

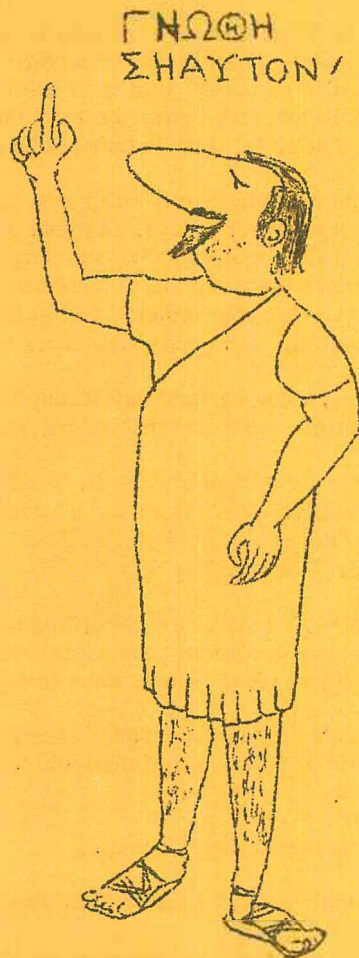
ἀρχὴν εἶν' ὁ λόγος" - which is about the extent of my conversation in that language, but they ignored me. "Φυκκίγγ μιγραντ βαυταρδς," I mumbled to myself.

After another hour or so, everyone went home except Peter and Robin. Peter mentioned the present atmosphere of tension in Chile. Robin went to sleep. "It all started with Bernardo O'Higgins," I said, and in little less than two or three hours we had resolved the Chilean Situation.

About 5.15 Peter somehow got the inert Johnson into his car. "Good night," I said, and went back to bed. For ten or fifteen minutes I listened to the Morris's unco-operative starter motor, then drifted off to sleep.

Now it's way past 2.30. I'll just ring Robin to see if he got home safely.

Hmm. In three minutes it will be time for dinner at the hostel (hostel, yes, not hotel), and I have to take these two stencils back there anyway to write in the Greek words, so while I'm at it I might try some instant sketching to fill the rest of this page. No cars, though: did that last time.



Yes, well... The instant sketch turned out to be myself, dressed in typical classical Greek garbage (sandals, plastic see-through toga and "Athens in '75 BC" tee-shirt), saying some more Greek. I wonder if it means anything?

FROM THE DEAD CENTRE

SYNOPSIS:

During January I applied, not very hopefully, for one of three positions as A-grade journalist with the Parliamentary Reporting Staff in Canberra. Duties: editing transcripts of Senate committee meetings, and a bit of proof-reading and indexing. As a B-grade journalist (officially, that is: George Turner says I'm not a journalist's bootlace, or words to that effect, and I am happy to agree with him) with some background in proof-reading and librarianship, I thought I might as well have a go. Being unemployed at the time (you've heard that one before?), I had nothing to lose but a 7-cent stamp and an hour or so writing a letter of application.

I was rather astonished, first to have my letter acknowledged by return mail, and then to be invited a week or so later to contact the Hansard chief in Melbourne to arrange an interview. I did that, then spent two days studying the official Style Manual, since there was to be a test as well as an interview. I presented myself at the Spring Street Mausoleum suited, booted and relatively clean-shaven, and found Mr Stuart, the chief reporter, unexpectedly amiable and polite. He said I was the only person to be interviewed in Melbourne, and my hopes soared.

The test was exhaustive and exhausting, taking in spelling, vocabulary, grammar, composition, sub-editing, the lot. (What does "importunate" mean? "Germane"? What is wrong with this sentence? - "You can get to Melbourne quicker by air than by train." And so on - pages of the stuff. The speech selected for sub-editing was so woolly, so confused in thought and expression, so full of non-sentences and meandering verbiage, that I nearly flung it from me in disgust and frustration. Fortunately, my experience in rendering the works of L. Harding, F. Rottensteiner and certain others into English in ASFR had prepared me to some small degree for this kind of thing, and I did the best I could with it. I hoped, fervently, just in case I got the job, that they had picked out the worst passage they could find. Now I know they didn't.)

About ten days later I was again interviewed at Parliament House, this time by the Principal Parliamentary Reporter from Canberra. We talked for about three minutes - about such things as whether I had ever been "in trouble with the police" and where my name came from - and then Mr Bridgman asked me when I would like to start. Trying neither to look astounded nor fall off the chair, I said, "Ah - Monday week?"

And on Monday week I started. In between...? Well, first of all, there was an incredible hassle with the red tape involved in having my remaining furniture and books removed. My sister, Joy, did most of the packing and more or less organized me. I mean, no-one has ever fully succeeded in organizing me, but Joy did very well - drawing my attention to such matters as the de-frosting of the refrigerator, whether I wanted to keep this or that and if not what should be done with it, when I was preoccupied with weighty but rather time-consuming reflections about which books to take with me in the car. A great invention, sisters.

Then the VW looked like having a coronary occlusion. The cause was traced from an unhealthy-sounding rattle to a loose fan (a false lead, that: when a new fan was put in the rattle continued) and finally to a buggered camshaft. (I think that's a technical term: it's what the mechanic called it, anyway.) Meantime the estimated cost of repair rose from \$20 (Wednesday) to \$275 (Friday). I had hoped to leave on Thursday. The car finished up with a new short-motor, and I had to find that \$275 in cash, since the VW people knew I was leaving Melbourne and wouldn't take a cheque. A good friend (I would mention her name, but I think she would prefer otherwise) lent me the money, and I got the car back.

MEANWHILE, amongst other things which blur in my memory of that week, on the Wednesday night about two dozen Melbourne sf fans farewelled me at the Degraeves Tavern. Lee and I got drunk on nostalgia. Henry presented me with a flagon of red when I ordered a carafe. Robin made a speech, including a very bad Keats & Chapman anecdote, in his well-rounded tones. Coffee afterwards at the Foysters' - and that's about all I remember of that night. Carey must have driven me home.

I left Melbourne at 10.15 pm on Friday, 3rd March. I had been warned not to drive at over 50 mph, and to change the oil at 200 miles. The car was packed above the Plimsoll line with the gear I thought I would need to survive for maybe a month or so - typewriter, tape-recorder, tapes, stencils, about forty books, John Sandler's lithograph (which I would not entrust to any carrier) and all my clothes. Oh, and an addressing machine, my remaining records, the cassette recorder, a flagon of red (in case they didn't have things like that in Canberra) and a few hundredweight of absolutely essential odds and ends. It was a slow journey.

I booked into a cheap motel in Benalla about 1.45 am, and was on the road again at 8. I sent George Turner a postcard from Wangaratta (I have the feeling, George, that that action might lack meaning for some who read this; may I mention that most of your novels have been set in Wangaratta?) (okay, a Wangaratta of the mind, then - a true creation proceeding from a something-oppressed brain) (is Wangaratta an aboriginal word meaning "tree-lake"? - that's something I never got around to asking you), and stopped for breakfast and an oil-change at Albury, on the New South Wales border, about 10.30. About 4.30 I drove into Canberra. All the way down Northbourne Avenue I was followed by a police car. The ACT police hate Victorians. (On the other hand, Canberrans in general assume that interstate drivers haven't a clue where they are going - which happened to be true at the moment I am speaking of - and show their contempt by breaking the most elementary traffic rules. But that's another story.) At 4.45 I pulled into the Forrest Motor Lodge, National Circuit, Forrest - and there I stayed for about twenty-four hours, studying a map of Canberra, finishing off what was left of the flagon, speculating on what future might lie before me in this cheap imported plastic town and (dare I admit it) writing an interminable philosophical poem on the subject - a mess of blank verse maudlin in nature and now happily indecipherable.

On Sunday I found my way to Curtin, one of the outer suburbs. An outer suburb in Canberra is anywhere more than three miles from Civic Centre. Here I met for the first time in about twenty-five years my cousin, Lorraine, and for the first time ever her husband, Ted, and their children and grandchild. We decided very quickly that I was the black-sheep of the family and thereafter got on famously. Ted is an operations officer in the RAAF and takes tutorials in economics at the Australian National University. Not my line at all, but he plays chess (I've been back since: progress score, one all), keeps a good rough red and knows what's what in Canberra. I like him and my virtually unknown cousin and their progeny, and I hope I will see a lot more of them. After all, what are relatives for but to be imposed upon?

On Monday morning... but about this stage I think I should halt this synopsis and say:

NOW READ ON:

On Monday morning, 6th March, I packed all my gear back into the VW (since I had no idea where my new employers had arranged for me to stay that night), left the car at the motel, and walked the mile or so to Parliament House. I entered the nation's elegant stone heart (not for the first time: I think my father took me through the place when I was about fourteen) and asked the way to Hansard. The directions were a little vague. After five minutes trudging through the catacombs, I asked an office-girl the way. "Hansard?" she said. "Which department is he in?"

I found the office, eventually, talked to the clerks there and then to Mr Bridgman - who informed me that I would be working at the Government Printing Office in Kingston. Damn. I was looking forward to announcing my new address as "Parliament House, Canberra". That would have impressed a few people - bank managers and finance companies, for example - but it was not to be. So I was driven down to Kingston and introduced to my boss and fellow-workers - but not to the myriad pretty typists. Who says there is no class distinction in Australia? Just because I'm an overpaid journalist doesn't mean I'm too proud to be introduced to a buxom, vivacious, smiling - oh, the hell with it. Probably all married anyway,

That night one of my fellow sub-editors drove me back to the motel. We had more than several drinks at the Hotel Kingston ("where the Russians drink" - it's opposite the USSR Embassy, and I'm probably on ASIO's file now for sure) on the way. Since I had now established that the Government (ie, taxpayers) was paying my full expenses at the motel,

I ate well, treated myself to a '66 Kaiser Stuhl burgundy and, after chatting to the very lovely head waitress for an hour or three, tottered out of the restaurant about 10.30 and unpacked the VW, again.

On Tuesday I talked to several real estate agents about flats. I didn't like the idea of living in a hostel. Their advice was depressing and unanimous: a two-bedroom flat would cost somewhere between \$30 and \$40 per week, a small house (anywhere - near town or 20 miles out) about the same, and my chances of finding something unfurnished were very slim.

So on Wednesday I rented a garage and workshop in Kingston, about half a mile from where I work, and on Friday morning I packed all my stuff back into the car again and that night moved into a hostel: Lawley House.

I spoke to the lady in the office about the hostel's rules and so on, and was not what you might call enthusiastic about the place. I had been misled about the tariff, didn't like the idea of not making a noise, couldn't understand the details she rattled off about meal times cut lunches laundry facilities hiring the iron but bring it back immediately &c. The bit about no smoking in the dining room, however, came through very clearly.

I was worried about the workshop I had rented, too. It was enormous - 25' x 12' - big enough to live in. The garage was about 18' x 12', too, so there was plenty of room - but absolutely nothing in either to make them livable. Neither had a ceiling; the walls were unlined; the floor in the workshop concrete and in the garage just earth. As workshop and garage, they were excellent; as somewhere to live they were impossible. That night, though I couldn't afford it, I went back to the motel to eat. At least there I had someone to talk to. (Thanks, Fay: you have no idea how much you cheered me up that night.)

The next morning I was allotted a place at a table in the hostel dining room. This, I understood, was to be my place for ever and ever. Bletch. The waitress was charming, though - bright, cheerful, talkative and pretty. Are they a race apart from ordinary mortals? At lunch I met the only other person permanently stationed at my table - a rather sad-looking Ceylonese named Thilakapala Wijedeera. (On Sunday morning we sat in the sun and talked about Indian classical music - I mean, he talked, I questioned and listened. And I discovered that in the five months he had been in the hostel, no-one had talked to him much, that he had great difficulty in following Australian conversation - the accent was strange, the talk too rapid - and that he was very lonely. No wonder.) That night, I think, we were joined by a young CSIRO plant physiologist, John Schiller. And I discovered - too late for that meal, unfortunately - that wine is permitted at table.

Suddenly, life felt better. Wine with meals, that custom which distinguishes civilized beings from savages, could be resumed. I felt good. And on the next morning my landlady said she was renovating a small bungalow (that word means something much different outside Australia: here's your chance to pick up some local dialect, overseas readers), about 9' x 7', next to the workshop. I said I would rather have that than the workshop, and have since moved into it.

So here I am. For a shade under \$40 per week I have (a) my room, all meals, table tennis, laundry facilities &c and all the company I want, at the hostel; (b) this little bungalow, with a couch, bookcases, files and typewriter - in short, a study; and (c) an enormous garage, where the Roneo lives and all my furniture and the other thousand-odd books. I share the garage, though. There's a possum lives in the rafters during the day. He seems house-trained.

I haven't said anything about the job yet, and probably won't until I know exactly how I stand with the Crimes Act. A lot of the stuff I am working on is Top Mum, and I don't want to face a firing squad - or even lose the job, for that matter. But I am enjoying it. The work is no more frustrating than proof-reading, and the conditions and pay make it very much worth putting up with.

So at that point I will leave for the moment. Next instalment: maybe something about how I deserted Thilakapala and John and went to Alison and Visma and Peter's table, how I didn't get to Melbourne for Easter, and other great stuff like that. (25.3.72)

