

'GOLD OUT OF STRAW': AN INTRODUCTION TO THE LIFE AND WORK OF AMY WITTING

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It is rather unusual for anyone to be in their early seventies before being recognised as a writer of merit. In this respect Amy Witting must surely be unique amongst Australian writers. Although she has been writing all her life, she was 71 when her powerful novel *I for Isabel* was published, in late 1989. This novel attracted considerable critical attention, and since then most of the backlog of stories and poetry written over a lifetime have been published. The 1993 Patrick White Award followed and she became known to a wider readership. The quality and sophistication of her work, first observed over fifty years ago, has now been generally acknowledged.

Whilst Witting has been known to members of the literary community in New South Wales for many years, her life and work have generally been something of a literary mystery. Like her fictional character Fitzallan, the 'undiscovered poet' in her first novel *The Visit* (1977), her early publications were few, and scattered in Australian literary journals and short-story collections such as *Coast to Coast*. While Fitzallan's poetry was 'discovered' forty years after his death, Witting's poetry has been discovered and published, but curiously, it is absent from anthologies. For me, the 'mystery' of Amy Witting deepened when the cataloguing-in-publication details in a rare hard-back copy of *The Visit* revealed the author as being one Joan Levick.

Joan Levick was about eighteen or nineteen when she first considered being a writer; and it was shortly after, like many women writers before her, that she deliberately adopted a pseudonym. But unlike many others she saw no need to disguise her sex. An interview with C.J. McKenzie in 1977 hinted at a reason behind her choice of name. He quoted the dictionary meaning of 'witting' as 'aware'; but later, Peter Craven revealed that Witting's choice of name was a considered decision, symbolic of a private but powerful directive that she made to herself: Witting had promised herself that she would never be 'an unwitting monster', that she would always face the truth—that she would *always know* the best and worst about herself and life. Her work reflects this philosophy.

The border between autobiography and fiction is widely recognised as a fragile one. No matter how truthful and objective a writer may wish to be, autobiography is well known as 'a lying art' and the creative consciousness as highly skilled in selection. On the other hand very many writers go to the powerful material of childhood when writing either autobiography or fiction. Amy Witting's novel *I for Isabel* offers an example; but while the novel draws on personal experience Witting remains reluctant to discuss the links with her own past. She is resolute that she has said all that she intends to say about her early life and is even more adamant that there will be no biography or autobiography!

In a recent broadcast Morris West said that he could never think about writing an autobiography because in many senses his novels were his autobiography (ABC Radio, 5 April 1996). In many ways this statement applies to Amy Witting. Whilst she is more open about the varied experiences of adult life and her life as a writer, throughout her novels and short stories she obliquely draws on personal material as a resource.

There are both social and personal reasons why Amy Witting has chosen to remain in the background of the literary fraternity. She was born on 26 January 1918 in Annandale, an inner-city suburb of Sydney, a 'tough place' inhabited by many who were hard-up and still to face the crushing effects of the Great Depression. Witting claims that being brought up in such an environment has at least provided her with an inexhaustible subject—one that recurs throughout her prose and poetry—'survival', and often against the odds (Dowrick 158).

Levick is Witting's married name, and behind this is the child and young woman, Joan Fraser. There is nothing in print that offers any detail about the Fraser family and their life in suburban Annandale. However, though she won't discuss the past, Witting admits that it is not possible to write a novel like *I for Isobel* 'except from personal experience' (Lim 3). There are recurring examples of this factionalised family in Witting's early unpublished stories. Such a family usually includes: a sister, beautiful and favoured; a father who is absent or at best a pale shadow in the background, helpless against the tyranny of his wife; a mother, trapped in a world of neuroses destructively vented on others. Then there is always another child (or young adult)—a character who is often cast as 'the victim', confused by the physical and mental deprivation that is part of home life. That child is *unusually* perceptive, sensitive and feisty—a child who believes in the integrity of its inner world, a child with an independent mind and a daring spirit who maintains a belief in 'self', a child who is a natural survivor, despite life's vicissitudes.

Joan Fraser attended the local Catholic school, St Brendan's, at Annandale from 1923 to 1929. There is often a huge sense of sadness in any anecdote that Witting does tell about her childhood; but there is also a spirited independence too. She says that as a small child she 'yearned for peace and quiet ... and silence', and she often relates the story of herself, aged six, telling the classroom nun that she would prefer to go to Limbo rather than Heaven—Limbo would be peaceful and quiet and offer the respite she craved, presumably from both her classmates and home (Simmonds 142). Primary school taught her to 'know the enemy' and also to know herself. Witting recalls that her 'first lesson in humanity ... [was learning] to understand my persecutors.'

I suppose I really did shine [at the little convent school ... but] the discipline was so vicious and children who suffered by being caned for getting things wrong naturally took it out on me ... I thought I'd escaped when I went to High School, but it just happened again, and it was mysterious (Interview).

There seems little doubt that her family circumstances were difficult and Witting

was under a great deal of pressure both at home and at school; she was also often ill with what was eventually diagnosed as TB.

Like her character Isobel, Joan Fraser was an avid reader, acting as many sensitive children do by retreating into a rich inner world with books for company. At the age of eight Joan Fraser was certainly composing small poems and stories (Cheney 6). She recalls creating a fantasy—*The Rajah's Ruby*—a serial story to entertain other children waiting with her for music lessons every Saturday morning at Annandale school. Other juvenile pieces were included in school magazines, and, as is echoed in *I for Isobel*, were printed in the children's pages of the newspaper. Witting says that most of her early writing reflected familiar social situations: regrettably 'There was little nice to write about', so she wrote about the 'terrible people' she knew. Amy Witting later destroyed these early attempts, dismissing them as 'practice'.

Her secondary schooling took place at the prestigious, selective Fort Street Girls High from 1930 to 1934. Joan Fraser was again ostracised because she was top of the class. Amy Witting holds firm opinions about the rigours of her education and she regrets that 'such a lot was left out', especially history and geography. She now has negative views on schooling.

[I have] the greatest hatred of IQ tests ... I don't think I've got as dazzling an IQ as all that ... [but] people kept saying 'you are not working up to your ability' ... and they felt I was withholding something ... nobody ever said you did well at school [only] 'why didn't you do better?' (Interview).

At the same time, James McAuley and Harold Stewart were attending Fort Street Boys High. McAuley was already displaying his literary talents by editing and writing for the school magazine and publishing his first poem (Coleman 4). Joan Fraser met these bright young men, who were later to become her friends at Sydney University, at an inter-school debate. Witting still takes delight in the fact that the girls from Fort Street won—something she believes 'was never forgiven'.

Whilst at Fort Street, Joan Fraser, aged 16, had a poem published. 'Wanderers' appeared in *The Sydney Morning Herald* on 28 July 1934, under the pseudonym Du Guesclin (Coleman 4). It is indicative of her serious approach to life and poetry, and the subject matter hints at her sad, anguished state of mind.

Now come, my Sorrow, we shall go together
Down evening roads, and hear the wild sea-song:
Hear the hills murmur through the night, 'Be tranquill'
Hear the winds whisper over us, 'Be strong!'

Now come, my Sorrow, in the after twilight
We shall find friends—beauty and quiet sleep
Will walk beside us. In the peopled silence
We shall forget to weep.

At the University of Sydney, from 1935 to 1937, Joan Fraser studied

English and Modern Languages and became part of what Peter Coleman calls the 'sourly brilliant literary circle' that gathered around James McAuley. Witting joined Harold Stewart, Dorothy Auchterlonie (later Green), Oliver Somerville, Alan Crawford and Ronald Dunlop. Towards the end of her degree A.D. Hope and Donald Horne joined this elite group. She graduated Bachelor of Arts, but when her father died during her final examinations at the end of 1937 a break occurred in her university career. To assist in supporting the family she joined the workforce, undertaking a series of unsuccessful jobs in what she describes as 'not my brightest year' (Letter to YM). In 1939 she gained a Teachers' College scholarship and returned to University to complete a Diploma of Education. It was during this, her final year, that Donald Horne enrolled in Arts I.

During my research it was Horne's 'sociography' *The Education of Young Donald* that was a particularly exciting 'find', especially since I had not met Amy Witting at that stage. Horne's book recreates a vivid picture of university life and documents numerous encounters with Joan Fraser. At the age of seventeen, Horne was impressed by her maturity and style:

Fraser ... dressed modestly, in the intellectual fashion, and even put on her lipstick modestly, but this modesty in embellishment seemed to bring out the whiteness of her skin and the warmth of her eyes ... [He noted her] affirmations of feminine equality—rolling her own cigarettes, or paying for her own cup of coffee. She talked softly, in a monotone, using not pitch but a certain kind of word stress to create emphasis, but she talked very amusingly and wryly, introducing me to the throwaway style of soft, confident under-emphasis (Horne 222).

Horne goes on to evoke Joan Fraser as a young woman who was amusing and always able to infuse vitality into any conversation—'reciting Dorothy Parker or A.E. Housman, or telling pointed anecdotes or jokes, or making wisecracks'; when she joined any group he notes how 'the conversation burn[ed] even brighter' (Horne 223 & 254). Another friend, the mathematician Professor John Reed, was also impressed with Fraser's ready wit. He is on record as saying: 'wherever I went in all the world I have never heard the like of [your conversation]' (Interview).

Horne's memories afford glimpses of the literary group's meetings. They gravitated towards the Myrtle Street pub (which Witting describes as 'the cradle') or held long coffee-drinking sessions at University; on Sundays they met at a cafe in Pitt Street called Sherry's:

McAuley's fingers tighten with emphasis; Somerville mimes sorrow, bending over his coffee cup; Hope looks across the room and smiles and sips his China tea; Stewart tells a feline joke; Fraser frowns slightly before softly reciting several lines from a poem; [Alan] Crawford leans forward and flips the ash off his cigarette ... (Horne 245).

Horne tells us that as a young man he thought, 'writing Verse was perhaps all that mattered', and, with the arrogance of youth, he says that all of his poetry-

writing colleagues (except McAuley) were 'very minor poets'. To Horne, a novelist was 'beyond the pale' and when he discovered that Joan Fraser was writing a novel he decided to avoid her.

... although she was writing a novel and there seemed no doubt that it would prove very amusing, even Fraser now seemed only a minor figure—because she did not write Verse (Horne 230).

In fact it is surprising that the perceptive Horne had not connected her ability to quote from a wide range of poetry with a serious interest in the form. Though Witting would later describe herself as 'a failed poet' claiming that she was 'out-talented' by her colleagues, more realistic is her observation that 'she lacked the sense of the "egotistical sublime" that animated her male contemporaries at Sydney University in the 1930s' (Craven 36). In this kind of climate it is not surprising to discover that Joan Fraser wrote little serious poetry. McAuley, it seems, did encourage her and persuaded her to publish a piece in the University's Literary Magazine *Hermes*. It was to be forty years before any other poem by Amy Witting would be published.

Though life at Sydney University was seen as heady and exciting by the others, in retrospect, Witting considers the experience 'such a terrible disappointment.'

I was so looking forward to it—to be among one's peers, to be among all those ideas and thoughts ... it was *not* what it was cracked up to be ... (Simmonds 142).

For Joan Fraser, life was constrained by the rigidities of church, family and society and she describes her inner life as a 'cage in which you could neither sit nor stand nor lie.' There were immense internal and external pressures. In an interview with Peter Craven, Witting noted that beneath the sparkling facade of university life, world events were impinging, creating a disturbing undercurrent and deep uncertainties about the future. In Peter Coleman's book *The Heart of James McAuley*, he reveals that McAuley too viewed these years as artificial: the 'poetry, gin and jazz, free thought and loveless licentiousness, sour wit and revolutionary gestures' he saw as a 'fantasy film with an ideological scenario running continuously [on] a screen blocking out the world' (Coleman 19).

At the end of 1937 James McAuley left Sydney University to become a private tutor. The friendship between Witting and James McAuley was brief and Coleman quotes an untitled poem written by McAuley before he left—a farewell to his friend Joan Fraser. As well as indicating his feelings it is interesting to note McAuley's prophecy regarding the importance of 'words' as a sustaining force in both of their lives.

No epitaph seeing you are not dead,
A simple prophecy will do instead,
For you and me: a lonely death to die

With a phrase or two to keep us company.

Write if you can, since write you must,
Words cannot soothe the angry dust.
O peevish flesh and hope too long deferred!
We ask for life, and we receive a word (Coleman 20)¹.

It seems that friendly communication between Fraser and McAuley ceased in 1939. In a note (attached to Witting's unpublished poem 'Letter to James McAuley', 1954) the notion that they 'fell out' is implicit in her reference to him as 'an ex-colleague' (Literary Papers). More recently Witting has acknowledged her ambivalent reaction.

I spent my life trying to emerge from that [Sydney University] group ...
Trying to find a normal life. Jim did and I did. Jim and I seemed to occupy
the same ecological space, which is perhaps why we couldn't get on;
normality was something we dreamed about then (Craven 7).

Though it seems likely that they hardly spoke to each other again, a curious communication continued through the printed word. Witting says she wrote 'Letter to James McAuley' 'in a dirty black rage' in response to McAuley's 'A Letter to John Dryden'. Her poem's tone does not veil a contempt for what she saw as an abdication of reason as he deferred to 'The blessed voice that tells you what to do'. McAuley's poem concludes with the lines:

Thus I have written, hoping to be read
A little now, a little when I'm dead.

Witting's fiery response suggests to him that he:

Kneel to your god, and kneeling find escape,
But dignity is with the upright ape ...

Your eyes I fear are permanently shut.
At least you reach your goal, of being read.
This present moment, after you are dead (Literary Papers).

Though Witting deliberately sent her poem to James McAuley at *Quadrant* she did not expect that it would be published; she just wanted him to read it. She is now a little regretful that she wrote 'that bitchy poem' but also pleased that 'it got him to knock out a couple of absolutely awful things in 'A Letter to John Dryden' before it was reprinted in the *Collected Poems* (Interview). Though it seems that Joan Fraser and James McAuley were fundamentally opposed and could not 'get on', there remained a mental bond—as Witting says: 'a level of understanding that we didn't find anywhere else'—and a communication of sorts through the occasional printed piece (Interview).

When Joan Fraser completed her Diploma of Education at the end of 1939 survival again became an imperative. Her first appointment was at Riverside

Domestic Science school in 1940, where she notes that her career began 'in disaster'.

Being trained to teach French and German and never having been out of an elite class, I was set to teach general subjects to what I now know was a class of slow learners ... what I must have done to those poor children haunts me still (Letter to YM).

Then followed a number of short transfers within the New South Wales education system, leading finally to Coonamble where she stayed for three-and-a-half years. At the end of the war Witting taught in Young, then Manly Boys High for a year. In 1948 she went to Kempsey, where she remained until 1953. It was there that she met Les Levick—a high school teacher who specialised in Industrial Arts. They were married in December 1948.

Witting's unpublished novella '*The Garment of Grace*' (c. 1951) documents a young teacher's experience in the classroom and the frustration and disenchantment felt in trying to teach unwilling or barely literate children. Vera, fills in lonely hours teaching herself to write short stories by using randomly chosen 'character and plot cards' (*Literary Papers*). In reality, in those early days Witting kept despair at bay and her own mind stimulated by concocting 'detective stories out of French phrase books' (Craven 36). She admits that she 'became a devoted listener to landladies' gossip' during the years in which she lived in boarding houses and that this added to her experience and pool of material.

I was a gatherer of family histories, reminiscences of odd characters, happenings polished by time and telling ... real incidents ... tales told to me ... experience pre-digested (Disher 319).

Amy Witting entered the Bodington Sanatorium in 1953 after a routine TB check of her Kempsey pupils revealed that she was suffering from this disease. She remained there for five months but responded well to treatment with streptomycin. The effect of this isolating experience was profound and the confrontation with near-madness and death has, until recently, emerged only in oblique references during interviews or been subtly mirrored in incidents in stories. It is only in the as yet unpublished poetry sequence '*Breakdown*' that she has openly reviewed, then laid to rest this particular ghost, to the point where she is now able to affirm that 'I have shown some courage and got in return some knowledge'.

Despite the trauma, it was during the enforced isolation in hospital that she turned, in earnest, to writing. Once again '*The Garment of Grace*' offers a factionalised account of what looks like autobiography—Vera's long period in hospital, followed by gradual recovery and a return to teaching. After her son's birth in July 1954 Witting began to publish her short stories. The first appeared in *Southerly*, whose editor at the time was Kenneth Slessor. He is on record assaying that he would publish anything Amy Witting might like to submit (Coleman 6). In 1957 Witting returned to teaching.²

In the early 1960s Amy Witting and Thea Astley were teaching at Cheltenham Girls High. Astley, already an established writer, was very impressed by Witting's story 'Goodbye, Ady, Goodbye, Joe', and encouraged her to submit it for publication. This story, inspired by factual details of a major flood in Kempsey, was accepted and published in *The New Yorker* in April 1965. The editor, Robert Hemenway asked for more. Witting then sent 'The Early Settler' which was published in May 1968 but heavily edited without consultation. Sensitive to this interference Witting decided not to write again for *The New Yorker*.

It is an interesting coincidence that when Witting first met Patrick White it was he who asked for *her* advice. Witting met him in the early 1960s at the home of Thea Astley; he was so impressed by her short story 'The Weight of a Man' that he sought her advice on the techniques of short story writing as he was about to try writing in this form for the first time. Again, when Witting's short story of the harsh Australian outback—'The Survivors'—was published in 1975 in the British magazine *Stand*, White responded with a complimentary letter. He wrote:

I thought the story very well written, and you get the idiom marvellously. The characters are alive, but I wish you would write about people who interest me more ... After working with sheep for a couple of years in my youth I'm allergic to them, and particularly to those who deal with them (Literary Papers).

This story is widely described as 'a minor masterpiece' and draws heavily on Witting's experience of life in outback Coonamble during the worst of WWII and a major drought.

After six years at Cheltenham Girls High (1957 to 1962) Witting's teaching career concluded with her appointment as Mistress of Modern Languages at North Sydney Girls High School—a position she held for seven years. When questioned about her slight literary output during those busy years, Witting says that her creative ability was channelled into her teaching. However, within the education system her writing skills found a very practical outlet. In conjunction first with Chloe Flegman and then with Anne Robson she wrote two highly respected French text books. Despite her early misgivings, teaching, in the end, proved to be a rewarding profession. And the interest in teaching remains years after her retirement—Joan Levick answers every letter she receives from students who are studying her books, and she is always willing to speak at teachers' conferences and take part in judging competitions for young writers. For twenty years she has also taught English as a Second Language, and she is especially attracted by the idea of empowering migrant women with sufficient language skills to ensure their independence. Once again she has recorded her teaching techniques in a book, *Each One Teach One* (1988).

Amy Witting has been writing all her life, compelled as she says by 'that commentating voice that won't be quiet, that won't sit still', so it is surprising to discover that a body of serious poetry did not exist until recently (Craven 36).

Indeed, as Les Murray says, it is *amazing* 'that so fine a poet could have been working unnoticed at such a level of achievement'.

Coincidentally it was once again *The Sydney Morning Herald* that published her poem 'Housewife' on 12 February 1977, 43 years after 'Wanderers' in 1934. After the manuscript of *I for Isabel* was roundly rejected by Australian publishing houses Witting turned to writing poetry. During a period of travel she writes that:

I saw myself as a 'real' poet—that was in 1980, in the archives at Augsburg, where I was studying the life of a friend who spent four years there in a Displaced Persons camp. I came across the Ricarda Huch poem which I translated then and there as 'The Street of Pain', giving up research for poetry with relief (Letter to YM).

1977 to 1985 can therefore be clearly named a specific 'poetry period'. On her return to Australia Witting began to publish in *Quadrant*. The then *Quadrant* editor, Peter Coleman, has claimed her as 'a discovery' but no-one else appeared to notice (Letter to YM). Her poetry continued to appear in *Quadrant* and *Overland* during the 1980s before being collected in her self-published *Travel Diary*.

Over the forty to fifty year span that encompasses the published and unpublished manuscripts there is only fragmentary evidence of a poet at work. The unpublished story 'Death of a Poet' includes a full poem, 'To Verlaine'. Later reprinted in *Travel Diary* as 'A Letter in Wartime, to Verlaine in Prison', this poem is an important indication of Witting's poetic ability; but her usual wry humour she cannot resist playing a double game in 'Death of a Poet' (as she does later in *The Visit*) by pronouncing a verdict on her own poem. Her character, Freddie, declares it 'pleasant but second-rate'.

In 'The Garment of Grace'—the novella that appears to be one of Witting's initial attempts to come to terms with the powerful material of *I for Isabel*—there is a near-complete prose outline of a poem. 'Half the Fairytale', not published until forty years later reworks the novella's sub-theme—artistic achievement. Witting, like some other artists, accepts as a metaphor for artistic alienation that she must 'walk on knives', and be compelled to continue in what is often a frustrating search for objective expression and public acceptance.

I've been sent to search
often enough for strawberries in the snow.
The kind magician who bids the winter go
left me in the lurch.

I've been made to sift
poppy-seed from ashes, spin gold out of straw.
The gnome didn't come, the mice didn't stir a claw
while I worked my shift.

What I would impart
turned into toads that jumped out of my mouth. The spell

made me look with wonder at those who spoke so well
from the toadlike heart.

I'm the mermaid, too—
mutilated myself and walked upon knives to be
inside the enchanted palace of fantasy.
That one came true (*Beauty is the Straw* 10).

The 'work shift' may indeed have been a long one for Amy Witting, but the eventual success of *I for Isobel* did conjure 'gold out of straw'. This novel proved to be an artistic turning point. Looking back Witting recalls that after 'a long battle ... it was like a stone rolling away ... I haven't stopped since' (Lim 3). *I for Isobel* won the FAW Barbara Ramsden Award in 1989 and was short-listed for the Miles Franklin and NBC Banjo Awards and is now set as a text at both secondary and tertiary level.

Despite diminishing eye-sight Amy Witting shows no sign of retiring from writing. In May 1994, at the age of 76, her third novel *A Change in the Lighting* was released. A second collection of short stories, *In and Out the Window*, came out in August 1995. Witting is currently working on her fourth novel and her agent is seeking a publisher for the poetry sequence 'Breakdown' and the remainder of her unpublished poems.

Amy Witting's considerable achievements have now been acknowledged but Witting reports that she is glad she did not receive such recognition earlier on in her life, no doubt because she would still claim that she does not want to be noticed—that fame has no appeal. Her family, and especially her young grandchildren, add an important element to a very active life—a life that is generously shared, but a life too of the heart and the mind that has found expression in her writing and touched the lives of many.

There is a very nice symmetry to Amy Witting's life, one which would have surprised young Joan Fraser very much. This paper commenced by making a connection between Witting and her fictional character Fitzallan, the poet. Overlooked as an artist, his one slim volume of poetry is all that remains; but in Witting's story his papers and letters are eventually discovered by a researcher in the Mitchell Library. When Amy Witting wrote *The Visit* in 1977 and created this alter-ego—Fitzallan, she would hardly have dreamed that her own literary papers would have ended up in the Mitchell, nor that she would be accorded a place amongst the now-prominent Australian writers who were her youthful peers. It is a satisfying coincidence.

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Interview with Amy Witting, 19 October 1994.

Letters from Amy Witting and Peter Coleman.

Endnotes

1. In line four there is a pun on Joan Fraser's name.
2. The Mitchell Library lists 'The Garment of Grace' as c. 1951. The material ties in accurately with real events of the 1940s and early 1950s; it is therefore likely that the story was written later, perhaps c. 1954/1955.