Excerpt from *Leaving Home with Henry* by Phillip Edmonds

Setting Out

Phillip Edmonds

The road across the Hay Plains looks as if it is paint- ed on the land. Trevor's trip would be a journey from one ocean to another across a third of the continent. He'd just returned from India and wanted to go to a place where there weren't as many people and that kind of drive could be just the ticket. There would be places to see like Peak Hill that looked like it had only two shops and the odd dog, and West Wyalong, its fantastic curvy main street, suggesting in the early morning that the desert could be turned back, even during the driest times. Beyond such places low mountain ranges rise out of the plains like blue ships. The horizon shimmers, even in winter, as if it doesn't know when to give up or where to start. There are in the distance large outbuildings looming like agro-businesses, but just in front of the eyes potholes to negotiate, and further away an unbelievable absence of trees, a land caught in some kind of crazy rain shadow, refusing any feature other than itself. A colleague at his work spoke of the place in a fearful voice, of the time when she and her family had had to take the Western High- way to see relatives in Sydney.

'It was the quickest way to get there if you had to go by car,' she said, 'but it was away from towns with main streets and parks.'

Trevor saw the trip as part of a wider mission into where mateship might be and liked to coax his ageing car across different landscapes. Australia had become a country of cities, but Trevor

didn't think he'd find anything there as they were slaves to the latest fashions, he often said. So on this trip he would try to avoid them. It was more subtle really and rather his way of looking for an angle that wouldn't be swallowed up by all the noise.

He was only skirting the country, for to be totally pre- pared would only be trying to conquer, summarise, under- stand it, when why shouldn't it remain a mystery? Why can't we wander aimlessly? Like some other people who drive long distances, he talked to himself and imagined he had the writer Henry Lawson's blessing, the man himself sitting in the back seat of the car making notes and think- ing up stories. It would after all be a journey through the mid-west of New South Wales, Henry's country – a land- scape miles from the outback. Trevor was worried where the Real Australia had gone but his search often came over like a Steve Irwin film aimed at overseas consumption and as a white man he knew he could only find part of the story, yet undeterred he drove on like another passionate fool.

After several hours he drove down the main street of Hay, a town of substantial buildings and sturdy looking banks. Further down the road at Narrandera, the highway forks; one arm towards Sydney, one to Melbourne, one to Adelaide and another to Brisbane. Henry had known the place years ago. At the service centre huge truck drivers devoured steak and eggs, grey nomads discreetly ate their salad sandwiches and a family from the Middle East sat bemused and cold under the bright light. He rarely came through the place but it came up in dreams as a site of significance.

Being there in real time he understood why; it was a place where images of the rest of the country could be thought about because they were a long way away. Brisbane was all foliage and bright heat, Sydney can really only see the sea because mountains obscure the inland and Melbourne is very European and planned and so far south it can pretend that the interior doesn't exist. The truck stop would never be the Red Center or the real center of the continent,

every- one knows that, but it was Trevor's turning point because it brought up a dreaming about where most Australians live and have lived.

Trevor didn't forget Adelaide and the direction from which he had come. Perhaps it was the place that inspired him. It seems perched below an enormous land and appro- priate for his idea of skirting rather than consuming. In summer there is no breath and the desert takes revenge on a place that tries terribly hard to be civilised. The Barossa Val- ley is the superb example. On a range of hills, extending up from the south, it seems lucky enough to get whatever rain there is left after fronts flirt across the south-west. European migrants planted grapes and created towns that are micro- cosms of the class structure of the old world and tourists can now try to taste a sophistication the desert will always lack for the comfortable mind. Further away into semi-desert country on the road to Broken Hill, around a hamlet called Hallet, a boy named Hubert Wilkins dreamt of becoming an Antarctic explorer and an aviator who could fly over and away. Even though Wilkins had been heroic, perhaps the lesson is Australians are in flight from what makes them distinctive. Adelaide rests between trying to prove itself and resenting that it isn't England and people walk in straight lines. As with the rest of the country, if people lack moisture, are they too dried up to have the energy to be generous?

After the intersection he wanted to make it to Canberra by morning where Henry Lawson's papers were waiting in a vault in the National Library. Apart from perhaps Banjo Paterson, they were the letters of Australia's most famous writer. He remembered reading Lawson for the first time and how it made his heart jump and memory rev. That time in the school reader! Our stories for once and not another off-colour English imitation. 'The Drover's Wife,' the story called 'The Union Buries its Dead,' the snake, the dust and the dread, his special sense of humour, and on the back cover a bearded man gazing into the distance. After such an introduction Henry's life had always been fascinating to Trevor,

swinging on a fulcrum of promise and despera- tion, suggesting so much about the larger story of Australia and the way he shaped images and made a space for dream- ing. The larger story, according to Trevor, was also about Henry's weaknesses, his propensity for the drink and the vantage points from which we judge him. Does he remind us too acutely of who we are and could be?

After Wagga the road turns into the Hume Highway, and order is restored by concrete culverts, cambered overtaking lanes and reliable signage. You would have to be a complete fool to get lost on that road. Ludwig Leichhardt should have been so lucky. It was wonderful compared to the day before as the car felt comfortable on a road made like a posh hotel that cared and caressed you. There were no direct oncom- ing headlights, no potholes, and distance was deposited in sweepingly sensible curves. The service centers were clean, surrounded by watered lawns and modern amenities and people were intent and efficient the way they went about their journeys. The cars were of a better class with cruise control, air-conditioning and other denials of distance. The whole sense of it was that you'd be home free, and lonely Australia won't get you.

Loneliness

Trevor knew about loneliness. His journeys across the country were often trips away from disappointment, a way of clearing his head, and when travelling he didn't stay in one place long enough to take on its melancholy for he had enough of his own. There were always surprises, because from where he stood there had to be joy in the unexpected and there usually was. This journey was making him dream and remember other trips. A particular town would always be marked by the people who had known it, a bend in a river represented a smile once seen, and a dog reminded him of a dog he'd once had and a place he had been for a long time.

'Melancholy is the feeling we often have for this coun- try,' he

often said to friends, and the place he was reminded of certainly had a lot of that.

It was miles from where he was driving, in old goldfield country in Victoria, but like all things in Australia, if you know it well, everything reminds you of something else. The fallowness of one place eventually finds energy in a range of hills or a river, it gives and it takes away and somehow refuses to be dishonest, and meandering to and fro is part of it.

He'd lived on a bush block, down the end of a dirt track with his wife. He could now see the place through the wind-screen of the car even as he was driving. There were cars and trucks to negotiate, but he could see the block, not like in a photo, rather with the furry sight of someone having a slight migraine, that feeling that the brain was having to take on too much in a short time, blurry in unexpected spots and then clear like a clean window for reasons that can't really be explained. What was he remembering? He certainly remembered the tankstand which he built on a bed of gravel under which brown snakes used to sleep. Talk about Henry Lawson's 'The Drover's Wife', he thought. Memories like that came with the territory.

On the block they experienced every season, grieved over infertility, had nocturnal visits from kangaroos, saw black ghosts, and tried to cope with a sickness that sucked them dry. It was a time of terrible yearning, and nothing could contain it. A grief that ripped and played with absolutely everything and, even in springtime, there were reminders of small deaths and huge silences.

He laughed at city friends who tentatively drove their new cars down the track, and for a time he wanted to fol- low them out of what he thought was an exhausting place, but after a while it got to him and he stayed. He was never really part of the country but it was kind even during the worst times. The birds always accepted him and the other animals sanely suggested in their diffidence that it was OK to be there. Down the other end of his track he had a lar- rikin friend called Barbara and they'd always chat during the

time he was there about their slice of Australia, in her cottage stacked floor to ceiling with history books.

He remembered being politically active around that place and the silence surrounding his fitful efforts. Nearby in the closest town there was a community radio station started by people from Melbourne who were remnants of the 1970s, and some locals who had dreamt for years about hearing their own voices. Trevor presented a current affairs show featuring the opinions of unpopular people, and each week their strange stories echoed across the country to listeners in a few population centers and over paddocks of phlegmatic sheep and cattle. He promoted issues such as multicultural- ism in a landscape where the gumtrees and the people were always the same whatever the season.

Out on the block when the silence became a cocoon, all of a sudden a car would appear from nowhere and the sound of shooting way up in the pine forest startled the birds. Kan- garoos left footprints in the clay on the edge of the dam and foxes left scats, careless markers to their latest conspiracy.

He remembered every bend and bump of the track in as he had to negotiate it most days. Its blond grass, rabbit war- rens on the crest of the first turn to the left, a rosemary bush next to a few bits of wood and some bricks that could have been a ruin; tulips inexplicably next to a cactus along the gate of the neighbour's property. The time they got bogged in one of the dips that collected water after it rained because the earth was too soft and they got stranded. The only thing left to do was to walk into town and get a truck to come out. He didn't have the phone on then, and when they did, it would sometimes forlornly ring out in a room surrounded only by wind and wildflowers. It was the city calling, or a potential message from someone who lived there. He felt isolated yet safe.

He remembered how he would lie on the ground when- ever he returned to the block from trips to the city or to pick up supplies in the outside world. He'd hurry on those trips, feeling out of place

when he wasn't on the block. Lying down he could see ants organising their world, carrying food in endless processions, incongruous rocks poking out of the ground, the earth itself as dirt in his fingers; the gestures of someone without a history of bland acceptance and with the time to dream. As the years went on he became like his dog, following his senses to discreet deaths in the undergrowth and to old mine shafts containing wary secrets. They only had to look at one another and they would go off into the bush at the slightest sound, responding to small variations in wind direction and sometimes the sight of kangaroos grazing. For days he lay on the ground and cuddled the empty beauty of the place.

He was dreaming even as he negotiated the traffic direc- tions on the comforting new highway.

Is this what this country does to you if you wander around it long enough and don't stop? he wondered as he drove on towards Canberra. Flatten you out, suggest you aren't all that important; make you see the funny side of desperation, and just when you get sick of it, make every detail memorable? Henry Lawson has a lot of explaining to do, reflecting the way things are, and, at times being cheeky by slyly suggesting what Australia could be and pointing out what a laconic mess I've made of my life.

National icon

There is a cultural junction at Yass, which is an old town. Once the site of interstate trucks trundling down the main street, it has been bypassed and now sits not far from the cleanliness and strutting self-importance of the national capital. He was going down to Canberra to see Henry, away from creeks and billabongs, dry waterholes, snakes and drov- ing, to a place where the pubs are full of men and women who work in offices and he was driving away from private things he hadn't been able to resolve into a place that

want- ed to be public and important – circular streets that skirt statues, offices that contain secrets and anonymous suburbs where people like him try to find joy. But he turned away from those places in the way he'd turned his back on his marriage because it had become too pragmatic. Deep down he fancied himself as a larrikin who wanted to be spoken of as a national icon like the writer he admired so much.

If I am remembered, even monumentalised that would be great, it'd make up for all the rest. I'd be important for once and someone would love me, he imagined, driving towards Canberra wondering whether Henry liked it in the library stacks.

The National Library was after all air-conditioned, respectful, and free of drought unlike Bourke out on the north-west plains where they'd both once been to see the bush.

But Henry can't wander about any more and probably needs rescuing, he mused.

For Trevor trips to Canberra were a tiresome diversion because, among other things, it reminded him of how far he had to travel only to be insignificant in a place full of mon- uments. He had really wanted to drive from Hay to West Wyalong, across another featureless plain, in the way he'd once travelled down the range from Broken Hill to Port Augusta, where on a clear day you can see tomorrow even if the view is pitiless. It was easy driving through that kind of uncompetitive country because in that part of Australia you feel dried up in that all the moisture has been sucked out of you and you don't have anything much left to give. Yet those places can be beautiful, even if in the height of sum- mer, when a north wind comes off the desert, the original inhabitants are saying, 'Go away, go away.'

The car seemed to be limping as he drove into the Aus- tralian Capital Territory. It felt unsteady, so he pulled into a garage and the man in charge was laconic in the way people who work with cars often have to be.

'It's your wheel alignment, mate, it's out a bit, see your tyres are

wearing differently. You been over rough roads or something? You know, mate,' he added with a chuckle, 'I always see people who have flogged their vehicles over the rest of the country, and who only find out about their faults when they come to Canberra. It's an occupational hazard for me.'

Trevor just didn't like Canberra because the winters were bone-sapping and the summers breathless. He had a sister there who liked it though and who once said that the place 'kept the bush at bay', and restored her faith in order. But during the last drought kangaroos came into the suburbs in search of food and water and lolloped all over the lawns in front of an image of themselves on the national crest of Parliament House. They ran into fences and got run over on arterial roads, and when the big bushfires came, flung themselves everywhere and wouldn't be controlled.

Not far from the garage, surrounded by spacious lawns, the National Library loomed up. Henry was there some- where or the bits of him people had collected. There were letters Trevor needed to see inside a vault. Walking to the library across the lawn from the car park he realised that he hated Henry for having such an influence over him because he had been too acute and human. Finally he found the letters; some to the editor of the *Bulletin* about not hav- ing enough money, how he wanted to blow his brains out because no one cared for his stories and that if we didn't believe in ourselves we might end up ruined like his life. Trevor felt that Henry could be going crazy trussed up in a national vault, the subject of air-conditioning and histori- ans. He had seen the letters and made notes and needed to get on because Canberra was getting into his head and he didn't want to end up staying any longer in the place where Henry had been all those years.

Coming out of Canberra there is another important fork in the road. On a stretch just north of the last suburb Trevor heard a noise from the back of the car, and even though concentrating on negotiating around a huge truck, he saw a figure in the rear-view

mirror. Sure enough, it was Henry Lawson moaning and groaning in the back seat, reciting odd lines of poetry and refusing to sit still, like a kid on a long trip. He was talking to himself.

'When will we get there?' he kept saying as the car picked up speed in sight of open country.

If you go north towards Sydney, the Hume Highway is once again safe and efficient and a sensible route for families on a long trip. But Trevor wanted to go north on a different road because he had seen Sydney and the new is often only a replay of the old.

At Yass there is a change in the country again. Off the highway the road to Boorowa fits into the land, winding around brown hills with a tinge of green. It snakes north around paddocks with sheep, and finally, after traversing a range comes out into flatter land. There are signposts to Wagga, to Grenfell (Henry grumbled something about wanting to go down that road), to Leeton (Trevor haz- ily recalled how his recalcitrant passenger once had a job measuring water in the Murrumbidgee), to Young, and to Cowra from where you can go to Parkes.

'Why are we going here? After we hit the plains, there will be nothing, I want to go to Sydney,' Henry announced.