In June 1966 Bernard Smith, then teaching in the Fine Arts Department at the University of Melbourne, invited me to fill in for him as the art critic of The Age for six months while he was on sabbatical leave. Before the six months were out, Bernard was appointed as the Foundation Power Professor of Contemporary Art at the University of Sydney and The Age was rather nervously stuck with me as a callow art critic of twenty-three. The art world in Melbourne in the late 1960s was small and compact, and one quickly got to know artists, dealers, critics and curators. By this time, Fred Williams was a widely admired and respected figure. He had taken the major laurels of the day, from the Helena Rubinstein Art Travelling Scholarship in 1963 to winning four major prizes in 1966: the Wynne and John McCaughey Prizes from the Art Gallery of NSW, and the Georges and the W.D. & H.O. Wills Prizes.

I met Fred Williams in 1967 when he held an astonishing one-man show at the Georges Gallery, filled with masterpieces such as Oval Landscape, Chopped Trees, Landscape with Blue Cloud and so on. I got to know him partly through Hal and Kate Hattam, whose house in Cromwell Road, South Yarra, had a salon-like atmosphere. Artists and writers came and went, argued and gossiped. Fred enjoyed the ambience. He was both a gregarious man and yet reserved in his friendships.

It was in the later 1970s that I grew close to Fred Williams. There had been some mild jockeying between James Mollison and myself as to who would receive the palm and write the book on his work. Fred decided that Mollison had enough on his plate creating the National Gallery of Australia and that I might be a better bet at completing it. Fred must have had his doubts later, for it took me five years. During that time I was teaching a heavy load at Monash University. I devoted every Tuesday to writing and made it a rule that I would not rise until I had written a thousand publishable words.

Fred was a rewarding but enigmatic subject to work on. He laid down no prescriptions and imposed no order. He made one request of me: as I had included portraits of his two eldest girls, Isobel and Louise, would I mind adding an image of his youngest daughter, Kate. I was left to my own devices: it was up to me to make sense of the work. He would answer specific questions about the date of a work or the location of a motif. Occasionally, I would venture further and outline an idea on a particular period or series. He would listen politely and say that it sounded interesting. ‘At least you have got a point of view’ was about as close as he came to indicating that I was on the right track. But he would rarely venture beyond that. The present absorbed him. In contrast to an artist like Albert Tucker, Fred Williams betrayed little interest in his past. If you asked him directly about a specific episode, he would answer clearly and concisely, but he rarely volunteered information or elaborated on his answer.

I have wondered whether the past for Fred was shaded with a generalised unhappiness. He knew relative impoverishment in London in the early 1950s when he was in his twenties. He would allow himself a trifling sum, say half a crown, for dinner but would frequently pass it up for an extra pint or two at the pub where Francis Bacon and his crew regularly drank. On his return to Melbourne in 1957, he struggled for recognition, and public support was meagre. His exclusion from the Antipodean group and exhibition in 1959 stung him deeply. All of the Antipodians were either close friends or acquaintances. His personal life was certainly lonely before he met Lyn Watson in 1960, fell in love and married her. His marriage was a source of enduring support and succour to him. It came at much the same time as he left the Australian Galleries, where he had proved a disappointment to the Purveses, and moved to Rudy Komon’s gallery. He showed with him for the first time when he was thirty-five, in August 1962. Fred, I suspect, dated his emergence from the shadows of obscurity and anomic from that time.

If I uncovered a group of early works, Fred would be momentarily interested, recalling where he had painted them or with whom. But, in terms of constructing a narrative of his life as an artist, he had little interest. Even his famous diary, which he meticulously kept from 1963 until his death nineteen years earlier, remained largely unread and uninterpreted by anyone but himself.
years later, recorded immediate and present events. The lack of a self-aggrandising past was a chief factor in his extraordinary modesty as a man and as an artist even at the height of his fame and celebrity. Of all his generation, Fred Williams knew himself the best and was a most integrated personality. He was not without the customary fears and fraughtness of being an artist. Normally, these would arise from some difficulty he was experiencing in his work. If something began to go awry in an organisation or institution he was associated with, he tended to take the most pessimistic stance.

Lyn formed a secure and comfortable domestic ring and routine around him so that he was able to concentrate on his work with a singular sense of purpose. When I was writing the book, I would visit regularly to go over piles of gouaches and try and sort them into the various series or look through the extensive oil sketches of the early 1970s. Fred had invariably been in the studio since early morning. He would break briefly for lunch, go back into the studio afterwards and emerge in mid to late afternoon, take a bath, write up the day’s diary, read The Herald (then an afternoon paper) and prepare to entertain numerous droppers in for a glass of excellent wine around two o’clock, four o’clock, twelve o’clock, ten o’clock, eight o’clock, one o’clock, five o’clock, half past one o’clock, four thirty. If this well-honed round was broken for long, Fred would become restless and mildly irritable. The studio routine was paramount: work came first. When I was finishing my book in the last months of 1979, Fred allowed me to look at the diaries to check the dates of paintings and the sequences of series. Stupidly, I had been too shy to ask him earlier. It seemed intrusive. With only weeks to go to my deadline, I would sit up most of the night trying to read through the 365 pages of a year’s diary to see what I had missed or got wrong. What struck me as I tore through them was what a struggle had gone on in the studio through much of his mature career. Those days of long and hard labour in the studio, moving from one painting to another looking for inspiration as well as preserving it, often ending up being frustrating and exhausting, represent the common round. The days when the work sailed along on its own volition were rare. Waterfall Polyptych (1979, Art Gallery of New South Wales), so dense and monumental in conception, came easily to him, one picture unfolding from the next. The Adelaide murals of 1972–73 in the Festival Theatre, by contrast, were struggled over for months. They made him sick with frustration and anxiety, and were in some ways abandoned rather than completed. Yet the Adelaide murals rank amongst his finest work, innovative in the use of the strip format and, in their brilliant colour, presaging the new, iridescent palette of the 1970s.

The studio routine and its struggles had one major variation: his regular day out in the landscape, painting directly from nature. There, Fred Williams felt liberated. He painted with concentrated energy without hesitation. In the later 1970s he particularly enjoyed going out with a young Melbourne painter, Fraser Fair, who would drive him (Williams never learned to drive a car) and often work alongside him. The most convivial of men, Fred hated any social interference to his day in the landscape. Even when the day was long, involving an hour or more drive to the location, he would come back notably energised by the experience. I remember seeing the four panels of Chalk Creek (1977, Art Gallery of Western Australia) propped up around the sitting room at the Tooronga Road house either on the day or the day after they were painted. Fred pointed delightedly to each in turn and said: ‘Ten o’clock, twelve o’clock, two o’clock, four o’clock. I’ve only got to cut back the paint a bit and they’re ready.’ He had realised a major work directly, en plein air, without undergoing the labours of the studio, and he was delighted.

Although Fred Williams was stout all his life, he had a brisk and energetic manner, springing from an acute intelligence. His judgments on persons, objects and events emerged with a singular sense of purpose. When I was finishing my book in the last months of 1979, Fred allowed me to look at the diaries to check the dates of paintings and the sequences of series. Stupidly, I had been too shy to ask him earlier. It seemed intrusive. With only weeks to go to my deadline, I would sit up most of the night trying to read through the 365 pages of a year’s diary to see what I had missed or got wrong. What struck me as I tore through them was what a struggle had gone on in the studio through much of his mature career. Those days of long and hard labour in the studio, moving from one painting to another looking for inspiration as well as preserving it, often ending up being frustrating and exhausting, represent the common round. The days when the work sailed along on its own volition were rare. Waterfall Polyptych (1979, Art Gallery of New South Wales), so dense and monumental in conception, came easily to him, one picture unfolding from the next. The Adelaide murals of 1972–73 in the Festival Theatre, by contrast, were struggled over for months. They made him sick with frustration and anxiety, and were in some ways abandoned rather than completed. Yet the Adelaide murals rank amongst his finest work, innovative in the use of the strip format and, in their brilliant colour, presaging the new, iridescent palette of the 1970s.

The most convivial of men, Fred hated any social interference to his day in the landscape. Even when the day was long, involving an hour or more drive to the location, he would come back notably energised by the experience. I remember seeing the four panels of Chalk Creek (1977, Art Gallery of Western Australia) propped up around the sitting room at the Tooronga Road house either on the day or the day after they were painted. Fred pointed delightedly to each in turn and said: ‘Ten o’clock, twelve o’clock, two o’clock, four o’clock. I’ve only got to cut back the paint a bit and they’re ready.’ He had realised a major work directly, en plein air, without undergoing the labours of the studio, and he was delighted.

Although Fred Williams was stout all his life, he had a brisk and energetic manner, springing from an acute intelligence. His judgments on persons, objects and events emerged as sharp obiter dicta without malice or sentimentality. Once he had given his opinion, he would not repeat himself. You either heard it or you missed it. He was naturally drawn towards the literate and cultivated. Michael Davie, formerly deputy editor of the Observer in London and editor of Evelyn Waugh’s Diaries, became editor of The Age in the late 1970s. Ann Chisholm, his wife, had just published a widely acclaimed biography of Nancy Cunard. Fred took to them both soon after their arrival in Melbourne. They brought an easy cosmopolitanism, a London smartness and range of reference that delighted him. As a fellow diarist, Fred consumed the Waugh Diaries avidly, cheerfully and ironically remarking that they were ‘just like me: no inner life’. Ann missed London more than Michael and was skeptical of, even bored by, all the
talk of ‘an Australian identity’, still grinding away in the 1970s. Fred found this liberating too. In 1974, against his better judgment, he had gone off to Erith, an island in the middle of Bass Strait, for a week or so to paint with Clifton Pugh by day and to indulge in the higher conversation with Ian Turner and Stephen Murray-Smith by night. Fred was happy to let Cliff rattle on, and he generally found Turner’s and Murray-Smith’s (particularly the latter’s) dinky-di diggerism irrelevant to his own work, even obtuse.

Fred found the whole Erith experience a bit trying. He felt that he was ‘painting to order’ and did not have the same affection for the Erith gouaches as he had for some of the other marine series of the 1970s. One morning, Christine Abrahams and I had been sorting out the Bass Strait gouaches into the Erith series and the Flinders Island series. Fred came in just before lunch to see if we had got it right. He took one look at the gouache on the top of the Erith pile, picked it up and tore it into pieces. ‘That’s going out for a start,’ he said in a businesslike way. Christine, my research assistant on the book, turned pale with shock. Later she plaintively asked me why Fred could not have given it to her if he did not want it — which rather missed the point.

Murray Bail became a close friend of Fred and Lyn’s at this time. Like Davie and Chisholm, he was sophisticated and cosmopolitan in attitude. Fred got to know him well when they were both on the Council of the National Gallery of Australia. Fred was intrigued by Murray’s knowledge and prejudices in modern art, as well as by his saturnine personality. More often than not, Murray would arrive complaining about how tired or how sick he felt, practising recuperation as a social mode. But the relationship between the fabulist writer and the observant painter resulted in one of Fred’s finest portraits, with Murray standing full length in the studio, hesitantly raising his left hand to his mouth.

Fred Williams had the best eye of any artist I have known. Far from being inarticulate, his judgments on works of art were crisp and pointed. We once went to an exhibition together by one of the tyros of the 1970s. The pictures looked confused, unresolved and run up quickly for the exhibition. Fred looked at them carefully but quickly, and turned to me and said quietly: ‘There’s nothing wrong with painting these pictures, just showing them.’ Looking at art with Fred was a similar experience to looking with Clement Greenberg: you saw things you had missed or overlooked. By instinct, Fred would look for the half-tone in painting, the control over the transition from light to dark that guarantees the unity of the surface. When I judged the William Angliss Art Prize with him out at the Showgrounds, we gave the prize to George Haynes, bypassing many leading Sydney and Melbourne painters. What struck me most as we looked at the show together was how little attention Fred paid either to the style or imagery of the work. He would read the paintings perfectly as surfaces, sensing what was alive, what was deadly and what was truly meretricious. ‘The hardest thing in painting is to put one colour next to another and make it work,’ he was fond of remarking.

As I SPENT the best part of five years writing my book on Fred, I got to know him better than almost any other artist. The more I saw of and the closer I drew to his art, the more profound and surprising I found him and his art. Working on him was exactly like working on any major European or American painter: you felt you could excavate the work forever and find new elements. Twenty years after his death, his work resonates ever more profoundly. The painter whose final series took the heroic desert landscape of the Pilbara was also in the 1970s a marine painter of delicacy and subtlety. The poet of the overgrown botanist’s garden at St Andrews was also the master of the perilous and precipitous gorges west of Melbourne. The landscape of intimacy and the landscape of grandeur were equally his domain.

The book came out towards the end of 1980. Joe Burke (Herald Professor of Fine Arts at the University of Melbourne) launched it guardedly in a poky room at the Australia Hotel. Through the good offices of Christine Abrahams, Alitalia flew me home from Italy, where I was on sabbatical leave. Lyn and Fred picked me up at the airport. After a recuperative shot of Vecchia Romagna at our house in Parkville, I cleaned up and went to lunch with them. As Fred and I were leafing through an advanced copy remarking on the generally impressive quality of the reproductions, I picked up my glass and drank the wine, casually remarking that Australian wine had improved a lot. Fred said nothing. Some days later, he told me and many others (for it became a favourite story of his) that he had opened one of his finest bottles of French wine, a premier cru, in honour of the occasion and all I had said was that Australian wine was getting better!

There are passages in the book that make me wince now, and much that I wish I had asked Fred about. I missed the hidden grandeur of his themes, although they have emerged more clearly in retrospect. The book was generally well-received. Bay Books produced it quite sumptuously, and it ran to three editions before hitting the remainder table. Bernard Smith, true to his pattern of public excoriation/private friendliness, reviewed it for Meanjin. He began by offering lukewarm praise and went on to make the unoriginal point that Cézanne was a principal source of inspiration to Fred Williams. He concluded, however, with the nasty inference that I might somehow be ‘on the take’ because I had thanked Rudy Komon for his help with the book, lightly referring to him as both ‘carrot and stick’. It was an unworthy smear, which he reprinted eight years later in his selected essays, The Critic as Advocate.

When Lyn phoned me in late November 1981 to tell me Fred had been diagnosed with inoperable lung cancer, I felt the chill that goes with sorrow and fear. The Australian art world without Fred Williams seemed an unimaginable place. All his friends, acquaintances and those who had but a nodding relationship to him felt the same way: a vital, irreplaceable presence was passing from the Australian scene. A sense of barrenness was inescapable.
At first, the news was confined to a small circle of family and close friends, but, gradually, word leaked out. Fred was emotionally restrained and diffident about demonstrations of feeling. He found the expressions of sympathy hard to cope with and a terrible distraction from his work, which remained a source of refuge and comfort to him right to the end. Some of the responses to the news were grotesquely inappropriate. An art dealer turned up with a bottle of scotch and proceeded to take the barely disguised line ‘let’s drink for tomorrow we die’. I witnessed the most inappropriate of all. An artist of longstanding acquaintance, whom Fred had never liked much, turned up unannounced. When Fred answered the door, momentarily groaning when he saw who it was, the artist greeted him as follows: ‘Oh, Fred, they told me you were dying, but you look fine.’ Fred was appalled. I left soon after. Fred told me later that he refused to give the artist a second glass of wine and fixed me with a hard look: ‘Never forgive him for that remark. What if one of the children had overheard it?’

It was difficult to know how to take one’s leave of this good friend, this great artist. I fear I failed him at the end. Fred was moved briefly into the Peter MacCallum Clinic, where I visited him. Lyn, with style and imagination, had brought him an array of excellent wine in half-bottles. We had a glass together. Lyn withdrew and left us alone. I wanted to say how much his friendship had meant to me, how much I owed him. I did not, and we frittered the time away in chatter. Yes, of course, I felt nervous, even squeamish, about talking to him in the tone and terms of an obituary. But it was a failure on my part. I knew, as I left the Peter MacCallum, that I had disappointed and let my friend down in his hour of need, and had withheld the assurance that he was deeply loved and admired.

Fred’s courage and resilience during those last six months were extraordinary and heartbreaking. He embarked on no new work, but he completed many works that he had left unfinished. He told me he had no hesitation now as to what to do. The studio was a place of comfort, more a sanctuary than ever. Fred remained active to the very end of his life. One Friday, he and Lyn came down to the National Gallery of Victoria to look at the pair of pastoral paintings by François Boucher I had just bought for the Gallery, my first major acquisition. He bestowed the good housekeeping seal of approval, declaring the Agreeable Lesson ‘plastically perfect’. And then told me to swap the frames and re-gild one of the edges. The following Monday, he went to Canberra to attend the first meeting of the Council to be held in the new building. He returned to Melbourne on the Tuesday. The next day, Rudy Komon came down to host one of his artists’ lunches. Lyn and Fred went and enjoyed the familiar mix of good food, excellent wine and lively talk. On the way home, they sat in a favourite spot in the Botanical Gardens. Fred Williams died that night.

Lyn rang me the next morning at the Gallery. I dropped everything and drove straight to Tooronga Road. Members of the family were there; so were John and Helen Brack. The atmosphere was stiff, desolate and awkward. John broke the silence with the trenchant remark, ‘Well, I hope my last act won’t be going to a committee’, and miraculously relaxed the atmosphere. Only the families and a small circle of his closest friends attended the funeral, held in one of those bland and cheerless chapels at the Springvale Crematorium. John Brack delivered the eulogy — nobly, simply and with the intimate affection of a lifetime’s friendship:

The death of a friend, yes. The death of a relative, yes. But above all, the death of an artist. That is different in a particular way from the death of others, because while he lives, he is the work and when he dies he stays behind. The work speaks to us now, in his voice, as it will speak to those yet to come. This is the great consolation, both to the artist and to those who are left.

Brack concluded by reading W.H. Auden’s poem Musée des Beaux Arts (‘About suffering they were never wrong / The old masters … ’). Lyn asked me to get hold of a recording of Beethoven’s Missa Solemnis, Fred’s favourite work of classical music. The violin solo before the Sanctus was played, and Fred Williams was borne away from us.

A fortnight later, I organised a memorial tribute to him in the National Gallery of Victoria. We hung the eleven oil paintings by him then in the collection in the Australian Galleries. Hundreds of people packed into the Gallery. James Mollison, Jan Senbergs, Margaret Plant and I spoke. It was a moving and dignified occasion. The large and silent crowd embodied the truth we all felt that here was the passing both of a great Australian artist and of a dimension in Australian art that we were not likely to see again.

For me, Fred remains the brightest of the true names. Two decades after his death, his art has taken on an epic quality, the long struggle to realise fully the extremes and the norm of the Australian landscape. The world of Sherbrooke Forest, the waterlogged paddocks of Lysterfield, the dry plain stretching below the You Yangs, these familiar and accessible places are held in balance against the storm-tossed clouds over Mount Kosciusko, the burning, natural monuments of the Pilbara, the arid coastline of Western Australia, biting into the Indian Ocean.