

Tom Hungerford (1915–2011)

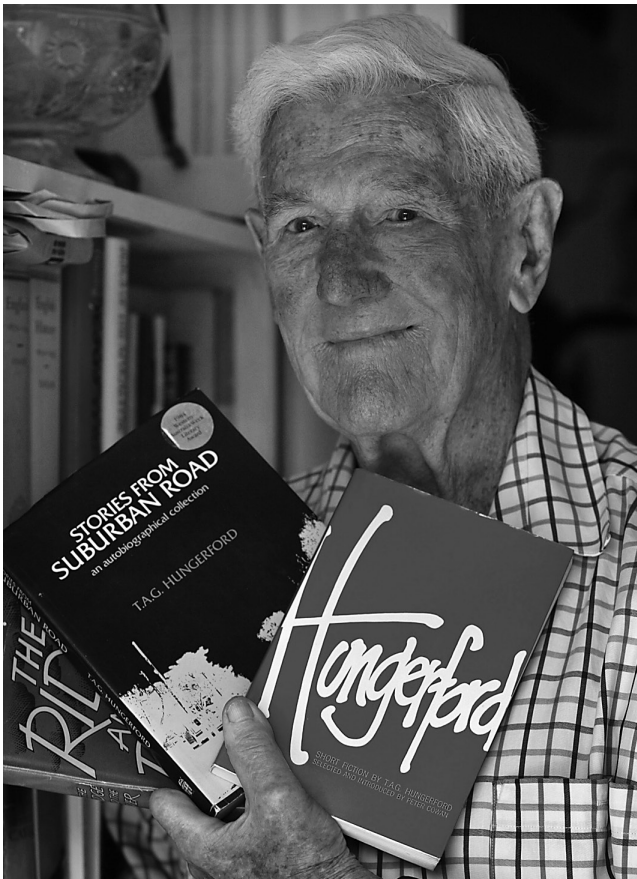
Geoffrey Bolton

For most of my life Tom Hungerford has been a significant and substantial Western Australian. I first came across him as author of *The Ridge and the River* (1952), one of my discoveries during a university education in the late 1940s and early 1950s that in those halcyon days included plenty of time for voracious reading outside the curriculum. Those of us who had been too young to serve in the 1939–45 war learned a good deal from the ex-servicemen and women whom we encountered at university. Serious about their opportunities and given to firm opinions expressed with great good nature, they were an important maturing influence on the rest of us, but were often reticent about their wartime experiences. After reading *The Ridge and the River* we could begin to understand.

Throughout his later life and work Tom Hungerford made a major contribution in helping Western Australians to define their sense of identity in a rapidly changing world. Deftly and precisely in *Stories from the Suburban Road* (1983) he delineated the overgrown country town that was the Perth in which the older generation grew up. This was a world where children walked to school and played hopscotch and French cricket in the street and got to know the local shopkeepers

and Chinese market gardeners. Men travelled to work and women went to the Perth shops by tram, and on Friday evening husbands brought home their pay packets so that their wives could carefully reckon the next week's budget.

Tom Hungerford knew the sights, the smells, the ways in which people interacted with one another in this world we have lost, although, as a North Perth boy, I am bound to take issue with the South Perth myth in Tom's writing suggesting that we were a lot of 'lair's' on our side of the river. Perhaps he was thinking of Highgate.



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Beyond his accurately etched picture of the local scene there were bigger themes: change and mutability and the gradual fading of the insights of childhood and youth. He not only described the character of the old Western Australia, he embodied the best of it.

Not that he was representative of a type. He was always a cat who walked by himself, perhaps driven by a disdain for compromise and bullshit, perhaps finding solitude essential to creativity. He could be cantankerous but enjoyed the company of men and women with whom he could share good talk and sometimes listen. Everything to which he turned his hand was marked by a passion for good craftsmanship, whether it involved writing, or cooking, or the leadership of men in war. His was a character of integrity and generosity.

Writing a few years ago about Tom Hungerford, I found myself haunted by lines originally written by the elderly William Butler Yeats' in 'To a Young Beauty':

*There's not a fool may call me friend,
And I may sup at journey's end
With Landor and with Donne.*

There would be a welcome for Tom Hungerford in that company.