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A Talk On Martin Johnston

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This piece is five thousand words or about thirteen pages long. Endnotes and photo credits are given at the foot of this page. Click on the note to be taken to it; likewise to return to the text.

In 1990 when Martin died I was in Greece. I couldn't attend his funeral nor share in the mourning with his many friends. This talk is my farewell to Martin, not in a funereal sense but as a celebration of the qualities and gifts I admired in him. I will not attempt to tackle here the more academic and difficult question of where Martin might fit in any literary scheme of Australian writing. He is in many ways a unique writer who confounds any simple pigeon-holing or attempts to locate writers in respect to an assumed canon of literature. What is important is that Martin enriched Australian literature with fine translations of Greek poetry and there was much in his writing that drew directly from Greek literary and cultural traditions. These are the things I want to talk about.

I'll begin by way of anecdote. In 1983 when I applied for a position as a Greek subtitler at SBS-TV, Martin was responsible for recruitment. The subtitling test he set was based on an extract from a film called *The Request* [Note 1]. Looking back on it I can now better understand the reasons why he may have been drawn to it, apart from the fact that it was one of the best Greek feature films of the early 80's. The film is based on the true story of Nikos Koemtzis whose father had been a left-wing political prisoner in the postwar years. During the Junta years of the late 60's and early 70's the security police had been continually hounding Koemtzis to force him to become an informer. As with many Greeks who were politically marked, all avenues in life were shut for Koemtzis. The film re-enacts a night in which Koemtzis and his younger brother visit a nightclub (in English parlance, a 'bouzouki' club). The atmosphere is charged. The security police turn up. Koemtzis feels trapped. His nerves are at breaking point. The only freedom left for him is the dance floor. He makes a request to the band for his brother to dance for him. In the unwritten code of this social milieu a request is closely tied to personal honour. The security police move onto the dance floor and mock Koemtzis's brother. A fight ensues and Nikos Koemtzis snaps. He pulls a knife and stabs three or four security police.

The film not only captures the political harassment of the time it also gives a psychological insight into a figure representative of a curiously Greek blend of urban-folk culture. At the time of his trial Koemtzis was depicted by the media as a monster. But as the circumstances of his life became known, particularly after the

composer singer Dionysis Savvopoulos wrote a moving song about his life called *To Makri Zeimbekiko yia ton Niko* [Note 2], Koemtzis became something of a hero.

Looking at Martin's life and writing I think one can see a deep affinity on his part towards this Greek urban-folk culture and its expressions. I'll say more on this later. But to continue the anecdote, the extract for the subtitling test was in fact, perhaps not surprisingly, a poem read out by the poet-actress Katerina Gogou who appears in the film in theatrical, ancient Greek, chorus-like sequences. The poem was from her work called *Three Clicks Left* [Note 3]. I'll read my translation to give you a feel for the tone of the film and her radical social stance.

I want us to talk together in a coffee house
one where the doors are open
where there's no sea
only unemployed men
silence and dust lit by sunlight
- the sunlight in the brandy -
and the dust and cigarettes in our lungs
and let's not take precautions today, my friend,
over our health
and don't give advice
about how I'm tossing it back
and how I'm wasting myself
and let the make-up, snot and tears
on my face
run.
Just look calmly
at my nails, my hair and the years
which are dirty
and me
I don't give a damn about all that
They only care about the Party, for Christsake!
why the Party hasn't been fixed all these years
and you a friend. A real friend
just like Kazantzidis sings it
and the brandy's shit
and the contractor hasn't shown
there's a room above the coffee house
for those on the run
I'll let it all spill out at some point
I do that when I'm drunk - just to throw you -
to see you without your underpants, to see what you'll do
but you, you're not like the others
you'll get up and dance a request
...*your hands took a birch rod and thrashed me* . . . [Note 4]
and in your cupped hands you'll hold my brain
with love and care
it's ready to explode into a thousand pieces. It hurts.
And when
they come to tell you
that this is not
the time
or place
for such things
draw your stiletto and slash.
The Koemtzis brothers were right.

Without suggesting that Martin in any way condoned violent acts I think he may have felt a great deal of empathy for the social stance and mood of Gogou's poem. In terms of Greek society, I think Martin was keenly attuned to its more radical cultural and social currents. In one of his last interviews [\[Note 5\]](#) in 1989 when pressed as to whether there was a "life theme" or a "consistent thread" in his work to which he kept returning he answered that perhaps he was drawn to "oppositional" historical characters or views. "There is a need to state the opposite," he said. Given the cultural experience of Martin's formative years it's not that surprising that he should have been drawn to the outsider or oppositional figure. I'll explore this a little further on in relation to his interest in Greek folk poetry and certain Greek historical figures.

The poem by Katerina Gogou brings out another point, that is, just how very different Martin's poetics were to this sort of writing. Whereas Gogou's poetry has a strong visceral quality, a spontaneous feel to it, Martin's poetry is highly crafted and erudite. It seems to me that there is this tension in his writings, which to a point was reflected in his life; a tension between a deep emotional connection and empathy with common experience and culture on the one hand and on the other a very complex intellectual and artistic response to it. This tension or seeming contradiction is very evident in his poetry, where, as he said to John Tranter in an interview [\[Note 6\]](#) in 1980, he wasn't interested in "committed poetry, or poetry of explicit statement, or particularly in communication." He saw his poems more in architectural or sculptural terms. They were "objects . . . beautiful but useless objects". This was Martin's deeply-held view and more importantly the way he practiced his poetry. This makes him a 'difficult' poet to read but in no way uninteresting or unrewarding. It would be a mistake to simply dismiss him as an "obscure" writer, a charge he himself considered unfair. My own feeling is that the above tension was often worked out in other genres that Martin wrote in, namely translations, reviews and articles, particularly the latter two, where his writing was superbly pitched, expressing a wide range of sensitivities and concerns.

I'd like now to pick up on some of the points I've already made and explore them in relation to Martin's writing about things Greek. Martin's first major venture into this area was in 1973 with his poetry translations for the book *Ithaka* [\[Note 7\]](#). Now out of print, the book is a work whose significance has never been fully appreciated. As Con Castan has pointed out recently [\[Note 8\]](#), apart from Martin's anthology there has been precious little modern Greek poetry translated in this country, even twenty years later.

Martin's Foreword to the book has a decidedly polemical tone. To understand it in context we need to remember the mood of the time. Greece had been under a military dictatorship for six years. Resistance to the Junta had been growing within Greece and overseas amongst Greeks abroad and their philhellene and pro-democracy supporters. Martin and his family were a part of this resistance.

In the Foreword, Martin states his belief that the English-speaking world has unjustifiably ignored the "richness and variety" of modern Greek verse. He also makes no bones about his exclusion from his selections of verse written in *katharevousa*; this,

in his words, "artificial and archaising 'purist' language invented in the nineteenth century in order to divest the language of 'corruptions', responsible for the utter debilitation of literature until the advent of such writers as Kavafis, and recently reinstated as the sole medium by the thugs and yokels who run the country."

Today the language issue has been more or less resolved; views have shifted to more moderate ground. However, at the time, and for most of the last 150 years, the language issue was often intensely political.

Martin's selections are, by his own admission, highly personal. This may also have been a result of his distance from Greece and the anomalous state of Greek poetry publications at the time. Nevertheless the most important Greek poets of the 20th century, with the notable exception of Yannis Ritsos, are present even though their particular poems may not be generally acknowledged as their most representative or strongest.

Martin's selections also include a number of poems by the well-known novelist Vassilis Vassilikos, more as examples of anti-junta writing by a political exile than for their strictly poetic interest. These were included, in Martin's words, "as a tribute to those Greeks who have not yet allowed totalitarianism to stifle their voices."

Another point to make about this selection is that Martin not only included six folk songs from the 18th century he also announced that he intended to compile "a full-scale collection in the future". This collection was never completed although, until the end, he kept translating songs and had plans for an extensive introduction to a published collection. I consider this aspect of his writing so important that I'd like to talk about it separately further on.

To complete my comments on *Ithaka* I'd like to look at the question of translation style or, as Martin put it in the book's Foreword, "the mechanics of translation". To quote Martin, "I have, I think, kept these versions rather closer to their originals than is normally the case today, in an effort to preserve what is characteristically Greek in them." He does admit to taking liberties particularly where he had to render, in his words, "the flamboyance and the large gesture" of Greek into the "tighter" tradition of English. On a comparison of Martin's poems and the originals I would say that he favoured a restrained and, where possible, syntactically faithful style of translation, with some exceptions. I think in poetry this is necessarily a tricky business and ultimately a question of individual style. What is interesting is that in 1980 in an interview with John Tranter [\[Note 9\]](#), Martin had adopted a stronger and more severe position on faithfulness. He said "when I did my book of translations from modern Greek . . . I had to - rather illegitimately, I feel, on principle - to alter the verbiage of some of the poems quite radically, because I thought they were - in Greek - very good poems; and I thought they could be in English very good poems; but not if I simply translated them. Which is not much of an act of faith in the poets. But it had to be done that way

or not at all. I'm still not terribly proud of having done that." There is an element of ambivalence in Martin's statements on translation which stems, I think, from the translator's dilemma as to how far one can depart from the original without betraying it. The old Italian adage "traduttore, traditore" (translator, betrayer) is often more acutely felt by the poet/translator. I think that Martin's bi-cultural background may have also made him more sensitive to the issue of cultural and linguistic fidelity.

As a further point of interest I think Martin shared with one of his favourite authors, Borges, a preference for using the 'harder' or more etymological sense of words. [Note 10] This is particularly true of Martin's translations where he shows a strong feel for the etymology and the physical quality of Greek words.

In passing I'd like to point out that in the early 1970's Martin also introduced a number of Greek books and writers to the Australian public through his superb book reviews in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. These reviews are characterised by great wit, command of the genre and a political and literary maturity that belied his youthful age. As in his translations in *Ithaka*, Martin was truly opening up an area that was, to use his phrase, "terra incognita for most English-speaking readers".

And now to Martin's translations of and interest in Greek folk songs. My first point of reference will be an article "Songs of the Robbers" which Martin wrote for the English-language magazine *The Athenian* in 1980. [Note 11] It's a highly perceptive and sympathetic piece of writing that manages simultaneously to guide an English-speaking audience through the historical and emotional terrain of Greek folk-culture while avoiding an academic or cultural distance. There is a memorable paragraph in the article which clearly shows the deep connection Martin had with this oral art form. I will quote it in full.

"I first came across Greek folk-poetry, and especially the *kleftika tragoudhia* ('Songs of the Robbers') when I was twelve and living in Hydra, and a friend gave me a copy of Polites' collection. [Note 12] Twenty years later I am as much in thrall as ever. I have translated them and re-translated them, and am still doing so; writing articles and radio features about them. And one memorable evening I read them to an audience of two thousand Greeks who had gathered in Sydney, Australia to protest against the Junta, and who sat there frozen with emotion, many of them weeping, at this vital part of themselves being given back to them; improbably enough, by a long-haired, hippy-looking Australian, in an outlandish accent, but still in their own language, of which these poems are one of the glories."

(You can read [this article](#) in full in this issue of Jacket.)

In this article Martin makes two key assertions. Firstly, that in Greece, as opposed to most Western cultures, there is still a living tradition of folk-culture, which is oral and not the prerogative of a "lettered elite". Secondly that this tradition has a continuity that goes back to Homeric times, and Martin cites examples of how this continuity appears in the folk songs of the Byzantine period. In pointing these things out and delving into folk art in a passionate and serious way, Martin is very much expressing a 20th century

modern Greek intellectual viewpoint, particularly as it has been articulated by the poet George Seferis. Whether in poetry, music or visual arts the cross-fertilisation between 'high' or intellectual art and folk-culture in Greece has been crucial.

What obviously fascinates Martin as a poet is the extraordinary artistry, economy of expression and emotional power of Greek folk songs which have been created anonymously through collective experience. And many of Martin's selections are in reality fragments of songs, variations of which have been written down by Greek folklorists, and from which Martin has often taken a single verse which has moved him. For example the short "Of Varlamis" which Martin likens to an "almost Buddhist tiny vignette". [Note 13]

What is also striking about his selections is his enduring interest in songs that deal with death, and in the simple and powerful way death is dramatised. Consider for example, the two simple lines, also often sung as a *miroloi* (a dirge) , and which he quotes in his article:

Just see what a time Kharos has chosen to take me,
Now that the branch blooms and the earth gives forth grass.

Martin's interest in the elegiac mode extended beyond Greek folk-poetry. It was a form of writing that had a painful connection with his personal life. But in Greek folk songs he may have found an elegiac expression that went beyond pain to an acceptance of life's tragedies. In his article he comments on the song "Pass by my Country" that it possesses a "true Stoicism that loves life all the more passionately for the knowledge that early death must sometimes be necessary".

Another interesting view that Martin expresses in his article, and one which relates to the idea of cultural continuity mentioned earlier, is that we can regard Greek folk songs as a part of an epic, "a discontinuous epic" maybe, but just as much an epic creation as say Homer's epic songs of almost 3,000 years ago.

In a sense General Makriyannis is a part of this modern epic. He is also the subject of a biographical novel *Makriyannis, or The Good General* that Martin had begun a few years before his death and which unfortunately remained unfinished. The draft of an opening chapter published in the *Selected Poems and Prose* gives a tantalising insight into a literary work that, in my view, had enormous potential.

Makriyannis, interestingly enough, is frequently mentioned in the article "Songs of the Robbers". Martin begins this article with the sentence, "If modern European fiction 'came out of Gogol's overcoat', modern Greek prose came out of the ample folds of General Makriyannis's kapa." For those not familiar with this modern Greek figure, Makriyannis was a man of humble origins who became a revolutionary fighter and leader in the Greek war of independence against the Ottoman Turks in the second decade of the 19th century. He was a veteran of innumerable battles and a political idealist who, after Greece became an independent state with a Bavarian monarchy, was active in a movement for constitutional government. But Makriyannis was more than just a soldier and political fighter; he was a living embodiment of Greece's oral folk culture. He was also a fine exponent of the improvised song. But what earned Makriyannis an honoured place in Greek literature is that, an illiterate man, he taught himself to write late in life, and, fired by the desire for the truth of his people's fight for liberty to be

known, wrote an account of his life that has the literary stature of an epic. Makriyannis' *Memoirs* weren't published till 40 years after his death and only began to be read more widely in recent years.

Martin's introduction to Makriyannis, as also to the 'primitive' painter Theofilos, was through the writings of George Seferis. Writing during the Second World War, Seferis put forward the proposition that Makriyannis was the most important prose writer in modern Greek literature. I'll quote a few brief extracts from Seferis's article. [\[Note 14\]](#)

"The content of Makriyannis's writing is an unceasing and tragic struggle of a man, who with all the instincts of his race deeply rooted in his soul, searches after liberty, justice and humanity."

Seferis also comments that for Makriyannis justice is measured in human terms. His humanity is neither that of the "superman" nor that of the "worm". Seferis believed that Makriyannis had a deep and intuitive understanding of human tragedy that had survived through folk culture from ancient times. To understand the ancients, Seferis wrote, we need to search the soul of the people. Seferis summed up his comments with the following.

"This is what I had to say about Makriyannis, the illiterate wayfarer of a momentous life, who with such great effort set down on paper those things his conscience had seen. That true messenger of a long and unbroken folk tradition, who, because it was so deeply rooted inside him, talks to us in the voice of many, not in the voice of one, about what and how we ourselves are."

In Makriyannis's own *Memoirs* we find the following significant passage in the Epilogue.

"Well, we all worked together [to liberate Greece] and we need to guard her together and for the powerful or the weak not to say 'I'. Do you know when someone should say 'I'? When they struggle on their own to make or destroy something. When many people struggle and make something then they should say 'we'. We are at the 'we' not the 'I'." [\[Note 15\]](#)

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This folk dimension is something I think Martin was striving for in his unfinished novel *Makriyannis, or The Good General*, which is rich with themes that preoccupied him; the conjunction of the man of action and the man of contemplation, the folk and the literate figure; also the oppositional character in history; the betrayed revolution; the journey into the past. I think this novel in the making had a large vision. Martin was trying to weave the material of folk creation into it, to tap this rich vein and feed it into a modern literary work. This folk dimension is introduced in the opening line with the idea of the song as the General's instinctual creative connection with the world.

"The General hadn't sung for years; he'd argued instead, mostly with God, which hasn't helped."

And a little further on.

"Usually he'd found songs as easy to grasp as to make. As recently as the fourth time he was condemned to death a song had come to him as they rounded the hill of the Acropolis, he and the guards, and they'd let him sing it through to the end, which had

been the same as the beginning. 'Three birds perched on the mountain-peak and wept . . . '

And a deeper note of internal discord emerges further on.

"But now the General can't hang on to the most important song of all, his own; other rhythms keep getting in the way."

Reading Martin's draft I feel that there are deep personal connections and affinities at work in his intimate fictional portrait of General Makriyannis. There is also a clear echo of his view that Greek folk songs can be seen as one continuous epic and there is a desire to swim in this epic stream. I'd like to quote the last section of the draft published in *The Selected Poems and Prose*.

". . . You have to get things right, every time. Someone, some day, will want to know. One day there will be time for histories, and by then there will be so many lies - there are so many already - that the fabric of the tale will have a lovely glossy sheen to it, will be a joy to run your hands through, gleaming, complicated, all of a piece, and false as the Devil himself through the weave. The people who set it down will set themselves in it like precious stones, and who will be there to give them the lie? Who will doubt what's taught in the schools, or the common knowledge of the marketplace and the cafe?

There has to be someone like me, the General thinks, someone who is plodding and exact and writes very slowly - who learned to write late - to set it down as if keeping accounts, not writing verses. And the song changes every time you sing it. The only history we have is what we can all agree on. But all the songs put together make one great song, which is the song of us all and how we came to be this way, even though no one can sing all of it. And though we're none of us what we were."

There is a curious connection between Seferis's article on Makriyannis, Martin's unfinished novel and his poem "Getting to Know the General". [Note 16] In his article Seferis makes a distinction between poetry and prose using the analogy of dance and walking. Prose is like being taken on a walk with the writer at the reader's side. Seferis then offers the following comparison.

"If I had to write a poem to express Makriyannis it would be totally different. I'd try to write three lines or three pages, marshalling from my experiences of the images and pain of my country, those words which I'd feel would give you the emotions he'd excited in me, without necessarily naming any of these, him or the things he talks about. In poetry the previous step is never lost in the next step, on the contrary, it remains nailed to the memory till the end and integral within the totality of the poem."

It is in this sense that I think Martin's poem "Getting to Know the General" can be read as an oblique reflection of himself and his prose work on the General. It is with some caution that I offer the following comments, as in much of Martin's poetry there are multiple layers of reference at work, some of which go beyond any one reader's sources of reference. But I take comfort from Martin's statement in an interview in 1989 where he says of his poetry, "Ultimately I guess I am occasionally satisfied with the knowledge that it all connects, without believing that there is any one reader out there in the real world who gets all the connections." [Note 17]

It seems to me that the poem can be read as a journey back through time, which for Martin is simultaneously the search for General Makriyannis and his own past. This search, this journey, also provides an extended metaphor for all created worlds which intersect each other in strange terrains that exist as mental labyrinths or puzzles. The poem, while having this general reference, is nonetheless strewn with personal clues. For example the lines:

An exercise in metrics takes you back
to portraits of heroes in the whitewashed schoolroom
and a language you couldn't yet quite understand.

Getting to know the general is an exercise
in stretching characters beyond their limits
obliquely to edge past time that lies in wait
in the alley of cypresses that aren't the past
of anyone but you, and seem to know it.

The search for the General is a journey through texts, often indecipherable,
often intersecting, with many a stop in waiting rooms where documents,
tickets and visas operate under a surreal and bureaucratic logic. The journey
through time winds its way through a Mediterranean landscape.

In the past the fig trees wear the walls down,
the towns unbuild themselves to bedrock,
usurers haggle in the village square.

On the curving road to the abbey you realise
your map is of another country . . .

The poem ends on a somewhat enigmatic and pessimistic note.

. . . . In the waiting-room

a trapdoor slides open, canvas flaps, a gust of wind
slaps open a sackful of dust. In the next room

the general is picking jonquils. The doors are nailed shut.

This poem has a haunting quality to it; the images, to recall Seferis, nail
themselves to the memory long after the reading. This quality is heightened
by a surface narrative that refuses to yield simple answers. Its ending has
perhaps hidden within it the philosophic acceptance of Kavafis's ending to
his famous poem "Ithaka", quoted by Martin at the beginning of his own
book by the same name.

And if you find her poor, Ithaka has not defrauded you:

with so much knowledge you have gained, with so much experience surely you
understand by now what these Ithakas mean.

To conclude my comments on Martin's writing I'd like to return to an earlier
point about whether there is a discernible "life theme" or "consistent
thread" in his writing. I think there is. And though it may be one of a
number of threads, it is a particularly long and deeply woven one. It is his
search for a lost past, a deep longing to connect to a people and their more
heroic and inspiring traditions. This may be a nostalgic yearning, perhaps
for an illusory Ithaka, but there is also a deep affinity there for those
traditions and achievements that have given Greeks the courage to face and
endure difficult times. One of these is a deep yearning for freedom and the
other is a tradition of song and poetry that deals with death in tragic but
human terms, transforming it into an exaltation of life. In both of these
Martin was true to his Greek culture.

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Martin was a much-loved and respected colleague in the subtitling
department at SBS-TV. His assessments of programs were always a delight
to read for their wit, breadth of knowledge and honesty. He translated a
wide range of Greek programs, including Greek tragedies, modern Greek
poetry and the lyrics of rebetika songs. His translation of a documentary on
the poet Yannis Ritsos in 1987 was, I think, for him a high-point in his
subtitling work.

And a final anecdote, ironic yet strangely apt. If you ever look up the word "rebetika" in the 1993 *Oxford Companion to Australian Folklore* you will find an extensive entry with the opening words. "'Greek blues', also known in Australia as 'Piraeus Blues' . . . ". [Note 18] The latter term in fact derives from the 1980's SBS-TV broadcast title for *To Minore tis Avgis*, a Greek drama series about the lives of a group of early 'rebetika' musicians. The person who came up with the title "Piraeus Blues" was Martin. Thank you.

NOTES

[Note 1](#): *I Parangelia* (The Request) 1980, directed by Pavlos Tasios.

[Note 2](#): The song "A Long Zeimbekiko for Nikos" was released on the album *Rezerva* by Dionysis Savvopoulos.

[Note 3](#): Katerina Gogou *Tria Klik Aristera* (1st Edition 1979) Kastaniotis 1993
For an English translation see Katerina Gogou *Three Clicks Left* (Translator: Jack Hirschman) San Fransisco, Night Horn Books, 1983.

[Note 4](#): A phrase from the lyrics of an old rebetiko song. Markos Vamvakaris composed a version of it in 1936 and the singer Grigoris Bithikotsis released it in 1961.

[Note 5](#): Interview by Erica Travers (17 June 1989) in *Martin Johnston: Selected Poems and Prose* (Edited by John Tranter) University of Queensland Press, 1993, pp. 269-270.

[Note 6](#): Op. cit. pp. 251-255.

[Note 7](#): Martin Johnston *Ithaka* (Modern Greek Poetry in Translation) Bundeena, Island Press, 1973.

[Note 8](#): Con Castan "The Greek dimensions of Australian literature" in *Striking Chords: Multicultural literary interpretations* (Edited by Sneja Gunew and Kateryna O. Longley) Sydney, Allen & Unwin, 1992.

[Note 9](#): *Martin Johnston: Selected Poems and Prose* p.114.

[Note 10](#): See discussion by James E. Irby, translator and co-editor of Jorge Luis Borges *Labyrinths* New York, Modern Library, New York, 1983, p. xxi.

[Note 11](#): Also in *Martin Johnston: Selected Poems and Prose* pp. 127-132.

[Note 12](#): N.G.Politis *Eklogai apo ta Tragoudia tou Ellinikou Laou* (Selections from the Songs of the Greek People) . Martin worked from the 1958 4th Edition for his translations of folk songs for Ithaka.

[Note 13](#): *Martin Johnston: Selected Poems and Prose* p. 131.

[Note 14](#): Extracts are translated from Seferis's article in *Stratigou Makriyanni Apomnimonevmata* (The Memoirs of General Makriyannis) Athens, Byron Publishing House (Year of publication not given.)

[Note 15](#): Op. cit. pp. 517-518.

[Note 16](#): *Martin Johnston: Selected Poems and Prose* pp. 93-95.

[Note 17](#): Interview by John Tranter, 1989, op. cit. p. 266.

[Note 18](#): *The Oxford Companion to Australian Folklore* (Edited by G.B. Davey and G. Seal) Melbourne, Oxford University Press, 1993.