

The Pioneer Players

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T H E

P I O N E E R

P L A Y E R S

JESSIE UNA WILKINS

M.A. HONOURS

1976

I certify
that this work has not been
submitted for a higher degree
to any other university
or institution.

J.U. Wilkins

A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

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J.U.Wilkins.

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S U M M A R Y

The Pioneer Players, a group of playwrights and actors, came together in 1922 in Melbourne to produce Australian plays. Louis Esson, who was mainly responsible for the formation of the company, received help from Leon Brodzky, Vance and Nettie Palmer, Stewart Macky, Hilda Esson and Frank Wilmot. Although they owed their direct inspiration to the Irish National Theatre, the Pioneer playwrights belonged to the Lawson tradition in Australia.

The following plays were performed in 1922:

The Battler by L.Esson.

John Blake by S.Macky.

A Happy Family by V.Palmer.

Five Short Plays - The New Bridge by G.Byrne.

The Woman Tamer by L.Esson.

The Trap by S.Macky.

The Bishop and the Buns by E.O'Ferrall.

Telling Mrs Baker by V.Palmer.

In 1923 the Pioneer Players produced:

Voice of the People by A.Mulgan.

Mother and Son by L.Esson.

Five Short Plays - Mates by F.Brown.

The Great Man by Katharine Susannah
Prichard

The Black Horse by V.Palmer

The Bishop and the Buns by E.O'Ferrall.

The Trap by S.Macky.

Four Short Plays - Travellers by V.Palmer.

The Drovers by L.Esson.

Pioneers by Katharine Susannah Prichard.

A Disturber of Pools by F.Wilmot.

In 1926 they performed:

The Bride of Gospel Place by L.Esson.

The Pioneer Players ceased to exist mainly because of lack of money. Furthermore, reviews of their plays had not been encouraging. They did show, however, that Australian playwrights would come forward if they were given encouragement and finance. Esson's plays are particularly interesting in the way he brought together the Irish and Australian traditions.

CHAPTER I

THE FORMATION OF THE PIONEER PLAYERS

- i EVENTS, MOVEMENTS AND INFLUENCES LEADING TO
 THE FORMATION OF THE PIONEER PLAYERS

- ii THE FORMATION AND ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE PIONEER
 PLAYERS

- iii WHY THE PIONEER PLAYERS FAILED TO FOUND A
 PERMANENT AUSTRALIAN THEATRE

CHAPTER I
THE FORMATION OF THE PIONEER PLAYERS

i

Events, Movements and Influences
Leading to the Formation of the
Pioneer Players

The Pioneer Players were a group of Australian actors and dramatists who came together in Melbourne in 1922. Looking back on their achievements when she was writing "Notes on the Pioneer Players" in a publication of some of Louis Esson's plays in 1946, The Southern Cross and Other Plays, Hilda Esson described their aims as:

not only to produce the works of Australian authors, but to found a theatre and a school of actors which would present our own life and problems with power and sincerity, and stimulate the creative impulse in our own people.¹

Louis Buvelot Esson (1879-1943) was the person most responsible for the formation of the Pioneer Players. Other Australians, especially Vance and Nettie Palmer, Leon Brodzky, Hilda Esson, Dr. Stewart Macky and Frank Wilmot supported and encouraged Esson. To form such a company Esson needed inspiration and practical help. He was to derive part of his motivation from overseas movements, mainly that of the Abbey Theatre in Dublin, but the climate of literary thought in Australia also seemed to be suitable for such a movement.

Apparently, many Australians in the first two decades of the twentieth century were anxious to advance Australian drama. Writing in the first issue of the Lone Hand in May, 1907, "Stargazer" had asked:

What hope have we of seeing them (Australian plays) played while the patrons of the theatres revel only in the spurious conventions and preposterous stereotyped characters of the Cockney melodrama?²

An article in the same publication on 2 December 1908 declared that "most European countries possess national theatres" and advised the Australian dramatist, "Get your play produced". If he failed to impress the managers of professional theatres, he was told to "get it done by amateurs".³ H.C.Coghlan on the Red Page of the Bulletin of 3 October 1912 in an article, "The One Act Play Competition", also claimed that "good Australian plays" had missed production because of "anti-Australian bias in the reading of plays by managements". Leon Brodzky, writing in the Lone Hand of 1 June 1908 asserted:

No-one for that matter, can name an Australian play that has ever had any pretention of being considered seriously as drama.⁴

Indeed Frank Dalby Davison in "Memories and Impressions" (in The Southern Cross and Other Plays) refers to Louis Esson as "our pioneer dramatist" (p.219) who "had turned to the theatre for expression when there was no theatre" (p.221).

Before the formation of the Pioneer Players, there had been, of course, plays written by Australians and plays about Australians. Some, such as The Bushranger (1853) written by Charles Harpur, had been literary pieces never performed on the stage. Others were crude melodramas and burlesques of slight literary value. Plays such as The Sentimental Bloke and On Our Selection were very popular. They were continually revived in the 1910s and 1920s but they were, as Leslie Rees declares in The Making of Australian Drama:

the legitimate successors to the melodrama, comedies and burlesques of the seventies, eighties and nineties - good popular theatre ... but only in a minor degree contributions to the development of an Australian drama in the new twentieth century sense.⁵

Authors such as Arthur Adams whose volume Three Plays for the Australian Stage was published in 1914 and G.S. Beeby who published Concerning Ordinary People in 1923 wrote plays which were not particularly Australian in atmosphere and which did not attract any great acclaim among critics of the time.⁶

Furthermore, there had been performances of Australian drama, such as the "annual Drama Nights" organized by William Moore which he describes as:

a movement started in 1909 (which) was, I believe, the first organization in Australia in which the sole object was the production of local plays with a literary as well as a dramatic quality.⁷

The dedication of the anthology Best Australian One Act Plays edited by William and T. Inglis Moore in 1937 is to Louis Esson:

whose groups of one-act plays, produced in Melbourne about 1911, was the first original and distinctive contribution to our drama.

Among the plays performed on Moore's Drama Nights were two written by Esson, The Woman Tamer and The Sacred Place.⁸ In each of the years 1909, 1910, 1911 and 1912 there was one of these Drama Nights⁹ of which Moore wrote, "The decisive success of Esson's plays fully justified the enterprise".¹⁰ Nevertheless, these nights were held only once a year, during a four year period. Similarly, the productions of the Melbourne Repertory Theatre, founded in 1911 by Gregan McMahon, only included an occasional Australian drama, at

least one of which was written by Louis Esson.¹¹ It was during this period that he was making a name for himself as a dramatist.

Since Esson was to be the one mainly responsible for the efforts of the Pioneer Players, it is necessary to understand how he came to form such a company. Although he was to be influenced by literary and social movements in Australia and overseas, his direct inspiration appears to have come from the Irish National Theatre. He was in Europe at the time when the Abbey Theatre first opened on 27 December 1904.¹² With him was Leon Brodzky, a Melbourne journalist who shared Esson's enthusiasm for drama. On 3 November 1904 someone apparently related to Leon Brodzky wrote to A.G. Stephens, signing the letter "M. Brodzky":

Leon Spencer Brodzky is in Paris with his bosom friend, Louis Esson. They intend to set the Thames, Seine, Arno and Po on fire with their symbolism. Sad trifles such as dramas are to be written. The two young reformers mean to revolutionize the English stage. They have drifted into the Irish literary camp of which Lady Gregory is the Arch Priestess and Yeats its prophet.¹³

Writing in Fellowship, August 1921, in an article called, "W.B. Yeats on National Drama", Esson recalls a conversation he had with Yeats in 1904:

When fifteen years ago I had the honour of meeting W.G. Yeats, almost the first words he said to me were: 'Keep within your own borders'. This was by no means the advice I wished to hear at the time. I had a vague love of the bush but I had no idea that cattle men and bullock drovers were suitable subjects for literature. I belonged to the decadent school, sighing for the studios of the Quartier Latin where some of my friends were studying painting, and the cabarets and cafes de nuit of Montmartre. But I knew instinctively that Mr Yeats was right. He believed in national art, national drama. 'If you want to do anything', he said, 'you must regard your own country as the centre of the universe.'¹⁴

Yeats, drawing on his own experiences, also offered practical advice on how to begin:

He thought we should take a small hall in Melbourne, find some enthusiastic amateurs for actors with an old Shakespearian professional for a producer, and make a beginning as soon as possible. He suggested that some little comedies of country life should be written first, one act plays in prose.¹⁵

This meeting made a lasting impression on Esson. Again in his article, "Irish Memories and Australian Hopes" published in the Australian Quarterly in June 1939, Esson relates his meeting with the "poets, critics, historians, scholars, wits, political and social reformers" of the Irish literary revival and he repeats Yeats' advice:

It was a memorable event for me when one day I received a letter from W.B.Yeats asking me to meet him at Lady Gregory's drawing room ... Knowing I had come from far away Australia and was interested in literature, Yeats' first words were, 'Keep within your own borders' - words coming from such an authority¹⁶ at such an impressionable time I have never forgotten.

In this article Esson declares that Yeats looked on the new Irish drama as "an expression of the real life of the people" (p.56).

Esson saw the performance of some plays written by members of the Irish movement. He relates that he was taken to a theatre (he could not remember its name) where he heard "the strange and powerful idiom of J.M.Synge" in Riders to the Sea (p.56). He describes this play as "simple, elemental, inevitable" (Ibid.). On the same programme was a poetic drama by Yeats (which Esson does not name) and one of Padraic Colum's first plays, The Fiddler's Horse. Synge's advice was also to keep to real life situations and people when writing plays. "Every country has material for drama", (p.57) he told Esson. After a short stay in Paris, Esson went to Dublin in December

1904 where he saw, at the Abbey Theatre, The King's Threshold and On Bailie's Strand by Yeats, In the Shadow of the Glen and The Well of the Saints by Synge and Lady Gregory's amusing farce, Spreading the News (p.59).

Although he was disappointed that the audiences at the Abbey Theatre were usually small (Ibid.), Esson did not lose his enthusiasm for its production and ideas. On 4 April 1910 he published an article, "The Menace of Sanity in Literature" on the Red Page of the Bulletin in which he claimed:

There is more possibility of a distinctive Australian literature arising in the mysterious country back o' beyond than in the cities which are, for the most part, replicas of English provincial life; - in the shepherds and settlers and sundowners who have fallen, body and soul, like Tannhauser in the Venusberg, under the magic spell of the bush.

Furthermore, he quoted Synge to substantiate his claim. Again, in another article which Esson published in Fellowship, vi, No. 12 in July 1920, "The Washington Square Players", he recounted, with approbation, a conversation with Mr Edward Goodman, the director of this "little theatre" group. Goodman spoke of the influence of the Dublin Abbey Theatre's ideas on the Washington Square Players which led to their emphasis on "native" American drama and their contempt for "outworn tedious stage tricks" and "stock devices" (p.183). In the Fellowship, vi, No.9 of April 1921, Esson's article, called "J.M.Synge. A Personal Note", described his pleasure in 1904 when he met Synge at the home of John Masefield. One piece of advice from Synge was: "You have man and nature; try to find the right relationship between them" (p.140). Synge believed that playwrights "came in groups working for a common aim" (p.138) and he quoted the Greek and Elizabethan dramatists as examples. Judging from Esson's enthusiasm when he refers to the Irish

playwrights, it could be expected that he might try later to put their ideas into practice.

Similarly, Leon Brodzky reveals his admiration for the Abbey Theatre in two articles in the Lone Hand, one called "The Irish National Theatre" published on 1 May 1908, and the other, "Towards an Australian Drama" on 1 June 1908. He sees the Irish movement as an example for Australia to follow:

Many of us are in despair when we see how little relation the theatres¹⁷ in Australia have to the life of the country.

In "The Irish National Theatre" he perceives a likeness between Australian and Irish cultures in that each has "a desire for independence and a separate national life". Australia, however, has "no provocation to give its drama the intense desire of the Irish writers to substitute a natural for an alien drama".¹⁸ Nevertheless, Brodzky declares that Yeats' advice to Synge to "go to the Arran Islands" "to express a life that has never found expression" can be translated into Australian terms:

If in giving counsel to the would-be dramatist in Australia, we substitute for the name of the Arran Islands some part of the Commonwealth, Mr. Yeats' advice holds good for us all equally. (p.106)

Thus, Australian writers "should go to the life of the people" (p.107). From this article it appears that Brodzky and Esson were together as they were present at the performances of the same plays in July, 1904.

Furthermore, Brodzky claims that he had already tried to put into practice the ideas of the Irish national theatre. He had formed in Melbourne, in the middle of 1904:

what was to have been an Australian Theatre Society with the twofold object of producing some of the most important plays of the time and also any Australian plays that seemed to be of sufficient merit.¹⁹

Soon afterwards, later in 1904, when he left for Paris, this theatre group had disintegrated. Now, in 1908, he wishes to form a society to produce plays like the Irish theatre company in Dublin, and also the Theatre Antoine in Paris which, he claims, inspired Yeats to form the Abbey Theatre. Brodzky wants "a number of writers who have written plays" and "people of good education with a taste for acting" to join together to produce short plays evoking "a slice of life" (p.224). According to Morris Miller, such a group which was formed, lasted until 1909 but, having changed its name to the Playgoer's Society, it concerned itself chiefly with the reading of modern plays".²⁰ By the time that Esson had formed the Pioneer Players in 1922, Leon Brodzky had changed his name to Spencer Brodney and departed to America to work as a journalist there. He offered encouragement to Esson in his letters and even wrote a play (Rebel Smith) for the Pioneer Players.

Louis Esson was back in Melbourne in 1909. In the next few years he continued his literary career, exhibiting an observant interest in city and country life in Australia, "keeping within his own borders". In 1910 he published a slim volume of verse, Bells and Bees, in Melbourne, followed by another in 1912 called Red Gums and Other Verses. Most of the poems in both volumes are about the bush and its occupants. Such are "The Splitter" and "The Shearer's Wife" in Bells and Bees. There are, however, a few verses about slum characters. "Back Ter Little Lon" in Red Gums and Other Verse and "Brogan's Lane" in Bells and Bees exhibit an interest in the kinds of people who appear in Esson's plays about the slums of Melbourne. Moreover, he wrote poems, short stories and

articles for the Lone Hand, some under his pen-name "Ganesha". An article called "Round the Corner" in the issue of 1 December 1908²¹ again describes some of the people of the slum areas of Melbourne, types who were to appear in his plays of tough Melbourne life, The Woman Tamer and The Bride of Gospel Place. A character called "Smithie the Liar" is in both his plays as well as in his article, and Renie, the girl who keeps drifting back to "Little Lon" (Lonsdale Street), is the character in his poem "Back Ter Little Lon" as well as being in his article and in The Bride of Gospel Place. Three Short Plays, a volume containing The Woman Tamer, Dead Timber and A Silent Place, was published in 1911 in Melbourne. A reviewer, writing on the Red Page of the Bulletin on 4 January 1912, described Dead Timber as "a playlet that compares with the first offerings of the Irish Dramatic Revival" and "one play that Synge might not have deemed unworthy for promotion at the Abbey Theatre".

Meanwhile, Esson's early plays were being staged. At William Moore's Drama Night, held at the Turn Verein Hall in Melbourne on 5 October 1910, The Woman Tamer was played. On the same programme was a short play The Burglar by Katharine Susannah Prichard who was, later, to supply two plays for the Pioneer Players.²² Gegan McMahon produced Dead Timber on 13 and 14 December 1911. The Sacred Place (based on a short story Esson had published in the Lone Hand, No.1 1 May 1907) was played on Moore's Fourth Drama Night on 15 May 1912 and Esson's long satiric political play, The Time is Not Yet Ripe, was produced by McMahon in the same year. The Argus reported that the Athenaeum hall was crowded for the performance of the political play, among the

enthusiastic audience being the Prime Minister, Mr. Andrew Fisher.²³ Undoubtedly by this time Esson had gained a reputation as a dramatist of some ability. The epilogue which he wrote for the Fourth Drama Night was printed on the playbill, a copy of which survives in the Scrap Book of Florence Wilkie (p.86, M.S.D382 in the Mitchell Library, Sydney). It began:

To hold as t'were the mirror up to nature
(Said Hamlet) was the Drama's leading feature,

indicating that Esson still had in mind the ideas about realism which he had discussed with the Irish dramatists. When replying to a letter from A.G. Stephens on 26 January 1912 he offered to do an article on Yeats for the Bulletin.²⁴

At the same time, the emphasis which the Irish dramatists placed on reproducing "the life of the people" was reinforced in Esson's work, by the current attitudes in Australian literature in the period in which he was writing, a period described by H.M.Green in A History of Australian Literature as one of "self-conscious nationalism".²⁵ Green regards the work of Henry Lawson as "the most characteristic expression" of this "democratic nationalism" ("Introduction", p.348). Esson admired Lawson. An article "Australian Literature" which Esson published in Australia Today, a magazine brought out in 1910 by the United Commercial Travellers' Association of Australia Limited, praises Lawson as "the voice of the Bush, or rather of the bushman, for he can hardly be said to love the Bush" and also as "the simplest, most characteristic writer Australia has produced".²⁶ In 1922 the Pioneer Players were to produce a short play adapted from Lawson's short story, Telling Mrs Baker²⁷. In the same article Esson praised the

work of the poet O'Dowd whose nationalism appealed to the young dramatist. (It was O'Dowd who wrote a favourable review of Esson's Three Short Plays in the Socialist of 12 January 1912.²⁸) In his article in Australia Today Esson advised Australian writers:

to take a fresh outlook on life and therefore on literature; to stress the national note; to revalue all things anew. (p.61)

Vance Palmer who was to give valuable assistance to the Pioneer Players shared Esson's attitude. Writing in Steele Rudd's Magazine in January 1905, he had asserted:

Even now the national movement is beginning. In each of our cities is arising a little band of writers who are content to mirror with clearness the life around them.²⁹

Thus the advice of the Irish dramatists fell on fertile soil. When Esson wrote to Palmer about his visit to Oxford to see Yeats, he told Palmer, "I want you to feel that Yeats' authority would be behind your nationalism."³⁰

Allied to this belief in nationalism was an interest in politics. W.H.Wilde declared in Three Radicals:

Nationalism and radicalism flourished together in Australia, springing largely from the same basic causes. The struggle with the land inspired in Australia not only a love for the harsh and obstinate country itself ... but also a sense of fellowship with those who had joined the struggle.³¹

In her introduction to The Southern Cross and Other Plays Hilda Esson refers to this radicalism:

We were all rebels, and it was at this time (1910) that Louis was gaily writing in the old Socialist edited by R.S.Ross, articles that Bernard O'Dowd told him, with a twinkle in his eyes, could bring him five years for sedition. Although he was not a disciplined revolutionary, Louis never accepted the present social order, nor the conventional standards in political any more than in literary questions. (p.xiv)

In the Melbourne Socialist Esson wrote verses satirising capitalism, personified as "The Sick King" (the title) which were published on 4 March 1910 (p.4) and an article "Eight Hour Day" printed on 28 April 1911. (p.4). When Henderson published his plays in London, Esson told Palmer, "He would not have done the plays, I'm sure, if he hadn't known I belonged to the left".³²

Nevertheless, Esson's politics were not as important to him as his plays. Indeed, The Time is Not Yet Ripe, 1912, although it is mainly concerned with satire of armchair socialists, does seem also to put forward the belief that "the time is not yet ripe" for socialism in Australia. Moreover, there was a hint of disapproval of Palmer's activities in Esson's letter of 25 November 1920:

May I suggest that it is coming near the time when you will have to limit yourself; that is, put all your energy into your creative work. Gradually you will have to put your politics and economics and morals into the background, and give your passion and imagination to literature ... What I mean simply is that your work must come first; that must never be sacrificed for discussions and reforms and temporary topics. This, I sincerely believe, is the morality of art.³³

Palmer was a frequent contributor to the Socialist; one of his articles, published on 12 December 1913, was "Advice to the Strikers of Dublin", condemning English politicians who had been active in Irish government (p.1). Nettie Palmer's volume of poems, Shadowy Paths, was reviewed favourably (by "J.H.") in the Socialist of 19 November 1915. (p.4).

Another writer whose name appeared in the Socialist and who was to be a member of the Pioneer Players was Frank Wilmot who wrote under the name of Furnley Maurice. His poem, "To God from the Weary Nations" was advertised

in the issue of 18 May 1915 (p.3). Palmer reports that Wilmot "agreed with [E] Dyson's criticism of the dominance of the banker and the businessman in our life".³⁴ Although Wilmot wrote one play for the Pioneer Players, Palmer asserts:

His chief help to the Pioneers was the sober enthusiasm of his support. Here was a movement that ran parallel with his own ideas of bringing ordinary people into the world of art ... Night after night he would sit absorbed at rehearsals and come away talking of the possibilities of a new sense of life being spread by the spoken word, a popular culture more lively and accessible than that of books.³⁵

Indeed, Wilmot, in an article, "Our Literary Future", published on the Red Page of the Bulletin on 19 May 1910, took Esson to task:

Mr.Esson preaches a vile and enervating decadence that accepts all the tragedy of life, all the terrible experiences and subtle changes in men's minds, merely as subjects for art ... There are stronger and deeper forces in life than the aesthetic force.

Wilmot was criticising Esson's acceptance of Synge's advice on how he could write about unfortunate bush characters. Synge had said, "Are they not interesting then when going mad?" These words had been quoted in an earlier article by Esson, "The Menace of Sanity", published on the Red Page of the Bulletin on 14 April, 1910. In his reply to Wilmot, Esson claimed, in a dialogue called "The Disadvantages of Sanity" on the Red Page on 9 June 1910 that "art is aristocratic. (Art is democratic). Art stands above ethics." Such a claim indicates that his interest in literature was stronger than his belief in socialism whereas to Wilmot social reform to help unfortunate bush characters came first.

Reverend F.Sinclair, the editor of Fellowship, had an opinion similar to that of Maurice about the future

of the theatre. In an article, "The Theatre", published in the Socialist on 5 August 1910 he described it as:

an institution which influenced and was a permanent need and therefore could satisfy the wants of a community (p.1)

Furthermore, he asserted that the theatre "stood to the people in the same relationship as the public library and the art gallery" (Ibid.). As Hilda Esson relates in the introduction to The Southern Cross and Other Plays, at the Fellowship meetings which he held every Saturday night "for discussions on art and life", Wilmot, Esson, Vance and Nettie Palmer and Gerald Byrne (who was also to write a Pioneer play) were usually present. (p.xiv),

Although Katharine Susannah Prichard did not contribute to the Socialist, her social attitudes were akin to those of most of the other playwrights connected with the Pioneer Players. She was a close friend of Furnley Maurice who according to Justina Williams was in love with Katharine for many years.³⁶ In her autobiography, Child of the Hurricane, Katharine describes her mother's distress when her daughter, on her return from England in 1917, began to show "interest in the revolution" in Russia, and in "Socialist ideas generally".³⁷ Hilda Esson, writing, somewhat disapprovingly, to Nettie Palmer on 10 July 1919, "did not take Katharine's involvement seriously":

I find Kattie talking "high politics" in her last letter. It doesn't seem to be necessary for her, somehow ... She is such a purely artistic personality.³⁸

Yet Katharine was to become a very enthusiastic member of the Communist party. Ric Throssell narrates in Wild Weeds and Windflowers that when he was born on 10 May 1922, his mother insisted that he be dressed in a "Bolshevik gown" which she

had embroidered with hammers and sickles (p.42). Nevertheless her political beliefs and social philosophy did not appear directly in her plays. Although the baby, "the great man" in her play of that name, is expected to grow up and cure the social problems of his time and she refers to her own baby as "the great man"³⁹, she does not incorporate into her play the incident of the "Bolshevik gown" nor make any direct references to Communism.

It was not until later, when looking back at her early literary career, that Katharine Susannah Prichard was to express an opinion about the relationship between Australian literature and politics. In her autobiography, Child of the Hurricane, her only reference to Henry Lawson is about a quarrel he had with E.J.Brady:

A few weeks before, Henry Lawson had been visiting them (Brady's family) at the camp and Norma told me, smiling over the recollection, of the row there had been between E.J. and Henry when Henry talked about writing about Mallacoota folk. (p.221)

In 1942, however, in Australian Writers Speak, she was to declare:

In my opinion Lawson blazed the trail of a literature that was to be based⁴⁰ on realism, social progress and a love of Australia.

It could be that she already held such an opinion when she was writing her Pioneer plays. Thus, it is not surprising that Esson was ready to accept Yeats' advice to "keep within" his "own borders" since this was very similar to the concerns of other Australian writers.

It is difficult to assess the influence which the political beliefs of the Pioneer playwrights had on their plays. There are no plays dealing directly with politics except that written by Alan Mulgan. In fact, politics are

not even mentioned in the other plays. Probably the influence is seen most clearly in the fact that almost all the plays are written from the viewpoint of those of low socio-economic status: struggling farmers, drovers, slum dwellers, pioneers and convicts. They show less sympathy for larger property owners. These attitudes are, however, also those of the plays of the Irish dramatists, Yeats and Synge. As will be seen in a closer study of the Pioneer plays in a later chapter, their themes are never directly concerned with poverty and the attitude to life exhibited by most of their characters is acceptance rather than rebellion.

Furthermore, it is not an interest in socialism that brought the Pioneer Players together, but rather an enthusiasm for the theatre. Hilda Esson relates in the introduction to The Southern Cross and Other Plays that she met Louis as the result of a note from Katharine Susannah Prichard:

Bill Moore and Louis Esson are coming out tonight.
Do come and help me with them, darling. (p.xiv)

In her autobiography, Child of the Hurricane, Miss Prichard tells how Hilda, Nettie Higgins (later Palmer) and she grew up together, in the same suburb of Melbourne:

Hilda and I had met at the Armadale State School, and were soon talking to each other over the garden fence ... there was never anyone with whom I could share my most intimate thoughts as I could with Hilda ... Pressure was being put on her to study medicine ... She dreamed of being an actress....

Nettie Higgins and Christian Smith were Hilda's friends before they were mine. They all went to Presbyterian Ladies' College. (p.63)

Dr. Hilda Bull who was to become Hilda Esson was a member of the Melbourne University Dramatic Society. When the Argus of 28 June 1910 reviewed that society's production of Galsworthy's *Silver Box "special reference" was made to "Miss Hilda Bull's excellently conceived charwoman".⁴¹ With her interest in acting, she was to be as enthusiastic as Esson himself about forming a group of playwrights and actors.

Vance Palmer's first meeting with Esson was in July 1913 when, he reports, "we were about to marry women who had been close friends from girlhood".⁴² Esson's enthusiasm inspired him to write a play while in England:

Until then, I myself had hardly thought of writing for the theatre but Esson's idea of starting a movement on the lines of the Irish one interested me, and when I came back to Australia in 1915, I had ready a comedy,⁴³ A Happy Family, based on a simple country theme.

Palmer declares that Esson communicated the enthusiasm he had for the theatre to his friends:

What attracted him was not only the drama itself, but the idea of a number of people - actors, designers, technicians, scene-shifters and what not - all uniting in a common creative purpose. A man, he felt, did not draw the same satisfaction from working alone in his study as from collaborating with others in a rehearsal-room.⁴⁴

Yet Esson did not believe that the time was favourable for beginning such a movement since so many young writers and actors were involved in the First World War (1914-1918). As Esson could take no part in the war because of his health, he and his wife decided to go abroad. At their farewell dinner were Hugh McCrae, Katharine Susannah Prichard, Edward Dyson and Harrison Owen.⁴⁵ While abroad Esson's letters to Palmer mention his correspondence with "Kattie"⁴⁵ (Katharine Susannah Prichard) and with Gerald Byrne⁴⁶, indicating that

* The paper reported it thus. The correct name is The Silver Box.

he was keeping in touch with literary people in Melbourne. One letter discusses the poems of Furnley Maurice.⁴⁷

At the same time, Esson's mind was continually concerned with the idea of forming a group of players in Melbourne. While in New York he saw the Washington Square Players. In a letter to Palmer written on 16 February 1917, he describes them as a "company that might serve as a model for an Australian group:

It gives a programme of four short plays at a time, and keeps going most of the year. Its intention is to develop American drama,⁴⁸ and there are usually two local plays in every bill.

By December 1918 Louis Esson, Vance Palmer and William Moore were all in London. Palmer relates that Moore suggested that they should get "a few writers together" and produce an evening of one-act plays by Australians.⁴⁹ Although no plays were staged, Louis wrote for Moore The Drovers, which was to be produced for the first time on 3 December 1923, by the Pioneer Players.⁵⁰ As Louis mentions in a letter to Palmer on 25 March 1919, Frank Brown, Louis' half-brother, was also in London.⁵¹ He, too, was later to write a short play, called Mates, which the Pioneer Players staged on 16 August 1923.⁵²

It was in London in 1920 that Henderson published Dead Timber and Other Plays, Esson's volume which contained Dead Timber, The Woman Tamer, The Drovers and The Sacred Place.⁵³ On 14 August of that year Esson wrote to Palmer in Melbourne asking him to "shove a par in any of the journals" to help publicise the book which he was preparing for publication. Esson made a similar request to Spenser Brodney who was at that time, working on the Daily Standard in Brisbane.⁵⁴

As a result of the publication of his plays Esson,

to his great joy, received a letter from Yeats. As he tells Palmer in his letter of 25 November 1920:

My great score which has made me a little giddy, was a letter from Yeats. He says he approves greatly of my 'naturalism', that I write a vivid dialogue, and that the work reminds him strongly of certain plays that were produced with great success at the Abbey. He cannot judge my powers of construction; but if I have good construction and characterization I could become a 'powerful and successful' dramatist ... His opinion means more to me than anyone else's for I have always regarded him as the chief priest of the temple of Apollo.⁵⁵

Another letter, dated only "November 1920", presumably written after the twenty-fifth, begins:

I have just returned from Oxford, where I have had some long, elaborate and stimulating conversations with W.B.Yeats. I'm sending you a few notes that I hope you'll find suggestive. They are meant to hearten you, to give you confidence; and they have a moral - production.⁵⁶

Later in the same letter Esson repeats Yeats' advice:

He thought we ought to get the theatre going, no matter how small. A good 50 enthusiasts are better than 500 indifferents ... The plays we give should all be national. Academics will say we haven't got them. They'll never get them or anything else. At the beginning of the Abbey Theatre Miss Horniman wanted to do, with the local plays, the European masterpieces. That is what our repertory theatres have tried to do. Yeats said he wavered, but that 'inquiring man', Mr Synge, objected, and Irish drama was saved. 'A theatre like that,' said Synge, 'never creates anything'. Isn't that true? What did MacMahon create? What did Hilda's University Society that did Shaw, Galsworthy, etc., create? They should have discovered me for a start, but they didn't. (p.27)

Yeats' advice seems to have made Esson even more eager to start a company of Australians producing plays written by Australians.

No longer does he wish to follow the procedure of the Washington Square Players and produce some European plays as well. A few lines further in the same letter he tells Palmer that he will "drop Sinclaire a note". It was in August 1921 that Esson's article, "W.B.Yeats on National Drama" was published in the magazine Fellowship.

Furthermore, Yeats' interest probably inspired Esson to write more plays. In his letter of 21 March 1921 he tells Palmer that he has finished "two long Australian plays", one "a comedy set in a deserted gold field" and the other "a primitive tragedy, in the Wimmera district".⁵⁷ The first was, presumably, The Battler and the second Mother and Son. Each was to be produced by the Pioneer Players.

Meanwhile, in Melbourne, Vance Palmer had become friendly with Stewart Macky, a young doctor from New Zealand who was very interested in the theatre. According to Palmer, when he returned to Melbourne in 1919:

I found Dr. Stewart Macky running a small amateur company with the idea of training a group of actors who might form the basis of a national movement.

'I feel if we had something already going we might tempt Louis home,' he said.⁵⁸

On 18 December 1919 at the Guildhall in Melbourne Macky produced a programme of recitation and singing which included Palmer's short play, The Prisoner, which he had written while Esson was writing The Drovers, as well as some folk songs written by Esson and Furnley Maurice's "Unconditioned Songs". Macky and Bileen O'Keefe, who was later to act with the Pioneer Players each had a part in the play.⁵⁹ Again, in April 1920, Macky produced a programme of short plays but none was written by an Australian. The Triad of 10 May 1920 reported it as

"a new repertory movement, apparently sponsored by the People's Conservatory of Music"⁶⁰ which Annie Macky, Stewart's wife, directed. This was an organization "to spread a knowledge of music among the working classes".⁶¹ Among the actors and actresses who took part in Macky's programme were several who were, also, to become members of the Pioneer Players. According to the Triad Miss Feuerman played the part of Bianca in Oscar Wilde's A Florentine Tragedy, Mr Alan Murray played Guido in the same drama, Miss Handley played Mrs Lunn in Shaw's Overruled while Dr Macky played Mr Juno. The Triad's critic was not complimentary about their acting ability.

Macky was, moreover, interested in writing plays. As he "had not much knowledge of the country", having been raised in New Zealand, Palmer suggested that he use historical themes "emphasising what might be done with Price Warung's stories".⁶² As a result the doctor wrote a long play John Blake and a short one, The Trap. By June 1921 Esson and Macky were corresponding. In a letter dated "June 8" from Waverley House, London, Esson declared that he was anxious to read Macky's work especially as "Sinclair and Vance thought it was good"; Esson asserted:

It will be a matter of importance to me if you are going to become a good playwright. In Australia it was very difficult for me to attack the Repertory movement, good enough in its own way, and try to substitute a national Australian movement, because it seemed that I wanted only my own plays done ... I could work well with Vance, and our aim is more or less the same. Now if you can write plays and somehow, by faith or instinct I feel that you can, we'll have a few things to start with. I'm sure the three of us could put up a good show, with a blazing manifesto, and we'd soon get others around us.⁶³

Clearly, Esson now believed that he had three playwrights who could write for his "Folk-Theatre" as he called it in the letter,

in a somewhat similar manner to the way that Yeats, Lady Gregory and Synge had begun with the Abbey Theatre. He concluded his letter:

Do you think this is a job worth struggling for,
and do you think we could succeed? - -
If Vance. and you think the time is ripe, I'd
come out as soon as I could ... Write soon. I
want to be encouraged. (p.41)

Esson began to make definite plans. In his letter to Palmer on 20 June 1921 he talks of returning "before the end of the year".⁶⁴ He asks Vance to look for "a suitable hall" which would be cheap and "half a dozen promising mummers who would be willing to do something for the Cause".⁶⁵ He wants to "give three seasons a year". He is looking for a name. "The ----- Players".⁶⁶ He compares his ideas of a company with those of the Birmingham Theatre, The Washington Square Players and the Glasgow Repertory Theatre. He suggests that Vance "drop a line to Stewart (Macky) and shake him up". He asserts that "Kattie" (Katharine Susannah Prichard) could "do something too".⁶⁷

On Thursday, 1 September 1921 Nettie Palmer remarks in her diary that she has received a letter announcing that the Essons who are on their way home will arrive on "Monday, 19th".⁶⁸ Two days later she records that while the Wilmots were visiting her they had talked about Louis and his "ideas on theatre".⁶⁹ On 28 October she writes that the Essons, having arrived, are to live at Emerald near her.⁷⁰ Louis now possessed the inspiration, the encouragement and the help needed to form the Pioneer Players. It seemed that the time was ripe for such a movement.

THE FORMATION AND ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE
PIONEER PLAYERS

Louis Esson immediately set to work to revise The Battler which was to be the first production of the Pioneer Players. Palmer does not record how the name of the company was chosen. He describes how Louis was "brimming over with an almost boyish delight in familiar scenes".⁷¹ Also he liked Emerald which was a district similar to the setting of his play - an old goldfield not far from Melbourne. When a fire destroyed the Esson's cottage while they were at the railway station seeing Gerald Byrne off, the only copy of The Battler was burnt. Louis, however, not discouraged, managed to re-write it in a week.⁷²

Friends continued to help. Dr Stewart Macky returned from Streaky Bay in South Australia where he had been practising and "putting away every penny he could save in order to give the Pioneer Players a flying start".⁷² He began to work on his long play, John Blake, which was to be the second production of the Pioneers. From America Leon Brodzky offered encouragement. An undated letter written by Hilda to Nettie reports that "Leon had sent them"⁷⁴ information on how to form a theatre company.

Although Palmer declares that "The Pioneers finally opened with The Battler at the Playhouse in April"⁷⁶ the first performances were on 18 May and 20 May. According to Palmer there was some trouble about publicity. He quotes

an undated letter from Louis who was at Carlton:

Our publicity has not been brilliant. The Age and the Argus have done nothing⁷⁷ so far, and I'm quite unknown in Punch office.

Nevertheless there were advertisements in the Melbourne Age on 8 May, 10 May, 11 May, 15 May and 18 May.⁷⁸ The Sydney Mail of 17 May 1922 wrote under the heading "An Australian Play":

It has been left to Melbourne enthusiasts to organize a society for the purpose of - as its announcement sets forth, "producing original works of Australian drama only". Tomorrow and Saturday night next, the first offering of the Pioneer Players, as they are appropriately named, will be shown at the Melbourne Playhouse and should prove of more than ordinary interest. (p.32)

According to Table Talk of 25 May 1922, "there was a big audience of representative people which comfortably filled the theatre"⁷⁹ at the first performance. The Age asserted that the play "drew a large audience and was enthusiastically received".⁸⁰

Although all the reviews were in favour of the idea of an Australian national drama, they were not as enthusiastic about the play as Esson had hoped. The Bulletin was only mildly encouraging about what it called "this slim and graceful little comedy":

The Pioneer Players in whose plan for the occasional production of purely Australian drama lurks the gem of financial success staged their first attempt at the Melbourne Playhouse last week. The Battler by Louis Esson strikes the⁸¹ right note, although the blow is insufficiently hard.

Furthermore, Table Talk, while praising the play for "its good character drawing", still asserted that it was "too slight, at present, to make a whole evening's amusement":

With a little brushing up and drawing together and some judicious padding, especially in the way of

business, The Battler could be made a decidedly effective play. (p.22)

Again, the Melbourne Herald criticised the "evenings entertainment":

The play did not begin till 8.30 and even then had to be padded out with long intervals, during which a musical programme took place.⁸²

Smith's Weekly, however was kinder:

Inspired by the example of the Abbey Theatre and by the encouragement of one of its founders - the distinguished poet and dramatist, W.B.Yeats, Esson and his supporters have resolved to produce only plays that are true to Australian life ... The comedy and the drama are both finely genuine for they are inherent in the plain characters and simple episodes ... There is high promise for Australian dramatic art in the earnestness and ability shown by the authors and players.⁸³

According to the handbill for the next production (John Blake), Esson's play had been reviewed in the Argus, the Daily Mail, Brisbane, the Advocate, the Australasian, Aussie (Sydney), the Leader, the Weekly Times, the Labour Call and the Midnight Sun, as well as those publications already mentioned.⁸⁴ Short, favourable quotes were printed from each review.

Clearly, however, the reception of the first production of the Pioneer Players did not altogether please Esson. Nettie Palmer, writing to "Mr Long", in a train to Emerald on 22 May, described Louis as being "depressed about Thursday's performance":

There were some bad mistakes and the audience wasn't united enough. Saturday's audience was more numerous and far more alive. I believe, though, that there were some very hostile people⁸⁵ in the audience. Their reasons were not impersonal.

Nettie does not give any more information about the "very hostile people".

The programme for the productions showed a picture

of an Australian pioneer in a broad-brimmed hat and working clothes outlined against an orange-coloured background.⁸⁶ This picture was to reappear on the programmes of all future productions of the Pioneer Players. Prices were 5/-, 3/- and 1/- plus tax.⁸⁷

"Our next performance was John Blake by Stewart Macky", wrote Esson to Leon Brodsky:

It is a strong piece but Macky meant it chiefly as an exercise in technique. His style is mixed: He wants the episodes of an Elizabethan play, the casual touches of Tchekhov, the stress of Strindberg, as well as the Greek messenger who describes the murder of Blake at the end. Naturally, the psychology of the leading characters is not as convincing as it might be.⁸⁸ But there is merit in it and some powerful scenes.

These words certainly suggest that Macky had been ambitious. Unfortunately the play has not survived. The Pioneers took much trouble over Macky's play, perhaps because he was so enthusiastic about their work and they wished him to remain so. At the same time, Esson's words to Brodsky indicate that he was impressed with John Blake, as was Nettie Palmer. In her letter to Mr Long she had claimed:

Stewart Macky's play is going to be a huge effort for all concerned but it ought to be a marvellous success. I'm afraid that big epithets spring to my mind about it but that's the theme.⁸⁹

Unfortunately the Pioneer Players found it necessary to move to the Temperance Hall, described by D.J.Finley who designed some of the scenery as having "a gloomy atmosphere".⁹⁰ The play was advertised in the Melbourne Herald of 8 August (p.8) and in the Punch of 24 August 1922 (p.10) with prices quoted at 4/4, 2/2 and 1/1. The first performance took place on Thursday, 10 August and the second a week later. In the column headed "The Playgoer", in Punch of 21 September there was an announcement that John Blake had come to an end "last

Thursday night". (p.20) Presumably, then, it had been performed each Thursday night from 10 August - on seven occasions. Louis, in his letter to Brodney, claimed that "the company have now played continuously, giving their weekly show and rehearsing on most other nights".⁹¹ Palmer, however, complained about the absence of "a new, drama-hungry audience thronging to our weekly performances" and he related that Macky was "a little bewildered by the dourness with which the play was received".⁹²

As with Esson's play, reviews of John Blake were not as enthusiastic as the Pioneer Players had hoped. The Australasian of 19 August commended it for "opening up a rich field of romance" for playwrights but suggested that Macky "should reconsider its ending".⁹³ The Argus review, "Pioneer Players in Drama", 11 August 1922, questioned "the wisdom of making stage material out of the darkest deeds of old times" (p.8) and was not complimentary about the use of Price Warung's stories although Macky had acknowledged this in the programme:

The persons of the play are not intended as portraits of historical characters; nor is the story historical, though certain episodes have been taken from the Official History Records and the works of the late Price Warung.⁹⁴

The Triad complained also that "perhaps a disgusting weakness for fact weakened his (Macky's) desire to invent for himself",⁹⁵ and criticised adversely most of the actors. Punch of 24 August 1922, however, described it as "a brightly coloured play" which was causing "considerable stir among the play-going public". There were no reviews in Smith's Weekly, Table Talk or Sydney Mail. Possibly to get sympathetic publicity, Hilda wrote to the Melbourne Herald on 17 August 1922, signing

the letter "Hon. Secretary, Pioneer Players":

This is the only theatre of its kind in Australia, for the Pioneer Players differ from the repertory societies in that they stage only new and original works... They hope in time to create an interest in Australian drama similar to that already created in Australian painting and literature. (p.6)

[The third production, A Happy Family by Vance Palmer, was amongst the most successful of the Pioneer Plays. This may have been due, in part, to Leon Brodzky (Brodney). In his letter postmarked "9 Oct. 1922" Louis thanks Brodney for his article in The Australasian Journalist, X, No.9, 15 September 1922 which "must have stirred up the pressmen, for Vance Palmer's play received a good deal of space". Brodney's article was "a protest against the lack of encouragement in the Australian press of new Australian plays".⁹⁷ He described Esson as "one of the very few men whom Australia has produced who has a real insight into art and literature" and "a playwright who has succeeded in doing something to found a dramatic literature in Australia". Brodney regarded the Bulletin:

as the worst offender, because it has always had as one of its missions, the fostering of Australian literary talent ... Yet when it comes to the treatment of a work by about the only dramatic author Australia has to its credit, we get a couple of paragraphs which only barely indicate the subject matter of the play and put forward the opinion that if it were padded with further talk, furnished with brisker action, better tableaux, it might be commercially successful.

Brodney continued by referring to Aristotle's Poetics and Dryden's "Essay on Dramatic Poesie" and demanding from the critic not only the facts but:

the philosophy of the play, how it is bodied forth in the development of the theme and character drawing. And more important still, what is the quality of the mood that pervades the work.

Moreover, he insisted that the critic should ask, "What did the author set out to do? Was his plan reasonable and sensible and how far did he succeed in carrying it out?"

Not only was A Happy Family staged successfully on five occasions, but it also received complimentary reviews. According to the Argus of 23 September, the Pioneers presented Palmer's play at the Temperance Hall on 21 September 1922. Punch declared it was produced on 27 September,⁹⁹ and advertised it on 5 and 12 October for those nights.¹⁰⁰ Another performance which took place at the Athenaeum on 21 October¹⁰¹ suggests that the play must have been reasonably successful to make the change of theatre worthwhile. The Punch review of 21 September referred to it as "a vivid, racy interpretation of the back country". The Australasian of 30 September claimed that "it heads the other two plays in order of merit" and praised its humour as "easy and infectious if never subtle".¹⁰² The Bulletin commended "the appealing quality" of the characters and also asserted that "the show all round is a great improvement on previous productions",¹⁰³ while the Melbourne Herald declared that it was "natural and unforced ... stimulating and very enjoyable".¹⁰⁴ Only Quinton Davis of the Triad was unsympathetic. For him it was "an almost actionless achievement in which trivialities are spotlit".¹⁰⁵

As Esson remarked in his letter (postmarked "9 Oct. 1922"), the Pioneers now had "a good name". They decided to finish their first season with "a bill of one act plays

which he described in the same letter to Brodney as:

The New Bridge by Gerald Byrne, a little 10 minute
light farce.

The Woman Tamer by Louis Esson, a revival.

Telling Mrs. Baker adapted from Henry Lawson, a
quiet play. 20 minutes?

The Trap adapted by Macky from "Price Warung", a
bravura play ... almost 20 minutes.

The Bishop and the Buns by Ernest O'Ferrall (Kodak)
A good little farce with 5 characters all
different and amusing. 8 minutes. (p.3)

(By "bravura" Esson meant "daring" as he explained to Brodney.

The female character rolls down her stocking, showing her
ankle.)

According to the Australasian review of 4
November 1922, these short plays were performed at the
Athenaeum on 26, 27 and 28 October, 1922.¹⁰⁷ They received
mixed reviews. The Australasian began by commending them.
"The Pioneer Players continue on their worthy and very
interesting way". It described The Woman Tamer (pre-
viously played at the Turn Verein) as "as good as it
had seemed in memory", Telling Mrs. Baker as "not as good
a play as it is a story" and The New Bridge "an excellent
character study". It devoted several paragraphs to the
plays. Although the Bulletin of 2 November 1922 claimed
that the Pioneer Players "failed to reveal any advance in
the art of management and the trick of attracting the
public" it, too, praised Esson's play. It did, however,
claim that The Trap put a strain on probability and that

The New Bridge and The Bishop and the Buns were "but flimsy affairs".¹⁰⁸ On the other hand, the Argus of 27 October praised Telling Mrs. Baker as "an excellent adaptation" and asserted that The Trap had "some strong dramatic passages as well as character comedy". It called The New Bridge a "popular comedy" and like other reviews it agreed that The Woman Tamer was "as effective as ever". It supplied the information that The Bishop and the Buns, "a farcical fantasy" had been played previously in Sydney.¹⁰⁹

Thus ended the first year of the Pioneer Players. They had been moderately successful. They had produced three long plays and four short ones, all of which were new except The Woman Tamer and The Bishop and the Buns. Moreover, they had become a group of playwrights and actors producing plays about Australians. No other theatrical group had ever produced so many new Australian plays in one year. Indeed, neither the National Literary Society founded in Dublin 1892 nor its successor the Irish National Theatre produced as many plays in their first year. (The quality of the Pioneer plays will be considered later.) Nevertheless, Palmer records that Esson was disappointed:

He had a continual vision (perhaps an illusory one) of a little theatre where authors, actors, scene-shifters and artists could be brought together in a spirit of creative activity.¹¹⁰

Palmer believed, too, that the other Pioneer Players shared Esson's dissatisfaction:

... we were left at the end of the year feeling we had not progressed very far in the task of building up a company that would have a style of its own and a spontaneity in reproducing the kind of life it knew best.¹¹¹

Perhaps this feeling of inadequacy explains why the original drive and enthusiasm of the Pioneer Players did not seem to be in evidence at the beginning of the following year. Most of the information available about their activities in 1923 is to be found in a diary in which both Vance and Nettie wrote. It is now in the National Library at Canberra, among the Palmer Papers.¹¹² On Monday, 22 January 1923 Nettie reports:

Vance went to town for day. Saw Wilmot, the Sinclaires, the Essons and Stewart Macky. Pioneers not to be resuscitated this year apparently.

Possibly the Pioneers' inactivity was the reason for another society's request to stage the Pioneers' most successful play. On Friday 26 January Nettie records that "Frank Keon wants Vance's play, A Happy Family, for the Railway Institute Dramatic Society" for which he had apparently become producer. Keon had acted in every performance of the Pioneers. The Bulletin of 1 June 1922 had published a photograph of him under which was written, "one of our best known Repertory amateurs who lent his energy and experience to the success of Louis Esson's The Battler" and who "acted at the Railways Institutes' Saturday nights".¹¹³

A letter from Hilda Esson which shows that she expected the Pioneer Players to continue their performances also demonstrates her opposition to Keon's proposal:

We feel if we are to go on that it is very important to keep control of all the plays in our repertoire - there aren't too many of them and we feel that it would confuse things dreadfully if people could get Pioneer Plays from anyone but our own company. I feel that it would cheapen us ...

There is no record of what happened about the Railways Institute and Palmer's Play. Frank Keon did not act again for the Pioneer Players until the production of Esson's The Bride of Gospel Place in 1926.

Meanwhile the Pioneers were coming into action again as Vance's entry in the diary on Friday, 4 May, indicates:

A splendid meeting of the Pioneer supporters on Wednesday night with Montague in the chair. Louis Lavater, Wilmot, Stewart and others were there. Everything looks gay for the future of the Pioneers.

Apparently Macky had begun to write another play. On Sunday, 13 May, according to Vance's entry in the diary, he and Macky sat around the fire, reading "Stewart's play" which "is finished but a lot of work remains to be done". This seems to be the play called Mototafer which is mentioned in the diary again on 28 October and later on 12 November when it is called Mototapu. On 12 September in the diary it is titled, The Island. It seems that Stewart's wife was no longer in sympathy with his playwriting. Vance records that when he went to Stewart's place on 14 July, the doctor was reading his play aloud. When his wife, Annie, returned, the play-reading ceased. "Afterwards we had to listen to Annie's attacks on folk singing, folk music and folk literature" wrote Vance. To people who were trying to develop a "folk theatre" this must have been very trying indeed.

In her letter about Frank Keon wanting A Happy Family, Nettie had made a slighting reference to Annie Macky's taste in plays. Annie "liked Walter Turner's play (The Man Who Ate the Popo-mack) immensely," wrote Nettie, "perhaps because she has the same temperament, overcivilized and hating the primitive". In another letter Hilda declares, "I think Stewart needs all the moral support we can give him to counteract that sort of thing".¹¹⁶ Although Vance worked with Stewart on his new play again on Thursday 16 August, according to the diary on that day, Macky seemed to have lost heart. This play was advertised for a performance in November, on the handbill for the August production,¹¹⁷ as Nettie records. By 23 October, as she complains in her diary on that day, it was clear that because the play would not be ready the handbill and tickets would have to be changed. Mototapu was never acted, and does not seem to have survived.

Esson, however, was still working hard for the Pioneers. His play, Mother and Son, preceded by a short one, The Voice of the People, written by the New Zealander, Alan Mulgan, was produced on 7 June 1923 at St. Peter's Hall. In her diary for Friday, 1 June, Nettie writes that they had suffered "a day of horrible complications" in the dress rehearsal of Mother and Son and "Louis was rather cast down". On the day of the performance she met Louis "sauntering down to his work at the Herald office" as she "went up to St. Peter's Hall to make preparations". There was "a full house" and "the play" was "a success". When they were dismantling the hall on Friday 8, as she records on that day, "Hilda turned up and suggested another

performance of Mother and Son" but Louis, when consulted at the Herald office, did not agree. She had "dinner with Wilmot" who was "pleased with the play". The Australasian review of 16 June refers to the production of "Thursday last"¹¹⁸ which would have been 14 June yet it does not seem likely that the play was staged more than once. The Bulletin report of the play, published on 14 June, refers to the performance of "last week".¹¹⁹ The programme in the Palmer Papers has the date 7 June, 1923.

The critiques of the play were varied. The Bulletin described it quite favourably as "a bush drama of disappointment and suffering" with "a flavour of sex interest" and "stronger in feeling" than The Battler. The Australasian praised the production for providing "a satisfying evening's entertainment" although it had "a rather slender story". In the Melbourne Herald, however, "F.A.B." wrote on 8 June:

It is*coronial drama with the interest left out. Mr. Esson has won a place as a writer. No-one denies his power, but one may differ violently from his point of view. His drama is a reach of dry plain, with here and there a tussock of interest and a tiny rise of climax ... Things happen but the only inevitability is that the ending₁₂₁ will be unhappy, for that is repertory drama.

Other reviews published by the Herald had been quite encouraging.

Perhaps Vance Palmer decided that the critics needed to be taken to task again. When he wrote "The Missing Critics", an article published on the Red Page of the Bulletin on 28 July 1923, he probably had in mind Brodney's article of 10 September 1922. "What is wanted", Palmer declares, is a little genuine criticism in order

*Possibly this is a misprint for
"Colonial".

that it may be discovered what has been done in Australian literature and what is being done today". Nettie reported in her diary on 27 August that an article published in the August Triad attacked that of Vance in the Bulletin:

It was anonymous but clearly by the hand that attacks the Pioneers for their aim of "back to Yawk Yawk". Article full of sneers and untruths. Accused L and V of possessing "a peculiar leisure". 122

The article was "The Wail of the Forgotten" by "Vander-decken". It called Palmer's A Happy Family :

a play encoring Mr. Louis Esson's discovery that the great heart of the continent beats under the blue shirt of a yokel ploughman or something of the kind.

(This was apparently a reference to the drawing of the "pioneer" which appeared on all Pioneer programmes and handbills.)

Another result of the unenthusiastic reviews of Mother and Son could have been the burning of John Blake. On 12 June 1923 Nettie wrote in her diary:

Stewart told me he had burnt his play. Where the impulse came from I don't know but I can guess.

Macky's wife was apparently anxious that he should devote all his time to the practice of medicine. By this time, however, Macky himself was probably beginning to feel discouraged. His new play was in need of a great deal of rewriting. On Wednesday, 15 August, Nettie records in her diary that "Vance spent the afternoon working with Stewart on his new play" which is "painfully chaotic so far". Not only did Vance and Louis have the full support of their wives but they also had successful publications and successful productions of their plays (on Moore's Drama Nights) to give them confidence. Macky lacked all these. Furthermore,

the critic for the Bulletin had ridiculed his acting in Mother and Son where he had the difficult part of the elderly husband, Mr. Lind, who dies on stage. According to the Bulletin review:

Stewart Macky's youthful baritone shattered his imposture in the tangled locks and whiskers of Peter Lind.¹²³

Later, when the Palmers were overseas in 1935, they were visited by Stewart. According to Nettie:

He admitted that when he decided to concentrate on his medical work he had burned the only copy of John Blake as a sort of gesture of renunciation.¹²⁴

If Macky had made such a final decision in June, 1923, he apparently did not tell his friends at that time. It was not until October that Hilda wrote to Nettie to say that Mototafer was not going to be ready for staging. Nettie noted this in her diary on 22 October. Moreover, Stewart and Annie still seemed interested in the work of the Pioneers in the next few years.

In spite of all setbacks the Pioneer Players continued their activities. By 1 June 1923 they had formed a "Pioneers Club". The Melbourne Herald published a photo of Hilda Esson with the heading "Australian Playwright's wife", on that day, under which it referred to Mother and Son as the first play "produced under the club's auspices". (p.12 The first reference to the club in the diary is on 27 July when Vance reports a meeting of the Pioneers Club at the Lyceum at which there were "chaotic speeches" but "the result is that they may be of some use in collecting audiences for the 1923 season". Again, on Wednesday 8 August, Nettie notes in her diary:

Attended meeting of Pioneer Club in afternoon to decide on relation between Pioneer Club and Pioneer Players. Louis pointed out that the club existed to arrange the audience for the players. Miss Barkman insisted that it was for discussion of any play, no matter what.

The handbill for the next performance (which was of five short plays) refers to:

a dramatic reading in costume of Eugene O'Neill's play, "Anna Christie", which will be given privately early in October at the Queen's Hall.¹²⁵

Furthermore, Nettie declares in her diary on Monday 14 October that she had had a letter from Katie Lush asking her to be present at the play reading "next Monday". Although it was not strictly a production, but only "a play reading in costume", it would appear from the handbill that the Pioneer Players were bending their principles somewhat in using a play by an American about Americans. It points also to one of the difficulties of the Players at that time - that of writing or finding suitable Australian plays.

Other efforts were being made to get subscribers for performances. In the Croll Papers in the La Trobe Library there is a leaflet advertising Mother and Son "at St. Peter's Hall, Easter Hill" which also has spaces for would-be subscribers. It states:

To Miss Irish Shield, Hon. Sect.
44 Morrah Street, Parkville.
I enclose one guinea subscription.

The handbill for the five plays also invites:

those who are interested in the work of the Pioneer Players to become subscribers for the 1923 season. A subscription of one guinea will entitle them to 3 tickets for each performance and an invitation to a dramatic reading ... of "Anna Christie".

Nettie at no time records what success the Pioneers had in getting subscribers.

The next play night as advertised on the handbill consisted of "five short plays": Mates, The Great Man, The Black Horse, The Bishop and the Buns and The Trap, performed at the playhouse on 16 August 1923. (Actually, The Great Man is a three act play which would take about forty minutes to perform.) Evidently Macky's play had been revised. On 30 August Vance relates in Nettie's diary that when he went into Carlton to hear Macky's play read in the afternoon, the reading was delayed for discussion on a revised version of The Trap. Hilda, in her letter to Brodney on 20 August 1923 was pleased with the performance:

We had our most successful night last week when we gave five short plays - one of Louis' that was handed over to Frank Brown to touch up, as Louis didn't want his name on the programme, others by Kattie Prichard, Vance Palmer and a rather jolly farce by poor old mooney "Kodak" ... We find short plays are very popular. They were, too, in America, at the Washington Square Players and so many others and they give us what we need so badly, variety of names.¹²⁷

Hilda's claim that Louis wrote Mates raises the matter of collaboration. Macky and Palmer had been collaborating on Macky's play. The Irish playwrights, too, especially Lady Gregory and Yeats, worked together on plays. It could be that Louis and his half-brother had co-operated in the writing of Mates which is set in a country shanty like The Battler. Indeed, Vance Palmer claimed that the original idea for Esson's drama The Drovers "was based on an incident suggested by Frank".¹²⁸ In the Mitchell Library there is a play partly typed and partly handwritten, by Frank Brown, called The Spirit of Andeganora¹²⁹ which is

a kind of sequel to Esson's play, Andeganora. Brown certainly had more experience of the outback than Esson. A memorial article written by C.J.Dennis on Brown after his death at the age of 41 in 1927 relates how he led "a vaudeville team of wild Australian woodchoppers and whipcrackers upon a successful tour of the United States" and how he met Jack London and at his suggestion formed an expedition which walked from Burke to Darwin.¹³⁰ Palmer, too, declares that Frank "had knocked about" with drovers, horsebreakers and aborigines in the Northern Territory.¹³¹ After the war, according to Dennis, Brown became a "sporting journalist". Having been friendly, like Louis, with his uncle, the artist John Ford Paterson, Brown was also the acquaintance of artists and writers. Esson had, as his letter to Brodney from there on 14 March 1909¹³² indicated, worked at Bathurst for a while on the newspaper, The National Advocate. Apart from this he does not seem to have spent much time away from the city, and even Bathurst was not in the outback. Probably, there was collaboration but the play's knock-about farce is not typical of Esson's work.

In any case, Mates received good reviews. The Bulletin of 23 August 1922 described it as "cheerful and humorous".¹³³ An article in an unidentified newspaper in the possession of Mr.Stuart Brown of Newport, Victoria, describes the play as "a brilliant study of two very different characters who have become cobblers".

As on previous occasions, the reviews varied in their reactions to the plays The Bulletin, the unidentified

newspaper and the Australasian¹³⁴ all admired Palmer's play, The Black Horse. The Herald review was quite complimentary. It praised the "excellent attendance". Mates was described as "a humorous episode", The Great Man "a light comedy" and The Black Horse "a moving drama".¹³⁵ It was the only review to praise Katharine Susannah Prichard's play. The Australasian regarded it as "an artificial trifle" while the Bulletin called it "a pifflesome joke". Before the final production Esson had announced that "it wanted a little filling of bright dialogue" and was "still a shade too slight" but it might "look rather whimsical if the performance is satisfactory".¹³⁶

Macky's failure to have his play ready led to trouble. It was on the handbill for the five short plays that his Mototafer* had been advertised, as well as a play by Brodney:

A new and original play by Spenser Brodney and Stewart Macky, will be given at the playhouse in November.¹³⁷

After Hilda informed Nettie that Macky's play was not ready and that "the bill will have to be changed" they decided "to do Vance's Travellers and Louis' Drovers" as Nettie notes in her diary on 23 October. She refers to it as "a great nuisance" especially as Vance has had to cancel his "walking trip". Apparently, however, tickets naming Macky's play had already been distributed. On Friday, 2 November, Nettie relates that she had had "an angry letter" from Katie Lush, one of the Pioneer Club members, about the change in programme. Nettie continues:

* Vide p.33

Teddy, who had met K, also describes the Pioneer proceedings as feckless. The trouble is they feck too much or they'd have made do with Mototapu in its present state.

Brodney's play, which did not arrive till much later, was never staged by the Pioneers. Hilda had begun her letter of 20 August 1923, to Brodney, "We are looking forward with great eagerness to getting your play".¹³⁸ In a letter from Mallacoota West where he was holidaying, written on 14 July 1924, Esson tells Palmer:

Leon has sent his play at last but I haven't seen it. He says it is not propaganda, but entirely character, though his hero is a Queensland rebel and the atmosphere is political.¹³⁹

This play was Rebel Smith, published in New York in 1924. As with The Battler and Mates it is set in a country "pub". The hero, Bill Smith, is a member of the I.W.W. (apparently Industrial Workers of the World). At the beginning of the play the publican's only child refuses to marry him because of his politics. At the end, she is a believer in the I.W.W. while he has become more conservative. In the preface Brodney thanks Esson for spurring him on to write the play which he had begun in Queensland in 1920.¹⁴⁰

Leslie Rees believes that:

produced with a sharp sense of realism in Melbourne, it might have helped to reverse the fortunes of that crumbling crusade. New South Wales was bitterly divided over the imprisonment of a dozen I.W.W. men. One can even imagine theatre disturbances caused by the author's final self-alignment with his I.W.W. hero ... But, generally, such a play and such a provocative policy were foreign to the interests of inwardly brooding play devotees like Louis Esson and Vance Palmer.¹⁴¹

Nevertheless, it is doubtful if Melbourne audiences would have reacted to such a political play in the same way as Irish audiences had to some of the plays of Yeats and Synge, nor were the Pioneers, apparently, prepared to risk putting on such a play.

The next performance by the Pioneers was of four short plays at the Playhouse on Monday, 3 December 1923. Besides Travellers and The Drovers they produced A Disturber of Pools written by Furnley Maurice and Pioneers by Katharine Susannah Prichard. According to the programme for the night, the musical items were arranged by Mrs. Anne Macky.¹⁴² Nettie reports in her diary on 4 December 1923 that the performance was "satisfactory, with the audience not electric". On the same day she writes that there was "a mild notice in the Argus but not in the Age". (The Argus and the Age had ignored their two previous performances.) Reviews of the plays were quite encouraging except for that in the Bulletin of 13 December 1923 which was cruel:

A haunting fear that Futility has marked the Pioneer Players for its own was almost confirmed by their latest outbreak at the Melbourne Playhouse ... In the protracted entertainment, what happened in between orchestral items were but clever, amateur dramatic sketches adapted to the stage.¹⁴³

It characterized Katharine Susannah Prichard's play, Pioneers, as "sadly humourless" which is not true. It declared that Furnley Maurice's "sketch", A Disturber of Pools, depicted "a doddering idealist of doubtful sanity" and Vance Palmer's "sketch" which was "bright enough ... brought Australian drama no for'arder". Actually Wilmot's little play had

met with applause. Nettie remarked in her diary on 4 December: "Wilmot encouraged by his success to attempt some more plays". The Argus, which was kinder than the Bulletin, reported "some effective work" in Pioneers. A Disturber of Pools was noted as having "brought many smiles and some thought". Travellers was "a bright shanty comedy" but The Drovers was "a sketch about a death by shooting" which "reads much better than it acts".¹⁴⁴ In the Herald review of 4 December, the night's performance was described as "an interesting entertainment" in which:

the dramatists had sketched flesh and blood people, not theatrical marionettes and the actors were able to capture a remarkable realism.¹⁴⁵

At this time the Pioneer Players were to receive a serious blow. Louis and Hilda Esson left Melbourne on 7 December 1923 to go to E.J.Brady's place at Mallacoota West where they remained until 24 August 1924. (Nettie Palmer wrote this information in her diary on those days.¹⁴⁰) Louis Esson had been working for the Melbourne Herald. Hilda had told Brodney in her letter of 20 August 1923:

Louis has a small job on the Herald which boils the pot and is not too strenuous to prevent him working if he wants to.¹⁴⁷

Although he had been dismissed a few days before the performance of 3 December, he told nobody until after the play night was over as Nettie notes in her diary of 4 December. This highlights one of the greatest problems facing the Pioneer Players. They all had to work for their living and plays cost money to produce.

Living "under canvas" in the country, Esson did not lose hope about the Players. Judging from his letters to Palmer, the "Pioneers" were always on his mind. On 20 January 1924 he wrote:

About the Pioneers, I think it would be a pity if they stopped. If the finance can be made effective, there is nothing else to worry about. Stewart's play ought to be done. The experience of production might make him. Otherwise he might chuck the whole game. If we provide the best plays available, we justify our existence. If we can't raise the money, nothing can be done; but it is worth an effort to keep going.¹⁴⁸

It would appear, from Esson's letter of 19 February 1924 that the Pioneer Players had ceased to function as soon as the Essons left Melbourne. Clearly, it was, to a great extent, their efforts and enthusiasm that kept the movement going. Esson's letter begins:

We are sorry that the Pioneers had to go bung. I didn't expect them to go on, but I thought there might have been a kind of forlorn hope that Stewart might have seen his way to do something. I don't blame anybody for the failure. It isn't easy to push through something nobody wants,¹⁴⁹ especially without money, resources or faith.

Esson blames Melbourne, in part, for the failure, calling it "a wowser, bourgeois town, without an idea of any kind". He considers the idea of moving the Pioneers to Sydney. As his request that Palmer "keep Stewart going"¹⁵⁰ on his play demonstrates, Esson had not given up hope. In his letter to Palmer on 15 March 1924, Esson was still interested in taking the Pioneers to Sydney even though "Stewart wrote to say the Pioneers still had a chance of getting on".¹⁵¹ Apparently Esson had faith in Macky's work for in his letter to Palmer dated only "April, 1924" he again comments of him:

Stewart may write an interesting work some day, if he can only stick to it and improve his method instead of worrying over intuitions and inspirations. He needs stimulus and help and the minimum of abuse. I may have been too hard on him at times, but I meant it for the best. He has really something¹⁵² to say, if he can only learn how to say it.

When Esson wrote, on 14 July 1924, he had decided to return to Melbourne. "I'd hate to be beaten, now we have made a start. I'd like to be on the spot and I'd like Stewart to get something done".¹⁵³ He had not, however, heard from Macky for some time and he did not even know his address because the young doctor, who had returned to the practice of medicine full time, was apparently not living "near Melbourne".¹⁵⁴

After the return of the Essons, there were problems with the Pioneer Club which seems to have been functioning on its own while the Pioneer Players were out of action. All the information about them comes from Nettie's diary. On 10 September Nettie notes in it that the Pioneer Club has "sent notice of a reading of St. Joan at the Lyceum Club next Monday to the Essons, care of me". She also remarks, "The Club less and less meaning for the Players' movement". On 3 November, according to her diary, Hilda Esson "came down to talk over Pioneer Plans" (sic). On 9 November, Nettie "arranged for Gill and Alice Crowther to come up next Sunday for Pioneers' Conference". She writes on 15 November, "Mrs. Macky is coming tomorrow and G. Byrne for the weekend". After the meeting of Sunday, 16 November, Hilda reports, "vague evasive talk. The women must have

no faith in Pioneer Principles". On Monday 17 November she indicates that the Essons have come to a decision:

Louis and Hilda passed a sleepless night and decided that the Players had drifted so far from the original scheme that it only remained for Vance and Louis to withdraw and leave them to go forward ... Sent typed letter off; wrote to Stewart and Mrs Macky too.

The Essons, however, on Thursday, 20 November "had received a pained, surprised letter from Mrs.Crowther and Mrs.Gill. L. and V. are writing letters in reply". Furthermore, on Tuesday, 25 November, there was "a letter from Anne Macky saying that the bombshell letter had cleared the air". As Nettie declares, the letter had:

displayed the unfriendliness of Gilfillan and the loyalty of many, e.g. Mrs.Champion and Miss Barkman at the Committee Meeting of Friday last.

Finally, it would appear that the matter had been settled. The diary entry records:

Lunch in town with Gerald Byrne and Frank Wilmot. Saw Lowy (? Louis) in afternoon. Enthusiastic about Pioneer Club's devotion to the Three.

What this really means is a matter for conjecture. If the "Three" are Esson, Palmer and Macky, then it would appear that they had managed to win most members of the Pioneer Club over to their way of thinking. The problem at issue was probably the lack of support club members were giving to the production of Australian plays. No other references are made to the club in Nettie's diary.

There were other problems for the Essons. Nettie reports in her diary that on 13 December, they left Melbourne "for three weeks". On their return Louis was apparently looking for work as a journalist. In Nettie's diary for 17 January 1925 she notes, "Louis worried about

writing for Triad", on 21 January, "Hilda worried about Louis' work" and on 4 February, "Louis offered freelance work on Punch - not happy". Apparently Louis was doing some work for the Triad as on 24 April the diary reports "The Essons have gone to town to see some plays which Louis (does) for the Triad".

Meanwhile, the Essons had not given up hope about the Pioneer Players. In the Palmer Papers at Canberra there is a letter from Hilda Esson to Vance Palmer, dated only "Wednesday, 10th February", which was most probably written in 1925. Hilda writes:

"The great Australian drama", as Hughie calls it, should not be dependent on the caprices of a few more or less (especially less) interested people. You gave us a badly needed tonic the other day by your confidence that we should go on. I feel it is a duty, that it would be cowardly to draw back now, that ~~it~~¹⁵⁶ would make it harder for those who come after.

It seems that the Palmers had also inspired Esson who, Hilda declares in this letter, has "so far overcome his apathy, thanks to you, that he is going to complete his slum play". On 15 October 1924, when the Essons had returned from Malla-coota, the diary records that Nettie and Vance had "read Louis' play, 'Shipwreck'" and on 21 October, "Vance offered suggestions for which Louis was grateful". There is no further mention in the diary of this play, which was not produced by the Pioneers. It is possible that Louis wrote it and his "slum play" while at Mallacoota. On 12 February Nettie reports in her diary, "Hilda read aloud Louis' slum

play, 'The Bride of Gospel Place' - a bobbydazzler". Probably because the Palmers approved it, this play was to be the next production of the Pioneer Players.

The Players were, however, about to suffer another reverse. Vance and Nettie Palmer were about to leave on a holiday in Queensland where they were to decide to remain. In her letter of 10 February Hilda suggests that a programme of short plays should be put on in April before the Palmers "go". She asks for advice:

Should I write to each member of the company and find out if they are available? I fancy our stock has slumped seriously with some of them, and we need, ¹⁵⁷more than most companies, enthusiasts and workers.

Furthermore, Hilda told Palmer, "I am writing to Kattie today and will ask her when she can send her play". There is no evidence that Katharine Susannah Prichard ever sent a third play. Moreover, Hilda's enthusiasm did not result in any performance before the Palmers left for Caloundra on 28 June 1925, the date noted in Nettie's diary.

Apparently Macky was still interested in the Pioneer Players. He brought to the Essons Walter Turner's play, The Man Who Ate the Popomack which Macky and his wife both admired. (Turner was Macky's cousin.) Hilda told Palmer about it in her letter of 10 February. The Popomack:

has a very unpleasant odour - which clung to him ever afterwards so that he could no longer go into society... The construction has the daring innovation that certain scenes - a dream and a reverie - that only take place in the mind of the character are given on the stage ... ¹⁵⁸

This play which the Pioneers did not produce was, later, a great success in London. ¹⁵⁹ It did not, however, conform to the standards of realism and relevance to Australian life

which the Pioneers demanded.

After the Palmers had departed the Pioneers suffered another loss. This was the death of George Dawe who had been the producer for the Players since the performance of John Blake and whose personality had helped to keep them together.¹⁶⁰ In spite of all this, Esson did not despair. He asks Palmer, in a letter dated 30 November 1925, to "dig up somebody in Queensland! Get somebody to do a scene in one act."¹⁶¹ On 15 January 1926 he suggests that Vance could allow his plays, A Happy Family, The Black Horse and Telling Mrs Baker, to be acted in Brisbane. In return he asks for any play suitable for the Pioneers which Vance might find among those which Duhig has given him to read.¹⁶² Again, he tells Palmer, happily, in his letter of 29 March 1926, "Stewart is working on his play which, I trust, will turn out all right this time".¹⁶³ Finally, on 9 June 1926, at the Playhouse, another Pioneer production took place - Esson's four act play, The Bride of Gospel Place.¹⁶⁴ In his letter to Palmer, dated 15 June 1926, Esson informs him:

On the whole we did very well. It was a fairly smooth performance with less prompting than usual, and by good luck we had a satisfactory audience. From 7 to 9, after a week's perfect weather, there was an unexpected and heavy downpour of rain. It must have made a tenner difference to the house. But the booking had been good ... so we did very well after all. The house was almost full.¹⁶⁵

All the arrangements had been made by the Essons, themselves, Esson tells Palmer in his letter - the organization of the rehearsals, the printing of the programmes, tickets, dodgers, scenery, props, furniture and publicity. There is no mention of the Pioneer Club. Hilda had done most of the

work. Although Macky came twice to rehearsals and "got down to the show after the second act", he gave no other help. The Essons expected to be "about a fiver down in expenses".

Reviews were not enthusiastic about The Bride of Gospel Place. Although the Australasian of 19 June praised the actors, it hoped "that the author will not give us too much of the underworld". Its reviewer concluded, "With the improvements of time and practice, Australian drama may rise as modern national drama rose some years ago in Ireland and in Russia".¹⁶⁶ In the Herald of 10 June 1926, also, reference was made to the success of the acting and the production by Leo Burke, but there was no mention of the play as such.¹⁶⁷ Furthermore, the Bulletin review of 17 June told the story of the "woeful nuptials"¹⁶⁸ of the "bride", again with no direct references to the quality of the play. There was no review in the Age and Punch had ceased production in 1925.

Esson, however, appeared to be so pleased about the performance of his play that he already had in mind another play night when he wrote to Palmer on 15 June:

But next time it won't be my play. I don't want the company to bust for it is getting better. Leo certainly did good work in getting a good company together. He and Frank (Keon) will be along tomorrow night to discuss future plans. I propose we should do a bill of short plays for two or more nights at the Queen's Hall.¹⁶⁹

The plays which Esson was considering were, according to his letter:

Comedy by Gerald Byrne.
Something by Woolacott.
Black Horse by Vance Palmer.
The Ruling Passion by J.V.Duhig.

Apparently "Gerald's little play" was a new one, not The New Bridge. Esson declares that he will "try to fix it up".¹⁷⁰ He asks Palmer to "go over" The Ruling Passion with Duhig which "could be simplified and made quite amusing". It was "a Queensland sketch" about the effect race-horses and gambling had on a man's domestic life. Thus it would relate to Australian life and be acceptable to the Pioneers.

Despite Esson's optimism in his letter of 15 June 1926, no more Pioneer productions took place. In various letters to Palmer, Esson makes references to activities relating to the Players but none led to Pioneer performances. On 14 August 1926 Esson tells Palmer:

Stewart is working hard now on his play, which we hope to produce this year. We went up to Pakenham one week-end and got it into shape. He had it more in narrative than dramatic form. He came down yesterday for a couple of hours with a scenario, and it looks much better now.¹⁷¹

Moreover Esson tells Palmer in this letter Annie Macky has given a lecture on Australian drama which "created rather a storm. It was chiefly about me and there was almost a fight about it". His letter of 29 September informs Vance that Isabel Handley, who had acted in many of the Pioneer Plays, has written a play, The Mandarin Coat, "on the model of a 'mystery' story" which has been a success when produced by the Repertory company. Esson asserts, "I have no ambition to do a play like that". He talks of Kattie's (Katharine Susannah Prichard's) "wonderful luck".

I hope now you'll have your share of good luck. A writer needs a bit of luck, perhaps sometimes in his own material or in his circumstances,¹⁷² or even in his form which isn't constant.

Louis Esson, however, did not have any "good luck". He wrote an historical play, The Southern Cross, about the Eureka Stockade. On Vance Palmer's suggestion, Esson entered it for "the Triad competition".¹⁷³ Although he does not show his disappointment in his letters, Esson must have felt somewhat depressed when the competition was won by Katharine Susannah Prichard's play, Brumby Innes. In his letter of 6 December 1927 he hopes that "the Pioneers might be able to have a shot" at producing it, if "Tait's buck at it".¹⁷⁴ Brumby Innes was not produced by any drama company in Esson's lifetime. In the same letter he admits that he has "lost dash and enterprise".

Esson was never to regain his energy and enthusiasm. After his half-brother, Frank Brown, died in November 1928, Esson did not show any interest in reviving the Pioneers.¹⁷⁵ Brodney wrote of Esson's "inability to overcome such a terrible shock" in a letter to Nettie on 12 March 1932. He also praised Esson's "gallant fight for an Australian drama".¹⁷⁶

WHY THE PIONEER PLAYERS FAILED TO FOUND
A PERMANENT AUSTRALIAN THEATRE

Because the question as to what caused the failure of Australian drama to develop as early as other forms of Australian literature is so often asked, it is interesting to examine the reasons for the failure of the Pioneer Players to found a permanent theatre. Was it due to the audiences, the plays, the organization or the players?

Nettie Palmer, when asked by two members of the Brisbane Repertory movement for reasons for the disbanding of the Pioneers, decided that the lack of appreciative audiences was the main factor, this being caused by the place the Pioneers chose for their venture, and the time when they formed their company:

Melbourne is not an ideal centre for a nationalist movement in any of the arts. It is stiffish and rather philistine in its genteel, detached way. 'You've got to show me' is its general attitude towards anything new.

Then, the time was unpropitious. Since the war young people everywhere seem to have an idea that the cinema is the coming popular art. To them, the theatre appears an outmoded institution, not part of the after-world economy that is coming into being.¹⁷⁷

Apparently, Sydney audiences were no different. Indeed, when the Abbey Theatre Players visited Sydney in 1922, they did not draw very large audiences. The Triad of 11 September 1922 regretted that "the support accorded to them" had "been of outrageous meagreness". ("Abbey Theatre Players

in Sydney". p.59)

H.G.Kippax, while agreeing that the lack of enthusiastic audiences was the main reason for the failure of the Pioneers, believes that "the emergent middle class looked exclusively abroad for plays to stage" because they were "apathetic", conservative and "London oriented".¹⁷⁸

Hence they disliked:

the artistically unconvincing naturalistic bush drama derived from the bush and its legends and they deeply suspected the radical, reformist faith which helped to organize shearers and miners into militant trade unions challenging their mastery of the economy.

The ordinary citizen of Melbourne was accustomed to watching stage performances and films from England and America. A typical list of entertainments available can be seen from the "Amusements" page of the Argus on 9 June 1926 which carried advertisements for the following:

New Bijou Theatre:	<u>Red Hot</u> , a Moon and Morris Revue.
Majestic Theatre:	<u>Recompense</u> and <u>Eve's Lover</u> (films).
Paramount:	<u>Never the Twain Shall Meet</u> (film).
Palace:	<u>The Gold Rush</u> (film).
Theatre Royal:	<u>Leave it to Jane</u> (musical comedy produced by J.C.Williamson's).
Princess Theatre:	<u>Betty Lee</u> (musical comedy)
Tivoli:	<u>The Ideal of Ideals</u> (vaudeville)
Her Majesty's Theatre:	<u>The Mikado</u> (Gilbert and Sullivan)
Auditorium	Percy Grainger. ¹⁷⁹

Stage managers and theatre owners preferred the safety of productions which had already succeeded overseas. Audiences had become accustomed to these and expected them.

Furthermore, Australian city audiences were not

particularly interested in realism on the stage (or "naturalism"¹⁸⁰ as Esson sometimes called it). Esson's claim that he was putting "real life and real characters on the stage"¹⁸¹ did not bring him large audiences. On the other hand, farces such as the stage and film versions of On Our Selection and The Sentimental Bloke, each of which was very popular, may have helped to destroy any chance of encouraging Australian audiences to take Australian characters seriously. Esson could have made the same criticisms of those unreal characters as Alexander Buzo does of the influence of "the comic Bazza McKenzie stereotype" which he believes makes it difficult for Australian characters on stage today to be considered thoughtfully.¹⁸² Somehow the outback characters of On Our Selection had become part of the national consciousness. It had been played at the King's Theatre in Melbourne in 1912 to packed houses from 14 September to 1 November, six nights a week.¹⁸³ It had been revived, very successfully, between 15 July and 14 August 1913.¹⁸⁴ Such popularity was not achieved by any production of the Pioneers.

Similarly, The Sentimental Bloke was playing for long periods when the Pioneers were only managing to attract an audience for less than seven nights, and often only one. An advertisement in the Argus "Amusement" column on 14 October 1922 quoted the Herald review - "an actor would tell you that the Bloke did not go big - it went enormous".¹⁸⁵ Dennis' play began one session on 7 October 1922¹⁸⁶ and it was still playing on 31 October¹⁸⁷. It was

on 4 October that A Happy Family was played for the fifth and last time by the Pioneers. Five One Act Plays were performed for three nights in October 1922. Again, in 1923 A Sentimental Bloke was performed from 18 August¹⁸⁸ to 2 September,¹⁸⁹ while Five Short Plays, produced by the Pioneers were staged for one night only on 16 August. Still, in 1926 the first night of a session of The Sentimental Bloke was advertised in the Argus of 13 August¹⁹⁰ for that night and the play was still being staged on 31 August 1926¹⁹¹. When Esson produced The Bride of Gospel Place on 9 June 1926, he was happy to be only £5 down.

An 'obituary' of C.J.Dennis in the Melbourne Herald of 22 June 1938 suggested that he owed some ideas to Esson:

I think Dennis first got the idea of writing in slang from Esson's 'Back ter Little Lon'. He at once saw the possibilities of the vernacular. 'I'm going to write a Gor Blimey book', he said. And The Sentimental Bloke was the result. (p.6)

Nevertheless, other writers had already seen these possibilities before Dennis' book was first published in 1915. E.Dyson had published Fact'ry 'Ands in 1906, Lawson had published larrikin stories and Lewis Stone had published Jonah (1911). In 1910, Esson had used city slang in The Woman Tamer.

Some reviewers contrasted some of the plays of the Pioneers with On Our Selection. One review of Palmer's A Happy Family praised its realism:

It is far removed from that type that has done service to illustrate life in the backblocks. Such plays have mostly bordered on farce. They have served well to raise a laugh but they have not been convincing.¹⁹³

Similarly, the Bulletin review of Palmer's play praised it because the characters:

are pretty convincing and none of them ever runs to the farcical extremes of the quaint menagerie in "On Our Selection".¹⁹⁴

On the other hand, Quinton Davis asserted in the Triad:

Mr Palmer and his associates profess contempt for Mr Steele Rudd's "On Our Selection" but I doubt whether they have gone any further.¹⁹⁵

In a somewhat similar manner the Argus reviewer of Esson's volume, Dead Timber and Other Plays, claimed that Esson's play:

might fairly have been designed to give the dark sides of Australian life which are optimistically depicted in Mr Steele Rudd's "On Our Selection" and Mr C.J.Dennis' "Sentimental Bloke".

It must have been very irksome for the Pioneer playwrights to see such large audiences being continually attracted to On Our Selection and The Sentimental Bloke while Pioneer plays were attended by such a small number.

Esson needed to realize that the main appeal of those farcical plays, their humour, was not to be underrated. It was unfortunate that Yeats had told him that he would probably do his "best thing in tragedy".¹⁹⁷ Before Esson paid his second visit to Europe and met Yeats again in November 1920, he had written two plays which exhibit a humour and vitality lacking in any plays he wrote later. These were The Time is Not Yet Ripe and The Woman Tamer. Hilda Esson has written of his "devastating and impish wit which was the delight of his friends".¹⁹⁸ It was not in evidence enough in his Pioneer plays. When Esson tried to write a more serious play about slum life, The Bride of

Gospel Place, his work was not so successful. As Eunice Hanger has asserted:

It seemed almost a matter of conscience with these playwrights to present the starker aspects of Australian life, as though to be cheerful would have been condescending to be "popular". So, drought, slums, convict life and other typical hardships were perhaps overstressed and the resilience and adaptability of the Australian given less prominence than we now feel they warrant.¹⁹⁹

Writing in Southerly, (XVII, 1957), Miss Hanger attributed this to a kind of "grim Puritan conscience" which "drove them to an earnestness, which when you come to think of it, is not highly characteristic"²⁰⁰ of Australians. As she declares:

The presentation of man in his ridiculous aspects has a long and honourable tradition in drama and is equally traditional in the nature of the 'typical Australian'.²⁰¹

Furthermore, since the Pioneer playwrights wrote mostly about people living outside the cities, the middle classes of Melbourne would find it difficult to identify with the characters in their plays. Again, Esson was following the advice of an Abbey playwright, Synge, who had told him, "It is better to write about the bush than about ballet girls".²⁰² His two early plays which had been so successful, The Woman Tamer and The Time is Not Ripe, had not been about the bush. Palmer, however, agreed with Synge. Already in 1905 he had declared:

The only really national work we have produced ... will be found to be inspired by the bush. City dwellers tend to become more and more cosmopolitan and it is in the country that the individuality of people best asserts itself.²⁰³

Nevertheless, one reviewer pointed out that "in no country in the world is such a large proportion of the population in the towns" whereas, he complained, the "tradition" seemed to be "that an Australian play must deal with the bush".²⁰⁴ Only Katharine Susannah Prichard's play The Great Man made any effort to deal with the tensions of middle class city life.

Another reason for the disintegration of the Pioneer Players was their lack of a permanent theatre in which to stage their plays. In his article in the Lone Hand on 1 May 1908, Brodney had pointed out how fortunate the Abbey Players had been in their association with Miss A.E.Horniman who in the role of "fairy godmother" had "secured the old Dublin theatre and had it rebuilt".²⁰⁵ The Pioneer Players were not so fortunate. They moved from the Playhouse where The Battler was produced in May 1922 to the gloomy Temperance Hall for the production of John Blake and A Happy Family in September and October 1922. The latter was again played at the Athenaeum on Saturday 21 October where Five Short Plays were also performed in October 1922. Mother and Son was played at St.Peter's Hall in June 1923; the second group of Five Short Plays in 1923, Four Short Plays in 1923 and The Bride of Gospel Place were also performed there. Moreover, Esson complained to Brodney that "there was a big prejudice against The Temperance Hall because its reputation was bad".²⁰⁶ As he told Brodney, "We want a club-house or room where we could put up posters, photos etc."²⁰⁷

The lack of money created other problems.

Besides acting, producing or writing plays, the Pioneer Players all had to earn a living. In the same letter, Esson told Brodney that they were giving weekly performances and rehearsing on most other nights. This must have been very tiring in 1922 and 1923 when there were seven different productions. If Esson's troupe had been financially independent or subsidised by the government of the day, as some live theatres are today, the history of the Pioneers might have been different. More time to rehearse and organize would undoubtedly have improved the quality of acting and production. It would have also given Esson more time to write.

In one letter to Nettie (dated only 10 February) Hilda regrets that she has had to leave her work as a doctor. She is sorry because Louis will now have to find work. She declares, "I did so want to give him a free year to get some of his half-baked things thoroughly crisp and brown and out of the oven forever". It must have been unsettling for Esson to be dependent on his wife. Hilda continues, "If only we had any money, the Pioneers might be reconstituted and do well".²⁰⁸ Frederick Macartney, in a letter to me dated "1st February 1973", quotes one of Wilmot's letters to him, written on 30 November 1922:

It looks as though the Pioneer Players have spent all their money and, having made scarcely a perceptible ripple on the surface, must pass out without a gurgle.

After the first year of production, there was a shortage of plays which also led to difficulties for the Pioneer productions. When writing to Brodney on 23 August 1923 Hilda complained about the difficulty of "getting enough plays and authors". Short plays, she told him, "give us what we need so badly, a variety of names". Macky's failure to complete his play Mototafer was a great disappointment. Again, if Esson had accepted some plays by other writers, even The Man Who Ate the Popomack, he could have had the "variety of names" he needed and perhaps have increased his audience. Hilda Esson may have realized this when she wrote:

Perhaps he disciplined himself too rigidly, sacrificing everything to fidelity of impression. He often quoted Tolstoi's denunciations of one of Gorki's more romantic efforts! 'You invented that!' It was the most damning criticism he could make. 210

Apparently he expected other playwrights writing for the Pioneers to follow his example.

Perhaps Esson's own character had something to do with his failure to write successful plays once Palmer had left Melbourne and Macky had become disheartened. Esson needed the enthusiasm and companionship of others in order to work. He informed Brodney of this in a letter written on 1 January 1907:

What I miss is somebody to talk literature with, to criticise my stuff and ideas, and to give new stimulus. 211

Similarly, in his letter to Stewart Macky on 8 June 1921 he confessed:

I'm a thin reed myself, and I can do nothing without some support. But I'd be quite a bold boy²¹² if there were two or three others with me.

With Palmer's departure and John Dawe's death, Esson had little support.

Ric Throssell, the son of Katherine Susannah Prichard, in a letter to me, describes his play, The Death of Damien Burr, as a study of "the way a man of brilliant promise is defeated by life and the part that those he has loved and those who have loved him play in reducing such a man to despair". Throssell insists that his play "is not a biographical piece because Esson was much more generous than Damien Burr". Throssell, however, was interested in the contrast between "Louis Esson during his Celtic twilight" when he met him in Sydney and "the young genius of the theatre whom my mother described". Throssell's play, For Valour "looks at the same kind of problem".²¹³

Clearly, it was a combination of factors - the nature of the audience and plays and the conditions of production which inhibited the complete success of the Pioneer Players. As Eunice Hanger wrote:

It is a heart breaking story to read for they had no money and had only a limited acting strength available. But they do not seem to have been very unhappy about it all. They worked hard and wrote hard, and at last gave the game away and scattered, mostly to other work although they did not abandon play-writing altogether. The collapse of the movement was due simply to the economic organization of the theatre of their time: there was no commercial management to take their plays further and not enough amateur theatres then to constitute a market.

The vast expansion of the Little Theatre movement has made all the difference in this regard.²¹⁴

It is difficult to discover just how big the audiences for the Pioneer Plays really were. It seems, from Louis' and Hilda's letters, that they managed to just about fill the theatre for a one-night production. Esson's letter postmarked "9 Oct. 1922" to Brodney claimed that The Battler "paid its way". When they moved to the Temperance Hall, he wrote they were not able "to attract a really big audience there", although they were "getting a bigger audience" for A Happy Family. On the other hand, the Herald reviewer of A Happy Family complained that "the public, always interested in and enthusiastic about an intellectual experiment, signified the same in the usual way - by proxy". He had no solution as to "why the great majority of Melbourne theatregoers so methodically stay away from Australian plays".²¹⁵

Again, when Hilda wrote to Leon on 20 August 1923 she claimed that they had had their "most successful night last week" when they produced "five short plays".²¹⁶ Louis' letter to Vance on 15 June 1926 described the audience for The Bride of Gospel Place as "satisfactory" and "the house" as "almost full except for the balcony".²¹⁷ Furthermore, as we have seen, Nettie's diary for 7 June 1923 claimed that there was "a full house" for Mother and Son and on 3 December 1923 she described "everything" as "satisfactory but the audience not electric" for Four Short Plays. Esson does not seem to have been greatly perturbed by small audiences. Yeats had assured him that "a small audience of enthusiastic people" was better than "a large indifferent one" when he had been surprised by the small audiences at the Abbey Theatre.²¹⁸

At the same time, the Pioneer Players did not make the same impact as the Abbey Players did at a later date. In The Australian Theatre published in 1942, there is this assertion:

You can hear the plays argued from pub to pub along the Liffey by working men and clerks over their stout and sherry.²¹⁹

Evidently, working men and clerks of Dublin found the Abbey plays relevant to their ways of life, but working men and clerks in Melbourne did not come to the Pioneer performances.

Nettie Palmer tells a story in Fourteen Years which has been repeated by other writers:

There was Furnley Maurice's retort when Louis Esson asked him had he come to act as our chucker-out. 'Looks as if it isn't a chucker-out you want but a chucker-in'.

Frederick Macartney retold this anecdote in his booklet Furnley Maurice.²²¹ The same tale is told by J. Beresford Fowler in Stars in My Backyard, a history of Australian theatre in which he asserts that the Pioneer Players' productions "lapsed for want of public support".²²²

Perhaps Furnley Maurice was present at one of the performances at the Temperance Hall.

Even so, larger and more enthusiastic audiences, as well as supplying funds for future productions, would certainly have encouraged the Pioneer Players to continue their efforts.

CHAPTER II

THE TECHNICAL ASPECTS OF THE PIONEER PLAYS

- i NATURALISM IN THE PIONEER PLAYS
- ii PRODUCERS, ACTORS AND PERFORMANCES

CHAPTER II

THE TECHNICAL ASPECTS OF THE PIONEER PLAYS

i

Naturalism in the Pioneer Plays

In order to gain a better understanding of the Pioneer plays, it is necessary to examine more closely not only the attitudes to playwriting and production which the Pioneer playwrights held but also how these attitudes affected the production of their plays. Esson and Palmer believed in the theory of naturalism.

It would appear that by naturalism, Esson and his associates meant a close reproduction of reality in the setting, characterization and acting of a play. They were, as might be expected, following the ideas of W.B.Yeats and the Abbey Theatre. In the introduction to the Southern Cross and Other Plays, Hilda Esson explains this:

Louis refused conscientiously to mould or falsify his material, hating the conventional easy way out, striving always for the truth as he saw it.¹
(p.xi)

Almost immediately she quotes Yeats' words to Esson, "I do greatly approve of your 'naturalism'", indicating that to her and Esson, naturalism meant the reproduction of "truth". Esson's plays would also be naturalistic in the sense that he gave full details always of the setting of each play, the appearance and clothing of the characters and their ways of speaking, all of which he expected to be as life-like as possible.

By being naturalistic, Esson was, he thought, following the Abbey plays and those of the same kind. In his article, "W.B. Yeats on National Drama", Esson implies that by being written realistically and acted naturally, the new drama would be reacting against drama which did not follow the ideas of the Irish National Theatre. It would also be about Australian people:

In a National Theatre, not only would the plays be new and in some relationship to the life of the country, but a new school of acting and production would arise naturally.²

When he writes about the occasion on which he watched Synge rehearse with W.G. Fay, The Well of the Saints, Esson describes the play as "a drama of drift based on reality".³ Again Esson found that the performances of the Washington Square Players in New York City were based on the ideas of naturalism:

Most of the tedious stage tricks, shifting people about for no purpose but to give an idea of action, or the old stock device of "when in doubt cross right" were discarded altogether.⁴

An article he published in the Melbourne Socialist on 17 July 1912, well before his second meeting with Yeats in 1920, indicates that Esson was critical of traditional acting techniques at the time when his plays were being staged by W. Moore and G. McMahon:

If the players would learn that the average mummer is a bad, not a good model, and make no effort to reproduce with fatal fidelity the artificialities of the common stage, many of them would find that they are better than they imagined.⁵

In the same article he criticises G.B. Shaw because "as a realist ... he is a brilliant failure and he has no profound feeling for life". (It was in 1912 that Esson's political

play The Time is Not Yet Ripe was staged, a play which, to H.M.Green, recalls the work of Shaw.⁶⁾

Some idea of what Esson expected in the production of a play may be gained from his instructions to Palmer in Esson's letter of 21 May 1921. From a copy of the Herald which W.Moore sent to him, Esson discovered that the producer for the Mermaid Society in Melbourne was going to put on a performance of The Drovers in July. Esson asks Palmer to act as his representative:

If this information is correct, you might see Miss Coppinger for me and tell her that you know my intentions about the play, to avoid American 'suppressed emotion', 'strong silent men' atmosphere, false stresses etc. It needs to be played simply to make an effect. 'Briglow' is a hard part to get across, the others are easy enough. I should be grateful (if it is not too inconvenient for you), if you would keep an eye on the performance - that is, if there is any performance - and curse the actors freely.

Miss Coppinger, the producer, whose married name was Mrs Apperley, had been, as Esson told Palmer in the same letter, one of the Abbey Theatre players. She should have known what Esson wanted. The play, however, was not produced, as Nettie notes in her diary on 1 July 1921: "Learnt that the Mermaid Society is abandoning Louis Esson's Drovers in favour of an evening dress play by Frank Russell". It could be that The Drovers needs a non-naturalistic production. When the Pioneer Players performed it in 1923, no review praised it. The Argus of 4 December 1923 described it as a play:

which reads better than it acts and one cannot conscientiously say that it is suited for the stage.⁸ It is too faint even for a spiritual drama.

Yet The Drovers has been praised by Vance Palmer as "one of the most moving pieces Esson ever wrote":

When it was published ... Herbert Farjeon hailed it as a minor masterpiece, created by an artist with a sense of the theatre and (what was just as rare, he insisted) a sense of life beyond the theatre.

Palmer's approval of Esson's description of A Happy Family demonstrates agreement with Esson's ideas on naturalism. Esson wrote of it:

It avoids theatrical tricks and cheap effects, whether of farce or melodrama, and in its outlook upon life and technical method it recalls some of the plays written for the Abbey Theatrical Company.

[Brodney's attitudes to drama were the same as those of Esson, as can be seen in his article, "The Irish National Theatre"; although Brodney does not use the word "naturalism", he praises dramatic productions for being "natural", "simple and realistic" (p.110). When describing his experiences in Dublin he refers to the short plays of the Abbey Theatre as each being "a glimpse of life ... a new manner of seizing an impression of reality". Furthermore, he declares:

A new method of speaking dialogue has been developed, while on the scenic side the endeavour has been to be natural, that is, true to the locality of the drama, simple and realistic, but without any overloading of minute detail. (p.110)

Another observation he makes is similar to Esson's references to the stage techniques of the Washington Square Players. At the Abbey Theatre Brodney noticed that "many of the stupid conventions in stage business have been dropped, among them the stupid business of 'crossing to the right'."

As might be expected, Hilda Esson, with her interest in acting, was also a disciple of naturalism. She agreed wholeheartedly with the methods of the Moscow Art Theatre Company which she describes enthusiastically to Nettie and Vance in one of her letters:

No players ever do a part unless they are absolutely familiar with the country characters' modes of life referred to in the play; they rehearse for months, sometimes a year; they put the greatest stress on the actor being so much in the part that he is not acting but living it. Such intense naturalism as this should be very baffling to a critic like our friend Turner.

Another letter from Hilda informs Nettie, "Some Russian people ... who knew the Moscow Art Theatre, admired my acting".¹³ Again, Hilda declares that a Madame Tricki who is "half German and half Russian" has criticised the acting of a play called She Who Gets Slapped by commenting:

I may be wrong but after what I see in Moscow, the acting seems like declamation; it is so overdone, it is not like people, not natural. It seems so old fashioned.¹⁴

Hilda adds, "Their own acting (in Russia) seems so much more natural, yet terribly intense". In the same letter, she expresses her admiration for Chaliapin, the Russian operatic singer who was, she claims, an exponent of naturalism:

He never uses a gesture that isn't forced out of him by the intensity of his emotion - and then it is the most reticent and yet poignant expression imaginable. It is the audience that gasps and weeps and sways, not Chaliapin ... He never rolls his eyes or heaves his chest. He has a gorgeous comic sense but only because his expression comes straight out of life ... He simply expresses the character with such startling truth that the comedy is irresistible.

(Esson told Palmer in a letter dated 15 June 1926 that they had been to see Chaliapin.)¹⁶

It would appear, then, that naturalism in acting was fashionable in many parts of the world - not only with the Abbey Theatre Players, the Washington Square Players and the Moscow Art Theatre, but also in the world of opera. Looking back at Australian literature, A.A. Phillips in The Australian Tradition (1966) claims that Henry Lawson "used the mode of naturalism". He believes that Lawson "needed it to reflect his attitude towards life. His conception demanded that he keep within the scale of life - as - it - is lived."¹⁷

Furthermore, most reviewers of the early Pioneer plays knew about the aims and ideas of their authors and actors. Often the reviews made references to the realism in characters and acting in the plays. One example was the review in Aussie on 15 June 1922 which praised "what can be achieved by a little group of sincere players working in harmony". It commended the company's efforts because they showed "no striving after cheap effects, no horseplay"¹⁸ and no stereotyped characters.

The actors knew what the author wanted and they gave us familiar Australian types with a convincing freshness. There were no 'bad' men in 'The Battler' and no sticky heroines oozing sentiment ... Their easy natural style is reminiscent of the Irish Players¹⁹ though their characters are essentially Australian.

The reviewer was most enthusiastic about the Australian content as well as the acting:

This is the kind of acting Australian comedy wants. It will show the public that there are more interesting types²⁰ than English dudes and Yankee millionaires.

At first the Melbourne Herald commended their "ideal":

To encourage a school of drama and acting that will be free²¹ from convention but sincere and distinctive.

Later, however, reviewers began to become critical of the Pioneer Players' efforts to be realistic. In the Herald, the reviewer complained about the lack of action in Mother and Son:

Apparently native drama of this school scorns the dramatic. It looks around for a tragedy - an accident. Then it inquires and reports on antecedent facts ... Ibsen in Ghosts had a theme somewhat similar to that of the play under review but what a clever selection of dramatic incident he makes to heighten his climax. In Mother and Son²² there is no crisis, merely an accident.

It could be that it was an early version of Mother and Son to which Esson referred in his letter to A.G. Stephens on 26 January 1912: "I am working on a bush play - with no plot, no blood and very little 'action' - that I hope will be the best thing I have done".²³ Even A Happy Family, the most successful Pioneer play, was called "an almost actionless achievement" by the Triad reviewer (as has been noted).²⁴ The Argus reviewer, also, suggested that "at times a little more action would be welcome" in A Happy Family. Moreover, he asserted:

One fault, especially in the first act, was that in the endeavour to lose nothing of natural²⁵ ness, a humorous point was sometimes sacrificed.

Other criticisms of the Pioneer plays related to their stage techniques. The Herald critic of Mother and Son disparaged it and The Voice of the People which preceded it because they "suffered from the same fault, ignorance or contempt for stage techniques".²⁶ The review of The Bride of Gospel Place in the Argus of 10 June 1926 illustrates this

vagueness:

Stage convention has been abandoned by Mr. Louis Esson. Has he abandoned too much - the good points of the stage as well as the bad?

He has not yet reached a quite successful stage art of his own - in the manner for instance of the successful movements towards stage naturalism made in former years in Ireland and Russia.²⁷

One interpretation of Esson's naturalism is to regard him as a romantic writer by nature who forced himself to become realistic. Palmer was of this opinion. He regards Esson as "by temperament ... romantic, interested in what was picturesque and even exotic".²⁸ Esson's own words are somewhat confusing. In his article in Fellowship on 21 August 1921, he declared that Yeats' advice to him in 1904 was "by no means what he wished to hear" at that time because he did not regard "cattlemen and bullock drivers" as fit subjects for literature".²⁹ Nevertheless, when writing to Palmer on 21 May 1921, he stated:

I would do better if I could write on cosmopolitan subjects. I have enough technique, so I fancy, and there's nothing to stop me doing it - nothing except want of interest. And I can't work it up. Australia is a land of fantasy, of mystery to me.³⁰

Palmer declares that Esson "was gradually convinced that the natural place for a writer to look for his material was the world he knew".³¹ Yet Esson did not attempt to dramatise the lives of the middle-class city dwellers and intellectuals with whom he associated. The country and slum characters of his plays were not very familiar to him so that his interpretation of naturalism was somewhat ambiguous.

Some critics today attempt to attribute the supposed failure of the Pioneer plays to their naturalism.

H.G.Kippax claims that:

the temper of the Pioneer plays was one of revolt but their methods were those of adaptation. Their attempts to apply the naturalistic methods of the early Abbey Theatre playwrights ... to the epic themes of the outback were analagous to Kendall's attempts to apply a Keatsian₃₂ vocabulary to the austere Australian bush.

Of course, Kippax's assumption that the non-naturalistic methods of today's Australian playwrights are not related to overseas movements is not correct. The Theatre Antoine, the Abbey Theatre, the Washington Square Players and the Moscow Art Theatre were all part of a similar movement in drama, just as playwrights such as Brecht, Ionesco, Beckett and Albee are part of the non-naturalistic theatre of today.

Nevertheless it is true that the rise of the non-naturalism has led to a reawakening of Australian drama. Margaret Williams, writing in Meanjin xxxi, No.3, 1972, asserted:

Paradoxically, the greatest single factor in setting Australians free to explore the dramatic possibilities of their own society has been the decline of naturalism, particularly of the well-made naturalistic play.₃₃

She cites The Drovers as an example of "a well made naturalistic play".

Leslie Rees declared in 1942 that Pioneer plays were "sometimes a bit dull, colourless and understated".³⁴ This is a valid criticism of many of the Pioneer plays, especially those of Esson. Mother and Son, the Bride of Gospel Place, and even perhaps his later plays not written for the

Pioneers, could make more impact with non-naturalistic performances.

ii

PRODUCERS, ACTORS AND PERFORMANCES

As William Moore declared in his Prologue to the Fourth Annual Drama Night held on 15 May 1912, "A play is no play until it has endured the glare of the foot-lights".³⁵ The reputation of a play can be affected by the ability of the producer and actors as well as their interpretations of the meaning of the play and of the playwright's script.

Esson and his friends were anxious to follow the methods of the Irish dramatists. Yeats had suggested "an old Shakespearian professional" actor for a producer and "some enthusiastic amateurs"³⁶ for actors. There were sufficient of the latter because the Pioneers never seemed to lack actors.

Esson, however, produced The Battler himself. Nettie Palmer's letter to Mr Long, dated 22 May 1922, mentions Esson's "depression" after the performance. Apparently Wilmot had been critical of the play:

I don't think he (Wilmot) realized how much positive life had been created. He said the actors were better than the play, not realizing that the play gave those actors their very first opportunity of really acting and that Louis, as producer, had almost made each of them.³⁷

This seems to have been Esson's first attempt at producing

a play. In his letter to Brodney postmarked "9 Oct. 1922" Esson thanked his friend for having sent him "Shaw's article on the Art of Rehearsal!"

I have studied it carefully. It gives the points I wanted to know. I was in doubt as to how to get about the business, the relationship of words to movement etc. I'm going to have to read it to the company.

According to Table Talk of 22 May 1922, J. Beresford Fowler had been the stage manager for The Battler,³⁸ so that Esson could depend on someone else to help with rehearsals. Fowler had been "a red rag socialist" in Esson's play, The Time is Not Yet Ripe; he had played opposite Isabel Handley in Man and Superman and was later to become a professional actor.³⁹ He did not, however, act in any of the Pioneer plays.

After Macky had been producer for John Blake and Palmer for A Happy Family, Hilda Esson wrote to the latter suggesting that they should employ George Dawe as producer:

I suggested to Louis that we should ask George Dawe to produce - I found the company more than willing - it would relieve us of responsibility and I feel sure that if George took it on, he would work his heart out for us. Leo and Charlie both say he is tremendously keen to work with us so I feel it would be a lucky stroke if we could get him.⁴⁰

Palmer relates that "at the beginning of 1923, Dawe "took over the work of production". As a result, Mother and Son was "technically ... the most satisfactory performance"⁴¹ of the Pioneer plays. Palmer admits that "the lack of a producer" had been a "handicap". They (the authors) knew what effects they wanted but without any experience of production, they "rarely had the capacity to get them".⁴²

Apparently employing Dawe was the closest that the Pioneer Players could get to following Yeats' advice that they look for "an old Shakespearian professional actor" as a producer. Palmer describes him as:

a very capable actor of the old school, who had been the first to introduce Shaw and Galsworthy (at the University Dramatic Club) to Melbourne, and had afterward toured through England and America, playing in everything from⁴³ fashionable comedy to the fruitiest melodrama.

Although "carrying on his father's business of monumental mason", Dawe was still interested in the stage and anxious to work with the Pioneers:

Dawe was not a Willie Fay but both his personality and his professional experience proved very useful to the Pioneers.

Though he never completely understood our aim and thought our plays painfully lacking in tense scenes and exciting situations, he was ready to subdue his own leanings towards romanticism and work for the effects we wanted.⁴⁴

His pleasant character helped to make him an enthusiastic producer:

A contagious warmth radiated from him when he was absorbed in a play; it infected even the most wooden members of a cast.⁴⁵

The Essons and Palmers already knew that Dawe was likely to be a suitable choice. He had been a Pioneer actor from the beginning. Before 1923 he had already taken the leading parts of Ogilvie in The Battler, of Captain John Blake in John Blake, Bongo in The Woman Tamer and the bishop in the first Pioneer performance of The Bishop and the Buns (1922). After becoming producer, he took a small part in each performance - that of Tom Henderson, the old bushman, in Mother and Son and another, Alec McKay, the 'boss' drover, in The Drovers.⁴⁶ Palmer declares that Dawe had

difficulty in learning his parts at first, "because his mind was stuffed with the lines of so many long parts"⁴¹ from the past.

Conflicting opinions in reviews make it difficult for a critic, fifty years later, to acquire unbiased ideas of the acting abilities of the Pioneer Players. The Bulletin of 17 August 1922 asserted that in his performance as John Blake, Dawe had "an impressive personal appearance and manner but no strength in his polished diction".⁴⁸ On the other hand, the Triad of 11 September 1922 claimed that, in his role of John Blake, Dawe seemed "born to boom pomposities of an uplifting nature".⁴⁹ Palmer believed that Dawe was "a born actor of great power and vitality, with a gift for mimetics, a rich fluty voice and a commanding presence on the stage" who had "wasted his gifts barn-storming in the back streets of two continents".⁵⁰ The part of Ogilvie in The Battler suited Dawe since Ogilvie was "a breezy exuberant prospector".⁵¹ Hence Dawe was playing a character with a personality very like his own, so that Esson's demands for "a natural style of acting that subordinated the personalities of the individual actors to the general intentions of the play"⁵² would not be difficult for Dawe to fulfil. This would also apply to the other parts he played - John Blake and the bishop in particular.

When Dawe died suddenly in 1925, Palmer thought it would be difficult to hold the actors together.⁵³ It was Leo Burke who managed to do this and to produce The Bride of Gospel Place in 1926. Like Dawe, he had been a member of the

Pioneers from their inception. A photograph of him as Con in A Happy Family appeared in Aussie of 15 November 1922 (p.12).

He was praised in the same issue of the paper:

Full of vitality, he can hold the stage by merely leaning against a post, or efface himself in a moment when it is his business to fall into a group. This is the kind of acting Australian comedy wants. (p.23)

Leo Burke also played the parts of Sam Clarke in The Battler, Chopsey Ryan in The Woman Tamer, Briglow Bill in The Drovers, Harry in Mother and Son and Bush Reynolds in The Bride of Gospel Place. These were all leading parts except for that of Sam Clarke. Burke had a part in every performance.

The actors were, Esson told Brodney in his letter postmarked "9 Oct. 1922", "a bit lacking on the purely intellectual side" but they were "good in character" and "had experience of life". When writing thus to Brodney, Esson may have recalled that Brodney had written in the Lone Hand on 1 June 1908 that players "should be of good education with a taste for acting".⁵⁴ Still, at first, the actors could have been regarded as "enthusiastic amateurs" as Yeats had advised. Esson was quite optimistic in his letter to Brodney:

Our company should be first class in time. We have two or three ex-pros and others who have acted for years. We haven't made any discoveries yet among the young. The idea is to represent real people although one or two still go for the laughs.

Palmer declares that they "hoped to instil into the company a professional attitude towards their work and the theatre" so that their feeling would not consist of just incidental excitement for an occasional play. "We felt that no headway would be made until the actors took performances and rehearsals as equal opportunities for development",⁵⁵ he wrote.

According to him, Esson believed that "all engaged in the theatre should be inspired by the feeling that they were making something new".⁵⁶

Hilda Esson's opinions of the actors seemed to change with the varying success of their productions. At first she shared the early optimism of Esson and Palmer that they could build up a group of really inspired players. She wrote to Brodney:

I fancy our productions are very different from any other amateur show that has been here. The national ideal gives a solidity of purpose even to the actors that is lacking in "amateur theatricals".⁵⁷

Her attitude to the players was very practical. She was keen to keep the company together by making sure that they were happy and secure in their work. This is demonstrated in a letter she wrote to Vance Palmer:

I feel most emphatically that the feeling of the company wants to be kept good and enthusiastic ... Really, as far as acting goes, one is just as good as the next one, and Louis and I both feel that it is important to stick to those members of the company who have stuck to us. We can't complain if they leave us but if they stick they should receive the benefits of their loyalty ... Louis and I want to say to them that we want no-one who doesn't really want to play with us and we on our side are prepared to pledge ourselves to give the original Pioneers the first choice in every cast, ... by keeping the same ones, even if their versatility is sometimes a little overtaxed, you will make them so much better.⁵⁸

Later, however, she was disillusioned. She wrote to Nettie, after the production of The Bride of Gospel Place in 1926:

We were pretty disappointed in the company. The amateur is really a dud. He rehearses the least possible amount, gets his effects in the cheapest way and thinks only of his own little success. What a different history the Pioneers might have had if only we had been able to father a band of enthusiastic innocent people to whom it was the chief interest of life.⁵⁹

Hilda herself seems to have been a competent actress, so far as can be judged from newspaper reviews. She usually played a leading female part - that of an attractive young woman. In The Battler she played the part of Clara. Table Talk of 22 May 1922 described her acting as "in parts distinctly good" but "it was uneven" and "her coquetting was somewhat unconvincing".⁶⁰ The reviewer in the Triad was mildly encouraging about her role in John Blake (and he was usually uncomplimentary to the Pioneers):

Miss Hilda Bull was pleasantly innocuous as Amy Sherwin but one feels that she is stifling her good sense for the pleasure of exercising a purely feminine fascination.⁶¹

(Always, on the programmes, Hilda Esson used her maiden name.) Her "good character work" in A Happy Family was praised by the Australasian of 30 September 1922.⁶² Hilda Esson's most outstanding part was probably that of the governor's wife in Macky's one-act play The Trap. The Bulletin on its page "Melbourne Chatter" on 26 October 1922 declared:

The scene between Strude and the woman makes the play. It is a bravura effort and highly moral but as the Governor's lady in the course of a thrilling scene has to pull down her stocking and display her ankle, it is rather audacious for Melbourne. (p.41)

Hilda played the part of Norah, "the bush enchantress"⁶³ in A Happy Family, the mother in The Great Man and Pioneers, Emma in Mother and Son and Renie who was "enamoured of the lively life"⁶⁴ in The Bride of Gospel Place.

Frank Keon was one actor who always received good publicity. When the Bulletin of 1 June 1922 published a photograph of him, it had a complimentary commentary:

This is Frank Keon, one of our best known Repertory amateurs who lent his energy and experience to the success of Louis Esson's The Battler at the Playhouse the other night. His Watty in that production was so good that he will probably have a part in Dr. Stewart Macky's historical Australian drama, John Blake, to be staged by the Pioneer Players next month.⁶⁵

Furthermore, the commentary praised Keon's ability "to play anything from a pavement saunterer to middle-aged roués and grandmotherly parsons". It informed its readers that Keon had played in The Private Secretary, The New Sin and Camille and that he performed "at the Railway Institutes' Saturday nights". He had been "one of the first to appear in Gregan McMahon's literary shows in Melbourne and had since helped the Mermaids whenever wanted". The Triad reviewer praised his performance of Fletcher, a convict, as "crisp and vigorous" in John Blake. He was Watty in The Battler and Dave Watson in A Happy Family, all of which were quite important parts. Even though Hilda was indignant when Keon wanted A Happy Family for the Railway Institute's drama society, she seemed to regret that he could not play in The Voice of the People:

Frank can't play unless we play down at the Railways. I fancy the type of play would be quite impossible for them, though he wants to give it a try.⁶⁷

Keon had apparently become producer for the Railway Institute drama society. Later he was to play the part of Smithy the Liar in The Bride of Gospel Place. Although that is only a minor part, the Melbourne Herald regarded Keon as the "chief success"⁶⁸ of the play.

Two actresses who played with the Pioneers for most of their productions and who seem to have improved their acting ability with practice were Alice Crowther and Irene

Appleton. When Hilda Esson wrote to Vance Palmer about those players who had been "loyal" to the Pioneers receiving "first choice in every cast", she cited these two actresses:

For instance neither Irene nor Miss Crowther had done any work for us to suggest their being cast as we have cast them; but they will both be excellent. We might have searched Melbourne to find the particular "types" we thought necessary, and have done no better, if as well, in the end.

As the Pioneers were preparing to present The Voice of the People and Mother and Son, Hilda Esson is probably referring to Alice Crowther's part as the mother and Irene Appleton's part as Peggy, both in Esson's play. The Australasian declared that "Miss Alice Crowther" played her part "with strength and feeling"⁷⁰, while the Bulletin claimed that "no exception" could be taken to Irene Appleton's acting as "the homely Peggy".⁷¹ Alice Crowther, after having only small parts in The Battler and A Happy Family, played the mother in The Black Horse and the wife in A Disturber of Pools, each of which was a successful production. In the Melbourne Herald of 1 June 1923 there was a photograph of her with the title, "One of the Pioneer Players". Below it were references to her part in Esson's play and her previous acting experience:

Miss Crowther received her dramatic training in America, studying modern methods of dramatic expression in New York and Boston. Miss Crowther has had considerable experience on the professional stage. (p.12)

Like Alice Crowther, Irene Appleton had small parts in The Battler and A Happy Family, followed by more important ones on other playnights. She acted as the amusing waitress in The Bishop and the Buns (1922), the wife in The New Bridge and the charwoman in The Bride of Gospel Place. The

Australasian praised her part as the "haughty waitress" in The Bishop and the Buns⁷² while the Melbourne Herald declared that she "gave a capital characterization of the hardworking charwoman".⁷³

Another actress whose work was always praised in reviews was Isabel Handley, although she did not act for the Pioneers after October 1922. (She later wrote plays) The Triad of 11 September 1922 praised her acting as "strikingly good", claiming that "it was due to the actress and not the author that Mrs Blake achieved some personal and mental importance"⁷⁴ in Macky's play. Similarly the Melbourne Herald of 27 October 1922 asserted that "the charm of the Lawson playlet", Telling Mrs Baker, resulted largely from the acting and that "Isabel Handley's Mrs Baker was played with her characteristic naturalness and restraint".⁷⁵

One of the younger members of the Pioneer Players, Alan Murray, received mixed praise and censure for his part as the convict who killed his master in John Blake. The Bulletin of 17 August 1922 liked "young Alan Murray's histrionic talent in the role of Warrington:

... who starts by masquerading as a Brummagen Beaucaire, pinching earrings from Mrs Blake's ears to gratify his artistic pride in his own skill and then deteriorates into a savage animal through the austere malignity of Commandant Blake. This would come hard on an experienced actor.⁷⁶

The Bulletin reviewer believed that "Murray looks likely to go far if he means theatrical business". The Argus, however, asserted that "Murray was not the great actor the part required"⁷⁷ while the Australasian regarded "grim tragedy as yet beyond his powers".⁷⁸ He had had previous experience with the Mermaid Society; a review of their production,

Nan, in the Triad of 10 May 1921 mentions him.⁷⁹ Later he was to play Steve in A Happy Family, Jack Barnes in Telling Mrs Baker and Bathbrick, the curate, in The Bishop and the Buns, 1922. The Bulletin reviewer again praised his acting as Steve, which was really only a minor role:

Though immaterial to the plot, Steve attains histrionic importance through the skilful handling of Alan Murray who poetises the character's oddity into a wistful pitifulness discernible in his lightest comic relief. Alan Murray's acting is very good although it probably derides the author's intention regarding Steve's real part in the play.⁸⁰

Alan Murray left for America in 1923 where he became a singer. I spoke to him in Sydney in November 1974 when he was a teacher of voice production.

There were other actors who appeared in several plays. Reg Moyle had small parts in Mother and Son, A Disturber of Pools and Bride of Gospel Place. T.Kanake was a sentry in John Blake, an overseer in A Happy Family and a warder in The Trap. J. O'Connell was in The Battler, A Happy Family, Voice of the People, Drovers and The Bride of Gospel Place. Charles Doherty had a small part on each play night except the last. Eileen O'Keefe was in The Battler, John Blake and A Happy Family. Hetty Fueerman was in The Battler, The New Bridge and Voice of the People. Of those who had taken parts in Esson's plays on William Moore's Drama Nights, only T.Skewes who had been Chopsey Ryan in The Woman Tamer⁸¹ played for the Pioneers. He took the role of the old fossicker, "Terrible Mick" in The Battler. Esson had thought so well of him that he had asked Palmer in his letter of 21 May 1921 to see if Skewes would help out with the production of The Drovers which the Mermaid Society was considering:

Have you ever met Tom Skewes? He has played in some of my things, and no-one could be more sympathetic. He knows the bush, too, and is always an artist. If he was in Melbourne, I'm almost sure he would lend a hand somewhere, for the sake of the Cause. He played Chopsey for⁸² me, and he was quite perfect, to my idea.

Of the authors, Vance Palmer played a part once only - a convict in John Blake. It was in Mother and Son that Macky played the dying father. Esson did not take any part.

Apparently Maisie Bennett, who played the leading role in The Bride of Gospel Place, was a newcomer brought in for that occasion only.

Of those who played in The Battler, the first play, five still had parts in the last production, The Bride of Gospel Place. These were Frank Keon, Leo Burke, Hilda Esson, J.O'Connell and Irene Appleton. Thus the Pioneer actors were, on the whole, people who were interested in acting continually, although they were amateurs.

Undoubtedly they had difficulties because they all had to earn a living so that they would only be able to rehearse in the evenings and at weekends. Hilda Esson inferred that their enthusiasm flagged on occasions when she wrote to Palmer:

The company seems ever so much more eager to work. Three of them were there well before 8 o'clock.⁸³ Leo, if you will believe me, was the first.

Moreover, on an evening when four or five short plays were produced, the actors often took two parts on the one night. On 3 December 1923 Charles Doherty was Bob in The Drovers and Rodgers in Travellers while Leo Burke was Farrell in

Pioneers and Briglow Bill in The Drovers. This must have been hard for the players and the producer to organize.

On some occasions (those on which Dawe was not the producer), newspapers made references to carelessness or deficiencies in the acting of the players or in their productions. The reviewer in Smith's Weekly was kind about the first Pioneer production:

The acting by amateurs, several of fair experience with a touch of professional aid, had many good points for which one could forgive occasional deficiencies. There was always sincerity and determination.⁸⁴

Nevertheless, he believed that "much more experience" was needed "by some of the players". Aussie criticised the actors in A Happy Family:

They should do without their prompter; who, in Charles Lamb's words, "is heard the most and seen the least". Much hard work is yet required before the company becomes one for Melbourne to boast about. Good intentions are not enough.⁸⁵
The time has come for good performance.

Furthermore, this review claimed that "as far as acting and production" were "concerned", the Pioneers were "still in the experimental stage". They were still likely to "fluff a good deal, miss their cues, forget some little property".

Again, the Australasian asserted that "the necessity for the prompter's assistance was rather noticeable" in A Happy Family.⁸⁶

The reviewer of the Bulletin was more precise.

He was amused by "the curious police sergeant" in Palmer's play who:

was apparently suffering from the disorderly conduct of a false stomach which slipped upwards on Thursday and produced a pouter-pigeon effect.⁸⁷

It is to be hoped that these reviews were referring to the first night, 21 September 1922, of A Happy Family and that acting improved on succeeding play nights. Punch of 24 August 1922 claimed that the acting of John Blake showed a marked improvement at the second performance and really reached a "standard of smoothness" which the company could be "proud of".⁸⁸ Again, however, after Dawe's death in 1925, Esson had some problems with The Bride of Gospel Place. Nevertheless, he appeared to be congratulating himself on the performance when he wrote to Palmer on 15 June 1926:

We had only two breaks, Joe going out for a plate and not returning, but Frank as Smithy covered it up cleverly and even Rowe didn't notice it. The second was that the curtain in Act III fell on the screen.⁸⁹

Perhaps the reviewer in ^{the}Argus was making an oblique reference to the fallen curtain when he declared of Esson:

He has put real life and real characters on the stage, and if one says that some of the curtains are not effective - well there can be something beyond what is usually regarded as stage effect.⁹⁰

When Dawe produced plays, there were no great criticisms of acting or production. The Australasian of 16 June 1923, reviewing their short plays, described their "principals" as "excellent" and their "general team work" as "good".⁹¹ Furthermore, the Bulletin of 13 December 1923 admitted that "the mummers were generally competent and well-chosen and the characters easy".⁹²

Although Frank Keon had managed to hold the actors together, he could not inspire them to act as well as George Dawe had. Clearly they needed a competent producer in order to do their best work.

There is not much information on the production

of the plays. Most effort appears to have been spent on the scenery of John Blake. Vance Palmer relates:

Macky was anxious to provide settings that would be more in line with modern theatrical development than the shabby flats and set garden pieces⁹³ that had served so many amateur productions.

Max Meldrum, Esson's friend⁹⁴ who was also an exponent of "realism" in painting,⁹⁵ was persuaded "to design a garden scene" which his students "carried out".⁹⁶ In contrast to this scene:

the rest of the stage decor was given over to Don Finley, a young enthusiast for the theatre who afterwards made a name for himself abroad as a designer, organizing ... in London during 1936 an exhibition of theatrical design from all capitals of the Continent.

Leslie Rees records that Don Finley later "was the mainstay of the Turret" theatre in Sydney, because he was a "clever designer"⁹⁸. There is, in William Moore's Scrap Book at La Trobe Library, Melbourne, an article called "Australian Plays" by D.J.Finley. It is undated and from an unidentified newspaper but in the margin someone has written "Nov.1929". Finley writes of John Blake as "the most ambitious and probably the most interesting of the Pioneer Plays", written "rather in the manner of Drinkwater's chronicle plays".⁹⁹

In designing scenery for John Blake, Finley found that "the theatre itself did not allow him much scope".¹⁰⁰ This was the Temperance Hall which Palmer describes as an "ancient auditorium!"

The stage was high and shallow, the hall was draughty and the effect of any imaginative decor destroyed by a wedding-cake¹⁰¹ proscenium that beetled over the footlights.

The scenery, however, was praised by most reviewers, although the Bulletin sneeringly called "the pretence of scenery" ...

"rather painful".¹⁰²

The Punch reviewer wrote of it:

The scenery, by the way, has caused a lot of controversy because it is the work of two opposing schools - D.J.Findley (who has done the interiors) is a disciple of the fantastic Gordon Craig: while E.Kempton and E.Findlay (who together painted the Norfolk Island scene) are followers of Max Meldrum. Hence the arguments.¹⁰³

On other occasions the Pioneers seem to have kept their stage scenery quite simple. The Melbourne Herald of 4 December 1923 asserted:

A hut in the Gippsland forest, a suburban garden, a tableland in the Northern Territory and a bush shanty had little in the way of scenic effect to help out with the stage illusion.¹⁰⁴

He was referring to the play night on which the Pioneers played Pioneers, A Disturber of Pools, The Drovers and Travellers. It was 3 December 1923.

It was unfortunate that the Pioneer plays were only staged a few times. While the company was training its actors and actresses by giving them practical experience, the dramatists did not get much opportunity to revise or rewrite their plays, after seeing them played several times and watching the audiences' reactions to them or considering critical reviews of them. The Woman Tamer had been played previously. The Bishop and the Buns and The Black Horse were repeated, being played in 1922 and 1923. Apparently Macky did revise The Trap but there are no records of what the first script was like. The Battler, John Blake and A Happy Family were each performed on more than one night, as were the Five Short Plays in 1922. Yet there is no evidence that any changes were made in the scripts. After telling Palmer

about the production of The Bride of Gospel Place, Esson mentioned that he could improve the play in various ways if he produced it again:

I learnt a lot from rehearsals and the performance. Better strategy in Act I will make all the difference. The fact that the actors showed up the weak spots (good playing sometimes¹⁰⁵ can disguise a weakness) was to my advantage.

The author of the C.A.B. Bulletin, Australian Drama and Theatre, 28 July 1958, complained about:

how little opportunity there has been for the Australian playwright to gain actual experience in a theatre, to have his play staged, to have it staged well and to have its success or otherwise publicised, or patronized by large numbers of people.¹⁰⁶

At least the Pioneer playwrights had the opportunity to do this to some extent. It is unfortunate that their company dissipated after only a few years.

CHAPTER III

PLAYS WRITTEN BY LOUIS ESSON

- i VARIOUS INFLUENCES AFFECTING ESSON'S WORK
- ii LOUIS ESSON AND HENRY LAWSON
- iii THE BATTLER
- iv MOTHER AND SON
- v THE DROVERS
- vi THE WOMAN TAMER
- vii THE BRIDE OF GOSPEL PLACE

VARIOUS INFLUENCES AFFECTING ESSON'S WORK

Now that the work of the Pioneer Players has been considered in its practical context, it is necessary to separate out the aesthetic qualities from the practical.

An examination of the various influences which have affected Esson's work will include those of the Irish playwrights, Yeats and Synge, as well as the general Australian tradition of Lawson, Dyson and others. This will lead to an examination of the theme and stagecraft of each play, and hence to a consideration of just what makes Esson's work unique.

There are some general resemblances between Esson's plays and those of the Irish playwrights, and yet these can often be attributed to the tradition to which they belonged. Esson and Synge regarded themselves as realistic writers and it is true that each of them looks at common life with vigour and flair. The tradition of such writing reaches back into English drama as far as the Elizabethans. Esson was familiar with Ben Jonson's Bartholomew Fair which Yeats told him had influenced Synge and which Esson describes as "Billingsgate made classic".¹ Esson's slum plays, The Woman Tamer and The Bride of Gospel Place belong to the same tradition. In Ben Jonson's play, in Esson's slum plays and in some of Synge's plays such as The Tinker's Wedding there are likeable, low life rogues and villains interacting with a less pleasant representative of authority who may be a justice of the peace, a priest or a policeman. In Bartholomew Fair Jonson derided

the Puritan outlook. When Esson wrote for the Red Page of the Bulletin of 14 April 1910 about "The Menace of Sanity in Literature", he asserted that "the opposing forces" in life styles are "Puritan England and Dionysian sunshine". In The Battler, Bella could be said to represent the Puritan work ethic. Sam, her husband, complains:

I've been working hard, I haven't had a bet for months; cards, dice, billiards - I never look at them. I don't drink, I've been careful with my language, and I've helped build the new church. What more do you want?²

It is difficult, however, to apply the phrase "Dionysian sunshine" to the life of the other characters in Esson's play, although it is pleasant and relaxed. Similarly, the mother, Mrs Lind, in Mother and Son, sees hard work as a virtue. Again, the way of life Harry, her son, prefers is scarcely that of "Dionysian sunshine" although it consists of playing his fiddle, drinking and having a mistress rather than a wife. Esson's amoral attitude towards his characters in all his plays, and in his slum plays in particular, is similar to Jonson's in Bartholomew Fair and to that of Synge in The Well of the Saints and The Tinker's Wedding. [Furthermore, Esson's heroine in The Bride of Gospel Place who dies partly because of the behaviour of someone she loves, comes from a long line of women in literature, including Chaucer's Griselde, Shakespeare's Hermione and Dicken's Little Nell. The hospital scene in Esson's play, was regarded by Leslie Rees as "too reminiscent of the stock La Boheme passing of a tubercular heroine".³

Moreover, since the plays of the Irish and Australian dramatists were written by men who believed in naturalism, they all aim to be realistic, their characters all speak in their natural idiom, Irish or Australian, and

they are written from the viewpoint of ordinary, working people, not aristocrats or people in important positions in life.

There are, perhaps, similarities in the structure of some of the plays of Synge and Esson. L.Rees quotes Virginia Kirby-Smith's suggestion that:

The Battler was strongly influenced by J.M.Synge's character-comedy, The Playboy of the Western World, both plays being about a quiet, settled community momentarily disturbed by the advent of an outsider.⁴

Furthermore, in Synge's other plays, The Shadow of the Glen and The Well of the Saints, it is the coming of an outsider which upsets the way of life of a group of people. The same interpretation could be applied to Mother and Son where Emma intrudes on life at the Lind farm or even The Drovers where the actions of the newcomer, the jackaroo, cause the stampede which leads to Briglow Bill's death, unsettling the way of life of the drovers. Such an interpretation could also be put on Bartholomew Fair in which Zeal-of-the-land Busy visits the fair. It can also, as Leslie Rees admits, apply to "a whole regiment of comedies".⁵

Again, there are incidents in Esson's plays which are somewhat similar to those in some Irish plays. The Bulletin reviewer of 14 June 1923 saw such a likeness in Mother and Son:

The giddy lady accompanied by Harry, blows into the Lind residence when the old man is dying placidly in the corner; and hereabouts there is a suggestion of the Irish literary drama in the comparative neglect of the approaching corpse for the unexpected scandal of a wayside amour that loiters under the family roof.

Probably the scene recalled to him Synge's The Shadow of the Glen (1904) in which the wife and her male visitor became more and more friendly while the husband is supposedly lying dead in the house. Actually, in Esson's play the dying father is receiving plenty of attention and the interruption to it is quite brief. Another similarity is that the mother in Mother and Son and in Synge's Riders to the Sea, is possessed of "second sight"; each mother foresees the death of her only son still living at home.

Other comparisons can be made. The Drovers could be likened to Riders to the Sea since the sea is, in fact, the destroyer in Synge's play, just as another natural phenomenon, the outback, is, in Esson's play. The keening of the Irish mother, Maurya, could be compared to the lament of the aboriginal, Pidgeon, over Briglow Bill's body. Mother and Son and Riders to the Sea each has an atmosphere of storm and water. Vance Palmer believed that "what Synge was seeking in his plays was the wild poetry of natural scenes and simple people".⁷ Riders to the Sea is the play in which he had the most success. Esson, too, achieved these qualities to some extent in Mother and Son - and even more so in The Drovers. The similarities in incident, character and atmosphere, however, are not very specific or significant. There are only analogies.

Undoubtedly Esson did keep in mind the advice given to him by the Irish dramatists as, for instance, when he wrote to the Bulletin of 14 April 1910 about "The Menace of Sanity in Literature" (Red Page):

I remember the late J.M.Synge, that most original Irish dramatist, saying on this very point, when told of the loneliness of the Bush and the folk who often went mad there, 'Are they not interesting when they go mad'. He meant no more than that those people have less common thoughts and see flashes of the world in more vivid colours than their more prosaic fellows.

Perhaps Esson was thinking of Synge's words when he wrote Mother and Son in which Harry, the son, is regarded as "different from the ordinary run" by his parents and friends.⁸ Emma says of him, "I'm sure he has a streak of something but it's no good to him" (p.195). Harry prefers the loneliness of the Wimmera bush to the chores of the farm, as he explains:

It's strange out there on the lonely lakes, with the reeds swishing, and the water lilies, and the moon rising over the dull, grey sheets of water ... It's music to me. I can't explain it but I want to play the fiddle. (pp.165-166)

Furthermore, Esson could have been having some quiet amusement with Synge's statement when Rouser in The Battler teases the English migrant who is frightened because she sees "queer creatures" passing their farm at night:

There's only one mad bloke around here. He's the butcher boy. I've heard him preaching to the pigs and singing to the trees, yes, and one day I heard him reading the burial service over a slaughtered bullock. (Act I, p.7)

Undoubtedly Esson was following Yeats' advice that "some little comedies of country life should be written first"⁹ when he decided to begin the Pioneer productions with The Battler.

Nevertheless, Esson did not always act on Yeats' advice. Although Esson told Palmer that Yeats suggested a change in the action of The Woman Tamer, there

is no evidence that any alterations were made. Esson wrote:

The only adverse criticism made was that near the end of The Woman Tamer, the woman might have pretended to relax to make the end more surprising. He said he thought the element of surprise₁₀ was necessary in comedy but not in tragedy.

Thus, although Esson owed much of his inspiration to the Abbey playwrights, any influence they had on his actual plays was of a very general nature only.

Although Esson despised the work of G.B.Shaw, he clearly knew it as demonstrated by his political satire, The Time is Not Yet Ripe. One way in which Esson's work does resemble that of Shaw is in the way the characters of each playwright are continually putting forward a point of view, explaining and justifying themselves.

Esson probably knew some of Eugene O'Neill's work when the Pioneer Club held a dramatic reading of Anna Christie in October 1923. It could be that this influenced him in the writing of The Bride of Gospel Place in which "the bride" leads a somewhat similar life to O'Neill's character. Later, Palmer reports of Esson when he had become too ill to write in 1937:

He had a great admiration for Eugene O'Neill and followed his development from Anna Christie to Mourning Becomes Electra with intense interest.

As with the Abbey playwrights, any influence which Shaw and O'Neill exerted on Esson was not very noticeable.

It can also be said that the influence of other Australian writers on Esson's work is of the same general kind. Hilda Esson has described in the Introduction to

The Southern Cross and Other Plays how The Bride of Gospel Place and The Woman Tamer owe their conception to the period when:

Louis and Will Dyson found inspiration in the dark byways of city life for their sketches in the Lone Hand. It was completed much later when Louis re-visited their old haunts with Robert Dower, later Superintendent of the C.I.B., who not only acted as guide, but contributed a wealth of stories and character sketches culled from his long association and sympathy with these people. (p.xii)

These plays stem from a long line in Australian literature which reaches from the convict stories of Price Warung (1892-1896), Lawson's Arvie Aspinall stories (1896), E.Dyson's Fact'ry 'Ands (1906) and on to The Sentimental Bloke (1915), The One Day of the Year (1955) and other contemporary plays written in the vernacular about city life. They all demonstrate the manners and customs of those who have been the victims of society and unjust or misdirected authority - convicts, poor people and those living on the borders of law and order. Many of these people display an attitude of acceptance of a way of life from which they have no way of escaping. Most of these authors show understanding of these low-life characters, suggesting even that they are more sinned against than sinning, although the writer may find amusement in their behaviour. C.J.Dennis may have seen The Woman Tamer when it was first performed in 1910. Smithy the Liar, Chopsey's friend in Esson's play, is a "rabbito" just as Ginger Mick is, the friend of the "bloke". The latter had spent time in gaol for attacking a policeman, just as Bongo has in The Woman Tamer and in each play it is considered acceptable and even praiseworthy to have "stoused a rozzer"¹² (hit a policeman). Although Esson despised "Dennis' sentimentalities"¹³

the two writers do have certain qualities in common. Critics have found sentimentality in The Bride of Gospel Place. Marie Prerauer, in her article, "A Stir Up and why not!" in the Sunday Telegraph of 24 March 1974 referred to its "sentimental death-bed hospital scene" (p.77). Furthermore, Garrie Hutchinson claimed that in Rodney Fisher's production of Esson's play at the Arts Theatre, Adelaide, on 9 March 1974 "the sentimentality" was "beautifully controlled and stylised".¹⁴ A letter I received from Rodney Fisher, dated 3 March 1975, calls attention to the "unselfconsciousness" which is typical of some writing of the first two decades of twentieth century Australian literature:

My production was totally naturalistic in every way. The actors began rehearsal by viewing films such as the first talkie On Our Selection and Raymond Longford's The Sentimental Bloke which went a long way, I felt, to inspire the actors to a very real understanding of the play and the ability to capture the unselfconsciousness of the period.¹⁵

Looking back from the 1970s it is easier to see the "unself-consciousness" which such literature as that of Dennis and Esson had in common.

Again, Esson's descriptions of the goldfields in The Battler bear expected resemblances to other Australian stories about gold; there are windlasses and puddlers and fossickers both white and Chinese. There are also the belief in luck and "the dream of vast wealth got without exertion".¹⁶ Unlike other writers of the time, especially the novelist, H.H. Richardson, Esson is not concerned with "the tragedy of disappointed hopes suffered by those who succumbed to the 'unholy hunger'". He did not read The Fortunes of Richard Mahony until December 1926 when he praised it in a letter to Palmer as "honest, well-written and authentic".¹⁸

E.Dyson, too, is more concerned than Esson with the hardships and the failures of mining. The cynical humour which he displays in such stories as "The Golden Shanty", "A Visit to Scrubby Gully" and "A Zealot in Labour", all published in Below and On Top (1898) is absent from Esson's work. Later, when Esson was writing The Southern Cross, he informed Palmer, "I've forgotten Dyson's Roaring Forties but I'll try to get hold of it".¹⁹ Undoubtedly he meant In the Roaring Fifties (published in Melbourne 1906). Esson had shown his acquaintance with Dyson's work in a letter he wrote to Leon Brodzky in 1907:

Don't disparage Dyson. He is a sound worker who has always upheld the dignity of the craft ... He has a keen, quick, cute intellect, a sense of humour and fantasy also,²⁰ and he always constructs and writes soundly.

Another Australian who had written a novel about mining which Esson had read was R.Boldrewood. Esson refers to The Miner's Right in his letter to Palmer on 20 June 1921:

I found a great incident in Boldrewood - it has little connection with his novel, The Miner's Right, and seems to me to be true to life.²¹ I could do that, I think, if I had permission.

The Battler, however, is not based on any incident in Boldrewood's work.

Again, there are resemblances in the attitudes shown by characters in the works of Esson and E.Dyson towards the Chinese who had come to Australian goldfields. In The Drovers, the cook complains about having "a blanky chow for an offsider". "I'll make the yellow heathen move," he declares.²² Mick in The Battler is tolerant enough about their presence. Clara and Rouser, however, are not in favour of integration. Rouser tells of a "horrible murder

down Ironbark Gully":

You know her - the sea captain's daughter, her who married the blooming Quang when her husband died. Well, last night they got quarrelling and she stuck a knife into the Quang, and when the trooper broke in, there he was in a pool of blood and she was lying on the floor in the horrors. (Act II, p.29)

Clara adds, "A nice thing she was, drinking brandy and marrying a Chinaman" (p.30). Dyson's short story, Mr and Mrs Sin Fat, published in Below and On Top,²³ tells a somewhat similar story about a Chinese immigrant and his white wife. In The Golden Shanty and In the Roaring Fifties there is usually a kind of grumbling tolerance of the Chinese.

Esson had published some articles for the Lone Hand on China: "The Asiatic Menace - the Awakening of the Dragon"²⁵ and "The Asiatic Menace - Celestial Politics"²⁶ each of which was written "from Shanghai".

Another noticeable similarity in Esson's plays and in the work of other Australian writers of the same period is the frequent use of the bush shanty as a centre of action or as a meeting place. In the manuscript in the Campbell Howard Collection, Armidale, the title of The Battler is The Diggers' Rest (The Battler). It was on the verandah of this shanty that the action took place. Esson describes it as "a big, old-fashioned ramshackle shanty" with a general store attached, and a fowl yard at the back. The Australasian referred to it as a "general store and pub"²⁷. The shanty or "pub" is used as the stage setting for other Pioneer plays - for Palmer's A Happy Family and for Frank Brown's Mates. In his play Rebel Smith, Brodney used a "pub" in a small country

town as the setting.

Palmer's novels, The Shanty Keeper's Daughter, 1920 and The Boss of Killara, 1922 (each published by the N.S.W. Bookstall), had a shanty in each which is central to the action. Dyson, too, had used a shanty in this way in short stories such as "The Golden Shanty" and "Hebe of Grass-tree" (Below and on Top, 1898). In Lawson's short stories it is often the place where the bush worker loses his money as in "Poisonous Jimmy Gets Left" and "The Shanty Keeper's Wife". Lawson's shanty-keepers are usually surly, money-grabbing people unlike those of Esson.

As it is a convenient meeting place for people living on farms, or itinerant workers, the shanty is a useful stage setting where characters can meet and interact. Enemies meet there, as in A Happy Family, as well as friends. It is often the centre of love life since it supplies feminine characters as in Mates or The Shanty-Keeper's Daughter or Hebe of Grasstree. Humble and important people mingle there, on quite egalitarian terms. The coach usually stops there. In A Happy Family, the shanty keeper works for the coach company. Information can be communicated easily in a place where all kinds of people meet. In The Battler, it is the place where Watty woos Clara, where the "battler" returns to meet again his old sweetheart, Kitty Smith, and where Rouser does the harder work while admiring Clara from a distance. To it comes Mick to buy his stores and talk to Andrew. Mrs Jones the English migrant comes there to meet the coach to get mail from "home". Sam, the bullock driver, arrives to borrow a saw.

While in Mother and Son the shanty is a place

of sin and temptation, where the son meets his "light-of-love" and spends his money unwisely, in The Battler it is a pleasant, friendly place. Its egalitarian atmosphere is only briefly disturbed by the arrival of commerce and riches.

In the city, a somewhat similar effect is gained by using a tea-room as the setting in The Bishop and the Buns and a cafe in The Bride of Gospel Place.

Furthermore, the use of a horse accident as a means of initiating or forwarding action is found on several occasions in the work of Palmer and Esson. The son in Esson's Mother and Son, the son in Palmer's The Black Horse and Briglow in The Drovers all die because their horses throw them. It could be that The Drovers was the first play written in the repertoire of the Pioneers to have a horse accident in it, since Esson was writing it in London in 1919.³⁰ There was a horse accident, again at the beginning of Palmer's novel The Boss of Killara (1922) although no death results. The Black Horse was written in 1922. (In Nettie's diary of 12 January 1923 is written, "Vance finished 'Black Horse' and read it ...".) In The Drovers the accident is the opening incident from which all the action arises. In The Black Horse it is the concluding incident, and also in Mother and Son where it is unexpected and artificial. Lawson's and E.Dyson's characters do not ride spirited horses, probably because they are less prosperous than those of the Pioneer playwrights.

The only other notable similarity is that there is a family feud in A Happy Family and in Mother and Son, used on each occasion to enliven the action; it is basic to the structure of Palmer's play whereas it is only incidental

in Esson's drama. Palmer uses a similar feud between a land-owner who has prospered and one who has not, in The Shanty Keeper's Daughter.

Another Australian author whose work Esson had read was Joseph Furphy. Esson told Palmer that he could "not regard Such is Life as a literary work" although "it was well worth preserving for its matter".³¹ Esson and Furphy share qualities which are common to other writers of their times - a "temper democratic and (a) bias Australian" and a particular interest in ordinary, working country people who usually, also, display a resigned attitude to life. There are other similarities. Each author demonstrates a knowledge of national types. In The Battler Andrew is a Scot, Mrs Jones a "Pommie" and Ogilvie a "Geordie" and in Mother and Son Mr Lind is Norwegian while in Such is Life there are, among others, Folkstone and Willoughby who are types of English gentlemen and Terrible Tommy, the Scot. Furthermore, each author possessed an interest in the "bushman's yarn". "Terrible Mick's" long stories in The Battler resemble the yarns of Furphy's bullock drovers around their camp fires.

Nevertheless, with so many authors writing realistically about life in mining areas and in the bush, such comparisons as have been made are analogies rather than influences.

LOUIS ESSON AND HENRY LAWSON

As has already been noted, Esson's use of naturalism, his belief in the importance of "the Common man" and his opinion that people who live in rural areas are the true national types, place him in the Lawson tradition in Australia, as well as in that of the Irish playwrights of the turn of the century. Comparisons of the work of Esson and Lawson are of theme, attitudes and data rather than structure, since each writes in a different medium.

A.A. Phillips claimed when writing "The Democratic Theme" that in it:

The effect of the literature of the nineties and of Lawson in particular can be strongly felt in the work of such writers as Prichard ... Palmer and others.³⁵

Esson would be one writer who illustrates this claim. In the final scene of The Battler, Mick the old fossicker who had been dismissed to the kitchen in Act II, is invited along with Rouser the rouseabout to join the shanty-owners for tea and a game of cards (p.50). Furthermore, Mrs Lind in Mother and Son spends some time pointing out to the son of the rich squatter that his family had once been the equal of hers:

Now look here, Jim. I remember when your father started, and many's the time he's had help from us. But when the drought came, he went against us and bought Peter out. (Act I, p.161)

Esson may, however, have been reading into Lawson's work something which was not there, when he wrote to Palmer on 23 November 1925:

In the early days we looked to the bushworkers, shearers and others as the men most likely to represent the national spirit. Lawson always looked to these men as the real Australians. But now they seem to have become little cockies ...³⁴

Certainly Lawson writes about itinerant workers but many of his characters are or have been "little cockies" - notably Joe Wilson in the series of short stories in Joe Wilson and His Mates (Sydney, 1902). They were often quite happy in this occupation.

Furthermore, Lawson does not seem particularly interested in depicting any "national spirit", whatever Esson meant by that. Perhaps he was thinking of mateship and endurance, these being the attitudes most usually exhibited by Lawson's characters. Esson himself is particularly concerned with characters possessing these qualities although he tends to single them out for our admiration whereas Lawson does not show us many of his characters as romantically heroic. Briglow Bill in The Drovers is heroic and larger than life. Mrs Spicer in Water Them Geraniums and the drover's wife in the story of that name owe their appeal to the commonplace, every-day nature of their existence, in which their courage and endurance stand out. Esson does not, moreover, possess that "insecurely triumphant survival of tenderness through endurance" (to use the words of A.A. Phillips in "Lawson Revisited")³⁵ which suffuses these stories of Lawson. Nor does Esson possess Lawson's "resigned and sardonic outlook"³⁶ which pulls his stories back from the edge of sentimentality. Of course, Lawson's use of a narrator in the short story enables him to direct his reader's attitudes more easily than Esson can with his conventional, naturalistic three-act or one-act plays.

Lawson seems to expect his readers to accept people as human beings with all their weaknesses and to be resigned, as they are, to the tragedy and comedy of the human condition. Of Lawson's male characters in Joe Wilson's Mates³⁷ Joe was an alcoholic who settled on a farm because his wife knew he would not keep sober in the city ("Water Them Geraniums", p.53), Bob Baker in "Telling Mrs Baker" was an ex-squatter who had squandered his money (p.161), Jack in "His Brother's Keeper" was an alcoholic who was likely to leave his wife with no money (p.259) and Douglas in "Lord Douglas" has deserted his wife. (p.394). Women in Lawson's stories are usually the victims of their husband's weaknesses. Mrs Baker in "Telling Mrs Baker" and Mrs Spicer in "Water Them Geraniums" are left to bring up their families without money when their husbands disappear. As A.A.Phillips wrote:

His chosen subjects are the men of the roads, rejects from an unjust society, the slum's victims, the selectors struggling thin lipped against a hostile nature ... their wives facing slow spiritual destruction through hardship and loneliness.³⁹

Phillips regards many of Lawson's male characters as suffering from "a guilty past" which they bear "with a growth in tenderness".

In The Battler, Esson has a gallery of bush characters which includes a rouseabout, a bullock driver, a shanty owner, the wife of a small farmer and a fossicker who is also a swagman. All of these could belong to the Lawson tradition. They are not, however, "rejects" of society nor are they struggling hard "against a hostile nature" nor do they suffer from "the burden of an ironic and painful past".⁴⁰ Indeed they are happy, well-adjusted

people. True, they do accept whatever happens to them with admirable stoicism, but even after the gold mine peters out, not one of them is in danger of starvation or loneliness. Furthermore, Esson's attitude, in contrast to that of Lawson, is genial and optimistic. He seems to like and respect his characters. The shanty-keeper, Mrs Smith, and her son, Watty, are on good terms with all their customers. They are neither like the grasping shanty owners of most of Lawson's stories nor the over-generous one who has "the bailiff in" in "A Bush Publican's Lament" (Joe Wilson's Mates, p.425-428). "Terrible Mick", the fossicker, admits that he cannot settle. As Mrs Smith says, "He's always knocking about the country with his old billy" (Act II, p.21). He knows, however, that there will always be "a good meal, a good drink and a hearty welcome" (Ibid.) at the shanty. Although he was "a swell as a young fellow" and "used to ride a fifty guinea nag and sport a gold-mounted riding whip", he "could never keep anything" (Ibid.). His feckless life style resembles that of Wilson, Steelman and Mitchell, yet Mick has no guilty feelings about his past and no thoughts of insecurity. Even Geordie Ogilvie, "the battler" who loses one fortune in the east at the end of the play but almost immediately hears that he has made another one "in the west", never really suffers, although he shows a praiseworthy fortitude at the news of his loss:

"I've been through the mill and I've had my
fun, too. I took it as I went along.
(Act III, p.44)

Lawson's characters are not without regret. As the narrator declares in "Telling Mrs Baker":

I once heard the chaps singing that I was a jolly good fellow when I was leaving a place ... but all the same I wished I had half the money I'd lent them and spent on them and I wished I'd used the time I'd wasted to be a jolly good fellow.
(Joe Wilson's Mates, p.161)

Although Ogilvie's wife "was always trying to thwart him", (Act II, p.32) he has no guilty feelings about his treatment of her. He accepts the fact that he has no control over his own destiny, making no effort to exert any:

I'm a prospector, Kitty, and east or west,
bush or desert, I've got to follow the gold
(Act II, p.20),

he tells Mrs.Smith. Lawson's characters usually have given up trying to control their own destinies, by the time the reader meets them but some of them, Joe Wilson in particular, had tried in the past. Unlike Lawson's prospectors, who are never seen in an aura of romance, to "Terrible Mick" and Mrs Smith and to the audience, Ogilvie is a romantic figure:

Many a fortune he made and threw away. But he
would always get his way in the end.

He was that strong, too. Once I seen him
lift a twelve stone man on a shovel and hold him
straight out ... like that ... You don't see men
like that nowadays. (Act I, p.10)

None of Lawson's goldminers ever makes a fortune. Dave Regan and Andy Page do manage to keep themselves by continuous hard work as in "The Golden Graveyard" (Joe Wilson's Mates, pp.93-103) but they are figures of fun, not romance. They are battlers in the real sense of the word.

A closer consideration of other characters in The Battler demonstrates how they differ from similar characters in Lawson's stories. For example, Billy the Rouseabout (Rouser) resembles those of Lawson's characters who wish to settle on their own piece of land, as Joe Wilson did in "Water

Them Geraniums" (op.cit., p.48). Rouser declares:

Gold's a gamble. Give me the land. Farming's slow but it's safe. I've got my eye on a little piece of ground about forty acres - it would grow lucerne - down by the creek. A man could make a living with a few cows and pigs. (Act II, p.25)

Rouser's father, however, certainly belongs to the Lawson tradition. When asked where he is, Rouser replies, "He'll be on the booze. As soon as he gets a few quid in his pocket, he's up the wattles" (Ibid.). Sam is like Joe Wilson when he was first married. He has reformed to please his wife. Previously he had spent his time "drinking, gambling and losing his money" (Act III, p.27.) . Sam's reform, however, appears to be permanent. He is only lured by the gold long enough to sell his shares and buy a new bullock team in order to persuade his wife to come back to him. Mrs. Jones, the English immigrant who with her husband has taken up land is continually complaining about the grass, the flies, the mosquitoes, the rabbits and the snakes (Act I, p.18) but she is making a living on the farm.

Esson, then, in The Battler shows none of Lawson's pessimism. Since there were undoubtedly some happy, prosperous people living in the bush in the early twentieth century, Esson's characters are in this sense realistic enough although they are not very complex.

The same could be true of old Tom, the itinerant bush worker in Mother and Son. He is a wanderer by choice who possesses "no land, no family, no cares" (p.153). He declares:

I've been outback into the real bush, far away from your little cockie towns and farms ... It's free there and you go where you like, and think your own thoughts and you live your own life ... just like the Arabs in the desert. (Ibid.)

Tom, who reads the Koran, is more conscious of his own attitudes to life than any of Lawson's characters and more articulate about them. All of Esson's bush characters are like this. Tom, like Briglow Bill in The Drovers is happy to die under a tree in the outback.

Briglow Bill is probably Esson's idea of the kind of character that Lawson would have "looked to as most likely to represent the national spirit". He is like many of Lawson's characters in his way of life:

I've lived my life, careless and free, looking after my work when I was at it, and splashing my cheque up like a good one when I struck civilization (The Drovers, p.15)

Yet he is a nobler character than any bushman in Lawson's or Dyson's short stories or in any other Pioneer play:

I've lived hard, droving and horsebreaking, station work and overlanding, the hard life of the bush, but there's nothing better, and death's come quick before I'm played out - it's the way I wanted. (Ibid.)

Esson's play undoubtedly contributed to the myth of the strong, stoic, heroic bushman, the myth which is questioned in Ray Lawler's Summer of the Seventeenth Doll (1955) and reaffirmed in the more contemporary play, Jack Hibberd's A Stretch of the Imagination (Currency Press, Sydney, 1972-3). In Esson's other bush plays, acceptance without complaint of the inevitable is seen as a virtue; in The Drovers it acquires a kind of spiritual value and is regarded as heroism. This attitude which is not present in any previous Australian

writer is Esson's contribution to the bush ethos.

The characters in Mother and Son are closer in attitudes and life-styles to Lawson's characters than those in any other Esson play (except perhaps Dead Timber which the Pioneers did not produce). It makes an interesting comparison to Water Them Geraniums. In each story there is a careworn mother living on the edge of poverty, trying to run a farm. Mrs Lind's husband in Esson's play is an invalid who dies, while Mrs Spicer's husband is rarely at home. Each has a son who deserts his mother, leaving her all the work and responsibility. Mrs Lind's son, Harry, steals a sheep; Mrs Spicer's steals a horse. Each is saved from gaol. Peggy, the girl who wants to marry Harry and is willing to "look after the house and milk the cows and do the cooking" while he goes "fishing and shooting" (p.167) could become, in a few years, worn out and disillusioned like Mrs Spicer.

Mother and Son has previously been compared to Synge's plays. Possibly the resemblances amongst the characters and incidents of Lawson's stories, Synge's plays and Esson's plays, result from the fact that each author is writing about poor country people living at much the same time. Lawson's stories were published a decade or so before Synge's plays. Characters such as the blind couple in The Well of the Saints who do not wish to lose their affliction and then have to work hard instead of "sitting blind hearing a soft wind"⁴² are not unlike some of Lawson's itinerants such as Mitchell who left home when his parents complained that he should go to work ("On the Edge of the Plain", While

the Billy Boils, p.60). The tinker woman who wants to become respectable by being married by the priest, in The Tinker's Wedding can be likened to Mrs Spicer who puts on her old patched tablecloth when she sees visitors coming, and takes pride in her geraniums. Nora in The Shadow of the Glen tires of the loneliness and monotony of farm life just as so many of Lawson's women characters do. The tricks the tinkers play to deceive the priest have their counterpart in Mitchell's deception of the squatter in "Mitchell: A Character Sketch" (While the Billy Boils, pp.137-139). Many other parallels can be found.

Synge's work lacks Lawson's attitude of sardonic understatement and what H.Heseltine has called "that sense of the horror of sheer existence" which he finds "deeply located in Lawson's imagination"⁴³. These qualities, moreover, are also absent from Esson's plays. Yet Synge and Esson share that power to ennoble ordinary human beings. Lawson's narrator is usually half apologetic about his characters and their faults. Synge makes his audience feel that the tinkers and the blind beggars have dignity and a point of view which must be considered. Nora who leaves her husband in The Shadow of the Glen is not an apologetic figure. Synge's women speak out for themselves and are not afraid to rebel. Lawson's women characters usually suffer passively from the follies of their men folk. Esson's women characters are usually in control. Mrs Smith and Clara run the shanty in The Battler. They direct the male characters. The mother in Mother and Son does not accept her situation passively. Emma, the "bad woman", has dignity. This is probably one way

in which Esson has brought together the Irish and the Australian traditions. Esson's ability to give his characters dignity and even nobility is highlighted in the varying concepts of mateship put forward by Esson and Lawson. In "A Sketch of Mateship" Lawson's narrator describes how Bill gambles away the eight pounds he received for the sale of Jim's horse. Jim lends him more money. The story concludes:

Now it strikes me that if this had happened in a civilized country (like England) Bill would have Jim arrested and jailed for larceny ... And would Bill or Jim or the world have been any better for it? (Joe Wilson's Mates, p.422)

Mateship for Lawson is forgiving your mate even if he robs or disappoints you. Esson's idea of mateship is more positive. The Boss in The Drovers says to Briglow:

You've always done your share, Briglow, and a lot extra. I'll never find another mate like you.

Mateship here is working hard together. It is a more dignified and noble concept than that of Lawson.

In the same way, Esson's characters seem to be more at home, more dignified in their environment. Lawson's characters appear to dislike the bush. The description of the landscape in the second paragraph of "The Drover's Wife" is typical of his work:

Bush all round - bush with no horizon, for the country is flat. No ranges in the distance. The bush consists of stunted, rotten, native apple trees. No undergrowth. Nothing to relieve the eye save the darker green of a few sheoaks which are sighing above the narrow almost waterless creek. (While the Billy Boils, p.107)

There are similar images of desolation and hopelessness in

the picture of the landscape, in "In a Wet Season":

Sky like a wet, grey blanket; plains like dead seas, save for the tufts of coarse grass sticking up out of the water; scrub indescribably dismal - everything damp, dark and unspeakably dreary. (p.132)

Esson's settings range from the very dry outback of The Drovers to the well-watered countryside of the Wimmera in Mother and Son and the "picturesque place" of The Battler "with hills and gullies all round and a merry little creek" (Act I, Scene I, p.1). His characters like their environment. Esson reproduced the atmosphere of the Wimmera so successfully that a critic of Mother and Son wrote in the Bulletin on 19 July 1946 when reviewing The Southern Cross and Other Plays published by Hilda Esson after Louis' death:

"Mother and Son" is the best play in the volume but one does not feel that Louis Esson was ever happy with it, that he ever felt free to write and say what he liked except in one charming scene where he brings in a couple of excited bush kids ... There's a lilt, a lyricism, a freedom about this little scene that is not to be found anywhere else in The Southern Cross. It reminds me of the poetry of Shaw Nielson. (Red Page)

The reviewer was referring to the scene in which Ted and Peggy describe how they caught a hive of bees:

Peggy: The scrub was that thick, it closed all around you, and you were tripped up by the supple-jack, and you couldn't see the sun.

Ted: I had to keep calling out to see where Peggy was.

Peggy: I seen a mob of emus.

Ted: I seen a lot of wild pigs. ...

Peggy: We were that careful ... we never broke the comb or drowned the bees or nothing ...

Ted: I found the bee-tree.

Peggy: Well, if you did, I found the queen ... I put my finger in the comb, and there she was trying to hide in the hollow of the tree. She was the

last of the whole swarm; but I spotted her,
the beauty ...

Ted: You could sniff the honey half a mile off ...

(Act I, p.156)

Hilda Esson in the Introduction to the Southern Cross and Other Plays claims that Mother and Son "breathes the air of the bush, of blossoming gums and wild honey and at least speaks in the authentic voice of the author". (p.xii) .

Another example of how Esson brought two traditions together and interpreted one in terms of the other is the way in which water is associated with destruction in his bush plays. In Mother and Son it is during a storm that the father dies and Harry returns with Emma, thus destroying his mother's hopes that he would marry Peggy and settle down. At the end of the play Harry dies from a fall from his horse while trying to jump the creek. The cattle in The Drovers are ready to stampede because they can smell the waterhole which only contains enough water for half of them to have a drink. One possible explanation of this could be that in Synge's plays water is destructive, especially in Riders to the Sea which Esson knew well. The action in The Shadow of the Glen takes place on a "wild night" and there is a storm in Deirdre of the Sorrows. Esson, it will be remembered, had seen the first two plays while in Dublin in 1904. His variations in the attitudes and behaviour of the bush characters which Lawson and he both wrote about helped to build up and modify the Lawson tradition.

iii

THE BATTLER (THE DIGGERS' REST)

Esson's description of the theme of The Battler was contained in his letter to Brodney written after it had been performed:

The idea is simply that an old fossicking village, that had a roaring past, is stirred to life by the appearance of the battler, who was a great man 40 years before. He finds again an old mine, there is a brief flare up and then a collapse. The past can never be repeated. For instead of the new life being like the old, it is rather hard and commercial, and when the reef is lost, there is a feeling of relief that the little village can go on its simple agricultural way. (Letter post-marked "9 Oct., 1922".)

Life at the shanty does become "rather hard and commercial" after the rediscovery of gold. This theme is carried out chidfly through the actions of Clara. Although newly married to Watty, she no longer laughs at his jokes. Having taken over the management of the shanty, she continually urges her husband and Rouser to work more quickly. She sends Mick round to the kitchen to eat whereas he had formerly dined with the shanty-owners. She suggests that Mick get the old age pension, and she decides to buy more expensive furniture if the gold shares continue to rise. When the gold peters out, she changes back to her earlier relaxed manner, admitting "It was a bit upsetting. My nerves were all on edge" (Act III, p.59). Esson is not concerned with moral judgements about gambling or gold fever. Sam, the bullock driver, sells his shares out at a profit with which he buys a new bullock team. Esson's theme is that a simple, relaxed agricultural

way of life is more comfortable and leads to more happiness than commercialism and riches.

Nevertheless his claim that "the past can never be repeated" and that "the new life is not like the old" seems to indicate that when the country surrounding the Diggers' Rest was experiencing a gold rush, life there was not "hard and commercial". This is not demonstrated by the play. Although Geordie Ogilvie reminisces romantically about "plenty of gold and cock-fighting and dancing girls in every corner salon" (Act I, p.16), Mrs Smith recalls the practical side of life during the gold rush:

The diggers stretched halfway across the road here, waiting their turn for a drink. Do you know I used to take £140 across the bar on a Saturday night ... And sometimes I would be busy all day, standing at that window there, buying gold. (Act II, p.19)

A story which Mick tells also casts suspicion on Esson's assumption that the old life was not commercial:

I remember a good story when me and young Geordie Ogilvie were working together in White Horse Gully ... Once we were partners, and were just cleaning up our claim before we left it. Well, one evening, when it was getting late, Geordie was still working down the hole while I was waiting on top. "Hurry up, Geordie," sez I, "I want to get home for my tea." "Hold on!" he calls back, "I've struck a patch. Do you think I'm going to knock off, when I'm picking up these little shining bits like tatties!" With that he kept throwing up a heap o' little golden nuggets. "I don't care," sez I, "I can't wait. Are you coming?" "No, I'm not" sez he. "Then", sez I, "I'll sell the blarsted hole." A crowd of diggers were gathered round by this time, and a couple of new chums yelled out what would I take for it. "£50!" "Right!" they said and handed over the money. "Come now, Geordie" I cried, "I've sold the hole." Geordie came up and started to swear, and the new chums hopped down the hole. They worked there for a fortnight, and do you know, Andy, they never found a speck ... (Act I, p.3)

Perhaps Mick's description of the changes in mining methods

explains what Esson meant. On his return from his wanderings Mick tells Rouser:

I like fossicking around with my old tin dish but mining nowadays is different. They chips a bit o' the reef and crushes it in the dolly pot. It's all machinery and noise and bustle, and hard work for regular wages. That don't suit me. I like to be my own boss and knock off whenever I feel inclined.
(Act III, p.35)

It is the mechanization of mining which makes the "new life" "rather hard and commercial".

Another central concern of the play is the belief in luck or fate, this usually being equated with what the land gives you, a belief which is also present in Esson's other bush plays. Mick's story about "the two old mates who went prospecting together" embodies this central issue. One prospector who was lazy stopped to rest but his partner tramped on, unsuccessful in his attempts to find gold. The lazy one while absent-mindedly "pulling up the grass" found a nest of gold nuggets. (Act II, p.21) Again, this belief can be seen in Andrew's frequent comments; "I daurna' complain. It might be waur", (Act I, p.2) he tells Mick. "I hae me meat and a guid bed, and a roof abin me heid" and "I'm ouer auld tae fash about it", (Act III, p.47) he informs Clara when he is told that there is no more gold in the reef. Indeed the belief in taking whatever fate sends is also illustrated in the way all the characters except the land agent accept with little complaint the failure of the mine. The themes of anticommercialism and luck are closely integrated.

Esson does not seem to have been particularly conscious of drama as conflict. His wife reported in the Introduction to The Southern Cross and Other Plays that he once wrote in his diary:

I find I have little interest in events. I like the lyric and dramatic, a vivid impression, a twist of thought, a scene, a crisis, a glimpse of beauty. (p.xvi)

Although "twist" and "crisis" imply conflict, yet an examination of The Battler will show that Esson was apparently aiming as much to evoke an atmosphere as to present his audience with a well-constructed story. Indeed, when writing to Brodney in the letter postmarked "9 Oct." he described The Battler as a play depending on "character and atmosphere".

Esson would not have agreed with the claim of H.G.Kippax in the Introduction to Three Australian Plays:

All drama derives from conflict: the Australian realist drama had to project an antagonist which was not human - the country and its climate. Realistic drama makes much of scene - but what stage could hold the Australian bush and plains?⁴⁴

The land in Esson's plays is usually that which gives men riches or takes them away either by mining or farming or in some other way. As it gives without reason, and not necessarily to those who deserve its gifts, it does not interact fully with the characters. Esson was not aware of the land as an antagonist. To him it was something to be accepted - something that was always there.

The structure of The Battler is conventional to the extent that it does have an exposition, rising action, falling action and a denouement, yet there is another structure superimposed. This is made up of a contrast of moods. In most of the first act there is an atmosphere of peace and relaxation; in the second most of the images are of excitement and action while towards the end the feeling of relaxation returns. This structure is symmetrical in its relaxation - activity - relaxation pattern.

The play opens with "terrible Mick" and Andrew, two old prospectors, talking "on the pub verandah" (as Esson told Brodney in his letter postmarked "9 Oct. 1922".) The first words of the dialogue, "Summer dust's coming", indicate that the weather is contributing to the peace and slowness of the atmosphere. Action is retarded because Mick must repeat most of what he says since Andrew is hard of hearing. The two old men agree that "it's quiet here the noo". Conroy, the estate agent who is the next character to enter, complains about the lack of progress:

No sign of the coach - late as usual. This is a God-forsaken hole, no business, no progress, no enterprise. People are tired, too tired to pay their rents. (Act I, p.2)

Sam, who comes next, borrows a saw which he then proceeds to sharpen, very slowly, for the rest of the scene. Watty, the son of the proprietress, whittles during Mick's long yarn. Billy the Rouser is accused of "not overexerting" himself. As he leaves to go to the stables, he turns and says:

This place is pretty slow. They only have a dance once a month, and then some of 'em don't turn up. (Act I, p.9)

This first scene, moreover, is quite a competent exposition. Sam's long yarn and Mrs Smith's reminiscences about the early days of the goldrush both mention Geordie Ogilvie, "the battler", thus raising the audience's expectation about him. There are also indications of the development of a love story with the Watty - Clara - Rouser situation.

After nine typewritten pages of exposition, enlivened with some gentle humour in dialogue and characterization, the rising action begins with Rouser's announcement of the coming of the old hawker who turns out to be Geordie

himself. This scene is also the beginning of the period of activity which contrasts with the previous period of relaxation. The first act ends with Mick and Mrs Smith recognizing Geordie who proceeds to dance a jig, reminding them of how they had danced when the shanty was the centre of a rich goldfield. Everyone applauds him.

The atmosphere of activity is continued at the beginning of the second act when Mrs Smith is trying in vain to persuade Geordie Ogilvie to change his clothes "all stained with clay and dripping wet" from his work in the mine and to rest instead of returning to it. Mick, too, is moving, taking to the track again with his swag. Rouser is busy looking for Dodger the horse, Bella leaves Sam because he is overcome by gold fever and Watty begins to think of marriage when Clara announces that she will have to go home to her parents to help pick the strawberry crop. Conroy is trying to persuade Mrs Smith to sell the shanty. Only Andrew still relaxes on the verandah, a contrast to all the activity about him. The act ends with everyone in a state of excitement because Ogilvie has rediscovered the reef.

In Act III the rising action continues. The imagery which is still associated with activity has now begun to be related to commercialism also. The name of the shanty is to be changed from The Diggers' Rest, suggesting relaxation, to the Commercial Hotel. When Rouser knocks out "a pro who used to fight at the stadium", he is advised to "take up the game" for profit. Clara, now Watty's wife, is thinking in terms of possessions as she "improves" the shanty with "the telephone, and billiard table and a gramophone". (Act III, p.37) They are "going to have gas, real gas, hot and cold

baths, marble-top tables, an ice chest and all sorts of improvements" (Ibid.). There is talk of shares which Ogilvie declares will "reach a hundred (pounds) and more by the end of the week "(Act III, p.38). Mrs Smith is dressed in black silk. Even Andrew is valued in commercial terms. Mrs Smith relates to Ogilvie how she married Andrew because he was so useful about the shanty. Now that he is old and ill, he "only costs me his tucker" (Act III, p.39), she says. Sam has bought a new bullock team. Conroy is getting ready for a subdivision sale.

The pace of the action has increased so much that it is almost frenetic, with Clara urging Rouser to hurry and finish painting the sign so that he can do all the other work awaiting him and also demanding that Watty perform several tasks at almost the same time, then deciding that she will have to hurry to do various things herself. She has no time to listen to Mick's yarn as she hustles him round to the back door. Rouser complains, "Everybody's too busy to have any time for a bit of fun and sport" (Act III, p.37). The weather, in keeping with the action, is clear and crisp (Act III, p.38).

Just when Rouser is about to fix the acetylene gas plant so that the shanty can be lit up in the evening and Conroy wants to "celebrate the great gold discovery" by festivities, Ogilvie comes on stage and sits down, lighting his pipe, "outwardly calm". Almost immediately he announces that "the mine's finished". Rouser, in keeping with the mood of the announcement, soon afterwards lets the gas escape.

Although the news is sudden and unexpected,

an anticlimax rather than a climax, the audience has been prepared for it to some extent. Ogilvie had warned:

Gold's a will o' the wisp. I've seen a township
rise in a night and another fade in a day. (Act
II, p.20)

Moreover, Rouser had insisted, "Gold's a gamble. Give me the land". (Act II, p.23) Mick, too, had not believed that there was payable gold left in the district. Thus, the failure of the mine has evolved naturally in the development of the plot.

The third phase of the development of the play, the return to an atmosphere of relaxation and non-commercialism, begins immediately, with the falling action. The old atmosphere is re-established through the reactions of the various characters. No-one except Conroy becomes angry or upset. Mrs Smith says, "Dont' think about it" (Act III, p.43). Ogilvie, who has, apparently, lost everything, agrees with her:

My family would have the laugh on me if they knew,
but I'll say nothing about it. (Act III, p.44)

Watty, who has lost some money, clowns in his usual fashion:

I never had any luck. Once I bought a pet
kangaroo, and then the damned thing wouldn't
hop.

Sam, the reformed gambler, takes a moral view. "It's a lesson to us" (Act III, p.43), he says, and is duly rewarded with Bella's return. Even though Clara complains about not being able to buy "that suite" (Act III, p.44) "finished in rich brown antique oak, style Louis Quinze" (Act III, p.38), she is soon laughing again at Watty's jokes. To round off the falling action, Ogilvie hears that gold has been found

in his mine in the west and decides to depart. Thus, no-one has really suffered.

The symmetrical structure is extended to repeat, in reverse, most of the activities at the beginning of Act I. Just as Ogilvie came on stage in Act I with gifts for Mrs Smith and Clara, so in the denouement in Act III he leaves in a similar atmosphere of excitement, with gifts from Mrs Smith and Watty. In Act III Mrs Smith and Mrs Jones gossip, as they did in Act I; Conroy complains about the lack of business activity; Sam and Bella are on stage together talking about a church social again; Watty is clowning and Rouser is helping Clara. These, too, were the activities they were engaged in at the beginning of Act I. As the curtain goes down, Andrew and Mick are back on the verandah of the shanty with Mick beginning one of his long yarns.

Esson's stagecraft is quite competent. For example, the jig which Ogilvie dances at the end of Act I (p.16) could be effective, dramatically, ending a quiet scene with some activity and indicating that the battler's confrontation with the other characters is to result in a heightening of the action. When he sings a song in Act III, (p.38) he acts in the natural way for a man who is happy about the discovery of gold. Furthermore he is acting in character.

Esson groups his characters effectively. Most of the time only two or three characters are on stage at the same time, except towards the end of each act when nearly all the characters are there. In the first act this happens with the arrival of Ogilvie, in the second act it is at the

time when Ogilvie announces the discovery of gold, and in the third act it is at Ogilvie's announcement of the mine's failure - three crucial scenes. In Act I, immediately after Ogilvie's arrival, when "exeunt omnes into bar except Sam and Bella" (p.16), the young married couple quarrel about Sam's desire to break his promise to Bella by going into the bar to drink. Bella wins. The act ends with Mrs Smith, Clara, Watty and Ogilvie back on stage. Similarly, after the announcement of the gold discovery, Clara tells Sam that Bella has left him because he is "chasing the gold" (p.34). When he leaves, Ogilvie, Watty, Mrs Smith and Clara remain on stage. Again, in Act III, after the announcement of the loss of the reef, all go into the bar except Sam. Bella returns and they are reconciled. The contrast of a group scene in which all are interested in the gold followed by a scene in which two people talk about the drawbacks of gambling on the gold, in each act, is effective in indicating different moral attitudes.

The love story is well managed in the first two acts. Clara has shown admiration for Watty in two scenes while Rouser has declared that he would do anything for her. Later, in Act II, when Clara tells Watty she will be leaving, he begins to think about marriage. His shy, awkward wooing is interrupted by Rouser with his incongruous story of the murder; then Bella interrupts, then Conroy and after his departure Rouser returns. (Rouser has already declared that Clara is such a good worker that she would be an excellent wife for him on the piece of land he someday hopes to farm.) The lovers are on stage for most of Act II but at the end Watty has only managed to offer to drive Clara to the dance. When

the third act opens, Watty has proposed off stage and the marriage has taken place off stage also. This means that the audience which has been waiting for Watty to propose would be disappointed, after having watched his unsuccessful efforts to do so through most of Act II.

There are no passionate scenes in the play. The lovers are bashful. The other characters are almost all relaxed and unemotional. The humour of dialogue and character which infuses the play is pleasant and acceptable but of no great subtlety. It is what might be expected from ordinary country people. It can be seen, for example, in Watty's sly remarks to other people, as when Mick decides to go wandering round the countryside again:

Mick: I'm going to Ferny Creek

Watty: Business I suppose

(Andrew chuckles and coughs. Mick glares at him).
(Act II, p.21)

The two old sundowners as well as Conroy and Mrs Jones are meant to be figures of fun but they are not caricatures.

The play does not lack colour. The descriptions of the first gold rush, forty years before, given by Mrs Smith and Geordie Ogilvie recreate these colourful scenes in the minds of the audience. This is what Ogilvie tells the "young people" at the shanty:

Wait till the mine's in full swing with the creak
of the windlass, the throb of the battery, the
smoke of the smelter, the rumble of the ore-trucks -
that's worth working for, eh? What made this
country? It was the gold. That brought settlers
from the ends of the earth, and the right sort, too.
(Act II, p.34).

He remembers "it all, just like yesterday":

We had all sorts on the diggings, what a swarm!
Chinese and Poles, Californians with scarves and
sombreros, sailor men in dungarees run away
from their ships, Lascar coolies and negroes,
Johnny Raws from Piccadilly, with eyeglass and
pegtop trousers - the black-fellows with 'possum
rugs over their shoulders - the troopers riding
past, and the diggers with green veils and pockets
full of gold. (Act II, p.20)

Again, the play has unity of place in the
traditional sense because all action takes place just outside
the shanty. This has been thoughtfully organized with three
entrances to the shanty (to the bar, the central hotel and the
store) and a road running across the back stage behind a white
painted fence, all of which allow the players to move about
freely. On the left, a three rail fence, a shed and the fowl-
yard are "suggested" by the backdrop. There are no involved
stage directions. Only once is there a direction for someone
to cross the stage. This is when Clara is called by Mrs
Smith (Act I, p.3).

Another aspect of the stagecraft is the
individualizing of the characters. They vary in age from the
two old men, Andrew and Mick, to the young lovers. There is
also a variety of accents. Andrew's Scottish dialect is
reproduced in the script. That of Mrs Jones, the "Pommie"
(so named by Rouser, Act I, p.8) is not but presumably it
was reproduced on stage. "Geordie" Ogilvie who came from
Berwick as a young man should have a "Geordie" accent. Clara,
Rouser, Wattie, Mick and Mrs Smith speak in the Australian
vernacular to the extent of using "seen", "ain't" and other
varieties of the negative:

Clara: Hot out ain't it? (Act I, p.7)

Clara: It wouldn't do no harm" (Act I, p.4)

Watty: It don't give much shade. (Act I, p.10)

Mick: There ain't no sign. (Act I, p.2)

In addition there are contrasts in the varied occupations of the characters and in their attitudes to life. There would be little chance of an audience confusing them.

The women's parts are important because they are the ones who control and direct the lives of the menfolk. Clara directs Watty, and Bella has reformed Sam. Mrs Smith owns and manages the shanty while Andrew her husband rests because of his age and asthma. Ogilvie, the main character, however, is not directed by any woman or man.

Esson wrote to Brodney that The Battler was "a group play" (Letter postmarked "9 Oct. 1922"). This is true. All the characters constitute a group except Ogilvie who comes from outside this community. The action is mostly between Ogilvie and the group or else it is initiated by Ogilvie's confrontation with the group even though each member is individualized. Margaret Williams has declared:

The well-made play formula of individualized protagonist and antagonist, and the logic of motivation

does not always apply to Australian plays because

our playwrights have in fact been more concerned with corporate and representative man than with the exploration of individual psychology.⁴⁵

Her assertion that "the image of man in Australian drama is (also) collective and social rather than individual"⁴⁶

does apply to The Battler. The group has in common its attitude of acceptance of whatever happens in Acts I and III before the gold discovery and after the mine has failed, as well as its dependence on the land (which may yield gold or

food). Nevertheless, individuals in the group do react differently to the changes in life-style at the shanty after the discovery of gold. Watty, Mick and Rouser do not readily adapt to the change in pace. Andrew is not affected by it. Sam has a more complex reaction because he is subject to other pressures.

Individual psychology is not explored to any great depth. Even though it is called The Battler, the play never seeks to determine why Ogilvie has this compulsion to follow the gold. A.A. Phillips in his article, "Assaying the New Drama", asserted that "the greatest achievement of naturalism is:

its power to probe deeply and accurately within the character, thereby bringing the audience to an awareness of the more significant movements of human impulse.⁴⁷

Ogilvie, however, is an illustration of a battler rather than a study of one. Before his arrival the audience has been told of his strength and determination by Mrs Smith and his trickiness by Mick. He is first seen as a practical joker, pretending to be a hawker but selling his goods to the lowest bidder. His determination, which is really a compulsion, is in evidence immediately. Although sixty-eight years old he does not worry about getting wet, muddy and exhausted in the mines. He rouses the enthusiasm of others. He is the disturbing element. He is almost poetic about his search for gold which appears to be motivated by the desire for excitement rather than wealth. This poetic quality is demonstrated in his address to his dish:

Here's the old dish. Do you remember all the gold
glinting in you, and the shining nuggets we found?
They think we're both getting battered and played

out. We'll show them ... I've lost one fortune
but I've found another. (Act II, p.23)

He is nonchalant when all seems lost. Esson seems to hold the battler up for admiration. Perhaps he had in his own subconscious compared Ogilvie's compulsion to follow the gold with his own determination to be a dramatist.

In all, the play lacks force, depth and subtlety. Its success would depend very much on the vivacity of the actors. The very nature of Esson's structure with such emphasis on the quiet, calm atmosphere of the beginning and end of the play is not really conducive to drama nor is Esson's desire to show Australian character as undemonstrative and self-controlled. Yet his presentation of life in a small country settlement shows close observation. It is a picture of a world of happy-go-lucky people. Well acted, it would be for an audience an evening of light entertainment, with very little in it to make it really memorable.

iv

MOTHER AND SON

Mother and Son, Esson's other three act play of country life, was probably conceived while he was on a holiday in the Wimmera district. He had written to Brodzky on 1 January, 1907:

Next Tuesday, January 8th, we depart for the Bee Farm and Wild Ducks to Horsham way. We shall stay 6 or 8 weeks. I feel I shall get something good. After that we shall take a cottage at St.Kilda by the sea where I shall endeavour to get closer to the Eternal Verities.⁴⁸

It was in his letter of 21 March 1921 that he told Palmer that his play was set:

in the Wimmera district, with a suggestion of bees, duck-lakes, the desert etc. It is a very beautiful district, strange and shimmering, remote from Victoria, where at least in my time, you came on emus and kangaroos.

Since one of the central concerns of the play is the land's meaning to various characters, the author's use of landscape requires close examination. "The scene in Act I is set on a lonely bee-farm in the bush, little more than a clearing in the forest. Everything is wild and primitive " (p.145). At the beginning the landscape is pleasant, with "hills in the distance and big trees all round" (Ibid.) and bee-hives in the clearing. There is, too, the lyricism of the scene when Peggy and her brother describe how they captured the swarm of bees, suggesting the possibilities of fecundity in this place.

Furthermore, this atmosphere of calm nature relates to the plot because in Act I Harry appears to have decided to settle down and marry Peggy now that Emma has left the district.

At the same time, Harry, who is doomed from the beginning, is always associated with water. He buries the sheepskin "by the red gum pool" (Act I, p.150). He admires the lakes where he goes duck shooting, especially "the muddy Scotchman" - "You should see its high reeds and dead drowned timber", he tells Peggy (Act I, p.164).

Act II opens on "an evening of rain and storm" (p.168). There is a "terrible storm roaring through the bush" (Act II, p.168) while the family are in the living

room of the cottage. It is a metaphor of their lives. While it rages, Harry returns with Emma, and Peggy, who has been helping his mother while his father is dying, leaves after a confrontation with the other woman. [The activities of Act III take place on a calm night in spring. "The yellow box is blossoming and there's manna in the red gums," Peggy tells Mrs Lind who agrees:

We expect a big honey flow. It's a splendid season. The bees are busy now - and you should see the parrots! How greedy they are - that shows there is plenty of blossom. (pp.211-212)

Here there is a kind of ironic conjunction - the awakening of nature and the apparent desire of Harry to forget Emma and settle down, just before he is killed. Old Tom's picture of the dry, clear desert country suggests a peaceful life without complications, the kind of life which he leads, asking nothing of the land except to move across it. Mrs Lind wants to tame the land while Harry is fascinated by it but also wants to leave it to go to the city.

While dealing with various attitudes to the land, this play is also concerned with the problems of conformity, of conflicting generations and of the artist in outback society. Harry is the non-conformist, the rebel and the artist. Although he does not fit in with his parents' way of life, his mother has no thought of his following an alternative life style which might make him happy.

Mrs. Lind represents the conformist. After her husband's death, she tells her son, "I've only you now, Harry" (Act II, p.181). Her idea of the best kind of life is to cultivate the land with the help of a good wife. This had been the life style followed by her husband. Rouser in

The Battler had the same belief. As she tries to explain to Harry:

This could be made a fine place yet - not a rich farm, but as good as anybody could need. Peggy would help you ... She'd make you a good wife.
(Act I, p.163)

She tells Tom Henderson that he is:

a disgrace ... an old man wandering up and down the world till the end of your days. (Act I, p.153)

Perhaps she is afraid that Tom's could be the kind of life Harry will lead, yet Tom is happy enough with no family, no possessions and no responsibility. Mrs Lind, in contrast, has worked hard all her married life and she has "born seven children and buried two" (Act I, p.153). She could leave but she does not wish to until she has seen Harry married and settled down on the land she and her husband have partly tamed. She tells Peggy at their final encounter:

I wouldn't mind leaving them (the bees). I could go off and see my other children ... You'd all be settled and I wouldn't have another care in the world. (Act III, p.212)

The life of the small farmer is examined in other aspects. When Mrs Lind complains to Emma about all the hard work on the farm, the latter asks "And what's the good of it all?" (Act II, P.194). Mrs Lind, however, wants "to keep things together for whoever comes after" her but Emma tells her, "Little thanks you'll get for that". (P.193).

Although the Linds envy the squatter's life style with its accompanying wealth and power, Harry also despises it. In the confrontation between him and Jim Blake, Harry shouts, "You think you can do as you like because you're a squatter's son" (Act I, p.159) and he calls Jim's father "a flaming miser".

In the conflict between mother and son, he loses because he cannot make up his mind to leave her after his father's death. As he tells Emma, "Mother has a stronger will than I have. I could never stand up to her" (Act II, p.187). Yet the mother loses also. In Harry's frustration, he spends his time "drinking and fiddling at the shanty" (Act III, p.190), leaving all the farm work to his mother. He has tried to compromise by keeping Emma at the farm but she, too, wants "some life and excitement" (Act III, p.195). She, like Harry, does not "belong here, among these cockie farmers" (Ibid.) To some extent Esson, moreover, is examining the "cockie-farmer" attitude which Tom also sees embodied in Mrs Lind. (Act I, p.153)

These varying perspectives of man's relationship to the land also serve to develop another theme of the play - the artist in society. In his article in The Australian Quarterly in 1939, Esson asserted, "Artists in this age are treated like outlaws"⁵⁰. Because Harry cannot conform, he is destroyed. Mrs Lind, at the beginning of the play, blames the fiddle for Harry's being "restless and defiant" (p.146). "It's the fiddle that takes him to the shanty" (p.177). Harry, his tongue loosened by drink, tells Emma and Jim in Act III that he got his violin from "old Rongetti":

He was a famous player in his day, so I've been told.
But he took too much laudanum and, God knows why,
drifted into the back country ... That was the only
master I ever had ...
When he was dying, he gave me his fiddle: 'Ah,
you 'ave ze technique!' he said.

Emma's attraction has been in part for Harry the fact that she has sympathised with his secret ambition to become a musician

in an orchestra. He tells her, "If I've got to play the damn'd fiddle, I should play it, not hang around here" but he is afraid that "it's too late" since he is now twenty-six (Act III, p.209), and that he "may be no good at all" (Act II, p.186). Emma offers advice - "Nobody can live for anybody else" (Ibid.) but Harry will not desert his mother. His moral dilemma is insoluble. The matter is settled in a somewhat arbitrary manner, when Harry's horse throws him and kills him after Emma has left him. There could have been in Esson's mind a connection between two artists, Rongetti and Harry, both destroyed by their society.

No reviewer realized what Esson was aiming to do. The Bulletin review of 14 June 1923 described Harry as "a shiftless young yokel" whose "life and happiness are wrecked" by the "gloomy dalliance of a light of love called Emma"⁵¹. The Australasian of 16 June 1923 characterized Mrs Lind as "the heroic mother of the bush whom work and loneliness have made somewhat shrewish of tongue, but whose heart is of gold"⁵². Harry is a man out of tune with his surroundings which offer him no satisfaction. He can only play at shearing sheds and boundary riders' huts in wayside shanties and in splitters' camps (Act II, p.197). He says in the end, "I suppose I wanted more than I could get" (p.209) - comparing his ambition to "the desert's mirage".

In structure Mother and Son is conventional. The exposition which takes most of Act I, introduces the various characters in person except Emma. Conversation focused on her, however, signals her importance, before the audience meets her, later, in Act II. Harry's mother accuses

him of keeping "company with a bad woman" for whom he has run into debt.

The central conflict between mother and son, and their life styles, is established immediately at the beginning of the play with their first confrontation. The mother is in a position of power and is confident of her moral stance. Harry is on the defence and is unable to communicate to her his viewpoint. The audience, undoubtedly, would feel empathy for the mother. Harry has stolen a sheep from Blake's because there is no meat in the house and because "he informed on me when I was duck shooting and I don't forget it. They weren't his lakes either" (Act I, p.146). The mother emphasises the differences in their attitudes to life:

That's your way, letting everything drift. Here have I been slaving from morning till night while you lie about and brood, or go off to the township and get drunk on their raw wine ... You can see your father's breaking up - and me, you leave me here to work when I ought to be resting ...

Harry's only reply is, "What a tongue you've got".

The play is to develop through relationships between the mother and Peggy, the farm girl and the son and Peggy, the son and Emma, and the mother and Emma. There are a series of short, contrasting scenes in Act I. The next encounter after Harry leaves to bury the sheepskin is between Tom, the old "swaggie" and Mrs Lind. His calm outlook quietens her anger. The conversation between them serves to give the audience background information on the Lind family. Tom asks if Harry still plays the fiddle. Mrs Lind shows her love for her son and expresses the hope that "he'll settle down soon". She talks of her lone-

liness and her husband's bad heart. Peter Lind comes on stage. Discussion is on Tom's and, in contrast, the squatter's ways of life. Mrs Lind leaves. This quiet scene of the two people talking is interrupted by the excited voices of Peggy and her brother Ted, two young people raised in the bush. They have been out in the thick scrub to catch a swarm of bees for Mrs Lind. This happy scene in which everyone is helpful and pleasant is interrupted by the arrival of the squatter's son, accusing Harry of sheep stealing. There is an angry confrontation between the two young men during which Harry shows his wildness by threatening Jim with a gun. While Harry goes off in anger, Mrs. Lind calms Jim down. Harry is heard playing his violin. Jim leaves a message for Harry to play his fiddle at a shearer's ball. When Jim has left, Peggy and Harry go off together to try out his new boat. In Peggy's company, Harry "feels free again". Indications are that he is to marry Peggy when he returns from a duck-shooting expedition which he expects will earn him "a big cheque" (Act I, p.165). Mrs. Lind appears to have won.

In Act II the situation is to be reversed with the return of Harry with Emma. At the beginning of this act, which takes place "a few weeks later" and is set "in the living room of the cottage", Peter Lind is dying, with Tom, Peggy and Mrs Lind watching him. Tom is comforting them with readings from the Koran. Jim Blake calls to offer help. When the creek floods, Jim, Peggy and Tom go out to rescue the cow. The older people talk about when they first settled in the district. Reference is made to Harry's wildness.

Mrs Lind shows some understanding of him when she says "Somehow he's different from the rest of us ... better or worse, I hardly know" (p.186). The atmosphere is peaceful. Peter Lind is resigned about dying. His wife is sure that Harry will settle down and help her. When he does arrive, not knowing how ill his father is, he has brought Emma with him. The rising action continues with a confrontation between Peggy and Emma and another between Emma and Mrs Lind. While Harry is trying to explain why he has brought Emma with him, the old man dies quietly. When Harry claims that he "couldn't help it" mother and son are reconciled. Nothing is settled about Emma who cannot be turned out into the storm. Peggy has left after seeing Emma in Harry's arms.

In Act III the rising action continues with Emma and Mrs Lind living together with Harry. No-one is happy. Nothing has been solved. The climax comes when Emma, believing that she cannot help Harry who will not leave his mother, departs with Jim Blake, after drugging Harry's drink. The denouement is speedy. The mother appears to have finally won. Harry does not appear upset at Emma's departure. Peggy is enticed back, ready to forgive Harry. He, however, still half-drugged from the drink, goes riding to clear his head. He dies while attempting to jump the horse over the creek. So the mother loses after all. She sobs, as the curtain goes down:

He was a strange boy ... I tried hard but I
couldn't save him ... I couldn't save him.
(Act III, p.212)

There is more action in Mother and Son than in The Battler. The conflict over Harry's life style is kept continually in the mind of the audience. The ending spoils

the play but it is difficult to imagine a more suitable one.

The characters are distinct. For example, there is a contrast between Peggy and Emma. The mother's part would be the most outstanding. The Argus reviewer of 29 June 1946 admired the "fierce uncompromising protectiveness of the mother" as "something not easily forgotten"⁵³. He did not, however, regard her character as particularly Australian. He wrote, "It took a Scot to paint her" (Ibid.). (Esson, who had been born in Scotland while his parents were visiting there in 1879, referred to himself as a Scot in a letter to A.G.Stephens on 11 December 1911.⁵⁴) Again, the characters in Mother and Son are more complex than Lawson's bush characters. Esson attempts to explain why Harry is unable to settle down and why Emma is "bad".

The play is probably the more interesting when read than when acted. The scenes which evoke the beauty and fascination of the bush are poetic rather than dramatic. H.M.Green wrote that:

Mother and Son is by far the best of the longer printed plays; here the atmosphere of tragic gloom which to so many writers of the period was almost inseparable from a depiction of outback life, and which contained indeed an element of truth, in days when the small farmer was encouraged to take up poor country without capital, is well created and sustained ... it is effectively broken ... by a gentle humour and also in passages that are poetic, as in Harry's vision of the lovely lakes; by the delightful episode in which Peggy and her little brother return gleefully from beehunting; and by the dialogues between Peter and old Tom,⁵⁵ the wanderer, and his observations on the Koran.

THE DROVERS

As Palmer relates, The Drovers was written in 1919 in London:

All that summer he (Esson) worked on The Drovers, trying in a Bloomsbury flat to capture the atmosphere of a cattle camp on the Barkly Tableland, with the sun coming up over the arid plains, the drovers anxious about the dry stretch ahead of them, and the cattle 'pegging for a drink'. Louis was a slow worker. He would try out every phrase of his drovers' dialogue to make sure it was idiomatic. "On horseback", he would mutter, pacing about the room, "on horseback, it doesn't seem right". "In the saddle", someone would suggest, and his face would light up as if he had just dislodged a piece of grit from his eye.⁵⁶

[The theme of The Drovers is acceptance, without complaint, of the inevitable. This acceptance takes the form of courage when facing death. Like old Tom in Mother and Son, Briglow has no wife, no family and no dependents. Hence neither bushman has to worry about leaving others to face a life of hardship similar to that of Mrs Lind. Neither of them has asked for much from life so neither has been disappointed. Each has lived his life alone and each has no fear of being alone when dying. Yet Briglow is much younger than Tom so that his death is more tragic. Furthermore, unlike old Tom who quotes the Koran, Briglow Bill has no queries about life after death.

In making Briglow a lone, uncomplicated character Esson has been able to concentrate on his creed and hence communicate it forcefully to his audience. For instance,

Briglow shows no anger against the jackaroo who helped cause his death because Briglow believes that "it's fate" (p.15). His attitude is quiet acceptance. It's "part of the game" he tells the jackaroo (p.8). Briglow and old Tom are, nevertheless, somewhat non-human in their preference for solitude and their lack of human kin.

In fact, Briglow Bill, as his name suggests, is already part of the bush before he is buried in it. As he tells Alec the boss, "We know the bush, me and you. We're old at the game" (p.14). The aboriginal, Pidgeon, recognizes this in his strange, half-humorous epitaph:

You Briglow and old man Boss, you savee bush all -
the - same blackfellow... I think first time you
blackfellow, Briglow. You die then you jump up
white fellow. Now you die and bye'n'bye ...
next time you jump up blackfellow ...

Perhaps there is even a suggestion of the rebirth of the spirit dying in Briglow since the jackaroo has now been "blooded". He has learnt the creed of the bush. "What's done is done. You get out to the cattle now", the boss tells him (p.11).

Possibly, some of the play's success would be the suggestion that Briglow has shown no fear of dying and most members of an audience would like to possess the same composure. He is man in a hostile universe, overwhelmed but unconquered. It is quite remarkable that there should be no sentimentality and no cynicism in a play where the main character is dying throughout.

The play illustrates an attitude to life. It does not work out a conflict. It moves quickly at the beginning. The rising action starts immediately the curtain rises. "A shot rings out" (p.6) - the fatal shot fired

by the jackaroo when he sees a dingo. This stampedes the cattle, leading to Briglow's injuries. As the cook describes the stampede, the two young drovers, Mick and Bob, carry in Briglow who already knows he is "done", as he says (p.7). The talk is mainly about what "rotten luck" the accident is for Alec, the boss who is "responsible for them cattle" (p.8) and must get them away to where there is ample water. This is the cause of the tension. The boss must leave Briglow to die with the aboriginal. Only the jackaroo protests so that there is really no great conflict.

The rising action continues as Alec and Briglow agree that the cattle must go on, Briglow gives his possessions and money to the two young drovers and one decides to buy a horse with his share. The tension is relieved briefly by the antics of Pidgeon demanding tobacco and stealing food. The noise of the cattle stampeding on two occasions is followed immediately by the contrasting quietness of the laconic dialogue around the dying drover. The climax, the departure of the drovers, is well managed with each man's farewell being "so long Briglow" and his answer "so long" (pp.16-17-18), each taking place at short intervals. The resolution is his death alone with the aboriginal.

With its emphasis on illustrating a feeling about life rather than on any conflict, The Drovers is indeed more lyrical than dramatic. It has epic qualities also in its presentation of one character, Briglow Bill, as a kind of archetype whom the audience is expected to admire.

The Australian bush is not really a protagonist because it cannot be blamed entirely for Briglow's death.

The cattle stampede, partly because they are thirsty and partly because the jackaroo fires a shot at a dingo. Briglow would have died whether the boss had pushed on or not. Certainly, however, he would not have died alone if the land had not been dry. Thus "the country and its climate" (to use the words of H.G.Kippax⁴⁷) is only the antagonist if it is equated with fate. It is fate also which initiates the action at the beginning of the play with the appearance of the dingo.

Palmer regarded this play as "one of the most moving pieces Esson ever wrote":

There is nothing fabricated about it; the climax rises naturally out of the simple situation, and the feeling between Alec, the boss-drover and the dying mate he is forced to leave behind, is suggested with the least possible emphasis. Indeed, the last scene between the two men is almost brutal in its bareness, so fully do they accept the inevitable. It is left to the blackboy, with his wild threnody in pidgin, to distil the tragic poetry from the scene.⁵⁸

This is, like The Battler, a group play. The outsider is the jackaroo whose ignorance caused the tragedy yet in the end he, too, has become a bushman because he has accepted the bush ethos. The contrast between the well-meaning young loquacious jackaroo "new to the bush" (p.15), and the seasoned, laconic drovers would be dramatically effective. The drovers, although a group, are differentiated clearly enough into Alec the Boss, an older man and the two young drovers. The small cast is completed with the cook and Pidgeon. The blackfellow was probably acceptable to an audience of the nineteen-twenties, e.g. the boss's warning to him:

You can't run away from me. Supposing you run,
me track him up, track him up, bye'n'bye catch -im
you, shoot -im Pidgeon full with bullet, leave -im
Pidgeon longa little black fellow black ant ...
Here, tobacco (Throws a plug). (p.17)

Esson was to give a more detailed picture of aborigines in his short play, Andeganora⁵⁹ which was not a Pioneer Play.

The Drovers owes some of its impact to the incongruity of the situation, to the acceptance by the drovers and by the play's audience that it is the right decision to leave a dying man alone in the outback, attended only by a half-civilized aboriginal while his workmates drove the cattle to water. It is also impressive because of the complete understanding between the two mates, Briglow Bill and Alec, the boss-drover.

vi

THE WOMAN TAMER

The Woman Tamer, a light-hearted comedy set in the slums of Melbourne, is mainly concerned with one of the traditional themes of comedy - the discomfiture of a boasting hypocrite. What H. Spencer wrote in the "Introductory Note" to Jonson's Bartholomew Fair, could be applied also to Esson's play: "Rogues, hypocrites and fools are the satirist's staple, and here they are".⁶⁰ Esson is not presenting a picture of his own world of middle class city life. Rather, the play is a kind of curious peep-show, letting his audience see how "the other half" lives. Nevertheless, some connection between the two cultures is made when Chopsey

puts forward a justification of his behaviour:

We're orl thieves ... ev'ry bleedin' one ov us.
We're orl at the saime gaime, so long as we aint
found out. We're orl taking ther mugs down.
One bloke ... dus ther trick with 'er silk 'at
on ther Stock Exchange, and er shyster mine⁶¹ We
do it with er jemmy. It's funny, aint it.

In keeping with this justification, Esson's attitude is amoral because, although his play deals with thieves and rogues, only the boaster is punished. Fat, lazy Chopsey who is sure that his charm and astuteness give him a secure place in Katie's affections and her house, is rejected when Bongo returns.

Bongo's triumph raises another issue, the attitude that physical force wins out. Bongo, fresh from gaol, possesses a "terrible solid left" which "got him nine months" (p.13). Although, (in the words of Constable Jones) he is "a bad tempered gentleman", Katie prefers him to Chopsey who does not try to argue with his successor. There is irony in the fact that Chopsey, who becomes so upset when he loses his temper and "puts a hand on" Katie (p.10), is rejected for Bongo who "assorted a blind man" (p.13). Katie really does not have a very good choice. It is true, however, that Esson's play is more concerned with the showing up of Chopsey's conceit than with the theme of physical strength conquering all. Bongo is only a minor character.

Katie, wanting the material things of life, continually belittles Chopsey's lifestyle. He earns his money singing and playing the mouth-organ "outside the pubs". Katie tells him:

Yer music, that's 'ow I fell in. Ugh, I'm sick
o' yer and yer music, and yer buskin' and yer
organ - yairs, an' yer flash clobber, a' yer
fringe ... (p.17)

Apparently his music does not earn him much money. Chopsey offers to change, to "get lots of things for yer" (p.17) and to take "yer to all the dances". He is considering a partnership with Shipmate to rob a house but Katie is scornful:

Fat lot you ever done! I aint seen yer dive on
no red lot. I aint seen yer stoush no rozzer
(policeman). I aint even 'erd about yer in ther
'Erald for snow-droppin'. Ow now. Not you.
You pl'y ther organ. (p.6)

Later in the play Chopsey, showing no desire for action, tries to persuade his friend, Smithy the Liar, to do the actual robbery while those who planned it, Chopsey and Shipmate, will share in the proceeds. His talk of taking part in a robbery was apparently just boasting, to impress Katie. In her "Introduction" to The Southern Cross and Other Plays, Hilda Esson has referred to Louis' enjoyment of the sport of "deflating the pompous". (pp.xiv-xv)

The Woman Tamer, then, can be considered as a conflict between two ways of life. Katie makes the choice. Chopsey represents one life style and Bongo the other. The theme is worked out in terms of Katie's discussion about these characters. It is traditional in structure.

From the beginning of the first scene, with Chopsey's arrival home and Katie's demand to know if he has yet planned a robbery with Shipmate, the action moves quickly, the confrontation between the two characters developing into a conflict of wills in the rising action. The quarrel is well-managed:

Katie - Wot's the strength of it? I've bin waitin'
orl afternoon ter 'ear 'ow yer got on. Don'
be a nark.

Chopsey - (on sofa) - Give it er breeze.

Katie - (pleasantly). Come on Chops. Tell us
orl about it.

Chopsey - Wy don't yer giv yer tongue arf an 'our
orf?

Katie - Growl, snarl. Y'orter be in yer kennel.
(p.5)

Expectation about Bongo is aroused in the audience by Katie's comparison of him with Chopsey: "Bongo didn't tork and skite about it. E done it" (p.7).

There is a false or minor climax when Chopsey half-heartedly "shoves" Katie because she will not pick up his coat (p.8). When she pretends to weep and then laughs at him, he hangs up his own coat. After she has gone shopping, Chopsey shows his stupidity by his boast to Smithy that he knows how to handle women and he and Katie are "gettin' on splendid". The irony of the situation is quite obvious to the audience because Katie, clearly in control of the situation, has announced through the window:

Cheer up Birdie. Sing er little song to yerself.
I'm goin' ter bring yer 'ome er surprise. (p.9)

The slum background is highlighted by Smithy's complaint that "it's 'ard ter maike er livin' now wifout work" (p.11) and his subsequent fear of Constable Smith. The action slows down as the two friends talk to each other and to the policeman. His warning to Chopsey about Bongo only emphasises Chopsey's conceit. He reiterates his boast: "I know 'ow ter 'andle wimmin" (p.15):

Yer don wanter knock 'em about, Mr.Jones. Humor
'em. Katie'll do anythin' for me. (Ibid.)

A few minutes later Katie has ordered him out of her house.

This is the climax. The falling action takes place quickly.

Bongo arrives and Chopsey leaves, "terror stricken".

Katie - Don't dirty yer 'ands on 'im Bongo. (To Chopsey) See if you can git on with Fishy Liz. She's fond o' music (p.21)

Esson's attitude towards his characters is dispassionate, as befits comedy. He presents the police constable as a pleasant, firm administrator of the law. The ex-convicts and their associates are figures of amusement but the audience does not pity them or feel disgusted by them. The woman character is the one directing the action, as in other plays by Esson. Her part is the main one although Chopsey is on stage throughout the play while she is absent for a while. The characters are all clearly delineated, with a striking contrast between fat, lazy Chopsey and Bongo, "a powerful, square-set man, dressed in a blue sweater with cap and black silk muffler, bulldog jawed, clean shaven and cropped" (p.20). The names - Chopsey for one who earns a living with his mouth, and Bongo - have been well chosen. Smithy "with a couple of rabbits over his shoulder ... small but well built and agile" (p.9) is again different from the other male characters. His function in the play is to add local colour. This "pickpocket and spieler" (p.9) talks about "blowin' down ter Sorrenter in one of them B'y (Bay) boats with the 'Art and Arrer Push'" (p.10) when "two o' them smart D's nicked us fer bein' suspicious lookin' kerrickers" (Ibid.) He is anxious to tell the police constable that he is in regular work so that he will not have to go back to prison.

The small cast, five in all, is suitable for a one-act play. All the action takes place in "the front room of Katie's cottage" in which "the front door and window

open on a narrow lane" (p.5). The unity of place does not destroy the realism of the play.

While it is not a very complex or thought provoking play and it has no strong satire or memorable scenes, still The Woman Tamer possesses irony in structure and dialogue, and interesting characters who, even if they are not presented in depth, are still acceptable as people who could have existed in the atmosphere and situations Esson has portrayed.

His contemporaries regarded his presentation of the characters and activities of slum life as accurate. The Bulletin review of his Three Short Plays (Melbourne, 1912), published on the Red Page on 4 January 1912, described the play as "stark realism":

The first (play) is an incident of Black Eagle Lane in the slums of Melbourne. It makes no pretence to romance, but it is a faithful transcript of life, rendered in the vernacular.

The same publication on 2 November 1922 praised it after its second production because "the colour of criminal life is cleverly laid on"⁶². George Farwell, writing in 1946, claimed that Esson not only "made brilliant use of idiomatic speech and slang so that his play appears intensely natural", but also reproduced "the rhythms of their speech, their moods, the way they thought and acted" so well that his characters are "authentically Australian".⁶³

In all, The Woman Tamer is a lively, actable playlet.

THE BRIDE OF GOSPEL PLACE

In some ways The Bride of Gospel Place explores another version of a theme present in Mother and Son. In each play a woman loves a man so much that she is prepared to forgive and protect him, no matter what he does. In The Bride of Gospel Place it is Lily's love for Bush, her lover, whereas in Mother and Son it was Mrs Lind's for her son, Harry.

Again, to some extent, Esson is concerned with the courage shown in dying without complaint and without blaming anyone. Lily resembles Briglow Bill in her refusal to blame Bush and her belief that her life was "a bonzer old time while it lasted".⁶⁴ There is the same indication that neither has died in vain, since the jackaroo has now been initiated into the life-style of drovers, and Bush is determined "to train hard ... to win that fight" (p.129) as Lily has asked just before she died. Again, like Briglow, Lily attributes everything to "luck". (Ibid.) Yet she is not just a feminine Briglow because unlike him she leaves behind someone she loves. Esson does not avoid sentimentality in The Bride of Gospel Place, partly because Lily takes so much longer to die than Briglow Bill and partly because her acquaintances are not laconic drovers but talkative city people who continually refer to the sadness of her dying. Esson's treatment of this issue in his four-act play lacks the sensitivity he showed in The Drovers.

Just as in his other plays, one of Esson's concerns in The Bride of Gospel Place is to examine the life-style of a group of people. Since the characters in his four-act tragedy live in the slums of Melbourne, as did those in his one-act comedy, The Woman Tamer, there are certain resemblances in characterisation and atmosphere. A character known as "Smithy the Liar" appears in both plays. (He is apparently the same character.) In each there is a pugilist, although Bongo in the short comedy is closer to a caricature than Bush in The Bride of Gospel Place. In each play there is a sympathetic but respected policeman. Regular work is something endured so that an ex-convict can avoid being "vagged" (p.110). The leading male character in each play is reluctant to share his secrets with his mistress in case she betrays him. A successful robbery is a daring and admirable achievement.

Nevertheless, in The Bride of Gospel Place Esson is anxious to show that love and tenderness can exist in such an amoral society, so it forms a contrast to the materialistic world of The Woman Tamer. The characters in his long play are not as stylized and lacking in compassion as in his short play. The people of Lily's world speak a language not quite so loaded with the idioms of the slum-convict dialect of Chopsey and his associates. Thus the characters in The Bride of Gospel Place seem less strange to a middle-class audience. It is easier to feel empathy with Lily and Bush than with Katie and Chopsey.

Another issue which is inherent in the play is the apportioning of the blame for the way of life which the slum characters lead. Economic circumstances appear

to be partly the reason. Delia blames "this hard-boiled town" (p.193) for the fact that Lily "never had a chance", yet Lily had originally become ill when she had been discarded in Sydney by another lover who had spent all her money. Delia, when pregnant, had been turned out by her parents so she had become a prostitute in order to earn a living. Milky, the confidence man who has spent "two moons" in gaol between the first and last acts of the play, and Smithy make no attempt to change their unlawful habits. Bush resorts to robbery so that he can live comfortably with Lily instead of going back to the iron foundry, as he needs time and money to train for the fight. The only one who does not seem trapped by economic circumstances into this way of life is Renie who has escaped by marrying Bill, yet she cannot stay away from the warmth and liveliness of the life she once lived. The ballet girl and the washerwoman in the hospital, although not members of the slum-convict world are, like them, victims of a fate which none can escape; (even so, the ballet girl is not the victim of economic forces).

Although the play is traditional in structure in the development of the main theme which is self-sacrifice for love, yet there are pauses in the action while the characters exhibit their way of life to the audience. The whole of the first act is taken up by a scene in an all-night restaurant, which serves as the exposition by introducing first Bush and later Lily and allowing them to meet. Before their meeting, however, there are a series of short incidents which introduce Spiro, the Greek owner of the restaurant, the Master, who was once an articled clerk and now offers legal advice to

his associates, Milky accompanied by Renie, followed by Smithy and the constable, all of whom reappear in the final scene. The other characters who come to the cafe, the student and Vanity Fair, are there for local colour only; they are not seen or heard of again, while the doctor appears only briefly in the hospital scene in Act III. There is, however, some interaction in Act I when Smithy annoys Lily who is rescued by Bush. Renie's story is possibly a parallel to Lily's since love wins out in it, also.

In Act II which takes place in the "parlour of the Bride's cottage" (p.94) where Bush and Lily have been living happily for "some weeks", the rising action continues with some dramatic tension when Bush returns, after having been missing all night. Lily is afraid that Bush has tired of her, as her previous lover did. The tension lessens when she is reassured but it rises again when he tells her of the robbery he has committed. Again he reassures her and the lovers part with passionate kisses so that the audience believes that there is happiness in store for Lily. The visit of Delia and Suzette, while serving to illustrate the customs of Gospel Street with its easy virtue and amoral outlook, also raises the dramatic tension again by revealing Lily's anxiety that she will betray Bush because she is so nervous. The fortune-telling again arouses the apprehension of the audience when Lily turns over the ace of spades but this subsides with the news of the death of an acquaintance, the "Plum". With the arrival of Renie, Smithy and the constable, one by one, most of the slum characters are on stage again. Apprehension again rises with the constable's questions which

focus attention on Lily's nervousness and give credibility to Bush's belief, expressed later, that Lily has betrayed him. There is dramatic irony in Constable Robson's words:

Lily: ... He never missed a day all last week,
 not even Sunday afternoon.

Constable: Sunday? Bush was out training last
 Sunday afternoon.

Lily: Yes, he's terribly keen to win this
 fight.

Constable: I'm glad you told me, Lily.

Lily: (anxiously) What?

Constable: If he's as keen as that, I'll have a bit
 on him myself. (p.112)

The scene when Bush returns after the others have left is very dramatic. Because Constable Dobson has stopped and questioned him in the lane, Bush believes that Lily "must 'ave blabbed and put him away" (p.113). Esson has prepared his audience for the confrontation between the two main characters, first by Bush's reluctance to tell Lily about his exploit and later by his warnings to her to be careful; still, it comes as a surprise to the audience, contrasting with the happiness exhibited in the first part of this act. The end of the scene when Lily makes desperate attempts to prevent Bush leaving her and he shakes her off angrily, striking her a blow as she falls, is dramatically exciting. This act is lively and well managed.

It is in Act III that the play descends into sentimentality. As Esson's wife was a doctor, the scene set in the "special ward" (p.115) of a public hospital would be authentic. The action of the plot slows down in the long conversations between the ballet girl, the washerwoman, the doctor and nurse which serve little dramatic purpose except

to contrast the ballet girl's bad temper with Lily's quiet patience. Perhaps the washerwoman's story serves as a parallel to Lily's because of her acceptance of a husband who for thirty years has earned nothing and has "knocked" (p.119) her about. It is not a particularly successful parallel.

Lily, who has been admitted "with an injury that brought on a haemorrhage" (p.125) is hoping that Bush will visit her. She does not blame him: "It was just a rotten mistake ... Bush never meant to hurt me. It was my weak chest" (p.124). Lily is grateful for the short period of happiness she has experienced. The next scene is well-managed and amusing. When Constable Dobson comes for her "dying declaration" she "covers her nervousness with a little pert air" (p.126). She acts in the heroic tradition as well as in the tradition of the convict ethic not to "squeal" (p.140) when she parries his questions. As she tells Delia, "What's the use o' juggin' a fine strong man like Bush for the sake of a girl like me" (p.129) and "I don't care what happens as long as he's safe" (p.128). Her quiet acceptance and death are followed by the nurse and doctor arranging to have supper together, while Lily is lying there dead - an ironic conjunction.

Act IV again set in Lily's house is a contrast to Act II. The room is subdued because Lily's body has been brought here to await the funeral. Dramatic tension is aroused to some extent because Delia hopes that Bush is at the door each time she opens it in turn to Milky, Smith, Renie and the Constable. Finally Bush comes, not knowing about

Lily's death. Everyone except Delia leaves. She gives him Lily's message. This is the real climax:

Bush: ... Damn the fight. I'd like to burst up the whole bloody show.

Delia: (slowly) Lily wanted you to win that fight. It was her last wish.

Bush: (trying his muscles) I will then. I'll win it for her ...

Delia: Think of your girl, and be a man for her sake ... (p.141)

As the curtain goes down, Bush is left alone calling "Lil! Lil!" crossing to the room where Lily lies in her coffin. This is a swift denouement.

This last scene would be difficult to play.

Writing in the Sunday Telegraph of 24 March 1974 after seeing Rodney Fisher's production of The Bride of Gospel Place on 9th March, Maria Prerauer declared:

The first sleazy cafe act really works. It's a succession of brilliant vignettes, a parade of underworld and underdog characters ... that might have stepped straight out of a sixty year old issue of the Bulletin. But today the other two corny acts don't - can't - come off ... The splendid cast all fight a losing battle to bring it back alive.⁶⁵

Gary Hutchinson, however, in his article, "Rescued from Oblivion" in the Australian of 22 March 1974 claimed that "the slightly melodramatic scenario is an example to bring home the sentimental nature of our regard for criminality" ... (p.11). He did not criticize the conclusion:

Even the exceedingly tragique declaration of Bush's love and determination to go on that closes the play didn't make me laugh; in fact it was quite moving. (Ibid.)

The characters are varied and interesting.

Gary Hutchinson was impressed by the character development

of Lily who changes from "a weak, self-pitying tubercular girl" to "a tough, self-reliant woman"⁶⁶. Lily's part in the play would be very demanding. In the first three acts, the action is focused on her. When she comes on stage in the first act, tired and despondent, dressed in white, she stands out in contrast to the bright, noisy crowd in the cafe. By the end of this act, she is one of the crowd, dancing happily because she and Bush have come together. During Acts II and III Lily is again the centre of attention while she and Bush work out their tragic love affair and while life in the hospital ward revolves around her. In Act IV the focus of attention turns on Bush.

One commentator, Helen Covernton in the Sunday Mail, praised "the gangland humour, the tongue in cheek cliches and sheer stoic goodwill" of the play⁶⁷ even though she believed it was sentimental after the first act.

There is humour in the play which does enliven some of the sentimental scenes. Perhaps the ballet girl is partly introduced into the play to supply some amusement. When the doctor announces that her "tetany" is "probably of parathyroid origin" Lily, doped by morphia, sits up and announces: "Eh, wait a bit! I want to back that both ways" (p.121).

In spite of the opinions of some critics, The Bride of Gospel Place does suffer from sentimentality. Esson, furthermore, slows down the action too much by spending too much time on exhibiting the habits and customs of his slum people.

Again, the change in viewpoint from that of

Lily to that of Bush at the end of the play somehow spoils the unity. After Lily has died, the long fourth act with her friends harping continually on the pathos of her death, is too banal. The audience grows tired of hearing about how unlucky she was. The conclusion, with Bush swearing to win his fight for Lily's sake, is almost an anti-climax. A fight against "Black Peter" seems incongruous in such circumstances.

Nevertheless, The Bride of Gospel Place possesses some interesting scenes and some praiseworthy character studies.

CHAPTER IV

OTHER PIONEER PLAYS

- i Plays Written by Vance Palmer
- ii Plays Written by Stewart Macky
- iii Plays Written by Katharine Susannah Prichard
- iv Frank Wilmot's Play, A Disturber of Pools
- v Frank Brown's Play, Mates
- vi Alan Mulgan and the Pioneer Plays
- vii Ernest O'Farrall's Play, The Bishop and
the Buns
- viii Gerald Byrne's Play, The New Bridge

PLAYS WRITTEN BY VANCE PALMER

Like Esson's dramas, Vance Palmer's plays are essentially Australian in setting and characterization. All of Palmer's Pioneer plays are set in the Australian cattle country. Palmer, moreover, was an apostle of mateship and egalitarianism. Furthermore, his aims in writing his plays were for naturalism and realism.

Nevertheless there are differences. Palmer wrote nothing as grim as Mother and Son and nothing as amusing as The Woman Tamer. Again, his characters are more like ordinary Australians than those of Esson's plays. There are no unusual people in Palmer's plays, yet these are the types that Esson prefers - the battler losing one fortune to gain another, the Koran-quoting bushworker and the farm boy who has great musical talent. Palmer's accordion player in A Happy Family is just an ordinary bushman with no desire for fame. Even his hatter in Travellers is not unusual. As Frank Dalby Davison wrote:

From the very beginning Palmer wrote on the sensible assumption that Australians were human beings complete in all natural attributes and that life here had a validity and interest equalling life elsewhere.

This is not to say that Esson's characters are unreal, but only that they are unusual. It would be easier for members of an audience to feel empathy with Palmer's characters because they are everyday people. Palmer, moreover, was more

interested in interaction among characters. Esson's characters are usually victims of fate whereas Palmer's are more victims of their own characters. He usually has commonsense solutions to problems as when the young lovers in A Happy Family decide to leave their feuding parents and the fathers become "mates" again, although in The Black Horse the father's intention to stop the son riding the horse comes too late.

As well as being important because they broaden the canvas of Australian drama by introducing different kinds of characters, Palmer's plays are also interesting because they shown signs of his attempts at some of the themes which are present in his later novels. In A Happy Family these are his interest in the family unit and the conflicts between two generations in it, each of which Palmer was to treat in a more masterly fashion in such novels as Daybreak (1932) and The Swayne Family (1934). Again, his play Travellers exhibits his interest in viewing "this jumbled society of ours from different levels of experience".² This is a major issue in his novels such as Seedtime (1957) and Golconda (1948). Furthermore, his fascination with environment and its influence on men which is revealed in The Black Horse, his play, is a central concern of The Passage (1930).

In addition, the same kinds of incidents and settings appear in Palmer's plays and some of his novels. There are picnic races, an artesian bore and an aboriginal settlement in A Happy Family and The Man Hamilton (1928). Water imagery appears in all three plays, always related to happiness (unlike water imagery in Esson's plays). The wife

in The Black Horse declares: "When I'm working among the oleanders I can pretend the sea is just down below the fence".³ (She hates the outback but finds pleasure in her garden.) In both A Happy Family and The Shanty Keeper's Daughter (1920) there is a feud and a "Romeo - Juliet" situation which is resolved by a show of commonsense when the two fathers meet. Moreover, in the short story, The Hermit in The World of Men (1915) a hermit called Joe has his life interrupted by travellers in somewhat the same way as does Joe, the hatter, in the play, Travellers.

Hence, although Palmer's contributions to the repertoire of the Pioneer Players were not of great intrinsic value, they were important in adding variety to the plays performed by the Pioneers, as well as acting as practical experience for his later novels.

A HAPPY FAMILY (1922)

The main theme of A Happy Family is the traditional one of two feuding families, the daughter of one being in love with the son of the other. The feud allows the presentation of two different ways of living, the selfish, miserly, hard-working life of the squatter, Bentley, and the co-operative, relaxed, cheerful life at the shanty which Con Bentley, the squatter's son, remembers as "his idea of a happy family".⁴ Although the author's sympathies are to a great extent with the poor shanty-keeper's family, he is not entirely without understanding of the squatter's point of view.

Palmer is more concerned with the question of economic circumstances than Esson is in his examination of various life styles.

Another issue taken up in A Happy Family is mateship. For Palmer it is simply the lasting obligation that a man has to someone who has been his mate. His emphasis, in contrast to Esson's, is on mateship's duration. The young lovers each question the failure of their fathers to live up to this creed. When Norah reminds Pat Landy of the time "when you were on the track with him (Bentley), sharing tucker and blankets", her father replies scornfully, "What does a young fellow know about the world? Full to the neck with sentiment about mateship and the like of that!" (Act I, p.5). Similarly, Con, criticising his father's behaviour, declares, "All the same, a mate's a mate. No-one can go back on that". (Act II, p.2). Bentley shows his own consciousness of the bond in his assertion, "I'm not going to have the crowd in the pub say I've ruined an old mate" (Act IV, p.33), when he tries to buy the shanty to prevent the lovers coming together. In the end, mateship wins out. Esson described the last scene between "the two old mates" to Brodney:

Instead of them rushing at each other they happen to talk of old times; and before they know, they are yarning together and recalling old mates and the horses they put through together in the Cooper. (Letter postmarked "9 Oct., 1922")

Esson's estimate of Palmer's play shows discernment. In the same letter he called it:

a very simple play, with more story than mine, well written, a comedy that never touched tragedy or suggested farce.

[The play is traditional in structure. The situation between

the two families is quickly evident in the opening scene at the shanty. Norah and her sister Etty are preparing for the arrival of the coach. Norah deplores her father's behaviour in the feud and reveals that Con will be on the coach; he left home six years before when his father remarried and began to become mean. Tension is built up as Mrs Landy declares that Con will side with his father. With the arrival of Etty's fiancé, Dave Watson, and his brother Steve, who plays the accordion, more dramatic tension is developed. They bring fresh meat which was taken from one of Bentley's steers. Norah's apprehension about possible police action by the squatter is ignored. The first act ends with the arrival of the coach. At Con's insistence they all dance to the accordion. There is irony in his pleasure at returning to find "a happy family".

The opening of Act II presents a contrast. Bentley, eating his solitary breakfast, displays his way of keeping "everybody's nose to the grindstone" (p.13). The rising action begins with the quarrel between father and son. When he learns that Dave has been brought in in handcuffs, Con leaves, declaring that he will not return. Thus the two questions raised in Act I, Con's stand and possible police action, have been answered with Dave's arrest and Con's choice of action.

In Act III, tension increases as the audience waits to see what will happen to Dave and whether Con can persuade Norah to leave her feuding father. There is a double climax. The lovers decide to elope. Bentley will not give evidence against Dave who is released. The falling action begins with Bentley's efforts to buy out Landy, not

knowing that the lovers are married. Mateship is the catalyst which reconciles the feuding men. Once this friendship is re-established, Norah and Con return. The denouement is the celebration of the marriage at the shanty. All are now "one happy family"

Esson described the reconciliation scene as "well prepared for" in his letter to Brodney. Indeed, in many ways, Palmer's play is well constructed. There are no scenes or characters unrelated to the plot. The settings are described in a naturalistic manner but they are never noticeable in the story as, for example, the scenery is in Esson's Mother and Son. The bore, for instance, in Palmer's play is part of the story because it shows Bentley's desire for more profits and because Dave is welcomed there by Bentley's employees, a warning to the squatter that his feud is not popular. Yet it is never described by any character. As V. Smith asserts, however, the two worlds "that of youthful love and aging enmity are not integrated into a convincing dramatic whole" although there is "colour and freshness" in the dance and song scene which "suggests a world of youth and happiness away from the obsessed world of the feud".⁵

Like his settings, Palmer's characters are not memorable in any way. They speak, usually, as ordinary people in ordinary situations, except Con who is rather wooden in action. Their speech is educated English, unlike many of Esson's characters. This, however, is explained. Dave is a "station boy" whose father owned land. Mrs Landy, who eloped with Landy years before with Bentley's help, also came from an educated family. The

attitudes of the characters, however, are not always conventional. The feud had started because "old Bentley accused" Landy "of putting his brand on Glenbar calves" (p.3). Etty admits that this could have been true, but she asks, "Do you think old Bentley's never put his brand on calves that came into his yard?" (p.4). Public opinion is on Dave's side, even though he is guilty. Mrs. Landy remarks, about picking a jury, "I didn't see a man I wouldn't trust my freedom with, if I'd committed murder itself " (p.23). Con, the squatter's son, regards Dave's arrest as an "infernal joke" (p.21). The attitude shown to the law resembles that of Esson's characters in his city plays.

Yet there is never any suggestion that Palmer's characters are victims of fate, whereas Esson's characters usually are. Con and Norah are not 'star-crossed lovers'. They are young people who use common sense to guide them and who are not afraid to think for themselves.

The humour which enlivens the action is, like all the other elements of the play, well integrated into the story but it is not particularly subtle. In all, A Happy Family is quite a competent piece of stagecraft, even though it lacks any great originality in setting, story or characterization.

TELLING MRS BAKER

When Palmer adapted Lawson's short story, Telling Mrs Baker, for the stage, he altered the conclusion. The Bulletin of 28 September 1922 mentioned that "Henry

seemed pleased with the idea" of a stage version of his story.⁶ According to H.M.Green, Lawson knew and approved of Palmer's arrangement of his story".⁷ The latter had "arranged to produce the play" for Lawson's birthday, as a "tribute" to a man "who had opened up a new world for us in our youth" but "before that date came he was dead".⁸ In Lawson's short story Mrs Baker remains ignorant of the real nature of her husband. In Palmer's adaptation she knows all the time that the drovers, Andy and Jack, are lying, although the audience does not realize this until the end of the play. She accepts their behaviour as that of "good mates to him".⁹ After the drovers have gone, in the play, Mrs Baker asks her sister, "Do you think Robert and I have lived together all these years without knowing one another through and through?". Apparently Palmer had decided that his ending was more realistic. H.M. Green agrees:

For what nowadays appears a sentimental ending, Palmer has substituted the dramatically effective discovery that Mrs Baker knew the truth about her husband all the time. (p.684)

Nevertheless, when reading Lawson's story, few people are conscious of any lack of realism. Lawson's ending suits the development of the theme on mateship whereas the stage version loses the impact of the short story. In Lawson's work the sister, called Miss Standish, tells the drovers who have lied to Mrs Baker to save her husband's reputation:

I want to thank you for her sake. You are good men. I like the bushmen. They are grand men - they are noble. (Joe Wilson's Mates, p.172)

This speech is not included in the play. Furthermore, there is no record of why the sister's name was changed to Esther Reeves in the play.

The central concern of Lawson's story in his own version is the conflict between the code of mateship practised by the drovers and their desire to be truthful. Their code requires them to look after Baker while he wastes his money on a barmaid and drinks himself to death, and to see that his wife believes that he lived and died nobly. This they are prepared to do, even though they disliked Baker. On the other hand, as Jack points out to Andy, "If she knew he was only a selfish, drunken waster she might get over it all the sooner." (p.163) Because he was their mate, however, they believe, "We've got to do the best for him now" (Ibid) In the end the conflict is resolved because after they have told Mrs. Baker what a fine man her husband was, they tell the truth, in confidence, to her sister.

Esson described this to Brodney as a "quiet play". (Letter postmarked "9 Oct., 1922") The short story was not so quiet as Mrs Baker broke down and sobbed whereas in the play she just lies back while little Bobby asks his questions. Palmer's play confuses the audience because of Mrs Baker's revelation at the end. She then appears to have been playing a part in agreeing with the drovers about Baker. Palmer does not even clarify this by suggesting that the wife had some affection for her husband. Apart from this, the dramatization of Lawson's work has removed the narrator from the original story. This means that the atmosphere of the play has changed since the story had been told entirely from the viewpoint of Jack, the drover, who emphasised the code of mateship continually. In the play the drovers seem more concerned with telling their story to please Mrs Baker so she will have pleasant memories of her husband

rather than because Baker was their mate.

What H.Heseltine wrote about Palmer's plays in general would apply particularly to Telling Mrs Baker:

The total pattern of dialogue and action, displayed within the visually naturalistic framework, has an impact that is both crude and superficial.¹⁰

TRAVELLERS

Palmer's central concern in Travellers is the confrontation of people with different attitudes to life. Not only is the hatter's lonely existence twenty years in the out-back, living in an isolated hut, contrasted with that of the three travellers, but each of these also despises the way of life led by the other two. The author is thus able to examine the social snobbery shown by the housekeeper to the barmaid and their criticism of the politician's selfish self-esteem. The hatter and the barmaid are presented as the most admirable of the group.

Another issue is embodied in the final words of the play, spoken by Mick, the driver of the flood-bound coach, to Shanty Joe, the hatter. "It's a poor shower of rain that doesn't put a drop of water in somebody's tank"(p.62). Mick is speaking metaphorically as he gloats over the chicken and wine left by the travellers in their haste to get to the squatter's homestead. Joe had put forward the same idea, literally, when the coach travellers were complaining about the weather:

If you'd been living here you wouldn't growl about a bit of mud. It's the first rain we've had this five months. Horses so poor they wouldn't throw a shadow. (p.50)

The action advances through the dialogue. There are a series of short scenes, usually between two characters only, with Joe supplying an occasional comment. The first, a discussion between Joe and the politician, Rodgers, establishes the situation of the three travellers forced to take shelter in Joe's poor hut, and shows Rodger's entire lack of gratitude. The next, between all the travellers and Joe, isolates Alice, the barmaid as the only one prepared to endure their hardships cheerfully. When she leaves the stage to change into dry clothes, Mrs. Grimes, the housekeeper, complains about Alice's lack of refinement while Rodgers, like a typical politician, flatters her. When Mrs Grimes leaves to change, Rodgers flatters Alice who is unimpressed by his superior position in life. The three travellers, settling down to a meal with wine provided by Alice and chicken by Mrs Grimes, agree that "the sharing of common hardships is the surest way of making people stick together," (p.57) as Rodgers expresses it. "This camaraderie of the road" (Ibid.) is ironically interrupted when Rodgers departs with a squatter who offers him shelter for the night. As the two women criticize Rodger's selfishness in leaving them unprotected, Joe announces that the squatter will also take them to his home. No-one thanks Joe who utters the final criticism:

And good riddance. Talk talk! There's never been such a lot of magging in this hut since that black cockatoo died ... Talk, talk! Nothing good enough for them travellers. They'd bone your bed and clean you out of tucker, without so much as saying thanks. (pp.61-62)

There is really no climax in the play. It is just an illustration of how three people react in an unexpected situation. Vivian Smith points out that Palmer possesses "a fine ear for the nuances of social pretention"¹² and it is evident in the dialogue of Travellers. The characters are not particularly realistic. In the short space of the play, as H.Heseltine has asserted:

The two women from differing social classes are forced to make their reaction to the puffed up male so overtly the medium for Palmer's comic judgement as seriously to₁₃ endanger their existence as dramatised characters.

The latter does not behave in the way that an audience expects. He shows more sense and courtesy than the travellers.

Nevertheless, Travellers is quite an entertaining sketch with lively dialogue and ironical humour which, although it is not subtle, still develops naturally from the situation in the play.

THE BLACK HORSE

The Black Horse is Palmer's only tragic play. His others in contrast to this one had all been similar in their everyday atmosphere and commonsense resolutions.

This play is also more complex in its themes than any of his others. It is concerned with the outback and with its influence on the characters of its inhabitants. In this theme it resembles, somewhat, Esson's play, The Drovers. Each writer manages to bring the outback on to the stage by employing a character who is almost identified

with it but Harry Bain is not a figure the audience can admire whereas Briglow Bill is. The Black Horse is, moreover, about opposing attitudes to life represented by Harry Bain and his wife, Rhoda, attitudes which cause the destruction of what each values most - their son. Thus it deals with the psychological implications of family antipathies. It is the land which has made Harry Bain callous and hard, and Rhoda tense and unhappy because she was crippled by a fall from a horse bred on it. The outback is immediately brought to the audience's attention by contrast, in Rhoda's explanation, in the first few lines of the play, of the pleasure she experiences in her garden:

Do you know there was a dew this morning, and it made everything so different. I could have worked for hours, weeding and laying out new beds, if that freshness had only lasted. (p.7)

Her complaint that when "the sun rose and sucked it all up" there was not "a cool spot in the whole garden" (p.8) anticipates the resolution of the play. As at the beginning, so also at the end, the outback with its heat and hardness is in control.

The conflict between the father and mother over the son Walter is also established almost immediately. He is discontented because his mother wants him to follow a profession instead of going on the land. As he is seventeen years old, he resents her over-protective attitude towards him. Yet Walter does not seem enthusiastic about station life since he has not risen early to join the men in their work. Although he envies his father's toughness, the boy intends to spend the day reading beneath the grape vines.

The contrasting attitudes of the parents are emphasised by the observant housekeeper's words to Walter,

when the mother has left the stage:

It's a pity we weren't all made of cast iron.
Your mother is unlike the Boss, as could be.
She ought to have the kind of life where there'd
be balls, and flash dresses, and people saying
nice things to her. (p.11)

With the arrival of Harry Bain there is a confrontation between father and son. Walter, inspired by his father's enthusiasm, is quite willing to help with "the wild scrubbers".(p.13) He is, however, apprehensive about "tackling the black horse". (Ibid.) When Walter agrees to ride the black horse and leaves to do so, the father appears to have won the contest over his son. There is a pause in the action while Harry Bain makes light of an injury to his hand, thus demonstrating his own toughness in contrast to the soft, yielding image which Walter has projected. The tension begins to rise again as Mary, the housekeeper, asks, "Do you think Mr Walter's old enough to tackle that black horse ... They all say it's bad".(p.15)

The dramatic tension increases when Mrs Bain comes in and quarrels with her husband about Walter riding the horse. The sympathy of the audience, which had previously not been with the wife, now swings round to her as Harry Bain's thoughtless brutality is revealed. He had even sold, at a profit, the horse which injured her. Palmer, however, does not make Harry an entirely unsympathetic figure since the father points out that he wants Walter "to look after this place when I peg out". (p.17) Rhoda declares that someone else can be found to do this. As recriminations mount, Harry offers to stop Walter riding the horse. The tension subsides but only briefly. Walter has already been

thrown by the horse. This is the climax.

The scene which follows is psychologically convincing in demonstrating the reactions of mother, father and son to the accident and in showing the complex relationships between the three characters. After Walter is carried in, Harry shows some apprehension by sending for the doctor although he is sure that Walter is not really hurt. Having shot the black horse, he feels that he has atoned for persuading Walter to ride it. Walter blames his mother for his fall:

Mum, why did you always keep me away from the yard?...
You didn't give me a chance ... I was in a funk.
That was what the trouble was. (p.25)

Later, he tells her, "Other boys never looked ahead. I always saw myself thrown before I was in the saddle." (p.26) Rhoda, however, unaware that he is dying, thinks of the accident as a blessing:

I've watched the hot winds dry up the garden and
felt I was being dried up, too, like a plant
without roots. If this is a means of getting
you away from the life here, I'll thank God on
my knees ... year after year I've sat on that
verandah, looking out over the mulga, and wonder-
ing if I'd ever get away from a world that wasn't
harsh and grey. (p.26)

The dramatic irony is compounded by Walter's desire to have one more chance to ride the horse and by his father's thoughtless declaration after killing the horse: "Well, that's settled ... Come on, Walter ... A breath of fresh air will make a man of you." (p.27) The introduction of the garden imagery in the mother's speech, with the contrast of the hard grey mulga, reinforces the importance of the outback in the action.

The imagery of the play is usually well integrated

with the theme. The black horse, which represents the destructive antipathy between man and woman and their attitudes to life, also acts as a catalyst. The contrast between the hard, dry landscape which represents the father and the cultivated garden which suggests the mother, is dramatically effective. It is not, however, particularly well related to the plot. It appears only at the beginning and the end.

The complexity of the story is intriguing. The son blames the mother for his failures because she coddled him. She blames the father because he was partly responsible for her injury which led to the coddling of the son for which the father also blames her. The real culprit is the harsh country which made the man hard and the horse wild. The ambivalence of Palmer's attitudes, with his sympathy moving between the two parents, is thought provoking. At the same time, Palmer is examining the myth of the outback in which courage is confused with thoughtlessness and callousness.

PLAYS WRITTEN BY STEWART MACKY

JOHN BLAKE

The two plays written by Stewart Macky and produced by the Pioneer Players were both historical plays set in early convict days in Australia.

It is to be regretted that Macky destroyed the only copy of John Blake, his long play, which had been staged in August 1922, as it appears to have been one of the first serious attempts to write an Australian historical play using material about the convict system. Vance Palmer could not understand why the play had not met with more success:

Macky's play itself did not rasp the nerves with prison cruelties; the first act was set entirely in an early Sydney drawing-room, the last in a Melbourne middle-class house, and some of the scenes were gay with costumes and light chatter of the period; but a curious tradition had insisted that all treatment of convict days should be tabu.¹⁴

The Australasian of 19 August 1922 described it as "a drama in four acts dealing with the administration of penal institutions of the early convict days".¹⁵

The story appears to have been about a convict in service with John Blake who was badly treated and who killed his master some years later. In the programme in the Palmer Papers, the first act is "John Blake's Home, Sydney", the second is "Outside the Commandant's Home, Norfolk Island", the third is "A Corner of the Jail Yard, Norfolk Island (early morning)" and the fourth is "John Blake's House, Williamstown". The action takes place between 1826 and 1843.¹⁶

The programme's declaration that "certain episodes have been taken from the official History Records and the works of the late Price Warung" gave reviewers the opportunity to make comparisons between these and John Blake. It is from these reviews that some information about the play can be gained. The Bulletin reviewer appeared to be very knowledgeable about the records and about the works

of Price Warung when he claimed:

... it is clear that the Warrington who is a victim of John Blake's "systematic" harshness in 1826 and who ultimately murders him at Williamstown in 1843 (even as John Price, father of Col. Tom Price, was done to death by vengeful lugs) is a perversion of the historic character of pickpocket Harrington¹⁷ who flourished in Sydney under Governor Phillip.¹⁸

His later reference to the pickpocket Warrington, who starts by "picking earrings from Mrs Blake's ears" and later becomes "a savage animal" because of "John Blake's malignity" gives an outline of the play. His interpolation about John Price indicates that there is some connection between the reason for his death and the reason for the death of John Blake. A further reference in the Bulletin review is to "a bright little kiddie" in the play who innocently adds, "God damn John Blake" to her evening prayers. This seems to have been taken from Warung's story, "John Price's Bar of Steel"¹⁹ in which John Price's son adds this to his prayers when he is taught to do so by a convict servant who has a grudge against Price because he is being returned to the convict prison. Price sends his son with a bar of steel for the convict who is whipped when it is found in his possession. In the same review, moreover, there is praise for the scene:

described as "a corner of the gaol yard, Norfolk Island" where a voice puts the dim and ghostly lugs through their satanic catechism of hate ... Warrington is sworn in as appointed slayer of John Blake, after having been incited by another convict ... to join the ring.

This scene surely would be based on Price Warung's story, "Secret Society of the Ring".²⁰

How successful Macky's adaptation of his material was is difficult to judge, since the reviews were not enthusiastic in their reactions to the play, as has already been noted in Chapter I.

As the Pioneer playwrights were particularly anxious to be realistic and to avoid melodrama, the Bulletin's suggestions for the play would not have met with Macky's approval:

Though destitute of hero, heroine or 'heart', it is worth considering. Padded, picturesquely staged and acted by forcible professionals, it would at least be a melodrama of importance, abhorrent and more interesting to thinkers than any version of "His Natural Life".

The Australasian of 19 August 1922 regarded it as "an interesting piece of work" for "a first play"²¹ and the Argus called it "a set of episodes rather than a drama".²² Esson told Brodney (in his letter postmarked "9 Oct. 1922") that "the psychology of the leading characters is not as convincing as it might be".

In all, John Blake remains an intriguing mystery.

THE TRAP

The Trap, Macky's one-act play which was performed in October, 1922 and again in August 1923 is based on a short story by Price Warung called "Captain MacConochie's Bounty for Crime" which had been originally published in

the Bulletin of 27 February 1892. It was republished in Tales of the Early Days (Melbourne 1892, pp.1-20). The story itself was based on a report from MacConochie to Gipps on 20 March 1841 (pp.14-27) which was printed in an enclosure in a despatch from Gipps to Lord Russel, 1 May 1841;; the despatch was included in a volume, Correspondence Relative to the Convict System Administered in Norfolk Island published as volume 7, "Convict Discipline" of the Parliamentary Papers (House of Lords, Victoria) 15 vols. London 1846. (There is a copy in the Melbourne Parliamentary Library.)

Macky, who made a wise choice of story, followed the original by Price Warung quite closely, using some of the original names and much of the dialogue of the short story. He did, however, change the spelling of Maconochie to McConochie. He changed the convict's name from Tracey to Strude, possibly because the name "Swinger Strude" caught his imagination. There is no Johnson in the original short story and no mention of a grass hut as the setting of the story. The time sequence is changed in the play. In Price Warung's version it is several days later that the convict is told the lie that Maconochie had muskets trained on him while he talked with Mrs Maconochie. In Macky's version Tuff tells Strude immediately after Mrs McConochie leaves. Strude reacts brutally at first but then realises that Tuff is lying. In Price Warung's story, Tracey believes the warder and sinks back into degradation. Another difference in the two versions is in the climax. In the story there is no suggestion that Mrs Maconochie was

once a convict nor does Tracy take fits. Mrs Maconochie leaves the convict sobbing and the reader is not told what took place in the five minutes they were alone together.

The play examines the use of humanitarian methods in dealing with convicts. Macky uses unity of time and place with the setting being a grass hut on Norfolk Island in 1840.

The action proceeds by means of several conflicts. The opening conflict is between McConochie and the two warders who wish to keep to the old regulations and who plan to frustrate McConochie's intentions. Within this conflict is the confrontation between Captain McConochie 'king of the lags' and Strude, the incorrigible, whom the captain attempts to convert by kindness. This is followed by the conflict of wills between Strude and Margaret McConochie. There is, also, the conflict being slowly resolved within the mind of Strude himself between his desire to be treated like a man and his belief in and loyalty to the creed of the hardened convicts, the 'lags'. The opening conflict is resolved at the end of the play.

The play is traditional in structure. It is lively and unusual in action and atmosphere. The opening dialogue between the warder Tuff and the overseer Johnson quickly establishes the situation and atmosphere. Their disapproval of the new commandant's desire to introduce more humane treatment for convicts is immediately clear. They believe it will lead to mutiny. No words are wasted. Their use of what McConochie later refers to as "'flash patter' that serves for the Queen's English on Norfolk

Island"²³ sets them apart from the normal world. The tone of the play which is at first humorous with Tuff's efforts to get rid of his "hiccups", becomes more serious as he and the overseer plot to frustrate their commandant's humane intentions. Their fear of the convicts is conveyed effectively to the audience. It is highlighted when the governor, on his arrival, asks Johnson to look after five convicts (one of whom is to be Strude) who are to be allowed freedom to cultivate a farm. Johnson tells McConochie he prefers to commit suicide. The audience learns of the brutal treatment of the convicts when Johnson's statement that he "came down on the truck" is elucidated. The truck which brings down supplies is pulled along by convicts.

Tension mounts with the rising action when McConochie asks Tuff when he brings Strude in, to remove the convict's leg-irons and handcuffs. Swinger Strude's brute-like nature is projected well. As soon as Tuff begins to read his record, Strude brazenly finishes it for him:

... of unnatural crimes - one murder - three 'ighway robberies, sex assaults and a heap of other things ... so now you know me, yer flash blade. Gi'e us five hundred kisses o' Madam Cat an' 'ave done wi' it. Look slippy, ol' King o' the Lags. (p.261)

The conflict between governor and convict for the convict's reform begins without promise. Strude lives up to his reputation by giving Tuff "a swinging blow" which "floors him". (Ibid.) The captain, however, persists. He orders Johnson and Tuff to leave him alone with Strude. Again, dramatic tension mounts as Strude "leaps tigerishly at Captain McConochie who fells him with a clean blow to the

jaw". (p.264) When Strude, expecting to be sent to the gallows, is helped to his feet by the captain, he regards this unusual reaction to his crime as "a bloody trap".

(Ibid.) The tension increases with the convict's reply to McConochie's question "What proof do you want" (that it is no trap)? Strude, smiling "evilly to himself" (p.265) asks for five minutes alone with the captain's lovely wife whom they have both been watching through the window.

Thus the conflict between captain and convict now continues in the form of a confrontation between Margaret McConochie and Strude. She is quite confident as she assures her husband, "I shall be able to manage him".

(p.266) This is a remarkable scene, different from any others in the Pioneer plays, not only because of what the Bulletin had described as "rather audacious for Melbourne"²⁴ - the incident of Margaret pulling down her stocking to show her ankle - but for other reasons, too. The convict's reactions to an attractive woman are realistically portrayed, as when Strude exclaims to her:

Take your hand off me. Do you want to set me on fire? I be a man still, if I be a lag - so your ol' King of the Lag's been telling me! (Sneering) (p.208)

The scene, moreover, possesses humour with Margaret McConochie's confidence in her ability to manage Strude being realized in action:

Strude: (clumsily) I never be a ladies' man.

Mrs McConochie: Come now, did you never take off your hat to a lady?

Strude: Beg pardon, ma'am. (Quickly doffs cap. Mrs. McConochie laughs.) Wot yer laughing at?

There is a rise in dramatic tension when Strude, becoming aware that she has caused him to revert to his behaviour in the days before he became a convict, shows his anger and bewilderment by threatening her:

Ain't yer galley? I be a bad kracter. I be one of the worst codgers on the island an' I got yer at my mercy - a 'connosier' in murder. What the 'ell are you laughing at? (Ibid.)

Strude tells her about his treatment on the island. When he has a fit (probably epileptic) the warders "string me up in the wall cuffs" (p.268) and feed him bread and water until he is ready to work again. Although the tension subsides as the two characters become friendly, Strude is still determined to "fight 'thorities" which he has sworn to do "on the lag's bible" (p.268). The climax comes with his assertion:

You haven't been tied up, stretched out on the triangles till you can't move a finger waitin' for the swish swish ... (p.269)

and Mrs McConochie rolls down her stocking to show him the scar made by double leg irons, used only on incorrigible convicts. She points out that Captain McConochie saved her and he can save Strude. The falling action begins with Strude's belief that he now has Margaret "trapped". He exclaims, "Come on, my gay ragged dozy. One kiss and I'm your true man for ever". (p.272) She, however, declares:

The trap's within you, Strude. He trusted you. You know he trusted you. Now kiss me if you dare. (Ibid.)

Mrs McConochie wins.. "Mat, I'm real proud of you", she says. The dialogue is interrupted because Strude is about to have one of his fits. After McConochie takes away his wife, who is now showing signs of strain, Tuff and Johnson

kick Strude viciously in order to show him that he is still a convict. They tell him that he was "covered wi' three carbines" (p.273). For a few minutes he reverts to his previous animal-like state, rushing to the door while the warders cower in fear. Dramatic tension arises again. Yet McConochie has really won. Strude turns, with his hands held out for the handcuffs:

This ain't no put up affair. You can laugh if
you like. I be a man. 'E trusted me ... I
be a man. (p.273)

Although the Bulletin reviewer claimed that this play "puts a strain on probability that no amateurs are equal to"²⁵, it is very dramatic. The variety of moods - humour, pity and terror - grips the attention of the audience. The characters are arresting. Strude, in particular, is an unusual character study, a picture of a man thoroughly brutalized by "the system".

iii

PLAYS WRITTEN BY KATHARINE SUSANNAH PRICHARD

Katharine Susannah Prichard's plays, The Great Man (August 1923) and Pioneers (December 1923) are among the first plays concentrating on domestic life, written by an Australian. In each of these plays the action is seen most of the time through the eyes of a woman who shows a desire to think for herself rather than conform to the ideas of those around her.

Her interest in the attitudes of women to love and childbirth in The Great Man foreshadows the same concerns in her novel, Intimate Strangers (London, 1937). Moreover, her sympathy with the underdog in Pioneers is a feeling which is present in much of her later work. The parents' expectations in The Great Man that the baby who is "the great man" will revolutionize the world reflect Miss Prichard's political views. The parents' final decision that they must direct all their efforts towards raising "the great man" for this purpose could be compared to that of Greg. and Elodie who, in Intimate Strangers (p401) decide to save their marriage by working for social justice. Miss Prichard was to write the play, Brumby Innes, which won the Triad award in 1927. It was not to be performed, however, until 1972, because of its frank approach to marriage and to aboriginal problems.²⁶

THE GREAT MAN

In her autobiography, Child of the Hurricane, Katharine Susannah Prichard recalls how she used to leave a note on "the dinner table" for her husband when she "finished a story or play". She quotes the one written on the completion of The Great Man:

Katharine Susannah Prichard requests the pleasure of the company of Hugo Vivien Throssell V.C. to a reading of her new play, "The Great Man", at - what time Himself decides to sleep - on the side verandah. (p.257)

Miss Prichard's unpublished three-act comedy is the only play, apart from A Disturber of Pools, of all those acted by the Pioneer Players which is a genuine attempt to put on the stage a sincere representation of the middle-class life of the early nineteen-twenties, with which the Pioneer Players and their audience were familiar. It is possibly the first domestic comedy written by an Australian which makes an honest attempt to reproduce this life. It suffers, however, from a failure in realism due to the over-simplification of the minor characters in an effort to make it amusing, as well as a lack of clarity in the third act as to just what are its central issues.

Miss Prichard's note on the front of the script in the Campbell Howard collection is an example of the need for a playwright to see his play rehearsed so that he can alter it if necessary:

The play was cut a good deal, evidently. There is a note by Hilda Esson on one page (of the original): "Acts I and II as in original, Act III revised". I did not see the production, so don't know where the cuts were made.

The Great Man's main concern appears to be that people must face facts and make the best of things as they are, rather than have their heads in the clouds. What happens is that a romantic and impractical young married couple, Isabel and Robert Kennedy, both very much in love, believe that a baby is "the one thing they need to complete their happiness".²⁷ Ironically, the new baby nearly breaks up their marriage.

The setting in each act is the drawing room of

the comfortable, middle-class home of Maggie Gray, Robert's sister. In the first two acts it is neat and tidy with fresh flowers on the table. In Act III there are "withered flowers on the table" (p.17) and the room is in disorder, reflecting the state of mind of Isabel and Robert.

The play opens at 1.30 a.m. with Robert, Vi his sister-in-law, Maggie and Hebe, Maggie's maid, all awaiting the arrival of the doctor. Robert and Isabel, because the roof blew off their shack and there is a housing shortage, are staying with Maggie. Since the baby is arriving two weeks before expected, there is no room at the hospital for Isabel. The atmosphere is expectant with some comic relief as Maggie is cheerfully assuring Robert that "she'll be worse before she's better" (p.1) at short intervals while Hebe continually asks them all, "Will y' have a cup of tea?" (Ibid.) When the doctor and nurse arrive and Robert goes with them to see Isabel, the play becomes a dialogue between Vi and Maggie with occasional interruptions by Hebe and by Robert who is now pacing the garden. This dialogue completes the exposition of the play by revealing the excitable, impractical characters of Robert and Isabel and also Maggie's and Hebe's resentment at having their comfortable life disturbed. Maggie declares that Robert, although "a dear boy", is "rather irresponsible" (p.5) and Isabel, although "a dear girl" is "so untidy". (Ibid.). She agrees that they have been "ideally happy" like "lovers in poems and things". (Ibid.). Vi recalls their marriage and Isabel's ex-fiance:

I feel quite storm-tossed when I think of it. One telegraph boy chasing another up the garden path, Rodriguez imploring Isabel to see him - threatening to kill himself, cut Robert's throat, blow all their brains out. (Ibid.)

Robert singing and shouting all over the place - and mother wanting to give Isabel a slap-up wedding. But no, they said, they didn't mind whether they were married or not. (p.6)

Already, Vi points out, their unconventional behaviour extends to the unborn child. They have some "very queer ideas":

That's why they call the babe "the great man". Expect him to revolutionize the world, abolish poverty, misery, battle, murder and sudden death ... Awfully boring for the poor lamb, don't you think? He'll have to be always organizing something - like Bob and Isabel. (Ibid.)

At the end of Act I, a "shrill cry is heard" and "the great man" (p.8) as Robert announces, has arrived.

Act II shows the changes in the household caused by the baby's arrival. Hebe quarrels continually with the nurse because she steals hot water all the time and "I can't get me dishes washed or anything" (p.10) as she complains. Robert threatens to "clear them both out and do everything myself". (Ibid.). Isabel feels that "the world is full of microbes ... millions of them lying in wait for the baby as if the air were full of dragons" (Ibid.). Robert is worried about Isabel. "If only you wouldn't worry" he tells her (Ibid.). She tells Maggie, "He's worried about my being worried until I'm nearly worried out of my wits". (Ibid.). Maggie disagrees with the nurse who wants the baby fed at regular intervals but Vi agrees with the nurse. When visitors arrive for a neighbourly chat, one keeps seeing a strong resemblance between Isabel's baby and "our little Pauley that died". (Ibid.). Robert gives the baby his "dirty old manurey thumb to suck". (p.14). The baby cries at intervals. Isabel becomes hysterical and when the nurse and Hebe argue, Robert sacks Hebe without realizing that the nurse is leaving next

day. Maggie goes off to stay with her sister, leaving Robert and Isabel alone in the house to cope with "the great man" and the household chores.

The act ends with Robert, his arms around Isabel, reassuring her, "Don't cry, darling. We'll manage. It'll be fine having the place to ourselves, won't it?" (p.16),

There is irony in Robert's words because life for Isabel and the baby is not fine, when the curtain rises on Act III "a few weeks later". (p.17). The atmosphere is still tense. Unsympathetic Maggie, who comes for some of her clothes, complains about her undusted china bureau and her blackened saucepans. When Isabel is rude to her, Robert quarrels with his wife. Seeing how tired she is, he offers to get dinner but becomes angry when he cannot find the French mustard because Isabel has put it in the wrong place. Recriminations fly as he accuses her of no longer loving him because she has only time for the baby. She denies this but admits that "the guilt is off the ginger bread" (p.21). This is the climax. The baby wakes at intervals during the quarrel and Isabel sings him to sleep. During dinner they are friends again, "Quite like old times - before he came," (p.22) says Robert. Isabel, too, appears to resent the baby: "Your sister Maggie used to say, 'My dear, you don't know what true happiness is, until you have a child'" (p.23). Still, they agree that their "job" is to "rear this infant" (Ibid.). When Isabel decides to return to the shack where they were happy, Robert is dubious but he helps her with preparations. The baby, however, arranges the denouement by beginning to sneeze when they are ready to go out into the cold. Robert shows some sense of responsibility

by reiterating what Isabel said previously. "We've got to settle down to reality", (p.24) he says, and Isabel adds, "and count our blessings". She promises to "dust the china and scrub the pot bottoms". She agrees with Robert:

If only you and I, and the great man, are all together, we'll make a do of things anywhere, won't we? (Ibid.)

As Isabel goes to put the baby back to bed, Robert promises to wash up.

The last act is disappointing. It really does not solve anything. Isabel has been already doing her best with the baby. Robert has caused most of her problems by sacking Hebe. There is, moreover, no suggestion that Isabel is now going to be free of the gratuitous suggestions from Maggie. The review of The Great Man, published in the Bulletin of 23 August 1922 declared that:

Hilda Bull as the wife appeared to take its (the play's) torch bearing conclusion as a profound Ibsenish flourish.

This could mean that the Pioneers changed the ending so that the wife asserted herself, demanding more help and consideration. Furthermore, the same review referred to Robert as "the under-done father" which would be consistent with this kind of ending. Such a conclusion would follow naturally from the events in the play, although it may have displeased a male reviewer.

The play is enlivened by the constant humour which pervades it until towards the end of the third act. Hebe (apparently named after the cupbearer of the Greek gods) with her constant offer of cups of tea and her production of whisky, served in a teacup, for Vi, is amusing. The scene

where Mrs Peabody compares the baby with her Pauley possesses wry comedy. The conflicting views on how to feed the baby show humour. The dialogue between Maggie and Vi is clever, with Maggie siding with her brother and Vi with her sister:

Maggie: Oh well, it's nice to think they are safely married.

Vi: If eugenics mean anything this baby ought to be out of the ordinary.

Maggie: Dear Robert!

Vi: Dear Isabel!

Maggie: My brother is physically a perfect specimen of a man. Old Colonel Walker said to me one day, pointing to Robert. It was on the railway station, I remember. He said ... pointing to Robert. Dear me (inspecting the knitting more closely). There's something wrong here. Two pearl, two plain, two pearl. He said ... pointing to Robert ... he said: That's the type of man we ought to breed from.

Vi: And my sister has brains for both. (p.61)

Furthermore, the situations in the play are authentic and the main characters are realistic. Isabel's part would be most demanding. The baby, for which a doll was used, as would be expected, might not appear realistic if the actress playing Isabel was at all weak. Robert is a character who does behave in the manner in which a thoughtless new father could, trying to help his wife but only causing her trouble. The minor characters, however, are not three-dimensional. Maggie is too unsympathetic to be entirely realistic. Hebe, also, is a caricature. Mrs Peabody could not have been so stupid and tactless. Competent actors would, however, give comic performances in the parts of these characters.

PIONEERS

Pioneers is a one-act play following closely the events of the first six chapters of Miss Prichard's novel The Pioneers (Adelaide, 1915) which had won the Hodder and Stoughton £1000 prize. In the Preface she had declared that she had made notes for her novel "about 1903 when I was twenty and living in South Gippsland" and that these were based on "yarns and gossip I heard there" (p.5),

Like Stewart Macky's play, The Trap, Pioneers is concerned with attitudes towards convicts. In each play the convicts are more sinned against than sinning. Macky's convict was still in captivity on Norfolk Island whereas in Miss Prichard's play, the two convicts have escaped by boat from Port Arthur to the mainland of Victoria. Another central concern of Pioneers is compassion in conflict with the desire to be successful. Mary Cameron, the Welsh migrant, helps the convicts when they come to her hut but, at first, her pity for them is not shared by her Scottish husband, Donald. He attempts to persuade her to reveal to McLaughlan, the trooper, the direction taken by the escaping convicts. His attitude is, "If you show sympathy with lags ... what'll be said next - you're a lag yourself".²⁹ Mary, however, stands firm, trying to change Donald's mind by insisting, "These poor creatures were not bad men, Donald ... and you know men have been transported..." Donald interrupts with the words "for trapping a hare" and Mary adds, "or trying to get better wages and making speeches" (Ibid.).

It is the development of the relationship between husband and wife that is the most satisfying element in the play. Miss Prichard's treatment of the husband-wife relationship on stage is well managed.

Again, like other Pioneer plays, Miss Prichard's play follows the tradition of the well-made play. The climax would be the departure of the convicts just before the arrival of Donald Cameron with McNab and McLaughlin. The tension lessens with the decision of the trooper and his friend not to pursue the convicts and it disappears at the conclusion when Mary refuses to reveal their escape route. There is unity of action also as all the action takes place in the interior of the hut. The setting is described in detail but unlike Louis Esson, Miss Prichard does not go into detail in the description of her characters.

The play opens with a dialogue between Donald and his wife which gives the background of the story, telling how they came to settle and to clear the land. This exposition also highlights the different characters of husband and wife although her manner is somewhat misleading. He talks, in a practical way, of clearing more land and having "pigs and a byre" while she declares that she is afraid of being left alone while he goes to buy stores. She calls it "a strange lonely country ... without sight of a roof in it, never the sound of a human voice or the lowing of cattle". (p.90). When he exclaims as he gazes over the land, "Ours ... All ours - virgin forest and farm land", she replies, "Ours? How they came down cursing ... the great trees". (Ibid.). The only suggestion of toughness beneath her nervousness is her

laughing reference to his disapproval "when I got into an old pair of your breeches to climb up and down when we were lashing the roof on". Although their marriage was one of convenience, for he chose her from a group of emigrant women because he needed the £30 government bounty that he thus gained, yet he tells her he now loves her. Nevertheless Mary insists she is not worthy of him, but Donald assures her, "It's all done with, the past!". This remark is not fully explained in the play.

With Donald's departure, the drama becomes a monologue as Mary talks to Davy, her baby, about her fear of being alone in the bush. The atmosphere of apprehension which her words build up becomes charged with fear when two escaped convicts "ragged and unkempt" rush forward. Unexpectedly, after her previous behaviour, Mary greets them "fearlessly, with quick sympathy" (p.99):

Mary: What's the matter? Have you lost your
 way?

Farrell: We have.

Mary: Then you're welcome indeed. Come in and sit
 down and I'll get you something to eat. (Ibid.)

She shows her quick wits by putting the baby into Farrell's arms while she bathes the head of the other convict, Steve, who has collapsed.

The scene between the woman and the two convicts is well managed. Steve, who is delirious, has to be restrained, at intervals, by his friend. At first he menaces Mary. "No games ... or it will be the worse for you", he says (p.100). The tension subsides as she gives him food and puts wet bandages on Steve's head. Soon Farrell is

rocking Davey in his cradle and, joking when the baby cries, "He's forgetting his party manners ... and keeping such bad company at his age". (p.101) The atmosphere in the hut becomes grim again when Steve screams in his delirium, "I won't be caught ... taken alive. I'd rather go to hell" and Farrell explains:

Thinks he's being flogged ... he would be if we were sent back ... You know where we came from.
(p.102)

They intended to kill Mary if she screamed and they have killed Donald's dog. When Mary declares that this is a pity, the answer is:

Pity! What pity's been shown to us? Do you know what it means to have made your escape from Port Arthur, swimming the bay at Eaglehawk wrapped in kelp, cheating the bloodhounds chained a few yards from each other across the neck ... (p.102)

Farrell and Steve had expected help from McNab the storekeeper but had overheard him offering to share with McLaughlin the reward for their capture. The tension continues to grow as Farrell points out that, after the "things done to them" as convicts they would rather "kill a woman who had served them" (pp.104-105) than risk her betraying them. It subsides, however, after Mary convinces him that she wants to help them. When he wonders why, she "sighs and turns away from him" saying, "Oh, there's reason enough". (p.105) The atmosphere again becomes tense as Farrell realizes that "they'll be on the road after us now" (Ibid.). Mary willingly gives them her husband's spare clothing. Her one fear is that they will harm others but Farrell reassures her. She describes their safest escape route. They hear horses on the road. Steve goes off in the wrong direction and must

be brought back. Finally, the convicts have gone and the play again becomes a monologue as Mary burns their clothes and wonders how Donald will feel about what has happened. A few minutes later his voice is heard, calling, "Mary". With him are McLaughlin and McNab.

The audience is kept in suspense during the dialogue between Mary and the three men because she is doing her best to conceal the visit of the convicts. Although Cameron finds some fallen bandages, he does not betray her. She again plays the role of a nervous woman, pretending to be "quaking like a leaf" (p.111) and hearing noises outside.

The two newcomers are, in contrast to the convicts, a pair of inhumane men anxious for the reward. McLaughlin says:

When we heard they'd got away ... I says to McNab ... lags bein' scarce these days, "Come with me now," I says, "they can't be gone far" ... (p.110)

McNab is described by the sergeant as "a bloodhound on the scene ... when there's a reward for capture about". (Ibid.)

They are, however, afraid of the convicts, as Mary soon discovers. She plays on this fear:

Oh it was brave ... but foolhardy of you to come, Mr McNab. Why didn't you bring soldiers from the Port, Sergeant? (p.112)

Mary acts so convincingly that the surly shanty keeper decides that they will "split the reward" (Ibid.) with soldiers. At one stage they draw their guns and listen for noises outside.

The action is well managed in this part of the play with Donald trying to spoil Mary's plan by pointing out

that the convicts will be "well away" when they return. There is humour in the character of McNab, a man whose utterances are usually of one or two words.

When husband and wife are alone, Mary again uses her guile to persuade Donald that her actions have been the right ones, reminding him of "the terrible days amongst all the rough people I found myself with till you came" (p.114). When he still argues that some convicts were thieves and murderers, she still refuses to break her promise:

Mary (quietly, her eyes meeting his with settled finality): It was my word I gave, Donald.
I'll not tell you.

The character of Mary is the main one in the play. She is on stage all the time. This character is quite complex and it would need an actress of ability to play Mary's changing moods. In spite of her appearance of helplessness, she manages the convicts and their pursuers. Although she does not change Donald's mind entirely at the end of the play, she still has her own way. In fact, Mary's constant role playing as she pretends to be a helpless female could irritate an audience. She might appear to be deceitful and devious rather than humane and intelligent. Her character is not presented in a very subtle manner. Moreover, the change from a supposedly nervous woman to a quick-witted resourceful person at the arrival of the convicts is too sudden. On the other hand, Mary is a much more three-dimensional character than any other woman character in the Pioneer plays. The mother and Emma in Mother and Son

and Clara in The Battler, who all seek to dominate male characters in those plays, are more direct and simple in their attitudes. Mary appears more alive than they do. In Pioneers the development of the situation at the conclusion when Mary tries to persuade her husband to agree with her point of view, is psychologically sound. She appeals to her loyalty to him, his love for her, his sense of justice and pity and his pride in the land which, she claims, "will be the Redeemer (and) blot out all old stains" (p.115). Although she is genuinely fond of him and does not wish to upset his pride by dominating him openly, she must, finally, reveal her strength of character and defy him.

All the other characters are much simpler than Mary. They are clearly defined. Mary's Welsh voice and Donald's Scottish speech would make an effective contrast to the other voices on the stage. There is no indication that any of the other characters had an accent of any kind.

Although Pioneers could not be called a great play, it is on the whole actable and well-constructed, with variety in action and atmosphere. It ranks with The Trap and John Blake as one of the first Australian plays to attempt to reproduce in a realistic fashion an early period in Australian history on the stage. It is also an interesting psychological study.

v

FRANK WILMOT'S PLAY

A DISTURBER OF POOLS

After the first production of A Disturber of Pools by the Pioneer Players in December 1923, Wilmot was to become the author of other plays. These were never published and are now in the Campbell Howard collection at the University of New England. They were White Ants, performed at the Queen's Hall, Collins Street, Melbourne in June 1928; Revolution: a farce, produced at the same hall in April 1932 and White Feather. Wilmot's work is another example of the need (which Esson had tried to meet) in the 1920s of a place where playwrights could practise their craft and experiment. As a close examination of A Disturber of Pools will show, Wilmot possessed some dramatic ability which might have flowered more fully if it had been encouraged. Although Vance Palmer called this play "a slight fantasy", ³⁰ it is more than that. It is ^a gently mocking comment on suburban life conveyed through a series of confrontations among people professing different attitudes to life.

A Disturber of Pools has a distinctly contemporary flavour with its criticism of those who destroy the native Australian bush in order to make way for the building of homes. Another concern of this one-act play which is typical of today's thinking is the criticism of city living, "the crowded wharves and the rushing streets full of noisy traffic". ³¹ Nevertheless, the setting of the play is

certainly in the 1920s when butchers still called at homes for their order in the morning and delivered meat in the afternoon. The scene is "the back garden of a suburban villa" with "trees, shrubs and flower beds". Although the play possesses a climax with the confrontation between Darracq and Horace, Martha's husband, yet it departs from the traditional structure of the well-made play because its action is circular, just as a stone is when it "disturbs" a pool by being thrown in. The stagecraft follows the circular action since the first and final scenes each show Martha in discussion with the butcher boy. Darracq's beliefs have only temporarily shaken the other characters' attitudes to life. He is "the disturber of pools" which apparently settle back to their original condition with his departure. The symbolic design is integrated into the story to produce a satisfying pattern as well as a convincing investigation of feeling. Indeed, taken literally, Horace is the disturber of pools, as the review of this play in the Argus²³ pointed out. It is his development of the land in order to build houses that has spoiled them.

The story is told through a series of dialogues, each one contributing something towards a contrast between suburban and country life. Darracq, Martha's uncle, who represents the quiet, meaningful life spent close to nature, is the first character seen, as he pushes his wheelbarrow across the stage. Immediately after this in the first dialogue the butcher boy suggests to Martha that "the old chap" is "a bit touched" (p.2) and she defends her uncle. She is insistent that she must have steak for dinner.

The next dialogue which is between Darracq and the butcher boy shows up the old man to advantage. When the butcher asks, "Come on the wallaby, all the way from Queensland, 'aven't yer?" Darracq replies, "And why shouldn't I come on the track? There was no hurry, was there?" (p.2). He criticises the butcher for his ignorance of nature:

Do you really know anything? Could you tell a fantail from a mopoke or the call of a whip-bird from a grey thrush's? (p.3)

The butcher, who looks at birds from the viewpoint of the businessman, replies:

I don't know about birds with their feathers on, Mr.Darracq, but I can easy tell a turkey from a squab if they're plucked. My oath! It's me business. (Ibid.)

Answering Darracq's questions about what "business" offers the butcher, the latter explains, "Oh, I get me tucker out of it and it keeps me busy and out of mischief" (Ibid.). He believes that his life is "not so bad". As he says, "I'll save up, buy a block of land, get married and settle down ... Everybody does it ... and if I don't like it I can get a divorce or clear out" (Ibid.).

With the departure of the butcher, Darracq's closeness to nature is further demonstrated in his dialogue with his niece about growing broad beans and not cutting down the black wattle where little birds nest:

All the bush is disappearing with your husband's auction sales, and plans, and proposed tramways. It's fifteen miles further back than it used to be. (p.5)

Although Martha takes the practical view that "people must have houses", (Ibid.) she wants him to be happy. The scene between uncle and niece is pleasant and affectionate. She insists that

he wear Horace's waterproof. While he appreciates her concern for him, he declares that he is "getting tired of the place" (p.4). He says, "The wind blows the smoke of the fire into my eyes, but I can always see the road". (p.5). He regrets that she has no time for her music now, insisting that what human beings regard as "useless things" are often not so (Ibid.).

When Horace's voice is heard Darracq returns to his gardening. The dialogue between husband and wife develops into a quarrel about Darracq's ideas on life. The husband complains that her uncle "goes round bleating all that silly, mystical stuff of his to the neighbours". He asks:

And why does he always look at me in that queer way - as if it was me who was making a fool of myself? (p.6)

Martha tries to calm him:

He doesn't mean anything ... I know he feels that you imagine he has no right here because he has a passion for unprofitable things. (Ibid.)

When she talks of the need for "sympathy and imagination" in life, tension between Horace and Martha increases, especially as she refuses to go and watch him play golf. Horace takes the viewpoint of the man of commerce who has "a reputation to keep up" (p.7) and who wants her to make a good impression on the doctor and his circle of friends because they are influential in their suburb.

While Martha goes to get Horace's raincoat which he cannot find, he and Darracq carry on a dialogue. It begins with a question about where to plant lettuce and ends with Darracq gently accusing Horace of being "too impatient to ever be happy" (p.10). With Martha's return,

husband and wife continue to quarrel. Horace is angry that Darracq has gone off "quite undisturbed" (p.11) after annoying him. Martha adopts her uncle's point of view, declaring that she is "wearied to death with keeping up appearances" (p.12). In great anger, Horace takes up his golf clubs. He is going "somewhere where things are real and not covered with sunshine" (p.13).

After the heat of the argument between husband and wife, the following discussion between Martha and Darracq is quiet although she is sorry that he insists on going. She declares, "I have my home, my husband, my child" to which he replies:

They have crushed you. The road, the gullies,
the places I wander into remake me. They
don't crush me. (p.13)

He tells her that they will lead him "to where the long stream dies in the pools" (Ibid.).

When he has left the audience is brought back to suburban life by the comic relief of the butcher boy's arrival. Martha can only have sausages for dinner. "This place is going ahead so fast", he tells her, that the butcher cannot keep up with the demand. Martha, her mind occupied with her uncle's ideas, no longer cares what meat they have for dinner. The conclusion is satisfying for the audience. Even though Martha has not adopted her uncle's way of life, she has been affected by his ideas. The play's anti-commercial theme has been conveyed in a pleasant, easy manner.

Although there is not much action in the play, there is effective variety in the atmosphere of the successive dialogues. There is also some good stage business, such as the occasion when Martha's husband thinks she is searching

for his raincoat while she is really getting Darracq to take it off and put on another one. The transition from one dialogue to the next is smooth and realistic. The language is lively and it never becomes bogged down into platitudes, in spite of the discussions on the nature of living. Furthermore the verbal sparring never becomes vicious or cruel.

The characters are clear cut and contrast well with each other. Besides the comic character of the butcher boy, each of the others is presented to some extent in a humorous fashion, so that Martha, Darracq and Horace all amuse the audience with their behaviour while at the same time they are taking part in serious discussions.

Darracq is the most outstanding character. His belief in nature mysticism is well conveyed, as seen, for instance, in the lyric he mutters as he gardens:

Let your song be delicate
The bees are home
All their day's love is sunken
Safe in the comb. (p.4)

In some ways he resembles old Tom in Esson's Mother and Son with his preference for wandering around, alone, close to nature rather than living in a civilized community. Darracq puts forward Wilmot's belief:

that the natural landscape has an aboriginal
power that would shape our spirits to some
higher₃ purpose, if we approached it with due
piety.

Palmer's claim that Wilmot "was definitely lacking in the power to project himself into conflicting characters"³⁴ is not entirely true. Although there is a slight atmosphere of unreality about A Disturber of Pools

in that people like Darracq do not usually exist in Melbourne suburbs, yet most commentators have accepted him as believable. Macartney wrote of Darracq's "simple wisdom" in his "love for natural things and plain ways".³⁵ Similarly, Wilmot has created a believable character in Horace who is the "conflicting character" to Darracq. Horace's inability to understand anything outside his own ambitions and his bewilderment at his wife's talk of "sympathy and imagination" would contrast successfully, on stage, to Darracq's ideas on life. Horace and the butcher boy share, on different social levels, a similar attitude to life. Each gains some sympathy from the audience although the play is mainly concerned with presenting Darracq's attitudes which, presumably, were shared by Wilmot.

A Disturber of Pools shows Wilmot as "a mocking but unembittered observer of life".³⁶ The play possesses "a curious mixture of sentiment and satire, colloquial decisiveness and delicate lyricism".³⁷

v

FRANK BROWN'S PLAY: MATES

Frank Brown's short sketch, Mates, produced in August 1923, has never been published. A manuscript³⁸ which is not quite complete is in the possession of the author's son, Mr. Stewart Brown of Newport, Victoria. It is typewritten with additions and corrections in what is apparently Frank

Brown's writing. The main alteration is to the name of the barmaid. It has been changed from Maud to "May" and then, again, to "Carrie".

Mates is a lively farce with four characters, and it satirizes the idea of mateship. This theme is developed by contrasting the behaviour of two mates, one a shearer who holds firmly to the code of mateship and the other a disqualified jockey, a "townie", (p.1) who fails his mate. The play at first shows mateship in action, then its breakdown. Presumably it was re-established in the missing conclusion to the play. Everything is exaggerated, the scene, the contrast between the characters and all the expected images of outback Australia.

The scene is an isolated bush shanty, outback, beyond Bourke near opal fields, in the height of summer in a dry season. Into it stumbles big Bill Ross, in a state of exhaustion, carrying his unconscious mate, Joe. Bill's first words emphasise the theme. "It's me mate" (p.1). His concern is for Joe whom he had met at Bourke only a few weeks before. In his half delirious state Joe, once a jockey, raves on about "being disqualified for suspicious riding", (p.4) thus preparing the audience for his later failure to be a true mate to Bill. When he recovers consciousness, however, due to the efforts of Bill and Carrie, the barmaid, he is very, very grateful to Bill:

Joe: Gorblime you save me life Bill.

Bill: Rot.

Joe: My oath you did. I know. You carried me all the way here. How far was it?

Bill: It don't matter Joe.

Joe: How far?

Bill: Aw, about ten mile. (p.6)

Bill, usually a man of few words, modestly insists that he did it because "We're mates, ain't we?" (Ibid.) After they have put the semi-conscious Joe to rest on a mattress on the verandah where it is "shady and cool", (p.7) Bill, all the while blaming himself for "taking Joe over that track", (p.8) explains his attitude more fully to Carrie:

A mate's a mate whatever happens. It doesn't matter who he is or where he comes from or what he does, so long as he's a mate, it makes no difference. I never heard tell of a man going back on his mate. It's share alike and stick together till the end of the track. (p.10)

The barmaid is to be the means by which Bill's ideas on mateship are to be tested. As they have a few drinks together, he admires the opal which Carrie is wearing. When she informs him that it is a present from Ned Devine, "a married man" (p.12a), Bill becomes upset. He also insists that she is "too good to be behind the bar, serving drinks to miners and shearers" (p.14). Soon a romance develops with Bill holding her hand assuring her she is "as high as the stars above me" (Ibid.). This, however, is interrupted by the entry of Joe, newly shaven and wearing clean clothes. The atmosphere begins to become tense. With great confidence Joe proceeds to flirt with Carrie and to insult Bill who is most annoyed at the behaviour of his mate. Joe tells Carrie, "I've had nobody to talk to for weeks but that big blob over there" (p.16). He asks her how she would like to be in Melbourne with him:

We'd have a good time. I got the ontree into the most select society. Why me uncle's a judge. (Ibid.)

When Carrie doubts him, he insists, "Yes, he judges at the terrier coursing". (Ibid.) Bill shows he does not believe Joe by telling a "tall story":

Talking about big sheds, Bogan Bill when he broke the record used shears three feet long and tied on a Chinaman for a knocker. The shed he shored in was so big the overseer had to ride round on a horse; they cut the brownie with a circular saw, and the cook's off-sider had to go out in a boat to sweeten the tea. (p.17)

Soon Bill can no longer endure Joe's rudeness; he reminds Joe that he saved his life. Joe's reply is, "Can't you see we're having a little talk", and he ignores Bill again.

The shearer's frustration erupts into violence when Joe declares that Carrie "needs a man about the place" and offers "to take on the job" and "run a book on the side" (p.17). Forgetting his belief in mateship, Bill yells, "I'll murder you, you little city waster". (Ibid.). While the two men are fighting, Ned Devine comes in and separates them. The dialogue here is ironic:

Bill: I saved his blarsted life.

Devine: Saved his life. Why I thought you were going to take it.

Joe: He's my mate.

Devine: Sufferin' snakes it don't look like it. (p.20)

The tension subsides when the two "mates" discover that Devine is married to Carrie. Bill moves out to camp by the creek but Joe stays to talk to Ned who has found valuable opal in his mine.

The manuscript ends at page 21 with Joe asking Ned, "How will you splash it up? Will you play the ponies?" and Ned replying, "Not on your life. There's only one square way to gamble and that's with the pennies - two up". Apparent-

ly Joe and Bill did become mates again in the missing conclusion because the review of Mates in the Australasian of 25 August 1923 described the friendship as "battered by a woman and cemented when (they) found she fooled both".³⁹

Although somewhat superficial, the play does possess qualities which would appeal to an audience. There is slapstick humour as in the scene where Joe woos the barmaid while Bill tries to point out to him that he is not acting like a mate. There is humour in the dialogue, also; for instance, Bill's remark that he left "Bourke because it is too close to Sydney" (p.12). The variety in the action would keep an audience's attention. The first scene with Bill staggering in with Joe, followed by the scene with the development of the romance, then the next with Joe's interruption and the subsequent fight and finally Ned's arrival and the revelation that he is Carrie's husband would all keep the audience's eyes on the stage. The scene of Joe's professed gratitude which contrasts with his later behaviour and Bill's interpretation of all this, all explain and satirize the idea of mateship which has already been presented in an exaggerated manner at the beginning of the play. The characters are also, of course, exaggerated, as is to be expected in a farce.

There is a weakness in construction in the barmaid's failure to reveal that she is married to Ned. When he arrives, this point is glossed over. He asks, "What's happening" and she replies, "Just a bit of fun" (p.20).

The play is very consciously Australian, with the isolated shanty, the shearer and his mate staggering

across the outback, the talk of opals and two-up and Caulfield where, declares Bill, "Joe says there's a lot of good horsemen" (p.11). The tall story, although typically Australian, does not fit in particularly well with the dialogue.

Nevertheless the play is quite successful as a send-up of mateship. It makes an interesting contrast to Telling Mrs Baker.

vi

ALAN MULGAN AND THE PIONEER PLAYS

There is no available information about how or why the Pioneer Players came to produce the New Zealander, Alan Mulgan's one-act play, The Voice of the People, in June 1923. Perhaps Stewart Macky, being a New Zealander, knew Mulgan's work. Possibly it was the Reverend Sinclair who had gone to New Zealand who suggested the play to Esson. Someone may have shown him a copy of Mulgan's Three Plays of New Zealand, (Auckland, Melbourne, etc. 1920) in the Preface to which a reference is made to Esson's work:

What has come to be called the modern dramatic revival in Europe has so far found but feeble echoes in Australasia. A slender volume from Melbourne by Mr Louis Esson (published in London) - the work of a real artist - is almost the only notable evidence of the presence of the modern spirit. In New Zealand Mr Alan Mulgan betrays the same presence in the three short plays offered here, and for the first time, native dramatic effort is published in the Dominion.

Clearly, Mulgan knew of the production of his play in Melbourne, since in the Alan Mulgan Papers in the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington, New Zealand, there is a programme of the Pioneer production at St. Peter's Hall on 9 June 1923.⁴¹

As there would be the question of royalties, there must have been some correspondence between Mulgan and Esson or one of the other Pioneer Players.

Furthermore, Mulgan's play possesses certain resemblances to Esson's drama, The Time is Not Yet Ripe. In each play a self-satisfied young man with political ambitions is discomfited by an attractive, politically minded young woman with different political sympathies. Each play exhibits the same cynical attitude towards politicians. Professor Shelley's Preface refers to Ibsen's play Pillars of Society and Galsworthy's play Loyalties as examples of drama possessing the "modern spirit" (p.4) which Shelley regards as having "dramatic value ... inseparable from the analysis of social values implied in the action presented" (Ibid.). He assumes that Mulgan's plays belong to this tradition, just as H.M.Green assumes that Esson's The Time is Not Yet Ripe does. Perhaps Esson chose Mulgan's play because he liked the attitudes it presented. It would, moreover, give some variety to Pioneer productions because no other play produced had dealt with politics.

Nevertheless, Mulgan's play is rather slight and ineffectual. It lacks the power and impact of the plays of Ibsen and Galsworthy. It does, however, possess some humour in its satirical character study of a member of parliament who is determined to keep his position. The

Bulletin reviewer of 14 June 1923 described it as "an attempt to show a political soul, naked and unashamed" which lacked "dramatic substance" and hence was a failure as a "curtain raiser".⁴³

In Mulgan's plays, just as in those of Louis Esson (and G.B.Shaw), the scene and characters are described in detail, giving a producer little chance to use his own ideas. Mulgan may have done this in his published plays in order to make them suitable for play-reading, since in the Preface, Shelley regrets that "the habit of play reading has declined" but hopes that "with more careful and imaginative teaching of dramatic literature" (p.3) it may revive. In the "Preface to Second Edition" (1930) Mulgan thanks those who "by staging these plays or reading them aloud ... especially in the drama classes of the Workers' Educational Association" (p.4) have made a second edition possible. An example of the detailed descriptions of character is that of the Reverend Mortimer Harrington:

a smallish, slight man, approaching middle age. His clear-cut face is wrinkled and his dark eyes under eyebrows beginning to turn grey are wells of ironic humour. Irony has always been his bane, and he is as much in its grip as a confirmed smoker is a slave to tobacco. But for this he might be a bishop. (p.53)

One concern of the play is that some politicians are hypocrites; another issue is the deflation of pomposity and conceit. These are developed in the form of a farce with an opening dialogue between the Reverend Mortimer Harrington and Rachel Bromley about her brother George Bromley, M.P., followed by a dialogue between George and the clergyman still about George and his work and a concluding

dialogue between George and Beatrice Galbraith. The setting is Mr Bromley's study.

In the opening scene, the audience's curiosity is engaged by the contrasting attitudes of the other two characters towards the absent George. Rachel "worships him", (p.53) while Harrington's attitude is one of ironical amusement:

Rachel: ...He rang up at lunchtime to say that he would be home at three, and it's nearly that now. You know how punctual he is.

Harrington: Most. I never knew a man call for subscriptions more regularly. Is he well?

Rachel: Very well and how rapidly he's getting on! ... And that speech in which he repudiated the bribe has caused quite a stir ...

Harrington: ... How comforting it is to all of us to know that we have at least one public man who is not only honest but is not afraid to say so (p.54),

Although the irony lacks subtlety, the exposition is bright enough and prepares the way adequately for the entrance of George Bromley, "pushing in manner, rather loud of voice and entirely self-satisfied" (p.55). The following dialogue demonstrates George's conceit and ignorance as well as his reliance on his friend, Harrington. It was undoubtedly more amusing to an audience of the 1920s which would most probably have been familiar with British history:

Bromley: How do you think the speech went?

Harrington: Capitally, capitally, only you got a little mixed up in that allusion to Pitt and Napoleon. You substituted Gladstone for Pitt. You may recollect that I advised you to remember the conjunction of the two letters P.N. - Pitt and Napoleon - and to think of Promissory Note.

Bromley: By Jove. I'm sorry. Did it matter much? I must have been thinking of G.N. I wonder why. Oh yes, Grand National ... After all, what have we got to learn from the past? We're miles ahead of it.

Harrington: Of course. The past had no frozen meat, no picture shows and no tinned peaches. (pp.56-57)

Bromley is a study of an unscrupulous politician. His one ambition is to remain a member of Parliament, no matter what he must do to accomplish this. He tells Harrington that he is in some difficulty because he expressed himself "very strongly" to "a deputation of shop assistants". He told them he was in favour of the compulsory closing of shops on Saturdays. Later he realized that this did not please the shopkeepers and farmers so he must now "readjust" his "views" (p.57) He asks Harrington's advice about anything else he can do to remain as M.P. The clergyman replies:

... you are patron or president of every cricket and football club; you know the name of every farmer's baby and the peculiarities of every country dinner table. (p.59)

His only other advice to Bromley is that he should get married to someone who would "entertain and canvass for you and help you with your speeches" (Ibid.). Bromley's choice of a wife, Beatrice Galbraith, does not please Harrington. He describes her as "independent, you know, and rather advanced". (Ibid.) What is worse she is "working for the Labour Party" (p.60). With his usual self-conceit, however, George is sure he can "talk her round":

Miss Galbraith has these extreme views simply because she is young and inexperienced and has been thrown into contact with a number of socialists of her own age. I am sure she only wants the other side to be put to her in all its bearings for her to see how utterly absurd is

the line she is taking. (Ibid.)

At this opportune moment, Miss Galbraith is announced. She is "pretty, brisk and business like. Her clothes are plain but in perfect taste and an air of distinction surrounds her" (p.61). There is effective dramatic irony here in the ambiguity of the situation. George, believing that Beatrice has come to visit him because she is attracted to him, is ready to propose to her whereas she has really come to blackmail him. Although Mulgan apparently wants his audience to admire her, her principles are no better than those of George. At the same time, her deflation of his pomposity is amusing.

Almost as soon as she is seated George, ignoring her hints that she has come on "a very peculiar sort of business", (p.62) asks her to marry him. She "goes off into a seizure of laughter" (Ibid.) which she tries to control but cannot. As this begins to subside she informs him that he has lost and she has found his notebook. In it he keeps information about his constituents that will make them feel friendly to him:

Beatrice; (reading from the notebook) Mrs
Brown Pukerewarewar scones March 10th -
It means you visited Mrs Brown on
March 10th and she gave you tea and
scones. The next time you go there
you'll say, 'Ah, Mrs Brown, the last
time I came here you gave me such
delicious scones'. (p.65)

There are other similar entries. Beatrice suggests that:

for the good of your health as well as for the
good of your country, it is time you ceased to
be a member for Gordon". (Ibid.)

George calls her a fiend. The collision of their points
of view becomes even clearer when Beatrice makes a definite

demand:

I want this. A month ago you definitely pledged yourself to vote against the admission of women to Parliament. You will now withdraw that pledge and support this proposal. (p.67)

At this point Beatrice gives the book back to George. Although this does allow her to appear in a more favourable light to the audience, it is a decided weakness in the plot since, oddly, she now appears to trust him to do what she demands. Assuring him that one day she will be the member for Gordon and that "you cannot fool all the people all the time", (p.68) Beatrice departs. The play concludes with Bromley on the telephone to Harrington. "I say, something disastrous has happened. For heaven's sake come over at once" (Ibid.),

The characters are clear cut and interesting. They are caricatures which are, however, quite adequate for the farce. The dialogue in the early scenes is lively and flippant. In spite of the weakness in the plot, Mulgan's play would be successful as a farcical character study of an ambitious politician.

vii

E. O'FERRALL'S PLAY

THE BISHOP AND THE BUNS

E. O'Ferrall's play, The Bishop and the Buns, is a dramatised version of a short story with the same title which he had published under his pen-name, Kodak, in the Lone Hand, XIII, No.12, 1 May 1913 (pp.21-25). When his play was produced by the Pioneer Players in October 1922, the

Argus of 27 October 1922 asserted that it had been previously played in Sydney⁴⁴ where O'Ferrall worked for Smith's Weekly.⁴⁵

Although well-constructed and entertaining on stage, The Bishop and the Buns is just a slight, amusing farce with not much literary value because its characters are unrealistic and its plot also bears little relation to reality. It has no typically Australian content whatever. An audience could assume that it had been written by an Englishman who had never visited Australia. Nevertheless, there were undoubtedly bishops, tearooms, greedy boys and lazy waitresses in Melbourne in the nineteen twenties. Furthermore, Esson made no complaints about the play's lack of Australian atmosphere or characters.

The theme is the deflation of pomposity and self-conceit, portrayed in the person of a bishop who suffers humiliation because of his high-handed conduct. The play, moreover, possesses an attitude of disrespect towards authority, not only in the insolence of the waitress towards her customers, but also in the behaviour of all the lower-class characters towards the bishop. None of the characters, however, is shown to be any more admirable than that pompous person.

Every one of the characters is a caricature. In the list of dramatis personae the bishop is described as "very pompous and overbearing", his curate, Bathbrick, is "thin, nervous and abject", the old lady is "shabby, vehement and suspicious", the waitress is "dreary, slipshod and insolent" and 'O'race is "a sulky, greedy boy".⁴⁶ Like the

descriptions of the characters, that of the setting is brief and clear. The scene is "a garden or indoor tearoom" (Ibid.).

The play develops first by means of a dialogue between the old lady and her grandson, 'Orace, all about their desire for a bath bun each and how they will acquire one, followed by a dialogue between the old lady and the waitress about getting "two bath buns and two glasses of milk" (p.3). While the old lady goes to telephone 'Orace's mother, the bishop and curate enter. A dialogue between them is concerned with the bishop's great desire for a bun and his suggestion that they take the buns on the table in front of 'Orace and order two more to replace them. 'Orace contributes four words to their conversation. With the return of the old lady, all the other characters except the curate direct a flow of angry words towards the bishop accusing him of theft. His efforts to replace the buns are useless because the waitress has no more. The old lady declares that scones, a suggested substitute, give her "indigestion". Having discovered that she and the waitress both belong to the "Universal Church o' Prime Gospel Celebraters", the old lady discusses with her the "ippercrits" of "this 'ere 'igh and mighty religion" (p.15) to which the bishop belongs. The climax comes when the bishop and curate discover that neither has brought any money. They depart, the bishop promising the doubting waitress that he will send the money and complaining to Bathbrick that he will now be too late to keep his appointment "to address the synod on 'Honesty in Private Life'" (p.17).

The character of the bishop stands out because

he is isolated from the other characters. It is mainly the contrast between the speech of the bishop and curate and that of the other characters which emphasises the differences in their social standing. Furthermore, the curate's obsequious attitude to his superior highlights the bishop's overbearing and self-satisfied manner. This adds to the humour of the situation in which he is humiliated.

There is a weakness in construction in the final scene in which neither bishop nor curate has any money, a most unlikely situation, although this has been anticipated somewhat, earlier in the play, when the bishop complained about Bathbrick's ineptness in organizing his life because the curate had just taken his superior to a steam-heated greenhouse in mistake for the cool tearoom. Furthermore, the play could end quite convincingly with the bishop leaving the tearoom. It does not need the final scene where he finds he has no money. Perhaps the reviewer of the Australasian of 4 November 1922 was referring to this weakness when he asserted that The Bishop and the Buns was "an amusing farce" which "pleased the audience very well" although there was "a little too much of it".⁴⁷ The Argus review of 27 October 1922 described it as "acted much too slowly and thus its unreality was emphasised".⁴⁸

GERALD BYRNE'S PLAY - THE NEW BRIDGE

Gerald Byrne's play The New Bridge, produced in October 1922 by the Pioneer Players, does not appear to have survived. When Byrne, who was the editor of a magazine for the Victorian Department of Agriculture, died in 1939⁴⁹ his effects passed to a cousin. After the death of this cousin in 1967, these effects were sold.⁵⁰

The New Bridge may have been acted, later, by the Theatre Guild in Melbourne. A cutting in William Moore's Scrap Book, taken from the Community Magazine of 1 May 1931 states that the Theatre Guild "formed to encourage local playwrights" had been producing plays since 1925 and "a one act drama by Gerald Byrne" was to be performed at Kelvin Hall, Exhibition Street".⁵¹

The New Bridge was praised in the Australasian review of 4 November 1922 for the "excellent character study" of Thomas Allan, "a contractor and the president of the shire" who "has to receive the governor" at the opening of the bridge which "has been built against Allan's advice". He "rejoices exceedingly when the bridge subsides in a heavy flood".⁵²

The programme describes the scene as "the sitting room of Thomas Allan's house" and the characters as "Thomas Allan, a contractor, Mrs. Allan, his wife, Mary, their daughter, and Gordon, a State school teacher".⁵³

The Argus of 28 October 1922 described it as a

"popular comedy"⁵⁴ while Aussie of 15 December 1922 called it "a bright little country comedy".⁵⁵

CHAPTER V

AN ASSESSMENT OF THE ACHIEVEMENTS
OF THE PIONEER PLAYERS

The most obvious achievements of the Pioneer Players are the few plays they wrote which have "joined the select company of works still remembered and esteemed from the past".¹ These would be mainly one act plays such as The Drovers and The Woman Tamer by Louis Esson, The Black Horse by Vance Palmer, The Trap by Stewart Macky and Pioneers by Katharine Susannah Prichard.

Although the longer works of the Pioneer playwrights are flawed, they were important in the development of each writer's literary achievements especially that of Palmer and Miss Prichard who went on to do their best known work in the novel.

Furthermore, Esson's plays are especially noteworthy in that he moved the Lawson tradition from the short story to the stage. In doing so, he developed and modified it by infusing it with some of the ideas of the plays of the Irish National Theatre from which he drew much of his inspiration to write plays. He gave his version of Lawson's world a realistic dramatic presentation in his plays, Mother and Son, The Drovers and The Battler. Palmer, also, extended the Lawson tradition with different country characters and themes in The Black Horse, A Happy Family and Travellers.

Macky and Miss Prichard performed a similar service for Australian history in The Trap and Pioneers. Plays such as The Great Man and A Disturber of Pools made some effort to dramatise suburban life of the time. In all, the Pioneer plays were the first serious attempts to put on stage some areas of Australian life.

Their historical importance is to be found in their demonstration that it was possible to have a company of Australian actors producing Australian plays written by Australians for Australian audiences. Although they had limited success, they did inspire other small theatre companies and thus a tradition grew that Australian plays were of some value. Nettie Palmer in Fourteen Years relates that four young men, including Dr Duhig and George Eaton, came to see her at Caloundra on 6 March 1926:

eager to pump fresh life into the Brisbane Repertory Company by the occasional production of an original work.²

They wanted to know about "the ideas and achievements of the Pioneer Players".³ There is a review of a performance of A Happy Family by that company in an unidentified newspaper cutting in the Palmer Papers.⁴ Another review - of The Black Horse - in the Hobart Mercury of 21 September 1928 describes its performance by the Hobart Repertory Theatre Society.⁵ In each case the plays received praise. Moreover, Nettie Palmer saved an advertisement for the Little Art Theatre in Melbourne which was producing on Thursday, 12 April 1928, a group of Australian plays which included A Disturber of Pools and Telling Mrs Baker.⁶ According to Leslie Rees, the Community Theatre at Darlinghurst, Sydney:

within a year (1930) ... had produced about thirty one-acters by local authors as well as four three-act plays by members of the (Community) Playhouse.

Furthermore, Rees asserts:

Even during his lifetime the name Louis Esson acquired a legend within a limited circle.⁸

This legend was important because Esson's foundation of the Pioneer Players, which H.Heseltine describes as "one of the most significant and bravest experiments in Australian theatre history",⁹ demonstrated to later generations that financial help was necessary if Australian drama was to develop into something of literary value. Esson showed that playwrights and actors would come forward. A permanent theatre was needed where plays could be performed by actors with time and encouragement to give an interpretation of a play which would do justice to the author's intentions. Playwrights needed opportunities to see their plays staged several times, so they could be improved after audience reaction was noted. Although Esson's dream of a permanent national Australian theatre failed to materialise in his lifetime, it did point the way to the conditions necessary for the flowering of Australian drama which has taken place in the last ten years.

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3. Arthur Adams, The Australian Drama, IV, No.20, 223.
4. "Towards an Australian Drama", III, No.14, 223.
5. L.Rees, The Making of Australian Drama (Cremorne, New South Wales, 1973), p.108; henceforth referred to as L.Rees, The Making of Australian Drama.
6. Vide H.M.Green, "Drama", A History of Australian Literature (Sydney, 1961), pp.686-687 for more information on these playwrights.
7. W. Moore, "The Development of Australian Drama", Best Australian One Act Plays, ed. by W.Moore and T.Inglis Moore (Sydney, 1937), p.xx; henceforth referred to as W.Moore, "The Development of Australian Drama".
8. L.Rees, The Making of Australian Drama, p.114.
9. Ibid.
10. W.Moore, "The Development of Australian Drama", p.xx.
11. Ibid. According to W.Moore, Esson's play Dead Timber was produced by Gegan McMahon for the Melbourne Repertory Theatre. L.Rees, however, declares that it was produced for the "Drama Night" of 13 and 14 December 1911 "in conjunction with the Melbourne Repertory Theatre". (Vide L.Rees, The Making of Australian Drama, p.119.) Esson's play The Time is Not Yet Ripe was produced by the Melbourne Repertory Theatre (Ibid.)
12. Footnote, Letters of W.B.Yeats (London, 1954), p.444.
13. Letter from 322 Cardigan Street, Carlton, MS. A6103 Mitchell Library, Sydney. Esson's mother and uncle lived not far away in Queensberry St., Carlton. Vide letter from Louis Esson to Vance Palmer, addressed from 67 Queensberry St., Carlton, dated 15 September 1921 in V.Palmer, Louis Esson and the Australian Theatre (Melbourne, 1948), P.44; henceforth this publication will be referred to as V.Palmer, Louis Esson.

14. Fellowship, VIII, No.1 (Melbourne, August 1921), 15.
15. Ibid.
16. Australian Quarterly, XI, No.2, 55-56. This article was based on a lecture to the Australian English Association on 14 November 1938. All later references to this article will be incorporated in the text.
17. "Towards an Australian Drama", III, No.14, 223.
18. "The Irish National Theatre", III, No.13, 106. Later references to this article incorporated in the text.
19. "Towards an Australian Drama", III, No.14 (1 June 1908), 223. Later references to this article incorporated in the text.
20. "Drama", Australian Literature 1795-1938 (Sydney, 1973), p.353.
21. Lone Hand, IV, No.20, p.165
22. Programme, MS.1174/3/50, Palmer Papers, National Library, Canberra; henceforth referred to as Palmer Papers.
23. "Repertory Theatre" (24 July 1912), p.6.
24. Letter addressed from 67 Queensberry Street, Carlton, MS. Ae20, Mitchell Library, Sydney.
25. Sydney, 1961, "Contents", Vol.I, xxii. Later references to this publication incorporated in the text.
26. Melbourne, p.57. Later references to this publication incorporated in the text.
27. "Theatres", Australasian (14 November 1922), p.993.
28. Socialist (12 January 1912), p.1.
29. "An Australian National Art". Article republished in The Writer in Australia (Melbourne, 1969), p.170.
30. Letter addressed from 15 Waverley House, Kenton Street, London, dated November 1920; V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.26.
31. Melbourne, 1969, p.24.
32. Letter addressed from 15 Waverley House, Kenton Street, London, dated 14 August 1920, V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.24.

33. Op.Cit. pp.24-25.
34. Frank Wilmot. The Writer in Australia (Melbourne, 1969), p.184
35. Op.Cit. p.182.
36. "Rage That Engenders", Southerly, XXXII, No.1 (1972), 17.
37. Sydney, 1967, p.250.
38. R.Throssell, Wild Weeds and Wind Flowers, The Life and Letters of Katharine Susannah Prichard (Sydney, 1975), p.39. Later references to this book incorporated in the text.
39. Child of the Hurricane (Sydney, 1963), p.257. Later references to this book incorporated in the text.
40. "How the Australian Writers Affected Australian Life", Literature and Life in Australia. (A series of talks arranged by the Fellowship of Australian Writers for the Australian Broadcasting Commission) (Sydney, 1942), p.71.
41. "University Dramatic Club", p.4.
42. V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.1.
43. Op.Cit. p.5.
44. Op.Cit. p.4.
45. Letter addressed from 15 Waverley House, Kenton Street, London, dated 21 March 1921, V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.33
46. Letter addressed from 15 Waverley House, Kenton Street, London, dated 22 January 1921, V.Palmer, Louis Esson, pp.30-31.
47. Letter addressed from 15 Waverley House, Kenton Street, London, dated 21 March 1921, V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.34.
48. Letter addressed from 39 West Washington Square, New York City, V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.7.
49. V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.17.
50. "The Pioneer Players. Varied Bill Well Received", Argus (4 December 1923), p.12.

51. Letter addressed from 15 Waverley House, Kenton Street, London, V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.15.
52. Handbill, MS.1174/31/85, Palmer Papers.
53. Letter addressed from 15 Waverley House, Kenton Street, London, V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.23.
54. Letter addressed from 15 Waverley House, Kenton Street, London, dated 30 August 1920, MS.5679, La Trobe Library, Melbourne.
55. Letter addressed from 15 Waverley House, Kenton Street, London, V. Palmer, Louis Esson, p.25.
56. Letter addressed from 15 Waverley House, Kenton Street, London, V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.26.
57. Letter addressed from 15 Waverley House, Kenton Street, London, V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.32.
58. V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.20.
59. "Music and Drama", Age (19 December 1919), p.8.
60. "New Repertory Society", Triad, V, No.8 (10 May 1920), 45.
61. V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.20.
62. Op.Cit. p.38.
63. V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.40.
64. Letter addressed from 15 Waverley House, Kenton Street, London, V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.41.
65. V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.42.
66. Ibid.
67. Ibid.
68. MS.1174/16/4, Palmer Papers.
69. Ibid.
70. Ibid.
71. V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.45.
72. Op.Cit., p.48.
73. Nettie Palmer, Fourteen Years, Extracts from a Private Journal 1925-1939 (Melbourne, 1945), p.179.
74. MS.1174/1/10121, Palmer Papers.

75. Letter addressed from 67 Queensberry Street, Carlton, postmarked "9 Oct. 1922"; henceforth referred to as letter postmarked "9 Oct. 1922".
76. V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.49.
77. Letter addressed from 67 Queensberry Street, Carlton, V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.48.
78. Amusements, p.12 in each issue.
79. "The Pioneer Players", p.22.
80. "The Pioneer Players", p.11.
81. "Sundry Shows" (25 May 1922), p.34.
82. "A Pioneer Play", p.8.
83. "True Australian" (27 May 1922), p.10.
84. MS.1174/31/87, Palmer Papers.
85. MS.1174/1/1033, Palmer Papers.
86. MS.1174/31/94, Palmer Papers.
87. Ibid.
88. Letter postmarked "9 Oct. 1922".
89. Letter written in a train from Emerald, dated 22 May 1922, MS.1174/1/1033, Palmer Papers.
90. "Australian Plays", in an unnamed newspaper cutting dated "November 1920" in William Moore's Scrap Book, La Trobe Library, Melbourne.
91. Letter postmarked "9 Oct. 1922".
92. V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.50.
93. "Theatres", p.393.
94. MS.1174/31/94, Palmer Papers.
95. "Temperance Hall. John Blake", Triad, VII, No.12 (11 September 1922), 59.
96. "The Playgoer", p.20.
97. "Critics of Australian Drama", p.207. All later references to Brodney's article are to this page.

98. "A Happy Family", p.14.
99. "New Pioneer Play" (21 September, 1921), p.21.
100. Amusements, p.20 in each issue.
101. "Dramatic Notes", Australasian (21 October 1922), p.889.
102. "Dramatic" notes, p.723.
103. "Sundry Shows (28 September 1922), p.34.
104. "Wayback Comedy" (22 September 1922), p.8.
105. "Temperance Hall. A Happy Family", VIII, No.1 (10 October 1922), 59.
106. MS.1174/31/75, Palmer Papers.
107. "Theatres", p.993.
108. "Sundry Shows", p.34.
109. "Australian Plays", p.19.
110. V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.51.
111. Ibid.
112. MS.1174/16/75, Palmer Papers. All subsequent references to the 1923 diary are to this MS.
113. "Melbourne Chatter", p.40. Programmes for John Blake, MS.1174/31/94, Five Short Plays, MS.1174/31/103 and A Happy Family, MS.1174/31/75, Palmer Papers, all have his name listed among the actors.
114. Letter addressed from 235 Rathdown Street, Carlton, dated only "Sunday", MS.1174/1/10135, Palmer Papers.
115. "Bride of Gospel Place", Melbourne Herald (10 June 1926), p.26.
116. Letter with front page missing, MS.1174/1/101, Palmer Papers.
117. MS.1174/31/85, Palmer Papers.
118. "Theatres", p.1195.
119. "Sundry Shows", p.34.
120. MS.1174/31/75.

121. "Rise of Australian Drama", p.6.
122. 10 August 1923, p.13.
123. "Sundry Shows" (14 June 1923), p.34.
124. Nettie Palmer, Fourteen Years, Extracts from a Private Journal 1925-1939 (Melbourne, 1948), p.178.
125. MS.1174/31/85, Palmer Papers.
126. Inventory, Part II. Box 106. Also MS.1174/31/85, Palmer Papers.
127. Letter addressed from 235 Rathdown Street, Carlton, MS.6069, La Trobe Library, Melbourne.
128. V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.18.
129. MS.A.822, P and M File, Mitchell Library, Sydney.
130. This article, from an unidentified newspaper, was given to me by Stuart Brown, Frank Brown's son.
131. V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.17.
132. MS.6066, La Trobe Library, Melbourne.
133. "Sundry Shows", p.34.
134. "Theatres" (25 August 1923), p.393.
135. "Five Australian Plays" (7 August 1923), p.7.
136. Extract from letter with no address or date, V. Palmer, Louis Esson, p.53.
137. MS.1174/31/85, Palmer Papers.
138. Letter addressed from 235 Rathdown Street, Carlton, MS.6069, La Trobe Library.
139. V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.60.
140. Preface, Rebel Smith (New York, 1925).
141. The Making of Australian Drama (Sydney, 1973), p.126.
142. MS.1174/11/26, Palmer Papers.
143. "Sundry Shows", p.34.

144. "The Pioneer Players. Varied Bill Well Received" (4 December 1923), p.12.
145. "With the Pioneer Players", p.9.
146. Nettie Palmer's Diary for 1924, MS.1174/16/6, National Library, Canberra. All later references to her diary for 1924 are to this MS.
147. Letter addressed from 235 Rathdown Street, Carlton, MS.6069, La Trobe Library.
148. Letter addressed from Mallacoota West, Victoria, V.Palmer, Louis Esson, pp.55-56.
149. Letter addressed from Mallacoota West, Victoria, V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.56.
150. Op.Cit., p.57.
151. Op.Cit., p.57.
152. Letter addressed from Mallacoota West, Victoria, V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.60.
153. Letter addressed from Mallacoota West, Victoria, V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.60.
154. Letter addressed from Mallacoota West, Victoria, V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.62.
155. MS.1174/16/7, Palmer Papers. All other diary entries for 1925 refer to this MS.
156. Letter addressed from 235 Rathdown Street, Carlton, dated "Thursday", MS.1174/1/10137, Palmer Papers.
157. Letter addressed from 235 Rathdown Street, Carlton, dated "Thursday", MS.1174/1/10138, Palmer Papers.
158. Letter addressed from 235 Rathdown Street, Carlton, dated "Thursday", MS.1174/1/10138, Palmer Papers.
159. H.G.Kippax, "Drama", Australian Society (Melbourne, 1963), p.194.
160. V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.63.
161. Letter addressed from 73 Rathdown Street, Carlton, V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.65.
162. Letter addressed from 73 Rathdown Street, Carlton, V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.67.
163. Letter addressed from 73 Rathdown Street, Carlton, V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.68.
164. "Towards Australian Drama", Australasian (19 June, 1926), p.1533.

165. Letter addressed from 73 Rathdown Street, Carlton, V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.69.
166. "Towards Australian Drama", p.1553.
167. "Bride of Gospel Place", p.26.
168. "Sundry Shows", p.34.
169. Letter addressed from 73 Rathdown Street, Carlton, V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.70.
170. Op.Cit., p.71.
171. Letter addressed from 73 Rathdown Street, Carlton, V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.73.
172. Letter addressed from 73 Rathdown Street, Carlton, V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.70.
173. Letter addressed from 73 Rathdown Street, Carlton, dated 10 March 1927, V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.84.
174. Letter addressed from 73 Rathdown Street, Carlton, V.Palmer, Louis Esson, pp.91-92.
175. Letter addressed from 73 Rathdown Street, Carlton, dated 29 November 1928, V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.102.
176. Letter addressed from 229 West 43rd Street, New York City, U.S.A., MS.1174/1/3936, Palmer Papers.
177. Fourteen Years: Extracts from a Private Journal 1925-1939 (Melbourne, 1948), p.16.
178. "Drama", Australian Society (Sydney, 1963), p.195.
179. p.26.
180. Vide Chapter II of this thesis.
181. "Bride of Gospel Place", Argus (10 June 1926), p.16.
182. "Buzo Bemoans Bazza's Bastardies. Playwright Alexander Buzo Talks to Ian Moffitt", Australian (6 April 1974), p.21.
183. "Amusements", Argus (16 September 1912), p.16 and (31 October 1912), p.16.
184. "Entertainments", Argus (5 July 1913), p.24 and (14 August 1913), p.12.
185. Argus, p.32.

186. "Entertainments", Argus (6 October 1922), p.20.
187. "Entertainments", Argus (31 October 1922), p.16.
188. "Entertainments", Argus (18 August 1923), p.32.
189. "Entertainments", Argus (31 August 1923), p.16.
190. "Entertainments", Argus (13 August 1926), p.20.
191. "Entertainments", Argus (31 August 1926), p.22.
192. MS.1174/29/2, Palmer Papers.
193. "A Queensland Play", unidentified newspaper, MS.1174/11/1, Palmer Papers.
194. "Sundry Shows", (28 September 1922), p.34.
195. "Temperance Hall. A Happy Family", Triad (10 October 1922), p.59.
196. "New Books", Argus (8 January 1921), p.5.
197. Letter addressed from 15 Waverley House, Kenton Street, London to Vance Palmer, dated November 1920, V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.27.
198. "Introduction", L.Esson, The Southern Cross and Other Plays (Melbourne, 1946), p.xiv.
199. E.Hanger, "Preface" Australian One Act Plays (Adelaide, 1962), p.27.
200. "Forbears of 'The Doll'", Southerly, XVII, No.1 (1957), 32.
201. Op.Cit., p.33.
202. L.Esson, "J.M.Synge, A Personal Note", VI, No.9 (April 1921), 137.
203. V.Palmer, "An Australian National Art" The Writer in Australia (Melbourne, 1969), p.169, originally in Steele Rudd's Magazine (January, 1905).
204. "Wayback Comedy", Melbourne Herald (22 September 1922), p.8.
205. "The Irish National Theatre", Lone Hand, III, No.13, (1 May 1908), 107.
206. Letter postmarked "9 Oct. 1922".

207. Letter postmarked "9 Oct., 1922".
208. Letter addressed from Rathdown Street, Carlton, MS.1174/1/10127, Palmer Papers.
209. Letter from 235 Rathdown Street, Carlton, MS.6069, La Trobe Library.
210. L.Esson, The Southern Cross and Other Plays (Melbourne, 1946), p.XI.
211. Letter addressed from 93 Drummond Street, Carlton, MS.6067, La Trobe Library.
212. Letter addressed from 15 Waverley House, Kenton Street, London, V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.41.
213. Letter addressed from Ainslie, A.C.T., dated "9/10/72".
214. E.Hanger, "Preface", Australian One Act Plays (Adelaide, 1962), p.7.
215. "Wayback Comedy", Melbourne Herald (22 September, 1922), p.8.
216. Letter addressed from 235 Rathdown Street, Carlton, MS.6069, La Trobe Library.
217. Letter addressed from 73 Rathdown Street, Carlton, V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.69.
218. L.Esson, "W.B.Yeats on National Drama", Fellowship, VIII, No.1 (August 1921), 18.
219. P.McGuire, Betty Arnott and Francis McGuire, The Australian Theatre (London, 1942), p.78.
220. Fourteen Years: Extracts from a Private Journal 1925-1939 (Melbourne, 1948), p.17.
221. Furnley Maurice (Sydney, 1955), p.30.
222. Stars in My Backyard (Devon, 1942), p.99.

CHAPTER II

1. Letter addressed from 15 Waverley House, Kenton Street, London, V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.25; also quotes Yeats' words to Esson.
2. Fellowship, VIII, No.1 (August, 1921), 18.

3. "J.M.Synge, A Personal Note", Fellowship, VI, No.9 (April, 1921), 142.
4. "The Washington Square Players", Fellowship, VI, No.12 (July 1920), 83.
5. "The Repertory Theatre / Exit Shaw", Socialist (17 July 1912), p.3.
6. H.M.Green, "Drama, A History of Australian Literature (Sydney, 1961), p.681.
7. Letter addressed from 15 Waverley House, Kenton Street, London, V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.34.
8. "The Pioneer Players. Varied Bill Well Received", p.12.
9. V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.19.
10. Op.Cit. pp.50-51.
11. "The Irish National Theatre", Lone Hand, III, No.13 (1 May 1908), 108. Other references incorporated into the text.
12. Letter addressed from 73 Rathdown Street, Carlton, dated only "Sunday", MS.1174/1/10135, Palmer Papers.
13. Letter addressed from 73 Rathdown Street, Carlton, dated only "Wednesday, 10th February", MS.1174/1/10128, Palmer Papers.
14. Letter addressed from 73 Rathdown Street, Carlton, dated only "29th July", MS.1174/1/10130, Palmer Papers.
15. MS.1174/1/10131 and 1174/1/10132, Palmer Papers.
16. Letter addressed from 73 Rathdown Street, Carlton, V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.72.
17. "Lawson Revisited", The Australian Tradition (Melbourne, 1966), p.27.
18. "Stagery", II, No.14 (1922-1923), 13.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. "A Pioneer Play" (19 May 1922), p.8.
22. "Rise of Australian Drama", Herald (8 June 1923), p.6.
23. Letter addressed from 67 Queensberry Street, Carlton, MS.Ae20, Mitchell Library.

24. "Temperance Hall. A Happy Family" (October 1922), p.59
25. "A Happy Family" (23 September 1922), p.14.
26. "Rise of Australian Drama", Herald (8 June 1923), p.6.
27. "Sincere Play by Mr Louis Esson", p.16.
28. V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.4.
29. Fellowship, VIII, 15.
30. Letter addressed from 15 Waverley House, Kenton Street, London, V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.33.
31. V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.4.
32. "Drama", Australian Society (Melbourne, 1963), p.195.
33. "Mask and Cage. Stereotype in Recent Drama", p.308.
34. "Australian Drama in Relation to Literature", Australian Writers Speak (Sydney, 1942), p.85.
35. Playbill of the Fourth Annual Drama Night, p.86, scrap-book of Florence Wilkie on Leslie Wilkie. MS.D.382, Mitchell Library, Sydney.
36. L.Esson, "W.B.Yeats on National Drama", Fellowship, VIII, No.1 (Melbourne, August, 1921), p.15.
37. Letter written "In a Train to Emerald", MS.1174/1/1033, Palmer Papers.
38. "The Pioneer Players", p.22.
39. J.Beresford Fowler, Stars in My Backyard (Devon, 1942), pp.99-144.
40. Letter addressed from 235 Rathdown Street, Carlton, dated only "Friday", MS.1174/1/101233, Palmer Papers.
41. V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.52.
42. Ibid.
43. V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.46.
44. Op.Cit. p.63.
45. Ibid.
46. Information about the parts played by various actors has been taken from the following Pioneer Programmes:

46. (Continued)
The Battler, MS.1174/31/4; John Blake, MS.1174/31/94;
A Happy Family, MS.1174/31/75; Five Short Plays, 1922,
MS.1174/31/125; Four Short Plays, MS.1174/31/104;
Five Short Plays, 1923, MS.1174/28/514; Mother and Son,
MS.1174/31/109; Bride of Gospel Place, MS.1174/31/61.
All are in Palmer Papers. All future references to
parts played by actors to be found in these MSS.
47. V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.63.
48. "Sundry Shows", p.34.
49. "Temperance Hall. John Blake", p.59.
50. V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.46.
51. Op.Cit., p.47.
52. V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.46.
53. Op.Cit., p.63.
54. "Towards an Australian Drama", Lone Hand, III, No.14 (1
June 1908), 224.
55. V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.47.
56. Op.Cit., p.52.
57. Letter addressed from 235 Rathdown Street, Carlton,
dated 20 August 1923, MS.6069, La Trobe Library.
58. Letter addressed from 235 Rathdown Street, Carlton,
dated only "Friday", MS.1174/1/10124, Palmer Papers.
59. Letter addressed from 73 Rathdown Street, Carlton,
dated only "29 July", MS.1174/1/10130 Palmer Papers -
but probably 1926 because Nettie mentions seeing
Chaliapin and so does Esson in his letter to Palmer
dated 15 July 1926 from the same address. V.Palmer,
Louis Esson, p.71.
60. "Pioneer Plays", p.22.
61. "Temperance Hall. John Blake" (11 September 1922), p.59
62. "Happy Family", p.723.
63. "Sundry Shows", Bulletin (28 September 1922), p.34.
64. "Bride of Gospel Place", Melbourne Herald (10 July 1926),
p.26.
65. "Frank Keon", p.40.

66. "Temperance Hall. John Blake" (11 September 1922), p.59.
67. Letter addressed from 235 Rathdown Street, Carlton dated only "Friday", MS.1174/1/1025, Palmer Papers.
68. "Bride of Gospel Place" (10 June 1926), p.26.
69. Letter addressed from 235 Rathdown Street, Carlton dated only "Friday", MS.1174/1/10124, Palmer Papers.
70. "Theatres", Australasian (16 June 1923), p.1194.
71. "Sundry Shows" (14 June 1923), p.34.
72. "Theatres" (4 November 1922), p.993.
73. "Bride of Gospel Place" (10 June 1926), p.26.
74. "Temperance Hall. John Blake", p.59.
75. "Farce and Grand Guignol", p.14.
76. "Sundry Shows", p.34.
77. "Pioneer Players in Drama" (11 August 1922), p.8.
78. "Theatres" (19 August 1923), p.393.
79. "Nan", Triad (10 May 1921), p.44.
80. "Sundry Shows", Bulletin (28 September 1922), p.34.
81. L.Esson, Three Short Plays (Melbourne 1912), p.3.
82. Letter addressed from 15 Waverley House, Kenton Street, London dated 21 May 1921, V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.33.
83. Letter addressed from 235 Rathdown Street, Carlton dated only "Friday", MS.1174/1/1035, Palmer Papers.
84. "True Australian" (27 May 1922), p.10.
85. "Stagery", II, No.19 (15 November 1922), p.12.
86. "Theatres" (30 September 1922), p.723.
87. "Sundry Shows" (28 September 1922), p.34.
88. "The Playgower", p.21.
89. Letter addressed from 73 Rathdown Street, Carlton, V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.69.
90. "Bride of Gospel Place" (10 June 1926), p.16.

91. "Theatres", p.1195.
92. "Sundry Shows", p.34.
93. V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.49.
94. In a letter from Mallacoota West, dated 15 March 1924, Esson told Palmer he was writing a novel about "an artist in a new country". His hero was "a mixture of Meldrum and myself". (The novel was not completed.) V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.58.
95. "Sundry Shows", Bulletin (17 August 1922), p.34 contains a description of a showing of Meldrum's paintings.
96. V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.49.
97. Ibid.
98. L.Rees, The Making of Australian Drama (Cremorne, New South Wales, 1973), p.128.
99. William Moore Papers, J.K.Moir Collection, MSS. Box 37, La Trobe Library, Melbourne.
100. V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.49.
101. Op.Cit., p.50.
102. "Sundry Shows" (17 August 1922), p.34.
103. "The Playgoer" (24 August 1922), p.21.
104. "With the Pioneer Players", p.9.
105. Letter addressed from 73 Rathdown Street, Carlton, dated 15 June 1926, V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.70.
106. Australian Drama and Theatre, XXII, No.7, p.119.

CHAPTER III

1. Letter addressed from 15 Waverley House, Kenton Street, London, to Vance Palmer, dated November 1920, V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.28.
2. L.Esson, The Battler, Act II, p.27, MS. in Campbell Howard Collection, Library of University of Armidale. Other references incorporated in the text.
3. L.Rees, The Making of Australian Drama (Cremorne, New South Wales, 1973), p.136.
4. Op.Cit., p.123.

5. L.Rees, The Making of Australian Drama (Cremorne, New South Wales, 1973), p.123.
6. "Sundry Shows", p.34.
7. V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.3.
8. L.Esson, Mother and Son, The Southern Cross and Other Plays (Melbourne, 1944), p.161. Other references incorporated in the text.
9. "W.B.Yeats on National Drama", Fellowship, VIII, No.1 (August 1921), 15.
10. Letter addressed from 15 Waverley House, Kenton Street, London dated November 1920, V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.26.
11. V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.108.
12. L.Esson, The Woman Tamer, Three Short Plays (Melbourne, 1911), p.6. Other references incorporated in the text.
13. Letter addressed to Vance Palmer from 15 Waverley House, Kenton Street, dated 4 February 1920, V.Palmer, Louis Esson, p.21.
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