Jolley, 11 November 1939).


9 The mother's "barth"/"parth" corrections are repeated by Muriel Bell to her daughter in *An Innocent Gentleman*, 29.

10 Jolley, "Mr Berrington", 36.


12 Jolley, "Mr Berrington", 36.

13 Personal communication Madelaine Blackmore to Brian Dibble, 12 December 1997.


16 Berrington would not have enlisted as a private to avoid being killed, for the fact that lieutenants had a higher mortality rate only became known later. In World War I declining a commission was not uncommon: H H Munro ("Saki") famously refused one, claiming it would be inappropriate for him to lead men into battle without having any experience of it. Note that Berrington's three war medals were very ordinary: the 1914–15 Star was for those who joined before the end of 1915 (i.e., were not taken by conscription, which started in 1916), the British War Medal for those who served overseas, and the Allied Victory Medal for all who served in World War I.
CARMEL MACDONALD GRAHAME

AT EYRE

Along the endless beach, wind
and white
on white sand and
all clear space seem
to meet. My footprints,
hurled away,
will never last, and I,
divested of trace,
do not matter.

Beyond the Bight:
Antarctica.
I fling my imagination
through a rent ozone layer
and try to salvage purity
— star-spiked ice, say, or
cosmic confusions of light
restored to Aurora Australis.
Sublime — just an idea.

Then I spot the signs:
nets, flags, lines,
bits of boat, rags,
shell and bone,
detritus strewn
and left behind
by dogs and fishermen.
So. So.
Finding limits
drew me to this place
in search of wilderness,
and dead ahead lies
vanishing point.
In its tatters
I discover disappearance
is ambiguous.
DEANNE LEBER

CONSTELLATION: TRIPTANGULUM AUSTRALE (SOUTHERN TRIANGLE)

A triangle to orient our sky

Desert moon scorches sand. Our bodies metronome heartbeats through the soft bends of our spines. Cradled by earth. An amber tear is suspended here. On the neck of a lunar goddess. Panting. She straddles the sky with a sarong and sunscreen. At midnight the memory of the sun burns. Its chariot clinging to the horizon. Dunes and spinifex wheezing. Light pollution keeps eyes down. We look to the ground. Dodge bottles. Shards and needles. Out here. On our backs. In the flames of ebony shadows. We cannot find a beginning to the stars which seem to rise from spaces invent spaces. We fix points to guide by. In lines dragged across the sky. Fingers slipping into the black. You tell me how to tell where we are we. This cosmic connection this stellar caress spins. Caught in the falling of goddess grins. Myths that streak the sky with words. Dangling from her fingers. I imagine he says. Your heart looks like this. Insignificant from a distance. A pale flame shining. Its identity formed by lights surrounding. Heroes escape this gaze. Stories elude our tongues. As sand crawls up my thighs gathered grain by grain into a kangaroo snow dome. We are he says. Points of light. Sailing around myths. Past Hercules or a lover. Swans or feathers. Draws three points together. I could create them in any part of the sky. I could draw my own heroes or lovers. Black swans outstretched. I would be part of the clouds. Had my life brought sails and a compass. An architect of constellations. Building star by star by space. Had I drawn my own flesh into pins of light. I would know where I am. My arms in his arms. My skin terrorised by his bones. Draw the lines that holds us. In this night we are the sky. We are a million billion sparks of light exiting through pores. Shaken and scattered and high.