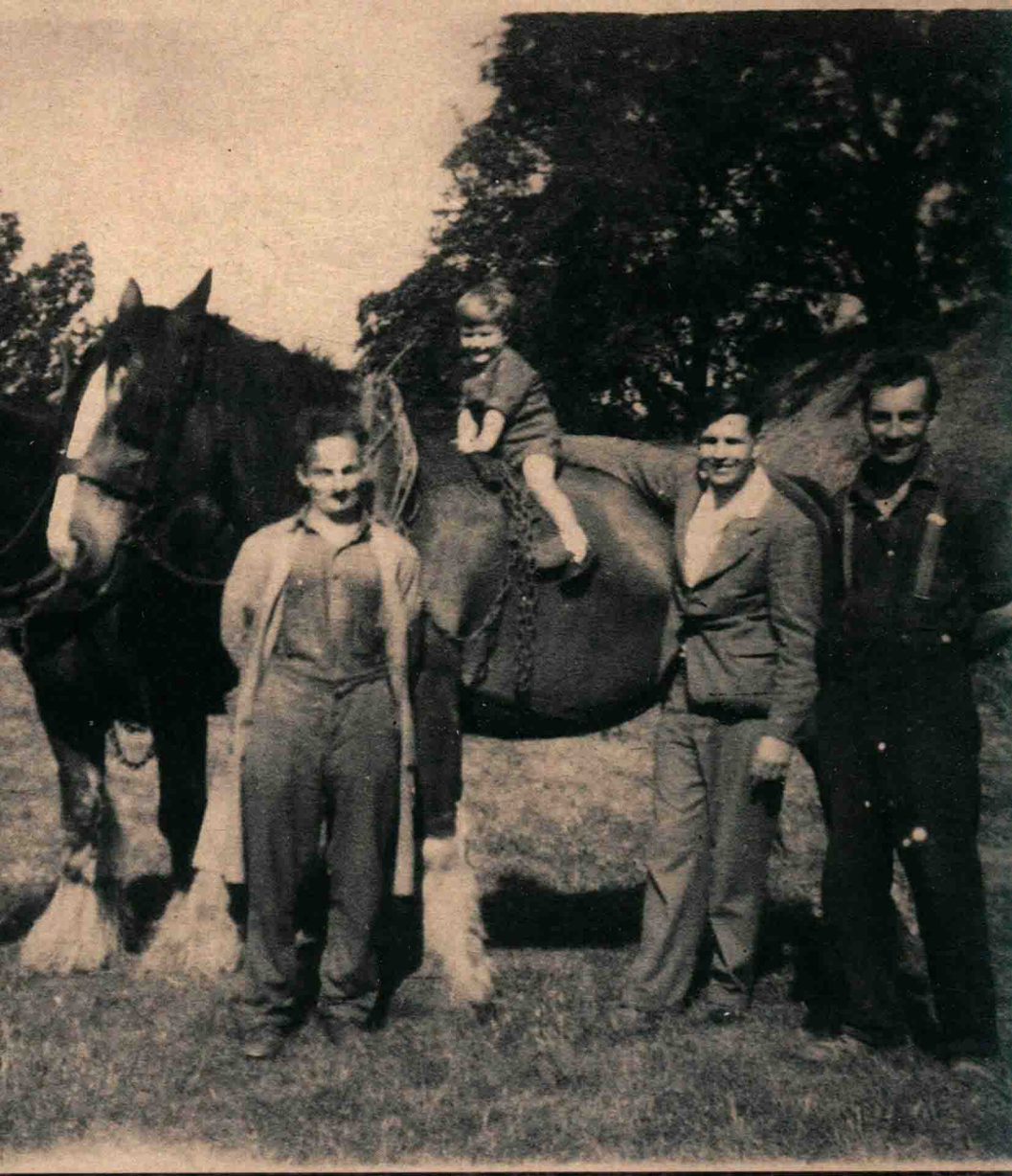

Growing Wild

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Growing Wild

Also by Michael Wilding

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To Deborah

Preface

'Your letter came as a shock surprise,' my parents wrote, when I told them I was thinking of going to Australia. But it shouldn't have really, for my grandfather had gone there some sixty years earlier. Australia was part of the family myth. My father would reminisce how the mushrooms used to come up after a thunderstorm on the Darling Downs. He recalled the sailors holding him over the side of the ship on the way there, or the way back, they didn't stay long, my grandmother couldn't take it, living in a humpy out in the middle of nowhere, grandfather putting in fencing posts, they came back to England. Next time when my grandfather went to Canada he went alone, to bring the family later, but they never went there, he came back to the foundry. And there was Uncle George on my mother's side who had an orange plantation in Sydney which the lawyers swindled him out of. That was another family myth even if no one seemed too confident about its veracity.

Australia had always been a presence in my childhood. Cleaning up the house after my mother had a stroke, I discovered some old diaries I had kept as a teenager and I thought, ah, I might be able to use something here for a novel. I couldn't. Use anything. It was all teenage despair, even less interesting than the mature despair I had ready access to. But on one page there was a doodle of a map of Australia. It dated from when I was fifteen. Beneath the map was a note. 'I seem to have drawn a map of Australia. Why is that? Does that mean I am going there or something?'

So I can claim a sort of Australianness as well as Englishness. Though it's often hard to say where anyone ultimately comes from, once you start looking into things. My paternal grandfather who came to Queensland was born in America, after his father had

jumped ship, running away from the English Midlands. The Wildings were a family of runaways and escapees, as their surname readily implies. 'Ten ruddy Wildings saw I in the wood,' John Dryden wrote in his translation of the *Æneid*. A restless family.

So I suppose I could claim to come from America, at some distance. And then back in England, well one set of grandparents was called Haffner, which is a Germanic name, but where they came from I don't know. And another lot were supposedly French Huguenots. And then on my mother's side apart from the family myth that we descended from the Black Prince, there was a possible claim to Celtic descent. Great Uncle Will Griffin used to play the Welsh harp. And we lived on the borders of the Marches, that borderland between England and Wales, where the Anglo-Saxons and Danes and Normans bumped up against the Welsh. So anybody living there might expect to be of mixed descent.

But how important is this search for one's national identity, one's defining ethnicity? If asked where I come from, it is more meaningful for me to answer that in class than in national or ethnic terms. From the working class. The experience of class discrimination is something that seared deeply into me. It is one of those themes that is not explicitly taboo; it's just that if you write about it much, you get the response of, 'Boring, boring, boring,' or, 'Oh, he's not still going on about that.' Class is not a feature of the cultural debate these days. In the agenda of political correctness, in which gender and ethnic analysis is privileged, class analysis is strikingly refused. The University of Sydney distributed to all its staff a pamphlet on discrimination on grounds of ethnicity and gender, and listed all the words you couldn't use any more, and warned you of all the things you mustn't do or think any more: but nowhere in this list was there any mention of class discrimination. And yet this remains the largest discrimination of all. I once asked how many working class students there were at the university, and I was told the numbers were not known and it was too difficult to find out. So writing about it, I've tended to deal with the theme obliquely, slipping it into a story that ostensibly deals with some other theme. I managed to insert it into a story, 'Reading the Signs', amongst attempts to describe what a flying saucer looked like. The

New Yorker asked me to confirm that the characters called Mum and Dad were fictional and not based on real people.

'Dad wrote to the paper. "As an iron-moulder, it seemed to me like a glowing red ball of molten iron."

'Sometimes he would be at home with burns on his hands or feet from the molten iron that had spilled. Now he is at home dying of emphysema from the foundry dust.

'"It was just like the molten iron when it comes out of the furnace."

'Mum was furious, embarrassed. She went red.

'"I never expected them to print it," Dad said. "I just wrote it as information for them."

'Other people in town had sighted it. There were other letters.

'"You might have known they'd print it."

'"No, I didn't, so that's that," said Dad.

'Mum was mortified. On the forms at school we wrote "Engineer" not "Iron-moulder." Filling in the forms for university, I went off to a private place and my stomach wrenched for a long time and for "Father's Profession or Occupation" I crossed out "Profession" and wrote "Iron-moulder."'

In the end, to try and escape all the varieties of discrimination, I decided I wanted to be a writer. In those innocent days when I made that decision I thought being a writer was just being a writer—I didn't know it was a role that nationalist politics, market forces, arts bureaucracies and the political professionals were eager to control. I thought being a writer was being a writer. Well, it still can be: you don't have to be taken over. And I thought being a writer you could say excessive things, troublesome things, even outrageous things, and get away with them. And even when I found out you couldn't get away with them, it still seemed worth saying them. By then it was too late to change, anyway. It had become a habit.

David Lodge once asked me in perplexity, or maybe even in exasperation, 'So what are you? Are you an Australian writer or an English writer?' I suppose I wanted to be both. Or maybe neither. Transcending mere nationality. A citizen of the world. A writer. That was my youthful ideal. Nationalism as far as I could see had

caused an awful lot of suffering. A slogan beneath which politicians and arms-manufacturers could send young men out to die for them. Women, too, these days. Internationalism seemed a good thing. Globalization has taken the gloss off that a bit lately, though it's not what I had in mind.

The writers I admired were many of them expatriates. Lawrence Durrell, Christopher Isherwood, Henry James, Joseph Conrad, D. H. Lawrence. It seemed the way to go. The future looked bleak in England. Three years at Oxford had made it clear to me that if you came from the working class, you were never going to be accepted by the ruling elite. And the ruling elite ran the cultural show. Oh, you might find yourself a niche, as long as your politics were conformist, as long as you basically accepted the order of things and said so. But you'd always be a sort of upper-servant. Well, my mother's family had been upper-servants.

Issues of expatriation have never been an explicit concern in my fiction. No doubt subterranean themes can be detected. And in writing critical essays about Lawrence and Conrad and James and Marcus Clarke and William Lane and Jack Lindsay and Christina Stead, no doubt at some level I was drawn to the expatriate. But strategically it has always seemed to me a bad idea to get into the business of comparisons. H. M. Hyndman tells of a nineteenth century Englishman who was asked how he liked Melbourne. 'He replied, with the drawl that was habitual to him, "Immensely. But don't you think it is a little far from town?"'

But being a Midlander, I never had much acquaintance with town, anyway.

Dame Leonie Kramer, launching a book of mine, compared me to Byron, which I thought was jolly nice of her. 'Shaking the dust of England from his feet,' she elucidated.

Well, it was rather like that.

As that famous old boy of my school, Adam Lindsay Gordon, wrote in 'An Exile's Farewell',

'I shed no tears at quitting home,
'Nor will I shed them now!'

As for what effect a change of place has on a writer, Gordon dealt with that succinctly in his poem 'Doubtful Dreams,' which fellow expatriate Marcus Clarke published in the *Colonial Monthly*.

'I have changed the soil and the season,
'But whether skies freeze or flame,
'The soil they flame on or freeze on
'Is changed in little save name.'

The thing about writing, it has always seemed to me, is you just sit down and do it. Write. Wherever you are, about whatever you know, whenever you can. Where you've been, where you are. Like Clarke and Gordon, at times I've turned back to writing about England, at other times I've written about Australia. No regrets. I am doing the same thing here.

Much of the fiction I have written has been autobiographical. I have tried not to duplicate that material here, though once in a while I quote from it. Nor have I repeated my recollections of the Wild & Woolley publishing years, which I have written about separately.

Acknowledgments

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Growing Wild

Contents

Among Leavisites

It was an afternoon in early Summer in my last term at Oxford. I was sitting on a bench in the inner courtyard of college, having a break before returning to the library. From an upper room came the sound of a typewriter, erratic but urgent.

'Wallace must be writing his book at last,' I remarked.

Wallace Robson, famous as the foremost English literature don, even approved by the great Cambridge critic F. R. Leavis, was also famous for never, at that stage, having written that book, his book, any book at all. Though once he had left Oxford he produced several.

The typing stopped and shortly afterwards he emerged from the foot of the staircase and scuttled, head down, out of the quadrangle.

I looked in my pigeonhole on the way through the porters' lodge. There was a letter in it. No address, just my name on it, clearly hand delivered. It was a typed note from Wallace asking me to see him some time in the next few days. I wondered why he hadn't just given it to me in the courtyard. Perhaps he hadn't seen me.

'Come in, come in,' said Wallace.

I went in.

'Oh, hello,' he said, that note of surprise, but polite welcome. Not put out, just vaguely puzzled.

'How are you getting on ?'

I said I was getting on well.

'That's good,' he said.

The conversation, such as it was, lapsed. Wallace looked across anxiously, his brow furrowed with that frequent expression of concern, seriousness, puzzlement. I seized the initiative. I had to. This was my allowed half-hour coffee break between the morning sessions in the library. I should soon be due back.

'You asked me to see you.'

'Oh yes,' said Wallace. 'Yes. So I did. Do sit down.'

I sat.

'Have you ever thought of going to Australia ?' he asked.

'I can't say I have,' I said.

'Oh,' said Wallace. 'My very good friend Sam Goldberg has a job going there.'

It was my turn now.

'Oh,' I said.

'A lectureship in Sydney,' said Wallace. 'Just for three years.'

'Mmm,' I said.

'Of course some people find they miss things there. *The Times.* And they don't much like the Australian accent. Especially in women.'

Neither seemed a major obstacle.

'Anyhow, go away and think about it and let me know what you decide.'

I got up to leave.

'Better than being a junior bottle washer in Sheffield,' he added.

I don't think he ever mentioned that he had once spent a term teaching in Australia.

I have no initial impression of Sam Goldberg that I can remember. I think he might have met me at the airport, but even of that I am not sure and have no memory. Of airport meetings my only recollection is the story of the previous professor, Wesley Milgate, meeting a new arrival, shortly before having his breakdown and retiring to the Blue Mountains to play the organ in some parish church or dissenting chapel.

'I never wanted to be professor,' he said. 'I never wanted to be an administrator. Stationery, stationery, they expect me to keep a track of stationery.'

Or was the stationery part of another story, of his knocking on every staff members' door and giving out airmail letter forms after administration had complained about the department's stationery consumption?

'Here, take some of these, go on, take more.'

The reason for thinking Sam met me is that I remember being in his house on arrival, a modern yet dark, gloomy two story red brick house. It had nothing in architecture or situation to recommend it. I had expected a view of the harbour, boats, seagulls, but there was no view, no sign of water.

Accommodation had been arranged for me in a college. He described where it was in relation to the university and the teaching hospital and what was the best way to get to the department.

'I'm sure Michael would be more interested in where the nurses' hostels are,' his wife said.

I remember that. I think she had been a nurse.

'So what do you want to teach ?' Sam asked me.

I had no idea. I had just taken finals. It was all literature, all accessible, at least up to 1870 when the Oxford syllabus had ended.

'I don't mind,' I said. I tried to be more specific. 'Anything except Milton,' I said.

Milton had been a compulsory author in my first year, and compulsion rarely endears.

'That's it then,' he said. 'Milton it is. I don't want some Miltonist teaching Milton.'

Perhaps I had expected to gain merit from my proposed exclusion. Milton was a particular bugbear of the Leavisites. Perhaps I had expected a complicit smirk at my correct taste, my gesture of avoidance. I had certainly not expected this new compulsion. Compulsion it was. I demurred. But I got nowhere.

That was the first uncertainty, so early on, at the very beginning, indeed. Apart from Milton I chose, or agreed to the suggestion of, the novel course. That was why I had come to Sydney, after all,