

GRAEME KINROSS SMITH: '...The Frequent Image of Farms' - A Profile of Les Murray

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HAYFORK POINT

*Dazzling blue eyes
of winter stare from the box-trees
the shadows of barns are thin with frosted straw.
All over the country
the dented light of milk cans.*

*Cold proteins cling
to the wet-lipped cane-knife blocking
swedes by the sty for a tumult of fat squealers.
For the mouths of following cattle, boys on tractors
bayonet green stacks and hoy them down the sky
green spinning in air.
The bull, looking up
is drenched in flying meadow.*

*Pinched hours pass
and farmers lug dull cans
but magpies, dismissing weight, lift over stones now
alighting on wires ever farther off
to balance at behests
of song, and spring*

*for something has turned
and from the heavens, gently
invisibly, gently
grass goes on falling.*

Stuck in the farm gate is a green branch as Les Murray had promised. It's a sign for the newcomer, simple, ready to hand; a rural message, speaking of a particular piece of earth. Beyond it, on the flats is the low-slung house, roof and walls glaring in the sun, starting out of the deep green of China Pear and paperbark trees. This ribbon of white gravel road runs eleven kilometres from the Pacific Highway at Coolongolook to the old selector's block still called the Forty Acres on Horses Creek. It winds on through Bunyah for another ten kilometres, up the valley, heading away from the sea, the hills closing around it, before it tips over a ridge into the next valley and steepens towards the hill town of Gloucester and beyond into the higher country of the Gloucester and Barrington Tops.

Hills folding on hills cradle the house, school, river-bridge and church at Bunyah under a direct sun; the green valley shimmers and steams in a haze of November heat. Cattle dot the thick mat of grass on the flats, moving only slowly, or lolling in the shade of trees on the lower rises. Les Murray sits at the laminex table in the bare kitchen. He is a big man. His face is open, candid, ready to relax into the freshness of boyish laughter and enquiry. A khaki boiler suit contains his twenty-stone bulk-it leaves him free to loll on the floor

or the ground, to roll under the bottom strands of fences, to work on dams, to milk, to walk paddocks. He talks quickly, as if in apology for the rightness of detail with which he builds up pictures. There's a touch of Australian nasal twang, and always a strong lacing of the vernacular. He speaks often in colourful images that are grounded in deep knowledge. Now, savouring a fitful breeze from the open door he plays with a packet of cigars, waiting for the jug to boil for a cup of tea. 'That's an east wind,' he says, half to inform himself. 'The start of the summer pattern. If that wind doesn't get up from the coast we cook in this valley from December to February.'

On this forty acre farm Les Murray is surrounded by the geography, history and landscape of his life. Everywhere about are the talismans of his art, lines from his poems. A mile away, beyond the swamp and its paperbarks gape the doors and windows of the bleached weatherboard house in which he was born. Closer is the old dairy he and his father built, hardwood rails still strong. In the hills close by are the houses of farms taken up and relinquished by his ancestors since the Murrays came to the Manning Valley further north as squatters in 1845. His great-grandfather, John Murray, first selected in the valley at Bunyah in 1870. And beyond that is Les Murray's region, the mid north coast of New South Wales. It stretches northward from the Myall Lakes and Seal Rocks only forty kilometres away, through the fishing resort of Forster, to Taree and Wingham on the Manning River and then further in sweeps of rainforest, farmland, blue coastal range, dramatic headlands and white ocean beaches to Port Macquarie and Kempsey.

'This is the centre, the tribal centre, that I work from,' Murray says simply. 'I was born in that direction' - he waves an arm at the hills to the north east' - at Nubiach Hospital. That was in 1938. I grew up on the farm next to this one. My father was a tenant of his father's, dairying on 140 acres in those days. He rented the land at £60 a year. My childhood was pretty isolated. For one thing I was an only child, and my mother died when I was twelve. But also in this valley I met very few other kids till I was nine years old and went to school. Between seven and nine years I did some correspondence school-Blackfriars in Sydney-although I'd been reading since I was four, in my own way. There were a few books about the place. I could read some of my mother's school prizes. And we had a Cassell Encyclopaedia, 1924 edition. I knew every page of that. In fact, I had a beautiful 1924 education.' Murray chuckles, butts the cigar, leans back, folding his arms behind his head. 'And then I went to Bulby Brush school, a three and a half mile walk over the mountain, as we used to say. The school's closed now, but it had sixteen kids then. That walk to and from school was exciting-wedge-tailed eagles on the mountain, rabbits along the creek, a lot to do and explore. I didn't get home till after six at night, quite often.'

After the death of his mother in 1951 Les Murray had no schooling for a year and then went to Nubiach Central School, thirty kilometres away, where he was among 150 other children. He found it a relaxed extension of primary school. He left when he had finished the Intermediate Certificate and spent the year 1954 at home, sitting around, reading, milking cows, doing farm work. During that time he came to a vague and slightly romantic conclusion-he wanted to be a writer:

'I was thinking more of short stories and novels then. Although I read all of Milton's works in one big gulp that year I wasn't imagining myself as a poet. In 1955 I went back to do Leaving Certificate at Taree High School. My English teacher there, Mr McLaughlin, introduced us to Eliot and Hopkins - modern poetry. I'd dodged poetry before that, because any that I'd seen had always been in an archaic language and didn't seem to be about anything in my experience-it seemed quite irrelevant. I even suspected that poetry might have died out since those things were written. But suddenly here was Hopkins showing that language could be exciting, could come alive, could be about relevant things. Then there was the sportsmaster at Taree who used to drive me to school. He mentioned that there was such a thing as Australian poetry, and I said Oh, you mean Banjo Paterson and the others, and he said no, no and reeled off names like R. D. FitzGerald, Kenneth Slessor and Judith Wright. That planted a seed in my mind-this sort of modern poetry was written in Australia too! Then in 1956 I tried it myself. On Christmas Day I wrote ten bad poems and sent them off to the *Bulletin*. They bounced of course. Douglas Stewart was the literary editor then; he used to have an "Answers to Correspondents" column. His answer to me was that I'd obviously put more thought into the covering letter than into the poems-which was true. I've often chuckled about it with Doug. Stewart since.'

In 1957, after trying to join the Air Force (he was rejected-pimples), Les Murray went to Sydney University on a Commonwealth scholarship. 'I discovered the Fisher Library there, and fell in love with it,' he says. 'It was the old Fisher, of course, in those days-a beautiful Gothic barn with gargoyles on the

staircases. I've written about the Fisher and that whole period in the set of sonnets "Sidere Mens Eadem Mutato". That's the Sydney University motto-"The same Mind Under Different Stars". I used to come out of Fisher every now and then to do my course. But I failed all but Elementary German in first year and lost the scholarship. Having had no chance to do languages at school until Leaving Certificate I wanted to do every one that was on offer at University. I taught myself several languages in Fisher Library, using those English University Teach Yourself books. Later I was to do a year's Chinese. I wish I'd gone on with that.'

Murray spent four years at Sydney University (1957-1960) without graduating. In 1961, after working for a time in the Telephone Accounts Branch of the PMG and at other jobs equally desolating, he hitch-hiked round Australia. He returned broke. In 1962 he went back to Sydney University to take part in a German Department play ('And to shelter from employment,' he says cheekily.). He met Valerie Morelli, who was wardrobe mistress for the production. Valerie had been born in Hungary and raised in Switzerland, migrating to Australia with her family when she was ten years old. In September 1962 she and Les Murray married, settling into a one and a half room flat in Glebe. Early in 1963 they moved to Canberra. Les Murray had found a job in the Translation Unit at the Australian National University. The work satisfied two elements in his nature-his fondness for the intricacies of language, and his eclectic fascination with information.

'We worked mainly on technical and scientific material', he recalls. 'The first thing I did, for instance, was a translation from the Italian of a paper called "Nodular Cutaneous Diseases in Po Valley Hares". That was for Professor Fenner, the man who developed myxomatosis to eradicate rabbits. We did work for all the departments of the Institute of Advanced Studies and for the John Curtin School of Medical Research. One day we'd be translating about cholesterol levels in blood, another we'd be doing something on Italian shipping in the fifteenth century, or translating from the Dutch about the fascinating Macassarese penetration of Northern Australia-the trochus fishermen and traders who had been coming down to Australia for centuries before the white man.'

Les Murray has always carried a basic reverence for the sanctity of life and the small miracles of existence such as those celebrated in his gentle and humanly religious poem 'Once In a Lifetime Snow'. It was this reverence, as well as his wife's Catholicism, which led him to become a Roman Catholic in the spring of 1964.

In 1965 Les Murray was invited to Cardiff for the British Commonwealth Arts Festival Poetry Conference. He made some firm friends there and became very fond of the Welsh countryside. In 1967 he quit his job in Canberra and went back to Cardiff. Valerie and their two young children followed soon after. 'We stayed in Europe for fourteen months', says Murray. 'It was the typical Australian grand tour-broke half the time. We lived in South Wales and later on Culloden Moor out of Inverness. That was a case of romanticism and circumstance coming together. I happened to find a house on Culloden Moor-country houses were cheaper, larger, more convenient to rent. We wintered there; it was the one part of the trip that the children still remember.'

In 'Vindaloo at Merthyr Tydfil', one of his poems from that period, Les Murray remembers something quite different, however. 'I went with some mates from Cardiff to Merthyr Tydfil', he explains, 'and discovered that marvellous British institution, the Indian restaurant, the curry house.' The poem, with its echoes of Dylan Thomas, its rolling good humour and its sprinkling with the names of British beers, completes the story:

*I called for curry, the hottest,
vain of my nation, proud of my hard mouth from childhood,
the kindly brown waiter wringing the hands of dissuasion
O vindaloo, sir! You sure you want vindaloo, sir?
But I cried Yes please, being too far in to go back
the bright bells of Rhymney moreover sang in my brains.*

*Fair play, it was frightful. I spooned the chicken of Hell
in a sauce of rich yellow brimstone. The valley boys with me
tasting it, croaked to white Jesus. And only pride drove me,
forkful by forkful, observed by hot mangosteen eyes,*

*by all the carnivorous castes and gurus from Cardiff
my brilliant tears washing the unbelief of the Welsh.*

*Oh it was a ride on Watneys plunging red barrel
through all the burning ghats of most carnal ambition
and never again will I want such illumination
for three days on end concerning my own mortal coil
but I signed my plate in the end with a licked knife and fork
and green-and gold spotted, I sang for my pains like the free
before I passed out among all the stars of Cilfynydd.*

When the Murray family came back to Australia late in 1968, Les Murray could not find a job ('I fell foul of the old Australian rule that if you haven't a job, you can't have one'). He went back to Sydney University, did a further year of German and a course in linguistics and took out his degree. Then, as Murray says, he 'ran headlong into a whole lot of nonsense'. Buoyed up by the promise of a Commonwealth grant, he bought a house in Canberra and set himself up, ready to begin compiling a book of translations of Aboriginal poems-a project he had looked forward to for some time. But, despite verbal promises, no money came through. He began working as a clerk in the Prime Minister's Department, sitting down at the dining room table after tea each night to write. Still no grant for the project. His patience ran out in 1971. He gave up, bought a house in Chatswood, and took a job with the Department of Education and Science in Sydney. The work was boring and undemanding-little more than the drafting of a few letters. He read to pass the time-two books of Evelyn Waugh's *Sword of Honour* trilogy in the one day! Soon after, he 'retired'.

But gradually Murray was moving towards what he wanted-to live, by and large, from his writing and from work that attached to it. His poetry had become better and better known in the late 1960's. In 1965 he had published his first book, *The Ilex Tree*, a shared volume with his fellow Sydney poet and longstanding friend, the lawyer Geoffrey Lehmann. The two had edited the Sydney University literary magazines *Hermes* and *Arna* during their time there together in the late 1950's. *The Ilex Tree* contained poems such as 'The Widower In the Country', 'Noonday Axeman', 'Driving Through Sawmill Towns' and 'The AwayBound Train' that rang with Murray's particular sense of place and people. In 1969 came his second collection, *The Weatherboard Cathedral*. Murray had been awarded a Commonwealth Literary Fund Grant while he was living in South Wales in 1968. In 1970 he won the poetry section of the Captain Cook Bicentenary Literary Competition with his collection of poems 'Seven Points for an Imperilled Star'. Another six-month literary fellowship came to save him in 1971. 'Those fellowships have repeatedly been like a trampoline for me-they've prevented me from falling right through', he says. In 1972 he gained one of the new three-year writer's fellowships. These were grants made available by the Labor government largely as a result of Les Murray's own articles on literary patronage and the submissions he had made to the Labor Party and writers' organisations in 1969 for some sort of guaranteed income scheme for writers.

In all this Murray stresses the writer as someone having a positive role in society, stresses the poet as singer, as one of society's story-tellers. And that role, he feels, imposes obligations. Hence the trips he has made to do readings, to give lectures-all through the Riverina, South Australia and in 1972 on a very extensive six-week tour of Western Australia, from Esperance in the south to Wyndham in the north. He spoke about writing, about Australian literature, reading his own work and that of others in schools and public halls. 'We owe it to people out there whose taxes go into supporting poets and other writers', says Murray. 'They have a right to hear the results. With me it's a matter of duty and pleasure being happily conjoined. I like doing readings. Poetry is showbiz in part-the showbiz of the solitary man.'

The problem as Les Murray sees it, is that society is ready to accept and use the writer's product, but still balks at regarding writing as 'work' in the normal sense. 'Even Kenneth Slessor looked at it in that way', says Murray. 'He regarded writing not as work but as an avocation.' Les Murray snorts. 'Yes-the only profession too honourable to be rewarded in money! That means that literary fellowships are looked upon as prizes-as if one had entered a lottery. Not that I undervalue fellowships. Time is vital to any writer-my writing has improved greatly in the time that fellowships have given me. But I also maintain that if people are paid to teach from our writing, to use it, then we are entitled to some fair payment. I even mounted a one-man strike at Sydney University on that basis. In 1971 I was desperate for a job, and I asked Sydney University for

anything-pushing barrows in the library... anything-but they said they couldn't help. So I said right, you can take all my work off your courses. It's a strike. They said I had no legal right to restrict access to my work and they went on teaching it!' Les Murray spreads his hands resignedly and laughs. 'I followed the same line with Macquarie University. I believe they did take my work off their course for a while, until the students began writing bootleg essays on Murray. Ah, the loneliness of the long-distance one-man striker. I don't think I'm bitter-minded enough to keep up that sort of thing for long.'

Les Murray's aim in recent years has been to reach a situation where he can live in reasonable security without reliance on literary fellowships. Through literary grants he receives the equivalent of a Primary Teacher's salary, but without the same security of income, and is dependent on the decision of a tribunal every three years. That is hard for a man with a family, he points out. So he has continued to combine other literary work with his poetry. He writes at Bunyah some of the time, or at Chatswood, not far from the hum of the Pacific Highway. He reviews books for the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Bulletin*, *Quadrant* and other literary magazines. He works for an average of three or four days each month on the editorial selection and production of Dr Grace Perry's literary magazine, *Poetry Australia*, sifting a mountain of submissions, sending back the 98% of poems that will not achieve publication. 'Thank God, we always seem to get enough worthwhile stuff to keep the covers apart-and most issues contain a jewel or two. You have to work to get those, but they justify the whole enterprise.' In 1974 he travelled to the Poetry Festival in Struga, Yugoslavia, near the Albanian-Macedonian border, and visited the School of Commonwealth Studies at Aarhus in Denmark, where Australian literature is taught. Murray's interest in Celtic poetry came to fruition in 1977 in a special Gaelic issue of *Poetry Australia* for which Professor Roderick Thompson of Glasgow acted as guest editor.

Les Murray finishes a cigar, holding it gingerly between thumb and first finger. He looks out at the Wang Wauk valley. Rich cauliflower clouds are rising behind the hills, building towards the afternoon's thunderstorms. He butts the cigar, reaches down to pull on boots, ready to walk the paddocks. He steps outside into the tense air of the afternoon and stands foursquare to appraise the vegetable garden which his father has made on the rich creek soil near the house-lettuces, broad beans, turnips, leeks, tomatoes are well tended in rows. A pile of cow pats lies on the grass beside the spade, ready for digging in: 'We can make this into a Chinese farm, you see - pigs, poultry, a few vegetables,' Murray says. 'The area is too small for cattle, and there are some things we can't grow. The winter isn't hard enough for walnuts or cherries, for instance. But we might get back to growing China Pears, persimmons and loquats for preserving. The nearest thing to a cash crop would be some lucerne along the river flats. Dad is keen on that. I could make do with some extra reviewing and article writing (not so much that it interferes with the poetry). I can do that from here, trusting to the mails, and let this farm feed us. Subsistence agriculture and writing, if you like. We'd be something like the Chinese rich peasant, I suppose-without tenants, of course!'

As he strides in boots and boiler suit the valley opens out before Les Murray. It is as if lines from his poems run in the air, poem titles distil in the heat haze - 'The Broad Bean Sermon', 'Folklore', 'The Edge of the Forest', 'Escaping Out There', 'Treeroots and Earth', 'Laconics: The Forty Acres' or 'Walking to the Cattle Place'. The last is a sequence of poems that arose from Murray's interest in the cattle he had known since childhood, and from his reading about the Hindu reverence for the cow; he began to explore the cultural and linguistic richness of the civilisations, Western and Indian, developed by peoples who were originally cattle herdsman and who settled down still holding the cow at the centre of the consciousness. 'Mother cow has been a mighty world-shaper', he says. 'I thought there were three or four poems in it. But it got to be sixteen', says Murray as he stumps through the coarse grass. As he speaks the dark red Devon cattle watch him, jaws moving placidly, from the edges of the swamp. 'Tom Keneally's another cattle man', Murray adds, thinking aloud. 'You know that line of his about cows standing around stunned at the glory of their own digestion. And you get to know the sounds cattle make-in some parts of 'Walking To the Cattle Place' the reasoning is done almost through onomatopoeia, through associations dredged up by the sounds cattle make.'

For a poet of his age, the breadth of Les Murray's poetic output is very impressive. And the titles of his books are delightful for their wit and appropriateness. After *The Ilex Tree* (1965), and *The Weatherboard Cathedral* (1969), he published his collection *Poems Against Economics* in 1972, then *Lunch and Counter Lunch* (1974), his collected poems *The Vernacular Republic* (1976) and another collection, *Ethnic Radio* (1977). In 1978 a collection of his prose - reviews and articles from the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Quadrant*,

The Bulletin, Australian Quarterly and other sources-appeared under the title *The Peasant Mandarin*. The pieces reflect his interest in artistic patronage, in the need for an Australian republic, in the occult and extra-sensory perception. Writing prose, he admits in the Preface to the book, 'is a sovereign aid to thinking'.

Robert Gray, his fellow poet of the north coast, has written of Murray's poetry: '... on every page there is distilled some pleasure in life.' And as he talks Murray reveals that his is a pleasure built out of history (the Aboriginal and white history of the mid north coast that runs down to his own lifetime); out of the inspired detail of the natural world (sharks coming up the Coolongolook River to spawn, the straggly dignity of the 'apple trees' - angophoras - that dot his land, the distinctive smell of rain on dry ground that signals the release of an oil in the earth and triggers fish to spawn and birds to gather where fish spawn). It is a pleasure built upon country habit, upon the direct and unobtrusive country way of dealing with circumstance, upon closeness to animals, upon folk humour and the folk story out of which a family pride and consciousness spring.

'I think the north coast begins at O'Sullivan's Gap, just north of Buladelah', he says. 'I always feel when I pass through those beautiful white Flooded Gums near O'Sullivan's that I've come in the front gate, as it were. South of that you're still in the outriders of the Hunter Valley. They say that there's a new species of plant for every mile travelled north from there. Of course this has been as much timber country as dairying country-there's the Wang Wauk State Forest, Buladelah State Forest, Batchelor, and a string of others north of Taree, up through Wauchope and beyond.' Les Murray's father was a timberman and bullock-driver in the Wang Wauk forest for years, cutting billets, fence-posts and sleepers with a chain-saw and wedges. For seven years he worked as a bullock-driver for his father without payment-'a victim of the old family system', says Les Murray. Later he worked for the Masonite section of the Colonial Sugar Refining Company. He was such a valued timber cutter in the district that he was kept on after retirement age. It is his father, set against the bush, that Murray has pictured in his early poem 'Noonday Axeman':

*Axe-fall, echo and silence. Dreaming silence.
Though I myself run to the cities, I will forever
be coming back here to walk, knee-deep in ferns,
up and away from this metropolitan century,*

*to remember my ancestors, axemen, dairymen, horse-breakers,
now confined in silence, down with their beards and dreams,
who, unwilling or rapt, despairing or very patient,
made what amounts to a human breach in the silence,*

*made of their lives the rough foundation of legends -
men must have legends, else they will die of strangeness -
then died in their turn, each, after his own fashion,
resigned or agonized, from silence into great silence.*

Or again, there is Les Murray's father, and his taciturn father before him, in the later poem, 'The Edge of the Forest':

*The edge of the forest, hard smoke beyond the paddocks
frays back and is there. Cutters go out through it,
come in again on the ringbarked slopes, down the fence lines.*

- You have to send flooded gum quick. It don't stay
flooded -
ironbark's a bugger to bark if it comes dry weather -
the man sitting next to me knows inside the forest.

*He has his praise out there. Two taps on a trunk
and he can tell you its life. Steering the chain saw
he can drop a tree on a cigarette paper. His billets*

*bumped, loading, ring like gongs; they win prizes.
Tallowwood's lovely: it has a deep like fat.
He has raised trucks out of swamp with his quick chain
cunning.*

Or again:

*At four years old, he was milking easy cows
and was put to the plough at fourteen, the day after school.
Hauling timber with the teams, trusted in cattle dealing

he worked, then and always - long in lieu of pay -
for a sign of love from his irritable father,
the planter of flasks. His nightmare, strawed with praise.*

Les Murray's ancestors were hard-drinking Highland Scots. Their rum, whisky and schnapps bottles still turn up in the valley's soils. His great-grandfather had 'the vice of hospitality' and used to fit 24 people round the table in his modest home. He once carried the whole valley on credit at the store through a drought. Then came Murray's grandfather who, it was calculated, drank the equivalent of the wages of two and a half working men throughout the Depression. Or there are his uncle and aunt just down the Coolongolook road, subjects of love, admiration and inspiration for Murray, as they are described in the poem, 'Towards the Imminent Days':

*In my aunt's house, the milk jug's beaded crochet cover
tickles the ear. We've eaten boiled things with butter.
Pie spiced like islands; dissolving in cream, is now
dissolving in us. We've reached the teapot of calm.*

*The table we sit at is fashioned of three immense
beech boards out of England. The minute widths of the years
have been refined in the wood by daughters' daughters.
In the year of Nelson, I notice, the winter was mild.*

*But our talk is cattle and cricket. My quiet uncle
has spent the whole forenoon sailing a stump-ridden field
of blady-grass and Pleistocene clay never ploughed
since the world's beginning. The Georgic furrow lengthens*

*in ever more intimate country. But we're talking bails,
stray cattle, brands. In the village of Merchandise Creek
there's a post in a ruined blacksmith shop that bears
a charred-in black-letter script of iron characters,*

*hooks, bars, conjoined letters, a weird bush syllabary.
It is the language of property seared into skin
but descends beyond speech into the muscles of cattle,
the world of feed as it shimmers in cattle minds.*

In his poem 'Driving Through Sawmill Towns' Murray writes:

*'As night comes down, the houses watch each other:
a light going out in a window here has meaning...'*

The lines conjure up the essence of the local, of human habit and idiosyncrasy. 'Up here', Murray says, 'where you've got space around you, it makes you more of an individual, more easily seen. In these parts, too, a bloke lives for years after his death in a way that he doesn't in the city. For instance, I went to Ken Slessor's

funeral in Sydney in 1971 - I suppose there were 30 people there. In the same month I went to cousin Hughie Murray's funeral up here, and there were 800 people at it. He was known for himself. Given an education he might have become a biologist. He used to take lizards and field mice into school in his pockets. But the farms made hard demands in those days, especially on boys. There were few schools - no high schools - and no libraries. All but the wealthiest country people were effectively excluded from Western civilisation by neglect, by lack of encouragement, by child labour - no one spoke up for those children. Hughie became a farmer, played the fiddle at dances and raised some nice kids. His funeral would've been the biggest occasion of his life! Poor old Johnny Cope, as we called him...'

Gradually changes have been wrought, though, on the people of the Bunyah valley, and for the good. Their horizons have been widened, their parochialism reduced. But still those over forty in the valley are generally poorly educated, having grown up in a limbo, as Murray describes it, without the grandeur and remnant graces of the original pioneers and yet without the education and richness of tradition to give them any other basis. Once the people of the valley used to concern themselves with each other's affairs, as in so many small rural communities - 'You know, women who had telescopes to spot pregnancies. That sort of thing', says Les Murray. 'Everything was open to public comment. It's much less oppressive now. Every kid goes to High School, quite a few go on to university. Fresh ideas have come in to break the stagnant nature of the place - and it was stagnant in many ways. There used to be a chilling boredom on a lot of the farms. On the other hand, you could say it was a working anarchy, ruled by convention and prestige rather than law. There are still some of those interesting Ben Hall principles about - the police as outsiders, the small community policing itself.' Murray tells the story of the farmer who had the habit of keeping other people's machinery. Rather than risk bitterness, his neighbours chose their moment and repossessed their equipment from his shed. Not a word was spoken.

Quite a deal of Murray's best work is underpinned by the stories he has absorbed from his family and from others in the district. He'll point out in the paddocks the low log barns, half a man's height, in which as a boy he used to sit with his father husking corn by lantern light. As they worked his father talked about the weekend dances at grandfather Murray's place that used to last from Thursday until the following Tuesday; of sons driving their fathers into town, a signal that the old man was going on a bender; of the Aborigines chewing the native tobacco of the north coast and going silly on the narcotic it contained, and how the whites later taught them to smoke it. 'And Dad would tell me how his mother used to speak in great fear of the Breelong blacks - Jimmy Governor and his brother', Les Murray recalls. 'They put a scare into the whole of northern New South Wales. Jimmy committed his murders at Breelong in the central west. Then he and his brother Joe went bush, sticking to the forest in the ranges from way up near Kempsey, and came out down here. Joe, the brother was shot dead near Maitland. Jimmy was brought down later with a charge of buckshot at Bobin, out of Wingham. That's the sort of thing that gave me the poem 'The Ballad of Jimmy Governor'. The old chap running the Wingham historical museum can remember Jimmy being brought out of the bush - he was there that morning, a boy of seven. He walked behind the cart as they brought Jimmy in, joking and cracking hardy.'

An inclusive human warmth, a celebratory enthusiasm for life's offerings - these are central characteristics of Les Murray's verse. There is also an ability to believe ultimate good rather than evil of his fellows. 'If there's one thing I retain strongly from Calvinism', he says, 'it's a belief in original sin, the belief that there's no human solution. It protects you from the murderous optimisms.' His poems have an eclectic breadth of reference, give the impression of inevitable artistry and judgment in a range of voices and verse forms, from the moving simplicity of pieces like 'An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow' and 'Once In a Lifetime Snow' to poems of sharp humour and observation such as 'Portrait of the Autist as a New World Driver' in which Murray describes his late coming to the driving of cars. There is something of the lineal essence of driving in the lines:

*Swapping cogs to pass a
mountainous rig and its prime mover, I
reflect that driving's a mastery the mastered
are holding on to.
It has gone down among the ancient crafts
to hide in our muscles.*

And a car, Murray discovers, 'is also a high speed hermitage' for its ability to encapsulate and insulate us. The poem ends with chilling honesty:

'... of course we love our shells: they make the anthill
bearable of course the price is blood.'

In his writing Murray is a considerable reader and researcher, but not a notetaker of impressions. 'I reckon that if you forget something it couldn't have been important anyway. But nothing's ever lost-you'll recall it if you need it', he says. 'My way of composition varies. Sometimes a poem will come almost without a draft; those outpourings are usually either the worst or the best. But usually I do a few drafts that I call sighting shots where I'm finding out what the metre and the structure have to be. That's generally settled early and from then on it's not so much a matter of more drafts as more mess and scratching out on the one draft. The draft looks funny, especially if it's a long poem. There'll be some bits that work, and I'll cut them off and staple them to the last section that worked - it gets to be long snakes of paper stapled together. Then I type it up to see what it looks like.'

Murray's writing and thinking have been fertilised by a number of quite disparate writers. 'It's hard to talk in terms of influences', he says. 'In any case, what looks like an influence is often just an agreement in temperament. I gained a lot from Slessor, revered him, although we hardly ever discussed poetry. Doug Stewart, too, has done me many favours. And we could go back to Virgil - particularly his *Georgics* and *Eclogues*; not so much the *Aeneid*. Hesiod, too, and Pindar and Horace. From them I get a certain way of looking at the world. There's also something about their extreme economy, skill and tact with words. Probably Hesiod merely reinforces me in the way I'm going anyway-an agreement, you see. Another poet was Robinson Jeffers, the Californian. I resonated with his poetry, but I'm not as misanthropic as he is. And there were a lot of German poets, a lot of Celts.'

As for the teaching of literature in schools and universities, Les Murray regards it with friendly suspicion. 'I wonder about its value', he says. 'I wonder at it; that our work should be so important to people like academics. I'm delighted when they get something right. And yet it makes it all worthwhile when their comments illuminate something and make you, the author, think. What worries me, though, is the idea that so many people hold of literature as *belonging* to education, as a matter in which only the schools and universities have competence. It's as if the population delegates to the schools and universities the job of doing its literature for it. ("Oh, you understand our poetry for us. We don't have to read and understand it for ourselves then.") I once defined education as being, among other things, a means by which society protects itself against art. There's still some truth in that. Our present system tends to exile poetry from the people.'

Speaking from his experience as literary editor and reviewer, Murray regrets the fact that there is a generational division in Australian poetry at present. 'Sometimes I regret that the older generation, among whom I am numbered, is on one side of the denim curtain, and the younger group on the other. There's a lot of depth in both groups, but the younger group, for all its vitality, seems to be preoccupied with poetry as process, with the politics of poetry, where people are published and so on - that's a pity. Poetry-as-process and suchlike theories imply that poetry isn't sufficient in itself: it's a means rather than an end. Every individual poem is a failed, skimmed brick, from all of which, in the end, a successful edifice is to be built! Really, though, this whole journalistic generations game is quite misleading. There are now good poets a few years *younger* than the officially Young writers, who are rapidly eclipsing them. They've rejected derivative modernism and go their own ways, broadening the Australian mainstream.'

In much of Murray's writing there is the gentle tension between the two elements that have been abiding poles in his life and in Australian life-the city and the bush. He has the advantage of knowing both at close terms, as his poem 'Sydney and the Bush' shows. But he is not simplistic about it. He is drawn to Sydney for its intellectual life, by economic necessity, by the cut and thrust of literary lunches, reviewing, book launchings. 'I like Sydney - a beautiful city, a place of great excitement. But I've found that Sydney-siders are often unsympathetic to country people. They have stereotyped attitudes to us; they know very little about us. When I was at university we'd get a lot of good-natured ribbing about being peasant boys and rural hicks. I used to play up to it. I'd tell them stories, yarns they'd never have thought of for themselves, about us poor people up the country who hardly had a roof to our mouths. That's one of my father's lines. But that great

Australian opposition is still there. You know that some of it is affectionate - the old stereotypes of country inbreeding and so on-but that some of it is also meant to *place* you, to put you down.'

So it is the country, the natural world, that succours Murray first. He returns to it for renewal. But in addition to his attachment to the Celtic element in his past on the north coast Murray has an empathic link with the Aboriginal awareness of that country. It comes through memory, intuitive understanding and a passion to understand more. In a fascinating article, 'The Human Hair Thread', which he wrote for a special Aboriginal issue of *Meanjin* in 1977, he put it thus:

There has been an Aboriginal presence in my work almost from the start. This is natural enough, in one coming from the country. Until quite recently, the original Australians were almost exclusively a country people, and the white culture they had to resist or assimilate with was the Australian rural one. Growing up outside the cities, one couldn't fail to be conscious of them, living on the fringe of things, mostly in poverty, hanging around the pubs in Taree or walking the two hot, dusty miles back out to Purfleet Settlement.

Later he writes of the Aboriginal woman, Mrs Ella Simon of Taree, who is one of the last fluent speakers of Kattang, the language of the Aboriginal people who occupied the country between the Manning and Karuah Rivers in which Murray grew up:

Mrs Simon is a great lady of my country, a person of immense wisdom and justice, and she knows where all the corpses are buried. She would probably know who the old black man was who stood by the roadside in Purfleet with his hat in his hands and his eyes lowered the day my mother's funeral passed by on its way out to Kramback cemetery. I was twelve then, but that man has stayed with me, from what may well have been the natal day of my vocation as a poet, a good spirit gently restraining me from indulgence in stereotypes and prejudices. Or trying to. I don't know who he was.

In poems like 'Beside the Highway' Murray has pictured the desolation of the Aboriginal settlement at Purfleet, just across the river from Taree. In 'The Ballad of Jimmy Governor', with its jogging trooper's rhythm, he has touched on Aboriginal tracking and magic, set against white society. Since then, in more and more of his story-telling in verse, he has turned from the dialect of the rural poor used in those early poems to the subtle rhythms of Aboriginal song cycles. His most recent work is the verse novel, *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral*, which has a strong Aboriginal element in both the story-line and the verse-form.

Contrary to the conventional wisdom that they cannot, Murray believes that white people can possess the continent of Australia imaginatively in very much the Aboriginal way. There are two strong sponsors of his thinking and writing in the Aboriginal sense-the Coolongolook River, and the red-headed fruit bats that fill the air with their wings in the Wingham Brush as they fly out to forage in the late afternoon. 'The fruit bats are very nearly my dreaming', he writes. '... Without pressing the point further than it will go, I know I would be most reluctant ever to hurt a fruit bat.'

In 1976 Les Murray won the C. J. Dennis Memorial Poetry Competition with his long poem, in thirteen sections, 'The Buladelah Taree Holiday Song Cycle'. It is a moving account of the urban white man's groping, even half-ashamed need for 'walkabout' in his own country. It is written in the style and rhythm of the great Moon Bone song cycle of the Wonguri-Mandjikai people of Arnhem Land. With its feeling for place and memory, its invitation to look again at Australia, language, landscape and people, it is perhaps the best summation of Murray's work to date. It took him six weeks to write. He describes it thus:

'... This was the annual exodus of many urban Australians to the country and seaside resorts, people, many of them only a generation or two away from the farms, or even less, going back to their ancestral places in a kind of unacknowledged spiritual walkabout, looking for their country in order to draw sustenance from it. Or newcomers looking for the real Australia. Or people going to seek unadmitted communion with the sea, with the bush and the mountains, recovering, in ways which might look tawdry to the moralising sophisticated eye, some fragments of ancient festivity and adventure...'

6.

*Barbecue smoke is rising at Legge's Camp; it is steaming into the midday air,
all around the lake shore, at the Broadwater, it is going up among the paperbark trees,
a heat-shimmer of sauces, rising from tripods and flat steel, at the place of the
Cone-shells,*

*at that place of the Seagrass, of the tiny segmented things swarming in it, and
of the Pelican.*

*Dogs are running around disjointedly; water escapes from their mouths,
confused emotions from their eyes; humans snarl at them Gwanout! and Herebooy! not
varying their tone much;*

*the impoverished dog people, suddenly sitting down to nuzzle themselves; toddlers
side with them:*

*toddlers, running away purposefully at random, among cars, into big drownie-
water (come back, Cheryl-Ann!)*

*They rise up as charioteers, leaning back on the tow-bar, all their attributes bulge
at once:*

*swapping swash shoulder-wings for the white sheeted shoes that bear them,
they are skidding over the flat glitter, stiff with grace, for once not travelling to
arrive.*

*From the high dunes over there, the rough blue distance, at length they come
back behind the boats,*

*and behind the boats' noise, cartwheeling, or sitting down, into the lake's warm
chair;*

*they wade ashore and eat with the families, putting off that uprightness, that
assertion,*

*eating with the families who love equipment, and the freedom from equipment,
with the fathers who love driving, and lighting a fire between stones.*

(from 'The Buladelah-Taree Holiday Song Cycle')

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