

# THE MIND *of* RUSSELL

NIGEL STARCK DESCRIBES STORYTELLER RUSSELL BRADDON'S REMARKABLE LIFE DURING AND AFTER SUFFERING SLAVERY IN CHANGI PRISON CAMP

BELOW  
Russell Braddon (1921–1995)  
Letter written in Changi prison  
in September 1945 on paper  
made from grass  
Papers of Russell Braddon,  
1949–1990  
Manuscripts Collection  
nla.ms-ms8963  
Courtesy Jillian Lloyd for the  
Braddon family

**B**URMA RAILWAY SURVIVOR, PSYCHIATRIC hospital inmate, author of a book which has sold two million copies, Russell Braddon drew on his strength of mind, suffered agony of the mind, and ultimately triumphed by his fertility of mind.

Along the way, he also created a telepathy act that topped the bill at the London Palladium. The product of all this mental activity is found today in the National Library of Australia's Braddon collection—19 boxes of manuscripts and memorabilia. Within these holdings, the correspondence alone offers a poignant demonstration of Braddon's ingenuity, much of which was composed on the crested notepaper of five-star hotels. But one letter was on paper made from grass in Changi prison camp. In that letter, written to his grandfather in September 1945 following the liberation of Singapore, Braddon declares: 'I shall never indulge in manual labour again'. He had worked as a slave for his Japanese

captors—building the railway, an airfield and ammunition dumps, and contracting dysentery, malaria and beri beri.

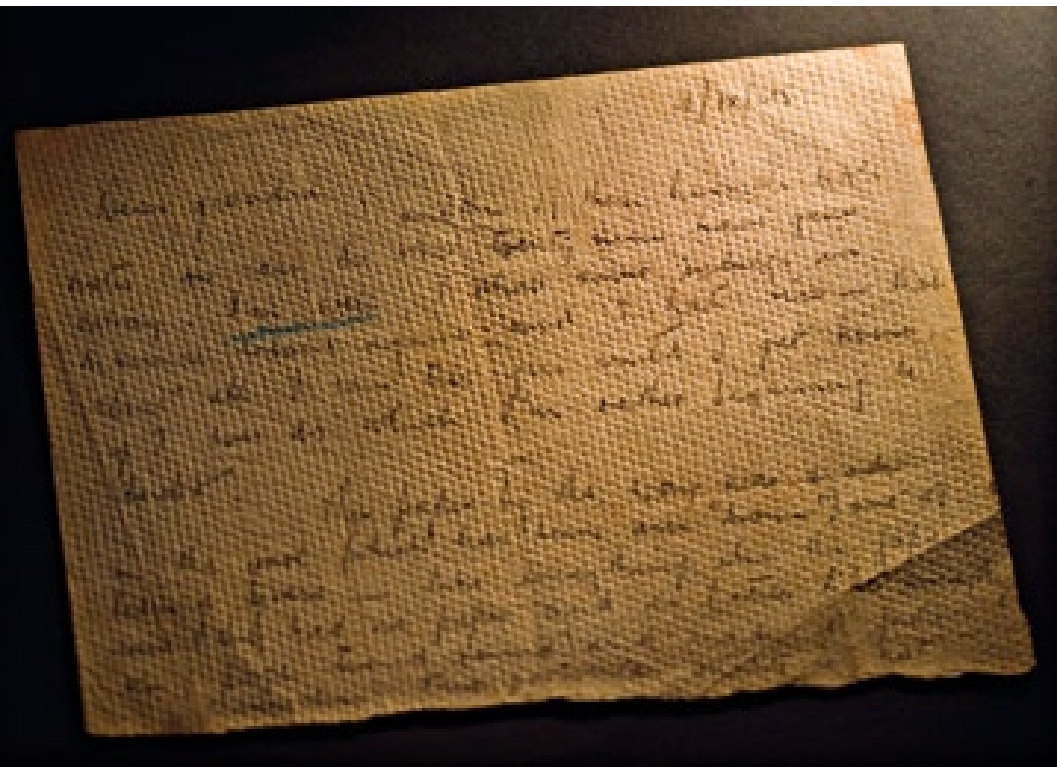
Slavery was something which, surely, even Braddon's fecund imagination had not envisaged on his enlistment in 1941. His lineage militated against it: a great-grandfather and a grandfather were knighted politicians; his father had been a barrister; the family name was endowed upon a Canberra suburb.

On completing his arts degree at the University of Sydney, the pathway at the time towards the study of law, he gained his widowed mother's written approval to join the Second Australian Imperial Force. And so, as his impeccable copperplate memoir in the Library's collection recounts, Russell Braddon presented his 20-year-old self to the recruiting sergeant in 'the small hut in the middle of Martin Place, immediately above the gentlemen's lavatory'. From this unpromising episode, the memoir unfolds into

*The Naked Island*, the book which has achieved those two million sales and that today, 57 years after publication, is still in print.

It is a story of survival, mateship and courage. On his 21st birthday, immediately after his capture in Malaya, Braddon writes of his decision to 'eat *everything* ... cats, dogs, frogs, snakes ... green leaves from almost everything that grew, roots and rubber nuts'. He would 'steal whenever and wherever possible' and, perhaps above all, would 'keep my mind active by reading whatever I could lay hand to and by talking to whomever could endure me'.

His mental exercises included reading the complete works



# BRADDON

of George Bernard Shaw (stolen when sent on a working party to a Japanese brothel), memorising *Mein Kampf* (the only book he was allowed to keep while enduring the hell of the railway), and trying to recall the second movement of Bruch's Violin Concerto (when being assaulted by the guards).

This fortitude saw him through. Braddon returned to a peacetime society, but found peace of mind elusive. Yet, from the perspective of Changi, his postwar prospects appeared seductive, as a September 1945 letter to his mother makes apparent:

*I'm sorry, old Mum, but I have struck my last blow with any form of agricultural implement. I shall never again mow a lawn. I have acquired a hideous amount of knowledge about how to build railways, aerodromes, trenches and roads, all over Thailand and Malaya, and I never intend to use any of it. I shall start Law again at the University next March. I know now, better than ever, that that is the sort of thing I'm designed for, not good honest work.*

In the sequel to *The Naked Island*, published in 1958 as *End of a Hate*, he describes the first day of homecoming—and 'the unequalled luxury ... the delicious, incredible privacy' of a hot bath:

*Wonderful, I was alone ... Not so long ago I had weighed seventy-two pounds [33 kilograms], been covered with sores from head to foot, been dying of nineteen different foul diseases ... Alone? Alone, did I say? ... I hadn't been on my own for four years. This bathroom was miserable, human, penal almost.*

Braddon, sitting in the bath, bellowed for his mother and his stepfather. They tore up the stairs, perched on the lavatory seat, and gave this gregarious ex-prisoner the human company he craved. Later that night, though bathed and fed and soothed by familial conversation, there was a bedtime encounter



with further unrest. He 'tossed and threshed for hours in this solitary, dark comfort', and then slept on the floor.

Discomfort of a more prolonged and intense kind was to follow on his re-enrolment at university. Despite the assertion made in the September letter to his mother, he found it impossible to direct any energy towards the study of law, failing his finals 'with resounding thoroughness' and turning with increasing reliance to the medication prescribed for a profoundly troubled mind. One notably anguished day, he took an overdose of phenobarbitone:

*Hopelessly unstable and insecure by now, and suddenly overwhelmed by the violent onslaught of a backlog of wartime diseases, I disintegrated as a person.*

He was incarcerated again, this time—as he disclosed in a 1970 interview for the Library's Oral History Collection—in a hospital ward 'that had bars on the windows'. There, Braddon's natural inclination to bloody-mindedness contributed to an extended stay, for the psychiatrists would discharge him only if he signed a document promising not to again consider suicide as a remedy for his troubles. Braddon refused for five months, eventually signing when that indefatigable imagination of his had dreamt up a more palatable way of life: he would go to England

ABOVE  
Unknown photographer  
NX8190 Gunner Russell  
Braddon of the 2/15th Field  
Regiment, a few months  
before his capture in Malaya,  
1941  
Courtesy Jillian Lloyd for the  
Braddon family

BELOW  
Unknown photographer  
Braddon (left) in 1949  
with relatives—and tennis  
racquet—about to board ship  
for England  
Courtesy Jillian Lloyd for the  
Braddon family





and become a writer. Straight off the boat, he linked up again with his old Changi associate, Syd Piddington, who was forging a career in show business.

Five years earlier, at Changi, Braddon and Piddington, an amateur conjurer, had devised a mind-reading act as part of the entertainment regime. Their own officers approved: prisoners who were starved, beaten and threatened regularly with imminent execution needed all the diversion they could get.

The Changi concert party, drawing on the ranks of imprisoned actors, singers and musicians, had long contributed to this cause. And now telepathy, through its capacity for generating argument, was to have a peculiarly therapeutic property, as Braddon says in *End of a Hate*:

*Sydney Piddington and I had conceived and perfected demonstrations which half our comrades said were trickery and the other half maintained were telepathy.*

They had rehearsed so assiduously that, in performance, the blindfolded Braddon could identify colours, cards, objects and even addresses selected from the audience and ‘transmitted’ by Piddington. The Australian prisoners’ own commanding officer, Brigadier ‘Black Jack’ Galleghan, subsequently recalled: ‘I know of nothing that kept the men’s minds and their mental capacity more agile’.

After the war, while Braddon wrestled painfully with torts, Syd Piddington worked on thoughts. He turned professional, married Sydney actress Lesley Pope and, with her as his partner, achieved nationwide fame on commercial radio. The venture was so successful that they sailed to England, securing a contract with the BBC.

In those pre-television years, when families sat around ‘the wireless’, variety acts such as that presented by the Piddingtons were often performed live; the pressure to maintain freshness of material and standard of performance was immense. Syd and Lesley needed a scriptwriter, manager and ‘ideas man’. Braddon, joining them in London on release by the psychiatrists and already schooled in the secrets of their vaudeville telepathy, was the obvious choice.

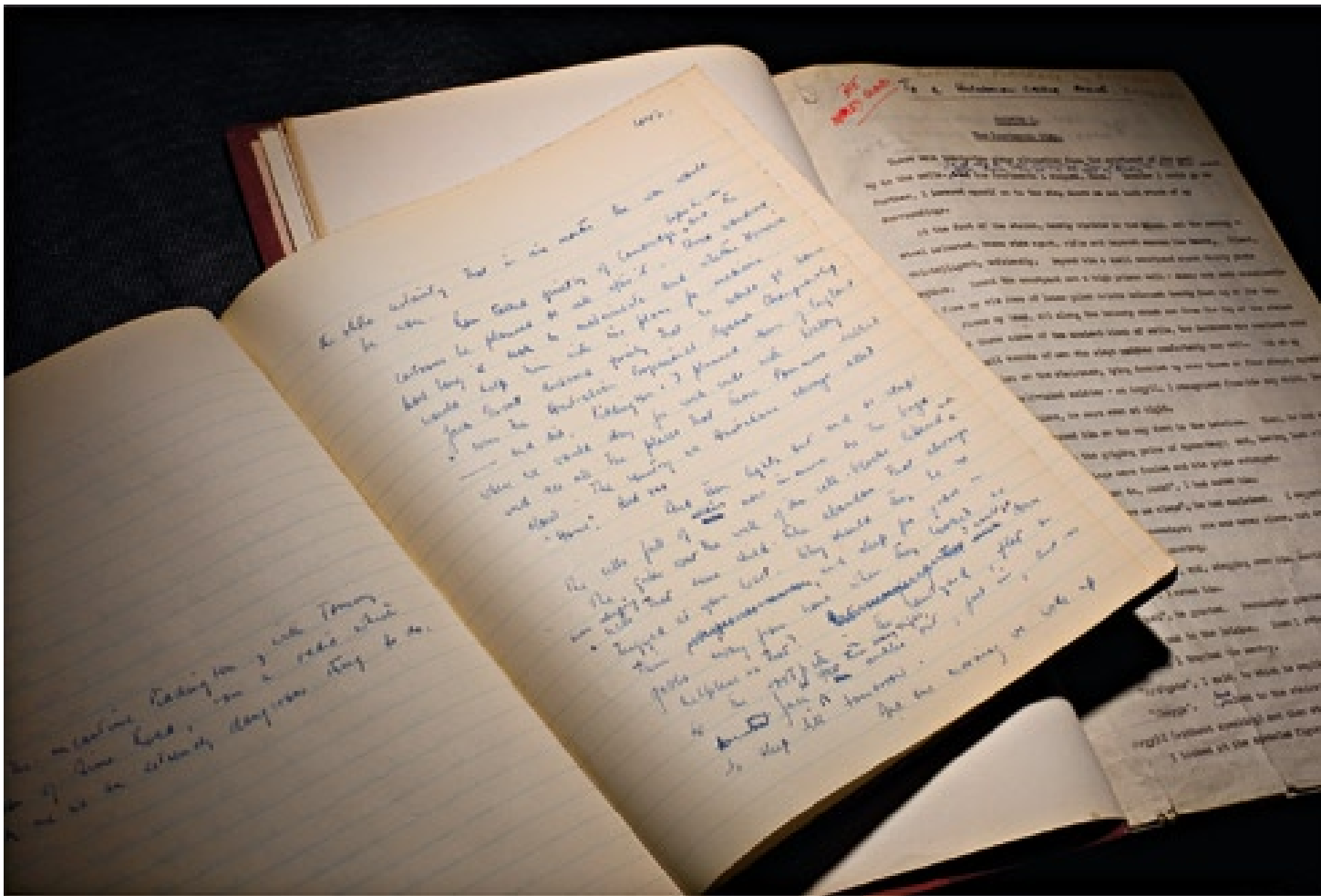
The Library’s collection reveals the originality of Braddon’s ideas. Refining the

mechanisms engineered in Changi, he sent Lesley into Sir Walter Raleigh’s cell at the Tower of London, to a naval depot for an underwater descent in a diving bell, and up above Bristol in an aircraft. At all those locations, she ‘read’ with a consistent degree of accuracy the eclectic quotations and song titles conveyed by Syd from his BBC studio audience.

Britain was intrigued. Braddon’s chronicles record listening figures of 20 million, a sustained dispute in the national press over the legitimacy of the act and—after so much personal anguish—his own metamorphosis into best-selling author.

His first book was *The Piddingtons*, written as they





toured the provincial theatre circuit following their BBC debut. It quickly ran to three editions. Within what is otherwise a frolicsome account of three young Australians whose show distracted Britons from their ration books, it contains some vibrant passages, describing the hand-to-hand fighting which both Braddon and Piddington had experienced in the Malaya campaign before their capture.

Braddon impresses the reader as a natural storyteller, and it was this quality which convinced the publisher, Werner Laurie, that another book was germinating. Braddon was persuaded to develop the combat episodes into *The Naked Island*, a text of extraordinary candour and stoicism.

Syd and Lesley Piddington, still inspired and accompanied by Braddon as their scriptwriter, played the London Palladium, took their extra-sensory entertainment to both Austria and Africa, and made a triumphant return tour of Australia. All the while, ex-Gunner R.R. Braddon, of the 2/15th Field Regiment, was composing his wartime account.

It reached the bookshops in February 1952, on the day that King George VI died. Overcoming this awkward coincidence, *The Naked Island* impressed the *Times Literary Supplement* as ‘compelling’, the *Irish Independent* as ‘a great book because of its stark realism, its Swift-like satire, its searing irony’, and the *Birmingham Gazette* as ‘an enthralling narrative ... a tribute to the human spirit’.

Its author would live for another 43 years, publishing a further 28 books, presenting television documentaries, establishing himself as a provocative journalist, and travelling the United Kingdom, the United States of America and Australia as a public speaker. From the prison camp and the asylum there had emerged a most remarkable mind.

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 NIGEL STARCK is senior lecturer in creative writing at the University of South Australia. He acknowledges, with gratitude, the assistance of Russell Braddon’s relatives and accountant, Philip Miller, in field research for this article.

ABOVE  
 Russell Braddon (1921–1995)  
 Notebook and typescript of  
*The Naked Island*  
 Papers of Russell Braddon,  
 1949–1990  
 Manuscripts Collection  
 nla.ms-ms8963  
 Courtesy Jillian Lloyd for the  
 Braddon family

OPPOSITE, FROM TOP  
 Unknown photographer  
*Portrait of Lesley and Sydney  
 Piddington, 1950s*  
 b&w photograph  
 13.9 x 8.8 cm  
 Pictures Collection  
 nla.pic-an24353731

Sydney Piddington  
 (1918–1991)  
 Lesley Piddington with  
 Braddon on an excursion to  
 Victoria Falls during their  
 1950 African tour with their  
 telepathy act  
 Courtesy Lesley Hazlitt