

letters

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Poseurs' Push

*From Professor Sir Henry Harris,
Regius Professor of Medicine
Emeritus, University of Oxford.*

In your issue of 1 April, 2002, you have a review of a memoir by Grahame Harrison in which there is a mention of 'The Push'. This was an episode of the forties, not the fifties. 'The Push' was a small group of young men, for the most part from the Faculty of Arts, who came together in the closing days of the war. There was then a curious wartime dispensation that allowed men in the Faculty of Arts who were at the head of their class to postpone being drafted into the army until they had taken their degrees. A couple of men from the Science side were also members, but there were no women.

We used to meet in each others' houses to discuss a presentation that had been prepared by one of us. My Juvenilia file still contains a pompous piece on aesthetics that I produced for one such occasion.

As far as I have kept track of them, every member of 'The Push' did something interesting with his life. Jim Baker, Bill Maidment and Noel Hush became distinguished academics at the University of Sydney; others, like myself, made their careers overseas.

The name was simply an abbreviation of 'Poseurs' Push', a sobriquet that was given to the group by Murray Sayle, already then a sharp-eyed journalist. He was not a member of 'The Push' and we must have struck him as insufferably pretentious. We were certainly full of ourselves. I was a founder member and remained an active participant till the end.

Henry Harris
(BA 1944, MBBS 1950)

Physical test

I was a laboratory technician (lecture demonstration) in the School of Physics from 1959 to 1961. Senior lecturer Dr Henry

Rathgeber was in charge of lecture demonstration, while Ray Anderson was Professor Julius Sumner Miller's assistant at some memorable demonstrations for the Summer Science Schools and the spin-off TV series.

Of the teaching to undergraduates, two memories stand out. One is senior tutor-demonstrator Phyllis Nicol's illustration of a chain reaction to her first year students.

Preparation required steady hands and nerves because it involved setting and loading a benchful of mousetraps with small wooden blocks.

Despite guarding against students causing a deliberate or accidental premature 'explosion' it did happen, causing extreme chagrin to Ms Nicol who was unrestrained in her opinion of the culprit.

Another is Professor Stuart Butler's 'confidence in physical laws'. Attached by piano wire to the mid-point of the 32ft (10.7m) ceiling in the main ground floor lecture theatre was a 16lb (7.3kg) shot put. I stood against the wall on one side of the theatre, making sure the back of my head remained in contact with the wall. With the wire taut Professor Butler held the shot just touching my forehead and then released it.

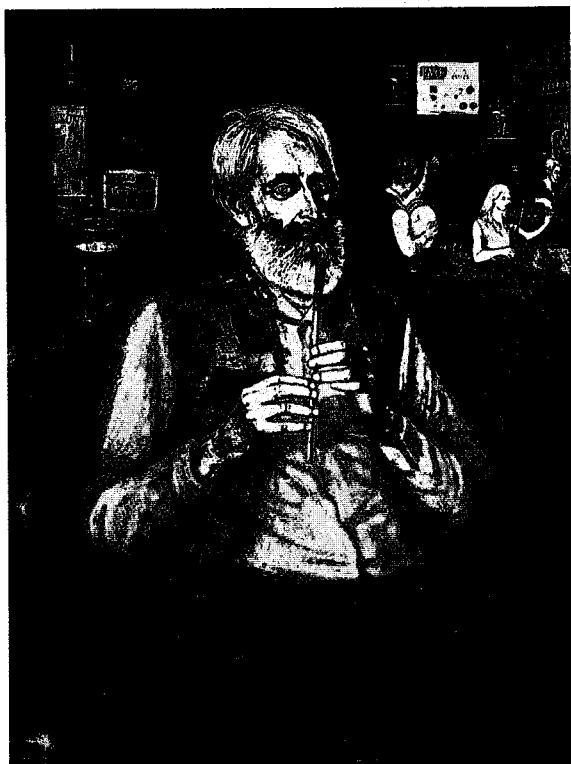
A long slow arc took it to the opposite side. With eyes wide open I watched its return swing. As it came closer to me I heard a crescendo of gasps from the students. The law held. It stopped at where it was released before resuming its pendulum sway. My head was intact.

Live demonstrations could be a superbly effective way of teaching physics.

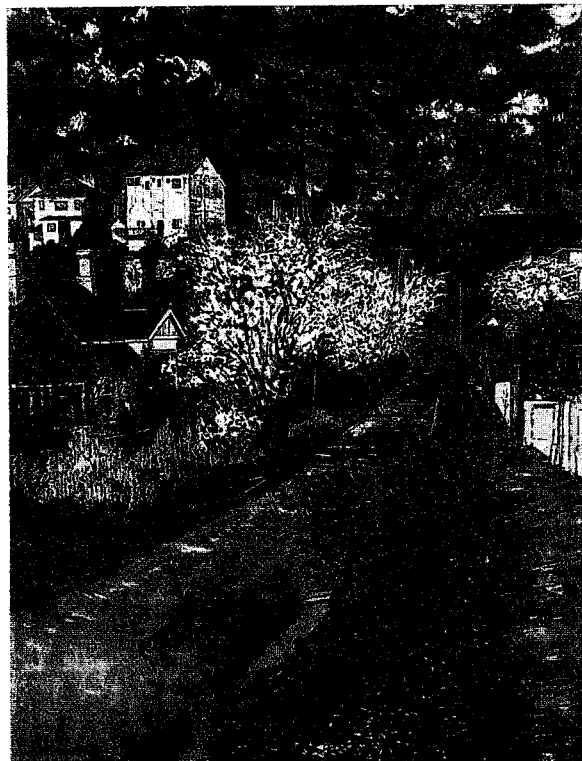
Gerald McCallum
(BA 1967, MA 1971)

Titanic link

The accompanying picture may be of interest to *Gazette* readers. While touring Nova Scotia in



'Portrait of Frank Byrne', 1995, oil on board, 90 x 70 cm



'Springtime, Galvin Street', 1997, oil on board, 40 x 30 cm

A CELTIC SONGLINE

The calendar of Brian Mooney's life and travels, reads like a complex and extended Celtic songline linking Australia with Europe. Text by Jonathan Bowden.

Photography by Dennis Harding.

BORN in 1930 in NSW, Brian Mooney grew up in Hay, on the banks of the Murrumbidgee River – his Huck Finn days as he calls them. At the outbreak of war in 1939 his family moved to Sydney and he began to absorb those influences which, by his early twenties, already saw him as an accomplished professional musician in the evenings

with a serious daytime interest in studying painting. He has continued to balance the life and times of a professional singer with a passionate and discerning study and practice of painting. Like many artists who classify themselves as self-taught he has, in truth, studied intensively, widely and for long periods in different corners of the earth. Starting



'Bush Dance', 1998, oil on board, 30 x 40 cm

in his late teens in Sydney, he became a fervent admirer of the Heidelberg School and that lesson, absorbed over a lifetime, is evident now in his treatment of landscape, especially in his intense and highly personal observations of the bush.

At the age of 24 he spent a year at the Julian Ashton School, studying drawing under John Pasmore and Henry Gibbons. His refined and sensitive draughtsmanship shows that his brief apprenticeship there was well spent. Also a student there was John Olsen and the two have remained good friends ever since.

Over the next 10 years he led a nomadic existence around Australia, supplementing his earnings as a musician by working as a rouseabout, circus hand, and jackaroo from Melbourne to Cape York. His visual recall is such that he is able to re-create landscapes and events such as form the background to *Circus Girl* entirely from memories of this period.

By the early 1960s he was a considerable figure in the Australian folk music scene: Traynors, the longest-running folk venue in Melbourne, was started jointly by Mooney and Frank Traynor during this period, which drew to a close for him in 1965 when he made his first overseas trip to Dublin.

Drawn initially to Ireland by its music and bardic traditions, he found himself very much at home there and much in demand as a performer. The relative freedom that the life of a professional musician gave him allowed him to pursue his studies of painting in London, Paris and Germany as well as in Ireland: 'Ploughing an eight-inch furrow in the footpath that joins the Municipal with the National Gallery in Dublin, or a similar track down Whitehall and along the Embankment while in London' as he traipsed daily between the National Gallery and the Tate. It was at the latter institution that he first saw Turner's watercolours: 'They were only small, but so delicate I couldn't believe a human hand had done them.'

His visit to Ireland turned into a 21-year sojourn, during which he married a Galway lass, Phyllis (Montgomery) and together they raised a family of four boys. Phyllis took a doctorate in physiology at Galway University and both partners in the marriage continued to work, Mooney playing and singing in the pubs at night and minding the "boys" by day – something that involved long walks with an old pram along the lanes and byways of Galway. He also made regular tours of Europe as a folk singer and used these trips to further his acquaintance with the great art collections of Europe. Phyllis, who has a fine singing voice, accompanied Mooney and performed with him in London, Paris and Germany.

It wasn't therefore until the early 1980s that Mooney returned with his family to Australia and settled in Launceston, Tasmania. Since his arrival there, he has become an established figure on the local music scene, but he has also turned his energies increasingly to painting. He works mostly in oils on a prepared board, and the paintings shown here were completed over the past 10 years in Launceston. Moving with great freedom from observed scenes to recollected imagery, often in the same painting, his works are a dense and elaborate tapestry of images plucked from a remarkable memory and then woven around contemporary faces or into new landscapes. From Ireland and Irish bars and street life and song to Australian hazards of drought, isolation, independence of character and clarity of light, there is a constant echo or resonance between the two places and the two influences. Although he was born and

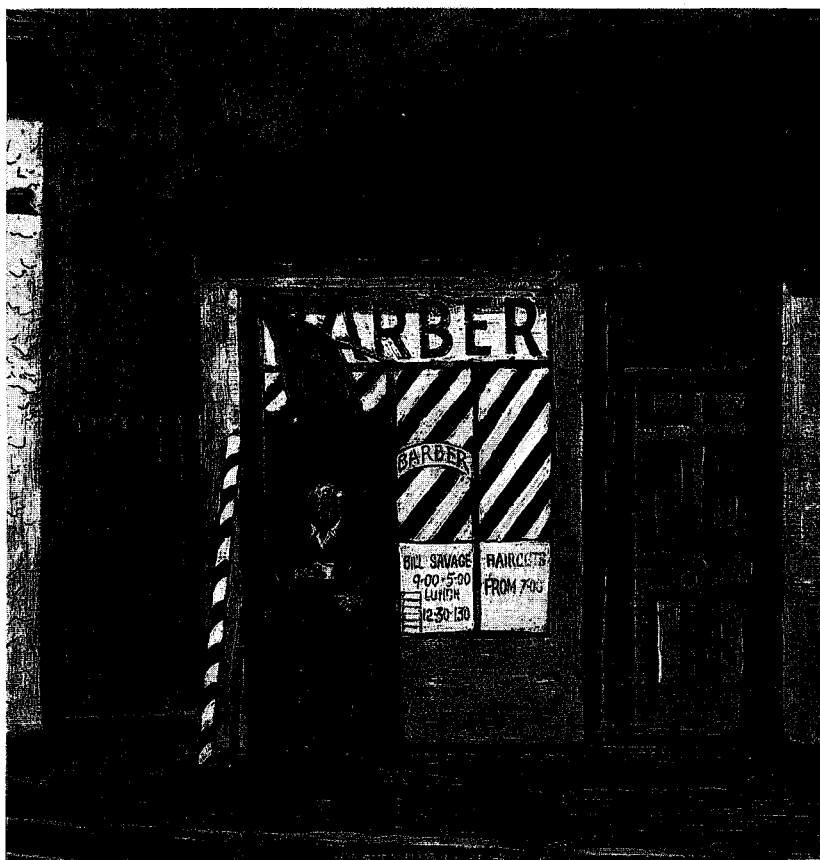


'Sunday Afternoon at Irish Murphy's', 1998, casen tempera, 20 x 30 cm

raised in Australia, Mooney is, in a sense, more at home in Ireland than in the antipodes: or perhaps there is a homeliness associated with the Ireland in his work that is absent in his observation of Australian landscape, where his eye is sharp and unsentimental. His depiction of trees especially has the pungency and precision of the Heidelberg School, and much of their freedom too. But what makes his work so interesting overall is the breadth of influences he has absorbed in order to create it.

Painters are made rather than born, and self-made at that. Musicians are born, even some actors and writers. But painters have to work at it, not only to enlarge their memory by constant practice of observation and drawing, but to expand their area of intuition by studying other painting, absorbing it as an act of praise and finally allowing it to become part of their own synaesthetic pathway.

'Bill Savage: The Barber of Charles Street' (detail), 1997, oil on board, 60 x 40 cm





'Show People - Circus Girl', 1990, oil on board, 20 x 30 cm



'Laughing Faces in a Pub', 1993, pencil on paper, 15 x 20 cm



'Road to Sofala and Others', 1992, oil on board, 30 x 40 cm



'The Turnoff to Wyndermere', 1991, oil on board, 40 x 30 cm

Individuality in painters takes time and privacy to develop, but those who are passionate enough create this privacy by any means they can, and persist until their real character begins to flower. In this process, luck can help too: sometimes it's a well-paid part-time job or a supportive family, but the history of the art of the last two centuries can only be told in terms of the artists who painted what they wanted, how they wanted, in the medium they chose.

Mooney has managed to do this, and it is the very private quality of his works that makes them so appealing. These are representations of the streets he knows, the faces he meets, the pubs where he has performed. And linking the Australian with the Irish in him are the pathways that anyone who picks up an airline map can immediately perceive. These red lines that finger out from Sydney and Melbourne like the tentacles of a sea anemone do not terminate in Singapore, Delhi or Dubai. They go on to Europe where the majority of Australians come from: and 200 years after the first Europeans arrived here these lines back to Europe are as well marked as ever. But are they simply a trade map? Or are they also the spirit pathways, manned by angelic outriders who keep the wings of the jumbo jets in the air while their cargo of souls sleeps its way back to their Dreamtime in Europe? Lloyd Rees spoke well when he described meeting his ancestors in the caves of Les Eyzies. He did, and he communes with them now: in his life as in his works he recognised that it isn't just Aboriginal culture that predates 1788. European culture goes back thousands of years too, and it is essential for Australians of whatever origin to remain connected to the chain of awareness which leads back to their beginning. In the absence of a continuous connection with the land, these links are mostly invested in the art of the past.

I believe that Brian Mooney's paintings, describing as they do a lifetime spent moving along the lines that connect his life in Australia with the life of his forebears in Europe, are a valuable and moving insight into the soul search that so many Australians are embarked on.

Jonathan Bowden

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