Mysticism and Stuff Like That
Brian Medlin
For Christine

Introduction by Christine Vick
Read the following essay and you will have learnt a lot about the man Brian Medlin. Not just his ideas and values but how these fused with his loves: poetry, philosophy and the Australian bush.

For me this essay is special; it was written during our last few months together. It was part of our life, our talk: it had a presence. Brian worked on it between bouts of illness and pain, in doctor’s waiting rooms, in hospital and finally from his bed at home. Three days before he died he completed it and handed it to me. ‘Here, I’ve made you a present,’ he said. ‘I wrote this for you.’

I sat at the end of the bed and read. I was blown away by the ease with which he moved from anecdote to analysis, from philosophy to poetry, back and forth weaving them together, telling a story, in fact several stories. And I was moved by how he saw himself and humanity and its artefacts as part of nature, not separate from it, a rare achievement in western society, and central to understanding the photographs in the final chapter. (Photos that were taken on what turned out to be our last visit to “another Best Place” the Coorong.) I was moved by many things...

He asked me what I thought. Then, ‘Do you think I’ve been too hard on Bob Brown?’

‘It’s the most beautiful thing you’ve ever written,’ I said. Ten years on I still think that.

* * *

My first shared poem
I wrote my first poem in 1939. I know this because it was written at the outbreak of the Second World War. I suppose that I must have been reading poetry by then, but the first poem I can remember admiring was Tennyson’s poem, ‘The Eagle’. This was about a year later. For many years poetry was a deeply private practice, both the reading and writing thereof.

Not at first. I know that I confided in my father at least once. He sent a poem of mine to ‘The Bulletin’, the covering note concluding, ‘The author of this poem is twelve years old. Thanking you in anticipation of a favourable response, Jack Medlin.’ Alas for anticipation. Answers to Correspondents for the appropriate week dealt me the best literary advice I have ever had: ‘Don’t use “Thou” and don’t, when stuck for a rhyme for “truth” drag in a “Tyrant’s Hoof”.’

Soon after this, it must have been, my mother came across a poem about death, sensible, I’m sure, and for all its literary inadequacy, right on the knock. Death, it maintained, was the fact of life. The upshot of this, The Old Girl’s ill-equipped foray into Lit. Crit., was frequent hours of discussion based on the assumption that I was incorrigibly suicidal. This assumption spread like

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locusts throughout an extended family of whom till that time I had been fond. Suicidal or not, I rapidly became murderous.

(Don’t get me wrong, my mum was a first-rate old Tartar, just out of her literary depth in these shallow sands, that’s all. As for the rest of them, minding their own business was not a deeply-rooted family virtue.)

**Trevor Rowe**

In 1941, I met my oldest friend Trevor Rowe, still cherished. This was a great stroke of luck for both of us, though it occurred in the context of what to this day I regard as one of the major disasters of my life. Innocent of offence, we became students at the Adelaide Technical High School, an institution which in those days enjoyed a quite unmerited educational reputation. It acquired and maintained this reputation, by selecting out students who had distinguished themselves as primary students. It then subjected them to a merciless course of cramming, almost entirely devoid of intellectual and academic value. So intense was the cramming, such servile swots were the students, that the Adelaide Tech managed, year after year, to cream off the best results in public exams. This in spite of the fact that it pushed its victims through matriculation in three years instead of the four squandered by other schools. That took students to the Leaving qualification. More affluent schools and more prosperous students went on for an extra year to complete the Leaving Honours qualification.

In spite of the fact that Rowe seems to remember me as a goody-goody, at school, this was far from the case. I think that he is inclined to confuse Christianity with conformism. Well, I was at that time, a devout Christian all right, but a non-conformist and non-conforming Christian. With the exception of Rowe, I despised the most successful students of my time, regarding them as boring farts. I was much more drawn to the larrikins amongst my contemporaries, people like Parker and Tansell. (Come to think of it, there was another successful student whom I respected. Nichols could bowl at will a ball I never learnt to play.) As for school work, I did as little as possible, preferring to educate myself at the South Australian Public Library. I took to Rowe in spite of the fact that he did pretty well, usually coming out amongst the top three or so in the term’s results. In spite of this failing, he was witty and irreverent, agin’ the guvmentt. I’m sure that he detected the same qualities in me, though my early religiosity has caused him to forget the rebelliousness.

Don’t think that this rebelliousness was expressed in daring action. Mostly it operated at the purely verbal level. There were some good gum-nut fights out of bounds in the Botanic Park. From time to time, God blew with His winds and The Great Armada, masquerading as Jolly’s Boats, was scattered across The Torrens – again out of bounds. Yet there was little room for the kind of revolt that enlivened the schools and universities of later years.

I played organised sport at The Tech – footy, cricket, tennis, hockey. Rowe shot at the small-bore rifle-range. I had been using firearms in the bush from the age of about eleven, so that Rowe’s chosen sport had little appeal to me. We did, however, find a common interest in strenuous bushwalking. And I mean *strenuous*.

**Tintern Abbey**

And that, I’m sure, contributed to our joint excitement over Wordsworth’s *Tintern Abbey*. The sounding cataract haunted us like a passion. It was of course an unbelievable bit of good luck that the young Wordsworth had bounded over the mountains like a roe. No real compensation, alas, for the pathetic paucity of real sounding cataracts throughout the Adelaide Hills and, as for
the haunting passion, that we had to supply for ourselves. The Adelaide Hills resounded with lines recording the coarser pleasures of Wordsworth’s boyish days.

I speak more for myself than for Rowe, when I talk of our excitement over this poem. He seems now not to remember the enthusiasm we shared for it. Perhaps he has forgotten, perhaps I have reconstructed the past. Perhaps even then I was projecting my own feelings onto him.

Whatever …

Whether or not Rowe heard often the still sad music of humanity, the poem deeply affected me. I became something of a mystic. In the long run not a Wordsworthian mystic, rather an aggressively godless one. Yet, for all that a mystic profoundly influenced by Wordsworth.

Those remarks may seem obscure and even contradictory. So perhaps I’d better say something about mysticism.

**Mysticism**

*Bob Brown’s mysticism*

Consider the following passage.

Wilderness emerged as one avenue of spiritual transcendence. When Bob Brown, the hero of the Franklin campaign, told of his first wilderness experience (on the Franklin River), he might well have been recounting an acid trip or an ascent into religious ecstasy: ‘I lost awareness of all else – my raft, my friend, my obligations, myself.’ And then, ‘the process of thirty years which had made me a mystified and detached observer of the universe was reversed and I fused into the inexplicable mystery of nature’. Counterculture devotees mistrusted science for the role it played in devising destructive technology. Rather than observing nature empirically by identifying and observing, as traditional naturalists had done, they imbibed nature holistically, meditating on hilltops and hugging trees. Enjoyment of nature switched from a right- to a left-brain activity. Wilderness, once a Christian temple, became a New Age shrine.1

First, I shall remark that Bob Brown is properly described as the hero of the Franklin campaign and that accordingly Australia is greatly in his debt.

Next I remark that I see nothing wrong with imbibing nature ‘holistically’ (whatever that may mean). Not in itself. If the practice leads to false belief; if it militates against the empirical study of natural phenomena (and what other phenomena are there?) then of course it is to be condemned.

I do, though, see plenty wrong with Brown’s mysticism, at any rate as here expressed. According to him, he lost awareness of his friend. He lost awareness of his obligations. If these statements are true, then he had ceased to be a moral agent. The universe is not (pace Wordsworth) a moral agent, so perhaps Mr Brown had indeed ‘fused into the inexplicable mystery of nature’.

Brown’s mysticism, as presented here, is pernicious. For he seems to be claiming that there is some higher, better, state of consciousness than that of a moral agent.

Or it would be pernicious, were we to take it seriously.

Several people to whom I read this passage, responded in a way that at first surprised me. I had expected them to say that the passage was pernicious. Instead, they said that it was pretentious.

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I believe that they were right. I believe that we cannot take seriously Brown’s claim to have been in such an elevated state of consciousness that he lost awareness of his friend, of his obligations. (Though perhaps he wasn’t thinking of them.) Suppose, for example that his friend had fallen out of the raft, would he have remained blithely fused with the inexplicable mystery of the universe? Of course not. Brown’s fusion then is mere play-acting mysticism, mere pretentiousness.

And what of his consciousness of himself? Did he, for example, let the river take him where it would?

It is true that we are not always consciously thinking of our friends, not always dwelling knowingly on our moral obligations. Nor, for that matter, are we always consciously thinking about ourselves – though some people come closer to it than others. If this is all that Brown means when he says that he lost awareness of his friend, of his obligations, of himself, then his claim is downright trivial and the further claim that he fused with the inexplicable mystery of nature, based as it is upon triviality, is certainly pretentious.

These are only a few of the difficulties for Brown’s account. We’ll spare him most of the others, but there is one that he should certainly face up to. How, if he lost awareness of himself, would he ever know that he had fused with the inexplicable mystery of nature? What had so fused? Did he experience that fusion? But then the notion of experiencing a loss of awareness of oneself is as fine a contradiction as you’re likely to get even on a good day. And if he didn’t experience the fusion, then in what sense did he have any sort of mystical experience at all?

There are human beings who are not moral agents, but certainly Bob Brown is not one of them. What’s more, such people are necessarily exceptions. Human life is the life of moral agents, lived well perhaps, or ill, but of moral agents nonetheless. It’s true that there is never any shortage of smart-arses to argue that morality is a load of bunkum, Nietzsche being perhaps the best known of them all. But their arguments are broken-backed. If there is no such thing as obligation, then I am not obliged to attend to any argument whatsoever, however cogent it may be. Hence, I am not obliged to respect any argument to the conclusion that obligation is some sort of powerful illusion. Human beings are inescapably moral beings. Bob Brown himself is notably a moral being, none the less so for an ‘experience’ that he believes somehow elevated him above morality.

I have suggested that Brown’s claim is merely pretentious rather than pernicious in the way I first took it to be. This doesn’t mean, of course, that it isn’t pernicious at all. Bob Brown, we have said, is a moral being. Now in saying that someone is a moral being, I don’t mean to praise them (or for that matter dispraise them). Moral fervour can be one of the finest manifestations of human nature. It can also be one of the most evil. Osama bin Laden and George W. Bush are both men of moral fervour. Is the world a better place for their presence? Paradoxically, one of the things that can generate moral fervour is a belief that one is somehow elevated above common morality. I don’t cite either George W. Bush or Osama bin Laden as victims of such a belief. But, off his own pen, Bob Brown stands accused of this delusion. Such a delusion can lead to bigotry and intolerance. I don’t know whether Bob Brown is bigoted and intolerant. I do know that if he does suffer from some delusion to the effect that by some sort of mystical fusion with ‘nature’ he has been even for a moment elevated above friendship and obligation, then he is certainly at risk from those vices.

To say this isn’t to say that Brown is subject to these vices. Criticising Brown’s Mysticism isn’t to condemn his politics – any more than praising Wordsworth’s is to approve The Lost Leader.
Wordsworth’s mysticism

Brown’s mysticism might be called ‘Wordsworthian’ for the reason that like Wordsworth’s it is somehow based on ‘nature’. All that shows though is the inadequacy of labels. For the two positions are utterly different. Consider the following passage from the 1805 version of The Prelude:

The immeasurable height
Of woods decaying, never to be decayed,
The stationary blasts of waterfalls,
And in the narrow rent at every turn
Winds thwarting winds, bewildered and forlorn.
The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,
The rocks that muttered close about our ears,
Black drizzling crags that spake by the wayside
As if a voice were in them, the sick sight
And giddy prospect of the raving stream,
The unfettered clouds and regions of the Heavens,
Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light –
Were all like workings of one mind, the features
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree;
Characters of the great Apocalypse,
The type and symbols of Eternity,
Of first and last and midst and without end. (Book vi, ll)

The first thing we notice is the immense descriptive power of Wordsworth. For Brown, Nature is an abstraction, something about which nothing is said. For Wordsworth, the one face of nature has many features, observed in detail, described with fervour.

Next, Wordsworth is not ‘fused’ with nature. He is, of course, part of it since it comprises everything, it is first and last and midst and without end. And yet he is a discrete part, separate to himself, capable of perceiving other parts as distinct from himself.

Black drizzling crags that spake by the wayside
As if a voice were in them.

For Brown the essence of the mystical experience is a kind of trance-like loss of awareness. For Wordsworth it is an intensified perception of the detail of the world. It is this that makes Wordsworth’s mysticism exciting while Brown’s is at best boring.

At best boring, at second best pretentious, at worst pernicious. Consider now the following passage from Tintern Abbey.

For I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour
Of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes
The still sad music of humanity,
Nor harsh, nor grating, though of ample power
To chasten and subdue. And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things. Therefore am I still
A lover of the meadows and the woods,
And mountains; and of all that we behold
From this green earth; of all the mighty world
Of eye, and ear, – both what they half create
And what perceive; well pleased to recognise
In nature and the language of the sense
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide and guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being.

Wordsworth’s mysticism isn’t only a sharpening of the senses. It is humanely ideological. It hears the still sad music of humanity. It is, moreover, religious. It feels a presence that rolls through all things. This comes as close as one would wish to get to God. A god, not distinct from the universe, not identical with the universe, but immanent in the natural world. (And what other world might there be?)

(Though I point out this difference from Brown, I don’t suggest that in this respect Wordsworth’s mysticism is superior to Brown’s. I am no great fan of God.)

Notice too that Wordsworth’s mysticism is innocent of the pernicious amoralism of which Brown accuses himself. For Wordsworth nature is not, as for Brown, a moral opiate. He recognises in nature and the language of the sense, the soul of all his moral being. For him morality is grounded in sensory experience. Not in sensory experience as such, but in sensory experience as mediating an awareness of a presence pervasive throughout the universe.
Pervasive not only throughout the objects of sense, but in the mind of man.

**Morality and the universe**

In what follows, I shall speak dogmatically. My concern is to make positions and distinctions clear, not to justify this position as against that.

I certainly prefer Wordsworth’s mysticism to Brown’s. One good reason for doing so, I believe, is that Wordsworth’s is a ground for morality, whereas Brown’s purports to be an abdication from morality.

That said, I would add that I think that Wordsworth’s supposed ground is mistaken. The universe is not a moral agent. Nor is it the manifestation of a pervasive presence, a presence which is a moral being. And even if it were so, such a presence could not provide a ground for the morality. That presence would be good or evil according to whether it were good or evil. It couldn’t constitute a standard of good and evil, nor the origin of them.

We are moral beings and inescapably so, in spite of the villains amongst us, in spite even of the amoral beings amongst us.

There is I believe an objective difference between good and evil – all things considered and in the long enough run. But the objectivity cannot be supplied, by invoking anything external to human nature as the ground of our moral being. Morality is generated by the social nature of human beings and cannot be validated by appeal to anything outside.
It doesn’t follow from this, by the way, that morality is all bunkum. I’ve said above that any attempt to demonstrate this leads straightway to paradox. (This is the one position in this essay that I take myself to have established.)

This isn’t to say that, as a matter of fact, a man like Wordsworth may not be sustained as a moral being by his supposed perception of a presence that rolls through all things. Whatever it takes. Maybe it was Wordsworth’s mysticism that kept him on the rails – though Browning would have disagreed, of course.

For the mystic these facts are likely to be obscured by the nature of mystical experience, by the fact that it is experience. By that I mean that it comes ready-made as direct awareness. Supposed direct awareness. When we look at a bird in a tree, we have the best reason we can have for believing that there is a bird in that tree. We see the damn thing. (We can be wrong of course, but characteristically we are not wrong.) When we feel a presence that rolls through all things, we may well think that we have equally good reason for believing in that presence. After all, we feel the damn thing. The difference is that in the case of the mystical experience, our beliefs are built into the ‘experience’ shaping it into an apparent perception. In the case of real perception our belief is generated by the bird, say, or by the black drizzling crags. The presence, on the other hand, is generated by the belief. That is, it isn’t perceived at all.

**Mysticism and Atheism**

I shall return to Wordsworth, but at present I want to put a case for atheistic mysticism. Consider the following passage that I wrote some years ago.\(^2\)

The postulation of intention behind the universe solves nothing. It accounts for the unexplained order of the universe, by postulating another order still unexplained. (Notably St Thomas Aquinas tried to break this regress, but failed I believe.\(^3\)) Further, it fails to account for the glory of creation. Creation manifests the glory of a creator only to the extent that it is glorious in itself, whether created or not. The invention of a personal creator, then, has no function except to assuage human arrogance and cowardice, pandering to the notion that only what is personal can be of value.

I suggest that the concentration of the glory of ‘Creation’ into a person, a glorious Creator, may make it easier to realise and express those feelings which are appropriate in response to the glory of the universe.

In the glory of the universe, we confront the ineffable. To start with, there is the problem of scale. The universe is too big for our imagining. This is an empirical fact. But it is also the consequence of a simple mathematical theorem known as the Map Paradox.

The world is not a grain of sand. Nor can it be seen in one.

Next there is the problem of intelligibility. The existence of the universe is a fact, an inexplicable fact. True there are explanations for natural phenomena. There are even explanations which purport to explain the existence of the universe; for example, the universe is the result of fluctuations in the quantum vacuum. But inevitably, all such explanations proceed from something unexplained.

God is supposed to embody both these properties (along with others). He is infinite, too vast to comprehend. And He is unfathomably mysterious, ‘in light inaccessible hid from our eyes’.

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\(^3\) Brian Medlin, ‘The Contingency Argument,’ *Sophia*, 5.3 (1966) 17-34.
And yet, we are made in the image of God. Since we resemble Him in some way, He resembles us in some way. This cuts Him down to a comfortable human size. At the same time it renders him intelligible to us. But there is no way, be it finite or infinite, that the universe can be made small enough for us to envisage it. Nor is there any way that the fundamental mystery of the universe can be resolved, no way we can achieve a final and intelligible explanation for its existence.

Wordsworth’s mysticism is, at heart, theistic. Through nature he senses a presence. And so he perceives infinity through the finite, the unintelligible through the visible and tangible. Or so it would seem to Wordsworth. But such feats are not possible to a mere poet. Not to Hercules. Not to God Himself.

There is however, another kind of mysticism, that which comes to recognise and feel the vastness naked, so to speak, rather than dressed up as God. I do not mean that this recognition is an awareness of the universe as a whole. On the contrary, we become conscious of our inability to achieve any such awareness. I don’t mean either that the universe becomes intelligible to us. I mean that, however much we may know and understand about the universe, we sense it as fundamentally unintelligible. It’s a bit like looking on darkness which the blind do see. At the same time, I’m reminded of Ulysses’ untravelled world whose margin fades forever and forever as we move. I don’t mean that there are always more things than we can ever experience. Perhaps that’s how the pragmatic Ulysses saw the matter – Homer’s at any rate. The things we know are parts, parts of a greater whole, forever unknown to us. Unknown except for that inevitably partial understanding we may have of bits and pieces. And by a whole, I don’t mean any sort of Parmenidean One. The universe is a plurality, but it is a united plurality. Nor do I mean any sort of Platonic abstraction. The universe is a concrete affair whose parts are studied and largely understood by physical scientists. Largely and yet partly. The greater our understanding, the more our ignorance is exposed.

So far, we have a mere commonsense physicalism, a mere intellectual realisation. Where does the mysticism come in? What makes the realisation mystical is that it is given in experience. (Or seems to be.) The universe is directly perceived through its parts, as was Wordsworth’s presence. And directly perceived as unknowable. Unknowable as a whole.

Such a perception may be illusion of course. The point is that it exists. It happens. It is as real a phenomenon as Wordsworth’s perception. Certainly as real as Brown’s.

That isn’t to guarantee that the phenomenon is a real perception. Such perceptions carry conviction. That is partly why they are perceptions, or seem to be. Alas, they aren’t real perceptions at all. They are real phenomena, yes, but not perceptions. They are not perceptions because the belief that they seem to generate and validate is already built in. It isn’t generated by the supposed perception as is the belief that there is an apple on the tree before me.

When I was young, a boy in primary school, I used to camp in the hills behind Orroroo. I’d live for days on crested pigeon roasted on green sticks. I’d sing as I wandered the scrub, amongst other things Cowper’s great hymn ‘God moves in a mysterious way’. Years later, when I came to read Wordsworth’s Tintern Abbey, I recognised his experience as my own. Wordsworth’s Presence was present on the Pekina Creek as well as on the Wye. At that time, I was devoutly religious. Of course I’d found a presence on the creek – I’d brought it with me.

Soon after I’d discovered Tintern Abbey, I ceased to be religious and soon after that I adopted something pretty close to the atheistic materialistic view of the universe outlined above. What Wordsworth calls ‘nature’ still affected me as deeply and intensely as it had done before this change. Not merely hills and trees and stuff, but also things that were more obviously human artefacts as indeed are many of the objects and landscapes that Wordsworth would have included in his nature. Notice here that Wordsworth’s concept of nature differs from Brown’s notion of

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Wilderness. Wordsworth’s Nature is largely a human construction. For Brown every human intrusion diminishes Wilderness.

In spite of my intellectual turn about, I continued to sense, as it were, a deeper reality underlying natural phenomena. But there had been an important change in the experience. For now I brought to the objects of sense a new set of beliefs. Accordingly, I recognised in ‘nature and the language of the sense’ not a presence, but an absence.

This kind of experience has been an important feature of my life and I wouldn’t have been without it. And yet, I value it for what it is, not for something else. It doesn’t tell me about reality. On the contrary it expresses beliefs about reality already held. The same goes for Wordsworth’s mystical experience. And I believe that pretty much the same goes for any other mystical experience, including the visions of saints. (‘The happening of saints to their vision.’)

I have talked of the apprehension of an absence. I do not mean a lack of awareness, the empty mind. I mean an intense awareness, like Wordsworth’s of the objects of sense. Certainly, that intense awareness doesn’t include, or even seem to include, direct access to the soul of all my moral being. In that it differs from Wordsworth’s. But it also differs from Brown’s. For it doesn’t carry with it moral oblivion. I don’t forget myself as a moral being, I don’t cease to be aware of my obligations. I don’t fuse with nature either. I don’t need to. I am not nature, but a part of nature and keenly aware of myself as part of something incommensurably larger than myself.

The kind of mysticism I have tried to describe is, I believe, as good as any other. True, it is not a guide to the ultimate nature of reality. But then neither is any other kind of mysticism. This is, first, because, no kind of mysticism is any kind of guide to any kind of reality and, next, because there can be no guide mystical or otherwise to the ultimate nature of reality. In the nature of things, as a matter of logic, not even God can know the ultimate nature of reality.

Roland E. Robinson

At about the time I came upon Tintern Abbey, I was befriended by the poet and editor, Flexmore Hudson. Hudson had an enormous influence on my life and I have spoken about this elsewhere (Rationality, Reasoning, Ratiocination). I also came to know Max Harris, five or six years my senior and about a million years more sophisticated. From these two men especially, I began to learn that literature was not at all like the stuff we were taught at school. I began to be aware of recent European literature as well as of the sort of things that were kick-starting in Australia.

I learnt that Australian poetry could be Australian, could speak of and to the country I knew. I especially learnt this from the verses of Roland E. Robinson. One would have to say that Robinson is a minor poet, I suppose, but then he is a minor poet of exceptional quality. The body of work is pretty small and there is nothing to match the two or three great passages in Wordsworth. And yet: there are all those good poems, good lines. Much of the time Wordsworth is a bloody old bore. Robinson never. The only half bad poem by Robinson is his one shot at mysticism.

Immortality

Into all sights of lonely grandeur the soul
Shall pass: Into infinity of sea and sky:
Into forsaken spaces wide and bare:
And shall be scattered over the starry whole.
And lost in the voices of the winds crying by:
In waving grass and trees that rustle in air.

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To appreciate just how poor this poem is, compare it with a poem of similar content, Dylan Thomas’ *And Death Shall have no Dominion*.

So much is contentious. What is not contentious is the effect Robinson’s work had on me. His poems spoke to me as few poems have ever done and none until that time. They are simple direct and vivid and they are mainly about one of the enduring passions of my life – the Australian bush.

I have his first book, *Beyond the Grass Tree Spears*. It is inscribed with my name and the date August, 1944 in a hand-writing imposed by the Adelaide Tech. and soon to be abandoned. I remember vividly opening it and reading the first poem, though I don’t remember where this happened.

**Inscription**

I made my verses of places where I made my fires;  
Of the dark trees standing against the blue-green night  
With the first stars coming: of the bare plains where a bird  
Broke into running song, and of the wind-cold scrub  
Where the bent trees sing to themselves, and of the night  
Dark about me, the fire dying out, and the ashes left.

Another poet who was very important to me at this time (that is, from 1944 to the early fifties) was James McAuley. I came to correspond with McAuley in the sixties and seventies and we met a couple of times. That we thought well of one another’s work doubtless had a good deal to do with allowing us to lean comfortably across the sturdy political fence that divided us. I do not, like McAuley, walk with patience toward the dead, nor expect, as he expected, a welcome in that windless shade. Yet I still admire many of his shorter poems, as I admire few other poems.

Another poet important to me was C. R. Jury – Charles to his many mates. I met Jury a bit after this time – in the early fifties and we became close friends. Jury was a mystic. He was also the author of the two best poems to have been written by an Australian, ‘Sicily in Autumn’ and ‘Sicily in Spring’. And yet his one clear and determined expression of mysticism (‘Hymn to the Muses’), written as it is in a No Man’s Language, leaves me cold.

**Christine and the Coorong**

‘Inscription’ was to be a favourite poem of Christine Vick to whom I introduced Robinson’s work almost four decades after discovering it myself. I remember her years ago muttering passionately as we walked in the bitter light through the curly mallee at the head of Yudanamutana Gorge. I could make out the words –

And of the wind-cold scrub  
Where the bent trees sing to themselves.

I met Christine in 1980. We became mates, lovers and eventually married. We shared many things, among them a love of the bush. We travelled widely by conventional car, 4x4, trail bike and light aircraft and, best of all, on foot.

Another thing shared was a love for the poems of Robinson. And so once again I came to share poetry intensely with a friend. This time I wasn’t mistaken, as I seem to have been over Rowe and Wordsworth. Robinson really did mean as much to Christine as to me.

There was one special place that we loved and visited many times, The Coorong. The Falls on Carpa Creek above Yudanamutana Gorge in the Flinders Ranges were to us The Best Place in the World. But another Best Place was my camp, soon to become our camp, at The Coorong.

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From my early teens I had put in many good days on The Coorong, alone and supported by my little rifle. Salt Creek was a day’s hard ride from Tailem Bend where I took my bike off the train. Hanging onto lorries sometimes made the trip easier. Traffic was sparse in those days, but the drivers were friendly. From Salt Creek you could cross to the Younghusband Peninsula and find soaks at the inland foot of the dunes.

I introduced Christine to the Coorong, as I had to the poetry of Roland E. Robinson. Immediately the area, somewhat further South than Salt Creek, became Our Country. There were times when the whole landscape and atmosphere were suffused with sexual passion. Whether this was also a fusion with the inexplicable mystery of nature, I can’t say. I can say that each was fully aware of the other.

There is a poem by Robinson that describes such country.

**For Rex Ingamells**

> Sword grass, sword-sharp to the grasp,  
> stunted banksia and tea-tree,  
> hold those sandridges that clasp  
> the hard bright jewel of the sea.

Camped there we heard the ageless hoarse  
> ocean down the long sand-bars,  
> And cries of swans that held their course  
> Across the galaxies of stars.

I thought of you there, Rex, my friend  
> I shall not grasp again your hands,  
> Nor see your face. World without end  
> The ocean thunders down the sands.

Rex too had befriended me while I was still at school. He was killed youngish in 1955. At that time he was based in Melbourne, but he too had been a South Australian. (In fact we were both born in Orroroo.) It is quite possible that Ingamells and Robinson had at some time camped on The Coorong. At any rate they had certainly camped in coastal country not unlike that of the Coorong. (There is nothing quite like The Coorong! Nothing at all!)

Recently Christine and I visited The Coorong and our old camp there. In my case, perhaps for the last time; though I’m hoping for just one more go. The pictures which constitute my final chapter of *Mysticism and Stuff Like That* were taken on that visit. They are not mere illustrations, but an integral part of the document. In taking them, I had in mind the final lines of *Tintern Abbey* in which Wordsworth addresses his sister, Dorothy. These lines are apt to the current condition of Christine and myself because I am dying. What’s more, though, the lines and pictures belong well together in spite of the great differences in the two kinds of landscape involved; in spite too of the even greater differences between the two kinds of women. They belong together for the reason that my experience of nature resembles Wordsworth’s in yet one more way. Unlike Brown, who was able to become unaware of his friend as he fused with the mystery of nature, both Wordsworth and I enjoy the friendship, the presence of the friend, as part of the whole experience. For me, it was as though Christine was not merely present: she was part of the landscape, sharing and shaping its character.

Nor perchance  
> If I should be where I no more can hear  
> Thy voice, nor catch from thy wild eyes these gleams

‘Mysticism and Stuff Like That.’ Brian Medlin.  
Transnational Literature Vol. 8 no. 1, November 2015.  
Of past existence – wilt thou then forget
That on the banks of this delightful stream
We stood together; and that I so long
A worshipper of Nature, hither came
Unwearied in that service: rather say
With warmer love – oh! With far deeper zeal
Of holier love. Nor wilt thou then forget
That after many wanderings, many years
Of absence, these steep woods and lofty cliffs,
And this green pastoral landscape were to me
More dear, both for themselves and for thy sake.

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