

Laurie Duggan was born in Melbourne in 1949 and currently lives in Brisbane. He has published eleven previous books of poems including *The Ash Range*, winner of the Victorian Premier's New Writing Award. This second edition, appearing simultaneously with his selected poems, *Compared to What*, is the first outside Australia. His cultural history *Ghost Nation: Imagined Space and Australian Visual Culture 1901-1939* was published in 2001. He is an Honorary Research Advisor at the Centre for Australian Studies, University of Queensland.

THE ASH RANGE

Laurie Duggan

Shearsman Books

This edition first published in the United Kingdom in 2005 by
Shearsman Books
58 Velwell Road
Exeter EX4 4LD

<http://www.shearsman.com/>

First published in 1987 by Pan Books (Australia) Pty Limited,
Sydney, Australia.

ISBN 0-907562-69-8

Copyright © Laurie Duggan, 1987, 2005.

The right of Laurie Duggan to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyrights, Designs and Patents Act of 1988. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Front cover illustration 'Penderscourt, 1935', reproduced by permission of the State Library Victoria, Melbourne. Rear cover photograph of the author by Rosemary Hunter.

Acknowledgements

This volume was published with the assistance of the Australian Studies Centre at the University of Queensland.



The publisher gratefully acknowledges financial assistance for its publishing programme 2005-2007 from Arts Council England.

CONTENTS

| | |
|---------------------------------|-----|
| INTRODUCTION | 8 |
| Part One: STARS | 13 |
| Part Two: MAPS | 21 |
| Part Three: OWNING THE LAND | 55 |
| Part Four: GOLD MOUNTAINS | 79 |
| Part Five: NAVIGATION | 117 |
| Part Six: REMOTENESS | 131 |
| Part Seven: BALANCE OF PAYMENTS | 149 |
| Part Eight: WHITE PALINGS | 161 |
| Part Nine: AN IDYLL | 179 |
| Part Ten: STIRLING | 195 |
| Part Eleven: JANUARY 1939 | 205 |
| Part Twelve: WEATHER | 223 |
| SOURCES | 239 |
| ILLUSTRATIONS | 246 |

Maps and photographs removed in order to reduce file size.

Introduction

'Gippsland', the area treated in this work, roughly occupies the eastern third of the Australian state of Victoria. It is a territory defining itself from a combination of my own experience and what I've been able to rationalize from its history. My grandfather, Michael Patrick Duggan, was born at Hinnomunjie, a 'remote' habitation north of Omeo, East Gippsland, in 1870. He was of slight build, an expert horseman, and for a while a champion local jockey. When he was fourteen or so he worked delivering mail between Omeo, Dargo and Grant mining settlement. It's still rough country now. He would often camp overnight with people he'd later find out were bushrangers. Michael's brother, George, known as 'Buff', was a dingo trapper whose expertise was called upon by the Victorian State Government in the early 1900s. He was asked to address some parliamentarians in the state capital, Melbourne. 'Buff' was so concerned as to whether or not he would be recognised when he arrived at Flinders Street station that he took along a couple of dingo skins and slung them over his shoulder.

My grandparents, Michael and Ellen, lived in a small house on the bank of the Tambo River, working for a large property called Ensay Station. Ellen bore ten children. One son died in France in 1918, another almost made it into a major Australian Rules football team (South Melbourne) in the early 1930's. A daughter played the piano for the silent movies and another son spent part of the Second World War in the Japanese prisoner-of-war camp at Changi. My father, Jim, became a motor mechanic leaving for the city (and the RAAF) shortly before the war. I grew up in Melbourne.

When I was still at university in 1971 I wrote a poem called 'East' which dealt partly with Gippsland, partly with my family, and partly with the political situation of the time (Australia's involvement in Vietnam), though its 'real' subject was mass media and the distortion of individual experience. I moved from Melbourne to Sydney in 1972 and didn't visit Gippsland again until 1976: to all purposes I'd finished with the place. But I drove through the region that year. There'd been a bad drought and I ended up helping one of my aunt's neighbours to distribute stock feed around the paddocks. I also saw an uncle for the last time, up at the Omeo hospital. There seemed to be so much I still had to say about the area and I knew I'd need much more space than 'East' had taken. I began to collect local histories and odd bits of data about the region.

In 1973 I read Walter Benjamin's essays in the collection called *Illuminations*. The editor, Hannah Arendt, referred to his 'Arcades Project', then an unavailable and supposedly untranslatable work. She described the Project as Benjamin's attempt to realise an ambition to compose a work entirely out of the writings of others. Unlike an anthology this work would present itself as a cohesive argument where the assembled passages would complicate and develop lines of thought through their placement. The idea of writing a book in which none of the words would be my own appealed to me greatly because for some time I had been interested in visual collage. My take on this mode of literary production was to become *The Ash Range*. The finished project, like Benjamin's work in progress, contains sections of my own composition (roughly 10% of the book) and annotates its sources.

I'd describe *The Ash Range* as a 'documentary poem'. Perhaps this is just a modern way of saying 'epic' though, unlike epics generally, it lacks a protagonist (unless the protagonist is, as Peter Porter suggested, the area, Gippsland itself, which 'lives' through or despite all of its acculturations). I suppose the work it most resembles in this respect is William Carlos Williams' long poem *Paterson*, though Williams, in the first two-thirds of his book at least, anthropomorphises the physical features and the town of Paterson, New Jersey; that is, he describes Paterson as a sleeping giant shaped by the curve of the Passaic River. I had a number of other examples of 'documentary' technique to learn from. John Dos Passos (in USA) showed that even such a seemingly 'impersonal' method can produce startlingly individual results. Charles Reznikoff's *Testimony*, a work made up from late 19th century American legal records, was another encouraging example. 'In editing the following episodes' he said, 'I thought of myself as a kind of archaeologist. I did not invent the episodes but neither did the original writers. I brushed off the words I thought unnecessary, now and then substituted words I thought more effective than the original wording, and added whatever rhythm I could by way of verse.'

Local histories often focus on the families of their authors, on the council (if the author is or was connected with it), or on the 'great men' — like Angus McMillan — who are seen in a heroic light as the forebears and legitimisers of the present state of affairs. But my family were never among the landed gentry and my relatives, like quite a lot of other people, don't appear in the history books. Partly to avoid falling into the same pattern (attractive as it sometimes was), I chose not to concern myself with family. Instead, I've named lots of people throughout the

book hoping to reflect a variety of experiences. The one place where I do introduce the name Duggan is, in effect, as a kind of joke:

12/12/1884

A man named Duggan was arrested by Constable Richardson at Grant a few days ago under the Vagrancy Act. He is somewhat silly and labors under a strange hallucination, viz. that there are but six men on earth who are to go to Heaven, and that he is included in the six. He carries with him a map, a geography, and a grammar in his swag, together with a bucket and five billies. He has been in the Beechworth gaol upwards of five years off and on for vagrancy. It is strange that a man of this kind has not been committed to an asylum before now. Constable Richardson proceeds to Bairnsdale with him on Monday next, where he will present him on a charge of lunacy.

It occurred to me in the midst of my field researches exactly a hundred years later that I was not altogether unlike this possible distant relative.

I was aware as I was compiling materials of the absence of women's voices. I worried a lot about this but there seemed little I could do, given the sources I was working with. I think if I'd had more access to private letters and family documents the picture might have been a bit different. I knew for example of a number of women who were writing fiction in the region but early in the process I'd abandoned the idea of doing a section entirely composed of portions of novels set in the area (I think though that, had I done this, it would have revealed how little the literature of this part of the bush actually reflected its environment). The closest I came to doing anything like this was in part nine where I made use of late 19th and early 20th century tourist literature, and here mostly the voices are, or purport to be, those of women.

With *The Ash Range* I wanted to write something that would run against the current trend of the New Nationalism (as promoted by governments and advertising executives). Although I had long been fascinated by the region I didn't know whether, in all honesty, I could construct a pastoral. There are really very few, if any, places in Australia these days that don't, in effect (and contra Les Murray), function as suburbs. I think this has been the case for a long time now, maybe since the First World War. In an earlier book, *The Great Divide*, I quoted the American writer, Michael Lesy:

[A]n analogy between city and country life was implied, denied, and then transformed into an illusory choice between distinct

civilizations. It is this imaginary choice, put under a walnut shell and pushed about the table like a pea for sixty years, that makes us even now believe that there is somewhere else to go.

In Melbourne from late November to early December 1984, and in February 1985 I spent hours in the Latrobe Library looking through local newspapers. I would copy out anything that seemed of interest, without worrying too much about how it would 'fit-in' to any scheme. I felt no imperative to follow up any detail unless I wanted to, nor any need to document different viewpoints. I had no pretence to 'objectivity'.

I shuffled the collected items, passages from books and pieces of my own writing around until certain broad areas were suggested. Then, before doing any further editing I thought about the placement of the sections. I finally settled on twelve chapters: a nice classical figure that related to the fact that it was a kind of epic that I was writing. Within each section I had to deal with the disparate documents and pieces of my own writing which seemed to relate to or frame them. My approach to this internal editing was to try and retain the particular flavour and language of my materials, and above all not alter what was being said. This still left plenty of room for editing, cutting down unwanted asides and verbiages, and giving the pieces visual and aural shape alongside their neighbours. Some things immediately suggested that they should be broken into shorter lines and spaced as a poem. Other items resisted change, insisting on their prosaic nature. Part eleven of the book, dealing with the 1939 bushfires, took its structural cues from Dos Passos' *USA*. It is presented entirely as prose, and is made up largely from newspaper accounts. I wanted to use the jump between items to indicate fear and uncertainty the way a movie documentary might use a rapidly intercut sequence or as Dos Passos himself had done with the 'newsreel' segments splitting up the body of his text.

Dealing with the figure of Angus McMillan, I adopted a different strategy. Rather than attempt to cut a single track through the McMillan legends as rehearsed by local historians, I thought it would be more interesting to allow the 'explorer' to speak for, or rather, against himself. I was able to find four different accounts of his journey and I edited each of these down and arranged them in columns so the discrepancies would be clearly apparent. Count Strzelecki's story, on the other hand, begged to be turned into a novelette. His own account, James Macarthur's, and others were welded together to give the effect of breathlessness.

Around the same time came the idea that I would have to 'frame' my material as an epic might be 'framed' — that is I had to situate

Gippsland in a wider world. I was originally going to run an astronomer's description of the night sky in the southern hemisphere in parallel to an Aboriginal account, contrasting the borrowed classical mythology with the local version, but this device would perhaps have been a pretentious and discouraging way to start the poem. Eventually I discovered the beginning among notes written during an early 'field research' period that I had described to myself in a moment of doubt as 'the pub crawl'. To conclude I had to return to the place where I had begun: Ensay. But I couldn't, at this point, avail myself of the apparatus of epic poetry. No great slice of historical action had been rounded off. Where else to end but in the bar of the local pub?

★

Cyril Connolly suggested that a sure sign of a book's continuing significance was its republication after a period of ten years or more. *The Ash Range* first appeared in Australia in 1987. Various people in Australia and elsewhere have asked in the last few years whether or not it might reappear. Here it is.

I would like to thank the Victorian Ministry for the Arts for the 1984 grant that set serious research work in progress. The Australia Council for the Arts provided further funding the next year. Rosemary Hunter typed up a large part of my original materials, and Michael Heyward and Peter Craven published substantial extracts of the draft in *Scriptsi* magazine. Penny Hueston was able to visualise my seemingly unpublishable manuscript as a book. Her (then) employer, Pan Macmillan (Australia), produced a volume more handsome than I thought possible and Don Watson contributed a generous introduction.

When Tony Frazer offered to republish this book we realised that with reproduction rights and additional technical necessities it would be a more expensive prospect than usual for a poetry volume. We would like to thank Martin Duwell for his expertise and the Australian Studies Centre at the University of Queensland for their generous assistance.

I originally dedicated this book to my father. Though not one to read anything other than newspapers he read the book and responded to it with understated pleasure ("It's good but there's too much 'heaving to' in the early parts."). I dedicate this new edition to his memory.

Laurie Duggan

I

STARS

Mitchell River, Eagle Point, 1914

La Trobe Collection, State Library of Victoria

1.1

In a high wind, on a rock in the back paddock
pollen dusts my pants;
180° of the valley before me:
 its scattered dams, sheds,
 fawn and white masses
 of fleeced and shorn sheep;
Mt Elizabeth to the south-east,
and north, the country round Tongio Gap;
the hillside below covered with yellow flowers,
 green clover,
 scattered rocks and stumps;
behind me, the electrified fence and low dry scrub
 up the steeper slope to the Angora Ranges,
 clearings on the spurs;
over to ENE, Ensay township,
the ridge in front of the highway,
 cemetery hill on the far side;
behind it the logging country of North Ensay and the
 Nunniyong tableland.
To the north spirals drop from the clouds;
turbulent convections over Benambra.
In this wind the cockatoos fly unsteadily
but the swallows manage to hang in place.

Nightfall and the wind drops,
 Crux, due south
 over the hotel,
lowest in its diurnal course;
west of the cross, Centaurus; further west
Ara, the Altar, Scorpio and red Antares,
Pavo, Indus, Capricorn, Grus, Toucan,
and Bunjil?
 — who made the earth and
 the people down here;
the Classics inverted overhead —

Bunjil

grew tired

and told the musk-crow who
kept the winds:

'let some out from your bags'.

And Crow

gave out a blast that ripped trees skywards.

But Bunjil wanted more.

So the knots were all untied,
and a gale blew Bunjil and his people off the planet:
flecks of light in a dark sky . . .

. . . looking down on sphagnum bogs
trampled by cattle
to swampy flats

thus, Nunniyong
and the surfaces of the Bogongs,
grey over green, on a yellow field,
slope gently southwards in conformity with the general
inclination, initiated when the Mesozoic palaeoplain
was deformed.

At a depth
of four feet, embedded
in solid stratum, Mr Stirling discovered
bones of forgotten marsupials.

Nargun,

*like a rock, all stone
except for his breast,
arms, hands:*

*no one
knew what these were made of.*

The disturbing forces made one course:

that the main range may be fairly considered as a great axis of
perturbation;

that all the elevations, subsidences and inclinations which exist on
both sides of it are posterior, subservient, and perfectly in relation
to the effects of the convulsions of that axis;

that these convulsions, though keeping invariably their north or south course, did not affect the crust simultaneously;

that the dislocation, fracture and contortion took place at different and distant periods;

that in these periods the action of different causes greatly and alternately altered the heaved-up surface; and finally

that the great order of superposition of compound minerals remains undisturbed, and in perfect identity to that observed on the rest of the globe.

Thus, the eighteenth century displaces the mappemonde,
its special effects of fire, ice and mist,
the Virgogici, the Trogdolytes, Mt Purgatory;

the divide shifts to the south,
and the Mitta
steals the Tambo headwaters
boathooking at Tongio Gap.

Downstream, the Tambo braids;
long strips of rubble;
and at the mouth of the Mitchell
a silt jetty pushes into a lake.

I walked out on that jetty in 1964;
wood huts on the end,
new currents and a shifted entrance
shredding it to islands.

1.2

And the people were taught by Mangan-Ngaua
'how to make nets, canoes, weapons —
everything they knew'.

And someone
showed women the secrets of initiation,
and Mangan sent his fire

Aurora Australis
filling the whole space between earth and sky.
Sea broke over land
and all but the eminent ancestors perished,
changed to animals, birds, fish;
the sea falling and rising
as the polar caps grew and shrank
and the rivers joined up across dry beds
and the dry beds filled with water again
and a third sand barrier stretched down the coast,
the elevated beaches of Lake King
70' above the sea,
composed of an indurated reddish clay and calcareous paste
containing 'ostreat' and 'anomia'
different from existing species...

Sand, gravel, pebbles,
rest upon the surface, loose.

Transported fragments bear
oxides, phosphates, sulphurates and arseniates of iron
... oxides of titanium, molybdate of lead,
cornelian, opal, agate,
agglomerated pebbles of
compound minerals...

The sea broke over the land
and the men turned into fish, reptiles, marsupials,
and some years later the eighteenth century began
to map it out.

And a message
passed from tribe to tribe
that the sky's props were rotten,
and unless men were sent
to cut new poles
the sky would cave in and kill everybody..

