

Diary entries - June 1, 1943 to September 19, 1943

June 1

Last night I came back to the boarding house half doubting for no reason that I was shifting into the other room. But the moment I reached the door there was the glow of a fire kindly lit all ready for me. It was a minute or two before I saw a glow over the mantelpiece, and realised my books were now behind the sliding doors of the case there, instead of in the wardrobe, a welcome surprise, though some of the books are too tall for any of the shelves and must lie down. I must put my H and R texts [*his textbooks for his accountancy studies*] on the highest shelf, to stand them up, though I hope the remoteness of their position there will not make reference still more infrequent.

Of course I had some misadventures with the fire during the evening. The fire, in fact, at one stage, was quite put out about it, but long suffering Mrs Foley got it going again, and with the bucket of chips I kept it bright.

The fireplace and the book case, the easier-to-grip lino, the sofa (though it is nothing out of the ordinary still it's a sofa), a convenient door handle by the bed to hang my trousers in their press form and in some respects the increased size of the room and the triple windows, make it far preferable to the other room.

August 3

I have decided to strictly enforce the original idea with which I started this book – a daily write up. Lord knows what there will be, but however flat or fluting, there is going to be something.

There will be some use to me in these memories – they will fix a few things on paper. It sometimes frightens me when I think how little I had to remember, and how badly I remember it. Once I could have named the approximate date and

duration of every trip up of Maurice and Sidy [*his nephews*] – I think I still might. I had the first thirty odd destroyers lost off by heart and now I don't know whether we've lost 100 or 200. The very fact that I remembered this is not merely my affection for destroyers, but the fact that I had so few things worth remembering.

This will be something to re-read, there will be some things in it to recall with gladness – if it survives, and escapes the fate of all that verse. It's about a month now since I delved into the dusty piles of papers in my blue safe and hunted for the rolled up collection, which must have numbered a good 200, of verses, the first half (approximately) written out from the original, the second half in the draft and irreplaceable. At first they were going to be on the second shelf, then they were going to be in the box under my table, then they might be in one of my drawers. Then it dawned on me with increasing certainty that I must have burnt them that time a couple of months ago when, impatient to get all the rubbish burned in an afternoon (impatient in vain), I crammed dozens of rolled up correspondence school assignments into the fire with scarcely a glance – but enough I'm sure, to have identified even the drawing paper outer folds of my verses. God knows what aberration made me miss them. I only know that it was a feeling of discontented helplessness I mustered up in my only half convinced mind, the same I feel now. For they could be no where else than the places I looked, and however crammed and stacked they are, I went through them again and again, longingly fingering and prying into those other, contemporary rolled-ups – the 'museum of futility' Those verses from June 1938 to January or February 1939 may in the main be replaced from their scattered drafts (such as still exist, and the fair proportion do exist) if I only have the heart to hunt them out someday and write them up – as I had meant so long to re-write the whole business. But those from then on to about March 1940, which rightly, or wrongly, or immaterially, I value more, were almost all, if not all, in the draft.

Well, this leaves me little time to say anything about to-day, but that doesn't matter. Listen: I took my coat and was glad; it started to spray after I got into the train and I

turned my coat inside out, shiny side out. She was cold, a wind that went right through you. It rained and blew on and off all day; once the sun shone. I was glad of those briquettes.

Wednesday August 4

This morning the sky was beautifully clear and blue and the sun gave promise of soon warming the air. When I got out at the station somebody held the door open for me. It was Mr Brown, the auditor, bluffly smiling. Later he came to my compartment with a message for 'Shoey'. A few months more and he will once again be slashing green ink through my ineradicable erasures and reproducing my altered figures in green. Poor damned me. I do hope I'm not still there then. But I will be. Holiday time will be my best chance to catch another job, and if I have 'em in November or December it will be NBG for another job – walking out right when the season [*at the canner*]) is beginning.

This morning Mrs Foley took me into June's room and suggested I move into it. As usual my mind took flight and all I could say was that it was out of doors – that is my only objection, the uncomfortable cold-catching treks to the bathroom and the meal table in all weathers, only I didn't manage to explain that. She was disappointed, she must have been counting on putting two people into my room. I suppose I'll end up paying more for it. It's worth it, to have the room to myself. Only, I wish that room of June's was connected with the house. It's nice and quiet.

All day, spasms of windily cold sunshine alternated with bursts of windily freezing rain. Frank Dummett reckons it rained ice on the bus this morning coming down from Toc [*Tocumwal*]. The last three days have been very bitter. The rivers are beginning to rise at last. I hope they turn on a show for me – not one that causes any damage, of course.

Well that's enough for to-night. I'd better get on with my work.

Friday August 6

I was unable yesterday to keep up my intention of writing this up every day, as there wasn't time before the pictures and of course it was beddo after them. This will probably be the case every Thursday, but as there isn't likely to be anything memorable save the pictures, Friday will do duty for Thursday.

Last night I saw 'Swamp Water'....

As I climbed the steps a tall overcoated figure said 'How are y', Les.' It was Ron James, who left the office in December, a month after I came. ...Ron came along to where I was sitting at the right hand end, the place I always make for to get a leaning post for my crutches.

I am still too unused to pictures – I've been perhaps 15 times this year – to be able to criticise pictures properly, so in general I enjoy most leads and a high proportion of supports. [*Lester writes crits of Swamp Water and Scattergood, the first of thousands*]

Sunday August 8

There is really no excuse for not writing anything yesterday, so first thing I am sitting out in front – to do yesterday's quiet chronicle.

Yesterday morning, up late betimes as usual on that glorious day of leisure, in spite of all resolutions to get down to Thompson's early. [*Lester did the books for this Shepparton shop*]. A long long drawn breakfast, a period of messing about till my trunk was packed and lugged up to the front veranda, then out under a beautiful sky and through town pleasantly sunlit went to Thompson's. There I practically finished ruling up and heading the new general ledger – get out of that cloud, you damned sun – between tales of the week's doings.

When I got back to Foley's I had to unpack my raincoat.

Ron called for me in the producer-driven-taxi, and the train didn't take long in coming. It was amazingly full, for there is nothing on this week-end, I think. Spying an empty seat and luggage rack I decided the 'reserved' no longer applied and guess was right.

At Tally [*Tallygaroopna*] Dad and Maurice met me, but Maurice got on and went up to Wunghnu. He hopped in so quickly we didn't even say hullo. Dad had a sore foot and walked so painfully slow I almost lost my balance [*Lester is on crutches*] keeping back with him.

Monday August 9

I'd like to write of the beauty of the morning and the day, but my fire is wee small embers and there's no coke in the tin and the air grows old. So I'm off to beddy-byes and all the sentences I had fashioned...as I came down in the train this morning, must wait on other Mondays.

Tuesday August 10

To-night I have been checking the Tally Red Cross Accounts, and have about half finished them. I'll complete them to-morrow night.

Wednesday August 11

The weather continues perfect, that is, by day. Night is frosty of course, and when I go out to the taxi in the morning the frost claws every blade of grass, and cakes the posts. I notice more and more wattles every day, on the train going to Mooroopna, and from the bus coming home. There is something inexpressibly gladsome in the way wattles smile out as you come on them.

Going up to get my ticket this morning I saw Terry Hill and Verna Daish. He didn't see me, though I looked across at him twice from a couple of yards off. Somepun

tells me Terence didn't want to. Being me, I acted on that supposition straight away and didn't draw his attention.

Thursday August 12

[*When he reached the cannery*] there was another supply train in the station yard, which means a long walk round. ...the supplies were all motor vehicles of one kind and another – all Greek to me, American rather -, most of them heavy trucks, some covered, a few ambulances. A few soldiers walked along the length of the train on the ground, I didn't notice their uniforms but their voices were American.

Saturday August 14

Last night Mrs Dummett brought a friend in for tea. During the evening she apparently collected another friend or two, and from her room came increasingly loud laughter and talk, mixed up with the sound of four year old Irene hopping and thumping about. ..they flocked out about nine o'clock. I hoped they had gone for the night, and that Mrs Dummett would only come home in the wee small hours, to bed. But about eleven o'clock, I suppose – I was in bed and didn't look at the luminous dial of my clock – they tramped in, and for an age they made merry.

They didn't disturb me all the time, it was the occasional upsurge of their coarse voices, their clumsy movements, that kept me from going to sleep or roused me from the down grade to a doze. At such times I would wonder that Mrs Foley tolerated it, knowing her as I do.

Once I tried to imagine her in the other room, feeding a covered fire of impatience, with the fluctuating noise from the room across the corridor, till that powder-barrel Irish temper should suddenly flash off, as I had so often seen it.

Still no peace. (Not a sound from Irene. What a hardened little veteran she must be.) There were clinkings and clinkings and clinkings of bottles being shifted, and

sliding noises. Mrs Dummett tramped down the corridor, taking the bottles out to the car.

This morning, when I was finishing packing my case, Mrs Dummett knocked on Mrs Foley's door, and apparently began the reconciliation. They're queer creatures these racing people and their women, imitation volcanoes that a night's sleep can douse.

At Thompson's, Mr and I got a lot further with the question of his tax return. Ken [*his son*] has now arrived at Mildura and begins flying on Monday.

He drove me home, talking politics, a subject I had raised by quoting the Smith's Philosopher quip that we would have a democracy – on August 21st from 8 am to 8 pm. He likes Mr McEwen, as I do. I think I'll vote UAP-CP in the Senate since I think Beurepaire may be a good man.

Back at the boarding house, I had another long wait for my taxi, which didn't pick me up till some minutes after the train came in. Next week I'll change my practice; instead of going back to the boarding house and waiting for a taxi, I'll go on from Thompson's and let the taxi just pick up my case. This will avert the danger of missing the train and will give me longer at Thompson's.

Monday August 16

Another day missed, but who cares. Yesterday I put in reading, as the wireless battery was on the verge of conking. I wish they could get the wireless into Shep.

However, I must get to work. I've lost the best part of a week chiefly due to that Red Cross job and it's half past eight now.

They've had another beer up tonight, all in it, Bill [*Foley*], Frank and Mrs Dummett, George Clark and Mrs Foley with Irene providing a very noisy

accompaniment, either skipping and wanting to be watched, or wanting to be star talker.

They got quite vulgar at one stage when George went down the yard. Jests about playing with yo-yo's flew thick and fast. It's remarkable just how 'by Jesus', 'Christ', and that old stand-by 'bugger' flew round among them. Of course Bill has always been foul mouthed and Mrs by no means dainty. But the pace certainly quickens when they're drunk.

Listening to them, I feel glad that I was brought up to look on drink as an evil, and that reason has always given me an aversion to it which, no matter what the arguments for it in moderation, will keep me from ever touching it at all. I would very much like to see drinking die out, which it won't, or die down to a moderation which can offend no one, - that people didn't drink at all would would very much like to see drinking die out, which it won't, or die down to a moderation which can offend no one, - that people didn't drink at all would please me much better than their moderation. However, since it won't die out it's a case of live and let live. They're welcome while they don't break in upon me. They're adults. Beddo.

Tuesday August 17

The wattles are an unceasing delight. They grow by the railway line, they glimpse from amid the timber beside it, they lean over the Goulburn clambering down its banks to the water. They love the watercourses. And do I love them.

Friday August 20

I was glad I was going to the pictures last night as one more far from amusing piece of domestic disharmony was making up between Bill and Mrs Foley.

When I had got to bed I was drifting off to sleep when I heard steps along the passage (Bill's)...

He wasted no time, but took a flying leap into his very filtheist profanity. ‘Fucking’ and ‘Bastard’ and (impotent attempt at stringing insults together when he finds it so hard to string an ordinary phrase together) ‘slut of a thing, you are’. All his wild accusations of laziness and unhelpfulness and stinginess came in again, and once more, but with so deadly a fury in it I just about believed it, that one about bloody well clearing out in the morning. ..she could run her own bloody house.

She apologised to me this morning, which she needn’t have, for in almost any quarrel, whatever rubs her own hot temper may have given, Bill turns so foully abusive and violent I lose any sympathy for him. Yet it would take a long long while for me to get to dislike him, for, like Mrs Foley, he gives me a very good spin. It’s difficult not to warm to him as he diligently does out the house of a Saturday morning, though in an hour or two the probability is he will be on another soul-scarring binge, and the peace of Poor Mrs Foley will be shattered for the best part of another weekend. And when he comes in to set the kindling alight when I am dressing after my shower, with his companionable ‘How’s Lester,’ then follows it up with the coke, how could I feel a really hard spot for him? ..he just looks a still tough, time-battered, slightly cynical mouthed little jockey. However, the effect of his drinking is showing now more perceptibly.

Saturday August 21

It rained steadily during the night and sounds as sweet as ever. I hated getting up more than usual. I can take a lot of rain when I’m in bed. I never liked any music better to drowse off to.

Mrs Dummet and Irene were up early, awaiting Frank’s arrival. They were to drive down. Irene was wildly excited. It was only her second trip to the races. Frank was too much on edge even to chew a piece of toast. (Hanging onto the race results a boring minute to-night I heard his name once – second in what sounded like the main event.)

The Foleys urged them to take time to vote before they left, to save messing round in Melbourne with absentee votes.

[Lester goes to vote. In a note written many years later he says 'about two elections later, still in my 20's, I began my life-long practice of voting Labor'.]

Sunday August 22

Well, the election has gone the way I expected, with an even bigger landslide than I half expected. I can't say I'm very sorry, neither am I specially pleased.

Monday August 23

At Shepparton an air force man, with a voice which I think was born somewhere in the British Isles, and who was probably well into his thirties, put a tremendous conglomeration of luggage and kit on both racks, then saw it was a ladies compartment. In spite of our assurances that there would be no trouble these times, he took it all down.

Thursday August 26

I have a new cold – that is, a fresh graduation in the winter long cold – and that and the rain decided for me that I would not see 'The Men in Her Life.'

Wednesday September 1

It's days since I touched this book and I'm not much in the mood now. I want to get back to 'The Brothers Ashkenazi' which Mrs Walker lent me at the weekend, and which has occupied much of my spare time since.

Val [*his sister*] landed home Saturday night looking very fit, and to my taste, prettier than she ever looked. She is very happy at Gosford [*with the WAAF*] save that, due to the shifts, she only gets two unbroken nights' sleep a week and can't sleep in the daytime.

Dud [*his brother Ulva*] came in to see me last night. I thought he'd have stayed with Roughies [*his sister Daisy and her sons Maurice and Sid*] but he spent the afternoon with them – he came up Monday – and came straight through on the train. He must have had tea up the street – Mrs Foley passed a remark on that this morning. He's a flight-sergeant now, learning of it nearly a fortnight after; he didn't expect it, and only found out through Fraser, Val's one-time pal inquiring for Flt Sgt Dudley. He's sore at missing this leave in South Australia with Cynthia [*Ulva's fiancée*]. Of course he couldn't get a priority but through the OC of his flight got a job ferrying a Battle [*plane*] from Melbourne to Adelaide. He'd never flown a Battle, and just as they were finishing showing him the layout, his passenger 'a shiny bum' [*squadron leader*] who couldn't fly, turned up and got the jitters. It was no dice. Poor Dud did the block. One only blue duck.

We spent the time till he had to leave for the train yarning in front of the fire. He finished by giving me three gruesome accidents – in two fatal 'prangs' he had been only eye-witness and in another crash, not fatal, the chief eye-witness. One of the crashes was a collision, and he related the whole thing in such vivid detail that I won't set it down, as I won't forget it. [*Years later Lester made a note in the diary, 'I have, thank God.'*]. The other death was night flying, on a pitch black rainy night, and the fact that he told it almost as a joke only heightened the sense of the tragedy of it. A young trainee after over-shooting twice, went straight in. Dud ran into the O.C's office [and said] 'Young Barnwell's down.' 'Thank heaven for that.' 'He's down for keeps.'

He looks very fit. His skin has cleared right up and is a beautiful deep brown.

Monday September 6

After a quiet Sunday spent sneaking paragraphs of 'The Fall of Paris' – brought home by Val, together with half a dozen other books – under the nose of a budding headache (blimey).....

Today, came unwelcome news – the curtailment of the rail services. This cuts out Monday, Wednesday and Friday morning down going trains, and Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday midday and afternoon trains. . . . Which means, unless they can arrange a way for me to get across [*to the cannery at Mooroopna*] the job is through. I wouldn't live in Mooroopna under any consideration. Now there will probably only be people journeying across too early again. I'm not all that worried over the thought of losing the job; it's simply that change is always unwelcome at first to me, that I don't dislike the job at all and sometimes get rather pleased with it, that I had got rather used to the daily taxi and train jaunts, and that I have got on well with them - I couldn't help being pleased with them for calling me even such a name as Les, after ten months of Mr Dudleys from Mr Thompson down.

Also it may mean being uprooted from my present address, and going to Melbourne, which is an inconvenient distance from Tallygaroopna, even though on general principles I want to go to Melbourne.

Tuesday September 7

My problem may work out as follows: to-morrow morning, I sleep in till 8, take the 10.30 bus; Thursday morning, go by train; Friday morning, they hope, come over with a radiologist who comes to the Mooroopna hospital two or three times a week. . . . The weekend is my trouble. I can get home either Friday night or Saturday midday – but the next train down is Monday night. If I must be marooned away from home at week ends, far better in Melbourne than in Shepparton or Mooroopna. Into the bargain, they're so infuriatingly near home.

Friday September 10

On my way to the Bank of Australasia I made a call from a public call box to Dr Mill. The subject of the call was sordid and unhappy. I have been disturbed for long enough by an itching that must have been piles, and occasionally, led by the soreness to look at the paper, saw it flecked with blood. I am to see him on Monday,

when I land off the bus. I'm not enjoying the idea of suffering from piles, quite apart from the seriousness of the ailment. Too too frightfully infra dig.

Saturday September 11

As the engine came to the platform one of the smallest of a group of boys sat down on the edge and dangled his legs. There was a roar from the stationmaster. The boy scrambled up, dusted his trousers, and moved away.

A seemingly endless crowd poured out of the train. There was a very large number of airforce men. ...

On the opposite seat a rolled up 'Truth' proclaimed 'Does Australia want the Windsors?' It had nearly lured me into buying 'Truth' yesterday in Harry's. I read the heavy type upside down and found the answer was in the negative. At the time of the abdication and marriage Truth talked about the worlds greatest romance.

Tuesday, September 14

Yesterday morning dawned frosty and bitterly cold. Dad and I went down to the crossing, and crossed the road to the partial shelter of a big tree – big for Tally. ... The car seemed crowded, but I fitted in the front seat...

My room was unswept, the bed unmade, the ashes still in the grate. I didn't hear Mrs Foley come out of her room till well after nine. There was a very hectic week end – Bill knocked her about. She has a bruised ear and a scarred chin. Warfare has continued into this evening.

I got to Dr Mills about 5.15 or 5.20. There were three people already waiting.. It was a long while before I was called.

The pile is not at a serious stage. The doctor gave me the prescription – something or other called suppositories are to do the job. He advised me to keep my bowels open with paraffin.

Wednesday, September 15

Three years ago today 185 German planes were shot down.

When I got home I unwrapped a suppository and put it to its nefarious work.

Friday, September 17

Yesterday afternoon the wind was gloriously sunny, as I left work. On such late afternoons my soul has dried in me, and harsh earth, and bare-wood and heartless ageing sunshine have seared my eyes and my mind; on such afternoons I have flown with the wind in joy as near selfless as I could attain, over earth's rich green and brown, through the straining toughness of trees exulting in the wind, under the sky's gay purity, drinking in the rain of gold that poured on me, with a kind thought for the passiveness of bare wood and stone and metal. Yesterday I delighted in it, though my body was of warped bone and corrupt meat, and my eyes that hungered after beauty were too dull to grasp it all.

Saturday, September 18

I got up early, to get breakfast over by train time in case Dad did land in. However, he didn't, and I wrote my letter, begged an envelope from Mrs Foley, posted the letter, and bought a bottle of paraffin ... The rest of the morning I spent on my sofa or writing at the table, finally closing off the old ledger – the actual financial statements were out weeks ago, but the ledger remained closed off only in fiction. I was cold and I put on my rain coat. My leg froze. My heart was dull as the clouds that ruled the sky.

[*Lester goes to Thompson's...*]

I spent a pleasant afternoon and my heart revived a little. Sometimes I think they actually do like me in an easy indifferent way. Anyway we don't find it hard to make each other smile, and chuckle, even laugh. I'm terribly afraid of liking somebody who doesn't really like me at all. Each of them is a likeable girl in her own way, but I still ponder over the paradox that – I like Miss Johnson best easily, but she would be the last I would fall in love with; yet I feel no sensual attraction, or have never detected any, towards the other girls. Its simply the brutal fact that they are comely and she is homely, so that they would be likelier to awaken that feeling which means 'marriageable love'. But I'm still Mr Dudley, and I feel surer than ever that I will never mean more than a casual friend to anyone who might mean more than that to me.

I wish I was seeing 'Blossoms in the Dust'. I'm sitting alone before my fire at twenty past ten, but I am not so lonely as I expected to feel. Perhaps, probably, I would have felt lonelier, as I so often do, amid the crowd at the Astor, furtively trying to detect one person by himself like me and seeing only couples and groups. I was not going to write this stuff when I began this record. It was to be more of an extrovert business, as an almost instinctive counter to my self-centredness, miscalled introspection. Probably it is due to the influence of Eve Langley's 'The Pea Pickers' which I've been reading this week.

...The streets were crowded. It somehow pleased me. I feel less conspicuous and seem to walk more rapidly – I suppose by comparison with others contentedly sauntering, among whom I deftly weave.

Sunday, September 19

We all got up about 9 o'clock and had a scratch breakfast. I sewed a button on the shirt I'll have to wear to-morrow.

About half past ten I screwed up courage to venture forth with a view to walking round the lake. I was afraid I might encounter people.

...Evelyn is leaving next Wednesday. When she comes back she will board at Radley's over the way. The news makes me feel more depressed. It tells me anew I am out of place here. I often wondered at Ev staying on so long after all the other girls had gone. Mrs Foley doesn't want women boarders and though she and Ev have always got on well, Eve will be more at home over there with her girlfriend.

Sunday, September 19

I don't like raw onions but I ate two on principle. I can still taste them. Last night I finished the 'Pea Pickers'. As Val said in a letter yesterday the author is 'rather a weird sort of person', but on the whole I enjoyed the story. That strange self-confessing lyrical wisdom of hers appalled me. Fancy meeting a girl like that, even though one can recognise kindred feelings in many things. But the expression! Still, much of the verse was genuine poetry. Some of it I'd like to have written, rather, I'd like to be able to throw the shackles off my lyric feelings in the same way. I can read this book again inspite of the laceration of my sensitive nerve of embarrassment.

Wednesday, September 22

On Monday morning I got to the Tarax corner 8.45 and almost immediately a sedan dating back somewhere in the thirties, came up. Dr McMeiken turned out to be a mild-voiced, youngish man with a throat that rose into a little of the second chin. We didn't have a great deal to say, but he was pleasant spoken...

Last night I went to the 'Lyric' to see 'Moontide'. There was an interesting newsreel on the 'Tragedy of Italy'. The support, an 'Arizona Rough Riders' picture, scarcely bears talking about.

Saturday, September 25

Bert Dunn called for me about 20 past 9. I remembered my pyjamas at that moment and grabbed them from under the pillow. I held them as unobtrusively as I could

getting into the lighted car - there was a woman in the front seat and I felt silly carrying them. I stuffed one half in my raincoat pocket and the other inside my coat where it formed an ample bosom.

When I got into the station I found a seat where there was only an airforce man, I unstrapped my case and raked up the pyjamas from their uncomfortable repositories. 'I might as well finish packing my damn case,' I said, and he agreed it wouldn't be a bad idea.

When I got home mum was in bed with the sick headache. She got up this morning, but didn't look at all well. I wouldn't let her poach me an egg, and I had packed most of my few change garments last night before going to bed. If Dad had known it was immaterial to me whether I went down to Thompson's in the morning or afternoon, he might have been able to arrange a lift in with Dave Anderson today, which would have saved so early a rising, on a late bed going.

On my way home I had my first ice cream for the season. Dinner was late. I finished at one-thirty. Going out the back door I found two little girls, waiting to take Irene to the pictures, hovering perilously close to the lavatory, so with modesty I proceeded out the back gate and on to Thompson's. For my virtue my bladder gave me little trouble, though morning tea, two cups of tea at dinner, and afternoon tea, had accumulated by my return at about five o'clock.

On my way back this time I called in at old Mr Colgan's for something to tide me over the weekend. I took a Truth, and was disappointed to find it full of nothing but bigamy; but was very pleased to pick up a Penguin I wrote in vain for to Robertson and Mullin's two years ago - 'Further Adventures of an Irish Roll' by Somerville and Ross. It will brighten my spare time.

However, tomorrow I'm going over to Stubbings for dinner and the afternoon. I had fixed it with Tom subject to not being able to spend the weekend home. He

rang me this afternoon from a public call box to find out. His voice echoed very much as though he was talking in a box, as he was.

Bill and the Dummets were well drunk tonight. Mrs Dummet had another temporary blue with Mrs Foley. It's marvellous how people make up quarrels. There's quietness in the house at present. Everybody seems to be out. I'm going to bed to try to get to sleep before they return.

Sunday, October 3

I didn't realise just how much of that bed I'd see during the coming week.

Last Sunday Tom called for me at 10.45 in his father's car and we drove under a quiet grey sky to his home....

We drove in the paddock and left the car by the house fence. Nigger (a brown and white dog) greeted us blithely. When we got inside, Mrs Stubbings, whom I hadn't met before, was introduced to me. A big fair girl, who is going to have a baby next February, she has a brown patch over her left brow. I don't know whether it's a birth mark or only temporary -- it doesn't appear in her photo, which Tom showed me once, and a coloured enlargement of which paired with one of Tom in air force cap, on the living room mantelpiece.

(Written on Monday, October 4)

An old man with a bag over his arm mooched around in the timber on the other side. Upstream we could see the country beyond the other bank and occasional traffic passing along the cemetery road.

Two ducks suddenly rose opposite us and fled wildly. All unseen, they had been sailing under the bank. Tom cursed the screw that made it no use to follow the bank looking for a sitting duck. It made no difference that there has been a close season for ducks for years. Shooters don't care.

Next morning when I got up my nose was running badly and I had a slight headache, which soon stopped. The day before my eyes had felt heavy. However, treating it as the mere makings of yet another cold, I went over with Dr McMeiken, who was affable in his mild way.

All the morning I sneezed and blew and my eyes streamed. 'You've got the measles,' declared Des, but I wouldn't have it. It was a blotchy sunburn from yesterday. I went home on the quarter past one bus, and went to bed before tea. I only had a bowl of soup and a couple of cuppas. I then remarked that one of the boys had reckoned I had measles. 'Shade your eyes,' said Mrs Foley and brought the light over. 'You have got measles.'

Dr Mills came next morning. I had a mild attack. He was pleased that I hadn't a cough and the rash had not spread badly to my chest. I was to stay in bed three or four days and could get up then if I felt like it.

It was a boring time, mostly spent in drinking and making water. I couldn't read and felt little interest in the wireless, and was preoccupied with keeping myself covered when tempted by perspiration to bare myself. Mrs Foley looked after me well and I gave her 1 pound over my board. Daisy (*his sister*) came in the take away my washing and leave a change, on Saturday morning, when I got up. I had raked up 1 pound of silver and copper and got a note from her for it, without telling her what I wanted it for. It leaves me with one shilling and nine pence halfpenny. I'll go across to work on Wednesday morning, that will cost me one shilling and my pay envelope will be very welcome.

I need cheering. I just long to be established in a better paying job (especially since I discovered Tom, too, is being paid £6/5/-) and a good place reasonably convenient to it. I wish to hell Daisy had a house in town (*Melbourne*) but there is not the faintest likelihood of her going down. I'm conscious too, of being further behind

with the study than my slow goingness should have permitted. I still caught six texts to do and I want a long time for revision.

Into the bargain, the house is worse than ever these last few days. Bill has been getting drunker and drunker and to crown it all, Mrs Foley went out with the Drummonds and ended by insulting Frank after lord knows what cumulative irritation. She called him a bastard and he turned her out of his car. She had a bandage over one eye today, and said to me Bill didn't do it, but I didn't ask if Frank did or if it was just an accident, or a cold.

I heard snatches of the after turmoil after they had all arrived home. Frank saying 'Nobody ever called me a bastard' (apparently understanding 'and got away with it') as I had heard him proclaim one night when he had a bad quarrel with his wife and hit her for calling him it. And in the kitchen he continued to declaim about bastard's and 'my own wife'.

Mrs Foley was trying to sell the household things to a prospective couple and they were to come and attempt a settlement today but didn't turn up. I heard her crying once after she came off the phone, so the deal must be off. God, I'm tired of it all.

I don't like daylight saving. I should be in bed now, at 7, and don't want to go. I suppose I must.

Bugger everything and I can't even turn it into a poem in the manner of old.

Tuesday, October 5

Things are moving rapidly to a climax.

The auctioneer Watson and another chap arrived this morning to take an inventory of household effects. While they were in my room I mooched out. Returning at length from down the yard I saw first a short woman, then a tall man, come round

the two little sleepouts. The woman, who had coloured lips and cheeks, was early middle aged (I'm no judge), and might not have been unattractive but that I was not attracted, rather put off by the hardness of her expression.

Eventually, Mrs Foley got something close to her price, but though she made them take all that she wasn't keeping as a condition of sale, they still ruled the roost and made their conditions about most things. They wanted her to stay on for six weeks, but she refused and thereby being several chops and changes, only the final one of which is material to relate, in its proper place.

They also wanted the men boarders to stay on, not the Dummets.... She told me she was turning my room into a lounge (I don't really need the fireplace now) and that she would be pleased to fix me comfortably in another room. She would not be keeping so many boarders as Mrs Foley, probably, 'things will be different from when Mrs Foley ran it' she had preceded this statement rather rudely. She had two daughters, one going to high school, the other finishing state school, and a baby, but 'he's as good as gold. You'll never hear him. You won't know he's in the house.' Furthermore, it would be a real home from home, I would be made happy with them. 'We call ourselves refined people. My husband neither drinks nor smokes.' And Mrs Foley put in 'That'll be a change for you, Lester.' I flattered myself my face had been expressionless, but later, when I mentioned the 'refined' Mrs Foley said 'I thought I saw your face fall when she said that, and I hurried up to try and get her out of the room.' ...It was one to chew over. She spoke with unemotional glibness, and I had heard her laugh.

...Mrs Foley put the kybosh on that when we dined alone together, and had a heart-to-heart talk on a multitude of sins, including the Dummets, who wouldn't move out.....She (Mrs Foley) certainly has a hair trigger temper on top of a shaky, tremulous, unhappy nervous system which so often sets it off. Still, she's been given a very hard time, especially since the Dummets came, and I've experienced her best side, and a very good side it is.

But I'm on borrowed time – To return to the kybosh. Mrs Foley could not put off leaving beyond a fortnight and the people were not coming in immediately. During the hiatus, we were to find ourselves temporary accommodation somewhere else, and this was to be sprung on us. Mrs Foley had already been canvassing Mrs Opic on my behalf to see if Radleys could put me up temporarily, even sharing a room. I found that I had been a very good boarder,....I had been admirably self contained amid all the hubbubs that had so often occurred.....

I'm certainly not going to put up at a pub and if I move out, I won't move back.

God bless Mrs Foley, and help her achieve some kind of happiness wherever she goes. A blind mother, a backward son, and a drunken husband.

Wednesday October 6

More borrowed time. I returned to work on the half past ten bus, in beautiful weather, summer's infancy.

When we were nearly to Mooroopna, two Wirraways (*airforce planes*)I had seen circling around ahead, came over us very low. Wirraways have been hanging round a lot the last several days.

This afternoon I broached my wish to go through, and Les (*his boss?*) took it without much surprise, and with sympathy. The gist of his remarks was that, being qualified, I was wasting my time on the job now I had become familiar with it, that it was a routine differing little from month to month, and with definite limits on what it had to teach me. As he said, I would in my own interests have had to make a move sometime or other, and it is to their interest that I leave before the season, not when it is in swing. He saw Mr Shoesmith, who agreed that if I wanted to go, it was no use stopping me. That's always the policy.

The hitch was poor Tom. Both he, and especially his wife, had set their hearts on going today, and he had an obvious fear that any postponement might lead to another.

Then Tom went home to break the news to his wife. When he came back he called me outside and asked would I board with his mother a couple of weeks, letting him go tonight. I instantly agreed, as I hated to put him about (and I thought to myself that I'd have a few weeks longer for postal feelers to Melbourne.) Since I had agreed, the bosses then gave Tom back his leave and his peace of mind.

I still dislike Mooroopna, even for a couple of weeks. The house, down Elizabeth Street, is also a sizeable walk from the office, so I'll still have to take lunch.

Saturday, October 9

I move on Tuesday.

Today was very cold and wet. Dad came in with me and took back almost all my books. We were in a dog box [*enclosed train carriage*] with Mrs Humphreys [*a neighbour from Tally*]

Monday, October 18

Well after this 9 days wonder – silence – I had better briefly recount the past week, which the circumstances of a strange house has so far prevented my doing.

On Tuesday morning the alarm awakened me. Except after the pictures, I never set it, and this was the first time I hadn't woken up in time to brake it. My case was atrociously heavy. Bill carried it out to the taxi for me, and I was deadly afraid of the hinges. Dad had to take the strap home with him on the case of books. However it held somehow. I gave it to Les the taxi driver at Mooroopna to take to Stubbings with the message that I would be down after work.

After work commenced the long walk in a strong side and tail wind, lugging my lunch case and raincoat. I knew there must be some short cut by the side streets, but I was not prepared to prospect their twists from the main street.... It is atrociously rutted – nearly all the side streets are very poor stuff. I got to Stubbings just behind the man of the house. My room is a comfortable little one, with solid dark stained furniture made by Mr Stubbings, who is a carpenter by trade.

I missed the hot water system very much, the more so on account of the length of the walk. I didn't have a bath from Monday night to last night, when I broached the subject and Mrs Stubbings said she had wondered to herself whether I was able to take a bath, and had decided to leave me to mention one. They have a chip heater, and a good bath and wash hand basin.

On unpacking my trunk on Tuesday night I found I had everything – except my ration book. I racked my brains to think what I had done with it, but my mind was a blank. I couldn't recall whether I had collected it from Mrs Foley before going home Friday, in which case I might have left it home.

At dinner time next day I got a ring. 'Is that you, Lester? This is Bill Foley here. Listen (Bill's favourite prefix) have you missed anything?' 'My oath. My ration book.' 'I'll give it to the bus driver to take across to you.' The carriage cost me sixpence and was I glad to see it again.

On Wednesday – I think – Cecil (Joe) Brown, a former wages clerk, gave Mooroopna one of its periodical goings over in his Wirraway. Actually, just about all he did was keep flying over very low, to the great perturbation of Leo and the rage of the townswomen. He did once make me a little anxious when he did a slow roll (only he was a good 500 feet up) and cut his motor momentarily on coming out of it. A while later a pair of Wirras (perhaps he was one of those two) came over somewhat higher and did some looping and rolling.

It was well for Cecil's fame he came over when he did for on Friday at 11.20 the Lancaster was to pass. Somewhat after that time we heard a strong drone approaching steadily. Down through the foreground trees showed the great lifted wings with their four engines. I think I never thrilled to the sight of an aeroplane before. I wished I was up on the silo where a few happy people had been watching its parading over Tatura and Kyabram. It came over as low as Cecil had, its greatness making it look still nearer curving easily away as it passed close to the cannery office and floated away over the town.

That night the service car took me to the train, which was early. As the second half of the train came slowly up and I fastened my eye on the last, (corridor, carriage, Merl [*his sister*] leaned out of it and called in her fresh soprano, 'Lester'. I had often had her in my mind, but it was a pleasant surprise, none the less.

She is on 'sick leave'. She doesn't look sick, but she has had enough. Since July last year she's worked 13 days a fortnight, with a weeks break for measles and three weeks to settle Tom's [*her husband Tom Mann*] father's affairs. Her doctor told her she should take a full month off and rush straight up the country. So she rushed off and wired Daisy and bought her ticket and got it endorsed before the reply came. I think Merl's practically made up her mind she's had the trams. She banking pretty heavily on Tom being posted down here when he gets his leave.

When we got to Tally, we thought the train had beaten Dad to it. However, after we had chatted at the door for a minute, we spied him emerge from the darkness beyond the station office, having fruitlessly quested the front part of the train. It turned out he was expecting Merl, as Sid had been down that morning from Wunghnu and told them. If I finish up this week, I'll see something of Merl before she goes back. Mum was again sick, for the third Friday running, but this time she had got over the worst and was not laid out to it.

[*Later in the week*]

I had dinner, two shillings at the Central Dining Rooms. It was a good meal except that the cabbage had pernicious anaemia.

Monday October 25

Nothing memorable occurred last week. Three sailors were at the cannery on Wednesday, spruiking for war bonds. They were entertaining, especially on the subject of canned vegetables. Apparently Australian canned vegetables might just as well be thrown away the moment they're produced. They are as soon as, or before, they're opened by the services.

Friday night I finished up [*at the cannery*]. I shook hands with most of them.

I got another case of 16 oz, which gives us two 4 dozen cases (now less 3 tins) and several 30 oz still left, including one precious can of apricots. Merl and Val will be able to take some back with them.

Merl was down when I got home Friday night. Val arrived on the Saturday midday train having reached Shepp by the Benalla bus. She looks well but she'd like a posting. Gosford has lost its charms.

Saturday afternoon Merl and I went to the prisoner of war sports. Daisy and the kids were down. ...it was in a good cause and it had its moments. One of these was the women's rooster chase. Merl in her socklets – I held her shoes – was on the tail of the rooster right till the last till it took such a violent change of course she was one of the furthest and flagged with the rest – all save gallant Kittie Little who at last flung herself on the poor bantam.

Thursday, October 28

Mrs Dunnett and Irene were two of the people killed in the level crossing smash the other day. Frank and two kids had just been set down back along the street, the

paper says. I don't have premonitions – but they were among the people I had flashed over as I wondered if the victims might be someone I knew. I didn't somehow feel surprised that it was Mrs Dummett, but I hadn't given a thought to poor little Irene. I feel strangely unaffected by the news – just curious. Now and then I try to picture them as corpses, undisfigured, but it won't work. Their faces keep the heavy lidded aliveness. When my mind goes back to them a few weeks ago, it seems funny that the shadow did not fall. But I think it almost never does – to anyone unconcerned, certainly. I hope Irene was asleep.

Tuesday, November 2

On Friday afternoon Merl and Sid came down on the afternoon train. Sid was to go back with me next day and take home some messages, especially green peas. Merl had a letter from Tom and was going to town next morning. Tom is to report to Ascot by next Saturday for leave and his new posting. Merl is banking a little too heavily on it being a Melbourne posting.

Sid and I played cricket till it was too dark to see the ball against the trees and the cowdung.

Next morning Merl and I caught the train. The sky was overcast, there was a light mist, so I took my rain coat, which I soon regretted. At Shepp I stayed at the train window talking [with Merl who was en route to Melbourne] till the train pulled out.

I took a boot to D. Henry, boot repairer, then settled down to a morning's work, probably my second last. The train was a little late, but not badly so. I got the only spare seat in a compartment, so when Sid got on at Tally, we stood at the end for the short journey to Wunghnu. After he gave me my ticket I lost the darn thing, and hunted through all my pockets over and over till I found it in one of them.

Wunghnu station is prettily planted with flowers and Wunghnu, which I haven't been in since I was a little boy, and only been through it a few times since, [ten

miles away?], is a collection of ancient dilapidated houses spread along several streets besides the Tocumwal road, which is called Carlisle Street for the duration of Wunghnu. Daisy's house is on this road, the last house this side of the creek. We went in by the back way, past some ancient sheds, including Mr Langs cart shed, and strands of barbed wire were such as infest that end of the town. The house, once a bakery, and before that a granary or mill, is drab, old cemented or grey painted brick, red tin roofed. Such as it is, it is one of the best in Wunghnu, and has electricity, something she didn't have in Tally. But she hates the house and Wunghnu. [*Daisy lives in various houses in Wunghnu for the rest of her life*]

I slept at nights in a sleepout with Sid. Much of the time I spent reading and talking to Daisy. However, I went across to the creek several times, chiefly with the kids and enjoyed it.

The chief attraction on the creek is a young pelican, which sedately fishes upstream and down stream, and now and then sails after some brown ducks which swim off briskly. The pelican is quite open to inspection, a placid bird, and seemingly no athlete.

Monday, November 8

On Saturday morning I went in to Thompson's for the last time – Anyway, I shook hands with Mr Thompson after we'd talked over his comparative figures for the last two years. Then I put my head around the office door and said 'Good morning' to the girls, instead of 'Good bye' feeling dubious whether to shake hands. I think an easy 'Good morning' was the right sort of farewell. I'll be in Shep with Dad on Thursday morning, shopping. Looks like the remaining 53 coupons for this half year will go west.

A letter came from Jessie Canet (*aunt*) on Saturday saying that of all the places she had been to, one in Royal Parade, Parkville, was the best, only it would be either £2/5/- to £2/10/-. She said that she thought she'd put a deposit on it on Saturday

unless she got a wire. (Her letter was written on Thursday: she didn't know of the Sunday-Wednesday-Friday intermissions we now suffer). Fortunately her suggestion sounded the best, in spite of the price, and to confirm it I sent off a wire that afternoon.) Mum wrote to Jessie today, asking her could she meet me. I begin to get nervous, but I'll be more nervous when I get down there, meet new people, and go hunting a job. My nagging fear now is less getting a job than getting one to pay that heavy tariff. Nobody may consider me worth more than £6/5/- untried.

Tuesday, November 9

There was no letter from Jessie today, so on the face of it the room is O.K.

Today was a glum day with Mum bent on worrying herself sick over having not heard from Merl since she went back. (Maurice was down last night, and neither had they heard.) She even sent a reply paid telegram to Mrs Russell, to which no reply has yet come, and was very sorry afterwards she hadn't rung the police. Anything you say merely aggravates matters when they're like that. I try to say nothing and wish to Christ I could hear nothing.

When Dad got back from Wunghnu he said Daisy was going to ring the depot next morning.

Wednesday, November 10

Merl sent a telegram this morning. 'I arrived safely. Writing tonight. Tom held up. Love.'

Dad and I are going into Shepp to-morrow morning to try and get a large suit-case, also two light sports coats, a pair of trousers, and two pairs of socks, which will more than eclipse my remaining 53 coupons and encroach no little way on theirs. I will draw £14/-/- out of my two bank accounts leaving £1/10/- in the Commonwealth and £8/-/- in the State Savings Bank. What it is to be a small

capitalist. I have approximately £5/- on me and £13/12/- in war savings certificates.

During the last week I finished *Water into Gold*, and read *On the Wallaby*, and two of Dad's library books – *The School of Virtue* and *The Methods of Dr Scarlett*.....a very enjoyable story. Dr Scarlett was a thoroughly lovable old rascal. His limericks were gems, his commentary inimitable, his puns – well, I'm partial to bad puns.

'There was a young woman named Smith,
Whose virtue was rather a myth,
She said 'Try as I can
I cannot find a man
Whom it's fun to be virtuous with.'

Thursday, November 11

Dad and I went into Shepp this morning. Uncle Bert and Lesley went away on the train this morning. Uncle said to me he might drop over to see me Sunday or Monday (he and Lesley will be in Park Street, Parkville, near the place) but in the light of after news, he won't find me if he does.

[Lester says goodbye to Mr Colliver, exam supervisor]

He wished me the best in that hail fellow way of his, and asked me to write and let him know how I get on, as I will. If I had stayed on in Shep I'd have had one more exam under his supervision – in March, only this time I'd have suggested a guinea a night.

[Lester buys items of clothing but can't find everything he wants.]

I decided to celebrate the reprieve of my 20 remaining current coupons by deferring to Mum's repeated wish about ties. I bought two, a \$-/5/11 rather pretty blues, and a £-/4/6 indifferent mixture, but I hate ties anyway.

[*Lester and his father, Charlie, sit in the gardens for a time and talk with...*]

Mr Kennedy the practising accountant to whom Mr Morrish introduced me over two years ago. He reiterated that in his view the practising accountant was doomed, due to the wiping out of the small three guinea businesses which were their bread and butter. In fact he gave them ten years. While we were talking an armistice march of school kids and airforcemen went down Fryers Street to the memorial. Soon eleven chimed and after several minutes I remembered the silence.

We got two letters from Jessie, one dated the 9th and the other the 10th. Our Saturday telegram arrived Monday and our Monday letter Wednesday. She went to take a room Tuesday night and they were full.

Daisy came down during the afternoon to see what was a-cooking and to say that she thought the Saturday morning train would be barred to the general public and reserved for the air force. (If true, that's partly why it was crowded this morning. Crowds forced to go early to avoid the Cup [*Melbourne Cup*] morning crush.) The upshot is Daisy and I go down [*to Melbourne*] Tuesday morning (the kids stay here and Carlisle's [*neighbours*] look after the chooks, cow and lambs). I stay at Grandma's and Daisy at Merl's or one of the relations and she will hunt board for me. With a bit of luck the Royal Parade place may be empty – its position at this distance affects its dearness.

12 o'clock and it's me for bed. I got a nice long letter from Val to-day.

Friday, November 12

Having written so much yesterday I'm exempted today.

Saturday, November 13

The Red Army is driving further west of Kiev. [*Three paragraphs of war news, an unusual subject for Lester*]

The famine in India is slowly being mastered. Whatever defence has been advanced by the British, their chief one about shipping space is simply disgusting. It simply means that the survival of a few hundred thousand Bengalis has had a lower tonnage priority than British needs. Nobody starved in Britain during the worst of the U. Boat campaign, and that they starved in India during the improved shipping months is a worst commentary on Britain than any story of informal mismanagement is on the Indians.

Dark Felt won the Melbourne Cup. I drew him a year too early.

Maurice came down this morning and stayed to dinner. He and I played cricket with a tennis ball, a bat he and Sid improvised once upon a time, and a kero tin. He entertained me with facts about cricket as played in the Wunghnu school. Sid is coming down Monday morning.

Tonight after having a more than usually listen-to-able programme over 3AR I was just sitting down to these dry chronicles when the plot thickened. Mum had been out with the light to the kitchen – always a chronic place when the weather is changing for flying ants, which apparently have been white-anting under it for years – and when she came in, a number came with her. They were all over the screen on both sides and all over the other side of the panes of glass. A constant ooze and skitter of them was coming between the sashes and the sill. There was nothing to do but blow the light out.

Sunday, November 14

Spitfires broke up a raid on Darwin, shotting down two out of nine bombers. The 64th raid.

Monday, November 15

Mum after a day worrying over one coat, wanted me to stay till Thursday, but we managed to persuade her – in other words to prevail without convincing her. My

heavier coats and the light house coat will be left behind to be minded in her good time. I know her eyes and health too well to imagine she'd get them done by Thursday, or the next Thursday. She worried herself sick over the damn things, when all the time she needn't, and at length insisted, what I had already assured her I would do, that I buy another coat in Melbourne. As usual too, she rubbed Daisy thoroughly up the wrong way and Daisy is always quite prone to bicker with her.

I made a wonderful discovery this afternoon, fishing in Ulva's wardrobe for one of my certificates. A folder made out of thin glossy paper, stuffed with papers, and tied with string, met my gaze. How it got there, Lord only knows. In faint pencil it bore the title 'Copies and Uncopied Originals', but I knew the moment I looked at it, that it was the poems I had long since concluded were burnt. (I cleaned out the blue safe and all my boxes the other week, squashing my last lingering hope.) When I started to look through the vast storehouse I found myself no longer pleased with them, having surrounded them in memory with a polish and rhythm they lacked. I was displeased with the botches, but someday I'll read them again with pleasure and then I'll start to revise them again, aiming so far as possible to avoid altering the language except where essential to improve the rhythm and make the poem a bit less pointless. I'm writing this last bit at Grandma's, but next time I go up to Tally I'll bring them down and start on them.