## BARBARA WILLIAMS

## An Interview with Les A. Murray

LES MURRAY, b. 1938 Bunyah, New South Wales. Grew up on a dairy farm. Attended Sydney University, then worked at a variety of jobs. Since 1971, has worked as a full-time poet, essayist and reviewer. Poetry volumes include: Poems against Economics (1972); Lunch and Counter Lunch (1974); The Boys Who Stole the Funeral (1980); The People's Otherworld (1983); The Vernacular Republic: Poems 1961-83 (1983); The Daylight Moon (1987); Dog Fox Field (1990); Collected Poems (1991). Prose titles include The Peasant Mandarin (1978); Persistence in Folly (1984); Blocks and Tackles (1990); The Paperbark Tree: Selected Essays (1992) and The Australian Year, with photographs by Peter Solness and others (1985). Editor: New Oxford Book of Australian Verse (1986); Anthology of Australian Religious Poetry (1986). Edited Poetry Australia magazine (1973-80). Numerous awards include: Grace Leven Award for Best Book of Verse (1965 & 1980); Scottish-Australian Exchange Fellow (1981) Canada-Australia Award (1985); National Book Awards (1974, 1984-5 and 1991); Christopher Brennan Medal of the Fellowship of Australian Writers (1985); National Poetry Award (1988); Australian Broadcasting Corporation Bicentenary Prize (1988); Doctor of Letters, honoris causa, University of New England (1990).

The following interview took place on 23 October, 1991 in Toronto, during the International Festival of Authors at Harbourfront. Murray began by reading the poem, "Bats' Ultrasound":

## Bats' Ultrasound

Sleeping-bagged in a duplex wing with fleas, in rock-cleft or building radar bats are darkness in miniature, their whole face one tufty crinkled ear with weak eyes, fine teeth bared to sing.

Few are vampires. None flit through the mirror. Where they flutter at evening's a queer tonal hunting zone above highest C. Insect prey at the peak of our hearing drone re to their detailing tee:

ah, eyrie-ire; aero hour, eh? O'er our ur-area (our era aye ere your raw row) we air our array, err, yaw, row wry - aura our orrery, our eerie ü our ray, our arrow. A rare ear, our aery Yahweh.

- BW Lots of fun, that one. Would you like to begin by telling me why you chose that poem, of all the ones you could have chosen?
- LM Oh, I don't know. I just thought that people are amused by it. And it's a piece of idiot virtuosity; I like idiot virtuosity!
- BW You say, in your introduction to the New Oxford Book of Australian Verse, that, [as editor] you sought the "strange," rather atypical, poem(s) of some writers' works the ones in which "the Spirit peeped forth" and I wondered if, perhaps, "Bats' Ultrasound" is an example of one of your own "strange" poems?
- LM What really peeps forth in that poem, I think as well as the enjoyment of something difficult; it's a sort of a "high-wire" poem is also my childhood love of animals. I'm very fond of animals, and getting out of the human world, getting to that other, absolutely timeless world in which the eagle's never heard of America!
- BW Well, there [in that poem], you are relating the human, the animal and the divine realms, aren't you? You end with "Yahweh," presumably, a deliberate reverberation.
- LM Yes, sure. What else peeps forth a bit in that poem, is deafness. Anybody [who's] that interested in sound, is probably a bit deaf.
- BW And you are, aren't you? You've written a poem on the subject ["Hearing Impairment" in The Daylight Moon].
- LM Yes and what's lovely about deafness and very seductive about it is, as sense declines, possibility opens up; you know, all the things they *might* be saying. I actually tell my family what I *hear* them say, and they get quite irritated!
- BW So maybe you're getting on a closer wave-length to the bats' ultrasonic languages!
- LM Yes! [A hearty laugh, here]
- BW Australians, by their own admission, don't tend to go too deeply into metaphysical concerns, it seems I'm thinking here, for instance, of Chris Wallace-Crabbe's essay, "The Absence of Metaphysics," in Three Absences in Australian Writing did you also feel that there was a gap there when you decided to edit the Anthology of Australian Religious Poetry, or were you commissioned to do that?
- LM I think that perception is wrong. I think Australians go into metaphysics a lot. It's just that a lot of them, when they do, are very inarticulate. The very articulate people tend to be afraid of it and [are] concerned mostly to deny its existence, but "inarticulate Australia" is very interested in metaphysics; Aborigines will talk about it all day. They're so utterly taken up in metaphysics, they never bothered to develop some other things like architecture, which is a perfectly valid choice. It just took us [white Australians] a long while to see that that had been a choice, and a valid one. And now what they call "ordinary Australians", are very often metaphysical and given to sitting around, trying to have deep conversations.
- BW You've said that you had specific instances when poetry first strongly took hold of you in your teens...

- LM It was fairly late in my teens. Like everybody in high school, I thought I hated poetry - well, didn't hate it, it wasn't part of my mental universe while, in fact, I'd been preparing myself all my life for it and didn't know it. I'd been terribly interested in words and terribly interested in the life of things and the way things are, their quiddity. But the poetry I heard at school - there was so little of it for a start that it didn't reach me - I never thought of myself in relation to it until, suddenly, I started reading - or my English teacher put me on to - Gerard Manley Hopkins and a few other more recent people and I thought: "My God, that old stuff that I hadn't been looking at, is actually fascinating." And I was already beginning to think of doing something artistic. The first instinct I had was to be a painter, but I was no good at it; I had no talent for drawing, or painting. And didn't even like getting paint on my fingers! And I sure was no musician! The only kind of reading that I did was a few novels and a lot of non-fiction; like many quasiautistic people, I was interested in facts, you know: "What are the Rules?" The fact that poetry was about essences and about presence came as a revelation to me. I thought: "You don't have to worry about plot and characters and all that boring rubbish. You just get to the essence; the place where the stones and the mountains are as important as the people." An ideal life for a solitary only child from the bush.
- BW That was going to be my next question: "Was your childhood mostly solitary?" So, it was.
- LM Yes, yes. Although I had lots of good friends. The first half of it the part up till I was nine was quite solitary; I would have seen children two or three times a year what you haven't had, you don't miss. Then I started making a few friends. I started going to a little school which had fourteen kids in it and I gradually met more people in my area; they were still all in my own culture, from local, small villages and farms. So my first meetings with fellow kids were pretty happy ones. And then I ran straight into that new invention, the teenager, when I was sixteen. I went to Taree High School. It was in a town and the ethos was absolutely different. That was the year that they invented the teenager, or when the word came to us from America. I found that I just didn't fit that pattern at all. I was the wrong kind of person for it and I had a fairly bad time at that school, on the basis of being fat. I think "fat" was the way they were trying to express something that they couldn't put a name to. Really, what was wrong was that I was a weirdo.
- BW Because you were from the country? Were most of them from the country?
- LM No, they were town kids; their parents might have been from the country, or their grandparents. The ethos I met in town was utterly different. That ethos then continued at university. I met a good many more of that kind of people there. But I always remembered where I'd been happy, in my own country.
- BW Was the awakening of your religious consciousness of similar specific origin to your poetic response?
- LM Yes and pretty much the same time, too. Going to Sydney University and meeting Catholics and sort of looking out and saying: "Oh, I can see...yes, that feels right. I belong to that!"
- BW Had you been born into a Catholic family?
- LM No, I'd been born a Free Presbyterian, which is the real old, tough sixteenth-seventeenth century movement. None of this soppy "mercy" stuff, you know. I love some of the poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid. He's got a poem about the Day of Judgement that begins: "There hae to be nae warning". I can laugh now, but the harshness used to terrify me. Instinctively, I knew I

- didn't like that spirit, didn't want that. So I'd moved away from it and been nothing much in my teens.
- BW You've described the poetic experience whether it's writing, reciting or reading as an organic one and Octavio Paz has said: "There is a mouth that speaks and an ear that catches the spiral murmur of the poem." Is his remark similar to how you feel about poetry?
- Yes, he's right about the spiral. I talk about spirals. In fact, the spiral is the characteristic shape of criticism, of good criticism. You come back you never exhaust a work of art you come back round to it at various points in your life when you look at it again. And you come round on the spiral of your own development and you see it afresh. It's the same with a writer's subject matter. You will come round on that spiral enough times to get it right. You will eventually get it right. Getting a thing right and getting it written, makes a kind of a pun, but it's the true pun!
- BW Gaston Bachelard writes of the poetic image as "the seed of a world," in the poet's and the reader's consciousness. Does this relate to how you regard the significance of imagery?
- LM Yes. Most things in the world are to do with the reduction of world to manageability and art is the opposite.
- BW Yes, constantly expanding.
- LM That's why it has to be contained in universities and places like that, in order to protect people from it!
- BW That's dangerous ground, isn't it? That's a question we're going to get onto in a while. I wondered if you see poetry's health-giving properties, as you describe them in "Embodiment and Incarnation" [in "Notes on Preparing an Anthology of Australian Religious Verse"]...
- LM Yes, all that can be the health of crisis. But it's a very small-scale kind of crisis. It may go very deep, but it's small-scale. It generally doesn't demand a vast pain on the part of the recipient, but it may place in him the seed of utter change. Like Rilke saying that a man lying there dead is making laws. The laws that a poem, a work, makes, or discloses, aren't *policed*, though. We are freed rather than constrained by them and it [the poem] doesn't need our obedience.
- BW So when you talk sometimes of poetry's "usefulness", is that connected to its health-giving qualities, or does it mean something different?
- LM Yes. What it really means is, that it re-integrates parts of us that are that generally live separated: the world of our dreaming consciousness, the world of our thinking, daylight, waking consciousness and the world of our body; these three roughly running in tandem, but not having much contact with each other. But what a work of art any work of art does, if it's any good, is re-unite them to fusion. And a lot of religion, essentially, works in the same way, and good designs, good engineering, good architecture, human achievements of many kinds have this fusion. In fact, I don't think we create anything without the fusion. If we fake it, the building will be bad; the poem will be shallow. Something will be wrong. But the fellow who got the Canadian flag right that's a little poem. And if he hadn't got it right, [then] when we looked at it, we wouldn't have said: "That's one of the best-looking flags in the world."
- BW Great for us to hear this!
- LM That's right. But, of course, a bad cause can do the same magic. Slavery's something we all hate, in the cause of the American South; but finally, after four years of war, the South turned up a great flag the final Confederate flag which still exists. The Russians, on the other hand, had a helluva

portentous revolution and turned up a flag that was no good, a bad design they were stuck with for seventy years.

BW A non-poem.

LM Yes, you can pick the difference between something that's a true fusion, a true poem, and something that's not.

BW Having suffered a nervous breakdown a few years ago, can you say whether poetry was part of the restorative process, or did you stop writing? Was there a pause in your writing at the time?

LM No, I went on writing. I just had to watch out about getting obsessive about certain things. The great mystery about depression is whether it causes your troubles, or is caused by them. Nobody knows. We know exactly how the mechanism - the bio-chemical - mechanism operates in the brain. We don't know what sets it off, whether it's the body that sets it off and then the world becomes the subject matter of our disease, or whether it's the world - the subject matter of our lives - that turns on our disease. But, it's a dangerous thing. It's terribly common, very widespread. If you're lucky, you eventually work through it and come out the other side. You don't so much work through it, you live through it. I don't think you can do a damn thing against it. Drugs help some, but they didn't help me.

BW And you don't think you can write your way out of it, either, then?

LM I poked the pencil at it, a few times, writing poems to try and explore things that it brought up. Whether that did any good, or not, I don't know. I think anybody sort of pokes at their sores and if you can do that with a pencil and make poetry out of it, it makes the whole exercise of some use. But what I was always uneasily conscious of was the fact that the disease is a dangerous one and could continue, but I just hoped it wouldn't. In fact, I've seen it kill people. Friends of mine, so it was scary. And yet it's also illusory - a dreadful storm of illusion in your head.

BW But you had enough spirit to keep you going through it, then, presumably?
LM I had something, you know - divine grace, or something. I don't think I got through it; I think I was got through it, whether by my body, or part of it.

BW You see poetry as having redemptive values, don't you? Can you expand specifically on this?

LM I think it's - when you make a work, be it a poem, or a completed fusion such as I'm describing, it contains spiritual power and people can contemplate it and touch it, or draw energy and grace from it. There's all the difference in the world between that and an incomplete fusion, which is what I call a "poeme", which is, say, a big ideology, or somebody's own private obsession. Something like that - which contains all the elements of a poem, but isn't in a final, completed form, and in fact, is delaying fusion, is a ravening demon. So, it wants action and sacrifice; it wants people to obey it, to feed it. The poeme of Marxism, just to take one example, is a dangerous one which demands that no other poems exist near it. And anybody caught in such a big system - they're in their own big poeme, which demands action and ever more presence for itself, therefore, they can't allow art, or even other people to exist. They've got to police even their own discourse. Where I first encountered that was in Free Presbyterianism. It's true of any system that cannot crystallize that way. It's a big incomplete poem which demands your life out of you.

BW And when we try to force poetry into the schools and universities, or force it in along certain lines, there are problems there, I think. I know you've talked [with indignation] about its being preserved as "an endangered species."

- LM It worries me a lot the system of education which tries to translate it [poetry] into prose by explication. Actually, there are some kinds of explication which *are* needed just to clarify the terms, you know, the *words* that are used in the poem and so on. That's valuable, but interpretative stuff is a terrible intrusion. People will grope for it because it's easier than poetry and they think it's more socially sanctioned than poetry, and they're right. They're going to get marks for that type of paraphrased poetry. You never get any marks for reading *poetry*, you get marks for reading and writing waffle about it.
- BW And how have students and teachers and critics responded to your ideas in the essays that you've written about this recently?
- LM With hostility and horror! [Murray laughs heartily.]
- BW So, you actually go into the schools and...
- LM ...and tell them [the students] that poetry is being used, being kidnapped by the schools and is being used as an instrument of their socialization. They will eventually be insulted with examinations on the subject and their lives will be graded on the basis of how well they can waffle. And on the outcome of these results, will depend the handsomeness of the spouse they get and the size of their motor car and various things like that. And I think it's a horrible way to treat poetry. The only thing that could save poetry in that concatanation of values, would be to ban it from them. I'd like to see poetry withdrawn from schools. I'd like to see it on television or put back into newspapers where it was a hundred years ago, where it's a normal part of people's reading.
- BW And part of their everyday life.
- LM Well, I've seen the results of modernism; a school turns more kids off poetry than it turns on. It happened to turn me on. But, for every one of me, it turns hundreds off.
- BW I suppose it depends on the teacher, sometimes, but there are very few teachers that are going to...
- LM It's awfully hard to teach poetry. What will you teach? You know that you are preparing kids for a big insult called an exam. Now there are people that presume an exam can examine somebody's response to poetry.
- BW Do you see it as ironic, then, that the more successful you are as a poet or anybody else is as a poet the more likely it is that your work will be studied in universities and schools?
- LM One of those great big ironies, yes. I even led a strike against it in a university. I was in desperate need of a job - very broke - and I asked the professor there to get me as a job, not as a teacher, just as a trolley-pusher in the library, or something to survive on. She wouldn't because...I don't know...I wasn't an academic. So I said: "Well, right, you can take my stuff off the course, you can take all my poetry off the course. You people are well paid to teach about people like me and yet you're prepared to allow us to starve." She didn't get the point. She called in the university's lawyers and said: "Can he do that? Can he take these books off the course?" And they gave an opinion: "No, he can't." The mountain cannot withdraw itself from the geographer, from geography! And the snake can't take itself out of biology! At that same time, we were working towards a better system of direct state support for literature. That had already existed in Australia for a fair while in a small way, but it was about to increase. The "national identity" industry was going to support a lot of writers, because we had to buy ourselves a literature, for the sake of keeping up with the overseas Joined; you have to have a literature. You've got to have a flag and an

airline and a national identity and these things cost money. So, I was saved by that alternative non-university patronage. My wife was a teacher and that's a respectable occupation in which you can get a wage and gradually, through the subvention of the arts, I could get a wage a lot of the time, as well as the proceeds of literature itself, you know, the ten per cent of the sale price of the book that the publisher will give you - if he can't persuade you to take seven and a half! My point is that losing the lion's share of what our books are sold for drives us into a dependence on education not warranted by our supposed poor sales. Some poets sell well - I do - but someone else keeps the proceeds! And we're told we're economically marginal and unpopular and believe it, because we're getting so little. Robbers soften us up for political academics to take over.

- BW In your 1978 article in Australian Poems in Perspective, you identified two main strands in Australian poetry: urban-minded "Athenian" and rural, tradition-oriented, "Boetian". Do you still see such strongly-marked patterns and do you still see the Boetian thread as closely connected to, and retaining a remnant of, priestly dignity?
- LM Yes. I don't know whether I'm the only one doing that now. No, no, I'm not, really. There are still country-based poets, poets whose poetry comes out of their country backgrounds. It's very unfashionable to talk in those terms in Australia at the moment because the dreadful factionalism which afflicts Australian poetry is on Marxist lines, on whether you are progressive, or reactionary establishment. It's a pure lie, as it always is. It means that one particular gang is trying to push down what they pretend is another one, for supremacy in the literary scene and in the giving of fellowships and honours and that sort of thing. It's just as "dog-eat-dog" an exercise there as anywhere else, but it happens to be particularly vicious in Australia. There's positional warfare all the time. What the progressive faction takes as its icon is that it's modernist. The rest of us are supposed not to be. In other words, it's the 1920 show, with the same old breakthroughs coming round on a revolving cycle.
- BW In an interview I did with Peter Porter in 1989, we discussed these strands the Athenian and the Boetian and he said that, in fact being city-born he was a characteristic Australian in many more respects than you are, although he didn't regard himself as characteristic of the myth i.e. that almost all Australians live in the bush. Now what do you think of Porter's ideas on the subject?
- LM No, the myth is that *identity* lives in the bush. A true myth. That idea, that culture should be organized in deference to demography, is a critic's demand, superficially logical and backed by bullying. Most white Australians do live in cities but when white people first went to Australia, they found that the first thing that could give them any kind of feeling of distinctiveness was the bush, because it was so utterly different from Europe and they slowly, slowly, by a lot of mistakes, came to terms with it. And that struggle was their identity. And only in the last generation or so, has there been this strong insistent demand which came in advance of literature a demand made by critics that we should now be urban and sophisticated and so on; this was used to silence the older tradition of the bush and definitely try to create another kind of culture in Australia, somewhat of an international copycat culture. I couldn't see the need myself. I thought that these things would arise organically, rather than being ordered up like a whole lot of new furniture.
- BW Do you think they are happening more organically now?

- LM No, it's still forced.
- BW It's still a dichotomy?
- LM I wouldn't silence anyone; I'd just let a thousand flowers bloom and see what people like. There is a sense of the forced draft in Australian culture. I come from a culture I've always known ... every person who comes from the bush knows we are a caste, or class of people, who are sentenced to death. We are meant to disappear, we're not liked by our elites. The problem I suppose I have with Peter Porter although he's a very civilized man is that, in his mind, I don't compute. The people who gave him a helluva bad time at Toowoomba Grammar School, were people from the country like me. Richer, but still bush boys.
- BW So you were getting a bad time in your school and...
- LM I was having a bad time at Taree High, for being a "bushie" and he, about ten years before, had a bad time at Toowoomba Grammar for being a "townie." And he can't bear, or believe, in his heart of hearts, that the "enemy" those horrible kids could produce somebody like me, who writes poetry.
- BW But at least poetry can bridge the gap between you and perhaps bring you closer.
- LM He's a very good man and that dispute was kind of an old-fashioned poetical disputation; it wasn't to be taken entirely seriously. It wasn't all hatred and rivalry.
- BW And yet a few critics have taken it very seriously, haven't they?
- LM Oh yes, because they've been schooled, in this world of politics, to think that all things can and must be couched in scorn and hatred and opposition.
- BW Do you see any evidence of a synthesizing strand in Australian poetry between the two extremes?
- LM I do it myself, quietly. I write as much about the city as I do about the bush. I write about all sorts of things under the sun; I don't regard myself as antiurban, even though to see me that way saves the exertion of thought. I'd hate to be characterized as any particular kind of poet. Anybody who calls me any particular kind of poet is behind the game; I've already moved beyond that.
- BW In your recent poetry, say, in the volume, Dog Fox Field, you've had an obvious urge, or a deliberate, conscious aim to return to the use of rhyme and to aim also for brevity, you say. Was this a very deliberate conscious attempt?
- LM I was trying to learn brevity. Yes, it was like: "I'll try to learn that part of the instrument." You're always trying to learn to play a different part of the instrument.
- BW When you say in the poem, "Spring", in that collection: "I've brought rhyme to meet her; rhyme has been ill" talking about the young girl skipping the poet comes to meet the young girl...
- LM I started it in Spring itself.
- BW ...do you feel poetry has been lacking because rhyme has been abandoned?
- LM The people certainly do! Rhyme is an organizing principle as great as logic and it is quite different from logic; you could almost call it a kind of armour against rationalism. It's an organizing principle as great as rationalism and as structured and yet absolutely unlike it. It's just like saying that poetry is a kind of fusion of the dreaming mind, the body and the waking consciousness.
- BW What you've called [elsewhere] "a trinity."
- LM The Enlightenment puts all of its eggs in the basket of the waking

- consciousness. Even when it pays lip service to our other dimensions. It's, therefore, one-dimensional. To destroy the Enlightenment which is what I'm out to do is to find something bigger than it. I'm not out to destroy it just out of dislike for it; it's because I think it's untrue. It's a misrepresentation of the way that humans work and the world is.
- BW With regard to Aboriginal sites and beliefs, you've written of the tjurungas of certain tribes as being "the actual bodies of the great creative ancestors," [rather than mere objects].
- LM That's how the Aborigines think of them.
- BW And Levi-Strauss has written of archival items as being of equivalent significance for Western civilizations, what he calls: "the past materially present." Would you agree with this? And do you see written poems as another form of tjurunga for Western societies?
- LM Yes. Art is something in which you make a new body for yourself and for other people. The Aborigines are dead right on that.
- BW It's been said that myth is to a culture as the dream is to the individual. Would you comment on this? And what do you see as being the cultural dream-life of Australia as reflected in its creative expressions?
- LM Sometimes, the thing that looks very bare-faced will, in fact, have a tremendous dream content when closely looked at. The Australian house for example, the shapes and decoration of the houses are full of dream consciousness, which the dream mind recognises. You find it in all sorts of shapes in every country, all sorts of unregarded shapes, I think: the shapes of boats and, you know, turns of phrase; all that kind of thing. As well as in the big myths that people can track down and put their finger on.
- BW How far do you think that Australian literature and art in particular, and society in general, have come towards reaching a satisfactory resolution between the original inhabitants and later settlers?
- LM At least they've started.
- BW You've written about "convergences" [among different races] as opposed to assimilation. Do you think that has begun to come about?
- LM Assimilation's not on; you can't turn everybody into one kind of a person. But to be able to be at peace with each other and exchange the treasures of the spirit is the most I'd ask for.
- BW You've said, "Sooner or later I will have to give some blood for dancing there" i.e. on the grounds of integration between cultures.
- LM Ah, sure, yeah. In other words, I'm going to be kicked around by various kinds of critics for looking at that material. They call it what is it? Appropriation? Cultural theft? All that sort of thing. The critics who say that are nearly always white people. I've had no trouble with Aboriginal people.
- BW I was going to ask about that because, here in Canada, very often, aboriginal people have made that claim [about writers]; they've said that white people are appropriating their voices. That's the difference here. [Some] white people are saying it as well, but it's a strong native response.
- LM There's no way at all that a white person will get native material right, anyway. They don't threaten anything. If they [Aborigines] had more confidence in their own cultures, they wouldn't regard them as threatened by the attempts of someone from outside them to learn and appreciate their wisdom. A culture unshared is sterile. Australian Aborigines believe in sharing, though some sacred things are secret. Those are specific parts of myths, though, and what I borrow are forms and ideas. Just as they do.
- BW Thinking now about specifically Australian imagery and mythology not,

though, what you've called "image-mongering", which you've said is dismissive and contemptuous - but the gradual accretion of imagery over time, which obviously contributes to national consciousness; you've written, in the poem "The Inverse Transports" from Dog Fox Field: "Has the nation been a poem or an accident/And which should it be?" Have you got an answer to that question?

- LM No, the question was meant to stay open as a question, to let people think about it. America puts herself very strongly forward as being a poem, a poem about human liberation and being the last best hope for mankind and so on. Other places have put themselves forward as poems. Some of them have been benign poems and some of them very much the other sort. Hitler put himself and Germany up as the bearers of a big poem. One's as dangerous as the other. Actually, I think, a nation putting itself up as a poem is probably vastly more dangerous than seeing itself as an accident. Like America before Independence, Australia was an accident, a found object. Captain Cook, who did his work up on the St. Lawrence, sounding the river for the battle on the Heights of Abraham, later went on to a career in which he happened to find the east coast of Australia and caused the settlement there. Europeans were then full of a tremendous energy and would naturally spread out into the world. Australia was set up as a gulag and finally busted the wire and got out.
- BW You had the energy, too, didn't you; the other side of the coin? You returned to your native rural district, from Sydney in 1985 and your poems from The Idyll Wheel show loving observation and a sense of at-oneness with the bush. How has the "homecoming" transpired over a longer period of time? Do you feel more at home than ever?
- LM It might have caused that breakdown, because you go back to where the "hot" material is and get too close to it and it will ask you questions with a knife at your throat. I knew that before I went there, that it might be dangerous and the whole place might be dangerous. I couldn't swear to its causing the breakdown. I think you do, eventually, have to confront all of the parts of your life, if you haven't got it all worked through and understood and integrated.
- BW So do you feel comfortable being back there?
- LM Oh, yeah, yeah, very much. And I get along well with the people there, too.
- BW Do you farm?
- LM No, no I never wanted to farm, not even when I was doing it!
- BW And have you managed to attain a sufficient space and time there to develop, or attain, your desired contemplative life? I imagine that's why you love being there.
- LM Yeah. It's home. And it's looking after Dad, who's getting on in years. Although, I think he's got a lot younger since we went there; he was getting quite old in his mid- to late-seventies, when we went there because he'd got cataracts. I forced him to go down to Sydney, to the eye hospital and get the cataracts fixed. When he got his eyesight back, he turned around and started going out to dances and things and I asked him the other day, I said: "Listen, you seem to be a lot younger than you used to be, you're not thinking of dying, yet, for a while, are you?" He said: "No, I gave it up. I was dying in my mid-seventies, but I've changed my mind." I must say, I think I come in the country under the sort of "tolerated phenomenon" clause. All sorts of human idiosyncracy is tolerated in the bush, especially if they feel that they own you, that you belong to them, you're one of them; a great deal of eccentricity is allowed. The only eccentricity of mine which

- gets commented on much, is this jet-setting habit of going to Canada, or New York, or somewhere, to read poems!
- BW You must be a minority of one, I suppose.
- LM They say: "That's the only time he puts his shoes on."
- BW Yes, wearing shorts forever! [From the poem "The Dream of Wearing Shorts Forever", which opens: "To go home and wear shorts forever"]. You've mentioned, in the "Preface" to Persistence in Folly, how an academic had made a passing remark about seeing some of your essays in The Peasant Mandarin [1982] as "disguised autobiography" and you came back to that implied criticism by saying that you saw your work rather as an experiment to discover whether it is possible any longer to be an individual in Australia. Have you found in the seven intervening years that it is possible? It sounds as though you have.
- LM Yes, it's more possible in the bush than in the city, because what it seems to require in Australia is space. Australia's remarkably collectivist and a conformist society in the cities.
- BW It's not the impression we have from abroad.
- LM No, I know.
- BW Isn't that strange?
- LM Don't forget, Australia's unlike, say, well, particularly America. I'm not so sure about Canada, but America is the place where trade unionism failed; Australia is where it succeeded and that means there's a very much more collectivist ethos in the place. You mustn't scab and you mustn't let the side down. The bush is the only place in Australia where individualism's allowed. It's certainly not allowed in intellectual life and it's certainly not allowed in most city life. It's allowed in insanity and in the bush; those are the two places you'll find it.
- BW When you think of the British origins, to some extent, of both Canadian and Australian white settlers...
- LM Yes, most Australians haven't got the social confidence to be eccentrics in the British way. That's a high price we pay for having favoured a proletarian ethos for ourselves. Though not all Australians accept that image. Eccentricity does require independence, though - including being safe from the sack, as few are in an employee culture, rather than an employer culture, or Old Money culture.
- BW But do you not think their way is closer to the British than the Canadian way is?
- LM I don't know; I don't know Canada well enough.
- BW And I don't know Australia well enough!
- LM I do strongly feel the difference between Canada and America. I don't think you've got anything to worry about on that count. I know you do lacerate yourselves about that, but it's an illusion. It's perfectly clear that you're not the same people at all. Not only because *you* can make a good cup of tea, either! There's just a very different feeling and spirit about the two peoples, for an outsider.
- BW You've written movingly of your native region in the concluding passage of "In a Working Forest", from Blocks and Tackles...
- LM You're up on the latest, aren't you! [Laughter from both participants.]
- BW I want to quote a passage very close to the end:

As you move and work there, or as you die there...in an intense spare abundance...away from the marks of human incursion, it is always the first day. One in which you are as much at home as a hovering bee, or the wind, or death, or shaded trickling water.

This seems to me to be the most precious experience in life for you and, perhaps, one of the most precious things about going back there. Is poetry a similar experience? In poetry, do you feel that it's also always "the first day."?

- LM The same thing; all those things.
- BW So it's as natural as breathing, to be in poetry and in that spot.
- LM Because it's full life; it's not divided life, not that wakefulness which excludes the dream, or that kind of abstraction which excludes the body.
- BW So you can be thoroughly in touch.
- LM Being all there at once and letting the world be all there at once. What people find awfully hard to do is to stop drawing lines and demarcations.
- BW Finally, is there any topic that we haven't covered that you'd like to bring up?
- No, I can't think of anything. I'll probably think of it later. Mind you, I do essentially think in "afterwords". Often, I'll publish the same essay three or four times because, each time, there's half a dozen more sentences in it. Like the other day, I asked my father about that essay that you just quoted from. I had the brains only the other day to ask him how much they actually got for those logs. I forgot about the economic side of it when I was writing the essay. He told me they made about twice as much as the basic wage at the time drawing two big logs a week. I wish I had another chance to publish that essay afresh so that I could put in the money side.
- BW That finishing touch.
- LM The return as well as the price.

The interview concluded with Murray reading "Mollusc", a recent poem:

## Mollusc

By its nobship sailing upside down, by its inner sexes, by the crystalline pimplings of its skirts, by the sucked-on lifelong kiss of its toppling motion, by the viscose optics now extruded now wizened instantaneously, by the ridges grating up a food-path, by the pop shell in its nick of dry, by excretion, the earthworm coils, the glibbing, by the gilt slipway, and by pointing perhaps as far back into time as ahead, a shore being folded interior, by boiling on salt, by coming uncut over a razor's edge, by hiding the Oligocene underleaf may this and every snail sense itself ornament the weave of presence.