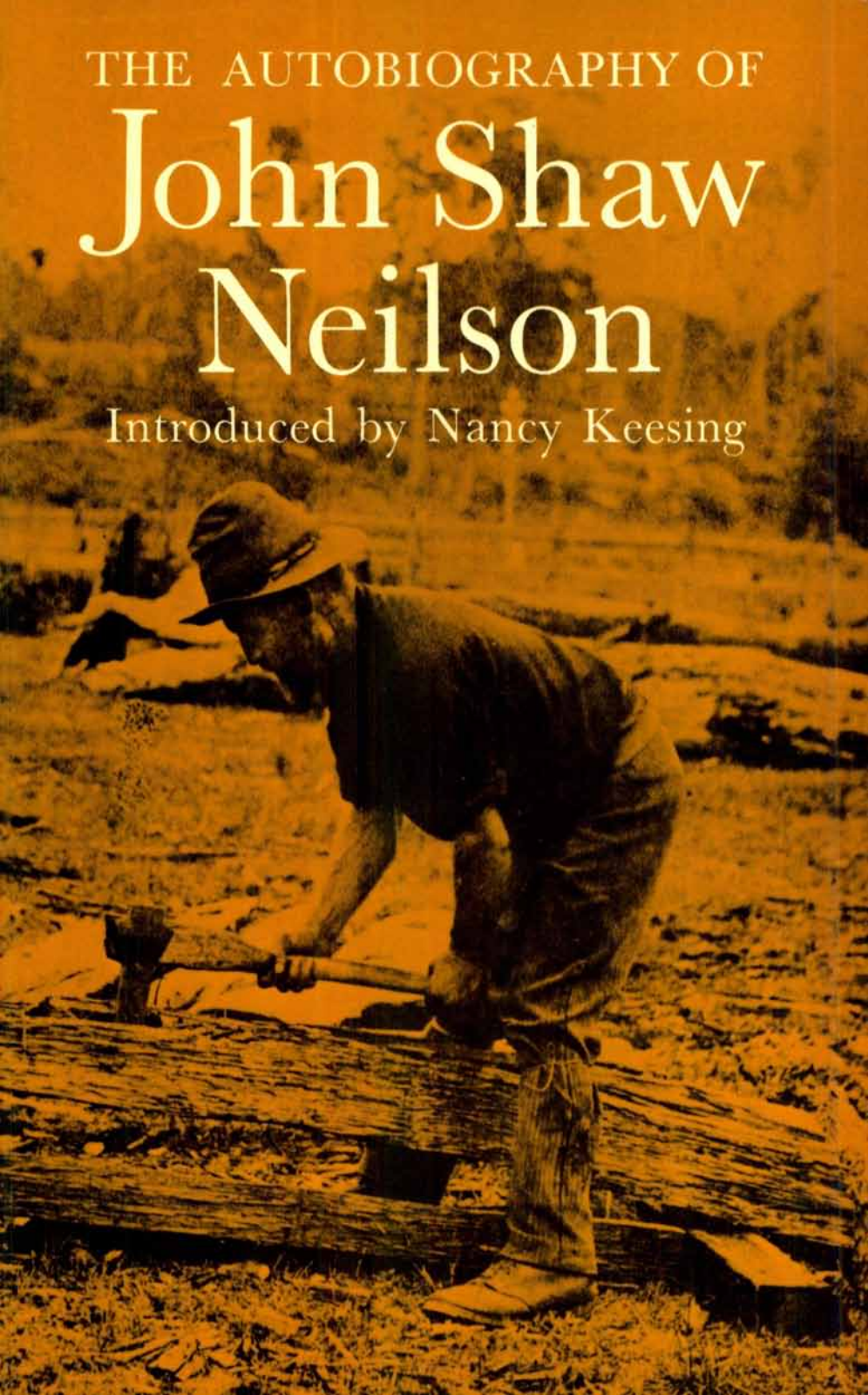
THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF
John Shaw Neilson

Introduced by Nancy Keesing



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NANCY KEESING

National Library of Australia
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Preface

In 1964 the National Library of Australia purchased a collection of Neilson material from a connoisseur of literary Australiana, Harry F. Chaplin. Chaplin had bound letters, memoranda and manuscripts of the poet John Shaw Neilson into volumes, grouped according to content, and in the same year had published a guide to the collection. One of these volumes contained Shaw Neilson's autobiography, transcribed from his dictation by several amanuenses, who compensated for his failing sight. The volume also contained letters which illuminate the history of the collection.

The autobiography had been written at the suggestion of James Devaney but was never published. Devaney was a poet who filled the role of mentor and critic after the death in 1933 of Neilson's earliest guide, A. G. Stephens. He helped care for the ageing Neilson in the last years of his life, transcribed his poems for him, and amassed a considerable amount of Neilson material. He gathered more from Neilson's brother and executor, Frank Neilson, and used it in writing *Shaw Neilson,* a biography published in 1944. After Neilson's death Devaney was a tireless supporter of his work, publishing *The unpublished poems of Shaw Neilson* from working notebooks, and *The last poems of Shaw Neilson* from transcriptions made during Neilson's stay with the Devaneys in 1946. The autobiography took the form of letters written by Neilson to Devaney; Neilson

felt however that it and his light verse should not be published until he had 'gone west'. Devaney felt in any case that he had, in writing his life of Neilson, extracted most of the relevant facts; a few details only had been omitted owing to wartime circumstances.

Ten years later, Devaney offered his Neilson collection to Harry Chaplin. He was working on an outback station near Cloncurry at the time, and thought perhaps that the material would be safer with Chaplin. It included his notes and working data for his books, and many letters he had received from Neilson and from A. G. Stephens. Of this material, a 'small suitcase' had already been stolen some years earlier. Thus were lost the first two instalments of the autobiography, which is why Neilson's recollections start in 1889. Chaplin took possession of Devaney's papers in 1957.

Correspondence between the two at the time indicates that Chaplin did not share Devaney's low estimate of the autobiography's importance. He wrote on 23 July 1957,

> Rereading your letter stimulates me to again mention the possibility of publishing some of the Neilson material. His autobiography, perhaps, in an edition limited, to keep down the cost. Not necessarily an expensive production on any luxury plan, but a nicely produced book which would put on record his life and experiences and place them permanently in print for the future to study. With a few photographs and some facsimiles of his writing, and . . . a preface by yourself, it should make a nice little shelf item for his admirers.

The National Library has in some sense inherited Chaplin's commitment to the manuscript, and in publishing it has indeed followed many of his suggestions

as to format. Shaw Neilson admirers have grown considerably since 1957 and this edition, though not large, is not a limited one. Nor have we a preface by James Devaney; he died in July 1976. We have however an introduction by a distinguished poet and literary critic, Nancy Keesing, who knows, from her chairmanship of the Literature Board, the uncertainties that can harass the creative efforts of a writer like Shaw Neilson. Most importantly, we now have available, in permanent form, Neilson's own view of what it was like to live in Australia at that time, and a glimpse of the kind of life that formed one of Australia's finest lyric poets.

G. CHANDLER
DIRECTOR-GENERAL

Introduction

by Nancy Keesing

This autobiography was written in the form of long letters to James Devaney, continuing an association which had begun in 1930. Devaney had read a slighting reference to Neilson's verses by a 'modernist' critic, and wrote to the poet; Neilson's cordial reply led to a regular correspondence. When in 1933 Neilson's mentor and critic A. G. Stephens died, Devaney stepped into the gap, and provided support and criticism until Neilson's death in 1942.[1]

Devaney suggested the project to Shaw Neilson in the 1930s when, employed permanently in Melbourne, Neilson was perhaps finding inspiration difficult. Replying to E. J. Brady's suggestion that his appointment should not preclude him from writing verse, Neilson wrote, 'I do not seem to want to. I'm afraid I have exhausted myself—no more inspiration'.[2]

The letters make a rare and exciting document for sometimes unexpected reasons which transcend direct literary interest. Much of the autobiography has been quoted and paraphrased by Neilson critics and biographers, but few people have read Neilson's own account in the strictly chronological order he chose, and at his own pace. The book's interest and importance lie not only in its commentaries on Neilson's poetry and work as a poet, but in its value as a work of social history. It would merit publication were the author an unknown man, because of the absolute rarity of

documents describing the day-to-day lives of obscure people in their own straightforward speech.

Geoffrey Grigson wrote of a poet who died eight years before John Shaw Neilson was born, John Clare was a new wonder, a new bird in the curious aviary of peasant poets', and refers to Clare in words which aptly apply to Neilson, 'a poet in defeat entirely undefeated'. Peasant poets did not, of course, suddenly appear about the mid-seventeenth century as a new phenomenon in the English-speaking tradition. They had sung world-wide throughout human history; to them we owe many of our best-loved songs, some religious language and ritual and the greater part of traditional folklore. This 'aviary', though, was curious and new in that its birds could be named and identified, in Britain, from about the time of the Commonwealth, since when occasional talented and fortunate poor boys were taught to read and write. Then collectors like Sir Walter Scott began to assemble and publish oral verse.

John Shaw Neilson was a peasant poet in the direct line of Burns (whose poetry he learned as a boy), Clare, Crabbe and Rob Donn.[3] Like Rob Donn, but unlike the other three, Neilson worked arduously, and essentially as a peasant, for the greater part of his life. The fact that Australia does not officially admit to a peasantry is beside the point. Little is altered by our preference for euphemisms like 'cocky farmer', replacing earlier terms like 'stringybark settler'. Neilson uncompromisingly called himself a navvy when a more pretentious man might have said 'fruitpicker', 'scoop operator' or 'quarry hand'. Neilson and his father and brothers, straining their muscles, racking their joints and breaking their hearts at pioneering a series of doomed small farms, were unequivocally peasants.

The 'silent majority' is a term of recent political coinage which adventitiously but exactly describes most of the world's people. Reasons for their silence are easy to infer. Through literature and drama, a vocal minority has striven to lend them voices. In the English tradition, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Defoe, Dickens, Henry Lawson, John dos Passos and Patrick White reproduce those voices very well; but rarely indeed can a first grave-digger, a Stan Parker or a Mitchell speak for himself. Even more rarely, since education came later to girls than to their brothers, does a Moll Flanders speak directly, except in the suspect sub-literature of sensation and pornography.

John Shaw Neilson speaks directly. Listen:

> I went back to Yallorn and worked for about another six weeks. I was working in a slump [sump] hole. I was up to my knees in mud, and every second week we had night shift. I got that tired that I coud not get up in the morning and I was frightened of rhumatics so I decided to sling the job in. I meant to go up to Mildura again as I could generally get work there in the Winter amongst the vines, (p. 114.)

It is clear that Neilson believed that 'rhyming' and 'prose writing' not only needed different skills, but were distinctly separate creative acts. His prose is not distinguished. He conceded to adverse critics of his poetry the right to their own opinions, but his poetry was daemonic, and he knew it, and never wavered in his conviction of his own uncommon capacity. As to prose he wrote, 'I was about twenty-two before I came to the conclusion that I could not write prose' (p. 34). The dichotomy is plain when one compares topics found both in his prose and poetry; death, for instance. 'She

murmured something which we could not understand. In a minute or so she was dead' (p. 63). 'My little niece appeared. She was not destined to live very long . . . she succumbed sometime about Easter' (p. 95). And then consider:

> Parting is of the cold
> That stills the loving breath,
> Dimly we taste the old
> The pitiless meal of death.

The autobiography poses many questions. Why do deaths and major and minor illnesses pervade so many pages? Its pace is slow and deliberate because Neilson had to dictate it to his sister and stepsister. Why? The short answer to each question is: poverty.

Poverty curtailed Neilson lives untimely. Poverty denied them proper medical attention and treatment. It was not directly responsible for the poet's part-blindness but it compounded the difficulties of defective vision. Strenuous, poorly paid jobs kept Shaw Neilson and his brothers often ill-fed, sometimes underfed, and ill-housed if not under-housed. 'A stripper isn't a bad place to sleep in. Aw, I've slept in a hen-house!'[4] Damp and cold racked their joints; dust thickened in their lungs. One can only speculate how allergies, vitamin deficiencies and the poor, scant food of remote camps may have contributed to their itches and skin complaints, poisoned fingers and slow-healing wounds, gastric disturbances and even nervous ailments. Neilson always felt physically improved when he worked in Mildura at fruitpicking time: 'the mass of green foliage seemed to benefit my eyes very much' (p. 92-3). Perhaps the fresh fruit he ate there, though surfeits sometimes made him sick, contributed to his well-being. When his

two sisters, in their twenties, developed plain symptoms of tuberculosis, poverty denied them effective treatment; family love was not enough. 'If we had had plenty of money she would have been able to go to a Sanitorium or a long distance off. As it was we could only do our best' (p. 60).

Within the span of this book, family poverty did not reach its earlier level of destitution and actual bankruptcy; but the Neilsons never surmounted or overcame it. Why were they so poor, this family of hard-working, able, honest, idealistic, intelligent and fastidious people with their inherited gift of song? For one thing, they had no capital: 'We had just thirty shillings and one cow when we arrived. Mother remarked that we had just exactly the same amount when we arrived at Minimay, eight years earlier. But we had three cows then and some young cattle. I really dont know how Dads creditors missed the cattle' (p. 32).

Other settlers, however, with less intelligence and aptitude, made good from equally humble beginnings. The Neilsons were competent workmen. What went wrong for them? The answers, uncomplaining and stark, lie in these pages; in the long tallies of droughts, vermin plagues and government mismanagement: 'The Shire had sued us for Rates which made things particularly awkward. Dad had to pay them after we left or our horses would have been seized. What an absurd thing for a Shire to hunt a settler off the land. They could have easily collected from the Government who had all our money locked up' (p. 89).

Other reasons for failure are not directly stated. The family began farming in a potentially rich but then little understood area which has special needs for fertilisers and trace elements. The chronically impoverished

Neilsons could not afford to farm according to the best precepts of their era. With the benefit of hindsight, we know that many agricultural practices of those days were misguided and inefficient, 'ecologically unsound'. A further misfortune was the depression of the 1890s, which blanketed Victoria while the family struggled to establish itself in the Nhill district. Some twenty years later, lack of capital forced the Neilsons to leave the land, so they did not benefit from the long-withheld but eventually forthcoming profits from wheat reaped during the scarce times of World War I.

Many women appear in these pages. Those Neilson came to know as admirers of his poetry, like Mary Gilmore, Kate Baker and Louise Dyer (his first benefactor), are described at least briefly. Maggie and Jessie, the sisters who died, are also described. On the whole, however, the reader might wrongly gain a superficial impression that the love, loyalty and drudgery of Neilson women were taken for granted. This was not so. Neilson's actions show him to have been a loving and responsible son and stepson, brother and stepbrother. The family womenfolk relied on him, as did his father in old age and his brothers when misfortune struck. A message from home asking for help would always bring him back, often at personal and financial inconvenience, to the family hearth.

In Neilson's songs and love songs, 'the woman or women of whom he sang must, for the most part, remain as mysterious as the Dark Lady of Shakespeare's sonnets'.[5] Of actual 'romance' in his life, little is certainly known and nothing told here.

Because of his poor sight Neilson dictated a great part of his poetry to relatives, friends and sometimes fellow-

labourers in bush camps. His chief amanuensis was his sister, Annie McKimm, who transcribed his poetry, helped with frequent revisions and arranged manuscripts for publication. Another frequent helper was his step-sister Lisette. The two women took the dictation of this book. Neilson warmly acknowledges their help, but makes no tactful attempt to minimise the frustrations of partial blindness.

I was curious to know whether Shaw Neilson's poor sight was another instance of disability directly attributable to poverty; whether, had he been able to afford the best treatment, his vision might have improved. I also wondered if today's medical advances have made possible a cure or substantial alleviation of a condition like his. I put my questions to an ophthalmic surgeon, Dr Reuben Hertzberg, who very kindly read Neilson's own references to his sight, and some of James Devaney's observations about the poet's vision. With his permission, I quote:[6]

> John Shaw Neilson's references to his ocular disability and the inadequacy of glasses prescribed for him leads me to the conclusion that he had organic ocular disease. Apart from his inability to read and write he maintained that his health was good.
>
> The fact that at least three Collins Street oculists had prescribed glasses and a fourth accused him of malingering would indicate that he had no obvious ocular disease such as corneal disease or cataract, both of which would have been apparent to the most casual observer. The suggestion that 'strained eye muscles' were the cause of his symptoms can be dismissed.
>
> Neilson probably was suffering from a disease

affecting the macula. This causes loss of central vision so that the patient is unable to read or write or does so with great difficulty. Peripheral vision remains intact and as a result the patient gets about quite well although distance vision is impaired. Neilson probably had impaired distance vision but the greater disability is for close work.

It is not surprising that the oculist of the 1909-1916 era failed to make a diagnosis for quite often the lesion is minimal and may produce a visual disability out of proportion to its size.

It is possible that he was using peripheral vision when picking peaches in 1924 for he remarks 'standing on a ladder and staring at different angles on the fruit brought on a severe eyestrain'.

If my interpretation is correct he would not have been cured today for this is a degenerative condition for which there is no treatment. He would have been assisted with visual aids which are now available for people with subnormal vision.

Aids like talking books and recording tape of course did not exist in Neilson's times; even radio was not available in the places where he chiefly worked. Typewriters then were cumbersome machines, which he could scarcely have carried from camp to camp, and it might have been difficult for him to learn to type; according to his brother Frank, 'he had a total lack of interest in all mechanical things. Often after we had left farming and were looking around for employment, I would obtain work, as I had a bicycle and could of course ride if necessary some miles to work. He, however, used to be compelled to walk, as he never would have the patience to be bothered even with the simple push-bike.'[17]

Devaney called Chapter 17 of his book, 'The Making

of a Poem' and there fully described his own experience of writing out a poem to Neilson's dictation in 1940-1. Neilson was old and ill then, but the incident must mirror many other occasions.

> Limitless patience was necessary. He would sit with his eyes closed, his lips moving as if they shaped silent words, his head sometimes shaking as though he were rejecting words or phrases. But sometimes when he had found the words he would look up with a strange intentness. Then he had a direct, beautiful look when dictating. He began at last:
>
> 'How long ago since first a thief was I,'
> (Long pause.)
> 'That time . . . That time I was too close unto the earth,'
> (Very long pause.)
> 'And yet God was upon me from the sky. That wasn't it but we'll put it in for the present. I rather like that metre—it's easy to remember and suits me.'
>
> He became silent again, his lips moving . . .[8]

It was a slow, frustrating process. Neilson complained that when he first woke in the morning he could 'rattle off stanza after stanza' but during the session of dictation he grew tired.

When I first read his manuscript autobiography, I assumed that its strong speech rhythm indicated the usual cadence of Neilson's voice. I imagined that he spoke in the slow, deliberate bushman's drawl one still hears in the outback, and which I privately call 'Duke Tritton's voice' after my old friend, a shearer and folksinger.[9] This first impression was reinforced by some of Neilson's

self-deprecating comments: 'My English is always deplorable' (p. 128). But now I think I was wrong; he necessarily spoke more slowly than usual when dictating. 'I used to get very impatient at the slowness when I was dictating. When anyone is reading my stuff aloud, and they hesitate or stop, I get terribly impatient too,' he told Devaney; no doubt he referred to dictating poetry but the statement would to some extent be true also of his prose. Devaney said: 'He had plenty to say in a voice a little louder than usual—a pleasant resonant voice. He talked fluently, using correct English and constructing sentences well, though he listened more than he talked.' His face was 'thin and alive and suggested a sense of humour' and, indeed, a wry salty humour is not lacking in this autobiography and informs a great deal of his verse, not only the light verse he wrote, but also many of his lyrics and ballads.

As to the manuscript of this book: Annie McKimm and Lisette Neilson wrote clear hands, but paragraphing and punctuation vary between them. Devaney had clear ideas as to the method of treating the manuscript, and wrote to Chaplin on 12 February 1958,

> In case of publication of the autobiography, of course one should not print every error of grammar and punctuation, but I would not make any alterations without indicating them (1) by square brackets for alterations of words in the text (except for obvious faults of spelling) and (2) by a brief note in the foreword calling attention to this.

It has seemed sensible to add textual notes indicating comments by Devaney, and to mark the changes of amanuensis. Usually, there is no doubt as to the meaning or correct version of occasional words and proper names;

where a word or syllable is drastically misspelt, or clearly left out by accident, a substitute has been supplied in square brackets. Otherwise alterations have not been made.

There is only slight evidence that Neilson revised his autobiographical letters in any way. Notes in Devaney's handwriting occasionally appear in the margins, but the text is otherwise as Annie and Lisette took it down. Neilson was, however, aware that Devaney might wish to publish the work, and correspondence during the project indicates his frame of mind. He worried about the gaps in his recollections:

> I find that my memory is remarkably bad concerning the years between 1919 and 1923. I had a good deal of worry at the time and that may account for it. I remember things that happened since '23 very much better. . . . You will find the statements about the dates my verse appeared at times incorrect and confusing. If you had a complete set of the *Bookfellow* from 1907 to 1924, it would be a great help. . . . I have only a few odd ones.[10]

He fretted at the heaviness of the task and the slowness of transcription:

> I thought I would be able to send you the sixth letter this week . . . I can only get my sister for an hour or so on Sunday . . .[11]

and may have felt that revision would be too onerous. He was continually worried about his job with the Country Roads Board, a temporary appointment renewed annually, and was for thirteen years concerned that he might antagonise someone highly placed. In these circumstances, and in failing health, he had no

wish to revise the details of his life. And Devaney, in using the material for his life of Neilson, paraphrased extensively, but selected and edited the material.

That he was unable to revise means in one sense that it is not quite fair to Shaw Neilson, that meticulous craftsman, to publish this document at all, but its interest and value override that consideration.

The scarcity of Neilson's work is one factor in its value. For a number of reasons much of Shaw Neilson's writing is quite lost to us. Many of his notebooks were destroyed in the mouse plague at Chinkapook, mentioned here, and others were badly mutilated. His nomadic life accounted for other losses and his part-blindness cost him some poems before they could be written down: 'Sometimes I have been able to get a few stanzas written out for me at the week end. Some have escaped my memory altogether' (p. 157).

The worst thieves of his work were deprivation and an arduous life which denied him leisure and peace of mind. 'You ask me something about my method of writing verses . . . responsibilities, debts, and plans to make a living, are all big enemies,' he told Devaney. One of the most moving sections of the autobiography describes the emergence of *New poems,* which he managed to finish because he had 'plenty of leisure'. That spell of leisure he owed to the beginning of the Depression; in 1927, unable to find a job, he came to the city but, ashamed of his poor appearance, 'did not tell my writing friends that I was in Melbourne. I led them to believe I was still in Merbein'. When friends did learn of his plight, a testimonial appeal was arranged and there was an indignant newspaper correspondence about his situation. It is good to know that Blamire Young, whose vision as a watercolourist is sometimes as delicate and

mysterious as the best of Neilson's poems, was chief among those who helped to collect £112. Young greatly admired Neilson, and helped in other ways at other times.

Then, in 1928, Melbourne friends secured for the ageing poet a job as messenger in the Country Roads Department, and a Commonwealth Literary Fund pension of £1 a week. By 1934, when his autobiography ends, the pension had been increased and, with his salary, Neilson earned about *£7* weekly. His income was never enough to afford him ample writing time or real peace of mind, though it did allow him to buy 'lollies' for the many Melbourne children who became his friends.

He worked, and worked too hard, until a year before his death; in 1937 he worried that when he reached the age of sixty-five his humble job might end. 'In Melbourne there are many Philistines who can't see that a rhymer should not go on subsistence like anybody else.'[12] It is ironic that certain recent critics of government patronage of literature and the arts invoke Neilson's name to support their arguments against grants to writers. 'John Shaw Neilson was a navvy . . . no poet will write a better poem as a result of a governmental golden gift . . . Poets write because they like it', said one advocate of starvation in garrets.

References to Neilson's shabby clothes are frequent in the autobiography. He hesitated to meet Mrs Dyer because he was so down-at-heel; 'my trousers were unspeakable'. I was happy to learn that by 1934, when James Devaney met him, Neilson was 'always well-dressed', and to know that, in the last two years of his life, retired, old and ill, he was at least able to visit writer friends and be less 'shut in a world of my own' with 'no chance of studying the language, or the words of other poets'.

The lines printed at the head of the Autobiography were addressed by Devaney to Neilson on the endpaper of a copy of *Beauty imposes* (1938), and introduce a remarkable and straightforward account by a navvy who also was 'a poet in defeat entirely undefeated'.

Neilson's life

John Shaw Neilson was, through both his parents, of Scottish descent. His paternal grandmother, born Jessie MacFarlane, married twice in Scotland. By her first marriage to William Neilson she had two sons who both wrote poetry, William (born in 1842) and John (born in 1844). The younger was John Shaw Neilson's father. Jessie was widowed early and then married John Shaw, to whom she bore three children in Scotland.

In 1853 John and Jessie Shaw emigrated to Australia, setting out with John Neilson and the three Shaw children, but leaving William Neilson with his MacFarlane relatives. During a voyage of great hardship the two youngest Shaw children died and were buried at sea. William Neilson and some members of the MacFarlane family later emigrated to Australia, where William was known as 'the singer of Penola'.

John Shaw was an unskilled labourer. In Australia he became expert at many bush trades, including shearing, rough bush carpentry, fencing and bullock driving. Eventually he managed to buy his own bullock team and hauled wool from inland Victorian sheep stations to Portland on the coast, returning with supplies for up-country settlers. His stepson John worked beside him and grew up with 'the attributes of a skilful bushman; sturdy, self-reliant, a strong axeman and

fencer, a shepherd and drover with practical knowledge of animal husbandry, a teamster and stationhand'.[13]

There were no schools where young John Neilson lived and worked, but he learned to read and write, perhaps from his mother. During the 1870s he published verse in several newspapers, and some of his bush ballads became popular.

In 1871 at Penola, South Australia, John Neilson married Margaret McKinnon, who was then twenty-one, the Victorian-born daughter of a Scottish migrant family. By this time various members of the Neilson, Shaw, MacFarlane and McKinnon families lived in or near Penola, a prosperous town not far from the Victorian border.

The young couple rented a rough slab cottage in which on 22 February 1872 their first child, John Shaw Neilson, was born. His father worked at various jobs, preferring the independence of contract work as a timber-getter, shearer and road contractor. Four more children were born at Penola: Maggie, Jessie, Annie and Bill. Frank was born later, at Minimay, in Victoria.

John Neilson owned a few books and at night often read aloud to his family. Every evening the family prayed together and heard a Bible reading. John Shaw Neilson later told James Devaney, 'I didn't go to school before I was eight, but I remember I could read before I went to school. I never got any real lessons at home, but we had some books, and I seemed to teach myself mostly. I began in the usual way of "c-a-t—cat". It was just that I was fond of it.'[14]

Wages were low and, despite his bushman's skills and hard work, John Neilson was beset by complicated debts and business difficulties. In 1879 he decided to take up a small holding of his own in the Western District of

Victoria. He selected a block of 320 acres to which the family removed in 1881. Minimay, on the perimeter of the Little Desert region, was a potentially fertile area, but then uncleared, unfenced, swampy and infested with dingoes and rabbits. John Neilson, like many other smallholders, simply did not possess the capital to develop his holding properly or to ride out bad seasons. The eight years his family spent attempting to establish a farm and a home were a depressing routine of hard work, high hopes, disappointing harvests and continual debt.

John Neilson was often forced to take jobs away from home to earn ready money, leaving his eldest son in charge of milking, killing sheep for the family meat, providing rabbits and other game; the boy was a skilful hunter.

Neilson led the Minimay settlers in making frequent petitions to the Victorian Government for the establishment of a school in the district. In 1885, after many delays, a school was opened and John Shaw Neilson, walking two miles there and back each day, was enrolled for a year. In the afternoon he attended to his farm jobs and responsibilities. He left school at fourteen after a total schooling period of only two and a half years but, said his family, 'he learned more in two years than we did in six'.[15]

The lad then began working with his father. By the age of fifteen he had learned to shear. When he was sixteen, a perhaps over-ambitious, and certainly disastrous, contract on the border fence nearly cost father and son their lives. The area was remote, the summer hot and the Neilsons had underestimated their food and water needs. They had to abandon their equipment and travel with horses and cart for two days

without food or water to Scorpion Springs. They arrived there none too soon; Neilson recalled drinking fourteen pannikins of water and the horses 'licked out the dishes like dogs'. Despite their need for cash they did not return to that job. Annie Neilson recalled that her brother worried greatly about the family situation towards the end of the Minimay period; he was not, she said, an optimist like his father.

Despite material and educational deprivation, John Shaw Neilson's childhood and boyhood in the countryside at Penola and Minimay afforded rich stores of memory and imagery for his poetry. His family and others who remember him in those years recalled his bush skills, his ability to track wild bees and gather their honey, and his prowess at hunting ducks and rabbits for welcome additions to a meagre family table.

One cloud dulled his childhood and marred his happiest achievements with feelings of guilt and fear: his mother's unbending Presbyterianism. Otherwise a warm, loving and brave woman, she believed fanatically in hellfire and a vengeful god, transmitting her beliefs to her children and insisting on strict and repressive religious observance. Neilson viewed God as 'The Challenger', a being who would regard his honey-gathering with disapproval, and whose rage would punish stolen pleasures. He did not shake off these fears until he was fourteen. In that year he wrote his first poem, showing it only to his mother. She praised the work and told John Neilson of his son's ability.

In 1889 the family travelled by covered wagon across the Little Desert (in fact it is not true desert; it contains numerous soaks and springs and supports a varied animal life). Their goal was the district of Nhill. Margaret Neilson was pregnant and they had almost

no money. This time they did not contemplate buying a farm of their own, but the Victorian economy seemed buoyant and in the Nhill district jobs, though poorly paid, were relatively easy to find. No one saw the severe depression of the early 1890s looming ahead.

With the arrival of his family at Nhill, John Shaw Neilson's autobiographical letters begin.

The Autobiography of John Shaw Neilson

TO JOHN SHAW NEILSON

Poet, you have not the doors
Of the small suburban great,
Their rewards and high estate,
And the elbowing world ignores;
Yet your simple song unknown
Shall last their builded halls of stone.

James Devaney

Early Rhymning and a Setback

We arrived at Nhill on June 13th [18]89. It was a very wet season. The water was up over the Railway embankment at Diapur, twelve mile west of Nhill. From there out to the S [outh] A [ustralian] border a lot of the lowlying country was under water. Nhill was a thriving town.

We managed to rent a cottage on a farm about four miles south west of the township, close to the Tarringinnie East School. Nhill was about eight mile north of the edge of the Little Desert.

The Little Desert was a strip of worthless stringy bark country that ran from the SA border due east towards Horsham. It would be rather difficult to define the northern boundary of the good country in the W & middle Wimmera. At Serviction [Serviceton] on the SA border the strip of good country was about sixteen mile wide. There was a few patches of poor stuff even among the good (such as the Lawloit Range). At Nhill, the good country would be pretty well forty miles from N[orth] to South. Further east towards Dimboola the good country ran from the Little Desert about seventy miles to Lake Corung [Coorong]. I think settlement was just about starting there at that time. Beyond that, the country is good nearly all the way through to Mildura, a distance of over a hundred miles.

At that time people used to call it desert, and say that nobody could live in it, but in our days wheat is grown

all over the dryest of the NW part of Vict[oria].

Had Dad selected at Nhill instead of Minimay, perhaps our fortunes would have been better. I certainly would have gone to school earlier and as Dad was a very hard working man, I think he would have got on well wheat growing.

In 89 the great depression had hit Melb[ourne] but it. was not very apparent at Nhill. It was not difficult to get work although wages were pretty low *£1* and keep for a ploughman and thirty shillings a week in the harvest time. Dad got a contract for fencing soon after we landed.

We had just thirty shillings and one cow when we arrived.

Mother remarked that we had just exactly the same amount when we arrived at Minimay, eight years earlier.

But we had three cows then and some young cattle.

I really dont know how Dads creditors missed the cattle.

Mother always argued that these cattle actually belonged to me, because in my early months Granny McKinnon had given me an uncommoly [uncommonly] good cow, named Black Maggie who was the ancestress of all the cattle we had. This used to rather puzzle me in my early days, because, our cattle were all red. None of them ever took after the Mothers side.

Nhill was altogether such a different place to Minimay. There were more chances for young people. We all seemed to be more hopeful.

Most of the land was rich especially on the black flats. Rich land always seemed to me to have a fine effect of [on] the spirits. Poor country depresses me more than it does most people. There is a great deal of poor country in Vict, a fact which Victorians carefully avoid making public.

About the end of Aug Mother gave birth to a infant son. He was christened Neil after her father. He seemed a fine healthy child, but when only two or three days old he took convulsions and died.[1]

My sister Maggie started to work for the wife of a farmer close by and the following year she started as a sewing mistress at the local State School.

About the middle of Oct Dad & I went away to the SE of S Australia shearing. We returned a few weeks before Xmas. We got work wheat cleaning. After that was over, we followed a trashing [threshing] machine, (a steam one) this time. We were out till March & made about thirty shillings a week each. The red rust was very bad that year and I got sore eyes, which stopped me from doing any reading or writing till the middle of Winter. All that Autumn & Winter we were working contract fencing.

I think the sore eyes was about the beginning of my very discontented period which lasted for several years. I was very like Mother, there was a good deal of the pessimist in me. I remembered while we worked at that contract fencing, Dad was a good deal of his time writing a Ballad. I thought it was a very good ballad, but he never got it printed. I believe Ward & Lock would have printed it, but they did not want to pay for it, and they only wanted to give him a book, in which it was going to appear.

When my eyes got better, I tried to write verse and Stories. I got eight lines of rhymne into the *Leader.* My first appearance in Print was under some pen name.

They were very raw lines, but Dad praised them, and said, they were very much better than what he did at the same age. He also thought that one of my stories was fairly good.

That encouraged me, and I kept on trying to write stories & sketches. I was about twenty-two before I came to the conclusion that I could not write prose.

I think the inability to write either decent verse or prose had a good deal to do with my low spirits about this time. I was in my nineteenth year when the rhyme in the *Leader* appeared.

That was 90, the year of the big Maritine [maritime] strike. Very foolishly Spence the Leader of the Shearers Union called the shearers out in sympathy. This was a fatal move as it turned the Patorularts [pastoralists] against the Shearers. The previous year most of the Squatters had been friendly to the Union.

Dad & I had arranged to go, and we had pens at Eldersley [Ellerslie] in the Western District of Vict. Dad decided that we would not go. He could see trouble sticking out. The manager of the Station in a letter to Dad afterwards told us that he kept the Pens for us for many weeks. We both belonged to the AWU and we were anxious to be loyal to it in every way.

I never seemed to get a chance to go shearing after that.

The next Spring, we were woodcutting.

In the Summer of 91 we took contract wheat cleaning.

It was a very rough job. We had to batch & work long hours.

We were at it two months, and only made thirty shillings a week out of which we had to pay for our food. The usual wage at this time was thirty shillings a week and keep.

Dad was always very fond of contract work. He did not like working for a boss. Frank my youngest brother is like that still. I on the contrary prefer working for a boss. I have nearly always found at piece work that a

man has to work desperately hard to make a living.

I think it is pretty common knowledge amongst the working class, during the last thirty years, that the Contract System is always in favour of the Employer.

That year we followed the trasher again, but only for five weeks. This year, I had a better job, I was on the wheat stack. The year before, I had been chaffy, and that accounted for the sore eyes.

In the Autumn we were breaking stones on a Road job.

Then I think Dad & I did a small contract for the shire, some draining and a culvert.

In the Winter we got a job of woodcutting which lasted close up till Xmas.

Just before Xmas Dad tendered for and got two small contracts in the Dimboola Shire, which joined Lowan Shire in which we lived.

The first one was a small invert and he got a good price for it, about £12 but we had to pay something for the cartage of stone, it only took us a week.

The other job for which he had £30 was a snag. It was honestly worth £50 or £60. He would have thrown it up, but he did not like to lose his deposit, and disappoint the Engineer who seemed to be a very fine old fellow. Had we worked the job properly we might have done much better. We should have grubbed the mallee on one end of the job, and carted the stuff from there.

Instead of that we got permission from an adjoining farmer to make a tank on his land, and we carted the filling from there.

It took us a long time in the middle of Summer, and the job just about paid rations & horse feed.

I was very disgusted with that job.

Before he had finished he got another contract for post and wire fencing from the Shire.

He had a really good price for it. He wanted me to cut the posts for it by the piece, but I told him I would go away and try and get some contract picking & clearing up in the New Mallee. I had heard of men making ten shillings a day, and it seemed good wages then. Dad took his stepbrother Uncle Dave[2] who was living at Nhill at this time into the fencing job, and I believe they did pretty well at it. Later on he got some road making in the Lowan Shire.

About the middle of March I left home. I was in Warracknabeal on St Pats Day. From there I walked north to Roseberry [Rosebery]. In Roseberry I fell in with a farmer who offered me a job at £1 a week to go clearing.

I took this as I did not have much money left. It seemed difficult to get Contract clearing as it had been snapped up earlier in the Season. I got on very well with the clearing. My employer was a young man, and we batched together, and I did the cooking.

I think I cleared about 100 acres in about seven weeks when I jarred my left thumb badly. I stayed in the camp several weeks poulticing it and using all the remedies that were recomended. I used to be up all night poulticing it and cooking & washing up in the daytime. My employer said I could stop as long as I liked and look after the thumb but as the other thumb was becoming affected, he thought I ought to see a doctor.

I decided to go home, and see a doctor. I thought I would be alright in a few weeks. The Doctor lanced the thumb but the whitlow left it perman [en]tly stiff. It descharged for over two months and I think it was

three months before I could drive a scoop team, and it was twelve months before I could use an axe. What surprised me most when I did start axe work was that it was not the stiff thumb that was the bother. It was the other one. It would begin to throb and I would be frightened of another whitlow if I did not knock off.

In five or six years time, however it did not seem to trouble me so much. Whitlows are very common amongst men who do 'snagging' that is cutting off the short mallee stumps which are left after the roller.

Early that year Dad applied for and got a block of land near Sealake [Sea Lake] in the County of Harkarook.

In Sept he & I and his brotheranlaw (Jim Cornell)[3] who had also got a block there went over to have a look at the Country.

It was 120 miles NE of Nhill.

I still had my arm in a sling although I had been horse-driving.

One day we camped for dinner about ten mile east of Hopetown [Hopetoun].

At the same tank the Governor and his party with E H Lascelles of Hopetown had stopped for a midday meal. We rested about two hundred yards away from the Party.

A hack belonging to one of the Governors Party got away from its rider who had dismounted, and was running away into the scrub, when I caught it and took it back to its owner. He was a big stout chap, he did not even say thank you.

I was rather surprised, that such a fine gentlemen [sic] should behave so badly. After dinner Lord Hopetown himself came over. He began to chat with my father just as if they had known each other from boyhood.

What a charm the man had.

He spoke of everything that would interest us, the future of the Malle[e], the possibility of the depression ending, the improvement of the gold mining industry in Bendigo.

There was no nonesense about the Earle. He seemed to be every inch a man. He was a fine Sport.

I think nearly all elderly people agree that he was the best liked Governor that Vict ever had.[4]

In the later part of 1902,* the Australian ANA of Melb offered prizes for short Stories, Poems & etc., in collection [connection] with the ANA Celebrations in the following Jan.[5] My father won a prize of six guineas for a Poem on the 'Pioneers' (Set subject) and I won a prize for a Poem at two guineas for Juniors under twenty-one (any subject). Dad knew I was competing but he never saw my verse until after it was printed in the papers.

The Pioneers was really a fine piece of Verse. A amatear electionest [elocutionist] from Vict took it over to W Australia and it was recited a good deal there. My Verse was correct enough but I grew to dislike it very much, because I thought it was too prigish.

I think people about twenty-one generally write bad verse.

They begin to think they know a good deal wheras they know next to nothing.

After the prize I began to get more confident about my rhyming powers. I got several pieces into the local papers (the *Nhill Mail).*

I think only one of these was any good at all.

It was called 'Emily Wynn' and in later years A. G. Stephens thought if it had been altered it might have

***'This should be 1892': note by James Devaney, MS, p. 15.**

done for one of the books.

Before I was twenty-two I think I had two pieces in the *Australasian.* They were corre[c]t enough but very weak & conveninel [conventional]. I suppose the Editor was anxious to encourage a young writer. In quite recent years I have had fairly good verse turned down by well-known papers. Before my last book *(New poems)* was published in 27 I had one poem turned down by several well known Editors who should have been good judges.

Anyhow AGS put the piece in the book. Now the remarkable thing happened.

When the book appeared one very good judge of Verse who lives in Vict in a private letter to me, picked this thing out for special praise.

He advised me to send a copy of it to an English Review.

I did not do this as I thought that was a job for the Publisher.

Naturally I do not wish to mention the name of my critic friend nor give the name of the piece.

Towards the end of 1894 Dad decided to publish his verse. It was to cost £17.10.0. and he could manage to scrape up the money to pay for it.

Most of his early verse needed alot of altering. He and my sister Maggie were at it for several weeks in the evenings. The Proprieter of one of the local papers (The *Mail)* was to do the printing. Just before Xmas while I was harvesting near Lake Hindmarsh about twenty-five miles away I heard that there had been a big fire in Nhill. The *Mail* office and many other buildings had been destroyed. Most of Dads stuff had actually gone through the Press. Some of it was rescued and we had a lot of it (badly smoked) in our possession for some years.

Dad used to say, that it was rather an advantage that it had got burnt because most of it was not correct enough for a book. He had, however, a notion of publishing again because Maggie & he altered a good deal of the damaged stuff.

After we got to the mallee, funds were remarkably scarce, and although Dad wrote most of his best verse after he turned fifty, he did not seem so keen on publishing.

I think the best bit of verse he wrote, during our stay at Nhill, was 'Loves Summer in the Snow'. It seemed to have more charm about it than the others. He had a good ear for Rhytym and he had read much good verse. He wrote one religuous piece 'Easter tide' for the *Australian [Australasian]* just before we left Nhill. I think it was a remarkable piece of work for a man with no education, a man that had to fight so very hard to make a living all his life.

Early in 1895 Dad & Bill my young brother Bill left for Sealake. They were to build a hut on the land there. I stayed behind on a fencing job.

About this time I became rather concerned about the health of my sister Maggie. She was a great enthusiast, about anything she took up. She had always seemed a very healthy girl up till now but anyone could see that the work was too much for her. The sewing mistress job for which she only got 12/6 a week was only five and a half days a week. That could be managed.

But she was studying for Competentcy [Competency] Exams to enable her to be a school teacher. She would be up till midnight, doing the papers, which was sent up by a Coach. In addition to this, she had joined the Salvation Army and she was often at their meetings in the evening and on Sunday she had not a moments

rest. She was up at six in the morning at knee-drill. She would be speaking at meetings during the day and the afternoon, and often was going up till 11 oclock at night.

I was opposed to her work in the Army because I considered that she had joined an intolerant Body.

They were very fanaticial and seemed to treat their soldiers with very little mercy. Of course it is difficult to reason with young people when they set out to sacifice themselves to an idea.

My sister failed four times running at the Exam. Everyone was surprised at this, because she was an excellent teacher. I believe she used to get flurried and make mistakes in simple addition.

One of the Examiners told her this afterwards. Just before she failed the last time, she had made up her mind to enter the Army as an Officier.

I dont think Dad was too pleased at this. He was a very religuous man and a very tolerant one. I opposed it because I knew the very hard lives which young girls (Army Officiers) were leading. By this time I began to read a bit, I knew what was going on in the world. Mother had always been a religuous woman and she could not reasonably say anything again[s]t it.

She had belonged to the local Corps of the Salvation Army but had left it by this time. She was perfectly justified in leaving it too. An Officier sent up to take charge, used to speak to the converts & soldiers in very much the same way as he used to speak to the bullocks which he had driven in former years leaving out the swear words of course. Mother was a woman of refinement and she could not stand this man who made rude jokes. Mothers health had been very much better during our stay at Nhill than it was a[t] Minimay: She was a young looking woman for her years. When she was

something over forty she went one time to nurse a sick niece. This niece was a remarkably pretty girl. She was one of the beauties of the district. The Doctor in attendance remarked how very closely she resembled my mother. For a long time after that it was a joke among my sisters, how proud Mother was of the compliment. Her own girls did not resemble her much at all. They were more like my fathers people.

In May 1895 my father & Bill came back from Sealake. Dad scraped up a team somehow. He borrowed a wago[n], his step brother Uncle Dave lent a horse and came with us for the trip. We had a horse & dray besides I believe we had one cow.

I dont think we had our usual thirty shillings. Dad established credit for horse feed and he also got credit for groceries when we got as far as Birchip.

On the road up my sister told me she had refused an offer of marriage before she left. I knew the man he was a very decent fellow but he did not belong to the Army. She preferred to remain single and she still had the idea of going into the Army as an Officier.

The year previous Dad had got 120 acres of Mallee rolled down. We bought seed wheat & chaff, borrowed a scarifier and got it in somehow. My sister Maggie helped for a while with the clearing. We soon found out that she would have to be careful. She did not seem to stand much exertion.

My two younger sisters remained behind at Nhill.

Ninety-five was the start of a run of bad seasons which lasted up to 99.

It was August before we got the crop in which was really about two months too late. We used to have about three dust storms a week. The rabbits came by the hundred thousand. Some times they ate the poison we

laid sometimes they did not but it seems to make very little difference in their numbers. We had some showers, the crop came in and it was eaten down straight away. We applied to the Store keeper for netting to keep them back. He gave us enough to fence two sides of the little square that we had cleared.

This however did not interfere with the bunies much, they merely went round. Then Dad conceived the idea of splitting palings for about sixty chains of fence. Dad never could see any difficulties. He delighted in the impossible. I opposed it because I could clearly see that unless the crop was made rabbit proof in a few weeks it would be too late to expect a yield. I got a job from a contractor who was doing a fencing contract close by, for £1 a week for three weeks. This contractor was a shrewd man and a friend of my fathers. He was very sorry to see him tackle such a impossible task.

After the fencing job was over I got [a job] harvesting at Birchip where I earned another £3. I think this is the only money that come into the family during six months. I walked back from Birchip Xmas Day. It was about thirty-five miles. When I got near home I heard that Dad had been ill with a cold. I was much relieved when I found out that he was alright again. He had actually managed with the help of my brothers to do about forty chains of paling fencing.

Of course the whole thing was utterly useless. The crop had been beyond hope since early in Oct.

About N Year our block which was all green Mallee got swept by a bush fire. We thought one of the neighbours set the fire. It was supposed to be a good way of making the rabbits a little thinner. Dad was a little annoyed about the fire, because it would cost five shillings an acre more to clear the block now.

However there was some prospect of feed on the burnt country the following year.

Mother had an idea that we might be able to keep a cow. Mother & Maggie got on very badly without fresh milk.

The fire had given Mother & Maggie a severe fright. From that [time] on Maggie use to suffer from palpatration of the heart. I suppose it was due to her weak state of health. She had now abandoned the idea of entering the Salvation Army as an Officier. Her health made that impossible.

The problem of our Water Supply was serious. We could get water by carting it from a station tank six miles away but we had no feed for the horses.

We only had three horses and a pony.

Dad managed to paddock the two draughts and the pony at Swanhill [Swan Hill] about fifty miles away. We turned the other one a buggy horse out on a station paddock.

He managed to exist there on some Salt bush. Dad got a job of fencing from a neighbouring Settler who had some money. I forget what price we got for the fencing but I know it was worth three times as much. This man had a tank of good water on his land & we all went and camped there. We finished the fence in about two months. Just then one and a half inches of rain fell and we got some water in a tank we had made at home.

We shifted back home, and began to consider how we could get [a] crop in for the coming year. One of the draught horses had died at Swanhill.

We had only two horses left, and no horse feed. Dad arranged with a neighbour who had teams to disc in the 120 acres for us. In lu [lieu] of that we had to do some

fencing. We had to walk four miles to do that job. I remember one day Dad went out and cut a hundred big pine posts. It was very good work because the timber had been culled. I went out next day and I could only cut eighty, and my posts were not so big. Dad & I made an underground tank and timbered it with pine.

I cannot remember where Dad got the seed wheat that year. He must have by some miracle established credit.

We had no money, not enough for [a] postage stamp. We had no papers. We used to borrow the *Leader* when it was a week old. While we were working at the tank, word came that Grandfather Shaw had died. I remembered Dad knocked off for several hours and had a long talk with Mother. Old John Shaw had been rather a hard man to agree with at times, but Dad had always got on well with him. The old chap had married the second time when he was over seventy years of age. His bride was only twenty-eight at the time. There had been two children but one had died. I believe the widow was left in rather poor circumstances.

We cleared twenty acres extra that year and got it in somehow. The crop came up and looked well. There had been some decent rains in the Autumn.

There were no rabbits to worry us.

They had been completely wiped out by the Drought.

All August we had very severe frosts and in Sept more frosts & hot winds. The crop burnt up before our eyes.

I think it was about July of that year Dad got a job snagging on Tyrell Downs Station.[6] He was camped along side of a rabbiter. This Rabbiter used to tell us great tales of the Droving, which he had followed for some years. He used to read the *Bulletin* and he had some aquai[n]tance with Lawsons & Patersons verse.

I used to take tucker out to Dad and some times stop at his camp all night. One days I stuck [struck] in a *Weekly Times* Bango Pattersons [sic] 'Clancy of the Overflow' taken from an old *Bulletin.* It struck my fancy very much. I began to try my hand at rhymning again. I accomphised [accomplished] a rhymne 'Polly & Dad & the Spring Cart' and sent it to the *Bulletin.* I never heard anything of it for three months. Then it appeared on the Red Page. We were all very proud of this. I am afraid it was a pretty bad rhymne.[7]

AGS remembered this piece but he never showed any disposition to put it in any of my books.[8]

The best bit of rhymne, I did at this time was a light piece called 'A Remarkable Lamb'. It was not a parody on 'Mary's Lamb' but it was a tribute to the popularity of the remarkable little Poem. Years after AG said that he would have liked to have put it in one of the books, but it was too light.

The 'Springcart' appeared about Dec 96. I think it was about five years later than that before I got anything else printed. I may have had one stray, a very unimportant rhymne in the *Australian Journal* 97.

The end of 96 is therefore the start of the Set Back.

In the Spring of that year Dad myself and my two brothers were working at fifteen shillings a week each.

We were cutting tracks and etc in the Mallee on Tyrell Downs which was being sub-divided for Share Farmers.

On towards Xmas Dad & the boys took a small contract of cutting Mallee. I took a small patch on my own, but I was not able to finish it because my right thumb got jarred again rather badly. I had been cutting light mallee for a good few month[s] but I had been very careful. When I tackled cutting the bell bottomed mallee (or

bull mallee) as we used to call it, my thumb gave way.

I was very disappointed, and some people advised me to wear a leather stall on it. I went down to Wycheproof which was fifty mile away and saw a doctor. The doctor merely advised me to knock off axe work and the local saddler said a stall would be useless. The trip cost me ***£2*** and I came home rather disappointed.

This would be about the middle of Jan.* I knew that by waiting another month I could get clearing & burning off on Tyrell Downs.

In this clearing there would be a lot of snagging to do, and there did not seem to be any prospect of my thumb being fit for it.

Towards the end of the month I walked over to Swanhill.

I heard that there was some Suckering being done on a Station on the other side.

I walked out to the Station and found that there was nothing doing, and came back and camped a couple [of] days at Swan hill. I fell in with some men who had come from W Aus and they advised me to go up to Mildura, where the grape picking was just going to start. The boats were running as there had been a heavy Summer rain at the head of the Murray River.

I landed at Mildura about the 1st Feb. It was a very hot day about 115 deg. I chummed up with a German (a married man) and we both walked out about eight miles to try and get a job.

We got a ride back that evening with a waggonful of boys & girls who had been picking. We camped that night on the River with all the mosquitoes. We went out next morning & got a job about four miles away. I think we worked altogether about five or six weeks

*** '1897', notes Devaney, MS, p. 34.**

but the wages were very poor, only five shillings a day. When the picking was finished, there seemed to be nothing doing at all, except the wood-cutting.

The German & I tackled this. In about a weeks time however, he had to go away, as his wife was very ill and I never saw him afterwards.

Mildura was in a very bad way in 97. Many of the English people who had come out, and put a few thousand pounds in the settlement, had lost all, and gone back to England. Many more stayed behind only because they had not enough money to leave. There was no doubt that the Settlement was put in the wrong place. Much of the ground that was brought under irrigation was worthless. Great Enginerring blunders had been made, and people who had posed as Experts did not seem to have even ordinary intelligence.

I stuck to the woodcutting for something over three months. I had to be very careful with my thumb, but I managed to earn about seven shillings a day which was a fair wage in those days. The main trouble was, however, that we wood cutters could not get our money from the first Mildura Irrigation Trust which was in a bad finnancial state.[9] Some weeks we only got ten or fifteen shillings, some weeks we got nothing. I and many others got sick of it.

I had about ***£6*** coming to me.

With some persuasion and a little luck I managed to get it. If I had had more money I might have gone over to the Eastern Riverina where there was grubbing & clearing going on. The year before I had thought seriously of going to W Aus if I could have scraped up the money, but now there were hundreds of men coming back from the West.

I decided to go back to Tyrell Downs because I

heard that before long there would be some clearing done there. I thought that by keeping to the light mallee, I might have been able to get along alright. My thumb was very little trouble to me while at the wood cutting, but during the last month of it, I had been troubled a great deal with indigestion. I took some patent medicine which made me better for a while and when I knocked it off, I was wor[s]e than ever. I found out that sometimes I could eat no breakfast, and sometimes very little dinner, which was no good when a man is at axe work. I thought that with a few weeks at home, that the indigestion would vanish. I found out when I arrived at home there would [be] plenty of work close by but the indigestion did not vanish, it began to get worse. Sometime in July we got a contract for mallee cutting. I worked two days and then had to knock off. I did not seem to have any more strength than a child. I went into Sealake & saw a doctor who used to come up once a week. He told me that the trouble had come about through me batching and going to work too soon after meals.

He advised me to go away to town and have a holiday, to go to the theatres and have a good time generally. This of course was excellent advice but rather hard to follow at the time. For two or three months I pottered about on the farm, I carted tucker & done little jobs, but I was getting weaker all the times and my nerves was getting bad, and sometimes I ate nothing for two days. In Nov I got down from something over ten stone to eight stone eleven pounds. Dad became alarmed and got a note from a friend and got me into the Swan hill hospital. I think I was about five weeks there. Everybody was very kind to me.

I remember very clearly (a nurse), a very light hearted

person, who used to fetch a drink of tea or coffee every evening after we went to bed.

The doctor said I had gastrituous [gastritis], I forget what else besides he called it. I got some medicine (not much) and a little bit of bread & butter three times a day. For over three months I had not been able to touch bread. At times I could eat a few biscuits. By some micrale [miracle] I now began to swallow bread & butter. I began to get better. The surroundings were so different. I managed to overcome worrying over my inability to work.

A few weeks before Xmas my brother Bill came over with the trap & took me home again.

I had foolish notions that I might be able to go harvesting.

I think the whole thing was an inheritance from my mothers side.

It was some nerve trouble.

It was fully eighteen months after that before I was able to hold my own at any thing like hard work.

This particular year like the two preceding ones was a bad one.

We had about 140 acres in but we did not get the seed of[f] it.

A few weeks before Xmas Mother got ill. She complained of a headache and great pains at the back of the neck and she must have had a high temperature although we did not really know it.

We got out the visiting doctor from Wycheproof.

He said it was imflamation of the liver. He advised us to send her to Wycheproff [sic]. We sent her down with my sister Maggie to act as nurse. After about nine days the doctor wrote up to Dad saying that he thought that my Mother should [showed] signs of typhoid fever and

that it was very unusual for a person of her age to contract it. She was forty-seven at the time. I think it was Xmas Day that Dad took Mother down to the Bendigo Hospital as the last resort. The mixed train was very slow in those days. I think it took about eight hours a distance of ninety miles from Wycheproof to Bendigo.

It was a very hot day and the it [sic] was partly the train journey that killed Mother. She only lived a few h[ou]rs after reaching the hospital. Had the doctor known from the start what the trouble really was she ought to have had a fair chance of recovery. Although we had suffered hardships for the last two years Mother seemed to be in excellent health. Everybody remarked it. In those early days of the mallee most people suffered in health through drinking bad water through a shortage of fresh milk & meat. There was a good deal of typhoid in the district.

Early in Jan 98 Dad got a contract for constructing a telephone line from Sealake to Tyrell Downs.

I and my sisters were minding the farm, carting tucker ectc. The new job kept Dad and the boys very busy.

Towards the end of Jan Maggie should [showed] signs of typhoid fever and was taken down to Bendigo Hospital. She was there about three months. After she had been away about one month Dad got a wire to go down, as she was very low. We did not think we would see her again. When Dad came back in a few days, he was in good spirits. She had taken a turn for the better.

I think it was in May she came home. She was very weak & hysterical but she pulled round in a few months.

* * * *

In March the Telephone line was finished. Dad had a

fair price but he did not make much money because he had to put men on to rush it through. That year my brother Bill & I took some share land West of Sealake. We concluded that this was the best policy because if we depended altogether on the Home block, the storekeeper & the Mortgagee would come in and get the lot.

The Share crop did not turn out very well. It looked something like a four bushell crop.

Wheat was very cheap that year too. As we owed the land owner a third of the crop & a bill of horse feed besides, we did not bother to go to the expense of stripping it.

The crop on Dads block was very poor something less than a bushell to an acre. We barely got the seed that we put in.

In the Spring of that year Dad and the boys had rather a good job of mallee cutting. I think they made about ten shillings a day at it.

During the following Summer Dad got two jobs of sand scooping and a crossing all of which he got pretty decent prices for. The family fortunes began to look up a little. I think we were all more hopeful.

In March 99 Dad got two jobs. One for an Invert in the Wychproff [sic] Shire & one for sand scooping in the Swan hill shire.

We all went down to Kaneira & got a house there. My sister Annie had been with us for about two years now but my other sister Jessie did not come to live with us for several years after.

I took on driving the scoop and also carting stone. It was the first actual work I had done since June 1907.*

• Devaney notes, 'Should be 1897', MS, p. 48.

My spirits rose very much, when I found out I was able to work again. I believe that Dad arranged to have a little crop harrowed in that year but I know that it never came to anything. We never stripped it. About Xmas time 99 we got several rather good jobs, and I remember that we all had dinner at an hotel in Sealake where we were working at a crossing.

Early in 1900 we got a contract for sand scooping. The job was spread over a good many miles. We did not have a good enough price for the Sand scooping. There was too much shifting on it. We also got a contract for making a road and a culvert on a black flat near Swanhill.

It was a wet Autumn and we got badly caught on the block ground. Dad wrenched his back on this job and he had to go to the Swanhill hospital for ten days.

In May of this year the relief of Mafeking happened. The boys and Dad went in to Swanhill twelve miles away to witness the celebrations. I remained looking after the camp at Lake Boga at the week end. I attempted to write verse again.

It was 'The Child We Lost' that I tackled. It was very imperfect and I only got a few stanzas out. I felt convinced however that I could do much better than when I turned out 'Polly & Dad & the Spring Cart' four years previously.

I dont remember tackling any more verse that year except a piece about a Soldier who had fallen which was never printed.

In Aug of that year I applied for & got a block of mallee on [the] Parish of Waitche [Waitchie] about fourteen mile east of Sealake. It contained 575 acres. It was a pretty good block. Dad was very enthusiastic. He said it was worth £300. Well peharps it was to

anyone who had the capital, the proper constitution and tempermant. I had no money and was unsuitable for pioneering in every way.

Later in the year my father & the two boys & Annie got a block each in the Parish of Eureka about twenty-six mile north of Sealake.

This was mostly grazing country. A good deal of it was windblown and the whole parish was swarming with rabbits.

I think Dad & the boys only saw one side of the blocks, when they applied for them. They [ad]joined a netting fence which was a valuable thing when it came to ring fencing. The land was nearly all plain. The boys were very sick of heavy timber country, and the Mallee shoots.

They had done a lot of axe work. There was some fine water catches on the country, and that was an added attraction. I believe they would have done better, however, to have got further back in the Parish amid the good timber country. It was however difficult to get four blocks altogether. There was not much demand for the land in those days.

Many of the people who had blocks recomended to them would not pay the Survey fees. They were afraid of the rabbits, and the many other difficulties. When I first saw this land one could notice that some of the burrows would get filled up. There would be no more room for rabbits to run into them.

In the Summer of 1901 we did eight mile of fencing near Lake Tyrell. We also did some boring for water with hand orgers [augers]. In the autumn we took several jobs of clearing on Tyrell Downs. The two girls were working at Sealake at hotels there. They had been with us at some of the contracts but it was impossible

for them to follow us around. In August of that year Dad went shearing at Daytrap. I and my two brothers shifted on to my block at Waitche, but we only stayed there two days. I got a job cooking for some contractors, and Bill got a job clearing for the same people, and Frank got a job driving a plough team close by. It was while I was at this cooking that I got back from the *Bulletin* 'The Child We Lost' which I had sent them a few months previously (along with 'Sheedy was Dying').

I remember showing it to a fellow worker who was a printer by trade. He said he thought it resembled Longfellow. I could not see any likeness. The Editor complained that the piece was hazy, and that it wanted a lot of alterations.

I did the alterations, but in the letter I maintained that the piece was not too vague. I never heard anything more about it till it appeared on Jan 3rd of the following year. 'Sheedy was Dying' appeared a few weeks earlier in the Xmas *Bulletin.*

Almost exactly about five years after 'Polly & Dad & the Spring Cart' was printed appeared in the same paper.* This was the Setback, five years a good long one. I think AG must have been editing the *Bulletin* at this time.

There was a great lot of writing in violet ink on the piece he sent back for alterations. One stanza of 'Sheedy' was altered very considerably with [out] me being consulted. Had I been consulted I could have done the alteration much better. Many years after this AG complained about this particular stanza. He did not like it. I pointed out that he had himself altered this without asking me, and he did not deny it. AG was a wonderful

*** Revisions here: original phrasing has not been crossed out.**

man at detecting faults, but he was always the first to acknowledge that he could not himself set them right.

Somewhere about the time 'Sheedy' appeared I got a very polite short note from the Editor. It was not AGs writing. It may have been Archibalds.[10] It said that the Editor would be pleased to consider any verse that I wished to send. My confidence began to grow. Dad never thought much of 'Sheedy' but he liked the other piece 'The Child We Lost'.

That harvest I took a job of cooking with a farmer. After that I went wheat cleaning. When the wheat cleaning was finished I went north of [sic] up to Tyrell Downs where Dad & Bill were doing some stripping. They were preparing to put in some wheat on one of the new blocks on Eureka. I am now approaching my thirtieth birthday. I have got over the five years set back but they [there] were many more set backs ahead. Luckily I did not know anything about them.

I must before closing this chapter, say something about Dads rhymning.

While Mother was alive, during our first two years in the Mallee, he wrote several pieces. Her death was a great blow to him. He wrote the 'Last Time' about that time. I am not sure whether it was before or after that that he did two pieces 'The Old Bugle' and 'The Men of the Fifties'. The later was written for a Competition. After he turned sixty he never seemed to talk much about getting a book printed. He was always short of money, and short of time to do any alterations. He was always more or less concerned about the health of my sister Maggie, who had been rather delicate for a good few years. His main idea in taking up the land was that we would have a home for the girls. He led such a very active life that it was quite remarkable that

he ever found time to do any verse at all. We have now started in 1902. It was a very famous year. I will explain something about it in the next chapter.

WRITTEN BY AM FOR JN, FOOTSCRAY 3/2/34

Twelve Years Farming

I think my last letter finished close on to my thirtieth birthday in 1902.*

I believe it would be in February of that year that my father, my brother, & myself went out to live in the new country in Eureka.

We had managed somehow to get some horse feed & seed & we intended to put in some crop on the black flats between the saltbush hills.

Dad had by a very clever move got some second-hand wire very cheap. A young fellow, a son of one of the old time mallee squatters sold them for a few pounds wire in several miles of a barb wire fence. This wire would have cost about £70 or £80 new.

One day, Dad was out drawing some of this wire about ten miles away.

It was very hot weather. He was just about out of water & he stopped too late being very eager to finish. He had to walk the ten miles after dark & he had no water bag. He had great difficulty in reaching our camp.

It is all very civilized country now but in those days there were still a few wild cattle left & the dingoes used to make dismal sounds in the mornings in the winter time. With the cheap wire we managed to fence in the four blocks about a square mile each which adjoined each other, about 2400 acres altogether.

*** Lisette Neilson has begun transcribing; punctuation and spelling vary from the first letter.**

I think it was about the end of February that my sister Maggie became alarmingly ill. She had been working in a hotel in Sea Lake & was still stopping there. The publican was a friend of ours.

I believe that some time previous she had hurt herself while turning a mangle. She was a pretty energetic person although she had poor health for a long time.

Some visiting doctor had examined her & had told the publican's wife that one of her lungs were affected and that she was in the first stage of consumption. Dad & I went into see & of course we realized she could not keep on staying at the hotel.

It was a very difficult situation for us as we had very little money. I remember that night Dad & I took counsel together beside one of the big wheat stacks in the Station yard. At last we decided that we would try & get someone to board her over in Swan Hill. Dad knew a boarding house keeper over there & one or two other people. It was fifty miles from Sea Lake, a long dry trip, & no water on the road. Dad was away for about a week with the horse and buggy.

When he came back he reported that he had got Maggie in with some people he had known in Tyrrell Downs. We were all very much relieved as we thought that with the change Maggie might possibly improve.

About a week after this Dad got a letter from Maggie & we saw by it that she was slightly hysterical. She was very anxious that he should come over & take her away from Swan Hill. The little river town was a very unhealthy place in those days.

Typhoid fever raged there every Summer. At this particular time some mild form of colera was going round.

Maggie in her weak state was very afraid of this. Dad

set out again on another long dry journey & he was away for something over a week. When he came back he was as cheerful as usual & he told us that he had got Maggie in with some people whom he knew. They were running an hotel at a Station about fourteen miles down the line from Sea Lake. I have often wondered since why those people were so remarkably good to Maggie. She stayed with them for something like twelve months. They knew at the start what was wrong with her. There was a doctor boarding at the same place & she was under his care. The doctor told Dad one day that if Maggie lived to be forty she might recover. I think that this was mainly kindness on his part to keep our spirits up.

If we had had plenty of money she would have been able to go to a Sanitorium or a long distance off. As it was we could only do our best. 1902 is generally recognized [as] the severest drought that ever hit the Southern part of Australia. Although we were a good way north we were a good way better off than some of our Southern neighbors.

We had a rain gauge & it recorded eleven inches for the year. At Donald a hundred miles south of us, the rainfall was only four inches.

The rains we had brought of [on] a fair bit of feed on our plain country & in the saltbush. We managed to make a good deal of money by gisting horses. There was no wheat or hay grown in the mallee or Wimmera that year.

We had a little black flat in between the saltbush hills. The water of the hills irrigated a few acres & on this we managed to grow about twelve ton of hay. It was very valuable to us, but of course it was all mortgaged to our storekeeper.

Altogether we had managed to make something over

£200 out of the agistment. The four of us had to put in all the year on the land to get this. It was really only a little more than tucker when everything was reckoned up. Of course there was no such thing as work to be had during that drought. The drought did one good thing, it wiped out the rabbits as a menace. Of course there were a few left.

During 1902, I remember writing one piece of verse. It was 'The Heart Longs' & I always thought it was a very poor thing.

For the first three months in 1903 we managed to make a little out of the agistment but the rains came fairly early in the year & feed began to grow in the Mallee and northern Victoria. Sometime in March 1903 I went down to Berriwillock where Maggie was staying & brought her up to Eureka. She was still very cheerful but was getting thinner & thinner. Dad had built a little hut for her away from our other dwelling place & she had a little bell which she could ring at night when she wanted any of us to come in. The old lady who ran the hotel told us that she could not keep Maggie any longer. Her daughters had been awfully good to Maggie & she was particularly fond of one of them.

We found out the good season was really a bit harder on us than the previous one which was good.

We had no seed wheat & we had no land cleared for crops. We had no team to do anything with & it was impossible to get work away from home. The cleared country we had was not suitable for wheat growing & the good mallee land was very heavily timbered.

As it was our credit was still good & we got in debt. We had no cash to buy mutton with & we lived that year to a large extent on rabbits. I have never been very fond of rabbit since. Sometime in June Maggie asked

me to go down to Berrywillock [sic] to the doctor & get some liniment for her. I rode down one day & back the next. I stopped the night at the hotel. In the morning when the doctor was giving me the liniment he said 'My friend you know it is only [a] question of time.'

Maggie seemed to grow weaker as the weeks went on. Dad used to go up to town once a fortnight & fetch home a supply of Porter which the very kindly storekeeper gave us on credit. We were able to give Maggie almost every comfort that an invalid could have had. My second sister Jessie who had stayed behind in Nhill when we came to the Mallee now came to live with us. She had been working in Maryborough for some years previously. She was great company for Annie, who had had a pretty rough time looking after her sick sister. I slept in a little hut about a chain away from Maggie.

Often at midnight she would ring the bell for me to come over & have a talk to her. It was very lonely for her when she was lying awake on the long winter nights & at times the cough would be troublesome.

Dad was a little deaf & rather hard to wake. My sisters would often be very tired after the constant attentions which an invalid needed.

In the early hours of the morning towards the end of July Maggie rang the bell & I hurried over to her hut. I found out that she was in very good spirits but was lonely & wanted someone to talk to her. I had not seen her so bright for a long while. She could always see the humorous side of anything & she started telling me some comical tales about the people she had been working for, for the last few years.

I suppose we talked for something over an hour & I thought she began to look tired. All at once she said 'What is wrong with the light it is going dim.' I knew

that the end was near but I did not have heart to rush away at once to waken the others. Presently her head went back & she said, 'I think, I think,' very faintly.

I ran out & woke up Dad & my sisters. They were all over in a few seconds. Dad held Maggie's hand while she murmured something which we could not understand. In a minute or so she was dead.

Twelve Years Farming

[continued]

In the Spring of 1903, we had rather a lean time. There was plenty of grass everywhere & we had no prospect of making money out of the agistment. We had no wheat and therefore had no prospect of making money out of the land. We still had a little credit with the storekeeper. We had plenty of cleared land but it was not very suitable for wheat-growing. Our uncleared land was very heavily timbered. We had no money to hang on and clear this land & besides we saw that before long the rabbits would breed up, and it would be useless to put in [a] crop unless one had the money to buy wire netting to fence it.

One of the uncleared blocks, which was very heavily timbered was mine.

I got it from another man in exchange for my block on Waitchie which I had had for two or three years & had not been able to do anything with. This was a first class block & adjoined one of my father's, & so was easily fenced.

About this time we thought seriously of getting some share land on Tyrell Downs, a few miles from where we lived. Some of the blocks had been abandoned there, & as all the country was ring-fenced with netting, there would be no difficulty with rabbits. We had only two or three horses left but we were hopeful that we may get a few somewhere & have a go at the share-farming the following year. Dad went shearing at Daytrap where

the Tyrell Downs sheep were shorn.

He was a pretty good shearer yet although he was about sixty.* He also shore at Lalbert fifty miles further south.

My brothers & I put in time on the land till about October when we got some chopping down on Tyrell Downs. Dad joined us at this & we finished some time in November. It was about this time I think that Frank had to go away. He had been ailing for a good while. He hurt his side about six months [previously] & he contracted dry pleurisy. He [had] done a great deal of hard axe-work when he was a mere lad about fifteen or sixteen. It made him thin & miserable & he was apt to take any illness seriously. He went down to my Uncle William Neilson[11] in Penola who was running a saw milling business there.

He was away about six months altogether. He was much better when he came back but he was not able to do any hard work for a year or so afterwards.

Before we finished the mallee cutting I found my nerves getting very bad. Possibly the loneliness & the very hard existence had something to do with it & my sister's death certainly added more than a touch of gloom. I can't recollect whether the mallee cutting was finished when I left or not.

I believe that the girls & Frank & I all left at the same time.

Annie went to work for a farmer's wife near Sea Lake. Jessie went to stay with an uncle of ours near Beulah. I went down about fifty miles south & took a job of wheat cleaning near Birchip. I think Dad & Bill had just about finished the mallee cutting when I left.

• Devaney notes, 'Born in 1844' (MS, p. 71). John Neilson was, then, fifty-nine.

Afterwards they took on contract stripping.

I got on very well at the wheat cleaning. I found my nerves were very much better & my spirits rose considerably. Just before I finished the second job about the end of January I got a letter from Dad. He wanted me to go back & do some wheat cleaning & assist generally. I had a horror of going back to the loneliness & the batching but I thought it my duty to go & I did so. I found Dad as usual very cheerful & confident but he had a good deal of trouble on his hands. He & Bill had got by some miracle a new stripper. They had also got through our store keeper a very nice delivery horse which we called Bluey. He was a blue rhone [roan] with a good touch of the Arab in him. He was a fair trotter & a good jumper. Bill thought a lot of Bluey & it really seemed a shame to work such a game little horse in a stripper but new settlers are always making up scratch teams. I have seen mere foals eighteen months old yoked up.

I dont think any colt should be worked until he is three years old.

I think at this time Bill must have been away carting 'blow' chaff as we used to call it. He & Dad had taken a block on the shares for the coming year & Bill was getting the fodder ready while it could be obtained free. Dad finished the stripping in a few days & I helped him with winnowing. It was a very poor crop & a very rusty one which he was stripping. The Station owner was giving him so much wheat in payment for stripping & cleaning I forget the exact amount.

I found it almost impossible to work but we managed to do the cleaning somehow. I had a strange horror of this locality where I had put in a few rather bad years. It was very difficult for me to eat the very poor food

we had on the camp. We had no money & very little credit. I slept very poorly & got into a very doleful state of mind. While I had been working with the farmer at Birchip I had been used to very good food. He was a very hospitable Irishman. When the cleaning was done I decided to go south again. I thought I might be able to get work on some of the thrashing machines. I went down to Bendigo by train & walked back through Korong Vale, Charlton & Donald districts. There was plenty of work to be had on the thrashers but I did not take any of it.

I found out I could only sleep an hour or so at night. I could eat anything & I could walk well enough in fact I could walk too well. I could scarcely keep still if I met anyone on the road & started to talk. I really should have gone to some rest home or some place like that for a while. I had no treatment & I began to think that my reason might go altogether. Probably the whole thing was some inheritance. I decided the best thing was to walk back to Tyrell Downs for there at least I had some chance of getting some treatment.

I got back one Sunday. I had been away about three weeks. I found Dad had taken a contract for burning off & clearing in the new country near Tyrell Downs and Bill was putting in the crop on the share country two miles away.

Dad went down to Sea Lake twice & got me medicine & drugs but everything seemed to make me worse. The drugs would put me to sleep but I used to wake up singing out. I felt strong enough for anything, I could eat well but I could not sleep without the aid of drugs. I could not keep still. I used to walk about all day. Dad was very much hindered by my sickness but he finished the clearing in a couple of months.

I think it was about May or June I got a farmhouse on a block near our share land & got Jessie up to keep house for us. I think Annie was with us for a time. Frank was with us too, but he was not able to do any work till the following year.

It was a very dry year. There was very little wheat on [our] share land. I think it was only about a bushel to the acre but we got some seed & wheat the following year. About Christmas time I began to drive the stock to water and do bits off [sic] odd jobs but as soon as I got off horseback I would be walking about again in an aimless fashion. It was not until March about twelve months after I first got affected, I managed to control my nerves enough to yoke up a team of horses & drive the disc harrows all day. It was a great triumph. I have never lost control of my nerves since although at times I have been very depressed & puzzled & have worried a good deal about minor matters when I could not sleep. I found out that worry over a very trifling thing will keep me awake all night whereas a really serious matter that I should worry about does not affect me in the slightest.

Early in the winter of 1905, we managed to get some money out of the Eureka blocks by letting them for agistment. I think that it was either £100 a year or £150, we got for two years. A sheep man took them & he insisted on a water hole being put down. This cost £100. The family fortunes began to brighten considerably.

1905 opened up as a wet season. Bill had got in about 500 acres of wheat & there seemed to be a prospect of him getting a fair crop. It must have been about May or June that I took a writing fit. I had only written about three pieces for the last three and a half years. 'The Heart Longs' I have already spoken of. 'Twas In the Early Summertime' was published in the *Bulletin*

in 1903. I must have written 'The White Flowers Come' in the same year but I dont think it appeared in the *Bulletin* until 1905.

Another rhyme which I had almost forgotten for many years was 'The Lad Who Started Out'. It belonged to this period.

One Sunday in the Spring I was over at Swan Hill. I saw the bees there in the dandelions on the river bank. That gave me the idea of the boy swimming the river to follow the bees. A.G. didn't care too much about this piece as a ballad when I sent it to him a few years afterwards. I think it was in 1927 that he at last dug it up &c got me to make some slight alterations.

I had never before had such an urge to write & I dont think I have ever felt so eager since. I suppose the feeling of elation after getting over the nervous trouble had something to do with it.

At this time, both A. G. Stephens & Bertram Stephens[12] were attempting to get out an anthology of Australian verse. I believe Bertram Stephen's anthology was published the following year but A.G. never succeeded in getting his together. There were too many things against him. I do not think there can be any doubt at that particular time he was the best judge of verse in Australia. As a critic he made many enemies. The *Bulletin* as a fiercely radical paper was much hated in certain quarters. These things &c the unfriendliness of people who owned copyright stopped the publication of a collection which certainly would have been a [of] value.

It was through this proposed anthology that I first began to correspond with A.G. Up to that time I had written very little that was of any value but I was not critical. I thought that I had twenty or thirty pieces that

might do for a little booklet and sounded A.G. on the subject. I wish very much I had kept the letter he sent in reply. I suppose it has been lost on my numerous shifts or perhaps eaten by the mice. It was very kindly, very encouraging, but he told me plainly that I had only written three pieces that were of any value. He did not say the best of the stuff was mere dogrel, but I could see that myself soon after. He advised me strongly to keep on, & to grow up with the country. I am not quite sure [whether] it was in this letter, that he advised me to have full confidence in myself & he hinted that I should do really good work if I persisted. Dad read the letter & was very much impressed with it.

It was at this time that my eyes first began to trouble me. I had been writing a great deal both by daylight & lamplight. Most of the stuff I was writing was mere rubbish & it was certainly not worth a man ruining his eyesight over but A.G.'s letter had given me great confidence in myself, & the only thing that could stop me was the failure of my eyes. I had no money to go to Melbourne & get my eyes tested & get good glasses like I should have done.

I remember getting some treatment from an Indian oculist at Sea Lake. He put some little pellets (made of curry I think) into my eyes. He charged £27 & of course the treatment did no good whatever. I had to knock off reading altogether. For twelve months or more I never looked at print. I had to get my sister Jessie to do all my writing for me. I got out a good deal of stuff but very little of it was worth print.

I can remember a few pieces that got into the *Bulletin* in 1905 & 1906. In 1905, 'The Woolly Sheep' appeared. A.G. never thought it worth collecting. Also 'At The End of Spring' which was a bit better & is collected.

In 1906, 'The Child of Tears' appeared on the red page. I think that 'The Sacrifice' also appeared the same year. I don't remember any others.

During 1906, I had a good few pieces in hand & kept altering them a good deal. Toward the end of that year A.G. told me he was going to launch a magazine of his own in 1907. So I started to prepare some rhymes for him. He had a wonderful knack of making a man feel confident.

In January the *Bookfellow*[13] appeared & on 17th of that month 'Granny Sullivan' appeared, with a picture of the old lady with a shawl on her shoulders.[14]

I sent a good deal of stuff to A.G. in the early part of 1907. Some of the pieces that appeared in the *Bookfellow* that year were 'The Hour is Lost', 'The Sun is Up', 'In the Street', 'The Land Where I was Born'. There may have been one or two more. I remember also a light piece, 'The Pretty Gleaner', & a parady on Whittier, both uncollected. The *Bookfellow* was a brilliant little magazine for the first few months.

About the fourth month it began to decay. I think that it was in the fifth month that it ceased suddenly. A.G., who had been corresponding with me off & on, ceased corresponding. As I could not read the papers I did not hear much of what was going on in the writing world.

It was about eighteen months after before I found out he had gone to New Zealand.

In the Summer of 1907, my sister Jessie became seriously ill. For some time she had been getting thinner and just before Christmas she had gone in & seen a doctor in Sea Lake. He had treated her for some sores which she had on her neck. We did not attach much import to these as we all seemed to be frightfully

ignorant of the different ailments that attack humanity. Friends of ours in Sea Lake knew more about her illness than we did. The doctor of course had not told her anything to frighten her but he had told other people she was suffering from Tubercolosis. Bill & Annie got to know about it & told me. I had to consult with Dad as to what was to be done. We were very short of money although we held a good deal of land & stock & horses.

Dad did not seem to take the thing seriously. He seemed to hope that she may get better by good treatment at home. It was impossible to get her into any home and without a good deal of money it was impossible to send her to any distant place. No one would board her, when signs of the disease were so evident. We concluded that the only thing to do, was to try & do the best for her at home. One peculiar feature of her illness was, she laughed at the idea there was anything seriously wrong with her. She was all her time thinking of making new dresses & going to dances etc. She was a very high spirited girl. She had fine eyes & a good complexion. She did not have much education but she had a good speaking voice and was a wonderful mimic.

Once when she was coming from Nhill to see us in the Mallee some of our friends who met her took her to be an actress.

1907 was a very severe drought nearly as bad as 1902. We did not get a great deal of wheat in 1905 but we had a fair crop in 1906. In 1907 Frank got a share block alongside Bill's & together we put in nearly a thousand acres of wheat. It was all put in very well & with ordinary luck we would have got about 3000 bags off it, which at the price that was going that year would have made £2000. By the end of winter about August, we saw that

we would get nothing, perhaps seed. In that year the Tyrell Downs Company had 10,000 acres of wheat in. I dont think that enough was obtained from it for seed for the following year.

Some people might wonder why the settlers lost blocks of land when they were mortgaged.

If you lose £2000 one year you probably get in debt for over £1000 in a year.

In the Eastern Mallee, directly west & north west of Swan Hill it was reckoned that ten or fifteen years after settlement was started there was not one of the original settlers there. Some of the land had changed hands three or four times.

In August of 1907, we rented a cottage in Swan Hill, & sent Jessie over there & Annie to look after her. There did not seem to be much difference in her except that she was getting thinner & if possible more light-hearted than ever.

I went over in September to see her & it was rather difficult to believe that she was in a serious illness. Annie used to tell us that she was always joking & planning to make new dresses for herself.

Towards the end of September Dad got a letter from Annie. She wished him to come over at once as she was rather frightened to stay with Jessie by herself. She thought that Jessie might collapse at any time.

Dad went over & we all considered that the end was not very far off. It was just about the end of September that I got a wire to come over. I went over in a buggy. It took me all day to get there. I did not see her alive. She had died the previous evening.

After Jessies death Annie was very much worn out. We were very anxious about her as she seemed in poor health for some time.

In October of that year, Bill had the bad luck to get appendicitus. I think we had a team of bullocks at that time & Bill was out looking for them in the scrub. There was a great deal of unfenced land in the Parish of Eureka & Teuron then. Bill had been out all day & was very hungry. He had eaten a good many quong-dongs which were ripe at the time.[15] He was siezed with violent pains before midnight, & what we knew we guessed it was appendicitus.

The doctor there told them what it was & advised us to take him to a private hospital in Wycheproof forty-five miles down the line. This they did & he remained there a few weeks & recovered without operation. Dad did not care about the operation nor Bill either. They had very little faith in the local doctors' skill.

At that time doctors were not as clever with appendicitus as they are now. It was only a few years previous to that, that King Edward had been operated on & unless one had a first-class surgeon there was a big risk of going out under the operation. Bill came home & he could not work much for a good while. There was not very much to do in the way of harvesting. I think we only got about thirty bags of wheat off the 1000 acres.

That Summer we were compelled to put up a netting fence round our blocks in Eureka.

It meant a lot of work & it cost a lot for the netting. We were managing to get some rent for the blocks every year & it was a great help to us because we had a good deal of expense through sickness at this period.

Before finishing with 1907, I must say a little more about my rhyming. When A.G. left suddenly in May (or was it June?), I started to send things to the *Clarion* in Melbourne. It was either in 1907 or 1908 that Randolf

[sic] Bedford started that magazine. It was a very live thing like Randolph himself. I believe it ran for a couple of years altogether. It grew irregular as time went on & sometimes did not appear every month, only once in two months.[16] In it there was much splendid prose by Bedford & fine drawings by Will Dyson.[17] Once or twice Hugh McCrae[18] sent verse. The editor put in everything I sent, limericks & all. I dont suppose they were much worse than most limericks are. I remember writing a parady on 'The Silent Life'. It was done as a protest against some of the practices of the late Dr Fitchard. The Doctor was a good journalist & much revered by all good Methodists.[19] I am afraid however my verse exhibited bad taste. Of my serious verse which appeared in the *Clarion* I remember 'Old Violin', 'The Meeting of Sighs', & 'Lowan's Nest'. There were several short light pieces and a few dozen limericks. 'The Sundowner' was I think the best piece of light verse I had written up to that time. It was in the same meter as Arthur Adams' 'London Streets'.[20] I am very fond of that meter. I suppose Adamson [sic] invented it himself. It is very easy to parady.

At times I have shown some of my light verse to my friends. Many of them seem disinclined to express an opinion. Generally speaking I think they disapprove of it. A man needs a good knowledge of English for doing light rhyming & my knowledge is of course very slight. I have got the reputation of being rather a tearful kind of fellow & perhaps it is best to stick to it.

The year 1908, I remember very little about. I think it was in the winter of that year that I was called to a Land Board to see why my block should not be forfeited.

The late Sir Thomas Bent was I think then Premier.[21]

He himself was used to very small patches of land, cabbage gardens & such about Brighton.

He thought 640 acres too much for any man to have. He wished to cut the holdings down to 480 acres each; but there was such a protest that the allotments were allowed to remain somewhere about a square mile.

In more recent years saner Governments have fixed the area at 800 to 1000 acres.

The reason I was called up was that some Government official thought that I held two blocks. On a map I saw my father's block alongside mine was marked 'J.S. Neilson'.

The Show Cause Boards generally did very unjust things.

A settler who wished to get another settler's block would write to the Government & say that he, the neighbor's block, was infested with rabbits, & if the neighbor did not happen to be living on the block he had a big chance of losing it. On my case I employed a lawyer & the Board seemed to admit there was no reason for forfeiture.

I believe it was in November 1908 that Jack Johnson defeated Tommy Burnes [sic] for the world's championship in Sydney.* This has not much to do with my story but I remember it very clearly because Randolph Bedford went over to write up the fight.

Early in 1909, we bought a big mob of cattle. We did not have a very good crop the previous year & were in grave financial difficulties although we had a lot of properties. We had to do a great deal of improvement on the land on Tyrell Downs. We had to ring fences with netting. After cultivating the land for six years we

*** 'Upon Boxing Day at Rushcutter's Bay Stadium,' notes Harry Chaplin (MS, p. 97).**

had the right to get it from the Crown & it was not until this was done that we could obtain any loan on it. As we had so many cattle we could not put in so much wheat but it was a good year for cropping. We did not do so well out of the cattle as we thought we would have done.

That winter I had a few weeks holiday in Bendigo. I felt very much better & put on about a stone weight. My eyes must have improved a great deal because I used to read the newspapers in the Mechanics Institute. In fact I read too much. I soon made my eyes bad again. I should have had reading glasses years before. Sometime in the Spring I went back to Bendigo to get glasses. It was a very foolish thing to do because there was no oculist in Bendigo. I cannot understand yet why I was so stupid. It would have only cost a few pounds extra to go to Melbourne & get the best man in Collins St. I got glasses from an opticin [optician] in Bendigo. He told me to wear them all the time & that I would soon get used to them. He made a pretence of testing my eyes & he said that these glasses would do both for distance and reading.

I went back & attempted to wear those glasses all the time. I wore them for a fortnight. If I had kept on any longer I would have probably gone blind. That optition was really no worse than most of his kind. Several times since then there has been an attempt at some legislation against this sort of thing. After this for a long time I had to rely solely on my sister, Annie to do my writing.

I think that it was in 1910 that we sold the Eureka property (the four grazing blocks). We got a *£1* an acre for it, which was a good price for grazing land at the time.

This was a very good season. We put in about 300

acres of wheat & had a fair crop. It must have been in 1910 that A.G. wrote to me from New Zealand. I hadn't heard from him for about three years. He wrote in an exceedingly difficult hand to read.

Dad was trying to read it for me. Dad was slightly deaf in one ear & was a bit slow in comprehension although he had splendid sight. He came across a lot of figures in one row. He said that he thought that perhaps A.G. had won a ticket in tats[22] or had been left money somehow or other. Some of the rest of the family came to his aid.

They managed to make out that A.G. was running a newsletter in different papers & that he had 100,000 or 200,000 readers. I forget which. He was anxious that I should write for him again.

This gave me a bit of a start at the rhyming business. The next two or three years I sent him odd verses. I forget how long the newsletter ran.

Perhaps it was two years. Some pieces I remember that came out in it were 'Surely God was a Lover', 'Little White Girl', 'You & Yellow Air'. Three pieces that appeared in it were 'The Dream is Deep', 'Is It the Last',* & 'The Lover Sings'. These last three must have been written in 1906 or 1907 but the *Bookfellow* faded out before they could be published. I think 'O, Heart of Spring' was written about that time also. I suppose it also appeared in the Newsletter. I remember that I altered one stanza of 'Yellow Air' for A.G. The stanza as it now is runs:—

> Out of your eyes a magic
> Fell lazily as dew
> And every lad with lad's eyes
> Made Summer love to you.

*** 'It is the last'.**

When I sent A.G. 'Is it the Last' & 'The Lover Sings', he said they both needed a good bit of alteration but they both appeared just as I wrote them. I wrote 'The Dream is Deep' in the Summer time. I was riding about a good deal after stock at the time. I seldom could write anything in the Summer because the heat & the flies seemed to unsettle my mind. The best time for writing in the Mallee is from the beginning of May till the end of September. The mornings are sharp but there are a great many sunny days. The winter sunlight is particularly beautiful.

Towards the end of 1911 I saw Melbourne for the first time. My father & my stepmother accompanied me. I forgot to mention that my father had been married the previous April.[23] That was the year 'Parisian' won the cup. I did not go out to see the race as someone who had promised to call for me did not turn up. I saw a Collins St. oculist & got reading glasses. He used strong language when I told him about the optition advising me to wear distance glasses. After I got home I found that the new glasses were very little good to me. I could read a little, but only in a good light & large print. In 1912 I went down three times to see another oculist. He was a very nice fellow, a very pains-taking man. He gave me glasses three times but at the finish he told me that he didn't think he could give me glasses to do much good. He said that some of the muscles were badly strained & it needed an operation to tighten them. After I had a good try with the third pair of glasses I went down & saw another man. He was much older & I think is really the best man I have ever consulted. He strongly advised me against allowing anyone to operate on the muscles. He gave me glasses which were certainly a great improvement on any I had had before. I could

read a little by going out into the open but writing always seemed to bother me.

Early in 1912 I had sent two bits of verse which A.G. praised highly. These were 'Lament for a Child', & 'Love's Coming'. I had not as a rule been used to very high praise from him. He would often say that he liked a piece or that it was good verse. He was wonderfully quick at picking bad lines & continually warned me against dropping into dogrel. Often I have cut out stanzas & tried to improve bad ones. He would return the M.S. saying the alterations had only made things worse. The greatest assistance that A.G. gave me was that he prevented me from publishing rubbish. I dont think that his newsletter could have run for about more than eighteen months.

It was in October 1912 that he put my picture in *Bookfellow* in Sydney. There was an article boosting me & four of my rhymes were quoted. If I remember rightly the pieces were 'Lament for a Child', 'Love's Coming', 'You & Yellow Air' & 'The Dream is Deep'.

Mary Gilmore wrote me a very kindly letter at the time.[24] This encouragement from a total stranger gave me new confidance. I think rhymers are like actors, dont get on too well without some applause.

Early in 1912 my sister Annie was married to William McKimm. He was a son of Mr R. J. McKimm of Collingwood a retired Public Servant.

It was sometime in the winter of this year we sold our land on Tyrrell Downs. We got a fair price for it (£3 an acre).

Land was going up rapidly about this time but there had been a tempory slump owing to a heavy fall of rain one summer. There had been about eight inches in one week & it almost ruined some of the farmers.

I think it was in 1912 that I wrote 'Old Nell Dickerson'. A.G. was rather dissatisfied with this piece & suggested a good few alterations which I accomplished. I am afraid that it still remains very raw in places.

I believe that 1912 was a fair year but we did not have very much wheat in as the only two remaining blocks we had (my own & my fathers) were very heavily timbered. We did not have time to do the clearing.

Early in 1913, it would be I think in February I remember a very fierce heat wave.

It averaged some where from 100 to 110 for about ten days. I was helping my father do some burning off on his block.

My stepmother was stopping with her people in Leongatha & Dad & I was batching. It was while I was at this job that I wrote 'The Eyes of Little Charlotte'. I sent it to A.G. some weeks later & he liked it very much. When he liked a thing he was not afraid to say so.

I believe that one or two lines were altered slightly at his suggestions.

In May of this year I went into Sea Lake to see my sister. She was stopping at a boarding house there with her first born son. He was about five or six months old & was a fine strong boy but had had a rather nasty illness & had now recovered. I am inclined to think there was some bother over his vaccination & my sister wished me to go out and see my brother-in-law over the matter. He was working driving a scoop team for the State Rivers[25] on the channels in the new Mallee about twenty-five miles north of our place.

I went the evening of the following day & camped with the Channel men for a night. My brother-in-law made me a bed on the floor of one of the tents & I slept pretty cold.

The night after I got back, I got violent pains in the back & I began to vomit. I concluded that I must have got a chill in the kidneys. There was a chance of catching an early train at Chillingollah about 2 o'clock in the morning.

I was not quite sure that there was a Doctor at Ultima & I thought it possible I might have to go into the hospital, so I went on to Bendigo.

It was a very cold night & I was very glad when the journey was over, about 11 o'clock in the morning. The doctor soon stopped the pain & I was alright in a few days. I came home inside a week but I had to go without meat for a month & take a mixture two or three times a day.

During that month I did nothing much except cook for my brothers. I felt in very good form for writing & I managed to get out two rhymes about the same time. I think the tonic I was taking must have had a good deal to do with it. I used to feel as if I had been taking two or three small drinks of wine every day. The two rhymes were 'Petticoat Green', & 'The Wedding in September'. The first one I wrote in about a month altogether. The other one I had been thinking of in the previous year. In 'The Wedding in September' the main thing is the fiddler. I had had [sic] for a long time thought of the unearthly sounds a fiddler can make while tuning a fiddle & connecting them in some way with the vile noise cats make nightly. As violin strings are made of cat-gut, I had something to go on but the idea was too difficult for me. I believe I sent these two pieces away together. He [A.G.] did not say much about 'Petticoat Green' except that it was glorious verse, but he criticised the other piece a great deal. He wanted me to make many alterations.

I knew that it was very imperfect but I did not seem to be able to alter it without making it worse. I wrote & told him my mind about it & I concluded that he did not think it worth print in its present form. It was not until about six years later when my first book appeared that it saw the light. It was put in exactly as I sent it to him in the first place. As I am approaching 1914 a year of a very bad drought which stopped my writing for a while I am trying to think if I've forgotten any of the pieces done in this period. Perhaps 'The Loving Tree', was written then or perhaps during the War, I am not sure. I think 'The Scent of the Lover' was also written during the War. My memory is not much good for dates.

It was either in '12 or '13 that I started to make arrangements with A.G. for the publishing of my book. He got hold of a good number of pieces & typed them but most of them was of little value. Early in 1914, he thought [of] a series of lectures about our different writers. The one in which I figured was in Sydney but I think the big war had just started a few days before. Naturally people's minds were unsettled & poetry was looked upon as a minor thing.

I think that Mr Holman presided at that lecture.[26] In it A.G. openly declared that I was the first poet in Australia. It can easily be understood that any lecturer making such a statement about an unknown rhymer would meet with severe criticism. A.G. certainly did. There was another aspect of the matter which cannot be overlooked. He had been used to slashing verse & prose which he did not like. Many people had felt his lash & they did not miss it when they felt a chance to ridicule him. One thing which I always resented very much was the inference from some people that he merely

boomed me because he had the copyright of my verse. This to me seems as much as saying he was a rogue & a vagabond.

I do not mind anyone saying that he was entirely wrong or that he was wrong in his criticism of all verse but I disliked the thought that anyone should think he was dishonest in regard to my verse. All the people who like my verse may be entirely mistaken. I am not much of a judge myself. In twenty or thirty years' time it will be a much easier thing to judge. I have many letters from A.G. in which he spoke with emotion about my best verse, perhaps a dozen pieces or twenty during my writing years. Had I kept them I could have shown anyone how utterly false it was when they said he was insincere when he rated me so highly. He knew the defects in my work better than anyone else & he deplored them.

I had so little education & had read so very little. I had never travelled, I knew nothing about the world. Besides all this I had a certain laziness of mind which it is hard to describe & I very often lack confidence in myself.

1914 was a terrible year. The drought was bad enough but the War utterly bewildered us. We put in about 400 acres of crop well but of course got nothing. We had to go out channelling with the horses to keep them alive. We lost some horses through the bad season & owing to the War our credit was stopped at the Store. We had got through all the money obtained from the sale of the land & the two blocks we had were mortgaged. The early settler in the Mallee lived on credit & the stopping of it was a serious thing for the District. My two brothers & I worked for two months to keep the horses alive. We could just pay for the horses & our

own food.

Early in 1915 we applied for seed wheat & horse feed & got some from the Government. We managed to get the crop in again somehow & as the season opened up well things began to get a little better. The Mallee is a wonderful place to recover.

During the drought the Channels got full of sand. The whole place was a desert; but with the early rains in Autumn everything changed. I dont remember doing any writing in 1914 or 1915. I may have attempted some light stuff but it would be of no consequence.

In April 1915 my eldest stepsister, Lisette was born. As she is writing this I think it is only fair to announce the date of her entry into the world. My stepmother came home with her sometime in May. It was just about this time that my brother Bill showed violent signs of a nervous break-down.

For twelve months previous to this we had been rather concerned about him. We put it down as mainly [due] to the strenuous life he had been leading. The hard work & the worry brought about by the drought. Now however I can see he wanted Medical attention. It was most difficult to do anything with him. He would scarcely speak a word to anybody.

However at last I persuaded him to go down to Bendigo and there we saw a Doctor.

The doctor did not seem to think it was anything serious. He thought it would wear off with a good holiday & no worry. I tried to get him for a few weeks into the Bendigo Hospital but the doctors there could see nothing the matter with him. To send him for a long holiday at that time was pretty difficult as we were pretty short of money. As he was then I did not care to leave him with strangers who could not possibly know

him as well as I did. He seemed a bit better while away & he had to go back home as my father & I had taken some grubbing in the new country twenty miles north. It was our only chance to make a few shillings as the drought had left us very bare.

We had only been about a week on the grubbing job, when Frank came out one evening & asked me to come down & take Bill away again. He was very alarmed about Bill's quietness. He did not seem to be able to sleep at night. He feared that he might lose his reason altogether. That evening I went down & in a day or so we managed to raise some money by selling a horse. Again it was a matter of terrible difficulty to get Bill to go with me but I managed it in the end & got to Melbourne & saw a Collins St specialist. This man had a great reputation but I must confess that from my own experience some of the things he told me were utterly wrong. Mind & the nerves are a difficult thing for a layman to reason about.

But since that time I have never had so much respect for nerve's specialists. Anyhow on his advice I left Bill in Melbourne for a long holiday. He had scarcely any treatment. It was about six months before he was able to do any work & it was a long while after that before he became his old self again.

My own opinion is that probably the main trouble was some inheritance from Mother's side of the family. The McKinnons were strange people they became very moody & at times very high spirited. It was during this trip to town that I saw a real live Australian poet. Bernard O'Dowd.[27] Mary Gilmore had corresponded with me regularly & she had asked me to see Bernard first time I hit Melbourne. I had a wonderful reception from Mr & Mrs O'Dowd. From what I had seen of his

verse I imagined Bernard to be a severe man, a scholar, but I was delighted to find him so kindly & such a splendid sense of humor. One could not help noticing however the former element in the man. One could see that he felt deeply for anybodys wrongs the earth over. I shall never forget that evening. Someone has said of him that he has one of the finest minds in Australia. He is altogether above the class of man who is generally boomed here as a Public Benefactor, because he has made money by clever brain in polotics or trade.

My brother-in-law & I took another grubbing contract. It was about twenty-five miles from our place & Frank used to fetch us out tucker once a week. It was very rough work & many flies & centipedes & other insects to contend with. It lasted about seven weeks. We must have been [there] about Cup time because I remember my brother-in-law reading to me how Patrobas won. I think we had about 300 acres of crop that year. We would have had a very nice crop only for the charlic [charlock] or wild mustard which spoilt half of it & made it very difficult to strip at all.[28] However I think we got about 700 bags out of it. Had we been able to sell the wheat for say three shillings a bushel, we could have carried on for another year. We had the mortgagee clamouring for interest & the store-keeper chasing us & numerous other creditors were in a threatening attitude. I can say now after looking back that it was principally the Wheat pulled the drovers off the land.* In those days one could not criticise the Government without been called disloyal. The Wheat Pool was mismanaged in an almost criminal fashion.[29] The Goverment collared everything and had no consideration for other creditors. One could not sell a bag of fowls' feed to a

*** Devaney notes, 'pool that drove us', as an alternative (MS, p. 124).**

neighbour. We had but one block left & the position was something like this: There were 300 acres cleared on it, it was well improved & only two miles from the Railway Station.

Just before the War we could have got about £1800 for it. It was mortgaged for £900 & there were some arrears for interest about £50 I think. We owed the storekeeper & other creditors perhaps £150 in all. We could easily have carried on for another year had we been treated in a reasonable manner. Our wheat was seized & we were promised 2/6 a bushel dividend, but it was not available till about four or five months after the wheat was delivered. In some cases six months. I believe other dividends were paid later on that brought it up to four shillings a bushel. Some of that wheat I believe was sold in England for 12/6 a bushel. Many people would inquire as to who was getting all the difference but there was a great silence about such things. Farmers taking them all through are not very bright fellows but many of our neighbours spoke very feelingly about the matter.

The same thing was worked on a much larger scale in the selling of the wool. If my memory is right some years ago W. H. [M.] Hughes said in Parliament that Australian woolgrowers had never got a third of the value of the wool taken during the War. I understand that the late T. J. Ryan[30] when he was in England made inquiries as to who got the other two-thirds. He did not seem to think that the English Taxpayers had got much benefit out of it. If such was the case it must have been those splendid gentlemen who were always boasting about their loyalty who feathered their nest at Australia's expense in a time of trouble. If these adventurers waxed fat on the sale of our wool they must have got

something out of our wheat too.

Early in March, my brother-in-law got a job as ganger on the State Rivers. He was to take charge of some Channel teams near Piangle [Piangil]. We thought it a good chance to go over & get work with him. We reckoned that Bill could drive a team although he could not do heavy work. We could get nine shillings a day each & it was much better than sitting down to starve on the land.

The charlic seemed to be an overwhelming menace. Had we had more land cleared & money to put in fallow we may have been able to destroy it.

I was very tired of being bullied by creditors. I was more inclined to leave the land than Frank. He was always a better settler than I was. I could see no prospect of carrying on for another year. The Shire had sued us for Rates which made things particularly awkward. Dad had to pay them after we left or our horses would have been seized. What an absurd thing for a Shire to hunt a settler off the land. They could have easily collected from the Government who had all our money locked up.

If anyone asked why I left the land I would say the Wheat Pool aided & abetted by the Shire Council made me give it up. I could always reason with other creditors. I have generally found storekeepers, auctioneers, agricultural implement makers & others kindly among suffering people.

The fourth letter now draws to a close. I have just turned forty-four. I am in good health although my eyes are no good. I am in good writing form if I had any liesure. I dont remember writing anything of any consequence in 1914 or 1915.

WRITTEN BY L.N. FOR J.S.N.
MAIDSTONE 29TH APRIL 1934

The Worst Seven Years

In March 1916, we left the farm. As things turned out afterwards it was not a very wise course but that I must explain later on. I went down to Melbourne & got Bill to come back with me. I had some business down there over the Wheat Pool. Bill was very much better by his long holiday but he was not by any means his former self. He reckoned however that he could drive a scoop team as he had been used to horses from his boyhood.

I had a good job, I was driving the tucker cart & doing some grubbing. We were only there a few days when Frank had the misfortune to wrench his hip very badly. He is not a very big chap only about nine stone in weight. He was holding a single furrow plough behind a big team of horses & the work was too much for him. Of course he could not work, he could only hobble about the camp. We managed to get half pay for him for a few weeks from the State Accident people, but then the doctor declared he was fit to go to work, to do light work. It was a most ridiculous thing. He could not even boil the billy. He was in danger of falling over. To make matters worse after being examined by the Doctor once or twice he got a bad itch. Some of the soldiers were coming back by this time & had skin trouble. The Doctor was dealing with a good few of them & I think he must have contracted it from some of them. I got Frank to go to a private doctor who certified he was certainly not fit to work. He did no work

for over two months & then managed to drive a team but he was very weak & miserable.

When we had been at the job something over three m[on]ths we decided to sling it in & go for a few weeks spell in Melbourne. Frank was not well by any means & Bill was only poorly. I was getting on fairly well myself. For the last few weeks I had been driving a scoop team. For the last few years I had to avoid much walking as I had a weak knee. I got a touch of rheumatics in it & it remained weak. However by bandaging it up, I got on very well. I did not get completely rid of this trouble till about '19. Since then, it does not trouble me much unless I do a great deal of walking in a day.

Nowadays I find I can do about seven or eight miles with a bandage on. After that it begins to give away. Bill improved very much in Melbourne. We were something over a month there. I think this was the year I wrote the verse 'To a Schoolgirl'. I remember showing it to a young fellow in Bendigo. He afterwards became a journalist Victor Kennedy was his name. He is pretty well known now in the North of Queensland. I believe he has a couple of books of verse to his credit.[31] I think I must have got the idea of that rhyme when I was at Piangle. While I was on the tuckercart I often used to give rides to the children who were coming home from school.

About the end of July we went up to Mildura as we heard there was work there on the blocks. Mildura was just beginning to boom properly then. Land was going up rapidly in price. Sultanas had gone up to £70 a ton owing to the War. Before that they were only £30 or £40. We got a job each at Merbein then a new settlement from six to ten miles west of Mildura. I had a

variety of jobs, about two or three weeks on each block. Most of these block holders were very decent people to work for, but most of the work I did was pretty hard. It was weeding couch grass with a long handle-shovel. Sometime in the Spring my eyes got very bad. I had strained them somehow by doing the weeding.

I had to [be] very careful & watch in the couch grass lest I should cut some of the earthenware pipes. As this prevented me from taking a job at fencing or anything I thought it best to go to Melbourne & see the oculist. I went down to the man who gave me my glasses. He was a clever old chap but very solemn. He took my guinea but solemnly said he could do nothing for me. In fact he seemed rather surprised to think that there was anything wrong with my eyes at all.

I could hardly make this out. But later on, when I got back & told Frank about it, he gave me an idea. He thought it possible that the doctor might have thought I was trying to dodge conscription. It was that very month October that the Conscription poll was taken. The Conscription Party although they used every unfair means possible were badly beaten.[32] To look upon me as a possible soldier was rather ridiculous. I was forty-four years of age, & I had a very weak knee, & my eyes were almost useless at times; but one must remember that the war fever was very strong in Victoria in 1916. I can remember one man, a young clergyman about twenty-five, splendidly-made fellow over six feet high, & as sound as a bell. He went round advising every young fellow to go to the war yet he never volunteered himself not even as a chaplain. Such hypocrisy one cannot forget.

When I came back from Melbourne I got another job amongst the vines. It was November & the mass of

green foliage seemed to benefit my eyes very much. I dont remember very much about the job, except that I bought a new tent for it, & some stray cattle came along and tore it to ribbons. Bill got a job fencing for one of the settlers. He improved a great deal. He took a very great interest in the Anticonscription move. About the end of November I heard that Dad had a good crop & I went down to Chinkapook to drive the stripper for him. He spoke of driving the stripper himself but he was getting too old to have anything to do with horses. Harvest-hands were rather scarce as so many had gone to the War. It was a splendid season. There were crops over the fences everywhere. I think that Dad must have had less than 200 acres but we got 700 bags off it.

It took a long time to do it as it was a very damp season. Often we could not start stripping till near mid-day. This was the year of the mouse-plague. We could see them out in the paddocks about Christmas time. By March they were in uncounted millions. As soon as we got the wheat winnowed we had to cart it away. It was [a] great difficulty to make anything to keep them out of the seed wheat. They got everywhere & used to bite the children while they were asleep. Some women with young children went away south till the worst of the plague was over. About April I went away for a few weeks spell at Bendigo. When I returned I found the mice had almost eaten up about fifty bags of seed wheat which had been stored in a hut on our old block which we had left the previous year.

This wheat belonged to the Wheat Pool or the store-keeper I forget which. I did not have much sympathy for either but I tried to save some of the grain. There had been a pretty fair self-sown crop on some of the land, which we had left. I saw clearly that we made a

mistake the previous year. Had one of us stopped and disc harrowed the crop in we would have had 700 or 800 bags. Charlic did no harm it had killed itself. Many other farmers made the same mistake. One man left out 600 acres, as he thought the charlic would kill everything. I heard afterwards that one or two old farmers from South Australia knew that this was one of the tricks that the charlic had.

In July that year our block was sold, although it was my block. It was all we had of the land we had worked conjointly. I think it was sold for about two pounds ten an acre which was the amount owing on it including, seed, back rents, etc. I dont think it went up in value because two years after it could have been bought for two pounds fifteen. I believe that on the day of the sale, one man who was coming to bid, had a motor mishap. Had he been at the sale he would have bid five or ten shillings an acre extra & this might have meant something like £200 extra to us. As it was we got nothing. The rabbits were becoming alarmingly bad on my father's block & as he had no money to get netting I did not think it much use to help him clear to get more in. Most of the land we had in was grassy & needed spelling. As it was getting late in the season he left something like 150 acres to some young men on shares. They must have fought the rabbits somehow. I was not there next year to see it stripped but I believe the crop was only a poor one. About this time Dad seemed to have a fair chance of selling the land. He wanted *£4* an acre for his land. He recognized he was getting rather old to work it himself. It was [a] very good block & close to the township but it was difficult to get a buyer at the price. About July I went down to Melb. & met my brothers. They had been working on the wheat-

stacks at Cobram amongst the mouse-eaten wheat. Both had got a slight touch of the mouse-plague. Early in August we all went back again to Merbein.

We got work on the soldiers' settlement, planting. I had a variety of short jobs. [We met] An accountant, of German descent, who was out of work because of the War. He was extremely hard up. We too were pretty bare. Casual work is never much good. The accountant suggested we should take a ticket in tatts. We did so & won £9 each. It was the first time any of us had a ticket, except the accountant of course, who was an old gambler. That year I won £3 on Westcourt[33] on the Melbourne Cup. Since then I have scarcely ever won anything. If ever I go to a race course I lose a few shillings on each race. I am very fond of looking at horse-racing but the noise is dreadful. But most of our sports are noisy. Football matches are perfect infernos. Every discord in the world seems to be there. I am not surprised at [that] English cricketers have at times complained of our vulgarity.

Sometime in Spring 1917, my brother-in-law & sister came up to live in Mildura. My sister had two little boys & her husband got a job at the saw-mill. He was afterwards working for some time on the river boats. Somewhere about Christmas time my little niece appeared. She was not destined to live very long. About six weeks old she contracted what was known as the X-disease. It was a form of meningitis.[34] People said that it came to the town with a circus company. My sisters child lived for two or three months in the hospital. She astonished the Doctor by her vitality, but she succumbed sometime about Easter. At that time, I was working at West Merbein driving two horses in a gravel dray.

I think my eyes must have got a good deal better because I had been carting grapes during the Summer. The green foliage is a great cure. I was able to read a little because I remember reading about half of a ridiculous love-story I found in my camp. I did not keep that job very long, about seven weeks I think. The mare that I had in the lead was in foal & the old mare in the sharves [shafts] had been in several bolts. She would always try & get off if I was anyway near a railway station & had the dray empty. The wet weather began to come on & the roads were very boggy owing to the seepage. I was always getting stuck so I tendered my resignation. My boss was as white a man as ever I worked for & he was very anxious that I should keep on. He was frightened he would get someone who would knock the mares about.

My next job was grubbing & I was working a forest devil.[35] This was on new country being cleared for the soldiers. I was only working a week when I jagged one of my fingers with a raggedy wire rope. I had to have a months spell. I stayed with my sister in Mildura. She was living in a little cottage on the river bank. Her husband was away all the time in the mill-boat fetching logs down. I think it was just after I gave up the horse-driving job that [I] did a little weeding amongst the oranges for a few days. It was then that I was struck with the very beautiful light there is in May in Northern Victoria. The dark green of the orange [trees] & beautiful sunlight give them enchantment hard to describe.

It was there that I got the main idea 'In [in '] The Orange Tree', but I was not able to finish that rhyme till about the end of 1919.

Some parts of the stanzas I had in a piece of the same metre which I had tried to write in '16 or '17 when I

was in Melbourne. I dont remember doing any verse in '17, except 'To a Flowering Almond', which was not published in the first book.

During '16, '17, '18, & nearly all '19 I was too much worried at making a living to do any good at verse.

After my finger got right, I got a short job, & later on a job of fencing which lasted about two months. In October of 1918, Grant Hervey was tarred & feathered by the camp followers of C. J. de Garis.[36] It caused a great sensation in the town. I left by train the following morning.

In Melbourne I met my brother Frank who had been working in Gippsland. We got work together in a quarry near Yarraville. The loading was too heavy for Frank. He only stayed a couple of days.

I hung on to it till Cup time, when half a dozen of us were put off as the owners were reducing hands. The ganger was one of the old type who stood on the bank & roared. An unpleasant man to have anything to do with. I could keep my end up as far as the work was concerned although the spawls [spalls] were rather too heavy for me. When a man gets over forty-five his lifting power is not so good. The following year I got a job in the same quarry & kept it for seven weeks.

Nightwatch won the Melbourne Cup that year. It was the first time I had seen the great race. Just before Armistice Day the 11th November I went to work at Sugarloaf Resevoir near Alexandra. I was put in the Concrete gang which is about the worse gang in the job. There must have been 200 or 300 men employed. On the third day there I was put on an ariel [aerial] tram about forty feet high. I was wheeling concrete in dipping traps. The other men employed at this were much younger than me. We all had to ride on the

trucks to keep pace with each other. We had to be very careful to put the points back for each other. A mistake of this sort would have meant that one of us truck & all, would have been hurled onto the rocks down below.

One day the young fellow ahead of me forgot to turn the points. My glasses were covered with sweat. I could not see very well. The chap who was on the tip saw what had happened & ran up to meet me just in time. I was taken off this job in about eight days & put onto one which was much harder. We had to carry cement for two hours a day & the rest of the time we occuppied in dragging out wet sand-bags & carrying them around. They weighed anything up to two hundredweight. We were often walking on narrow ledges & up thirty or forty feet in the air.

It was very difficult to get a camp & for a time I slept in a little hut near the river. It was very damp & my rheumatic knee gave me a lot of trouble. I suppose I was treated just as well as anyone else on this job, but conditions were appallingly bad for all the workers. This was at the end of the War when men were supposed to be very scarce. The cry of scarcity of labour has always been a lie as far as Victoria was concerned. I understand that the Governments of the different States started in earnest their different imigration policies about this time. When I had been there about a month, I wrenched my ribs. It happened because they put me with a fresh mate who was not used to wrenching the wet sand bags from the bank. He let all the weight fall on me. I knew that I would be alright in a few days but I thought it a good plan to leave & get some harvesting or something a bit lighter. I landed back in Melbourne about ten days before Christmas. In a few days I had chummed up with [a] bricklayers laborer & in a few days we got

a job to go out haymaking. The girl in the Registry office told us that the job would last three weeks. As it happened it only lasted two days. I was driving two horses in an old pole waggon & the hay was full of thistle. When we returned to Melbourne the labor agent, who seemed rather decent, promised us another job without any fee after Christmas.

After New Year I went out to the free job. The bricklayer's labourer did not come. We were hay-making about fifteen miles out. There were five of us working, carting hay in very hilly country. The sheaves were very heavy. Our employers were well-to-do farmers, but the housing conditions were disgraceful. Five of us had to sleep in a place scarcely big enough for one. The tucker was good. The people were religious. They said Grace before & after meals. On our first Sunday we laid about & put our heads together. One of our party, a little fellow, a returned soldier declared that the boss was working points on him. He wished him to unload, not only his own dray, but another man's. We all agreed that this was unfair & promised to strike in the morning if the boss would not listen to reason. In the morning the boss asked Charlie to unload two big loads straight off. Charlie refused & downed his fork. Myself and another came down off the haystack & the two pitchers came in off the field. The actual boss was a school teacher, a young fellow, a very keen gentleman indeed. These were patriotic people mind you, they would always boom Charlie up because he was a soldier.

We started to walk back to Melbourne because there was no early train. We stopped at the hotel in the nearest little township. The barman there told us that our late employers had four different sets of men doing their shearing. They must have only had a few hundred

sheep altogether. All the party except myself got more or less drunk & it was pretty late before we got into Melbourne. I only had about a pound left. I thought one time of wiring to my brother Frank, who was working at Mildura, to get a few pounds. I decided not to as I thought I could get a job at one of the Registry offices & get a road job. There were a lot of road jobs going on out at Gippsland.

In a couple of days I chummed up with another chap & we got a job at a Registry office. It was potato digging at a little station out beyond Warragul. We found out that the employer we were going to work for did not exist. Besides there were no potatoes fit for digging in the District. My friend Jim was very indignant. He was a rather superior chap & he had a few pounds with him. He wired to the Labour Agent & threatened him with Law if we did not get our return fare & all expenses. I only had about five shillings left, but Jim offered to pay my fare up to Trafalgar. He thought that we might get a start at the potatoes there or at draining. We got to Trafalgar Saturday night & had to wait all Sunday. We were far too early for the potatoes & the draining was an impossible job. On Monday we heard of a job in a new quarry about ten miles back nearer Melbourne. We got back by the morning train & got a start at work the following morning.

My first job was in a pig-shoot [chute] letting the spalls down into the shoot towards the crusher. I got my shins very badly barked & had bruises on them for twelve months afterwards.

In a couple of days it was found that the pig shoot was too flat. The boss put in another one, much steeper. I was taken off that job & put on filling the trucks on the floor of the quarry. Jim & I were mates there for

about three weeks.

Jim had done a lot of quarry work & spalling. He said the job was altogether too dangerous & that I was in a danger of getting killed any time.

It was the middle of Summer & my glasses were alway foggy with sweat. Often I could not see what I was doing.

Several times a day a big boulder shaped [like] a grind stone would roll like lightning past me. Jim continually predicted that I would be smashed. There is of course always extra danger when a new quarry is being opened up. There is no room. The main trouble was that all our spallers with one exception were ameteurs. They had no idea of making anything safe for the men working below them. The one exception was a little dark chap, a face-man. He knew the business from A to X. It was quite safe to work near him anywhere. He knew what he was doing. He did not lose his head. After about three weeks I had a particularly narrow shave with a big boulder one day. I asked for my time & left the next morning.

I went up to Trafalgar because I knew that the potatoes would be fit to dig by this time. I was idle there nearly a week looking round. I could not get on, on the drains.

Men were quite willing to stand up to their knees in water for eleven shillings a day, and this was in 1919 when men were supposed to be very scarce. The scarcity of men anywhere in Victoria has always been a monstrous lie. I was looking for a job of droving when a farmer offered me a job of potato-digging which I took.

I put in three weeks of this but I did not do any good. The crop was a very poor one and I was not used to the work. I had to help to load the potatoes with a

young fellow. He was the bosses' brother. He used to work about eleven hours a day & rush about like a madman. He was a nice enough young fellow but he had been brought up wrongly. He was on the verge of a nervous-breakdown with sheer hard work. When we were loading nearly all the weight used to come on me as he was much taller than I was. While I was at Trafalgar I got a letter from A.G. I had not heard from him for a long time. In fact I dont think I had written any verse for the previous eighteen months. He wanted me to alter a piece. It may have been 'The Loving Tree' or 'Inland Born', I am not sure which.

The next job I had was on the Mirboo line about twenty-five miles from Trafalgar.

I was on a road job there for another three weeks. It was very hard work & the last week I was there I had to walk four to eight [miles] from work without getting any extra pay for it. My employers were extraordinary strong young men, & the only employee besides myself was a big Dane, a man of great strength. I think at one time he had been an amateur wrestler. It was rather difficult to keep pace with such men.

Sometime in March I resolved to go back to the Mallee. I heard that the Government was making a new railway line. An extension of the line running north from Sea Lake. I got back to my fathers place &c found out that he was just about to shift. He exchanged blocks with a man on another farm about two miles away. I put in about four days assisting with the shift. After that I went over &c got a job at Mittyack. Bill drove me over. It was about twenty miles. Bill had not been having a very good time lately. He had been doing a little mallee-chopping but the prices were low & the work was a little too hard for him. I got work from a sub-

contractor. The gang varied in size from twenty up to forty. We were all our time taking out shallow cuttings say ten or twelve feet deep.

Most of the shovelling was good but the pace was always solid. If we had not worked hard the sub-contractor would have had a blank envelope for his pay. He could not feed his horses. In fact such a thing did happen to one of the contractors on the line. The sub-contractors system was a very disgraceful thing. I do not know if it existed in the other states, but it flourished in the Victoria Railway Construction when [till] railway construction finally ceased in the State.

I worked four months there altogether. It was a very dry season, almost as bad as 1902. We lost no time with the rain & only half a day with the dust. But plenty of days when we did work we should have been in camp if we had any respect for our eyes. What made things much worse was that we had many new chum navvies with us. They threw the sand everywhere, often over the horse & the driver. Any man who is used to shovelling can do so without unduly tempering [disturbing] his neighbors. Most of the new chums were sailors who had been put out owing to some strike. Generally speaking I found sailors great skites & very often unscrupulous. When I was at the job three months I got word from A.G. that he was fetching out my first book *Heart of Spring.*

The superior copies were sent over to Chinkapook to my father's place for signature. I went over there and signed them & came back to the job.[37] The last camp I was at was at Kulwin near the Terminus. I had been batching for the last month & I found that I was getting so weak, I could not carry on. For the first six weeks I was in a boarding house. It was a very bad boarding

house, but I could always get one good feed a day out of it.

Then I had a brief spell of a week or so in another boarding house which was worse. During the last two months I was compelled to batch. The bread we got was generally a week old. It was difficult to get tucker. The water which the Government carted us always tasted of dead fish. The Victorian Railway construction seemed to follow bad old traditions. I have seen men forced to walk four miles to work without getting any time for it. Even in 1919 a navvy was charged for shovels. Before my time of navvying I believe the times were still worse. I think the bad treatment metered out to navvies generally in all States maybe traced back to the time when road work was done by convict bands. I understand that the man in charge always had firearms & was always ready to shoot. Other Victorian State Departments noticeably the State Rivers & Water Supply & The Electricity Commission[38] have set fine precedence by making conditions far more tolerable for the worker.

I have worked for both these above departments & I can testify that in most cases some form of shelter was found mess-rooms were constructed where board could be obtained at reasonable rates. There was also a genuine attempt at a pure water supply.

When I finished at Mittyack I went over & stopped with my father who was living near Chinkapook. As luck would have it, he had put in no crop. Had he done so he would have had a heavy loss. 1919 was a general drought. There was scarcely any wheat in the District. I think I put in about six weeks at my father's. He was doing some fencing for a land owner near by. He had cut a lot of pine posts on a reserve near-by. I was pretty well knocked out with the navvying and the starvation.

I wasn't much good at the axe but I helped him for a day or so while he finished the cutting. I then dragged the posts together & charred them for him. Dad was getting a bit too old for hopping about with the horse in the thick timber. He was seventy-five at this time but he seemed almost to be as good a man as ever he was at fencing.

While I was having this spell A.G. launched the book *Heart of Spring.* He got some very good reviews & some unfriendly ones. He showed me all the friendly reviews & a few of the unkindly ones. One of the worst of the latter I did not see for many years after. It was written by David McKee Wright for the *Bulletin.*[39] I recognize there are many educated people who did not like my verse at all & who seemed to be fairly good judges. This review showed me as a very feeble singer indeed. A whimpering person, not likely to be heard of again. A.G. must have been a bit furious over this. One must remember that there was very little love lost between the proprietors of the *Bulletin* & himself. When A.G. started the *Bookfellow* in 1907, James Heblethwaite [Hebblethwaite], Hugh McCrae & myself sent him some of our best work. Had A.G. still been with the *Bulletin* that verse would have most likely appeared on the Red page, which for some years previous had obtained the best work written in Australia. The *Bulletin* people were only human & jealousy is strong in most of us. A few years later when Heblethwaite died, I was astonished to notice that his death notice only occuppied about an inch of the *Bulletin.* James Heblethwaite was a fine poet, a delightful gentleman as those who met him testify.[40]

While on this few weeks' rest I finished The Orange Tree'. I would have liked to have got it out in time for

the book but there was no chance. I think a man writes better when he is having a complete rest after toil or any form of worry. I have said before that I got some of the ideas when I was weeding oranges at Merbein. There was also something which I tried to drag in, some enchantment or other. I cannot well describe it. I have seen Prints of Botecelli's [Botticelli's] wonderful picture 'Spring'. I think that is its name. Its [sic] has lovers, it has maidens & greenery & I think a robber in the background. Of course I know nothing about art at all but anything of Botecelli's I see fills me with emotion. Prints of other great pictures seem to leave me cold.

Some time about the end of October I went down to Melbourne. I got a job loading on the same quarry at Yarraville. The boss was as unspeakable as ever & the work was really too hard for me but I hung on until Christmas time. It was a pretty safe quarry. It was not very big but it was very deep & hot.

While I was there Mrs Vance Palmer[41] wrote me a very friendly letter but addressed it to South Yarra. I did not get it till several months afterwards when I was out on a road job in Gippsland. While I was in this quarry I got a wire one morning from my sister that her youngest boy four years old had been attacked by meningitus. He was in the Mildura Hospital & had one of his eyes removed. I believe he hardly rallied after the operation. I did not get a full account of his death until a letter followed me to Gippsland after New Year. At Christmas time I met my brother Frank who had been hay-making near Werribee. We both went out to a road job early in January. We were out twelve miles from Warragul & it was a splendid summer climate.

I was working on the batter & Frank was driving a scoop team. I think we put in about four months

altogether. After we came back from the Easter holidays, Frank had a friendly argument with the ganger over the horses he was driving. They wanted to take them & put them in the team & do the ploughing now & again. He threatened to leave over it. I would have done the same myself under the circumstances. The ganger was a friendly little fellow & did not wish Frank to leave as it was difficult to get a good scooper. The contractor was a very good considerate man to work for but he was short of horses at the time. Anyhow we both left over it & we both went out to see my father who was now living near Dandenong.*

I think it was early in May, that Frank and I went out to see my father at Hallam. He had bought a little place there, about four mile from Dandenong.

It contained about twenty acres, and I think the price was about £600. The house was valued at £400 although I dont see that it could have cost that much, though it was in the building boom period, and the house was new.

I was rather concerned about this deal because Dad told me he had paid away nearly £200 on the place, and he had something less than £200 left. He had sold his plant, and had a little money left out of that, and there was also a little money coming to him out of the wheat pool.

The land was of rather poor quality. It might have grown a very light crop of hay or kept a few cows. It would have been a right enough for a man, had he had an assured income apart from it.

I advised Dad not to pay any more instalments of [on] the land, and [to] try and sell it as soon as possible.

*** Punctuation changes again; Annie McKimm has taken up the transcription.**

The market was still pretty good. I went up to Merbein about the middle of May, on the 29th of that month. My youngest nephew Allen McKimm was born at Mildura.

When he was a few month old he was named 'Mick' and the name has stuck to him ever since.

I got a job amongst the vines at Merbein. I rigged up a camp at a reserve and I had a succession of short jobs, a few weeks at each place.

Frank had stayed behind at Hallam doing some additions to my fathers place. He is a pretty good bush carpenter. He came up to Merbein some time in July, and we camped together.

He got work close by doing some fencing. While a[t] this camp, a chap named Jack Shaw came to see us. He had heard of me as a rhymer. He himself had done a bit of verse for a little magazine, called *Birth* running in Melb about that time.[42] He told [took] rather a fancy to some of my light verse. He was a queer lad. He was a great admirer of Francis Thompson. He was in a wandering mood a[t] this moment, but for most of the year he kept bees a[t] Yarra Glen. Some time after this he called on AG in Sydney. AG seemed to think a lot of him. He was like an old time mistrel [minstrel]. He was too unworldly to make a decent living. Early in Sept I got a job which promised to be rather a long one. The first day I got it I got a wire from my Step-mother asking me to come down at once, that Dad was ill, and the wire was about two days old when I got it. The school children were in the habit of fetching out the mail from the township which was five mile distant. This wire had blown away somehow, and a stranger had found it on the road. I was a couple of days getting down, but I was quite relieved to find Dad quite normal

& cheerful. It seems from what my stepmother told me that he must have had a very slight stroke.

It had been very cold weather, and he had been driving about a good deal, but I [think] that worry must have had a good deal to do with it.

He had paid another instalment on the house, and his cash was gradually melting away. Dad was now seventy-six and I began to see, that perhaps the end was not very far off. He might had [have] lived for a number of years. He seems quite healt[h]y and was able to work nearly as well as ever. I decided to get a job close to him for a few months if possible. On the 1st Oct I got a job on a pipe trench at Beaconfield [Beaconsfield].

I also got a job for Frank there who came down from Merbein. The job was run by the State Rivers and the man in charge (an Englishman) was quite a decent man to work for. I remember that Frank & I went in to see the Melb Cup, that was the year Patrel [Poitrel] won.

Towards the end of Nov I wrenched my side while shovelling the wet clay. It might have got right in a few days but it was very heavy work and I decided to either go haymaking or get a job on the quarry. A few days later I took a look round some of the quarries near Melb. Out past Sunshine I came across a gang of men taking out an excation [excavation] for a big building (a flour mill). They told me I could get on with them. I made up my mind to start in the morning. The next day was dreadfully hot. It must have been ove[r] 100 deg in the shade. I knocked up at 4 oclock. I must have got a touch of the sun. I was not fit to work for about a week afterwards. I was all the time trying to get ice drinks. When I felt a bit better I got a job at a registry Office and went out to Little River hay-making.

The job only lasted one day. There was [a] strike, and I left in support of the strikers. How-ever I got a job the next day about eight mile away with a man who my brother Frank had been working [for] previously. He was a very good boss. I put in four weeks. First of all pitching in the paddocks, then driving one of the waggons. When I finished I went out to Hallam to see Dad. He was very cheerful, and he seemed quite confident that he would be able to sell for about the same figure as he gave.

I recognised that selling land was rather a difficult business. I have had some experience in this matter. I was very worried about Dad during this period. It put the rhymning out of my head for a while.

Frank kept his job at Beaconsfield till about the end of the Summer. After N Year I went out to Glen Maggie [Glenmaggie] Weir near Heyfield.[43] I had heard about this job while we were at Beaconfield. We were in a big excavation and it was in the middle of Summer & very hot. There was a good deal of carelessness on this job. Sometimes we would run our picks into jelly [gelignite] which had miss fired. Seventy or eighty shots were fired at once and it was too many for a man to count accurately. We had some sailors with us, who were very poor nav[v]ies. I believe it was a stewards strike that had put so many of them out of work. It is* one of the disadvantage that the nav[v]y has to put up with, is to be always working with new chums. New hands are apt to bring accidents on themselves and others. Most of these were young strong fellows but they were very lazy. We were getting twelve shillings a day, and they reckoned the work was altogether too

• Erased and bracketed by Devaney, MS, p. 177. Lisette takes up again.

much for the money. They said they could get £4 a month with good food on the coastal boats. They rather looked down on us. Most of us regarded them as rather in the road. I have not worked with many seamen, but most of them I found to be great skites & not very fond of toil. We used to have to go across the river in a boat to get our dinner because the mess hands refused to cut sandwiches. As I was pretty slow in getting off the mark I [was] nearly always in the last boat across. By the time I got home & had a wash a quarter of an hour was gone. By this time many of the younger lot had finished their dinner. They did not even bother washing their hands, although they were all as black as niggers. On certain days, I forget which, our cook made very good plum puddings. Those who had got inside information made a great rush home on those days. One young fellow whom I knew, got no less than four helpings one day.

Very often I got no pudding at all. When I think of the way some navvies behave I am reminded of a saying reputed to be from an old priest. 'I cant love the human race, I've seen it.' But I must not be unjust to my fellow workers. Most of them especially the young fellows & the bushmen were decent chaps. I like the bushborn ones much the best. They were more modest & more efficient at anything.*

I stopped six months at Glenmaggie all together. The [that] Winter I had rather a rough time on the River bottom and worked a few nights on night shift. In August I got word from my Stepmother that my father had had another bad turn and I went down to Hallam the next day. I found that Dad had rather a bad cold, and could not sleep at night.

He, my stepmother & the two little girls were living

•**Annie begins again.**

in a small hut on a neighbour's place.

They had to leave the holding which Dad had paid the deposit & instalments on. The place had been sold. I believe the owner got a little more than what Dad was offering to sell it for. Dad had had rather bad luck. A man who was looking for land thought the price reasonable and promised to come and see it but never turned up. It seemed just a succession of flukes not being able to sell it.

The owner (a land agent) was no worse than most land agents. He foreclosed because he found a man who had more money and was more likely to keep up his payments that [than] Dad was.

One of my stepmothers sisters was married and had some spare rooms in a big house near Leongatha. She offered to let Dad & her sister have them till they could look round and rent a place.

I went into Dandenong and got some medicine for Dad and in a few days the cough left him and he could sleep and he got better wonderfully quick. He was very weak and it was very cold weather.

I managed to get all their stuff into the station and I got them aboard the train for Leongatha. Just before my people left I got word from the ganger at Heyfield that there had been a big flood and the job would be probably be shut for a few months so I decided to go back to Mildura.

I got a job with the man with whom I have been working when I got the wire twelve months previously. He had the name of being a very hard man but I got on very well with him, in fact, he over paid me once or twice.

Those were rather good times to get work and of course there were a great many loafers in every district;

this man had had some arguments with them.

Some time in Nov I finished at Merbein and went down and got my first job at Yallorm [Yallourn]. I worked there till Xmas and during the holidays I went down for a couple of days to see Dad. He was looking remarkably well and was cheerful as usual.

He had rented a small piece of land with a farm house. It was roomy, but an old building. He was doing a little fencing for the man who owned the place. He was such an energetic person that he scouted the idea that he was too old to work.

He was still getting a little money from the wheat pool, rather more than he first expected.

I knew that his funds was nearly exhausted and from that time on I used to send him a little money every week. I advised him to apply for the Old Age Pension but he did not [like] the idea of it.

Besides he had bought a block of rough country about 300 acres near Balaria [Boolarra] somewhere about twenty or thirty miles [south] from Yallorn. He had never seen it and he got it without any deposit.

I knew that there was some very rough country out there and that it was swarming with rabbits. I did not say much about [it] but I could see how very hopeless it was for a man of Dads years to clear land in Gippsland. I could make about £4 a week while working and this would cease if I went on the land to help him. The Authorities are not very anxious to give the Old Age Pension to any one who has property no matter how valueless that property is. At this time I came down again from Yallorn to see Dad, but I could only stop one day.

He was very bright and seemed quite well. He was very anxious to go on with the Balara land and seemed

quite confident that we could make a living on it. I put the matter off, as I saw that the only thing to do was me to keep a job, and help him as best I could. He agreed to apply for the Pension and I believe he got it a few weeks after that. I went back to Yallorn and worked for about another six weeks. I was working in a slump [sump] hole. I was up to my knees in mud, and every second week we had night shift. I got that tired that I could not get up in the morning and I was frightened of rhumatics so I decided to sling the job in. I meant to go up to Mildura again as I could generally get work there in the Winter amongst the vines. It was towards the end of May that I met Frank in Melb. He was on holidays and we went down to Leongatha together.

Frank could only stop two d[a]ys but I stayed a few days longer.

I noticed a very decided difference in Dad. He was failing rapidly. I could see that he could no longer use the axe.

He had a horse and dray and I got it, and carted as much wood as I could and chopped it up for him. The very evening before I decided to go away he took a bad turn. It must have been a very slight heart attack. He was very frightened. I had never had seen Dad frightened of anything before.

He did not lose his speech and he seemed to get calm again in about twenty minutes or so.

He told me afterwards that he could not sleep at night and he used to start worrying.

I resolved to stay a day or so longer but I could not stay very long as I had to get back to get a job to keep things going.

The following day he seemed quite right. Some of

my stepmothers friends heard of his sickness and came to see him. They stayed up pretty late playing cards that night, and Dad was playing cards and laughing with the rest of them.

Next day I had to say goodbye. I had to left the leave taking pretty late, and I was anxious to catch the train at the Station two miles away.

Dad walked down with me to the road about a quarter mile.

I remember that he asked me to walk slower although I was walking slowly.

When I got out the gate I looked back and that was the last time I saw him alive.

When I got back to Merbein I found a job on the cable track near the township.

I worked here six w[ee]ks.

I got several letters from Dad but he complained that his appetite was poor.

I was camped with Frank about two mile from the town.

I got a wire one evening saying Dad was ill. I think the wire said he had pneonia [pneumonia].

I made ready to go down in the morning.

Through neglecting to see the local paper I did not know that the train did not go from Merbein that morning, but only from Mildura. When I got in next morning and found out how the trains ran it was then too late to catch the Express. But for that mistake I might have been able to have see[n] Dad alive.

As it was I got down the day before the funeral.

My stepmother told me my father spoke about me several times during the illness as he was expecting me down.

It was only during the last thirty-six hours while he

was in a private hospital that his mind began to wander.

The nurse told us that [what] he spoke most of was some race horse. This horse I forget his name now had won some big jumping event and was also entered for the Melb Cup.

I remember speaking to Dad a good deal about this horse.

One man I worked with had won *£40* over one of his wins. It seems strange that a man like Dad who thought very little of racing should be talking of horses in his last moments.

I was very short of cash about the time of the funeral and Frank who was usually in constant work had been out of work for six weeks. A chap who had married one of my stepmothers sisters gave me some timely assistance.

It was a problem to find a house for my stepmother and the two little girls.

This man bought a small cottage and rented to us for nine shillings a week. It was one of my fathers last wishes that his wife should not part with the children.

I applied for the childrens pension for them and in a few months it was obtained.

I attache here a Death Notice written by Mrs Millar (one of my stepmothers sisters).*

In Memoriam

> With the passing away of the late John Neilson, another of Australia's pioneers has departed from this world of toil. Born at Stranraer, Wigtonshire [Wigtownshire], Scotland, he came to Australia in the Fifties.

• **Marked 'Enclosure' by Devaney, MS, p. 191, but in Lisette's hand.**

For some years he occupied land at Tyrell Downs, Swan Hill, and Chinkapook, devoting his time partly to sheep raising and wheat farming. He helped to fence the border line between Victoria, and South Australia. Of a kind, genial disposition, together with a quiet humor, he ever had a gentle word for man, woman & child. Being of a literary turn of mind, he composed many poems which have appeared in print, from time to time, and several have gained prizes at competitions, amongst which are such favorites as 'The Pioneers', 'The Men of the Fifties', 'Rest', 'Home', and 'The Swans'.

He leaves, to mourn his loss, a widow, and two little girls by his second marriage, and one daughter and three sons by his first marriage; the eldest of whom is Shaw Neilson, the author of *Heart of Spring.* Although advanced in years, he could converse freely on all present day topics, with ease and fluency. His short illness of pneumonia proved too much for his lion heart, and he passed away to his rest. To conclude with a line of his own verse—

'Your loving words till coming
day will keep,
Tonight! Oh! I am weary;
Let me sleep.'

I believe that there was also a notice in the *Sea Lake Times* (one of the Mallee papers).

He was very well known, and very well liked wherever he had lived. Some weeks after his death I got a very feelingly written letter from Charlie Howlly [Howley] (the man with whom he had swapped blocks). This man knew him very well during the later years.

He testified to his courage kind[l]iness and above all

to his toleration. Howelly was a very devote Catholic and my father was a Presbyterian but not at all a very ortherdous [orthodox] one during the last twenty years of his life. He had good eyesight and was a great reader.

He always kept himself very much in touch with what was going on in the world.*

After my father's death, on my road back to Mildura, I stayed in Melbourne one night & went to see the poet, J. B. O'Hara.[44] He & and his very charming wife received me with great hospitality. J.B. was at that time still working very hard as a headmaster at one of the schools. I had to confess that I had hardly ever seen any of his verse nor had I had it read to me although he had sent me one or two of his books. I think I like best his 'Little Creek' published in one of the anthologies. I think I like best, some of his sonnets, & some of his pieces in set forms, rondels, rondeaus.

J.B. had in his time known most of our writers. I only saw him the once. He did not live a great many years afterwards. He seemed to dislike very much most of the *Bulletin* verse, the horsey, rough & ready stuff which was still popular in the early part of the century. One of his pupils was Elzie Cole, of whom he was very proud.[45] She has done some really fine work. One poem of hers which appeared in a recent anthology reached, I think, a very high level.

When I got back to Merbein I put [in] a few weeks in a telephone cable job & then got work on one of the fruit blocks till near Christmas time. I went down to Melbourne for Christmas.

After New Year I went out to Yallourn and got on a pipe trench gang. We were all put off in seven days. I dont know exactly why. Such sudden changes were

*** Lisette takes up again.**

very common at Yallourn. As far as I was concerned I worked just as hard as for a contractor, but I believe some of the chaps were inclined to stand up & stretch their backs. It is only human nature after all.

I was rather lucky, I got on at the Brown Coal Open Cut across the river. I worked there six months altogether. On March 8th of this year, I had a little piece of verse in the *Bulletin.* It was called 'Maude Fane Departs'.

The fifth Letter draws to a close. I am calling it 'The Worst Seven Years', because it is a navvie's joke to comfort a newcomer who is feeling the work with the guide.—The first Seven Years are always the Worst Mate.

The Navvy with a Pension

I am calling it this because during my last five years as a casual laborer I had a £1 pension a week which was a great help when out of work.

It was in March 1916 when I left the land, and March '23 when I found myself among the Maltese in the Open Cut. I think there were only about 130 employed and about half were Maltese. These people had been introduced as strike breakers several years previously. Most of them were inoffensive chaps; but at times there were ill-feeling between them and the Australians. One night a woman fired a shot at one of the Maltese. This created a great stir. There was a good deal of gambling & sly-grog selling going on at the time.

Several weeks after there was a general clean up. On both sides of the river there would be about 3000 men employed. There is always a sprinkling of crooks when there is a big pay every fortnight. By aid of 'pimps' the police managed to catch a good few sly-grog, two-up men & others.

About August the job got altogether too wet & I left & went up to Mildura. I got on there working on a pipe trench for the P.M.G. I worked under two different gangers up till November. I left Mildura just after Melbourne Cup time. I meant to go out again to Yallourn. Just before I left I got word from A. G. Stephens, that Mrs James Dyer, a Melbourne lady had offered to fetch out a book of my verse by subscription.[46]

I wrote & told the lady that I did not think the thing was practicable.

She replied that she meant to do it somehow. While I was stopping in Melbourne prior to going out to Yallourn I got a note from A.G. saying that Mrs Dyer had given the publishers a cheque for £100, & that the book would be out in a few days. He wished me to read proofs and make corrections. This I could not do as I had no money to stay in Melbourne and I was bound to go out to work. Thus *Ballad & Lyrical Poems*[47] was born in a great hurry. A.G. did not have much chance to make a book of it. He had to put in nearly everything that was in the *Heart of Spring.* I was very glad that he left out the 'Little Milliner'. I think there must have been nearly twenty fresh pieces put [in] & most of them had been written during the last four years.

Just now it is Saturday afternoon and I am very tired. I can only remember the names of a few of those fresh pieces. Before I finish the next letter I will try and get a list of them so that I can remember a few of them. 'The Orange Tree', was perhaps the most important of the newcomers. 'The White Plum Tree', I finished just in time for the book. A.G. said he liked it very much. One little piece, called 'For a Little Girl's Birthday', I did while I was at Glenmaggie. The little girl was a very pretty dark haired child, a daughter of one of the gangers. I wrote 'Schoolgirls Hastening' when I was staying in Melbourne for about a week not long alter my father died.

I was staying in Fitzroy at the time. Every morning I used to go down to the city for breakfast, just before nine. Every morning I used to meet the schoolgirls coming up to the old High School which has since been abolished. I used to think those girls were remarkably

beautiful. I dont suppose they were any more beautiful than they were before or are now, but a man sees things different at different times in his life. I had just been for many months in a navvies' camp. I think that most men who have lived for any time solely in the company of men must have felt the certain lopsideness in their surroundings. I suppose it was the reaction after this lopsideness that made me start the rhyme.

I cant think of any of those rhymes today. The book got some very good reviews but through some mistake the Melbourne *Herald* forgot me altogether. Four years previously they had given *Heart of Spring* a very good notice.

I got a job in the clearing gang and worked there till Christmas. I came into Melbourne for the holidays and while stopping at my lodgings in Fitzroy I got a wire from Mrs Dyer asking me to call and see her on the following day. I had previously got a letter from A.G., suggesting that I go & see Mrs Dyer but I very much disliked the idea. I was very hard up & I was very badly dressed.

I had on a grey coat and vest, the remains of a rather decent suit; but my trousers were unspeakable. They were slops of the worst kind. They were dark & at least a size too large for me. I turned them up at the bottom to accomodate my rather short legs. I would have got out of that trip if I could possibly have done so, but there didn't seem to be any option. I felt very much indebted to Mrs Dyer, and an argument had occurred between her and A.G. She it seemed wished to put her point of view before me. I would rather have not wished to mention this matter in my letters at all; but at the time it happened many of my friends & Mrs Dyers friends knew a good deal about it.

I think it is just as well that I should say what I know about it. Dr W. G. Whittaker was in Melbourne in 1927. He was examming for the London College of Music.[48] He was I believe a distinguished musician & a composer of much fine music. He became acquainted with Mrs Dyer who was so well known amongst musical people in Melbourne. She showed him my verses & he took a fancy to some of them and set one or two to music. As he would have to copyright his songs it was neccasary for him to get permission from A.G. who owned the copyrights of my books. What he offered was, I believe, a guinea straight out for each piece used. A.G. did not think it was enough. He contended that we should be paid a certain royalty on each hundred of the copies sold. There was some correspondence & some friction. Dr Whittaker called on A.G. just before his boat left Sydney for the old country, but they did not seem to arrive at anything very definite. It was over this little argument that I was called out to see my benefactoress.

It was New Years Day 1924.

A beautiful Summer morning about 11 o'clock I went out to Toorak. When I beheld such geat mansions & such spacious grounds I could scarcely get pluck enough in me to enter the gates. I need not have been so timorous about it as Mrs Dyer & her worthy husband made me so very welcome. Had I been the Prince of Wales I could not have been better treated.

Mrs Dyer explained to me very carefully the point of view taken up by herself & Dr Whittaker. I began to think that A.G. had really been unreasonable but I had to be loyal to my old friend & publisher. I knew besides he had the final sayso in these matters as he held the copyright. I understood that the rate offered by Dr

Whittaker was the same usually paid to well known British writers of verse. I promised to write to A.G. & do whatever I could to help him into a more reasonable frame of mind. I have recollections of a very fine New Years Dinner. A very fine six-course dinner the like of which I had never seen before.

After that I said goodbye to Mr Dyer & the very gracious lady who was anxious that my verse should known be [sic] not only here but in the old world, to which she was going to take a trip before long.

I remember writing to A.G. and putting my view before him. It was of no use. In the end an agreement was made between us &c Dr Whittaker. He had the right to use eight songs, but there had to be a certain royalty paid on the sales.

I remember he sent me a copy of one 'The Song &c the Bird', set to music but I dont know whether he went on with the others. I believe he went on with some of the others, but I dont think any sales could have been affected [sic]. Dr Whittaker wrote me a letter once & explained very clearly his outlook. He said he wrote because he could not help doing so.

I think that the argument slight as it was, did some harm to me. Mrs Dyer was very anxious to give my book a boost during 1924 in Britain. She was at home during the London season &c had great opportunity of doing so. It is rather difficult to get any one to buy an unknown man's verse. If anybody knows about me in Britain, it is almost entirely due to Mrs Dyer. She gave away many books of mine &c I believe that some were lost at sea. In Melbourne she encouraged several elocusionists to recite my verse. She told me that she had put on a green dress herself at an entertainment &c had said 'Petticoat Green'. She did not say she recited

it. She was too modest for that. I believe that but for the difference with A.G. she would have been able to do more.

I have a dim recollection that 'Love's Coming' was set to music & sung in London. I believe that it was in 1928 while I was at Merbein that I received a letter from Mrs Dyer. I had had one or two previous letters from her written from Italy or France. She told me in this one that a very fine illustrated copy of McCrae's work was being produced in London.[49] I think Jack Lindsay[50] had something to do with it. She hinted that something might be done to help me to get a similar edition out if A.G. would not be too unreasonable on the matter of royalties.

I thought the thing over but I wrote & told her I did not think anything could be done on the matter. I never mentioned anything about it to A.G. at all. I thought it would only lead to fresh bickering. If any arrangements had been made for publication of an expensive edition I suppose Mrs Dyer would have lost a good deal of money on it. Neither I nor A.G. had any to lose. Mrs Dyer is such a wonderfully generous woman that it seemed to me a rather mean thing to allow her to risk any more money. It has always seemed to me a deplorable thing that this woman who had done so much to help me & my literary godfather A.G. had disagreed, while they were both working to get my rhymes better known. I am afraid I get over a lot of ground over this little argument.[51]

After New Year I went back to the clearing gang and worked there till about March. The clearing was hard enough work but I did not mind it. We were grubbing big timber mostly stumps. Part of the time I was hooking on for a man who was snigging [snagging?] for the team.

I got on alright on the clearing gang but early in March the work was stopped. The bosses said it was costing too much. I think it ran into about £100 an acre altogether. Some of it was let for £60 an acre but the contractors managed things differently to what we did. Ours was much more difficult work. It was nearly all immense stumps. A fellow-worker of mine said the land was only worth about £1 an acre when it was cleared. The sand had to be carted into the garden plots around Yallourn to enable the people to grow flowers or vegetables.

From the clearing gang we were all put into a pipe trench gang. It was really sewer work, it was about eight feet deep and we were not been [sic] paid the right wages.

I only stopped a week. Very few of the original gang stayed that long.

Of course newcomers were always coming along, dead-brokers as navvies usually are.

By the constant arrival of these workers the good work was carried on. Hardly any job is so bad that a starving man will not tackle it for a few days.

I made back to Merbein as my brother told me that the grape picking had only just started. It was a month later than usual. On the way back I stayed in Melbourne again, for a day or so. I dont think I went to see Miss Kate Baker this time.

I think it must have been just after New Year when I dined with the Dyers, that I first saw the little elderly lady with the soft voice and the charming presence.

She had been acquainted with Joseph Furphy, (Tom Collins,) the author of *Such is Life.*[52]

She had a very strong belief in Furphy's greatness. I have never been able to read *Such is Life,* but I believe

very good critics think that it is one of the most valuable works produced here. I understand that the late Justice Higgins thought very highly of it.[53]

From a few scraps that have been read to me you can see that Furphy had a lofty leisureless [leisurely] style. After Furphy's death Miss Baker collected and published his verse. She told me that she had only thirty shillings left in the world when she had done this.

A.G. had been very anxious for some time that I should meet Miss Baker. Miss Baker introduced me to Mrs Beatrice Fowler, a white-haired, but still very young looking widow. She was running a press-cutting business in Little Collins Street. Since that time she has often sent me cuttings concerning my books. She is generous to [a] fault.

I was also taken out and introduced to Mrs Fowler's sister, Mrs Heywood, who had some grown up daughters. I was treated very hospitably by the Heywood family.

I had a long run at the grape-picking that year. It lasted about three months. It was a wet drying season & Frank & I worked till about the middle of June amongst the damaged raisins. With constant watching & maneouvering) we got all our employer's stuff boxed.

I had rather bad luck before Easter. I got a touch of gastritus.

For the last twenty years I rarely touch [ed] raw fruit. It does not seem to agree with me, but the grapes were very good ones and very tempting and I took one occasionally. I always used to wipe them before eating them but I think there must have been some spray left on those I consumed. Some pickers seemed to eat the grapes all day without any injury; but a very slight touch of arsenic brought me a lot of trouble. I did not get rid of the gastritus altogether for about eighteen months

afterwards and for the rest of that year I could scarcely eat any breakfast. It does not matter much when a man is at light work, but when a man is navvying it is difficult to carry on under such circumstances. Several months after I used to carry a bottle of white medicine; chalk & peppermint I suppose. It cost ten shillings each time, and I think the chemist must have made nine & ninepence profit on it.

Early in June I got a letter from Mary Gilmore in Sydney. She said she was going to visit Victoria and said she wished to meet me in Melbourne. We had corresponded for a good many years and I was anxious to see her. As the work was just finished I decided to go down. Mary Gilmore impressed me as a very brave woman with a good deal of the reformer in her composition. One could easily understand such a woman taking part in strikes and going to New Australia. I had been able to read some of her verses before this and got some read to me. I liked best of all some of her little lyrics. She has a fine ear for song.

The late Frank Morton,[54] who should have been a good judge said of her, 'Mary Gilmore is our best woman writer both in prose and verse.'

When I came down on this trip I thought that I might meet a few fresh friends, but I was not prepared for what was ahead.

Miss Baker & Mrs Fowler had organized a reception at Mrs Heywood's place at Studley Park. The reception was in honor of Mrs Gilmore and myself. It was rather a trying affair for me, as I am not used to company. I get on alright with two or three people, but thirty of [or] forty make me very nervous. I find out I have nothing to say and besides my English is always deplorable, and most of these people were pretty well

educated.

I think most of the guests had come to see Mary Gilmore as she was very well known amongst our writers and all the Labor crowd. She and I met many people who have been good friends to me since. Some alas have passed away. I remember most clearly Henry Tait,[55] the composer who had a frail body and a fiery soul. He died a few years afterwards much to the sorrow of all his friends. I think he was a very remarkable man for a country like this to produce. It was here that I first met Gerald Byrne, Bob Croll, Percival Searle [Serle], Nettie, & Vance Palmer, and Louis Lavatter [Lavater].[56] After the reception I stopped about a week, the guest of the Heywoods, and during that time I again renewed my acquaintance with Bernard O'Dowd. A party of us went out to see him one evening.

Bernard was in very fine form. It was a pleasure to listen to him. He spoke with feeling of the history of Ireland.

In some way Bernard resembles a Scandinavian in appearance. There is a lot of the revel in him too.*

I stopped for about a week with my sister in Bacchus Marsh. Her husband was working on the telegraph lines in that district. From there I went up to Red Cliffs where I got a job on the cable track for the P.M.G.

It was about the best job of navvying I had. The stuff was all good shifting and the boss was a fine reasonable fellow. The only drawback was that through the gastritus I had difficulty in eating any breakfast. We finished up just after Melbourne Cup time, when Frank & I went down & got a job of haymaking at Melton.

After New Year, Frank went back to Merbein and I

• Changed to 'rebel', with note by Devaney, 'Probably means rebel' (MS, p. 219).

went out to Shepparton. I was going to try and get some peach-picking there. I was about a week looking for a job & when I got it, I could only manage to stick at it for two days.

The peaches had to be a certain size & not too green. Standing on a ladder & staring at different angles on the fruit brought on a severe eye-strain. I decided to go back to Merbein. I got on grape picking near Frank and my eyes soon seemed to recover amongst the heavy green foliage of the vines.

When I finished the picking I had a few days idleness. I was camped with Frank on his bosse's block. Frank's boss an Irishman by extraction finished his picking a few days after my boss ceased operations. Being an Irishman he was hospitable. He brought out a glass of beer and insisted on me taking some. It was a sort of a harvest thanksgiving you can understand. I don't like beer much but I took some to please him. On a very hot summer evening I might take a drink if I had been working hard and was unable to eat my tea without it; but I couldn't drink a glass of beer in cold weather. Anyhow to please this raisin grower I had several glasses. I must have drank over a pint altogether, and that was a very large drink for me.

I was not drunk but I was in very good spirits. I felt very much inclined to make up verse. That night before I went to bed I started 'The Flight of the Weary'. Next day I was idle I was at it again and the following day too.

My eyes were not much good at the time. I think I wrote some of it and got Frank to write the rest. I altered it a bit for the next few weeks. I did not send it to A.G. for a few months afterwards. When I sent it I remembered apologizing because I thought the opening

idea was a good bit like Victor Dal[e]y's 'Sunset Fantasy', and I also thought that near the finish the piece resembled in some way Henry Lawson's notion, in the 'Lost Loves Hotel'.

Another rhyme that I accomplished while I was camped at this place was 'The Hen in the Bushes'.

Down at the foot of where we were picking I was walking round one Sunday, I discovered a little hen sitting in some bushes near the vines. It was red hot weather in February & I thought the poor little creature might die for want of a drink.

I reported the matter to the blocker's wife & I think some measures were taken to help the little mother.

Some time in April, in company with my brother Bill who had come over for the picking from Tyrrell Downs I went down to Ouyen looking for work. It is a very dusty country at that time of year. We got work with a contractor who was on a road [job] about twelve miles north of Ouyen. This man did not have much experience of road-making. Everything was very mixed up on the job and the tucker was rough.

In a few days it rained heavily and the contractor went home to put his crop in. He left us idle a week. Part of this time we should have been working.

We were charged twenty-five shillings a week for food that was not worth more than ten. There were only the two of us, and an old blacksmith who acted as cook.

He was one of the worst cooks I have ever met. He used to make corned-beef stews.

The bread was often nearly a week old.

In a few weeks another cook was put on and some more men. Things improved a little for a while but were soon as bad as ever. When the boss blamed me for sending out the dray not properly filled, I resented it

& threw down my shovel.

I was not driving & I had my side well filled.

I went back to Merbein & after a time got on with Frank amongst the vines.

Bill hung out on the job about a couple of months longer than I did. He was looking after the horses & driving & doing some odd jobs. He had a much better stomach for standing rough tucker than I had, & he also had more patience.

We finished the vines about the middle of September (some of the export grapes were very late).

I went down to Melbourne on the chance of getting a job navvying at Yallourn or elsewhere in Gippsland.

Bill got some work picking stumps, close to where he had worked for the road-contractor. I had a long wearisome search for work. I did a weeks pea-picking near Geelong. I think I made five shillings a day. Work was getting very scarce in Victoria.

The assisted imigrants that had been coming in for several years past had completely swamped the labour market as far as rural work was concerned.[57] In many cases farmers who had been paying men up to ***£2*** a week for ploughing, sacked their men.

Everywhere imigrants were complaining that they had been misled. Many could get no permanent work. They were often kept on public works when they were not suitable or strong enough for the work. An Australian would have been sacked straight away had he given so little value for the money. It was a very dry season & there did not seem to be much chance of work, haymaking.

I decided to go over to the Riverina. I heard that the crops were pretty fair there.

I believe I had to borrow a few pounds from Frank

to do the trip.

I got work at ten miles north of Lockart [sic]. I was haycarting for three weeks & thistle cutting for a week. The boss & his wife were splendid people & the tucker was excellent. The wages were thirteen shillings where in Victoria they would have only been eight or nine shillings.

After finishing at Lockhart, I went over to Orange where I was cherry picking for a few days. I also did a little pea-picking. Both these industries are no good. Families take it on & work long hours. The conditions were much worse than anything I had seen in Victoria.

One pleasing thing about Lockhart District, there seemed to be no imigrants there.

After New Year I went out to a little town about eighty or ninety miles north of Dubbo. I heard there was a lot of burr-cutting to be had here. This had been very much exaggerated. It was too early for burr-cutting. There had not been enough rain.

I believe I could have got a job with a clearing gang on a station if I had liked to walk out about twenty miles. My left knee was never much good for walking long distances. I decided to go back to Orange & try to get on at the iron-ore quarry at Cadia.[58] I only had about £2 left. Back at Orange I heard there was no chance at Cadia. So many men had gone out after the New Year. I decided to have another turn at the pea-picking. With two other men I waited three days for a job to start. We only worked six hours when the boss knocked us off as the price of peas had a sudden drop. My finances were now below ten shillings. I was four miles north of Orange & walked in & got my mail.

There was a letter from A.G. He had sent me a money order or p.n. [postal note] in lieu of a cheque

which the *Australasian* had sent him for 'The Flight of the Weary'. Fortunately* it was drawn out for Merbein, Victoria. I think it was only about £1 but it would have been very handy just then. I cant recollect very clearly about this money. I know I never got it till a fortnight after. With two of my pea-picking mates, I managed to get to Cadia with some bother. After waiting a day we got on & although I had no money my credit was good at the boarding-house.

Cadia is a small township in a big hollow. The inhabitants can never see over the surrounding hills. Loading trucks with spawls is not bad work & shovelling the clay when it is dry is not too laborious.

All quarry work is more or less dangerous and this was a bad quarry. I think nine men had been killed in it some time before. The gangers were careful men & every reasonable precaution was taken. But before I was long there I had several narrow escapes with [from] either being maimed or killed.

About Easter the rain began to fall. Then the over-burden mixed clay and stone, a few hundred tons or so at a time would fall. Shovelling wet clay is heavy work. It used to wrench my ribs a good deal.

I had for my mate a man named George. He was over seventy years of age but he was one of the best workers in the quarry. He was a small man but well built, & very tough.

He must have been a very handsome man when young. He had been a horse-breaker & shearer. He had been in the Western District & New South Wales for about sixty years. It was he who told me he remembered convicts being sent to Bathurst to be flogged some time in the latter sixties. I have never bothered looking up

*** 'Un-': Devaney's note, MS, p. 229.**

history to see if he was correct, but he was very truthful, very honest, & generous to [a] fault. It was his story of a convict being sent to Bathurst that gave me the idea for 'Ballad of Remembrance'.

That winter I managed to write one piece of verse, 'The Green Lover'. My eyes were a little [better] owing to the change from Victoria & I used to do a bit of scratching every Sunday. I started to write this thing as a kiddie piece. I used to see the *Sydney Morning Herald* now & again.

There was a great deal of kiddie verse in it, most of which I thought was very poor. A.G. was very disatisfied with this piece when I sent it to him. He disliked very much the word 'lolly'. He denounced some of the stanzas & I altered them. He kept on complaining about it. At last I put in the stanza—'Beauty is broken about the world' & that pleased him. I dont think the piece was printed however till the following year.

A.G. was a shrewd judge of public taste. When 'Green Lover' appeared in *New Poems,* several critics picked it out for unfavorable notice. The word 'lolly' seemed to offend them. H. H. [H. M.] Green[59] when he gave me a very generous notice in his book, seemed rather disturbed about this rhyme. My idea was, that he thought it grotesque or improper in some way.

Nettie Palmer was one of the kindest of critics. She spoke of 'froggie piece' as a blessed fantasy & I haven't heard so much grumbling about it since. I think 'Lament for Early Buttercup' was printed in *Sydney Morning Herald* when I was at Cadia and also 'The Birds Go By'. I believe both of these had been written the previous year, but perhaps I finished them in N.S.W.

I remember that A.G. was rather distressed about 'The Birds Go By'. Several times he got me to alter it,

but was still disatisfied. Then he put in a line of his own 'Lifting the eyes of the heart, to the height of the sky'.

It is by far the best line he ever made me a present of. He was very proud afterwards when some one picked it out for favorable notice in a review. He very rarely attempted to put a line in my verse. He might put in a line* or an odd phrase. When he attempted a line, he usually failed but he had a fine instinct for a good word or a phrase. If I was given a chance I could always alter a piece to suit him by making a new stanza or a new line but it might take me weeks or months to do it. He used to say I was a poor patcher. I was certainly a very slow one.

In the winter time the quarry ceased operations for three weeks. Nearly all workers had to clear away because they had no money to stop.

It was beautiful weather in the three weeks of idleness & we had a great deal of rain just before. By September the weather began to get much better & the good weather made the work much lighter. As the Spring went on, my old friend George began to be very much troubled with his eyesight & the place was dangerous enough for a man with good eyesight & I had a rather anxious time keeping a watch on the other side of the dray.

One day a new chum Englishman who did not understand the boss's directions started working on the face right above old George's head. Had I not interfered very speedily my old friend would have been maimed or killed.

It is difficult for an Australian born to understand how these new arrivals acted so stupidly. I suppose the poor beggars were very frightened of losing their jobs in a strange country & they got rattled through being

*** 'Word' in Devaney's hand, MS, p. 234.**

afraid of the boss & generally speaking the boss was very lenient toward them.

One remarkable thing I noticed in this quarry was the great scarcity of spawlers.

The award for a loader was I think £4.16.0. a week. For a spawler it was not much over £5. Of course good spawlers could not be got for that figure. It would have paid the employers to pay twenty-five or thirty shillings a day [to] the tradesmen for spawling is really a trade. The result was that any one could get spawling to do. Some new chums, sailors & firemen took it on. The ganger offered it to me; but I refused because I was not strong enough & I was not used to the work & I was afraid of jarring my thumbs. I knew one good spawler in the quarry who could do nearly ten times as much as the new chums. Some of the new chum spawlers were terrible loafers & besides it was very dangerous to work near them.

The weather got much warmer in October & my old mate's eyesight got so bad that he had to knock off. He went away to visit a brother in a neighboring town. We heard afterwards that he was very short of money & very few of us had any to give him.

He was very foolish with money. He would lend to anybody. He had great respect for all good people & was very tolerant. He despised wasters & yet he was so good-hearted he would lend to them. He had a fine mind although he had scarcely any education. I think that when his eyes were better he was able to sign his own name & read a little. Taking him all round I think he was one of the nearest approaches to a Christian gentleman that I have ever met.

In November the dust in the quarry got very bad & I began to think seriously of going back to Victoria. I

had not seen my stepmother & the two stepsisters for nearly two years & I thought I would get at least four or five months work at Mildura in the grape-picking & the pruning season. I also had a keen wish to see Sydney & my friend A. G. Stephens.

I packed up about the middle of December. I arrived in the harvest city* one evening & got lodgings somewhere out near Paddington. It was a very noisy place on the tram-track. I did not know that the trams ran all night in Sydney. They cease at midnight in Melbourne. A couple of days after I met A.G. by appointment at the Post Office.

He was still a very fine looking man. He must have been very handsome when younger. One of the first things he told me was that his ancestors were flemish pirates who settled in Wales three hundred years previously.

Most of the Stephens he said had been editors. They were good at looking over other people's work, but did not have much creative power themselves.

I forget what day of the week it was. I remember we went for a ferry-ride & afterwards he came back & showed me his den & we had a long talk there. He had a wonderful collection of all sorts of scraps written & printed. We talked little about my verse but much more about other peoples.

He really had a fervant love for Australian verse & prose. He had known so many writers and helped so many. He had a marvellous memory. He spoke with genuine feeling of many who had passed out.

There was a touch of something like genius about the man. His mind seemed to remind me of lightning. He was a difficult man to understand. One person who knew

*** 'Harbour' noted by Devaney, MS, p. 239.**

him well said that he was several men in one. He was extremely emotional & yet a stranger would not think it of him.

I think it was that day we went to see Mrs Gilmore. This warm-hearted lady was very anxious that I should meet Prof. Brereton & Christopher Brennan.[60]

She managed both these things. I believe she had great difficulty in finding Brennan because he was at some remote address. It was on the following evening that I met the charming John le Gay Brereton. We spoke [for] several hours & he saw me home about midnight. He spoke very feelingly of Henry Lawson whom he had known so well.

I think it was the following day, a Saturday, that I met Brennan. A very kind soul named John Quinn[61] invited A.G. and myself to dine with him at a cafe. The proprietor was French. French was spoken & I believe I was the only person there who did not understand the language. I was at once struck by the resemblance of Chris Brennan's head to that of the great Dr Johnson. One man said of Brennan that he had the greatest mind in the Commonwealth.

I think that man was a good judge. The next day was a Sunday & A.G. arranged for a party of us to go on a ferry ride. There was A.G. and myself, Brennan, Robert Crawford & Mickey Sortell [Sawtell] who wrote under the name of 'Orleff' ['Olaf'] for the *Worker*.[62]

I was deeply interested in Brennan's talk. He was a wonderful speaker. Crawford was a little man. He had written some very beautiful triolets. Triolets are not very easy things to write. I have tried them. I think Crawfords are the best ones I have ever seen done by an Australian poet. Mickey Sortell was by much the youngest of the party. He had written some very good

prose. A few years back he had done twelve months gaol through being mixed up in some labour trouble.

He seemed to me a very fine fellow indeed.

About dark we got back, & separated from Crawford & Sortell. A.G. & I & Brennan got back into A.G.'s den & there we listened for a couple of hours to Brennan's wonderful talk. I remember him saying that he considered the last part of Scotts 'Marmion' as good as anything in Homer. He said that his chief ambition was to translate two Greek tragedies. That evening when he said goodbye to A.G. he walked half the way home with me. Although he had such knowledge & such achievements, he spoke as simply to me as though we had been mates in the bush together. I can quite understand that he was very popular as a lecturer.

The evening before I left Sydney, I went with A.G. to a reunion run by the Workers Educational League.[63] There was a very lively lot of young people there.

I think A.G. used to deliver lectures about our writers to some of the students. I remember promising to write some autographed verse for two of the girls there, but when I got back to Victoria I put the matter off so long, that at last I was ashamed to attempt it.

I walked nearly all the way home with A.G. that night.

I was depressed at having to say goodbye, as I thought it unlikely that we should see each other in life again.

When I got back to the little State I found out that my sister, Mrs McKimm, was having some bad luck.

Her husband had been sick & out of work for several weeks.

The eldest boy had got a job at fifteen shillings a week & she herself had been forced to go out & make a few shillings a week working at a hospital.

All were very glad to see me. I went out to Leongatha where I had not been for a couple of years & saw my stepmother & the little girls.

Early in February I went up to Merbein, near Mildura where my brother Frank had secured a job of grape-picking for me. It only lasted a week however. My employer wished me to work overtime for nothing. Thereupon he sacked me & paid me off.

He was a very ignorant fellow. He did not even know the agreement under which we worked. I took the matter quietly for I knew that he would be compelled to pay me two days wages instead of notice.

I reported the affair to the organizer & he collected the money later on.

I had two other jobs that Summer. I got in about seven weeks altogether. I forgot to mention that somewhere earlier in the year I had gone out & seen Blamire Young the artist.[64] He & his charming wife entertained me very hospitably.

My eyes were not very good at the time & he would insist on me getting my eyes attended to at his expense. I did so & got a pair of glasses which made things much better for me for a good while.

About the end of March I went down to Melbourne. I had got a few pounds together & decided to get some of my teeth drawn. I was pretty thin & miserable when I came out of the quarry. I did not weigh much over nine stone. My brother-in-law got a job sometime in March. He had been out of work for over four months. He got work as a builders laborer although he was not fit to start when he did.

He had got hurt on the P.M.G.'s Department about six months previously, besides he had been suffering from blood-pressure. My sister & the boys had been

having a pretty rough time.

I think I must have stayed in Melbourne five or six weeks. I got back to Merbein towards the end of May.

By accident I got a very good look at the little Duchess when the train pulled up at Footscray on the way to Adelaide.

The depression was beginning to be felt & there were thousands of unemployed in Melbourne at that time. There was a little flash of sham prosperity when the Duke & Duchess were in the city.[65]

It was during my spell in Footscray that I managed to get 'Seven Days Down' into shape.* I believe the ballad was started a year or so earlier.

'The Lodging-House Canary' I wrote sometime during the previous Summer. At the lodging house where I stayed in Sydney there was a canary, a very fine whistler. This piece appeared in *The Spinner.* A.G. did not seem to care very much for it. I think the little magazine died soon after it.

We got a couple of jobs of pruning that year.

When we finished towards the end of August I went down to Melbourne.

The depression was now setting in properly & I found it impossible to get anything to do. I did not work again during that year.

As I was very poorly dressed I did not tell my writing friends that I was in Melbourne. I led them to believe I was still in Merbein. I, of course had to keep well out of their vision. Quite incidentally I mentioned I had not been working, to a friend of mine. She spread the news to some others, & it resulted in Blamire Young, Mrs Davidson, & some of my other admirers getting up a testimonial to me.

• **'The Moon Was Seven Days Down'.**

Blamire gave a picture valued at £50 to be raffled. They disposed of it by means of an Art Union & £112 was collected altogether.

I got the money from Bob Croll in November & the first thing I had to do was to get some more teeth out & get a new set in.

I was out of work over five months altogether. I think it was in September of that year that the book-sellers ran a book week. I tied for eleventh place with a lady Myra Morris in a popularity poll stunt.[66] The most surprising thing was that two of our finest writers, Jessie MacKay & Hugh McCrae, were even further back than I was. I think Kendall headed the list, but Patterson & Lawson were close-up.

That Spring my third book of verse, *New Poems*[67] appeared. I could not possibly have managed to get the pieces finished unless I had plenty of leisure.

I have never had any considerable leisure since. A.G. was very doubtful at the start whether we could get enough pieces to make a show at all. When I sent him 'Stoney Town', which appeared in the *Australasian,* & 'The Child being There', he was very pleased. He said that if I could keep on writing up to that level, all would be well.

The ballad, 'Seven Days Down', he was not so sure about. He seemed worried a good deal over it.

He suggested slight alterations, some of which I carried out, & some I thought unwise.

It's a difficult thing to write a serious ballad. One cannot copy the old ones, 'Gilmorris' & 'Sir Patrick Spence' [sic] & all modern things seem so hard & awkward.

I think A.G. rather liked the little piece, 'Song Without Wine', but he never said anything about it.

He put it in the front of the book without a name.

In the Collected Works I have called it 'The Magpie in the Moonlight'. It was rather vague as it was but most people know that magpies sing in the moonlight.

We got some very good reviews for the little book.

In Melbourne the reviews were kinder than they have been for the Collected Works.

We got one particularly good one from *Stead's Review*.

There was a little bit of a hitch about the Superior edition of this book. People who had ordered copies expected [them] for Christmas & they did not appear till the following March.

Just before Christmas I was entertained by Dr Booth at the Literature Society.[68] My friend said so many kind things about me that I was compelled to return thanks.

It was my first attempt at public speaking & I sincerely hope that it will be my last.

It was really a moment of victory. After being ignored in some quarters & after knowing that my friend & publisher A.G. had been ridiculed for praising my verse I had some of the leading lights in the Literature Society in Melbourne assuring me that I was a poet.

About the end of January I went up to Merbein again.

I got about seven weeks grape-picking & returned to Footscray about the end of March.

Both this year & the one previously the growers had obtained very heavy crops of sultanas.

I must have been out of work for nearly two months; I got back to Merbein at the end of May. I think my brother & I got about a months' pruning but through a misunderstanding we lost another contract which had been promised us. For over a week I walked over the settlement looking for pruning. I could only do about eight or nine miles a day as my left knee is never very

good. Frank got a few odd days now & again.

We just got promise of another job when I got a wire from the Country Roads Board asking me if I would accept a job as a messenger in the office at a salary of £4.10.0. a week.

I was very much astonished although I knew that some of my friends were moving in the matter. I thought it possible that I may get a job as a navvy on the Railway line or obtain employment somewhere with the State Rivers.

I believe that one of the main men in the movement was my good friend & brother poet, Frank Wilmot, better known as 'Furnley Morriss' [Maurice].[69] The Hogan Gov. was in power at the time & Mr J. P. Jones was Minister for Public Works. It was through Mr Jones' influence with Major McCormack that I got the appointment. Major MacCormack [sic] had just been appointed Chairman owing to the death of Mr Calder, the first Chairman of the Board.[70] On the 15th July 1928 I started my duties, & I can truthfully say that since then I have received nothing but kindness from the members of the Board & the whole staff.

I am now starting to be a city worker with the hope that I may have some leisure to do writing. I hope to conclude these rambling memos in another short letter. I am no longer a navvy with a pension.

WRITTEN BY L.N. FOR J.N.
FOOTSCRAY 12.8.'34

Six Years in Melbourne

1928 was about the start of the depression which has raged more or less ever since.

The Board was very busy indeed when I started in July. It had been formed back in 1913. I think Mr Livingstone M.L.A. had something to do with it. I am not very clear about its early history.

Up to that time each shire made its own roads.

The motorist was beginning to cry out for decent roads.

Settlers in out of the way places saw that their only means of salvation was quicker & cheaper transport.

Old time surveyors in the Land Departments cut the country into squares & made roads up hill & down dale. This blundering had made settling almost impossible in the hill country.

Owing chiefly to the Country Roads Board large areas of fertile hill country are now used for dairying.

Old settlers now speak with horror of the old days.

In 1929, my second year with the Board, the depression started in earnest. I can remember hundreds of hungry-looking men coming to the office looking for work & women sometimes in tears, begging for jobs for their husbands.

I think it was in the winter of '30 that Sir Otto Niemyer [Niemeyer] came from London.[71] Their was a good deal of panic in Victoria at that time. It is somewhat difficult just now to realize the strain that

was on the Premier (Mr E. J. Hogan) & the Minister for Works (Mr J. P. Jones). There was a constant outcry to find work for everybody & the Government was blamed for many things for which it was not responsible at all.

The dreadful muddle into which Closer Settlement had got & the terrific annual loss on the Railways were two of these.

The strain proved too much for Mr Hogan & his health broke down badly.

It was only after months of severe illness & a trip to England that he began to look like his former self again.

I have only met this tall & energetic man two or three times. I think I said in the last letter that it was through Hon. J. P. Jones & Furnley Morris the poet, that I got my present position. That is so, but I also think that it is possible that the Premier of the day had something to do with it.

One day when I was in the office the Chairman introduced me to him. I remember that he told me that he remembered Randolph Bedford sending a note to him about me.

Back in about January 1927 I remember [sitting] to Will Dyson for a sketch which was afterwards published in *Art in Australia.*[22] After the sketching was over Dyson gave me a note which Randolph Bedford had left for E. J. Hogan. Randolph had been over from a trip from Queensland & of course Will Dyson and he were old friends. Dyson had done drawings for him in 1908 for the *Clarion.* That was just before Dyson went to London.

I took that note round to Mr Hogan's secretary. He was very courteous & I believe he did all that he possibly could.

I called a second time & I think he advised me to see

some man in the Railway construction.

He may have given me a note. I am not sure.

The Premier's Secretary assured me that something might be done later on although the railway men could do nothing for me just then.

I may have gone to see him again in April. About May I went back to Merbein again.

I think that it would be the first year I was working for the Board that I finished 'The Whistling Jack'. A.G. did not like this piece at all. He said that the triplets were managed not so bad but the outlook of the thing was distasteful to him. He was distinctly a man of war. He hated Pacifists & I am inclined to think that he despised vegetarians. I explained that I was neither a vegetarian or a pacifist, but that did not seem to make matters any better.

I remember he wrote to me; 'the piece is only a more objectionable form of war'. He did not say more objectionable, he used some other word, which I forget.

I had [it] in hand about six months altogether. At last he agreed to type it off & send it to a paper for me. He sent it to the *Australasian;* & I think we were both surprised when that paper put it in. I think that the only thing he said in its favor was, 'You think good thoughts'. Asking A.G. to have anything to do with a piece like this was something like asking an Orangeman to go to Mass.

I did two other pieces about '29 or '30. 'The Good Season' & 'The Bard & the Lizard'. He did not care much for this latter piece.

He wrote a parady on it. I think that it appeared in *Aussie* & the parady was there too.[73] 'The Good Season', he liked much better. In fact I think he spoke better of it than anything I had done during the last

six years. He was very hard to satisfy in this rhyme. I altered many lines & whole stanzas for him. He even asked me to alter one or two lines which I thought alright & which I refused to alter. I began to notice the old man coming on in A.G.

It was not surprising. He had done extraordinary things with his brain. Much hard work for which he could never hope to have any reward.

Indeed for some of his hardest & most sincerest efforts people were inclined to ridicule him. I noticed that his instinct for the right word was not so good, in the last line of 'The Good Season' he put in 'all week round'. He maintained that it was better than year, which I have put in since.

About this time A.G. sent me a piece of his comic verse to correct. I think it was called 'Aussie Girl'. It was rather poor stuff. It had already been printed. It was difficult for me to understand why so gifted a man could be so careless about his own rhymes, but he was a man of riddles altogether.

I think he sent 'Good Season' to the *Australasian* [in] Melbourne. It was kept a good while & A.G. had to write to them about it.

He was very vexed over the manner in which he had been treated. I think he got it into the *Sydney Morning Herald* a few weeks later. I think he got a little piece of verse called 'Eva was Gone' ['Eva Has Gone'] into *Aussie* about this time.

He told me afterwards that he was sorry he sent it. He did not count much on it.

One thing that dissappointed me was that I had so very little leisure for writing verse. I think perhaps that it was not so much the want of leisure, but the dreadful noise of the city which stopped me.

Sometimes in the early hours of the morning when I lay awake I might get a small lyric started or half-finished. When I got up in the morning I was always in a desperate hurry to get away to work.

There would be not time to get anyone to write anything down for me. By the time I came back in the evening the memory of the rhyme would be gone. Perhaps I could not even remember the name of it.

A.G. began to complain generally that my verse lacked glow. He advised me to try different metres to disguise my slowness.

I think that it was in the winter of 1931 that my old friend got a sudden impulse that my Collected Works should appear. There was I think some Publishers Representative in Melbourne at the time. He wished me to interview this man & take some of my writing friends along with me.[74] This I refused to do. The whole thing was against my grain.

I altogether dislike urging anyone to publish my verse.

I really had no say in the matter as A.G. held the copyright of the three different books. I contended that it was solely a matter for him. He could do as he liked while my interests were safeguarded by the agreements I held. Anyhow one day I got a note from him saying that I need not bother about the review [interview?]. I was rather relieved & I think A.G. was offended over it in some way.

He never asked me afterwards to interview anybody for him.

I think that it was in the winter [of] '31 that my brother Frank read 'The Song For A Honeymoon' in an old exercise [book] of mine.

I had had it on hand for a year or so but never could

find time to finish it.

Frank advised me to send it to A.G. which I did.

A.G. liked two of the stanzas very much but pulled all the others to bits.

He advised me to cut out most of the stanzas. A good many had nothing to do with a honeymoon at all.

The piece as it appears in print now is very different from the copy I sent him. It could hardly be recognized as the same piece. He gave me many valuable hints, & in one or two stanzas put in lines of his own.

Most of these I threw out.

I believe that two or three of his lines still remain in the piece. We argued a good deal over these lines, & considering that he had gone to such pains over this piece & taking into account our life long friendship, I gave way in several instances.

Honestly however I think that I could have put in a better line myself. Perhaps this is just an author's vanity.

A.G. had a marvellous instinct for throwing out the unfit, the unworthy.

But when he tried to [re]place it by something better he was in difficulties.

It is a hard thing for one man to alter anothers rhymes. It is a difficult job, like being a step-father.

The piece was finished sometime before Christmas & A.G. got it into the Bridge Number of *Art in Australia* in March '32. The editors sent me a cheque for two guineas, but they wished me to send back the ordinary receipt which gave them the copyright.

Previous to this A.G. had asked me not to give the copyright to them.

I scarcely knew what to do but sent them back the two guinea cheque & asked them to send me a guinea for merely the right to publish.

This they did accordingly, but A.G. seemed to be rather displeased about the whole matter. He admitted afterwards in a letter that he was vexed with me for doing this.

I think he thought that the right to publish was worth two guineas.

In the winter of '32 A.G. began to write to me about the making of a collected edition.

He wished to scrap our old agreements & make a new one. I think that two thirds of the profits was to go [to] myself & one-third to him.

This sounded alright. It sounded more liberal than the agreements I already held, but there was a flaw in it & I was quick to point it out.

I argued that if A.G. made an agreement with the publisher on these lines it would be very difficult for me to prove what profits, if any the publishers were making.

I would have the ordinary right to look at his books & so on, but publishers are crafty folks & I have always heard that their habit is more or less to rob an author.

I suggested instead an agreement covering only the serious verse but slightly more in favor of A.G. than the one we already held. This he would not hear of at all. He thought that the old agreement was not generous enough, & the new one did not favor him much.

He wanted the right to pick from all the verse I had written including the light verse & make a collection.

To safeguard against dishonesty on the part of the publisher, he suggested that each of us should have the right to buy each other out for £150 if we were disatisfied at the way things were going.

I disliked this idea, as I could not imagine any of my friends finding £150 no matter what bother I was in.

The most serious impediment however was the matter of the light verse. I was quite willing that he should have the right to publish it at a later date, two or three years ahead (I, of course, to have some say in the editing).

But this was not what he was after. He wished the right to go through the lot & make a[s] big a book as possible.

I think that it was likely that he was treating with some publisher at the time & publishers generally like bulk.

What surprised me most about the whole affair was that up to very recently, he had always asked me to refrain from mixing my light verse with my best.

I had never written any light verse over my own name since I had written for Bedford in the *Clarion.*

About November '32, I wrote him a **long** letter & made him a final offer about the light verse. So **long** as it did not appear with the serious verse I was w**illing** to let him have the copyright on almost any terms he wished.

He replied in a very kindly letter. He seemed very disappointed, but he said he would not accept the offer although it was a good one.

I dont know whether I still have a copy of the letter.

I think I had written something about the new statue just erected to A. L. Gordon.[75]

I remembered he wrote, I like the letter.

I was pleased at that because I knew he was sorely disappointed that I would not do as he wished.

I got a reply. It was the last letter I ever received from A.G.

I got a reply written & I promised to send him some verse after New Year. I meant to do it at the time but

circumstances were against me.

I kept putting it off & off. I could not get the verse finished.

Early in March he sent me a little booklet concerning Chris Brennan. I did not comprehend till then that Brennan had died the previous year.

There were some touching passages in that little thing & many touches of humor.

I have had bits of it read to me since, & I can see now that A.G. thought that he might be going west before long.

Just about Easter my little nephew read one morning at the breakfast table that A.G. was dead.

It came as a great shock to me. I did not know that he had been suffering from some form of heart trouble for years.

I thought that by his vigorous letters that he was likely to last a long time.

It would be difficult for me to describe to anyone his loss to me. His word had become almost like a law & it was difficult for me to depart from it. I do not think that any man could have more patience or perseverance than he had. His mind was far too brilliant for some of our so called critics here who tried to make sport of him.

He had a good workman's horror of a bots' [botched?] job.

Not long after A.G.'s death I heard from Lothians the publishers. They were anxious to fetch out a collected edition. Then came a time of much correspondence between Mrs Robertson, the publishers & myself. I think Mrs Robertson would have been inclined to put in some of the lighter pieces, but I set my face against this & I found her very reasonable.[76]

There was a difficulty of making the book any size. I had written so little.

A. G. Stephens had held the copyright of about ninety pieces.

[A] Few of these were picked out & I sent Bob Croll about a dozen pieces or ones that had not previously been published in book form & a few new ones.

I think there are ninety-nine pieces in the book as it stands now. 'The Ballad of Remembrance' was sent in at the very last. I did not know whether it would get in in time for the printers. I had called it 'The Englishman's Defence' but Bob did not like the title so I changed it.

A little piece called 'The Road to the Hospital' was just too late for the printers. It appeared just recently in the *S.M. Herald.*

I had a good deal of worry over doing the autographed verse for the Superior edition.

My eyes were very poorly & I had to do the verse without looking at it. I had to open them now & again to see that I had not made too dreadful a job. This strained my eyes badly. I was really sorry that I promised to do it.

Lothians were very anxious that I should do it as there is a chance of profit on a Superior edition & a big chance of loss on an ordinary one.

However I finished the autographing & in a few weeks my eyes did not seem much worse. Owing to unseen delays the book did not appear until the 31st May 1934.[77]

I got some very good notices from Sydney & Brisbane & one good one from Pat O'Leary of the *Advocate* Melbourne.

Otherwise the Melbourne notices were rather cool & short. There was little enthusiasm about them.

From the *Australasian* particularly I received a trifling notice. From this paper I received very good reviews when my first and second book appeared.

However critics come & critics go & I must admit that some very good judges do not seem to like my verse.

One has to make an allowance for the difference in taste.

I for instance dislike Wagners music. I dislike Kiplings jingle pieces. I dislike Tennyson's 'In Memoriim' [sic]. It seems abominably dull to me.

I dislike Thackerys *Vanity Fair* which some critics think the best novel in the English language. I think Dickens is over-boomed altogether.

I can't understand how any one could read 'Meredith'. We all have our dislikes. We can't help that.

Many of my dislikes may be caused through want of education.

I must admit that sometimes it rather puzzled me why the Victorian government in its schoolpaper should be rather afraid of my verse. That little publication has been running for many years. During that time it has given to the children many good things but it has also put out month by month Australian verse of little or no value.[78]

Perhaps my verse is not suitable for children. I think however that some of the simpler pieces could have been used.

I believe that any fair minded judge would admit that they are above the level of much of the verse published.

Critics still puzzle me. Many assert that I am too vague.[79] Others assert that I use only the simplest of language & that my meaning should be clear to anybody. Those who say I only use the simplest language cannot

be very far from truth, because my knowledge of English is so limited, that I cannot afford to use out-of-the-way words the meaning of which I am not often clear about. For the last twenty five years I have been able to read scarcely any thing and nobody reads to me. I am therefore shut in a world of my own. I have no chance of studying the language or the words of other poets.

When a critic says that I become monotonous & that I have a very limited range of words he is not far from the truth.

Since I came to Melbourne I have been able to write very little indeed. Since the publication of the book last May, I felt a great urge to write something. I have started perhaps a dozen different pieces. When I say 'started' I mean I have got a few first lines or stanzas out in the early hours of the morning when I have been lying awake. Sometimes I have been able to get a few stanzas written out for me at the week end. Some have escaped my memory altogether. Pieces get started somehow in different meters but the same thought seems to prevail [in] each. I think I will be able to pick out a few which I think are the best & tie them down to something definite.

I am looking forward to my next annual leave at the end of November. I may be able to complete some of them then.

Twenty-five years ago Randolph Bedford wrote of his own rhyming in very much this fashion.

I have sometimes thought myself that a poet is like a female creature, a fish, or some other sea creature that lays immense quantities of eggs most of which is [sic] destroyed.

Perhaps this urge to write something near the end is merely the manifestations of vanity in an elderly

rhymer.

We have all heard of actors & actresses* who will positively not retire.

These jottings of different happenings are drawing to a close.

I feel sure that I have put in some very trifling things that are of no account. I daresay I have left out many things that might have interested some of those people who like my verse.

In conclusion there are some friends whom I think I should specially thank. I will leave out the ones who are departed & there a few of them. The two of whom I will always have in my mind most are my father & A. G. Stephens. They were both enthusiasts, lovers of poetry.

First of the living ones of whom I think is Mary Gilmore.

As far back as 1912 she wrote me a very encouraging letter & we have corresponded at intervals ever since. She is now nearly three score years & ten, & still writing. I think next of Kate Baker, the little old lady who published Joe Furphy's poems & for the last ten years or more has taken such a keen interest in my rhymes. Then Mrs James Dyer that wonderfully generous woman who spent a £100 in fetching out *Ballads* [sic] & *Lyrical Poems.*

I believe that seven years ago she would have brought out another edition but there were some difficulties at the time. I think also of Mrs Beatrice Fowler the very loyal friend who acted for A. G. Stephens in Melbourne when he brought out the little booklet *New Poems.*

It was chiefly owing to Mrs Fowler & her sister Mrs Heywood & Miss Kate Baker that I was first introduced to some of the writing people of Melbourne.

*** Changed to 'singers' by Devaney, MS, p. 284.**

This crowd included Percival Searle, Mrs Davidson, R. A. Bronowski (now of Canberra)[80], Nettie & Vance Palmer, Louis Lavatter, Gilbert Wallace & many others.

I desire to thank the fine old gentleman Blamire Young, the artist, for his kindness to a very uncouth navvy & also Will Dyson who did a drawing of me.

I must not forget some of the elocutionists, Miss Beatrice Ternan, Miss Jessie Wilson, Miss Clara Marlgren [Malmgren] & Miss Eilleen O'Keefe who helped to make my rhymes better known.[81]

A special word of thanks is due to the ever genial Bob Croll who edited the Collected Works & to my good friend Gerald Byrne, who has often invited me out to his quarters on Sundays & who has read to me many times both verse & prose.

I appreciate also the great kindness of my friend C. H. Fawcett of Footscray who gave me a birthday party last February.

We were a small party only four, & of course the cake had no room for so many candles.

I must also record what I owe to my brother Frank for his kindly criticism & for his eagerness to help me in any way.

My thanks are also due to my sister Annie for the long years she has patiently done writing for me.

In conclusion I must not forget my step sister Lisette who during the last twelve months has put in many wearisome hours in my service.

THE END

WRITTEN BY L.N. FOR J.N.
FOOTSCRAY 6.10.'34

Notes

Introduction

[1] James Martin Devaney (1890-1976) was born in Bendigo. He went to school there and at St Joseph's Marist College in Hunter's Hill, Sydney, where he trained as a teacher. He taught in various parts of Australia and, during an illness, began composing poetry which was published in *Smith's Weekly*. He married a nurse and began freelance writing. His wife later proved invaluable in tending the fretful and aged Shaw Neilson. Devaney's role in Neilson's life is described by Chaplin: 'Insufficient credit has been given to James Devaney for his presentation of Neilson. His work has naturally been overshadowed by the earlier efforts of A. G. Stephens. But Devaney contributed much during the poet's life time, and later, towards the acceptance of Neilson as one of Australia's few major poets.'

[2] Quoted by Harry Chaplin, *A Neilson collection* (Sydney, Wentworth Press, 1964), p. 43.

3 Robert Mackay ('Rob Donn' or 'Brown Robert') wrote ballads, some of which are quoted and discussed in a note to Walter Scott's story 'The two drovers'.

4 James Devaney, *Shaw Neilson* (Sydney, Angus & Robertson, 1944).

B A. R. Chisholm, *The poems of Shaw Neilson* (Sydney, Angus & Robertson, revised and enlarged edition, 1973).

[6] From a report by Dr Reuben Hertzberg, M.B., B.S., D.O., F.R.A.C.S.

[7] Devaney, op. cit., p. 31.

[8] Ibid., p. 164.

9 'Duke' Tritton was H. P. Tritton (1886-1964). 'Shearer, farmer, contract worker, gold prospector, writer, folk-singer and more besides, I first met Duke in the 1950s when Douglas Stewart and I were collecting material for *Old bush songs*. He had a great repertoire of these, a flawless memory and an authentic style in the Australian tradition of sung and recited folk verse. At my suggestion he wrote down yarns of his youthful bush experiences. These were published first in serial form, and then as a book by the *Bulletin*, and later by the Shakespeare Head Press in 1964, as *Time means tucker*. During his last years in Sydney Duke Tritton became a celebrity among groups and people concerned with the collecting, recording and performing of Australian folk song and recitation.'—Nancy Keesing.

[10] Shaw Neilson to Devaney, 4 June 1934. A. G. Stephens left the *Bulletin* in 1906 and began the *Bookfellow* in 1907. It underwent

financial crises in 1913 and 1923, but survived until his death in 1933.

[11] Shaw Neilson to Devaney, 5 August 1934.

[12] Shaw Neilson to J. K. Moir, January 1937.

[13] Hugh Anderson and L. J. Blake, *John Shaw Neilson* (Adelaide, Rigby, 1972), p. 5.

[14] Devaney, op. cit., p. 67.

[15] Ibid., p. 69.

The Autobiography

[1] According to Frank Neilson, his brother's first poem was written in 1889, 'Lines written to Baby Neilson—died in 1889' (Chaplin, op. cit., p. 15). Anderson and Blake (op. cit., p. 46) trace the verse to the *Nhill and Tatura mail,* 22 April 1893, where it was retitled 'Baby's asleep'.

[2] David Shaw was the son of John Shaw, Jessie Neilson's second husband.

[3] James Cornell married Emma Shaw, John Neilson's stepsister.

[4] John Adrian Louis Hope (1860-1908) was born in Scotland and attended Eton and Sandhurst. In 1883 he was made Conservative Whip in the House of Lords. In 1887-9 he was Lord High Commissioner to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. He was appointed in 1889 Governor of Victoria, and travelled widely. When he left in 1895, there were many public demonstrations of his popularity. During the period 1895-1900 he held posts in the third Salisbury Government, being Paymaster-General and Lord Chamberlain. In October 1900 he was appointed first Governor-General of Australia, and on 1 January 1901 took part in the inauguration of the Australian Commonwealth by the Duke of York. In 1902 he resigned after disagreements about supplements to his salary of £10,000; he was however created Marquis of Linlithgow.

[5] The Australian Natives' Association was a patriotic and friendly society begun in 1871, when a public meeting was held of native-born Victorians 'to protect the interests and promote the welfare of Australians'. In 1872 membership was extended to the native-born in all the colonies, and the body was renamed the Australian Natives' Association. In 1890 an intercolonial conference was held, and during the decade the Association conducted a long campaign for Federation. Other enlightened aims of the body were: land taxes on the unimproved value of land; female suffrage; a minimum wage; and one man one vote.

[6] Shaw Neilson's notebooks were purchased by the Mitchell Library, Sydney, in 1964 from Frank Neilson.

[7] Alfred George Stephens (1865-1933) was born in Queensland. At twenty-one he was editor of the *Gympie miner.* In 1891 he was sub-editor of the Brisbane *Boomerang.* In 1892 he was editing the *Cairns argus.* In 1894 he joined the editorial staff of the *Bulletin,* a Sydney periodical established in 1880. In 1896 he instituted the Red Page, a literary and political section of reviews, poems, articles and short stories that drew upon the best talent, of the day, selected and arranged with A.G.'s superb critical sense. He ran the Red Page for ten years, with

a break in 1902 when he went to Europe. In 1904 he produced the *Red pagan,* a book of essays culled from the pages of the *Bulletin.* He also published the *Bulletin story book* (1901) and the *Bulletin reciter,* popular books which helped to spread the work of contemporary Australian writers. In 1906 A.G. retired from the *Bulletin* and went to New Zealand, where he worked on the Wellington *Evening post.* By 1907 he had returned to Sydney and took over the running of the *Bookfellow (see* n. 13).

[8] Neilson makes no reference to the fact that another poem, 'Marion's child', was published in the *Bulletin* on 4 May 1895, and reprinted in the *Bulletin reciter* put out by A. G. Stephens in 1901. He gives the impression that 'Polly and Dad . . .' was his first appearance in that paper, in December 1896. 'As "Marion's child" had appeared eighteen months before he had either forgotten this fart, or chose to ignore it. Perhaps the latter, for on matters of detail and dates, Neilson's memory was remarkably good . . . James Devaney does not make any mention of this poem, either, in his biography of Neilson' (Chaplin, op. cit., p. 16).

[9] In 1881-3 the Victorian Government established local irrigation trusts under the Water Conservation Act. Mildura was settled in 1887, by the American irrigationists George and William Chaffey, who had been induced to come to Australia. The then Minister for Water Supply, Alfred Deakin, sponsored an Irrigation Act establishing the right of the Crown to use for irrigation all water, regardless of riparian rights, and to authorise construction of dams and weirs. The Mildura project faced many setbacks in its early years but was ultimately successful. In 1905 the creation of the State Rivers and Water Supply Commission centralised much of the administration of irrigation schemes along the Murray and other rivers.

[10] John Feltham Archibald (1856-1919) was born in Geelong and worked as a reporter on the *Warrnambool standard.* A Francophile, he changed his name to Jules Francois. In 1880 he founded the *Bulletin,* with John Haynes. He was its editor in 1880 and 1887-1903. In 1914 he sold his interest in the *Bulletin* and in 1919 was editing *Smith's weekly.* He also founded the *Lone hand,* which was edited by Frank Fox and then Arthur Adams, and ran from 1907 to 1921.

[11] Brother of John Neilson, William emigrated to Australia some years after the rest of his family and settled in southeastern South Australia, where he was known as 'the singer of Penola'.

[12] Bertram Stevens (1872-1922). Born in New South Wales, Stevens was by profession a solicitor's clerk. He edited the Red Page of the *Bulletin* while Arthur Adams for a time edited *Lone hand (see* n. 10) and then succeeded Adams as editor of the latter. He later became editor of *Art in Australia (see* n. 72). He edited an *Anthology of Australian verse* (Sydney, 1906), which was republished in 1909 as the *Golden treasury of Australian verse,* and later merged in an anthology compiled by George Mackaness.

[13] In 1907, A. G. Stephens began editing the *Bookfellow.* This had been a part of the *Bulletin* since 1899, but from 1907 appeared as a

separate magazine. There was a gap in publication between 1907 and 1911, and several financial crises thereafter. In 1913 Mary Gilmore *(see* n. 24) purchased for £70 the right, title and interest in the *Bookfellow,* thereby enabling Stephens to pay the bills and preventing seizure by the printer. A.G.S. was retained as editor at £4 a week. In 1923 his daughter Constance Robertson *(see* n. 76) acquired the paper for £40 and employed her father as editor till 19 February 1925. She supervised production till the *Bookfellow* ceased publication in 1925; after A.G.'s death in 1933, she remained the registered proprietor of all rights.

[14] The picture was a full-page drawing by Dagmar Ross. It appeared on 17 January 1907, and the artist was paid thirty shillings (Chaplin, op. cit., p. 17).

[15] *Santalum acuminatum,* known as quandongs.

[16] Randolph Bedford (1868-1941) was born in Sydney. In 1888 he joined the staff of the Broken Hill *Argus.* In 1889 he moved to the Melbourne *Age,* where he stayed till 1891, when he turned freelance and became a wanderer. He was elected to the Queensland Legislative Council in 1917, and in 1923 held a seat in that State's Legislative Assembly. In 1937 he contested (unsuccessfully) a seat in Federal Parliament. He wrote poetry, short stories and novels, and edited the *Clarion,* a monthly popular magazine which sold for sixpence, and ran to sixteen pages. Its brief life covered the period 1907-9.

[17] William Henry Dyson (1880-1938) was born in Victoria. He worked as an artist on the Adelaide *Critic* and in 1902 returned to Melbourne to work on the *Bulletin* and Melbourne *Punch.* He married Ruby Lindsay in 1910 and went to London, where he worked on the *Daily herald.* During World War I he was an Australian war artist and cartoonist. In 1925 he was given a large salary to come back to Australia and work for the Melbourne *Herald* and *Punch,* but in 1930 returned to London, where he spent the rest of his life.

[18] Hugh Raymond McCrae (1876-1958) was the son of George Gordon McCrae, a minor poet, and was born in Victoria. He studied art and architecture, but decided to support himself by writing verse and satirical sketches in the Melbourne *Punch,* the *Bulletin,* the *Lone hand* and the New York *Puck.* He was an actor of considerable attainments, and appeared in Australia and the United States. He edited the *New triad* in its last stages. His main achievement however was in poetry, and many of his books were illustrated by Norman Lindsay.

[19] William Henry Fitchett (1842-1928) came to Australia from Lincolnshire as a small boy. He became a Methodist minister in 1866 and was on a circuit for sixteen years. In 1876 he took an Arts degree at Melbourne University and later an honorary LL.D. from Queen's College, Toronto. In 1878 he proposed that a Methodist girls' school be set up in Melbourne, similar to the boys' school Wesley College, and in 1882 Methodist Ladies' College at Hawthorn was established. Fitchett was its first principal and held the post for forty-six years.

He was also an active journalist. He wrote a regular column in the *Spectator* (as 'XYZ') and from 1882 edited the Sunday home magazine

Southern Cross. He wrote a scries of articles for the *Argus* entitled 'Deeds that won the Empire': these were collected and published (Melbourne, 1896; London, 1897) in thirty-five editions and 250,000 copies. His *Wesley and his century: a study in spiritual forces* (London, 1906) was especially popular.

[20] Arthur Adams (1872-1936) was born in New Zealand. In 1898 he came to Australia as literary secretary to J. C. Williamson, the theatrical entrepreneur, and wrote a pantomime, *The forty thieves.* He stayed in Australia as a writer and poet. From 1906 to 1909 he edited the Red Page of the *Bulletin* (see n. 10) and worked also as substitute editor on the *Lone hand* and Sydney *Sun.*

[21] Thomas Bent (1838-1909) was the son of a market gardener; hence Shaw Neilson's remark about 'cabbage gardens'. In 1871 he defeated George Higinbotham (later Chief Justice of Victoria) in the contest for the Brighton seat in the Legislative Assembly. In 1880 he was Minister for Public Works in James Service's Government, and Minister of Railways in the O'Loghlen Government in 1881-3, a post in which he sponsored construction of 800 miles of railway line. In 1893 the financial crisis almost ruined him, and in 1894 he lost his constituency and turned to farming. He was however returned for Brighton again in 1900 and began a second political career as Minister of Public Works, Health and Railways. In 1904 he became Premier and in 1908 was knighted.

[22] 'tats': Tattersall's Consultation (universally known as 'Tatt's'), and set up by George Adams (1839-1904) who was born in England and migrated to Australia in 1855. He was a butcher and publican. In 1878 he took over the lease of Tattersall's Hotel in Sydney and in 1884 purchased the freehold. The hotel was headquarters of the Tattersall's Club, and Adams began to hold regular sweepstakes on race meetings. In 1881 he opened the sweepstake to the public and on the Sydney Cup that year offered a stake of £2000. Such activities were outlawed in New South Wales in 1892, so Adams transferred his business to Queensland and in 1895 to Tasmania. During the period 1902-30 the Federal Government put a ban on delivery of mail to Tatt's, but in 1953 a proposal was made to establish a State lottery in Victoria, and Tatt's was transferred to Melbourne.

[23] He married Elizabeth MacFarlane, aged twenty-eight. The 'cup' is of course the Melbourne Cup, run on the first Tuesday in November.

24 Mary Jean Gilmore, *nee* Cameron (1865-1962), was born in Goulburn. New South Wales, and taught in a number of country schools. She then taught in Sydney, where she met William Lane and was converted to his New Australia movement. She sailed with a party of 'new colonists' to Paraguay and married a fellow-colonist. On the break-up of the community, she taught English in Argentina and Patagonia and wrote for newspapers in Buenos Aires. In 1902 she returned to Australia with her husband. For twenty-three years she edited the women's page in the Sydney *Worker.* One of Australia's foremost woman poets, she was created a Dame of the British Empire.

[25] The State Rivers and Water Supply Commission was set up by

the Victorian Government in 1905, to be 'responsible for the control or general supervision of irrigation, rural domestic and stock supplies, town supplies, and flood protection and drainage schemes outside the metropolitan area'. Under the 1886 Irrigation Act the Crown could use all water in any stream, lake or swamp, and no riparian rights could prevent the use of water for irrigation *(see* also n. 9).

[26] William Arthur Holman (1871-1934) was born in London and migrated to Sydney at eighteen. He became a cabinet-maker and made a name as a debater and Labour supporter. In 1898 he was elected to State Parliament, aged twenty-seven. He studied law, was admitted to the Bar and became Attorney-General, Deputy-Premier and then Premier of New South Wales. He supported closer settlement, developed the railways and irrigation projects, and set up several successful State enterprises. He broke with Labour after the failure of the second conscription referendum during World War I and for four years led a 'nationalist' government. In 1932-4 he was a member of Federal Parliament but was excluded by his opponents from Cabinet posts.

[27] Bernard Patrick O'Dowd (1866-1953) was born in Victoria. He took a degree in arts and law at Melbourne University and became assistant librarian at the Melbourne Supreme Court Library. He was later Parliamentary Draftsman. A fervent radical, he resigned in 1935 from the public service and helped found the radical weekly *Tocsin.* He also wrote for the *Bulletin* and published six small collections of verse, as well as legal textbooks.

[28] Charlock *(Sinapis arvensis,* of the family Crusiferae) is a weed with poisonous seeds. It can now be controlled by spraying at an early stage with hormone sprays.

[29] Before World War I Australian wheat was sold privately in Britain and Europe under Australian contracts prepared by the London Corn Trade Association. During the war, increasing risks and freight costs led to a marketing scheme between the Commonwealth and most States. Advances were made to farmers pending sale of their wheat, which was compulsorily acquired by a wheat pool and sold under controlled conditions. The Wheat Pool was replaced after the war by voluntary pools conducted by growers' committees until in 1928 world stocks accumulated and prices fell by one-third of pre-war levels, while facing increased duties in other countries. In 1931-2 and 1933-4 the Commonwealth Government spent over £8 million on bounties and relief. In 1938 the Wheat Assistance Act fixed prices at 5/2d per bushel and in 1939 the Australian Wheat Board was set up to acquire and market all wheat at fixed prices. By the end of World War II, world prices had risen rapidly, and stabilisation schemes have since been introduced.

[30] William Morris Hughes (1862-1952) was born in London and migrated to Brisbane in 1884. There he worked at various occupations, travelling widely. In Sydney he became organiser of the Australian Workers' Union; during the maritime strike of 1890 he was counsellor to the Wharf Labourers' Union and then its secretary. He later formed the Waterside Workers' Federation and became its president. In 1894

he was elected to the New South Wales Legislative Assembly where he was known as a skilful debater. He was during the 1890s the leading Labour proponent of Federation and was elected to Federal Parliament in 1901. In 1903 he was admitted to the Bar, having studied law, and became in 1904 Minister for External Affairs, then (1908) Attorney-General. Then in 1915 he became Prime Minister, and advocated total war against Germany. As a believer in compulsory military service, he isolated himself from Labour policy and after the failure of an October 1916 referendum on the issue was expelled from the party. For three months he led a 'National Labour' government supported by the opposition. 1917 saw the formation of the Nationalist Party, a coalition of Hughes' Labour supporters and the Liberal party. In November 1957 he launched another conscription campaign, threatening his resignation if the result was 'no'. The campaign was bitter and Hughes invoked wartime censorship powers to prevent publication of an opposing speech by T. J. Ryan *(see* n.31), and even to seize the issue of *Hansard* reporting it. In December the referendum was held, and lost: Hughes resigned but was recalled when a Labour government could not be formed.

[31] Thomas Joseph Ryan (1876-1921) was born in Victoria and took arts and law degrees from Melbourne University. He taught in Victoria and Queensland, and then practised law in Rockhampton. In 1909 he was elected to the Queensland Legislative Assembly and in 1912 became leader of the Labour party. Labour was elected to power in 1915 and Ryan became Premier, Chief Secretary and Attorney-General, sponsoring measures for workers' compensation, industrial arbitration, factory inspection. He also introduced the State into trading activities such as coal mines, steel foundries, meat processing and insurance. In 1919 he resigned to enter Federal politics and was returned as Member for West Sydney. He was still involved in heavy libel actions against Victorian and Tasmanian newspapers at his early death, and most of his socialistic enterprises in Queensland reverted to private industry.

[32] Victor Kennedy (1895-1951) was born in Bendigo. He lived for some time in Queensland, and worked on the *Gympie times* and the *Tweed daily.* In Cairns he edited *Northern affairs* for fifteen months. In 1933 he was invited to give lantern lectures on the Great Barrier Reef, and travelled down the cast coast to Melbourne, where he met James Devaney. He had met Shaw Neilson some years earlier in Bendigo, where he had studied art at the School of Mines. Neilson had astonished him afterwards with a gift: the typescript, 'we'll marked all over in red' by A.G.S., of *Heart of spring.* Kennedy also worked in Shepparton and Geraldton, but kept up a correspondence with Neilson. In 1938 he published a third volume of poetry, printed by the Hawthorn Press. He was an enthusiastic supporter of the Jindyworobak movement. With Nettie Palmer, he was co-author of a biography of Bernard O'Dowd published in 1954 *(see* also n 27).

S3 Devaney contends that the horse's name was Sasonof (op. cit., p. 104). Neilson however is correct; Sasanof was the 1916 winner.

[34] 'X-disease' covered a number of ailments earlier in the century.

It is used today to denote cardiac arrhythmia and other conditions with widely varying symptoms.

[35] A forest devil was a mechanical device used in clearing land of timber and stumps.

[36] Clement John de Garis (1884-1926) was a pioneer in the dried-fruit industry at Mildura. His publicising activities brought him into conflict with 'Grant Hervey', otherwise the eccentric writer G. M. Cochrane, who in 1919 appeared in Mildura posing as an American, Hervey G. Madison.

[37] The ordinary edition of *Heart of spring* was bound in blue cloth boards with gold titling and sold at five shillings. The 'superior' edition, of twenty-five, was bound in soft blue leather with padded covers, edged in gilt. Each copy was initialled and numbered by A. G. Stephens, with a stanza in Neilson's hand written on the half-title verso. The stanzas varied.

[38] In 1894 the Melbourne City Council established a power-generating plant at Spencer Street. Electric tramways were running in Melbourne, Geelong, Ballarat and Bendigo in the early twentieth century. In 1917 the Victorian Government set up a statutory authority to investigate brown coal deposits in the Latrobe River Valley. In 1919 its report led to the establishment of the State Electricity Commission and the construction of the Yallourn power station. The S.E.C. brought all power-generating activities under its control and in 1941 the Spencer Street station came under its aegis (though the station remained the property of the Melbourne City Council).

[39] David McKee Wright (1869-1928) was born in Ireland and at eighteen migrated to New Zealand, where he entered the church. He left, however, to become a journalist and poet. He then went to Australia, where he succeeded Arthur Adams *(see* n. 20) as editor of the Red Page of the *Bulletin.*

[40] James Hebblethwaite (1857-1921) came to Tasmania from Lancashire at the age of thirty-three, for health reasons. He taught, and became a clergyman, taking Anglican orders in 1903. He held various parishes in Tasmania.

[41] Mrs Vance Palmer is Nettie Palmer, *nee* Higgins (1885-1964). She was born at Bendigo and took an arts degree at Melbourne University. She studied phonetics in Germany, then took her M.A. in Melbourne. In 1914 she married Vance Palmer in London, and spent five years between England, France, Belgium and Australia. When the Civil War broke out in Spain in 1936, the Palmers left Spain, and returned to Australia, where they lived by journalism, literary criticism and Vance's novels, plays and short stories. Nettie Palmer wrote, with Victor Kennedy, a biography of Bernard O'Dowd, and a memoir of her uncle, Henry Bournes Higgins, first president of the Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration.

Vance Palmer was a journalist, novelist and playwright (1885-1959). Born in Queensland, he taught, then turned to writing. He was appointed to the Commonwealth Literary Fund Advisory Board in 1942 and was its chairman from 1947 to 1953. He was also delegate to the

World Peace Conference in Helsinki in 1955.

[42] Anderson and Blake (op. cit., p. 135) consider that Jack Shaw was in fact a cousin of Neilson's, an elder son of Dave Shaw, Neilson's uncle *(see* n. 2). *Birth* (Melbourne, 1916-22) was devoted mainly to poetry and articles and was edited first by W. Mitchell and later by Bernard O'Dowd, Frank Wilmot, Nettie Palmer and Frederick Macartney.

[43] The Glenmaggie Reservoir, on the Macalister River near Maffra, supplied water for irrigation to the Gippsland district.

[44] John Bernard O'Hara (1862-1927) was born in Bendigo. In 1886 he was lecturing in mathematics and natural philosophy at Ormond College, in Melbourne University. In 1889 he became headmaster of the South Melbourne College, which was by 1917 the leading private school in Victoria. The poem quoted by Neilson appears in *The poems of John Bernard O'Hara* (1918).

[45] Elsie Cole (Mrs A. H. Angel) was a Melbourne poet of the time, whose best book, in H. M. Green's opinion, was *Children of joy* (Melbourne, 1928).

[46] Louise Berta Mosson Dyer was the daughter of L. L. Smith, a Melbourne politician who had had medical training in Paris. She was born in Melbourne and educated at the Presbyterian Ladies' College. She pursued musical studies overseas under Edwin Scharf and Phillip Halstead. In 1913 she married a Melbourne businessman, James Dyer, who endowed her creation, the British Music Society of Melbourne, with £10,000. About 1930 she migrated to France, where she set up the Lyrebird Press and published music, specialising in editions of ancient and rare composers, particularly those of the fourteenth century. She was a member of the Cent et Une, a group of women who published at their own expense one book per year in a de luxe edition of one hundred copies, illustrated by a well-known artist. For her efforts she was made a Chevalier of the Legion d'Honneur and awarded the Gold Palmes of the Academie. In 1939 she married an Oxford don, Dr J. Birch Hanson, and lived in Oxford and Paris until her death in about 1962 in Monaco. Her daughter took over the Lyrebird Press in Paris.

[47] *Ballad and lyrical poems* (1923) appeared in a limited and an ordinary edition. The limited edition consisted of seventy-five copies, bound in green and white striped boards, with a green canvas spine. A paper label was affixed to the front cover, and the spine title was in gilt. Each was numbered and signed 'John Shaw Neilson'. The ordinary edition was bound in similar striped boards, but with a paper label on the spine, and was of a slightly smaller format. The book was to have been dedicated to Louise Dyer, but there was not time before she left for Europe; Neilson's next two books made up for the omission.

[48] Despite the establishment of the University Conservatorium in Melbourne in the early 1900s (a rival was known as the Melbourne, and later the Melba Memorial, Conservatorium), the practice continued for many years of having candidates examined by visiting examiners from the London College of Music, as its qualifications were acceptable

in Britain and Europe, where aspiring performers must seek their reputations.

[49] McCrae's book *Satyrs and sunlight* **(1909)** was produced in a quarto edition in London in **1928** and **1930,** illustrated by Norman Lindsay.

[50] Jack Lindsay **(1900-**) is the eldest son of Norman Lindsay. He graduated from the University of Queensland. He helped found and edited the journal *Vision* and with Kenneth Slessor helped found *Poetry in Australia.* He produced one book in Australia, *Fauns and ladies* (Sydney, **1924)** and left Australia for England, where he now lives. He has written many novels and volumes of poetry. In **1923** with John Kirtley he set up the Fanfrolico Press, which went with him to London.

[51] Chaplin (op. cit., p. **4)** discusses this question of A.G.'s financial involvement in Neilson's books. *Heart of spring* made a loss of some **£50,** as many copies were remaindered at a shilling. *Ballad and lyrical poems* was guaranteed by Louise Dyer with a cheque for **£100;** she received fifty copies of the ordinary edition (at six shillings apiece) and fifty of the limited edition (at a guinea each). A.G. stated that he was out of pocket on both editions.

[52] Kate Baker was a schoolteacher who had boarded with Joseph Furphy's family and undertook to publicise his work. *Such is life* was published in **1903,** under the pseudonym Tom Collins, and *Rigby's romance* in **1921.**

[53] Henry Bournes Higgins, uncle of Nettie Palmer *(see* n. **41).**

[54] Frank Morton **(1869-1923)** was born in Kent, but came to Sydney and tried engineering, business and maritime pursuits before drifting into journalism. He worked for *Triad,* which ran from **1915** to **1927,** and wrote poetry, mainly about the sensuous pleasures of love.

[55] Henry Tate **(1873-1926)** was a poet and composer, author of *Australian musical resources,* and was interested in trying to develop a distinctively 'Australian' music, based on a deflection of the major scale. He was an expert chess player, and a member of the Australian Literature Society.

[56] Gerald Byrne edited the *Agricultural journal.* He was a member of the dramatic group the Pioneer Players, and wrote a play, *The bridge.*

Robert Henderson Croll **(1869-1947)** was born in Victoria. In **1886** he worked in the Melbourne Public Library, then transferred to the Education Department, and was Registrar of the Council of Public Education for thirteen years. He was interested in anthropology and a keen naturalist, as well as contributing prose and verse to many journals. He was first general secretary and treasurer of the Australian Academy of Art and assistant editor of *Emu.* He was for a time during World War II deputy chief publicity censor for Australia.

Percival Serle **(1871-1951)** was born in Victoria and educated in Melbourne. He was chief clerk and accountant at the University of Melbourne, but retired to devote his energies to literary research and his dictionary of Australian biography **(1949).** Assisted by R. H. Croll and Frank Wilmot, he edited *An Australian anthology: Australian and*

New Zealand poems (London, 1927).

Louis Lavater (1867-1953) was a composer, critic and teacher. A graduate of the University of Melbourne, he later founded the Australian Guild of Composers. He was music critic of the Melbourne *Sun.*

[57] Between 1873 and 1910 Victoria abandoned schemes of assisted immigration. In 1910 assistance was restored, and between 1910 and 1940 116,015 assisted immigrants arrived in the State; 39,946 of them in the period Shaw Neilson is describing, 1910-25. Selection emphasis was on labourers for public enterprises, rural workers and small capitalists with agricultural experience—all competitors for the kind of work Neilson sought. The Federal Constitution had placed powers to control immigration in the hands of the Commonwealth, but active control remained with the States until 1920, and then policies followed the same general lines. With the economic depression of 1929, immigration fell and Australia suffered a net loss of population.

[58] Cadia is about sixteen miles southwest of Orange.

[59] Henry Mackenzie Green (1881-1962) was a brilliant student at Sydney University, then a journalist with the *Sydney morning herald* and the *Daily telegraph* for thirteen years. In 1925 he was appointed Librarian of the Fisher Library at Sydney University, and held that post for twenty-five years. He was a critic and editor of both Australian and English literature, as well as writing poetry and essays. In 1961 his greatest work was published, *A history of Australian literature, pure and applied* . . . .

[60] John Le Gay Brereton (1871-1933) was the son of a doctor and minor poet of the same name. He was born in Sydney, took an Arts degree there and worked in the office of the Government Statistician. In 1902 he was made Assistant Librarian at the University of Sydney, and later Librarian. In 1921 he was appointed professor of English at the University. He was an Elizabethan scholar, a poet and writer of prose sketches; among the latter were portraits of Henry Lawson and Christopher Brennan.

Christopher John Brennan ((1870-1932) was born in Sydney, and took a degree in philosophy and classics. Between 1895 and 1908 he worked as a cataloguer in the Sydney Public Library and as occasional lecturer in Latin, French and German. In 1908 he was appointed lecturer in French and German at Sydney University. In 1920 he became professor of German and comparative literature but was forced to resign in 1925 when his wife sued for separation. He spent the rest of his somewhat Bohemian life teaching and coaching, supplemented by a small Commonwealth Literary Fund pension. He contributed many articles to the *Bulletin, Bookfellow* and the *Modern language review of New South Wales,* and published several volumes of poetry. In 1933 A. G. Stephens published a posthumous tribute, *Chris Brennan.*

[61] John Quinn (born 1879) was New South Wales Parliamentary Librarian from 1924, and a friend of Chris Brennan's.

[62] Robert James Crawford (1868-1930) was born in New South Wales and educated at Sydney University. He was a farmer and businessman,

who contributed to the *Bulletin* and *Bookfelloxv.* He published several volumes of poetry and was represented in several anthologies.

Michael Sawtell was a journalist and writer of radical opinions. He was a member of the Industrial Workers of the World, a revolutionary industrial and political organisation. In 1916 he was charged in Western Australia with seditious conspiracy and convicted on perjured evidence.

[63] The Workers' Educational Association was founded in 1913, after the visit of Albert Mansbridge, the Association's founder in Britain. With David Stewart, he toured Australia at the invitation of the universities of Melbourne and Sydney; his expenses were paid by James Barrett, Chancellor of the former university. By 1914 the W.E.A. was established in all States as a system of university extension lectures and other activities aimed at general adult education in the arts. However, Australian distances made it a difficult system to administer, and by 1938 the project had declined in all States except New South Wales and Queensland.

[64] William Blamire Young (1862 1935) was a Cambridge graduate who came to Australia in 1885 and taught as a mathematics master at Katoomba College in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales. He met the cartoonist Phil May, who persuaded him to adopt art as a profession. In 1911 he had his first successful exhibition, in Melbourne. He designed posters, but was chiefly noted for his watercolours. His technical experiments included the use of chemicals in his washes. He was also a critic noted for scholarship and liberal views. He showed great kindness to Neilson. A.G. however did not care for him, and 'often lakes a swipe at him in letters to Neilson' (Chaplin, op. cit., p. 26).

[65] In March-May 1927 Albert, Duke of York, visited Australia. The younger brother of Edward, Prince of Wales, he later became George VI. With the Duchess, he visited all the States in H.M.S. *Renown,* and opened the first session of the Commonwealth Parliament in Canberra on 9 May 1927.

[66] Myra Morris, a poet, novelist and short story writer, came from Boort in Victoria. Jessie McKay (born 1864) was a New Zealand poet.

[67] *poems* (1927) was published in an ordinary edition in grey wrappers, and a limited edition bound in green cloth with a gilt front title. Neilson received fifteen copies, and wished apparently to present one to Archbishop Mannix; A.G. replied, 'I am not keen on the gift to Mannix. I think a cloth copy is over the odds, since you are not of his faith; please yourself (Chaplin, op. cit., p. 23, citing letter of 11 November 1927). Neilson and A.G. had agreed upon an equal share of the takings; Neilson wrote that each received fifteen shillings.

[68] Dr James Booth was president of the Australian Literature Society, established in 1899 'for the study of Australian literature and the encouragement of authors'. Bernard O'Dowd was one of its first vice-presidents.

[69] Frank Leslie Thompson Wilmot (1881-1942) was born in Melbourne, where his father was a pioneer socialist and friend of Bernard

O'Dowd. His early literary efforts were published in *Tocsin.* At fourteen he was employed at Cole's Book Arcade, and later became manager. He was subsequently manager of Melbourne University Press. He contributed regular verse and articles to *Triad* and the *Bulletin* under the pen-name 'Furnley Maurice', and lectured on Australian literature for the Commonwealth Literary Fund. The best of his verse was published in an edition by Percival Serle *(see* n. **56)** in 1944.

[70] Its chairman then was Major William Thomas Bartholomew McCormack (1879-1938), an engineer and valuer in shire councils in New South Wales. In 1913 he was appointed a member of the Victorian Country Roads Board, and also lectured in an honorary capacity on the engineering faculty at Melbourne University. From 1914 to 1917 he was overseas with the First A.I.F., where he was mentioned in despatches and won the Croix de Guerre. In 1928 he was appointed chairman of the C.R.B. and was the author of a report on modern road construction and safety systems presented to the Victorian Government.

An item described by Chaplin (op. cit., p. 36) is a Christmas card with a greeting consisting of a poem of two stanzas, addressed 'Xmas greetings, 1940, To the Men of the Roads, from C.R.B. Staff and Employees.' Neilson's name is printed at the foot of the poem.

[71] In January and April 1929 loans in London had failed, and Scullin's high tax and tariff policies were proving unsuccessful. In June 1930 Scullin agreed that Sir Otto Niemeyer, a director of the Bank of England, should make an inquiry into Australia's public finances. Niemeyer attended the Premiers' Conference in August and stated that Australia's living standards were too high, compared to her position in world trade. As overseas loans to bridge the gap had been unsuccessful, he recommended wage reductions. This was anathema to Labour supporters, and resulted in New South Wales Premier J. T. Lang's plan for countermeasures. Niemeyer was represented as the agent of overseas bankers and financiers, and in 1931 Lang repudiated the interest on State loans raised in London. This led to his dismissal by the Governor, Sir Philip Game.

[72] *Art in Australia* was founded by Sydney Ure Smith (1887-1949), who was president of the Sydney Society of Artists. Its standard of reproduction was high, as was the standard of writing in the accompanying articles. It ran in Sydney from 1916 to 1942.

[73] *Aussie* ran in Sydney between 1918 and 1931. It was essentially a soldiers' magazine, with First A.I.F.-type humour, paragraphs and very short articles.

[74] By 1931 A.G. had become discouraged with publishing Neilson's books, and suggested to Neilson **(5** May 1931) that he go to Oxford University Press with a deputation of six friends and seek publication; he suggested O'Dowd, Croll, Serle and Gilbert Wallace (editor of the *Education gazette* and *Birth.* Nothing however came of the proposal, and the project was cut short by A.G.'s death in 1933. Neilson was later approached by the English publisher Lothian.

75 Adam Lindsay Gordon (1833-1870) came to Australia from England,

and worked as a mounted trooper and horsebreaker. He was briefly in the South Australian Parliament but resigned. Various business enterprises failed, but throughout he wrote ballads. The combination of misfortune and possible head injuries from steeplechasing and horse racing led him into deep depression, and he shot himself. A memorial was erected to him in Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey. A.G. thought him 'a 4th rate poet, if a poet at all' but Neilson was perhaps sympathetic to Gordon as the two had something in common: extremely poor sight.

[76] Constance Robertson was A.G.'s daughter and inherited his copyrights. She offered to select the poems for a collected edition. Neilson wanted Devaney to write the foreword, but Mrs Robertson differed: 'I do not think a preface from him would carry much weight from a selling point of view'. R. H. Croll eventually wrote the foreword and selected the contents (Chaplin, op. cit., p. 30).

[77] *Collected poems* (1934) appeared in an ordinary edition of a thousand octavo copies bound in blue cloth, and a limited edition of fifty-five copies on large paper, signed, and bound in red buckram. It was dedicated to Louise Dyer. The limited edition sold out almost immediately, but in 1937 Neilson wrote to Devaney that Lothian's had about 620 ordinary copies left (21 March).

[78] The *Education gazette* was edited by Gilbert Wallace, who also edited *Birth.*

[79] Neilson to Devaney, 19 August 1934: 'Some people seem to think that it [lyric poetry] should be as definite as an ironmongers catalogue, and as dogmatic as a Calvinist sermon.'

[80] R. A. Broinowski (born 1877) was a public servant with the Defence Department and the Federal Senate. He edited *Spinner* (Melbourne, 1924-7). He also wrote poetry, and edited original verse programs for the Australian Broadcasting Commission.

[81] Beatrice Ternan, Eileen O'Keefe, Jessie Wilson and Charlotte and Hilda Malmgren were listed as elocutionists or teachers of elocution in Melbourne directories of the time.

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The orange tree (1954). Composer Margaret Sutherland, setting for voice, clarinet and piano. Melbourne, Lady Northcote Trust Fund

Five songs (n.d.). Composer Frank C. Francis, in collaboration with Shaw Neilson

Other settings were composed by Alfred Hill *[Love's coming, Song be delicate),* Mirrie Hill *(Song be delicate)* and Horace Keats *(The orange tree).*

The National Library of Australia acquired in 1964 a collection of papers about the poet John Shaw Neilson, including a series of autobiographical letters never before published.

Neilson (1872–1942) was the son of a small settler and contract labourer in Western Victoria, and led the same kind of life as his father, helping his family work a number of disastrous selections and adding to their income by seasonal jobs at fencing, fruit picking, quarrying and woodcutting. His mother and two of his sisters died young, and he and his brothers suffered from chronic ailments attributable to poor diet and constant anxiety.

Recounting this grim saga, Neilson also tells how he came to write lyrical verse and ballads in his spare time, and how through his mentor, A. G. Stephens, his efforts were published in the *Bulletin*, the *Bookfellow* and other journals. Thus his reputation grew as 'Australia's finest lyric poet' — an astonishing achievement for an unschooled 'navvy', as he always described himself.

Neilson's autobiography, in relating these oddly assorted elements of his life, is an important social and literary document, illustrating how fugitive and inexplicable are the sources of art.

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