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An Australian Alter Ego: The 50th Anniversary of George Johnston's *My Brother Jack*

Timing can be crucial in the way a book is received.

In 1964, quite out of the blue it seemed, a kind of Rip Van Winkle arrived upon our shores with a novel that interpreted how the Great War had affected us — not in the trenches of Gallipoli or the Somme but here on the Australian home front, and indeed in the home of a single Australian family.

It now seems surprising that this theme had never before been explored in a major work of Australian fiction. After all, every schoolchild had been brought up on the cliché that the battles of World War One had been the bloody birth of our newly federated nation. Yet the representation of the legend of the Anzacs had been left to the historians and to the sculptors who produced all those soldiers standing — heads bowed; leaning on their rifles — on plinths in scruffy suburban parks and in the dusty main streets of country towns. Fittingly, these innumerable Unknown Soldiers seemed to be referenced in the novel's cover art, which was created at the author's request by the painter, Sidney Nolan, and featured an iconic image of an Anzac: the eyes squinting against the sun, the skin tanned to a bronze colour that merged with the khaki battledress below the neck and the slouch hat that was lazily slung onto the head.

The author who seemed to appear from nowhere was someone whom Australians had known and admired twenty years earlier as a war correspondent, but who had done that un-Australian thing of going to live in Foreign Parts. Appropriately, for the figure of someone newly arisen from a decades-long sleep, when he returned he looked old beyond his years. Reassuringly, however, his voice (frequently to be heard on the national airwaves) had an Aussie accent as thick as cocky's joy. His novel, on the other hand, didn't look too thick and it had a title to which everyone could relate.

All of this, combined with an unparalleled media campaign (initially orchestrated by the author himself), contributed to the immediate popularity of George Johnston's *My Brother Jack.* The crucial element in the novel's success, however, was the fact that it came out at a time of cultural and political revival, a time

when Australians — in the wake of the seemingly endless Menzies era — were beginning to question and re-evaluate the whole business of their national character and identity. (Also published in 1964 was Donald Horne's *The Lucky Country*; at that time, people recognised the title as ironic.) In this same period, Australia was becoming entangled in a new war: this time, one that would divide the nation — not just in terms of right against left, or right against wrong, but one which would set generation against generation. While Johnston's novel appealed to readers who had lived through the historical period in which it was set, the debate over the Vietnam War also made younger Australians keen to read about the time when the Anzac legend had begun.

Overall, the acclaim for *My Brother Jack* was both literary and popular. In March 1965, the novel won the Miles Franklin award. In August of that same year, a ten-episode television adaptation went to air on the ABC. The script was written by Johnston's wife, Charmian Clift, who at that time had a widely-read newspaper column published each week in Sydney and Melbourne. Not only did the series acquaint a great many more people with the story of *My Brother Jack* but it was also the first time that working class Australian viewers were invited to see an Australian family like their own, speaking the Australian vernacular in Australian accents.

Within a few years of publication, *My Brother Jack* became more of a legend than a mere piece of fiction. By this, I mean that it became one of those stories that people *feel* they have read, even if they have not.

This year, as the novel reaches its fiftieth anniversary, the timing is again felicitous, because this milestone coincides with the centenary of the outbreak of the Great War. As we begin a four-year feast of Anzac memorialising, already the bookshops are being flooded with innumerable new war books — fiction, history, faction, photo-journalism. It seems timely to explore the making of this novel.

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Appropriately, one of the book's inspirations was a legendary war...

On the Greek island of Hydra, in the winter of 1955 to 1956, George Johnston and Charmian Clift, together with their friends, Sidney and Cynthia Nolan, spent many a boozy night talking about the battle of Troy, which seemed close in place if not in time. As well as lending Sid Nolan his copy of the *Iliad*, Johnston showed him an article by another Australian writer, Alan Moorehead, who described certain parallels between the Australian military campaign of 1915 and the legendary Trojan

battles and pointed out the proximity of the two battlefields. A fast worker, Nolan immediately started painting the images that would become his *Gallipoli* series.

In retrospect, it is somewhat surprising that George — also a notoriously fast worker (one of his journalist colleagues described him as 'typing like a road drill') — did not immediately start hammering out a story with an Anzac theme. Instead, he continued to write the kind of novels he had been writing for the previous decade: novels with heroic characters, certainly, and sometimes even Australian characters, but set in exotic locations anywhere in the world except Australia. Cynthia Nolan, in a letter written from Hydra to her friend, Pat Flower, in March/April 1956, described Johnston's latest publication, *The Sponge Divers*, as a 'rehash of Steinbeck and Hemingway'. She added: 'I will not say what he wants to hear, that he is a brilliant writer. And if asked I will say that if he wants to write something a bit better he'll have to go to what he knows — Elwood, Melbourne... Australia.'

George Johnston's family home was actually in Elsternwick, but the neighbouring suburb of Elwood (which runs down to Port Phillip Bay) was part of his childhood territory. If Cynthia Nolan got the geography a bit wrong, she was right in her summation of what Johnston needed to do. In 1956, however, the author was still running away from the home where he had grown up — a place that he would describe (when finally he stopped running, and wrote the first page of *My Brother Jack*) as

> An undistinguished house — weatherboard painted dark stone and a corrugated iron roof of sun-faded Indian red — which sat behind a wire fence, privet hedge, small square lawn of buffalo grass, and the name *Avalon* in gilt letters on a blackwood panel in a flat and dreary suburb far away in Melbourne, Australia.

Apart from the fact that the house was named *Lochied*, the author's description of his family home had, from all accounts, a photographic clarity. And yet, not long ago, when made my way in a heat wave to the quiet little suburban street where George Johnston grew up, I would never have been able to recognise the house, if I hadn't known the street number.

These days, the weatherboards are painted white and the galvanised iron roof is silver, but the most noticeable thing about the house is the fact that it is almost impossible to see. Three eucalypts (one with an unusual weeping habit) and some sort of fruit tree (peach? nectarine?) shade a front garden that seems much larger than the one in the book. Yet while the vegetation is thick, there is nothing of the cramped and

enclosed feeling created by Johnston's description of the wire fence and privet hedge, and nor is there the sterility of a small square lawn. Indeed, half a dozen tomato plants sprawl about in cheerful company with the native shrubs, and a pumpkin vine clambers up one of the gums.

Over the next day and a half, I walked back and forth through the landscape where George Johnston lived and played and went to school. With the help of old maps, *Sands Directory* and the volunteers of the Glen Eira Historical Society, I managed to locate most of the novel's landmarks (even if they were not always exactly where the author placed them). Although the area has moved up the class scale and is more multicultural, the thing that has not changed — that cannot change — is the topography. On my second afternoon — reeling from the heat that seemed to radiate from the footpath — I jumped into a taxi and travelled the short distance down to Port Phillip Bay, where the flat sea meets the flat land in one direction and the flat horizon in the other.

Yes, this is it, I realised: this was the flatness that George Johnston sought to escape, at almost any cost.

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George Johnston was born in the Melbourne suburb of Malvern in 1912. At that time, his brother Jack was three years old, and big sister Jean was five. George's father, John, always known in the family as 'Pop', was a maintenance worker for the Melbourne tramways. His wife, Minnie (née Wright), was the daughter of the editor of Bendigo *Advertiser,* and had been brought up to play the piano and dabble in water colours. Although the piano remained in the living room, Minnie had traded art for the responsibilities of a housewife and mother.

Within a couple of years of George's birth, the family moved into *Lochied*. At about the same time, there occurred two separate events that both made George suddenly feel he had been abandoned. Firstly, he stopped being the centre of his mother's attention when she gave birth to another baby, Marjorie. Not long afterwards, George's father enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force and went off to a place that 'was always referred to as "the Front"'. No sooner had baby Marjorie arrived and Pop departed than George's mother also started to disappear from the house for virtually all the time that young George was awake. On her fleeting reappearances she wore stiff aprons and strange white headdresses that made her seem like a stranger.

It is significant that in George Johnston's fictionalisation of this early period of his life, he has the mother-character 'leaving her four small children' in order to go off and become an army nurse in France for 'rather more than three years'. In fact, Minnie Johnston became a Voluntary Aid Detachment auxiliary nurse at the nearby military hospital in Caulfield. Her own mother, Emma, moved into the house to look after the children; George and his brother Jack (displaced from their bedroom) shifted into an enclosed veranda at the back of the house, which was further enclosed by a dark and rampant vine known in the family as ‘the dollicus’. Missing his mother, the little boy became 'something of a namby-pamby' (as he described his young alter ego); more simply, brother Jack called him‘a whinger’. When George clung to his grandmother’s skirt, she dosed him with castor oil and sent him out into the back yard to play in a small area surrounded by tall paling fences that obscured any sense of the outside world.

In these elements — the flat landscape, the sense of being enclosed and confined, the withdrawal of love, the feeling of abandonment, the derision of big brother Jack, and the mysterious presence of the ‘dollicus’ vine — we have most of the ingredients for the origin of the novel, *My Brother Jack*. Yet there is one thing missing...

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Going back to the incisive comment on George Johnston’s writing made by Cynthia Nolan in the European spring of 1956, it is interesting to place alongside it a passage written at the same time by Charmian Clift. In the ‘April’ chapter of her diary-cum-memoir of the first year the couple spent on the island of Hydra, *Peel Me a Lotus*, Clift describes the exuberant period following the birth of their second son, Jason, and the family’s move into their newly-purchased home. In this time of excitement, Johnston (always a great talker) ‘talks in a wild spate of words’...

> of all the arrivals and all the settings outs, as if his life was a knotted ball that he is madly unravelling backwards... all the way back to the flat suburban streets and the flat suburban houses behind the safe silver wire fences and the child waiting in the bathroom for his father to enter with the razor-strop to administer the ritual monthly beating. 'For the sins,' his father said, 'I have not found out.'

Here George is a kind of Theseus, following a ball of twine that leads him through the labyrinth of claustrophobic Melbourne suburbia to the monster at its heart. In 1956, however, this was all still talk. At this time, the author could not face the sustained engagement with his past that writing a novel about it would require, and so he continued his potboilers and pastiches, some better than others.

In 1959 George Johnston developed a new alter ego character, named 'David Meredith', whom he used as the protagonist of the novel *Closer to the Sun* (1960), set on a Greek island remarkably similar to Hydra. In *The Far Road* (1962), he again used David Meredith as his viewpoint (though not his voice) as he told the story of a journey he himself had made through China towards the end of World War Two, when he had seen one hundred thousand corpses of refugees rotting beside the road. Despite (or perhaps because of) his personal engagement with this material, the author would later tell an old friend, journalist Elizabeth Riddell, that with 'halfway through' these David Meredith novels he had 'got cold feet'. He explained, 'I broke their backs in the middle. I didn't have the confidence to do it right.' Certainly, *Closer to the Sun* is a failure, but *The Far Road* is an unfairly neglected novel, significant as one of the first pieces of Australian fiction to be set in Asia. Unfortunately,al though it received decent reviews, sales were an unmitigated disaster.

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In July 1962, George Johnston turned fifty. Reaching this kind of milestone often prompts a period of personal stocktaking. For Johnston, the passage of time had a particular urgency, because he had suffered for a number of years from a series of chest complaints that had their origin in the tuberculosis he had contracted as a war correspondent but which were exacerbated by heavy smoking, a damp climate and primitive living conditions. By his fiftieth birthday, Johnston was so run-down that he thought his life could well be drawing to an end. As well, there were strains on his marriage, caused in part by his wife's infidelity and in part by the fact that George seemed to Charmian to have become a different person from the man she had married. (She would describe this as 'a strange kind of adultery'.)

Dissatisfied with himself for losing his nerve in his two previous David Meredith novels, George Johnston began to make some notes exploring the character

of this alter ego, with whom he was increasingly identifying. Seeking to understand the character's 'back story', the author went back to his own beginnings, and wrote two pages of typescript titled 'Childhood — "The Dollikos"'. This note begins:

> His mind, perhaps, had been in some way twisted strangely by a childhood which he had not come to understand — or even been prepared to try to understand — until he was a man of middle age. Only then did he come to see the geographical flatness of the suburbs, the emptiness of the sky, the hollow places where companionship should have been, and the imperfections that had surrounded him. And in maturity he was inclined to cling, with a kind of perverse but passive greed, to everything that was antithetical to these earlier formations.

By now, Johnston had come to believe that the flatness of his childhood landscape and the emotional flatness of his home environment were what had set him on a lifelong quest to escape suburbia — first by way of his wartime travels, and later by making his home in Greece. His passion for Charmian Clift was also seen as part of this quest for adventure, as well as being an attempt to win the love that he felt he had lost in early childhood.

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As the summer of 1962 turned to autumn, George Johnston let the memories of his childhood flow in conversation with his usual sounding board and collaborator, Charmian Clift. She would later declare that she and her husband 'talked for thirteen hours straight once and came up with an idea that turned into a novel called *My Brother Jack*'.

At this time, Clift was herself working on an autobiographical novel that she had been writing for many years, and which in fact she would never finish. Titled *The End of the Morning* and set in Clift's home town of Kiama, the drafts of this novel show that the author was developing the character of her alter ego by contrasting her with her sister, who was very different in temperament. This gave Johnston a model for the fictional exploration of two contrasting siblings as they developed through childhood and adolescence. In his hand-written journal of notes for *My Brother Jack*, George Johnston wrote: 'You see, what I am trying to get at is what made Jack different from me. Different all through our lives, I mean, not just older or braver or

not as clever.' From this early jotting it is clear that while the novel's narrator would be David Meredith, his brother would carry the name 'Jack' from life into fiction.

Johnston began writing the novel in about October 1962. In an interview given some six years later, George Johnston described the moment of inspiration:

> Alone in the house and very sick — I thought I was going to die — I examined this whole thing of life and achievement. I thought of the books I'd written and I suddenly felt that not one of them amounted to anything.
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> I thought to myself: 'Why don't you write something worthwhile?' So I got up out of bed, still sick, and I went downstairs, shaking with fever, and I wrote the first page of *My Brother Jack* exactly as it was printed.

Although the author would tell the story differently in other interviews, this is true enough, if we allow for the fact that months of preparation have been edited out. So let us return to this first page...

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Straight after the description of the *exterior* of the family home, Johnston takes the reader through the front door and into the house, where 'a souvenired German gas-mask hung on the tall hatstand ... and the whole area of the hall was a clutter of walking sticks ... and sets of crutches ... and there was always at least one invalid wheel-chair there and some artificial limbs propped in the corners'.

As readers fall down a time warp into the period of the Great War, they also enter one of the parts of the novel where memory replaces fiction. This is not say that the material is fact, but that the author believed it to be fact. Not long after *My Brother Jack* was finished, the Johnstons were visited on Hydra by a young Australian poet, Rodney Hall, to whom they described Clift's role in the writing of this book. Some years ago, Hall told me:

> The main thing [Charmian] used to say to him was: 'Is that really true?' ... Her input was to say, 'Come on, George, you've written lots of fiction that may not last. But this is important — let's get it right.' And she said that all the way through she was saying, 'Is that *true*?' And he felt challenged, and a lot of the stuff he re-wrote.

Certainly it is true that from the time George was two years old until he was twelve or thirteen, the Johnston family home was filled with talk and images and physical evidence of war and sickness and mutilation and death. As well as working at the hospital every day and often through the weekend, Minnie Johnston had the

habit of bringing home pet invalids to recuperate for a period of weeks or months; one veteran stayed so long that he eventually married George's elder sister. These house guests were mostly 'amps' or 'double amps'. One had lost his arms as well as his legs and was reduced to a torso and head in a wheelchair. Others were blind. Yet another wore the scars of mustard gas in terrible facial burns, and used to frighten George with his 'staring silences'. All of these men had been at the Front, and their reminiscences haunted the imagination of the boy who used to sit so quietly on the veranda as they talked that they would forget he was there. Yet this wasn't the worst of it.

Hidden in 'the big deep drawer at the bottom of the cedar wardrobe' in his parents' bedroom the young boy discovered copies of the *Illustrated War News* together with three volumes of propaganda cartoons by the Dutch artist, Louis Raemaekers, whose graphic images were produced to stir up popular hatred against 'the Hun'. While the photographs in the former showed 'corpses sprawled in muck or drowned in flooded shell craters or hanging like cast-off rags on the tangled wire' of the muddy 'wilderness' of the Front, the cartoons 'assumed a horrible reality, the substance of nightmare translated into printed truth'. In the narrator's descriptions of his furtive visits to this collection and the 'morbid thrall' exerted by this material, there is a sense of the illicit attraction of pornography.

Meanwhile, as George was witnessing these obscenities from the home front, his father was actually experiencing them on the front line. After making it through Gallipoli, John Johnston was shelled and gassed in the trenches of France, losing some of his hearing and developing a tendency to bronchitis and lung trouble. More significant were the psychological scars that he brought home with him. Like many war veterans, Pop suffered shell shock (or post-traumatic stress disorder, as it was later called). Venting his inner torment in explosions of anger and bigotry, he now became ‘Pop’ by nature as well as by name.

Through the rest of his childhood, George feared his father; when the fear finally subsided, it was replaced by loathing. In *My Brother Jack*, the author

dramatises this combination of terror and repulsion in the scene where the Meredith family go to the wharves to greet the returning troops. After five years of absence, the father is a complete stranger to the boy:

> I was seven then, but small for my age, and the day was charged, for me, with a huge and numbing terror. This fear was involved with the interminable blaring of brass bands, and a ceaseless roar of shouting and cheering, and the unending trampling past of gigantic legs [...] The climax of it all came when a strong voice, hoarse with excitement, began to shout, 'Minnie! *Minnie*!' and without warning I was seized suddenly and engulfed in one of the gigantic, coarse-clad figures and embraced in a stifling smell of damp serge and tobacco and beer and held high in the air before a sweating apparition that was a large, ruddy face grinning at me below a back-tilted slouch hat and thin fair hair receding above a broad freckled brow, and then there was a roar of laughter, and I was put down, sobbing with fear, and the thick boots marched on and on, as if they were trampling all over me.

Rarely has a passage of literature captured so perfectly a child's sense of vulnerability and powerlessness in an adult world. And as to size of this 'gigantic figure', there is no exaggeration. John Johnston measured six foot three inches (190 cm) and weighed fifteen stone (more than 95 kilos); George was a particularly small boy, who would not start to shoot up until he was in his teens. More important, however, than his physical slightness was the sensitivity revealed in this passage. George seemed to *feel* things more than his siblings. Certainly, he was much more thin-skinned than his brother Jack, who was not only three years older and physically much stronger, but who took everything in his stride and rarely paused for reflection.

This difference in feeling — in the way life was experienced — between the two brothers is relevant to the next bit of the story. This concerns the matter of the 'ritual monthly beating' to which Charmian Clift referred in *Peel Me a Lotus*. In a memorable passage of *My Brother Jack*, the narrator relates how, in addition to 'summary punishment' such as a cuff around the ears or a 'slash with a stick or a strap', his father instituted a 'system of monthly punishments [...] for the offences which had *escaped* his attention'. Describing 'the blind rages' that overtook the man as he 'thrashed' his two sons with his razor stop, the author concludes, 'This went on for several years, and God knows what damage it did to me psychologically.'

But is this fact or fiction? Garry Kinnane in his biography of the author accepts the declarations by George's siblings Jack and Marjorie that 'no such beatings took place'. Yet not only did Charmian record George talking about them, but artist Cedric Flower (who with his wife, Pat, had stayed with the Johnstons in their first island home, on Kalymnos), also heard these stories. In telling me this, Cedric added that whenever George would speak of these terrible punishments, Charmian would rush from the room in floods of tears.

Nine decades or so after these events did or did not happen, the point is not their truth, but their effect in the novel, where the description of the beatings underlines the Great War's violent aftermath on the home front. Certainly, for George Johnston there could be no mythologising of this war. 'By the time I was about thirteen,' his alter ego declares, 'all the returned soldiers we knew had come to see the whole conflict as a monument of disorganisation and waste and political chicanery.' It is easy to see why this message struck a chord with readers in the 1960s and 1970s, as the Vietnam War appeared to be repeating this history.

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In conclusion, we might ask: given that George Johnston asked his friend Sidney Nolan to produce the art work for the original cover of this novel, who and what is the iconic image of the Anzac meant to represent? Is it Pop — shell-shocked, irascible, abusive? Or is it brother Jack, the emblematic Aussie hero?

While the horrors of World War One are presented through the perceptions of a child, the real commentary on war and heroes is embedded in the deep irony at the core of this novel: that when the World War Two comes along, Jack enlists at the first possible moment, but is deemed unfit for active service and never sees a shot fired in anger. It is David, the sensitive, cowardly, artistic, namby-pamby brother, who goes off to war.

Whoever the Unknown Soldier in Nolan's cover-image may be, this anti-war classic should be mandatory reading for any Australian, young or old, who seeks to fill a spiritual void in their life by making a pilgrimage to Anzac Cove or the Australian National Memorial at Villers-Bretonneux.