

## From the Back Verandah

After all that research fun you had our first quiz (*Bikwil* No. 25, May 2001) here at last is . . .

### Kwizz Gig 1

1. Which composer wrote the *March-Past of the Kitchen Utensils*?
2. According to legend, which European queen was crowned five years after her death?
3. A certain mnemonic verse begins:  
Sir, — I send a rhyme excelling  
In sacred truth and rigid spelling.  
Numerical sprites elucidate  
For me the lexicon's dull weight.  
What is it intended to help us remember?
4. Who was the only Englishman ever to become Pope?
5. His transatlantic namesake wrote several historical novels, but this historian wrote only one — *Savrola*. Who was he?
6. Which historian and scientist was asphyxiated while investigating an erupting volcano?
7. The ending of which American novel underwent 39 rewrites before publication?
8. Which rock classic begins with the words "Really don't mind if you sit this one out"?
9. Which nineteenth century artist painted 70 paintings in the last 70 days of his life?
10. Her clergyman uncle was a best-selling Victorian author, and she was a spinster who walked for a week through hitherto unexplored West African territory and made friends with the cannibal Fang tribe of Gabon. What was her name?

— Fizzgig

# BIKWIL

*The Magazine of Quiet Enthusiasms*

Editor: Tony Rogers

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## Fifth Birthday News

*Bikwil* has come a long way since it began in May 1997 with a handful of subscribers — some of them, it must be confessed, gently coerced.

Well, now five years have passed, and though our magazine continues to appeal to a niche market, that original band of heroes and heroines — almost every one of them still loyally with us (thank you all) — has been joined by other like-natured minds from around the globe.

Similarly, the number of contributions I receive has been steadily increasing. Time was when I nearly lost heart that I'd get

enough submissions to fill the next issue. So much so that, as some of you would have realised by now, I had to resort to inventing improbable pseudonyms for myself.

But all that editorial dejection looks like it has passed for good. Indeed, now I have to keep the queue of contributors waiting far longer than any of us would like.

So as to reduce that delay a bit and also to allow for longer articles and stories, I've decided to increase the size of each issue once more, beginning with the issue you're now reading. Yes, *Bikwil* is now twice the size it was when we began. Ain't we got fun!

### Colophon

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*Back Issues Are Still Available*

*I don't know if you have ever leaped between the sheets, all ready for a spot of sleep, and received an unforeseen lizard up the left pyjama leg? It is an experience that puts its stamp on a man.*

P.G. Wodehouse

*Henry James had a mind so fine  
no idea could violate it.*

T.S. Eliot

## Quintessential Quirky Quotes

*You know you're getting old when you stoop to tie your shoes and wonder what else you can do while you're down there.*

George Burns

*If you can't get rid of the skeleton in your closet, you'd best teach it to dance.*

George Bernard Shaw

*Well, Art is Art, isn't it? Still, on the other hand, water is water. And east is east and west is west and if you take cranberries and stew them like apple-sauce they taste much more like prunes than rhubarb does. Now you tell me what you know.*

Groucho Marx

Barry, the gender bender, is at work in his choice of Noel Coward's *Mad About the Boy* and he includes the once banned piece of harmless naughtiness *Ain't It Gorgeous* — the old 78 was probably hidden in one of the garages with a pile of yellowing *Man* magazines. Almost all the recordings on the double album originated in London. The collection indicates just how greatly pre-war Australia was dependant economically and culturally on Britain.

I haven't seen a film by the enormously popular dancing, singing star of the twenties and thirties Jack Buchanan, but the three records he made with Elsie Randolph are light and witty with the bonus of having the piano played by Ray Noble who leads the orchestra.

One of the great voices, selected by Humphries, belongs to an Australian, Marjorie Stedford, (1912-1959) who "made it" in London singing with the top orchestras of the thirties. Her voice, deep like a man's, is superb on *Stardust*.

Were it not for Barry Humphries and Bill Armstrong

the glorious effortless singing of Lucienne Boyer (1901-1983) and the youthfulness of Ann Lenner (1910-1997) would remain lost and abandoned. And all of us would be the poorer for not having heard the work of those hundreds of anonymous musicians and arrangers whose meticulous and inspired playing now lives again.

In the choice of the songs and his friendship with many of the elderly composers and singers, there is material for the future biographer. Let's soon have a thorough, truthful and scholarly biography of the greatest son of Marvellous Melbourne — Mr Barry Humphries. In the meantime, give thanks to Messrs Humphries and Armstrong and enjoy the gift of forty-six packages of gaiety and delight retrieved for us from sombre, silent vaults of Time.

— Peter Mara

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Like Parlophone, Regal Zonophone was a popular brand of 78.

The *So Rare* two-CD set catalogue number is 11-2 on the BAC label.

## Mary Bennet

1

I confess I found my sister's story somewhat superficial. And if that makes me sound like a prig then I would remind you that *Pride and Prejudice* was thought to be rather too light and bright and sparkling by no less a person than its creator who — in a letter to her own sister — felt that the work was perhaps in need of "shade", in need of stretching out here and there with a long chapter of "solemn specious nonsense".

And who better qualified (you may well think) to supply such shade and solemn specious nonsense than myself? In any case it's high time *Mary Bennet's* side of things was universally acknowledged. And it's not such an unsisterly side either. I daresay I shall be a great deal kinder to Miss Lizzy than ever she was to me.

But right at the outset and lest there be any confusion I wish to acknowledge the help given me by my two particular friends, Maria Lucas (abominably traduced in *P&P*) and Mrs Stephen Tregoning (Cassandra Long that was). It is to

them and to my goddaughter Margaret Mary Collins that this work is dedicated.

Where to begin? Well I'm sure you all have a very unflattering picture of me — plain, ponderous, bookish, dull-witted, with a flat chest and a flat singing voice I never tire of showing off — the voice that is. Now you might think I shall be at pains to deny all that. Well I shan't. Some of it is undoubtedly true.

The interesting thing to my mind is *why* it's true. But to find out that we really need to look at Longbourn in the early days- a brief look will suffice — when my sisters Jane and Elizabeth were very small, when my father still loved my mother and when I was as yet unborn.

Now I have it on good authority from Cassandra's aunt, Mrs Long, and also from Lady Lucas that my father was seriously disappointed when Elizabeth was born, on account of the entail. But then according to Mrs Long and Lady Lucas (or Mrs Lucas as she then was) Elizabeth was such a delightful, merry *impish* babe that my father

was very soon reconciled to her existence — more than reconciled, he rapidly came to dote on her. Her favourite trick was to creep into his library with her little blue blanket and make a nest for herself beneath his kneehole desk. My father would be reading, quite forgetful of her presence, and then he would look up to find her dark eyes fixed upon him.

Later, he taught her to read — the only one of his children he personally tutored. (Jane at that time was being taught by the Lucases' governess and Mama considered Elizabeth too young to be included in the class.) And so delighted was my father at his little Lizzy's progress that if there were company present he would call on her — despite Mama's objections — to show her precocious talent. Mrs Long vividly remembers Elizabeth chalking words on a slate and lisping *Sally in our Alley* when she was but two years old. She also recalls the infant prodigy performing a sailor's hornpipe while my father beat time on the arm of his chair and called on everybody to witness Lizzy's amazing sense of rhythm. (I believe at one stage my father even considered teaching Elizabeth Latin but nothing ever came of it.)

My mother not unreasonably took exception to all this. "You will

turn the child's head, Mr Bennet. She will be so puffed up in her own conceit that pretty soon there'll be no telling her anything." My father would laugh and return to his book. In those days he did not expose his wife to ridicule. That came a little later, after I was born.

Mama's joy at the prospect of a third child was known to most of the good people of Meryton. So certain was she that at last the Bennets were to be blessed with a son that she arranged for his name, Gordon Gardiner, to be embroidered on a fresh supply of blue baby linen. (Elizabeth's blue blanket was a relic of equally optimistic expectations.) My father too looked forward to the birth, anticipating the cutting off of the entail and the discomfiture of the Collinses.

"And how will you like having a little brother, Lizzy?" my father would say, whereupon Elizabeth would clap her hands. "But it may be you'll have to make do with another sister." At which Elizabeth would frown and shake her head. I'm told this caused my father much amusement.

I was not born at Longbourn and for that too Elizabeth was responsible. As Aunt Philips tells it, she and Mama had spent the morning shopping and on returning to my aunt's house Mama of a sudden was taken

humorist — an essential part of the Australian scene like Gough Whitlam or Les Murray.

But in 1959 Barry was at an early stage in his journey. Arrived in London, unknown, he sought out yet another established creative figure of the previous generation. Humphries met Eric Maschwitz, head of BBC light entertainment and lyricist of *Room Five Hundred and Four* and *A Nightingale Sang in Berkley Square*. Maschwitz was friendly and helpful to Humphries and forty years later he returns the favours. Both those songs, in splendid wartime renditions, are on the CD. Vera Lynn's 1941 *Room Five Hundred and Four* is poignant, giving a believable and intimate glimpse of wartime romance and reminding us of how she is able to hit a note in its perfect centre. Dame Vera, 24 when she recorded this hit, is now in her 84th year.

One of Humphries' positions in Melbourne had been that of elocution teacher to housewives at the Greta Meirs School of Charm. What an extraordinary position for the embryonic

satirist but it is notable that on every record chosen by Humphries, excepting the few by *foreigners* singing in English, the diction is outstanding. Hildegard's 1937 *So Rare* has a crystalline harp accompaniment supporting an effortless voice, floating to the highest notes and having great beauty of diction. Humphries has known Hildegard since the 70s and in 1999 she was alive and well in New York at the age of 93.

There are five songs by Hildegard on the two CDs of *So Rare*, all recorded in London in 1937, which reveal the technical as well as musical excellence of that period. That the glamour of Hildegard, forgotten for more than 60 years, has been brought back into the bright light of the present is one of the triumphs of this collection.

A fine baritone himself, Humphries includes several tracks by pianist-baritones. Leslie Hutchinson and Turner Layton, both recorded in London, enjoyed great popularity in their day. But try to tell them apart — it's quite a test.

destructive, sadistic behaviours. In 1962 or thereabouts I was in the audience at the Macquarie Auditorium for *A Nice Night's Entertainment* — Barry's first one-man show. Barry struck terror into his audience, even those of us who made certain they didn't come late! His satire was so savage, his sexuality seemed indeterminate and he himself projected insecurity and oddness. You felt he had a frightening inner rage and that he was close to breaking out into destructive behaviour. Yet there was a joy in seeing someone, for the first time, having a go at the materialism, the aggressive philistinism, and the comfortable assumptions of authoritarian, narrow minded middle Australia. His early shows in Sydney were sold out and the LP's did well — they had a taste of forbidden fruit about them.

In 1968 I saw a lank haired, sallow, plain looking chap get on the London Underground at St John's Wood. This fellow sat by himself, talking to himself and shaking with laughter. He was in an inner world entirely — perhaps creating an episode of the

hilarious *Private Eye* comic strip *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* — and oblivious to all the other people in the carriage. He seemed like one of those mad people around London and going all the way downhill fairly rapidly.

In 1981 or thereabouts, on a Saturday night, over the car radio, I heard Barry give an interview to the ABC. If you have ever known Depression and, really, who hasn't, you would have recognised a person speaking from a place where there is no hope. This was a bleak, abandoned cave Humphries was speaking from where everything was burnt and wasted. Barry spoke of his alcoholism and of his long term membership of Alcoholics Anonymous. Indeed that connection with AA seemed the only torn fragment of hope he could grasp at that time.

Barry recovered and all of us have benefited from the riches of his inner world. His satire became gentler and he relied on his wit, his ear for language and the outrageousness of his characterisations. Indeed an intimidating figure became a loved

ill with a pain in her side and palpitations. Aunt Philips, believing Mama's time had come, summoned the midwife and sent an urgent message to Longbourn. But when my father finally arrived, having had to walk the distance in the noonday heat, he found all three women — Mama, Aunt Philips and the midwife Mrs Sproat — enjoying a hearty nuncheon.

Mama was in high good humour. "Such a morning I have had, Mr Bennet! Gordon Gardiner still refuses to bestir himself but Mrs Sproat assures me it's the rule with boys so I don't complain."

Papa was hot and fagged from his walk and gave her a short answer. Now that he was assured Mama was in no danger, he was impatient to return to Longbourn. He was concerned for Elizabeth. She was unwell — feverish and refusing food — and the nursery-maid Eurydice Morton (of whom more later) was equally concerned. Papa now proposed borrowing Uncle Philips' carriage so that he and Mama might return to Longbourn without delay.

"What! you would have me go now and very likely give birth in a ditch! And all because Elizabeth has a trifling little cold!"

Aunt Philips and Mrs Sproat were almost as indignant. They

thought it most unwise for Mama to travel. Far better for her to stay quietly where she was and await the birth without any more excitement. And Mrs Sproat strongly advised against Mama returning to Longbourn until after Elizabeth was completely restored to health. If the child had contracted a nasty infectious illness she might well give it to the baby.

My father then declared his intention of returning alone, after which Mama burst into tears and accused him of loving Elizabeth more than herself. Fortunately my Uncle Philips walked in at that point and persuaded Papa at least to delay his departure until after he had had something to eat and drink. The two men then repaired to the front parlour and after Papa had drunk several glasses of spruce beer he went and spoke to Mama in private. Shortly afterwards he left for Longbourn alone.

Mama's pains began in the early hours of the following morning. At first she refused to allow my uncle to send for Papa and when she finally did consent it was too late. I was born an hour before he arrived.

— Jennifer Paynter

[ This novella will be continued in the next issue. ]

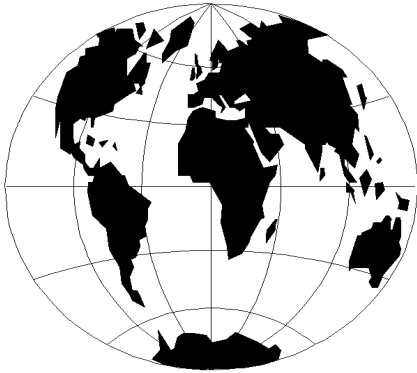
## Web

When I began this column in *Bikwil's* inaugural issue (May 1997), the very first site I reviewed was *The Sydney Morning Herald*. A month or so ago, as our fifth anniversary approached, a new look seemed a reasonable thing to consider. After all, this is one of Australia's most popular sites, drawing around 1.3 million readers a month.

Well, by coincidence the *SMH* site has recently undergone an overhaul, so the idea turns out to be doubly opportune. Not that this is the first revamp it has had in the intervening years, but the current upgrade seems particularly successful.

By and large the enhancements concentrate on content, which in my book is what the Internet is all about. The *Herald's* method here has been to give greater depth of coverage in several broad categories: business, technology, sport, travel and entertainment.

Taking the example of technology, we find more coverage now by it having drawn from the pages, not only of the *Herald*, but also of its Melbourne sister paper *The Age*.



## Line

Business treatment has likewise expanded and now covers a wider range of major sectors. One change I appreciate is the division of the entertainment section into separate subsections: film, TV & radio, music, arts, books, fashion, puzzles.

Another new feature is an archive of "your favourite columnists", so that you can revisit his or her writings. Time will tell how far back such essays will be kept.

Sure, some of these changes may not lie within your areas of interest, but let me assure you that news and comment sections maintain their justly reliable reputation. Currency is maintained by the by now well-established Breaking News section.

Cosmetically, the site shows minimal change in this year's incarnation, though some streamlining has taken place and, more significantly, a new navigation bar has been created to give visitors easier access to the sections they like best.

And, yes, the *Herald* remains my browser's home page.

— TR

these perfect discs so that no artists' fees would need to be paid. As if in reparation Humphries has chosen this, the first record he guiltily pulverised, for inclusion in *So Rare*.

The German actor's voice has timbre ripened by cigarettes, age and whisky and his monologue, spoken against the ragged yet tuneful singing, conjures up a picture of lonely sailors in some foggy seaport longing for the warmth and love of their homes. A big hit of 1933 carries its lonely appeal onwards into a new century.

Unlike most contemporary entertainers Humphries, from the beginning of his career, turned to the show business creatives of the previous generation as though this firstborn child from Melbourne was searching for older, stronger brothers to show him the way. In London he sought out Mischa Spoliansky, a popular composer of the Weimar period.

You would think of a Central European like Spoliansky as a damaged, starveling survivor of a bombed out, war ravaged

Europe, but here, in the detailed booklet that comes with *So Rare*, is the beaming, ancient Mischa, beautifully attired, seated at a grand piano with the elegantly tailored Mr Humphries nearby. His 1932 song *Tell Me Tonight* is performed in German by the magnificent, Hitler persecuted, Comedy Harmonists.

In 1999 when ABC FM radio began playing the records of the Comedy Harmonists again (my cousin Ella tells me they were on the radio "all the time" in the forties and she loved them) I bought an imported CD of their music. Bill Armstrong, using well preserved Melbourne acetates and working in his studio to remove any crackles or hisses has restored the clean original rich sound. In comparison the imported CD has surface noise and a drab sound. Armstrong's restoration of the forty-six 78s means that we now hear the music more clearly and richly than it's ever been heard before.

In his amusing and fairly frank autobiography *More Please* Humphries writes of his triumphs and also of his alcoholism, depression and of his

## Rare Indeed! Barry Humphries and the Regal Zonophones

[ *Memorable Moments in Music* No. 5 ]

The Australian poet Les Murray has found his biographer in Professor Peter Alexander — and what a story that is. Our Nobel Prize winning novelist and dramatist Patrick White has won a worthy Boswell in David Marr. But who will be sufficiently astute to write the biography of the most enigmatic and talented of all? Painter and writer, actor and female impersonator, baritone and falsettist, Satirist to the Age, the tender yet sadistic Mr Barry Humphries.

In the recent double CD of vintage 78's, *So Rare*, chosen by Humphries, his tender side is to the fore in his treasuring of forgotten and lost musical masterpieces. These are 78's which were stored in new condition in at least two Melbourne suburban garages by fastidious owners. Sandy Stone characters, no doubt: collectors who hoarded their fragile 10 inch circles for

sixty or seventy years knowing that within the spirals of their black yet golden coins was held, in silent imprisonment, the Spirit of Music, captured forever young. The two doughty knights, who crept into those lonely sepulchres of sound and who magically released the young princes and princesses of Song into the sunlight were the veteran record producer Bill Armstrong of Melbourne and his cobbler Barry Humphries.

In his 1992 autobiography *More Please* Humphries recalls how he was paid by E.M.I. to smash up 78's made unsaleable by the arrival of the LP. There were five boxes of ten inch Parlophones entitled *When the Lighthouse Shines Across the Bay* featuring a monologue by the famous German actor Conrad Veidt. It was Humphries' first task, as reluctant Vandal, to hammer one neat small hole in

## Meet a Quiet Enthusiast

[ No. 1: A Conversation with Bet Briggs ]

Tony Rogers: You have been a contributor to *Bikwil* since its inception, Bet. What attracted you to the idea of writing for *Bikwil*?

Bet Briggs: That's easy to answer, Tony. Being encouraged to write about my enthusiasms and to have an outlet for expressing them appealed to me. I remember a day in 1996 you and Ellie visited me, and over lunch or afternoon tea we talked excitedly about having a little magazine where we could express our interests and enthusiasms — our eccentricities if you like — and invite others to do the same. I don't think the name *Bikwil* was born that day. But we did discuss the notion of encouraging "quiet enthusiasms". I think we talked about the essay, too, as an excellent form for exploring ideas and all the topics of interest to us, and one we could feature in the magazine. My contribution to the first issue, however, wasn't an essay. Instead, I wrote the small poem *Go, Little Bikwil* as a send-off for our modest creation. I've been pleased and privileged to be a contributor of both poetry and prose ever since and hope to continue now we're starting our sixth year.

TR: Much of your work for *Bikwil* is poetry. How long have you been writing poetry?

BB: Close to sixty years. I've kept some of my juvenile poems and the first of them I've noted as my "first poem written 1943". In May that year I was 12. I was dabbling with stories and poetry before that, though. When I got the urge to write the poem and how long it took me I can't say precisely. I could've started it and finished it in a day or two or taken much longer. That's the way I've always worked, get an idea, work on it while it's fresh and create a poem in a short time, or take weeks or months. Sometimes years. It's important to write down an idea quickly when it comes or I lose it. You know what I mean, Tony. That "first fine careless rapture" can be lost if attention isn't paid to it. Too often I've failed to be "the wise thrush". I always have a notebook and pen with me. Any old scrap of paper comes in handy, too. I've got manila folders full of dated jottings. I don't know when or whether any of them will grow into a poem or simply end up as compost for something to grow in the garden.

TR: Speaking of gardens, many of your poems have been about the natural world, haven't they? You obviously have an affinity with nature, particularly trees.

BB: Yes, the natural world inspires me. That first poem of mine was called *Nightfall*. It was an imagined response to the coming of night in the bush. I didn't write it from experience. If I have an affinity with nature it hasn't come from a background of living intimately with it. I was born and grew up in Newcastle. In my young years it was a smoky, grubby industrial city because of the Steel Works. Not that that troubled me much. Newcastle was home and the world to me then. Not far from our house in New Lambton was The Park as we called it. It was more like a chain of big paddocks and a few horses grazed there. The ocean was a tram ride away and Newcastle's beaches and coastal scenery were, still are spectacular and beautiful. Sometimes on a Sunday Dad would take us for a drive into the Hunter Valley, up round the coal towns and the dairy farms and vineyards. Once we went to Watagan Mountain near Cessnock and drove through the rain forest, probably my first experience of one. Some early poems came out of my experiences of those Sunday drives. The valley landscape was so beautiful and awesome. It nourished my sense of wonder which I'm pleased to say I've never lost. I left Newcastle in 1964 and came to work and live in Sydney. I've seen more of Australia and the world

since and love the beauty and grandeur of it all. Sometimes I try for a poem. Sometimes it comes.

For as long as I can remember I've loved trees. Just the look of them in groups or a forest or one alone is awe-inspiring.

I think that I shall never see  
A poem lovely as a tree . . .

I love that poem and the song. I grew up hearing John Charles Thomas singing *Trees*. Dad sang it well, too. He had a lovely voice and Mum accompanied him on the piano. Come to think of it, I've written quite a few poems about trees. The second poem in my folder of juvenile poems was called *Trees in Winter*. That was written in 1944. While I was in hospital in 1947 I used to observe a tree outside the ward window. It was a great comfort to me to see its daily moods and I wrote *To a Tree* in praise. I'll go on writing poems about them and praising them.

TR: Where else has your poetry or prose been published?

BB: Apart from *Bikwil* I contributed a few articles and poems to the Sydney Jazz Club's *Quarterly Rag* from 1988 to 1994 and a book review to *Jazzchord* in 1997. Then a couple of years ago I was invited to contribute an essay to a book in honour of Dame Leonie Kramer. I was her research assistant from

## Revelation on Canvas

[ From her *Poems for Azimuth* ]

### I

Colour on colour, tone on tone,  
stroke after stroke of the brush  
forming pattern on pattern,

in a passionate rush  
the colours collide,  
they crowd and they crush.

### VI

Colours of earth, air and water,  
rhythms of pattern and line  
becoming strata of life:  
bone, flesh and blood,  
heartbeats on canvas.

Colours in counterpoint:  
they throb and they pulse,  
they sing and they dance.

— Bet Briggs

# The Feral Joke Collector



## More Church Announcements

- ◇ The associate minister unveiled the church's new tithing slogan last Sunday: "I Upped My Pledge - Up Yours."
- ◇ Don't let worry kill you. Let the church help.
- ◇ Thursday night potluck supper. Prayer and Medication to follow.
- ◇ Remember in prayer the many who are sick of our church and community.
- ◇ For those of you who have children and don't know it: we have a nursery downstairs.
- ◇ This afternoon there will be a meeting in the North and South ends of the church. Children will be baptized at both ends.
- ◇ Tuesday at 4:00 p.m. there will be an ice cream social. All ladies giving milk will please come early.
- ◇ Thursday at 5:00 p.m. there will be a meeting of the Little Mother Club. All those interested in becoming a Little Mother please see the pastor in his private study.
- ◇ This being Easter Sunday, we will ask Mrs. Lewis to come forward and lay an egg on the altar.

– Forwarded by Katisha

1972 to 1986 during her time as Professor of Australian Literature, so I wrote about my experiences of working with her and the projects we shared. I called my essay *A Serious Game: Reflections on Being a Literary Sleuth*. The book came out in May last year.

I'm a late starter in the publishing stakes, Tony, on a regular basis, that is. When I was younger I was reluctant to push my work, not confident enough, to be honest, to put it to the test. I did dare on a few occasions. I could count the number of times and the number of successes or failures on one hand. In 1949 I sent a story to *The Sun*, got it back some months later in 1950, with a rejection slip and a handwritten note. I appreciated the note. It was encouraging and I learned from it. Maybe in an odd way it even boosted my confidence. I never stopped writing. The first piece I actually had published was a poem called *The Open Road* in *The Masonic Club Journal* in 1950. Nothing more till 1962 when I was an undergraduate at Newcastle University College. I contributed a short story called *Spring Tide* to the first issue of *Nimrod*, the Students' Association literary magazine. Years later again, in 1975 while working for Prof., I wrote a light-hearted account of my work with her, a forerunner, but unlike it in tone, of that most recent

essay. I called my first effort *Notes from a Literary Sleuth's Casebook*. It was published in the first issue of a small magazine originating in the English Department at Sydney University: *new literature review*.

These days I enjoy being a regular contributor to *Bikwil*. It gives me confidence to see my work in print and makes me try harder to be a better writer.

TR: How important is music and its affect on you?

BB: You're a music lover and musician, Tony, so you'll understand when I say if I had to live without music I'd feel very deprived and diminished. Music has always been part of my life. As I said before, Mum and Dad were musical. Dad played sax and clarinet professionally and he sang beautifully. Mum played the piano well and was a very good accompanist. My sister Carolyn inherited those skills, developed both by study and experience, and, today, she's a talented pianist.

I always wanted to play the violin but I never did learn. I started on piano when I was 12. I love the piano but I never became proficient enough. Too many stops and starts in my learning over the years. In the 1950s though, while I was working as a laundress at Newcastle Hospital I went to the Conservatorium

for three years for piano lessons and also studied harmony and form and history of music. But I let it slip away from me again. I regret that. Still, it wasn't all lost. It helped me to understand and appreciate more fully what I'm hearing. There have been many times when I've been profoundly moved. I think I could write a book of "Memorable Moments". When I first heard Debussy's *Clair de Lune*, for example, I was ironing and listening to the radio and on came Andre Kostelanetz' orchestra playing this beautiful piece. I stood as though pinned to the floor, hardly breathing, my scalp prickling at those delicious lush sounds of strings and horns cascading. It was like standing in falling moonlight. When I found out later it was written for piano I bought a copy and tried to play it. Not very successfully. Technically I wasn't good enough. But it was a pleasure to try to reproduce the chords and notes accurately and to hear those lovely progressions of harmony. And I can always hear it played by a good pianist. Recently, earlier this year I heard it played solo by a Japanese harpist. It was beautiful! I still have the Kostelanetz LP, too.

Whenever I feel that prickle of my scalp, the shiver up my spine, the lump in my throat and tears in my eyes, and the hairs on my arms

standing up, I know I'm hearing something special. Music is a great comfort in my life and an inspiration for writing poetry. I couldn't be without either.

TR: You have worked in various jobs, haven't you? Could you tell our readers something more about your career?

BB: I've had six jobs in my working life. When I left Newcastle Girls' High School prematurely at 15, I went to business college to learn typing, shorthand and book-keeping so I could get an office job. I only lasted a month at the college. I couldn't stand it. I learned enough of typing to get me by, but not to get a job.

My working life actually began on my 17th birthday. I started as a probationer nurse at Wallsend Hospital. Just six months after I'd been there as a patient. But I only lasted one year. It counted for nothing had I gone on. Training actually started at 18 so I'd have had to start all over again. I realised I wasn't cut out for the job so that was the end of my Nightingale experiment. I left the lamp behind and went home to Mum and Dad.

After that I was a spinner in a cotton mill, a pretty awful job, noisy, monotonous, walking up and down tending this monster of a machine and getting fine fluff in my hair and throat and up my nose. I

## *Glad Tangents*

You are all there is left  
to look forward to  
in the day —

After many hours  
of meaningless learning  
all I wish to do  
is listen to you  
rant and rave  
about life  
touch me  
with your philosophies  
and go off  
on those tangents  
you do so well.

— Rebecca Page

[ Rebecca runs a poetry magazine called *Beatnik* at her site <http://www.poeticricity.com> ]

## A Word in Your Pink Shell-like

In Fizzgig's *Verandah* column in Issue 29 (January 2002), we met the 19th century murdering grave-robbers Burke and Hare. One detail reported was that after Burke's trial there arose in England a popular verb *to burke* that meant "to suffocate or strangle", an observation that prompted an email to the Editor from a reader who referred to another *birk* in wide use in England.

Despite assuming that you'd already recognize this latter manifestation as slang for "fool", our Editor still yearned for more, and queried me as to whether something attention-grabbing linguistically might be forthcoming on the matter.

Well, to invoke Sherlock Holmes, the case is not without its points of interest.

As to its spelling, all the dictionaries I've been able to consult give the word as *berk*, though most concede several variants — *birk*, *burk* and even *burke*. The reason for the preferred spelling will become clear in just a tick, but for the sake of completeness I'd first better give all the meanings on offer. So far, I've turned up "fool", "idiot", "boor", "annoying person", "inept person", "despicable person". A derogatory term, to say the least.

It arose in the 1930s as an abbreviation of either *Berkshire Hunt* or *Berkeley Hunt*, but there's disagreement as to which is the true original phrase, both being plausible. The Royal Berkshire Hunt takes place, I understand, every year on Easter Monday. Whether the Berkeley Hunt is still held, I couldn't say.

Origins aside, the crucial point is that *Berkshire/Berkeley Hunt* is rhyming slang for *cunt* — here in the sense of "dickhead" or "pain in the arse". And, as we all know, two-word rhyming slang expressions almost always end up truncated — whence *berk*.

Here's an interesting conundrum, though. The first syllable of both *Berkshire* and *Berkeley* is pronounced "bark" in England, so how come *berk* rhymes with "lurk"?

My conjecture is this. The official enunciation ("British Received Pronunciation") may well be "bark", but it's doubtful that the Cockneys who invented this bit of rhyming slang would pronounce *Berkshire/Berkeley* that way.

So much for *berk*. A fuller treatment of rhyming slang in a future issue, maybe? Fingers crossed.

— Harlish Goop

had enough after 18 months. In 1953 I began working in the laundry at Royal Newcastle Hospital. I stuck that for about six years. It was hard physical work, didn't do much for the mind, but I managed to get my stimulation by taking up music again. I was keen, too. I used to pedal from the hospital to the Con., about ten minutes away, in my lunch hour. How I ever expected to play the piano properly after gripping the handlebars of my bike and racing through the traffic to get there and back to work on time, I've wondered about often. I must have been nuts. If I didn't go far with the playing I did complete the theoretical study. So there was gain as well as loss when I gave it away again. And I gave it up because I decided to go back to school in 1959, to night school five nights a week to get the Leaving Certificate. I finally gave the laundry up, too, not long before the exam. When I got the Leaving with a modest pass in five subjects I knew I couldn't stop there. I was 28 with no job prospects at that level of education. So I went on to university and did a Bachelor of Arts Degree. After graduation I began what I could call me professional career when I came to Sydney in 1964 to work at the State Library. I was there for four years, learned some new skills, like indexing and doing research for

people who sent in requests for information on all sorts of topics. I liked that very much and the indexing, too. It fitted me for my next job.

In 1969 I became an editorial assistant in a publishing firm (CCH Australia). I learned copy holding, proofreading and more indexing skills. This time it was tax and business law I had to index, a daunting task for someone without the slightest bit of knowledge of law in any form. Somehow I managed it for three years.

Finally I got the job, my longest and my last, as Prof. K.'s research assistant for 14 years until I retired in 1986. Things I'd learned in some of my other jobs were good groundwork for my job with Prof. I compiled bibliographies, indexed some books, maintained a huge card index on literary and other subjects and researched enquiries people sent in to Prof. I worked with her on so many interesting literary subjects for talks, conference papers, lectures, essays and books she was engaged in. For me it was a further education and it helped me to become a seasoned literary sleuth.

*Bikwil* has played an important part as well.

(This interview will be concluded in the next issue.)

## *Eschewing Intimacy*

Eschewing intimacy,  
he  
studied geometry  
and pondered the logic  
of pawns and kings on checkerboard battlefields.  
He  
reached out and touched  
the world around him  
by tinkering with engines  
and marveling at the meshing of machine gears.  
He  
felt warmth  
from the glow of incandescent vacuum tubes  
of his own design.  
He  
found companionship  
playing with ant colonies  
putting sugar on his finger  
and watching them crawl for sweetness.  
He found faith  
in the certainty of computer circuitry  
and the accuracy of the output.

He always bought bonds with a fixed rate of return  
whenever he possessed a principal  
finding them a lot less worrisome  
than chancing those mercurial investments  
that only might yield high interest.  
Of course he neither loaned nor borrowed much.  
No friend needed him. He needed no friend.  
His assets  
near the expiration of his term  
remained pretty much the same  
as when he started,  
but he was satisfied  
at the final audit that  
he made  
proper and prudent investments  
for himself.

— Richard Fein

[ More of Richard's poetry may be found at his Web  
site <http://www.expage.com/page/richardspoems> ]