

Candida Baker: Les A. Murray

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LES MURRAY was born in 1938. He grew up on a farm in the dairy and timber country around Bunyah, a small district on the New South Wales coast. An only child, his mother died when he was twelve, and he spent the years between school and university with his father.

In 1956 he left school and moved to Sydney to attend Sydney University, where he began writing poetry. However, it wasn't until 1959 that he submitted his first poems for publication outside the university.

When he left university he was employed for four years at the Australian National University in Canberra, where he translated scientific, technical and scholarly articles from Western Europe for academics. In the late sixties he was the recipient of two early Commonwealth Literary Fund Fellowships, and since then has written poetry full-time, with occasional periods as a writer-in-residence to see him through the 'buffer' years when he is not on an Australia Council grant.

His first book of poems, *The Ilex Tree*—with Geoffrey Lehmann—was published in 1965. It was the start of a long journey into his own rural past and the Scots Australian heritage which was a strong part of his family culture. Other books followed—*The Weatherboard Cathedral* (1969), *Poems Against Economics* (1972), *Lunch and Counter Lunch* (1974), *Ethnic Radio* (1978), *The Peasant Mandarin* (1976), and a verse novel, *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral* (1980).

The book which attracted the widest attention was *Selected Poems—The Vernacular Republic* (1976, reprinted as *The Vernacular Republic: poems, 1961–1981*). In it he established himself as a poet of extraordinary breadth and vigour. *Persistence in Folly* (1984), a book of selected prose, followed, and in 1984 *The People's Otherworld*, which won the Australian Literature Society Gold Medal and the New South Wales Premier's Prize for Poetry.

The interview with Les Murray took place on a sunny autumn day at his home in Chatswood, a northern Sydney suburb. An unpretentious brick house with a pleasantly overgrown garden, it houses Murray, his wife Valerie and their five children, who range in age from twenty-two to four years old. After Valerie had made us coffee, we retired to Murray's study at the front of the house, where Clare, the eleven-year-old decided to join us.

I secretly wondered if this might have an adverse effect on either Murray or myself when it came to asking or answering questions and the interview began somewhat shakily, while Clare passed the time by drawing a not entirely flattering portrait of the interviewer.

Puffing on a cigar and wearing one of his favourite striped jumpers, Murray was outwardly articulate and friendly—his bulky frame of the comforting rather than intimidating variety—but he became surprisingly nervous if he felt a question deserved more than the usual rote answer. His shyness was apparent, for instance, when he attempted to talk about his poetry in depth—he didn't try to hold back, but he found it difficult to be expansive, as he himself says in the interview. What he did say, however, was that it was the resonance of poetry which intrigued him. Like classical music, of which he is fond,

poetry created a world of sound and colour for him. Explaining why he would never have been a novelist, he said, 'I'm fairly uninterested in character and plot, compared with the feeling, the sense of things'.

Murray is a complex character: a devout Christian, a republican nationalist who fears nationalism, a poet who writes traditional verse with a rich new language. His preoccupation with the military has worried more than a few of his admirers. He freely admits that he has made enemies, and that he is an enemy to some. He believes that all people are individuals, but one of his ideals is that humanity should live in an equal society. But perhaps these paradoxes are what produces the extraordinary range his readers have come to expect from Murray's work.

The study where Murray works is a comfortably muddled room overlooking the front garden. It adjoins the main connecting hall in the house, and one is well aware of family noise there. Murray, sensibly, does most of his work when the children are at school and university, when the house is quiet.

INTERVIEWER: You've won a lot of prizes for your poetry. Do you think they've been useful to you?

MURRAY: Yes, I do. But they probably stir as much envy as they stir admiration—at least in the trade. However, they make it a bit more likely that one can go on getting fellowships and at least be able to afford to write. What else do they do, let me think . . . well, they make the relatives happy and the money's useful, when there's any attached to them. But they're the worst sort of patronage really. In fact the only form of patronage which truly works is if the government or a private body gives you an income and lets you get on with it. Preferably without looking in on you, like Peggy Guggenheim used to refrain from doing. The last thing you want is your patron looking over your shoulder. The difficulty with the otherwise very good Australian patronage system is that it has to be reviewed every year.

INTERVIEWER: But you have mentioned in interviews that you felt the grant system had made you, in a sense, unemployable . . .

MURRAY: Oh yes. It did that long ago. I designed some of the present system in a Labor party position paper I wrote back in 1969, and I said at the time that the Commonwealth Literary Fund fellowships could be a disadvantage. If you received one or two of those, no employer was going to want you around the place because they never knew when you might want to wander off and spend a year writing. Eventually they'll say, 'Don't come back'. Still I guess I've had so many fellowships now and am such a notorious and flagrant writer that nobody would ever want me in their office.

INTERVIEWER: How did you survive before the present system then?

MURRAY: By working at cover jobs. I had two of the early fellowships, the Commonwealth Literary Fund fellowships. One of them, in 1968, was an absolute life-saver. We were living in Wales, and we were literally down to our last sixpence. Look, I'm not joking. And with it we bought a pig's head, which should have been turned into brawn but we didn't know that. We roasted it, and it wasn't very good. Then I hocked my typewriter and went up to London to try and find some sort of work. I'd been there a few days and I went to Australia House just in case there was some mail there, although it was supposed to be sent to our address in Wales, and lo and behold there was a telegram saying 'Congratulations, you have been awarded a Commonwealth Literary Fund fellowship'. So that really saved us. We packed up our gear after that and spent a winter in Inverness. We thought we might as well have one *real* winter while we were over there. I wanted to spend some time in the Highlands. After that we drove to Europe and toured around until our car busted, and then we hired another one. We had a good time.

INTERVIEWER: Did you like Scotland?

MURRAY: We loved it. We lived at Culloden, a few miles above Inverness and the cloud over Inverness used to come up into the bottom of the garden. When I say garden that's probably misleading; it was snow and dead grass, but with the cloud it was very spectacular. A tragic place, of course, Culloden Field. But to go back to your earlier question — I survived before the fellowships by taking odd jobs. Labouring and storeman jobs early on. I was a translator for four years at the ANU. I was in the Public Service a few times; I think I took their oath, or affirmation, on at least five occasions.

INTERVIEWER: What did you translate?

MURRAY: Scientific and technical and scholarly articles from Western Europe, for the academics. This was a nice job because I learnt a lot. I wrote a poem about it called 'Employment for the Castes in Abeyance'. My colleague was a bit upset about that at the time, but I think he got over it.

INTERVIEWER: When did you start writing poetry?

MURRAY: I began to get somewhere with it in about 1959 or 1960. I started trying to write in the late fifties, but I didn't preserve any of the early stuff. There were flashes in it, and probably there were one or two I should have kept, but overall they weren't good. The earliest one I've kept is from 1961. So I've been at it for over twenty years now.

INTERVIEWER: How do you discipline yourself to write?

MURRAY: Everybody in the house goes off to something educational. Valerie teaches ESL as they call it—English as a Second Language. Christina is a tutor in Animal Physiology at Sydney University. Daniel's at the University of New South Wales, the little kids are at various schools and the baby goes to a lady during the day. So the place gets quiet at around quarter to nine, and I work until the first one comes home at about half past three. Then sometimes if I'm really on the trail I'll work again after about eleven at night. I need quiet to work though; I didn't always, but I do now. It's such high concentration work, and you can have your concentration cut to pieces by somebody walking in and saying, 'Dad, have you seen my . . .'

INTERVIEWER: Do you find the length of time that it takes you to write a poem varies a lot?

MURRAY: The longest I've ever taken was on *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral*, but it was a verse novel, and that took about fourteen months. I've known poems that need to be put away and forgotten about before you can finish them. The longest I ever waited for a poem in that way was probably two years. Mind you, I forgot the poem existed! But I couldn't solve the end of it, it wouldn't come right. I think I wrote it in 1962, and I simply couldn't finish it. I pulled it out a couple of years later and wrote the last three lines of it with no trouble at all. You do occasionally have to get right away from a poem for it to work. I find a poem has a certain aura to it; while you're still in that aura you can work on it, tinker with it, but once you're no longer in the aura anything you do to it will usually only damage it. Which is why, although you sometimes need the break from them, you can rarely work on very old poems, poems you wrote ten or fifteen years ago.

INTERVIEWER: Do you use the word aura in a spiritual sense?

MURRAY: Not really, it's a metaphor for being caught up in the life of that particular poem. The best thing of all with a poem is when you know you've got it in the bag, you've captured the particular essence, which is always more surprising than you thought, and all you've got to do now is to polish it into shape and get the details 110 per cent right.

INTERVIEWER: How do you measure the work you've done? It's easy to ask a novelist how many words they write, they understand that, but how about poetry?

MURRAY: Amount means nothing to a poet. When Oscar Wilde said that you could spend a morning putting a comma into a poem and an afternoon taking it out again, he wasn't exaggerating at all. You can do that quite easily.

INTERVIEWER: Do you find it an agonizing process?

MURRAY: No, I find it a marvellous one, although it can be frightening to face sometimes when you know you're going to have to do all the work on paper rather than having done it in your head. The best time is when you've got a head full of poetry, although you never know what you've done in your brain until you sit down. Sometimes though, it's in there and that's terrific. That's known in this family as being pregnant. You know, they reckon you only use ten per cent of your brain, well in art you use a lot

more than that. You use a lot of the silent part and you don't know quite what you're doing. You float really, and it comes from somewhere deep inside. It's up to you to try and get as much of your internal resources as you can out of you and onto the paper.

INTERVIEWER: In a sense it's a more naked expression of oneself being a poet than, say, a playwright or a novelist, because they can use more technique . . .

MURRAY: We have every bit as much technique as a novelist or playwright . . .

INTERVIEWER: I don't mean in the sense of writing technique, I mean that they often disguise it in a way a poet doesn't. Like 'The Steel', for example, in *The People's Otherworld*. That to me is an extremely vulnerable poem. Is it difficult facing up to that sort of emotion when it comes up?

MURRAY: Well, I cried when I wrote that poem. I think I had to be that far away from the event to be able to write about it. I wrote it thirty years after her death and I don't think I could have done it before then.

INTERVIEWER: Did she die in childbirth?

MURRAY: No. It was a miscarriage; she started to bleed uncontrollably, the doctor wouldn't send an ambulance and our car was out of commission. It took a while to get her to hospital and by then she'd lost an awful lot of blood. She rallied after that for a while, but then she got toxæmia of the kidneys and she didn't have the resources left in her to fight it off.

INTERVIEWER: How old were you?

MURRAY: Twelve.

INTERVIEWER: You must have felt very bitter about it.

MURRAY: No, but of course I only got the story in bits and pieces. Dad felt bitter, because he knew the whole thing from the word go, and it hit him like a great iron club, but for me it was more gradual. Partly because it was in *that* region of the body, so among reticent country people I wasn't told too much to start with. It was only just before I went to Scotland that I heard the last bit that fitted into the story, which was the fact that I myself had been induced. The old method of induction was just to break the waters and the baby just had to come out; now of course they can give injections and it's a great deal more controlled. But in those days it was get born or bust, simple as that. The induction may have damaged my mother and caused her later miscarriages.

INTERVIEWER: Were you a close-knit family?

MURRAY: Yes. Because of her miscarriages I was the only child. There were only the three of us, and we were very close.

INTERVIEWER: After she died did you and your father develop a special relationship?

MURRAY: Yes and no. In a way we did, but he was so shattered by mum's death that he was barely alive for five years after it. He gave up telling me stories—he'd lost all heart for them. He gave himself up to his farming and that was it. He's never quite recovered from it. He looks all right, but any pressure can bring him down.

INTERVIEWER: You've come from a very small family then, to having a five child family.

MURRAY: Yes, but of course one-child families were a rarity in the bush in those days. Dad was one of eight—well eleven actually, three died in infancy—and mum was one of eight. Valerie comes from a small family, she has only one brother. But then her history is utterly different, because she came out of Hungary in the war—which I've written about.

INTERVIEWER: I'd like to ask you about the background of Australian poetry. Do you think it's fair to say that there are two very different strains here—the poets who are descended from the European moderns, and those who have used the American moderns as their guide?

MURRAY: I don't know about all these classifications, they worry me a bit. But there was a hectic period when there was supposed to be an American or European model—it varied from commentator to commentator. But it drew on different traditions in different places. In Melbourne, for example, one group drew very much on the modern German tradition, but as much as anything that was a promotion. A disparate group of people banded together to overthrow what they saw as the establishment that was holding them down — Australian poetry is easy to capture but impossible to hold — but eventually their great canon virtue of youth deserted them. They were no longer the youngest poets around and the group's been in tatters to some extent ever since. But it was the cause of enormous bitterness; and it was the first time in Australia that we'd seen the techniques of literary terrorism used. I kept my head down for a fair while, but I gradually became the enemy no matter what I did, just by existing I became the hated enemy.

INTERVIEWER: Was that disturbing?

MURRAY: Oh yes. It took me a long while to start fighting back but eventually you have to when you're being driven out of existence. Some poets were destroyed. Geoffrey Lehmann, for instance. His reputation was just starting and he's never recovered from the mud-slinging. These kind of ruthless tactics were carried out until they finally ran out of steam, or had the steam let out of them, and now a kind of hypocritical peace has descended on the whole scene. The hypocritical peace of those who would still fight if they thought they had the forces. But I don't trust them as far as I could spit them up wind, some of these people.

INTERVIEWER: Most of the writers I've interviewed seem upset by classifications of their — or other writers' — work.

MURRAY: Well, we just had a terrible immersion in the tyranny and bastardry that it really means. The thing is that classifications in Australia — or anywhere — are never about knowledge, they're always about power. And that's what the whole thing was about. It was the first time we saw the methods of revolutionary socialism applied to capturing the citadels of art in Australia.

INTERVIEWER: You talk like a poet!

MURRAY: Well I suppose I could say that I was at war for about fifteen years, and it's not quite over yet. Especially out beyond the trade, in critical circles.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think of Australian poetry today?

MURRAY: It's not bad. Until recently there was a surprising lack of young poets coming on. There are a few picking up now, but not too many. There's very few under thirty. Kevin Hart was the youngest poet in Australia for quite a few years. There's a brilliant young fellow, Richard Allen, who has gone off to Holland to become a professional ballet dancer. Whether he'll write again I don't know. I ran his 'Epitaph for the Western Intelligentsia' at the end of the *Oxford Book of Australian Verse* which I've just edited. That book was a test of character too, because I had to put in everybody who'd been on the other side in the civil war. I had to be scrupulous; I think I managed it.

INTERVIEWER: I haven't read 'Epitaph for the Western Intelligentsia'. In title at least it sounds a bit like 'The International Poetry Festivals Thing', in *The People's Otherworld*, which made me laugh. Is that a true picture of a poetry festival?

MURRAY: Definitely. I can tell you which festivals it was based on. Struga in Yugoslavia and Poetry International in Holland.

INTERVIEWER: You don't enjoy them?

MURRAY: I love going to them. But they're bullshit. What use is it reading poems to people in languages they don't speak and providing them with usually fairly inept translations? And I'm in the agonizing position of being able to judge the translations. They're just big cultural get-togethers, about national cultural prestige and careers and display. The last thing they're about is poetry.

INTERVIEWER: When did your interest in languages start?

MURRAY: It's a funny one that, because there wasn't much of it where I came from. There was a bit. Some of the very eldest people around remembered Gaelic, and the first language I used to hear a lot apart from English was Arabic, because Taree happened to be a town with a lot of Lebanese. So I suppose I grew up conscious of language. I don't know, I just started studying and I liked it. I've always liked learning to excess. I'm a word freak.

INTERVIEWER: Were there any linguists in your background?

MURRAY: My great-grandfather's cousin was Sir James Murray, of English dictionary fame. He taught himself a dozen or more languages. And he nearly came to New South Wales. His first wife was dying of tuberculosis; he wrote to his relatives in Australia and said, 'Look, we need a warm climate. Could I get a job teaching out there?' He was a self-taught scholar. He'd gone through the apprenticeship system of becoming a teacher — first you were a pupil and then you were a teacher. They wrote back saying that Australia was desperate for teachers and that they should certainly come out. Well, they only got as far as London and his wife died there, so he settled down and eventually re-married, and went to Oxford. Oxford never gave him a degree either, but they asked him to do their dictionary! It's an old Scots tradition, self-education.

INTERVIEWER: Is it difficult teaching yourself a language?

MURRAY: It's a piece of cake. You buy yourself a 'Teach Yourself Russian,' or German, or whatever, and start from there.

INTERVIEWER: How about speaking though, that must present difficulties?

MURRAY: That's a detective job. It's almost impossible to represent accurately on paper how a language sounds, but it's fun to guess from the indications how it *might* sound, then you try it out on a native and see how far wrong you are, and then you gradually adapt it until you've got it right. It's exactly the same thing as having an ear for poetry or music. Sometimes amusing things happen. I remember I'd never spoken Danish and I was in Denmark. Bruce Clunies-Ross teaches there at the University of Copenhagen, and he'd invited me over for a week. We went up to the bus stop to meet his girlfriend, and there were two people up there he got yarning to and they seemed to speak no English, so Muggins here started speaking Danish. I'd only ever read or heard Danish before, I'd never tried to speak it, but I was getting on all right, and getting better at it, making whole sentences and being understood. The man had a little sly smile on his face all the time and it turned out he was the English master at the local high school. He was letting me speak Danish, just to see if I could do it, and really that's how you learn. You feel nervous of course, but you have to do it, and once you've taken the plunge it's not so bad. It's best to be slightly drunk. You can speak languages much better if you're slightly drunk.

INTERVIEWER: Going back to your poetry. When did you first begin to think you might want to be a poet?

MURRAY: Late in 1956, when I was eighteen. I'd never taken much interest in poetry, or at least, I didn't *think* I'd taken much interest in poetry. In fact I think I did. I used to hear a lot as a kid because my grandfather's generation was still interested in poetry. Scots of that generation and previous generations were, of course, and I caught the tail-end of that, although it was mostly Robbie Burns when I was young, and a certain amount of Australian bush poetry. But I went away to town, to school — the town and the country are very different things — and in the town I was really being taught to be a white-collar worker. Kids of that kind ignored or despised poetry, and since I wanted to be like them I thought I wasn't interested. Then just before I left school, our two very good English teachers, who happened to be married to each other, introduced me to modern poetry, and I thought that here, at last, was something

which was relevant. It wasn't just talking about English plants I'd never seen, and leaves that fell off trees, when the leaves never fell off gumtrees, or not in that seasonal way, anyway.

INTERVIEWER: Who did they show you?

MURRAY: Hopkins first. That was a shock to the system because the language was so alive it made you want to weep. Then I saw some of the English moderns of the thirties, and they were talking about corrugated iron and railways. I thought, 'Wow, this stuff's not only about primroses!' Then I read some modern Australian poetry; I think my sports teacher introduced me to that. He mentioned there were people in the world like Kenneth Slessor and Judith Wright, and I was hooked. I never looked back. Once you get turned on to it, that's it. I started trying to do it once I got to Sydney Uni, and neglected my studies horribly to do so. I was doing three things at university. One was learning how to live in the city, the other was learning to read, and the other was learning to write, so I didn't have much time for my course.

INTERVIEWER: You have a reputation for being a modern day Celtic bard. Is that how you see yourself?

MURRAY: That is my punishment for writing essays. One should never write essays, especially self-explanatory essays. I mentioned in one or two essays that I was interested in the Celtic bardic tradition, and I immediately got myself labelled. People would rather label than think. It's quicker for them. I thought it was a profitable line in poetical history — a line which had become very weak in our time, but I thought it still had some potential for life. You didn't just re-create it, you learnt from it and then did your own thing with it. That's what you do with any form of artistic borrowing. Anyway, critics were only too happy to pin the Celtic bard label on me because it made an agreeable change from Murray the Bush . . .

INTERVIEWER: The Bush Balladeer . . .

MURRAY: Exactly. Really, they'd do anything rather than think, or read attentively, some of the labelling people.

INTERVIEWER: But it is unusual to be the sort of poet you are with the bush background . . .

MURRAY: That's right, and that's why they have to label me. I'm an anomaly. I'm the wrong class to be a writer, or they think I come from the wrong class to write about the things I write about. That's where Australian critics are uncomfortable with me because I'm the wrong class, or what the Aborigines call 'wrong skin'. I offend dismissive stereotypes about rural people.

INTERVIEWER: Do the thoughts in your head surprise you?

MURRAY: Yes. There's a very good line by Mick Stow somewhere, which is, 'Country children know more than they know'. And I'm one of the few who managed to get some of it down on paper. I think most people know more than they know, really. I get into trouble sometimes, like every time I get a prize I dedicate it to the poor people of the North coast. The rural poor. I used to do it in complete sincerity, now I do it partly because of all the bastards it will irritate.

INTERVIEWER: You still have a place near Taree — that retains a sense of continuity for you doesn't it?

MURRAY: I've never moved from the country. Oh, I did acquire a taste for coffee shops early in my urban exile. Sometimes when I'm a bit dry though, I head towards the Darling River. I figure you always get a poem before you hit the Darling. But the place at Bunyah Dad and I own together. It's a small place, forty acres. Dad bought it and we put the house on it. Dad does the farming, we visit. It works well.

INTERVIEWER: Would you like to live there?

MURRAY: God, yes.

INTERVIEWER: Why don't you?

MURRAY: Because the little fellow screaming out there in the corridor is an autistic child, so he has to go a special school. He's seven now, and although he's made good progress — he's left the autistic school — he still needs a lot of care and special education. His speech is about at the three-year-old level, and he's very erratic. He'll probably never be right. We just hope he'll be happy. He might eventually shake it off enough to lead an almost normal life, but as they told us the other day, he'll probably always need somebody around he can recognise. I think I might leave him the farm though, because he loves the place. The irony of it is—although he can't realise this—is that he can't live where he'd like to live, because of what he is. But apart from that there are other considerations. The sheer difficulty of getting people to school, all that. I'm not the only member of the family.

INTERVIEWER: Do you find he gets less frustrated in the country?

MURRAY: To an extent. He wanders around and plays by himself—they're solitaires, autistic children. Really, he's an exaggerated form of me. I feel the introverted side of my character has been passed on and exaggerated in him. It's difficult not to feel guilty about it, even though it is patently ridiculous to blame oneself.

INTERVIEWER: You've said that you enjoy learning languages, do you enjoy travelling?

MURRAY: Funnily enough I don't. Well, not much. I'm not terribly interested in cultures outside of the broad one I belong to. I'm a little bit Toynbeeish in that way; I see a lot of cultures people are interested in as dying cultures. Really, the future of the world is the West, in one form or other, and the rest is remnants. Even as the West may be collapsing, it has the prestige.

INTERVIEWER: That's a controversial viewpoint.

MURRAY: Bloody oath it is. Right now we're indulging to the hilt in an elite fashion for every cultural remnant in the world. I've done it myself. Certainly the Celtic thing was one of my indulgences—although that was never recognised by the keepers of literary fashion because it's not a favoured cultural remnant. Not ethnic, somehow.

INTERVIEWER: In the *Vernacular Republic* you talk about how little the cultural potential of Australia has been realised. What prompted you to write that poem?

MURRAY: I suppose I was trying to draw on the whole experience of its people—Australia's people—rather than on elite views. I'm also in the apparently paradoxical position of insisting on quality and hating elitism. That was one of the reasons . . . this is difficult to talk about. I always get tongue-tied when it's important, which is one of the reasons I write poetry because there you can sometimes *say* something. It was in some ways a model on which Australian culture can be built. It was unlikely that it would be so built, but I figured that in the early stages of any culture there is a moment where that sort of quality of culture can be caught, but then it passes and an elite of one sort or another takes over. In America they were lucky to have a long enough period of the primitive, or vernacular, to get things like Whitman and a number of good primitive painters before the curtain of respectability descended. Unfortunately I think we've missed that moment. By respectable I mean two things: old-fashioned dead respectable and modern radical respectable. Two faces of the same thing, and both of them have ruled for too long in Australia. The other thing I saw was that in any given culture there was usually one place that would be the Capital and the rest would be labelled as Provincial. I thought, 'Wouldn't it be lovely if we could avoid that in Australia?'. That it would be wonderful if we didn't force our culture to be over-centralised, so that nobody need feel down-graded or provincial. I suppose at least in Australia we do have several centres. Some of them in decline. I guess Adelaide and Brisbane are declining. Although I hope not. Melbourne and Sydney are on a par and are going ahead. At least we've got two Parises instead of one. Although deep down I think Melbourne's probably on a losing streak. I think Sydney's our equivalent of Paris, and it's a pity, I'd much rather see something like the German model where all sorts of places are important. There's no capital of the bush—and a declining amount of capital in it, in the

money sense.

INTERVIEWER: You mention the importance of quality without an elite. Do you feel that quality Australian literature isn't accessible enough to people?

MURRAY: No, it's accessible enough; all they've got to do is buy it in a bookshop. It has different problems. The fact that the blasted publishers won't publish enough copies of it, for one thing, and that those are therefore so expensive, for another. I've been fighting for years to get publishers to print four or five thousand of a book of verse rather than a measly 750. Publishers are desperately reluctant to sell books, for some reason. I sell well for a poet, but I'd sell better if Angus and Robertson's gave me half a dog's chance. When they published the last book I asked them how many they were printing and they said, 'one thousand', I said, 'Why don't you do four, I can outsell a novelist'. But no, they were terrified by that idea. I said, 'It'll sell out in weeks, it'll be gone before Christmas and then there'll be none in the shops'. I was right too.

INTERVIEWER: They only printed a thousand of *The People's Otherworld!*

MURRAY: Yes. Mind you, they've reprinted three times since then, but it would make much more sense to publish more to start off with and put them out where people can get them. They'd probably sell twelve thousand like that instead of four. People get put off if they go into shops and can't buy the books straight away. Look, it's partly a bad result of a good thing, and that is that Australian literary publishing is subsidised, so publishers haven't really had to push Australian literary books because they get paid for them anyway. They're not risking anything. The ones they push are things like collected poems and selected poems for which they get no subsidy, so they've got to make them pay. Also, and this is not entirely the publishers' fault, the booksellers won't take the books. The publishers should put the screws on them and say, 'We'll only give you Len Deighton if you take some literary books'. But they won't of course. The trade's bedevilled by self-fulfilling prophecies about what people will buy.

INTERVIEWER: On the back of *The People's Otherworld*, Jeff Nuttall from *The Guardian* remarks: 'The really disturbing thing about contact with the Australian scene, however, is discovering the gigantic talent of Les Murray'. He goes on to say how extraordinary it is that you can be so well known here, but not heard of overseas. Is that beginning to change now?

MURRAY: Yes it is, and I haven't had to compromise myself to reach that position, so I'm happy. A book of my selected poems is coming out in England later this year and that'll get around a bit. I've also published a well-received selection of poems in New York. I'm getting known gradually.

INTERVIEWER: You judge quite a few poetry prizes don't you?

MURRAY: Not really. That's only started in the last few years or so. I've just reached the age for it, I suppose. A lot of things in Australian literature go by seniority. It's like the New South Wales Police Force, I've finally been promoted. At forty-six I'm a Crown Sergeant—maybe even an Inspector. The only prize I'd judged until recently was back in 1975, there was something extraordinary, like 3,000 entries. There's a heck of a lot of people in Australia who write poetry, although what happens is that most of the entries can be rejected straight away. It's quite easy to get down to a shortlist, but then it comes down to a difficult choice. Often the top entries will be of the same standard and it's hard to say, 'Well, *you* shall be given the means whereby you can buy beer and sandwiches for the next six months, and *you* shall be given nothing!' Poets, like farmers, live on dribs and drabs and prizes are part of those dribs and drabs. You'd like to give them out to every worthy contender if you could. The compromise judgements are intensely frustrating too.

INTERVIEWER: You were talking earlier about the paper you did for the Labor Party on the current grant system.

MURRAY: Yes. They used a lot of my ideas, not quite how I'd thought them up. I'd suggested a guaranteed income scheme, which was more or less income supplementation, but they decided that would be fairly unwieldy to operate, so they followed the old scheme of direct fellowship grants. Originally they had three year grants, but the Federal Budget defeats them. They still allegedly have

them but they're very rarely given out. They do have a thing which they're strangely and deeply secretive about called the Emeritus Fellowship which they give to elderly writers. But I believe it's fairly small. That's like a pension for life. I probably annoyed many people with my contention that if teachers of literature and critics, as well as publishers and librarians, were worth their assured and often high incomes, then the writers, the primary producers as it were, deserved reliable and sufficient wages too. Even if only as a matter of efficiency, to buy them time to write the literature others live from. I took that as the moral basis of my claims.

INTERVIEWER: Are you on a fellowship now?

MURRAY: Technically not. I've still got the money from a couple of fellowships hanging over because I did a couple of writer-in-residence stints. So I've got one more payment before I cease to be on a fellowship. They have what they call a buffer year every so often, when you've got to be laid off. So I'll be on my buffer year next year.

INTERVIEWER: I see you work on a manual typewriter, do you type your poetry straight away?

MURRAY: Oh no, I hate typing. I only type with extreme reluctance at the very end of the process. I don't do many drafts, but I write all over the first one—unless it gets completely unreadable, then I start again. Or sometimes if I want to clarify something, get all the muck off it, to see it clean, I'll re-write it. But I don't have to do that too often. Sometimes a poem'll fight you like anything, other times they flow. The ones that flow easily are strange, they tend to be either the best or the worst. The real test is if nobody other than myself can tell the difference between the ones that flow and the ones that every word was sweated over.

INTERVIEWER: There's a funny little one I like about the bottle house in Queensland, which I once saw . . .

MURRAY: I haven't seen it! Sometimes it's better not to see these places because you can imagine them better. I know some poets like not to imagine. There's a very strong streak of what I call non-fiction poetry which runs through Australia, where you don't have to use much imagination because what you're writing is strange enough already. I think that school will last a good deal longer.

INTERVIEWER: But you don't subscribe to it?

MURRAY: No I don't. Except when I do. I came along at a slightly unfortunate time for me, an interesting time historically but personally damaging because it was the era where people decided that Australian culture didn't really reside in the bush any more. The bush was a '*dreadful* bore, my dear!', and suddenly everything looked towards the cities.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think of the standard of poetry reviewing here?

MURRAY: Abysmal. I'm not at all sure I've ever been accurately represented in a review. I've been praised, but I've almost never been discussed in a balanced way, concentrating on the *poems*. Most Australian poetry reviewing is 'yea, yea', or 'boo, boo', there's not much in between. And the reasons they give or are covertly working from are often political. 'You've got to like this', or 'If you're caught liking this we'll crucify you'. Sometimes, amusingly, it's conceded praise full of political warnings. That's probably the standard line on me just now. It's partly a deposit of the bad habit of paraphrase, trying to summarise you, as if you were writing expository prose. So few of them can write about one's work as poetry—which being an inexhaustable medium can't be summarised. They think the poetry is just a vehicle or ornament for a disguised form of prose. In which they try to find a line.

INTERVIEWER: Who are the contemporary poets you admire?

MURRAY: Lots of them actually, and some who might be surprised that I like their work. Although I wish to God Roger McDonald would go back to writing poetry and stop dabbling with the novel, so does he; I suppose he can't help it. These things are not controlled by the person, they're controlled by inner urges, but it's a shame. Kevin Hart's very good, Alan Gould is good, there's Linda Molony in Canberra,

who should keep going. I'm very fond of Bruce Dawe's, and Susan Hampton's, and Rhyll McMaster's, and Peter Kocan's, and John Forbes's, and Bob Gray's work. I always get anguished when I'm doing these lists because the names go right out of my head. I neglect to mention people I should mention. But generally there's a good standard here at the moment. I don't see much coming out of America just now, at least not from Americans. The two best writers in America at the moment are Joseph Brodsky and Derek Walcott, who aren't American. I fear a lot of poets in America have been swallowed by the universities, disappeared forever into the realms of academe. In Britain and Ireland there are a lot of good poets, and of course they don't get swallowed in the same way.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have any long-term ambitions as far as your poetry—or your life is concerned?

MURRAY: I'd like to get through this world and out of it without seeing it come down in ruins. I'd like to go on writing until I die. But most of all I'd like to think that there was some sort of livable, honourable world left for my children when I go. One in which they mightn't have to truckle to official or self-appointed police all the time. I haven't got a great load of positive ambitions, but those are the sort of things I think about. Basically I just want to go on writing.

INTERVIEWER: How do you feel your poetry has changed in the twenty-five years you've been writing?

MURRAY: It's got better. I don't know how it's changed. I suppose I play the instrument better, I can do things in more subtle ways now. It spirals in a way, it keeps going back on itself, finding things from the past and doing them again, or not doing them again exactly, but looking at them afresh, from another level of confidence.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have a favourite poem?

MURRAY: Usually the last one I've written! I did a good culling job when I went through the poems for *The Vernacular Republic*, which covered twenty years from 1961 to 1981. I quietly got rid of the ones I thought weren't very good, but even so a few of those made my heart ache, and maybe they should have been left in. Other people would tell me so anyway. But I think I got it nearly right. The sad thing is that once something is published you're no longer the boss of it, people claim it whether it's good or bad. I remember I went to talk at a university once, and the class had been studying a poem of mine I'd thrown out years before. 'Not that bloody thing', I said, 'the logic in that has got a broken back'. But no, they insisted that it was important, and they were all busy writing essays on it, when I would have liked it to disappear.

INTERVIEWER: Do you enjoy being a writer-in-residence? I know you've done it several times.

MURRAY: It's pleasant enough. I can write quite happily in a strange room. In all the universities I've been at it takes a while for the students to decide whether they like you or not. They study you from a distance, and then make a caucus decision. All favourable to me so far. So you don't see them for a while. Except at New South Wales, they come around straight away there, in fact they pride themselves on their friendliness. They like to see themselves as being completely the reverse of Sydney Uni, which they see as being toffeenosed and snotty. UNSW students often set out to be 'good blokes'. Still, how many students get the *point* of poetry I really don't know. It's a knack more than anything else. I suddenly twigged in 1956 as to how poetry worked and what you could do with it, after that it was all plain sailing. Before that I couldn't understand a blasted thing about it.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that point can be reached by reading a lot of poetry?

MURRAY: Yes, although that wasn't the case with me. I was more interested in science fiction and a rattling good book. Or non-fiction. I'd probably read more than I thought I had, though. I remember I took home Milton's *Paradise Lost* over a long weekend once when I was about fifteen and I was taken aback by it. But at that stage it seemed to me that the poetry got in the way of the story; it wasn't until some years later that I saw how it all fitted in. When I go to schools I think at least I manage to make some kids stop *fearing* poetry, which they often do. They see me bumbling in, they see my weight, and it

destroys all their stereotypes about poets.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think poetry as a form has changed much over the years? I know people like to think so, and perhaps it is written more simply now, but even then there is the example of the Latin poets . . .

MURRAY: Latin poetry was created for the sake of providing exemplary school texts. A Greek fellow called Livius Andronicus, who was taken to Rome in the third century B.C. and was appointed as a slave tutor to some gentleman's children found there was no Roman literature he could set for the children to study. Only a few old Roman ballads, that sort of thing. So he decided he should create a literature. It started off on that basis, to fill the need of educating the gentry's children. Then the Romans began casting around to see if they could make their terribly complicated, stiff language dance and sing. They decided not to fill it up with Greek works but to try and write pure Latin. They managed it admirably. Virgil is one of my favourites, and I've recently been studying Horace. But poetry hasn't really changed much. What happens is it gets better and more complex, more rich for a while, and then the host civilization collapses under it and it has to build itself up all over again. Sometimes that rule is reversed. Dante, for example, broke all the rules by writing the greatest of all Italian poems first. It's just about the earliest poem in Italian and it's the best one. In our own culture, we spent ages getting rid of a 'poetical' language that had become dated, in favour of a freer, more colloquial diction. But really the new one is quite stilted and poetical by now, and enforces all sorts of attitudes buried in it. You have to wrestle against it, a lot. Bad poets don't.

INTERVIEWER: Are you interested in other forms—novels or plays, for example?

MURRAY: Novels, yes. Plays I don't know much about. I rarely go to the theatre, because the theatre in my time has seemed to involve an enormous amount of political and social conflict. I don't like conflict much. It's that funny old Scottish subculture of the bush in which we were taught to fear conflict. Having rows was strongly deprecated because it's too dangerous, somebody might get killed. I cannot understand how urban middle-class people can allow so much anger loose in their lives. It's so dangerous, and it becomes a terrible indulgence. It gives them a fearsome licence to hate and loathe. Violence in the home seems to have skyrocketed in the last fifteen years. Or maybe the media are stressing it now, for political purposes. When I go to the theatre I smell the hostility in the foyer. They're dressed up for it, they're drinking their drinks and waiting for it. Although as with everything there are honourable exceptions.

INTERVIEWER: What about fiction?

MURRAY: I love fiction.

INTERVIEWER: Have you ever been tempted by it?

MURRAY: No, not really. Except once when I wrote a verse novel. But that's a poem. Prose is as far from poetry as sculpture is.

INTERVIEWER: It's interesting you should say that because Malouf, for example, says he finds it easy to go back and forth between the two . . .

MURRAY: Of course, that's because he's a natural prose writer. He's hardly a poet at all. He only ever wrote one poem, the one about the foxes, and he probably knows it himself. I'm not being deprecating about his work; he's a wonderful prose writer, and he thought he was a poet for a while, but what he was always writing in his poetry was a kind of concentrated essay. I think he finally found himself in *An Imaginary Life*. I remember when he was writing it we sat down one evening and he told me all about it, and I thought it was a marvellous idea. It's partly about an autistic child too, although he might not realise that. I didn't at the time. But that's what those wild children are, running around with the animals in the hills. The famous Wild Boy of Aveyron was clearly an autie.

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned that you felt there were similarities between you and your son Alex. Do you sometimes get glimpses of what's going on in his world?

MURRAY: You get glimpses from time to time, but you often can't put words to it. It feels exactly like the part of my brain which I can barely put words to, which is mostly the part my poetry comes from. There is some suggestion that one side of their brain is overly developed and that there's a failure of linkage between the two sides. The left side is the verbal, communicating side and the right side is the spatial side, or orientation if you like, and he's enormously aware of all that. It would be impossible to lose him, for example, he remembers his way to everywhere. Never misses a footstep. Tribal Aborigines have that ability as well, although with them it's cultural. There was a teacher in the North West of Australia who noticed how exceptionally good the tribal children were at finding their way about, so she started setting them more conventional tests, placing objects on a square, asking them to memorise them and then scrambling the pieces up. The Aboriginal children were consistently better at remembering the original pattern than the white children. I'm a bit like that, too. I think it's partly to do with being brought up in the bush. Alex is obsessive, of course, as all auties are—obsession being a name we give to great powers of concentration applied to objects we don't reckon merit so much interest. But when I'm trying to talk about something which is really important to me—as you saw earlier on—I find it difficult to communicate. I think that's one reason why writers write—as an overcompensation for one's inarticulateness to say the things one wants to say. So you write poetry or novels instead.

INTERVIEWER: Do you find there's something spiritual about writing poetry, that it comes to you from somewhere far away and is manifested through you?

MURRAY: To an extent. 'There is another world, and it's this one', somebody once said. But yes, it comes from mysterious places. We've got such a dreadful terminology. Because we've fought religion so hard in the Western world, to try and get rid of it, we've turned our language into an anti-religious instrument in which it's almost impossible to talk about certain realities. But that mystery—let's call religion a mystery—is everywhere. It's inside everything, it's inside you, inside this room. The best metaphor I've heard for it recently was in the movie *The Right Stuff*, where they described it as 'pushing the outside of the envelope'. Which is about performance really, but it's prompted by the same force. Religions are large poems, you know.

INTERVIEWER: Which art form do you think poetry is most like then? Do you think, for example, that it has more in common with a visual medium than perhaps it does with novels or short stories?

MURRAY: Definitely. The links with painting fascinate me, those stilled fields of simultaneity. I think poetry and prose are quite different. When I was much younger I dabbled with a prose novel, which was dreadful, and wrote some short stories, which were a bit better but not much. I discovered that I wasn't at all interested in character or plot. I've always been interested in *resonance*, the sort of resonance that one feels in a painting or music by, say, Mozart. Or in a landscape even before you write it. There are very few writers who draw poetic lines and shapes in their prose. McDonald does, while others simply write poetic prose, which is quite different. I'm not sure that it's possible to marry the two successfully, in fact I'm not sure anybody should try. Certainly I'm not going to. I do have a naughty yen at times to recapture for poetry certain areas it has tended to lose to prose. Narrative of various sorts, for example. Certain sorts of amplitude. But I'm often frustrated by the successivity of prose, by the way too long a succession of things in a poem will tend to pull the energy out of it—because it, a poem, wants to be a field, in which everything is alive *at once*, everything's relating to everything else in a network all over the piece. It's hard to stretch that too far along a time-line, as prose narrative does. You can lose the simultaneous teeming quality of poem, the eternal now—which is I guess what most prose sacrifices. Thereby giving us the world we live in now, a prose world in which people do things and suffer things in succession and then come to a full stop.

Sydney, April 1985

An interesting postscript to the interview was that a few months after it took place, the Murray family decided to move to the country property at Bunyah. With Alex's schooling in mind, it was not a decision which was taken lightly, but Murray was soon impressed with how well it had worked. Not only did the family seem more settled, he said, but he had written more poems in four months in the country than he could in a year in Sydney. He remarked that he now came to the city as 'little as possible', and didn't miss it at all. It took him some months to complete the work on the interview because, 'I was so depressed with it that I couldn't bear to touch it for ages'. Murray made it clear that 1985 had not been a rewarding year, and he was afraid that the interview was much blacker than his normal frame of mind.

He said that he was more at peace with himself in the bush and was looking forward to continued productivity.

June 1986

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