

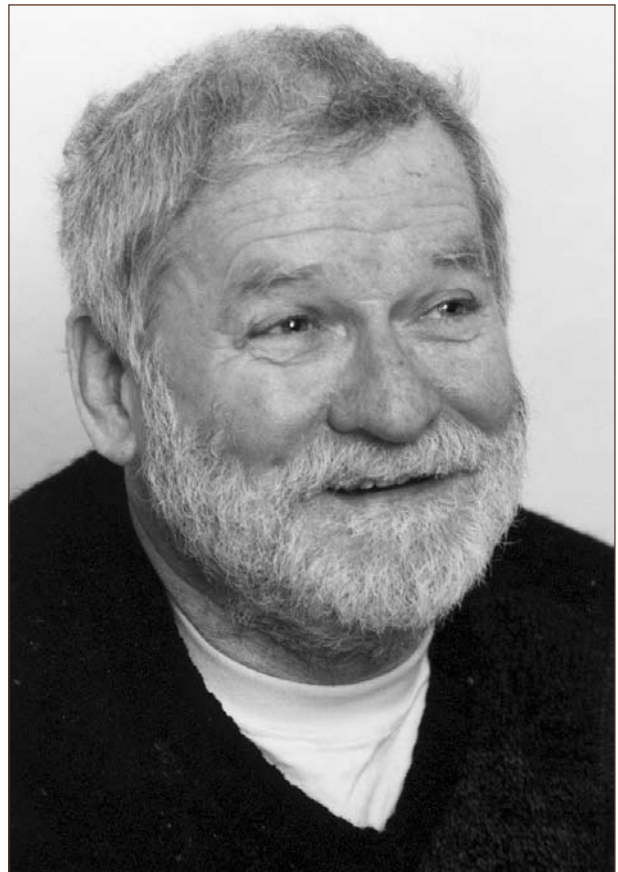
# Thomas Shapcott

## Memories of growing up in Ipswich

Date of interview: 1995

Interviewer: Robyn Buchanan

Interview available on CD



### Track 01

I was born in Ipswich in 1935, one of twins, my twin brother was Jack - John Arthur Shapcott. We were born at St Andrew's Private Hospital. I have an older brother Bob who was born two years before and a younger brother Jim who was born in 1940.

My grandfather William Warren Shapcott migrated to Australia from south of London, originally Cornwall, in 1885 and his wife Eliza Page Sutton came out the next year and they raised their family of six sons and one daughter in Ipswich. He was a pattern maker - which was a highly skilled cabinet-maker really - at the Ipswich Railway Workshops. He retired in 1925.

He had been quite active as I discovered many years later in the cultural and social life of Ipswich from when he had arrived. Only a few years ago, someone sent me a cutting from a newspaper from the years just after the First World War describing a visit by an Ipswich literary society to Southport on an excursion and my grandfather was named as the treasurer of this literary society. I remember him as a very dapper, extremely neat gentleman, with a very precise English accent. I don't remember my paternal grandmother at all, she died in 1919. It was rumoured in the family that she had been one of the first students at Girton College in Cambridge but I don't know whether that was just a rumour.

She imbued her elder children with a sense and feeling for education and the arts which was probably most clearly demonstrated in her one daughter my aunt Win (Winifred). My father ran away at 16 to join the First World War. He had left school at 13, he was a younger son and did not get the educational advantages of his older brothers. So I think he ran away as much to prove himself as for that great wave of patriotism in 1914 and he was away until he was 21, he came back in 1919 after having served in the trenches in France on a number of occasions and for very long periods of time. When he came back to Australia, his mother was dying of cancer and she died very shortly afterwards.

The family had a sort of hobby farm, a pineapple farm up at Glasshouse Mountains and that was a sort of release valve I think and I'm interested in that because my grandfather who seemed to be not a farming type at all clearly wasn't much involved in that but his big rather strong hefty sons had done a lot of that and Dad actually stayed there for six months after he came back from the war to help get over the whole shock and what was called neurasthenia in those days.

When he came back into the world, he was extremely active in forming the Returned Servicemen's League and the Legacy Clubs in Ipswich and was a life member

of both of those organisations. He became very active man in the social life of the town, he was a Councillor for many years so he had a public life. He was a public accountant which he educated himself into, he became the accountant to The Queensland Times newspaper and when he applied for the position of manager, he didn't get it in the middle of the Depression just after he was married, he resigned and set up his own practice as a public accountant in town.

So that's the sort of background of my father and his side of the family. And this had impact on my own growing up. I became in fact an accountant also and went into partnership with Dad later on. So it was a middle class family, with certain cultural pretensions which were by no means uncommon in the town.

On my Mother's side, it was, I think you'd call it more working class family; her mother was Irish who came out from Ireland at the age of 4 with the Duhigs who were relatives and on my Mother's father's side, it was Scottish.

Both my grandfathers were very active in the Trade Union movement in the late 19th century, my maternal grandfather Arthur Ravenswood Gillespie, started the first Co-operative Building Societies in Queensland in the 1880s I think it was.

So there was a sort of proud history on both sides, not only of trade union involvement but also of craftsmanship and a certain educational interest.

I put that down to the mood of that late 19th century when



*Tom Shapcott in a typical Queensland back yard on Denmark Hill*

the whole concept of workers' education was very much discussed, Mechanics Institutes and things like that. From that background, in my family as I grew up, there was a strong love of music. My grandfather had been an active member of the Blackstone-Ipswich Cambrian Choir, had gone down to eisteddfodau in Victoria and places like that in the 1920s, he had a bass voice and was clearly musical. My father wasn't very musical, he had a nondescript singing voice, he had a pleasant speaking voice which I'm told I inherited and probably some of the accent which he got from his father, but he didn't have much of a singing voice. He played the piano a little bit.

My mother had no musical sense whatsoever, she "couldn't sing to bless herself" as she always said. She used to croon rather weird little ditties which she told us when we were babies were popular songs of the day but no-one could ever recognise what popular songs they were supposed to be.

I actually was very musical and this came out when I was a little kid. The people next door, a Roman Catholic family called Burns with whom we sort of lived - there were three daughters just a bit older than us and we were always invading their house - and they had a piano, and Mrs Burns or Mr Burns cornered my father once and said "Tom should have lessons because he is always playing the piano and actually making nice sounds," or words to that effect.

So Dad decided to buy a piano when I was about 9 years of age and all of us boys were taught the piano by a cousin-in-law of my father, Gladys Payne, and I was the only one who kept on with it up to ATCL level.

## Track 02

In growing up in Ipswich in that period - I was five when the World War started, 10 when the war finished - I have very clear recollections of Ipswich during the war, of the American servicemen out at Amberley, we had a lot of American servicemen came and had meals at our place and Dad was a Justice of the Peace and we even had an American serviceman and an Australian girl knock him up at 10 o'clock one night wanting him to marry them because in America apparently, Justices of the Peace could marry people. Dad had to point out that wasn't the case in Australia.

But we did meet a number of American servicemen who were encouraged to stay at people's places for meals. A lot of them were country boys, not from big cities at all, and both Dad and Mum were very actively involved in all the Comforts Funds, the RSL and all the service industries to help people during the war.

In terms of the cultural and social life of the town, a few early memories I think are worth recording. First of all, my own experience with Blackstone- Ipswich Cambrian Choir. Lyla McGuire was conductress at the time, she used to come around to Blair State School where I was a pupil and give us singing lessons and then she decided to



*"I became a member of Ipswich Choral Society". Pictured rehearsing for The Merry Widow are (left to right) Patricia O'Malley, George Hogg, Betty ..., Tom Shapcott, Jean Weir and producer Jean Pratt. 1956*

have a Junior version of the Cambrian Choir so Jack and I went down to the Cambrian Hall one Saturday morning when she had the first meeting and she had a huge number of little kids there and she had us all singing and then she stopped us and she said "There is one voice which is out." No one would confess who was that voice that was out and she went through voice by voice by voice and eventually pounced on me and I was the voice that was out.

So I was expelled from the Junior Blackstone-Ipswich Cambrian Choir on my very first day. And Jack left with me, Jack actually sang perfectly well in tune. I can still remember very clearly walking home back up Denmark Hill. I think the reason I remember it was because I was very angry, I think that is the reason for the vividness of that recollection - turfed out of the Junior Cambrian Choir.

In a sense I got my revenge later on because I became a member of the Intermediate Choral Society that Myfanwy Sullivan conducted in the early 1950s when I was in my late teens. They, after a few years essentially of doing some concerts, entering for eisteddfodau, started producing musicals, and the first one we did was "Our Miss Gibbs" which must have been 1954 and then we did

"The Maid of the Mountains" and then we did a really ambitious one, "Merry Widow" and that was the last one I was involved in with the Intermediate Choral Society which eventually was split and George Hogg who was a member of that choir formed the Ipswich Orpheus Chorale a little later on.

I had known George Hogg since Grammar School. I initially went to West Ipswich State School in 1940 but in 1944, our parents transferred us to Blair State School because they weren't satisfied with the education at the Ipswich West State School, it was a very impoverished school, though rather a pretty school, the only memories I have of West Ipswich State School was we had to have evacuation classes and things like that, and they gave us rubber things to put in our mouths to bite on in case of bomb attack. We didn't have any trenches, so we used to have to go down and lie in an eroded clay bed near Little Ipswich Station and pretend that we were little bits of clay, I suppose, in case the Japanese saw us. It was all pretty amateurish.

When we transferred over to Blair State School, they had trenches and proper air raid shelters. But by that time, the worst of the war scare and war training was probably just



about over. I don't clearly remember having evacuation exercises at Blair School, although they must have had them. I suppose the first memories are the ones that stick.

Of memories of primary school, I think there are a couple of things that are important, particularly in ways that were to influence my development as a writer. The first poem I ever wrote was when I was 10. My Father was secretary of the Victory Eisteddfod so it would have been 1945 and it was a big, presumably Queensland, Eisteddfod, the first one after the war, and it was held in the Wintergarden Theatre, in the big old Wintergarden Theatre, the wonderful Wintergarden Theatre, not the one that is in its place now.

And as a judge for the literary section and verse-speaking section, was a man from the ABC in Sydney called Frank Clewlow who was the man who actually founded the ABC children's session, the Argonauts Club, a national radio program which was to be of immense importance to me. It encouraged young people, and particularly isolated young people, to write and send in their contributions, to send in their drawings, and even to send in their musical compositions which I did, and they had a series of certificates, blue certificates and purple certificates and it was based upon the Greek legend of Jason and the Argonauts and there were a series of goals you aimed for, and you got a badge when you joined and you got a "Golden Fleece" badge when you got a certain number of points and you got a Dragon's Tooth - Golden Fleece, Dragon's Tooth and Dragon's Tooth and Bar was the very highest - which I got.

But in 1945, I showed this little poem that I had written to Frank Clewlow, I'm sure Dad had pushed me into doing that, and he looked at this poem which was an absolutely horrid bit of doggerel, but the advice that he gave me was very important. He said "That's very nice dear," or words to that effect, "but your last stanza is not rhyming properly whereas all the other stanzas are rhyming properly, and if you thought a little bit more about it, I'm sure you would find a more satisfactory rhyme to give it a proper sense of finishing and you would be much more happy with the result." So I went home and of course immediately thought of a better rhyme that gave it a good clanging end and I was much happier and felt a sense of achievement. And that was an important lesson, that one should do the extra bit of work to get the craft organised and that was to influence me.

By the time I was in Grade 7 at the age of 13, I was writing much more ambitious pieces and I imagined that I would be able to have them taught in class, I was ambitious about them, and was surprised that my teacher didn't want to teach them to all the class.

The Queensland school readers of that period were actually very good, prepared in the early part of the century but they covered a wide range of stories and poems ranging from Greek and other myths and legends, some Oriental ones, some Gothic ones, Norse ones, and samples of Australian writing and poems. Looking back

on them, I think we were very lucky to have had that range and that series of invitations to read.

## Track 03

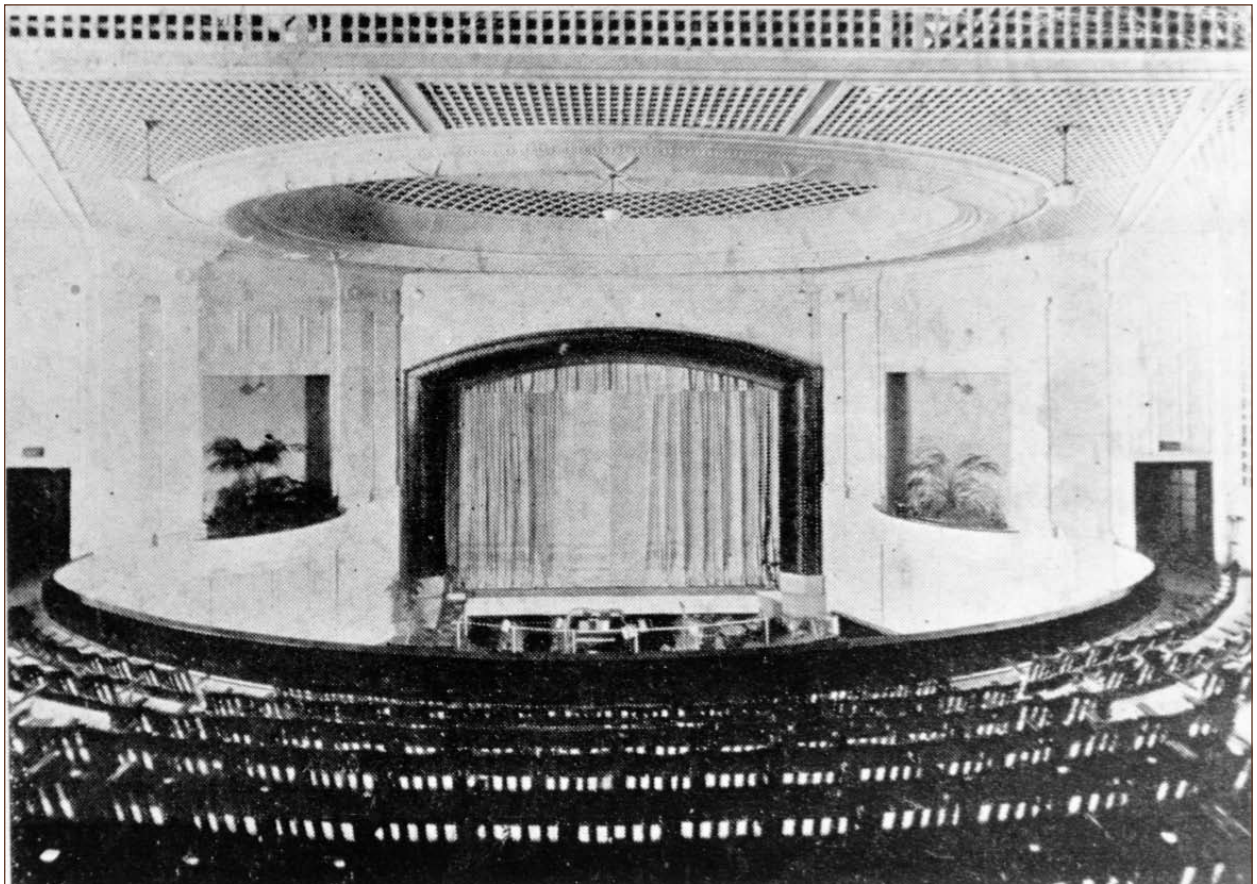
By the time I had reached Scholarship grade, Dad decided to send us to Grammar School for two years and told us we were lucky to be there for two years, he left school at Scholarship.

So 1949 and 1950, I went to the Ipswich Grammar School which was in that period of post-war slump. Most of the dynamic younger teachers had gone off to the Second World War and were replaced by older men, although in the case of one, Allan Ware, he just moved on from Senior to become a teacher, a good sportsman, he played football for Australia. So most of the teachers were pretty clapped out. There was one exception though and one I certainly would like to mention for the record and that was Charles Foggon who taught French and Latin and his wife Gwen Foggon was very interested in theatre and she had the Grammar School boys and the girls from Girls' Grammar School do a number of Shakespearian plays when I was at Grammar School and that was an important introduction.

Then actually shortly after that, in the early 50s, she started an amateur dramatic society, I'm not sure if it was part of the Little Theatre but it might have been. But one of the things I do remember was that she performed a play written by a local Ipswich resident by the name of



*Tom Shapcott and Patricia O'Malley in Maid of the Mountains, 1955*



*"The Victory Eisteddfod.... was held in the wonderful Wintergarden Theatre"  
(Photo: Interviewer's collection)*

Green who worked with the QT [*The Queensland Times newspaper*]. And it was a sort of Shakespearian version based on the Old Testament book of Esther.

Thinking back on it now - I've no longer got the script - it was probably appalling, a sort of imitation Shakespeare in high English Elizabethan language, but we were all very excited by it and we did a lavish production of it and by that stage, I was deeply into music and I provided the sound music for that production, it was in the old days of 78 records, and I still recall that the music that I used then was the Szymanowski 1st Violin Concerto which at that stage was an extremely exotic and rare piece of music, and I think the slow movement from Carl Nielsen's 6th Symphony which sort of indicates that I was by then pretty much into what seemed avant garde classical music which was my great love.

Of other early events of Ipswich in that period, one of the ones I mostly remember is Harold Blair, I can recall there was a big concert to support Harold Blair to send him to, I think, the Melbourne Conservatorium which was held on the North Ipswich playing oval and I can recall, I must have been in the Scouts at the time, we filled lots and lots of palliasses with straw because bands people from all around Queensland were all coming to play and they were giving them accommodation out in the animal stalls or something like that.

I can remember the actual concert which was out in the open air, on that oval, it was very crowded with lots of

people, and Harold Blair was treated as a local hero, there was no doubt about that, everybody was really excited with that event, that great sense of community recognition for a wonderful voice which is what I guess I remember.

I suppose in a sense, that does reflect something of the generally very tolerant attitude towards Aboriginal people in the town, there were a lot of local Aboriginal people who were sporting heroes in Ipswich at that period and Neville Bonner who ended up living two doors above us on Denmark Hill, was actually first encouraged to go into politics by my brothers Jack and Bob who were members of the Junior Chamber of Commerce, and they talked him into it.

He also started up a little business manufacturing boomerangs. It is all very ironic now, perhaps one shouldn't tell these tales in politically correct times, but Mrs Sanger across the road used to do the Aboriginal designs painted on the boomerangs and she was a very fair woman, Iris Sanger, she used to play the piano at all the local dances, but Iris used to help Nev out in those early days.

## Track 04

The Eisteddfod movement was a very important one and it channelled a lot of effort into competitive playing and I can recall as an 11 or 12-year old being one of





*Blair State School Hockey team, Ipswich Champions in 1948. Tom Shapcott is in middle row, second from the right; his brother Jack is on the left of the same row. The teacher is Blair headmaster A.J. Beck. Allan Langer, related to the famous Broncos player, is in the middle of the back row.*

about 300 people who played “The Round Dance” by Gade in interminable sequence. I think that element of attention to skill, a lot of people learned music they otherwise wouldn’t have learned and the grand events were undoubtedly the big choral items which were very much in the Victorian tradition of choral singing, Ipswich of course has this very large Welsh community and that was certainly reflected. Indeed, one of the things that I do recollect and have dined out on over many years was that Lyla McGuire used to teach us Welsh songs in Welsh at primary school, so I was able to sing “Gwlad, gwlad...” [chorus of *Land of My Fathers*] when I was at primary school and many years later, I’ve been able to spread that little bit of multi-culturalism.

I suppose the other thing of adolescence, growing up in Ipswich at the end of the 40s and beginning of the 50s, I’ve mentioned the ABC Argonauts Club and its importance that can’t be underestimated and it is very interesting that of my generation of writers and composers, a surprising number of them started, being encouraged by contributions to the Argonauts Club. A whole generation parallel with mine was much encouraged by that Club. Once television came in 1956, the ABC did try to adapt that to the new medium but it didn’t work in the same way.

And that was part of the whole change that also took place that I think is worth mentioning, the whole change in technology. In the World War, a lot of new technologies were developed which were then after the war, gradually put into peace time purposes. So by the end of the 40s, there were not only things like the Holden car, the first Australian car, and then proper refrigerators and not ice chests in the house, but the paperback book first hit Australia about 1947.

The availability at that stage of inexpensive paperback books - and a lot of them from around the world came onto the market - meant that even in Ipswich you could buy them. I was interested in poetry and music and in the early 50s, Penguin books started releasing contemporary European poets in inexpensive editions. We also started to get a lot of American literature which previously had been almost impossible to get.

The long-playing record came out. It was developed in America in 1949 and by about ‘51 or ‘52, the first long-playing records really came out in Australia and it was about ‘53 when I first bought the equipment. And again, the long-playing record suddenly, over a very short period of time, made available an enormous repertoire of music that had not been available. The great example of course

is Vivaldi of whom I think almost nothing except perhaps one three-minute tiny work might have been available in the days of 78s. Within two years of long-playing records, dozens and dozens of his concertos were made available. The Four Seasons which is now a sort of music even my rock-listening son was to buy, it's become one of those artifacts of cultural heritage. So there was an explosion of the amount and the range of music, not only in the classical repertoire but for the range of folk musics, and in those early years, a lot of recordings of poets reading their own works became available.

So I was part of the generation that saw a sudden access to an enormous cultural heritage. Similarly, the quality of colour printing improved enormously in that period so that half-reasonable reproductions of an enormous range of western European art tradition became widely accessible.

And so even in a town like Ipswich, where in one sense I think we felt a bit isolated, in another sense I was able to import thorough Ray Jones Library any books I wanted to, and have subscriptions to the New Yorker and to the Saturday Review of Literature from America, the Musical Times from England - I was able to get all of those and I was only working for about £4 a week in my clerk job in those days.

So I mention these to illustrate what was possible, in fact I ended up in the early 50s and middle 50s importing long-playing records direct from England. In order to do that, it was very difficult to send money overseas, you could send I think £4 by money order, a maximum of £4, and I used to save up for a couple of months to get enough to import these things from not only England but from France and in one case from Denmark.

So that for anyone who was interested in a particular specialist line, as I was in contemporary music, it was certainly possible if you were interested to follow up. And that was something that I don't think had been available to a previous generation. So that was part of the explosion of technology and access that occurred in that period.

Then of course in 1956, television caused further changes I mentioned the Argonauts Club virtually withered and died as a result of that and the new medium had different demands. It's very interesting I can recall when television first came to Ipswich. Before it came to Ipswich, in the evenings if you walked down any of the streets in Ipswich, you'd see people sitting on the front steps of their houses in the dark, perhaps listening to the radio which was just inside. A lot of people would go to bed very early - in a lot of houses the light would go off at 9 o'clock. People had to make their own entertainment, there was quite an amount of entertainment. My parents would occasionally have people over and they had to endure us playing the piano or singing, my older brother Bob had a flute, we'd give musical impromptu concerts. Or my parents would play the latest game, we played Canasta and then perhaps a little bit later on, in the 50s, Scrabble came out and other games, people would play card games, dice games and things like that.

Once television came, people moved inside at night time. Rooms which had never been used in houses suddenly became where people would congregate to watch the TV set. And so that grey, luminous light would appear in people's front window and from the living room which had never been used except for funerals and things like that.

It was a curious thing, I felt, in sub-tropical Ipswich because on summer nights, the insides of the houses stayed pretty hot for a long time and I broke out into a sweat almost at the thought of sitting for three or four hours watching television.

Perhaps that hastened the introduction of the other breakthrough item of technology, air-conditioning which was to become a common thing much later really, in the 60s I think was the first portable air-conditioning units were first invented and used; during the Second World War in 1943, air conditioning was first developed and experimented with on a massive scale.

## Track 05

In 1956, when I was 21, I bought my first car and that made me mobile. That meant that I could go to Brisbane and Brisbane suddenly became an accessible place. I was able to explore the delights of Brisbane. I used to go to Brisbane, my grandparents lived there when I was a kid and so we'd go occasionally for a weekend and my grandmother and aunt would perhaps take me into the Museum or very occasionally to a concert. The first opera I ever saw was just after the war, it would have been in 1946, and it was Maritana, the once-popular English opera of the 19th century which was partly written in Australia and that performance was given at the Lyceum Theatre in 1946.

And my aunt took me to see Rio Rita, a musical comedy of the '20s, about the next year perhaps, 1947.

So in a sense I was being introduced to the idea of musical theatre at a slightly more sophisticated stage, though it was still pretty raw I guess, looking back on it. However once I got my car, I was able to go regularly to orchestral concerts.

Another thing I perhaps should mention of great importance, enormous importance, in my primary school years, this would be in 1947, and that was the Queensland Government sponsored the formation of a State String Quartet. and they used to visit, I can recall them coming to Blair State School and I can recall us going to the Wintergarden Theatre to hear, not only the State Quartet but the State Orchestra in Ipswich as a primary school kid. They caused a profound effect I must say, in me. The first time I heard the orchestra, they gave us a little booklet on the instruments of the orchestra, giving a brief summary of what each instrument did or could do, what their range was, and as I was learning music at that stage, I certainly was able to interpret the musical notations. In fact, it

prompted me to start trying to compose music myself and in that period from about 1951 until '54, I certainly seriously attempted to compose music. I wrote first of all a small set of three pieces for piano but I quickly branched out and wrote a concertante work for flute and orchestra. It started off as flute and strings but I expanded it to full orchestra and a string quartet. The work for flute and orchestra, I actually sent down to Eugene Goosens who was the conductor of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra in the 1940s and he was much proclaimed as looking for new Australian composers. Unfortunately, at that stage I was so naive I didn't enclose a stamped, addressed envelope for return of the manuscript so I never got it back. I was expecting to be acclaimed as a genius, but I'm afraid I was no genius.

However that again is an illustration of what one felt was available, it was a world of very rapidly expanding possibilities and horizons, I felt in that period of the early 50s and the State String Quartet certainly introduced me to a whole range of music that otherwise would have been quite inaccessible to me. And they had a good repertoire, it was an interesting repertoire. I can still recall the works they played which ranged from Beethoven quartets, Hayden quartets, Mozart, to string quartets by Alfred Hill who was an Australian composer - born in New Zealand but lived most of his life in Australia and a piano quintet by Ernest Bloch who was then a contemporary composer who was considered very important.

So it was a repertoire that was adventurous for the period and it needs to be recorded that they came and did those things. No other state had a travelling string quartet, we were the only state that had that. and that was because one of the ministers of parliament Foley, I've forgotten his Christian name, his daughter was a professional musician, a violinist and so he had become very interested in music and in chamber music. Ernest Llewellyn was the leader of that quartet he was also in the symphony orchestra. Possibly one of the things that made it attractive for young kids at that stage was that the second violinist was quite a young man called Donald Scotts and he just looked like a blond surfer type. and he became a sort of energetic-looking role model that a 12 or 13-year-old kid could have as an alternative to sporting characters that were much-trumpeted around, and I think quite a lot of people were able to make that identification which was very good, probably one of those accidents but it was certainly something that made them more human. You felt he could give you a wink out of the corner of his eye or something like that as he was playing.

## Track 06

When I was 19, I did National Service training at Wacol (which we called Wac-ol in those days before the Yanks came, it was always called Wac-ol but their accent forced a pronunciation change). That period was the period when I finally gave up my musical ambitions. Being in isolation in camp for three months, I found that writing was very portable - you only needed a tiny notebook you could slip into your pocket and I used that to write down my reactions. It was a time of very considerable tension, it was the middle of the Cold War period, the Korean War

had just finished. When in the course of our National Service training, 1954, the Soviets exploded the first hydrogen bomb and the Americans shortly afterwards, we were sort of very forcibly fed the belief that the Third World War was on our doorsteps, it was about to happen. So there was a sense of urgency and tension throughout all that period which we now see with some cynicism but at the time, it seemed real enough because of what we were told.

And so that intensity of response, the sense of anxiety and imminent catastrophe - we all remembered pretty clearly the effects of the Second World War on our particular generation. So it was much closer to us in that sense and I naturally found the lyrical impulse to get it down in writing and particularly in the form of poetry. It was what influenced me greatly.

Why poetry? Well, I think poetry because of the intensity and concentration that poetry provides, the concentrated essence of things and that was what appealed to me. I was trying to write a bit of prose but really it was that concentration within as few words in its telling as possible that appealed to me and particularly in the case of, say during national service when you jot these things down on the lavatory or something like that - in odd moments here and there.

And after I came out of National Service, that was when I decided first of all that I wanted to continue to write poetry and be published and then I decided I should learn a bit more about what other poets were writing, who were my contemporaries, that is other Australian poets and so I started reading the work of other writers.

One of the ironies of this whole incident was in that very same intake of National service training, quite unknown to me, was a contemporary who was to become a very well-known poet and is now an even better known novelist Rodney Hall. He was in that intake at Wacol that I was at, but he was in the band, he played the clarinet, and so I never met him. Rodney edited the magazine of that intake, he played in the band in a cushy job, I was a corporal in the engineers. That was ironic because here was I, a clerk, pretending to teach these blokes from the coal mines of West Moreton or Mt Isa how to handle PE2 or gelnite, detonators, things that they were doing every day. I always considered that a very warming experience, I found their sense of humour and their humanity, their tolerance if you like and their general geniality was a very life-affirming experience, I found it a very positive experience in that sense - and so they could quite tolerate me.

There were a few people who were hopeless and what have you. I think there is a great psychological difference that could happen in a situation like that. I was very fortunate in that the natural peer figures within our group - we were essentially in a tent of about 24 people - the natural peers in that group automatically came out and one was a lanky guy, I think he ended up as a builder or something like that, another one was a bloke who was a miner, and they were just natural peer figures that people looked up to and they were fairly mature. But had such figures who became the natural leaders within the group been otherwise, I can certainly imagine how the whole thing could change. There was one guy who wanted to



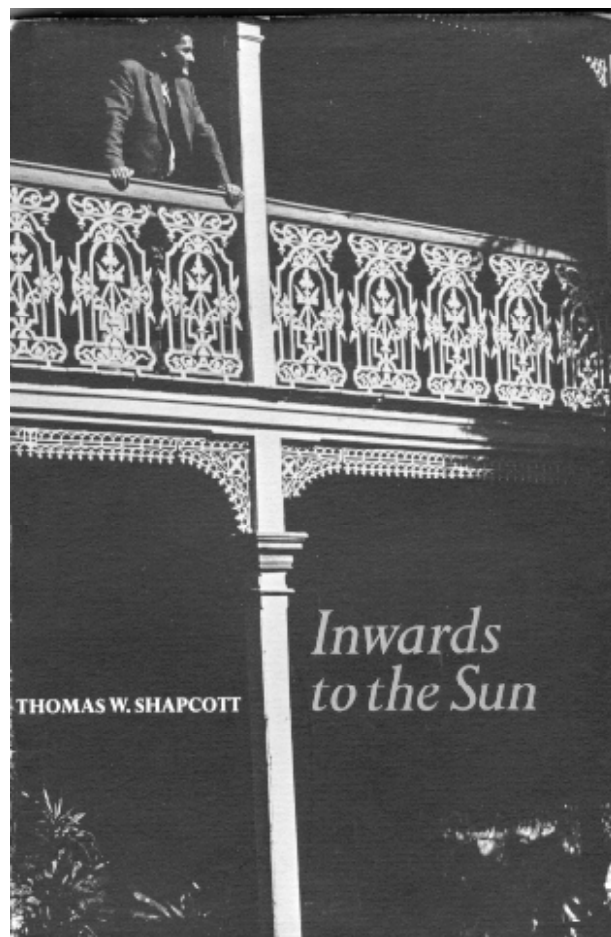
be a leader, and he was a bully and a coward, and would have loved to exert the bullying aspect and he just was always left on the edge because of the circumstance that there were a couple of laconic, fairly level-headed sensible blokes who just told him to shut up.

## Track 07

So on the whole, the experience of National Service was an interesting one and it focused my ambitions on writing and so I then set about learning the craft more conscientiously, learning what my contemporaries were doing, and in those days, the Sydney Bulletin was a weekly national newspaper which was publishing a lot of contemporary poetry and so I started submitting to them and after a while, they'd reject and occasionally, they started writing a few little notes of encouragement on the bottom of the reject slip and then in 1956, my first poem was published in the Bulletin. Almost at the same time, a literary quarterly called Southerly published a set of six of my poems and put my name in very big print on the front cover "Thomas W. Shapcott" and underneath it "Six poems by a new Australian poet" and that actually changed my life, to get that sort of attention in one span like that gave me the entree so whenever I sent any poems anywhere else, my name was known and that is the biggest problem of a new writer, to get even the editors to recognise your name, because normally you would have one poem published here and six months later another poem published somewhere else and two months later probably somewhere else and it really takes time even for editors and people who are trying to follow emerging talent to start to register a new name. But by having six poems presented in that way, it really made a big difference.

I was working as an accountant all this time. After I had done Junior, I wanted to be a journalist but my father said "Well, there aren't many jobs available in journalism at the moment" which was true in 1951. "Why don't you go to business college and learn shorthand and typing and that will give you some skills".

So I went to a business college in Brisbane for six months and absolutely hated it with a loathing, but did learn typing and as I was a pianist, I was able to type very quickly and got a very high speed, 130 words a minute. I was just getting up to speed in shorthand when after six months I said "I can't stand this any longer" and so Dad suggested I should perhaps go and work in his office and earn a bit of my own income. This was of course the trap. I had won a scholarship for an accountancy course when I was at Grammar School and Dad had said at the time "Accept it, you never know when it might be useful" and at the time I had said "Oh no, I'm going to be a journalist". However six months after I had been working in his office, Dad quietly reminded me of this scholarship that I had and by this stage, I had realised that journalism wasn't quite the glamorous "Clear the front pages, I have a story for you" sort of thing, it was more likely to be reporting the local Fire Brigade Board meeting.



*The cover of "Inwards to the Sun" published in 1969. Tom Shapcott is pictured on the upper verandah of his home Belmont in Ipswich.*

So I was tempted by I guess the money, not that I was paid very much, when I started off it was £3/1/- a week pay of which I paid £1 board to my parents and spent the rest on gramophone records and books. But that was how I finally drifted into accountancy and then I married in 1960. I had nearly finished my exams and my wife Margaret said "For goodness sake Tom, why don't you finish that last exam and get it out of the way" and so in fact I spent my honeymoon swotting - amongst other things - and sat for the last exam and then once I was qualified, I went into partnership with my father and I stayed in the practice. He died in 1972 and I kept up the practice until 1978. By that stage, the accountancy practice was a commercially-based Ipswich practice and I was amongst other things secretary of the local Fire Brigade Board, auditor of Moreton Shire Council, but I had started to specialise in taxation for people in the arts and academics and people with international travel, so I had expanded to a rather more interesting field in accountancy.

However in 1976, I was in New York and I had some sort of an attack on a bus and I thought I was going to die and it gave me quite a fright and amongst other things, I decided I did not want to spend whatever life I had left doing other people's income tax returns. So I then decided to apply to the fairly newly-formed Literature Board for

a three-year writer's grant which were then available and if I got one, I would take that as an indication to go that way. I got one, and I tried to convince myself at the time I would keep up the accountancy practice and only go to the office one day a week and spend the rest of the week writing, which was absolutely impossible. I realised I had been manoeuvring myself to get into a position where I had to make a decision. And I made that decision to sell the practice and so that was when my accountancy career as such finished and since then, from '78 to the end of '83, I was writing full-time and started writing fiction, and then from the end of '83 until '90, I was appointed Director of the Literature Board of the Australia Council in Sydney and then from '90 I freelanced for another two years and then became Director of the National Book Council in Melbourne which is my job now.

## Track 08

But getting back to the Ipswich years, I suppose that experience of being an accountant from, well really 1951 I started as a junior clerk and intermediate clerk, so '51 to '78, I had what I now realise is a remarkably interesting experience of contact with fellow people in Ipswich in that professional capacity and what I discovered is when people come in to talk about their taxation, about numbers and figures, they end up confessing their whole lives.

So I met a great range of people covering all sorts of jobs and professions, lots of human interest stories and because they were initially expressed to me in terms of things like money, I think it must be a bit like how a priest must feel having confession, people start to tell you their business and end up telling you a lot more.

In some ways, I think that gave me a very rich resource base which I was to really use many years later, 10 years after I finished accountancy before I could start to use some of those stories which came out in my first book of short stories called "Limestone and Lemon Wine". Limestone of course is the original name for Ipswich so they were nearly all based upon stories that people had told me in their income tax.

In some way, most of my contemporaries who were writers probably became academics in that period. There was a great change then in a sense of education. I mentioned earlier, my father told me and Jack that we were lucky to have two years at secondary school. By the time Jim my younger brother who is five years younger, came through, he automatically went right through secondary education and on to tertiary education and actually became a teacher for a while. And that was just taken for granted, it wasn't even questioned, in those five years there was a huge change. And that of course was the influence of the federal government under Robert Menzies who in the 1950s, introduced a major program to improve education standards in Australia. It was clearly percolating through our whole culture and Jim was able to get the benefits of that.

I've often wondered what would have happened had I gone on to University. The only slightly chilling aspect of that was when I was 13, at the Eisteddfod, I entered a poem in the Eisteddfod and won it. Cynthia Kinne won the Under-16 Poem, her father was headmaster at the Booval [Silkstone] State School and they were published in the Queensland Times, this would have been in 1949. Many years later, I read them again and I thought my poem was pretty embarrassing but Cynthia's poem was in fact a very fine poem indeed, the sort of poem which could easily be reproduced in any contemporary anthology. In other words, she was a bit older but she clearly had a great deal of talent and very real creativity. I remember speaking to Cynthia a few years later, because she went straight on to University and I kept some contact with her and she said to me that while she was at University, her critical faculties were so honed and refined that she was far too critical of anything she tried to write so her creative side just withered. and sometimes one wonders would that have happened if I had gone straight on to University, perhaps I was lucky in a sort of way that I did not go on. Many years later, a lot of my contemporaries did go on to become academics and academics as poets by the 60s and 70s was sort of the norm, whereas when I was starting to write poetry in the early 50s, most published Australian poets were actually journalists. So there had been that great seachange in overall culture and I envied that for a long time, but at a certain stage, I realised that there was a sort of predictability, there was a sameness tended to happen among academic writers and that was when I really started to realise that the life experiences I had had as an accountant, the human experiences, were actually a very valuable resource and that resource is still probably barely tapped but I feel it is there.

## Track 09

Ipswich has been a recurring theme in my work. Sometimes it is only a shadow, for instance my last novel is called "Mona's Gift" and it is really about an aunt of mine whose name was Mona, Mona McPherson was her actual name, who came from Ipswich and the shadow of Ipswich in that is first of all in her recollections of her growing up in the book. But also, the movement of someone who comes from a place like Ipswich moving into a place like Sydney and one of the most perceptive reviews of that book picked on exactly that point, that the book is a chronicle of how people move from provincial areas, regional areas, into the city and how they have to do a life course in learning the tricks of the big town. And there are other aspects, I mean I completely invented the main male figure who is a doctor, who is in fact a member of the famous Stephen family of England, the Bloomsbury Stephens, like Virginia Woolf and what have you, but who had had as a young man in the novel, an uncle living in south-east Queensland, he had a farm, and that experience in Canungra and places like that had equipped him with the sort of perspective which he was able to bring into focus in the Kokoda episodes, the

Kokoda Trail later on, so there was a backgrounding of this part of the world in that book.

I've a book of poems due for publication in September this year 1995 which I had originally called "Inside Itchy Park" - my publisher thought that was too scratchy a title so it is now called "The City of Home".

But Itchy Park is the name we as kids always gave to Baines Park which is a stone's throw from where I am sitting at the moment describing this.

It is a whole volume which is a sort of organised whole, it has a series of short poems about Itchy Park or the neighbourhood which recur throughout, sonnets and meditations. The sonnets are the Itchy Park ones, and the meditations are fairly much - most of them are, in some way or another, meditations of having grown up in Ipswich. A couple of them move away from this but most of them are about that experience.

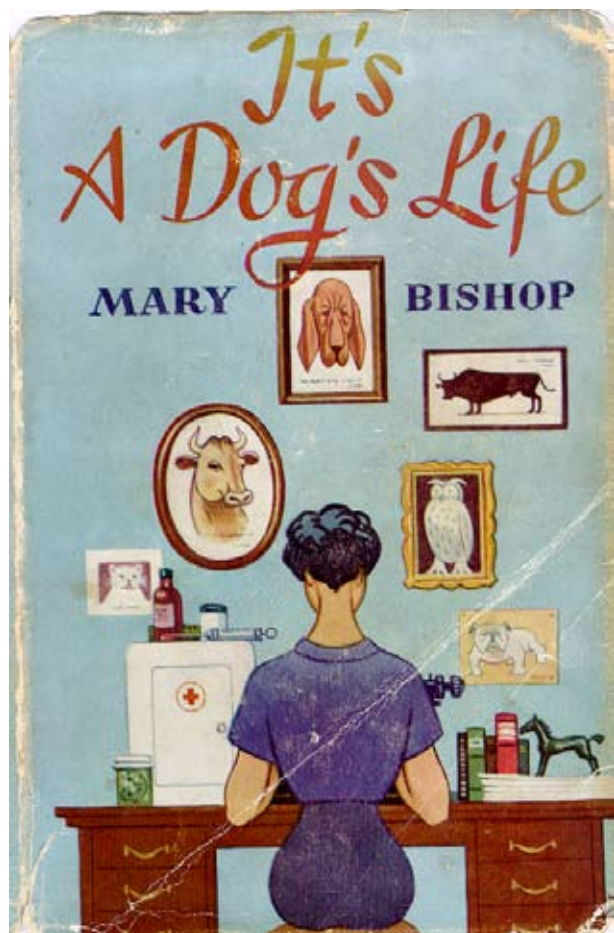
Partly I suppose, because in researching the novel *Mona's Gift* which is largely set in the Second World War, it did trigger my memory of a lot of my own experience of the Second World War in Ipswich and I wanted to get some of that down in some of these poems. So the shadow of the Second World War appears very much as well as the living-in-Ipswich experience. I think one certainly has the greatest treasury or resource bank from where ever one has lived in the formative years up to the age of 25. There

can be other earthshattering experiences and things like that happen, but sometimes it takes a long time to be able to know how to use some of these experiences because any writing involves a bit of craft, a bit of trickery, a bit of polish, a bit of organisation and sometimes you can get that down in a raw state but very often, it needs to go through a process of meditation. I like to think there is a computer bank in the brain that actually does a lot of that work for you when you are asleep and as I've got older, I've come to rely more upon that thought process.

In Ipswich when I was growing up, there was certainly no real literary group. There were a number of people who were interested in English literature, writing. I was slightly unfortunate in that when I started Ipswich Grammar School in 1949, a very interesting man Cecil Hadgraft, who had been teaching at the Grammar School had just left to take up a position in the English Department at Queensland University. He taught my older brother Bob and his son was actually a very good friend of my young brother Jim. So the Hadgraft family were here around but I was never actually taught by Cec Hadgraft. He was the first person who wrote a literary history of Australia which was for the general public, in the early 1960s it would have been. He was a very interesting man, a scholar and quite a wit. I did eventually meet him and he was very helpful.

The other person who later on was to give me some encouragement was Professor Andrew Thompson of Queensland University who came from Ipswich. He knew my father quite well and when my first book was published in 1961, dad asked Andy Thompson, "What do you think of it?" I think Dad was probably embarrassed about the whole business. Andy spoke extremely encouragingly about my potential and then about a year later I got a letter from him out of the blue saying "I just re-read your book after 12 months and I still think it's the most exciting first volume I've read for many years". So, I got that sort of encouragement but there was no writing group. There was no writing group one could meet and I felt very isolated in Ipswich.

When I started writing I would probably show Mum my early poems and she'd say, "That's nice dear." And sometimes she'd say, "Go and show that to your father." But really that was about the level of encouragement so my relationship to writing in the 1950s was by submitting things to publishers. And essentially *The Bulletin*. And so it was very strange the first time I had a poem published in the *Bulletin*. I excitedly bought the paper and showed it to my parents and my uncle then I couldn't think of anyone else to show it to. I probably showed it to my brothers. I've often mentioned the story of when my first book was published in 1961, it's called *Time on Fire*. I showed it to Jack my twin brother. Jack said, "Yes. How much do you make out of the sale of a book like that?" And I said, "It sells for 21 shillings, a guinea, and I get ten per cent so that's two shillings." And so Jack said, "Well, I'm not going to buy a copy of the book but here's your two shillings." That was sort of the level of family support.



*"Lucille King had published a very successful book..."*  
(Lucille King used the pen-name Mary Bishop)



The Commonwealth Literary Fund which was operating in those days, used to have a writer's tours scheme. I remember the first time a writer came to Ipswich - it was probably about '56. That was David Robotham originally from Toowoomba living in Brisbane and a journalist there. He was the first published poet that I actually ever met. There were over the years, a couple of writers I got to know quite well personally. There was Helen Haenke who many years later started writing poetry. She published in fact, two very fine books of poetry in the late 1960s, early 70s before she died of cancer. I got to know Helen fairly well in the early 60s. She had started by publishing short stories in the Women's Weekly and then moved to more ambitious things. She was a good friend of Mrs King - Lucille King - who was the wife of a local vet. She came from the midwest of the United States. She had published a very very successful book in a style very popular in the late 1940s called ..she published three books actually... the one that I remember I think was called Life in the Dog's House. It's a series of anecdotal stories about being a vet's wife after the style of a book called the Egg and I which had become enormously popular which was also based on sort of anecdotal tales of someone who grew eggs - it was made into a movie. Her book sold umpteen thousand copies overseas in England and America and she was sort of known in Ipswich. I think Helen Haenke and Lucille King saw quite a lot of each other and they might have formed some little group or coterie of women writers or something like that but they were an older generation than I was and I wasn't encouraged to be a part of that at all.

It was a very isolated occupation and as one thinks of it, Ipswich has a surprising number of people who had literary connections. For instance, on the other side of Denmark Hill where we lived, was Sydney May who was a music specialist. He had published a book on the history of Waltzing Matilda which is still considered to be one of the best accounts of the origins of Banjo Patterson's poem. So he was there in his little corner. They were all an older generation so he might have had some contact with people like the Haenkes but they were not people I knew or met. Of my generation, there was no-one apart from Cynthia Kinne who went to Queensland University and then went down to Tasmania.

It is difficult to think of anyone who was a contemporary of mine and I was probably in a sense isolated. In another sense, I had a very active social life. My father was the local District Commissioner of Scouting and we'd been involved in Scouts movement which at that stage was quite lively and interesting. Then, we became very much involved in the Choral Society and we were members of various social clubs. At that stage, there were regular social dances at the croquet hall that we used to organise, sometimes at the Cambrian Hall that we organised either for the choir or one of the other social groups, the tennis group or what have you. But within all those people I encountered, I suppose the musical performers would probably be a fair number of them because there was a lot of performance of music in Ipswich in those years.



*Tom Shapcott in Itchy Park, 1995*

## Track 10

**I'll read some of the shorter poems, some of the Itchy Park poems from the 1995 volume called "The City of Home". This is the first poem that I wrote about Itchy Park.**

It was a triangle of sloping ground with a dozen starved trees.  
We called it Itchy Park. There was a pole  
with iron chains and a ring you held to whirl  
like a chair- o-plane. There was a splintery seat we'd use  
to jump from or get up into the brittle branches - these  
never led anywhere much. It was a scraggy, dull  
landmark but it was on our way to school.  
It had bindy-eye and every other needle grass.

Driving up Denmark Hill, a visitor, what  
would you notice of Itchy Park? You'd speed uphill  
without a glance. I think I would as well  
except that the swinging pole has gone - heat  
from a submerged anger complicates the loss.  
Despite our denials, we are trapped by ownership,  
whose other name we guess.

**This is a slightly longer one but it's about the same area of Itchy Park and it's called An Ordinary Party.**

What was the year of Jacqui Finimore's party?  
I think I was ten. Her dad was there.

I scratched for images: plump Jacquie with her laugh  
and her excitement; Mrs Finimore, smaller than us,  
birdlike and big eyed who ate only sweet lollies;  
their back yard rolling down hill to a clump of tree  
probably mango where we tumbled and explored  
though it was perfectly ordinary, just the same as ours  
(loquat trees too, acalypha, hibiscus, bindy-eye).  
And. yes, her dad, there to keep us in check.  
He was "the dentist". Though he grinned  
we knew what it was like to have your mouth opened  
and probed, and in his smile was the clench of the drill.

Everyone in town knew Jim Finimore had returned  
from the War and the Japs after missing out  
Jacqui's first school years. He was not home  
for the earlier birthdays so even beyond gobbling cakes  
and jellies there was something. But he was an ordinary dad,  
all our dads looked old. He laughed and joked -  
that's what grown ups did at parties. Merle, his wife,  
was the starved one, the bird one, the nervous stranger  
who looked as if drawn from gut and gristle. Jacqui seemed  
more the mum, bossing us around with her lovely big voice.  
Her mother stayed inside protected from wind and noise.  
It was an ordinary party, one out of a small town childhood,  
crammed with sweet things in the sugar rationing years.  
Jim Finimore for nearly as long as I remember  
was to be the town's mayor.

Thinking back to that party  
in their house edging Itchy Park, I hear the overtones  
of a theme so taken for granted, it was a gift,  
the melodic scales of everyday in a rough and tumble garden.  
Jim Finimore sang the energy of greedy happy kids  
being part of the bunch with his only daughter  
as if three years in Changi and on the Burma Thailand Railway  
were merely the ground base. The gatepost was leaning  
and there was guttering that had to be cleaned.  
Now he was back he better get on with it. As quick as bamboo  
piercing a stony outcrop the healing cover grew  
and perhaps only his starved, possibly anorexic wife,  
if there were the bad nights and the nightmares, ever knew.



**And this is a second Itchy Park poem.**

The von Losberg house off Itchy Park had an attic.  
Through the front door sometimes I caught sight of the little stair.  
The big yard was fenced solidly, we took stables and sheds,  
the shade tree and the dark fowl pens for granted.  
The house was austere and neat and I always loitered passing there.  
We were never asked in. On the park swing, we went on to make  
ghosts and adventures.

Old Mr von Losberg was prim  
in his homburg hat and waistcoat with his gold chain  
and his was the only attic in this part of town.  
They kept to themselves. It was The War. Their name  
shortened to Losberg dropping the imperious “von”.  
Thistles and weeds began to appear on their lawn.

**I'll just read a couple more. This one's called “Near Itchy Park” and it's a place now called Villa Maria and has been destroyed.**

**Near Itchy Park**

The Big House down the street had walls, not a fence.  
The gates were cast iron and scraped the drive  
in an arc, rutting the sandy gravel to give  
it emphasis. It was a place where “diligence”  
once meant a carriage as well as the gardener, cook and stable boy.  
The gateposts were what you took  
in first as you passed on your bike. They were immense.  
And on top, each side, an heraldic lion held its shield  
carved deftly in sandstone. After that, the lawn,  
the bright flower beds, the borders, the bunya pine  
and the drive set the Big House apart in its magic field.  
Except that the back wall was also the wall of a cell  
with a high barred window. Who lived there? No one would tell.

**I'll just read one from the end of the book. This one I've called Anzac Park.**

**Anzac Park**

All parks have their monument. Its a stake in the heart  
that tethers them or wards off subdivision.  
In Itchy Park, the odalisque I'd almost forgotten  
listed the names of the First World War. They were Our Part  
but we picked the black lettering of their initials out  
from the marble. The names followed much the same pattern  
as our roll call at school, though some had been lost or forgotten.  
We weren't the first, it took others before us to start.  
But there was a time when dad got us all up out of bed  
to join the Anzac Service at Itchy Park.  
Flags and uniforms, and in the half dark  
a bugle sharp as a penknife gouging the dead  
out of their silence and flinging them into the dawn.  
The bugle wept. Itchy Park offered the names up, every one.