

Love Governs

Meeting Merric

When Charles and I came hand-in-hand to Melbourne at the beginning of 1951, he from Sydney, I from Brisbane, we immediately gravitated to the interlocking centres of art activities – the Jorgensen tribe out at Eltham, the mudbrick Clif Pugh colony at Cottles Bridge and the Boyd family settlement in Murrumbeena.

The first time we braved it out to visit Arthur Boyd, we travelled down suburban streets, as directed, to find the unkempt block between two suburban edifices, rightly named ‘Open Country’. It was late in the day and we politely went round to the back steps. Less politely yelled out Arthur’s name until out he came. Quiet gentle greetings from the quiet gentle painter. Charles was his usual loud-mouth self. We were standing close on the small, much-frequented verandah when an elderly gentleman, Arthur’s father Merric, extruded from the brown interior.

‘Arthur, Arthur,’ he gently remonstrated, ‘please don’t speak so loudly to your visitor. It will make him feel unwelcome.’

Thus reprimanded, Charles temporarily toned himself down. We were ushered into the sitting room, known as the Brown Room,

where were Biblical paintings and figurines. In one corner was a blackboard on which was described in chalk, in pyramid formation, the testament:

LOVE GOVERNS

LOVE GOVERNS all the time

Love governs all the time in every way.

This, we were to learn, was Merric's mantra, which he wrote in chalk on the footpath whenever he got the chance, long before Sydney's 'Eternity' man took to chalking the pavements of that city. Whenever Merric got half a chance he would also chalk his pyramid on the back of daughter Mary's tunic as she headed out to school. What the wide wicked world called premature senility, those touched by Merric recognised as the Sermon on the Mount meek and mild who shall inherit the Earth. As art does.

The Homecoming

Much open house activity went on at 'Open Country' – we Blackmans became attenuated members of the Boyd family. We often spent evenings with Arthur and his wife, Yvonne, in their cabin alongside Arthur's studio at the back of the allotment. Like us, their dwelling was divided into two areas – one for painting and one for everything else: in our case loft and stable.

Their bed was a sofa, endearingly covered with a patchwork quilt sewn from patches of their own clothes. Not much for dinner tonight. Jacob's coat cost three pounds, a whole impasto tube of pure Cadmium, and what a wonderful yellow focus of the painting it was.

For bigger occasions, which required a gathering of the Boyd clan, the Brown Room in the main house would be the place.

Great was the gathering for the homecoming of brother David and wife, Hermia, after their absence of several years. They had been living in the south of France, in Tourrettes-sur-Loup, learning their ceramic art of pottery. David had somehow become a missing person myth, although Charles had known David much earlier, as a teenager, when he worked at the *Sydney Sun* under editor Kenneth Slessor and illustrator Herman 'Jonah' Lloyd-Jones.

One day, David had consulted Charles about a 'musician fellow' over in Tahiti who wanted to marry one of Herman's daughters. Charles said something like: 'What's wrong with that? Clytie is of age.' However, it was not older daughter Clytemnestra that David was proposing, but the younger Hermia, not much more than fourteen or fifteen at the time. At that stage David was trying life out as a pianist, but 'came to his senses' and realised he too was an artist like the rest of the family. David and Hermia did marry, of course, and as it happened, took lodgings in the house, since mythologised, at 104 Dowling Street, Woolloomoolloo, landladyed by the notorious Ma Porteus, where Jimmy Somerville, pianist with the Port Jackson Jazz Band, lived with various others, including Charles. He said Hermia was so shy that she would sit by the window all day, sketching a bit, until she saw her Davy return.

If you won favour with Ma Porteus she would reward you with an onslaught of brains on toast for breakfast. Charles and I would record the onslaught of our real marriage as beginning in his digs at that house on his twenty-first birthday. Upon that occasion he had trailed the streets to snatch her a bouquet of hangover flowers in lieu of back rent, only to find she had taken revenge instead, throwing in the fire the pile-up of his juvenilia. Such is life.

Anyway, back to the Boyd homecoming, for which celebration it was organised that we buy a keg of beer and tap it ourselves – a collection would be taken up for beer money. All was going well.

David was there, tall, dark and handsome as a Greek God and shy Hermia, his lady-wife, flounced in decorative garments like some modern Queen Mab.

Someone got up on a chair in the Brown Room and made a speech, which we couldn't hear too well, but presumed was the welcome home speech, and then sent round the hat. We all duly put in our beer money, only to find out that the fellow had been making a speech about the Communist Party (Yvonne's addiction at the time), and had got off with all our beer money, so we were all left broke, but with the keg debt still to pay.

Nevertheless, fired-up with the downing of the beer, the throng managed to manhandle the illustrious piano down from the Brown Room and into the garden with its attachment, father Merric himself. The night wore on and Merric played on. Next morning, at the usual time, he nonchalantly took his place at the piano in its new outdoor setting.

David and Hermia took up life in another cabin at 'Open Country', had their babies, and joined in the Boyd saga for as much of ever-after as lifetime afforded them.

One Christmas

Although 'Open Country' – where Arthur, brother David back from France, and John Perceval, already married to Mary Boyd, had their studios – became home ground for us, it happened that we Blackmans found our own coach house loft studio in Hawthorn, a few doors up from the tinkling bells of the Aladdin Gift Shop and back parlour of Elsie (Sal) Smith.

This back parlour became the sitting room rendezvous for painters. At evening they were to be found there sitting, sitting, sitting, as in a waiting room. Indeed, it was a waiting room because

the elder Smith son, Martin, had his tap, tap, tapping framing studio in the backyard shed. Frames were always faithfully promised and always long overdue. The only recourse was to sit on and on, which means, of course, to talk on and on. So Sal's parlour was Where It All Happened. Tea was brewed. Cake sometimes arrived. Projects, gossip, arguments, pasts and possibilities, and prices of brushes were all discussed. Martin, the waited for, the prince imprisoned in the backyard tower, many time and oft until the midnight hour on the never-ending frames, would eventually appear in the back doorway. Tall, blond, handsome in a Prussian officer way, Martin's presence was imperturbable and ecliptic. When the clock stood at five minutes to six, the eleventh hour, it was the signal for the rattling of coins in pockets. Generally the collection amounted to the price of two bottles of red. Martin would gather up the collection and transit through to the front door, which marked the shutting of shop for the day.

Although we knew he would make it – he always did – there was a certain tension that perhaps this might be the evening when he did not. He would purposefully stride up Glenferrie Road, across Burwood Road as the town clock stood with arms at the vertical, his figure gracefully entering the bottle department as the hotel doors legally snapped shut at six. Then strode he back slow, as Sir Bedivere towards the shining levels of the lake, to the 'Aladdin', brandishing not the sword Excalibur but in each hand a bottle apparelled in brown paper, mystic, wonderful, to be greeted by tumblers and thirsts commensurate.

This routine was memorably changed when flagons were introduced, 'three for the price of two'. Although the Wynn brothers (who actually bought paintings) might refer to wine in flagons as being akin to sheep dip, their arrival marked a change in all our lives. We could afford to drink just a little bit more. The successful painters would take their fresh-baked (pay later) frames home


while the rest of us would linger until the wine brought homeward hunger down upon us and we left.

All activities accelerated in December. Summer brought forth dancier dresses. Cherries were in the shops. Christmas was in the air. More and smaller frames were needed for the galleries' end-of-year bargain sales. Christmas as a year-stopper event came upon us. Melbourne traditions played out. Charles and I were part of the greater Murrumbeena family; Christmas took place in the Brown Room, all on best behaviour. 'Love governs' more than ever, children's frivolities given right of way.

It was the custom that Everyone Gave Everyone Else a present. The computation and permutation of all thirty-plus people giving handmade presents provided much ingenuity with paper and paints and *poèmes de nature* arranged in every form of transferable adornment. It also made for much floor covering of papers and stalks, pebbles and petals thereafter. Bring-a-plate was as much a part of the festive day as the 'bring-a-thing'.

Each year the focal point of the feast was the large turkey gifted for the occasion by Sunday Reed. This was annually collected by Arthur Boyd, as family elder, from a certain illustrious delicatessen in Flinders Street on Christmas Eve, and brought home to 'Open Country' for the morrow.

One Christmas Eve in the mid-1950s, the usual mob were gathered convivially in Mrs Smith's parlour. There might even have been two flagons of sheep dip. Arthur was conspicuously missing, being off on his mission. It seemed he was away a long time. But then, queues got longer every year and every year another favourite was added to Sunday Reed's turkey bountification. But still he took a long time coming. Eventually he arrived. He came in very quietly, more than soberly. He took a seat, wordless.



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John Perceval the impish, the mischievous, was first to speak, in a somewhat mocking tone. 'Did you get the turkey, Arfy?' he asked.

Arthur shuffled, his 'no' languaged all through his body. Finally, he admitted he did not have it. He told us that when he had worked his way to the head of the queue, the server who had the Reed turkey distribution list, looked carefully and reported that his name was not there, definitely not listed this year. Arthur had turned away, didn't even stop for a beer at Jackson's.

Silence prevailed.

A twinkle grew in Perceval's eye. 'Arfy,' he said as gravely as a conjurer pulling a rabbit out of a hat, 'did you forget Sunday's birthday?'

The single expletive word of enlightenment, guilt, disbelief, sprang from Arthur's lips.

'Mustn't forget Sunday's birthday,' jibed Perceval with glee.

Sunday was in the habit of doing the rounds and giving us all carefully chosen presents before Christmas, generally a good shirt from Georges or some such store out of our price range. Her birthday fell mid-October. To her, it was the annual occasion for giving tokens of love, gratitude, respect. The token could be ever so slight. The painters would give a sketch, the potters a platter, the wives something made. I, for instance, once knitted a cotton face washer with crocheted edges. Failure to give a birthday remembrance did not go unnoticed, until perhaps one wondered why the next year's shirt was not forthcoming.

With our mates we held together with a raw and earthy intimacy. We always took the world outside with a pinch of salt. Avenging comedy ever prevailed. There was a silly Christmas song around that went, 'Does Santa Claus sleep with his whiskers / Under or over the sheets?' In the manner of naughty children narking their school teachers, we parodied, 'Does Sunday Reed sleep with her titties / Under or over the sheets?'

That Christmas passed without turkey, but certainly not without loaves and fishes in the great bonhomie of the Brown Room.

Karel Zoubek's Prize

When we gatecrashed the Melbourne scene, there were many stories floating around about Karel Zoubek, and indeed there was Karel Zoubek himself. He was a large and solid, active and talkative, figure with heavy accent – we thought it was some form of Russian. He had his violin and played it effectively at most romantic moments.

He showed up often among the painters. He liked going to galleries, but not for long because, he declared, he would get optic indigestion. He always announced his opinions and was quick to contradict others he apprehended. In winter he wore short sleeves and knee-length shorts. On approach he would say, 'What do you think I am? I tell you. I am comfortable.'

He had gone on tour to Tasmania a couple of years earlier, said he had met this composer chap called Peter Sculthorpe, and gave him a bit of a hurry-up. (Peter always affirmed this was true.) What's more, he turned out to have a girlfriend called Yvonne. She was sturdy, smiley and not at all shy. Half the time she was missing. It turned out she went off to Persia as a strapper to train horses, particularly Arabs.

At this time there was a confluence of people I refer to as 'we-all' – the painters, potters, philosophers, camp followers and passers-through, unwillingly branded as bohemians. Central in a way to 'we-all' was the Boyd family and their habitués, of whom Zoubek was one. We often frequented the Brown Room at 'Open Country', with its ominously Biblical gravitas and modest piano, to which Merric, father of the family, would daily gravitate.

It came to pass that, at a certain turn of the year, we all received invitation to a violin recital by Karel at the auspicious chapter-house behind St Paul's Cathedral. Zoubek was a strong virtuosic performer, Soloist Supreme. We-all & Co. pretty well filled the hall. As we entered, we all received a Lucky Door number, for there was to be a prize-surprise.

On return from interval, the Lucky Door winner was announced, the prize presented. Doris Boyd, gentle mother of the illustrious family, was the lucky winner. (Doris, in the Boyd family nicknaming, was Pussy – Arthur was Chooky – or Chook-Chook.) Doris stood up and into her outstretched arms was, not so much presented, as dumped down, in a kind of painted Moses basket, a small and writhing, alive-alive-o little black puppy dog. We all applauded heartily and remembered even less of the items in the second half of the concert – but that they were passionate, very Slavic. Doris called the puppy Peter (not Paul) and he thrived in the Murrumbeena household for years.

Gradually we all moved out of circuit, went on to our various somewhere-elses. Fame did not clamp its thorny crown of laurels upon Zoubek's brow. Now time has passed and many who were at that concert have grown old and died. Peter Sculthorpe was the last of we-all to still talk about him. And if we aren't here to talk about him, write about him, he will be gone forever, and that would be a pity.