

Interview with Chris Wallace-Crabbe

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Chris Wallace-Crabbe was born in 1934 in Melbourne, Australia. He was educated at Scotch College and the University of Melbourne, where he is now a Reader in English. He was a Harkness Fellow at Yale, 1965-67, and held the Australia Chair at Harvard, 1987-88. He has lived for short periods in Italy and Britain. His poetry volumes include: *The Music of Division* (1959); *In Light and Darkness* (1964); *The Rebel General* (1967); *Where the Wind Came* (1971); *Selected Poems* (1973); *The Emotions Are Not Skilled Workers* (1980); *The Amorous Cannibal* (1985); *I'm Deadly Serious* (1988). He edited two poetry anthologies: *Six Voices in Contemporary Australian Poetry* (1963), with poems by Slessor, FitzGerald, Hope, Stewart, Wright, and MacAuley; and *The Golden Apples of the Sun* (1980), a volume of sixty-three Australian poets of the twentieth century. He edited and authored several critical books: *The Australian Nationalists* (1971); *Melbourne or the Bush* (1974); *Three Absences in Australian Writing* (1983). He has a novel, *Splinters* (1981). This interview took place during the second annual conference of the American Association of Australian Literary Studies at Penn State University, 21 March 1987.

The poetry of "psychomachia": what were you doing in it?

I think I first mentioned the word in my *Selected Poems*. One of my main areas of concern has been what I want to call *psychomachia* — finding different ways of dramatizing how the parts of self . . . of one's identity, sit down together, war with one another, interact. I'm interested in different — often anthropomorphic — caricature-like images of this. For me, body and soul, super ego, ego and libido, and other traditional schemata, don't fully answer to the variety of things I want to dramatize. So I invent other figures,

topoi. The poem "The Centaur Within" and its companion poem, "The Joker," represent a kind of amoral, perhaps Nietzschean, vitalist part of the self that is not amenable to ordinary patterns of behaviour, even resistant, perhaps, to language. Later versions are more complex: "Mind," "Introspection," "The Landlord of Himself." Someone, possibly William James, said: "We have no ways of getting what we want from ourselves." The self is never fully harmonious; the back wheel is always going at a different speed from the front. This is the kind of thing that a lyric poem, rather than a novel, can contain. For me, this is the route of internal dramatic movement.

Did this later development correspond to a certain chronological maturity?

I don't know. I was brought up in a good, old-fashioned atheist household. I did major in Philosophy. Until recently, I've been particularly interested in the British Empiricist tradition.

It seems you were adumbrating that in your Selected, including the "Meditations" sequence.

The "Meditations" sequence represents an editorial act on my part. They were written over a number of years but it made more sense to gather them together; a couple more were written to complete the sequence, developed out of poems like "Dejection Ode," "Resolution and Independence": slightly larger, lyrical-sized, romantic poems in which the moods are taken out for trot, often in some picturesque savannah.

Let me get into that at this point — landscape . . . is one of my own special concerns in Canada; I'm interested to see how Australians relate to landscape. For instance, I told John Tranter that I saw his mode and mood as ironic; he saw it rather as laconic. Tony Hassall touched on this, today in his paper: the way that the land is seen as alien for a lot of Australians, initially. I think that for early settlers in Australia and Canada, the first consideration was physical survival. Then the diary and journal emerged as modes of expression; later forms of literary expression were not yet readily available. After that came the more contemplative mode.

Perhaps you come in there immediately because you're not an early settler.

There was a kind of contemplative mode very early on, partly because of the very time lag you talk about. Long after the Romantic poets flourished in England, people were writing long pastoral poems in couplets in late eighteenth-century mode in Australia.

Say in the late nineteenth century?

No, the first half of the nineteenth century.

In Canada, that still happened around 1868 to 1880. So similar Australian expression occurred earlier?

The last might have got through as late as 1880, but by then the quasi-folk ballad is rising as the Australian standard. To return to landscape: I think landscape is what Australians have instead of faith; everyone likes landscape. As Graham Davison pointed out, a lot of those who write about the bush avoid living in it. There was a great nationalist period in the 1890s; Davison's article, with a map, shows a little ring of boarding houses in central Sydney where most people who wrote about the bush — the balladists — were living. Most of them, though, had parents or grandparents who'd been farmers, or gold miners during the Gold Rush. . . . Only by the mid-1980s did Australia become an overwhelmingly metropolitan country; some people say: "the next most metropolitan country in the world after Holland."

The balladists: are you implying that they are ones who have not actually been out in the bush?

Many of them had bush childhoods — grandparents in the bush. So, it's often a nostalgia for childhood or for Grandma's or Uncle Jack's stories.

You yourself have a phrase about remembered trees as being "the dearest furniture of our childhood." Tranter, however, saw the bush as threatening in his childhood, "looking out on fifty million gum trees."

But my childhood was inner urban.

Would you talk about that: your early background, your development as person and poet?

My oldest memories are of living only about two miles from the downtown centre of Melbourne where some people were beginning to live in 'unspeakable' flats. We didn't live in flats yet, only refugees and occasional bachelors lived in flats. But at the end of our street were the Botanical Gardens of Melbourne — perhaps the most beautiful Botanical Gardens I've seen anywhere in the world: English Picturesque landscaping style, quasi-natural, but extraordinarily 'artful' in the tradition of Humphrey Repton and Capability Brown. The kind of gardens you walk around and never exhaust because you can never remember what is going to be around the next bend. Everything is done in arabesques and curious curves: brakes and bunches of trees concealed, a bit of water, suddenly appear at the next turn, or the bridge.

You spent a lot of time in the gardens?

I think so. We moved frequently in my childhood. During the War, my father was away in India; he didn't come home for four years. So I and my brother and mother lived in a two-room flat on a busy street. So, it's perhaps the opposite of John Tranter's position: a thoroughly urban childhood. I feel beautifully attuned to the natural world, can find it readily picturesque.

So for you it's not a threat?

Not at all, I like to walk out into the bush in pitch darkness and just wander.

Do you get a lot of your inspiration there?

Yes. We've got a shack at a place where mountains covered with virgin forest drop down to surf beaches.

The surf, would you follow up on that?

It doesn't occur much as a fully developed theme, it occurs more often as random imagery. I have a scattering of poems in recent times where either the surf or stars, or both, appear. Stars are extraordinarily bright at the beach, away from city smog. Both

loom larger and larger in my imagination as embodiments of a universe which is extraordinarily exciting and inscrutable because it makes no sense. Even a forest, you can begin to make sense of; you can say: “The stands of mountain grey gum here alternate with stands of mountain ash. And the she-oaks will grow here because this bluff is slightly exposed to the sea winds,” and so on. . . . The stars and surf are exhilarating because they don’t respond; they don’t give a damn. They just give you a pulse of incredible mortal vulnerability.

So you don’t see the landscape as indifferent?

I do get pleasure from it, from the parts of it that are remote from habitation. But I don’t feel anything absolute about this; I don’t mind that the landscape also sometimes has farms in it.

With the stars and surf, do you find a sense of the ineffable, or just the inscrutable?

Both. There’s something incipiently religious in the attitude that I have towards them, a religious impulse that doesn’t return any clear messages.

The stars and surf can still be expressed through your poetry, even though they are inscrutable? That is a way of expressing something of their effect?

A very little of what they have to offer.

Scratching at the edges?

In a poem I’ve just published in *The Oxford Magazine* — about night down at the beach — the kind of interaction I’m talking about is, perhaps, represented by these lines:

and thin bright stars
 in their savage beauty
 whisper secretly
 “You must die.
 You know that.
 You have to die.”
 I know it, I riposte
 uncomprehending
 but please do not let them
 burn my body.

We'll return later to landscape; meanwhile, other considerations: your relative position as a poet, starting with Melbourne, trying to place you in the Australian poetical spectrum. It seems to me you're somewhere in the middle; an individualist voice, but of neither extreme. So, I'm wondering, since you grew up in Melbourne . . .

Neither a "Tranterite," nor a "Bushie," nor a "Squatter."

You don't fit any categories.

Some recent reviews of my poetry suggest this. It's a hard poetry to place properly.

Are you comfortable with that reading?

I don't fit in with Les Murray, the Squatters, or the post-modernists. I like being a fairly well-behaved ugly duckling.

So, what is Melbourne like? Is it very British?

People in Sydney traditionally thought, after the turn of the century, that it was more British, as did the people in Queensland. It's a far less hedonistic city than Sydney; a recent typology of the two towns, in a *Meanjin* symposium, called Sydney "Tinsel Town" and Melbourne "St. Petersburg." Melbourne has a strong tradition of producing leaders of political parties of all shades of opinion: Maoists, Trotskyists, through to Conservatives. Things are read as politics from Melbourne, whereas they picture them as pleasure in Sydney. Melbourne's also the centre of Australian Rules football and Australian football is the central distinguishing feature of Australia sociologically. It is a great passion. On the whole, Melbourne is taken as a little wintrier, less beautiful, more British, than Sydney. So, Melbourne: plenty of duty, not so much fun there; the Catholics are more Mick, the Protestants more Prot.

The scientist aspect of some of your poems: you wanted to be a scientist when you were young. Rodney Hall, in the Collins anthology, says of your poetry: "Reason and moderation" and writes of its "clean, dry texture." So, thinking again of Melbourne as a metaphor perhaps for the central view — you as perhaps fitting

in the centre there — could you then be described as the poet, or a poet, of balance?

This has been said of me. But recent reviews are presenting less and less of this.

Which view is your preference?

A more ludic poetry that registers conflicts and allows whatever balance may emerge for the reader, rather than its being processed by the language beforehand.

That brings me to another point: you as word-magician, trickster, a “dealer” in language. There are aspects of the Trickster in your work; you also mentioned the Joker and then, there’s your Puck-Apollo poem.

And my novel, *Splinters*; running to and fro through it — half-hidden — is the concept of the trickster-god, various historical references to the trickster-god. The harsher notion of a trickster-god would be Thomas Hardy’s. Many primitive tribes in West Africa and elsewhere have a notion of a trickster-god who is sometimes more Puck-like, more playful, carnivalesque; sometimes he tends towards the darker side, the Orphic cults. I do feel strongly that in poetry it may be only by tricks and games of language that you can cheat Truth into disclosing herself. So you’ll find, again and again, high-spirited, even flip, phrases in some of my poems of considerable gravity — like “Intensive Care” that I read last night.

So, with the trickster, you’re not just dealing magically with words, but in ideas, content, too?

I like to stir the pot and see — when I add a few herbs and things — what they will generate. Often, when I write poems . . . I’ve got no idea where they are going to go. When I am in doubt, rather than purifying the mixture, I thicken it.

Your “three absences,” with reference to poetry: to take them in the order in which they occur in the book: the absence of love in Australian poetry.

It’s not simply a point about Australian poetry but also a great deal of twentieth-century poetry. Traditional kinds of love poetry seem

to have become less and less available. That's sometimes a good thing, too, because many were based on an extraordinary male-gendered set of assumptions; they had outworn themselves. That's one of the points I'm making in "Genesis," about Adam and Eve, where Adam gets a general caning for his inability to perform better.

And the absence of metaphysics?

I'm using metaphysics broadly to include many kinds of adventurous philosophical speculation. One doesn't get anywhere near enough of that in Australian poetry. We are no longer at the point where someone once said that what we had in Australian poetry were horses, horses, horses. But we still frequently get images, images, images. There's a remark I've always liked by William Empson: "Most modern poetry is in the imagist tradition. And it isn't the fashion to think in poetry."

A lot of Australian poetry, including much that I admire, has too much passive reflection, the immediate watercolour image, the Debussian impression, an insufficient willingness for the poet to turn around and challenge himself or herself — to dismantle the first position and say: "Okay, where are you now? Try again." I am very interested in poetry that takes difficult or challenging ideas, unresolved conflicts, tries to push them on, even if the result may not look syllogistically tight, but may lead to acts of verbal magic, highjinks.

And to new, possible, if only tentative, conclusions?

Precisely, thank you.

The image of passive reflection leads to another topic: Europe and its influence on you. There's been a lot of talk about "Are Australians being nationalist enough or too nationalist?" Hassall talked about this, about fiction and Europe; Australians going back there — the quest theme going back there but being disillusioned. I didn't get the impression that you were disillusioned and I certainly didn't get the impression, for instance, that Rosemary Dobson was. How did you find Europe?

Exciting.

Painting, art, that's another link here . . .

The only reservations I have is that I found the landscape absolutely hateful.

Even though there is this "picturesque" way of viewing Europe?

What annoys me is that the landscapes there all imitate forms of art. I can't find anything that feels natural, or fresh, in European landscape. I look and I think: "There's an illustration to So-and-So's book; a touch of Arthur Rackham here; a little bit of Constable there; a bit of Dürer background." I yearn for something natural.

I've reached the point where I am absolutely passionate about Australian foliage. Flying into Penn State yesterday, I looked down and saw miles of woodland with no leaves; it looked like rubbish. I nearly felt sick. I thought: "Isn't it dreadful to endure a winter like this?" Now that I'm at ground level, the golf course across the road — with its mixtures of evergreens, its spongy grass, the sense of space — is very nice. But looking down on the winter wood . . . whenever I see a European or North American winter, I think: "They've got it all from Yeats . . ." his "all dry sticks under a winter sun." Three words will do it: "all dry sticks." That's the Northern winter.

My more general problem is that the whole thing has been trampled over; generations have trod and trod . . . there isn't a nook or cranny that feels natural.

European art: what does that do for you? Do you find the cultural landscape also depressing, disillusioning? Too much of the past? Or do you find it enriching. Your year in Florence, the paintings?

I enjoyed being in Florence, but I probably wrote slightly less than I would have at home.

So, it was not a lasting influence artistically, not something that you felt you lacked before?

I was rapt in many of these paintings already from books. It was wonderful to see the real things rather than little reproductions.

But you hadn't gone, as some Australians do, to steep yourself in paintings?

Well, Florentine paintings, that's one of the things that draws everyone there. I wanted to expose myself to it and see what happened. I had a lovely year but, like the world of English writing, Florentine painting was something I already knew a great deal about. While there were lots of incidental pleasures, the great discoveries are not new. One cannot find a brand new seventeenth-century English poet whom one has never found before and who's absolutely smashing.

You were steeped in the cultural European landscape before, then?

Right. In Australian education, there's still so much Eurocentrism. When I was a kid, the children's books were English: the "William" books, "Biggles." Your mention of art brings me back to the question of background. I was very fortunate; my father was a Jack-of-all-trades: journalist, illustrator, wood-cutter, writer of hack children's stories. At none of these was he so good as to be daunting. So I finished up as a poet and my brother as a painter; we've always co-operated imaginatively, played off one another. We live a hundred miles apart — it isn't far in Australia. The other oblique legacy, crossover, remains: my brother has published two novels and I try to do a drawing every day or night.

Your way of winding down?

Yes, after book work. Also, I wanted to learn to draw again from scratch, develop my own visual range; you can only do that if you keep at it, day after day. There's a set of abstract and calligraphic forms of which I'm gradually building up a vocabulary.

To return to forms, the third absence.

I always feel poets should be constantly extending themselves. Many attempts to write in certain forms won't work; they'll be the ones for the wastepaper basket. One can be perfectly honourable and always write twelve-line poems, but I also feel it's important to exercise, to train, not to ossify. I like to mix as many linguistic effects into a poem as possible. I also try to push to and fro, trying

on new forms that I haven't tried before or that are in danger of going out of fashion. It's easy to write in what by now is the standard academic form of poetry: a rather link-free verse that ends with deliberate weakness. But when I have something important to say to myself, I try to use a long line.

Recently, I've been trying to write ballads, which I find damned hard. I wrote a rather vulgar series of political sonnets called "Sonnets to the Left" which have just appeared in *Meanjin*. They were partly the result of teaching Shakespeare's sonnets. I found a very interesting way to end a sonnet sequence. A sonnet is mad about closure. The octave closes off, the sestet closes off, another one starts, closes. . . . Rhymes are always closing things. It's such a locked-up form. But, in a sonnet sequence, you have a series of provisional endings, none of which is ever an ending. Any conclusion you have is deferred and deferred. . . . This is very interesting when writing about politics. I found the more of these I wrote — I held on to ten — the more it was revealed that all possible conclusions I could get to were only provisional, only part of the truth. At the end of the sequence, the only thing I am clearly in favour of is Aboriginal Land rights.

Flaubert has a phrase for this response: the only conclusion is that there are no conclusions, everything is relative. But so much twentieth-century thinking in so many fields is compartmentalized rigidly, specialists in one field closing their eyes to another field, also — one generation later — to their own field. A lot of current thought tends to resolve all these things neatly.

Precisely. Something that has been said of Flaubert: one has to be willing to be an idiot, to get a kick in the chops.

Yes, back to the trickster. I'd like to return now to landscape, something I didn't bring up before. You have a reference to A. D. Hope's quotation "without songs, architecture, history." Is this about Australia in general or Australian landscape particularly?

Australian landscape is only a trope in that poem for Australia in general.

There's a poem by Canadian Douglas Le Pan: "A Country without a Mythology" — which is a stage countries like Australia and

Canada go through, isn't it? Do you feel Australia is mapping out its own mythology now, so to speak?

I think so — a quotation from my “Genesis” poem: “It only took courage.” But it can’t be acquired at the drop of a hat. It takes a lot of hard yakka.

Yakka?

Yakka is work, hard labour. For me, it is much more exciting to be working somewhere where these things haven’t been fully established, where the cultural furniture hasn’t all been disposed around the room already. You’ve just got to sit still by the fire and burn the twigs and start from there.

In the context of your critical writing, you’ve got Melbourne or the Bush, as opposed to Melbourne, or the Bush, or Sydney.

The traditional colloquial saying is: “Sydney or the Bush.”

I thought you were implying that Australia has ironists or rhetoricians rather than transcendentalists and that this stemmed partly from viewing the land as alien. In Canada, the land would also be viewed initially as mostly alien. Hassall, this morning, said the American land was a haven for immigrants; landscape, there, wasn't harsh reality.

For two reasons: one, because of the extraordinary array of fertile land just going on and on; secondly — and this seems to me to be the most important aspect — because so many of the people who first laid down the mythology here [the United States] came for passionately religious reasons. Did I speak earlier of my sense of religion as being only a service industry in Australia, only existing there to oil the wheels of bureaucracy? Whereas, people came to settlements on the eastern seaboard of the United States because they were passionate believers in a faith, wanted to plant this sect in the New World. They were full of wonder. God had made a new start possible in America. The apple was perhaps back on the tree.

Is that a quote from Wallace-Crabbe?

No.

From someone else?

No, I just made it up now. It seems to be very important to recognize that the settlement of Australia was a matter of Government committees sitting around; the bureaucracy decided what should be done. Since then, as one political scientist has darkly put it: "Australians have a genius for being governed."

Do you, then, see religion in Australia as politics? Do you think the transcendental movement in Australia will never be strong? Is the poetry of, say, Chris Wallace-Crabbe the strongest transcendentalist element you'll get in Australia?

No, Les Murray just published a large and eccentric book of Australian religious verse. His very wide definition of religious includes many people. Certain kinds of religious beliefs, yearnings, metaphysical hope, sheer wonder, are not eroding. I also think the high point of solid, old-fashioned atheism is probably passed. On the other hand, I don't think there will ever be a significantly Christian society again.

Do you yourself see that with regret?

No. While I cherish areas of metaphysics in my backyard, I don't want to see any religious institution imposing its patterns through legislation, tacit edict.

So, politics now.

I love politics, political news. Australia, like Canada, has the double layer of federal and state governments. There are swags of political news to be interested in. Some of my poems show an interest apart from any political commitments I have. They've become much more complicated, as the sonnet sequence indicated. I've a growing interest in political drama, as in poems like "Breaking," "Old Men During the Fall of Government," which was about the scandalous dismissal of the Whitlam government by Sir John Kerr, the Queen's representative in Australia.

There's no programme on television that I like more than the counting of votes on election night. I sit there and become an instant psephologist, analyzing political trends. Some of my closest

friends at the University of Melbourne are involved in psychopolitics. It's a field that excites me, as passionate as poetry and as overweening as Freudian theory. It's like an operatic corner of sociology. My friend, Alan Davies, Professor of Politics at Melbourne, gave me a 'beaut' image of the passionately free will. He said, deriving from Auden: "Determinism gives us a desk with a great many pigeonholes in which to put our lives, but it doesn't tell us in advance which pigeonholes we're going to put our lives in."

Another of your themes: "Is tragedy comedy plucked unripe?"

On that I must go back to Furphy's novel *Such is Life*, which has always seemed to me the quintessentially Australian novel, where he may have said: "Tragedy is comedy plucked unripe." Often, it is too easily assumed that there is something immature about comedy. But the comic mode, in the fullest, most complicated, sense takes in enormous contradictions and essentially asserts that, given those contradictions, something goes on. I think of that as a basis for my writing: tragedy, taken far enough, ends up as comedy.