

chapter one

THE MALLEE – MY COUNTRY

Memory plays its own games in my remote and fading past. Only the few things that have cut deep grooves in the recesses of my mind remain firm in outline today. To tease out the memories, to put them in their place and time, to surround them with the people who stood within them and then to translate the maze of memory into words — that is my principal task as I set about writing of the self I was in that past. The rest is based on surviving relics — oddments like the bronze vase that Dad gave to my mother when I was about six, letters, bank accounts, scraps in newspapers, photographs, lines of poetry and songs. These things are there to treasure and be used, but with respect, discretion and care. One thing alone remains fixed because its contours can still be traced even when it changes. The land is there to walk on,

hesitantly and with reverence in the knowledge that it shaped me. My land, my country was the Mallee.

The Victorian Mallee is that north-western portion of the state bordered in the north and east by the Murray River and in the west by the border with South Australia. Coming from Melbourne in the south the plains of the Wimmera give way to the sandy stretches of the Mallee somewhere about Birchip. As a distinctive landform, the Mallee was created about 14,000 years ago by the inland rivers, when they came down into the Murray Basin. They washed out into floodplains and deposited sand, which became the soil of the Mallee. Semi-saline lakes were also formed, as well as sand dunes that bore some vegetation. The scrub that partly covered the area, as distinct from forest, of which there was none, was made up largely of mallee trees that grew from a hidden bole or stump into several stems. The Aborigines called this genus of the eucalyptus *mali* and thus gave a name to the region.

Major Thomas Mitchell skirted the area to the south and east in 1836, but the impression quickly took hold that the Mallee held out prospects of little advantage to settlers and, in the next 50 years, only a handful of intrepid souls ventured into that part of the country. In 1902, the *Sydney Bulletin* remarked, 'Nobody knows who made the Mallee, but the Devil is strongly suspected.' Certainly unaware of this dismal estimate of its prospects, my father bought a farm at Sea Lake in the Mallee about 240 miles from Melbourne in 1924. It was from our home on the farm that he took his pregnant wife to Melbourne in early April 1927.

Melbourne, my birthplace, remains my city. I have not lived there for more than 60 years and my birth in a private hospital in the bay-side suburb of St Kilda was not originally intended. My older sister was born in 1925 in Doctor Claude

Greer's private hospital, 'Maroondah', at Sea Lake. My mother was small of frame, the birth was hard, the baby was bonny and strong but she lived only very briefly, although long enough to be baptised Josephine. Dr Greer, much loved and highly respected, as was then common of bush doctors, said to my father, 'Mick, if you want to have a live child, go to Melbourne. Janie will never bear one in the Mallee.' Why the Melbourne surgeon chose 15 April, 1927, as the appropriate day to deliver me by Caesarian section remains a mystery. Yet, as a result, Good Friday, the day on which I was born, became a day of life and death for me. Long before, on a Jerusalem hillside, death was dealt to a Galilean rebel. For both of us, the decisive hour was about three o'clock in the afternoon. He died and I was born. It ill behoves a Gentile from an obscure village in the Antipodes to make any claim on the one whom Pilate chose to call 'Jesus, the Nazarene, King of the Jews'. Yet thenceforward, my path through life was wound together with His.

My mother had eaten nothing until one evening, a week after my birth, when her mother, Mary McInerney, née Neylon, and long since out of Ireland, visited the hospital. She had been a bush midwife and, from under her widow's weeds, she produced a bottle of champagne and ordered a reluctant Mick to open it. Janie drank a glass, became violently ill and soon afterwards asked for a meal. We returned to the farm on the edge of the township of Sea Lake. There I became a child of the Victorian Mallee. It was a place where the making of a man was a simple thing. Yet, for me, simplicity was woven with a burden of complexity that was not all of my own choosing.

Perhaps my coming into his world did a little to lift my father's worries. His land was mortgaged and the bank expected its annual payment. The previous harvest of 1926–27

about Sea Lake was bounteous, with 115,000 bags of wheat delivered to the local railway station. The *Weekly Times* reported that the next harvest, of 1927–28, was ‘one of the worst experienced in the Sea Lake District’, with a rainfall of 6.28 inches compared with the average of 12.5 inches. Winter and spring were long and dry for families whose well being was determined by rain and, in the upshot, less than 30,000 bags were harvested. I have no knowledge of what share Mick Molony contributed to the total.

I was almost two in February 1929 when my grandmother took me in a pusher, called, I think, a go-cart, to a small rise near our home. From its sandy summit, she could see the trees which shrouded the cemetery on the next rise. I have always since called that place ‘The Hill’. At that moment, the men of the family were laying Mick McNerney down to rest. Mick, Mary Neylon’s second son, had been hospitalised in Egypt after serving with the 24th Battalion of the AIF in the trenches at Lone Pine on Gallipoli in 1915, where the fighting was so dangerous and exhausting that the 23rd and the 24th were rotated daily. In June 1916, he was severely wounded in the shoulder and neck in action in France and returned home in 1919 broken in body after further service as a sergeant on the Western Front with a veterinary unit. It was not then the custom for the women of Ireland to be at a graveside and perhaps my grandmother’s emotions at a distance were so strong that they coursed over into my childish mind. I have never been clear about what effect carrying a funeral as a first memory has had on my psyche, but I remember also that ‘Little Grandma’, as she was known, died in July in that same year.

Mary Neylon was born at Kilfenora in County Clare in 1856. Aged 15 she sailed for Australia and lived with her sister, Mrs McNamara, in Ballarat. At 19 she married Michael

McInerney on 29 March, 1875, in the church of St Alipius in Ballarat East, where Peter Lalor had had his arm amputated after the Eureka Stockade in 1854. It was Michael's second marriage at St Alipius because, some 10 years previously, his first wife had died in childbirth. The child, their first, did not live long after birth. There is no surviving record of my grandfather's birth, but Naise Cleary, late director of the Clare Heritage Centre, concluded that he came from Ballingaddy near Ennistymon and that he was born about 1836. Like Mary Neylon, he had never learnt to read and write, although it was said that he could calculate in his head how many scoops would be required to dig a dam of a certain size. They remained illiterate and, on their marriage day, they signed the papers with an 'X'. Formalised by my second name, Neylon, the bond between my grandmother and me remains strong today.

My father decided to go to war twice, the first time in 1916 under an assumed name, Lemonye, taken from the author of a novel he was reading. His eldest brother spotted him as his regiment marched down Spencer Street in Melbourne on the way to embarkation. Once informed that he was under age, the colonel in charge sent him home to Litchfield in the Victorian Wimmera where Thomas Molony, his father, farmed. On the second occasion, taking the best horse on the farm, Dad was more successful. He survived his brief period as a despatch rider in France but, hidden in his lungs, he brought home the seeds of mustard gas that floated over Flanders' fields in 1918. Mercifully, he was still strong and vibrant in the late 1920s. One day he saw me standing by the fence that surrounded the homestead. He swept down on his big red hack, gathered me up and placed me in front of him on the saddle. I remember the wind on my face as he rode rapidly through the paddocks, all the time laughing and

holding me close in safety. I have no memory of his ever telling me that those same paddocks would one day be mine. To do so would have been futile. Drought and depression combined to wreak their misery and we were in Melbourne by 1935, never to return as a family to the Mallee. My father was already broken in spirit long before the seeds of the gas finally flowered. He died in 1958 and failure had become his hallmark. In one thing of high valour, his love, he never failed.

Our home in the Mallee could not be called Bella Vista or any such name. There were no mountains in the Mallee and therefore no rivers. The only vista was of paddocks broken by gentle, shifting sand hills and small clumps of mallee scrub, the roots of which made excellent firewood. When the spring rains came and the wildflowers bloomed, the Mallee had its own beauty, but even then it could scarcely be called *bella*. Instead, the home was named 'San Jose'. This choice unquestionably stemmed from the fervent devotion of my parents to Joseph, a Jewish carpenter of Nazareth and husband of Mary of that same village. The house was constructed of peculiarly flattened but slightly ridged corrugated iron and, through the years, I have always delighted in hearing the sound of rain on an iron roof. A verandah ran around the house and, at the front, there was a lawn with two small palm trees. On one side of the house there was an orange tree and out the back, behind the kitchen, a mulberry tree with a soft, round bole which fascinated me because I found the native trees rough to my touch. I often sat under the orange tree and found it good to look up at its ripening, golden fruit. I proposed marriage to a delightful child, Phyllis Denley, under the mulberry tree. She was aged about six and, with much maturity and good sense, refused me. My toys were simple, but I received a rocking horse for my fourth birthday.

It was much treasured until the night Mother stumbled over it in the dark on the verandah. The horse lost part of its frame, Mother was injured and the toy disappeared. Uninhabited, the house in Sea Lake remains there today. The wooden verandah, lawn, palms and mulberry trees are gone. The orange tree is dying from lack of water.

It is harder to think now of the inside of a home which I have not entered in seven decades. As a child, I often tried to understand the meaning of the picture of the Sacred Heart on the wall of my parents' bedroom. That a heart could bleed when pierced I knew already from watching my father butcher a sheep or a pig. It took me much longer to be convinced that a human heart could bleed. There was another picture in the dining room that was surely as out of place as any then hanging on a Mallee wall. A man with a darkened visage, clad in long robes, stood on a bridge over a river. He was looking longingly at a lady, similarly clad. How and when the print, painted originally by Dante Gabriel Rossetti in London in 1871 and called *Dante's Dream*, was acquired I do not know. My mother explained to me that the man in the picture was called Dante and that he was a great poet. She said the lady, Beatrice, was the beloved of Dante and the bridge was in a place across the seas called Florence. I have since stood on the Ponte della Trinità and brought back to my mind those images of Dante and Beatrice. The wonder they created in my Mallee childhood never returned until I read Dante's *Paradiso*.

The first allotments of land at what became Sea Lake were put up for selection in 1890. By 1892, four selections of about 640 acres each had been settled around a small, freshwater lake. Dennis Gallagher had taken up the block to the south of the lake and James McGowan the adjoining one on the north. The surveyor's map, dated 1890–91, stated that

there were pine, box and mallee trees on the block and that the soil was sandy. It was McGowan's two blocks, reduced to 1,165 acres because the site for the township of Sea Lake had been cut out of one block, that my father bought 'at a satisfactory figure' from the estate of James McGowan in March 1924.

On 23 September, 1924, Michael Molony married Janie McNerney in Bendigo. He recorded the event cryptically, even laconically, in his diary. 'Married at Sacred Heart Cathedral at 11.30am. Breakfast at Shamrock.' No explanation was ever forthcoming as to why they were married in Bendigo rather than in Donald in the Wimmera, where 'Little Grandma' still lived at the time. Nonetheless, it was a happy choice. The cathedral was partially and, after World War II, became one of Australia's finest gems of Gothic architecture. Father Henry Backhaus, born in Germany, had been educated for the priesthood at Propaganda Fide College in Rome. He came to Adelaide to minister to the spiritual needs of the German migrants in South Australia and followed some of them to Bendigo in the early 1850s, when prodigious quantities of gold were discovered there. Probably unaware of their future value, he bought up large sections of what became the heart of Bendigo and in his will he left a huge sum of money to the bishop to build a cathedral. It was well and nobly spent.

The Shamrock, ranking then and since among Australia's greatest hotels — home to Nellie Melba when she sang in Bendigo — was a fitting choice to follow the marriage. After her first sleepless night in the Shamrock, Nellie had insisted that the clock on the Town Hall across the road be stopped overnight. Janie and her mother had stayed the night before the wedding at the Shamrock but it is not recorded whether they were kept awake by the chimes. The

honeymoon that followed lasted a month, partly at the Windsor Hotel and some of the rest at the Union Club in Melbourne. Dad entered in his diary on 27 September that they 'Went to Kings — Muriel Starr in East of Suez'. They also attended Mass at South Yarra and went twice to the races at Caulfield.

The *Sea Lake Times* proclaimed its integrity with the slogan, 'An independent journal free from secular or religious domination. It caters for all and panders to none.' On 2 October, 1924, under the heading 'Orange Blossom', the paper reported the wedding stating that the 'parties motored' to Bendigo and that the bride, carrying 'an ivory prayer book' was 'charming' in a 'handsome one-piece frock of mastic [sic] marocain and georgille hat of tasteful shadings'. After the wedding, they left by car for Melbourne 'en route to the Blue Mountains'. Some of this seemingly extravagant behaviour can be explained partially by a diary entry Mick made on 18 August. It reads, 'Sold farm', which means that he had disposed of the farm near Donald given to him by his father.

There can be little doubt that Janie had persuaded Mick to buy land at Sea Lake so as to be close to her McInerney family, but it would be too much to assume that it was part of the wedding contract. There had been an uneasy relationship between Mick and his father, who had resented Mick's having fought for the British Empire in the war. Putting a comfortable distance of 60 miles between the two of them may have seemed appropriate to Mick. Janie's brothers had selected land some 10 to 15 miles from Sea Lake, Ned Gallagher had inherited his father Dennis's block and Janie's eldest sister, Bess, had married Ned. With the purchase of McGowan's, Janie and Bess, Mick and Ned became neighbours. Besides the ties of family and daily toil and the constant comings and goings between the two homes less

than half a mile apart, Ned and Mick shared a common delight in each other's company as well as in beer.

On summer evenings at harvest time, it was often the case that Bess and Janie judged it ill advised of their men to go down to the Royal Hotel for a drink. There were two pubs in the town, but the men favoured the Royal, which was known simply as the 'top pub' and which was the closer of the two to their farms. To defeat the purpose of the ladies, and slake their thirst, one of them would take the precaution to fill a demijohn with beer at the pub, which was then concealed near the tank stand behind the house. Mick would suggest that he and Ned go outside for a 'pitch', the word he invariably used rather than talk or yarn. Then, in the cool of the evening, they sat down and passed the demijohn from one to the other, doubtless yarning in the meantime. Dad told me that he could never understand why Ned refused to drink the last few mouthfuls but, instead, poured them on to the ground. Ned was about 15 years older than Dad and he probably had memories of beer in the olden times when the sediment sank to the bottom.

Beer was unquestionably consumed in large quantities in the Mallee, but it would be wrong to conclude that the men were drunkards. Except for Friday afternoons, when the outlying farmers and their wives came into Sea Lake for provisions, it was unusual for a farmer to be seen in either pub before evening. I have a distinct recollection of the distress with which the women remarked on one particular farmer, assuredly afflicted with alcoholism, who came into the town, at some periods daily, and drank. It was predicted, mournfully because of his wife and children, that he would 'lose the farm'. To widespread sorrow, he eventually did so.

This does not mean that drink was frowned on. My McNerney uncles, Pat, Bill and Jack (a bachelor known as

Jake), were Friday-afternoon drinkers, at times to excess. Returning to their distant farms, they would not have another drink for at least a week, sometimes longer when they were unable to come into Sea Lake. Jake, being unconstrained by wifely admonitions, usually enjoyed his Friday outings greatly. On one occasion he was late arriving at our home for 'tea', which the evening meal was always called, rather than dinner, which was eaten at midday. Time passed, Mother became anxious and Dad and Bill were dispatched to look for him. They arrived back very much later with a bemused Jake. It appears they came across a sleeping Jake not far from the house and, ascertaining that he was simply in drink taken, they proceeded to the pub on the pretext of looking for him. The consequent condition of the trio caused immense displeasure to Mother.

There has been much amiable argument about the name Sea Lake which, by any account, is a curiosity. A. E. W. Tobin was an ex-Surveyor-General of Victoria who had surveyed the plan of the eventual township. He said in a letter in 1937 that young Ned Gallagher had drawn up an early map of the immediate area and written 'Sea lake' to indicate the place where the lake was situated. Ned's father, Dennis, was very likely illiterate so that making the map was left to Ned, who certainly could read and write. That Ned's spelling made 'sea' out of 'see', or that his handwriting was unclear, is possible. In any event, the name Sea Lake remained for posterity despite its seeming absurdity. For me as a child, there was mystery in the whole thing and I could never fathom it.

I took much joy in listening to the men talk about the various places in the Mallee where they had been or were about to visit to sell or buy a horse, sheep or a dog. I would often roll my tongue around the flowing, gracious names of the Mallee

that had come down from the old people who had lived long centuries in those places: Berriwillock, Culgoa, Myall, Ninda, Nyarrin, Nandaly, Chinkapook, Manangatang and many more. Beside them, Sea Lake made no sense whatever. Today, the lake where I sometimes went fishing as a child is permanently dry and has been replaced with a golf course, but the name, Sea Lake, remains a conundrum. Yet it adds to the mystery of the Mallee that, for me at least, has its own importance in a world in which the gift of wonder, like the lake, is drying up.

Reg, only child of the Gallaghers, was my first cousin and of him, and his antics, my memory still holds strong. He was 10 years my senior and he soon became, and ever afterwards remained, a source of strength in his rough, but loving way. Ned had a roan hack known only as The Roan. Greater refinements in respect of naming horses were not in vogue in the Mallee, where to be pretentious was to be merely foolish. One day I looked out from our house to see Reg standing on the back of a saddleless Roan as he rode him wildly around the house paddock. My mother took to telling me not to try to imitate the foolish things I saw Reg doing. I later came to sway with the movement of a horse, to guide it away from rabbit holes and to lie forward on its mane as we rushed through hanging boughs. I never stood up on a horse.

Reg contracted diphtheria when the contagion visited Sea Lake in 1933, but recovered quickly. After school one afternoon I had my usual glass of milk with bread and jam. The milk immediately ran out of my nostrils because the web of diphtheria was already clutching at my throat. I brushed with death for days and the sensation of slipping in and out of consciousness seemed pleasing even if it meant only an escape from the horrible shapes and colours that flashed across my brain. That is the only bout of illness I can remember from

my early childhood, although Mother told me that, like so many infants in the bush of those days, I almost succumbed to what was known as summer diarrhoea. Lacking antibiotics, parents could only tend their children in hope in such circumstances. For many, the hope remained unfulfilled and small graves in cemeteries testify to their sorrow.

Reg's courage or devil-dare never left him. From North Africa in 1943, he flew on numerous night attacks on bases in Tunisia, Sicily, Sardinia and mainland Italy. Posted later to Foggia in southern Italy, he survived 36 bombing missions over Italy and the Balkans with the Royal Air Force, bailed out over Corsica and crashlanded once at base. I stayed with Bess and Ned in the summer of 1943–44 to help Ned take off what passed as a wheat crop and, while I was there, a letter arrived from Reg marked 'Naples'. Over the years Bess had sometimes gone shopping at the Maples store in Melbourne and, as we knelt around the kitchen table during the Rosary and its interminable trimmings every night, we prayed for Reg's safety in that remote place Bess called Maples. Naples, both as name and locality, was beyond the realms of her imagination.

Marked with the scars of his war experiences, on his face, which nevertheless retained its handsomeness, and in his psyche, which had ever been confident and strong, Reg's health soon forced him to leave his desk in the normal public service in Canberra. He found a less demanding position at Government House and sometimes deplored the meanness of a succession of Australian governors-general in comparison with the large-heartedness of their British predecessors. After he retired, I asked him what he thought of Gough Whitlam's sacking by John Kerr. Reg quietly observed that he had liked Kerr, whom he judged to be a decent man, but his marriage had changed him because his new wife fed exalted notions of grandeur into Kerr's mind. In Reg's judgment, Malcolm

Fraser and the American Intelligence Agency had, if anything at all, much less to do with Whitlam's downfall than the new Lady Kerr.

When I went to Corpus Christi College, Werribee, in 1945 to study for the priesthood, Father George O'Neill S. J., who, aged more than 60, had arrived there from Ireland in 1923, was still on the staff though failing in health. This Jesuit of vast learning was known simply as George among the students, who had little knowledge of his background about which he never spoke. He had studied in Ireland, Prague and Paris, mastered six languages, was an examiner at the Royal University of Ireland and, in 1910, became the first professor of English at University College Dublin where James Joyce was one of his pupils. At Werribee, he taught modern languages and, possessing a sense of absolute pitch, he founded the orchestra. In the spring of 1945, a cuckoo had built its nest outside his bedroom window but it sang slightly off tune. Driven to distraction, George requested Henry Johnston, the rector, to have its nest removed. Henry was a devoted ornithologist and refused on the grounds that the bird was innocent of any offence and that, if he wished, George could change his room. Like the cuckoo, I met George through the world of music because I began to play the trombone in the orchestra. After a time, I told him that I would much prefer to play the piccolo. I explained that, although I did not mind playing the trombone in the orchestra itself, where it flowed in with the sounds of the other brass instruments, when practising alone, I found it an assault on, if not offensive to, my ears. George did not demur, but a senior student had already claimed his rightful entitlement to the piccolo.

George's eyesight was weak and first-year students were called on to read to him at night. My several readings were

warm and fruitful. Alarmed to learn that I had never read the Waverley novels, or even those of Trollope, he insisted that I do so forthwith and I almost managed to get through them in the next two years. One evening he asked me to read some poems he had selected from the work of John Shaw Neilson. Among them was the gracious poem entitled *The Orange Tree*, which I read with emotion. George asked me why I was moved by the poem and I explained that, before I was born, Neilson had worked in the district around Sea Lake, sometimes for Uncle Ned and Auntie Bess. The legend in the family was that his Orange Tree was the one at San Jose rather than one of those that grew on the irrigated blocks of land around Mildura. He then asked me whether I knew anything more about Neilson. I was already aware how much George revered him as one of the gentlest and finest of our Australian poets, so I hesitantly replied that Auntie Bess had told me Neilson was supposed to be a poet but that, in her estimation, he was barmy. The word and its application threw the old Jesuit into a fit of laughter and I was afraid lest he expire on the spot. Another evening, I asked him what he thought of James Joyce of whose *Ulysses* I had heard someone speak. He was slow to reply but said enough to make it plain that he had never warmed to Joyce nor, as I discovered later, Joyce to him. Yet it must be asked, and answered by others, who were they to whom Joyce warmed or who warmed to Joyce himself? George neither criticised nor praised his former pupil's writings, but in moments of wine-induced self-esteem, I have sometimes claimed that I was taught English by a Jesuit who also taught Joyce.

My father, who had left school at age 12 to help take off the harvest after gaining the Merit Certificate, was a reader to whom fine writing was a source of constant joy. In 1947, when I was a student in Rome, he sent me a copy of

The Reader Over Your Shoulder: a handbook for writers of English prose by Robert Graves and Alan Hodge. He did so perhaps in the hope that I would become a writer who would make his words stand up and inspire others when they read them. Although I was sometimes alarmed by the arrogance and god-like finality of its judgments, I kept the book near me through the years and partly shared my father's conservatism in respect of changes in the language, which the authors said 'may one day become incorporated in the main vocabulary of English'. In pencil, Dad noted in the margin, 'Which fact, though probably inescapable, is none the less regrettable.'

Certainly to ensure that, in some measure, I would remain an Australian at heart during my time in Rome, my father regularly sent me the *Bulletin*. While in the Mallee, and throughout his life, he read anything he could lay his hands on. There was no lending library within a hundred miles of Sea Lake, but Shakespeare was in the home among several classics of English literature, and Dad always read the *Bulletin* thoroughly. Proclaiming itself as 'a man's paper' and costing only sixpence in 1927, it was still a genuine expression of Australian nationality, though flawed by the racism that cast darkness over the national psyche. Dad had acquired the works of Banjo Paterson, Henry Lawson and other Australian poets whom he admired. Despite this, the only poem I was aware of that he could recite fully by heart was the splendid ode to life and drink, *Omar Khayyám*, by Edward Fitzgerald. He told me later that he committed it to memory to escape boredom while driving the tractor. My mother overheard his explanation and warmly suggested that his fondness for beer was the real reason. He drank wine reluctantly but, in his day, it was not in vogue except for sweet, fortified varieties and to be a 'wino' was to descend the ultimate step of alcoholic degradation.

Mother was also a reader and mostly followed in Dad's footsteps except that a sister paper to the *Bulletin*, called the *Women's Mirror*, was her favourite magazine. She had received some secondary education in a Ballarat convent and one particular gift the nuns fostered in her was painting. Little remains of her canvases except two. They are of reindeers beside a lake with snow-capped hills behind them, but in my childhood I saw many others scattered around the homes of our extensive family, mostly depicting religious subjects, long since out of vogue. Some slight vestige of her gift must have passed to me. In 1933, 'J. Malony' won a first prize in the school section of the Sea Lake Show for a drawing of a carrot, which Mother insisted on showing off to others. On the same day, Dad won a prize for a ram. Her enthusiasm for his win was minimal, which disappointed him.

The subject of the drawing was not my original choice. Our teacher had asked us to draw something and bring it to school the next day. I drew a pretty picture of a house under blue skies but, when I presented it, the teacher said, 'Oh John, why don't you draw something real?' I did so that night at home and the curious thing about the carrot, which I saw lying on the kitchen bench, was that I had coloured it in purple. It proved acceptable and a few years later I discovered that I was colour blind. I never drew or painted again, even though I had difficulty only with red, green and brown. Even today, it often comes to me that others must see colours in a way that is not open to me and I grieve the loss.

My formal education at the Sea Lake State School began in 1933 shortly before I turned seven. School was a serious pursuit, in which we wrote with slate pencils on slate surfaces, did our sums diligently and moved quickly into parsing and the other valuable matters that made up the curriculum. Mother, who, at her command, was so addressed

by her children, had already taught me to read and write and the medium used for writing at home was a pencil on brown paper. I have the most distinct recollection of my delight when, before I started school, I found that I was able to read and understand the exploits of Ginger Meggs and Minnie in the *Melbourne Sun*. That event was a genuine pinnacle in my life. I could read but, perhaps more importantly, I could enjoy humour. It also meant that, when under the watchful eye of Miss Hearn, a teacher beyond compare, I was immediately able to launch myself into the stories in the first-grade reader. I do not recall much, if any, humour in them, but I was happy with one in which there was a boy in a gig and a dog named Spot. There were also strange beings named hobyahs who flitted ominously through trees in some northern forest. The hobyahs continued to flit through my dreams for many years.

I was placed second in the class of 23 at the examinations in December 1933 and Philip McIntyre, the head teacher, wrote on my report in red pencil, 'Splendid John'. On this occasion, the *Sea Lake Times* got the spelling right with 'J. Molony — gift Mr Betts' placed behind 'I. McLennan — gift Mrs Kean'. While I have no memory of Mr Betts's gift, I wondered at the time whether Mother thought it was a 'splendid' result. Diphtheria had caused me to lose several weeks' schooling just prior to the examinations and she may have thought some consideration ought to have been given to me on those grounds. Probably marking me generously had already done that and justice demanded that the girl who got the top marks came first. It was a sound lesson for me. As a university examiner in later life, I often made allowances for a misfortune that had befallen a student, but I made sure that it did not upset the overall balance of the results.

In the first five or six years of my life, I was a virtual loner. My sister, Margaret, was two years and eight months

younger and my brother, Brian, was five years my junior. Margaret was born in a private hospital, Avonhurst, in Melbourne and a week later Dad had returned to Sea Lake by train. He wrote to 'My own dearest Janie' on 27 December and said how he 'was very lonely coming away from my two little girls'. He concluded with love and kisses for his 'two darlings'. I had remained in Sea Lake with Auntie Bess and Dad wrote that I was awake when he arrived after midnight and 'seemed very glad to see his old man again. [He] had a lot to say about his Mummy and sister and seemed to think they should have come on the train too.' The next morning Dad took me across to San Jose and, when he asked me whose house it was, I replied, 'My Mummy's.' At the end of the letter Dad wrote, 'John says he wants to send a kiss each for you and Margaret. Here they are. He made them himself.' They are in fact five 'Xs' done in pen. Reading these lines for the first time in a recently discovered letter I came closer to understanding my enduring, and strong, love for my sister and my utter desolation when I heard the news of my 'Mummy's' sudden death 34 years ago. I then felt, for the first time, that I had to stand on my own in the world.

Pushed back on self in my early childhood, I had to seek other relationships besides those in the home. We had no cats or housedogs and the working dogs did not interest me much although I was once moved to defend a sheepdog. Ernie, who worked on the farm, rigged up a metal dish with water in it and a lead in from a battery that gave a mild charge to the water. He then placed a bone in the water and roared with laughter when the dog tried to snatch it out. The dog ran away howling. I sprang at the dish and kicked it over in my horror at the cruelty.

Birds were one of my little wonders and especially the beautiful and dainty willy wagtails, which built tiny, woven

nests near the peppercorn trees. I thought their nests and the birds themselves were the most perfect things I had ever seen and that the graciousness of their movements was charming. I could watch them for long periods without tiring. My other favourite bird was the plover, whose plaintive cry I loved to hear at dusk, and the pretences of the mother plover of having a broken wing or injured leg while protecting her young fascinated me. I was careful not to disturb her eggs in nests on the ground but, try as I might, I rarely ever got close to the birds. They were always a few steps ahead and then took to flight. Often a phalanx of black swans flew overhead and I wondered to what distant swamp or lake they were soaring. The Mallee was my little world and elsewhere lived only in my imagination, which the night sky partly filled. Dad taught me about the stars and showed me how to trace the Pointers to the heart of the Southern Cross, for which he seemed to have a kind of awe. In the abundance of animals about the farm, I was less interested except for the horses.

Then, and ever since, springtime has delighted me with its budding promise, green grasses, wildflowers and, especially, golden wattle. A little rain and the sandy soils of the Mallee would burst into life, which soon withered when the rains ceased and the sun shone with vigour. Except for the rarely seen Mallee hen, whose huge nest was a source of much puzzlement to a little boy, the large native fauna, kangaroos, emus and dingoes, had mostly gone from our part of the Mallee, but there were many goannas and I often came upon a blue-tongue lizard which stared at me unblinkingly before it scurried into a hollow or a log.

About 14,000 years ago, the Mallee had changed from being an arid area to a more fertile one with many lakes and rich hunting grounds. Over the next 7,000 years, Aborigines had lived there although never in large numbers except for the

Murray people along the river and in small settlements around the lakes. From about 6,000 years ago, the land gradually became semi-arid and the only part of the northern Mallee that remained inhabited was in the vicinity of Lake Tyrrell, now the largest salt lake in Victoria. Thus the Mallee people, who probably moved up from Victoria's fertile Western District, which may have suffered from a degree of over-population, had certainly lived about the area of my bush relatives and there had probably been a small settlement near Sea Lake. These people were known as the Boorong and they belonged to the Wergaia cultural and language group. They drew water from springs in the sand dunes and hunted the animals that came to the springs to drink. They claimed to have a far greater knowledge of astronomy than other groups and Lake Tyrrell, together with the almost incessantly blue skies, were central to their Dreaming. At night, the stars shone brilliantly on the surface of the lake and in that way a link was established between earth and sky. All the native animals and birds had their counterparts in the star formations and the relationships between them lay at the core of all Aboriginal Dreaming.

None remained of the Aborigines who had once moved through the Mallee and I never saw one in my childhood, nor were they spoken of as having been there in living memory. After a dust storm I once heard Ned Gallagher say to my father that the land was so arid that it might as well be given back to the Aborigines. Ned and Dad neglected to take into account the fact that, before the whites cleared the land, the vegetation had assured the stability of the sand dunes and thus prevented the ravages of dust storms and erosion. Furthermore, long centuries had taught the blacks how to exist with the land. Nonetheless, in his estimate of the country, Ned was not entirely mistaken. By the time of white

settlement, even those places that the Aborigines continued to frequent were deserted except for a few remnants about Lake Tyrrell. In those circumstances, Ned would have found it difficult to give the country back to its first occupants, but he had said what seemed to me a very strange thing. I had no idea that there were other people besides ourselves who had lived in the Mallee. In that way, those others came into my own being as ghosts from a remote past, but at least they came as ones to whom the land, even granted its poverty, should be returned.

Among the white settlers of Sea Lake and its district, the word 'country' for land was in common use in my childhood. Expressions such as 'poor', 'fair' and 'good' country were heard and each country was known among the whites — as had been the case among the Aborigines — for the quality of its soil, the variation in annual rainfall, the crops it grew best and the relative abundance or scarcity of its productivity. Families were thus fixed to their country and the land most familiar to me was often spoken of as McNerney country, Ryan country, Irwin country and so on. The constant movement between the families from one farm to the next to visit, to exchange machinery, to help with the harvest or in times of need meant a broadening of the concept of country and thus of belonging.

Horse-drawn vehicles, gigs and spring carts were still in use in the Mallee although the car had begun to supplant them. Because he was mechanically inclined and owned a tractor, which he took three days to drive from Donald to San Jose in 1924, my father never had a team of horses at Sea Lake and there were no cattle on the place except for the odd milking cow. Wheat, barley and oats were the only crops and sheep were the other source of income. They were not fine-wool merinos, but crossbreeds whose wool and meat could be turned to a profit in good years. In the shearing shed, Dad

was always mindful of my presence. He probably knew the story of an awful occurrence that was told in sheep country. A father had not noticed his child fall asleep in a wool bale and cried out in agony when he weighed the bale after pressing because he knew instantly why it was overweight.

Because visitors were rare and visits by children, except for my cousins, rarer still, shyness — often the lot of the bush child — became part of my being. Throughout my life meeting strangers has always proved difficult. My palms sometimes perspire and my confusion can be so pronounced that I immediately forget the name of the person introduced. When I was about four, this solitary existence had already led to a strange form of introspection. In the *Mirror* there was a picture of a lady whose hair wound around the page and in the *Bulletin* there was always one of a man with the top of his skull cut off. It was my fancy to imagine the lady's hair going on for ever once it left the page and being able to look down deeper and deeper into the man's brain until I could go no further. My behaviour came to a head one day in a manner that alarmed my parents. Under a tank stand near our house there was a large drum of sheep dip. I took to sitting in the cool shade of the stand and looking at the drum. On it there was an illustration of a man with a drum of sheep dip and on that drum there was the same illustration until the whole thing got down to a tiny blur. I wanted to go further and further in pursuit of the man and his drum until one day my mother found me unconscious near the drum. The drum was removed and my access to the magazines forbidden. Ever since, I have steered clear of thinking of eternity, although I soon concluded that the finite cannot exist or be measured except through its relationship with the infinite. Even that thought is enough to bring me to a brink from which I quickly withdraw.

Gradually, some idea of wider relationships formed in my mind through contact with my mother's family, the McNerneys, Ryans, Irwins and Bradys, who lived further out in the bush to the west and north of Lake Tyrell. In a radius of a few miles, my relatives had settled on selected farms of 640 acres, cleared the land, planted their first crops and had somehow survived in their own manner since the late 1890s. They were on selections at Myall, Ninda, Nyarrin and Nandaly where, despite the clearing of the Mallee, the sandhills remained. It was soft, undulating country where sand shifted with the winds, covering roads, fences and even the railway line at times. On such occasions the passengers were invited to alight and help clear away the sand.

I spent much time among my relatives as a child and in my early youth. Their lives were often harsh and depended utterly on the bounty of the season and it was not uncommon in periods of drought to have to cart water, for example, from Ryans, where there was a bore, to McNerneys. In the drought summer of 1943, I watched as wild birds pecked at the windows of the McNerney home trying to gain entry to a source of water which they smelt, or sensed, was present. Such experiences taught me the value of water at an early age and I have never wasted it with comfort.

The Mallee families were also at the mercy of shopkeepers for credit and bankers for extensions on their mortgages, but many of these people were graced with abundant generosity in those days, which they extended to the farmers as best they could. Subsistence entailed the weekly killing of a sheep which, covered in a bag made from old bed sheets to keep away the blowflies, was left hanging overnight from a tree to set. On the next day it was butchered into its appropriate parts and fried, grilled, roasted or boiled in its various forms. Mutton, but rarely lamb, was part of the staple diet at most

meals, whether breakfast, dinner or tea. A pig was killed perhaps twice a year, but a bullock very infrequently. Rabbits were in plague proportions, but I cannot recollect ever eating one; they were vermin to be destroyed and not to be seen at the table, although rabbit meat was not an uncommon dish in the cities. On one evening at Uncle Jake's, I watched the rabbits as they swarmed in hundreds within a few yards of his hut. Trappers visited the farms and delivered their catch to the freezing works at Sea Lake, where more than 10,000 pairs were being processed each week in August 1932. On farms, water was too scarce a commodity to use on a garden except sparingly, but potatoes, onions, carrots, lettuce and tomatoes bought in Sea Lake helped to round out the diet.

One of the delights of my childhood was to stay with the Bill McInerneys at Ninda. The home was filled with fun, laughter and love. No rough edges in manner or speech were evident and a great quiet would come over the household when Auntie Mary, Bill's wife, who was an Irwin, would lie down to rest in the afternoon, saying, 'The weakness has come on me, Billo.' Mary died in 1941 of a bad heart at the age of 43. On the next block, Jake had his tin hut. The hut was primitive in the extreme with an earthen floor, no electricity, running water or sewerage. To a boy, it was a place of much happiness where nothing was known of the boundaries and conventions of a home ruled by a mother. In winter, the rain pelted down on to the iron roof of the hut, in summer, the sun baked its contents. One very hot summer evening I could stand the heat no longer so took my blanket and went down to the edge of the nearby dam to sleep. About dawn I awoke in roaring pain. A bull ant had stung the extremity of my penis. No heat drove me out after that. The hut lies in ruins now; the McInerney home, still with gracious lines and a gabled roof at the front, is a decrepit shearing shed.

I sometimes heard the word 'mob' used of, and among, the McNerneys and their extended family groupings. Because I was 'Janie's boy', and was often introduced as such, I was part of their 'mob'. I never heard the word used of the Molonys who, I suspect, were regarded as slightly snobbish. The intricacies of the relationships within the 'mob' had to be learnt or acquired by listening to the elders' conversation. No one was excluded if any kind of a relationship could be established, irrespective of the degree, and uncles and aunts were never differentiated on the grounds that a relationship was only through marriage. Years later, I remembered that I had heard among the older generation a lengthy analysis of how far the bonds extended to 'the Sydney Keatings' on the grounds that there had been a person known as 'Auntie Annie Keating' who had relations in that city. After Paul Keating became prime minister, I made my one and only excursion into family genealogy. I wondered what 'mob' Paul belonged to and wrote to him to inquire. He did not reply.

Homes in the 1930s had no electricity or refrigeration, but the wireless run on batteries became very common and programs of 'country music', consisting of mostly emotionally charged songs of romance or tragedy, or both, were widely appreciated. My first knowledge of cricket came over the wireless during the 'Bodyline' series in 1933. Throughout the district, but not in the town, where a more private telephonic service was provided, communication was through a partyline that could be listened to by the other families sharing the same line. The signal for each member of the party was very simple, for example, two longs and a short, and was raised by twisting the handle on the phone. There was invariably a 'stickybeak' on each line. Sometimes an offended soul would stop his, but more likely her, conversation and say, 'Get off the line', at which a soft click would be heard as the offender put back the earpiece.

Except at harvest time, when everyone had to face the labour of Monday, made more urgent by the Sunday cessation of work, Sunday evenings saw several families gathered at the one home for a meal. Very little alcohol, and then invariably beer, was on offer. After the meal, singing around a piano, if available, or a violin was customary. A concertina was rarely seen and I had the impression that it was judged to be an inferior instrument. The airs were mostly Irish but sometimes English or Scottish, and, gradually, a few popular American tunes, mostly of the 'Country and Western' variety, became common among the young. Dancing very frequently accompanied the singing. To these gatherings everyone was expected to contribute and the children would be called on for a solo. Rather than singing, I turned to memorising, and then reciting, lengthy poems. *The Man from Snowy River*, *The Sick Stock Rider* and, later, Chesterton's stirring *Lepanto* were among them. My contributions were listened to in silence and appeared to meet general approval. Somehow this accomplishment indicated to my listeners that I had 'brains' when all I had was a trace of native cunning and a bit of memory.

Although I had no aptitude whatever for improvisation in the mechanical sense, I grew to appreciate the gift in others. Dad, based partly on the experience he had gained during the war, regularly stripped engines down to their component parts, whether of tractors, cars, motorbikes or shearing machines. Replacing better, but still second-hand, parts for the old and worn, he worked until satisfied that the job was done. Then he would tinker gently with the engine so that it became a kind of extension of his hands. Seemingly intent on making it sing a song that he and the engine understood, this process went on until, as it purred softly or roared in a kind of exaltation, he put down his tools in quiet

triumph and stood back to roll a cigarette. Out at Nyarrin in the early 1930s, my cousin, Joe McInerney, who was a few years older than Reg Gallagher, began to generate electricity using a windmill as a source of power. The innovation was much remarked on at the time locally and even in Melbourne, but it brought him no financial gain.

In 1927, a census revealed that there were 141 houses in Sea Lake and its population was 686. The social classes of the town and the district were very simple. In the bush the hierarchical ladder started with swaggies, and rose through vendors of assorted goods, among whom there was the occasional Afghan with his astonishingly decorated cart laden with herbal remedies and other sundry, but fascinating objects; itinerant workers, farmhands and shearers. On the highest rung stood the farmers, among whom the largest landowners were pre-eminent. Even though some of them ran several thousand sheep and held thousands of acres, they were never known as graziers in the Mallee but were regarded as farmers, pure and simple.

Although in 1931 the *Sea Lake Times* once had an editorial entitled 'The Russian Menace' warning that things would get worse were the Russians to grow 'larger than ever' wheat crops, it only once used the dreaded word 'Depression'. The community stayed together and attempted to retain the appearance of normalcy. A Public Library was opened in 1931 with a membership fee of 2/6d a quarter, aeroplane flights were advertised at 10s per adult and 5s a child. I saw the aircraft but remained a spectator. The 'talkies' came to the town in 1932, but the first evening turned out unhappily when the machine broke down, which necessitated its being run again the next night for free. The film was based on Zane Grey's bestseller, *Riders of the Purple Sage*. Jimmy Sharman's boxing troupe attended one Annual Show and I distinctly

recall my fear when a female pugilist offered to fight a man for a one-pound purse. I assume the 'real' men refrained from the contest but a slender youth, possibly in drink, stepped into the ring. My fear lest the lady be injured evaporated when she dispatched him in the first round.

Sport played a significant role in the life of the town and the district, with Australian football, cricket and tennis to the fore and the local paper attempted to fill the spaces left empty by a lack of advertising with accounts of sporting events. The local golf course was on Dad's land, for which he was thanked annually, but he does not seem to have adopted the sport. Even the small centres such as Myall, Ninda and Nandaly, which could not be called villages but which had an element of cohesion based on a wheat silo and a railway station, fielded teams. A leading sportsman in the early days was Dr Claude Greer. Born in Launceston, he came to Sea Lake in 1906 with his horse and buggy, but a few years later he became the owner of the first Model T Ford in the district. He captained the Sea Lake cricket team and was a fearsome and skilfull opponent on the football ground. After World War I, a Gun Club and a Rifle Club attracted many members, although the more gentrified elements of the population seem to have avoided the Gun Club in which live pigeons were sometimes used as targets. Mick Molony had been a more than useful footballer in the Wimmera before and after the war, but at Sea Lake he competed only in rifle shooting. In 1924, he won a trophy and purse of two guineas shooting over four ranges up to 800 yards with a score of 136, while Dr Greer came in 12th on 98. Dad's participation in later years was spasmodic and his only public role in the community seems to have been his membership of the committee of the RSSILA (Returned Soldiers' and Sailors' Imperial League of Australia) in 1931.

In the town, shopkeepers, the post and station masters, teachers, the chemist, bank managers and the doctor stood roughly in that order in terms of status, although Felix Caleo, of upright life and inflexible honesty, was difficult to categorise. He owned the only café, called Caleos' Café de Luxe and stocked it with the 'Choicest of Choice Confections and Dainty Edibles'. In 1930, he informed his patrons that they could ring in an order for a 'late supper of crayfish and salads', while the main store, owned by a strict Protestant named Howard, advertised specials 'For the Lenten Season' including 'Lobsters, Oysters, Ling, Salmon and Cod'. The Lenten fast was carefully, even rigorously, observed in our home, but I have no recollection of the above delicacies being substituted for our normal fare.

Felix Caleo was a staunch Catholic who spoke to his wife in Italian. Both differences meant something in Sea Lake, neither of them to Felix's and his numerous children's detriment. I never became aware of the need to make invidious distinctions between myself and others based on breeding, social standing, wealth or religion, although there was one family on the edge of the town about which my mother seemed to have slight reservations. She told me once that it would be better for me not to play with the boys of the family. The father seemed to deal in empty bottles and other discarded odds and ends, which fascinated me, but obedience was already embedded deep in my psyche.

Among the Catholics, the priest stood on the highest rung of local society, so high indeed that no comparison with others was possible. In short, he was, as the old Irish language had it, 'the beloved of God'. For many years the parish priest of Sea Lake was Father William Davis, but no one used his first name. Ballarat-born and ordained from St Patrick's College, Manly, in 1899, he died in 1950. Throughout his

priesthood, the old Tridentine liturgy, muttered in Latin, changed not a whit from the forms in which it had been said or sung for centuries past. A thorough gentleman and true Australian, he lived within the community at peace and in dignity. Ecumenism as a theory was unheard of, but Bill Davis lived its basic precepts of respect and cordiality with ease. The principal forum on which he mixed with the men of the community was the bowling green. Some of the ladies, among them Auntie Bess, played croquet. Perhaps the rearing of her children prevented my mother from joining them.

Education and religion were the twin pillars upon which the social cohesion of the community rested. Teachers, parents and pupils alike treated schooling to the end of the primary level seriously perhaps because they were all aware that, for the great majority, no further schooling would be available. The local school went through to the Intermediate (Year 10) level, but by 1931, its enrolments in the Higher Elementary level had dropped by more than half due to the Depression and there were fears that it would be closed. Only those few families in which there was an ability to pay the fees, as well as the impetus of either much ambition or a tradition of higher education, sent their children away to boarding school. It was often the case that girls benefited over boys because they were seen as less useful contributors than males to the productivity of the farm. In any case, the routine of rote learning generally ensured that the children went out from primary school able to read and write, as well as to cope with simple mathematics. That all children attended the same school in which they mixed as young Australians, even to the extent of saluting the flag and singing *God Save the King* on a Monday morning, also helped to break down some of the barriers thrown up by the Reformation. I returned to the Sea Lake school recently to find that nothing stood on ground

that had once echoed with the play calls of children. The new school on the edge of the town is a fine building and many of the pupils are bussed in from outlying places in which the small, local schools have closed. The new school goes through from the earliest years to Year 12. I was not surprised, but was relieved, to find that no one had ever heard of me there, although I was disappointed that no list of teachers' names from years past was available for my scrutiny. All I wanted to do was to find out Miss Hearn's first name. She had left Sea Lake to go on exchange in Queensland in 1934 so that I was unable to benefit from her gifted teaching again. A diligent search by the staff at the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* revealed that she was Miss Jessie Hearn.

The religious faith of the Mallee people — at least the one engaged in openly — was Christianity in its various forms. The moral and ethical teachings of the Christian Church, understood in its broad sense, and thus including Anglicans, Catholics, Presbyterians and Methodists, were known, acknowledged and put into practice at differing levels by individuals, as well as within family and communal life. The major communal, public act was Sunday attendance at church services that, for the Catholics, meant Mass. This often demanded great sacrifice on the part of those who had to travel longish distances to their respective churches in vehicles, some horse-drawn and all of varying respectability and comfort. Fundamental Christianity, so called, was unknown. Catholicism was more Roman than Irish except for the accent of that significant portion of the clergy born and trained in Ireland but, at its heart, it was more Australian than either.

The dividing line between Protestants and Catholics was the general observance of the Catholic ban on mixed marriages. Joe McInerney was a rare exception in the family in that he married a woman of high integrity, a teacher named

Mary McDonald, who remained staunchly Protestant. Auntie Bess and Mother, both of whom loved and admired Mary, brooked no criticism of the marriage. Never once in my life did I hear my parents or relatives criticise any individual on the basis of his or her practice of Protestantism. On the contrary, I often heard it said by Auntie Bess and Mother, especially in reproof of errant behaviour among Catholics, that were we as God-fearing as many of our Protestant neighbours, we would be worthy people indeed.

Under the guidance of Father Davis, I made my First Communion, preceded a few days before by First Confession. A cousin, Mick McInerney, had been rounded up from out in the bush at Ninda and brought in to prepare for his First Communion with me. The night before, as we got into bed, Mick swore, certainly only a 'bloody' or a 'bugger'. Mick was a gentle child with the instincts of an artist to whom rough behaviour of any kind was unacceptable, but I was so convinced that my soul had been blackened by the mere hearing of the word that it would be impossible for me to receive Communion worthily until I had returned to Confession. Before Mass I crept around to the sacristy and insisted that Father Davis hear my confession again. To my immense relief, he showed no sign of resentment at this tedious interruption and heard my absurd little recital with patience. This episode was the first indication of a tendency to scrupulosity about sacred matters, which I had to resist for years, but it bore a precious fruit. There is much that I grieve about the way I exercised my own priesthood in later years, but perhaps an aspect of it that will count slightly in my favour on Judgment Day is that I always treated the poor souls ravaged by scruples with great seriousness and gentleness. They were incapable of sin, but who could convince them of that? Even worse, the disease of the spirit

from which they suffered made them despair of salvation and any word of mine to help them understand that God is not vengeful, but loving, was received with gratitude.

My parents were Australians and that was the end of the matter. To them, the King and the Pope were foreign abstractions although the flag, never seen even in a small replica about the house, possibly had a slight symbolic meaning. I have no memory of any talk of politics but, to Dad, the Bodyline Test Series was of considerable significance, as was Peter Pan's second win in the Melbourne Cup in 1934. I do not remember anything of Phar Lap's death in America in 1932 when flags were flown at half-mast in Sydney and Melbourne, although the *Sea Lake Times* attempted to get to the bottom of the mystery explaining, without acknowledging a source, that 'grass in the paddock in which Phar Lap grazed had been poisoned by spray blown from nearby trees'. The weather, the price of wheat and wool, when to sow or harvest a crop and shear the sheep, these things were of much import. In this simple cosmology, Ireland seemed to have no part and her sorrows, if remembered at all, were never touched on in our home. My mother could say a few prayers, including the Hail Mary, and some brief colloquial phrases in Irish learnt from her father whose mother language it was. He died in 1909 and I knew so little about him that I often wondered why his past was never mentioned.

After my mother's death, I remarked on this lack of knowledge to Auntie Bess and asked whether her father had perhaps been a convict. A few weeks later she invited me to the privacy of her bedroom in the home of her son, Reg Gallagher, and daughter-in-law Peg, in Grant Street, Manuka. She then told me that the family had been afraid to talk of her father's past in the early times because he had been involved in that affair at Ballarat 'when the diggers rebelled against the

Queen'. Their reticence to talk of the Eureka Stockade and the events of 1854 stemmed from their fear of losing the land grandfather McInerney had selected when parts of the Wimmera were opened in 1874. Of Eureka and his presence in the Stockade, from which he escaped unscathed, there was neither shame nor pride, only fear of possible adverse consequences. Furthermore, it would not do for respectable people to be known of as descended from a rebel. In the case of Auntie Bess, the reaction went to the extreme of regarding the British royal family with reverence and never letting pass an opportunity to tell all comers that her son, Reg, worked for the Governor-General.

When the surface gold ran out and the deep leads forced company mining, Michael McInerney had moved from digger to miner. He then worked on the Catholic cathedral in Ballarat. One day in the late 1950s, I was told by my bishop to conduct Archbishop Maximilian de Furstenburg, a European aristocrat who was the Pope's representative in Australia, around the cathedral. It is a building of little grace and His Excellency seemed ill at ease. To break the silence I said that my grandfather had worked on its construction. 'Oh, was he the architect?' he asked. 'No,' I said, 'he was a brickie's labourer.' I hoped that this would excuse me from any familial involvement with such poor architecture, but immediately I felt that admitting a relationship with a labourer considerably lessened my prospects of advancement in the ecclesiastical world beyond that of a curate.

The question of my vocation in life rested more with my mother than with my father, who had probably seen my future, during my early childhood at least, as that of a farmer. Before I started school my mother drew me aside one day in the main street of Sea Lake, called Best Street, and whispered, 'Look at the man who is coming towards us.' I can still see

him in my mind. He was tall, grey-haired and thin with a serious demeanour and walked with dignity. When he passed, she said, with awe in her voice, 'That man is a Master of Arts.' In that sentence the respect, yearning for and love of what the Irish called 'the learning' was summed up. The possession of great tracts of land, of wealth and even of fame could never replace 'the learning' which, in my mother's eyes, was the pinnacle of human achievement. She never said so, but I had surely disappointed her in the years of my early education. In the end, I saw her eyes light up when I visited her in hospital in Ballarat shortly before her death and said, 'Mother, I am a Master of Arts.' She would have been appalled to learn that many universities of today have in large measure so debased a noble degree that it can be almost shameful to acknowledge its acquisition. For me, however, my Master's degree remained much more a source of pride than my later doctorate in philosophy. I have concluded that my mother's words as the man came towards us in the Sea Lake street sum up the meaning of higher education.

Whether due to the recurring bad times or the natural inclination of a farming community and its township to stick together in ways that muted differences, I was only once aware that to be a Catholic could be a disadvantage. I had formed a friendship with a boy of my age who invited me to go with him and his father on a fox-hunting excursion. It was to take place early one Sunday morning. At home it was immediately apparent that the invitation could not be accepted because it would mean my missing Mass. I have no memory of feeling resentful, but that, and other little things such as not becoming a Scout, abstaining from meat on Fridays and not being permitted to enter non-Catholic churches, made me realise that the differences mattered. Thus the pattern was set. I was the child of an ancient tradition that

began in the clouds of Mount Sinai, reached its summit in a Galilean carpenter and blended Rome and Greece into the texture of the wild Celts of the North. It then flourished in the west of Ireland before stretching out its currents through the heads of Port Phillip Bay. Nothing could ever change the way in which that tradition cut its deep channels in my being.

The other things that set my life and partly determined its course were drought and depression. On his arrival in Sea Lake in 1924, my father possessed more than modest means. His was one of the earliest tractors in the district, he had two cars, a Buick and an Essex with a 'dickie' seat in place of the boot, he acquired an early wireless set and the home was comfortable in all respects, although the lavatory was set well away from the house itself. A nursemaid named Peggy, two farmhands — Malcolm, a loyal and loving Scot who never married and spent his whole life with, and working for, the extended family, and Ernie, native-born and full of mischief and rural humour — filled out the household. I am unaware of any social distinctions prevailing among us. The two men slept in modest quarters near the shearing shed away from the house in which, in any event, there was no further room. All ate together except at breakfast when Dad, Malcolm and Ernie were up and about earlier than the rest of us. The adults listened to the wireless and gramophone after the evening meal, while Dad read the previous day's paper, usually the Melbourne *Age* or the *Argus*, which had arrived by train from Melbourne the night before. The hierarchy of labour at San Jose consisted of Mother, who ruled in the home, and Dad, who ruled on the farm. The only occasion I ever noticed any resentment on his part took place when he suggested mildly that, instead of referring to us as 'my children', she might consider using 'our children'. I am not sure that she understood his point.

Some of the sense of equality practised at home must have marked me because, when aged about 11, I caused resentment in one segment of the family. On this occasion I visited a Molony farm in the Wimmera during the school holidays. Peter Jones, my maternal cousin, worked on the farm and, during the main meal at midday, I noticed that Peter was not present. I asked after him and was told that he ate in his own quarters. I said nothing but stood away from the table and joined Peter, where we shared his meal.

There was ample machinery on the farm at Sea Lake, a sound workforce and enough reasonably productive land to provide comfortably for a family, except in times of severe drought, so that, for a time, all went well. Fifty years later, I was told that, in taking up San Jose, Dad had over-capitalised. It was an expression I scarcely understood, never having inherited or owned any capital of sufficient quantity to warrant attention or categorisation. I gathered that it meant he borrowed too much money. Had he prospered as a farmer, I assume the accusation would not have been laid at his door.

In late 1929, the Bruce-Page Government fell and was replaced by a Labor government led by James Scullin. The same world-wide depression that doomed Mick Molony, and many, many thousands of others in primary and secondary industry throughout the land, doomed him. Scullin lost office as prime minister in 1932, but Mick lasted a few years longer. Of our impending doom I was given only a faint inkling. There was a custom in our home, as in many families, to acquire a silver baptismal mug for each child. My only brother, Brian, induced early so as to enjoy a safe birth as had been the case with Margaret, returned from Melbourne with Mother at Christmas, 1932. He had already been baptised in Melbourne and I asked her when he was to get his silver mug. She said something about us not being able to afford it and

the fact that I can remember the incident indicates that a new, threatening element had come into our lives. Peggy and Ernie were soon gone and were replaced with temporary labour, the Essex disappeared, two precious haystacks had to be burnt to the ground in a mouse plague and fine earth settled on the top of the contents in the salt cellars after the repeated dust storms. Scullin had urged farmers to plant more wheat, but their paddocks bore thin and almost worthless crops that sold at less than half the price of previous years. Throughout the Australian wheat belt, farmers began to walk off their properties leaving only debt and heartbreak behind them. They no longer gazed up hopefully at gathering storm clouds, but watched them scud away to distant oceans, where they aborted their precious burden. Henceforth, often in city pubs, some would tell their stories of riding out to barren paddocks to react with anger and despair as they saw crows picking the eyes out of sheep stricken helpless by hunger. They were reluctant to commiserate with the city people who complained of the red dust blown over Melbourne, knowing that the topsoil of the land was the lifeblood of the Mallee farmers.

In simple ways, I became the child of a depression because its effects ate into almost the whole of my existence. Throughout my life, in throwing anything away and even more in accepting wasteful behaviour, especially when it comes to food, I become uneasy and I fail to understand why so much still edible food seems to be thrown out of modern refrigerators, more than was ever the case with the old Coolgardie safe we had in Sea Lake. In those stringent times, millions of children in Australia, and elsewhere, grew up toyless and often joyless to go, in a few years, through war and its aftermath, so that prosperity became part of their lives only in the 1950s. By then, the pattern had been set of a deep urge for security and a steady job, of an

acceptance that things would never go well for long and that life was mostly a battle against the odds.

In late 1934, we visited Melbourne. In retrospect, it is clear that Dad was aware of his predicament at Sea Lake and went to Melbourne to test his prospects there. We stayed for a week in the hotel of a relative on the McNerney side. 'Uncle' Fred Garden was married to 'Auntie' Dollie and had previously owned the Royal Hotel in Sea Lake. His Melbourne hotel, the Royal Saxon, stood in Elizabeth Street and I took to sitting on a chair in a corner of the bar to look at the men as they came in for a drink. Fred, Protestant in religion and almost Faldstaffian in the immensity of his girth, beard and kindness, daily bought me a vanilla slice. I enjoyed it hugely but my interest lay more in what Fred provided for his customers. Each morning a roasted suckling pig was delivered and laid down on towels on the bar. A pot of beer cost threepence but every drinker was permitted to cut off a slice of the ham, smear it with mustard and consume it between two pieces of bread. Irrespective of how many beers a customer bought, only one slice was allowed. Perhaps that was Fred's way of trying to soften the miseries of a depressed Melbourne.

Melbourne celebrated its centenary in 1934 and Archbishop Daniel Mannix initiated arrangements for a Eucharistic Congress that attracted huge crowds, as well as an Irish cardinal. Of these matters I have no recollection. The early 1930s were still part of the great days of pioneering aviation and the Centenary Air Race left London for Melbourne on 20 October, 1934. The prize was £10,000 but Kingsford Smith had failed to modify his new plane, *Lady Southern Cross*, in time to compete. Despite the widespread disappointment at Smithy's absence, there was great excitement in Melbourne at the end of the race. Fred stood with me in Elizabeth Street where we looked up and saw the beautifully

crafted plane of the English aviators, C. W. A. Scott and T. Campbell Black, as it passed over the city on its way to winning the race in a time of two days, 23 hours. Melbourne already seemed an attractive place to me.

At Christmas time on our return to Sea Lake, a family picnic was arranged with the Gallaghers and others. It was to be held on the shore of Green Lake a few miles out of town. The added attraction was that the lake temporarily had water in it. Our car needed to be registered but our fortunes must have hit rock bottom. I had a small savings account in a local bank that could not be drawn on unless I signed a withdrawal slip. I duly did so for the total amount of about seven pounds and distinctly remember carefully creating a John Neylon Molony on the slip, but with unexpressed misgivings. Since that day, I have never had a savings account because there has never been much to save.

When the hour came to leave the Mallee, I had to turn my face away because I saw tears in my father's eyes. He never spoke to me of that day again but someone told me he left with only a few pound notes in his pocket. To me, in all things, he was so big, strong and full of life. That he could fail in anything never became even a thought in my mind. Mother, when happy, could and often did laugh so much that the tears ran down her cheeks. On this day she scarcely spoke, but she did not cry. We set out in the old Buick for the city. When we arrived it was night and Melbourne seemed a place full of light. In that moment I was glad. I have never regretted the loss of the farm except for the sorrow in the hearts of my parents. We had to move on to another 'country'. Yet from Rome 20 years later, I wrote to my parents, 'Somehow I still look to Sea Lake as our home' and I expressed the macabre wish for a 20-year-old of wanting to be buried on 'The Hill' near Sea Lake. I did not tell them at the time that I was seriously ill.

I could leave the Mallee, but it had done its own thing by marking me for life as an Australian. The fibres of my consciousness were woven with bird call and animal track, bush and shrub, the shimmering heat at noon, the blue of the heavens, the softness of the Mallee sands and the intense cold of night. In my spirit, the traditions of Augustine of north Africa, Patrick of Armagh and Aquinas of southern Italy had already blended with those of Magna Charta and Westminster to take shape in a child of the Mallee. Small wonder that the elements of my being sat uneasily together.