

DAVID PARKER

BUILDING

ON

SAND



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*Promotion of this title has been assisted
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*Angus & Robertson Publishers'
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ANGUS & ROBERTSON PUBLISHERS

*Unit 4, Eden Park, 31 Waterloo Road,
North Ryde, NSW, Australia 2113, and
16 Golden Square, London W1R 4BN,
United Kingdom*

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*First published in Australia
by Angus & Robertson Publishers in 1988
First published in the United Kingdom
by Angus & Robertson (UK) in 1988*

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*National Library of Australia
Cataloguing-in-publication data.*

*Parker, David, 1943–
Building on sand.*

ISBN 0 207 15838 X.

I. Title.

A823'.3

*Typeset in Baskerville by Best-set Typesetter Ltd
Printed in Singapore*

*“ . . . the curt cuts of an edge
through living roots awaken in my head.”*

Seamus Heaney, *Digging*

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PROLOGUE

Seed-time

The house was built on sand. When the winds blew straight in off the sea, as they did all winter, rocking and buffeting the house like a ship, and rain thrashed against the window-panes, and the sea thudded all night against the Esplanade wall, and the back paddocks flooded, my grandfather lay awake awaiting the fate of the foolish man in the Bible and dreamed of his bunker. He would dig deep into the lea-side of the hill, prop it up with railway-sleepers, then bring in rocks for the foundations, setting the whole thing in concrete two-foot thick. It would be solid, solid as a rock. And he would sleep all night.

As it was I would wake up to the striking of a match in the dark, catch for a moment the weathered face, the scarf and tweed cap he wore day and night in winter. Then the tiny coal of his pipe would glow, a small warming fire in the midst of the tempest, as he sucked, sucked, into the small hours and dug back through all the rain-bitten winters of his grown-up life, two Depressions and two world wars, back to the Old Days, to his childhood, the days of the horse and trap, when his family lived in a vast house set on the firm rocks of enterprise, uprightness, and reputation.

Edward was a talker. I often asked him about these Old Days, and he would make them come to life like Aladdin's wishes out of the smoke that twisted in endless ethereal skeins about his head.

When he told his stories he was no longer worried, and so I didn't have to worry either. In the mornings, at the distant drumming sound of cold water going into the kettle, we settled back and pulled up our bedclothes, warm in a world of known beginnings and known ends.

His father, he said, had once been a big importer of theatrical furnishings. They had lived in style not three miles away at Victoria House with governesses, a chinese cook and gardener, and a carriage that swept up a long drive to the house drawn by a team of four.

One day as a boy he'd found a spring. He'd been up since dawn rabbit-shooting in the sand-dunes and by midday was getting weak with thirst when all of a sudden there in a depression before him was a trickle of water, a little fountain bubbling up out of the sand:

"I put my mouth to the stream," he said, "and it was cool and sweet, the purest water I have ever tasted in my life. I washed it around my dry mouth and have never been so refreshed. And do you know, I went back to find that spot the next day and for years after that and I could never find it again."

He and his brothers and sisters never went to school. The five boys gave their governesses the slip and went swimming, riding and shooting. Everything happened in an endless summer paradise: "Miles of beach, miles of salt-marsh, miles of sandhills — all ours."

The family came together on Sundays for church:

"When we got into the carriage on Sunday and pulled up at St Michael's the people all stood aside as we went in and whispered to each other, 'the Rowe-Joneses.' "

Edward was thirteen in '95 when his father's business failed and they lost everything.

Sometimes in the night there would be a squeak then the low fog-horn wonk of the cork coming out of the sherry flagon. And then the long deep drinking, breathless drinking, that refreshed him like the sweet lost fountain of his youth.



The houses along Seaview Road were set high on a long sand-dune overlooking the Esplanade. They got a clear view of St Vincent's Gulf.

When they were built of red brick in the 1920s they must

have been imposing, most of them, with their long lawns and flower-gardens in terraces that swept down to the street. But the wind and sea-spray made paint crack and peel, wood split, and nails rust, so the houses, even the best kept ones, always had the air of having seen better days. High narrow windows looked out over the waters that the builders or their fathers must have crossed in the last hundred years. Edward's own father was conceived on the voyage out from England and was born, in 1851, in a colony that was only fourteen years old. Paved terraces and half-enclosed verandahs all faced the sea where the older people sat and looked out emptily, dreamily, all year round, with endless need and satisfaction.

Occasionally, on hot days when the sea was flat pale-blue and welded indistinguishably to the sky, a mirage or a ship on its way to port would move imperceptibly across the invisible horizon — like a vast skeletal battleship floating through the lower air. The last time a more palpable warship appeared was in 1870, not long after the Crimean War when a Russian cruiser entered the Gulf. It steamed along the coast and — apparently seeing nothing but dunes — it turned around and disappeared again into the Southern Ocean. Soon after that came the concrete pill-boxes, walls two-foot thick and dug well into the sand like Edward's ideal bunker, with little slits where in two world wars binoculars combed the empty seas. The enemy warship had entered the imagination and remained. In the 1950s front verandahs were the bridges of destroyers setting to sea when the Russians came again, as they no doubt would, to be met by the twenty-inch shells of the HMS *Sea-view*. The illusion was set off by the Norfolk Island pines planted in the street which looked amazingly like tall masts against the sky.

At the rear, the houses showed what they rested on more frankly: their yards ran down, for the most part naked of topsoil, to the still unsealed road built in the scare of the 1870s, Military Road. Here were lean-to chook-houses, wood and rubbish heaps, and a suggestion of sand-grass like thin fluff on a bald head. Dig anywhere deeper than six inches and you came to dry sand. Sand that fell off the spade like liquid leav-

ing a fine white dust in the air. Sand that had no cohesion but remained separate, even under the magnifying glass, like the numberless grains in the Bible. Sand so dry and white and soft that it left no clear trace of the foot that trod it, but closed over almost as completely as the sea.

For me, the sand was a great fascination and a great barrier. I dug in it, first with bucket and spade and the yellow excavator with rubber caterpillar tracks that my mother had given me. Overnight my holes and ditches and my hills and roads disappeared. Then I would tunnel into it with galvanised iron walls and roof, like a Ballarat miner in search of gold — only to come next morning and find my shaft more than half full of sand. It had come in through the nail holes like so many hour glasses. In time the sand would always fill everything up, undermining all imaginings and endeavours like the waves that made it. Later still when I searched for the fossils I read about or, when I went to school, for some sign of the first settlers, I came up against its endless blankness. It fell slowly, like a fine waterfall, over my feet. I stared at its whiteness as at an empty page.

And then, one day, next to a stunted olive tree, I found crab-shells and cockle-shells and near them smooth oval sea stones that had been blackened by fire. I ran to Edward:

“Yes, Jude,” he said, “they’re aborigines’ stones. They used to put them in the fire so they’d give out warmth all night after the fire had gone out. They used to camp all through these hills, you know, when I was a lad, always on this side of the hill out of the wind.”

Edward told me how they fished with long harpoons, and how they lay around the fires at night and could sleep soundly on the bare ground. And how they danced in war-paint and sang in strange tongues. And how they drank wine in later times and fought over lubras and speared each other. And how the police had to come with rifles and truncheons and take them away in the black Maria. And how, as a boy himself, he’d learnt the rhyme aimed by the Temperance Society at the aborigines:

*Tommy Walker walk up here,
 You've been charged with drinking beer,
 Seven and six you'll have to pay,
 Or else in jail you'll have to stay.*

With the stones' baked blackness and their sea-smoothed hardness in my palms, I thought I could feel the aborigines' glowing fires. In my hands they got warm again. I went back to the olive tree and put them back where I found them and covered them up, content merely to know that I had been preceded over the earth I walked on.



What Edward did dig was a thriving vegetable garden. Nothing grew on the dunes but sand-grass, a few stunted shrubs and, mysteriously, native paddy-melons which grew wild, throwing out their skinny hairy runners for twenty yards or more in search of food and drink. Everything else could survive only in imported soil. So at the back of the house Edward dug out sand, tons of it, heaving it downhill like a man frantically bailing out a boat, until he had a level terrace right across the hill. Then he took new galvanised iron and made a retaining wall. It was two feet high and was held in place by stakes that had to be driven at least four feet into the sand. Edward sledge-hammered them like huge nails into the side of the hill until they were rock-solid. Then Edward and I set out with the wheelbarrow.

On the other side of Military Road were lush hedged-in paddocks of grass grazed by Jersey cows. They might have been the green fields of England. The grass grew on alluvial soil from the River Torrens which flowed into the sea half a mile to the south. Before the banks had been built up into a high concrete-walled outlet in 1937 the paddocks used to be a single sheet of water when the winter rains came. There were old photos at school of Jersey cows up to their udders in water. And even now there was a swamp fed by small creeks not half

a mile inland to the east. The place was known as Jerusalem, and the very word filled me with a thrill of fear.

The soil in the paddocks was rich, jet black, full of huge fleshy earthworms and masses of grass-roots. Roots, some thick and succulent as parsnips and some slender as cotton thread, held the earth together. The spade cut straight in like an axe into wood and the soil was wet and heavy on the blade and smelt of decaying organic life, mushroom spores, juicy bulbs, seeds sweet as nuts. Edward loved the soil. As he held huge clods in his hands, he couldn't get over its richness, the living wealth of a whole river valley deposited at his back doorstep.

"Smell that," he used to say as he pulled a fresh clod apart, carefully parting the network of hair-fine roots as if he couldn't bear to tear them. The smell seemed to answer to some obscure yearning.

We filled two large wheat-sacks that had to be balanced on the wheelbarrow. When we reached the back gate we unloaded the sacks and dragged each one up the sandy path. Here we discovered all over again the unsteady character of dry sand, how it yielded unresistingly to weight and slid like a frivolous cascade under the straining foot of enterprise. Then at last we tipped the black clods onto the treacherous sand, covering it up.

We brought up hundreds of bags, labouring under a pitiless sun until half the hill was terraced. In summer Edward stripped to a singlet and long drill army-shorts, and always wore a white pith-helmet, from which, at the back, he sometimes hung a white handkerchief to cover his neck.

Finally we brought up the cow-dung. Edward loved this too, running his spade carefully under flat, hardcrusted wholemeal turds, like a baker taking his bread out of an oven, and sliding them solicitously into the sack.

"Oh Jude, here's a beauty!" he would call out, beckoning me to come and see a particularly thick, black, hard-baked fibrous turd, still heavy, moist and green underneath, which had come out wet and set in concentric rings like a danish pastry.

Then the soil and dung on the terraces was flooded from the garden hose. Edward stood amidst it all in gum boots, chopping it up with a spade, slicing it as a builder works his mortar. When the wet, black sludge had dried he raked it flat and hoed it into straight rows.

He opened packets with coloured pictures on them bright as happy endings. The small seeds ran between his fingers into the open furrows, and he tucked them into the dark blanket of soil. He sowed every imaginable thing. And when the sun had slipped into the sea he stood for hours, pipe clamped between his molars, waving his hose and sending a fine mist over the ground, which steamed with the dusty smell of rain.

In the early morning, before anyone else was up, just as the sun showed its face over the hills, I sat in my pyjamas and saw the first magical shoots of exotic green spearing up through the earth.

PART ONE

The House

