

THE YOUNG DESIRE IT

KENNETH SEAFORTH MACKENZIE



All characters in this book are entirely fictitious, and no reference is intended to any living person.

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W.G.C.

It is now opportune for me to thank you publicly for this book, which is really yours. It was written because you suggested it, and also because you made it possible for me to give all my mind and all my time to the difficult task of writing prose. If it has virtues, I claim them, as I must claim its faults; but its actual existence is greatly due to your kindness.

I had already told you that, though this story of Charles Fox is broadly true, the names and characters were, of course, all strictly invented by myself during those five weeks of solitude which saw the making of the whole thing. So we are not doing anyone an unkindness in setting down much that is — or should I say was? — true. If you do read this book, and like it, I shall feel doubly assured in offering it to you in friendship, and in gratitude.

Kenneth "Seaforth" Mackenzie

FOREWORD

ONE of my favourite memories of Kenneth Mackenzie is of him striding down Bridge Street in Sydney, probably after a visit to the *Bulletin* or on his way to Norman Lindsay's studio, declaiming from Tennyson:

All in the blue unclouded weather
Thick-jewell'd shone the saddle-leather,
The helmet and the helmet-feather
Burn'd like one burning flame together
As he rode down to Camelot.

With his light-coloured hair shining in the sun and his rich drawling voice shouting out the luxuriant lines, he must have seemed the epitome of youth and high spirits and poetry; and so at that time he was.

But it occurred to me, when I was thinking about a foreword for The Young Desire It, that, though I had known Mackenzie quite well for a few years in the way one knows people in Sydney—sometimes dropping in on Norman Lindsay with him to talk about Conrad or Browning; sometimes crossing the harbour to the house at Mosman where he was then living with his wife, Kate, and their two children, to drink claret and listen to music—I really knew very little about his life; nothing, except that he had lived in Western Australia, about the background to The Young Desire It. The one thing I did know about that novel was that Mackenzie told me that he had invented the author, "Michael Paul", and the quotation from Michael Paul's alleged writings from

which he had taken his title. He was always amused that none of his critics had spotted this harmless little hoax: it was typical of his impish humour.

The bare facts of his career are readily enough found: in H. M. Green's A History of Australian Literature, for instance. Green also gives a very good account of his writings, both prose and verse. He was born in Perth in 1913; was educated at Perth Grammar School and at the University of Western Australia; came to Sydney and worked for Smith's Weekly and the A.B.C. Weekly and in radio; served with the army during the Second World War and was a guard at Cowra, New South Wales, when the Japanese prisoners-of-war mutinied and broke out of the camp, an incident on which he based a novel which was withdrawn from circulation; lived in the bush at Kurrajong, about fifty miles from Sydney, writing and gardening; and died by drowning, in an incident most curiously foreshadowed in a poem, "Heat", written twenty years earlier, at Goulburn in 1955. His books of verse were Our Earth, The Moonlit Doorway and the posthumous Selected Poems (which included much previously unpublished work); and his novels were The Young Desire It, Chosen People, Dead Men Rising (the Cowra story) and The Refuge. He also wrote some short-stories which have not yet been printed in book form.

But how did he live in Western Australia, where The Young Desire It is obviously located? What was his family background? How and where did he develop that love of the land which speaks so eloquently in all his writings, but never more ardently than in The Young Desire It?

It so happened that, just about the time this foreword was due to be written, Kenneth Mackenzie's sister, Mrs

Catherine Hills, was writing to me from Pinjarra in Western Australia, about another matter: she wanted a copy of the Selected Poems. I asked Mrs Hills if she could supply the missing background; and this—in a style which showed that more than one member of the family had a talent for clear prose—was what she wrote:—

Picture a nervous small boy of seven years, with blue eyes, golden fair hair and skin too pale to become even slightly browned. . . . Kenneth was an extremely sensitive and retiring child, with a horror of any noise—especially noises made by other children, or men. Women were not associated with noise, as Mother always talked quietly and protected him, as far as possible, from noise and bluster. . . .

As well as his love for Mother, I think he was filled with an unusually strong love of Nature. You can imagine how he loved being here [at Pinjarra]. The river is less than fifteen yards from the back of the house and apart from a strip of cleared paddocks in front—probably half a mile wide—the rest was bush. There were always dozens of different types of birds about and a profusion of wildflowers in the spring. I have known Kenneth to lie near the riverbank for hours, watching Willie Wagtails build a nest right over the water on a branch of paper-bark that swayed down, each time the two birds stood on it, as though it wished to merge itself in its own reflection. Year after year they either patched up or rebuilt that nest, but I think we must have seen the first one built in that spot. Kenneth was probably nine years old at that time and until he was twelve he lived, barefooted and bareheaded, amongst the birds.

flowers, insects and small animals that he loved and that loved him, I imagine. The possums came into the ceiling of the house and would climb slowly down the rafters of the veranda roof above our beds. We were not supposed to encourage them, but we quite often sneaked a piece of bread into our pyjama pockets before leaving the kitchen; and then, as soon as the lamp was turned out by Mother, we would wait—usually for a very short time—until these bright-eyed and beautifully furry little pets would come shyly down the rafters until they were only three or four feet above us. I don't think Kenneth ever let me feed them but I used to watch, fascinated, at him standing with small pieces of bread which they would take from his hand though they would never let him touch them.

He was a sleep-walker and used to frighten Mother terribly. She slept on the veranda with us and quite often she wakened in the night to find Kenneth missing. One night she found him walking around a two thousand gallon tank that was on a twenty-foot stand. She knew there was only about a foot or maybe eighteen inches of stand all around the tank, so you may imagine how she felt. She spoke quietly to him so as not to waken him. She asked him what he was doing and he said, "I'm hunting elephants." She then suggested that he might have better luck on the ground, "as elephants very seldom climb onto tank stands"; and then she waited because she had no idea how he could have reached the stand—there was no ladder—and she was wondering how he could possibly get down without falling. Years later she was telling me about it and said, "I just stood on the lawn with perspiration dripping from me while he walked to the edge of the stand and then reached over to that jacaranda tree and climbed down it. I should have guessed, of course, that he would do that because you both climbed like monkeys." When he was down he came up to Mother and asked her if she had seen any elephants. She told him she hadn't and asked him what luck he had had. He said, "I didn't see one, but I could hear them." So she suggested he should get a bit of sleep before trying again. Much to her relief he came inside and got into bed without any sign of waking.

Then Kenneth was taken to school at Guildford Grammar. I think you could imagine the shock to a child living blissfully in the country that he loved where every beetle, bird, almost each separate blade of grass he knew and loved—to be suddenly taken away from it all. And to be taken away from everything that seemed to be so much a part of him—the life that he knew and loved—and be left at a place that, apart from being foreign because of being sixty or seventy miles from the home and river that he loved, was extremely foreign to his nature. To find himself surrounded by his own species, all much his own age, but so terribly noisy and evidently overjoyed to be there. He longed for the solitude of his home, his river and his own bushland companions as well as Mother—who, I imagine was to him the one human being who understood him and didn't make a noise!

Well, that period of his life he has portrayed in

The Young Desire It. I could not tell you anything of it except that it undoubtedly developed in him a contempt for the human race in general, and boys in particular. His extreme sensitivity could be felt more in his music, I think, than his poetry. He was given a tin-whistle when he was about eight years old, and in a very short tme was playing to a large audience of varied birds—from kookaburras they varied in size down to the tiny blue wrens. He was taught to play a piano and I think that he would have been a genius at that for though his technique was not perfect, his interpretation was beautiful and his touch was glorious. His soprano voice was lovely, but I think he preferred to play any instrument to singing. He made the instrument sing and in doing so had the satisfaction of feeling that he was achieving something. He couldn't bear anything that was orthodox and though he always said he was an atheist, I would have called him, rather, a heretic.

I think, maybe, I was closer to him than any other person because I knew what his feelings were and he could understand me as I did him. So many people were amused when he showed signs of writing—and once more he put up with being sneered at. When I was about fifteen Kenneth had left Muresk Agricultural College and taken his Leaving Certificate and was studying Law at the University. It was not long before the urge to write wiped everything else out of his mind and so he left Western Australia.

Mackenzie published his novels under the name of Seaforth Mackenzie, and his poems under Kenneth Mackenzie; but since it is as Kenneth Mackenzie that he

is usually thought and spoken of in Australia, it seems best at this date simply to call him by that name, as has been done in this edition of The Young Desire It.* The only reason for the different names was that Mackenzie wanted to keep his two reputations, as a poet and as a novelist, separate; but that, when he is so clearly a poet writing prose in his novels, is hardly possible. In fact an arguable but impressive point—H. M. Green believes that "his prose is, rather surprisingly, much richer in images than his verse"; instancing, from The Young Desire It, such passages as "There was someone there, walking on the leaves like rain," and, "The green sharpness of boys' voices". However that may be, it is certainly as a most beautiful pastoral, very close to poetry, that one thinks of The Young Desire It. Mackenzie's prose is at its most sparkling and most sensuous in this novel, and he evokes the hot Western Australian landscape with rare force and feeling. In spite of the extreme spareness of the "plot"—nothing really happens in the book except two crucial events: the master fails to seduce the boy; and the boy and the girl make love—there remains, too, a curious tension in that "rich and subtle eroticism" of which H. M. Green also speaks. It is a pastoral charged with the awakening of desire, like spring.

Douglas Stewart, 1963

^{*}Publisher's Note: This new Sirius paperback edition of The Young Desire It is published under the full name of Kenneth Seaforth Mackenzie. The kind permission of Mr Hugh Seaforth Mackenzie and Ms Elisabeth Little is gratefully acknowledged.

... To be free to choose is not enough. Though the young desire it, they cannot use that freedom, but must be forced into the decision of choice by good or evil circumstances which while they can perceive them they cannot control...

Michael Paul: The Anatomy of Failure

When he was fourteen, Charles Fox was a smouldering, red-headed fellow, a friend of nobody, slow but tenacious in his tempers, rather proud and not without courage. Most noticeable, perhaps, was that gentleness of which in a year his fellows at the school had removed the outward sign, and a dangerous, angelic innocence which, among them, quickly set him apart, not upon pedestals, but as one of that very contemptible social order, of those who see no necessity for doing evil.

Innocence appears to be as tempting to the gods as it is to sub-Olympians; like the perfect and unbroken face of a pool to one who has a stone in his hand, tempting in its complete freedom from the splash and ripple of character, and as immaculate as a mirror. Charles met the mortals and the immortals in his fifteenth year. It must have exasperated both to observe that nothing could teach him to deceive, to hide his feelings, and to want to hurt. He had already grown close to the earth, and his innocence, apparently angelic, was earthly and fruitful, not easily to be corrupted.

In the late afternoon of a day in February, that hottest of Australian summer months, when a brutal sun stood bronze above the river flats which you may see from the dormitory windows of Chatterton, Charles came to the School with his mother, walking from the railway station to the gates by a private path across a burnt, untidy field, overhung with Cape lilacs that still drooped, dusty and melancholy, in the late heat of afternoon.

It was February, with three more months of summer yet to come. The private path at each step breathed up a soft orange dust that hid the polish of his shoes. Across a road at the farther side of the burnt field the dark old wood of the School gates threatened him. He was afraid. In the lower part of his belly fear kicked and pulsed like a child in the womb, ready to be born; but it was fear of a disorderly kind, born of ignorance. He knew nothing of what life was like for a boarder at a reputable Public School with a name for sportsmanship, gentlemanliness, manliness and the classics. Nor did he know that the experience of it would be coloured by his own round head of reddish, curling hair, his red lips, his green eyes turning hazel, and an innocence which his mind reflected in his face.

His fear, disorderly and ignorant, found an outlet simply in regret for that life which had run its course and was now, as he walked beside his mother on the dusty path, coming quietly to its end. His mother herself symbolized it. A world where he had been left alone, happily free from the understanding and the companionship of any mind or heart; free and unscrutinized, with the greater part of each day given over to his own decision, in a world peopled and filled by himself in an infinite variety of disguise. That world had been chucked to the devil by a useful and necessary maternal decision, in which he had no part.

The preparations for his entry into the high life of the reputable School (governed by the Board of the Council of Churches, rich and very holy) interested him enough to lend him a little courage when he was not alone. Freedom had gone suddenly; he did more things at the request of other people than he had ever done, it seemed, in his life. There was a visit to the city, where he was measured for new clothes by a powerful Scot, lame and charming, who turned him round and about as if he were

a piece of furniture, and made his mother smile at him as though, now for the first time, they shared some trivial secret. For a week afterwards the names and appearances of a dozen city shops remained in his mind, together with a growing uneasiness of self-concern, which invaded his body like a disease, and made nightmares of his dreams. He began to pay the penalty of his own sensitiveness, and was often miserable. He had always been of an excitable temperament, liable to sudden emotional excesses; and now, on that short, endless walk from the station to the dark, sweltering School gates, the unpleasant excitement did a final triumphant battle with his defiance, and a lot of tears gathered in his eyes. Fruits of that victory. He began to press them away quietly with his knuckles, trembling and white.

'Charles. What's the matter, Son?'

His mother's voice was as calm as ever. She did not lack affection for him; but, like the rest of her emotions and the arrangement of her own busy life, it was methodical and without evidence of heat.

'Nothing,' he said. 'It's all right, Mother.'

They walked across the blazing roadway.

'That's right,' she murmured, kindly enough, giving his hand a quiet grip between her coolly gloved fingers. 'This isn't really a prison, you know.'

He had once said he feared it would be. But now her sense of method and procedure was at ease. And the gates swallowed them, like the blind open jaws of a dead shark, sinister and smally cathedraline. They had passed through. Freedom and innocence were, for Charles, left outside.

It happened that the name of the Headmaster at that time was Fox. Charles knew this — his mother had told

him, hoping to surprise and arouse in him some positive interest - and while they waited in the carpeted ante-room which opened into the august study he tried to take his mind away from troubles in his lower viscera (a new natural urge was threatening muscular control) by thinking of the scene which would present itself if this Fox were, unknown to them all, his own father, whom he did not remember. But in his imagination his mother would not come to life, nor soften and cry out; he could hear no passionate exclamations from her firm, straight lips, see no impulsive gesture. Such a gesture, even in his imagination, would have surprised him and seemed, to memory, foreign. Also, the face of this man hidden in the room into which a young boy had just been taken was the wooden ageless face of a young village policeman whom he had once seen mounting a bicycle outside the baker's shop, and whom he had, by some undiscoverable association, thought to resemble his father. Meanwhile, the trembling in his guts persisted, and he moved his hands and feet restlessly.

His mother was looking steadily in front of her, out beyond the open windows to where water sprinklers turned rhythmically, with faint sounds suggesting music, above clipped lawns. There was a melancholy murmur of doves across the tired afternoon spaces, and from quadrangles and corridors came the voices of boys. The voices were happy and shrill; but for Charles the whole forwardness of life had stopped upon a deep, uneasy pedal-note of suspense. In the ante-room there was a restless quiet. One or two mothers, coming late as he had done, were nervously preening and eyeing their boys, smiling at them, talking in low voices, seeming to find some sort of relief in touching their young, as frightened birds do with their broods. A big woman, badly dressed and intolerably

nervous, with a heartbroken affection stiffening her plain face, looked from the pert child beside her to the other lads, and back again, and again at the others, with obvious fear. Words seemed to issue silently from the slight movement of her lips. Her own boy was a merry, ugly youngster; unselfconscious and as alert as an animal, he stared about him, and once put out his tongue at a fellow who was gazing fascinated at that large wreck of a woman from the cosseting shadow of a well-dressed, expressionless parent.

With new and anguished consciousness Charles noticed these things, and was aware in the back of his mind of the doves' moaning, the cheerful cool greenness of the lawns already in shadow, and the green sharpness of boys' voices piercing the afternoon minutely. The heat of the day was easing a little, but a new building across the road beyond the lawns burnt red, each of its bricks a scorching coal as the sun caught it full and brazen from the upper west. A faint smell of wet earth came wandering into the breathless room, and the hairy leaves of cotton palms lay like opened fans on the tired air. In spite of the heat in the room Charles felt cold, and kept wiping the moist palms of his hands down the seams of his new breeches. His mother seemed unable to move, until a Master came out with smiling, conscious impressiveness from the study, and asked her to take 'this little man' within. That Master's face had fascinated Charles since the first time he had issued forth in his black rustling gown. There was an amazing expression of ruthless and petty self-importance in its features, which were classically exact and would have been perfect, had they not seemed too small. When he bent his head and stooped gracefully, looking sideways across his nose, away from the person to whom with exquisite friendliness a small, delicate ear was inclined,