

1995

Sumner Locke Elliott: writing life

Sharon Clarke
University of Wollongong

Recommended Citation

Clarke, Sharon, Sumner Locke Elliott: writing life, Doctor of Philosophy thesis, Department of English, University of Wollongong, 1995. <http://ro.uow.edu.au/theses/1376>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact Manager Repository Services: morgan@uow.edu.au.

NOTE

This online version of the thesis may have different page formatting and pagination from the paper copy held in the University of Wollongong Library.

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

COPYRIGHT WARNING

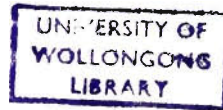
You may print or download ONE copy of this document for the purpose of your own research or study. The University does not authorise you to copy, communicate or otherwise make available electronically to any other person any copyright material contained on this site. You are reminded of the following:

Copyright owners are entitled to take legal action against persons who infringe their copyright. A reproduction of material that is protected by copyright may be a copyright infringement. A court may impose penalties and award damages in relation to offences and infringements relating to copyright material. Higher penalties may apply, and higher damages may be awarded, for offences and infringements involving the conversion of material into digital or electronic form.

**SUMNER LOCKE ELLIOTT:
*WRITING LIFE***

A thesis submitted in fulfillment of
the requirements for the award of the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY



from

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

SHARON CLARKE, B.A. (Hons)

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

1995

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to acknowledge the help and support of the following people without whom this dissertation could not have been written.

Professor J. Wieland, Dean of Arts, University of Wollongong, for his wisdom, guidance and patience; the staff and my fellow postgraduates of the Department of English, University of Wollongong, for their unflagging interest and support; my friend and mentor, Mr. Michael Stone, University of Wollongong, for his encouragement and limitless knowledge on all matters literary; Mr. George Whitfield Cook, New York, USA, for his open-heartedness, friendship, generosity, hospitality and trust; Dr. H. Gotlieb, Ms. Karen Mix, and the staff of the Special Collections Branch, Mugar Memorial Library, Boston University, Boston, USA for their professionalism, and spirited involvement; Miss Irene Thirkell, Sydney, for sharing her memories and her collection of Sumner Locke Elliott's letters; Ms. Elaine Steinbeck for her enthusiasm and emotional honesty; the relatives and friends of Sumner Locke Elliott both in Australia and USA, who shared their time and their recollections; The University of Wollongong postgraduate office for providing funding for my research through the Commonwealth Scholarship Program; my husband, Peter, my family and friends, for their love and belief; and Sumner Locke Elliott for his trust and inspiration.

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the life and writing of Sumner Locke Elliott (1917-1991). It is a biographical study which argues that through the canon of his work, Elliott both defined and attempted to come to terms with his sense of otherness, difference. A principle focus in this context is his perception of his family and childhood as central to his difference: through his writing he continually renegotiated and reassessed his family and himself in an effort to understand and to psychologically exorcise his own 'outsider' status. It is argued that ancestral memory is at the core of Elliott's art and life. His inherited name is emblematic of his sense of being more than the sum of his own parts; a collective or cumulative centre which encompasses the entire matriarchal generation preceding him. This is reflected in the dialogical form of his books (a narrative structure through which the writer is thinking/speaking/writing through many voices, consciousnesses and points of view). This dissertation similarly depicts Elliott's life as one of a developing dialogic imagination. To this end, the many voices and conflicting view points that informed him are heard throughout this narrative. Only against the background of family was Elliott able to distinguish and decipher his own self-delineation.

Elliott's writings - his juvenilia; his early stage and radio plays; his more mature stage works; his television scripts for America; his only Broadway play; and his ten major novels are critically evaluated and discussed in terms of the intersection between art and life.

Table of Contents

Foreword

Taking Flight

PART ONE: *Mother and Child*

1. "A World of Women"
 The First Sumner Locke Elliott
 Lily
 Blanche and Agnes
 Jessie
2. "The Child is Likely to Survive"
3. "The whole thing comes before me
 like a picture"

PART TWO: *Youth*

4. Growing Secret Antlers
5. The Stage of Independence
6. Radio Daze
7. Outpost of Progress:
 the other theatre of war.
8. Peace and Escape

PART THREE: *America*

9. First Stop: Hollywood
10. “He’s a New Yorker Now”
11. Broadway: “After my play
they pulled down the theatre.”
12. Fifteen Years of the Great Stars
13. “New York is where I live”

Final Flight

Appendix

1. Through Others’ Eyes:
Reviews by those who knew
Sumner Locke Elliott.
2. Sumner Locke Elliott: The Novels
3. Sumner Locke Elliott: The Plays
4. Sumner Locke Elliott: The TV Plays
5. The Locke Family Tree

Bibliography

“I think autobiography happens automatically for me. Memory is the strongest power I have, it’s my lifeline to the truth.”

Sumner Locke Elliott

FOREWORD

He sat framed in the glass front of The Brighton Grill, a fashionable restaurant on Manhattan's East side, peering out at the bleak New York street. "Just ask the maitre d' for Mr. Elliott," he advised me during our phone call to arrange this lunch. "I've grown very old and you mightn't recognise me from my photographs." But there he sat looking exactly like his photographs, particularly his baby ones; maybe for men a receding hairline unites the two poles of life: the bald baby had become the balding man.

In Australia, Sumner Locke Elliott won the Miles Franklin Award for his first novel, *Careful, He Might Hear You* (1963) and, after the publication of his sixth novel *Water Under the Bridge* (1977), he won the Patrick White Award for his contribution to Australian Literature. His work was greatly admired by the Nobel Prize-winning White who once commented that Sumner was the finest living Australian novelist apart from himself.¹

In America, several of Sumner's books were selected for publication by the Readers' Digest Book Club, and, among other honours, he was declared a Literary Lion by the New York Public Library in 1983 alongside names like Arthur Miller, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Susan Sontag and Herman Wouk. All over the world, his

¹ Patrick White said this to Bruce Beresford who included White's comment in his SLE Obituary Notice, *The Independent* (London), 29 June 1991.

novels had received critical and popular acclaim and had been translated into many different languages. But, as I discovered while researching his collected papers, he had been a writer in Australia and America long before he ever thought of becoming a novelist.

At sixteen, Sumner was apprenticed as a playwright and actor by Doris Fitton, director of the Independent Theatre in Sydney, and he also began acting and writing for the Sydney radio mogul, George Edwards. While he was still in his teens his radio serials and plays were broadcast across Australia and New Zealand. He was drafted into army service during World War II and he drew on his experience in an ordnance depot in the Northern Territory outback to write his most celebrated stage play, *Rusty Bugles*. The play's raw army barracks language was condemned by the New South Wales Vice Squad and the Chief Secretary, and even raised questions in Federal Parliament. Banned at first, *Rusty Bugles* eventually enjoyed a two-year nationwide run and forced a revision of Australian censorship laws.

Before *Rusty Bugles* opened, Sumner had left for a new life in America where he spent the next 14 years writing for television during the early days of the industry. His screenplays were broadcast coast to coast and he became one of the 20 best television

writers in a country generally acknowledged to be the television mecca of the world, before he turned to novels, of which he wrote ten. Armed with the knowledge of all this experience I wrote to him in January 1990, requesting access to his papers which were in collection at Boston University. To my delight, he answered this letter from an unknown researcher giving approval and suggesting that - on our way back from Boston - my husband and I join him for lunch in New York. We met him there in April, 1990.

He wore a tailored jacket and tie and looked stylish, his bright eyes belying his age. When we met it was as though we'd always known each other. He talked for over three hours and introduced the staff: Annie, the waitress; David, the Maitre d'; and Stephanie, the owner, who was the daughter of film star Joan Bennet. And we were Australians, "*real* Australians", he indicated with some pride. He ate sparsely and then insisted on picking up the check. During the conversation, which I would always remember as 'the Entertainment', there were only two brief pauses in his breathless rush of stories, enquiries and reminiscences. On both these occasions I went instantly blank: overloaded with questions, I asked nothing.

He spoke about his work, passing me a copy of his newly released novel, *Fairyland*. "I've been gay all my life," he confided,

placing his hand upon mine, “and this is about that experience.” Realising that I wasn’t surprised, he continued: “But I haven’t had sex for five years, since I suffered a stroke. Still I can’t complain, I had a good run.” This last remark - accompanied by a slightly wicked smile - reminded me of both the actor and playwright he had once been before becoming a novelist. Then as though he had said nothing revealing, he discussed the morning’s flurry of snow (“so unusual for April in New York, that I hoped you had seen it”); the recent elections in Australia; his early life and family; our trip to America; and his companion, friend and fellow writer, Whitfield Cook, who was then out of town.

We learned why he was so pleased that Labor (led by Hawke) had been re-elected in Australia. “Ours was a Labor house,” he explained. “My Uncle George was a Labor politician and I was brought up to vote Labor and did so, *always*,” he added with a New Yorker’s typical last word emphasis. Learning that my husband was a John Steinbeck fan and that we had just toured the Steinbeck locations of the West Coast, he told us how he’d met the great American novelist - “just the one time” - not long after arriving in New York, and he spoke about his quite separate and special friendship with Steinbeck’s widow, Elaine. A stage version of *The Grapes of Wrath* was on Broadway then and when he described the final scene - “...it’s how the novel ends but was cut from the film

version: when the white woman, whose baby has died, cradles the starving Negro man and breastfeeds him” - his eyes filled with tears. “So poignant and touchingly simple,” he said. He was vital, even when he spoke about his recent brush with cancer. “In remission,” he reassured us. Not until he rose from the table to leave the restaurant and needed assistance with his overcoat and hat did I realise he was a fragile 72-year-old.

He directed the cab driver with clarity and authority, but as he walked towards his apartment, his step was not so firm. Yet with his back still to us, he waved goodbye with a circular flourish of his hand, dramatic to the last. I never saw him again.

During the next 15 months we corresponded regularly and spoke on the phone occasionally between New York and Australia. He insisted on paying for these calls. “No arguments!” he said in his customary decisive tone. “I’ll be glad of the tax deduction.”

He gave formal approval for this biography just before his death in June 1991. Through his network of close friends, news of his passing appeared in Australian newspapers first, scooping even the New York press. He would have enjoyed that.

For me, his death seemed more like a rumour, a headline

without any real substance. It was just that his letters and phone calls had stopped. In my memory and imagination he lived on - I heard his voice in each of his books and saw his animated face and bright beguiling eyes behind every story.

His memorial service was attended by fellow writers, entertainers, actors, the Australian Consul, old friends and new. "But it wasn't a New York formal affair at all, just a gathering of special friends," Elaine Steinbeck explained. His favourite poetry was recited by its author, American poet Josephine Jacobsen; his favourite music - a Sondheim piece - was played; his favourite people were there. An extract from his novel, *Waiting For Childhood*, was read aloud by actor Gordon Chater, a fellow New Yorker and an old friend from Sydney theatre days. "The passage was marked out by Sumner in his copy of the book," Gordon Chater later told me, "and I was extremely nervous about reading it; sick in fact, because it was something he had been especially pleased with, depicting the relationship shared between a father and his child."

Elaine Steinbeck then told the gathering about Sumner's last days and her pride in her old friend's bravery.

He was very sick and very thin and he hadn't been dressing but insisted on putting on a brightly striped shirt for my visit...and, after we had greeted with hugs

and kisses, he became very dramatic and told me that there was a time for everything and that this was a time for remembering and recollecting. And he stretched himself up, very straight, and he spoke about a woman from his past. He began describing every detail of her life and his relationship with her. He was so emotional. And then he spoke about how remembering that woman led into the memory of someone else and then someone else. And his voice was so tremulous. And he said that this was what he did every day now: remembered and recollected. And when I started to cry, he encouraged me. He said not to be sorry or ashamed; and he marvelled at what a wonder it was to have a friend with whom he had shared such pleasure, laughter and gladness and with whom he could now also share the tears. And he was so strong that it wasn't morbid or tragic. He was performing a part of his life as a great show. And it was a magical time. Very often when one thinks of a friend, one thinks of a high point in that person's life, a time of youth or some extraordinary experience. But I think, that as a friend of Sumner Locke Elliott, I am the luckiest woman: I can think of the last time I saw him and I can remember *that* with pleasure. There was no fear and no pain. And through him the sorrow was transcended.²

From the many people I spoke to both in Australia and America, it is clear that Sumner Locke Elliott was a person who left a strong impression. Even his acquaintances retain memories of times they shared with him. His ability to achieve an instant rapport with people was best expressed by Broadway producer, Hal Prince, who recalled: "Sumner was the sort of person who radiated such warmth and enthusiasm that you came to believe he was an

² Elaine Steinbeck recalled her address at SLE's memorial service to me, New York City 1991.

old friend.”³ His ‘summer’ neighbours in New Hampshire, his ‘high-rise’ friends from New York and the Australian companions of his youth all maintain their own clear recollections of the man, the writer, their friend. He made each one feel they had a special place in his life for the ‘run-of-the-play’. He, in turn, inspired lasting friendships, some of them maintained almost entirely by letters. He was respected by his peers, loved by his friends and remembered by everyone with whom he made contact. He left behind a body of writing, including ten published novels, which will long be treasured by his readers around the world. It seems fitting that all future royalties from his books were bequeathed to The New Dramatists Society of New York where a plaque above the entrance reads: “These doors remain open through the generosity of Sumner Locke Elliott”. Sumner was a novelist who never forgot his beginnings as the boy playwright.

When I returned to New York after his death to interview his friends in America, I once again passed by The Brighton Grill in Manhattan. I half expected to see him there, still energetically telling stories and reminiscing but the table in the restaurant’s glass front was empty. I’m sure The Brighton Grill has never been quite the same since Mr. Elliott stopped coming.

**The Sumner Locke Elliott story
begins many years before my meeting him.
It really begins the night he took flight.**

TAKING FLIGHT

On a July evening in 1948, surrounded by a group of friends from the Independent Theatre, Sumner Locke Elliott spent several anxious hours at Sydney's airport before boarding a plane for America. By his own choice, he was abandoning all that was familiar to him: his family, his friends, his career, his country. He was almost 31 years old and leaving Australia for the first time. He did not expect to return.

I was on a midnight flight on a Saturday night. It was teeming rain and bitter winter and I was terribly overweight. I wasn't physically overweight, but the [baggage] allowance was forty pounds and I was twenty pounds over and it was a pound sterling for a pound weight and I had no Australian money. You were only allowed to take US\$800 out of the country in those days...and so we called Doris and said 'What's in the box office?' And she had a flop! But she came with canvas bags and...we counted out threepences and sixpences and we'd say, 'there's a pound', and they were saying 'Pan Am Flight is now awaiting Mr. Elliott'. And we'd say, 'there's another pound'; and finally I got on the plane.¹

Doris Fitton's Independent Theatre had always been Sumner's lifeline and on his last night in Sydney Doris saved him once again. "Without Doris Fitton, I would have been nothing... . She was the first person to ever make me think I was worth something," he said

¹ Gwen Plumb Interview, *The Gwen Plumb Show*, Radio 2UW, 1974. (Tape held in The Sumner Locke Elliott Collection, Special Collections, Mugar Memorial Library, Boston University, Boston, Ma, USA. NB: This will be hereafter referred to as SLE Collection, BU.)

more than once.² In the last novel he published before his death, Sumner recaptured all the details of this night in Seaton Daly's flight from Australia.

Someone who had travelled abroad had said that when you get to Mascot, ask for Mr. Dodge and slip him five quid and then if you're a smidge overweight he'll just smile and put you through...but Mr. Dodge neither winked nor put his baggage through... . 'You're nearly forty pounds over,' Mr. Dodge said. 'It's going to cost you a bit... . Say around a pound sterling a pound weight... .'

...Well, all he had now was American dollars, hard to get these days because of a dollar freeze...they had to last, not one could be spared. '...Who on earth would carry forty quid around with them on a wet Saturday night...?'

'Dolly would,' Rat said.

Dolly Hollingshead...kept her money under the mattress and hidden under coffee beans in jars... .

At eleven-twenty nine, a voice on the public speaker announced that Pan Am Flight 211 would...begin boarding in approximately five minutes... . 'They can't hold open the baggage compartment indefinitely,' Mr. Dodge warned.

Minutes ticked by...before...a disheveled Dolly appeared...with manila envelopes and little canvas bags...some of the envelopes held a pound note, some only ten shillings, some of the canvas bags were filled with shillings and sixpences, one even had threepenny bits... . Mr. Dodge and his assistants had started to sort out the money into little hills... . From the distant lounge, the voice on the loudspeaker was announcing that this was the last call for Flight 211... .

The last ten minutes became a crucifixion until Mr. Dodge, panting, said, 'Thirty-five. We'll let you go at that,' and the little pink LA paper tags were attached to the bags and...he stepped into the plane... .

(*Fairyland* pp. 197-203)³

In 1948 flying was still an adventure in itself. But to Sumner it meant much more. For years he had dreamed of America as a land of hope and opportunity, in artistic and personal terms, and he fled Australia with more than one kind of overweight baggage. His departure from Australia was as much a psychological journey as a physical one. But, as he pondered in the passage from *Fairyland*, "Why America?" Since his contemporaries were heading for England and Europe, his going against the tide was perhaps to be expected. His growing-up years in an eccentric family had denied him any sense of 'sameness' and conformity. His mother had died the day after his birth and for the next twelve years his guardianship had been uncertain as he became the centre of a family hostility which ultimately led to the Supreme Court of N.S.W. His sense of alienation and difference from other children was unavoidable and during his adolescence this was compounded by his growing awareness of his sexual orientation. Not being the 'same' he had therefore become 'other'. As a child, he had awkwardly resigned himself to the part of the 'outsider' which he

³ SLE, *Fairyland* (First published in the USA by Harper and Row Inc.1990). This edition by Pan Macmillan, Australia 1991. All future quotations from this edition.

seemed destined to play. An early school composition called "The Flame" reveals his childhood longing to be "like [his] brothers", to be one of the mob, and his knowledge that such a wish could never be attained; this theme recurs throughout most of Sumner Locke Elliott's adult writing.

Once upon a time there was a very small flame. He lived with his big brothers in the fire place. He was so small and weak that his brothers always said 'hiss' to him when he asked them a question. 'Oh, how I wish that I was a big flame like my brothers,' he would often say. Then one day his wish came true. A boy came along with a bundle of paper and left it near the fireplace. Soon a gust of wind came in the open window, up blew the paper right on top of the little flame. For a moment it almost smothered him but the next minute he caught hold of it and licked it with his flame mouth. In a second the paper caught alight and in another minute the once little flame was a roaring fire, up, up he went and was soon right up the top of the chimney. The little boy came back into the room and then called out 'Mother, the chimney is on fire'. The next minute the flame felt cold water dashed into its face. Soon he fell down and down, he stopped roaring and soon fell down into the fireplace. As he lay at the bottom of the fireplace dying he said 'I wish I had been a contented little flame and I should have been alive now.' Just then with one sigh he went out.⁴

The appearance of a mother is pertinent in this early piece of writing; here her character is responsible for the demise of "the

⁴ Original ms. in SLE Collection, BU. Notable in this childhood composition is the penalty incurred for not accepting one's individuality and difference, the hand one is dealt - a philosophy embraced by most of his Locke aunts.

little flame”, which is a reversal of the responsibility the young Sumner carried over the death of his own mother. Even in old age he continued to shoulder this burden, as is evident from his remark to an interviewer in 1986: “my mother probably would have lived if she had not had me”.⁵ Throughout his life, Sumner called no-one “mother”; only through his fiction could that title and that gap in his life become embodied.

During his early adult years, Sumner became renowned for his writing and acting talents within Sydney’s theatre and radio circles and he secured a place among his colleagues through his wit and humour. One of his friends said: “...to be with Sumner was to be laughing. He was such a great mimic and storyteller.”⁶ Others recalled that Sydney taxi drivers declared his entertainment value was more than worth the fare. But few of his friends knew how much despair and loneliness propelled him on a one-way flight to America: a journey which had its beginnings in his early life, when he was growing up in a family of diverse and conflicting women amid a narrow-minded, intolerant society.

⁵ Candida Baker, “Sumner Locke Elliott”, *Yacker 2*, (Pan Books, Sydney and London, 1987) p. 47.

⁶ Irene Thirkell from the Independent Theatre, Eileen Grieves (nee Lynch) from George Edwards Productions and Independent Theatre, both to me, 1991.

Part One:

Mother and Child

“This is a grave,” she said. “Your mother is buried here... . She just died. You see, your mother...wasn’t very strong. Having a baby was jolly difficult for her and you were late.”

Late? How could that be *his* fault?

“Late?”

“Late being born. It made her very tired and she died.”

...“Did they put - is she in a box...down there?”

“Yes...after years - after a long time nothing much is left... . But *you* are left. You are what is left of her.”

(*Careful, He Might Hear You* pp. 93-4)

Chapter One: A World of Women

Yes, it was a world of women. I mean, I was born into a 'woman' family. My mother had six sisters and one brother (he came somewhere in the middle)...my mother was the second last of the Locke children. (There were three...girls who died in infancy which I think was a blessing for me). My oldest aunt was my Aunt Lily, who was Mrs. Burns, married to George Burns the Parliamentarian, and she was my legal guardian when my mother died when I was born. And the other legal guardian was her sister Jessie, who was not married, and who had lived with a rather well-to-do cousin of ours in London for many years. The other sisters - they were a heterogeneous lot - they're rather a colourful family altogether because I have an Aunt Annie who served in World War I in the trenches; my Aunt Mary married a farmer; my Aunt Blanche went on the stage and my Aunt Agnes became a Christian Science Practitioner in Boston. So you had quite a varying cast of characters there.¹

Sumner Locke Elliott's description of his family as "a varying cast of characters" reveals much about what lies at the heart of his writing. This diverse group of women appear and reappear in a variety of roles throughout his fiction. His life and his work were shaped by their interactions with him, and with each other, by their conflicts and their harmonies, and by their presence in and absence from his day-to-day existence. Like the plays he wrote in childhood for the puppets of his tiny toy theatre, his most cherished

¹ Interview with Sumner Locke Elliott (Unpubl.), Richard Kelly Tipping, New York, December, 1985, now part of a collection of filmed interviews with famous Australian writers.

possession, his adult books became the arena where his family could be continually reviewed, renamed, and recast. In his texts he found not only a meeting place where he could embrace and rediscover those he had loved and lost, but also a place of reflection where he could reassess and re-examine those whom he had long held responsible for the pain of his formative years.

Over the three decades that he spent writing prose, reviewing and rewriting his growing-up years against the temporal and spatial background of his youth, Sumner attempted to exorcise the ghosts of his life and to come to terms with his own identity. His own life experience offered him a great canvas to paint upon. Australia became for him a land of imagination where memory could be both crystallised and transformed. His first and most overtly autobiographical novel, *Careful, He Might Hear You*, published in 1963 when he was in his mid-forties, Sumner termed “a clearing out, a ghost catching”.² At seventy-one, he made similar comments about his last novel, *Fairyland*, also acknowledged to be autobiographical: “It’s like fresh air suddenly coming into the room...”.³ “Writing,” he once said, “is a way to work traumas out”.⁴ Yet throughout his books, his voice is not the single cry of the lonely, lost child but the collective buzz of an entire matriarchal line

2 Clyde Packer, “Sumner Locke Elliott”, *No Return Ticket*, (Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1984). Also Hazel De Berg’s Taped Interview with Sumner Locke Elliott, No. 505, National Library, Canberra, Australia.

3 “Review”, *The Weekend Australian*, 16-17 June 1990.

4 Candida Baker, *Yacka 2*, (Pan Books, Sydney and London, 1987) p.70.

that encompassed himself and his family. By the time of his death he had become the custodian of those often conflicting voices and he was at one with them. Just as his life was influenced and shaped by these people, so his books represent his tracings and retracings of this influence.

Throughout his life, no matter how hard he tried, Sumner could never forget his absent mother who had died the day after his birth from eclampsia, a condition like Bright's Disease, which was related to her pregnancy. In his novel *Waiting For Childhood*, his mother's fictional counterpart, Sidney Lord, dies from this condition, and through Sidney's brother Fred (Sumner's Uncle Fred Locke in real life) eclampsia is described with painstaking accuracy:

...[Fred] got out of bed and went into the living room...and got out the dictionary to look up the word the doctor had written down about how Sidney died.

Eclampsia, a shining forth (*Ek--out, lampein--* to shine.) Attack of convulsions in latter stages of pregnancy caused by any of various toxic conditions of the body.

A shining forth. That was Sidney. If she had to die from anything, it would be bright.

(*Waiting For Childhood* p. 211)⁵

Even the death of Sumner's mother, it seemed, had been a radiant affair which had outshone the occasion of his birth; his

⁵ SLE, *Waiting For Childhood*, (first published in USA by Harper & Row Inc, 1987). This edition by Pan Books Australia Pty Ltd, Sydney, 1988. All future quotations from this edition.

coming into the world was mentioned mostly as an aside in his mother's obituary notices.

An old playbill of an amateur performance of Sumner Locke's first play...brings mingled memories. Summie herself is dead, a bride of less than a year and her soldier husband...is somewhere at the Front. This bright slight girl...had just returned from an American tour... . Poor plucky little "Summie" - she would have had great literary success had not the curtain dropped so soon. A tiny boy lives after her.⁶

Stories of his mother resounded through his life as they do through his books. His own name was a constant reminder of her: she had been called "Sumner Locke" throughout her life, and she added "Elliott" after her marriage. With barely enough money in her estate to pay her hospital bills and funeral expenses, her name was all she had to leave her only child.

In his first novel, *Careful, He Might Hear You*, Sumner grapples with his inherited name through his autobiographical counterpart, "P.S." and by drawing on his memories of the many memorial tributes to his dead mother to depict the presentation of a golden boomerang.

...Mr Champion droned on, came at long winded last to Sinden Scott, a brave little soul cut off in her prime just when she was about to reap the harvest, enjoy the fruits, find the pot of gold.

⁶ Obituary Notice, *Bulletin*, Sydney, Oct 1917.

“Bear we our little sister to the Tomb...”
intoned Mr. Champion.

“She hath set down the half-filled cup of life.
From Sunlight she hath hastened to the gloom;
Mother an hour, and one quick year a wife.
Our Little Sister of the Pen! The brave,
Kind, sanguine spirit falters to the grave.”

P.S. tugged at her dress. “Lila... .”

“Shh... . This is all about Dear One.”

“And now a golden boomerang to keep her
name returning.”

“Go and get the boomerang, pet.”

“No.”

“But it’s for you.”

“No.”

(*Careful, He Might Hear You* p. 146)⁷

But ‘the golden boomerang’ of remembrance in Sumner Locke Elliott’s life was his own name, a name from which he could neither completely escape nor fully claim as his own. At home, this problem was overcome somewhat by his family nickname, “Putty”. Yet for the boy, and later for the man, this name also had problems. Devised by his mother during her pregnancy, “Putty” was a name he still linked to her death, a shadow which continued to eclipse his life. Because she died after giving birth, Sumner always felt responsible for the tragedy. Perhaps foreseeing the difficulties he would encounter in seeking a completely separate identity, his aunt

⁷ SLE, *Careful, He Might Hear You*, (Victor Gollancz Ltd, London, 1963). All future quotations from this edition.

The melodramatic words of the speaker’s address at the presentation of the boomerang are lifted verbatim by SLE from a memorial poem by Randolph Bedford appearing as the frontispiece in a book of Sumner Locke’s own work published posthumously. The effect is one of bathos: it undercuts the sentiment, mocks the event, and ridicules the prolonged period of her mourning, all of which suggest SLE’s need to escape the links to his mother.

Lily called him “Bene” throughout his life.⁸ As a young man, he devised his own way out of his quandary by giving his friends at the Independent Theatre an array of cast names of which his own was “Bert”.

Sumner was Bert, Alma was Ag, Irene was Mill and Hadee was Ada. The names were those of a working class group and this was all part of the humour.⁹

“Love Bert”, became the signature, often squeezed in at the bottom, on letters he wrote to these friends, even in his old age. They complied with his reinvention addressing him as “Dear Bert”. He maintained a further variation with his dear friend, Gwen Plumb. They addressed one another for almost fifty years as “Ernie” and “Myrtle” (or sometimes “Mavis”), who were cousins in a play in which both had appeared during their youth.¹⁰

A scrapbook of newspaper clippings that documents the young author’s rise to fame,¹¹ from his boyhood until he left Australia in 1948, is headed “Sumner Locke Elliott”, but dominating the early pages are his mother’s photograph and tributes paid to

8 In SLE’s novel *Fairyland*, Cousin Essie (a character modelled on Lily) always calls the orphaned Seaton Daly, “Beanie”. Essie becomes Beanie’s surrogate mother.

9 Irene Thirkell to me, Double Bay, Sydney, 1991.

10 Love “Ernie” and “Dear Myrtle or Mavis” often appear in letters between these two. These names were also used in their antics during the war years when they treated an unsuspecting Sydney population as their audience, portraying themselves as brother and sister in various hilarious situations usually in the Sargent’s restaurants in the city.

11 This was no doubt the work of aunt Lily. This combined scrapbook covers a period from his birth and childhood until just before his departure from Australia when SLE was almost 31 years old.

her literary success in obituary notices. Clearly it was no easy matter for the boy to establish his own identity.

So intertwined was her life with his that he once spoke about “the shadow of his mother”¹² stalking the movements of his life. In describing his working day long after he had become an established novelist, his words are oddly reminiscent of his mother’s own account of how she had worked more than half a century earlier.

I’m a morning writer...so I like to get an early start and I’ve always worked straight onto a typewriter. Mostly on my old Smith Corona Manual and I’m now battling with an electric. I never work in the afternoon but I always finish the page and I only make the odd correction by hand - I don’t retype.¹³

(Sumner Locke Elliott, 1990)

...I work...in the mornings chiefly...hardly ever after midday... . I write straight onto my machine it saves time - and I don’t revise much - just a word here and there.¹⁴

(Sumner Locke, 1915)

One of Sumner’s television plays, written in the 1950s when he was almost forty years old, turns on the theme of a mother reaching back from the grave to control the life of her adult son.¹⁵

12 Clyde Packer, *No Return Ticket*.

13 SLE to me, 1990.

14 Katharine Susannah Prichard, “Two of a Kind - Yet Different: Australian Girls who have succeeded”, *Everybody’s Journal* (England), 6 January 1915.

15 *The Thin Air*, original ms., SLE’s television plays, SLE Collection, BU.

Even transformed as an American 1950s morality play, its parallel with his own life is unmistakable.¹⁶ In much of the fiction he wrote after he was in his forties, his mother appears as the tragic figure cut down before her time.¹⁷

As a young boy, stories of his mother's tragic demise were fed to Sumner as daily bread by all his aunts. She had been the "favourite sister" of each one, and each one embarked upon a separate journey to restore the mother to the son she had never known. Perhaps they did not realise that they too were seeking her again for themselves. They hoped - and insisted - that their sister's gift of imagination had been inherited by her son, and in fact long before he was old enough to write himself, the songs and poems composed by him in his childish play were written out and kept by his aunts.¹⁸

During the long years of his childhood, Sumner began to tire of the frequent stories about his mother, a woman and a time that

¹⁶ SL wrote a letter from The Laurels (the hospital of her confinement), entitled, "Where are my children", and on a rare visit to Australia after taking up American residency her son wrote an article eerily recalling his mother's letter with its own title: "Where are my books". Throughout his career as a novelist, SLE always referred to writing as his 'pregnancy' and his books as his 'children'.

¹⁷ (Helena) Sumner Locke (Elliott) inspired the characters of: Sinden in *Careful, He Might Hear You*, who dies after the birth of her son P.S.; Victoria in *Edens Lost* whose death leaves her young son Angus in the care of an aunt; 'little Uke' in *Water Under the Bridge* who (along with her husband) dies during the flu epidemic which struck Sydney in the 1920s, leaving her infant son Neil in the care of an old vaudeville friend; Sidney Lord in *Waiting For Childhood* who dies shortly after giving birth to a son who also dies; and Hope Daly, the 'little Soldier Woman' in *Fairyland* who pines so for her dead husband that she dies leaving her infant son, Seaton, to be raised by a close cousin.

¹⁸ Though his childhood was one of emotional upheaval and confusion, the point all agreed upon was his capacity to become a talented writer. The child was given so much confidence in his ability that once he had learned to write and could record his compositions and poems for himself, he somewhat brashly announced beneath each new work that this was "by the author of" the previous poem/story, just as publishers alert readers to an author's past fame. Only the child of a literary family would have the temerity to use such a device.

seemed so remote, but he revelled in the romance of his own beginnings: the great love affair between his parents and their separation by World War I just two weeks after their marriage. And while he was heartily encouraged to follow in his mother's literary footsteps by all and sundry, he grew to find this burden too heavy to carry through life. He vacillated between loving admiration and growing indifference for a woman he had never met, but whose presence influenced his every moment. This was borne out when he dedicated his first novel to his mother but then gave her character, hailed throughout the text as "the pure in heart", the ironic name of "Sinden", or 'the den of sin'.

Friends remember that throughout his youth, Sumner's one aim was to become a great writer of whom his mother would have been proud.¹⁹ Yet he retreated from the idea of prose because, before she died his mother had become a successful novelist. "I think I was frightened of comparison," he once told an interviewer, "and intimidated by her writer friends saying, 'Oh, you should carry on the tradition'."²⁰ On his first homecoming visit to Australia as the successful novelist, he pondered this point more fully: "Writing was associated in my mind from the age of four with the death of my mother, associated with women in peculiar clothes who behaved in a raffish kind of manner. The world of the artist and writer in my

¹⁹ Howard and Margot Craven to me, Sydney, 1991.

²⁰ "PS: We Hear You", Literary Supplement, *Bulletin*, 27 Dec 1983, p. 148.

mother's day was Bohemian. [I remember]...being taken for very erratically cooked Sunday dinners with my mother's colleagues and getting...lifted up onto laps and petted. They would tell me I would finish her unwritten book - the one she began in Arizona, carrying me then at five months pregnancy...[and] two others roughly finished. These became my millstones. They gathered dust in a trunk covered with stickers of hotels in New Mexico as her writer friends, many of them disappointed in their own careers, continued to incite me towards the sacred trust that was mine - to continue the heritage left me. 'She would have been the best of us.' These were tender well-meaning people but if ever a child was turned off writing it was me."²¹

The comparison with his mother, primarily because of his inherited name and his early success as a playwright, always appeared in press articles about him during his youth.

Sumner Locke Elliott, aged 12 years, thinks and lives in terms of the theatre...Sumner is the only child of the late Sumner Locke Elliott, well-known throughout Australia for her novels and short stories... .²²

Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* ran an article in December 1931 which exemplifies his situation. "Genius is Reborn", the headline read,

²¹ SLE, Address to Adelaide Writers' Week: "The Sameness and the Difference: Writing in two countries for four mediums", Festival of Arts, Adelaide, Australia, 13 March 1974. (Unpubl.) Copy held in SLE Collection, BU.

²² "As the Twig is Bent", *Sun*, Sydney, 20 April, 1930.

“Sumner Locke’s Son Writes Plays”.

The spirit of the mother reborn in the child!
 Fourteen years ago a bright-witted young novelist
 and playwright, Sumner Locke...died at the birth of
 her first child.
 Today her young son Sumner Locke Elliott has
 already written 15 plays... .23

Long after he had become an acknowledged and serious adult writer, no longer avoiding prose, when *Careful, He Might Hear You* had gained so many local and international accolades, the Australian press persisted in drawing analogies with his mother. Asked once too often about his author mother, he remarked: “I have a strange feeling that my mother and I would not have gotten along. She was very dominating. She had a very strong personality.”²⁴ Yet years after he had established himself in America, he still made the pilgrimage to her grave whenever he was in Australia. Even in old age, he would write from New York to thank friends for taking Mother’s Day flowers to the cemetery: “I was very touched,” he admitted. Yet the same elderly man, when asked about the absence of his mother in his life, shrugged his shoulders childishly and declared: “Who was she to me! I didn’t even know her!”²⁵ He once explained: “Not having a mother didn’t mean anything to me at all as a child. I didn’t know who she was.

23 “Genius is Reborn”, *Daily Telegraph*, Sydney, Dec 1931.

24 Muriel Reddy (in New York), “The years are sweet for Sumner”, *Sun*, Sydney, 2 Jan, 1988.

25 SLE to me, 1990.

They [the aunts] would refer to her as ‘little dear’ and we would go to ‘little dear’s’ grave. All that meant to me was a picnic.”²⁶ Yet he spoke and wrote about his mother throughout his life and his ambivalent attitude to her dominated his life and his fiction.

Sumner’s mother inspires many of his fictional characters and appears in various ways throughout his writing. Sometimes she is depicted sympathetically as the spirited independent woman dealt a foul blow by fate; at other times she is a character who selfishly brings on her own demise without a thought for those whom she abandons. The most constant element Sumner portrays is her youthful death, usually with an infant son left behind.

In the last novel published before his own death, Sumner cast his mother once again as a writer who dies young. She bears the ironic name of Hope (Seaton) Daly, “the little soldier woman” who is so consumed by her standing as a World War I widow that she confines her life to that role, leaving scant room for the task of mothering her infant son, Seaton, who is “named after...[his] mother’s maiden name”.²⁷ In *Fairyland*, Sumner quotes the very lines written by his own mother in her poem entitled “The Little Soldier Woman”.

“There’s a sacred kind of duty
In a trench of kitchen small,

²⁶ Muriel Reddy (in New York), “The years are sweet for Sumner”, *Sun*, Sydney, 2 Jan, 1988.

²⁷ *Fairyland* p. 107.

She knows nothing about shrapnel
 She knows something about hell
 She's a Little Solder Woman,
 Marching On..."

(*Fairyland* pp. 24-6)

But beside his portrait of maternal distance and alienation there is also evidence of a son's attempt to forgive and understand the mother he never knew.

...Not until he was a grown man and it became necessary for him to go through Her papers before he left the country forever, did he discover what it was that She was composing behind that shut door as blank as her face; when he discovered the dozens of patriotic stories and poems She had written for long-ago defunct magazines with names like *Digger* and *Battalion Bulletin*. Reading them he was flushed with outraged pity for Her and shame for his priggish parsimoniousness toward Her. They were patently all about herself...and the heroines were always slips of girls standing bravely up to Cruel Huns... .

(*Fairyland* pp. 24-6)

Sumner Locke Elliott's flight to America allowed him a measure of escape from both his family's and the public's perception of his mother as his role model. It seems appropriate that in *Waiting For Childhood*, the novel he wrote specifically about his mother's life and her family, he named her character "Sidney".²⁸ Sidney Lord is a writer whose own successful book is entitled

²⁸ Appropriately this name is of non-specific gender, as is "Sumner". In *Waiting For Childhood* the name (Sidney) lends her an androgynous framework which fits her tomboy presence: in the early part of the novel she is often given a masculine image.

“Mother Load”, which ironically expresses Sumner’s view of his mother. In life, Sumner Locke was her son’s own mother “load/lode” in both senses, being “a heavy burden” and “the often illusive but limitless source of mined wealth and richness”. She is called Sidney because, even though deceased, she came to embody all that Sydney as a place had become for her son: a memorial to his dead mother. Sumner expresses this merger of place and person in his novel through the peripheral character of the elderly Mrs Lord, whose amnesia has blotted out the memory of her younger daughter.

“What is the name of the smaller girl?” she asked Mary, honestly at a loss. “Which smaller girl, love?” “The girl who brought me in the newspaper just now.” “Why, darling that was *Sidney*.” But Sydney was the name of the city they now lived in. Was there a person too?... .

(*Waiting For Childhood* p.41)

Sydney, the city of Sumner Locke Elliott’s beginnings, and an important and highly detailed presence in so many of his books, was filled throughout his childhood and youth with his mother’s long-mourning relatives, colleagues and friends. One such friend (a Carlton neighbour of his aunt Lily) whose adoration for his deceased mother was overwhelming, refused to call him “Sumner”. As an elderly man, he recalled her words with bitterness: “...‘There was only ever one Sumner,’ she told me emphatically when I was just a

small boy. 'I shall call you Locke,' she insisted and she always did! Consequently I've always hated the name, Locke."²⁹

His need to escape such persistent comparison contributed towards his flight from Australia. But privately he could never escape the thought that he would always be the other Sumner Locke Elliott.

The First Sumner Locke Elliott

Helena Sumner Locke married Henry Logan Elliott on Saturday, 23 December 1916. The couple were both called by their middle names, a common custom of the time, and had announced their engagement just four days earlier on the women's pages of Melbourne's *Herald* newspaper.

AUTHORESS WILL WED SOLDIER

Miss Sumner Locke...well-known as a bright story writer, has become engaged to an Australian soldier, Pay-Corporal Henry Logan Elliott. Their wedding will be celebrated in Sydney on Saturday by Canon Bellinger at St. Philip's Church.

The prospective bridegroom is at present attached to the headquarters staff at Liverpool but expects to leave for the front early in the year... . The young couple have known each other since childhood.

(*The Herald*, (Melbourne) 19 Dec 1916.)

It was a hot Australian summer's day when the newlyweds joined a small family gathering in The Royal National Park south of Sydney on Christmas Eve, the day after their wedding. They had spent their honeymoon night in the nearby Como Hotel then more renowned for its drinking clientele than its lodgers.³⁰ Like so many other hotels in Sydney, it boasted Australia's most beloved poet and

³⁰ Now listed with the National Trust of Australia, this hotel is commonly referred to by locals as The Old Como Pub.

short story writer, Henry Lawson, as a patron. According to local oral historians,³¹ Lawson, by then a hopeless victim of alcoholism, regularly played dominoes in the courtyard of this waterfront hotel at Scyla Bay.³² When the poet ran short of money (which was often) legend has it, he would retreat along the banks of the nearby Woronora River to scribble verse which he then exchanged for drinks at the bar.³³ Once his credit and creativity were exhausted, a mate called Wattie rowed Lawson upriver to a point known as “The Bonnet”, a large rock outcrop with a cave where the poet shared a makeshift camp with two of his relatives.³⁴ According to Logan Elliott’s family, Lawson was a “good mate and a frequent drinking companion” of the bridegroom. Although Logan was a trained accountant, he also worked as a freelance journalist for publications like the *Bulletin*, with which Lawson’s name had become synonymous. Sumner Locke also regularly contributed to this magazine, which she always affectionately referred to as the “Bully”.

As the second youngest of the eight surviving Locke children, Sumner Locke had long been doted on by all her siblings, “all of

31 One such oral historian is Ted Cary, who owns and runs the local butcher shop at Como as his father did before him. Ted is the representative voice of the area and has maintained a lifetime interest in piecing together the history of the Sydney suburb of Como. (Ted Cary to me, 1993/4.)

32 This was near to an area named “Frog Hollow” where illegal gaming and fights were held to entertainment the rowdier element of the Hotel’s clientele.

33 Historical Documents of The Como Hotel, held by the publican.

34 According to Ted Cary, Lawson and Wattie were invariably drunk by the time they took to the boat and Henry was so moved by his mate’s unflagging kindness in seeing him safely back to his camp every night that he later penned a poem about him.

them secretly loving...[her] the best”³⁵ as her son later wrote in his first novel. Many of her family portrait-photographs bear the dedication: “More like a friend than a sister”.

The Locke family of seven girls and one boy (three other children died in infancy) had been born over a period of seventeen years (1869-1886) in either Queensland, Victoria or New South Wales.³⁶ Their father, William Locke, an Anglican minister, was assigned a variety of congregations during this period and their mother, Annie (née Seddon), a former school teacher, was constantly confined by her eleven pregnancies. The couple, always referred to by their children as Pater and Mater,³⁷ enjoyed the comforts of a middle-class life but held great sympathies for the working class and underprivileged. Most of their offspring - while raised in such comforts - consequently developed strong political and moral affiliations with working class people, and a sensitivity to their plight. After the death of William and the family’s subsequent financial slide, the Locke siblings were somewhat prepared for the working class life that awaited most of them as adults.

During their upbringing all the Locke children were made very conscious of their minister father’s achievement of a BA from

35 *Careful, He Might Hear You* p. 24.

36 Peter Seddon of Canberra, to me, 1991.

37 They inspire many characters in SLE’s novels and most are referred to as Pater and Mater.

Cambridge, England, and education was highly valued by the family, with each child encouraged to pursue an academic interest.³⁸ Many of the children were schooled at home,³⁹ which put even greater pressure on their mother. Indirectly this closeknit family unit, almost entirely female, may have created the fierce sense of identity and independence that all the Locke women displayed. Their own family afforded them such a large measure of individuality, in fact, that when Lily, Blanche and Sumner married, each kept her maiden name as part of her marital title. In Sumner Locke's case however, this had more to do with her established reputation as an author than with feminist values such as those to which Lily subscribed. While she held strong sympathies for the oppressed and underprivileged, and her own life, at least in theory, was an emblem of female independence, Sumner Locke considered a woman's primary role to be that of homemaker.⁴⁰

Coming near the end of the family line, Sumner Locke had escaped the dour sense of duty so evident in Lilian, the eldest child, who had in many ways filled the unenviable role of surrogate mother during her own mother's never-ending pregnancies. Sumner Locke embodied the larrikin element that brought all the

38 Both Annie and Jessie Locke were trained nurses; Mary Locke was educated well enough to open a private school which included musical tuition; Lilian Locke-Burns was a trained teacher and then became a public speaker and a political activist; Blanche Locke-Dunn was trained in music and performed on stage; (Helena) Sumner Locke (Elliott) was a writer; and Agnes Locke became a Christian Science practitioner.

39 SLE to me, 1990.

40 A letter by Sumner Locke during her trip to America indicates this and ridicules a shipboard companion who espouses the feminist ideal.

family great entertainment value. She was their creative spirit. Although all were very accomplished in either music or literature, she shone brightest. She could bridge the differences evident between her siblings because of her chameleon ability to blend emotionally with each of them.

At thirty-five, Sumner Locke wasn't a young bride, but because of her place in the family hierarchy and her petite stature she was always referred to as "our little Summie". After her death, the family remembered her as "little dear" which her son later translated to "Dear One", and her grave to "Dear One's Garden", in *Careful, He Might Hear You*. Perhaps his translation of this term also referred to the high price (playing on the ambiguous meaning of 'dear') his mother's abandonment through death had cost him during his life. His ambivalent attitude towards Sumner Locke - affection and high esteem on the one hand, and expense to his life on the other - is evident in the following passage:

Now they were going to Dear One's Garden
and he liked this... .

"Why are we going *today*?"

"Because it's her birthday."

He laughed. How funny they were. How could you have a birthday when you weren't there? ...He never quite thought of going to Dear One's Garden as a Treat because really it was rather dull, although the trip there was a Treat.

...Lila put her face to the glass next to his and said:

“Look over there.”

“Where?”

“Over there, see? Right down the river...A great big white house with verandas running all around it and a red roof with towers? See it? ...That’s the hotel where Dear One spent her - where she went away to stay with your father... .”

How strange it all was and embarrassing too for Lila to mention Logan, which she never did... . And surely it was wrong of Dear One to go off like that and stay away with Logan. Dear One never did a wrong thing in her life. They were always telling him that. She was a saint and an angel and too good to live and so God had called her away... .

Dear One’s Garden...was raised slightly from the dry red earth by a stone step. It had a white marble cross, taller than he, which had lettering on it and read, according to Lila:

SINDEN

BELOVED DAUGHTER OF WILLIAM AND ANNIE SCOTT,
“TO THE PURE IN HEART, ALL THINGS ARE PURE.”

at the top, and at the bottom (but not unless you cut away the grass and weeds):

BELOVED WIFE OF LOGAN.

(Careful, He Might Hear You pp. 26-9)

While Sumner Locke’s marriage to Logan Elliott had seemed sudden and impulsive to family members, it was never doubted that the couple shared a deep and true love.⁴¹ But the family considered that Sumner Locke had married beneath them. They referred to Logan’s father, a baker from rural Victoria, as “an illiterate” who compared poorly with their own “Pater”, a man of

⁴¹ Logan was already a heavy drinker and this would have been at odds with Lily and George’s stand on prohibition. They campaigned for temperance and would also have deplored the drinking habits of (Helena) Sumner Locke and Blanche, as Lily continued to dissuade SLE from such habits during his youth.

letters with a BA from Cambridge University.⁴² The Locke clan's scorn for the Elliotts' lowly status is epitomised in their description of Logan as "a baker's boy", a term that years later resurfaced in a son's writing about his parents and his family.

...Lila was watching...Mater was hurrying across the paddock...the other girls were laughing, everyone had seen her! She was disgraced and ruined...she was common. Necking with the *baker's* boy in a paddock and her father a Cambridge scholar... .

(*Careful, He Might Hear You* p. 180)

Yet as a result of being educated, Sumner Locke was an independent woman, like most of her Locke sisters, and she had already broken a long engagement to a fellow writer, Ernest Andrew Ewart.⁴³ Like her younger sister Blanche, Sumner Locke was Bohemian in her outlook and considered herself a free spirit. She had carved out a career as a prolific and successful writer, just as Blanche had pursued her own career in musical theatre. From the time of her teens, Sumner Locke's short stories and poetry had been published widely in Australian periodicals and newspapers,⁴⁴ and the release of her novel *Mum Dawson, Boss* in 1911 confirmed her reputation as an acclaimed writer. As well as her prose and

⁴² SLE, quoted in Trish Evans, "Sumner of the Three Dolls", *The Age* (Melbourne) 4 Sept, 1980.

⁴³ This is the Australian writer Boyd Cable, a fictional version of whom appears in SLE's *Waiting For Childhood* as Royce Cable, Sidney Lord's American lover during WWI. This character is a merger of Boyd Cable, his mother's former fiancé, and an American soldier with whom SLE himself had a brief affair at the end of WWII.

⁴⁴ SL's work appeared in various Australian publications including *The Native Companion*, *Wildcat Monthly*, *Punch*, *Bulletin*, and *Lone Hand*.

poetry, she had great success with her stage plays in Sydney and Melbourne.

In 1908 her first successful play, *The Vicissitudes of Vivienne*, was produced in Melbourne's Princess Theatre by an amateur company and the following year her one-act play *The Quality of Mercy*⁴⁵ was produced in Sydney's Theatre Royal as was her longer work, *A Martyr to Principle*.⁴⁶ These theatrical ventures led one newspaper of the day to refer rather impulsively to Sumner Locke as "Australia's first professional woman playwright". More appropriately, perhaps, she could have been named the country's most prolific woman playwright.

In 1912 she travelled to England where she forged a close and lasting friendship with another rising young Australian writer, Katharine Susannah Prichard,⁴⁷ with whom Sumner Locke had been acquainted in Melbourne's literary circles. Shortly after her arrival in England, Sumner Locke won £25 in a magazine⁴⁸ short story competition which set her on a path of success, as she spent the next three years working in London and Paris as a freelance journalist, poet and short story writer. In 1914 she and Katharine

⁴⁵ This play was co-written with Stanley McKay.

⁴⁶ Blain, Clements, Grundy (eds), *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English*, (B.T. Batsford Ltd London, 1990) p. 667.

⁴⁷ SL also met Miles Franklin in England at this time, and later in America during her travel there. MF was already an established acquaintance of the family through her long political allegiance and friendship with Lilian Locke.

⁴⁸ *Magpie*, a magazine new on the London scene.

Susannah decided to enter another literary competition,⁴⁹ this time for the best Australian novel of the year. The prize was £250. The women had grown so close that not only did they give each other encouragement and criticism while they wrote their books, but they made a pact to share the money should either of them win.⁵⁰ Katharine's now famous novel, *The Pioneers*,⁵¹ was awarded the prize and provided the means by which she and Sumner Locke could remain in England and continue their literary endeavours, their humanitarian work and their help with the war effort (World War I had begun several months earlier). The women worked tirelessly on their writing and were published extensively in England and Australia. Sumner Locke was so prolific that in five consecutive weeks one of Sydney's evening papers apparently printed "five sets of verses from her pen"⁵².

During this period in London Sumner Locke also spent time with her sister Jessie, who for some years had been the companion of the family's wealthy cousin, Aggie Barclay.⁵³ The sisters shopped together in Paris and became close in their exile. When another

49 The Hodder and Stoughton competition for best Australian novel submitted in 1914.

50 SLE to me, 1990.

51 Katharine, Susannah Prichard, *The Pioneers* (1915), (Hodder & Stoughton, London, reprinted 1916), also at NY 1917; revised edition, Rigby, Adelaide, 1963.

52 *The Book Lover* (Melbourne), 1 July 1916.

53 In SLE's novels, she was the model for Cousin Ettie Bult in *Careful, He Might Hear You* (1963) and Cousin Jackie in *Waiting for Childhood* (1987).

sibling, Annie Locke,⁵⁴ arrived to serve as a nurse in the trenches, it seemed almost like a family reunion. But it was clear from her letters home to Australia that Sumner Locke's romance with her fiancé Ernest Ewart was on the wane, with her protesting neglect. Ernest was thought much of by the family, but mostly because of his responsible attitude and his ability to keep the more flamboyant Sumner Locke to the straight and narrow.

In her three years overseas, Sumner Locke published articles, poetry, short stories, and a novel. Her resolve to forge a successful writing career for herself while abroad pivoted on her indomitable commitment to her craft. "If you really wanted to write," she once told a colleague who was bemoaning the uninspiring surrounds of a London lodging-house, "you'd be able to do it on the edge of a bathtub."⁵⁵ A piece written by Katharine Susannah Prichard on Australian girls abroad tells the tale of her friend Sumner Locke's beginnings in England and the strength of her convictions demonstrated by her persistence with local editors who were reluctant to employ colonial unknowns.

[O]ne day, she achieved the impossible, and interviewed the Uninterviewable. She "proceeded" upstairs in the wake of the office-boy, who

⁵⁴ Annie Locke served as a nurse "in the trenches" according to SLE. She remained in Scotland after the war and came home to Australia only briefly. "She hated it," SLE told me in 1990. "She hated the heat and the flies and really had become very Scottish, so she left again for Scotland as soon as possible and died there some years later."

⁵⁵ See Vance Palmer's appreciation in the foreword of *In Memoriam: Sumner Locke* (Sydney J. Endacott, Melbourne 1921).

presented her card to the Uninterviewable, saying:
 “She says she has come 13,000 miles to see you; and her business won’t keep you two minutes.”

“Never knew any business on earth that could be done in two minutes,” growled the Uninterviewable.

“Didn’t you?” said Sumner, smiling round the door.
 “Well you’ll see that mine can! If it isn’t, you can throw me out at the end of the two minutes.”

Needless to say...she wrote stories for his magazine “happily ever after”.

“Ah,” said another Personage, “you have talent my dear young lady. Your work shows great promise!”

“I’m glad you think so,” said Sumner sweetly.

“I’ve managed to earn my living by it for a good many years.”⁵⁶

In *Waiting For Childhood* Sumner Locke Elliott conferred his mother’s experience upon the character Sidney Lord⁵⁷ who, as one of his many fictional embodiments of Sumner Locke, is a writer longing to be accepted into higher literary circles. She is at first demoralised when she encounters the unsympathetic Royce Cable,⁵⁸ editor of “*Ovid*”⁵⁹ described in the text as “the cultured literary journal which cost 2/6 on the bookstalls bound in dark orange where printed on thick expensive paper was the output of such cynosures as Katherine [sic] Susannah Prichard, Digby Hammond and ‘Banjo’ Patterson [sic].”⁶⁰

56 Katharine Susannah Prichard, *The Book Lover* (Melbourne), 1 July, 1916.

57 SLE barely camouflaged the original source of most of his characters’ names.

58 The pen name of Sumner Locke’s first fiancé was ‘Boyd Cable’ who was in real life the Australian writer and journalist, Ernest Andrew Ewart, portrayed here as an unworthy lover.

59 This is probably SLE’s veiled reference to *Birth: A Little Journal of Australian Poetry* which appeared between 1916 and 1922; several of its contributors and editors were part of Sumner Locke’s literary circle (eg. Nettie Palmer and Katharine Susannah Prichard).

60 *Waiting For Childhood* p. 110.

...He picked up her manuscript from a small pile on his desk.

“I don’t ordinarily see the slush pile people, but I’m making an exception with you.”

...Sidney smiled brightly but he looked at her unsmilingly... . The ceiling fell in on her... .

“...[Y]ou’ll never get anywhere trying to copy other authors... . Now everyone has to start as a raw beginner...even Mark Twain, but...they had something original to offer, they didn’t copy anyone else and the reason I had you come in to see me was to tell you that...down under all this artificial bunkum you show talent... .”

“Thank you,” she said, getting up haughtily and taking her story. “I’ve been living on that talent for the last couple of years.”

(*Waiting for Childhood* pp. 112-13)

Like her fictional counterpart, Sumner Locke had published numerous poems, short stories and two novels in Australia before she travelled to England. Her Dawson novels⁶¹ proved so successful that eleven editions of *Mum Dawson, Boss* were published between 1911 and 1921. The novel became one of the N.S.W. Bookstall Company’s all time bestsellers but Sumner Locke, so desperate for money at the time she gained the contract for *Mum Dawson*, had sold the rights for a flat fee. “N.S.W. Bookstalls paid her fifty pounds...good money in 1910,” her son recalled years later. “They offered her thirty pounds and a penny on each [copy] but she

⁶¹ *Mum Dawson, Boss* (1911) and *The Dawson’s Uncle George* (1912); both published by NSW Bookstall Co. Ltd, Sydney.

thought it safer to take the fifty... .”⁶² This episode, too, became part of Sidney Lord’s experience:

“No royalties?”

“I took the larger advance in lieu.”

“You took the bait, they diddled you.”

“They only pay a penny a copy royalty.”

“It can add up.”

(*Waiting For Childhood* pp. 126-7)

While in England, Sumner Locke wrote a third Dawson book, *Skeeter Farm Takes a Spell*, and began a novel for the larger, more lucrative American market. But disturbing news from home at the end of 1914 interrupted it. In the growing shadow of the war, Sumner Locke returned “for a holiday to Australia”⁶³ at the beginning of 1915 to nurse her dying mother. She saw her trip home as only a short break in the career she had established in England, but she had not reckoned on the escalation of World War I nor on the changing circumstances of her life back in Australia.

In her youth, Sumner Locke had spent time in Bacchus Marsh in Victoria where her sister Mary had married and set up house with a local farmer. In 1899, before her marriage, Mary had moved to this district to open a private school called “Merrimu”,⁶⁴ where she won many accolades for the pupils she turned out. Sumner

62 SLE, Address to Adelaide Writers’ Week, 1974.

63 Katharine Susannah Prichard, *Everybody’s Journal* (England) 6 Jan, 1915.

64 Walter Stewart, *The Early History of Bacchus Marsh Schools*, (The Dominion Press Hedges and Bell P/L Maryborough for the Bacchus Marsh & District Historical Society, 1983).

Locke occasionally came to 'the Marsh' to help her sister's endeavours, and relatives believe that she first met Logan Elliott during these visits. The collective family memory is of the couple's friendship during these early years,⁶⁵ since the Elliotts owned and ran the bakery in nearby Ballan and the small neighbouring communities often mingled.

Into the bakery to meet his brothers, ghostly with floury faces and arms, Dave, Jock and Alan welcoming her in the heat of the ovens, poking fun at their lazy bugger of a brother, warning her not to believe a bloody word he said... .

(Careful, He Might Hear You p. 177)

This description of the bakery, written years later by Sumner Locke Elliott from family reminiscences, evokes his shiftless, unreliable father and the past life of his paternal line. His portraits of his father in no way attempt to veil their source. In two of his novels, Sumner portrays Bacchus Marsh as the landscape in which the characters Logan and Lowden become romantically linked to women modelled upon one or other of his aunts before they discover the true love of another woman, a character inspired by his mother, Sumner Locke. Both his loathed aunt Jessie and his adored aunt Blanche were depicted as spurned lovers in his stories, although in real life neither one had fallen under the real Logan's charms. "I took poetic licence, my aunt Jessie [and Blanche] were no

⁶⁵ From relatives Heather Shugg and Doug Watson of Bacchus Marsh, Victoria, to me, 1992.

more in love with my father than an elephant,” he once told an interviewer.⁶⁶

After her return from England, Sumner Locke spent most of her time in Melbourne, nursing her dying mother and working on her American novel, *Samaritan Mary*. She and her sister Blanche attended to their mother on alternate days. But the family was always in need of money and, as well as her nursing duties, Sumner Locke had to maintain her daily writing to survive. Her letters of this time (Jan/Feb 1915) indicate that the literary market in Australia was drying up.

...Nothing doing here. Dismal prospect. Look for Punch for this week (Feb 4th) Left Behinds in print...Three papers have written me this week to discontinue stories. That leaves me two to live on (about 9/- per week income)... . Punch pars don't occur enough to continue unless I chase society so have entered into contract with "Bully" to do stuff if I can get it. It might be worth about 10/- a week if I can get interesting paragraphs.⁶⁷

She returned to the city's literary circles and during the six months of her mother's illness renewed many of the contacts of her youth, but the pall of death in the family house tainted Melbourne for her. After her mother's funeral⁶⁸ at the end of July 1915, Sumner Locke wasted little more time in Melbourne. Since some of their family

⁶⁶ SLE to Richard Kelly Tipping, New York, 1985.

⁶⁷ Sumner Locke's letters, SLE Collection, BU.

⁶⁸ For a great deal of family information my thanks to Bill and Ruby Watson of Adelaide, South Australia, and to Doug Watson and Heather Shugg of "the Marsh" in Victoria.

had already moved to Sydney, she and her sister Blanche went north before the end of the year.

By early 1916 Sumner Locke's prospects seemed to have brightened with the news that *Samaritan Mary* had been released in America with rave reviews and that in the first five weeks more than 3000 copies had sold in the New York area alone. The story, set in rural America and written in a 'down-home' style, was praised for its authenticity. Proclaiming that the work revealed a rare ear for accent, humour and insight, reviewers across the country had presumed Sumner Locke to be an American male.⁶⁹ The *New York Times* referred to her as "Mr. H. Sumner Locke...a new writer of great promise." This innocent hoodwinking of the American critics and public provided good pre-release publicity for Australian and English editions of the novel.

Samaritan Mary...is an American book, written by an Australian, and the publishers who accepted it were blissfully unaware that the new author was not an American. The book is written about America with American characters, and American humour and the writer has never been there! It has already earned a wonderful wealth of praise from American papers...[which] have taken it for granted that Sumner Locke is a man, and also naturally assume an American. A girl who is

⁶⁹ See press clippings from *The Detroit Free Press* (March 1916); *Newark Morning News* (10 March, 1916); *The Living Age*, Boston (8 April, 1916); *The Evening Mail*, New York (15 March, 1916); *Christian Endeavour World* (22 April, 1916); *Boston Herald* (20 March, 1916); *The World*, New York (11 March, 1916); *The Pittsburgh Gazette Time* (4 March, 1916); *Democrat & Chronicle*, Rochester NY (3 April, 1916); *Washington Star* (18 March, 1916); *San Francisco Chronicle* (24 April, 1916) held in SLE Collection, BU.

clever enough to beguile the American public into thinking an [Australian] girl is an American man will go far.⁷⁰

It was also during 1916, perhaps on the strength of her literary success, that Sumner Locke broke her engagement to Ernest Ewart, who was still in England. Although their romantic alliance was dissolved, the couple remained firm friends until Sumner Locke's death. A devoted Ernest wrote to her constantly throughout the war, unlike Logan whose letters were rare and unreliable. In her own letters written while she was in hospital awaiting the birth of her son, just before her death, Sumner Locke mentioned that Ernest was to be her baby's godfather. Her remark in a letter to Katharine Susannah Prichard at this time of great illness that "she had never been this sick without Ernest with her" indicates the extreme closeness of their relationship. His role in her life had been almost fatherly, which she eventually acknowledged,⁷¹ although his reliable, serious nature was clearly at odds with Sumner Locke's unconventional one. For a time he had replaced the father she had lost in her youth but her break with Ernest was a further declaration of independence.

In his first novel, *Careful, He Might Hear You*, her son

⁷⁰ *The Book Lover* (Melbourne), 1 July 1916.

⁷¹ In a letter to KSP from her hospital bed, SL talks of Ernest's constant stream of advice about babies in his letters to her: "...he sounds as though he'd had two of his own instead of the *ME* one of many years".

portrayed the role Ernest played in his mother's life and the events leading up to her marriage to Logan Elliott.

"Oh, Pony - Ernest could have stopped her."

"Ernest couldn't stop a taxi."

"They had so much in common."

"Books."

"Books were her life, Pony."

"She was her own life and she didn't want it edited by Ernest. All he ever *did* was edit her."

"He worshipped the ground she walked on."

Pony giggled. "Provided he picked it out first."

(*Careful, He Might Hear You* p. 143)

It is unclear whether or not Sumner Locke's reacquaintance with Henry Logan Elliott, who was then working as a freelance journalist and frequenting Sydney's clubs and drinking establishments, played any part in her broken engagement to Ernest Ewart. There is evidence to indicate that the men knew one another in Australia and became friends during their war service overseas. It is known, however, that Sumner Locke met Logan Elliott again when both were submitting work to the *Bulletin* and that during the latter half of 1916 their relationship became serious.

After Logan's enlistment into the army, he was attached to headquarters staff at Liverpool in Sydney for a time and this allowed the couple to continue their love affair in spite of the war. Logan's wit and charm provided a change from the grey life and dutiful existence that war and family commitment had recently

imposed upon Sumner Locke. He was the fun-loving dreamer, the free spirit, and the embodiment of irresponsibility: the complete antithesis of the serious, dutiful Ernest Ewart. Logan, with his own literary bent, tapped into the bohemian side of Sumner Locke in a way only her younger sister Blanche could understand. His own flawed life - his drinking and his shiftlessness - were part of his attraction. Like Sumner Locke, he flaunted all the rules.

The tiny photographs of Logan which Sumner Locke carefully pasted into her albums never clearly capture his face. Likewise, as a family figure and as each character he inspired in his son's novels years later, he remains elusive and shadowy, never fully revealed. Yet his brief role in Sumner Locke's life was a dominant one, evident by her labelling of his photographs simply as "HIM". With all his flaws, Logan Elliott was the only man for her. In his scrutiny of his parents' lives this point was not missed by their son.

Dim faces and introductions to people...and then...someone detaching himself from the crowd and coming toward them, tall and unhurried.

"Him," Sinden said.

(Careful, He Might Hear You p. 53)

Towards the end of 1916, Logan learned that his overseas service was imminent. As it was for so many other couples of the time, their marriage was a rushed affair. The bride was forced to

piece together her outfit from what she already owned and hand-me-downs. She wrote to her sister Jessie in England, sending her a photograph of herself in her wedding gown.

My wedding dress - pale sky blue satin, your old lace (hat) from Paris and the shoes we bought there!

(23 Dec, 1916)

The newlyweds had just over two weeks together, much of it spent on the beach at Cronulla, south of Sydney, with a typewriter never too far out of reach. By mid-January Logan had left for overseas service. At first, Sumner Locke remained busy with her literary commitments: her stage dramatisation of her own novel *Mum Dawson, Boss* opened at the Criterion Theatre on 27 January 1917. It ran to good houses for two weeks and rounded off the Bert Bailey Company's season.

Prior to her wedding, Sumner Locke had booked a passage for America.⁷² Her New York publisher, Henry Holt, had urged her to sign up for two new books on the strength of the success of *Samaritan Mary*. Before she embarked on what turned out to be a harrowing voyage across the Pacific and an exhausting trek across the American continent, she was aware that America had entered

⁷² This detail was included in the Engagement announcement in *The Herald* (Melbourne) 12 Dec 1916. A royalty payment from *Samaritan Mary* had been forwarded to SL by Agnes from Boston. This money allowed SL to make the trip and probably paid for the wedding and honeymoon as Logan was notoriously lacking in funds. According to letters, SL was never concerned that she might have to be "the breadwinner" of the family.

the War and that she was pregnant.

Sumner Locke's plan was simple: she could traverse the American continent, gathering copy for a future novel;⁷³ attend to business with her publisher in New York; visit her sister Agnes who was then in Boston; and continue on to England where she could be reunited with her husband, Logan. When her son related the story to an interviewer years later, his admiration for his mother and his appreciation of the intensity of his parents' love affair were both patently evident.

[S]he came here with me when I was on the way...partly to sign her contract with Henry Holt in New York...and then hopefully to get across to London where my father was, because they had an extremely short married life...two weeks altogether, when he went off with the troops...and in those days it was very difficult, you could imagine for a woman alone and pregnant...to be crossing an enormous country like...America in the middle of summer when air conditioning had not been invented, and going to states like Arizona and New Mexico, and coming to New York and then to Boston where she had a sister. Meanwhile the United States had entered the World War too, and everybody said to her that it would be...extremely inadvisable to cross the Atlantic with U-boats and, picture the horror in those days of zeppelin raids in London...at night and black-outs...and indeed she did take fright and went back through Canada and of course I was born in Sydney.⁷⁴

⁷³ SL did find plenty of inspiration for her writing on this trip, particularly in Arizona which figured prominently in one of her unpublished manuscripts left incomplete at her death. This was to be called "Desert Madonna" and is held in Mitchell Library, Sydney.

⁷⁴ SLE to Hazel De Berg, 1970.

Before leaving Australia, Sumner Locke corresponded with Logan who was by then in England awaiting despatch to the front. She told him about her pregnancy and first called their unborn baby "Putty", a family nickname which Logan endorsed by return mail, sending his wife a postcard of a kewpie doll which he labelled: "Our Putty". In his first novel, their son bestows upon his autobiographical counterpart the nickname "P.S." - "the postscript" to the life of his dead mother, the writer Sinden Scott Marriott.⁷⁵

"You'll always be P.S. to us." They all laughed and he could see that they...would go on calling him P.S. until he was very old, maybe thirty.

(Careful, He Might Hear You p. 338)

In fact, Sumner Locke Elliott was called Putty until just after he was thirty when he left Australia and was able to claim his name as his own. The nickname "Putty" was probably related to the malleability of Sumner Locke's shape and the fact that it was then common practice for women - especially women who were living or travelling alone and wishing to retain social acceptability - to bind themselves during pregnancy to conceal their condition for as long as possible: such bindings were like the leg bindings called "puttees" that were worn by World War I soldiers, including

⁷⁵ As in the naming of this character, fictional counterparts are often rhythmically linked to their real life sources.

Logan.⁷⁶ Sumner Locke physically bound herself in order to camouflage her changing shape as she travelled across America. At quite an advanced stage of her pregnancy she wrote of her success at fooling everyone:

I am clad in an armour and really have an admirable figure of the best cut - Nobody guesses here [of my pregnancy] not even those I live with.⁷⁷

From cards and letters, the event of a new baby was clearly desirable for the parents and all concerned. Apart from Mary and Fred, none of the Locke siblings had produced children. The other sisters, all of whom loved their “little Summie” so dearly, were more than prepared to become doting second mothers to her child. As Sumner Locke travelled halfway around the world she noted in her tiny journal the progress of her unborn child.

Ap 6-17

Arrived at Vancouver, Canada today & am leaving at 11pm...by boat to Seattle for Frisco. Very few pounds in hand...and my love child three months today...I am isolated as a penguin and none of my people know where I am... .⁷⁸

Loneliness, isolation and financial deprivation are evident in this diary entry from her voyage to the States; they plagued her

⁷⁶ My special thanks to Heather Chambers for the derivation of this name and her stories of Putty and how the family still refer to him by that name. Thanks also to Archie Tyrrell, son of Sumner Locke's friend, who remembered SLE as “Putty Elliott”. (Archie Tyrrell to me, 1991.)

⁷⁷ SL, Letter, 28 May 1917, SLE Collection, BU.

⁷⁸ Journal of Sumner Locke, SLE Collection, BU.

throughout her time away. Sumner Locke's trip was not exactly as she had expected. She continued to work on her new novel, *Blue Sky Gentleman* as she crossed America, jotting down changes to the outline in her tiny diary, and then revising the manuscript. But when she arrived in New York, she encountered problems with her publishers that concerned not only her ideas for new books but also money and the discovery that their commitment to fiction writers was not as strong as she had been led to believe.⁷⁹ As well, the hazards of her journey on boats and trains, in all extremes of weather and environment, and the distances she had covered in her three months in America were gradually taking their toll. With the Atlantic closed to passenger shipping and no way of reaching Logan, Sumner Locke planned to work on for another month or two, leave a copy of her book with her New York agent, and return to Australia earlier than originally anticipated, thereby avoiding the enormous medical costs she would incur by giving birth in America. Her letters from this time indicate that the nickname of Putty for her unborn child was commonly used by all the family.⁸⁰

...I may return July boat instead of
November...because I find that the expense of the

⁷⁹ In a letter to Katharine Susannah Prichard, SL indicated that she had received only £100 from sales of *Samaritan Mary* and that "Holt's not all that interested in fiction". As her quarterly royalty from the book was supposed to amount to \$US350, this discrepancy was cause for worry and distrust.

⁸⁰ While this was true of the family generally, and of Logan in his early letters to Lilian, Lily also called SLE "Bene". It is interesting that - as well as "P.S." - he calls himself "Blue Sky Gentleman" in *Careful*: see factual references to 'my blue sky babe and book' in 28 May letter from SL to Lily which inspire the sustained family joke in *Careful* regarding Sinden's simultaneous work on the baby and book. Of relevance too are Seaton's nicknames of "Beanie" and "Mr. Tuppence" in *Fairyland*.

October business will be over thirty pounds without outfit...there is really nothing to keep me...so what on earth do I want to remain here for...I'd have you all to come and see me in Sydney during the period of Putty... . So - if you have made arrangements to go to the beautiful seaside...for Xmas don't please let me interfere but if the PUT and me could be included so much the better... .⁸¹

In another letter, two weeks later, she tried to allay any worries that news of her imminent return might have caused back home by maintaining the cheerfulness for which she was renowned.

...I eat enormously and look splendid and have done marvelously when you think of the desert and motoring through rough places, the sleeping in jolting trains and the chasing porters and luggage right round the States.⁸²

However, the same letter also revealed illness, continued loneliness and financial anxiety.

Even now I feel awful being so much alone and having to attend to myself mornings and they won't cook your food in America - people go out to cafes all the time. And I go stiff and tired after an hour outside...otherwise I'm OK... . Lilian my dear I miss you all frightfully - noise and all - your home cooking seems like another world away... . I take Agnes out to meals just to see her eat more than honey and buns...but honest I can't afford it even the extra bob or two. I gave her some dollars...she is wonderful and everyone takes her goodness and cures and it isn't a paying business.

⁸¹ SL's letter home to Lily from Boston 9 May 1917, SLE Collection, BU.

⁸² SL's letter from Boston 28 May 1917, SLE Collection, BU.

She says it isn't meant to pay and that God shall supply all your needs seems to keep her going. [Christian] Science seems here to be the adjustment of all woes, evil and worry. You just don't do a thing but wait - and remember God. I hope he will remember the PUT when the time comes - but I'll be ever so happier in Sydney and the Blue Sky babe and book ought to be out same time... .83

Clearly, she was in distress over her inability to reunite with Logan, whom she had begun to call "her beautiful ten minutes husband", alluding to the short time they had had together.

Logan...writes from Durban full of love for everybody...he was breaking his beautiful heart...because he was away at all. There never was a Lover like Logan; if only he could manage to make it pay as well... .84

Logan, my beautiful ten minutes husband is in Salisbury as Ord Room Sergeant... .85

Sumner Locke's phrase reappears as "my five-minute husband" in her son's first novel when Logan Marriott marries Sinden Scott and almost immediately leaves her to go gold prospecting.

"...Has the postman come?"

"Yes, but he comes again this arvo."

"Bearing a letter from my five-minute husband and then I'll be *off*... . Over the rainbow to find the pot of gold...for Logan it's *got* to be gold."

(*Careful, He Might Hear You* p. 264)

83 SL, Letter from Boston 28 May 1917, SLE Collection, BU.

84 SL, Letter from Boston 28 May 1917, SLE Collection, BU.

85 SL, Letter to Katharine Susannah Prichard, from the Laurels Hospital, Oct 1917.

Sumner Locke returned to Sydney from America in early August 1917, feeling ill and uncertain of her future. Her book, *Blue Sky Gentleman*, had been rejected by Holt and the disappointment had soured the project for her. As she mentioned in her letters, both the book and her baby had shared the same period of gestation and she and Logan sometimes referred to their child as “The Blue Sky Babe”. This connection surfaced in their son’s account of the event when his autobiographical double meets one of his mother’s doting friends for the first time.

“My God, is this him?...He’s the spitting image of her...P.S.” she said. “The blue-sky gentleman.”

Lila felt a sudden pang. She had forgotten - *almost* forgotten Sinden’s joke: “What are you working on now Sin?” “My blue-sky gentleman.”

(*Careful, He Might Hear You* p. 134)

Letters of this period also reveal that there was some anxiety in the family about their sister Blanche. Sumner Locke warned Lilian to “cease from dragging family anchors” and suggested a trip to Melbourne for her eldest sister to escape “a trouble we can’t look at without vomiting”.⁸⁶ Blanche, already exhibiting a drinking problem that grew worse over the years, was often at the centre of family rows over her meddling, lying and irresponsibility with money. She was, however, much loved by Sumner Locke whom she

⁸⁶ SL, Letter from Sprayleigh, Pitt Town.

worshipped in turn.

Before the end of August, Sumner Locke had moved into Lily and George's home in Ormonde Pde, Hurstville, a southern suburb of Sydney, and during September she entered "The Laurels", a private hospital in nearby Kogarah. She had been diagnosed with kidney problems and her health had begun to deteriorate noticeably. Most of the letters written from her hospital bed recreate vividly the torture she endured during the long weeks leading up to the birth of her son. Also obvious are her loneliness, her financial worry and her despair over Logan.

...Yesterday and for 2 nights before I died five times an hour in the sultry gloom of nights alone in bed! The torture of turning over, of pain - breathlessness and more abdom pain nearly to my toes made me real pleased to come in here... .
I wouldn't suffer (having a baby) again for myself alone! Two weeks here in bed with mild kidney complication - a big white room with windows onto a fulsome garden where a blue butterfly chases sunbeams. It wheels like the baby's soul - trying to hunt out things behind the shadows. I'm a whole heap alone and there's nothing doing for some days and I don't like it I've never been sick and alone without Ernest before! Godfather Ernest he is NOW! ...Logan my beautiful ten minutes husband is in Salisbury...but in 7 months all I've had is one letter and one cable... . Everybody assures me he is terribly depressed over me and wants to swim all the way home at once! It is a sure enough war for women who have to have babies

alone and no delivery of letters... . Since last week I've done a yarn and a war poem in bed and that helps - some.

Still on a diet - toil! But beat the staff to nothing on the bowel business. Tied up for 2 and a half days on seven doses oil! Four castor and 3 olive in sequence!...and pretty sick and pain on it as well! Vomited mostly the castor...and so suggested I take one of the good veg. laxatives! They agreed... . Last night it happened...and I've been taking exercise ever since... . 10 times running till 12 o'clock today... . The artillery is still rumbling at rear but the INfantry is very silent. Oil? you'd think I was a piece of machinery!

...At such a rate unless Putty makes his mind up to do one thing or another the bank will bust before I do. I see five (more) weeks of this... .

[L]onely, depressed and in rotten abdominal and bowel pain...last night my nerves nearly gave - aching bones - headache...pain and gas and helpless depression... . I cried and wouldn't look at Putty's clothes case...told (the doctor) I'd slap him hard when he came and the poor little thing not due till (next) Sunday (8th Oct).

Where are my children?

Doctor says he's beaten! No other woman could have stuck out the conditions of kidney at such a time and been intact now. He can't understand it. Says yesterday that the water went solid - a state of absolute certainty that had I gone on walking I'd have been all out of life.

Glad you are not trying to come today as I'll sleep early tonight. Had pain and headache all last night

as oil wasn't working right. Nothing doing so quit thinking you're wanted this side of next week... . Leave unnecessary working and thinking alone.⁸⁷

One of the poems Sumner Locke wrote in her hospital bed was entitled "The Blue Butterfly". Based on the scene she witnessed in the "fulsome garden" through her hospital room window, her deceptively simple poem tells of a mismatched love and a flaunting of the boundaries, which lead the star-crossed lovers to death.

Under the sun in the garden of song
 A blue butterfly spread her wings all day long
 She thought she was pretty, and wasn't far wrong
 And she found it all out in the morning.
 Her home in a rosebud was small and was neat
 Her blue eyes were shining and quick were her feet
 And the Bumble Bee Gentleman said she was sweet
 And he called every day in the morning.
 "I'll fly to you" said the Butterfly blue.
 "I'll fly to you" said the Bumble Bee too.
 "You're the best little Butterfly I ever knew
 We'll fly together for I love you".
 And out of the garden together they flew
 And it happened one day in the morning.

Under the moon in the garden of song
 The Blue Butterfly stayed an hour too long
 And caught a blue cold which was terribly wrong
 And she found it all out in the morning.
 The Bumble Bee Gentleman called at the gate
 But the rose petals shut for he'd come far too late
 For the Blue Butterfly had gone out to her fate
 And the Rose bud was closed and in mourning.

⁸⁷ Extracts from letters by SL sent from The Laurels Hospital to her sisters Lily and Blanche and to Katharine Susannah Prichard. From Sumner Locke's Letters, held in the SLE Collection, BU.

"I'll fly to you, Oh my Butterfly Blue"
 Sobbed the Bumble Bee Gentleman tender and true
 Then he broke his small heart in the cold and the
 dew.
 He couldn't exist; and twas all he could do.
 And their small souls went out to a world that was
 new
 And it happened one day in the morning.⁸⁸

This poem expresses Sumner Locke's longing to escape the prison of her hospital and eerily foreshadows much of what happened to her and Logan. Indirectly, their brief and unconventional love led to her death in childbirth and (through his inability to cope with her loss) increased Logan's alcoholic dependency, from which he eventually died.

Sumner Locke had been in The Laurels Hospital for over six weeks when her baby, overdue by ten days, was finally born on 17 October 1917. In a telegram rushed very late that night to Blanche, who was staying with their sister Mary at Parwan, near Bacchus Marsh in Victoria, Lily dispatched the long-awaited news:

Putty arrived this afternoon, splendid boy, eight pounds. Everything satisfactory. Lilian⁸⁹

The telegram was received by the doting relatives the following morning, by which time Sumner Locke was dead.

⁸⁸ Original manuscript of SL's unpublished poem, SLE Collection, BU.

⁸⁹ Original telegram, SLE Collection, BU.

It is still believed by surviving family members that she literally died writing, her pen skimming across the page at the moment of her death.⁹⁰ Obituary tributes of the “Popular Writer’s Death” were published across Australia with Logan still unaware of the irony that his wife, relatively safe from the War at home in Australia, could die, while he survived at the front. But as Sumner Locke’s own writing so often stated, the women left behind could also be casualties of war.

THE LEFT BEHINDS

We’re the “Left Behinds”, the “Staybacks”,
 We’re the ones to catch the slack,
 We’re the class that’s called “Not Wanted”,
 We’re the virgins from Outback,
 We’re the hefty arm that’s needed,
 We’re the sort to feel the brunt,
 We’re the bloomin’ “Take your places
 While the men are at the front.”

Chaps I know ’ave got commissions
 For his Majesty, the King,
 P’r’aps it’s guy or chaff, I’m thinkin’,
 When they ain’t done anything.
 Seen up here at harvest picnics
 Playin’ rounders with the girls,
 Lord! to me it do seem funny
 Makin’ chaps pretend they’re earls.
 “Services abroad,” that done it. Crikey! I’ve
 done service too,
 Rearing children, scrubbin’ moleskins -

⁹⁰ Heather Shugg, a cousin to SLE and a niece to Logan, remembers that the last page Sumner Locke wrote upon was kept first by Logan after he retrieved her papers and then by his family after his death. But, like so much family memorabilia, it became lost.

things a man 'ud never do.
 Bless yer, I can't see no difference
 Fightin' with a spade or gun.
 Diggin' brings the kids their breakfast
 That's a fight for anyone.
 Killin' men in heathen countries,
 Stakin' out another lot,
 Might be worth a fellow pluggin'
 If it keeps a boilin' pot.
 So it strikes me sudden, rather (sorry if you
 think I rouse),
 But the fightin' started really right at home
 here, in our house.

Yet we're "Left Behinds" and "Staybacks",
 Ready here to catch the slack,
 Just the class that's called "Not Wanted",
 Blessed virgins from the back.
 We're the anvil always heated,
 We're the bloomin' family tree,
 We're the line for dirty washin',
 We're - just where we ought to be.
 So I guess without presumin' an' with
 just a little fuss,
 To be fair to human bullocks, someone
 ought to mention us.⁹¹

Three days after her death, Sumner Locke was buried in Woronora Cemetery in Sydney's southern suburbs. Her funeral was attended by her relatives and the many friends and colleagues she had made through her life and her writing. Her loss, in terms of her literary promise, and her capacity to contribute to life, was reflected in the comment attributed to one of the mourners at her

91 SL's original unpublished poem, SLE Collection, BU.

graveside: "I hope the son will be worth the sacrifice".⁹² It was with the knowledge of such comments that her son grew up shouldering the burden of his mother's death.

After her funeral some of Sumner Locke's literary friends, under the guidance of Katharine Susannah Prichard, formed an editorial committee to collect a memorial book of her poetry. Her work was introduced by several tributes from celebrated contemporaries, including E. J. Brady, Steele Rudd, Boyd Cable, Mary Grant Bruce and Vance Palmer. All spoke of the loss of her bright spirit and original talent and the tragedy of her youthful demise, which was summed up by the final poetic eulogy of Mary Grant Bruce who said, "It is Australia's loss that her sun had gone down while it was yet day." All money derived from the sale of the verses was, as the committee's note stated, "to be used for the benefit of Sumner Locke Elliott's son who has been named after her".

The baby, as his mother wished, would be named Sumner Locke Elliott,⁹³ and was taken home from the hospital by his aunt Lilian and her husband George. Logan Elliott was still in England.

⁹² See entry by B. Andrews in Bede Nairn & Geoffrey Serle (Gen. Eds), *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, (Melbourne University Press, 1986), Vol. 10, 1891-1939, pp. 127-8.

⁹³ It is interesting that SL's original plan was to name the baby "Sumner Logan Elliott", a name which appeared on the original deed of guardianship drawn up by Logan Elliott in England. Sumner Locke's attitude towards Logan changed during her illness in hospital. While she remained devoted to him, she lost her trust in his love after he was sent to England because he seldom wrote to her. She felt insecure and misled. SLE said later that all the Lockes would have pressured their sister into naming her baby "Sumner Locke Elliott", as "they were insistent about keeping up their family name". (See Trish Evans, "Sumner of the Three Dolls", *The Age* (Melbourne), 4 Sept, 1980.)

Lily the Other Mother

In an old photograph of Lilian Locke as a small girl, she wears the expression and carriage of an adult caught in a child's body. Lilian, the eldest child of the Locke family, soon became accustomed to the position of surrogate mother which was thrust upon her as her own mother, Mater, produced one child after another. Lilian's nephew, Sumner Locke Elliott, captured her role exactly in *Waiting for Childhood* which, in many ways, was his ultimate tribute to his most beloved aunt.

...Lily had unconsciously taken on the role that her mother had vacated. Mother, who was constantly in what was referred to as a delicate condition, lay on sofas behind closed doors and was excused from bothering with visitors and parishioners. So the serious-faced little girl hung up coats and hats and asked people would they kindly come into the parlour.

As, year by year, sister after sister was added, she expanded her role of motherhood and in the course of her truncated childhood (for really she had not time for dolls, she played no games with other children) she grew up long before she had to... .

(*Waiting For Childhood* p. 72)

Among her diverse siblings, Lily had long been the outsider. Considered by them as 'one of the adults', she had soon been omitted from childhood secrets of disobedience and tales of daring

and adventure. She became the personification of responsibility, and throughout her youth, she led a very lonely existence, a fringe-dweller caught between the worlds of childhood and adulthood.

Not until she met George Burns, when she was in her 30s, did Lily find the intimate companionship that released her from her solitary state. In one of her poems, written not long after George's death which brought to an end their 26 years of marriage, Lily reveals much of the loneliness she had felt in her life without George.

All through the dreary mist of years
 I walk alone.
 The tired world is sick of tears,
 And so, through seeming endless years
 I walk alone.

I hear the sound of hurrying feet,
 And joy, and laughter - (Life is sweet) -
 But in the winter's rain and sleet
 I walk alone.

Once down the road of Memory,
 With laughing eyes you came to me,
 And where the headland meets the sea
 We walked alone.

But now I blindly grope my way,
 And know not if 'tis night or day,
 The curlew cries across the bay -
 I walk alone.⁹⁴

From the time she had stepped, or been pushed, into the role of surrogate mother, Lily had been regarded by her siblings as ‘the worry-wart’, a title which clung to her long after all her ersatz children had grown up. During her time in England, Sumner Locke wrote home to her mother gently mocking her sister Lily’s renowned potential for worry:

...remember not to attract trouble or shadow by thinking about it if it is not knocking at the door. Lily is the only one allowed to do that as she owns the door... .⁹⁵

But all the family realised that Lily had the capacity to give far more than they could.

She can’t help it - her name is echoing through the town and the good work continues under Lord Mayor and Her!⁹⁶
 ...Mrs Burns is...going to bits in doing “distress work” for others... .⁹⁷

Yet it wasn’t only others who benefited from Lily’s open heart. At one point or another her sisters, Blanche, Agnes and Sumner Locke all resided beneath her roof. Like a true mother, Lily was appreciated more by all her siblings as they came to realise how much she had contributed to their lives. In recognition of her

⁹⁵ SL’s letter home to Mater from England 1912, SLE Collection, BU.

⁹⁶ SL’s letter from The Laurels, Kogarah, Sept 1917, SLE Collection, BU.

⁹⁷ SL’s letter to Katharine Susannah Prichard, Sept 1917, SLE Collection, BU.

contribution to his own life, Sumner Locke Elliott conferred this realisation of Lily's worth upon his mother's character, Sidney, in *Waiting For Childhood*.

Lily looking after all of them in the big house in place of their absent mother... . Above all it was Lillian, sweet Lillian holding them all together through thick and thin, storms and sicknesses, worrying, dosing, losing sleep, bamboozling the bill collectors, praying for a lucky day... .

(*Waiting For Childhood* pp. 122-3)

During her youth, in spite of her family commitments, Lillian Locke rose to be a teacher. Her family's strong sympathy for the working class led to her becoming a political activist in the first wave of the Women's Suffrage Movement in Australia. She served as Honorary Secretary to the United Council for Women's Suffrage from the late 1890s until 1903.⁹⁸ According to historical accounts of Lily's political life,⁹⁹

she...primarily...supported female suffrage as a means of morally improving the public arena and initiating better working conditions for women wage earners. [She] devoted her energy to returning Labor men to power, as she believed it was the best means to assist working class women... . [O]ne of the few women of her time to obtain a central organising position within a political party...[she believed]...working class women, particularly those working outside the home, were the most oppressed; Lillian identified with them.

⁹⁸ For a full history of Lillian Locke Burns' political life see Betty Searle's *Silk & Calico: Class, Gender and The Vote*, (Hale and Iremonger, 1988).

⁹⁹ See also entry by B. Andrews, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, (Melbourne University Press, 1986.)

Gender came second to class in importance... . She saw the cause of working class women in terms of the class struggle rather than the gender struggle.¹⁰⁰

An excellent platform speaker, Lily travelled the eastern seaboard in an effort to rally women to the cause. During these years, she also began writing for the Labor newspaper *Tocsin*. It was through her political involvement that she met George Burns who was then a State Labor member for Queenstown in Tasmania.

Upon discovery of his dearest aunt's political past, Sumner Locke Elliott recreated the political and romantic alliance between his aunt and uncle. He presented them, barely disguised, as Lillian Lord and George Barnes in *Waiting For Childhood*.

"Miss Lillian Lord."

She had almost been drowsing when she heard her name announced... . She stood up and went to the lectern... . Lily began, as she always did, dramatically... . But...at once she recognised something sinister in this silence... . The first time she had not held an audience in her palm...she knew she was speaking badly... . Catcalls had begun to sound... . At this point Mr. Barnes...stepped forward boldly and holding out his arms to the crowd called..."Quiet, *quiet*, please...give her a chance...". A hush came over the hall... . But whatever power and authority she had started with had gone...she sat down to perfunctory applause... .

Mr. Barnes seemed to go over like the aforementioned house on fire. There wouldn't

have been a war if the women of the world had united against it... .

While she was dressing in the morning there was a knock on her door. For a second or two she could not place the man...and then, "Oh yes, of course," she said to Mr. Barnes... .

Feeling suddenly light and coquettish, she pinned on her hat [and]...went downstairs with Mr. Barnes, convinced that the fight was still on and that she had an ally... .

(Waiting For Childhood pp. 68-75)

After her marriage to George Burns in 1906, Lily continued her political activism although she did eventually come to recognise both the equal importance of gender as an issue for working class women, and the failure of the Labor party to provide true equality for all women.¹⁰¹

Lily campaigned with her husband when he stood for the seat of Illawarra as a Federal Labor member and supported him throughout his term in office (1913-17). Their support of prohibition may have cost George a second term but it did not dim their belief that alcohol was the principal cause of moral degradation in the family unit.¹⁰² This belief was confirmed, in their own family, by Logan and Blanche, and was the one single source of friction between Lily and her nephew as he grew older.¹⁰³

101 Betty Searle, *Silk & Calico: Class, Gender and The Vote*.

102 SLE to me, 1990.

103 A close friend, John Kingsmill, remembers well the problems of visiting SLE who still lived in Lily's home. "Sumner would tell Lily straight that we were going to have a drink. And her disgust being evident, sometimes heated words would break out." (John Kingsmill to me, 1991.)

As a young man, enjoying success on radio and in theatre, Sumner was frustrated by the fact that on the rare occasion when he brought a friend to the home he still shared with his aunt Lily, he could never offer them a drink. She would not tolerate alcohol in her home.¹⁰⁴

Within her marriage, Lily found political and philosophical harmony with George. As well as her political writing, she began to publish poetry. She was so popular as a political speaker that George was often referred to as Mr. Locke Burns,¹⁰⁵ even during his own term in government. But their devotion to one another kept their marriage on a solid foundation, and perhaps their only regret was that they had remained childless.

Named as a co-guardian by Logan, Lily was 48 years old when she brought her baby nephew home from the hospital after her sister's death. In many ways, Lily's life had turned a full circle and she was back in the role of surrogate mother that had so dominated her childhood and youth. She was portrayed in this role in many of her nephew's books, always as a character who is unafraid to question or reassess her own perspective and judgment. She and George were immortalised as "Lila and George" in *Careful, He Might*

¹⁰⁴ This made him separate the social world he shared with his theatre friends from the home life he shared with his aunts. Several of these friends recall that Sumner kept almost everyone away from the aunts.

¹⁰⁵ Betty Searle *Silk & Calico: Class, Gender and The Vote*.

Hear You.

From the time Lily brought her infant nephew home from the hospital, she remained devoted to him throughout her life. To say that the future looked uncertain for the newly formed family would be an understatement.

Blanche and Agnes

Blanche and Agnes Locke held the support roles in the play that was Sumner Locke Elliott's upbringing. Blanche, with her links to theatre (mostly vaudeville in later years), and Agnes, with her religious calling, were strong influences on the life of the young boy. They offered a relief from the conflict that arose between Lily and Jessie over his custody. Blanche - always penniless and, like her closest sister Sumner, a bohemian - fell into a hand-to-mouth existence which led her to rely heavily on alcohol as a panacea for all her woes. Agnes was devoutly committed to the Christian Science Church, had trained in Boston as a practitioner, and was always ready to thrust her religious philosophies at any passerby. She was also crippled and not averse to using her disability to advantage.

Yet in these aunts, who were also devoted to their young nephew, he found touchstones for his own difference: in them he saw his own sense of separation from the ordinary.

As the youngest of the Locke family, Blanche was always the baby and the spoiled one. She was Sumner Locke's dearest companion and this led her to rely on her closest sister when she was unable to fend for herself, particularly where money was

concerned. Although she had gained some training as a nurse, Blanche had a musical flair which manifested itself in a career on stage in vaudeville and operettas in which she toured a great deal. “She had a lovely singing voice and was in the chorus of the *Chocolate Soldier*, you know,” her nephew once declared to an interviewer rather proudly.¹⁰⁶

Blanche could dance, sing and act and she carried her professional talent into her personal relationships. In the family she was the drama queen, the actress, the meddler and attention-seeker. Her dependency on alcohol was exacerbated by the disaster of her brief marriage to a man called Dunn whose memory was blotted out of family annals. “She married a Scotsman when she was forty,” Sumner recalled some years after her death, “and a woman turned up later claiming to be his wife.”¹⁰⁷ Blanche Locke’s awful experience of marriage was conferred on Shasta Davies, the character she inspired in *Water Under the Bridge*. As Blanche’s drinking problem escalated, it affected her sober periods as well, so that her mental condition could at best be described as unstable. “If she wasn’t drunk, she was mad,” one of Sumner’s friends remembered.¹⁰⁸ And Gwen Plumb recalls Blanche being as “mad as a hatter [and] a snake. If you’d see her in the street, you’d try to

106 Gwen Plumb Interview, *The Gwen Plumb Show*.

107 Trish Evans, “Sumner of the Three Dolls”, *The Age* (Melbourne).

108 Irene Thirkell to me, 1991

avoid her.”¹⁰⁹ Even Sumner himself confessed that Blanche eventually became completely neurotic.¹¹⁰

During these years Blanche turned on Lily, who was then her only means of shelter and support. Even in public she was unspeakably rude to the aged Lily, who was such a proper and polite woman herself. According to those of Sumner’s friends who witnessed his aunt Blanche’s outrages, she was consumed by jealousy of the relationship between Lily and their nephew.¹¹¹ Sumner and his youngest aunt had many heated rows during this period. Blanche’s inability to control her problem spilled over into public scenes.

During his Independent Theatre years, between 1934 and 1948, the young Sumner was often confronted by his drunken aunt Blanche insisting, in thunderous tones to all and sundry, that she be allowed to sit in on rehearsals of *her* nephew’s plays.¹¹² While *her* nephew was greatly embarrassed by these episodes, he always excused her behaviour, choosing to remember only the whimsical and wacky friend she had been to him throughout his troubled childhood. She had been the counterbalance to the more serious Lily. As Lily was the kind, caring and responsible parent, Blanche

109 Gwen Plumb to me, 1991.

110 SLE to me, 1990.

111 Irene Thirkell to me, 1990.

112 Many of SLE’s friends, including Irene Thirkell, Gwen Plumb, and Leslie Rees remember these incidents and the embarrassment to which he was subjected.

was the zany, carefree and totally irresponsible pal. “She was such fun!” Sumner told the friends of his adult years as he recalled the life he had shared with Blanche when she had lived in Sydney’s bohemian community at Kings Cross.

The fun-loving Blanche appears in several of his novels. As Vere in *Careful, He Might Hear You*, she gives her nephew’s fictional counterpart, P.S., the light relief so necessary in his day-to-day trauma as the centre of a custody battle.

Vere said, “Now watch, P.S., while we do a funny thing.” And he giggled because everything Vere did was funny; she always did a funny thing the first moment she saw him, even if they were on the street... . Now she...filled the washbasin with hot water...and picked up a dusty, scratched gramophone record... . “Now watch what we do with Paul Whiteman.” She dropped Paul Whiteman into the hot water. It was very funny, one of her best funnies in a long while, so he laughed very much...and said, still gurgling, “Vere, why are you washing the gramophone records?”

“Because then we can bend it into any shape we want. This one is going to be a vase.”

...Vases out of gramophone records. Oh, Vere was marvellous, really marvellous.

(*Careful, He Might Hear You* pp. 12-13)

Blanche was still alive when her nephew rose to prominence with his first novel. The egocentric, crusty nature she had acquired by then is revealed in a letter she wrote to him after he had sent

her an advance copy of the book. “There’s not nearly enough of me in it,” she scolded him from across the other side of the world. “You’ve quite underestimated my role.”¹¹³ These comments made in her old age also reveal, perhaps, the resentment she had felt as a younger woman at being deemed an unworthy candidate for guardianship.

In the later portrait Sumner drew of his aunt Blanche - as Mig in *Waiting For Childhood* - her close relationship with his mother is brought into focus, bearing out the caption on his mother’s photographs, “more like a friend than a sister”.

Possibly because they were the two youngest, the last two conceptions of a thunderous series of matings, they...turned to each other for warmth. They had grown up dissimilar and yet so alike that people frequently mistook one for the other...and being the same size they often wore each other’s clothes and shoes. Seen together, it was clear that Sidney was the leader, but also that little docile Mig had an eye on a mystic objective. She would be the opera star, Sidney the famous author, they both knew that and were content. They made their beds and fried their sausages and bided their time, confident of the glory that lay ahead of them. Mates more than sisters... .

(*Waiting For Childhood* p. 107)

When Blanche’s own career failed to meet her expectations,

113 SLE quoted this letter in his frontispiece to *Careful, He Might Hear You*, The Reader’s Digest Condensed Book edition, (England), 1964.

she enjoyed her sister's notoriety, basking in the reflected glory for a time, even penning some poetry of her own which she had published in a leaflet collection in a move which today might be called "cashing in" on her sister's fame. But her writing, like many other of her endeavours, was never persisted with.

In the years following her sister Sumner Locke's death, Blanche made an attempt to revive her theatrical career. But her star never shone and she was always part of the chorus line, a part she was also destined to play in her nephew's life.

Perhaps Sumner Locke Elliott's most moving portrait of his aunt Blanche is embodied in Shasta Davies in *Water Under the Bridge*. In this novel, he imagines what his life might have been like if Blanche had been named as a guardian and taken him to share her tenuous lifestyle in King's Cross. Her omission from the guardianship ensemble was clearly a topic of family discussion during his growing-up years, especially in view of Blanche's relationship with his mother. As Jessie later told the court during the custody case, "Blanche had been [Sumner Locke's] constant and life-long companion".¹¹⁴

Attributed with both sides of Blanche's nature, Shasta is

¹¹⁴ Jessie Locke's affidavit to the court, Aug 1927, Proceeding of the Supreme Court of NSW, Case No. 4309. Documents held in SLE Collection, BU.

drawn as 'the surrogate mother by default' who feels the burden of her unwanted charge as soon as any form of personal sacrifice is required.

She must get rid of him, she *must*...and she only had three weeks left before she must go on tour.

...Charlie found the place... . She took him out on the tram with his clothes... . Even at a distance, walking up the hill, it looked discouraging. Sick yellow walls and dirty windows... . At the sight of Mrs. Hibbs he had clung to Shasta with his face turned into her leg... . Shasta hesitated... . She saw the imploring eyes looking up at her...[and] took a step back, him with her... . She picked him up under one arm, turned and ran... .

On the tram he sat very close to her. Now what?

It was her life or his. It was goodbye career or find some way out. It was find somebody to take him or goodbye freedom, so long fun and lovers and going where she pleased all over the country. At least for years. But what? How?

...She would have to abandon him somewhere... . It was getting dark...when they got to the deserted little side street of closed shops. She put his suitcase down and said oh look at that funny owl clock in there?...He looked at the owl...and she looked at him. Which of them was the more helpless? Her feet were cemented to the pavement... . Minutes ticked away while she saw a film of the little thing abandoned, crying, toddling along, trying to find her.

...An intense weariness came over her... . She picked up the little suitcase as if it weighed a ton.

"Come on," she said. "We're going home."

(*Water Under the Bridge* pp. 55-60)

Lacking the strength of character to give the child up, Shasta instead becomes the eternal martyr, using her inherited obligation to justify her own life's shortcomings, and her continuing pattern of failure. Through her eyes, the great promise of her stage career, the chance of marriage and partnership, and eventually even her own dignity, all fall victim to the overriding role of caretaker which she must perform for her ward. As the orphaned child of the novel, Neil Atkins, grows to adulthood he feels trapped, just as Shasta had during his childhood. But he escapes. First into selfishness, physical independence and a career as an actor; and finally into fame and fortune in England. In a prelude to Neil's departure from Australia for a new life overseas, which counterbalances the novel's earlier scene at the orphanage, he places Shasta, recently debilitated by a stroke, into a nursing home. This scene is drawn from Sumner's own experience with his aunt Blanche.

During the long drive she kept her eyes on the floor.

Long brick buildings with verandas were spaced on grounds under elms and jacarandas.

"See what nice grounds there are where you can sit outside once the spring comes?" he said.

...She sat crookedly in a leather chair while he filled out the forms... . Thus she was disposed of.

At least the matron was young, not one of those stiff and starched old hockey captains.

"Only eleven others in this ward and we've given her a bed by a window with a nice view of the

Pacific Highway.”

A nurse had already detached her from the chair, the nurse had a firm grip on her... . The moment had come.

He kissed the half-moon mouth, it seemed to respond.

“Now remember, it’s only au revoir,” he said in a squeaky voice.

She nodded and...turned to look at him... . Out of the one-sided mouth came three words as out of a speaking doll.

“So long kid.”

(Water Under the Bridge pp. 324-5)

An alcoholic and chain-smoker, Blanche eventually saw out her days in a nursing hospital at her nephew’s expense. By that stage, her emotional and mental instability and the tremendous generosity of his friends in seeing that she was well-looked after had convinced Sumner, only just establishing himself as a novelist in New York, that his return to Australia would not benefit his demented aunt. He wrote to her weekly until her death, often referring to her in letters to his old friends as “Aunt Etna erupting there in hospital”.¹¹⁵ She placed heavy demands on him during the years of her gradual demise, proving a less than cooperative patient with the various medical people and hospitals he tried to arrange for her through his network of friends and contacts in Australia. She wrote to him with complaints and requests for money, she spun lies about people and distorted situations; she continued to tug at the family ties from halfway across the world. Her efforts to haul

¹¹⁵ SLE, Letter from America, 15 August 1953.

him back to Sydney even contributed to Sumner's decision to take out American citizenship. Her relentless demands once led him to comment on her to a friend, quoting Lillian Helman's tart analysis: "the wicked very young, the wicked very old".¹¹⁶ He soothed her fraying nerves through his frequent letters and he often sent gifts of thanks to overworked nursing staff. He gave Blanche everything he could during her long road to death - everything but his physical presence, which he had decided was a price too high to pay. But, like his fictional double, Neil, in *Water Under the Bridge*, he incurred much emotional baggage by his decision to place his life ahead of his family obligation to her. By the end of the novel, which is permeated with Sumner's own sense of failure in his relationship with Blanche, Shasta's stubborn pride is her only asset. Blanche too retained such a pride until her own death. Her nephew's reinvention of Blanche as his surrogate mother, a role she once coveted, portrays her with bleak realism, relieved by only brief glimpses of the one gift Blanche bestowed on him throughout his youth: fun.

The Shrew, they called her in the rooming house and around the shops. Watch out for the Shrew and left warning notes for Neil in the hall VBM (Very Bad Mood) as she rampaged up and down the stairs, beating trifles into swords in the fires of her unreason. And then out of this raving termigant [sic] would suddenly step her old self, the old Shasta he knew as a young boy and she

116 SLE, Letter from America, 9 June 1953.

would start singing in her clear lovely voice while she scoured the frying pan... .

(*Water Under the Bridge* p. 62)

In this novel's imaginative recasting of Sumner Locke Elliott's life, the distortion of his destiny led him no further from the emotional mire of his real experience. Like his mother and his aunt Jessie, Blanche became another failed responsibility in his life, another shape and shadow of ambivalent emotion with which he still wrestled on sleepless nights well into his old age.

Ironically, Blanche, like her fictional counterpart Shasta, did in fact have a form of legal guardianship over her nephew, for a short time. When Jessie remained in England after Sumner Locke's death, Blanche was charged with the task of carrying out Jessie's role in their nephew's life. But Blanche's lifestyle, like that of her most famous fictional counterpart, was not conducive to motherhood and she abdicated from any form of responsibility after the death of her own mother. She did, however, greatly influence the course of her nephew's future.

At Jessie's request, and with the added incentive of a small income and free board and lodgings covered by the meagre military allotment Lily received from Logan, Blanche moved into Lily's house shortly after the infant Sumner Locke Elliott was brought

home from the hospital. She remained there either as resident or visitor throughout her nephew's childhood and youth, years in which she also rekindled her theatrical career in one form or another. Although much of her time was spent in vaudeville she inspired the young boy with her stories of life on stage and her knowledge of popular plays. Blanche introduced him to Hollywood movies which became his lifelong passion: her nephew later described his younger self as "a movies boy". So dominant in his life was this fascination for the movies, nurtured by his aunt Blanche, that at one point in his childhood his movie mania inspired him with career plans. "I had secretly decided to be a tap dancer. I was in love with Ruby Keeler," Sumner once confessed. "I took tap dancing lessons, but was so untalented they let me go."¹¹⁷ Blanche's encouragement and first-hand knowledge was clearly an important factor in her nephew's attraction to the world of dramatic writing. But from his very early years it was her humour and fun that endeared her to him forever.

Agnes Locke, conversely, was the sombre, spiritual presence in Lily's home during their nephew's childhood years. Growing up as the second eldest daughter of an Anglican minister, her choice to convert to the Christian Science religion and become a public

practitioner could not have been an easy one.¹¹⁸ In *Careful, He Might Hear You*, her nephew recreated the scene that his aunt Agnes' decision would have caused in her manse home.

...Mater...rising black-bodiced and stern, saying to Agnes, "Necromancy! I will not have necromancy in this Church of England house, so you must choose between your father and the devil"... . Agnes packed a cardboard suitcase, went down the front path to board a ship for Seattle and the glorious teachings of a Mr. Norman B. Pringle... .

(*Careful, He Might Hear You* p. 23)

Agnes spent some years in Boston which was, and still is, the home of the Christian Science Mother Church and, during her sister Sumner Locke's American visit in 1917, she was reunited with her then pregnant sister from whom she had so long been separated. This contact with her ill-fated sister, and the unborn child she was carrying, forged a link between Agnes and her future nephew - a link that withstood the tests of her growing fanaticism and frequent displays of bizarre behaviour.

Throughout Sumner Locke Elliott's childhood, Agnes maintained her humanitarian efforts in the name of her religion. The egalitarian nature of her faith appealed to the compassionate, humane Lily who, along with her nephew and her sister Blanche,

¹¹⁸ It is interesting that Christian Science was established (in 1879) by a woman, Mrs. Mary Baker Eddy. Agnes's choice reflects the strong female influence that pervaded the Locke sisters' adult lives.

became converted to Christian Science.

During Lily's last illness, her adherence to the Christian Science doctrine of healing that 'disease has no place within those properly attuned to the Divine Spirit' prevented any conventional medical intervention on her behalf. Sumner Locke Elliott's friends¹¹⁹ remember that Blanche, as Lily's nurse-cum-warden during this time, urged her to maintain this stand against her 'perceived' illness. Even when Lily herself began to ask for medical help, Blanche balked and by the time a doctor was called Lily's condition was already too advanced. It is uncertain whether her "dearest Bene", Lily's affectionate term for her nephew, was ever made aware of this situation as he returned from America just days before her death. It seems ironic that Lily eventually died in such circumstances, when both Blanche and Agnes later died in hospitals with their pain and distress relieved as much as possible by medical science.

Agnes was always referred to as "Nana" by Sumner in his childhood. To his young eyes, Agnes, encumbered by a crippled foot (a disability she had suffered from birth) appeared much older than her years. His later depiction of her as the religious fanatic, Agnes Scott, in *Careful, He Might Hear You*, is based on the 'mad

¹¹⁹ John Kingsmill and Irene Thirkell to me, 1991.

aunt' she had become during his late adolescent and adult years.

Poor Agnes, they always said, laughing and shaking their heads as Lila found herself doing now and regretting it when she saw the disappointment on Agnes' horselike face... . Agnes, under her tricorn hat and looking more than ever like Lord Nelson... . Poor Agnes.

What had she found? A life of handing out pamphlets to scoffers who heckled her on street corners, and of trying to raise money to help sustain a temple going to rack and ruin with the financial uncertainty of Eternity when she could not even afford a new hat; truded around in that old tricorn which she had worn proudly back from America.

Now, wearing her hat like a vow of poverty...when she spoke in the Sydney Domain along with the Communists, Pacifists, Prohibitionists and the other soapbox orators screaming for attention from the listless Sunday strollers under the giant fig trees.

(Careful, He Might Hear You pp. 22-5)

Agnes is still remembered by those who knew her in her old age, as a rather demanding, embittered figure who truded the streets of Sydney on her walking sticks as she journeyed daily to Christian Science Headquarters. But in his tender portrayal of her as Adnia, the club-footed sister of the family in *Waiting For Childhood*, her nephew revived the beloved "Nana" he knew as a young child, a time when she told him the stories of her youth with his mother and their sisters and brother.

Adnia...had begun life kicking and laughing in her cot and grown from that as in a spell of good weather to believing she was like her older sister Lily and her younger sister Mary, perfect as all children are perfect. Until she had risked comparison and begun to notice that she was in some way extraordinary... . She had seen...that the Bidens' sister Jill bowled for the cricketers. Well, Addie could bowl for them, it didn't seem to require that much effort... . Cautiously [she] broached the matter.

"No," he said.

"Why not? I can bowl underarm."

"Not on our team."

"Why ever not?"

"You're lame."

Oh.

...All the garden was silent around her, not a bee hummed. Lame. Not that she didn't know. Just that it was suddenly as clear as lightning striking that she was a hindrance. She was distorted. The real reason for the solicitude given her was pity... . Well the wheel of pity was not going to break *her* spirit... . Just watch.

"I can pull out my own chair," she said that evening snatching it away from the helping Mary.

"I can reach it," she said, snubbing Lily passing her the glass cruet... .

They stared at her as though she had grown antlers... .

(*Waiting For Childhood* pp. 32-9)

This image of being at odds with one's social environment, of having "grown antlers", which Sumner Locke Elliott used in depicting his aunt Agnes in *Waiting For Childhood*, is the same image he used to express his own sense of difference in his novel *Fairyland*.

[H]e had become quietly aware...of growing secret antlers... . That among these people he was a changeling... .

(Fairyland p.14)

The crippled and fanatically religious Agnes was clearly an icon of difference to her young nephew. After her sister Sumner Locke's death, Agnes had returned from Boston to Australia to carry on her religious work as a trained Christian Science practitioner. She moved in with Lily, George and their infant nephew, and her presence in his world was a reassurance to the boy that he was not alone in being 'other'.

Jessie

If Agnes and Blanche were embraced by a young Sumner Locke Elliott because they were anomalies in their society, his aunt Jessie was abhorred by him, not only because of the threat she posed to the security of his life, but also because she was so rigidly conservative and 'proper'. She was, he explained, "[a] bit on the English snobby side...very proper and rather Edwardian".¹²⁰

Jessie Locke's middle place in her family line followed the deaths of two infant sisters and the birth of an only brother. Excluded from the close relationship of her youngest sisters, Blanche and Sumner Locke, and too young to be part of her older sisters' entourage, Jessie developed an aloofness which remained characteristic throughout her life. Like Lily, she was caught outside her family's various groups. In many ways Jessie and Lily were diametrically opposed from youth by their positions in the Locke family tree: Lily, as the eldest, had no time for herself whereas Jessie, the middle child, became totally self-obsessed and egocentric. As the characters Lila and Ness (Vanessa)¹²¹ in *Careful, He Might Hear You* they are soon identified as adversaries.

Lila, watching her, thought...[s]he'll find it harder here; no class system... . Poor Ness... . Look at her.

¹²⁰ Hazel De Berg Interview, 1970.

¹²¹ Jessie Locke appears as Vanessa Scott in *Careful*, but Vanessa's name is usually abbreviated as Ness or Nessie by other characters. The Locke's Scottish ancestry might have prompted SLE to link Ness/Nessie and his loathed aunt to the Loch Ness monster, thereby also playing on the name Locke.

Just the same. With her swank clothes and la-di-da manners. Must say she looks marvellous though... . Wonder if she dyes her hair. Still that pretty auburn, like Pater's. All the rest of us were carrot. I've got this horrid mole in my eyebrow. Not Ness. Oh, no. *Her* little mole is like a beauty spot. God saw to *her*, all right. Not like any of us. Remote. Always was. Never could get close to her her, even when we were girls. And woe betide you if you got on the wrong side of her. Like the time I made the mistake of locking the door to Pater's room - the look in her eyes. Murder. Frightened me to death. But then she's *always* frightened me a bit and I don't know why... .

(*Careful, He Might Hear You* p. 50)

If Lily was the giving and responsible centre of the family, Jessie was the alien, clinging to her remote status, shunning the working class sympathies and values her parents and siblings embraced and had sought to push upon her. Jessie became a proficient nurse, holding certificates from the Alfred Hospital, Melbourne, and at one point she ran a nursing home in that city.¹²² But her life was changed forever when she was asked to join a rich family cousin as a companion.

They all knew it would be Jess. Long before the letter came from Cousin Jackie, everyone knew that Jess would be chosen to be the companion to rich Jacquetta and go live in style... . It could have been in the way her miniature hand pushed away, with a certain look of gastric derision, the baby bottle, later snatched off the offending woollen

¹²² See Jessie Locke's affidavit to the court, Proceeding of the Supreme Court of NSW, Case No. 4309, SLE Collection, Mugar Memorial Library, BU.

bonnet, the way that her child's body grew graceful...or that Jess's hair was burnished into a kind of flaming splendor... . No matter how uncomplimentary the fabrics of her cheap dresses, Jess always looked as though she were in brocades or velvet. It was just that thing about her... . Moreover, she knew it. She had a way of coming into a room as though she were obliging it. Yet she was not emotionally frigid. Books and music could send her into transports of joy or into tears... . But only fictional characters could disarray her exceptional calm.

It had to do with her secret...(not told to anyone)...that she was really English... . That was why she secretly detested her wide primitive homeland... . She was ready for England anytime that God decided to rectify the mistake that had been made about her place of birth...

(*Waiting for Childhood* pp. 20-1)

Like one of the sisters from Alcott's *Little Women*, Jessie was suddenly accepted into the wealth and social standing she always thought to be rightfully hers. She accompanied the widowed and wealthy "Cousin Aggie", as the family always referred to their small elderly relative, to England where they resided for many years, often holidaying in Wales, Scotland and Europe.

When her sister, Sumner Locke, took up residence in England in 1912, Jessie renewed family ties and grew closer to her younger sibling than she had been in childhood. She became part of her sister's life and came to know her literary friends and Ernest Ewart to whom Sumner Locke was then engaged. It was because of these

close years, just before World War I, that Jessie later felt justified in bringing a court action to secure custody of Sumner Locke's child.

When Sumner Locke returned to Australia to nurse their sick mother, Jessie remained in England with Cousin Aggie, who by then had become totally reliant upon her. During the next two years, Jessie continued her letters to Sumner Locke and maintained a friendship with Ernest Ewart even when his romance with her sister had faded. And, after Sumner Locke's marriage to Logan Elliott and his subsequent despatch to England, Jessie again became a contact overseas with whom Logan could feel a sense of family. According to her report to the court during the custody battle with Lily over their nephew, Jessie did not return after her sister's death to take on her role as the child's guardian because she had promised Sumner Locke that she would help Logan overcome his alcoholism.

Jessie, in England, received news of Sumner Locke's death from the London newspaper office of the *Sydney Morning Herald* which also passed on Lily's request that she inform Logan Elliott of the tragedy. Within two weeks Jessie had arranged for a deed of guardianship to be drawn up between herself and her brother-in-law. In this deed, Logan named his much-loved sister-in-law, Lilian Locke Burns, the child's godfather, Ernest Ewart, and Jessie Locke as

co-guardians of his son.

His grief over his wife's death, his alcoholic condition, and his uncertainty of his own future well-being as an active serviceman no doubt contributed to Logan's hasty relinquishment of his parental role. It is difficult to tell how much Jessie's counselling of her bewildered and broken brother-in-law may have influenced his decision. To take such a definite stance so quickly was uncharacteristic of the shiftless Logan. Certainly, Jessie's hand is stamped all over the guardianship agreement, a legally binding document, authorised by Logan across the other side of the world, and one that plagued his son all through his childhood.

As soon as Logan had named Jessie as a co-guardian she wrote to Blanche, asking her to move into Lily's home to fulfil her obligations to their nephew on her behalf. Jessie's forceful request revealed much about the distrust and jealousy in the family network, for Blanche was to be Jessie's spy in the Locke-Burns household, recording all Lily's actions. In her own letters to Jessie, Blanche could either verify or refute any reports made by Lily. Blanche, in turn, was to receive board and lodgings for her trouble as well as a nominal fee from the maintenance sum to be forwarded from Logan's military allotment. Blanche followed orders but was characteristically unable to sustain any permanent position of

responsibility and soon all parenting rested upon the well-worn but competent shoulders of Lily.

In 1921, three and a half years after her sister's death, a determined Jessie Locke, then forty-two years old and unmarried, returned home to Australia "for the sole purpose of taking over the custody of the infant",¹²³ Sumner Locke Elliott. Her return split open the world of the small child and the aunt and uncle who had become parents to him.

¹²³ Supreme Court document, "Guardianship of infant Sumner Locke Elliott". Statement by Jessie Locke, 19 July 1927.

Chapter Two: The Child Is Likely to Survive

SUMNER LOCKE

POPULAR WRITER'S DEATH

The friends and admirers of the well-known novelist, Sumner Locke, will learn with deep regret of the death of the lady in a private hospital at Kogarah this morning. In private life she was Mrs. Elliott - she was married in Sydney some months ago to Sergt. L. Elliott, of the A.I.F. - and yesterday she gave birth to a son. The end was unexpected as she had been making good progress. The child is likely to survive... .

(Obituary from *The Evening News*,
Sydney, 18 October 1917.)

After the death of his mother, the infant Sumner Locke Elliott spent his early years in the care of his aunt Lily and uncle George, first in houses in Hurstville and Rockdale and later in their home at 10 Waratah Street in nearby Carlton/Bexley. All these locations were part of what was then considered "the Illawarra Suburban District" of Sydney. Lily rented out rooms in these houses to supplement George's income which, after he failed to procure a second term in government, became substantially reduced.

Within weeks of Lily burying her sister and bringing her baby nephew home from the hospital, trouble was brewing in the family ranks. Jessie Locke, still in England, had procured Logan's legal co-guardianship. Using her contact with the third guardian, Ernest

Ewart, (still on military service in England), Jessie began intervening by letter, giving Lily orders about the baby's care, clothing and food. Jessie's instructions implied that she had Ernest Ewart's complete agreement and therefore carried the majority rule of the guardians. She also insisted that their sister Blanche, whom she herself had trained in nursing procedures, was to move into Lily's home and take custody of their nephew, acting for Jessie until the latter could return. As the deed of guardianship included no provision for custody, Lily had little choice but to obey. For her service, Blanche was to be sustained and sheltered, and to be paid an allowance of ten shillings a week from Logan's weekly stipend of thirty shillings, which was paid to Lily. Upon taking up residence under Lily's roof, Blanche soon demonstrated that she was more interested in the free board and lodgings than the demands of a new baby. Blanche maintained her household position, but soon the process of 'mothering' rested wholly with Lily who relinquished all work outside the home.¹ When Jessie cabled that Blanche should take the baby to their other sister, Mary Locke, and her family in Victoria, Lily stood her ground and refused. During the custody hearing that the conflict between Lily and Jessie eventually led to, Lily's affidavit explained the situation.

...During this period I was ordered by the Deponent [Jessie] (by cable acting for herself and Capt. Ewart) to send the child in care of said sister

¹ Betty Searle, *Silk & Calico: Class, Gender and The Vote*.

[Blanche] to a farm in Victoria the residence of another married sister which was already overcrowded and where another child was expected. Our residence was large and roomy and situated in the healthiest part on the Illawarra Suburban District and we are without issue ourselves. I refused to allow the child to be removed under the circumstances until a later period. I after discovered that Deponent had never been authorised by the other guardian to send any such cable.²

Lily was at a loss to know what her legal position was as no papers had been sent to her and Sumner Locke's Last Will and Testament, which would have cleared a path for her, had been proven invalid on a technicality.³ In desperation Lily sent a letter to Logan. In late March 1918, five months after the death of his wife, Logan hurriedly dispatched a copy of the deed of guardianship to Lily, the first legal notification she had received. The casual note he scrawled on it mentions neither his son nor Lily's perilous position, but this speaks volumes about Logan's irresponsible attitude.

20/3/18

Your letter of Feb delayed owing to my being transferred to A Coy 60th Batt. and catches me at a bad time as the newspapers will be telling you. You can't do much more than you've done and this deed should cover your ground.

Cheers L

² Lilian Locke's affidavit, NSW Supreme Court Case No 4309, August 1927.

³ Copy of this invalid will is in the SLE Collection, BU. The will was invalid because it was unsigned.

Logan had simply turned his back on the situation, a reaction that became characteristic of him when he returned to Australia.

For the next three years, Lily was placed in the unenviable position of being harassed and assessed by her absent sister's letters of instruction and recrimination sent from England. Blanche, too, began enjoying the power she could wield as go-between, sending Jessie reports of the situation at home. Blanche had long secretly resented Lily's surrogate position of authority. In the complex dynamics that was the Locke family line, Lily, the oldest, was now at last at the mercy of Blanche, the youngest. Blanche's attitude to Lily began to change from this point in their lives. Like a rebellious child, she stirred the trouble between Jessie and Lily, and revelled in her role, possibly finding it a consolation for being passed over as a prospective guardian. Her ongoing affair with the bottle exacerbated her jealousy and tendency to meddle, and reduced her ability to contribute much in practical terms towards caring for their infant nephew. But, in an effort to provide harmony in the home for Sumner, Lily rose above Blanche's petty jealousy. She made him the centre of her entire life and kept the atmosphere in the house as happy as possible. Out of motherly love for her youngest sister Lily overlooked much of Blanche's behaviour.

Blanche and then Agnes - after her return from Boston at the end of World War I - either resided in or visited the household throughout Sumner's earliest years and, although Lily and George must have felt enormous emotional insecurity during Lily's conflict with Jessie, their nephew was spared too much knowledge of it. During the custody case a statement made by Annie Andrews, who had rented rooms in Lily's home in the latter half of 1921, confirmed that the household was generally harmonious.

During that period...the home was always perfectly clean and in excellent order and the treatment of the infant by the Respondent and her husband left nothing to be desired. They both devoted the greater portion of their time and attention to him and did everything for his comfort and happiness... . During...my residence...there was never any suggestion of quarrelling between [them] or with the Misses Agnes Emily Locke or Blanche Locke and the only apparent trouble which I observed...was caused through the Applicant Miss Jessie Locke sending messages...as to what the Respondent should do with regard to the said infant's food and clothing... .⁴

The bickering by letter and cable back and forth across the world did, however, result in Ernest Ewart relinquishing his guardianship in 1919. Not only did he expect Logan's imminent return to Australia, but he had tired of being Jessie's implement in her protests and efforts to undermine Lily. His decision to remain

in England after his release from the military also meant he could not really contribute any guidance to the child's upbringing from such a distance. But Ewart's withdrawal as the third guardian only accentuated the trouble, pitting the sisters directly one against the other, and Logan's return in 1920 did little to alter this.

Logan's military stipend had been his sole source of financial maintenance for his son and this ceased in September 1920. According to Lily's affidavit, "on his repatriation he saw the child on several occasions but made no provision for him out of his deferred pay or War Gratuity". Logan's visits to his infant son during this time left only a blurred imprint upon Sumner Locke Elliott's memory. As an adult, he often said that he had only ever seen his father once. The one image of lasting impact upon the small child was Logan's departure from Sydney to Victoria in 1921.

...I was taken to Central Railway to meet him when I was about three, and he was still in uniform from World War I. I saw this tall, rather handsome man. He picked me up in his arms, then somebody said, 'Logan, you'll miss the train', and he ran and got on the very last carriage, and waved and waved and the train went out of the station, and there was only the red light of the train going away, and that was all I ever saw of my father... .⁵

Though Logan's other visits faded from his son's memory, that

pivotal scene of his father's departure from Sydney's Central Railway Station found its way into *Careful, He Might Hear You* as a turning point in the novel where Logan is recognised as the real barrier to his son's happiness.

A whistle blew.

"Got to go, love," said Logan. He reached down unsteadily for his suitcase and Lila clung to him.

"Logan, we want P.S... . You've got to let us adopt him."

"Ab-solutely. Write to you about it, love."

"No, you've got to stay and sign the papers."

"No. No more papers. Won't sign papers, love."

"*All aboard!*"

"Told Vanessa to go to hell. Told her she couldn't take him out of the country. All fixed, love."

"But that leaves everything just where it was. What you've got to do is get him away from Vanessa. *We're* his parents--"

The train jerked and moved slowly... . Lila...ran forward as the guard reached out, took Logan's arm and hoisted him into the train, slamming the door... . "We'll send the papers," she cried. "You've got to give him to us."

...[H]e kept nodding and smiling as the train gathered speed...and he was being drawn away...his figure growing smaller, his arm waving...over other waving arms... . She walked slowly after the quickly vanishing train...the green and red lights of the lumbering luggage van disappearing down the track into the night...and knew for certain that none of them would ever see Logan again... .

(*Careful, He Might Hear You* pp. 209-13)

Certainly, Logan never saw his son again, although his letter to Lily

from Victoria months later (in June, 1921) spoke of a future for the child in which he would play a part.

My dear Lilian,

...My recently gained position in War Service Homes, is temporary and not very remunerative, but I have every hope...that my future in a business will mature in perhaps a couple of months time.

I want to assure you that I am making every effort to guarantee a certain successful education for Putty, and immediate payment to you for your kindness to him.

I am working hard, and I know you have done your best, and I want to amicably arrange with you so that we can make everything right for the boy... .

If the dawn of my commencing future continues bright, then I will be very happy for Putty's sake... . I may settle here in Vic. in a country business and it is my hope that you will be able to visit occasionally [sic] - or as often as you like with Putty, so that we can always mutually arrange his future... .⁶

Like Logan himself, his letter was vague, sometimes ambiguous, expressing emotion and intention but devoid of any real substance or action. It acknowledged Lily and George as worthy parents and was testimony of Logan's weak, bumbling nature - he was truly the bumblebee of his late wife's poetry.

...Lilian please understand that I am more than worried about these arrangements and...if there is going to be any more outside "pin pricking" re

Putty, I will come to Sydney...and make arrangements...so that the boy will be at least free from this... . Lilian, I hope I love that boy as you love him... . I am hoping that you will take full charge of Putty until my affairs become more definate [sic] and I do appreciate all everyone has done, Blanche, Jessie, and everybody, but the time has arrived when he must be controlled by one - and I hope you can accept that.

...I understand that I am leaving most everything to you and trust to your tact and understanding to win through and our love for Putty should be a great incentive, as mine is a Father's love and yours, I know - is a Mother's.

I am not writing to Jessie for a few days but hope to meet her before she returns with Cousin Aggie.

All my love...and Lilian I will do anything for Putty's future.

My x to him

Yours affec.

Logan.⁷

Jessie Locke's return to Australia was imminent and Logan saw her in Melbourne before she travelled on to her final destination in Sydney. It is unclear what impact this meeting had on Logan's further actions, but from this point onward Logan Elliott virtually severed contact with Lily, George and the rest of the family. Although the "pin pricking" continued inflicting pain on his son, Logan never fulfilled his promise of returning to Sydney "to make arrangements". His addiction to alcohol, his perpetual need of money, and his inability to face responsibility fuelled the family's

⁷ Henry Logan Elliott, Letter to Lilian Locke Burns, 11 June 1921, SLE Collection, BU.

suspicion that Jessie had bought him off.⁸

His weak nature may have allowed him to abandon his son, but apparently no amount of money could convince Logan that his son's place was with Jessie Locke. He simply left the deed of co-guardianship in place and did nothing more about it. Within a couple of months he had remarried and a year later - in early 1923 - with this marriage in tatters, he disappeared. When Logan came home to Bacchus Marsh to die in 1939, he confessed to relatives that Sumner Locke Elliott was the only child he had ever fathered.⁹ He became hated by the family and finally became a pathetic figure in the eyes of his son. As an elderly man, Sumner admitted that his father's abandonment of him was still a painful memory, although one that he hoped he had come to terms with. He also confessed that he had long ago transformed his anger into pity for this man he had never known.

[T]he poor man. A failure in everything, except marrying my mother...that was the only wonderful thing that happened to him. Because she was a marvellous woman, vivacious and full of fun...the only great thing that happened to him...¹⁰

When Lily and George - desperate and under the most vitriolic attacks from Jessie - tried to adopt their nephew in 1923

⁸ Lilian Locke Burns' affidavit to the court, 3 Aug 1927.

⁹ Heather Shugg to me, Bacchus Marsh, 1992.

¹⁰ Candida Baker, *Yacker 2*.

they located Logan living in country New South Wales, but he retreated back to Victoria before they could come to any agreement with him about custody or adoption and, as Lily testified in court, there was “reason believe [the] Deponent [Jessie] assisted him financially at this juncture”.¹¹

Jessie Locke’s return to Sydney in July 1921 and Logan’s complete withdrawal from the situation finally brought the sisters face to face as adversaries in a battle that lasted a further eight years; a battle that produced no victor and ended only with Jessie’s sudden death in 1929.

Despite her nephew’s later description of Jessie as “never having been good-looking”,¹² photographs indicate that she was a pretty young woman when she left for England as a paid companion to her cousin. Her life at that stage had been full of promise, but she returned to Australia as a stout, dowdy woman approaching middle age, with a heart condition that had drawn little scarlet veins across her nose and cheeks.¹³ On her arrival, Jessie’s first priority was to establish a relationship with her infant nephew, whom she viewed as a means of expanding the horizons of her narrow life.

¹¹ Lily’s affidavit to the court, 3 Aug 1927.

¹² SLE, “Against Nostalgia”, *The Writer*, (The Writer Inc, Publishers, Boston, 1988) p. 10.

¹³ SLE, “Against Nostalgia”.

Jessie was always aloof, and her years of 'proper' life among England's upper classes had made her dispassionate and cold, a disposition probably not improved by the fact that she had no personal life beyond the sub-let emotional space that Cousin Aggie had afforded her. Jessie's wealthy lifestyle masked a spiritually impoverished life. During her years overseas she had devoted whatever personal time she had to delving through the Locke family history, tracing it back several centuries. Her personal insecurity was expressed through her need to 'place' herself in the context of history. Without a sense of individual identity in her own timeframe, she had looked to the past and to the family's composite identity to lend her life meaning and substance.¹⁴ Her nephew took a similar course decades later when, through his writing, he turned again to the family to find his own identity.

Jessie's imminent return to Sydney had been a frequent topic of conversation in the Locke-Burns household. Vague memories of this time, as well as the stories he was told about his aunt Jessie, inspired Sumner's depiction of this momentous event in *Careful, He Might Hear You*. Jessie, in the guise of the character Vanessa, is deftly lent a remote beauty, and her nephew conveys all the fear, loathing and curiosity the family must have felt at the prospect of their sister's homecoming.

¹⁴ My thanks to Gloria Kinna, granddaughter of Fred Locke, who inherited the family history documented by her Great-aunt Jessie. (Gloria Kinna to me, Qld, 1991.)

...Lila had begun the purring sounds in her chest and was breathing through her atomizer, which meant that the house was full of trouble...they looked down at him with put-on, birthday-treat smiles and said..."Your aunt Vanessa is coming".

Vanessa was coming all the way from England back to Australia and she was coming on a piano boat.

"Why is she coming on a piano?" he asked and they laughed...and said: "No darling...not a piano. P. and O. That's the kind of ship...a P. and O. ship."

But he couldn't get out of his mind a picture of Vanessa lashed with ropes to a grand piano that was breasting its way through giant green waves and foam... . On the ferry...George read the *Labor Daily* and Lila talked through it to him... . She seemed to be wound up... . She was still talking when the Woolloomooloo tram turned a corner into a street of piers and George said, "Look, there she is," and turning their heads they saw the tops of two huge black-and-yellow funnels... . At the entrance to the wharf...they stood and looked up at the piano boat, rising up into the sky... . He thought he could see Vanessa then... . Yes, there she was, ugly as sin, gaunt and bony; little beady red eyes staring out from under a witch hat, wisps of hair, snaggle teeth, a broomstick and cackling now, licking her thin lips... . But Lila said, "She's not there. Isn't that *funny*? Wouldn't you think she'd be looking out for us?"

(*Careful, He Might Hear You* pp. 4-44.)

As soon as Jessie had set up house with Cousin Aggie in Vaucluse, an exclusive suburb of Sydney, she called upon Lily to arrange weekend visits from Sumner, who was then three years old. Perhaps because of his anxiety about Jessie's return and the

weekend visits he was obliged to pay her, he suddenly began calling Lily and George Mother and Father. Lily, however, had never encouraged this, and she and George put a stop to the habit. No doubt Jessie enthusiastically assisted.

In Memoriam, a collection of Sumner Locke's poetry was published in 1921 by a group of her more celebrated literary colleagues led by her closest friend Katherine Susannah Pritchard.¹⁵ Containing photographs of the infant Sumner, the book was a stark reminder that his mother was dead and buried, even though her presence was everywhere.

While Jessie was in accord with Lily about keeping their late sister's memory alive in the child's life, she disapproved of the less celebrated literary colleagues of Sumner Locke. Many of these would-be writers were Bohemian, like Sumner Locke herself had been. Yet, with a few outstanding exceptions, most lacked her refinement and success and were redolent of failure. In Jessie's very elitist, British view of how her nephew should be raised, this troupe had no part. "She wanted to make me the kind of person she thought a child should be, which was...a prissy little English gentleman,"¹⁶ Sumner Locke Elliott remembered, still hostile many years later.

¹⁵ Steele Rudd, E.J. Brady, Vance and Nettie Palmer, and Mary Grant Bruce also took part.

¹⁶ SLE to Richard Kelly Tipping, New York 1985.

Lily, however, always gracious, entertained the passing parade of literary no-hopers and would-be writers who claimed a link to Sumner Locke because, at the very least, they genuinely mourned her sister. Over the years they filed in and out of Lily's various homes, always restoring Sumner Locke to life with stories of her hard work, her deserved success, her vitality and of course her tragic demise. "She would have been the best of us,"¹⁷ they continually declared. But even as a small child Sumner Locke Elliott could see these constant visitors for what they were. "With the exception of Katherine Susannah Prichard and, of course, Miles Franklin, they were mostly hacks, flops, who were hardly ever published, living on what my aunt Blanche used to call 'the smell of an oily rag,'" he later recalled.¹⁸ He depicted them in one of his most famous scenes in *Careful, He Might Hear You*.

Tin letters slipping sideways over the jetty said:
FAIRYLAND.

Beyond the jetty lay a discouraging picnic area...Trellised summer houses leaned and sagged under the ancient gum trees... . It was a playground of dead picnics... . What has happened to Fairyland? thought Lila.

...[She] smiled at an emaciated woman wearing a bright dirndl who was handing out tickets behind a table from which hung a banner declaring: WELCOME SCRIBES AND DAUBERS 1934... . Lila said in her best voice, "I'm Mrs. Baines - I'm Sinden Scott's sister."

¹⁷ SLE, Address to Adelaide Writers' Week, 1974.

¹⁸ SLE to me, 1990.

The woman stared at her, unmoved as a fish... . “My late sister -” Lila began...but the woman had turned away and was yelling, “Digger!...come here a minute.”

A young man in dirty white trousers and a sweater...came toward them... .

Digger twitched and said, “It’s all right, Daisy. Mrs. Baines was invited.”

...Lila peered around, hoping to see elated faces, outstretched hands, to hear glad cries of welcome, but saw only listless knots of shabby people... .

Digger led the way to a group seated under a pine tree [and] said, “Mum, here’s Lila Baines.”

...Conchita spoke in a deep tragedy-queen voice. “Dear Lila Baines. Little Sin’s sister... . Little, little Sin!” It seemed Conchita was about to call for two minutes’ silence... . Conchita...turned toward P.S. half hidden behind Lila. “And is this-”

Lila brought him out proudly. “This is P.S.,” she said.

Conchita studied him... . “There *is* no P.S.,” she said... . “I know that’s what she called him... . But there is *no* postscript to her. When she went, everything died with her.”

The obedient group nodded... . “There can be no appendix to a work of art such as she,” continued Conchita, and she beckoned P.S. forward.

“I shall call you ‘Boy’,” she announced and the group murmured approval. Conchita nodded graciously... . “Boy’s mother...had more spunk and talent than all of us put together. She lived among us, drank us all up and then hammered us into characters on her little anvil, sending sparks up into the night...”.

“Wasn’t there another book?” asked the old man with the marble knees.

“Unfinished,” said Conchita... . “Boy,” she said, “someday you will finish your mother’s book for her. Will you do that?”

(*Careful, He Might Hear You* pp. 126-32)

Sumner's short story, "The Writers Picnic", which he drew from his novel, gathered together the literary ensemble who had trailed in and out of his childhood years.¹⁹ His opinion of them was tainted by Jessie's own continual condemnation. Such rare accord with Jessie was probably due to the pressure this group imposed on his young life by urging him to fulfil his mother's potential: "You must finish what your little mother left unfinished".²⁰ Much later in life he recalled their insistence: "Disappointed in their own careers, they continued to incite me towards the sacred trust that was mine - to continue the heritage left me."²¹ Sumner's picnic scene with its larger-than-life versions of the literary hangers-on who had so plagued his early life was so vivid, that shortly before his death he confessed that he no longer remembered whether such a picnic really took place or whether he had reconstructed it from childhood impressions.²²

Jessie continually voiced her disapproval of her late sister's colleagues and their habit of swarming to Lily's home, and there were many other aspects of Lily's life that she considered detrimental to her nephew's well-being. During his weekend stays with Jessie, the young boy was interrogated about the people who

19 Geoffrey Dutton(ed), *Modern Australian Writing*, Fontana Library (Collins), 1966.

20 SLE to me, 1990.

21 SLE, Address to Adelaide Writers' Week, 1974.

22 SLE to me, 1990.

visited Lily's house and the people she took him to visit. Jessie disapproved of the neighbourhood children, the Carlton/Bexley working-class neighbours, and Lily's friends and political acquaintances. During his childhood Sumner often heard Jessie use the term 'common' to disparage a certain type of person or behaviour.²³ It became a signature word that echoed from the characters she inspired in her nephew's many books.

"Do you like the school, P.S.?"

"I like my own school better."

"Why?"... .

"I like my own school. Winnie goes there."

"That little girl from next door?"

"Yes."

"She's *common*."

(*Careful, He Might Hear You* p. 114)

Jessie also used the word 'common' to reassure herself of her superior position in life. "How vulgar and common, common, *common!*" Vanessa thinks in self-reproach for her dalliance with a baker's boy.²⁴

By the time Sumner was six years old, his life was equally divided between the homes of Lily and Jessie. Jessie's constant criticism and vilification of Lily during the years after her return from England, and her threats of legal action over custody of their nephew - threats all the more real because of her position and

²³ SLE to me, 1990.

²⁴ *Careful, He Might Hear You*, p. 180.

wealth - eventually made Lily agree to extend Jessie's time with the boy from weekends to half weeks. The age for Sumner to begin his schooling came and passed with Jessie refusing him entry to the neighbourhood schools in Lily's district.²⁵ School and the deprivation of this social centre of childhood became a preoccupation in his young life. He dearly wanted to attend school with Winnie, the small girl who lived next door to him in Carlton. During his holidays and half-weeks with Lily, Winnie was his touchstone to the outside world and, as she is so often depicted in *Careful, He Might Hear You*, a constant source of knowledge.

...They were sitting in Winnie's pepper tree. She was Tarzan and he was Jane, because he was smaller.

It was funny about Winnie; he didn't like her much and yet he did... . Winnie knew a lot of things. She had shown him a picture of God. God had a black beard and a mustache and his name was Mr. Marx. Winnie's father was always saying that if people listened to Mr. Marx there would be no depression or the dole... . Winnie didn't have to go to Sunday school and she had brought a note to school saying that she didn't have to sing "Rule Britannia" on Empire Day or salute the flag... . Winnie said..."I know a secret."

"What?"

She...said, "You're going somewhere else to live."

(*Careful, He Might Hear You* pp. 34-6)

It was testimony to his early friendship with Winnie that, after the release of the award-winning film adaptation of his first novel,

Sumner found her - an elderly married woman living in a retirement village on the south coast of New South Wales. Her letter of reply to his spoke of their childhood together, their closeness, and Lily, whom she still called "Mrs. Burns...a reserved lady".

Legally restrained from placing her nephew in school, Lily, a trained teacher, began instructing him at home, but the constant movement between two houses disrupted his lessons. It was especially this period of his life that revealed to him the class system at work in Australia's supposedly classless society. While Lily and George were not quite as poor as their counterparts in his first novel, nor his aunt Jessie quite as wealthy, the worlds Sumner moved between seemed poles apart, as he explained many years later.

[The] poverty on one hand was not as dire although it wasn't yet the Depression (...I made the book in the early 30's whereas actually this took place in the 20's)...nor was the great house as great, either. We did have a cook and a maid and it was up in Vaucluse, in a very superior part of Sydney. And there was, of course, a dramatic difference for a child...to adjust to a tiny suburban cottage and a rather large house with servants... .26

In *Careful, He Might Hear You* Sumner recalled the dramatic

difference he noticed as a child.

New things had happened. At Vanessa's he had riding and dancing lessons added to his afternoons and people talked a lot in undertones. At Lila's, the silver spoons disappeared, George stopped smoking and people talked a lot in undertones... .

(*Careful, He Might Hear You* p. 164)

Although Lily and George owned their small cottage in Carlton, life had no trimmings. They both worked hard but there was never any extra money. "They were always broke," Sumner remembered.

Jessie, conversely, as a companion to her elderly cousin, led a frivolous daily life of white-gloved luncheons with the well-to-do of Sydney.²⁷ Under her patronage, Sumner was given riding lessons, piano, violin, singing and dancing instruction, and the finest food and clothing. "We had maids and I was waited on hand and foot and they had a car and chauffeur," he recalled.²⁸

During the years between Jessie's return to Australia in 1921 and the custody case late in 1927, she moved with her cousin Aggie into no fewer than eight furnished houses and flats. This pattern of instability not only reflected much about Jessie's state of mind but also prevented her nephew from forming any close ties with the

²⁷ Hazel De Berg interview, 1970.

²⁸ Richard Kelly Tipping interview, 1985.

children in his neighbourhood, and when he was in Jessie's care he led a life of strict regimentation. Often she roused the child before dawn for religious instruction, even during the winter months, and his days were filled according to a timetable that included etiquette and culture as well as several more periods of religious training. This emphasis on religion was maintained throughout the time he was under Jessie's guardianship. "Jessie was very big on religion," Sumner told friends during his later life.²⁹ As a boy, he was showered with expensive things, yet was deprived of other children's company outside formal classes, concerts and so on. Lily offset this problem as best she could during his weekend visits with her. His friendship with Winnie Greenop next door was encouraged and his regular attendance at Sunday school gave him a taste of the social contact with his peers which his weekday life lacked.

It was at this stage of his insulated life that Lily and George took him for his long Christmas holidays to Bacchus Marsh in Victoria where a whole new world was revealed to him by the company and friendship of his cousins.³⁰ Relatives from both sides of his family lived in "the Marsh" district and Sumner's fondest memories of his childhood were of this region and the excitement of the train journey that drew him further and further from the purgatory of his everyday life.

²⁹ Irene Thirkell to me, 1991.

³⁰ Heather Shugg, cousin from Bacchus Marsh, fondly remembers SLE's visits during their childhood.

...When I was growing up I used to spend the long Christmas holidays on a farm in another state. I had to travel overnight to Melbourne on the express. No more glamorous experience in memory could outdo the excitement of that train. I can still smell the musty odour of the compartments and see the sleeping cars with their softly lighted corridors over the dark red carpeting with the words "NSW Railways" woven into them, and the dark green leather seats, half of which let down out of the wall and became the upper berth, reached by a small ladder with velvet covered steps, and I can feel the rhythm and sway of the train and the thick brown blanket that smelled faintly of smoke...³¹

Bacchus Marsh recurs in his books as a landscape of fiction and fancy, like a magical forest in a Shakespearean play, a place where city society rules are forgotten and nature takes its course. Here the boy first encountered unconditional acceptance, understanding and a sense of belonging from the children of his extended family. At his aunt Mary's farm, "The Glen", on the Geelong Road south of the Marsh, he was free to play with his cousins Bill and Betty Watson, stretch out on the bed of their older brother, Eddie, consume old movie magazines and listen to the strains of popular songs on the piano drifting through the house.³² Life here had no performance requirements and offered a sanctuary from the relentless training routines of Jessie's domain.

31 SLE, "Against Nostalgia", *The Writer*.

32 William and Ruby Watson, son and daughter-in-law of Mary Locke, to me, Aug 1992.

In the town of Bacchus Marsh, he also came to know his father's sisters, his aunt Midge and aunt Alice, as well as a set of Elliott cousins who were all more than happy to include another face in their play. "He was the apple of Midge's eye," according to cousins who remember those times or the family stories woven about them.³³ Like all members of the Locke and Elliott families, Midge was highly critical of her brother Logan Elliott's abandonment of his son. Initially - ashamed of her brother - she felt a sense of duty to the child but this soon became a genuine affection that lasted all her life. During the years of his childhood, youth and adulthood in Australia, Putty, as they all called him, often returned to the Marsh to stay with the Watsons, his aunt Midge, or his aunt Alice and cousin Heather in their home in Lerderberg Street in the main town. His cousins all knew of the drama of his childhood, in which he was "pulled from one end of the street to the other"³⁴ by his warring aunts. But, in the manner of children with strong family links, they kept this separate from the long days of play and recreation heralded by the arrival of their cousin Putty from Sydney. Long into their old age, the cousins, including Putty himself, maintained their friendships and kept them insulated from the influences of the outside world. Neither time, situation, nor distance diminished the affection obvious in

³³ Heather Shugg and Carolyn Ross (cousins of SLE) to me, 1992.

³⁴ Heather Shugg to me, 1992.

letters exchanged between the cousins for more than fifty years.

His summer holidays with his cousins in Bacchus Marsh offered Sumner Locke Elliott not only a respite from his life of loneliness, and a sense of family, but also a chance to develop the social skills necessary for taking part in the 'daily doings' of a diverse group of children. Not until he was 8 years old, when he was finally enrolled by Jessie in an exclusive private morning school in 1926, could he draw on these social skills when confronted by a very different group of children from those country cousins he so loved in Bacchus Marsh.

...I went to school first of all at a little day school...it was held at the Rose Bay Yacht Club for about eight or nine, and they were from rather wealthy families...and I remember one of the children was Alison Nicholas...the daughter of Judge Nicholas, and my aunt Jessie...was horrified when I came home, I think the second or third day from school, and I was asked what I'd learned, and...I extended my little hand to its full length on my nose...with the fingers outspread, and made a rude noise...and there was consternation, and the lady's name was Miss Pahl, as I remember, who was the teacher, was telephoned and then of course it was discovered that it was the Justice Nicholas's daughter who had taught me this rude gesture... .³⁵

The select morning school and his first teacher, Miss Pahl,³⁶ appear

³⁵ Hazel De Berg Interview, 1970.

³⁶ "Miss Pahl" to SLE; Jessie's affidavit records her as "Miss Pile".

in scenes of early schooldays in his first novel, *Careful, He Might Hear You*, and his last novel, *Fairyland*, where Miss Pahl is barely disguised as Miss Pile and Miss Peel respectively, and both are drawn as pompous and insensitive puppeteers.

“Little new boy. What is your name, dear?”

“P.S.”

Smothered laughter now and twenty-four eyes looking at him.

Miss Pile rapping on the desk for silence.

“What is your name?”

“P.S.”... .

“...Is your surname Marriott?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, Miss Pile.”

“Yesmisspile.”

...He sat still, while Miss Pile gave the older boys and girls sums... . Then she moved toward him... .

“How many letters do you know?”

“I know up to - um - up to haitch.”

“Aitch. Not haitch. Aitch...now you’re at a nice private school...we take care to keep our vowels nice and open... .”

(*Careful, He Might Hear You* pp. 103-5)

In *Fairyland*, he revisits the same private school, reviving once more that alien atmosphere through the character, Seaton Daly.

The little girls and boys who went to Miss Peel’s classes at the Prince Albert Day School were superior - not in manner but intrinsically... . It was as manifest as their uniforms: the little girls in pleated tartan skirts...and white blouses that tied in neat bows, the little boys in gray flannel short

pants and blue blazers with an embroidered gold lion and unicorn (for the Empire) on the pockets.

The little boys and girls all came from the big houses along Wentworth Avenue, Point Piper, and from...Rose Bay, and some of them sported double-barreled names...indicating the union of old family money with other old family money... . As they grew older, the boys would gravitate to the Edgecliff Preparatory School and then to Cranbrook... .

...Miss Peel's classes were held in a large sunny room in the Prince Albert Yacht club... . Miss Peel was an ageless virgin of perhaps fifty who wore an astonishing amount of very white face powder that ended at the chin...and who assumed knowledge she didn't have and persuaded parents to invest money in the school under an acquiescence of noblesse oblige. She smelled faintly of what the Lifebuoy soap ads called B.O. ...With visiting mothers she was obsequious to a degree of oiliness... . The little girls sniggered and whispered to one another because Seaton was the cousin of old rich Miss Dalgarno's *maid*. In the garden during the playtime recess...the children automatically divided into little partisanships, and it was quickly evident that Seaton belonged in none of them and he was left...alone.

(*Fairyland* pp. 5-7)

The children of this well-to-do set are most often depicted in Sumner Locke Elliott's writing as vindictive, intimidating brats. His unenviable position as 'new boy at school' is recalled as a means of crystallising the background against which his growing sense of difference and outsider status were recognised.

Cynthia said, "What's your name?"

"P.S."

"What's that stand for?"

"I don't know."

"I know...P.S. stands for Pretty Silly." Cynthia was a tremendous success. Three of the children rolled on the lawn...until the rest of them took up the chant... . "P.S. is pretty sil-ly. P.S. is pretty sil-ly."

Cynthia, swollen by now with importance, turned on the others and said..."Shut up. You heard what Miss Pile said. He's new and we have to be nice to him... . "What's your mother call you?"

(Oh, why do they always bring *her* up?)

...He said, "I don't have a mother."

..."Who was that lady who brought you to school this morning?"

"Vanessa... . My Aunt."

"Do you live with your aunt?"

"No, I live with Lila and George."

"Who are *they*?"

"My aunt and uncle."

"Where do they live?"

"Neutral Bay."

"Why are you coming to our school then?"

"Because."

...Cynthia held out her hand. "Give me your pocket money... ."

...He handed it over reluctantly.

"Is that all?" Cynthia looked at the shiny sixpence and three-penny bit. "How much does your father give you a week?"

He said, "I haven't got a father."

"Is he dead?"

"No... . He's a gold digger... . He's away."

"Where?"

"I don't know."

Cynthia's eyes were wide with inner knowledge. "Haven't you ever seen him?" she asked in a very kind voice.

"No," he said.

Cynthia turned and whispered to Ian... . Ian turned to another boy and whispered. "Pass it on," he said... . Each one in turn passed it on...until it reached a small knot of four heads together. The four leaped with joy and excitement. They had to let it out. "P.S. is a bastard," they screamed.

(*Careful, He Might Hear You* pp. 106-8)

The cruelty of the schoolyard became familiar to Sumner - he attended four very different schools between the ages of eight and sixteen.³⁷ In a conventional society where peers demand conformity, his fringedweller family situation was considered beyond the pale and always required explanation. As his writing revealed, the children at the private schools he attended were his most severe critics. Their company did little to ease the loneliness of the world into which he had been disagreeably thrust. By this time, he spent all weekdays with Jessie, a new arrangement made necessary because of his attendance at The Yacht Club school.

...He had said that he would not go, they would have to get a policeman to make him go, but in the end Lila had taken him...on a Sunday evening to the Big House and left him with Vanessa for the whole week so there didn't seem to be anything to do but come down here to something called the Point Piper Yacht Club where Miss Pile had classes in the

37

SLE remained defensive about school as a topic well into his adulthood. From the time he was 15 until he left Australia in 1948, he claimed either that he had attended so many schools he had lost count or else that he had attended "thirteen schools". Such exaggeration was probably designed to deflect any further enquiry into his background. This was a characteristic which became part of his masking technique: in order to exorcise his minor contrast in manner or speech as he grew older, he accentuated his difference as a defensive device.

mornings for girls and boys who had English nannies... .

(*Careful, He Might Hear You* p. 107)

From January 1926 until June 1927 he returned to Lily and George only for weekends and holidays. The loneliness he endured during this period is expressed by the detailed portrait of a 'still-life' child in his novel *About Tilly Beamis*.

...The child must certainly be his masterpiece, this little boy...dressed in private school uniform, in blue blazer with a dull gold crest on the pocket and gray flannel short trousers, knee socks and black utilitarian brogues.

...The boy sat...in a tiny broom closet lit by one naked ceiling light that cast a livid brightness on the lonesomeness and sterility of the little room... . In his small right hand the child held a fork over a dish of plastic fried eggs while his left hand lay flaccid in his lap, and he stared ahead with an expression of such unyielding mournfulness and despair that the cell seemed to reverberate with the word LONELINESS.

(*About Tilly Beamis* p. 177)³⁸

This child wears the same private school uniform worn by Sumner's 'double', Seaton Daly, in *Fairyland*. But the desolation of the still-life child in *About Tilly Beamis* reflects the childhood experience of the physically malformed Sprout Van Zandt. Plagued and isolated by his repulsive ugliness, the adult Van Zandt recaptures the characters and epiphanies of his scarred life with a

³⁸ SLE, *About Tilly Beamis* (Pan Books, Australia Pty Ltd (Parvane) 1984.) All future quotations from this edition.

world of dolls. The ruthless, cunning maid-cum-nanny who victimised him in his early childhood, his indifferent mother who rejected him throughout his life, and his manipulation by a heartless young woman during his youth are all eerily held in freeze-frame by mannequin figures in various settings at his house. His own youthful image, however is transformed into one of beauty. In many ways, Sprout Van Zandt is the older Sumner Locke Elliott's most revealing self-portrait, the essence of himself as the reflective writer. Through this character he reveals a scarred, fragile man whose art re-examines and sometimes reshapes from the scenes of his youth a person, moment, or outcome. Sprout Van Zandt and his house of dolls parallels Sumner's reinvention of his own life in his novels. Van Zandt's physical repugnancy is Sumner's outward expression of the sense of otherness, the emotional scarring, and the psychological alienation that he felt was his own disability. The child, unnoticed and unknown by his mother, and abandoned by his father, is at first made secure in the arms of a surrogate, only later to be wrenched out and thrust into the villainous grip of an impostor whose public face soon distorts behind closed doors: such is the character history of Van Zandt and the childhood experience of Sumner Locke Elliott.³⁹

Jessie strove to present her nephew to the outside world as

³⁹ This is a pattern expressed through several characters in his novels. Conrad Fortier in *Radio Days* is another SLE self-portrait, painted in a slightly different hue, in a different light.

the accomplished, refined, pleasant “little English Gentleman”. In private too, there was to be no noise, no idle or impolite chatter, and strict adherence to his study timetable. Sumner was forced to sublimate his own personality to meet her requirements or face Jessie’s penalties. Initially, these were merely deprivation tactics, but she resorted to unprovoked physical violence during the last six months of his stay with her. Sumner confessed to Lily that he had been “struck suddenly twice for no apparent reason and...on one occasion nearly pushed down a flight of stairs...”.⁴⁰

In later life, he realised that his trouble-making aunt was trying to love him “but she didn’t know how.”⁴¹

...I...never liked her, and in some dim response out of starvation, she...poured gifts and protestations of love on me, which...only served to widen the gulf between us... . Her responses to my unrelenting disapproval [were] expensive toy trains and riding boots of exquisite styling and leather, but she [was] wont not to risk exposure of herself in embraces or kisses... .⁴²

Life under Jessie’s roof allowed scant time for play or recreation, and Sumner’s mental anguish began to tell on his physical health, with repeated bouts of “depression and nerve strain”.⁴³ Photographs of him as a boy reveal a serious, pensive

40 Lily’s affidavit to the court.

41 Richard Kelly Tipping interview, 1985.

42 SLE, “Against Nostalgia”, p. 10.

43 Lily’s affidavit to the court.

child who seldom smiled. Unlike the photographs of the infant Sumner, photographs of the older boy never show him looking directly at the camera.

Jessie, too, began to behave erratically. When her nephew caught whooping cough she closeted him away and refused Lily and George access.

I went on one occasion...but was ordered out of the house and the door slammed on me... . On another occasion I was told to sit down and wait while Deponent [Jessie] went to ring a medical man to examine me. I...waited but the doctor did not materialise and Deponent rang a lady friend instead. On another occasion my husband was subjected to a vituperative attack and the housemaid was called to stand by as a witness. When we took our leave the door was slammed with my husband's coat and hat inside... .⁴⁴

The child had protested often at being sent back to Jessie from Lily's house. Jessie's insistence that, after leaving the Yacht Club morning school at the end of 1926 he enrol in the Edgecliff Preparatory School,⁴⁵ made it clear to him that his week-long stays with her were not a temporary arrangement. Worse still, Jessie had just severed relations with her cousin, Aggie Barclay, and taken a flat in Edgecliff where Sumner was "obliged to sleep in the same room as her".⁴⁶ The boy's life became even more stifled by his

44 Lily's affidavit to the court.

45 Hazel De Berg interview, 1970.

46 Lily's affidavit to the court.

deplored aunt.

In *Careful, He Might Hear You*, Sumner gives his aunt Jessie (in the guise of Vanessa) an Oedipal complex⁴⁷ that remained unresolved at her father's death and suppressed her adult sexuality. Sensing all is not 'right' with his aunt, the child in her care becomes self-conscious about his nakedness - her inspection seems to exceed the boundaries of the parental role: "...He felt funny with no clothes on in front of her, which he never did with Lila...".⁴⁸ Vanessa's feelings are finally and more explicitly transferred to her ward during one of the violent thunderstorms that both Vanessa and Jessie dreaded. "My Aunt Jessie had a morbid fear of thunderstorms," Sumner often recalled.

From the bottom of his sleep...someone was shaking him...so he opened his eyes and saw Vanessa... . Her hair was hanging over the shoulder of her nightgown and her face without any lipstick was as white as clouds... . He resisted...going down again into sleep, but Vanessa...fought him, pulling him up by both arms and stripping the sheets off him, forcing...and all the time saying something in sharp whispers which he couldn't understand...over the noise from outside...thunder... . Vanessa...shaking all

⁴⁷ Through a series of flashbacks woven into *Careful, He Might Hear You*, SLE draws a 'past life' character portrait of Vanessa, firstly, by revealing her overly close relationship with her protective, doting and elitist father who dies; and secondly, by exposing the bitter animosity and rivalry she feels for her mother who then dispossesses her by placing her with their wealthy cousin, Ettie. Such episodes reflect symptomatically the stages of initial identification, hatred, and rivalry which chart the Oedipus condition. [In fact, Jessie's relationship with her own mother may have been reflected in her failure to return to Australia when her mother was dying. Instead she remained with Cousin Aggie in England.]

⁴⁸ *Careful, He Might Hear You* p. 83.

over...reached quickly for him and lifting him...from the bed...embraced him tightly...her heart...beating quickly next to his ear... .[S]he was so different...he hardly knew her with her white mouth... . Then she pulled him to her as the thunder came again, and held him, and they lay together...arms around each other, and she whispered: "...I'm holding you." Yet it seemed to him, somehow, as though he was holding her. And...later...with the storm ebbing...Vanessa very heavy on top of him... .

(Careful, He Might Hear You p. 97)

While thunderstorms in the novel convey the explosion of Vanessa's repressed sexual passion, and the breaking free of her inner self, Sumner shows her overstepping parental boundaries during less dramatic moments.

...She lay down on his bed and closed her eyes...[and] said..."Put your arms round me and comfort me. Give me a nice kiss."

...[S]he reached out and took him to her...placing his arms around her neck and squeezing him tightly.

"...[W]e belong to each other...my dearest, my angel," she kissed him all over his face... .

"No," he shouted...scrambling off the bed, away from her and those kisses... .

(Careful, He Might Hear You p. 201)

Whether Jessie's affection for her charge really exceeded the realms of motherly love is open to contention. Sumner was never questioned about it. Up until just two or three years before his death, Sumner Locke Elliott indicated to his interviewers that

certain subjects were taboo. As he said once, when bemoaning questions about his expatriatism: “Most people would not ask in an interview personal things about your religion or your sex life but they seem to think they have a priority to ask how you feel as an expatriate.”⁴⁹ Certainly he discussed neither his religion nor his sex life until the release of *Fairyland*, which many people referred to as his ‘coming out’ book.

When Sumner was an elderly man, he recalled another episode that suggests what he referred to as Jessie’s “sublimated perversion”.

I am about seven years old. I am watching from a short distance two women in a lighted room. One is standing, the other seated in a chair. The one standing is my aunt. She is dressed in a wool skirt...with a tweed cardigan covering...what Australians then called a “jumper”. I have never liked her... . I watch her and the other woman deep in conversation. The other woman’s back is turned to my aunt. Without warning, my aunt leans suddenly over the chair and kisses the top of the woman’s head. I am appalled...⁵⁰

Whether his aunt Jessie was the aloof, rigid and overly proper person she appeared in society or a more complex sexual being behind closed doors will never be known. Sumner Locke Elliott’s fictional presentation of his aunt as someone struggling with an

49 Richard Kelly Tipping interview, 1985.

50 SLE, “Against Nostalgia”, p. 10.

Oedipal complex may have been the ultimate revenge of the child victim who still resided in the man. Certainly, sharing a bedroom with a loathed aunt would have posed many difficulties for a boy approaching ten years of age. Not the least of these would have been a growing confusion over his own sexual orientation: as an elderly man Sumner spoke and wrote that he had been “homosexual from childhood”.⁵¹ This life of imprisonment and invasion by his aunt, became unbearable for the boy and gave him the strength to finally assert his feelings and take a stand.

By July 1927, after six months at the Edgecliff school, the deprivation of his real home and family overwhelmed Sumner. Jessie’s intimidation of Lily and George had been relentless over the years and their numerous appeals to her had been ignored. They had often persuaded their nephew to cooperate with Jessie, fearing that otherwise he would be separated from them entirely. But, finally, at the end of a weekend visit with Lily and George on 10 July, he refused to return to Jessie. At the custody case Lily gave a full account of this refusal and its aftermath.

On Sunday, July 10th he absolutely refused to go back, crying and protesting all the time and wanted to telephone to that effect to Deponent [Jessie]. My husband and I tried to persuade him to finish the school term but he said he could not stand it any longer. We then tried to induce him to go back for one week, so that we could take some

action, but he still protested that he “could not stand it”. I then went with him to Deponent’s flat at 6.30 p.m., and I informed her that he had come to say that he would not return to her any more and I thanked her for all her kindness and generosity to the child. Deponent said “What is this, Putty”? and he replied “I want to say at Cambewarra, I want to stay with Lily and George” (meaning my husband and self). Deponent made some further protest and we then left the premises... ⁵²

This turning point in his childhood is rendered as the pivotal scene in *Careful, He Might Hear You*. In the novel, however, the author fulfilled his wish to telephone the news to avoid the daunting face-to-face encounter with his aunt which had actually occurred.

...Lila got the number and then asked Ellen to get Vanessa to come to the phone as the matter was urgent and finally there was a cool, “Hello”.

She said, “Something’s happened. It’s not of my making Vanessa. No, no, he’s all right, don’t be alarmed. He wants to speak to you himself.”

She handed him the phone and P.S. said, “I’m not coming back.” Then he said, “I decided myself.”

The phone clucked. Clucked and clucked until Lila put out her hand to take it from him but again he seemed to decide what would be best and he hung up.

“I told her,” he said, and Lila, looking at him and seeing the frightening future crowded into that one moment, felt at the same time a remarkable joy.

(*Careful, He Might Hear You* pp. 219-20)

By August, just one month later, Jessie Locke had brought a legal custody suit against Lily. The case, which went before the Supreme Court of New South Wales, was bitter and publicly acrimonious. Not quite ten years old, Sumner Locke Elliott was considered too young to give evidence in court and was questioned at length by the judge in his chambers.⁵³ The confusion he felt as a young boy undertaking such an important conversation informed his fictional retelling of this episode.

The judge said, "Do you like chocolate?"

Yes, he said, thank you, and the judge handed him a big shiny red and gold package of Nestlé's, the giant size... .

"Don't eat it all at once," said the judge. "If you got sick, your aunt would blame me."

Which aunt? Vanessa, of course. She didn't believe in chocolate for children because of their teeth and so very likely she'd given the judge strict orders about it and perhaps the judge didn't like that... . That meant everything was going to be all right and the judge was going to...give him back to Lila.

..."Now then," said the judge..."I'm going to ask you one or two questions and I want you to remember that this is all just between you and me... . Do you have a puppy?"

"No." Was the judge going to give him a puppy too?... .

The judge was saying, "Now a puppy has to be taught, doesn't it? Not to do certain things in the house? Has to be spanked when it's naughty? Eh?...Now then if you had a puppy and you had to give it away, to whom would you give it?"

That was a hard one. Who?...The judge helped him

53 SLE to Clyde Packer, *No Return Ticket*.

out. "Wouldn't you give it to the person who you knew would look after it the best?"

"Yes," he said gratefully, knowing for sure now that the judge meant Lila because she loved puppies... .

The judge seemed to know, like God, what he was thinking because he said, "Your Aunty Lila has been very kind to you, hasn't she?"

Oh, yes, he told God.

"And your Aunty Vanessa? Hasn't she been very kind to you also?"

Yes, oh, yes. He supposed it was better to be polite about Vanessa... .

"Why didn't you want to go back to her?"

Funny. It was hard to say why...it was like being asked a hard question in class with everyone looking at you and being nervous that if you came out with the wrong answer, then everyone would laugh at you, and now he saw that the judge was frowning and tapping his fingers together as if he was in a hurry.

"I don't know," he said to the judge.

"Why did you *tell* her you didn't want to go back?"

On the phone that night? Was that wrong? Of course he had to tell Vanessa himself. Lila had explained all that to him but perhaps she hadn't explained it to the judge.

"Lila said I had to tell Vanessa that I decided myself."

The judge seemed to understand completely because he nodded, and...picked up a gold pencil and wrote something down on a pad on the big desk... .

(Careful, He Might Hear You pp. 279-82)

In the novel the child, oblivious to the adult nuances of language and meaning at work in the interview, is handed over not

of Lila but to Vanessa, a ruling which eventually the two women themselves overturn when Vanessa gives her nephew up. Such defiance of the court ruling expressed Sumner's view of the judicial system and its decision-making processes.

The outcome of the real custody case was less clearcut, although certainly no less damaging. Jessie, fearing that she had lost ground due to court evidence that supported Lily, suggested a compromise: that her nephew be placed in Cranbrook School as a boarder at her expense.⁵⁴

In spite of Lily's written pleas that Sumner was temperamentally unsuited to boarding-school life, the judge decided that the child would board during weekdays at Cranbrook and spend alternate weekends with each aunt.⁵⁵ In later life, Sumner reflected that the judge probably felt that he would be "better taken away from all these women".⁵⁶ However, in *Careful, He Might Hear You*, the judge of the case is cast as a bumbling incompetent with a hearing disability, and his fetish for recording the most banal details rivals that of the judge in Lewis Carroll's *Alice*.⁵⁷

54 SLE to me, 1990.

55 Clyde Packer, *No Return Ticket*, p 142.

56 Richard Kelly Tipping interview, 1985.

57 See the Judge in Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, chapters "Who Stole the Tarts" and "Alice's Evidence".

“Now Miss Scott... . Did Mr. Ernest Huxley approach you in regard to changing this very impractical arrangement?”

“Yes. ...Mr. Huxley said he was very unhappy...and...worried about P.S.”

The judge leaned forward and spoke for the first time... .

“About whom?”

“P.S., your honor. It’s the child’s nickname... .”

Mr. Justice Hay-Piggott picked up a steel pen.

“B.S?”

“P.S., your honor. It stands, I believe for ‘postscript’.”

...The judge raised Santa Claus eyebrows and wrote P.S., as one might sign away Austria... .

“Now Miss Scott...you have said that the Respondent often defied your wishes in regard to your ward... .”

“Yes...she overrode my objections and took him to a writers’ picnic.”

The judge looked down. “What kind of picnic?”

“A collection of writers were giving a charity picnic...they were very strange...and there had been a lot of drinking...he was told by one of these writers that he must finish a novel my sister was writing at the time of her death. He then said he would never become a writer...and he used a vulgar expression... . Bosh and balls.”

The judge leaned down. “Bosh and what?”

“Balls, your Honor,” said Mr. Hood, and bit his lower lip.

Mr. Justice Hay-Piggot wrote a word... . Vanessa stepped down from the witness stand... . Lila was getting up and going into the witness box... . Mr. Gentle said...“Is it true, Mrs. Baines, that...it was implied in front of the boy that he’d been in some way responsible for his mother’s death?”

“No... . He told me that Vanessa had said he was late coming and so his mother had died... . Vanessa had taken him up to see Dear One’s Little Garden-”

The judge looked down crossly. “Dear who’s what?”...The judge, writing, asked Lila, “This is what you call the grave?”

“Yes...” said Lila... . Mr. Hay-Piggott regarded Lila fiercely. “What have you told the boy about his mother?”...Lila seemed flustered. “That she’s with the angels.”

“With the *Rangers*?” The judge looked affronted.

(*Careful, He Might Hear You* pp. 241-67)

While the adult Sumner caricatured the judge in Carroll’s impish style, the real judge took quite a liking to the young subject of such a difficult ruling. He took the unconventional (and, by today’s standards, unprofessional) step of inviting him on a holiday with his own family to the Blue Mountains, west of Sydney.⁵⁸ This experience informs *Edens Lost*,⁵⁹ in which a slightly older version of Sumner’s childhood self appears as the character Angus Weekes. Soon after his beloved aunt May dies, Angus by chance meets Eve St James, a friend of his dead mother, and Eve invites him to stay with the family of Judge St James in the Blue Mountains.⁶⁰ As in his

58 This story was told to friends by SLE and remembered by Irene Thirkell.

59 SLE, *Edens Lost* (Michael Joseph Ltd, London, 1970.) All future quotations from this edition.

60 The judge’s wife, Eve, who lures Angus into the Edenic “strange country” of the Blue Mountains, becomes his guide on what is essentially for him a journey of awakening sexuality. Angus is confronted by various forms of suppressed and expressed sexuality existing within, between, and among the characters of this world. The Blue Mountains, as a region, was used by SLE in several of his novels, most notably as either the scene of an aborted sexual encounter (as in *Fairyland*’s incident between Seaton Daly and his overbearing employer, the appropriately named Camilla Dick, who has a need to convert gay males through what she assesses to be her cathartic sex appeal); or as a site of disappointment leading to the interruption of a sexual happening (as in *Water Under the Bridge* when Shasta’s early return from the Blue Mountains terminates Neil’s attempted love-making with Carrie.) SLE’s own journey to the Blue Mountains following the battle over his custody marked a turning point in his life, a time when he was propelled into an unknown world beyond the romantic hopes and beliefs of childhood, a place where nothing made sense and all the rules were turned on their head. Such was the impact and timing of this world in SLE’s life that he always portrayed the Blue Mountains as a strange and alien landscape which evoked that sense of disorientation, loss and confusion he had experienced on his holiday there, and which in turn was experienced by his protagonists in their crossings from childhood to maturity.

first novel, Sumner cannot resist another ‘Carroll-ian’. This time, in *Edens Lost*, the Judge’s household resembles Alice’s world of inside-out games with arbitrary rules. At a meal that conjures up Carroll’s Mad Hatter’s Tea party, Angus is advised to have his soup “before it gets warm”.⁶¹ Like Alice, Angus enters a boundary world that lies between childhood and adulthood, a place where he will confront both sexuality and identity - the yoked hurdles confronting all Sumner Locke Elliott’s protagonists.

The young Sumner’s ‘post custody battle’ holiday in the Blue Mountains marked his entry into a realm of doubt and confusion where adults’ assurances that “everything would be alright” no longer rang true. While very few of Sumner Locke Elliott’s early experiences in Australia escaped his author’s scrutiny, and most of them were translated from fact into fiction, one notable exception was his ordeal at Cranbrook School.

All his life Sumner recalled Cranbrook with loathing, as a place of misery. At ten years old, he was a timid only child, overwhelmed by his separation from all that was familiar. He survived the next two years at Cranbrook as a boarder, at a cost known only to him. “I hated the world of watered milk, cold showers and masters out of Dotheboy’s Hall,” he later commented.⁶²

⁶¹ *Edens Lost* p. 41.

⁶² “The Novel Approach”, *The Guide*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 Feb 1989.

As a defence, he donned the mask of the wit, the mimic, entertaining his classmates in lieu of becoming one of them. To impress them further, and no doubt to rile Jessie, he took up smoking - eventually becoming a "sixty-a-day" fanatic - a habit he did not break until near the end of his life. During his 'incarceration' at Cranbrook he began to develop his public face and imaginative talents to overcome his daily misery there. It is strange, perhaps, that his boarding-school days were never portrayed in his novels.⁶³ Until the day he died, he never uttered a kind word about Cranbrook. In most of his interviews he mentions his old school with utter contempt, relieved only by his gleeful story of revenge: he caught scarlet fever there and infected most of the other 'inmates' before they all broke up for the long Christmas holidays.⁶⁴

However, according to Irene Thirkell, an old friend, Sumner was introduced to radio acting and theatre at Cranbrook. An English Master⁶⁵ who had a passion for acting and was a member of the Independent Theatre helped him to gain an audition for the part of a dying child, in a radio play put on by George Edwards, the famous 'Man of a Thousand Voices'. Sumner landed the role,

⁶³ As a young boy, SLE used Cranbrook as his model for the school in his first successful play, *The Twins of Twinmount*. This was written during his first year at Neutral Bay High, possibly as a means of exorcising the Cranbrook experience.

⁶⁴ SLE to me, 1990,

⁶⁵ John Alden; friends believe that he also arranged SLE's introduction to Doris Fitton who ran the Independent.

establishing with the radio mogul a connection that may have helped him into the radio career he enjoyed later in his life.

The scarlet fever he shared with the rest of Cranbrook sent the young boy home into the care of Lily who, as Jessie readily agreed, would be more able to cope with the sick child than she would herself. During his recuperation Jessie suddenly died.

It was January - the hottest month in the height of the summer in Australia - and I remember that, as a child, I displayed no emotion whatever at the funeral. I was dry-eyed to everybody's surprise... . And when we came back from the cemetery - she was buried in my mother's grave - when we came back from the cemetery, that night there was a fearful thunderstorm... . I became hysterical because I was suddenly aware of the fact that she was out there alone...in this dark and frightening storm and all my emotion came to the fore... .⁶⁶

Sumner's memories of Jessie's phobia and of her funeral plagued him on a trip back to Australia in 1974 when, as a successful and established author, he took the train from Sydney city to suburban Sutherland to visit his mother's grave. "It was a bright sunny day when I left but during the journey the clouds began gathering and on my arrival at the cemetery there was this violent thunderstorm which broke with such ferocity that I thought 'she's still after me'."⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Richard Kelly Tipping interview, 1985.

⁶⁷ SLE to me, 1990. A similar account appears in his article "Against Nostalgia".

Sumner developed an ambivalence towards Jessie over the years. Through his writing, he endeavoured to exorcise his childhood hostility towards her and he eventually reached an understanding of her. In one interview he even claimed that he loved her, yet told the same interviewer that the only thing Jessie had ever done to please him in his childhood was to die.⁶⁸ In a private letter to an old friend just prior to the release of *Careful, He Might Hear You*, he confided: "I thought the book would make me feel different about Jess but it hasn't really...".⁶⁹ Years later, when publicising his eighth novel, a more confident and frank Sumner Locke Elliott reconsidered the catharsis he had once claimed as the role of his first novel: "Catharsis? Not as much as I thought it would be. There's still some bitterness - I dream about it. But there's no way you can re-write the past...".⁷⁰ Yet even after saying this, he kept trying. In his old age Sumner reflected on Jessie's departure.

In my first novel, *Careful, He Might Hear You*...(the thought occurs to me more than occasionally that it was deliberate homicide), I contrived to have her die in a ferry accident. In real life (never as authentic to me as the fiction), she died as a result of the heart condition she had had for many years... .⁷¹

68 Richard Kelly Tipping interview, 1985.

69 SLE, Letter from America, 12 April 1963.

70 Sally Macmillan, "Sumner Locke Elliott: The fuse that sparks a masterpiece", *Weekend Australian*, Feb 8-9, 1986.

71 SLE, "Against Nostalgia".

During his years of torment, he no doubt had often wished Jessie dead, and her death recurs in his books. As with his mother, he gives Jessie many chances in his books to redeem herself but, falling short, she is always killed off in the end.⁷² There are several parallels between Sumner's mother and his aunt Jessie in his life and his fiction: as his mother's death gave him physical life, so his aunt's death gave him emotional and spiritual freedom, a catharsis that figures prominently in his writing. Sumner was 11 years old when Jessie died - her timing could not have been better. This liberation began with his longed-for reunion with Lily and George.

My whole life was changed and...I went to live with my...aunt Lily for the rest of my childhood and pre-adult years, and we lived first of all in Cremorne and then we lived in Neutral Bay, so I went to Neutral Bay High School, just the public school, where I completed if you want to call it my education...⁷³

While his transition from misery to a happier state was not as rapid as this recollection suggests, he spent his last primary school year at Cranbrook not as a boarder but as a day boy, before he was old enough to enter Neutral Bay Intermediate High School in the summer of 1930.

⁷² SLE was fascinated by Lizzie Borden who was acquitted of the axe murder of her parents in 1892, although many believed her guilty. She became part of American folklore. Borden, too, was kept a virtual prisoner in her own home. Not long after arriving in America SLE visited Lizzie's grave, picking the lone dandelion there. His interest in her character continued into his old age, as he attended a summer costume party in New Hampshire in 1990 dressed as Lizzie Borden.

⁷³ Hazel De Berg interview, 1970.

As a child, his survival throughout his tormented years had depended upon his knowledge of the unwavering love Lily and George gave him, and upon his own developing ability to escape misery and anxiety through his imagination. Free of the emotional see-saw of his childhood, he entered his adolescent years with a new sense of security that promised a far brighter future.

Chapter Three: The whole thing comes before me like a picture

Sumner Locke Elliott is a schoolboy in Sydney, NSW Australia. He is only 12 years of age and yet he is already astonishing his friends with his theatre lore and his plays. He has never been behind the scenes of any theatre and yet he conducts his own with confidence and not only institutes stage reforms but explains the necessity for them. His theater is a toy one and the actors are puppets. His spotlight is an electric torch, his orchestra a gramophone.

Sumner prepares and manipulates all the figures that appear on the stage, doing the speaking for each one, after the style of a Punch and Judy show, but with more comprehensiveness, owing to the wide range of characters... . [H]e has prepared and produced more than a dozen plays, and hopes "when he grows up" to produce his plays in a real theater. He has had his toy theater for three years, commencing as a playwright at nine. Each play runs for at least four weeks to the delight of his fellow students. He prepares his own "bills of the play", cards and programs... . [He] says about the preparation of his plays: "I can't sit at a table to write stories...The whole thing comes before me like a picture. When I have the rhythm of the story I sew it together with dialogue."

*(Christian Science Monitor
Boston, December, 1930)*

Throughout his childhood years of emotional turmoil, Sumner retreated more and more into his imagination. On his ninth

birthday he received a small toy theatre, complete with a set of 20 jointed cardboard figures, as a gift from Lily and Blanche.¹ Fascinated by Hollywood movies, adventure novels,² the tales of the theatre told to him by Blanche - his actress aunt - and stories of his mother's success as a playwright, the young boy soon set about devising stories to be enacted by the figures of his newly acquired miniature theatre. With practice, he became adept at choreographing their movements about the tiny stage.

In his last year as a boarder at Cranbrook he invented exotic situations and encounters for these figures he came to think of as his 'actors'. His imagination soared, at the expense of his schoolwork and, as a consequence, playbills and advertising leaflets drawn up by the young playwright in pencil were riddled with spelling errors. However, his memory for his characters' dialogue never failed. The voice training he had endured under Jessie's reign - which was reinforced at Cranbrook - had produced an affected speech for which he was later labelled "sissy" at Neutral Bay High School, but which helped him to modulate his voice for his various character inventions.

He first called his small theatre "The Empire" but soon changed the name to "The Regal", remarking that there were

1 "As the Twig is Bent", *Sun*, Sydney, 20 April 1930.

2 SLE told me that his favourite childhood novel was Baroness Orczy's *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1905). Sir Percy Blakeney, a master of disguise, was his hero.

already “so many Empires all over the world.”³ By the time of his release from Cranbrook and enrolment at the State Intermediate High School at Neutral Bay⁴ at the beginning of 1930, Sumner had become quite the master of his craft - inventing the plays, performing the characters’ parts as well as moving their figures about the stage, and attracting an audience. “Come and see the wonders of The Regal Theatre,” his advertisement invited. “Sydney’s most noted playhouse” it proclaimed below the credit announcing “S.L. Elliott” as “Owner, Producer and Manager”. In his new school he found a ready audience for his entertainment. A local newspaper reported in April 1930:

Sumner Locke Elliott, aged 12 years, thinks and lives in terms of the theatre... . He has written 13 plays, which he produces himself, and each play runs for about four weeks. He issues dodgers, advertising cards, and programmes, all hand-lettered by himself... . Sumner has all his plays off word perfect... . During the production...[he] talks for each of the characters, changing his voice as required. He manipulates each of the figures from the wings... . His spotlight is a powerful torch, and a gramophone the orchestra. He paints all his own drop curtains to suit his many changes of scene... . Despite his youth, Sumner impresses with his astonishing vocabulary... . His theatre has become a real thing; he criticises the productions of the legitimate stage from his own viewpoint, and

³ “As The Twig is Bent”, *Sun*, Sydney.

⁴ Students attended until the end of their third year at secondary level, then sat for their Intermediate Certificate. To continue their secondary education they had to transfer to another school.

elaborates his theories about stage craft with ease... .⁵

As this article suggests, Sumner Locke Elliott had found his feet. Besides running his small theatre as a professional concern, changing the programme regularly and advertising it with fliers and leaflets, he took a stand on particular issues of theatre politics. One of the fliers the young boy passed around the audience at his play *The Red Raven* urged them to support a petition against a proposed higher amusement tax.

HANDS OFF THE THEATRES
DO NOT ALLOW THE
HIGHER AMUSMENT TAX
TO COME INTO USSE
IT WILL MEAN DASASTER
CLOSING OF THEATRES
ACTORS OUT OF WORK
MORE TAX FOR YOW
SIGN THE PROTEST
AGAINST IT
NOW!

Certainly, George and Lily's political awareness and Blanche's love of theatre are both evident in the young boy's astuteness, even if

⁵ *Sun*, Sydney, 20 April 1930. A copy of this article was no doubt sent to the *Christian Science Monitor* in Boston by Agnes as a similar story appeared there in Dec 1930. Both are SLE's first press clippings.

his spelling must have had many of his teachers shaking their heads - not all perhaps with 'amusment'.⁶

While the children of his new school may have accepted him as a continual provider of entertainment, the boy remained a loner.⁷ He had classmates rather than friends. During his first year at Neutral Bay School he immersed himself in his cardboard 'company of players', his substitutes for friends; several of his early playbills refer to them as "girls and boys".⁸ They gave him a passport to his classmates' acceptance if not to a sense of belonging. The 20 puppets became his actor colleagues with whom he could share his obsession with all things theatrical. They were, in every sense, his 'company'; they helped stage the 'wondrous' events his leaflets advertised, and as his companions they helped him fill the lonely hollows of his life.

All his spare time was taken up with his ensemble of players. He could redress, and recast them any way he wished in any setting he imagined. But outside the parameters of his current play, each one retained its own identity: each figure was real to him, an actor he could cast in a particular role in a play. The best know of all modern puppets, Punch and Judy, were always the same on and off

⁶ Original flier is in his Scrapbook, SLE Collection, BU.

⁷ According to Gordon Kimberley, fellow school pupil. (GK to me, Coffs Harbour, 1991.)

⁸ Playbill for "The Purple Envelope", SLE Collection, BU.

the stage, but when Sumner Locke Elliott's performers came offstage they resumed their everyday identities. In his pencilled programme⁹ for his play "The Painted Clown" the characters of the play appear on the left of the cast list, and the 'real' names of the puppets are on the right.

CAST

MAGOR (sic) LEES	.....	REX GRIFFIN
MAJORY LEES	.....	PEGGY BOULT
JIM (THE CLOWN)	.....	REGI STAR
THE CIRCUS MAN	.....	GEORGE PUNT
CIRCUS LADIE (sic)	.....	KATH CLINE
SUSAN (THE MAID)	.....	PHILLIS PARKES

But offstage, too, Sumner continued to flesh out the 'real' lives of these actors. Some of his principal performers appeared in starring roles in many plays. Like their counterparts in professional theatre companies, occasionally one of these actors decided to marry, go abroad or perhaps retire. The cover for *The Painted Clown* programme, for example, informed the audience that in this play "Our Pet, Peggie Boulton makes her last appearance". In the behind the scenes world where the young playwright/producer was absorbed in casting, costuming, set design, rehearsals and memorising dialogue, each figure had a name, personality, history and perhaps a future. Rosie Reading, Peggie Boulton, Regi Star, George Brian, Monica Day, Richard Moore, Phillis Dickson, John True, Mary Black, and Ethel Cameron were some of the names who shone

beneath the banner of Sumner's Regal Theatre. The star of *The River of Night* was "Ethel Cameron", and her portrait, captioned "BEAUTIFUL ETHEL CAMERON", was hastily pencilled below the cast list and synopsis inside the programme cover. These actor companions became so real to Sumner that he shared snippets from their private lives with his audiences in the manner of a Hollywood gossip columnist. "Green Room Gossip" informed theatregoers that "Rosie Reading has retired from the stage for good. She is to be married shortly. 'I am settling down to have a family,' says Rosie. Her company have dispersed and gone abroad."¹⁰

Although inevitably the young boy outgrew his puppet theatre and the ensemble to whom he gave life, it did much to develop his creativity and greatly influenced his mature prose style as a novelist. As a boy, Sumner wrote plays casting his puppet actors in certain roles, choosing their cardboard crayon-coloured figures from his property box, dressing and reshading them, before controlling their movements on stage; but behind the curtain he also stepped inside their personas to act out their parts in their voices. As a novelist he approached his books in the same manner. As well as conferring his own experience on certain characters, for others he collected the shapes and personalities of the people in his life from the property box of his memory then redrew and recast them for his books, his voice becoming one with their voices. For

¹⁰ From "As The Twig is Bent" *Sun*, Sydney.

this reason, Sumner never adopted the first person in his fiction. “I have avoided the use of the first person because I find it confining...not being able to get into the minds of other characters is an irretrievable loss to me,” he once observed.¹¹ His ten published novels are written through “different points of view, different consciousnesses and different voices”.¹² His narrative style is a merger of free indirect discourse and stream of consciousness where there is rarely any intervention by a narrator. As the unobtrusive narrator of his novels, Sumner adopted much the same role as he had in boyhood when he was the puppeteer, behind the curtains of his little stage. But as a novelist, Sumner traded stage devices for language devices. Landscape and events in his novels are encoded, experienced rather than described, seen through each character’s view. In a cast of often dysfunctional characters there is no privileging of any one viewpoint, consciousness or voice above another. Yet like his early puppeteer self, Sumner the writer, is each character within his books, speaking as them, thinking through them, **being** them.

...I really feel that I am the other people. I feel that I am the girl that’s locked out of the hotel in *Edens Lost*...that I am the terrible man in *Going* who takes over the world...that I am both...male and female...both in love and out of love, in torment and

11 SLE “Against Nostalgia”.

12 This is a loose interpretation by Fowler of Bakhtin’s term: The Dialogic Text. (See M.H. Abram’s *Glossary of Literary Terms*, 5th Edition, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc 1988.) Of particular relevance is Bakhtin’s essay “Discourse in the Novel” in his collection *The Dialogic Imagination*, (ed. Michael Holquist, transl. Emerson & Holquist, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1981.)

out of torment, I always feel that I am the character
that's speaking... . 13

So much of his talent was honed during those early years of grappling with the dynamics of running his puppet theatre, that Sumner found confidence not only in himself but in his creative ability, which gave him hope for the future.

In his first year at Neutral Bay High School he managed to lure some of his fellow students into the wonders of acting. By the year's end, he had swapped his puppets for flesh and blood actors from his classroom and cemented his place among them. While he never achieved any close friendship, he found living, breathing companions who could share his enthusiasm and perform his plays. As one of his company of players recalled: "He was always a loner but we all knew who was in charge when it came to the plays. We rehearsed at his house and we did just what he told us to do. He did the writing, directing, choreographing and producing".¹⁴ The boy's gradual acceptance into this new community found expression in *Fairyland* in which his alter ego, Seaton Daly, progresses from the role of alien to that of confidant in the circle of his fellow students at high school.

¹³ Richard Kelly Tipping interview, NYC, 1985.
I am grateful to Prof. J. Wieland for drawing my attention to a link here with Katherine Mansfield who similarly commented about characters in her writing, claiming. "I have been this man...this woman."

¹⁴ Gordon Kimberley to me, Coffs Harbour, 1991.

Sumner's first production with his new company, The Enterprise Dramatic Club, was called *The Twins of Twinmount*, for which he was writer, director and producer, and also appeared in the lead part. At last he could move life-sized actors about the full-sized stage of his school hall. He did not fully relinquish his treasured toy theatre, but used it throughout his schooldays to choreograph his live players' movements.¹⁵ The play, a melodrama, was successfully performed¹⁶ as part of the Christmas holidays breakup, (which marks the end of the school year in Australia), and Sumner recalled, with some embarrassment, that he delivered his curtain speech "with perfect aplomb and enormous conceit".¹⁷

His "conceit" - part of his growing confidence and success - also manifested itself by the sudden appearance of a hyphen between his surnames. Now he was "Sumner Locke-Elliott". He maintained this emblem of sophistication for the rest of his Australian years, but shed it when he began life in America.¹⁸ On a return visit he made to Australia in 1974, there was some confusion over whether or not to hyphenate his last names, and according to *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Sumner said he "had the hyphen

15 Gordon Kimberley to me, 1991.

16 This production of *Twins of Twinmount* received favourable mention in *My Lady's Journal*, 6 Dec, 1930, Mosman, Sydney. This inspired SLE and his company to carry on the following year.

17 Hazel De Berg interview, 1970.

18 SLE admired New York art society for its democratic ways - titles and pomposity held no sway. In *Careful* and *Fairyland*, the most objectionable children have double-barreled names, and the judge - who is a figure of ridicule in *Careful*, *He Might Hear You* - is Hay-Piggot.

removed in the hospital in America”.¹⁹ “I became terribly conceited throughout my high school years and then during my radio and theatre days,” he later confessed with a shrug of embarrassment.²⁰ The withdrawn and shy child cloistered at Cranbrook emerged at Neutral Bay High as a precocious, apparently egotistical adolescent. Yet, as is so often the case in such reversals of character, the emotionally battered self was merely masked by the new experience of sudden recognition and acceptance.

During 1931, the boy began sending his short stories to “Sunbeams”, the children’s section of Sydney’s *Sun*, with pleasing results. He contributed to these pages over the next two years, sometimes earning himself as much as 7s 6d per story, a handsome sum for the time.²¹ His compositions moved from tales of implausible meetings and incredible characters to well-structured stories woven out of natural dialogue that had become his special strength. His story “Mrs. Jonquil’s Great Idea”, written when he was fourteen, reveals the young writer’s growing talent for evoking character with the barest amount of dialogue, and his flair for that irony and humour which were to become the trademark elements of his prose as a mature writer. Foreshadowed too are techniques of postmodernist writing that “dissolves the line between critical

¹⁹ “Author home for a taste of Australia”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 April 1974.

²⁰ SLE to me, 1990.

²¹ Awards of this amount to SLE’s stories “Mrs. Jonquil’s Great Idea” and “After a Substantial Reward”, Sunbeams, 1932. Scrapbook of clippings, SLE Collection, BU.

and creative practice”.²² Here was Sumner’s first attempt at the self-reflexive form of ‘telling a story about story-telling’ or using art to comment on art, a form he perfected in his later plays and novels.

Mrs. Jonquil’s Great Idea

“I have an idea,” said mother.

The whole Jonquil family ceased eating tapioca pudding and began to listen.

“I was thinking,” went on Mrs. Jonquil, “now that winter’s here, we must do something to amuse ourselves in the evening. I thought we could all start a small competition among ourselves. We must write a story by the end of a week; then on Friday night everyone will read a story and the winner will have one of my nice home-made sponge cakes.”

There was silence for a moment, then a burst of applause and cheering came from the Jonquil family, and all agreed that it was a splendid idea.

The following Friday evening the family gathered round the blazing fire with bundles of suspicious-looking manuscripts.

Everyone was sure he was going to win the much-liked sponge cake. Father was elected chairman and called upon Mother to read her story. Mother coughed proudly, and commenced:-

“It was a cold bleak night. Little Emma was wandering through the woods, gathering dew drips from the cabbages. Baby elephants ran from bush to bush, and the snow was deep. ‘Oh,’ moaned the child, ‘won’t somebody buy my mothballs and tie pins?’ The child struggled--”

“Enough!” interrupted Mr. Jonquil. “Little Emma will have to go on selling tie pins--”

“Anyway,” said Mother, bursting into tears, “it is a

very good story. It gets better as it goes on.”

“No doubt,” soothed Mr. Jonquil. “It couldn’t get worse. Joan next.”

Joan Jonquil, a slight young girl, rose to her feet.

“‘Her Midnight Adventure’,” she announced.

“Save us,” gasped the rest of the family.

“He held her--”

“Stop!” commanded her father. “That’s no good. It’s far too silly.”

“Well,” said Joan, “it’s better than Mother’s.”

“I like that!” cried Mrs. Jonquil, annoyed. “You wicked girl--”

“Order, order!” shouted Mr. Jonquil. “You’re next Tommy.”

Tommy, well fed on tapioca pudding, came forward proudly.

“‘Oceans of Blood’,” he read. “‘By James Jonquil’. ‘Aha,’ cried the bold, bad pirate. ‘I am going to make you walk the plank!’ He pushed his red sword through a sailor’s hat and --”

“Save us!” gurgled Mr. Jonquil. “This is awful. Not one of you can write a good enough story to win the cake.”

“Now you read your own story,” said Joan.

Mr. Jonquil blushed, and mumbled that he had not had time to write one.

“I suggest,” said Joan, “that we burn our stories and all share the cake.”

“Here, here!” cried the family in chorus.

Then the stories were thrown into the fire. “Little Emma” moaned as the flames licked her. “Aha,” laughed the bold, bad pirate for the last time as he became a cinder.

“Now,” said Mr. Jonquil, “where’s the cake?”

“Oh,” faltered Mrs. Jonquil, “I--forgot to make it.”²³

The elements of this story recall his earlier childhood composition, “The Little Flame”, where fire also evokes both family community

and destruction. Here, too is a reflection of Sumner's own mother as he perceived her - a distracted figure, full of bright ideas, but someone who ultimately disappoints her family and leaves them wanting.

Sumner continued to work on his plays for The Enterprise Dramatic Club, churning out several melodramatic works, such as *Low Lightning*, *A Visitor of Darkness* and *The Lady Lydia*, as well as submitting short stories for publication. His career as a writer advanced when he was introduced to Ivan Menzies, a visiting actor from an English Gilbert and Sullivan company. Suddenly he had been 'discovered' and his writing praised by a professional from abroad.²⁴ An impressionable Sumner was taken under Menzies' wing and was invited to join him backstage during performances of *HMS Pinafore* in Sydney's Her Majesty's Theatre where the young boy was made privy to "the rudiments of stagecraft".²⁵

Publicity abounded for both the visitor and his prodigy during the weeks of Menzies' stay. The newly discovered talent of young Sumner Locke Elliott was compared with that of his famous mother. The general opinion was that "young Elliott" had inherited his

²⁴ A happening which may have given rise to a distrust harboured by Sumner Locke Elliott throughout his life of the imported actor or celebrity. Ivan Menzies, an 'unknown' in Australia, could have been remarkable only for his overseas origins, such was the state of mind of most Australians at that time, a mentality which many might argue has varied little over the intervening decades.

²⁵ *Daily Telegraph*, Sydney, December, 1931. Part of scrapbook held in SLE Collection, BU.

mother's gift.²⁶ His recital at a children's concert, staged by Ivan Menzies in Her Majesty's Theatre brought him accolades.²⁷

Ivan Menzies...led forward a small boy and introduced him to the audience as a young prodigy who had already written fifteen plays... . The boy proceeded with perfect aplomb to recite "Captain Reece of the Mantelpiece", one of Gilbert's "Bab Ballads"... . As an encore number the gifted child recited an original poem of his own in praise of the roses that he saw while on holiday at the house of a relative in the country... .²⁸

Sumner was fourteen years old at the time of this event, but he was small for his age. The original poem he recited was written as thanks for a visit to his wealthy Clark relatives of Glenara Homestead in country Victoria.

"Corner of Glenara Garden"

Flowers wonderful and rare,
 Trees, blooming - others bare,
 Underneath - a garden pond
 A fountain fair - and all around
 Most beautiful of ferns and trees,
 A garden seat - the hum of bees
 That flash in sunlight - and abound
 Rose leaves - fallen, scent the ground,
 And, which give most utmost joy
 Scents of 'rambler' and 'Black boy'.

Up above - a terraced green

²⁶ Sydney's newspapers, *The World* and *Daily Telegraph* both agreed on this point (Dec 1931).

²⁷ "Children's Matinee, 'Cox and Box' and 'Pinafore'", *Sydney Morning Herald*, Nov, 1931; Scrapbook, SLE Collection, BU.

²⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald*, Nov 1931

And then - a lawn with sundial seen,
 A gravel path with rows of trees,
 Flowers which no one ever sees -
 In city streets or smoking towns
 But here just mossy-spreading downs.
 And far above - a tower of stone
 Where many flowers and heath are grown
 And further down a little creek
 Where small wavelets seem to speak.
 Higher up - some old dead trees
 Seem to leave - just memories.²⁹

Inspired by his success, Sumner began after-school classes in elocution and acting in Rowe Street in the city under the direction of Thea Rowe. Here he first encountered young Ron Randell, who became his life-long friend. Another pupil from those classes still remembers the awe in which Sumner was held by his teacher and his fellow students: "Even then his star was already shining brightly".³⁰ Tiny Rowe Street, destined to become a casualty to the skyscraper mentality that changed Sydney's look over the years, made a lasting impression on Sumner. Like the rest of his generation, he knew and used the small maze of connecting streets and laneways that were then the city's heart. On his visit to Sydney in 1974, after many years in America, he was appalled by the old city's destruction in the name of site consolidation.³¹ A passage in *Fairyland* evokes that now lost tranquil part of the city that had all

29 SLE Collection, BU.

30 Gwen Loxton to me, Cronulla, NSW, Aug 1992.

31 SLE to me, 1990.

the charm and intimacy of a meeting-place.

Tucked away between Pitt and George streets was Rowe Street, a lane of pleasant little shops like Margaret Jaye's *Objets* and a small coffee place called rhapsodically *Rue de la Paix*, which had only six small tables covered with pretty blue-and-white-check tablecloths and with a baby pot of geraniums on each one... .

(*Fairyland* p. 48)

Returning to Neutral Bay school at the beginning of 1932, the boy put to use what he had learned from his backstage tours and experience on stage with Ivan Menzies. He continued writing plays for his school, but now sought out other audiences beyond those of the school arena by entering his company in the competition of the Children's Drama Festival that was jointly run with the Junior Theatre League. Their production of his one-act play, "The Doctor's Debtors", won the all-boys section, and local and city press declared it a "well-sustained" and "well played comedy".³²

"THE DOCTOR'S DEBTORS" Sumner Locke Elliott
 "The Enterprise Dramatic Club"
 Produced by Sumner Locke Elliott

Katie (a housemaid).....Gordon Kimberley
 Reggie Taylor.....Bernhard Goodman
 Lady Margaret Darnley.....Sumner Locke-Elliott
 Sir Richard Darnley.....Geoff Rawlinson
 Edwin Rambeau.....Jack Roberts
 Dr. Saunders.....Alex Basford
 Policeman.....Norman Maxwell³³

³² Articles appeared in *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Sun*, *The World* and *Mosman Daily*.

³³ Copy of cast list from Scrapbook, SLE Collection, BU.

After this success the playwright and his troupe were then invited to conduct a costumed reading of another of Sumner's earlier plays, "Dynella Comes to Dinner", for the Macquarie Book Club play-reading circle at the end of the year. They also planned to produce more plays in Mosman.

While Sumner's literary endeavours were marked by one success after another through his third year at Neutral Bay High school, life at home had become more sombre. For several years his uncle George had battled an illness to which he finally succumbed in 1932. As George Baines in *Careful, He Might Hear You*, Sumner's beloved uncle is evoked by the repeated term, "sleepy"; he is a lethargic, forgetful and resigned character whose early promise has been dulled by failure. Surrounded by vibrant women characters, George reclines insipidly on the edges of life.

Hearing George's slow, regular breathing in the dark, hardly any different in sleep from when he was awake and walking around... .

George leaning on the spade, dreaming. Dreaming of what? Of jobs? Of money? Of Parliament and things that never came to them?

George...his creased face and hunched shoulders warned her that it had been another day of fruitless job hunting... .

(*Careful, He Might Hear You* pp. 11, 156, 206)

Although George Burns is fictionally depicted in his nephew's books as a kind family member, a loyal husband, and an upright citizen, he is also usually drawn as a retiring, inactive character. In most of Sumner's novels the patriarch is often just a background presence, a marginal figure. Two such failed patriarchs who reflect his uncle George are the judge in *Edens Lost* and William Lord in *Waiting for Childhood*. George Burns' failure to gain a second term in office in the 1917 federal election left him a broken man in many ways. In maturity, Sumner recalled his uncle as "a living wonder but not a very bright man...[who]...actually did lose the Labor election...by campaigning for prohibition." Incredulously, he added: "Imagine prohibition in a drinking country like Australia!"³⁴ The stress of the years when Jessie Locke pursued her campaign of terror had exacerbated George's fatigue. Consequently the ailing George was a presence rather than a player in his nephew's life. He doesn't appear at all in *Water Under the Bridge* or *Fairyland*, and in these novels there is simply no male character in the family unit of surrogate mother and son. Much as Sumner had loved his uncle, the man's passing changed little in his nephew's fast unfolding future.

The following year, 1933, brought the young playwright back to school to repeat his final year because, ever the poor scholar, he

³⁴ SLE, Letter from America, 12 April.1963.

had failed to gain his Intermediate Certificate. The experience gave Sumner a lasting scepticism about education in general: “Brilliant scholars, especially if they are good in everything, become jack-of-all-trades and they do not sustain themselves in any particular branch of learning. I finished about thirty-sixth from the top in a class of forty... . The boy most likely to succeed at school is the boy you never hear of again.”³⁵

During this same year, however, he consolidated his reputation as a successful playwright. He joined The Junior Theatre League, set up a new company of players called “The Masqueraders”, and wrote a play, *Storm*, which won the inaugural award of the Nellie Stewart cup, named after “the great actress Nellie Stewart who was the sort of Bernhardt of Australian theatre”, as Sumner put it.³⁶ On its front cover the author declared the play to be “a very tense drama in one act”.³⁷ Sumner, this time, was modest about his success: “I remember...not telling too many people because there was only one other entrant in that...section.”³⁸ However, he gained much publicity and was still being invited to produce *Storm* for various theatre groups more than two years later. What Sumner has referred to as “swarms of one-act plays”

³⁵ Clyde Packer, *No Return Ticket*.

³⁶ Hazel De Berg interview, 1970, in which SLE described this play *Storm* as “a tremendous melodrama, all taking place on the Cornish cliffs, about smugglers and World War I and spies and...I played an 85 year-old fisherman in it...”.

³⁷ Original copy, SLE Collection, BU.

³⁸ Hazel De Berg interview, 1970.

followed this success and in these he often played “the heroine in borrowed finery”.³⁹ Playing female roles at an all-boys school was by this time second nature to him. He had performed the leading lady role in his many of own plays, and had been outstanding as Dynella in *Dynella Comes to Dinner* and Lady Margaret Darnley in *The Doctor’s Debtors*. This practice of gender-hopping in his plays foreshadowed the mature novelist’s habit of conferring his personal experience on female as well as male characters. “I change sexes with the books,”⁴⁰ he once said, later admitting that in his 1970 novel, *Edens Lost*, the three main characters, “Angus, Bea...and Eve...all have aspects of me in them.”⁴¹

It was also during 1933 that Sumner began working as a radio actor with the George Edwards Players.⁴² Already an ardent fan of Edwards’ shows, which were regularly broadcast in Sydney, Sumner was overjoyed at the prospect of his audition where he would at last meet these radio celebrities in person. With the Depression gripping Sydney, and a household income depleted after the death of his uncle, paid work was also a rare opportunity for a schoolboy of 15. Many years later, Sumner described his impression of Edwards and his wife, Nell Stirling, in an article published by the *Bulletin*, as follows.

39 Hazel De Berg interview, 1970.

40 SLE to me, 1990.

41 *Sydney Morning Herald*, The Guide, 27 Feb 1989.

42 SLE to me, 1990. His recollection of the date of this audition sometimes varied.

All those diamonds at ten o'clock in the morning.

Two on each third finger... . A solid diamond wristwatch with a diamond strap...a heavy diamond brooch... . The young woman also wore a wedding ring of diamonds...She was in her late 20s...dressed in rich glossy black satin...and she wore a wide-brimmed black velvet hat...and a great deal of mascara and lipstick. Her hair was a very bright henna red...To a more discerning eye the young woman might have looked like a barmaid who had won the Irish sweepstakes...but...she appeared to me to be the most glamorous object I had ever laid eyes on and she was the nearest I had ever come to being in the presence of fame. She was Nell Stirling the radio star and I was being auditioned by her among seven other pimply-faced boys for the role of the dying young Tsarovitch in *Ivan the Terrible*.

Every Sunday evening at eight several million Australians from Sydney to Perth clustered around their...radios...to hear a whiz-bang followed by a drum beat and the announcement: "THE STARHELL HAS BURST, BRINGING YOU GEORGE EDWARDS, THE MAN WITH THE THOUSAND VOICES AND NELL STIRLING... . What the play was made very little difference. What the audience was waiting for and had been making bets on was the unique announcement of the players at the end. In a voice choking with carefully simulated incredulity the announcer would say "...the cast was as follows: Miss Havisham was played by Miss Loris Bingham, Pip as a boy was played by Master Spencer Teakle and Estella by Miss NELL STIRLING." Drum roll followed by the announcement (in shaking tones of calculated awe) that the roles of Pip as a man, Magwitch, Mr. Jaggers, Mr. Pumblechook, Herbert Pocket, Compeyson, Joe Gargery, the Dragoon, the Judge, the Innkeeper and all other parts were "ALL

PLAYED BY MR. GEORGE EDWARDS.”

...The Depression public took to Mr. Edwards and his 1000 voices with a fervor that verged on the hysterical... .

So I was thunderstruck with awe at meeting them and thrilled when I was chosen for the Tsarovitch (he was limited in playing children's roles to one child voice) and astonished at his ordinariness. He was small and portly and in his middle 50s but the real surprise was that he stammered badly (a secret well-kept from the public) and it was unlike any stammer I have ever heard. It occurred in the middle of a word so that “bottle” came out “bot-OT-le” and “telephone” became “tel-EL-ephone”...[but] I never heard him stammer on the air, not once in all the 12 years I was in the Edwards' organisation... .

To watch him perform, especially for the first time, was an incredible, even eerie, experience. You were not always sure where the voices were coming from; there was something ventriloquial about it and especially the knack he had for overlapping one voice upon another, a manner of interrupting himself. For example, a scene from *Oliver Twist* in which he would be playing Fagin, Sikes, the Artful Dodger and Oliver. He would bend slightly to the side of the microphone for Fagin hardly raising his voice from a whine so that, “Ah, come here my pretty” appeared to be coming from the nose alone and then he would pull back quickly, becoming taller and menacing for a deep, rasping voice that was Bill Sikes and then, springing a little to one side, come the piping voice of the Artful Dodger, and squatting down and rolling his eyes up he produced the child's voice of Oliver.⁴³

Until Sumner became a full-time employee of the Edwards' organisation late in 1936, he continued as a contract player, gradually building a reputation, an interest and a bank of knowledge at a time when radio was flourishing.

Gaining his Intermediate Certificate at the end of 1933, the sixteen-year-old then made the announcement, which could hardly have been unexpected, that he wanted to go into the theatre. He remembered years later that although they were not surprised, his announcement understandably dismayed the family. They did not forbid it however. As Sumner later realised, in the Great Depression "it was impossible to get a job in the theatre", with professional companies cutting back and even experienced actors working less and less. "Doris Fitton was the only thing but that was amateur and you weren't paid."⁴⁴ Yet his immediate family - his aunts Lily, Agnes and Blanche - had always supported his expanding interest in the theatre. They had provided his means, listened to his rehearsals, attended his performances and then lovingly gathered together his press clippings.

After family discussion, a compromise was reached. He was persuaded to extend his education at the expense of someone he always referred to in interviews as, "one of my other numerous

⁴⁴ Hazel De Berg interview, 1970.

aunts". In fact, a small investment from sales of his mother's memorial poetry collection probably financed it.⁴⁵ His variation of memory on this point could have had something to do with resenting his mother's intrusion into his life. He recalled: "They asked me...to take special classes in French and in journalism and also in typing, which I was against but have found out since what a blessing it was that I did...actually learn to become a proficient typist."⁴⁶

This special training, along with his theatrical background and obvious flair for the dramatic, did in fact gain Sumner a job as office and errand boy with J.C. Williamson's in Sydney in August the following year. He was soon given a higher position and became an indispensable cog in the company's advertising department.⁴⁷

But a role behind the scenes was not Sumner's goal in life. Throughout 1933 he had entered a screen personality competition run jointly by *The Australian Women's Weekly*, the Sydney Eisteddfod, Cinesound and the Cinema Academy. From sixty other hopefuls Sumner - the youngest competitor - was chosen as one of the five male finalists. His notoriety soared during the series of

⁴⁵ This would have appealed to the Lockes who all would have remembered that their sister Sumner Locke had her own aspirations about going into theatre in her youth, much to the disapproval of their Clergy father. Like her son, Sumner Locke also was offered a compromise and ended up clerking in an office while performing in amateur theatre at night. This history also provided her start in writing for the theatre.

⁴⁶ Hazel De Berg interview, 1970.

⁴⁷ Article in *Everyone's* June, 1936.

heats and finals of the competition, which lasted for several months and were lavishly covered by *The Australian Women's Weekly* and closely monitored by their huge readership. While Sumner failed to win the screen test, his success in reaching the finals made it imperative for him to find a more serious theatre career.

His plays began to appear in various amateur productions in Sydney. Having outgrown the Junior Theatre League, he joined the Studio Theatre Club with groups of other young hopeful playwrights and producers, including Trafford Whitelock, and formed his own company, The Tank Stream Players. Before the year was out, his insatiable appetite for theatrical achievement led the sixteen-year-old to Sydney's Independent Theatre and the great Doris Fitton, whom he always acknowledged as "his single most important influence".⁴⁸

PART 2

YOUTH

It may have been at this exact point of time that a subtle transformation took place... . It was not yet in proportion. Like his fledgling body, his suddenly protuberant nose over the still childish mouth, the hairline startled into waves, the faint down on the cheeks not yet shaved, the youthful personality was not yet formed, shy of exposure into the unknown, awkward and coltish in the new long trousers, the heavy brogues bought on sale at Gowing's, still fresh to starched collars and to studs, dimly startled by being charged the full price at the picture theatres and on trams. But still thankful to be out of childhood.

(Fairylad p. 46)

Chapter Four: Growing Secret Antlers

[A]t twelve years of age...he had become quietly aware, perhaps ashamed, of his knowledge of growing secret antlers, possibly wings. That amongst these people he was a changeling... . But not even...in a whisper or a dream did he ever voice it. "I am different."

(*Fairyland* p. 34)

During his adolescent and early teenage years Sumner Locke Elliott's awareness of his homosexuality deepened, although he did not openly confront it until just before his death when he wrote his last novel, *Fairyland*. In this, Sumner described what it was like to grow up gay in Sydney during the 1930s and 40s. "After 50 years of secreting a part of myself, writing *Fairyland* was like going to a psychiatrist, like fresh air coming into a room," he said when the novel was released in America in 1990.¹ His homosexuality became another shadow, like his mother, to taunt him for half his life until he left Australia in search of a new identity - one that was totally his own, forged in a more tolerant environment. And long after he found that new self in America, the memory of this repressed part of him continued to influence his fictional recreation of his youth and young adulthood, the years of his success and fame in Australian theatre and radio.

¹ Susan Wyndham, "Careful, he's made himself heard at last", *The Weekend Australian*, 16-17 Jun 1990.

During the fifty years of Sumner's life before *Fairyland*, he had two courses - deception and discretion - when it came to presenting his public face. Sometimes he played the bachelor who had waited too long for marriage and children, at other times he merely placed such private matters as sexual preference and religion off-limits. Even for his maternal aunts and beloved cousins in Bacchus Marsh he sustained the charade. Heather Shugg remembers asking her cousin about his marriage prospects and him telling her that theatre was such a demanding lifestyle there was no time for marital and domestic bliss.²

In his youth Sumner's initial sense of not belonging with his peers, at school and in the working world, became intensified by his growing awareness of his homosexuality. At Neutral Bay High School, a maturing Sumner was labelled by some of his fellow students as a "snob", a "sissy", "the boy with the la de da manners and way of talking [who was]...up himself".³

During his private schooling at Cranbrook, and his time with Jessie, unconsciously he had developed expensive tastes and attitudes, and together with his exaggerated speech and sharp wit, to some of his new companions at least, this suggested a superiority

² Heather Shugg to me, 1992.

³ SLE to me, 1990, and letter to me by former Neutral Bay boy 1991.

complex. His permanent return to the working-class home of his aunt Lily and the public school system were something of a culture shock for him, although one which he was more than willing to embrace. His need to be a part of this working-class world conflicted with his taste for luxury, and this ambivalence plagued him all his life. Detesting affectation in others, he often had to confront his own. In later life, interviews often became confessionals in which Sumner purged himself of this pretentiousness and claimed his place among the ordinary people - "little Australia". In *Fairyland* Seaton Daly, with his "lofty talk", embodies the same haughty attitudes that Sumner held and despised.

Although he told the Australian press (in publicity for *Careful, He Might Hear You*) that his youth in Australia had been "peachy...a wonderful time [in which I] lost any family bitterness",⁴ this was far from true. He was merely presenting his public face to hide his private life. Sumner explored the need for such a cover-up in his last novel.

"I am different" is the truth Seaton Daly faces in *Fairyland*. In this, Sumner's most controversial book, he examines his own experience as a homosexual and the homosexual subculture that prevailed when he was growing up in Australia. *Fairyland* includes

⁴ *Australian Women's Weekly*, January 1964.

fairly explicit scenes of boyhood masturbation, adult homosexual initiation, casual sexual encounters, and descriptions of the “underworld” of toilet blocks and laundry rooms. First published in early 1990, *Fairyland* failed to emulate the success of Sumner’s other Australian novels, its subject matter perhaps proving too confrontational for a public then still immersed in the ‘blame’ issue of AIDS and the associated increase of overt homophobia in many western societies.

So Gomorrah! Gomorrah was the underground station Men’s at Wynyard, all that subterranean white-tiled netherland...where men assumed monumental nonchalance, standing around the white porcelain fixtures like mannequins, heads up innocently...but wanton, taking unearthly time buttoning up, darting lightning glances at one another with faces as immobile as marble...and late in the evening when few were there it often could be observed that there were two pairs of feet to be seen under the door of one of the pay toilets... .

(*Fairyland* pp. 154-5)

Although AIDS was not an issue in *Fairyland*, “a period book” written about the 1930s and 1940s,⁵ the novel was still challenging in 1990 because it presented not only the frustration and alienation of homosexuality but also the promiscuity. Even after preparing himself for some critical backlash, Sumner was very disappointed by what he described as “a trite and misunderstood review in the

⁵ Susan Wyndham, “Careful, he’s made himself heard at last”.

New York Times”, by “the icy silence from old friends in Australia”⁶ (to whom he always sent his first editions), and by the fact that the novel was published only in America and Australia. “Apparently it was too controversial for the British market,” he commented in disbelief.⁷

Addressing the stereotyping of homosexuals, *Fairyland* presents a wide range of characters: the creative Seaton; the humble Rat Ratcliffe; the seedy antiquarian book dealer with paedophilic leanings, Mr. Lemoyne; the egocentric actor, Byron “Buck” Hall; the gladiatorial “ocker”, Arnold; the vile yet pathetic Captain Vince Smollett; the American WWII lieutenant, Lloyd C. Manville; and the unsavoury Broadway lawyer, Skinner. Through Seaton the subculture of homosexuality is explored, and his extremely diverse supporting cast makes it impossible to define or categorise “the homosexual”. Published in Australia in 1991 - eighteen months after its American release - *Fairyland* preempted the current mainstream publishing interest in gay writing. During 1993, there was some recognition of the underrated status of this work from literary quarters,⁸ and interest from several American

⁶ SLE to me, 1990. The silence of his friends may be understood in the light of the subject matter of this novel. Such people had long maintained and assisted in the privacy of his sexuality and were now confronted with explicit scenes of sexual liaisons which he openly declared to be autobiographical. It is difficult to know what he expected from these friends although it seems he was more insecure about this book than any of his others. SLE told me he would have preferred a note saying “I hate the book” than their silence.

⁷ SLE to me, by phone, Oct 1990. In late 1994 it was published in Germany.

⁸ Peter Blazey, “Heterosexuals given the whip hand”, review of *Australian Gay and Lesbian Writing: An Anthology* (ed. Robert Dessaix), *The Weekend Review*, *The Australian* 18-19 Sept. 1993, p. 6.

film studios keen to capitalise on the success of gay theatrical works playing to packed houses on Broadway.⁹

In the gay community, as well as society in general, there is still disagreement about the degree to which personal choice, social conditioning and genetic predisposition influence a person's sexual orientation. Sumner believed that he had been born gay, and claimed that he realised he was gay when he was ten or eleven.¹⁰

Throughout his youth, he was uncomfortable about his homosexuality. He had no stable sexual relationship and his wretchedness and anxiety would later haunt the homosexual characters who appeared in almost every one of his novels. His youthful view of his sexuality was that it was a curse, a trick of Nature. Like his counterpart Seaton in *Fairyland*, Sumner formed particularly strong friendships with one or two of the young women with whom he worked in theatre and radio. The bonds of such friendships often made him wish he were heterosexual.

Some misintegrated gene had interfered with his freedom just as it interfered with his physical desire of her even when tacitly, she had many

⁹ Whitfield Cook to me, Nov./Dec. 1993.

Fairyland, like all SLE's books, is built around such natural dialogue that it offers a blue-print to the screen writer. *Careful*, *Water Under The Bridge* and *Edens Lost* were successfully adapted as screenplays, the outstanding feature of each being their use of dialogue from the books. At the filming of Jill Robb's production of *Careful*, beside their copies of the script, the actors each carried a copy of the novel which they all called "the screenplay". *About Tilly Beamis* was also adapted into a screenplay, but money was not forthcoming for this project.

¹⁰ SLE to me, 1990.

times in her generous serious way implied that he might have her; she had said, half-jokingly, “You know I’m all yours.”...So, inconsistent because of the genetic weakness, he was unable to confide in the person he loved... .

(*Fairyland* p. 118)

New York, a culture where he found “none of that feeling of skulking round in parks that there was in Sydney...[and where there were] gay bars, restaurants and movie theatres”¹¹ changed his perspective on his sexuality, yet apparently not enough for him to be totally open about it. At the end of 1949, after having made his break into American television when he was mixing socially with Broadway and film celebrities, he sent a letter to old friends in Australia describing at length the actor/playwright Emyln Williams.¹² During Sumner’s time at the Independent Theatre, his writing had been greatly influenced by Williams’ plays and he had performed in *The Corn is Green*. However when he met Williams (after a performance of *Montserrat* in which he considered the actor “brilliant”) his former idol’s mannerisms clearly disappointed him.¹³

He is charming if a trifle limp I thought. Gives you one of those limp handshakes and is a tiny bitsy pansy in his manner, walks a bit girlish and has a peculiar high voice which is rather un-ingratiating but has great manner and very

11 Susan Wyndham, “Careful, he’s made himself heard at last”.

12 These people were all married couples or single female friends; often one letter was written to be passed around the group.

13 Before his death in 1987, Emyln Williams had written two volumes of autobiography: *George* (1972) and *Emlyn* (1974). The latter acknowledged his homosexual phase.

simple and sweet. They DO say he's a bit...well you know (even with a wife) but then of course Noel's reputation is not all it should be and anyway who cares?

(Letter from America, 9 Dec 1949.)

As we all know, comments about another person tell the listener/reader as much about the speaker as the speaker's subject. Sumner's comments about Williams - and Noel Coward - display his protective device: distance by disparagement. By saying "anyway who cares?" he made an indirect appeal, perhaps for tolerance from his old friends. Comments like this continued in his letters to Australia over the next two decades. In a scathing reassessment of Hollywood in 1953, he declared: "It's a vicious town full of fear and nervous wrecks. Everyone goes to a psychiatrist, or drinks, or is queer or something."¹⁴ Until 1974, when he returned to Australia for the Adelaide Writer's Festival, Sumner maintained his sexual ambivalence among the friends from his youth. Even after almost 25 years of separation, most of these friends became aware of his sexual orientation only by innuendo in his conversation, or by guess work - after all, they were by then more worldly than they had been during their naive youth. As late as 1988, when *Waiting For Childhood* appeared in Australia, he told a journalist that he had remained a bachelor because he "couldn't be bothered with marriage and children. It was out of the question...I have time for

¹⁴ SLE, Letter from America, 15 Aug 1953.

children now, but it's too late."¹⁵ Not until *Fairyland* was released in America in 1990, when Sumner Locke Elliott was in his seventies, did he publicly declare his homosexuality.

Many of the acquaintances of his youth - those who had known him throughout his meteoric rise to fame in theatre and radio, during years of high conservatism and intolerance, have said that sexual preferences were simply never discussed: "One just didn't speak of such matters."¹⁶ Sumner himself, for whom theatre was a sympathetic milieu for homosexuality, declared after the publication of *Fairyland*: "We all knew about each other but you never said a word. There was a kind of rule about it, a gentlemen's agreement, you never discussed sex whatever."¹⁷

In this environment where one's privacy was respected, his sexuality did not interfere with the talent, imagination and creativity by which he staked his claim as a writer. John Kingsmill remembers how flamboyant a figure Sumner seemed back then.

He was highly sophisticated with touches of
Noel Coward and Cole Porter about him - he

¹⁵ Muriel Reddy (New York), "The years are sweet for Sumner", *Sun*, Melbourne, 2 Jan 1988.

¹⁶ Gordon Chater to me, 1992.

One rare exception to this rule was recalled by Leslie Rees: "It was at an Independent Theatre party and I remember sitting, having a beer with a group of men - Sumner among them - on a side verandah of someone's house. The conversation turned to homosexuality and whether this one or that one might be homosexual. A few names were mentioned and then I heard Sumner himself say: 'Sumner is'. He said it quietly and just the once. There was a stunned silence among the group - no-one said anything. The conversation then changed course and none of us ever mentioned it again." (Leslie Rees to me, 1994.)

¹⁷ Susan Wyndham, "Careful, he's made himself heard at last".

wore a bow tie and often a velvet jacket - and he already, by that time, had tinges of an American accent... . He projected himself in the theatre as though he were in a wonderful American film and he was playing a role - himself...he was a shining star...[but] he didn't fit into the outside world in Australia... .¹⁸

Beyond the artistic sanctuary of the theatre lay that other world of critical appraisal, where any glimmer of peculiarity or shift from 'the norm', was suspect. Even a rise in one's economic prosperity was viewed askance as Sumner pointed out in *Fairyland*.

"Shifting to *Creemorne*, I hear," people said...half admonishing. Something to do with that writer chappie, he put on airs, that Seaton. And wasn't there something a bit - you know - about him? The smiles they gave him were mixed with disapproval underneath thin-lipped kindly tolerance.

Sometimes it was not so kindly. Slipping on wet pavement outside the Ace Ham & Beef, he danced a couple of steps to stop from falling and two beefy louts behind him sniggered, and one said, "Watch out in those high heels, sweetheart."

(*Fairyland* p. 101)

The looks of repudiation and the ridicule were all typical of that narrow, rigid Australian society, and sometimes the intolerance was expressed through physical violence. Sumner was once set upon by an unknown man, a homophobe, at Sydney's Wynyard Railway Station one night and he was nearly killed. Again, the incident

¹⁸ John Kingsmill to me, 1991.

appears in *Fairyland*.

[T]here was a man leaning on the closed tobacco kiosk...whose questioning eyes were noticeable a distance away. He was bulky and had large powerful shoulders forced into a tight suit made of some cheap material... . "Want to take a walk?" Seaton asked...and the man smiled... . The silence as they went up the back escalator was more likely an admission of linguistic failure than diffidence...but when they emerged into the dark steepness of Essex Street, it appeared to be more than gravity pulling them downhill to where there was a small truck bay safeguarded from the street by a high wall... .

Here in the safety of the minimum light from a streetlamp they stood, getting their breath, and Seaton had turned a pace sideways when the first blow struck him on the side of the jaw, knocking him...backward...and halfway to his knees. The second blow caught him full in the face... . Words were being spoken in what sounded like Swedish, curses and reprisals, he assumed, for some similar action taken against the bulky man.

He may have lost consciousness for a second or two because he...could not take in the welted shoes beside his eyes but then he was booted and booted in the face and it was clear to him...he was being killed... . Scrambling up, he managed to dodge the blows coming at him...got by...and out the open gate.

By morning...his face had swollen to a puce football, his eyes had narrowed orientally, and he had difficulty even speaking... . His Essie, his dear bland, unimaginative darling believed his story. It was an allergy he had somehow contracted the evening before at the wedding breakfast, very likely the cold salmon... .

(*Fairyland* pp. 155-6)

Sumner explained his real facial injuries by telling much the same story to his aunt Lily: “an allergic reaction to eating fish”.¹⁹ It is interesting that the *Fairyland* persecutor was foreign - Sumner may have been trying to appease his Australian readership or perhaps he was still unable to accept that such a malicious element could be part of the Australian society of his youth, a society he both cherished and detested. In many of his books the Australian setting - physical and social - is a living presence. As Sumner framed each scene with detail and texture, colour and light, he exposed the hypocrisy, the rigid conservatism and the pretentiousness that prevailed at the time. His first book, *Careful, He Might Hear You*, destroyed the myth that Australia was a classless society, and his last book, *Fairyland*, scrutinises the Australian code of mateship, and the pioneer outback bushman icon responsible (still) for Australia’s reputation as “a man’s country”.²⁰ In *Fairyland*, in a scene set in the Marble Bar of the Hotel Australia,²¹ Seaton Daly is confronted by a figure who could easily have stepped out of a ‘Banjo’ Paterson poem.

...Then in the gradually diminishing room, he caught sight of the tall man. Leaning against the wall near him, thin as tin, gaunt, unshaven under

¹⁹ Susan Wyndham, “Careful, he’s made himself heard at last”.

²⁰ Russell Ward, in *The Australian Legend*, mentions that homosexuality was practised by early bush pioneers when no other alternative was available.

²¹ This bar and hotel were real. There is also an outback town called Marble Bar. SLE told me he was particularly pleased with this scene from *Fairyland* which he read in a gay bookshop in Greenwich Village NYC when the novel was released in America. (SLE to me, 1990.)

the wide-brimmed dirty hat, a jackeroo perhaps, boundary rider from out west probably, cattle or sheep country, the ultimate in manhood, the shearer...the epitome of raw, brazen, outdoor paddocks Australia. For a few moments their eyes met and then, shockingly, unbelievably, the boundary rider winked at him, surreptitiously winked, and the wink was as daring as nudity in the street, concupiscent and inviting. The wink as good as said, come on over here a minute, cobber, and I'll give you the sweetest feel of your darling little arse. Perhaps riotous imagination had taken him by surprise... . But at that moment the boundary rider winked again, secretly. No doubt about it... . To be acknowledged secretly by such a protagonist of manhood was both horrifying and rapturous... .

(*Fairyland* p.113)

Recasting this figure of 'ultimate' Aussie manhood as one of the gay club, thereby subverting both the effeminate stereotype of the gay male and the unquestioned heterosexuality of the outback horseman, was Sumner's way of needling the culture that had bred him but had also made it impossible for him to live in. Secreting part of his life from the world, being unable to hide the fact that he had a small fragile body and delicate face, finding his only solace among the creative, sympathetic theatre realm, all contributed as much to his eventual flight from Australia as did the emotional baggage from his childhood.

Some of his theatre and radio colleagues were intuitively

aware that Sumner was gay, others were oblivious of the fact. Of the young women he mixed with at the Independent Theatre and in the George Edwards studios, he had many admirers: according to family stories “lots of the girls had crushes on Sumner”.²² While his small frame and sensitive features gave him a boyish appearance until he was almost forty, he was never a handsome man in the heroic sense. Yet his humour, wit and personality attracted many men and women and he was a sought-after companion. He went through the motions of escorting young women to dances and parties. He enjoyed their company and with several he forged deep and lasting friendships, which others sometimes mistook for romances.²³ “We all had our girlfriends,” he said later, referring to the facade of normality required by society or what he called “the girl front”.²⁴

There were other reasons for Sumner’s guise of respectability, apart from the intolerance of the still very smugly ‘British’ Sydney society. Biographer David Marr explains one of them when he describes the 1948 homecoming of Patrick White, who intended to live with his Greek friend Manoly Lascaris.

Men did not live together as lovers in Sydney
unless they cut hair or danced in the chorus of J.C.

²² Gil McClelland, the daughter of Sheila Appleton who worked with SLE in radio and theatre.

²³ From various friends I interviewed, some thought Sumner had been made bitter about women by unsuccessful romances.

²⁴ Susan Wyndham, “Careful, he’s made himself heard at last”; and Kate Jennings, “Pleasing Yourself”, *Island* (Tas.), Spring, 1991.

Williamson's musicals. Men of some rank might 'share a flat' but they were expected to make excuses, and they did, arriving at the theatre and dinners and public events with women on their arms. Even as they entered their dotage, these bachelors were called 'eligible' by the Sydney press.²⁵

In the late 1940s and 50s, the media and society may have conspired to camouflage men "of some rank" who sought "the love that dare not speak its name". However, a Depression-ravaged 1930s Australia heading towards a world war, showed no such indulgence, especially for anyone outside the privileged set. If White faced a difficult time as a homosexual in Sydney in 1948, the experience a decade earlier was worse for the less worldly Sumner whose memories were of furtive recognition, frustration and casual liaisons.

I was as about promiscuous as the Virgin Mary, mostly because there was no opportunity. We all lived with our family, so if you fell in love with somebody and wanted to have a physical relationship, where on earth were you going to take them? It was a kind of vaudevillian joke in the Tivoli - somebody's a poofter and they'd go into screams of laughter, but it wasn't venomous.²⁶

Nevertheless, Sumner's life in the decade before his departure to America included the sexual initiation, casual encounters and violence later related in *Fairyland*.

²⁵ David Marr, *Patrick White: A Life* (Random House Australia, 1991) p. 246.

²⁶ SLE to Susan Wyndham, "Careful, he's made himself heard at last".

Other reasons for concealing his homosexuality concerned family and religion and his sense of responsibility to his famous mother. This responsibility had, if anything, been magnified by his own early success and achievements. Living with his three aging aunts who were all devout Christian Scientists, still 'haunted' by the presence of his mother, and ever conscious of the public spotlight that had been trained on him from so early an age, Sumner could hardly make open declaration of sexual leanings that neither church nor law allowed. To be openly gay was out of the question, to be privately gay was immensely difficult. He had become the adopted son of an enormous, extended family, all members of whom scrutinised him and basked in the reflected glory of his every endeavour. Since he understood, at an early age, his responsibility to his family as a celebrity, he spent most of his youth repressing his homosexuality, perhaps hoping it would simply go away.

...[T]hat he need never again want, and not wanting the dubious pleasures of his left-handedness, the forbidden delights taken with care, with the blinds down, touching fingers under the table, disguised with girls present and only imploring eyes to witness, no longer a prey to any of it, would be the awakening of a reality and a trueness of himself.

(Fairyland p. 176)

And then there were the expectations of his immediate family: to

Lily, Agnes and Blanche he was a shining, talented young hero, who deserved to be loved by some equally worthy young woman. In *Fairyland* Seaton Daly is forever being quizzed by his beloved surrogate mother, Essie (modelled upon aunt Lily), about his prospects of finding “Wattletree”, his ideal girl.

“I have a suspicion,” Essie said, twinkling, “you have a date with Wattletree.”

He flushed, turned away. Wattletree was her unfortunate code word for The Girl. Some day The Girl would be brought to meet her. Lovely as a wattletree in early spring, all yellow fuzz. “When am I going to meet Wattletree?” she would ask, deliriously inaccurate, wilfully misled.

...For all her cooking, washing, ironing, mending, caring, she was given deception in return. But there was no breaking out of his chrysalis, not ever... .

(*Fairyland* p. 108)

One can only imagine how the young man, witnessing the intimacy of heterosexual couples, must have longed for the same close, loving experience. *Fairyland* deals with the taboo against a man introducing his male companion as “my lover, my love” and their exclusion from expressing even affection in public.

...Coming out into the clear December sunshine, they saw as if it had been arranged for them, a tableau by a fountain: a young boy and girl were kissing.

“See that?” asked Rat. “That is what is known as real life. We are the dream.”

(*Fairyland* p. 119)

A friend from the Independent Theatre who also worked with him in radio, preparing the scripts for broadcast, remembers stumbling upon the loneliness of Sumner, who was nineteen at the time.

There was talk about Sumner from some of the other girls in the typing pool, one in particular as I remember, at 2UW, regarding his 'dubious' sexuality. I remember his accent was terribly exaggerated even for those days but I thought he was dotty about another actress from the Independent who, as it happened, ended up marrying one of his closest friends. I don't recall any public demonstration of Sumner being associated with anyone in those days. If he needed a girl to go out with, he would often ask me. He always called me "Lynchee" from my single name of Lynch. We went to a lot of films together... . Sumner loved the movies and the Hollywood stars. He didn't ever tell me he was lonely. He was always entertaining everyone at both Edwards and the Independent: he was a great mimic and had us all in stitches of laughter all the time, with his imitations of the head writer at Edwards, Maurice Francis, whom he loathed, or of Doris Fitton herself, whom he adored. But one night, out of the blue, after one of our jaunts, I asked him if he'd like to come home for dinner some time and he said he would... . I remember the first time he came, my mother had to confess, when it was time to have coffee, that she'd burnt the cakes. And the next day, sure enough, the mother in one of his serials came out with the same confession. We were poor but a terribly happy and close family and he enjoyed the company and the bustle, he loved coming to my place which he did often and it was then I realised just how lonely he was. I never met his aunts and he never talked about them.²⁷

As an elder statesman of the New York literary community, Sumner later said quite glibly that the Sydney rule for a gay man back then was: “So long as your fly was done up and you didn’t make a pass at the husband as you left, you were all right”,²⁸ but his own experience of these times was a far cry from this.²⁹ The flippant comments he made in old age often belied the troubles of the sensitive youth. Living a lie in his family of aging, doting aunts, seeking companionship among friends of both genders with whom he knew he could never share a total intimacy, and most often loathing his secret self, the idea of making a pass at somebody’s husband was beyond the pale for the young Sumner Locke Elliott.

Another reason for his near-celibacy in youth was that he searched for love rather than sexual gratification. “Alas there was no one to advise on where to locate the needed loved one,” is the silent lament of Seaton Daly. Sumner exacerbated his wretched situation by losing his heart most often to his straight friends, at least with whom he could share his dramatic enthusiasm. For him, intercourse with such men was always verbal.

They lay on their backs...under the shade of a Moreton Bay fig tree in the Botanic Gardens, out of the brazen sun, talked out. They had had lunch at the kiosk in the gardens and talked and talked;

²⁸ David Marr, *Patrick White: A Life*, p. 245.

²⁹ SLE made this comment, before he wrote *Fairyland*, to David Marr, who himself is a declared homosexual. Old friends like Gordon Chater found this remark odd, and out of character.

talk had erupted from them as if they had been released from a mandated silence and now it had left them as much spent as though they had ravished each other sexually. The talk was, in fact, a substitute for sex... .

(*Fairyland* p. 123)

Few if any of these men were aware of the nature of their 'mate's' affection. The sheer loneliness that such a sublimation of self imposed upon Sumner was later expressed through his character Captain Smollett (known to all as Vince the Vile) in *Fairyland*. Smollett, a suppressed homosexual, is also the detested WWII army commander at the Butcher's Creek ordnance depot in the Northern Territory where Corporal Seaton Daly is stationed. Like Sumner's 1948 play, *Rusty Bugles*, the Smollett episode in *Fairyland* draws upon his own WWII experience at an ordnance depot at Mataranka, in the Northern Territory, although Sumner insisted that Smollett was "entirely fictional...there definitely was nothing like the affair with Seaton ever happening at Mataranka; we were all so strictly controlled by whatever they gave us to quieten us down that you couldn't do anything anyway."³⁰ The aloof, reviled Captain reveals an uncharacteristic tenderness in his amorous advances towards a naive Corporal Seaton Daly, who is ordered to drive him to Katherine, a town further north. After seducing Seaton, Smollett reverts to his commanding and demanding self with threats of recrimination should his reputation be sullied by a mere corporal.

³⁰ SLE to me, 1990.

Yet, in the months that follow, the sexual liaison continues, as Seaton is constantly surprised by, and compromised by, his superior officer. Not until the end of Seaton's post at the depot does he learn that Smollett strenuously conceals his true self from the outside world.

"So you're going back to a nice safe cozy job at base, are you?"

"Sir."

"Don't be so formal."

Captain Smollett smiled glassily... . Then still smiling he tore the towel he was holding completely down the middle. It was as biblical as the rending of clothes. In a strangled voice he said, "This place is going to be unthinkable without you," and as Seaton rose to go to him, barked, "Sit still. Anyone might come in." He bent over the tin wash basin as if in pain. "I shouldn't complain, it's not that bad...it's just that" - a very long pause and then in almost no voice at all - "I'm so fucking lonely. Not only here, everywhere. Back in Melbourne. Everywhere... . Oh, I shouldn't complain, I've got a good dull job to go back to. I'm engaged to a fine girl. Got my mum and dad. A bonza sister. They all think I'm the berries, poor boobs. I've never told anyone about myself. You're one of the four people on earth who knows. I just wanted to tell you that and to tell you one last time that I love you." He picked up the tin basin and, moving to the flap of the tent, threw out the soapy water onto the dry sand. For the first time, he looked at Seaton. "That's all, dismissed!"

(Fairylnd p. 182)

Captain Smollett, passing himself off as a heterosexual to his family

and society, and bent on the charade of engagement and marriage, is the epitome of frustration and wretchedness that Seaton's own future presents. Seaton accordingly plans his escape to the more liberated society of New York after the war.

Oddly enough, Sumner Locke Elliott's own sense of isolation from the mainstream of life was lifted briefly during his army service in outback Mataranka. His memory of it reveals his long, desperate need to belong.

I have a great love for it... . It was dreadful, a dreadful place, almost a punishment camp, and yet there was a curious feeling of peace. I don't think I've ever experienced it before in my life and I don't think I ever will again - comradeship... .³¹

In that all-male society - "We never saw a woman...[and] I know they gave us saltpetre"³² (supposed to reduce the sex drive) - he stopped feeling alien among his fellow beings, and briefly felt at one with his companions. In one of his most poignant passages from *Fairyland* he confers this joyous discovery upon Seaton.

...Perhaps something was put in the tea they drank, perhaps it was merely the superfluity of male bodies walking naked to the evening shower wearing only untied boots, nothing more useless than the dozens upon dozens of deactivated organs going flip-flop, flip-flop to the showers. No one looked, no-one cared... .

³¹ Hazel De Berg interview, 1970.

³² SLE to me, 1990. In fact it is not saltpetre but a similar bromide that was supposed to lessen the sexual drive. The army is reported to have denied ever administering any such substance.

Seaton was unable to remember when exactly it was that the old feeling of exclusion had vanished. He had become one of the mob, browned and red-dusted, thin with the daily portions of dry mutton and boiled potato (cold at lunch, hot at supper), gritty with the constant blowing sand...Here in this scorched earth exile, amidst five-foot-high anthills like ancient Inca cities against the sunset, here where only once a week a train whistle was to be heard in the night, reminding them of the outside world, here was peace. No one knew.

No one cared, he was one of the poor bludgers who'd copped "the Creek". On guard duty one dawn...he realised the utterly improbable: he was at peace, not happy, but more peaceful than ever so far in his life and being devoid of the precaution constantly forced on him by his sexuality or peculiarity, whichever it was, was as refreshing as early morning rain; the acceptance of him by "mates" and the continuous serenity of their peculiar brotherhood made it a singular appeasement.

So it was going to mess, say, that one automatically put an arm around a cobbler and he around you; they needed to and that was all there was to it... . When the truck came to relieve him, he put his arm around the driver's shoulder in this new morning joy.

"How are you mate?"

"Not bad, mate, how's yourself?"

(*Fairyland* pp. 174-6)

In this arid, inhospitable landscape and meagre life, Sumner finally knew intimacy. It seems ironic that such a place of deprivation had extinguished for a time his own sexual desire.

His return to the city, and then civilian life at the end of the war, also meant a return to the old charade and the old anxiety. But now he carried with him the memory of a less judgmental world of empathy and open-heartedness where he had been identified, known and innocently embraced as a fellow traveller. From this experience he wrote his most celebrated play, *Rusty Bugles*, enshrining forever his Mataranka companions. And, while waiting for his demobilisation, he continued looking for his own escape.

He had two brief affairs at this time: one with a young American captain in Sydney, and another with someone Sumner described in his old age as “a sweet married man from Melbourne who I’d known at Mataranka”³³. These men become, in Sumner’s fiction, a composite character who appears in various roles in his novels, but always in connection with disappointment in love. He appears, for instance, in *Fairyland* as the married American lieutenant Lloyd C. Manville who has a sexual liaison with Seaton Daly in the last days of the war in Sydney. The ironically named Manville then sponsors Seaton’s passage to New York but breaks off the affair with his Aussie lover to return to his wife and family.

...Here he was with the man who had opened the door to America.

Lloyd had already got into his bed...Seaton switched off the bedlamp over his own bed and, bending over put his arms around Lloyd and lightly kissed him on the forehead.

...“Just what do you think you’re doing?”

...Lloyd took off his gold-rimmed glasses, perhaps ready for fisticuffs.

“I just - was saying good night.”

“I’d have thought you had enough common sense to know I’m not built that way, son. You surely must know by now I’m happily married to a wonderful wife with a blessed angel of a child and that I’m just not that way, Seaton.”

...Seaton sat down on his bed so stunned that he could muster up nothing to say but the apparently awful truth.

“Lloyd, we were lovers in Sydney.”

“Good God, man,” Lloyd said, “that was the *war*.”

(*Fairyland* p. 210)

A similar character appears in *Waiting For Childhood* - American editor, Royce Cable, whose bedtime confession that he has both a wife and a homosexual tendency similarly shatters the ‘true at heart’ lover, Sidney Lord. But perhaps most interesting of all characters inspired by Sumner’s lovers is the American captain, Corey Orcutt, in *Edens Lost*, who becomes involved with the sympathetic Bea St James. After a night of passion, Bea agrees to rejoin Corey the following day at his hotel, only to find on her arrival that the hotel doors are locked and the lobby unattended. After hours of frustrated efforts to contact her lover, Bea finally persuades guests of the hotel to admit her. But when she arrives at Corey’s door she finds him about to leave as he has orders to ship

out immediately. Corey's insensitivity to Bea during his scene of departure reflects that of similar characters in the other novels.

They stood on the corner waiting for traffic to pass and he said nothing so she had to say it.

"Will you ever be back?"

"Oh, who knows?...If the war drags on another five years they might - oh - there's a cab. I better nab him. Taxi. *Taxi.*"

They ran a few steps.

"Yes, well... ."

...Then they kissed like relatives and shook hands at the same time... .

He got in.

"So long, Bea."

"Goodbye," she said but it was lost in the noise of wheels.

(*Edens Lost* p. 200)

Bea St James is a radio writer and her character combines the two opposing elements of Sumner's own personality: self-loathing and arrogance.³⁴ In transferring his experience to a female character and rekindling a romantic liaison with someone closely resembling past lovers, Sumner reveals the legacy of his anguished life as a covert homosexual. His position as an outsider allowed him to know the hearts of both men and women and this knowledge strengthens his fiction. "The young girl, Bea in *Edens Lost*, locked out of the hotel away from her American lover was me," he admitted. "I was having an affair with an American Captain and that's just how it

³⁴ Bea's characteristics were highlighted by Neil Armfield, director of Margaret Fink's television miniseries of *Edens Lost*, in "The Novel Approach", *The Guide*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 Feb 1989 p. 2.

happened.”³⁵ For Sumner, otherness was an endless, bumpy road that led off in many directions. He had long recognised that his homosexuality had rendered him one of life’s outcasts, but as his troubled course continued he also became aware “that it isn’t only homosexuals who are outsiders”.³⁶

The theme of the outsider persists throughout Sumner Locke Elliott’s books and draws from both his chaotic childhood and his homosexuality, an aspect of his life that remained more or less secret until miraculously, in his twilight years, he was able to celebrate the love and companionship for which he had so long searched. “At sixty, I have finally found happiness,” he confided to his friend Gordon Chater.³⁷ The Australian friends he wrote to remember how his characteristic “I” became “we”: at last he belonged with someone.

For more than the last decade of his life, he spent his summers in New Hampshire with fellow writer Whitfield Cook, a widower with a grown-up family. Cook had forged his own success as a screenwriter for Hitchcock, as well as earning acclaim as a novelist and playwright. Their common interests and respect for one another’s work had drawn Sumner and Whit together, and July to September (the northern summer) soon became a time of

35 SLE to me, 1990.

36 SLE to me, 1990.

37 Gordon Chater to me, 1992.

companionship. During these months in the tiny rural community surrounding their farmhouse in Jefferson, New Hampshire, up in the White Mountains, the little boy from Neutral Bay High School (as Sumner so often referred to himself) discovered a true sense of belonging and peace. His description of this summer retreat revealed his love for the area in which he had made this discovery: "...It's an eight-hour drive from here [NYC], in fact we're only thirty miles from the Canadian border. It's near Mount Washington, which is the highest point in the East, and the Presidential Range seems just outside our house," he told an interviewer with pride in 1986. "We live up on a dirt road in a beautiful old wooden farmhouse, very American red-barn, the whole thing..."³⁸

The red-barn farmhouse in its rural setting figures prominently in his 1981 novel, *Signs of Life*, as a place of healing for the central character, Virginia Green, and her daughter Mary. Virginia reappraises the relationships of her past as she enters the territory between life and death after a stroke. In many ways, for Sumner himself, the farmhouse became a reflective place for healing old family wounds. Like Virginia, he scrutinised many of his own past relationships in an effort to understand and forgive; these efforts were expressed in his last four novels, each partly written during New Hampshire summers.

³⁸ SLE to Candida Baker, *Yacker 2*, p. 59.

Until 1985, Whitfield Cook and Sumner Locke Elliott maintained separate apartments in Manhattan for the working months of the year, but after Sumner suffered a stroke their lives were totally shared. The happiness Sumner found late in life led him to comment: "So I've no problem any more at all. I'm fortunate."³⁹ In the manuscript he left unfinished at his death, Sumner caught this sense of spiritual union and shared intimacy discovered so late in his life. A brief description on the first page - "Two elderly gentlemen [who] touched fingers, remembering revelations of the heart under palm trees"⁴⁰ - is imbued with Sumner's contentment, ease and full acceptance of his other self.

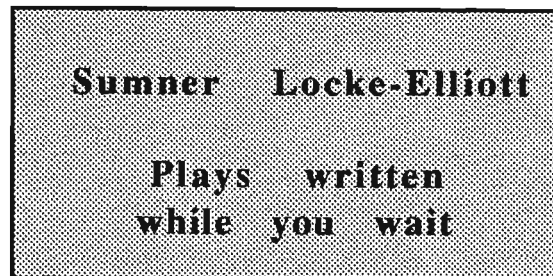
This account of Sumner Locke Elliott's secret self has run well ahead of his biographical progress. Now it returns to the young man on the edge of success in Australia in 1933; to theatre and radio in Sydney; and to a society not yet aware of an approaching war, in which Sumner earned his stripes not as a soldier but as a writer.

³⁹ Susan Wyndham, "Careful, he's made himself heard at last". In his interview with Muriel Reddy (*Sun*, Melbourne, Jan 1988), he said: "I think I have had a wonderful life, rich, overflowing...I've had very good friends, extraordinary good luck, no serious regrets, no deep sorrows, no deep serious secret sorrows. I could never complain...If I died tonight I couldn't possibly complain".

⁴⁰ SLE, *Radio Days*, (Angus and Robertson, Sydney, Australia, 1993) p.1.

Chapter Five: The Stage of Independence

No visitor to the young boy's Cremorne home could miss the notice on his bedroom door.



Nor did Miss Doris Fitton, the director, founder and energy centre of Sydney's Independent Theatre, to whom Sumner had introduced himself just six months earlier, miss this precocious youth. Miss Fitton, then also a Cremorne resident, and, like the Lockes, a Christian Scientist, had been invited home by her young playwright protégé to meet his aunt Lily. "I was monstrously conceited," the writer later admitted. "But I was trying to be funny too. That notice was meant to be like the ones in the shoe repair shops: 'Heels done while you wait'."¹

As a young boy, Sumner had developed the ability to write at an incredible speed, a talent that became a mainstay in his later career as a radio dramatist. At sixteen, this speed had already

¹ Helen Frizell, "Author home for a taste of Australia", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 April 1974, p. 7.

expanded his theatrical portfolio to 30 one-act plays which he had presented to Miss Fitton at their first meeting earlier that year. Yet it was not this vast body of work that had impressed the theatre impresario but the youngster's enthusiasm and confidence.

It was 1934 when the brash, ambitious sixteen-year-old had arrived at Doris Fitton's office at the clubrooms of Sydney's Independent Theatre in King Street. Informed by her secretary that "a Mr. Locke-Elliott was outside", Doris Fitton agreed to see the mystery man with the grandiose name, and in walked a schoolboy, carrying a bundle of thirty one-act plays.² Doris Fitton herself remembered "a slight boy" announcing, "firmly": "My name is Sumner Locke Elliott and I'm a playwright. I would like to become a member of the Independent Theatre and study theatre from every angle". "And so he did!" Fitton later confirmed.³

This story developed many variations in the press reports on both protégé and mentor over the following decades. Although only sixteen, Sumner was no longer a schoolboy when he met Doris Fitton, but his small build and youthful appearance would have made her assume that he was.

In his 1981 foreword to Doris Fitton's autobiography *Not*

² Helen Frizell, "Author home for a taste of Australia", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 April 1974, p. 7.

³ Doris Fitton, "A Protest Against Bureaucracy", an article in SLE's *Rusty Bugles*, Currency Press, Sydney, 1980.

Without Dust and Heat, Sumner attempted to set the record straight about his first meeting with Dame Doris, as she was by then.

Doris likes to tell that I came into the Independent in knee pants, I have courteously not contradicted this over the years, because I have never had the temerity to contradict Doris. In my early days, to refute anything Doris said, even mildly, might be to court the dreaded displeasure and to be passed over for a part until you had learned your lesson.

But I was in long trousers by the time I was sixteen and climbed the long steep staircase to the club rooms in King Street over the Mary Elizabeth tea room. I paid my guinea membership fee and, in awe of Doris, became ducal and informed her that I was the author of twenty-seven one-act plays and that I had performed in several of them, most often as the *ingénu*. I bestowed twelve of them on her. I don't believe she ever looked at them...⁴

This experience of his life found its way into Sumner's fiction about this period, in *Fairyland*. The theatre's clubrooms in "King Street" over "the Mary Elizabeth tea room" became landmarks for Seaton Daly, who joins a similar theatre, "Ivy Streeter's Drury Lane Players".⁵

...Upstairs was all delight. Upstairs at 10 King Street, up above the Mary Elizabeth Tea Room and Gypsy Palm Readings, was the floor occupied by Miss Ivy Streeter and the Drury Lane Players. The loft was painted apple green and around the walls

⁴ SLE, Foreword, Doris Fitton's *Not Without Dust and Heat*, (Harper & Row, Sydney, 1981.)

⁵ The loft "painted apple green" resembled the premises of The Rowe Street Players, close to the Independent, where Sumner first had training in acting from Thea Rowe and where he had met his close friend, Ron Randell.

were hung bright posters of the previous productions of the amateur company. Miss Schiller had accepted his hard-earned guinea membership fee and intimated that one day he might even meet...Miss Streeter herself... .

(*Fairyland* pp. 55-6)

Like "Miss Streeter", Doris Fitton was at first an aloof, forbidding figure. Sumner later recalled his early impressions of Miss Fitton and how he spent his first weeks at the Independent in the wilderness of her disregard.

She was a combination of Atila the Hun and Sweet Nell of Old Drury. Her insistence on complete loyalty was implacable...I was in extreme awe and terror of her. She very rarely spoke to me as she passed through the clubrooms... .⁶

While a relationship of mutual respect and understanding gradually developed between Fitton and her young playwright, her blend of irresistible charm and sheer ruthlessness became her trademark, as did her demand for unconditional loyalty from her theatre subjects. To cross Doris was always to incur penalty, according to Sumner. Although they remained life-long friends, disagreements arose, as they were bound to, and Sumner became well acquainted with the tough side of Doris. But such occasions were the exception, and their general compatibility and mutual admiration became the foundation-stone of Sumner's writing

⁶ SLE, Address to Adelaide Writers' Week, 1974.

career.⁷

Fitton had opened the Independent Theatre just four years before Sumner arrived on her doorstep. Her creative domain quickly became the leading light of Australia's amateur productions. She gave the public not only a regular menu of up-to-date overseas plays and avant-garde works but also a standing side order of local written drama. Whereas other amateur theatres, emulating their professional counterparts, relied on sure-success revival Fitton's Independent Theatre went from strength to strength over the years taking chances and offering a tremendous range of dramas and comedies.

There were the flops, the mistakes. But there were the triumphs: *The Constant Nymph*, *The Witch*, *Street Scene*, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, *Our Town*, *Rusty Bugles*, *The Visit*. And Doris was not one to be swayed by public pressure, she knew what the audience needed, even if it wasn't what they wanted. "Never mind that the public didn't much take to *The Plough and the Stars*, it was worth doing"; that "the Independent *must* do an O'Casey" would have been Doris's opinion.⁸

Sumner declared: "To Doris Fitton goes all my gratitude for her encouragement of the Australian playwright."⁹

7 SLE to me, 1990.

8 SLE, Foreword, *Not Without Dust and Heat*.

9 SLE, his own story in *The Broadcaster* (Perth), 17 Jan 1948.

From 1934 onwards, an enthusiastic, impressionable Sumner spent his lunchtimes, evenings and weekends acquainting himself with the textures and flavours of the Independent Theatre. "...I came everyday to the clubrooms with my lunch in a brown paper bag and listened to her actors and actresses talking theatre," he later told an audience on a visit home to Australia in 1974.¹⁰ In terms of his own early life, the portrait indicates his working-class status. This daily ritual, and his humble lunch, are re-worked in *Fairyland*.

...Luncheon (as Miss Schiller termed it) of sandwiches and tea was provided for members for one and sixpence, but in Seaton's case only sixpence was charged for a cup of tea when he brought his own sandwich from the Ham & Beef nearby, and it became a habit for him to...take refuge at the "clubroom"... . It smelled of cigarette smoke and excitement, and the lunchers were all stars...[who] kept up a thrilling mercurial conversation about the theater during lunch... .

(*Fairyland* p. 56)

During his early years with the Independent, while he honed his skills in acting and writing, Sumner also absorbed other elements of theatre craft. Gordon Chater, who first knew Sumner as an already established man of the theatre during the 1940s, remembers him as a first-rate director who could find comedy in the most ordinary of situations and show others how to reveal this

¹⁰ SLE, Address to the Adelaide Writers' Week, 1974.

in performance. His talents in this area helped the legendary Evie Hayes to stardom.¹¹ Another friend also remembers his interest in the many different facets of production.

He...really worked terribly hard on every aspect of theatre: if somebody needed help with staging, sets, or lighting - Sumner would do anything. But I think that he'd had such a terribly lonely life that it was a whole new world to him.¹²

Above all else it was the sense of an accepting, sympathetic family, of belonging among true companions of similar enthusiasm, that kept Sumner at the Independent day after day, night after night. Another of his Independent friends, Gwen Plumb, described this theatre 'family' in her autobiography:

We all worked for nothing of course, but were repaid with lasting, loving friendships... . After most shows the cast would go...to the roomy house she [Doris] rented...[where] Tug Mason, her charming husband, would be waiting up in his three-piece blue suit and we'd all tuck into food by the fire and play with the dogs Doris loved so much... . Afterwards, some of us would go home but there were always some who...would spread out on the floor, sofa, chairs... .¹³

11 Gordon Chater to me, 1992. SLE helped Evie Hayes by privately tutoring her in various roles she was trying out for: "Summie made Evie into Australia's Ethel Merman." GC recalls SLE's excellence in directing and his great intuitive skill in terms of casting.

12 Eileen Grieves to me, 1990.

13 Gwen Plumb, *Plumb Crazy*, (Pan Macmillan, Sydney, 1994) p. 78.

Gwen, whom Sumner called “Plumb” or “Plumby” in public (he addressed her privately as “Myrtle” or “Mavis”, names of her characters in shows long past), was one of the many lifelong friends he made at the Independent. She called him “Summie”, so they made quite an act. They were both extremely funny on their own, but mutual friends agree that together they were hilarious. Other close friends included Margo and Howard Craven, Alma and Irene Thirkell, Marie Rosenfeld, Molly Brown, Kevin Healey, Jessica Noad, Haydee Seldon, Joyce Lambert, Trafford Whitelock, Ron Randell, Audry Cunningham, Jane Connoly, Richard Parry, Desmond Rolfe, John and Sheila Appleton, Rina and Arnold Barker, Hazel Hollander, Gwen Meredith, and John Kingsmill. After the war, Gordon Chater at the Minerva Theatre (where several of these actors occasionally performed), also became part of this enclave. Of course during Sumner’s fourteen years at the Independent, various members of this group came and went, yet the camaraderie of these people was hardly diminished by time or distance.

After breaking through Doris Fitton’s aloofness, Sumner was given every opportunity to hone his writing and acting skills because Doris arranged performance readings in the Independent clubrooms to assess his work. “I wrote several one-act plays for studio evenings in which I always portrayed the lead, and it

gradually became, you know, the thing,” he recalled.¹⁴

His first role for the Independent was three lines as an office boy in John Galsworthy's *The Fugitive* at the Savoy Theatre, where Independent productions were performed every Saturday evening. According to Sumner, this small role won Doris Fitton's full acceptance of him as an Independent trouper: “I felt I had turned a golden corner in my career,”¹⁵ he later reflected. His performance was described by various reviewers as “exaggerated in an otherwise good study”, “credible”, and “a messenger boy that no employer, however kind hearted, would keep more than a week”.¹⁶ These notices began a scrapbook series of Independent Theatre clippings which ended only when he left Australia in 1948.

Sumner believed that learning his craft as an actor greatly improved his own skills as a playwright:

...from 1934 until I left for America in 1948...I wrote plays and I acted in a great many plays for Doris Fitton at the Independent Theatre, and I've always said the greatest experience in playwriting is to act in other people's plays. I think a good playwright - it doesn't matter if he's a bad actor, because he can come on, it doesn't matter if he comes on as the butler or as the handyman or what, and says a few lines, he gets to understand the workings of the theatre, he gets to understand

¹⁴ Hazel De Berg Interview, 1970.

¹⁵ SLE, Adelaide Writers' Address, 1974.

¹⁶ *Sunday Sun*, Sydney, 15 July 1934; *Sun.*, Sydney, 9 July, 1934; *Orange Leader*, NSW, 17 July 1934.

the mechanics of writing for the theatre, and indeed, I did.¹⁷

In his later novels, Neil Atkins in *Water Under The Bridge* and Seaton Daly in *Fairyland* were both drawn from Sumner's experience as a stage and radio actor.

The next three years brought a string of minor roles for Sumner.¹⁸ Peter Finch was a 17-year-old member of the Independent Theatre at this time, and the two young men came to know each other in 1934 when both had supporting parts in Elmer Rice's *Counsellor-at-Law*. Sumner later recalled how Peter Finch's outstanding talent impressed everyone connected with the play.

I was playing the office boy and Peter an Italian bootblack... He had five lines, I think. I watched him at rehearsals. I'd never seen him before and he was *electric*. I mean absolutely more brilliant than anybody in the entire cast put together and more brilliant than anyone we'd ever seen. He was rather grubby, looked as if he needed a bath, in shabby clothes and we didn't know where he lived or anything about him. But through the grubbiness, this marvellous thing shone out of him - this brilliance just shone. Offstage I remember he was always sneaking around trying to get someone to buy him a free cup of coffee.¹⁹

¹⁷ Hazel De Berg Interview, 1970.

¹⁸ Including Independent productions of *Counsellor-at-Law* (1934), *The Witch* (1935), *Merrily We Roll Along* (1935), *Caprice* (1935) *Squaring the Circle* (1935), *Richard of Bordeaux* (1935), *Hamlet* (1935), *Lady Precious Stream* (1935), *Street Scene* (1936), *Touch Wood* (1936), *The Black Eye* (1936), *Peter Pan* (1936) *Hassan* (1937), and *Noah* (1937).

¹⁹ SLE, in Elaine Dundy, *Finch, Bloody Finch*, (Methuen, London, 1987) p.68.

On the strength of this, Sumner cast Peter Finch as one of only two characters in his own one-act play, *Cafe on the Corner*, taking the other role himself. As *Cafe* was the first of his plays to be staged by the Independent (not just read in the clubrooms) the young playwright hoped that this would advance his career. However, the two young men had a falling out: “Peter...showed up for two rehearsals and then just disappeared. But what really annoyed me was that he turned up on the night of the performance and had the temerity to stand up and *wave* at me at the curtain! Then he just disappeared again.”²⁰

The enigmatic Finch (who later claimed an exotic Indian heritage) became a Sydney radio personality at the same time Sumner entered this flourishing form of entertainment, and they both performed in the radio adaptation of Sumner’s postwar play, *Invisible Circus*. In later years, Sumner also occasionally encountered Finch in America, much later, but the two men never became good friends. By coincidence, Finch headed for England the same week Sumner left for America. Their youthful antagonism, Finch’s great Hollywood success, and western society’s elevation of the “star-actor” over the writer may have contributed to the derisive reference to Finch in Sumner’s 1977 novel, *Water Under*

²⁰ SLE, in Elaine Dundy, *Finch, Bloody Finch*.

The Bridge, where the homecoming of actor Neil Atkins is eclipsed by the simultaneous arrival of Finch.

...But of course the press would be there because Finch was on the plane and Finch was the star of the picture they'd come out to make, Neil was very second-fiddle to Finch... . Click. Flash.

One bored reporter (twenty around Finch).

(*Water Under the Bridge* pp. 345-6)

Sumner's decision to sacrifice his acting ambitions for his much greater prospect as a writer may have also influenced this passage. The disappointment of the returning exile (who discovers an indifferent home public) has much to do with Australia's mania for "stars", especially those who have made good overseas. In *Water Under The Bridge*, Finch is the nemesis of Sumner's own youthful acting aspirations. The novel also reflected Sumner's homecoming in 1974 when he was enjoying far greater fame outside his native country which he felt, at times, was indifferent to his success. But there is more to this appearance of Finch (referred to only this by this impersonal surname) in *Water Under The Bridge*.

Finch advanced to stardom thanks to Laurence Olivier after he and his wife Vivien Leigh had toured Australia. Due to Doris Fitton's intervention, they had watched Finch in performance and been impressed enough to encourage him to go to London. After his entrance to the world stage, Finch then began a love affair with

Vivien Leigh. Many who knew about this affair believe Finch took advantage of Leigh during her mental illness.²¹ His eventual confession of this affair to Olivier briefly deterred the British theatre lord from giving him any further help, although his generosity soon overcame this resolve. During Sumner's early years in New York, however, when he was struggling to ignite interest in a play for Broadway, he felt unable to approach Olivier for assistance because of the Finch-Leigh history.²²

Although Sumner appeared mostly in minor roles in the Independent's main productions between 1934 and 1937, the knowledge he acquired from such performances was put to good use in the one-act plays that were regularly workshopped at the clubrooms during this period.²³ His production of *Cafe on the Corner*, successful even without the elusive Peter Finch, had given him a strong foundation on which to develop further productions. *Cafe* told the story of a sensitive "waiter with a nest egg and a romantic attachment to a young woman in the country who

²¹ In Ruth Park's autobiographical *Fishing in the Styx* (Penguin, Melbourne, 1994) she describes Peter Finch as having "thrived on the international scandal of his affair with Vivien Leigh". Also see Gwen Plumb's autobiography *Plumb Crazy* (Pan Books, Sydney, 1994); the biographies of Peter Finch by Elaine Dundy (Methuen, London, 1987) and Trader Faulkner (Pan Books, London, 1979); and Laurence Olivier's *Confessions of an Actor* (Coronet, London, 1982). SLE also held sympathy for Vivien Leigh whom he had always admired and came to know well during the 1960s when she was considered for the role of Vanessa in the then planned Hollywood movie of *Careful, He Might Hear You* to be produced by Joshua Logan. This production was later abandoned but SLE always recalled his talks with Vivien Leigh as the only good thing to come out of the exercise.

²² SLE to me, 1990.

²³ In SLE's later career as a television dramatist in America, he drew on his vast experience of writing one act plays which he felt similar in form to the hour-long screen plays he produced for NBC in the 1950s.

unexpectedly marries another man".²⁴ The play was described as "uncommon" by reviewers because its heroine was an influential but unseen figure. Most reviewers noted that "the boy playwright" was the "son of the late Victorian authoress, Sumner Locke", a custom that persisted all through Sumner's time in Australia. However, what these commentators failed to realise was that this invisible heroine owed much to Sumner's dead mother. At this time Sumner was presented with a pair of bronze, carved timber bookends "bearing the likeness in profile of Sumner Locke...with the inscription engraved and gilded: SUMNER LOCKE: Made Books and Friends".²⁵ This incident later appeared as the golden boomerang presentation at the writers' picnic in *Careful, He Might Hear You*.

The story of the bookends, twin portraits of Sumner Locke, was covered in several prominent magazines including the *Bulletin* which had published so much of her work decades earlier. These bookends - considered by some to be works of art - were purchased from some of the money raised from the sales of *Sumner Locke: In Memoriam*, published in 1921. The money had been accruing interest over the years as a war bond investment, and had become the young boy's "nest egg" - it had also paid for his post-school education. While Sumner remained ambivalent about his mother, he treasured these bookends and bequeathed them to his dearest

²⁴ Social column, *Sunday Sun*, 17 Feb 1935. Scrapbook, SLE Collection, BU.

²⁵ *Home Beautiful Magazine*, April, 1935. Also in *Woman*, Sept 1935.

companion, Whitfield Cook.

Other one-act plays for the Independent followed Sumner's success with *Cafe on the Corner*.²⁶ His original revue sketches also allowed him to fine-tune his satiric wit and revealed a fascination and playfulness with language that enlivened the many books he later wrote. In an article by Doris Fitton in 1980, reflecting on Sumner's success as a playwright and novelist, she recalled Sumner's ability to churn out these clever revue pieces almost at call.

He was a fine satirist with a highly critical view of human nature. Whenever we had visiting artists at the theatre Sumner would write a sketch for us. He certainly had talent and we knew it. Once...we had a terrible electricity strike in the middle of a season of *Mourning Becomes Electra*. He wrote a sketch called *Bunnerong Becomes Electric* (Bunnerong was the site of the power station)... . Sumner's development was going on all the time. His eyes and his brain were wide open to the atmosphere of the theatre.²⁷

²⁶ *When Tomorrow Comes* (1935), *Bleak Wilderness* (1935), *Glorious Noon* (1936) *Spotlight on Joanna* (1937) and *Ring Out Wild Bells* (1938). *Bleak Wilderness* was chosen in 1935 as part of Sydney's inaugural Drama Week; the play was praised by the *Bulletin* 11 Dec 1935, for its "spice of originality" and its ending - a murder is done by a madman in a lonely farmhouse. The article also drew attention to the Sydney's lack of theatre space: "It seems ironic that Sydney's first Drama Week should have happened...when only one full-sized theatre survived...and when that one house has been occupied for six months with revivals of old comic operas...The Drama Week enthusiasts were hard put to find a hall in which to stage their performances...". *Glorious Noon* (1936) was also taken up by Brisbane's Amateur Theatres which later produced many of his three-act plays. Notices for all such productions mentioned the playwright's mother who it was thought had "lived in Brisbane as a child, her father being a well known clergyman there many years ago". It was thought Sumner Locke had been born in Sandgate but left there as a baby.

²⁷ Doris Fitton, "A Protest Against Bureaucracy", in *Rusty Bugles*.

The Independent's support for such early works gave Sumner the confidence to extend his writing horizons and the premiere of his first three-act comedy, *The Cow Jumped Over the Moon*, was announced by the press on the young playwright's 20th birthday in 1937.²⁸ *The Cow* centred on the upheaval of a family when a middle-aged society woman with a grown-up son, brings home her lover of 20 years before. Doris Fitton's enthusiasm for this more ambitious effort was something Sumner remembered throughout his life as a turning-point in his writing career; her compliments eclipsed the many awards he received later for his novels: "She told me I was a clever boy, the equivalent of winning the Pulitzer Prize."²⁹

The Cow influenced almost every novel he wrote. All but his last two books, *Fairyland* and *Radio Days*, fall into three parts like a three-act play. *The Cow* put its author on the literary map in more ways than one.

On the opening night a fuse blew out in the second act requiring most of the act to be played with the house lights on and seemed to me at the time a major catastrophe. I think I gave a rather conceited opening night speech...³⁰

²⁸ *The Courier*, 17 Oct 1937. This began a series of writing events which would be linked to 'big occasion' dates in his life. His only Broadway play *Buy Me Blue Ribbons* opened on his birthday years later in 1951 and he sat down on Christmas Day 1960 to begin his first novel *Careful, He Might Hear You* and on 4 July 1977 to start writing his other prize winner, *Water Under The Bridge*. This latter date was not only American Independence Day, considered a national birthday, but also SLE's mother's birthday.

²⁹ SLE, Foreword, *Not Without Dust and Heat*.

³⁰ SLE, Foreword, *Not Without Dust and Heat*.

Sumner said that the lighting failure could have been either an omen that his theatre career was not destined to be a blaze of glory or a strike from the ghost of Paul Osborne, author of *The Vinegar Tree*, from which he had 'inadvertently' lifted the plot. But his memory of this performance was also one of joy: "It was the first time I had heard an audience laugh and applaud (my work) and the first time I had the intoxicating experience of hearing 'Author! Author!'"³¹

At least the *Daily Telegraph* reviewer recognised the "equal amounts of Coward and Nichols" in the play.³² Nevertheless, the "author", clearly identified as the son of Sumner Locke "whose books and plays caused a stir in Australia just before and during the Great War" was declared likely to go far by Brisbane's *Telegraph*. In 1938, *The Cow* had a brief but successful season playing to full houses at Hollywood's Call Board Theatre, "one of those small playhouses where the motion picture studios send their scouts".³³ This came about through William Rees, an established member of the Independent Theatre, who was then in America forging his own career in theatre.³⁴ He had submitted a copy of *The Cow Jumped Over the Moon* to the Call Board Management. They

31 SLE, Address to Adelaide Writers' Week, 1974.

32 *Daily Telegraph*, Sydney, 1 Nov 1937.

33 Unident. clipping, 13 August, 1938, SLE Scrapbook, BU.

34 William Rees had been with the Independent from the beginning and was part of Doris Fitton's first success *The Constant Nymph*, 1931, at the Savoy Theatre. He favoured directing although he made his name as an actor. He became casting director with J.C. Williamson's, Sydney.

were enthusiastic, agreeing to run the play for a limited season with Rees as producer and director. Not until the play's season ended did Sumner learn of his overseas success, from a friend who had seen it at the Call Board. Then came a royalty cheque and a letter of enquiry from a Hollywood film studio.

The Los Angeles *Times* review was warm, even though it recognised *The Cow's* source.³⁵ The Australian press was all abuzz with reports that MGM had sent for a copy of the play.³⁶ It was also rumoured that William Rees was taking the manuscript with him to New York.³⁷ While such prospects eventually evaporated,³⁸ there was some consolation for Sumner - MGM offered him dialogue work should he go to America. But the timing of this offer made acceptance impossible. Since Sumner was still financially tied to his three aging aunts, and many Australians were sure that war was imminent, he regretfully declined their offer. However, MGM's interest made him recognise that America was a place where he might realise his professional ambition.

Sumner believed that he had been attracted to America even within his mother's womb, when she had trekked that country during her pregnancy. Hollywood films had become a regular part

³⁵ Los Angeles *Times*, 3 July 1938.

³⁶ *Bulletin*, 17 Aug 1938; Brisbane's *Courier Mail*, 1 Nov 1938; Scrapbook courtesy BU.

³⁷ Sydney's *Sun*, 10 Aug 1938, Scrapbook courtesy BU.

³⁸ MGM considered the play for actor Billy Burke, but according to a later report (unidentified clipping in SLE Scrapbook, BU), but dropped it because of *Cow's* similarity to *The Vinegar Tree*.

of his young diet, thanks to his aunt Blanche, and he grew up in awe of the glamorous Hollywood stars of the time. He was also fascinated by the place that could produce so many exotic forms of entertainment.

Sumner's early experience at the Independent had led him to view England as the centre of theatrical creativity, but he later admitted to being "very defensive with English people who would come and patronise the hell out of you in Australia".³⁹ Although he formed strong friendships with English people who had made their home in Australia, he found "the tremendous pro-British thing in Australia" objectionable.

I've always felt that Australia should have been individual, by itself, which it is becoming, but in my day, it was not. Everything was always lauded about the British. People always referred to England as 'Home' [as though] there's only England. There's a kind of suffocating arrogance about it.⁴⁰

Even with these convictions, Sumner had felt the lure of London's West End, which to Australians was the only world stage

³⁹ SLE to Clyde Packer, *No Return Ticket*.

⁴⁰ Richard Kelly Tipping Interview, NYC, 1985.

Such republican philosophies were evident in SLE's novels. *Careful, He Might Hear You*, as one example, is thematically encoded with pro-Republican views. The Judge who adjudicates the custody battle fought over P.S. is projected throughout the text as the King's representative in Australia and therefore embodies the word of "the Crown" as befitting his judicial status. Not only is he characterised as a bumbling and defective presence in the Australian courtroom, but his decision to award custody of P.S. to Vanessa rather than Lila is later made null and void by the women themselves who rechart this outcome. In this episode SLE reveals his republican stance. *Water Under the Bridge* and *About Tilly Beamis* also endorse similar views.

that counted. But the Australian swimmer, Annette Kellerman, (elderly by then in the late 1930s), who came to know the young playwright through his work, gave him counsel that he claimed was the vital factor in his choice of America over England, which was then the more traditional destination for the departing Australian artist.

She'd married an American who was a movie man from Hollywood, he'd worked with Mack Sennett, and of course she'd swum Lake Chicago and Lake Michigan, the English Channel...and she said a curious thing to me. She said "You ought to live in America". I was talking about what I would do...it was a very bad time, everybody was saying "Should one go away", you know, "because we may be getting war at any minute", and she...said: "You see, dear...the sophisticated kind of thing you write, at least at the moment is not terribly Australian,' which indeed it was not, she said 'You'd be just another drop in the ocean in England...because you'd adopt the English method of writing, and you'd not be unique in any way... . You have the kind of personality that Americans will like [and] you have an opportunity there to be quite different.' And I thought about that.⁴¹

Urged by Kellerman not to waste any more time (she said: "there's a very long wait, there's only 200 a year on the quota, and...it goes from when you put your name down..."⁴²), he approached the American consulate and joined the waiting list of potential

41 Hazel De Berg Interview, 1970.

42 Hazel De Berg Interview, 1970.

migrants. War broke out the following year, and Sumner's migration took almost ten years to eventuate.

In the wake of *The Cow's* success, Sumner turned 21 on 17 October 1938, and received what he always referred to as the only contact from his father: a telegram congratulating him on the occasion.

EVERY GOOD WISH IS CONTAINED IN THIS YOUR
TWENTYFIRST LOGAN ELLIOTT BALLAN⁴³

The birthday message was addressed to Sumner care of J. C. Williamson's office, no doubt to avoid interception by the Lockes. This first recognition from his long-absent father produced mixed feelings from Sumner, but he answered it.

...I wrote him a long, rather difficult letter, difficult for me to write that is, saying that I would like to be in touch with him, that I knew he did not like my family and that they did not like him and that I knew he wouldn't want to have anything to do with me as far as they were concerned, but to write me at the radio station where I worked, 2UW, and that they would never know. No reply ever came... .⁴⁴

Perhaps family members had persuaded Logan to send the

⁴³ Congratulatory Telegram, 17 Oct 1938, 10.15 am, from Logan Elliott held in SLE Collection, BU. Logan sent the telegram to his son from Ballan in Victoria, the same tiny township where he had lived with his family throughout his own childhood and youth when he had first come to know the ill-fated Sumner Locke.

⁴⁴ SLE to Candida Baker, *Yacker 2*, p. 61.

birthday greeting, or perhaps even someone had sent it in Logan's name. Logan certainly received his son's reply. He died the following year in a community hospital where he was being treated for alcoholism. A small suitcase containing his life's possessions was handed over to Logan's sisters. Some years later while visiting his Elliott-relatives in Bacchus Marsh, Sumner discovered in this suitcase the letter he had written to his father.

[My Aunt Alice] told me that when my father died he had nothing, not a penny; they all had to put in to pay for the funeral. He left just one suitcase which had bits and pieces of old stuff he had kept, and there were some old press clippings about me, and my letter. So I didn't mind when I heard that he'd had the letter, that he'd kept it.⁴⁵

The discovery altered his view of his father and, in a small way, began the healing process of old wounds. Sumner said, years later: "So...I felt that I was justified. I was able then not to hate him. I'd registered. I just felt that it just wasn't possible for him to get in touch with me."⁴⁶

Logan Elliott had long been spoken of by the Locke family as "a quitter, a dreamer, a weak man who had no sense of purpose".⁴⁷ His 21-year-old son was probably determined to be nothing like the man who had given him little more than a surname.

⁴⁵ SLE to Candida Baker, *Yacker* 2, p. 61.

⁴⁶ Jenny Palmer, "PS: We Hear You", *Literary Supplement, Bulletin*, 27 Dec 1984, p. 150.

⁴⁷ SLE to me, 1990.

The Hollywood success of *The Cow Jumped Over the Moon*⁴⁸ gave rise to a series of three-act plays in which Sumner aimed for greater sophistication with English settings and situations, earning him the reputation at one point as “Australia’s Noel Coward”.⁴⁹ These works were highly derivative, influenced strongly by the English playwrights of the time.

When I was...writing my plays for the Independent Theatre...when I was in my early twenties - I was so brash and unbearable, you simply couldn't imagine. Not exactly conceited but terribly self-confident, terribly knowing, fearfully sophisticated, full of witticisms and criticisms, and pulling down everybody else, mostly because I really didn't know much at all. Everything was based on someone else's work, I was always copying plays. Noel Coward once read a very early play of mine that was set in England - where I'd never been by the way - and all he said, which was simply marvelously true was that I had the tenacity to write. What he should have said was that I had the vanity to write. But he also said 'One of these days he must write about something that he knows'.⁵⁰

Noel Coward read *Interval* when he visited war-time Sydney

48 Sumner's early taste of international success with *The Cow Jumped Over the Moon* had confirmed his belief in his ability to please American tastes - and all from a play which “took about three days to complete...”. (SLE in *40th Birthday - Independent Theatre 30th May 1930- 30th May, 1970*.) *Cow* was produced by many other repertory companies around Australia, and more than once as a benefit piece for the war effort.

49 *Australian Theatre Review and Preview*, Oct 1943.

50 SLE to Candida Baker, *Yacker 2*.

on behalf of the Red Cross in 1940.⁵¹ To Sumner, Miss Fitton was now “Doris” and he had been asked to escort her to a dinner given in Coward’s honour.

...It was not a theatrical occasion, purposely serious (it was a deadly serious time, France had just fallen) and the audience was decidedly not made up of theatre people. At the conclusion of his affecting speech, it was announced that Mr. Coward would personally greet everyone as they were leaving. On and on they filed past the tall, svelte figure. “We will wait until last,” Doris said firmly, “then we might have a moment alone with him”. At last our turn came and our names were announced. We shook hands with the Master, who had by then shaken four hundred and ninety-eight hands. There was a moment’s pause. Doris leaned forward and said in a conspiratorial way, “We’re of the theatre.” Mr. Coward’s blue eyes snapped and then the internationally-known clipped voice said, “I knew it. I could see it shining from you.”⁵²

Sumner’s early years under the spell and guidance of Doris Fitton added greatly to his education. He read Shakespeare, Shaw, O’Neill, Chekhov, O’Casey and Emlyn Williams. He later commented: “The Independent was snobbish in the best sense... . Doris...would have no truck with poor plays or fatuous teacup comedies or melodramas. Never. She gave the public the plays JCW would not

⁵¹ According to Doris Fitton, she sent a copy of *Interval* to Coward during his tour in Sydney. “He was rather critical about the opening...which had the leading lady arrive late in her dressing room. Coward said to me: ‘No leading lady would ever be late on a first night to prepare herself for the stage.’ But he realised there was potential there - in the play and in the writer.” (DF, “A Protest Against Bureaucracy” in *Rusty Bugles*.)

⁵² SLE, Foreword, *Not Without Heat and Dust*.

touch...".⁵³ Doris Fitton also began to cast Sumner in more demanding roles in plays other than his own.⁵⁴ "I was crazy about acting but I was never really that good an actor, I was alright in character parts. But I think I always knew that writing was my strength,"⁵⁵ he later observed. Critical notices suggest this assessment was modest. His comic portrayals in small parts frequently stole much more space in reviews than the size of his role warranted and his leading parts were often described as "brilliant". Doris Fitton, believed that Sumner became a good actor.⁵⁶

As Sumner's experience of high-quality dramatic works increased, his own plays became even more derivative: "I was very much under the influence of Noel Coward, Emyln Williamson and John Van Druten. I was doing my best to imitate them and the typical 1930s West End success".⁵⁷ This tendency was summed up in 1940 by the theatre critic and radio drama producer, Leslie Rees.

It is only to be expected that the author's youth, together with his intense interest in the plays of other people, should result in derivation of method and materials, though not of actual plot development. His theatre sense is always lively. At the present moment it is hard to say which the

⁵³ SLE, Foreword, *Not Without Dust and Heat*.

⁵⁴ *1066 And All That* (1939), *The Corn is Green* (1940), *You Can't Take It With You* (1940), *Saint Joan* (1941) and *The Seagull* (1943).

⁵⁵ SLE to me, 1990.

⁵⁶ Doris Fitton, "A Protest Against Bureaucracy" in *Rusty Bugles*.

⁵⁷ SLE, Address to Adelaide Writers' Week, 1974.

nascent Australian drama needs more - keen theatrical awareness arising out of a full knowledge of the limitations and advantages of the stage medium or attack on new aspects of life. Neither is of much value without the other. Sumner Locke-Elliott certainly has one talent developed to an acute degree.⁵⁸

Rees explained why local playwrights set their works of "this would-be sophisticated urban type" in England: local audiences had a greater belief in "the big world outside, already used *ad infinitum* in plays", and rising playwrights like Sumner Locke Elliott, who hoped to sell their plays overseas, assumed that a London setting would help them do this.⁵⁹ Sumner's next three plays all had London settings, and the most successful was *Interval*, which he developed from his 1937 one-act play *Spotlight on Joanna*.

...A backstage story taking place during the three years of a long-running play in the West End. To be fair - I could hardly write about a three year long running play in Australia - it purported to show the destructive effects of success on a young playwright and actress...⁶⁰

The focus and concern of *Interval* - its self-reflexivity - is common to many of Sumner's later stage, radio and television plays, as well as his novels. By examining and exploring the artistic

⁵⁸ Leslie Rees, *Australian Quarterly* 1940, reprinted in his *A History of Australian Drama*, vol 1: "The Making of Australian Drama 1830s to 1960s", (Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1978) pp. 176-7.

⁵⁹ Leslie Rees, *A History of Australian Drama*, vol 1, p. 177.

⁶⁰ SLE, Address to Adelaide Writers' Week, 1974.

milieu, or the artist as subject-matter, these works were able to reveal and interrogate their own form of writing, exposing the constructs of their narratives and lending a metafictional quality to their content. So often the theme throughout such works is the process of unmasking - the character, the performance, the craft. The human drama behind the theatrical production in *Interval* was one such unmasking.

Well received in its first run in April 1939, *Interval* was revived the following year in the Independent's new theatre at North Sydney. Sumner played the role of Gavin Gallowary, an understudy who is clever and unruffled until his long-awaited chance to star simply overwhelms him. Gallowary's comic scene in which he lights a cigarette beneath the theatre's "no smoking" sign assured Sumner's small part had audience impact. One night, this impact was greater than even the playwright had intended: the scenery fell down on him.⁶¹

Interval, with a memorable cast made up of many of the friends Sumner kept in touch with all his life, was a great success and was produced by theatre companies in every state in Australia; it even had a brief season in Rabaul before the outbreak of war in

⁶¹ SLE in An Overview in *40th Birthday - Independent Theatre 30th May 1930- 30th May, 1970* Souvenir Booklet.

the Pacific,⁶² while plans for a London production had to be cancelled because of the war. *Interval's* Melbourne premiere at Little Theatre (South Yarra) in September 1940 was attended by Sumner and a benefit performance took place in 1941 at Melbourne's Princess Theatre. Lilian Locke Burns, in her nephew's place, attended the 1941 performance of *Interval* at the Princess,⁶³ which had a special place in the Locke family annals because in 1908 Sumner Locke's first successful play, *Vicissitudes of Vivienne*, had been staged there, also for charity.

Interval was also one of four Australian plays to be published in 1942 by Melbourne University Press with the aid of Commonwealth funding.⁶⁴ During the war it was broadcast by the ABC across Australia. Sumner always remembered this play as his first unqualified success.⁶⁵ *Interval* was followed by *Little Sheep Run Fast* (1941), his first attempt to write serious drama, which had a tepid reception, and *Goodbye to the Music* (1942), about a once-famous London pianist endeavouring to forget his unhappy marriage and regain his artistic stature.⁶⁶ Praised for its snappy

⁶² This was as a result of an enthusiastic soldier who attended the Sydney premiere. ("Stars of the Air", unident. clipping, SLE Scrapbook, B.U.)

⁶³ *The Argus*, 10 Oct 1941, SLE Scrapbook, B.U.

⁶⁴ *Wireless Weekly*, 26 June 1941. Other plays in this series were *The Touch of Silk* by Betty Roland, *Red Sky at Morning* by Dymphna Cusack, and *Daybreak* by Catherine Shepherd. Each volume was sold for 2s 6d. Articles about the 1941 funding of these publications praised the quality of the books stating that Australian plays that had been published previously were often in inferior leaflet-styled booklets which soon fell into tatters.

⁶⁵ *40th Birthday Independent Theatre Souvenir Booklet*.

⁶⁶ A retitled and updated variation of his play *Foolish Yesterday*, performed earlier that year. According to SLE's letter to Irene Thirkell of 3 July 1941, he rewrote this play during his army basic training at a time when he was still under the influence of Emlyn Williams.

dialogue and clever acting (particularly Gwen Plumb's), several reviewers noted that *Goodbye to the Music* abandoned Australia for the glitter of London. By 1943, the demand for Australian drama had become strident. "What one sees at the Contemporary Show is not daring Australian modernism, but Australian artists, ignoring their own fine tradition, floundering in the wake of European art, and always twenty years behind it...", said one critic who, in a somewhat caustic review of *Goodbye to the Music*, also complained about the "hackneyed theme about the failure of a musician", and "the re-hash of a hundred contemporary London successes in the Noel Coward tradition". His praise was faint - "a good-humoured time killer".⁶⁷

Perhaps the critics prompted Sumner to set his 1943 play, *Your Obedient Servant*, in Australia. He considered it the worst of his first five three-act plays written between 1937 and 1943. Its failure, he later decided, had served a purpose: "I was conceited...and...believed my own reviews and believed some people who said solemnly: 'You have a great play in you, a great Australian play'."⁶⁸ With *Your Obedient Servant*, set on an Australian farm, Sumner tried unsuccessfully "to juxtapose an Australian...family against the climate of world totalitarianism". The result fell far short of the "great Australian play".⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Unident. clipping, SLE Scrapbook, BU.

⁶⁸ SLE, Address to Adelaide Writers' Week, 1974.

⁶⁹ SLE, Address to Adelaide Writers' Week, 1974.

Sumner wrote no more stage plays until after the war was over,⁷⁰ when he made his best contribution to the Independent Theatre's reputation and to Australian drama generally.

⁷⁰ By 1943 the Independent was one of only twelve little theatres left in Sydney from more than a hundred that had flourished there before the war. (*Thespis*, "Australian Theatre Review and Preview", unident. clipping, Scrapbook, SLE Collection, BU.)

Chapter 6: Radio Daze

The country turned to their little table sets or ornate consoles or what some of the older people called "the wireless" in suburban living rooms and lamplit farmhouses, one asked another was he or she comfy?

(*Radio Days* p. 1)

From 1934 onwards Sumner spent his evenings, lunch-hours and weekends immersed in theatre talk, theatre work and theatre people. But there was no income to be made from these pursuits as this was amateur theatre. He took several courses which his dotting aunts hoped would help him find paid employment and he had occasional acting roles in radio plays and serials, usually in juvenile parts. In 1935 he was cast in several of George Edwards' radio productions,¹ and this helped him gain radio work for the ABC including the leads in *Midshipman Easy* and *Aladdin*. All such productions were made in what Sumner described as "the primeval days of radio...before recordings were even dreamt of".² His live performances on air were no doubt enhanced by his stage experience at the Independent. Just as his theatre performances had strengthened the writing of his stage plays, so his radio-acting skills helped him to adapt a chapter of one of his mother's novels, *Mum Dawson, Boss*. "When Dawson Died" was broadcast by 2SM

¹ The longest running was "The Swiss Family Robinson" broadcast on Sydney's 2GB. SLE played Ernest. (*Wireless Weekly*, 30 May 1935.)

² *The Broadcaster*, (Perth), 17 Jan 1948.

and won that station's radio drama competition.³

In August 1935 Sumner also secured a job with J. C. Williamson's as an office and errand boy.

For two years I pasted cuttings into books about famous people, and made the tea. This soon began to pall, and the consolation of seeing many famous people close at hand didn't compensate sufficiently for always being in the office and not on the stage.⁴

But in 1937, when Edwards offered him a role in "The Empress Josephine" which was to be recorded, he had an opportunity to leave the drudgery of the office.

'The Empress Josephine'...was to be the first of its kind to be done commercially. I took the part of the son. The mysteries of a recording studio were unfolded for the first time. Dim figures in white coats bent over whirling wax discs which produced a radio voice as something unpleasantly familiar from another planet.⁵

This was the beginning of the radio recording studios, and of Nell Stirling and George Edwards' phenomenal radio factory which presented endless possibilities for radio as an industry and the Edwards' corporation as a business concern. For Sumner it opened the door into full-time work as a radio drama writer and actor.

³ *Radio Pictorial*, Oct 1935.

⁴ *The Broadcaster*, (Perth), 17 Jan 1948.

⁵ *The Broadcaster*, (Perth), 17 Jan 1948.

...George Edwards and Nell Stirling...literally had a factory going day and night, sometimes six or seven shows a night went on the air...I began my professional career as a writer [with] a children's serial called 'David and Dawn and the Sea Fairies'...harmless and great fun to write. They had no office space for me, I was paid £5 a week which I thought was a tremendous sum of money, for writing, acting, anything they wanted me to do, I was their casting director, I helped in the office, I gave out scripts to the actors...but I learnt to write on a battered old typewriter, sitting out in the outside office where there were six secretaries and phones ringing all the time, actors coming in and out, delivery people, six typewriters going all the time, and I learned to write against noise... .⁶

Sumner later found this atmosphere necessary when he began writing novels; he liked "the cross irritant" of the radio on and street sounds coming in through an open window. "Total silence I find dreadfully disturbing," he told an interviewer, stopping to listen to the relentless New York traffic.⁷

David and Dawn and the Sea Fairies on which the nineteen-year-old Sumner cut his teeth as a radio writer, was heard around Australia and in New Zealand.⁸ Its Sydney sponsor was a woman who sold cosmetics from a little shop in Rowe Street. According to one of the Edwards' former staffers, she came into the radio station

⁶ Hazel De Berg Interview, 1970.

⁷ Sally Macmillan, *The Weekend Australian Magazine*, 8-9 Feb 1986.

⁸ New Zealand author Janet Frame recalls this serial as part of her own childhood in her first volume of autobiography, *To the Is-land*. It was sold to NZ just after SLE began writing *David and Dawn*.

to broadcast all her own commercials live.

The problem was she would drone on and on in her monotonous...voice. Often running overtime as the red light was flashing and George and Nell were madly signalling to her to wind it up, she would then add comments like: "Well, ladies, I must go now as Mr. Edwards wants to give me a poke". And this was a children's serial running at six o'clock in the evenings!⁹

David and Dawn later appeared in *Fairyland*, as a children's radio programme called "Fairyfish", written by Seaton Daly, who is also paid "five pounds a week" for his trouble. Seaton is offered the job by Jobjoy Productions because their head writer, Morris Rice, had fallen ill from, it was implied, overwork: he had, in his own words, "allowed 'Fairyfish' to...flounder."¹⁰

Morris Rice was a barely disguised version of Maurice Francis, the head writer at George Edwards Productions who had devised and written *David and Dawn and the Sea Fairies*. And, like the fictional Seaton, Sumner had been engaged to relieve Francis of some of his writing load - then more than 20 shows a week, requiring over 100 episodes. But, according to a co-worker from the Edwards studio days, "Maurice Francis saw Sumner as a threat and the two never became friends, only ever managing to tolerate

⁹ Eileen Grieves to me, 1991.

¹⁰ *Fairyland*, p. 100.

one another...".¹¹ Yet Sumner recalled Francis only with admiration and respect. "Mr. Francis was capable of turning out hundreds of situations a week...keeping as many as seven or eight long-running stories in his head without ever getting mixed up."¹²

Sumner's first radio serial bears a striking resemblance to "Fairyfish".

"David and Dawn" [was] a children's serial with George and Nell portraying two tiresome tots with hideous Australian accents who had underwater adventures with numerous fish and molluscs all acted out by Mr Edwards. One of my earliest memories of him is his performance of a menacing clam; if a clam could have given utterance it would have sounded the way he did it, clammish... .¹³

Sumner began writing *David and Dawn* on his own typewriter, but soon had to dictate "the breathless dialogue" of this serial to typists. He had to write 52 episodes in record time, which meant five or six episodes each day. Every episode ran for about 12 minutes so he could spend no more than about forty minutes on each one: "I couldn't spend too long because I'd drop too far behind, and quite literally I never knew what was going to happen

11 Eileen Grieves to me, 1990.

12 SLE, "The Man of 1000 Voices", *Bulletin*, 22 July 1980.

13 SLE, "The Man of 1000 Voices".

on the next page.”¹⁴

Writing and acting all day long for radio and at night for the Independent Theatre, Sumner became totally immersed in his own creativity. He found humour in every situation and an audience on every corner. A theatre friend remembers that one night after he had waved goodbye to her, she glanced out of the bus window and saw him running alongside yelling out odd messages such as “thank your mother for the pickles”. Of course everyone else on the bus was laughing, just as he intended.¹⁵

Gordon Chater recollected that Sumner had a side to him which in a way was “a precursor to Barry Humphries’ ‘humour of non-comprehension’.”¹⁶ This was a spontaneous prank played on unsuspecting people who assumed what they saw was genuine.

We were coming out of the Hotel Australia... . And Sumner feigned a nervous breakdown right there on the pavement, sobbing and tearing at his clothes and nothing would stop him. Then in the middle of all the chaos with onlookers overcome by the scene he would turn it onto you. “And you’re responsible!” he yelled out, pointing at me...well what could you do.¹⁷

Sumner also sent his friends absurd telegrams, such as:

14 SLE to me, 1990.

15 Irene Thirkell to me, 1991.

16 Gordon Chater to me, 1992.

17 Gordon Chater to me, 1992.

“REDMOND PRONOUNCED INCURABLE HAVE SENT HIM SANATORIUM DRINKING BADLY AGAIN CANT CONTROL HIM CAN YOU ARRANGE LEAVE GRAN ARRIVE WEDNESDAY, BERT.”¹⁸ Telegrams, of course, were seen by many eyes en route to their destinations, which added to Sumner’s fun.

In George Edwards’ offices he unleashed his wit and keen observation skills by impersonating the trio of Nell Stirling, George Edwards and Maurice Francis. Another radio friend remembers a time when these three ‘executives’ had headed off to the Melbourne Cup for a week (horseracing, it was rumoured, eventually led them all to financial ruin):

...we hurried through all the work as quickly as possible so for the rest of the time we could have a ball. Sumner, with his back to the door, was impersonating Maurice Francis to perfection. Maurice was short with very thick lips and he had a different kind of voice. Sumner in his impersonation even looked like him. And we were all laughing hysterically when suddenly the door opened and Maurice Francis appeared, having come back early. Sumner, still facing his adoring audience, had no idea of his subject’s presence and couldn’t understand why our laughter had abruptly stopped.¹⁹

Sumner’s success with *David and Dawn* led to other writing

¹⁸ Telegram to Irene Thirkell, 29 Oct 1941.

¹⁹ Eileen Grieves to me, 1990.

tasks for George Edwards Productions,²⁰ now based at 2UW in Market St and using recording studios built for them by Columbia at Homebush in Sydney's west, where Edwards took advantage of actors.

[H]ired to play one part at the going price of £7/10 [they] found themselves trapped into playing two or three others in the same morning for the same price...[Because the recording studio] was miles out in the suburbs and Edwards provided transportation, one might as well submit to the larceny without complaining and get a free ride back in a comfortable limousine and know one would work again and quite often.²¹

Sumner, from a revolving chair, was now dictating episodes of various serials to several typists, one for each show. In *Edens Lost*, Bea St James (a 22-year-old radio drama writer with the pseudonym of D.K. Durfee) was, of all Sumner's characters, the one who followed most closely his own experience as a writer for radio. She even writes a Sumner Locke Elliott script, *Jezebel's Daughter*.²²

...Bea...couldn't explain her odd powers. The stuff flowed out of her. Often she went so fast dictating that the girls would cry out that they were way behind... . All she did was come in every morning and they would bring her huge cups of scalding

²⁰ These included adaptations of *The Channings*, *West of Cornwall*, and *Hard Cash*, and (as serials) Walpole's *The Blind Man's House* and Victor Hugo's *The Laughing Man*; heart-stoppers such as *Girl of the Ballet*, *Two Destinies* and *Tale of Hollywood*; his own serials - *Following Father's Footsteps*, *The Crazy Family*, *Tradesmen's Entrance*, *Jezebel's Daughter*, *Scarlet Rhapsody*, and his play *Man in the Dark*. Another serial, "East Wind Rising", had to change title because its sponsors were the manufacturers of a cure for indigestion!

²¹ SLE, "The Man of 1000 Voices".

²² SLE loved Bette Davis and her films, including *Jezebel*.

tea and she would look at the recording schedule...left on her desk (sometimes with a note: "We are dangerously close to air date on 'Jezebel's Daughter'. Can you manage six?"). Then she would buzz and Maisie or Nancy or Pat or June would come in with her notebook and she would ask where she had left off and one of them would read back to her the last few exciting cliff-hanging moments of the previous episode, which was often a surprise even to her.

And Maisie, who had humor, would say, "Now let's see you try to get out of *that* one, D.K."

Then she would close her eyes and begin. Slowly at first...then faster and faster until she was drawn back completely into the timeless and brightly lit countries of her mind through which she journeyed disguised as many fabulous people passing from one extraordinary event to another and, with the intenser lustre of fake jewelry, these creatures outshone the real world around her, everything real darkened and dimmed, aware of nothing else until Maisie, who was now on her fourth pencil, would call out, "You're on page seven," and she would bring about a climax.

Gulp tea. Next.

Next girl. More tea. Where were we?... .

(*Edens Lost* pp. 114-16)

Sumner gradually became notorious for his radio creations. His role as the obnoxious Harold in his first original serial, *Following Father's Footsteps* (broadcast for more than two years), impressed the critics,²³ as did his twangy-voiced Jim Hopkins in the highly successful *Dad and Dave* serial based on Steele Rudd's popular book. For several weeks Sumner also relieved Lorna Bingham as writer

²³ *Radio Pictorial of Australia*, 1 July 1941.

for *Dad and Dave*.

The author's acting radio credits included the starring roles of Huw Morgan in *How Green Was My Valley*, and Pip in *Great Expectations*, and smaller parts in *Algiers*, *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*, *Woman Without a Name*, and *Spring 1600*. But it was not only the critics who were impressed by Sumner. Janice Kenny, an avid radio listener during her childhood in the 1940s, recalled Sumner's serial *Scarlet Rhapsody* as "a ripe and fruity melodrama about a 'great concert pianist' by the name of Anna Nobach"; it was, she said, "an irresistible...vice for subteen girls who were having piano lessons from the nuns...".²⁴

Several of Sumner's dramatisations had good press.²⁵ His adaptation of Hugh Walpole's *The Blind Man's House* was described as "one of the most gripping radio serials to come from the George Edwards Studios" and ran three nights a week.²⁶ But George Edwards' coup - gaining Woolworths as a national sponsor - put Sumner's serial *The Crazy Family* onto the business pages. It was the first time a single sponsor had supported a programme nationwide and it was big news. Twenty radio stations in five mainland states broadcast the serial's fifty-two quarter-hour

²⁴ Janice Kenny, Tanja, NSW, to me, March 1991.

²⁵ E.g. Victor Hugo's *The Laughing Man*, and the hour-long episodes (an unprecedented length then) of his serial *The Man in the Dark*, the cast of which included Queenie Ashton.

²⁶ *Radio Pictorial* Sydney, Aug 1944.

episodes at 7.45 p.m. every Tuesday and Thursday.²⁷ Outlets for the programme sprang up in every centre where there was a Woolworths' store. Commercial radio had arrived. Across the country *The Crazy Family* was broadcast with the slogan "Laugh Your Head Off". But, despite the corporate sponsorship, the serial was not a success and was dropped after only a few episodes.

Years later Sumner Locke Elliott looked back on his time in radio - the serials especially - as a necessary but inferior writing experience: "You had to have a cliff-hanger ending each night, four nights a week. They were terrible things. [It was] just trash I wrote in those days; but it served a purpose."²⁸ It earned him enough money to maintain his first love, theatre. The elusive goal, a truly great play, plagued him all his life, even after his success as a novelist. After the war, his satirical stage play about radio, *Invisible Circus*, made it quite clear what he thought of the material radio churned out.

Yet his radio experience provided more than subject-matter for Sumner's novels and later plays. It developed his ear for dialogue, nuance and accent, as well as his writing speed; it sharpened his recall and taught him discipline. When he returned to Australia in 1974 he acknowledged this apprenticeship.

²⁷ *Broadcasting Business*, 9 March 1939.

²⁸ Clyde Packer, *No Return Ticket*, p. 145.

...I find it hard to apply the word art to radio... . But I'm impatient with snob writers (I was a bigoted snob about the theatre as "art" in my twenties) who look down their intellectual noses at conveyor belt writing... . Writers must write. Writers must earn a living between plays and novels. The greatest writers have had to turn out short stories, some form of potboiling. It used to be the magazine. In the thirties it became the radio serial.

In 1937 I joined the George Edwards-Columbia Records Organisation. Edwards and his wife operated a factory of dramatic sludge then heard all over Australia, coast to coast... . It was hard work but apprenticeship and in the next five years I turned out miles of incredible junk... . But the experience was invaluable: taught me professional discipline - eye on the clock - having to push on not even knowing what was to happen next - fight the flat morning mood (the writer's enemy): "I don't feel like it today". No room for the dilettante in radio - keep it going - keeping the story interesting. Make 'em laugh, make 'em cry, make 'em *wait*.

This is why I believe all writers should dirty their hands at some time in potboiling; there is an energy that is forced on you. There are terrible dangers: the serial form which mandates the fake climax at the end of every episode. But even Dickens wrote in serial form... .²⁹

As a radio dramatist, Sumner had to meet criteria that differed from those he encountered as a stage playwright, and having no visual contact with the audience is the most obvious one.

²⁹ SLE, Adelaide Writers' Address, 1974.

Stage and radio writing both contributed to his career as a novelist. Through his radio work, for example, he learned to judge what was 'popular'.

When Australia entered WWII, Sumner had to attend a ninety-day basic military training course between May and July, 1941, before returning to civilian life. George Edwards tried to delay Sumner's call-up by arguing that his radio shows were necessary for the morale of the country. But, as Sumner explained, "when America entered the war and the Japanese were threatening Malaya, writing for radio was no longer a valid reason for exemption and I was soon in uniform."³⁰

He wrote the occasional serial or melodrama for George Edwards when on leave after his call-up, or during his periods in various army camps, but there was less time for writing and his output diminished. But Edwards Productions, unaffected by the onset of war, flourished:

...while Holland and Belgium fell, they were grinding out *The Rajah's Diamond*, *The Woman in Black*, *Scarlet Rhapsody*, *Jezebel's Daughter*, *His Last Plunge* and *House of Shadows*... . So many new assistants, secretaries and additional writers now existed, it was like a minor MGM.³¹

³⁰ SLE to me, 1990.

³¹ SLE, "The Man of 1000 Voices".

Sumner's years in uniform extinguished his career in commercial radio. He returned to write for George Edwards after the war, but he failed to regain his enthusiasm. He had lost a part of himself, his radio career, while a soldier. Years later he expressed a sense of division between the writer and soldier in *Edens Lost*. Angus Weekes, the draftee, and Bea St James, the radio writer, are on trains that pass in the night.

[She] thought about a night on a train about three years ago when, stalled in a siding, a troop train had drawn alongside and, looking up, there was Angus staring at her from about two feet away - their faces were exactly framed in the two train windows and she had...waved but he remained slumped by the window... . She tapped on her window; she tried to open it but it was glued shut with years of soot. She stood up and gesticulated wildly to attract his attention but either the feeble brownout lights in her train were too dim or else Angus was only seeing the reflection of his own weary face in the dark glass, and then his train jerked and moved on, carrying him away, leaving her with the suspicion that he had seen her... .

(*Edens Lost* pp. 117-8)

Sumner, the drafted soldier, continued to write for radio for a time. In dimly lit army huts, under hurricane lamps he tapped out the occasional melodrama or episode of a long-running serial. But eventually he realised that radio had moved on without him.

**Chapter Seven: Outpost of Progress -
the other theatre of war**

[S]he had gasped at the sight of him, gaunt, much too thin with his stringy neck sticking out of the khaki collar which was too big for it... . [H]e remained slumped by the window, leaning his head against the dirty glass...only seeing the reflection of his own weary face... .

(*Edens Lost* pp. 117-18)

Sumner did his army basic training in the middle of 1941 and became an unwilling part of the January 1942 draft. For him, war service was confined to clerical duties.

I typed my way through the war. I was a Class A typist...in the various positions...that I was shoved around in during the five and a half years I was in the Army, and it did preclude my going into the infantry...at least I was always in headquarters, I was always safe... .¹

He was based in Wallgrove and North Richmond, west of Sydney, when Singapore was taken; he was in remote country homes in Singleton and Maitland, which served as headquarters in rural New South Wales, after the bombing of Darwin; and he was back in Sydney's Victoria Barracks just after Japanese mini-submarines entered Sydney Harbour and an offshore mother-sub shelled the suburbs of Bellevue Hill and Rose Bay.² In 1944, while Aussies

¹ Hazel De Berg Interview, 1970.

² Peter Luck, *A Time to Remember*, (William Heinemann, Australia, 1988) p. 326.

fended off the enemy in the jungles of New Guinea or Allied troupes landed on the beaches of Normandy, Sumner was in the Northern Territory on a six months' posting to the 8th Australian Army Ordnance Depot (8 AAOD). This unit of "ordnance clerks, storemen, drivers and engineers" formed "one of the largest supply depots in the North during the latter part of the war."³ Pte. Elliott's experience of war was not as the battle-weary soldier, but as one of the many unseen and unheralded defence troops whose war years were removed from danger and from glory. "We never saw a single Jap plane, we were never bombed, machine-gunned or sniped at like our pals in New Guinea, who were never free of excitement, we thought," he wrote after his return from Mataranka; "We were the backwash. No one knew we existed and yet we did...[we] were the ones who had to fight another kind of enemy...boredom..."⁴

From April to October, 1944, Sumner was living in an outpost he described as "a lonely strip of barren and seemingly endless sandy waste of ant hills and stunted trees".⁵ This desert incarceration forever changed him, as a person and as a writer. "I think I actually was down to about...115 lbs by the time I came back, everybody was horrified at the way I looked and yet I never felt better in my life."⁶

³ SLE's introduction to *Rusty Bugles*, Currency Press, Sydney, 1980.

⁴ SLE's introduction to *Rusty Bugles*.

⁵ SLE's introduction to *Rusty Bugles*.

⁶ Hazel De Berg Interview, 1970.

Having served as a private throughout most of the war, it was not until he became a radio writer for the *Army Hour*,⁷ at the end of 1944, that he was promoted to the rank of staff sergeant. It was, however, during his long wait to be discharged after peace was declared, that his war experience - in particular his six months in outback Mataranka - coalesced into his most famous stage play, *Rusty Bugles*.

The war cut short Sumner's career in radio, delayed his development as a playwright, and subjected him to months of physical, emotional and intellectual deprivation. Yet, as he so often acknowledged, his life was never in jeopardy and his situation was far easier than that of so many other reluctant soldiers forced to risk their lives in battle fields across the world. Oddly enough, the war years - especially his months at Mataranka - were the makings of him as a writer. Another Australian literary figure, Frank Hardy, also posted at Mataranka, considered this the turning point of his own writing career.⁸

⁷ According to Clyde Packer (*No Return Ticket*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1984), the *Army Hour* was broadcast "with considerable distaste by the ABC and dumped as soon as the Japanese surrendered".

⁸ Frank Hardy said this when interviewed by SBS television shortly before his death in early 1994. Hardy had edited the army camp newspaper at Mataranka, *The Troppo Tribune*, on which SLE also worked. More surprising was the fact that the connection between SLE and FH extended back to the tiny township of Bacchus Marsh in Victoria. Lerderberg St in that town had been home to FH from boyhood and was the vacation residence of SLE from the time of his childhood. Similarly it was also home to Australian author, Peter Carey, who in many ways followed SLE's footsteps to NYC. Carey's family home was directly opposite that of SLE's aunt Alice; PC would have been about five or six at the time of SLE's last visit. PC never met SLE and only ever encountered FH once: at a ceremony when PC's book *War Crimes* was being awarded a literary prize. PC introduced himself to FH with some enthusiasm explaining that he too came from Bacchus Marsh. FH was luke warm in response, telling PC that he thought another book should have won the award. When PC wrote to me outlining this meeting with FH, his comment in overview was "Small Towns!" (FH did not respond to my enquiries regarding any material suitable to this biography before his death.)

During the long slow months of boredom at Mataranka, Sumner begrudged more than anything the time that war service had taken from his career. From the beginning of his service he had written to friends about this nagging worry that life would leave him behind. "Time marches on!" he exclaimed in frustration. "I am the only typist here and must churn out more than 30 letters a day for everyone so I have no time to write anything."⁹ But Sumner's thinking and writing was changed by his time in the service, particularly at Mataranka. As for many other Australian writers before him, Henry Lawson among them, the outback awakened his spirit. His desert experience gave him wisdom and vision, and, eventually, a sense of kinship with his fellow ordinary Australian. This new understanding of the hearts and minds of Australians began to appear in his work. He came to see his Mataranka service as the first valuable experience of his life because of what he witnessed there: the endurance and dignity of the human spirit. His admiration for those who shared his 'desert campaign' convinced him of the worth of his own familiar realm and *Rusty Bugles*, as his memoir of this period in his life, marked his first conscious shift to autobiography as his writing source; a well of inspiration that was to nourish him from this point onwards

⁹ SLE, Letter from North Richmond Barracks, Feb 1942.

in his writing career.¹⁰

His army basic training with its set period of three months with a promise of return to civilian life, had seemed less threatening to his writing career than his service after call-up. During training, he could count on release. He did worry, however, that the war itself might intervene and turn his basic training into active service, yet letters written at this stage reveal none of the desperation of those he wrote after his call-up. Humour ran through his accounts of mundane, daily happenings:

Tomorrow we go on manoeuvres to Camden or thereabouts for five days, and it's going to pour like blazes the minute we leave. I know because the rule is that you sleep outside on a groundsheet with two blankets over you and that's all. The last regiment that went out got bogged in the mud for three days... .

(SLE, Letter from Wallgrove, May 1941.)

His descriptions of his rare leisure outings during this confinement are of the same genre: the humorous satiric anecdote, a form he perfected in letters to friends during the war, and evident in *Rusty Bugles*.

On Saturday...I was allowed off to go to the Gymkhana at Woodstock, a grandiose affair taking

¹⁰ While much fiction, if not all, has its basis in autobiography, SLE seems to insist far less on the distinction and distance between the literary forms than most other writers. In his prose, especially, the boundary between fact and fiction is not only blurred, it is almost invisible.

place in the grounds of an old home. What screaming fun! Officers everywhere leading their women around like roan mares. Only forty minutes to wait in between items and then the crowd all rushed to the fence so that it was impossible to see anything. How I enjoyed the tug-o-war. It was thrilling to see all those muscles straining at the leash like oysters rolling around. And the Band! Lovely! They played Colonel Bogey and Vilia all at the same time because the music had become mixed but no one minded very much. We then had tent pegging in which five men thunder down the straight with swords outstretched to skewer a small piece of wood...excellent and so useful a thing to learn in this war. I leaned casually against the officer's enclosure and the entire fence collapsed so I walked away very quickly and said nothing.

(SLE, Letter from Wallgrove, May 1941.)

The great boredom of this training period was the real enemy during WWII, not only for him but for thousands of others doing 'inactive' duty. "One day is so like another," he wrote, "that I have to stop and think how old I am."¹¹ At Mataranka in 1944, in the heat (relentless even in winter) of outback Australia, Pte. Elliott's weekends had not improved on Wallgrove: "...Sundays I sleep in and then spend the day washing. I'm such a one with the Persil these days...and then darning sox and a nice lay down to ease me poor back after typing dull memos all week...".¹²

11 SLE, Letter from Wallgrove, May 1941.

12 SLE, Letter from Mataranka, April 1944.

Endurance on the front lines of boredom, became the subject-matter of *Rusty Bugles*,¹³ whose characters are constantly occupied with washing their clothes, drinking their daily supply of beer, eating morsels from their prized caches of food (delicacies from faraway home, stored beneath their bunks), and dozing, lazing or sleeping.

Sumner's own lack of ability in any aspect of active army training probably kept him in so many monotonous postings, although the army had a reputation for getting placements totally wrong. (In *Rusty Bugles*, Vic Richards is keen to be in active service but is instead marooned in the desert ordnance unit.) Sumner's rifle instruction and target shooting practice as a trainee in 1941 was enough to convince army personnel that that he should be confined to an army office.

...Last Friday we had rifle practice. Well laugh! Had had exactly ten minutes tuition the day before so that all I knew was which end to distinguish from the other. I arrived at the range which was

¹³ SLE discovered a theatrical counterpart of *Bugles* playing on Broadway shortly after his arrival in New York - *Mr. Roberts*, starring Henry Fonda who also took the title role in the 1955 Hollywood version which also starred James Cagney, as the neurotic captain, and Jack Lemmon, as the scheming ensign, a show-stealing part played by David Wayne on Broadway. *Mr Roberts* was woven around the lives of a naval crew confined to a lacklustre hulk in the backwaters beyond the range of active duty and military commanders. SLE's first mention of *Mr. Roberts* is in a letter of 25 April 1949. "Have finally caught up with *Mr. Roberts* which...is really superb and Fonda magnificent. I wept and laughed by turns. Most tremendously moving and magnificently played by an all male cast and is very like *Bugles* in most respects only a little more plot - they are boys on a dirty tanker taking toilet paper around the Pacific with a brute of a captain that won't allow any shore leave." *Mr. Roberts'* arrival in England ahead of *Bugles* dashed the latter's hopes for an international life. A dispute had arisen between SLE and Doris Fitton over taking the play to London - it was not she but Australian actor John Wood who owned the international rights, and this had considerably delayed negotiations with London theatrical parties. Much to the regret of all, especially SLE and Doris Fitton, *Bugles* was never staged in London.

an enormous paddock place with little mounds and a big mound with numbers where movable targets suddenly slid silently into view like some lost mammal. When it was my turn to fire I was so petrified with fear (I had heard grim stories of back firing etc) and concentrated so much on keeping the rifle hard into my shoulder so that it wouldn't back fire, that I couldn't think of another thing. On the order "Fire" I let go like mad and the explosion deafened and dazed me. I became mad with the lust of shooting and let off a rapid five rounds straight off so that Officers ran screaming for shelter like dust before a North Westerly... . I not only did not hit a bull's eye but I did not once hit the target... . They wave a red flag when one doesn't score anything and when I came on the red flag was brandished so often it looked like May Day in the Soviet. Finally I scored one little hit but unfortunately on the next man's target... . I was labelled unqualified dismally... .

(SLE, Letter from Wallgrove, May 1941.)

Sumner required a rifle only on guard duty in the Northern Territory and even then it was a benign appendage considering its reluctant marksman. As it always had in civilian life, the typewriter was his means of employment throughout his army service. But the absurdity of his daily office tasks troubled him even during his training. "I get clever little memos to type about jam in the officer's mess and reports of motor cycle repairs which are marked 'MOST SECRET CONFIDENTIAL AND URGENT'," he wrote in a letter in which he also lamented that the "loneliness...is suicidal".¹⁴

¹⁴ SLE, Letter from Wallgrove, May 1941.

By mid-July 1941, he had survived his training and become a “human being again”, returning to theatre and radio work - but all too briefly. The escalation of the war put him back in uniform and by January 1942 he was staring at an uncertain future. His letters became noticeably less humorous: “...I wish the Empire would wake up and smash into things. We seem to be going on for years and I can't even get a laugh out of it.”¹⁵

However, his transfer to a base at Singleton in late March 1942, put his situation in perspective.

Outside West Maitland God forgot about trees, rain, communication and telephone... . I came up here on Thursday by truck... . We had a nice stop in a lane near Gosford for two hours because a utility broke down and they hadn't realised its absence. However I went for a walk down the road and a nice middle-aged woman ran out of a house to me with a glass of lime juice and a piece of rainbow cake. When she told me she had two sons in a prison camp in Germany I thought: ‘Summie you ain't complainin' because you're only ninety miles from home this time.’ Isn't it wonderful how other people's misfortunes cheer one up... .

(SLE, Letter from Singleton, March/April 1942.)

While he remained embittered about the war's interruption to his career, he never again resorted to self-pity. Instead, he followed a

¹⁵ SLE, Letter from North Richmond, Jan 1942.

road he had known since his troubled childhood at Cranbrook boarding school: his imagination.

He channelled his energies into what he always did best - entertaining and raising troop morale - beginning with an army camp concert in 1942 at Singleton.¹⁶ Later, at Mataranka, where the officers were quick to recognise his creative flair, he turned again to his writing and from then on he worked on ideas for radio and, for the first time, considered using prose. "I wrote one episode of a thrilling new G.E. serial...and mapped out a new short story. Going madly in for prose these days and deserting the theatre," he wrote to a friend at the Independent.¹⁷ As it turned out, his writing career included only three more stage plays.

During his postings on the outskirts of Sydney, Sumner was sometimes able to visit the city, either on leave, a nightly pass, or to acquire props and material for camp entertainments.¹⁸ Such outings allowed him to keep in touch with the Independent Theatre and the Edwards' radio studio. Later, stationed in Victoria Barracks in Sydney, this contact made it easier for him to re-establish

¹⁶ His first army camp concert in 1942 included locals from Singleton and featured "a boy soprano who rendered *Danny Boy* in a fierce nasal accent; a lady with a carpet snake; the fitter and turner's daughter who recited; and a mouth organ expert". SLE's sketch included "Mae West in a rather vulgar manner...played with unbelievable ineptitude by the Sergeant Major who essayed Miss West's curves and accents with as much subtlety as a busy locomotive".

¹⁷ SLE, Letter from Singleton, April 1942.

¹⁸ The Singleton concert costumes were provided by David Jones in Sydney, thanks to a former DJ's employee, "a window dresser named Shirt", discovered to be part of the unit. DJ's provided "rolls of beautiful material...and magnificent straw wigs one sees in the window" for this concert. (SLE, Letters from his army service, 1942-44.)

himself on the stage and as an occasional writer for Edwards.

At North Richmond, with only two days a month off, he still managed to stave off the pangs for society by dashing to Sydney by train, returning the same night on the midnight express, which arrived at Richmond about 1.30 am.

...[T]hen one walks along a disused railway line for three miles in pitch dark along uneven sleepers that make you do a jog trot like a filly with a string halt. Placed at delightfully unexpected intervals are cow traps thirty feet deep and the unwary crash to their doom. Then one plunges into the impenetrable Malayan jungle by the river for another two miles until one sees the tower and then makes up a steep hill that would dwarf Quebec. This is all what is known as a short cut.

(SLE, Letter from North Richmond, Feb 1942.)

Most of the country houses requisitioned for barracks in these areas were historic properties, and the North Richmond house reminded Sumner of a Hitchcock setting that raised one's expectation of finding "Mrs Danvers lurking in the shadow of the larder".¹⁹ His posting to Victoria Barracks in the city late in 1942 was a welcome return to the comforts of home (where he was permitted to sleep each night), and to his evening social life of theatre and friends. During such postings he occasionally appeared in plays at the Independent which also produced two of his own

¹⁹ SLE, Letter from North Richmond, Feb 1942.

works between 1942 and the end of 1943. A few of his melodramas and radio serials were also aired at this time.

In Victoria Barracks he encountered another foe besides the daily boredom of despatch and report typing. For several months between the end of 1942 and the middle of 1943, he worked in a section handling camouflage netting and he never forgot the smell of the netting which penetrated his clothes, hair and skin. It was so overpowering that he was convinced that people edged away from him in the bus on his way home from the Barracks each night.²⁰ This unsavoury experience was later conferred upon the Flagg sisters in *Water Under the Bridge*. Geraldine and Ila Flagg are two well-to-do but repressed spinsters who long to make a worthwhile contribution to the war effort. After receiving word to report to Warrant Officer Mooney, Camouflage Netting Department, Anzac Barracks, they fancy themselves mixing with the officers and attending parades in crisp uniforms.

Crumbs, how their hearts had fallen when they saw what they'd got into. The camouflage Netting Unit was installed in a disused ammo storage shed, a grim windowless edifice whose stone walls glistened with damp and the first thing they noticed was the dull fishy smell of the twine and the nets piled in mountains... . For a fleeting second Geraldine had glanced at the open shed entrance and thought of grabbing Ila and making a run for it. But, this was war, wasn't it? and

²⁰ Clyde Packer, *No Return Ticket*, p. 146.

they'd volunteered... . But how absolutely like them to have copped this. She held her handkerchief to her nose.

(*Water Under the Bridge* p. 241)

Sumner's own hopes of an easier life in city barracks were similarly shattered, as he trudged wearily home every night with that fishy pall still hanging over him. Less than two years later there was a "scandal involving over-purchasing of the creosoted twine netting which broke just before the end of the war, when it was discovered that tons of the stuff had been left to rot on docks in New Guinea".²¹ His return to the city did, however, allow him to observe the effects of the war on people generally considered safe and out of the action, and World War II Sydney was evoked in several of his works, particularly in *Water Under The Bridge* and *Edens Lost*.

Without congratulating myself, I think I came close to giving a vision to people who weren't there or who weren't born then, of what Sydney was like in the war. The brown-outs, the shortages, the sharing of cabs. Americans everywhere, everything rather dismal and yet at the same time a rather curious excitement going on. It was an extraordinary time.²²

His description of life in the city in *Water Under the Bridge*

²¹ Piers Akerman, "Prize for a prodigal who didn't come back", *The Age*, Melbourne, 28 Nov 1977.

²² SLE to Candida Baker, *Yacker* 2, p. 65.

depicts the Sydney he came to know when he was based at Victoria Barracks.

Outwardly there were changes. The brown-out made it hard to read the paper in the gingery lights on the trams and ferries. The glass had been removed from the big shop windows in town and replaced with chicken wire and cars had their fenders painted white so one would see them in the dark and some had inflated gas bags on top of them to save gasoline, no friendly neon signs flashed, and they had taken down the clock tower on the GPO in case of bombs... . And they couldn't get stockings and nobody had seen mustard for as long as anyone could remember; they saved soap down to the last sliver. But even when Paris fell to Hitler it had no effect on the infallibility of the five o'clock ferry lumbering into Old Cremorne wharf...or Mr. Newton mowing his lawn every Saturday.

Pearl Harbor? That was near Hong Kong, wasn't it?

But then there was Singapore and the British guns all facing the wrong way which no one had thought of (typical) and the Australian Eighth Army trapped. Then Manila, New Guinea and then Darwin bombed but people on trams still turned to the racing results, you couldn't rattle the Aussies.

(Water Under the Bridge p. 243)

The Australian apathy and chauvinism Sumner had come to despise by the time he left in 1948 were aspects of the national character he became more familiar with during his war service, and particularly while stationed in the city.

Even the night when explosions rocked the harbor and they'd got up...and peered through the dark veranda windows expecting, almost hoping, to see the golden confetti of ack-ack and searchlights...all was just dark Sunday night with the wireless just crackling, gone off the air... . Still it was with a little twitter of excitement that Geraldine read...that Japanese midget submarines had got through the safety net and almost got their target, the big American aircraft carrier moored at Cockatoo dock, before they'd been sunk by depth charges. The Flaggs stood in line when one of the mini subs was put on display to raise money for the Red Cross... .

Well, anyway, they'd had a brush with the real war, it had caused a ripple in the stagnant pond... . Sometimes when the noon sirens wailed Geraldine wished that it were a genuine air raid...smashing the smugness of people in this surely most smug of all countries. So isolated, chauvinistic and proud of it, preening about everything Aussie... . All the longitudes and platitudes of the whole cricket-loving, racing-mad, beer-swilling, sun-and-surf-worshipping good-old-Bondi-beach nation of ingrained suburbia, of dear old mums and dads and kids. Truly...there was no escape from the national blandness, it was like everlasting congenial weather... .

(Water Under the Bridge pp. 243-5)

In 1944, at the end of a typically hot Australian summer, Sumner was ordered to transfer from the psychological blandness of the city to a physically bland place - Mataranka, a barren outback desert bathed in endless sunshine. Lilian Locke Burns, relieved to have had her nephew back at home for more than a

year, was unhappy at the prospect of his leaving again and for such a remote region. Lily's old friend, Australian writer Miles Franklin, sent a letter to Sumner after the premiere of his play, *Rusty Bugles*, recalling the time he had been dispatched to the outback, and marvelling in its literary consequence.

When your aunt lamented to me that you were being sent away up there, I rejoiced for your sake and envied you your chance of getting away from the segregation of our banal cities to a different banality and better segregation. See the result. What a pity you didn't have six years in all sorts of dumps if the results could have been proportionately rich.²³

Above all it was the sense of being landlocked in isolation and desolation that gave *Rusty Bugles* such a powerful impact. The characters, raw language, humour, and tragedy were all spawned by this alien region that was both prison and fortress.

Sumner began the journey from Sydney by train to Brisbane where he enjoyed a few days leave and visited his old friend from radio and theatre, Gwen Meredith, who soon broke Australian broadcasting records with her serial, *Blue Hills*. While in Brisbane he also met Barbara Sisley, 'a Doris Fitton of the North' who owned the repertory company that had staged several of Sumner's plays. He was also introduced to American actor Will Lee, who had

²³ Miles Franklin, Letter to SLE in NYC, 31 Oct 1948. From The Miles Franklin Papers, Mitchell Library, Sydney, Australia.

appeared in the 1939 Hollywood movie *Golden Boy*; and he caught up with Michael Pate, an old friend from 2UW's *Lux Radio Theatre*.

Then came the journey from Brisbane to Townsville.

What a train... . It stopped for unaccountable reasons every hour or so and just stayed. At one place we drew up outside a lonely siding where a lady station master and a brood of grubby children came out and chatted with the engine driver...and finally ended up by joining in the two-up game! We stayed an hour and a half. It seemed a bridge was washed away North of Ayr and later that evening we transferred to trucks... . My fear alone would have been sufficient to resink "The Normandie". The road had ruts about 3 feet deep and the ride made Kakoda seem like the Pacific Highway. Added to this, the trucks were open, rain was falling and, as they say, night was coming on a-pace. I clung on as at every bump 25 men and bags fell on top of me. This, I imagined was the end. But no! We came to a tiny township where a train was waiting. It was reluctant to go but after an hour or so it moved on in a desultory sort of way... . We reached Townsville in teeming rain but the red beacon flashing on the mountain seemed like Central Square after what we'd been through.

(SLE, Letter from Mataranka, April 1944.)

The journey to Townsville was further than he had ever travelled from home before, and he found that the war had turned it into a place "practically American". He spent four days of relative calm discovering open air movies.

[Y]ou sit in a garden in a deck chair...and then lie down to see the film at an angle of 50 degrees. They show nothing but westerns and I suffered through *Law of the Pampas* and *Frontier Badmen*. Across the street was showing *Frontier Badmen* and *Law of the Pampas* in strong competition.

(SLE, Letter from Mataranka, April 1944.)

From Townsville another train took him to Mt. Isa, the end of the line, and the journey resumed by truck to Mataranka. This last leg of the trip - into the heart of the territory - gave him his first taste of the outback.

Well...no one lives there except the hawks (huge ones like gliders) and the ants. The ants are very settled in. They have built thousands of cone-shaped cathedrals (some 6 feet high) and these extend for miles like a great brown cemetery. We saw some emus and I rather hoped to see an emu and a kangaroo standing together holding up a shield marked 'Advance Australia' but it's just a fallacy. They don't! The land extends from horizon to horizon in dull flat grassy plains with occasional stunted trees. Sometimes big mountains of boulders shoot up and then disappear again and this goes on for 4 days. We stopped at night at grim little camps to be fed and bedded but up again at 4.30 for breakfast and the road. Stew in bright moonlight is like something out of Edgar Allan Poe! But it was interesting to see...the nothingness of it all - the emptiness for thousands of miles! What are we going to do with it all after the war?

(SLE, Letter from Mataranka, April 1944.)

Along the way, he came upon evidence of people and events

that had only previously existed for him in books and oral histories.

Since I've been here in the heart of the Never-Never, I've had a few cynicisms exploded. One was a little book about which I always used to laugh - 'We of the Never Never'. Well Mrs. Gunn lived on Elsey Station near here and I went on a trip to the falls, a glorious inland tropic pool where we swam. On the way we passed Aeneas Gunn's grave. He's known by the Abos [sic] here as 'Maluka' or White Master and some of the faithful servants are buried with him. Nearby a huge Banyan tree has cast its branches down into the ground forming a Gothic effect and the words Mr. Gunn carved to Mrs G. in 1901 are still to be seen... . In those days the only reach to civilisation (such as it was) was by bullock dray to Katherine - no mean distance and then only in the dry season. I think they were pretty brave.

(SLE, Letter from Mataranka, April 1944.)

On arrival at Mataranka, after a journey that had taken sixteen days, he settled into the menial office routine that was now so familiar. But he was busy if still bored. He advised friends back home: "Dispel all those ideas that the Northern Territory's vast wastes are where one sits in the sun eating bananas...It is only by the grace of God that I get to ablutions regularly enough to be tolerated at close quarters."²⁴

In *Rusty Bugles* Rod Carson's acceptance by his fellow inmates at the army camp was a gradual process, as it was for Sumner.

²⁴ SLE, Letter home from Mataranka, April 1944.

Bugles, which Sumner claimed was a documentary play, depicted communal living and isolation, in which these men shared the highs and lows of each other's lives and became like a family. In particular, this comradeship developed among the unranked members of the camp (from several hundred to about 2000 men). It was 'them and us' - officers versus the common soldiers - and Pte. Elliott was one of the 'us'.²⁵

Life for the ordinary soldier at Mataranka was difficult, due not only to the extremes of environment, climate and isolation but also to the rigid army codes and rituals, which seemed so perfunctory in such an outpost. The men were all desperate for leave. In 1970, Sumner recalled them as vividly as though it had all happened yesterday.

Those boys, those guys, were absolutely fabulous, some of them had not been on leave for two years. We never saw a woman. I know they gave us saltpetre. And we had two lousy movies a week, they were always Deanna Durbin for some reason, if the truck didn't break down. Two bottles of beer a week which we used to save up, hang in a sock at night to get cold - I was there in the winter, wonderful climate, desert, never rains at all, it can be 125 in the daytime - we were given a long siesta period, from 12 to 2 we had off, and then we worked till 6, and then as soon as evening came, it was mandatory to wear long trousers in the

²⁵ In Mataranka, the 'them and us' division between the ranked and unranked soldiers was symbolised by the springs-fed thermal bathing pool which was constructed by the common soldiers for use by officers only. This pool has since become synonymous with the town of Mataranka, now considered a desert oasis by tourists.

evening because of mosquitoes, and there were snakes and there were curious reptilian things that came in at night and looked at you, and dreadful food... .²⁶

The only contact with the outside world for the troops at Mataranka was the little weekly train to Darwin. They jokingly called it 'the Spirit of Protest', alluding to the famous 'Spirit of Progress', a glamorous train that ran between Melbourne and Albury in the 1930s and thrilled Australians with its sleek blue and gold body and its extraordinary speed of 190 km/hr (then equal to the speed of airliners).²⁷ But for the soldiers in the desert, the night whistle of the rickety little train to Darwin meant escape to everything they missed.

Their only other escape from the dull sameness of camp life was through the imaginative travel of movies, concerts, and play readings. Their two movies a week were mostly old westerns or films at least 10 years out of date. Sumner, writing home about seeing Jean Harlow in *Man in Possession*, said sarcastically: "I'm catching up on all the films I was lucky enough to miss in '34".²⁸ But not long after he had arrived in camp, he saw Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergmann in *Casablanca*, and was impressed. Decades

²⁶ Hazel De Berg Interview, 1970.

²⁷ Peter Luck, *A Time to Remember*, (William Heinemann, Australia, 1988) p. 18. In the mid 1930s this train cost £360,000 which Peter Luck reckons was equivalent to \$10 million by 1988 standards, a huge gamble in the context of The Great Depression.

²⁸ SLE, Letter from Mataranka, Aug 1944.

later, he watched this classic on television late one night in his New York apartment: "I sat looking at it and I thought 'Isn't it strange that the first time I saw this was sitting on a log with 2000 men under the stars with a screen set up in the Northern Territory'. The world's a strange place isn't it...".²⁹

Camp concerts had been "pretty grim" before Sumner arrived. He put on play-readings and comedies, and described the entertainment in amusing letters to friends at home.

We have a show to do before the pictures tomorrow night and also a Public Speaking Contest on Wednesday in which I have to speak for seven minutes on the Encouragement of Fine Art and haven't one idea in my head relative to the goddam subject. Maybe I'll just dazzle them with a bit of Picasso. I always think it's so encouraging to speak to a strange audience when you're not sure of your facts and I've not time to do any reading til then. Honestly we go night and day... .

(SLE, Letter from Mataranka, 8 June 1944.)

Just a month after his arrival at Mataranka, he began contributing to Frank Hardy's ordnance newspaper, *The Troppo Tribune*, which had been in print for a year. In early June the "Around the Depot" column reported: "Since Sumner Locke-Elliott has arrived the morning and afternoon tea breaks have become like Stage Door Canteen. Our Sumner gives the boys his impressions of

the stars with prominent members of the castle thrown in for good measure.”³⁰ Sumner had found what every performer dreams of: a captive audience.

The Troppo Tribune boosted morale for the almost 2,000 men of the 8th AAOD. They began to rely on it for entertainment, sports results, and various competitions that sometimes extended from Mataranka to other outback posts. But *The Troppo Tribune* depended on the supply of duplicating paper, at best sporadic and finally non-existent by the end of Sumner’s term. The tattered sheets he retained long after his sojourn in the Territory are full of the camp language that made *Rusty Bugles* so notorious. Sumner told Doris Fitton that he was dismayed when he first heard this babble of vulgar language, but after a week or two he became totally oblivious to it.³¹ “The constant repetition drove all obscenity from the words and rendered them...harmless,” he wrote in his introduction to *Rusty Bugles*, and his original version was full of the soldiers’ ripe, raw language. Sumner claimed that it had been toned down, but when it was first performed in 1948 the censors still deemed it offensive, especially to women. The biggest fuss was over a term, referred to (but never printed) in Sydney’s *Sun* as “a slang word” that “occurs repeatedly throughout the play,” and this might have been the best advertising an Australian play had ever

³⁰ *Troppo Tribune*, June 1944, SLE Collection, BU.

³¹ Doris Fitton, “Protest Against Bureaucracy” in *Rusty Bugles*.

received.

VIC: Nothin's biting me except you always got some complaint. What the hell... . You eat and sleep, don't you? No one's firing at you. You got it a good deal better than those poor cunts up in Lae, and all you talk about's going home to Mum.

(*Rusty Bugles* Act I, Sc. II)

ROD: Just passed the Leave Draft as I left the kitchen. The R.S.M. was giving 'em their papers.

GIG: Lucky Bastards... .

ANDY: I should have been on this draft.

KEGHEAD: Get ripped you should... .

OLLIE: Frig the Territory. We're on our way.

ANDY: Lucky cunts.

(*Rusty Bugles* Act II, Sc. I)

The word "cunt" was the most shocking of all terms in the play, but this word ran all through the everyday speech of Mataranka inmates. Sumner observed this in a piece he wrote for *The Troppo Tribune* six weeks after his arrival.

We take you far from the hurly-burly of civilised life to the mystic N.T. There, far beyond the beating heart of Alice Springs lies a paradise of the north, the playground of the white ants - picturesque Mataranka, which in the native tongue means "Abandon all ye who enter here". We leave the streamlined Spirit of Protest and come across a little shrine of beauty... . Taking a luxurious utility truck we proceed...to strange igloos inhabited by a forgotten race, cut off from civilisation. Here we see them at [their] rites, a

strange festival known in the native tongue as mess. They eat only the flesh of the bull with the flavour of tin and the pulp of the eggs of strange birds known as prehistoric hens. Some of these eggs are said to be over three thousand years old and were stamped by the egg board in the time of King Solomon... . By day these strange people journey in long lines to their stores, workshops and dumps where a mysterious cult is observed, that of winding many reels of red cord or tape around strange papers in triplicate and sending them by a large bird related to the emu family...to their destination and they are never heard of again. At night they maintain one of their oldest customs of mounting the guard, handed down from their ancestors and often only a privileged spectator is allowed to see this barbaric custom. It is said that one with his rifle may sleep for four hours standing upright... . [Their] language is strange and features one particular word and thus they remind themselves that woman is forbidden these elysian pastures... .³²

“We never saw a woman,” Sumner claimed. True or not, “that word” in the play was prevalent in the all-male Mataranka society. Its common use also indicated that it was typical then for the Australian male to denigrate women as merely sexual objects.

Apart from the camp language, *Rusty Bugles* depicted many of the characters, situations, and events that Sumner encountered at Mataranka. The extreme cold of the winter and the long wet ahead were discussed in almost every scene, just as Sumner continually

dwelt on them in his letters to friends in Sydney.

What wouldn't I give to see a decent wet winter street with icy sleet driving down. I never realised before the irritating effect that continual and blazing sunshine day after day has on the nerves. One awakens in the morning and cries aloud "what, that bloody sun again?" I haven't seen rain for four months except on the screen and they just love to give us films set in the Arizona Desert to comfort us... . They tell me nature makes up for everything round about December. Then you get 110 points in a quarter of an hour or such like... . Last night a magpie who haunts me (must be one of my deceased aunts) and hops onto my bed cawing in a most undignified way, pulled out from under my bed the defunct remains of a long dead goanna and defied all efforts to make it leave. It then ate it on the floor in a perfect welter of satisfaction while we reached for our gas masks. Isn't life full of beauty, don't you think?... .

(SLE, Letter from Mataranka, 9 Aug 1944.)

The magpie was not the only one leading a scavenger's life at camp. Sumner and the rest of the men longed for parcels of food or canteen vouchers from home to complement their diet, "unvaried as a lift drive in the Herald [building]: pumpkin every day with cold meat with a bowl of Persil for pudding."³³ In *Rusty Bugles*, Mac keeps a stock of Violet Crumble bars, which he counts regularly, in his soldier's box under his bunk, and other characters are always sharing sweets from their food parcels with their mates.

³³ SLE, Letter from Mataranka, 9 July 1944.

Sumner described his night guard duty in a letter to a friend: “I had my first experience of dingoes the other night, on guard at 3 in the morning and bright moonlight and all alone in the N.T. and suddenly I heard what sounded like 30 children being scalded to death a few yards away.”³⁴ He later dramatised this experience in *Rusty Bugles*.

VIC: Who’s there?

ROD: [*a voice in the distance*] It’s Rod Carson.

[*His torch enters the scene. The light flashes into VIC’s face*]

Who’s that? Vic, is it?

VIC: Yeah, it’s me. Where are you on?

ROD: Number Three Sub. Depot. I usually walk down here once during the shift to see who’s on. Hope you don’t mind.

[*VIC resumes his seat on the box. The torches go off.*]

It’s pretty lonely up there... . I’ve got the willies a bit tonight.

[*He laughs shortly.*]

I heard the dingoes a while ago. Sounds like a lot of kids being scalded to death... .

(*Rusty Bugles* ACT I Sc. V)

Sumner was never a formidable guard, as Gwen Plumb can testify, from a story he told her about one of his day shifts at a supply shed.

He was totally engrossed in reading the...copies of *The New Yorker* which I’d sent to him... . [H]e so missed our usual talk of theatre, and what we thought of as sophisticated chatter, that I’d sent him up this pile of *New Yorkers* and he was

³⁴ SLE, Letter from Mataranka, 9 July 1944.

devouring them, even during his guard. And he was standing there with his rifle which he couldn't have used against anyone anyway, it just wasn't in him. A truck came by and the usual "G'day"s, and "How yer goin' mate"s passed between all the men on board and Summie...and the truck went on and Summie returned to his reading. Later, he saw the truck go back the way it had come, and he waved and smiled and never thought any more of it until his relief arrived. Then it was found that the back of the shed he'd been guarding had been removed and the entire contents taken, liquor, cigarettes, food, and whatever else was stored there, presumed to have been loaded onto the passing truck. And Sumner hadn't heard anything because the *New Yorker* magazines were so interesting.³⁵

All the men at the depot were starved for entertainment. Old magazines and newspapers were devoured and any form of competition or gambling was popular, especially the Australian game of two-up (called "swy" in *Rusty Bugles*). Sumner was kept busy amusing them with sketches and revues.

It seems I'm fated to be busy even here... . I'm doing a burlesque show every fortnight for which sketches have to be written, and as these have to be (a) funny and (b) understandable, it's a job! Then I let myself in for doing a full revue and writing it; and in the middle of getting sketches written...the Edwards wired me to go on with a serial, 2 episodes a week (air mail) and as this is a Godsend and will save Aunty from selling matches on Wynyard Station which was becoming imminent as the last of the family silver was sold,

it had to become priority "A" and getting a typewriter at night is tantamount of having a cup of tea with the Pope. However I manage one night a week and have to get 2 episodes (14 pages) written before lights out at 10. Just to add to the confusion, I'm trying to write a novel... .

(SLE, Letter from Mataranka, 9 July 1994.)

While juggling the depot's entertainment schedule, picking up the threads of his radio writing career by airmail (in a new serial called *A Tale of Hollywood*), Sumner made his first attempt at a novel, although one month later he seemed to have lost enthusiasm for the project: "So far it reaches an all-out low in mediocrity. I haven't a style dammit but there it is I suppose I must finish the blasted thing, now I've done 50 pages or so."³⁶ This book was never mentioned again and no evidence of it survives. His time at Mataranka encompassed several developments in his writing career, and the lack of style he lamented in his letter was a hurdle he eventually overcame.

In the last months at Mataranka, he also managed to see more of the region. His first sighting of Aboriginals had been in a camp concert shortly after his arrival and one performer impressed him especially, as he explained to a friend in a letter: "When the harrowed producer said 'You must look pleasant though', his stoic reply was - 'No fella here yet.' I loved that!"³⁷ Like so many of his

³⁶ SLE, Letter from Mataranka, 9 August 1944.

³⁷ SLE, Letter from Mataranka, April 1944.

Australian city-bred generation, mostly of white Anglo-Celtic ancestry, he had little if any understanding of or respect for the Aboriginal culture. On a visit to one of their compounds (a detour from a fruit gathering trip to Katherine) he was appalled by the local inhabitants' living conditions and told a friend that he even felt threatened by them.

Wherever we wandered a large crowd followed us jabbering at a few inches behind and stopped when we did. Most terrifying I assure you. I've never seen such underfed, wretched...people and yet...we are told their moral code is excellent and they are supposed to be the oldest race known in the memory of man.³⁸

None of Sumner's novels were influenced by his brief glimpse of Australia's indigenous culture.

He took another outing in early September 1944, this time into the town of Katherine itself, in search of a dentist. After his dental appointment which amounted to no more than "three minutes after seventy miles", he had several hours of freedom in a country town, the first civilisation he had encountered for what seemed to him like years. In Katherine he discovered "a large canteen with a refrigerator, joy of joys, and an Education Service tent with a radio, on which Gwen Meredith's play was just then being broadcast, and lots of *Time* and *Life* magazines".³⁹ He also

³⁸ SLE, Letter from Mataranka, 8 June 1944.

³⁹ SLE, last letter from Mataranka, 13 Sept 1944.

found the theatre where Marjorie Lawrence had sung.

That gal deserved the OBE. It is just a bare proscenium right in the middle of the Persian Gulf of Katherine. On each side of the proscenium some misguided artist has pictured two vast and naked ladies in attitudes of abandoned despair clutching their abdomens probably, I should think, due to the complete non-existence of any powder-rooms in the N.T.

(SLE, Letter from Mataranka, 13 Sept 1944.)

Such journeys of discovery (or emergency) were always made on the back of an open truck along roads so thick with dust that when Sumner returned to the depot, he had "red hair and the complexion of a full blooded Sioux Indian," as he wrote in his last letter from Mataranka, in September 1944. This letter was in many ways typical of his first correspondence from the outback post. He asked for magazines and newspapers, described his recent outback travel, recommended a book, and mentioned his dread of the concert he was about to produce. He said he was buzzing with an idea for a new play, which of course had to be put on hold; and he asked about the theatre and friends. But noticeably absent were complaints about conditions, climate, food, or work. Perhaps the Allies' recent advances had boosted morale and the desert incarceration no longer seemed infinite, although at the time of writing he had no idea that in six weeks he would be stationed back in Sydney.

His daily existence at Mataranka was busy, often boring, but at some point it had also become fulfilling. He had found his place among the men, as their morale raiser. He was making a difference. His letters no longer mentioned the boredom of work but concentrated on people; even the officer in charge was given credit: "We have a new boss and he's good fun...a new idea every five minutes," he wrote.

While the ordnance depot at Mataranka forever meant isolation and restriction to the men who served there, in a strange way it had also become a place of security and understanding. "It was the comradeship," as Sumner so often recalled. While they loathed the location, detested the work and riled against the confinement, the conditions, the weather, these men found a sense of family among their fellow companions that, against all the odds, gave the depot a feeling of home. In the final scene of *Rusty Bugles*, Rod Carson comments on this.

SAMMY: *[Little spots of rain hammer on the tin roof. They all glance up.]*

Here it comes.

ROD: The big Wet. Four long months of it now... . We're certainly going to be sick of rain by the time Vic and

Keghead get home -

[He stops and laughs.]

I mean get back... .

[Thunder - the rain ceases.]

Home, eh? I'm beginning to look on

the bloody place as home... . I'm going
troppo.

(*Rusty Bugles* Act II, Sc. V)

Several years later, at Perth's Capitol Theatre on 4 November 1949, towards the end of a record-breaking Australian tour of *Rusty Bugles*, an unexpected incident occurred just after the last act.

Five men who had served at Mataranka with Sumner...appeared on the stage...and introduced themselves as the originals from which five characters in the play had been drawn. Each had identified himself easily, he said, and all were delighted with what they claimed to be the play's absolute authenticity... .⁴⁰

Sumner Locke Elliott had left Australia for America long before *Rusty Bugles* began its amazing run, and in fact he never saw a production of his most famous play. He did, however, keep in touch with several of his Mataranka companions. Like those who appeared on the stage at the Perth performance in 1949, other soldiers who had inspired several of the characters in *Rusty Bugles* returned to Mataranka in 1992 when a special revival of the play, set in an outdoor replica of the 8th AAOD, was produced to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of The Battle of Australia. By this time Sumner had passed away. But to his former companions who so bravely took to the stage in Perth in 1949 and to those who made it back to Mataranka in 1992, he left a moving tribute in his

⁴⁰ "The Play in the Theatre", article by unident. author, researched by Angela Wales, in SLE's *Rusty Bugles*, Currency Press (Sydney), 1980.

original preface: “To these hard-headed, swearing, grubby, generous friends I dedicate *Rusty Bugles...*”.

Sumner Locke Elliott, raised to the rank of staff sergeant, spent the last months of the war in the ABC's Pagewood Studios in Sydney as a writer for the radio programme, the *Army Hour*. According to the army's press releases, this show, “devised, written and produced by members of the Army, who in civilian life, were executives and stars in Australian radio” would tell “the story of Australia at war”.⁴¹

Each week in *Army Hour* a guest star of the services will be highlighted in dramatic and comedy scenes, introducing some central character, so that the session will be in itself a story illustrating phases of a soldier's life, work and love. In form it will be dramatically new and original. Employing the best talent in the services, it will give both entertainment and inside glimpses of the Army in action and at rest...The highlight of the first *Army Hour*...will be a factual dramatisation of the landing on Scarlet Beach seen through the eyes of a soldier as he is landed on the beach in the early dawn...⁴²

No matter how many heroic soldiers' lives Sumner dramatised for the army's programme, it was not the courage of heroes that lived in his memory but the fortitude of those whose battlelines did not appear on any maps.

⁴¹ *The ABC Weekly*, 18 Nov 1944.

⁴² *The Listener In*, 8-24 Nov 1944.

Chapter Eight: Peace and Escape

For more than seven months following the end of WWII, Sumner remained in uniform just marking time.

I was awaiting my discharge from the Army and I was working out at the old Pagewood Studios. I was with the Jim Davidson outfit at that time, that was the entertainment outfit which was gradually being disbanded, but we had to await our points coming up, and of course, not being married I had to make up more points than some of the others, and I had quite a considerable time waiting before I was released.¹

His post-war life in Australia between 1945 and 1948 lacked his usual enthusiasm and optimism. For him and other Australian writers, actors, and artists, it was a frustrating time. In the wake of the internationalism of the war, their homeland had become to them a barren country from which escape was mandatory: "We were all bottled up. Our ambition was to go abroad and the situation was exacerbated by the war."² The war itself had eventually seemed reason enough for military service, however meaningless, the afterwar period of uniformed life - when sometimes he was just folding bags - seemed pointless. There was only the waiting.

¹ Hazel De Berg Interview, 1970.

² Piers Akerman, "Prize for a prodigal who didn't come back," *The Age*, Melbourne, 28 Nov 1977.

In post-war Sydney, Sumner had nothing left of his youthful ambition to forge a place in theatre. He viewed professional companies with disdain, condemning their lack of support of the home-grown playwright, as time and again they revealed themselves interested only in reviving those sure-fire hits from abroad. Theatre, like all other aspects of Australian life, had taken on a 'second-hand' air.

[W]hat a desert we were in... . Everything came from overseas: books, stories, plays, films, everything came from England or America, occasionally from Europe, but homegrown people didn't have a chance in hell... . But Mr. X from abroad was different, the most second-rate people came out and postured all over the place - especially from England... .³

The *Army Hour* radio show on which Sumner had been a scriptwriter from November 1944, had been dropped by the ABC as soon as peace was declared. As he was confined by the army's timetable and under pressure to put any surplus hours into paid work, his long separation from Independent Theatre productions continued.⁴

Before the war, as a contract writer for George Edwards, and

³ SLE to Candida Baker, *Yacker 2*.

⁴ Doris Fitton produced *Invisible Circus* in May 1946, but Sumner's only role in this production was as a member of the opening night audience. From the end of 1943 until October 1946, his name was absent from the Independent playbills.

as a playwright whose works were bringing in a small but steady flow of royalty cheques from other amateur groups, he earned enough money to keep himself and his three elderly aunts comfortable. But by the time he was in uniform, the Locke-Burns-Elliott family having moved from their Cremorne house to a large flat in North Sydney, Sumner's army pay was inadequate to meet the needs of the family. His aunt Lily, who had always suffered from respiratory problems, had grown worse with advancing age and by the time the war began she was no longer able to take in boarders to supplement the household earnings. Agnes was still committed to a religious life of impoverishment, and Blanche's acting and singing career had long been destroyed by her drinking and erratic behaviour, so it fell to Sumner to take more financial responsibility for the family. This pressure, and the futility of his post-war army service, frustrated his creative life.

While still in uniform in late October 1945, Sumner made his professional acting debut in Roland Pertwee's Victorian period thriller, *Pink String and Sealing Wax* at Sydney's Minerva Theatre. His reviews ran hot and cold: the *Mirror* found him "extremely competent" as "the rebellious son who has a sordid affair with a public house floosie [and] becomes innocently involved in a murder";⁵ but the *Sunday Telegraph* said that Sumner "suppresses

⁵ "Murder Play at Minerva", *Daily Mirror*, Sydney, 30 Oct 1945.

this unfortunate youth to negation point.”⁶ Apart from this debut, his weekends and evenings during the long slow gathering of his points towards demobilisation (‘working’ for the army to offset his single status and his late entry to service) were devoted to radio scripts and performances from which he could at least earn some money. He was no longer under contract and found the freelance acting and writing market had become highly competitive, with many younger talents at his heels. He still managed several regular serials for George Edwards, paid on piecemeal rates, and occasionally worked for the *Lux Radio Theatre*. But on weekdays he returned to barracks, waiting for discharge.

Immediately after the end of the war, Sumner spent his brief recreational outings exercising his offbeat sense of humour, and Gwen Plumb was his partner in some of his escapades.

What we used to do was wicked but to us very funny... . When he was on leave...we’d go to Sargent’s which was a famous place for meat pies...which they served with mashed potato and peas, a big pot of tea, and a big plate of bread and butter for, I think it cost about 1/6d [15¢] at the most. And we used to go to this one on Market Street in the city and we’d be different people each time we went there. He was always in uniform of course... . And one time we pretended that he was blind. So I led him in and you could see every head at every table swooping round with that ‘poor soldier boy’ look of sympathy...and of course we

hammed it up so dreadfully. And I'd say: 'Mind the steps now - there's one step and another one. Wait, put your hand on the rail.' And he'd grope about in the air and it took us so long just to get to a table... . And then he'd do a funny fumbling thing with the chair. And you could feel everybody wanting to help him. Then he'd sit down and I'd order and the waitress' eyes would be full of pity. [When the meal came] he'd sort of try to pick up his knife and fork. And the waitress, always hovering, would say: 'Shall I cut up his pie for him?' And I'd say: 'That would be very nice.' And then he'd make stabs at the food, missing his plate entirely and piercing the tablecloth and anything else that was in the way.⁷

Having thus fooled an entire restaurant, the pair of replete actors paid their bill and made their exit in the same way as their entrance, maintaining their roles until they were safely out of sight around a corner when they would break into hysterical laughter.

With often nothing more to do but "drink tea" each day in the army barracks, Sumner began to write a play about Mataranka. "All the boys were real characters and in some instances, I didn't even change the names," he told his friend, Miles Franklin.⁸ The play was unconventional in that it did not rely on plot for dramatic impetus, but moved forward by character exploration, an innovation that did not please all critics. And so *Rusty Bugles*

⁷ Gwen Plumb to me, Wollongong, 30 April, 1991.

⁸ SLE, Letter from America to Miles Franklin, 7 Dec 1948. MF Papers, Mitchell Library, Sydney.

emerged, and was later praised as an anti-war play⁹ but, beyond its 'war is waste' message, it celebrated the resilience of ordinary, non-combatant Australians and challenged concepts such as heroism. Above all else, its gritty realism captured public attention. Indeed, Sumner declared it a documentary in his introduction to the play because of its factual basis.

Once *Bugles* was written - over a period of "about seven weeks"¹⁰ - Sumner felt a sense of release from some of his pent-up frustration and resentment. But, apart from a report that *Bugles* had been put on by an all-servicemen cast in Adelaide shortly after April 1946,¹¹ it languished for over two years, mostly because its language perturbed professional and amateur companies alike, and because the war was not what people wanted as entertainment material.

Rusty Bugles was Sumner's first revelation of a personal realm, and this made its initial rejection more painful. He shelved it and turned back to satire. He began a comedy about the life behind the radio microphone, *Invisible Circus*.

⁹ Leslie Rees, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 Oct 1948. In his later *History of Australian Drama*, vol. 1, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1973, Rees said: "*Rusty Bugles* was theatrically expert. It mirrored a phase of our history and touched off unerringly the humours and simplicities of the ordinary Australian. It stated a truth and cried a young man's protest, at the same time being continuously and richly entertaining. Doris Fitton's faith in the Australian writer, in drama itself, never had better justification.

¹⁰ SLE to me, 1990.

¹¹ "Young Playwright Visits North" *Cairns Post*, August, 1946.

After years of writing potboilers for George Edwards, it is hardly surprising that Aurora Network, the radio unit in *Invisible Circus* was a parody of the Edwards' corporation. Aurora's brainless but powerful J. B. Olliphant, its posturing radio stars all jealous of each other, its producers and writers - even the gag and effects man - were all drawn from Edwards people and Sumner half-expected that he would land in the libel court. The reviews of the play courteously omitted specifying George Edwards when mentioning the playwright's radio experience, although all agreed that the latter had given *Invisible Circus* its authenticity.

Sumner, back in Sydney, had gradually re-established himself in radio, but little remained of his enthusiasm for it, especially after being a radio dramatist for the Army. Besides in George Edwards' domain, he had become just a small cog in what was by then an extremely large wheel: "So many new assistants, secretaries and additional writers now existed, it was like a minor MGM," he declared.¹² Mataranka had changed him, and the war had changed radio and especially the Edwards corporation. Sumner's former life of churning out melodramatic serials with cliff-hanger endings now seemed superficial and futile. Sponsors, too, had become big players on the commercial airwaves. All was sacrificed to their needs, their tastes. Artistry and cleverness were no longer

¹² SLE, "The Man of 1000 Voices".

important - more than ever it was make 'em laugh, make 'em cry, make 'em *wait*.¹³ Sumner had never considered his radio writing an art form, always preferring theatre, and suddenly radio work had become merely a means for corporate sponsors to make money.¹⁴ He lost respect for a public that could be manipulated like this, and called into question its intelligence: “the clever ironic sketches flew over their heads” he later wrote.¹⁵ His continued involvement in what he eventually called “just trash” also made him lose some of his self-respect.

His spell away from the industry had given him a new perspective. He had matured and as a consequence, he began to reassess the direction his life was taking though he still recalled vividly those early intoxicating days of radio when he had joined George Edwards and Nell Stirling as a brash eighteen-year-old to take the pressure off the overworked Maurice Francis. *Invisible Circus* recaptured that excitement.

BRADLEY: McGee's the name... . (*SHAKING HANDS WITH MARK*).
How do you do Mr. Cornell... .

FREER: (*TO MARK*) Bradley wrote those splendid “Little Town” scripts... . We thought we might start him off relieving you of some of the “Old Man's Reverie”.

MARK: Oh, sure.

13 SLE, Adelaide Writers' Week Address, 1974.

14 Much of this history, he later incorporated in his final unfinished work of fiction, *Radio Days*.

15 SLE, *Radio Days*, (Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1993) p.2.

FREER: ...[S]o I'll leave you in Mark's hands -
(*GOING DOWN THE PASSAGE*) He'll show
you where the writers work.

MARK: It's next to the toilet... .

(*COURTNEY RUNS OUT OF THE SANCTUM*)

COURT: Hey, the boss is coming. He got the
earlier plane... .

(*...J.B...comes in concealed in a gigantic overcoat
and almost hidden by a cigar. He marches across
the foyer like God.*)

MARK: Good morning Mr. Olliphant... .

FREER: Your coffee and brandy is on its way
J.B.. .Sir.

...(AIRILY AT BRADLEY)

Our new script writer J.B. Mr. McGee.

J.B.: (*SUSPICIOUSLY TO BRAD*) You're McGee.

BRAD: Yes Sir, that's me.

J.B.: Keep your casts small. The slump's
coming. (*GOES INTO SANCTUM*)... .

BRAD: Is that really J.B. Olliphant.. ..

COURT: ...Well McGee how are you going to
like it here?

BRAD: Oh, I'm going to love it. It's just what
I've always dreamed of.

COURT: (*GOING*) Hell - What a subconscious...

(*Invisible Circus Act I Sc. I, pp. 15-17*)¹⁶

But this early memory was counterpointed by Sumner's post-war
view of the radio industry.

MARK: Radio has become blackmail on a national scale. From the sponsor right down the line. Boy you're part of the greatest national hypnotic force of all time - and in its toils is the greatest Trilby - the listening public - Buy this - Accept no substitutes - repetition - repetition - you've got to hand it to them. They'd sell heaven if they could get it into cartons, and find a sponsor - Buy your eternity now in the new cellophane package, the handy size.

COURT: Mark, don't - what's the use.

MARK: (TO BRAD) And you think you're going to write Artistic Drama... . (JEERS)

COURT: It's my fault - I filled him full of these ideas.

MARK: You ought to have known better. You only had to look at me.
(TO BRAD) That was Courtney's real interest in me - she was going to do a renovating job on a par with salvaging the *Normandie* - but it was a little late. I might have been a writer but I'm just one of the tired tumblers going through my routine falls in the circus. Because that's what we're in Bradley - an invisible circus, the great arena.

(*Invisible Circus* Act III pp. 62-3)

Sumner's return to commercial radio, coupled with his remembered past as that eager and youthful radio recruit, afforded

the maturer playwright a kind of double vision through which *Invisible Circus* developed and located its centre of dramatic tension. In the play, Sumner's two main characters portray the young new radio recruit full of idealism (Bradley McGee), whose arrival at Aurora Network opens the play, and the experienced radio dramatist (Mark Cornell), who has become disenchanted with the industry and with himself, and whose departure from Aurora closes the play. Structurally, *Invisible Circus* charts the 'changing of the guard'; but its main theme is the integrity of the writer's position, and how commercial radio corrupts it. The serious theme was made entertaining by the traditional device - satire.

Bradley McGee, as the embodiment of Sumner's youthful enthusiasm, and Mark Cornell, as the disillusioned cynic he saw himself fast becoming, are counterpointed throughout the play, reflecting Sumner's attempt to accept his own disassociation from his former self, his sense of lost youth and flagging passion. Later, in his novels, Sumner often adopted two or more characters to portray different elements of his personality or several conflicting opinions. As he put it, "My problem is that I am a Libra, an October birthday, and my sign is the scales... . And it's a terrible thing to be a Libra because I often see more than one side to a situation."¹⁷

¹⁷ SLE to me, 1990. Also in Kate Jennings' Interview, "Pleasing Yourself".

Sumner wrote *Bugles* as a release from tension, a purging. *Invisible Circus* expressed his struggle to accept the fact that he had outgrown his past, and his radio career. Not long before he died, he said: "Writing is a way of working out traumas," and so through this play he worked out his dilemma over his future in writing.¹⁸

Invisible Circus also explored the emotional crossroads Sumner had reached by this stage of his life. Whereas critics found Rod Carson in *Bugles* "a little unreal" in a play otherwise lauded for its credible characters and hard-edged realism,¹⁹ characters representing Sumner in *Invisible Circus* marked an advance in his self-portraiture. The confused, disillusioned Mark Cornell is convincing because of his human weaknesses.²⁰

MARK: I suppose you're angry with me over last night.

COURT: Not angry - disappointed.

MARK: Because I got drunk.

COURT: More than that. I hate to see what you do to yourself. (*COMING OVER TO HIM*). Sometimes when I'm with you I have the most frustrating sense of waste.

MARK: Thanks.

COURT: I wish that instead of going to so many parties you'd stop home once in a while

¹⁸ SLE to Candida Baker, *Yacka 2*.

¹⁹ Leslie Rees, *A History of Australian Drama*, vol 1, p. 179, where he cites his own and other contemporary critics responses to the play.

²⁰ In Mark Cornell, there is also a hint of Maurice Francis, the original radio dramatist with George Edwards.

and work on that book.

MARK: (ANGRILY) Jees! I've got to have a break away from it sometimes - haven't I? Do you expect me to go home from here after writing mush all day and turn out an epic at night. Hell I'm so damn tired.

(*Invisible Circus* Act I Sc. I p. 14)

Mark Cornell's dilemma was Sumner's own. His radio work, a necessary source of income, and his army commitments gave him little time for serious writing. He must have felt compromised. *Invisible Circus* thereby emerged as a self-reflexive work.

Just six weeks before the Independent Theatre's production of *Circus* opened in Sydney in May 1946, Sumner received his long-awaited army discharge. It was provisional, however, on his signing a contract with David N. Martin and the Tivoli circuit to appear in a new show in Melbourne, to be produced by his army superior officer, Jim Davidson. A disgruntled Sgt. Elliott agreed to this and four days later he was at last a civilian.

By late April 1946, he was in Melbourne rehearsing the Tivoli's show, *Forbidden City*, which he mockingly described as "a Chinese extravaganza with a Latin-American setting".²¹ When Jim Davidson quit on opening night, Sumner realised the full significance of his situation. It seemed he had merely exchanged

²¹ *The Broadcaster*, Perth, 17 Jan 1948.

one form of restriction for another as he went through the motions of acting and writing for a show and a theatrical factory he deplored. In an interview, two years later in 1948, he shrugged it off lightly enough.

...Anything can happen at the Tivoli! I still say that no one knows a thing until he has done an opening matinee at the Tivoli without a dress rehearsal. Twice I was nearly killed by the ballet and once went halfway up to the flies on a flying backcloth during a blackout. It was good experience... .²²

Many years later, however, he said: "My time at the Tivoli, I would rather just forget".²³ He considered their popular shows were just as trashy as those he was writing for the airwaves, and they reaffirmed his belief that professional companies in Australia had no interest in encouraging an Australian theatre tradition.

In the three months he endured with *Forbidden City*, he enjoyed only one brief escape from Melbourne and the hectic 'two performances a day, six days a week' schedule - a rushed trip home to Sydney to attend the Independent's premiere of *Invisible Circus*. One Melbourne paper even published his travel plans.

Sumner Locke-Elliott, now appearing at the Tivoli, has a little plan all nicely teed up for a forthcoming week-end which...should entail a bit

²² *The Broadcaster*, Perth, 17 Jan 1948.

²³ SLE to me, 1990.

of tearing round. His side-splitting satire on radio, *Invisible Circus*, is shortly to be presented by Doris Fitton at the Independent Theatre, Sydney, and he has every intention of being there for the first night. He plans to do the Tivoli matinee on the Friday, catch the Spirit that night for Sydney, see the premier of his show on the Saturday, and return by the Sunday night train, arriving in Melbourne for the Monday matinee.²⁴

Forbidden City moved to Sydney's Tivoli Theatre in August 1946 and Sumner was at home at last. Although *Rusty Bugles* was sitting on a shelf, *Invisible Circus* was a hit with both the public and the critics: "*Invisible Circus* thoroughly enjoys itself making game of the Sydney commercial radio game," wrote one critic. "...This is a comedy I would recommend to anyone and I hope it has a future..."²⁵

Doris Fitton's six-week season of *Invisible Circus* was a sell-out and the play eventually appeared in every state of Australia. On Boxing Day 1946, Sumner returned to Melbourne to attend its opening night at the Little Theatre. In January, the *Bulletin's* reviewer admired the authenticity so evident throughout *Invisible Circus*.

Sumner Locke Elliott, whose *Invisible Circus* was staged by Melbourne Little Theatre, obviously knows his subject. His young script writer, not yet

²⁴ Unident. clipping, SLE Scrapbook, BU.

²⁵ Leslie Rees, Drama in Sydney, unident. newspaper article, SLE Scrapbook, BU.

disillusioned, his senior script writer, full of excuses for his failure to be a Shakespeare, his gag writer, whose business of being funny to order has eaten into his soul, his radio stars, his technicians, who are devoid of respect for the literary attainments of the dramatists and authors, and the pompous managing director the Aurora Network are no doubt drawn from life... .²⁶

Across Australia, reviews of the various productions of *Invisible Circus* admired its witty sharp dialogue, credible characters and the playwright's authoritative knowledge of his subject. In short, every reviewer was mesmerised by the play and the playwright's talent. After his time in the wilderness, Sumner was back in the spotlight of theatrical success. In the avalanche of praise there was only one mention of the play's debt to American precedents.²⁷ Decades later, when *Invisible Circus* was produced by Sydney's New Theatre as part of both its 60th anniversary celebrations and the 1991-2 Sydney Festival, director Ken Boucher pointed out, in programme notes, the influences of the "Broadway-style comedy, in particular the work of the team of George Kaufman and Moss Hart".

[Kaufman and Hart's] *Once in a Lifetime*, which *Invisible Circus* often recalls, had been done by the Independent Theatre in the early 1930s, and if Sumner had not seen that production he was presumably familiar with the film version of the play.²⁸

²⁶ *Bulletin*, Sydney, Jan 1947.

²⁷ Unidentified press clipping of Brisbane performance, Scrapbook p. 98.

²⁸ Programme, New Theatre's prod. of *Invisible Circus*, Festival of Sydney 1992.

The Independent's production of *Once in a Lifetime* had been staged before Sumner climbed those stairs to the clubrooms. However he had a role in *You Can't Take It With You*, another Kaufman and Hart play at the Independent, and his long obsession with Hollywood movies and his knowledge of Broadway-based stage plays had begun to inform Sumner's writing: *Invisible Circus* marked a definite shift in his source of cultural influence from England to America. A 1992 review of *Invisible Circus* described the play as an "unjustly neglected satire", and suggested that its derivative nature made it "a period piece" rather than "a classic". The "classic" label, it was agreed by contemporary reviewers, belonged to the playwright's more mature work, *Rusty Bugles*.²⁹ Like most historical accounts of Australian Drama, such reviewers supposed *Invisible Circus*, because it was first staged in 1946, to have "provided the bridge between Elliott's early plays in the Noel Coward manner and *Bugles*", a play assumed to be from a later period based on its 1948 performance date.³⁰

By jumping the performance queue ahead of *Rusty Bugles*, *Invisible Circus* was, unfortunately, thereafter grouped with his earlier, less enduring stage works. However, Sumner had greatly developed his skills - particularly in terms of self-portraiture - with

²⁹ *Bulletin*, 24-31 Dec 1991.

³⁰ *Bulletin*, 24-31 Dec 1991.

Circus, the last Australian play³¹ he wrote.

Circus was adapted for ABC radio in January 1947 by George Farwell. The cast included Sumner, in the role of Freer, Peter Finch and a mixture of some of the rising stars of the day and several of his old friends. However, without its elements of visual comedy, the radio version failed. This did not detract from the play's continuing stage success, however, and it was taken up by amateur companies in every capital city around Australia. The visual comedy strength of *Invisible Circus* led Sumner to rather rashly put on record that he hoped "it would soon hit the screen."³²

Once the war had ended, and throughout the success of *Invisible Circus*, Sumner increased his resolve to go to America.

Everybody went to England in those days... . I was about the only person that I knew of who was aiming for the States... . I loved the idea of it. I was brought up in the Depression as a movies boy. We went to movies all the time. I grew up with a picture of [America]...which was not entirely valid but nevertheless intrigued me thoroughly. And then there were all the Americans that came to Australia during the war. I met many Americans who were in the theatre... . That put it firmly in my mind that the United States was where I wanted to go, and not London.³³

31 While this may be an ongoing problematical term, under the umbrella of the definition of Australian Literature, like *Rusty Bugles*, *Invisible Circus* is a reflection of Australian life and explores and extends the national consciousness.

32 Unident. clipping, SLE Scrapbook, BU.

33 Kate Jennings' Interview, "Pleasing Yourself".

His name had been lodged as a prospective migrant since 1938 with the American consulate and during the war one of his closest friends at the Independent, Marie Rosenfeld, married an American, Dr Sid Rubinfeld, who had been stationed with the US forces in Sydney. Dr Rubinfeld came to know Sumner, was impressed by his talent, and offered to sponsor him in his bid to emigrate to America. "He was wonderful," Sumner recalled. "He put up the money for my trip and guaranteed my accommodation and generally met whatever requirements were necessary." ³⁴

Sumner's lack of success at interesting any professional theatres in his stage works had confirmed his feeling that there was no future for him as a writer in Australia beyond radio, which he was growing to despise. In August 1946, while *Circus* was doing the rounds of the amateur theatres and *Bugles* was still on the shelf, he took a brief holiday in North Queensland, where, in a press interview about his visit, he condemned the professional theatre companies which he saw as the real hurdle to any progress for an Australian playwright. "Sumner foretells of a gloomy future for Australian drama and the stage," the *Cairns Post* reported, "owing to a complete dearth of encouragement to young artists and writers...A great handicap from the playwright's viewpoint was a

complete lack of a professional body to do his plays.”³⁵ He closed the interview by saluting Doris Fitton and other amateur theatre producers supporting the struggling Australian dramatist, but indicated that he expected to leave for America in 1947.

America was Sumner’s promised land, but since the quota system allowed only 200 emigrants a year from Australia to the United States, it took a further eighteen months for Sumner’s name to make its way onto the quota list. He continued writing for radio, and the most notable of his efforts was *Wicked is the Vine*, the first original radio play ever commissioned by *The Lux Radio Theatre*. This drama pitted two sisters against each other in a family intrigue, and they bear a strong resemblance to his warring aunts Lily and Jessie. Perhaps this element of personal background gave the play its wide appeal. In any case, *Wicked is the Vine* had much to do with Sumner’s later acceptance into American television.

Sumner took on any professional acting and writing assignments that came his way to save money for his trip to America. During a stage revue at the Minerva Theatre in Sydney, in what the press described as a “clever parody on the Eureka Stockade film”,³⁶ he came to know an actor who had just arrived from England: Gordon Chater. The pair shared a dressing room and

³⁵ Cairns Post, Aug 1946, clipping from SLE Scrapbook, BU.

³⁶ Australian Women’s Weekly, 10 Feb 1948.

began what was to become a lifelong friendship.

Apart from his appearance in the Independent's production of *The Little Foxes* in October 1947, Sumner was spending less and less time in his old headquarters. Yet it was always with these theatre friends that he spent his leisure hours, at their homes, sharing meals in inexpensive restaurants, or at theatre functions. He heralded in the 1948 New Year with them and seemed as witty and as clever as always, his laughter generating their own. But inwardly, he had begun to doubt that he would ever manage to leave Australia and the working life that was becoming steadily less rewarding. He was also worrying that time was running out for him. No longer was he "the boy playwright". He had reached the age of 30 and lost the edge of youth that, in his own mind, had always given his work such notoriety. During his childhood and adolescence he had made a meteoric rise to fame and success, but the war had clipped his wings and he felt he could waste no further time in a career and a country both of which he considered stagnant.

From 1946 Sumner had watched a steady stream of writers and actors leaving for England, but he clung to his plans for America. His status as a "late starter" haunted him throughout his

life.³⁷ And then, just as America seemed to be fading into a dream, he received word from the American Embassy. The announcement was recounted in *Fairyland*: “Out of the blue...a terse note...informed him that a quota number had become available...and that if he still desired to emigrate he must do so before three months was up...”³⁸ His years of languishing in the waiting land of red tape were over.

Sumner gave his aunts a portion of his deferred pay from the army and whatever other money he could manage, taking with him only \$US800, which was all that Australian banks would allow at the time. “That was supposed to last me forever!” Sumner said.³⁹

He was taking the biggest step of his life: “I had never been out of Australia in my life. I was thirty years old, and I had never been out of the country. The furthest away I had been was to Mataranka...during the war...I had not even been on a plane.”⁴⁰

He collected together a portfolio of his stage plays and radio scripts, his reviews and publicity. He typed out a resume of his acting and writing credits, selecting several stage works and two or three radio plays that he thought might appeal to American

37 SLE in Bruce Wilson, “The hindquarters, with the benefit of hindsight”.

38 *Fairyland* p. 197.

39 SLE to Candida Baker, *Yacker 2*.

40 Kate Jennings’ interview, “Pleasing Yourself”, *Island*.

audiences, in the light of the earlier success of *The Cow Jumped Over The Moon*. His only lingering regret was that *Rusty Bugles* had not been performed professionally. It was the work he cared most about and would always consider his first writing of any real value but, with its uniquely Australian flavour, it had, he thought, no international future.

Doris [had always] said to me that she felt that it was the wrong time for it, and...that everybody - which I think is true to a certain extent - after a long war, is sick and tired of the war, and she was always reminding me that after all, *Journey's End* was not done in London until about 1926 or 27, quite a long while after World War I was over. She didn't favour a production of it, because it was a big cast and several sets, and it would have been rather expensive...so it lay around unproduced, and then...when I was really leaving to come to New York, they decided to have...a big farewell do for me at the Independent one Sunday evening, a big supper first and then...a play reading, and they wanted of course for me to stage one of my own plays. They suggested an earlier play of mine called *Interval*...and I said to Doris "But it's been done, and it's tired, and everybody's seen it, and why don't we do - and it won't cost anything to do it, we'll just get some old uniforms and we'll make-believe sets, and I'll cast it"...and we did *Rusty Bugles*, and it was a sensation. I couldn't believe the roars of laughter at it, and...what applause it got at the end. Then of course, they made immediate plans for its production, and the rest, as they say, is history... .⁴¹

Sumner later claimed to be surprised that the audience had laughed so much: "I had thought it was a serious social commentary on the nation but everyone else was rolling in the aisles..."⁴² This playreading of *Rusty Bugles*, in which Sumner took the part of the young jockey, OT,⁴³ was the only live rendition of the work he ever witnessed. The play opened two months after his departure for America.

When the Independent Theatre produced *Bugles* in 1948, his loyal and fiercely proud aunt Lily attended every performance of the play's four and a half months season at North Sydney before its Australian tour. Lily's determined support of *Bugles'* Independent season made her uncharacteristically prominent among her nephew's friends, and thereafter she was remembered as "a little woman with a very straight back who sat there night after night, her face aglow with such pride".⁴⁴

On the cold wet July night that Sumner flew out of Sydney, his elderly aunts were not among the group that had gathered at the airport farewell. He had said goodbye to them in their North Sydney flat in William Street. Lily was not well that night, suffering from one of her, by now, frequent bouts of bronchitis, and Blanche and Agnes stayed home to attend her.

⁴² Piers Akerman, "Prize for a prodigal who didn't come back, *The Age*, Melbourne, 28 Nov 1977.

⁴³ The role SLE said he wrote for himself. OT is one of the boys, and looked after by them.

⁴⁴ Irene Thirkell and John Kingsmill to me, 1991.

Friends from the Independent collected Sumner in a borrowed car, and they set off for the airport into the wet winter night to farewell one of their best-loved members on what they all felt was his path to success.⁴⁵ Hours later, after the overweight baggage incident, he had boarded the plane, but his flight was delayed due to engine failure. “And I came back into the terminal and they were all still there. And I think Plumby said something funny like: ‘And how did you like the States?’ And we all laughed about it. Then I saw everyone who’d come out to the airport off home, which really was better, as it took the edge off the whole thing. And I think the plane finally got off the ground about four in the morning.”⁴⁶ As his plane drew away from his past, Sumner was flying blind into an uncharted future.

⁴⁵ Gwen Plumb and Irene Thirkell and John Kingsmill to me, 1991.

⁴⁶ SLE to me, 1990.

PART 3:

AMERICA

...There must be somewhere on earth where oddity went unremarked. Where one could be totally one's self without the knowing looks and the winks. He had a secret plan: he was going to move...to America. Some day, some how. Fly away home, it sounded like home.

(Fairylant p. 101)

Chapter Nine: First stop: Hollywood.

[S]he awoke with such a sense of freedom and elation it was as though she had all her life been held down with straps... . Remembering that she was free forever now from the stereotype she had been welded to since...childhood... .

By and by she reached Los Angeles, and the scent of it at once convinced her she belonged there, the curious mixture of carbon monoxide and oranges, of burned coffee and eucalyptus brought...a nostalgia and at the same time a daring sense of potential... .

...[S]he walked out into the peach colored Californian morning feeling American, feeling that the last vestiges of Australia had been...expunged... .

(About Tilly Beamis pp. 154-6)

The warmth of a Californian summer greeted Sumner's arrival at Los Angeles. After registering at the Drake Hotel, he discovered a transplanted Australian society across the other side of the world when Ron Randell, a friend from Sydney radio and theatre days, introduced him to Australian members of the Hollywood film colony. "I stayed with Ronnie Randell on the West Coast for about three weeks. He was very good to me and I was given a wonderful introduction into Hollywood - enrolled at the Beverly Hills Hotel swimming pool and all that kind of thing. And for a little boy from Australia, from Neutral Bay High School, I was just gah-gah at everything."¹

¹ SLE to me, 1990.

For the “movies boy” from Australia, Hollywood lived up to its reputation. His first letter home almost shouted his enthusiasm.

I simply adore it. I always knew I would and I just seem to fit in here as though I had been here all my life and apart from friends and family whom I do miss muchly there doesn't seem any legitimate reason ever to come home... . I have a rich tan from swimming pools and have been having a most fantastic time. I'm still in a sort of delirious [sic] ecstasy [sic] with life here, it is just so full and exciting... .

(SLE, Letter from Hollywood, 6 Aug 1948.)

Everywhere he went, he met screen idols.

...Lunched at Metro with Gene Kelly, Oscar Levant and Sinatra. Kelly and Sinatra both gems. Lovely sense of the ridiculous and most intelligent particularly Frankie whom I adored. Have met Ginger [Rogers] twice and really she is another Plumb. Same sense of humour and sweet...Saw Robert Taylor making *The Bribe*; he is a sweetie and it was most interesting shot to watch a...full size yacht in a tank with hurricane being screened in front of a huge movie screen with back projection of coast of Mexico...you just couldn't tell. Also met Aubrey Smith (very deaf) and Elizabeth Taylor doing *Little Women*... . At the Brown Derby [restaurant] where I have been several times they have a huge horse head in ice at the door. Sat next to Shirley Temple and Dottie Lamour... . I had a rum punch in a glass of ice at the Derby... . I also met Ethel Barrymore who is a most beautiful woman but everyone is scared of

her temper...looks like a Countess in mink. Just missed Bette [Davis] in the post office yesterday... .

(SLE, Letter from Hollywood, 6 Aug 1948.)

From this time onwards Sumner's life in America was filled with such encounters. Ginger Rogers, in particular, became a friend he always visited when he was in Hollywood. She also sometimes came to New York and they discovered that like Sumner, Ginger was a Christian Scientist, and her relationship with her elderly mother resembled the one he shared with his aunt Blanche.

Ginger is in town... . Mum is a great trial to her, always giving stories to the press and making a fool of herself with the un-American activities. Ginger said to me once: 'Sometimes, bless her, I need her like I need a hit on the head'. My favorite remark. What a sweetie she is and what a sense of humor, always making faces and doing silly talk like Plumb and the most generous sweet-hearted woman in Hollywood.

(SLE, Letter from America, 27 Aug 1949.)

As he established himself in New York society, first as a well-known television writer, then as a member of the theatre clique, he became accustomed to the company of such luminaries who were either appearing on Broadway, on television, or else en route to make a film in Hollywood. But to begin with, during this first brief period on the West Coast, he was dazzled not only by such people but also by modern America and its marvels.

Ronnie...drove me 90 miles to Laguna Beach to see *Personal Appearance* in the summer theater. A divine place on the ocean. We dined on an island en route in a Norwegian [village] all pink and white in miniature... . Driving back at night with ocean one side and all the lights of the drive ins (you can eat or see movies without getting out of your car they clip on a tray or the speaker) it is wonderful. Air ships go over at night with the news in strips in lights running around them all the time... . You should see the Sunday papers - about ninety-nine pages. I go to bed with it for a week. Food is marvellous... . Politeness kills you and hospitality...they really know how to make you welcome. I simply adore the whole set up... . You must have a car though as everything is diabolically spread out. Los Angeles covers seventy square miles - the second largest city area in the world. We went to Pasadena down a highway with 3 tiers and six lines of cars going in the one direction. The stores are wonderful. I can't resist buying things as sales are on. Rang Marie [Rubinfeld in New York] long distance which takes exactly two minutes you don't even book. I have finally mastered dimes and nickels altho taking a street car is a bit of a hazard still and making a public phone call from a box takes years off your life...We went to a drive-in movie house on Sunday night (it's like any other day - everything open) which houses a thousand cars at once and the toilet has hot dogs, orange juice, cokes, cigarettes and television if you're bored with the movie... .

(SLE, Letter from Hollywood, 6 Aug 1948).

While Sumner had looked into Australia's future in this first Hollywood experience and discovered the way the country he had

left behind was to be revitalised during the 1950s and 60s, he later reflected on his initial experience of Hollywood with nostalgia. “There were still remnants of the old Hollywood back then - the big studios, where you could go to places like M-G-M for lunch.”² In 1948 Sumner wrote to a friend: “Of course California is divine and most people here dread and hate New York and everyone warns me it is very different there.”³ This old antagonism between the two sides of the country, epitomised by the culture and counter-culture of New York and Los Angeles, Broadway and Hollywood, was well-entrenched. “I must write about Hollywood someday,” Sumner commented, “it is so fantastic. The women wear the most extraordinary clothes on the street including midriffs and gold kid sandals and ballerina skirts. This is *not* so in NY I am warned, only in Hollywood.”⁴

Hollywood became the focus of his first piece of published prose, *The Cracked Lens*. Like his plays *Interval* and the later *Buy Me Blue Ribbons*, it exposed what happens beyond the viewing range of the audience (or in this case outside the camera’s frame) and emerged from his chaotic experience of writing a television special for the legendary Hedda Hopper - an experience that convinced him he was no West Coaster. Only in his novel *About*

2 SLE to me, 1990.

3 SLE, Letter from Hollywood, 6 Aug 1948.

4 SLE, Letter from Hollywood, 6 Aug 1948.

Tilly Beamis (1985) did Sumner rekindle those first intoxicating impressions of the West Coast where he had first tasted the flavours of his new life and donned the mantle of a new person. The central character of this book - an Australian called Tilly Beamis - is Sumner's expatriate likeness. She reinvents herself as Tanya Bond on her arrival on the West Coast, asserting her separation from her childhood self.

In Tilly's old school exercise book, which she had used as a diary...which Tanya kept with her at all times, she drew a thin line through Anna Matilde Beamis and wrote her name boldly... .

(*About Tilly Beamis* p. 156.)

While in several of Sumner's books his fictional counterparts are inscribed with his experience of crossing from Australia to American in search of fulfilment, only in *About Tilly Beamis* did he attempt to explore the complexities of expatriatism, including that ongoing struggle to resist delineation based on nationality. When pushed on the question of patriotic allegiance, most often by Australian interviewers, Sumner maintained a paradoxical position.

[I]t's a hard question to answer because I'm very ambivalent about it. I don't feel American, but I don't feel Australian either... . I don't think I like to be stamped as being anything geographically very much. I love my own country, but I couldn't live there any more; I'm too much of a foreigner...it's a different country now... . I don't really know it anymore... .⁵

And just before he died, he reaffirmed this position.

...I don't think coming here [America] has changed me in any fundamental way. However ...[I am]...far less Australian than people are inclined to think... . People do tend to take my Australianness for granted because of books like *Careful, He Might Hear You*. But I am rather an expatriate in that I write better about the place away from it. On the other hand, although I am an American citizen, I don't consider myself very American, I don't consider myself to be any nationality, which I think is rather nice... .⁶

In *About Tilly Beamis* Sumner uses schizophrenia as a metaphor for the double or multiple selves that he perceived as the expatriate. The inner conflict of the schizophrenic character, Tilly/Tanya, reflects the sense of duality Sumner had known since his childhood and youth when he discovered his name had belonged to someone else, who, in many ways, he was expected to replace. Tanya's emergence from Tilly is also traced back to her troubled youth, the beginning of her uncertainty of self-worth. This pattern is repeated in the novel in the life of Hollis "Sprout" Van Zandt, the character Tanya eventually marries. Van Zandt's pig-like ugliness from birth cloisters him in a world of indifference and isolation because he is born into an image-conscious family ashamed of his appearance. Like Tilly, he also develops schizophrenic qualities in order to survive. The social constructs of

⁶ SLE to Kate Jennings, "Pleasing Yourself".

family expectation and public acceptance - which drive these characters to form armours of other personalities - are examined in *About Tilly Beamis*, a novel inscribed with Sumner's own youthful experience of constantly inventing and re-inventing himself in an effort to elude the doppelganger of his dead mother.

Sumner felt he had been born half-American because so much of his own gestation period in his mother's womb had been spent there. His escape to America was, in some way, a return that fate had ordained and so he employed fate as a force directing Tilly's destiny. During a brief stop-over on a bus trip, Tilly is presented with the opportunity to become someone else. Having gone to the restroom and inadvertently locked herself in, Tilly soon realises that her cries for help are useless.

...[T]he torrents of rain on the roof...made it obvious she would not be heard until someone wanted to use the toilet. Once she thought she heard some announcement being made of the bus leaving (then surely the dame at the candy counter would tell the driver someone was in the girls' room, but would she have remembered? She...had not even looked up at Tilly).

Through the small window above the lavatory there was a pocket handkerchief view of the steep hilly road bearing down on the bridge over the river, which was now swollen with the rains gorged up on its banks with dirty brown water flecked with creamy foam. But from this distance the vision was from a doll's house onto a toy scene and by and by she saw a toy bus emerge and

wobble down the hill. (Her only real annoyance being that her suitcase was on it.) Then...as the tiny bus started across the bridge, the brown water became the roadway, then...there was no roadway, no bridge, and the only sign of bus was suddenly the upturned back window, churning, disappearing in beer foam, turning upside down as it went under, and for a moment she thought she heard the sudden gulped-down screams... .

She heard nothing of the rain outside, heard nothing of the useless cries of people... . All that was occurring to her...was that this was her birth; felt the thrust of birth inside her as if she were changing one skin for another, freeing herself... . Then...she stepped out from herself boldly... .

*(About Tilly Beamis pp 148-50)*⁷

Based on evidence of her surfacing luggage, Tilly Beamis is declared dead by authorities - she reads about her death in the newspapers - but already Tilly has begun her new life as Tanya Bond.

...[S]he began gradually to concoct her life, substantiating the insubstantial, signing affidavits to take the place of lost passports and birth certificates, creating Tanya Bond.

(About Tilly Beamis p. 156)

As Tanya, (who in turn takes on another persona after

⁷ This scene of flood - of the bursting river and the dissolving bridge - is symbolic of birth and cleansing and also suggests the baptism of a new life, which is Tanya's transcendence of Tilly. The death and devastation intrinsic to the scene, which are yet beyond the focus of the central character's story, are filtered to the reader by their placement into the realm of toys, a placement which lends them a sense of unreality or fantasy. This was a technique which the author perfected in his many letters from America to friends in Australia: in these he used perspective and juxtaposition as tools to manipulate his reader's reception of certain events and details.

marrying, adding Mrs. Van Zandt⁸ to her swelling repertoire of identities), she eventually travels back to Australia at the end of the novel. This journey - in search of spiritual and psychological healing - locates and reunites her with her original self, the shunned Tilly. This too was Sumner's challenge; but rather than physical repatriation, imaginative travel provided his means of exorcism and unification. Almost involuntarily, it seemed, so many of his books returned to the Australia he had escaped, in order to heal old wounds, and restore his former self to life. "This will be my last Australian book," he repeatedly declared of each of the four novels released throughout the final decade of his life. But secretly his alter ego, the repressed Australian that lived within, was already

⁸ The section of the book in which Tanya marries the ugly American Van Zandt also suggests that, for women, marriage (with its change of name), like expatriatism, takes on the qualities of schizophrenia, a socially constructed condition. Tanya's experience of this marriage, her entry into the strange (and sexless) world of Sprout Van Zandt (whose own form of schizophrenia is denoted by his 'real' given name of Hollis) in his house of dolls and his hidden past, is reminiscent of the world which the nameless heroine of du Maurier's *Rebecca* enters. As the wandering woman in du Maurier's book becomes identified only as "Mrs. de Winter" and is often confused and merged with the former Mrs. de Winter who was the formidable Rebecca herself (dead but ever present), so Tanya is a substitute for her husband's mother, the original Mrs Van Zandt, also thought to be dead. During one incident when Tanya encounters the original Mrs Van Zandt on the telephone, the allusion to the du Maurier character is unmistakable.

The following week while he was attending to shrubs around the pool garden the telephone rang and after Tanya had said hello, the female voice said, 'Mrs Van Zandt.'

'This is Mrs. Van Zandt,' Tanya said, and there was a stillness from the other end and then the voice said, perhaps pityingly, 'No, *this* is Mrs. Van Zandt'.

(*About Tilly Beamis* p. 200)

The influence of *Rebecca* is evident throughout this part of *About Tilly Beamis*. Tanya's already double life becomes further multiplied as she takes on the name of Mrs. Van Zandt in Hollis' house of multiplicity (symbolised through the reshaped and recast replica dolls who people his rooms), a house which is the ultimate expression of his own schizophrenic condition. SLE's fascination, strong knowledge and understanding of du Maurier's *Rebecca* lends his book a deeper psychological intensity. Implicit in his sustained allusion to du Maurier's work is his comment on the schizophrenia of doubleness and duplicity which fuels both the narrative and the characters of *Rebecca*. du Maurier's book, itself a revamped and updated telling of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, could also be said to have schizophrenic tendencies.

scanning his memory for just one more glimpse of that place and time he had known throughout his youth.

In 1948, on his first stop-over in Hollywood, Sumner began to doubt his chances of an acting career. "It depresses me the glut of talent here that is unemployed," he informed theatre friends in Australia, after attending an amateur play. "The cast is superb and the play brilliant...yet this is only an amateur attempt." Yet he also found that the professional theatre abounded with insecure stars who camouflaged their shortcomings by employing only inferior supporting casts.

My first big thrill was to see Tallulah [Bankhead] in person in *Private Lives*. She is fabulous and one imagines a very highly polished actress with superb timing but what she does to Mr. Coward's rather tired old play is really something. She can raise one tired eyelid and say 'Really' and the house drops at her feet. But o kid the rest of the cast! They are worse than anything we have in the student's line. A big agent tells me that Tallulah and the Lunts rather go for poor supporting casts, isn't that naughty of them... .

(SLE, Letter from America, 6 Aug 1948.)

Even in these early Hollywood days, Sumner had become aware of the politics involved in casting, but he was not entirely discouraged and he persisted with his stage aspirations well into the following year.

He retained an affection for Los Angeles and Hollywood until he revisited it in 1950. McCarthyism was just then beginning to devastate the artistic community of the big film studios where innuendo and betrayal ruined so many promising careers. The McCarthy witchhunts also affected the New York television networks to some degree,⁹ but paralysed the movie industry. Fear overwhelmed creativity in Hollywood during the 1950s and big business took over movie-making. By then, for Sumner, Los Angeles had become “a vicious town full of fear and nervous wrecks.”¹⁰

In the early 1960s, when he had become a successful television writer, he was faced with the prospect of following the industry from New York to Los Angeles. By this time tape had taken over live television and the only original works being screened were the blockbuster colour “specials” - with their soaring production costs - which featured mostly Hollywood stars. Otherwise television for the writers meant adaptations. Like many of his contemporaries, Sumner was being enticed to move to Los

⁹ Just before he died, SLE recalled the effects of the McCarthy witchhunts on New York Television. “The casting director at NBC had a secret phone number, and whoever it was on the other end would say, ‘I’ll get back to you.’ And when they did, it would be to say something like, ‘You can’t use her - she was seen at a peace rally.’ It was horrifying because people were never told what was going on. All they knew was that suddenly all work stopped. It could be quite arbitrary. There were cases of mistaken identity. People weren’t beyond using the situation to settle scores, either.” (SLE to Kate Jennings, “Pleasing Yourself”.)

¹⁰ SLE, Letter from America, 15 Aug 1953.

Angeles by the big networks and he made a brief visit there to assess both the place and his television writing prospects. But Los Angeles and Hollywood had lost any semblance of their former splendour in his eyes and he decided he would rather change his occupation than live there. "As for California, it's not for me," Sumner declared. "Like Fred Allen said it, 'California, it's alright if you're an orange.' I came back to New York."¹¹ He remained a staunch East-Coaster for the rest of his life.

In 1948 though, Sumner was reluctant to leave Hollywood and all his newly acquired friends to set off for the unknown in New York. He travelled by bus, crossing the American continent in the heat of the northern summer, just as his mother had done by train over 30 years earlier. And, probably like her, his first impressions of New York, that city of dreams, were blurred by exhaustion and the heat and humidity of August.

I spent five days and four nights, sitting up all night on that bus, with stops made for meals and occasionally a shower. By the time we arrived in New York, I was so tired, I had no feeling whatsoever. I was dragged off the bus like a corpse.¹²

Seaton Daly, in *Fairyland*, makes a similar trip to New York in search of success, fame and fortune as a writer.

¹¹ Nan Hutton, "Australian with an East Side accent", *The Age*, Melbourne, 23 March 1974.

¹² SLE to me, 1990.

He had boarded the bus in Los Angeles last Sunday evening; it was now Thursday and in that time he had crossed America, breakfasted in Cheyenne, eaten lunch in Omaha, changed buses in Chicago, showered in Pittsburgh. Sleep, when it was possible, was with his head pressed against the window. Often the passengers had to get off the bus in the middle of the night while people came on to sweep it. Nobody had spoken more than a few words to him the entire trip and his own voice sounded disembodied... .

(*Fairyland* p. 205)

While Sumner's arrival in New York contained none of the glamour he had once envisaged, nothing could change the fact that he had at last arrived in this city of opportunity, convinced that this was his destiny.

Chapter Ten: "He's a New Yorker Now"

To begin with, America was not the technicolor dream.

New York was not the rose quartz color of myths.

New York was the squashed carton of strawberry yoghurt on the sidewalk, the steam rising from around the manholes as if hell were just below street level. It was...the Checker cabs that looked like big dented children's toys. It was little pails of dying flowers along Third Avenue and dirty newspapers blowing in the gutter. It was sirens. It was the pinnacles of silver and shining glass against the dazzling blue... . It was the gigantic difference after the quiet banality of Sydney, the raw sight and sound symbolized by the monstrous sanitation trucks...sweeping through spotless side streets while a block away the avenue was choked with garbage... .

The nacreous light over the East River in early evening and the liverish neon light of the subway...it was the sadness of discovering that in certain grotesque shops near Times Square one could buy a realistic imitation of dog excrement.

It was the moment of discovering you belonged.

It was then, the light turning green and the crowd stepping out, stepping briskly forward to cross Park Avenue at Fifty-ninth Street, and...crossing with them in the fall evening light striking the golden dome of the Grand Central Building, and all at once, glancing south, thinking 'I am one of them.'

(About Tilly Beamis p. 113)

It was America's difference from Australia that most appealed to Sumner. Los Angeles, with its wizardry of gadgets and

technology, its movie stars and glitter, and its space-age lifestyle, made Sydney seem like a marooned backward civilisation. And when he reached New York, the gulf widened further. The society he had left appeared bland and insular compared with the electric energy and diversity of this “town”, as New Yorkers called it, where everyone came from somewhere else and therefore belonged: “because everyone’s a stranger nobody is”, as Sumner put it.¹

I can’t tell you how wonderful [New York] was [in the 40s and 50s]... . It was magical. Everything was so cheap. The most beautiful little restaurants all along Third Avenue when the El [elevated railroad] was still there. And going to the theatre cost \$3. Or even less. You could go up to the second balcony for \$1.50 and see Lynn Fontanne and Alfred Lunt... .²

Sumner’s amateur theatre world in Sydney had been one of camaraderie and parity, but the amateur groups and the professional companies were separated by a gulf that was protectively maintained by the professionals. Sumner had been fully aware that Australian amateur actors, writers, directors and producers were looked upon as the underclass by professional bodies, those powerful, wealthy theatre owners, and he had regarded this group as the major enemy of the aspiring local playwright. His discovery of the truly classless society of New York’s artistic community, where there was a real equality of

¹ Joyce Lambert, “He’s a New Yorker Now”, *Woman*, 24 July 1950.

² Kate Jennings’ Interview, “Pleasing Yourself”.

opportunity, impressed him greatly. “You can be down and out and go to a party and sit next to Helen Hayes or the Ambassador from Uganda,” he once told a friend.³ In his mature years, after having travelled through Europe and England, he still considered that this egalitarian sub-culture was an element entirely unique to New York.

[T]he curious thing about New York [is] that anything can happen at any time. Nowhere else, not in Sydney, not in Paris, not in London...because [in New York] it is a democratic society in the arts. I love that. I love it being democratic. I love no titles, I love all that kind of thing... .⁴

His immersion into this democratic community was declared when he dropped the hyphen between his surnames, his youthful emblem of sophistication.

As for anyone else arriving in New York in the postwar years, the Statue of Liberty’s light promised Sumner a bright, hopeful future. But in 1948 it was soon evident to him that freedom had several faces: some eroded by want and failure, some shining with success and achievement. Yet all the faces that were New York mocked the mundanity that had been Australia. “There’s something in New York for people of every taste,” he told the

³ SLE to Gwen Plumb, *The Gwen Plumb Show*, Sydney Radio 2GB, 1974.

⁴ Hazel De Berg Interview, 1970.

Australian press not long after his arrival.⁵ Here, there was texture and paradox. Here, the rich and the poor walked side by side up 5th Avenue, or shared the same bus in the push and shove crowd of peak hour in the city: “Jane Wyatt...film star or not...still went up on the bus with me in the rush hour and hung onto the strap and was pushed and trodden on with all the hoy polloy...No one even turned around...”.⁶

Anyone could visit the Metropolitan Museum of Art where nobody noticed or cared about dress codes or what Australian society would have considered ‘proper’ attire. “One thing about Americans, that is very polite,” Sumner wrote to friends, “is that *no one* ever turns to look at you in the street no matter how odd you look.” He wrote this just after he had been severely sunburned: “You now couldn’t tell me from a Seminole Indian. My ankles got it worst and swelled. I look a peculiar sight in agencies this week, sartorially elegant in every respect except I’m wearing shower clogs on Fifth Avenue...”.⁷

In New York there was no Hollywood mask; here substance counted for much more than image. And then there was Broadway

⁵ Joyce Lambert, “He’s a New Yorker Now”.

⁶ SLE, Letter from America, March 3, 1949.

In a 1953 letter, SLE also describes frequently spotting “Miss Garbo” on the streets. “Passed her in the bus the other day waiting to cross Madison two blocks from here [his apartment].” Exceedingly wealthy celebrities often walked alone on the streets of NYC in those days and from SLE’s own sightings it appears to have been common practice.

⁷ SLE, Letter from America, 9 July 1949.

where opportunities abounded. New York produced the originality to which Hollywood added some gloss - at this time Hollywood looked to Broadway for much of its inspiration. Yet, for Sumner, life in New York in 1948 did not begin with the skyrocketing and fireworks he had once envisaged. He spent his early months lonely, unhappy and discouraged.

From August until March the following year he lived with his friends the Rubenfelds and their two noisy toddlers out in Flushing, Long Island. Although grateful for the support, Sumner did not find the Rubenfeld's house conducive to writing, and as the months rolled on the distance he had to travel to Manhattan each day also became a burden. Time, too, began to worry him. He watched his bank balance falling and, for the first time, began to doubt his talent.

The first few months were pretty terrible. I was staying with dear friends, but out of town, out of Manhattan, something I would never do any more. I hate suburbs... . I'm city born and bred, I love the cities, I've always felt completely at home in New York and I came in summer, and the New York summer is a vendetta against human nature unless you have air conditioning, but I would prefer always to be away from New York in July and August, and this was about the time I arrived. It's also a very bad time to get yourself around to see people. I had dozens of letters of introduction. I took my little radio scripts around and my publicity, and left them here and there.

Everybody was very nice, people are very nice to you in New York, contrary to what people think from other lands...but I needed money, I needed money badly... .⁸

He refrained from burdening his friends with his situation, and only his aunts were aware of his despair, through his letters. Because of the close relationship he and his family had always shared with Miles Franklin, he told her, too, something of his troubles.

...I'm making progress but it takes time and as you know this is the toughest place of all for US. People are kind and hospitable and I'm seeing people all the time and sitting in offices and thinking about things and looking out on the great towers in the early...evening and thinking about Manly and Bondi... . I don't want to come back until I've done something however small. Radio is what I'm after at the moment and I have several hopeful things on the string and hosts more people to see. One gets tired of interviewing day after day and taking scripts in and out of offices. I feel the first Sumner went through all that here too only in publishers' offices. But they are very charming even when not interested in one's scripts... .⁹

Although his daily life had become a gruelling pilgrimage to agencies and theatres in Manhattan, he still found the city night life most surprising and exhilarating, and its fantasy and humour was highlighted in his letters to other friends in Australia.

⁸ Hazel De Berg Interview, 1970.

⁹ SLE, Letter to Miles Franklin, 1949, Miles Franklin Papers, Mitchell Library, Sydney.

...[Y]ou shoulda seen me at Madison Square Garden Sat before last. It was an air force reunion with twenty thousand people. We were ushered backstage and sat in the wings next to Jimmy Stewart and Clark Gable with whom I shared the programme. Very sweet he is too and shy sort of and very grey haired and not too tall... . Then Bob Hope was with us too. Gypsy Rose Lee did her act which is terrific and of course we were but an inch away and saw *all*. Then Bob Hope did a burlesque of it undressing down to the panties and wearing a silver star on each nipple... . Then Gable brought on Eisenhower and Joe E. Brown read the tribute to the forces. Then we all got up to sing Auld Lang...and now its all in the newsreels over here with...me well to the fore. Haven't seen it yet but lots of people have and so I've made the screen with Gable... .

(SLE, Letter from New York, 10 Oct 1948.)

Such letters emerge as the training ground for the novelist Sumner became, as he developed his skills in using text to position his reader. In these passages he selected specific events from the range of his experience and he shaped and emphasised particular details, editing his life for presentation to his reader - a reader he continually and consciously manipulated. As a novelist, he adopted these same techniques and devices when writing his autobiographical fiction.

By October 1948 a guest spot on local radio provided his first income and he jubilantly told friends that he was "doing a

broadcast...with Edith Piaf, French star, and Lady Hubert Wilkins”¹⁰. His return to radio, after having been so disenchanted with it in Australia, indicated his desperation for money; at this time he also began writing journalistic articles for various Australian press outlets. As well, he had begun auditioning for roles in New York theatre and the cattle-calls and long hours of waiting in acting agencies eventually led him to reassess his position in the American arts and letters.

...[W]hen I came to America I still had ideas about the stage, then I realised America is a country of specialization, and it confuses Americans if you do two or three things. They say “I thought you were an actor.” “Oh but you write too.”. ..So I made the decision, after sitting round in offices in New York, looking at actors trying to get jobs, looking at the frantic thing that it all was, the rat race here, really truly frightening, and I thought...you’re up against such competition, you’ve got an accent to them, you could only play British parts; secondly, you’ve had no experience in this country, you’ve had little professional experience in the theatre; and I decided that the best thing to do was, if I could write, maybe I was only one out of fifty actors that could write, so why shouldn’t I just write... .¹¹

Sumner must have wondered if this was the right decision when he heard about the furore at the premiere of *Rusty Bugles* in Australia. Its opening night provoked threats of prosecution by the Police

¹⁰ SLE, Letter from New York, 10 Oct 1948. Lady H.W. had once painted SLE’s mother’s portrait in her wedding dress.

¹¹ SLE to Candida Baker, *Yacka 2*.

Vice Squad, a proposed banning by government representatives, and debate in Australia's Parliament. "In those days you could have gone to jail [there] for writing something like that," Sumner recalled, "but fortunately I was in New York [and] they wouldn't have tried to arrest me here...".¹²

In a letter sent to friends in Sydney just before the play's opening, he had asked them to send him clippings and their report on the first night. The discouraging months of dragging himself into Manhattan each day looking for work had made him long for Sydney, to enjoy the fanfare that always went with the premiere of any play of his at the Independent Theatre. He had waited so long for *Rusty Bugles* to have its chance. But the 'small town' mentality of the Australian theatre scene was still all too evident in the avalanche of telegrams, correspondence and press articles about *Rusty Bugles*.

After receiving news of *Bugles'* impact, Sumner made a statement from New York to Sydney's *Daily Telegraph*. He answered the charge of obscene language in the play and, taking the tack that the best defence is a strong offence, he attacked authorities about the discrimination waged against local Australian writers.

¹² SLE in Candida Baker, *Yacka 2*.

I am completely innocent of writing an obscene or indecent play... . I agree that in comedy obscene language generally is unnecessary and frequently in bad taste. But intelligent censorship would differentiate between this type of indecency and normal profanity used by soldiers. Unless our authorities grow up they are going to crush out any reality in the Australian stage and stifle our theatre... .

My sin, apparently, was the fact that I am a home grown author. It's a clear indication that an Australian playwright must first achieve distinction abroad before he wins fair recognition at home... .¹³

The *Sydney Morning Herald* quoted him as saying: "Australian plays have often been discriminated against before this. Australians seem to think that if a play comes from London or New York it is less liable to censorship than the local article."¹⁴ To support this argument, he pointed out that Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*, both far more contentious works, had been produced in Australia without censorship because they were plays from overseas. Over the following decades, Sumner raised his Australian voice in defence of local artistic endeavours in what became almost a crusade.

Two years later he wrote to a sympathetic Miles Franklin

¹³ SLE, *Daily Telegraph*, Sydney, 26 Oct 1948. Quoted in *Rusty Bugles*, Currency Press edn, 1980.

¹⁴ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 Oct 1948. Quoted in *Rusty Bugles*, Currency Press edn, 1980.

about his hopes of establishing himself as a successful New York playwright and, from this position, of contributing to an Australian National Theatre. He was still very aware that overseas success was the passport to Australia's acceptance: "Australia will have to awaken to its own national art one day but something must be done to offset public apathy and the ridiculous notion that anything local is instantly mediocre because it isn't West End or Broadway financially."¹⁵

Although Sumner was clearly upset by the threat of closure hanging over *Rusty Bugles*, he was heartened by the support with which critics and theatregoers alike had overwhelmed Australian newspapers in defence of the play, and in defence of their own rights to freedom of choice. Inspired by the public support, he cabled Doris Fitton, urging her to "moderate the language rather than allow [*Bugles*] to come under total ban".¹⁶ Years later he claimed, rather humbly, that the banning had made the play.

Rusty Bugles was a hit by accident because it was banned. If it hadn't been banned, it would have run its six weeks at the Independent Theatre in North Sydney and never been heard of again... . It would have done well enough, with good houses on Friday and Saturday nights, and then been absolutely forgotten. But the banning made it.

¹⁵ SLE, Letter to Miles Franklin, 26 Nov 1951. Miles Franklin Papers, Mitchell Library, Sydney. This letter also cries foul the fact that despite *Rusty Bugles'* achievement, as what he termed "the most successful local play in many years", there was no interest from publishers in printing it in book form. SLE to MF: "[W]hat can one do, and how to make a living comfortably unless you're Norman Lindsay?"

¹⁶ *Rusty Bugles*, Currency Press edn, 1980.

Made it! It was the most marvellous thing that ever happened to me. It was the front page news. Actually on the banner of *The Sun*. BANNED PLAY. Well, of course they were lined up around the block... .¹⁷

An agreement with authorities - to modify the language - was reached and the play continued, much to Sumner's relief. He added *Rusty Bugles* to his portfolio of successes as the play was transferred to the professional ranks and began its record-breaking run in a national Australian tour that lasted almost two years and attracted nearly 200,000 people. The play was also taken to New Zealand (where it was a flop) and plans were made for a London season, but unfortunate timing and poor management frustrated these plans which made Sumner believe once more that his best dramatic work was somehow cursed.

Seven years after the premiere of *Rusty Bugles*, Ray Lawler's *Summer of the 17th Doll* received acclaim in Australia and overseas and was hailed as the first play of such local flavour to find popularity with audiences. By then *Bugles* had become a tarnished emblem of a world war that, in the 1950s, Australia was trying to forget. During the lead-up to Melbourne's 1956 Olympics, a committee responsible for the cultural background to the Games contacted Sumner in New York. They requested a copy of the

¹⁷ Jane Nicholls, "Signs of Living: About Sumner Locke Elliott", *FOLLOW me* magazine, Sydney, June 1988.

manuscript and his permission to produce the play as part of the Games' festivities. Because of its history and reputation, they considered *Bugles* an appropriately 'national' work. A delighted Sumner forwarded the committee his only copy of the play. He never heard from them again, not even to acknowledge receipt of the manuscript.¹⁸

Sumner's absence from *Bugles'* tumultuous entry into the world and his reliance on second-hand reports compounded his frustration over the play. He eventually felt disassociated from *Rusty Bugles*: "I have a curious feeling about it, as though it were not one of my plays, because...I never saw it"¹⁹ The first tour of *Rusty Bugles* closed just three days before he visited Australia in 1950 and future productions also eluded him. Later in life he reassessed the effect of this closure.

...[T]he enormous publicity...was what made *Rusty Bugles* a success and not its inherent value as a play. Now it has inherent value as a play, and I am ambivalent about this, because if it hadn't been for the police action...it would never have been heard of again... .²⁰

This loss of confidence in the play was reinforced by jibes that *Bugles* was a product of publicity, most often launched by would-be

18 SLE to me, 1990. See also *The Age*, Melbourne, 16 April 1964.

19 Hazel De Berg Interview, 1970.

20 Hazel De Berg Interview, 1970.

Australian actors and theatre entrepreneurs who imposed themselves upon the playwright in New York. In letters home to his closest friends, he confided his bitterness about such attacks. His own denigration of the play became a defensive mechanism, part of his standard public 'spiel' on *Rusty Bugles*.

Towards the end of 1948, when *Bugles* was making both headlines and money in Australia, Australian regulations meant that Sumner had no access to his royalties. He remained unknown and on the edge of financial ruin in New York, where work ranged from meagre to non-existent: "...it was a dollar drainage at that time, Australia wouldn't allow you to take money. I was earning a lot of money from *Rusty Bugles*, [I] just couldn't get it out of the country."²¹

But the *Bugles* uproar had exorcised his earlier homesickness, and his anxiety and frustration over the whole exercise had rekindled memories of his difficulties in Australia as a 'local' playwright. In later life he summed it up:

...that peculiar Australian inverted vanity, that stupid apologetic thing of: "We know him, he's just a Sydney boy. A Sumner play, oh yes, oh well...' But Mr X from abroad was different, the most second-rate people came out and postured all over the place - especially from England... .²²

21 Hazel De Berg Interview, 1970.

22 Candida Baker, *Yacker 2*.

With fresh reminders of how insular Australia still was, only reports that his aunt Lily was very ill tugged at him from that distance. But America provided distraction on two fronts: "...lined up to do television adaptations for Kraft," he reported in his Christmas greeting cards, his matter-of-fact tone belying his relief. During his fruitless treks to Manhattan and despondent return journeys to Long Island each night, he had noticed the impact of television on the American people: "Walking down a suburban street...I saw the little blue screen shining in house after house and thought, my God this is going to change everything - radio and movies will be dead. It is a marriage between them."²³ Television suddenly became another potential outlet for him - closer to his revered theatre than radio had been, after all.²⁴ He began to pursue work in this new medium, and first attracted interest from Kraft, who like all the major sponsors had soon joined the television bandwagon.

In 1948 TV had broken in America. It was still primitive in form and prehistoric in technique. Tiny 14 inch screens and little cardboard sets and people with blue faces. Everything was done live with all the mistakes left in.²⁵

²³ SLE, Address to Adelaide Writers' Week, 1974.

²⁴ SLE reported that at one point, networks trialed the concept of screening television plays along the same line as theatre plays: the same television play was screened at 8 pm, six nights a week, with matinee performances also being screened on Wednesdays and Saturdays. The idea was not successful and was dropped shortly after its trial.

²⁵ SLE, Address to Adelaide Writers' Week, 1974.

Television took off rapidly in America and less than a year later Sumner wrote back to a still uninitiated Australia: "In New York everyone has a TV set - and on the lower east side they'd rather have television than chairs to sit on."²⁶

As his work prospects improved, winter approached and a blizzard hit New York in mid-December 1948. Sumner was entranced by his first white Christmas.

Swirling flakes and black winter trees baring arms into the sky and kids in red mufflers on sleds and Xmas trees and holly. I bought a pair of snow boots with zippers...and went tramping in it. I pat it on the face (marvellous for lines, you grow younger overnight) and am now ready to play second page in *Richard of Bordeaux* again... . All along the road you could see odd shapes and lumps, these proved to be cars completely covered... . The snow makes me feel as tho I want to read *Pickwick* again... . From my window the view is exactly like a Xmas card and I have to restrain the fictitious idea that at any moment a coach and four will come bustling round the corner... .

(SLE, Letter from New York, 22 Dec 1948.)

Sumner's letter embodies his sense of new beginning in a new country, and a return to optimism and hope as he looked across the holiday season to a New Year of high prospects. From this time onwards Sumner associated winter with renewal - year after year he delighted in the arrival of the cold weather.

Very, very cold just now but I love it, the air suddenly wraps your face up in a crease when you step out the door and people coming out of a place have to arrange their expression in advance because whatever you are doing, you just stay there frozen and it is foolish to wear a mincing smile as you are going out the door as nature will cement it on your face and you will proceed up the avenue smiling mutely and foolishly like a half-witted dope... .

(SLE, Letter from America, 9 Dec 1949.)

By February 1949, however, there was still no confirmation from Kraft. A despairing Sumner began directing an amateur company in a production of *Payment Deferred* for Queens Theatre. "I screamed and raved at them like Doris in a bad mood," he wrote to friends. But across the Atlantic *Rusty Bugles* had begun to stir the interest of London theatre producers. Letters ricocheted between England, Australia and America and it was suggested that Sumner take the role of OT in a West End production of *Rusty Bugles*. While he was contemplating this, word arrived of his first sale of work in America. In lieu of offering him adaptation work, Kraft had bought his radio script *Wicked is the Vine* - the story of two warring sisters in the classic good versus evil family dichotomy - which they proposed to adapt for television. This was something of a windfall for Sumner and his mood suddenly lifted.

What with...*the Vine* going on April 13 [and] the possibility of *Rusty Bugles* in London...I haven't had a second...with people coming in from London

and not knowing from day to day what might happen (if it came off I might even have a three month trip to England and Paris) I feel it better to be here in New York in the vortex at least until after my television show on April 13... .

(SLE, Letter from America, 3 March 1949.)

On the strength of his small fee from the sale of *Vine*, Sumner decided to move into Manhattan.

...I've been all whipped up by the fact that...a friend...got a divine studio garret combined with all mod cons for sixteen bucks a month! This is because it was not heated which to me is a divine blessing...as all Americans think they are dying if not in a hermetically sealed room of over 90 degrees. Right now I am going about in a thin silk shirt and panties nowt else with the snow four feet outside the window. So...I tramped up and down Manhattan yesterday but to no avail. I kept saying this was the perfect place and then...I'd ask the price and I would come to being given a brandy on the floor.

(SLE, Letter from America, 3 March, 1949.)

Eager for some independence after almost nine months with the Rubenfelds, and convinced that living in Manhattan would somehow change his luck, Sumner persisted and finally moved into a small room on East 31st Street.

I had a ghastly little room for 14 bucks a week with what they call a hot plate which is an excuse to gas yourself and a double bed with a hook in it and an old man in the next room with TB who coughed all night long at six-minute intervals... .

(SLE, Letter from America, 25 April 1949.)

While he awaited the appearance of *Wicked is the Vine* on television (13 April), he continued his assault on the talent agencies, now from closer quarters. But week followed week without any further breakthrough. The news from London about *Rusty Bugles* also worried him - arrangements seemed to be at a stalemate. This began a pattern of promise and disappointment that would shadow English plans for *Bugles* over the next three years until eventually all hopes of mounting the play were abandoned. For the first time in his life, Sumner was living alone in reduced circumstances and facing the prospect of failure.

During the nine months he had been in New York, the only work that had raised any interest from companies and producers was a radio play he had written almost two years earlier. "I must make with the goods and stop carrying around these tired old plays," he told friends.²⁷ But the nagging worry of money and the loss of confidence in his talent sapped him of any real desire to write. His creativity flagged and increasingly his typewriter was used only for his now infrequent letters to Australia. Just as his mother had made light of disappointments and financial hardship in her letters from America decades earlier, Sumner concealed his worry with wit and humour. A certain amount of pride was involved too: after all his old friends had been part of the great

²⁷ SLE, Letter from America, March/April, 1949.

fanfare of his departure in search of success in the world. To these theatre friends he wrote about recent cinematic offerings from both Hollywood and Europe; traded gossip (“the dirt”) about mutual acquaintances and about new places he’d seen; and above all, about the latest Broadway shows, where he could be found at least twice a week in the cheapest seats: “so high up that your ears pop with the altitude”.²⁸

The Lunts open in two weeks in *I Know My Love* - new Berhman play... . Following week Kit Cornell in *That Lady*... . Betty Field is to do the new Garson (“Born Yesterday”) Kanin show *The Rat Race*... . Hated *Black Chiffon* dull and talky but Robson giving a lovely performance. My favourite...is Miss Merman in *Call Me, Madam*, a lovely musical, very funny...not an *Annie* [*Get Your Gun*] but lovely tunes and Paul Lukas charming if a trifle dismayed about finding himself in a musical comedy. Gielgud opens tonight. Tomorrow going to see Jessica Tandy in *Hilda Crane*. Liked Celeste Holm in *Affairs of State* but was bitterly disappointed in *Season in the Sun* the Wollcott Gibbs play which got raves... . *Daphne Laureola* closed last Saturday, it was a flop here... .

(SLE, Letters from America, 1949-50.)

And then there was the excitement of his frequent first-hand encounters with stage and movie stars. Letters to “dull old Sydney” at the end of the 40s made his life seem (to Sumner and his readers) exotic.

Went into Mark Cross leather shop on Fifth Avenue on Friday... . Stood waiting at the counter whilst a tall beautifully dressed woman in fawn gabardine suit cut divinely and real alligator shoes was buying a wallet with a man. She turned round and it was Rosalind Russell, so attractive. Dying to say "Come and have a quick cuppa and tell all" but didn't like to... .

(SLE, Letter from America, 24 Oct 1949.)

He was still the little "movies boy" from Sydney, and when he came across the idols of his youth he must have felt that, like Alice, he had found his way 'through the looking glass'. But alone each night in his "dirty little room" listening to his tubercular neighbour, Sumner began to lose hope, and his appearance showed it. Normally a fastidious dresser, he began to look unkempt. Money became scarce. Aunt Lily had to send him postal orders for a couple of dollars just to keep him going. He skimped on meals and made do with the barest of essentials. He recalls going to a party in New York's East Village on a cold night in early April 1949: "I only went because I knew they might have a lot of *hors d'oeuvres* and it would save me having to buy dinner," he said, "and I got into conversation with this woman who was in her forties...".²⁹ This became the standard opening line of a story he told many times: 'The Valda the Nurse story'.

...[A]nd she said to me, "What do you do?" and I said, "I write", and she said, "What are you writing?" and I said, "I'm not writing anything. I'm caught

²⁹ Jane Nicholls, "Signs of Living: About Sumner Locke Elliott", *FOLLOW me* magazine, Sydney, June 1988.

in this terrible jam. I have no money and I really have got to write to earn some. I've got to write, desperately, but I'm so uptight with the fact that I have no money that I can't write, so it's a vicious circle."

It turned out she was a nurse from Bellevue Hospital and she said, "Isn't that strange? Our next-door neighbour is the top story editor at CBS, if that would be of any help to you."

A week later I was walking up Fifth Avenue and I suddenly thought I had better call this man because she may have got in touch with him. To my utter surprise he said: "Where are you this very minute? Come around."³⁰

Sumner later recognised this East Village party and "Valda" as one of the turning points of his life, part of a pattern.

My whole career, from the time I left high school when I was sixteen and got into radio, everything has been through people I've met who have led me to someone else, and so forth. Everything that happened here in the television days, happened through someone I met, whom I was designed to meet...³¹

Sumner's view of his life as a design, woven against the background of his mother's death, can be traced through his novels: from *Careful, He Might Hear You* to *Fairyland*. Sumner's success in New York is recounted through Seaton Daly, an Australian writer who seeks fame and fortune in America.

³⁰ SLE to Clyde Packer, *No Return Ticket*.

³¹ SLE to Candida Baker, *Yacker 2*.

This was no different than anything that had happened in the last four or five years; everything in New York led to something else. The nice woman in the dry cleaners who happened to know that old Mr. Samson wanted a quiet well-behaved lodger, the bare acquaintances recommended a dentist, who also attended to the teeth of the story editor at CBS; the anonymous woman at the cocktail party who was living with the director of the most-watched daytime soap, "Another Man's Woman"; person led to person, opportunity to opportunity, success to success... .

(*Fairyland* p. 216)

In Sumner's mind, fate had been a major player in the events of his life and was given star billing in his creative reconstruction. "I am, as always, a believer in fate the great decider... 'destiny'... is impossible to avoid,"³² he told a friend during his early years in New York, as he watched opportunities come and go. Fate figures prominently in the lives of his novels' characters who stumble on their destinies at funerals, through friends of friends, during visits to family in the country, by missing the last ferry on the harbour or taking the wrong tram home: suddenly there is order in the mayhem, reason in the uncertainty.

At CBS, Sumner first met Arthur Heineman who later introduced him to Worthington Miner, the man who was "God" to everyone at that network; a man who was more interested in Sumner's theatrical background than his radio experience. Miner,

³² SLE, Letter from America, 22 April 1951.

one of the few television executives with a New York theatre and film background, “was large and impressive and rubicund and brilliant, and extremely courteous.” According to Sumner, “he was then the top dramatic producer at CBS...of a marvellous...television show in those days...called *Studio One*...”.³³ This was a television anthology programme, broadcasting hour-long adaptations, mostly of classics, live across the country from New York each week. When Sumner described his first meeting with Worthington Miner, he was at his sparkling best:

...and he said, “[W]e are in a terrible jam.” I thought “You’re in a terrible jam!” and he said, “Have you ever read Somerset Maugham’s *Of Human Bondage*?” How, you know it’s 700 pages, and I said well I had, but not for indeed some years, and he said “Well, we are doing a production of *Of Human Bondage* a week from Monday and we go into rehearsal on Friday.” I think this was on a Wednesday afternoon - and he said “I have engaged a writer, we have [a] script and it’s come in, and it’s useless, it is deplorable, it is written by a radio writer we thought would be good, a distinguished radio writer, and we have learned our lesson: radio writers cannot write for television, they have no visual sense, but I understand that you have written for the theatre?” I said yes, and he said “We cannot pay you too much money, but out of the budget I have already paid him...I can only offer you \$200, but do you think you could do...some sort of script by Friday?” and I said “Mr Miner, for \$200 I can not only do *Of Human Bondage* by Friday, I can also do *War and Peace*...”³⁴

³³ Hazel De Berg Interview, 1970.

³⁴ Hazel De Berg Interview, 1970.

As a piece of good timing, perhaps fate, Sumner's introduction to CBS coincided with Kraft's successful screening of *Wicked is the Vine* through NBC, which enhanced his standing with both networks' executives. "Well that old tide seems to have turned," Sumner exclaimed, overcome by the fact that rival television networks were now clamouring for his work. "Just fighting over me, dear," he told a friend, in disbelief.³⁵

The screening of *Vine* was so well received that a prominent Connecticut theatre group planned to stage it as part of their summer season.

My thriller *Wicked is the Vine* is going to...Westport, Connecticut... . These people give auditions for plays and pay a cast and director to do it in a "fortnight" (I mean two weeks of course no one knows what a fortnight is here)... . This is a very good theatre tryout place in a barn and they invite all the great Hammersteins and whatnot from town to see the shows, only do five during the season... .

(SLE, Letter from America, 9 July 1949.)

Suddenly Sumner was referring to the tired old radio play he had written almost in another lifetime as "my thriller" and proudly told friends in Australia that his was the first TV play from Kraft "to be kinescoped - put on film - and kept forever...and [it] opens in

³⁵ SLE, Letter from America, 9 July 1949.

Hollywood May 4 which is a scoop for me.”³⁶

On the whole, though, Sumner was wary about making too much of his success. He knew what would be generally acceptable to his Australian friends and colleagues. Australians who had passed through New York in 1948 had already reported home about him. He was well aware that some Australians would resent anyone from home making too much of themselves in the world and would suspect that such a person might think themselves superior to the Aussies back home. This Australian trait fell under scrutiny in most of Sumner’s books. “I have always been nervous about being optimistic,” he confessed shortly before his death. “In a way it is cowardly of me but it is my nature to be that way. It’s a protection, a carapace against something not coming off.”³⁷

As if to assure friends back home that he knew his success was only minor, his letters usually made fleeting references to his achievements and dwelt much longer on recent close encounters with the big stars.

Last night I was very thrilled as I was guest of the Theatre Guild at their radio performance of *Alien Corn* and who do you think was the star...our Bette! I was in the studio with her and about a foot away. She looked very cross most of the time and nervous and kept getting up and going out every time she

³⁶ SLE, Letter from America, 25 April 1949.

³⁷ SLE to Kate Jennings, “Pleasing Yourself”.

was off for a moment and sipping glasses of water. She is very young looking and really quite attractive. Kirk Douglas was playing the man and I don't think they were getting on too well because she kept taking hold of Everett Sloan's hand and whispering to him. I was amazed she looks so young and of course that mad walk of hers and those big eyes. Would have adored to have met her after but there was a big crowd and when we got out of the theatre she had to be carried out by the police because 8th Street was blocked with fans and they climbed on the roof of her car and clawed...the glass all screaming "Bette we love you" and "Our Miss Davis".

(SLE, Letter from America, 25 April 1949.)

On the strength of *Wicked is the Vine*, NBC bought another of Sumner's radio scripts, *The Crater*, set in far north Queensland, and commissioned an original television play, *Pengallen's Bell*, which had to be set in Cornwall, England. Sumner knew nothing of Cornwall, but this appears to have mattered little to the NBC executives, for whom "Australian" was synonymous with "British".

As Sumner worked on his third draft of the CBS Maugham adaptation and, concurrently, rewrote *Pengallen's Bell* for NBC, he wondered if his \$900 earnings for both was really worth the stress. "I haven't lifted my bloody friggin' head from the typewriter for six weeks and I've had it," he moaned to friends.³⁸

Both the NBC shows went to air ahead of his Maugham screenplay, but Sumner always called *Of Human Bondage* his “real breakthrough”.³⁹ This was in part due to the prestige of CBS’s *Studio One* programme and partly because he was no longer excluded from the production process.

I was allowed into rehearsals and I began to get this unwieldy feeling of power, and...it was very interesting because I learned that there was no film in the camera, why there were three cameras was that you cut as you go along, I learned finally from my own mistakes how to get one character from one set to another. Everything was done absolutely live in those days, including the commercials, which were done in a little set behind, wherever you could squeeze it on. I learned about economics, I learned that if you could do away with the ballroom scene and have an anteroom it would save set space, and save them hundreds of dollars with extras. I learned to get a main character out of a scene quickly and delay so that she or he could do a lightning and nightmare change, sometimes with wig and costumes and ageing, on the set, and yet not make the play appear to be padded.⁴⁰

“I loved doing *Human Bondage*,” Sumner wrote to a friend shortly before the screening, “but to my fury they cut a hell of a lot of Mildred. But still and all I’m thrilled that they have allowed me to keep in the [illegitimate] child as censorship is strong here on TV

³⁹ Hazel De Berg Interview, 1970.

⁴⁰ Hazel De Berg Interview, 1970.

and also a scene where she is a prostitute on the streets.”⁴¹

Of Human Bondage went to air in November 1949, starring Charlton Heston in his first screen role. Heston appeared in Sumner’s next two screenplays for CBS, and, over the next fourteen years, many other famous names were listed in Sumner’s television drama credits.

Sumner’s success during the first half of 1949 enabled him to move uptown from East 31st Street to an apartment on Madison Avenue.

I was getting to the paranoic stage when the heavens opened and I found an apartment to share with a nice old man from the United Nations... . It is right on Madison Avenue...in the seventies on the *East Side* which I know doesn’t make you faint but it would if you knew New York because that is the most exclusive section of Manhattan where all the millionaire apartments are just off Park Ave and I get it all for ten dollars a week because it’s a share and the joy is he is going off for two months to look after another apartment so I get it most of the time to myself and its huge, parquet flooring, antique furniture electric kitchen with pressure gauges and things you put the dinner on at seven a.m. and come home and find it’s ready to dish up etc. Lovely and quiet to work in, with radio etc., so I am moving from the Ghetto Thursday... .

(SLE, Letter from America, 25 April, 1949.)

He also found an agent, “a sweet Scottish lady, Annie Laurie Williams”, and told friends that she was “the best in town who also represented John Steinbeck”.⁴² At a literary party one evening, shortly after signing with the Williams’ agency, Sumner was amazed to find himself not only in Steinbeck’s company but in private conversation with him.

John Steinbeck had a habit of passing through parties briefly, making a low-key entrance and exit. According to his widow, Elaine, Steinbeck enjoyed this way of ‘conning’ people, it appealed to his vanity as he knew that later everyone would be saying “Was that him?”⁴³ On the night Sumner met him, however, Steinbeck had been in a social mood; he had stayed on at the party and as the crowd of literary people shifted about the various rooms of the house, he found himself in a conversation with a total stranger. Sumner had always admired his books, and although he never met Steinbeck again, the meeting left a lasting impression on him. “I remember he asked me what I did,” Sumner recalled many years

⁴² SLE, Letter from America, 25 April 1949.

Annie Laurie Williams’ had built her reputation on her discovery of *Gone With the Wind*, by the then unknown Margaret Mitchell. SLE remained a client of Williams throughout his television career and for some time as a novelist. (She was still working actively near the age of ninety.) During SLE’s success with *Careful, He Might Hear You*, Williams urged him to sign a contract, without explaining the implications, releasing the film rights to Hollywood producer, Joshua Logan. The contract was an outright sale, rather than the more usual ‘option’ which would have incurred a renegotiation if a film had not appeared within five years of the agreement. Logan’s plans for filming were shelved after financial problems and the film of *Careful* took almost twenty years to eventuate when the rights were released to Jill Robb, an Australian producer. SLE’s second novel, *Some Doves and Pythons*, was loosely based on the life of Annie Laurie Williams and her clients. SLE and Williams had a falling out over this book and their relationship was never again the same.

⁴³ Michele Field, an interview with Elaine Steinbeck and John Steinbeck’s biographer, Jay Parini, “Steinbeck’s secret ambition”, *The Australian*, 2-3 July 1994.

later, “and I told him rather timidly that I was a writer. I mean you can imagine, I’d just started my career in television and here I was announcing to *the* John Steinbeck that I too was a writer!”⁴⁴ At this point Steinbeck offered to share his “secret of good writing.”

He was rather drunk and he was wearing a watch or a medallion on a golden chain and I was seated on the floor at his feet, not only metaphorically...but because there was no other chair. He leaned forward and, drink in hand, began a long discourse on writing. Because there was a waterfall of voices around us and someone playing a piano and because he was drunk and according to his friends, was addicted to mumbling, I could not understand anything he was saying to me with deep concern and could only stare at him wide-eyed, occasionally nodding or shaking my head slowly from side to side to give the impression that I was drinking in deeply what this great American writer had to offer me, a fledgling writer in television, this opportunity to learn something of value beyond pearls and rubies; feeling at the same time robbed and cheated because although I bent my head almost into Mr. Steinbeck’s crotch, I could only catch a word or two here and there passing into the babel over the piano, over the clatter of ice in his glass. But either through osmosis or lip-reading or by some mammoth effort of concentration I heard him say, as he got up to replenish his drink (he never came back) “You must like your work”.⁴⁵

Sumner contemplated this enigmatic advice for years, but decided

44 SLE to me, 1990.

45 SLE, “You Must Like Your Work”, Australian Writers in Profile: 12, *Southerly*.

that this one and only meeting with Steinbeck was something of an opportunity squandered. “So there I was with the great John Steinbeck who was prepared to tell me the secret behind his writing and I missed it all.”⁴⁶ Later, however, he came to know Steinbeck’s wife, Elaine: “And we just clicked: an Australian and a Texan. We had so much in common,” she remembered.⁴⁷ After the death of Steinbeck, when Sumner began his career as a novelist, Elaine became one of his closest friends, and was co-executor of his will.

By early 1950, Sumner had begun to cement his place at CBS where, like NBC, they also felt his nationality was well suited to adapting the English classics they favoured. According to Sumner, the network thought American writers were hopeless with English dialects, particularly cockney. Although he was no expert in this field, he knew his efforts would be acceptable for American consumption. With further successful adaptations of *Jane Eyre* and *The Willow Cabin* to his credit, the English classics had become his specialty. “It’s a national characteristic to believe in specialisation,” Sumner told an Australian interviewer in 1950. “I’m more restricted to working on plays with a British background... . My next assignment for instance is *The Passionate Pilgrim*, a play about

⁴⁶ SLE to me, 1990.

⁴⁷ Elaine Steinbeck to me, New York, 1991.

Florence Nightingale.”⁴⁸

But his career was suddenly placed on hold when he received news that his aunt Lily was dying. He immediately flew to Sydney, meeting his travel costs through the Australian Government's emergency release of some of his royalties from *Rusty Bugles*, which had just finished its season.

Sumner never faltered in his resolve to return to Lily during her final illness, but he was concerned about the interruption to his television career and about his re-entry to America. En route to Australia, an American immigration officer in Honolulu - who perhaps had taken a dislike to Sumner - set off this concern by warning Sumner that he could be denied re-entry to America. Sumner's worries were exacerbated when he found out on arriving in Sydney, that war had broken out in Korea.⁴⁹

The weeks he spent in Australia were unhappy. Just days after his arrival, his aunt Lily died and, despite his own grief, he had to console his aunts Agnes and Blanche. Clearly, little had changed in the family ranks. Sumner was constantly aware of the dissension, petty jealousy and bickering that persisted amongst the Locke sisters. His presence at least had spared Lily the stress of

⁴⁸ Joyce Lambert, "He's a New Yorker Now".

⁴⁹ Whit Cook to me, 1994, and Clyde Packer, *No Return Ticket*.

copied with her quarrelsome siblings during her final days. Lily had always been the stabilising force in her nephew's life; the mother who would never be given that title.

Sumner's visit had only intensified his feelings about Australia. He found no discernible difference in the society he had escaped two years earlier. The only benefit of being in what he once termed "the hindquarters of the world", apart from seeing friends, was gaining access to his royalties. From this money he paid for his aunt Lily's funeral and made some kind of financial arrangement for Agnes and Blanche before he hastily departed to what he now realised was his home in America.⁵⁰

"He's a New Yorker Now", the magazine headline said. In his aunts' North Sydney flat, Sumner gave the interviewer details of his life in New York: the little French restaurant on 55th Street; the hot biscuit mix you could buy in the supermarket that was practically already cooked for you; the old movies shown every week at the Museum of Modern Art where it cost 34 cents for admission; the friends he mixed with at the Algonquin, "a lovely old-fashioned hotel on 44th street...a haunt of theatre people"; his new career in television and his hopes "to crash Broadway".⁵¹ As he spoke, Sumner realised that in the last two years he had

⁵⁰ SLE to me, 1991.

⁵¹ Joyce Lambert, "He's a New Yorker Now".

adopted America, and America had adopted him. In America there was familiarity and self-worth; in Australia there remained only shadows and scarred memories. With Lily's death, Sumner felt he was a foreigner in his native land.⁵²

All the stress of his visit and his anxiety about re-entry into America, culminated in an attack of shingles during the several days of his flight back to New York. He travelled part of the way with his friend from Sydney theatre days, Evie Hayes, spending time in Honolulu, San Francisco and Hollywood.

This time on the West Coast, Sumner re-evaluated the place that had so impressed him in 1948. "Am cured of Hollywood for good," he wrote. "It's so bizarre and so *dull*."⁵³ This description did not, of course, apply to his Hollywood friends with whom he'd kept in touch since his first stop-over there two years earlier. Sumner enjoyed seeing them and confirmed arrangements with a Hollywood radio network to broadcast his play *Miss Bone*,⁵⁴ which was to star Miriam Hopkins. She was one of Sumner's screen idols and the prospect of her performing in his play assured him that he had once more stepped back through the looking glass, into the world of improbable happenings.

⁵² SLE to me, 1990.

⁵³ SLE, Letter from America, 26 Sept 1950.

⁵⁴ This play was also later sold to Hollywood television for adaptation and starred Mildred Natwick.

In the week before his flight home to New York, he visited the Hollywood Bowl, where he sat behind Cary Grant. He dined again at the Brown Derby; attended a party where he met Lizabeth Scott, who drove him home in her convertible; and stayed several days in the San Fernando valley with Virginia Smith, a friend from Columbia Pictures.⁵⁵ His flight to New York, however, was harrowing.

Had an awful trip...we lost an engine in mid air and had to make an emergency landing at four thirty am. at Kansas City where we were stranded for two hours, then left, then lost the other engine and had to turn back. Loathe Kansas City. Then got to Chicago and was routed to Pittsburgh and Philadelphia. Was sick tired. Got to New York ten hours late with no one to meet me, got a taxi, taxi got a ticket from irate cop. Found the apartment safe and clean... .

(SLE, Letter from America, 26 Sept 1950.)

Surprisingly enough, Sumner continued to prefer flying to all other modes of transport.

“It was great to be back in town with all the news and had a great welcome from CBS,” he declared upon his return to New York. But the Korean war and world politics had everyone there, and across the country, alarmed by the prospect of doom in the form of “the bomb”. The sudden wail of air raid-sirens, which were

⁵⁵ SLE, Letter from America, 23 Sept 1950.

supposed to prepare the population for attack, caused so much panic that the government wisely decided to stop the practice.

Sumner resumed writing for CBS, gradually working his way through the English classics.⁵⁶ However, for several months after his return to Manhattan in 1950, he had recurring dreams about being stranded back in Australia.

I used to dream that I'd get on a Madison Avenue bus and I'd step off in Hunter Street, or Martin Place. It was a classic nightmare. I'd get on a train to say go to Chicago and I'd arrive in Hornsby or Katoomba.⁵⁷

'Home' had become somewhere else; being in Australia, he felt, was to be trapped in a nightmare. Only much later, through his books, did Sumner come to understand and embrace his native land.

⁵⁶ SLE to Clyde Packer, *No Return Ticket*.

⁵⁷ SLE to Clyde Packer, *No Return Ticket*.

**Chapter Eleven: Broadway:
“After my play, they pulled down the theatre.”**

Blue Ribbons was my only Broadway play. And the only good thing that came from it, that I got out of it, was that I could say I had the last flop, not the last play, but the last *flop* to play the beautiful Empire Theatre, now torn down... .

(SLE, *The Gwen Plumb Show*, 2GB, Sydney, 1974.)

In February 1951 Sumner wrote to a friend in Australia that a wealthy young producer/actor had commissioned him to write a play. He said: “...if the play works out as we hope...it will mean an early production on Broadway”, and he described it as “a comedy with theatrical background but entirely different to *Interval*”.¹ At this time, only two other plays - both mysteries - by Australians had been produced on Broadway: Alec Coppell’s *I Killed the Count* had a brief run in 1942 and Max Afford’s *Lady in Danger* ran for 12 performances in 1945.² Both plays had opened and closed in what was politely referred to as an extremely short season. Aware of

¹ SLE admitted to writing another Broadway play “It was so bad I destroyed it.” (SLE to Kate Jennings, “Pleasing Yourself”.) In 1954 the *Herald Tribune*, (NYC, 29 May) reported that an SLE play, *Country Gardens*, - “a comedy taking place in Connecticut during a three-day period leading up to a wedding” - was to be tried in summer theatre ahead of a Broadway opening. According to the column, an option had been taken on the script by Everett Chambers (a casting director for NBC) who proposed to stage the play himself and was negotiating with actress Kim Hunter for the leading part. Another proposed Broadway production was an SLE dramatisation of *Auntie Mame*, the novel by Patrick Dennis. Rosalind Russell had been all but signed by the producers Robert Fryer and Laurence Carr, according to New York’s *Herald Tribune* of April 22, 1955. SLE’s letters between 1953 and 1955 mention that he was working on another play, *Hear the Gentle Lark*. This may have been the genesis of *Careful, He Might Hear You*, which he declared had started life as a stage play.

² Coincidentally, Vicki Cummings, who was to be one of the leading actors in SLE’s play had also appeared in Max Afford’s. (“She’s always getting stuck with Australians, she says,” SLE told friends in November 1951.)

this history, Sumner decided that satiric comedy, which had always been his strength, might bring him the success that had eluded his fellow Australians in their Broadway ventures.

Since his arrival in New York, Sumner had said in letter after letter to his theatre friends in Australia that he intended to “write another play”. After the success of *Rusty Bugles*, this became an even more urgent ambition. His hopes to “crash Broadway” had been widely reported by the Australian press during his visit at the time of Lily’s death. If television had become his life, his work, his means, theatre remained his passion. Even later, as a novelist, Sumner never completely abandoned his hopes to conquer Broadway. In interviews publicising his books he would say: “I’d like to do a play between now and my next novel. But, then he would add: “the play you talk about is the play you never write.”³

In 1951, Sumner was enjoying a certain popularity with America’s television public and gaining respect from the critics for his screen adaptations of the classics. He had just graduated from British-only works to American literature with his dramatisation of Alcott’s *Little Women* which CBS had screened over two nights earlier that same February, in a programming move that presaged, perhaps, the modern mini-series. But after more than eighteen

³ SLE in James Hunter’s “Success: being able to afford to say ‘no’;”, *The Age*, Melbourne, 5 Nov 1977.

months at the adaptation grindstone, Sumner had grown listless in what he referred to now as “the TV furnace” which must have seemed reminiscent of the radio factory of his youth: “...one could get burned out just writing assignments at white heat all of which dissipate energy and creative faculty for the joy of seeing one’s name on the screen for two seconds.”⁴

Yet, aside from his need to earn a living, television greatly appealed to his writer’s ego. After all, it presented advantages he had never dreamt of: “...the *New York Times* last Sunday estimated that a possible ten million people saw my *Little Women* and that’s some audience!”⁵

But dramatising other writers’ work frustrated him. He was merely ‘joining the dots’, converting to hour-long television versions these so-called masterpieces, some of which he thought substandard in their original form. He complained of the dullness in a letter to Miles Franklin.

Meanwhile one has to live...so back to the hack work and doing dull adaptations for television. I simply have to drag myself to the typewriter, there’s no joy in it but the money is good so one must be grateful... .⁶

⁴ SLE, Letter from America, 13 Feb 1951.

⁵ SLE, Letter from America, 13 Feb 1951.

⁶ SLE, Letter to Miles Franklin, 26 Nov 1951, The Miles Franklin Papers, Mitchell Library, Sydney.

Against this background, the request for a play for Broadway was overwhelming.

In spite of the years that had elapsed since his last stage effort, Sumner still thought of himself as a playwright. It is hardly surprising that he was tempted by a business proposal made by Jay Robinson, 20-year-old heir to the Arrow Shirts fortune. Robinson was the son of a doting mother who had been an ingenue.⁷

They [his parents] thought [Jay] was Richard Burton and so did he. 'Write a play', he said over a lavish lunch, plying me with martinis while he drank only milk. 'Your choice of subject, any theatre. Any director, any cast you desire'... . I was impatient and greedy, I wrote the play. We went into rehearsal at the hallowed Empire Theatre. Almost from the start we knew it was a disaster. It was like being on the Titanic.⁸

The concept for *Buy Me Blue Ribbons* had come from Robinson himself. It was to be an exploration of the production of a play: not a dressing-room drama, but an investigation of a play's progression from its conception to its birth on Broadway. *Buy Me Blue Ribbons* was to be based on Jay Robinson's experience, a year earlier, of financing and acting in a revival of Mordaunt Shairp's *The Green Bay Tree*. Robinson, as the 'star', had been eventually

⁷ Robinson was a protege of Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne who Sumner had come to know; it was on their recommendation that the young actor/producer had approached the Australian writer in the first place.

⁸ SLE, Address to Adelaide Writers' Week, 1974.

persuaded to withdraw from the play and was replaced by another actor. This rejection had rankled and the young actor/producer wanted Sumner to write a satire that would tell his story and expose the behind-the-scenes machinations of Broadway. Its play-within-a-play structure appealed to Sumner - so did the money and the prospect of fame on Broadway. Sumner signed the contract.

Blue Ribbons' prospects were promising at first. As it evolved it was passed around for comment from the Broadway cognoscenti, and in July 1951 Sumner told friends: "So far everyone thinks the play has a good chance and [is] very enthusiastic, even the *Schuberts* [sic]!! They rang up Al Rosen (our business manager) quite hysterical with enthusiasm".⁹

True to his word, Jay Robinson employed a good cast¹⁰ and an excellent director. Enid Markey, the actress taking the part of the befuddled Daisy, mother to the central character, was a great favourite of the American public, and much admired by Sumner. She was one of the modern Algonquin set who had adopted him not

⁹ The Shubert brothers (Lee, Sam and Jacob) were American theatre owners and producers who in 1916 controlled most of the theatres in New York and other principal US cities. In the 1950s the US Government took legal action against this monopoly and forced them to relinquish some of their theatres. The Shubert Organisation still operates and manages 17 theatres in New York and several others in other major US cities.

¹⁰ SLE told friends in November 1951: "...we settled on a good cast. Audrey Christie, excellent as the acid-tongued agent Liz ; Enid Markey (the original Tarzan's Jane)...magnificent as the tittery Daisy; Vicki Cummings as Camilla Ransome, the Hepburnish cattle-raising countrified Bucks County star; Gavin Gordon (ex-Garbo movies) as the director...; Jack Hartley (Jeanne Eagles Handsome in *Rain*) as the father; Cynthia Latham (an Ailsa Grahamish charming English actress) as Miss Cusack the nervous middle aged secretary; Phillipa Bevans as the Nurse; Wells Richardson a dear little man as the playwright-professor and others. Cyril applauded us for getting a superb cast... "

long after his arrival in New York and he was very happy to have Enid on board. Sumner chose Australian, Cyril Richard to direct, which gave him a strong ally in the pre-production battleground. He had been acquainted with Cyril and his wife, Madge Elliott, since his theatre days in Sydney but the trio had developed a close friendship in New York. Cyril had gained fame and wide acclaim for his acting roles on Broadway, in television and in Hollywood. With the Empire Theatre as venue and Cyril as director, Sumner indulged in some uncharacteristic optimism. Moreover, Robinson "has the makings of a fine producer," Sumner wrote to friends. "He talked actors into taking less salary, had a divine set built, excellent on clothes, good taste and business."¹¹

Sumner turned Jay's story - the financier and spurned lead actor - into the story of Jordon Sable, the producer and, for a time, the lead actor in a Broadway play called *Sounding Brass*, the life's work of Professor Oscar Nimrod, a harried playwright. *Blue Ribbons* exposes Jordon as the ultimate egotist who relies on his money to buy his way into theatre, to gain the loyalty of those he needs, and to promote himself. His customary response to every obstacle is "Buy it" and this cry runs all through the play. Before *Blue Ribbons* rehearsals began, Jay Robinson's behaviour was a matter of 'life imitating art'; far too closely for everyone's comfort, according to

¹¹ SLE, Letter from America, November, 1951.

Sumner.

...[H]e launched into a publicity campaign about himself, hired two of our most expensive press agents in town and got himself in everything from Winchell to Oleg Cassini, radio broadcasts, TV interviews, all of which raised the hair off my head. I pleaded in vain, I kept saying he would get the critics' backs up long before we ever started, what with presenting himself in the lead role, putting his name up in lights over the theatre (I finally finagled with Wolf Kaufmann our press man to get them down five a.m. one wintry morning) and everywhere he went the backs went up and the chances fell. By the time Cyril arrived we were already the talk of the town in not the pleasantest way.

(SLE, Letter from America, Nov 1951.)

In *Blue Ribbons*, Jordon Sable harasses a fairly meek playwright, Oscar Nimrod.

JORDON: How's the second act working out?

OSCAR *(At desk, taking out ms.)* Well, I think I can say we've hit it! Took me almost four days.

JORDON. *(Munching toast)* Have you got what I wanted?

OSCAR I think so. It's hard to tell when one's near a thing... . Four days' work.

JORDON Well, I'm afraid all this will be out now.

(Groping on table beside him).

I made some notes in bed last night, Oscar. *(Fishes out a huge*

bundle of about thirty yellow pages)

I want you to look these over.

OSCAR *(Looking depressed)* Oh, I see. Quite a lot.

JORDON I've been worried about that long scene between Donna Luiza and the First Mate. I think the whole play collapses if I'm off during that long scene.

OSCAR But my boy...that's where the Donna Luiza is plotting your death with the First Mate.

JORDON I've solved that. I'm on the whole time... . I'm there asleep on the tiger skin rug

(Buy Me Blue Ribbons, Act I; Sc I)¹²

Sumner was never, and could not be, a meek lamb such as Oscar Nimrod. However, Nimrod's subjection to countless rewrites dictated by the whims of fancy was something Sumner was all too familiar with in television work. And in a long and detailed letter Sumner wrote to be passed around among his friends in Australia, he described his own equivalent of Oscar's lamented "four days" of wasted work.

We rolled on cutting, changing, new pages every day it was [a] nightmare. I was so tired I was screaming. I'd get home from rehearsal at seven and have a whole new scene ready by nine next morning to rehearse. We played four private pre-views prior to opening. At the first one I was not

¹² SLE, *Buy Me Blue Ribbons*, Acting Edn,(Dramatist Play Service Inc (NY), 1952.) All quotations from this edition.

present in the theatre as the night before Ed Colton the big New York Theatrical Lawyer had been in front at dress rehearsal and said: "You're dead in Act Three unless you fix that last scene". I went home, took the night off without sleep and wrote a new scene to go in on the Monday night. Saturday night I attended the performance and listened to comments in the interval disguised as an audience [member], this scene we were taking out was *the* scene of the play. We...went back to the original... .

(SLE, Letter from America, Nov 1951.)

Once rehearsals began, Sumner and others had to reassess their opinions and impressions of Robinson's acting ability. Jay, who had been a child actor, was already a veteran with 14 years of acting behind him by the time he was 21. He had usually played roles "of a rather psychopathic and highly ambitious nature", as *The New Yorker* put it.¹³ "I had seen him in a play with Fay Bainter playing a psychotic. I thought it was a brilliant performance, not knowing till later he was playing himself," Sumner said years later.¹⁴ Although constant rewrites and fine-tuning by an intuitive cast turned *Blue Ribbons* into a play that was "clean and sharp and wittier" than anything Sumner had done before, nothing, it seemed, could overcome the inadequacy of its star.

Jay worked hard at rehearsals [but] he walks like a seal and Cyril was God himself, he was so patient and brilliant with him. At times we would see flashes of what Jordon ought to be but as Cyril said to me, you have written a tour de force for a boy of

¹³ *The New Yorker*, 27 Oct 1951.

¹⁴ SLE, Adelaide Writers Address, 1974.

18 that takes 20 years experience to be able to play.
He couldn't do it.

(SLE, Letter from America, Nov 1951.)

Years later Sumner recalled the night when it seemed that a miracle had dispelled the frustration and anxiety that had dogged rehearsal.

Late one Sunday night in the gloomy Empire Theatre we'd been at it all day and he suddenly sprang into one of his paranoi[a]c rages and said, 'Let's do it right through'. He came on and played it brilliantly, we were electrified and I looked at Cyril and a wisp of hope rose in our panting bosoms. Audrey [Christie] said 'O.K. kid, play it like that opening night and we're *in*.'¹⁵

After this rehearsal Cyril Richard told Sumner, "You know, I think we're going to get away with it."¹⁶ However, at the the four private previews they gave (replacing the out-of-town tryout) it was soon obvious that Jay could not sustain that flash of brilliance. Jay was again not only 'performing' but 'being' the hopelessly inadequate stage actor Jordon Sable, who was in reality a regurgitation of Jay himself. Without the necessary talent and stage presence, Jay's performance was not a satire of poor acting but merely poor acting. The script had become both the story of the production of *The Green Bay Tree* - alias *Sounding Brass* - and its own production story. The life-art-life trinity was broken only by the fact that,

¹⁵ SLE, Address to Adelaide Writers' Week, 1974.

¹⁶ SLE, Letter from America, Nov 1951.

unlike his fictional counterpart, Jordon Sable, who is ejected from the cast of *Sounding Brass* which goes on to become a smash hit, Jay Robinson remained in the cast of *Blue Ribbons*.

Going by the preview audience reaction, however, Sumner thought perhaps the play itself and the rest of the cast might pull it off. At the first preview the local press (whom Sumner came to distrust) packed the house and “laughed and roared and applauded... . And Cyril said, ‘It may be another *Life with Father*’.”¹⁷ At the second and third previews the theatre “swarmed with actors...and they laughed uproariously but then all went over to Sardi’s and bitched the hell out of us.”¹⁸ Everyone in the production clung to the show business adage: it would be all right on the night.

Sumner invited his friend Marie Rubenfeld to the final preview to hear her opinion. She was a very experienced actor and Sumner relied implicitly on her judgment about stage productions. He recalled her words of foreboding years later: “She turned to me and said, ‘You haven’t got a Chinaman’s chance unless he [Jay] breaks his leg tonight and you could get Roddy McDowall’.”¹⁹

On the morning of the play’s premiere, Sumner posed for photographs beneath the Empire Theatre banner for *Buy Me Blue*

17 SLE, Address to Adelaide Writers’ Week, 1974.

18 SLE, Letter from America, Nov 1951.

19 SLE, Address to Adelaide Writers’ Week, 1974.

Ribbons. The premiere coincided with his thirty-fourth birthday - 17 October - but as he said himself, the momentous occasion made him almost completely forget it was his birthday. The dream he had cherished since his early beginnings at the Independent Theatre in Australia - his play up in lights on Broadway - was coming to fruition. Yet standing before the camera, he could barely disguise his anxiety, let alone muster a smile. The wornout cast had disbanded only a few hours earlier. "Cyril had given out his last notes at one in the morning...and we went home to prepare for Gethsemene."²⁰

During the afternoon before the performance, while running through lines on stage, panic set in and even Jay looked sick and frightened. At this point Sumner decided not to attend the evening's performance, even though it was a sell-out.

We had a packed jammed house in the famous and lovely old Empire, the oldest and most impressive theatre in New York. At the half hour call, I was already almost sick [but] I was insulated from fright and disaster in the leading lady's dressing room with a fifth of scotch²¹.

During the evening Sumner was given promising reports of a "warm audience" who were "yelling and roaring themselves hoarse" and obviously "adoring it", but Jay Robinson still had them all on

²⁰ SLE, Letter from America, Nov, 1951.

²¹ SLE, Address to Adelaide Writers' Week, 1974.

Act One over, Jack Hartley came up to cast the first note of doom. Jay was playing very quietly for some obscure reason. Then Cyril at the door, a little grey in the face, 'We can't understand what he's saying'. He had just been in to Jay and that gentleman had said 'I always play quiet opening nights because the critics are all in the first six rows'. A quick double brandy. Act Two goes up. Holds up the show for six extra minutes with the huge laughs. But Vicki says he [Jay] is in pieces. They are carrying him along. Audrey up to hug me and say not to worry. Another nip. Act Three on. I crept downstairs and sat offstage to hear Enid tell the story of 'Rain', my only favorite bit in the play.²³ Never heard such wonderful laughs. Feel better. Jay odd but doing O.K. Couldn't see if he was seal-ing or not. Seven curtain calls, even quite a lot of cheering. Audrey: 'Doesn't mean a

22 SLE, Letter from America, Nov, 1951.

23 This scene spotlights the character of Daisy, Jordon Sable's mother, who, like Jay's own mother Robinson, had been an ingenue. Daisy is trying to placate the distressed Jordon who must sit at home on opening night of *Sounding Brass* because he is too embarrassed - at being ejected from the starring role - to attend the play of which he is still the producer.

JORDON: Ah, well, it's the end, Mother. I'll never go back...never...I tried, but it's no good. I'm finished.

DAISY: Nonsense, you haven't begun baby. I never liked that play, anyway, Jordon. think it was simply vulgar and horrible...and I'm glad you're out of it. Of course, that's all they like nowadays. When I was in the theater, we had lovely, sweet plays like *Abie's Irish Rose* and *Daddy Long-Legs*...and the people...they were real stars...Ethel Barrymore...Maude Adams...Oh, she was so wonderful in *Rain*, I'll never forget her...It was about a girl called Mary Turner who took the easiest way...Her mother was a Chinese madam in a house in Shanghai who gave this big dinner party...and someone got shot on their wedding night...and she came back as a lovely ghost called Moonyeen. Oh, I remember it so clearly...*Rain*....I'll never know why it was called that...

(*Buy Me Blue Ribbons* p. 61)

Enid Markey, the actress taking the part of the befuddled Daisy, (a character whose total lack of insight and tenuous grip on reality is demonstrated by her inaccurate recall and sanitising interpretation of *Rain*) was a great favourite with SLE and one of the modern Algonquin Set who'd adopted him not long after his arrival in NYC. Enid had belonged to a time and a cinema which he greatly admired and he tailored this scene to fit her history, a history with which the audience too was well acquainted as, like others of her era, Enid Markey held a special place in the hearts and minds of the American public.

god damned thing Kid. The critics are the boys, not the audience'.

(SLE, Letter from America, Nov 1951.)

After seven curtain calls it seemed the entire audience had moved to the dressingrooms of the Empire Theatre.

Then the floodgates. Everyone in town, everyone in America I know, people from Texas, California, New Jersey, Marie with a party of 29 people, Hartney, Frank and Viola Tait [of J.C. Williamson's, Sydney], Evie [Hayes] and Bill [Mahoney], Tony Miner from CBS, Illona Massey, Roddy McDowall (how wonderful he'd be as Jordon), and countless friends... . Like an Independent night all over again. Everyone adores the play but...that BOY! (line from play with Vicki's interpretation).

(SLE, Letter from America, Nov, 1951)

At the traditional opening night gathering at Sardi's restaurant, waiting for the early notices, Sumner was advised by Wolf Kaufmann and Vicki Cummings, two experienced members of his entourage, to prepare himself for the worst. Audrey Christie (who played the part of Jordon Sable's agent, Liz Kendall), arrived at 2 a.m. to warn Sumner that both the *Times* and *Tribune* had torn Jay apart. Moments later this report was confirmed by the early notices.

Joseph Schildkraut brings the notices to me. Murder in one plain word. He said, 'They are out to get him, he is the most loathed young man in NYC

and they had to tear the whole thing down to get him out so it's not directed at you.' Jay [is] helped out by mother at 2.09 a.m., white as Kleenex. We go on up to Vicki's and celebrate, feel fine. The *Post* and *News* come out, worse. Bill Hawkins, a friend of mine, is kind to me in the *Telegram*, Garland likes the play. Feel better. To bed at six a.m. Feel oddly like I had a success.

(SLE, Letter from America, Nov 1951.)

Blue Ribbons ran for only 13 nights on Broadway, but in many ways it was a success for Sumner. The play eventually enjoyed many productions across the America, and in Australia at the Independent in 1953. It was published by the Dramatists Service, including a French translation and other foreign rights, and was successfully adapted for television by Sumner in 1954 with, as he had envisaged, an ever-youthful Roddy McDowall giving Jordon Sable the substance that Jay Robinson had so noticeably failed to deliver. Jay's performance was slammed by the critics, many of whom, Sumner suspected, had written their reviews before attending the premiere. Walter Kerr described Jay Robinson as "suffering from delusions of adequacy," in his first theatre review for the *Tribune*, a review which secured his job.²⁴ Jay had greatly damaged the play's chances by lauding himself all over town as the next great name of Broadway, and his mother had made things worse, as Sumner discovered after the premiere. Mrs. Porter,

²⁴ Walter Kerr was trying out that week for the *Tribune* as a new reviewer and as a consequence of his review of *Blue Ribbons*, Kerr "got his job permanently...by saying of the young leading man: 'He is suffering from delusions of adequacy'." (SLE's Address to Adelaide Writers Week, 1974.)

owner of the Empire theatre, told Sumner that Mrs Robinson had written to all the critics two days before the premiere to tell them that Jay was going to be brilliant.²⁵

One of the most scathing attacks on Jay Robinson appeared in *The New Yorker* ten days later.

Jay Robinson, who produced and, in a manner of speaking, stars in an enterprise called *Buy Me Blue Ribbons*, at the Empire, is unquestionably one of the most bizarre personalities now operating in the theatre...His unique celebrity...had its genesis last season, when he financed...and announced his intention of playing the leading role in, a revival of *The Green Bay Tree*...[although] he withdrew amiably enough in favour of another actor. Just the same the memory of this experience persisted...and he persuaded a dramatist named Sumner Locke Elliott to write a play about it. Mr. Elliott obligingly did so, and the result is...a little hard to describe.

You have, that is, Mr. Robinson giving an extremely convincing interpretation of a young man almost totally unequipped for the stage, who nevertheless dominates one for nearly two and a half hours. Very few people would even consider the idea of offering a public satire of themselves and their highest aspirations, and therefore, I guess, Mr. Robinson must be regarded as original and courageous. However, since no real satire exists -- all that Mr. Robinson has done is transfer mannerisms that proved unacceptable in one play practically intact to another -- the effect is...just tiresome and embarrassing...²⁶

25 SLE, Letter from America, Nov, 1951.

26 *The New Yorker*, 27 Oct 1951.

Nevertheless, *Blue Ribbons* gave Sumner a great entrée into New York theatre.

Lots of interesting people came in during the 13 nights...to see me... . John Murray Anderson [wanting me] to do sketches for his revue, Leon Janney [asking me] to do *Ribbons* in stock, Roddy McDowall in four times asking can he get the rights, Lon MacAllister and all the child stars seeing it as a story of themselves.

(SLE, Letter from America, Nov 1951.)

Over two years later, in early 1954, with Cyril Richard directing again, Sumner provided sketches for John Murray Anderson's *Almanac*, which had a long season at Broadway's Imperial Theatre and gave Sumner a financial boost. One of the sketches he wrote for Anderson was a satire on two other recent Broadway plays, *Wish You Were Here* and *Picnic*, the latter having won the 1953 Pulitzer prize and Sumner's admiration. The sketch, as a tribute piece, was performed by Billy De Wolfe and the English star, Hermione Gingold, in her Broadway debut. The critics raved about it and William Hawkins wrote: "The *Picnic*, *Wish You Were Here* satire is pitless and bold. The company's youthful freshness makes it startling fun..."²⁷

In July 1953, on a visit to Hollywood for a television assignment, Sumner ran into Jay Robinson in a shop in Beverly Hills.

²⁷ *New York World Telegram and Sun*, 11 Dec 1953.

...[H]e has a five year contract with 20th Century Fox, has made *The Robe* and the [sequel] and is now to do *The Egyptian* and so is set. Glowing with sun and success. Amazing but they think he's talented out there so who can tell, we've all been left with egg on our faces... .28

Although Jay Robinson had, it seemed, found his true medium and put the Broadway failures behind him, Sumner always placed the blame of his own Broadway failure entirely on Robinson's shoulders.

In Sumner's last novel, *Fairyland*, the lingering ghosts of his Broadway experience reappear. A fading theatre star, Beatrice Tree, commissions Seaton Daly, to write a play as a vehicle for her comeback, and he writes *A Very Pleasant Lady*. Seaton suffers much the same anxiety and frustration as Sumner did, in circumstances resembling those of *Blue Ribbons*. After *Lady's* Broadway premiere the cast gathers to await the critics' verdict.

The night *A Very Pleasant Lady* opened on Broadway there was a fierce rain, which the old-timers said was a good augury; hit shows invariably opened in the rain... . The opening night party was to be in a suite at the Astor, superintended by Skinner, who was Beady's

SLE, Letter from America, 15 Aug 1953.

Jay Robinson played Caligula both in *The Robe* (1953) and its sequel *Dimitrius and the Gladiators* (1954). This was followed by supporting roles in *The Virgin Queen* (1955), *My Man Godfrey* (1957), *Bunny O'Hare* (1971) and *Shampoo* (1975), among others. Jay Robinson is described in *Halliwel's Film Goers and Video Viewers Companion* (Pallidin Publications 1994) as an "American stage actor of eccentric roles".

lawyer... .

“Oh, he’s behaving as if it were a smash hit...He’s always at his most ducal at a flop,” Emily [Skinner’s secretary] said calmly as if it were already a fait accompli.

“You think it is?” Seaton ventured.

“Well, with such a bad review in the *New York Times*, honey, there honestly isn’t much hope except that if Kerr likes it in the *Tribune* you might be able to hang on.”

...A while later Andrew Tighe [arrived]...waving the early edition of the *Herald Tribune*. Walter Kerr had opened his review by saying that there had been a lot of laughter last night at the Lyceum Theater but that unfortunately nearly all of it had come from the stage. Then Richard Watts in the *Daily News* lamented that he feared the welcome return of Beatrice Tree to Broadway would only be a matter of the shortest duration.

Already there was a steady stream of people out the door...Even to be present at an opening night of a flop is to somehow connect one with failure, and failure is insupportable in the Broadway lexicon.

From what Seaton...could hear coming from the bedroom, Skinner and the agents...were being notified on the phone...of the imminent closing. When they emerged their faces told the story.

“Saturday,” Skinner said...[to Seaton]... . “Don’t be downhearted...it’s not your fault, your play was *originally* very fine, very witty. I read it. It’s what happened to it that was unfortunate.”

(*Fairyland* pp. 214-21)

During the 13 nights of *Blue Ribbons*’ demise, the word “failure” had dogged Sumner. “But failure, like success, is only an emotion,” he concluded many years later, declaring that even the play’s failure had an upside.

But in the curious way it can happen, failure brought me to the attention of the greatest, most creative producer American television ever knew. A man named Fred Coe. His casting director came to the last matinee [of *Blue Ribbons*] and laughed a lot and asked to meet me.²⁹

And Sumner Locke Elliott's life took yet another new direction.

Chapter Twelve: “Fifteen Years of the Great Stars”

Studio One was taken over by another group and I went...to Fred Coe, who had the biggest influence on my writing life of anyone with the possible exception of Doris Fitton... . [Fred was] a brilliant producer who thought far more of writers than of actors... .

(SLE to Hazel De Berg, 1970.)

If Doris Fitton gave form and substance to Sumner's beginning as a writer, it was the NBC television producer Fred Coe who became the mentor of his mature artistic life. Coe was another energising spark in Sumner's life, one who extended the range and intensity of his creative abilities and prepared him for his career as a novelist.

In 1952 Sumner left the CBS television network for NBC with no ill feeling on anyone's part. He simply finished his last assignment for CBS in January and began his first for NBC's coast-to-coast live show, the *Philco Goodyear Sunday Night Playhouse*, in February. Joining the NBC team was made all the more easy because three years earlier this network had given him his first break into television by screening an adaptation of his play, *Wicked is the Vine*.

Apart from the prospect of joining Fred Coe, whose reputation in television was already legendary,¹ the main attraction of writing for NBC's *Philco Goodyear Sunday Night Playhouse* was the programme's emphasis on original material. In early 1952, after Sumner had written *Dusty Portrait*, his first screenplay for *Philco*, he told a friend in Australia what it was like to work for Coe's company.

I like this crowd better than any I've worked for...they asked for practically no rewrites, paid me one thousand two hundred and fifty dollars and gave me screen credit before anyone else and separate plugs on film every day for a week in advance to forty million [viewers]... . Such a nice handsome young producer too, with brains. I'll wake up soon and [find] myself back in *Studio One* with all the horror... .

(SLE, Letter from America, April 1952.)

Sumner's entrée into original screen drama for NBC included a bonus. Thanks to his nationality, he was cast in a small part in *Dusty Portrait*.

¹ Fred Coe was renowned for taking the risks in television that other producers avoided. He flew Ralph Richardson from England at an enormous salary in Dec 1951 for a half-hour special of Dicken's *A Christmas Carol*. Richardson's presence was necessary because TV was transmitted live then. It was regarded as a gutsy move. Coe's illustrious career included Broadway, TV and films in New York and Hollywood, and some independent film ventures in England. Anne Bancroft won the Oscar for his film *The Miracle Worker*. Coe also became television adviser to President Kennedy. Because of his great admiration for Fred Coe, SLE converted from a Republican to a Democrat. In his US first vote, SLE had helped return Eisenhower in 1957, but he became a staunch Democrat after Kennedy's rise to Government when Coe was part of the President's team.

I made my debut...as a cockney with a cap on and appeared in one shot in a fairground scene saying "Eh Ruby come and ave a look at the bleedin waxworks" and was properly temperamental over makeup and everything.

(SLE, Letter from America, April 1952.)

His acting aspirations had dissipated by then, though he may have relished the novelty of this small screen role. It also taught him about an actor's preparation for the television camera.

...[W]hat spoiling goes on, none of the old shoe box with a Kleenex and cold cream and one light. You go into this divine room with elegant Powers Models standing behind each chair. The first one put on your foundation, the next one your whiskers and sideburns, the next powders you over, the next does the hair in period style - poof and a spray of liquinette is put on to hold the curls in place and you're ready to go to wardrobe where white coated earls and dukes bow solemnly and fit you, then to the camera for dress rehearsal while they wheel in coffee for you. I'm not lying. I'd do it again just to be fussed over.

(SLE, Letter from America, April 1952.)

Apart from another cameo and a panel show appearance, *Dusty Portrait* was Sumner's only acting assignment. This screenplay, based on the Maybrick poisoning case which had some notoriety in the 1890s in London, was directed by Delbert Mann. Mann became prominent later with feature films such as *Dark at the Top of the Stairs*, *Marty*, for which he won the Oscar in 1955,

Separate Tables and a host of hit comedies in the 1960s. However, it was never just one individual who made the *Philco* television productions so successful. The company's work was its great strength, as Sumner acknowledged.

We had three brilliant directors who were Arthur Penn (he later did *Bonnie and Clyde*), Delbert Mann and Vincent Donahue. And there was a nucleus of actors, many of whom were largely unknown back then: Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward, Rod Steiger, Kim Stanley, Lillian Gish, James Dean, E.G. Marshall, Walter Matthau, Jo Van Fleet, Constance Ford, Charlton Heston (who appeared in four of mine), Jack Klugman, Felicia Montealegre (who later became Mrs. Leonard Bernstein) and Eva Marie Saint, who really came to attention, got her big break, through my play *Wish on the Moon*.²

For Fred Coe, his writers' creativity was the foundation of the success of each production: "...he made writers the stars and paid them more than the actors. It was the only time I was paid more than Charlton Heston," Sumner said years later.³

During this golden age of television in America, Sumner became one of a pivotal group of writers known as "The Golden Seven", and described by New York's *Herald Tribune* in 1958 as "seven of the best live dramatists TV has ever had".⁴ Their scripts,

2 SLE to me, 1990.

3 SLE, Address to Adelaide Writers' Week, 1974.

4 *Herald Tribune* (NY) Nov 1958.

produced under the ever-watchful eye of Fred Coe, emerged as complementary works, with each writer, in the American way, specialising. The rest of this group consisted of Paddy Chayefsky, who adapted his 1953 television script *Marty* into the highly acclaimed film of the same name in 1955; David Shaw (brother of novelist Irwin); J.P. Miller who wrote the television and movie scripts of *Days of Wine and Roses*; Tad Mosel who won the Pulitzer Prize for his stage play *All the Way Home*; James Lee and Robert Alan Aurther.⁵ Sumner's 1952 television drama, *The Thin Air*,⁶ based on the disappearance of Dorothy Arnold which he found a fascinating case, gained him great critical acclaim and was chosen as a model script for the drama course at Dartmouth University, which he told friends was "quite an honor".⁷

Fred Coe's "golden seven" were joined, for a time, by Horton Foote, who won an academy award for his screenplay of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and the prolific and versatile Gore Vidal.⁸ They were all great friends who kept in contact well after their careers had diversified. Sumner dedicated his novel *The Man Who Got Away* (1972) to Tad Mosel and remained in correspondence with

⁵ Chayefsky adapted several of his television plays for Hollywood including *The Bachelor Party*, and *The Catered Affair* in which actress Bette Davis played a small role. In 1975 he wrote and produced *Network* starring Peter Finch.

Tad Mosel's stage play under the title of *All the Way Home* was produced in 1960 and published in 1961. This was a dramatisation of James Agee's 1957 incomplete novel *A Death in the Family* which also won the Pulitzer Prize.

⁶ Rescreened as *Whereabouts Unknown* in 1957.

⁷ SLE, Letter from America, 10 Feb 1953.

⁸ Vidal is a TV dramatist, novelist, essayist, polemicist, and critic who has been widely published.

Chayefsky well into his old age. He also visited Gore Vidal in Italy, although this particular friendship later soured when Vidal replaced Sumner on the film *Breakfast at Tiffany's* - Sumner had refused to change the (George Peppard) character of the young writer, from the homosexual he appears as in Truman Capote's novel to the heterosexual gigolo he became in the finished film.⁹

However, during their television days, Coe's writers offered each other support which extended beyond their work for television.

We did seven or eight original plays a year, we were encouraged to try to outdo each other but not in the sense of nasty competition... . We were a happy family with Fred as Father. There was never any rivalry among us except to do better: we watched each other's plays. We were all so different. Chayefsky with his realistic plays of the Bronx...Horton Foote with his tender plays of small town Texas; and me with my plays about rich, unhappy people in New York.¹⁰

While Sumner did not remember feeling overwhelmed in such illustrious company, Tad Mosel, who joined Coe's group in 1953, recalls that, although they all adored Sumner, many of the group - including himself - were slightly dismissive of his writing as too light.

⁹ Whit Cook to me, 1994. It is, however, George Axelrod who is credited with the screenplay of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*.

¹⁰ SLE, Address to Adelaide Writers' Week, 1974.

We were all *so* serious, and we took ourselves *so* seriously and his writing was always clever, very clever rather than profound. But Fred adored him and his work.¹¹

Sumner focussed on simple stories but his experimentation in form, structure and point of view was well ahead of its time and out-of-step with the work of his contemporaries. This probably accounts for the enduring appeal of his television plays several of which continue to generating interest from New York production companies.¹²

Sumner's television scripts most often told the small story about the insignificant character and were always touched with his humour and lightness, personal qualities that also endeared him to his colleagues at NBC.

It was a Monday morning and we were all lined up in Fred's office for a publicity photograph. The night before a Paddy Chayefsky play called *The Mother* had been on - a serious play about a sweatshop worker. And the telephone calls - by which our successes were so often ranked - came in fast and furious that morning, all glowing with praise. And as we stood in our order, in a line around Fred, while the photographer was lining up the shot, Fred's secretary burst into the office

¹¹ Tad Mosel to me, 1994.

¹² In 1995 a New York-based company sought the rights to produce SLE's screenplays and his television play *Mrs. Gilling and the Skyscraper* for which Helen Hayes won the Emmy Award in 1957 has often raised interest although to date it has not been refilmed. (Whit Cook to me, 1995.) Both the BBC (England) and Australian television networks purchased the rights to SLE's television works in the 1950s and 60s.

with the news for Paddy that Marlene Deitrich was on the phone and wanted to tell him herself how much she had loved his show. As Paddy walked towards the door, excitedly, to take the call, Sumner said loud enough for Paddy to hear: "Well, *Lois Wilson* called me once!" And there were roars of laughter because, of course, Lois Wilson, while she was a good supporting actress from Broadway, was *no* Deitrich.¹³

Despite such playful rivalry, Sumner had once again found a happy 'family' amongst his television colleagues, complete with Fred as a somewhat young father called "pappy" by his team. This form of address had developed as an echo of Fred's own use of the term: whenever he was going to be critical of one of his writers, he would begin by saying, "now look pappy", and the writer knew instantly that changes were going to be made to the script.¹⁴ Being part of Coe's team gave Sumner the sense of kinship he had found at the Independent Theatre, within George Edwards' radio company, and among his army mates at Mataranka. Even when facing the prospect of death in 1991, Sumner was still in the process of establishing some kind of family, replacing the one he had felt deprived of in his childhood, and the less traditional model he had shunned in his flight to America.

In 1952, it was obvious from the complaining letters he

13 Tad Mosel to me, 1994.

14 Tad Mosel to me, 1994.

received from his surviving aunts, Blanche and Agnes, that their animosity was still thriving, even if they themselves were ailing. As Agnes' health deteriorated, she confided her suspicion to Sumner that Blanche was intercepting her mail.

I object to Blanche reading my letters (always). In C.S. [Christian Science] no-one has the right to information on a Practitioner's business which is private. Blanche demands to read all letters and that is why she quarrels so. Please never send my business through Blanche... .

(Letter from Agnes Locke, 6 May 1952)

And then there were Blanche's letters: confirming that she was still crusty and petty-minded, these always reminded Sumner that Blanche expected him to soon return 'home'. Sumner gave his aunts financial support through his Australian agent, John Cover, but individual cheques had to be drawn for each because money was still a sore point between Blanche and Agnes. No wonder Sumner embraced his 'family' at NBC, well out of the clutches of these women!

NBC also provided the camaraderie he had missed so much during his early years in New York. "It was nice. There was a coffee shop...where we all went. I knew many talented people," he recalled.¹⁵ A year after joining NBC, Sumner wrote to friends in Australia indicating his contentment.

¹⁵ SLE to Kate Jennings, "Pleasing Yourself".

...[W]aiting to sign my contract for a year's TV activities with Philco television after a bout of wrangling over Clause 8B and 8C and whether or not I, the party of the first half hereinafter known as the author, will at all times indemnify NBC against litigation suits, [plagiarisms] and the million bureaucratic issues producers can think up for contracts but as you know I just love working for this set-up, they are darlings and so appreciative of work that you do.

(SLE, Letter from America, 1 Dec 1952.)

Although he wrote for television well into the 1960s, for various NBC and CBS programmes (*Producer's Showcase*, *Playwrights 56*, *Kaiser Aluminium Hour*, *Alcoa Hour*, *Dupont, Playhouse 90* and the *Way Out Series*), Sumner's writing developed most particularly under Fred Coe's wing in the 1950s. As he put it, "to work with directors like this and to work with American actors brought me out. I mean, it brought me up to my fullest..."¹⁶

During this period, among these imaginative, stimulating and appreciative people, America reaffirmed itself as Sumner's place of belonging. By that time his work gave him a comfortable living - for his hour-long screenplays he was paid upwards of \$US1500 each - and this income funded several trips to Europe. At last he felt settled.

¹⁶ Hazel De Berg Interview, 1970.

In early 1952, he had received the first crumbs of recognition from Australia of his writing achievements. The Australian Government held a New York reception for people they considered “*Notable Australians*”; including people like Sister Kenny, John Brownlee and Sumner.¹⁷ But it was America, not Australia, that had given Sumner opportunity, praise and a sense of identity. His frustration over the whole *Rusty Bugles* exercise remained a bitter memory, and he realised, with resentment, that Australia’s praise of her own artists still depended on their overseas success: “Fancy the Aussie Government has at last woken up to the fact that I’m on the map and I’m being honoured next Friday night at a reception...Can’t wait for that sweet sherry and a peanut,”¹⁸ he wrote to friends back in Sydney, his bemused tone diluting the severity of his ‘too little-too late’ comment.

His television work, naturally enough, was American, and most of his plays were about the rich, lonely people of New York, the city that had captured his imagination and his heart. New York had given him his career, too, as well as hope and fulfilment. In 1955 he applied for his American citizenship.

I waited for quite a while. It wasn’t until 1955 that I decided to put in for citizenship. That was about seven years. I’d had a lot of experience by that time and made many friends. Also I’d become very

17 SLE, Letter from America, 19 Jan 1952.

18 SLE, Letter from America, 19 Jan 1952.

interested in this country politically... . And I thought, if I am going to stay here for the rest of my life, I would like to have a vote, especially a presidential vote...It wasn't any great patriotic thing. I have never been a flagwaver.¹⁹

Later, in the 1960s, Sumner was often quizzed about taking American citizenship, usually by Australian interviewers. At first he was wary of the Australian attitude that such a move was disloyal to one's birth country, and he kept the news of his citizenship to himself for a while. Eventually he adopted the public position that neither citizenship nor birthplace were as important as his occupation: "Whether I were Dutch or Scandinavian or German or Eskimo, I would still prefer to be thought of as a writer rather than have it localised."²⁰

Sumner had visited Washington DC, several times and had been enchanted by its beauty. His political interest in America as a nation may have been sparked by his attendance at the 1953 Inauguration of President Eisenhower, although the glamour of the occasion seems to have preoccupied him.

Went to...the ball. Very exciting -- wore my tails for the first time in ten years plus Sidney Rubinfeld's opera hat. Looked quite the thing - rather akin to a Parliament Cigarette Ad, but distinguished. Had no shirt or vest, they have deteriorated beyond wear (same one I wore in

¹⁹ SLE to Kate Jennings, "Pleasing Yourself".

²⁰ SLE to Jenny Palmer, "PS: We Hear You", *Bulletin*, 27 Dec 1983/Jan 3, 1984.

Interval), so...NBC came to the rescue, wardrobe department...gave the shirt, vest, studs, tie and collars. The ball was enormous, too many people, six thousand in all, never saw so much ermine and jewels in my life, second only to the Coronation. Esther Williams, Jeanette MacDonald, Lily Pons, Adolphe Menjou, Irene Dunne and others. No drink served but a Senator from Nebraska took us into a phone booth for a quickie. Took so long to get into the finery that we didn't arrive until midnight at the Armory and missed the Eisenhowers much to my chagrin... .

(SLE, Letter from America, 10 Feb 1953.)

McCarthyism, which affected the television industry in the 1950s, piqued Sumner's political conscience.

The casting director at NBC had a secret phone number and...when [it rang] it would be to say something like, "You can't use her - she was seen at a peace rally." It was horrifying... . There were cases of mistaken identity. People weren't beyond using the situation to settle scores either.²¹

Suddenly, he felt he should have a say in the running of the country he had settled in, and only citizenship would grant him this. For him, citizenship was also the last stage of the psychological journey he had begun almost seven years earlier, escaping Australia and his past.

When Sumner made his application in 1955, Agnes Locke had

²¹ SLE to Kate Jennings, "Pleasing Yourself".

already died from the effects of a stroke. Blanche, neurotic and demanding, was now all alone. The emotional burden she represented gave him impetus he needed to sign the citizenship application. In mid-1953, when she had collapsed from the long effects of her alcohol abuse and self-neglect, Blanche had cabled Sumner to return to Sydney immediately. With the help of friends, he made arrangements from New York for her to be settled in Rose Bay Hospital. Before long, Blanche wrote to him complaining that she wanted to go home. Sumner protested to friends: "I really cannot drop everything and travel out 10,000 miles to cope with that...I'm afraid she's a real neurotic now...Tiens! Old age!..."²² Becoming an American citizen was Sumner's ultimate declaration of independence.

He moved from one Manhattan apartment to another during the 1950s, but always there was Fred Coe and the *Philco* 'family', a stable environment in which Sumner continued to flourish artistically, always striving for new angles, experimenting with different writing techniques and perspectives.

His 1956 television drama *Keyhole* was an outstanding example of his innovative approach to writing.²³ The play presented an exploration of the way perspective, information and

²² SLE, Letter from America, 9 June 1953.

²³ SLE, *Keyhole*, original screenplay manuscript held in SLE Collection, B.U.

focus shape decision, judgment and truth. Narrated by an anonymous character merely called "X", (an "everybody" signature mark which thereby encodes anonymity) *Keyhole* confronted viewers with the way television manipulates their reception of facts and details. This was achieved through the metaphor of a court trial - interspersing the court proceedings of a case with X's on-camera narrative, so that the viewer was told things that were not produced or apparent in the evidence. X's intrusion made the case seem more fictional than realistic, and reminded viewers that no narrator - not even a television camera - is an objective source of information. The counsels for the trial were named "Black" and "White" and nominally they represented the clear-cut choices between truth and falsehood and the assumption that anything in print ("in black and white") was fact. Their names were also part of the play's commentary on television, then still predominantly a black and white medium.

Above all, it was the self-reflexivity of *Keyhole* which stamped it as such an innovative work for its era: it exposed the construction of its own reading/viewing position (revealing the way the narrator/camera narrows attention and highlights detail); and it challenged a compliant reader/viewer to adopt a critical distance, (to receive information with caution and be aware of manipulative factors).

Like Sumner's stage plays *Interval*, and *Buy Me Blue Ribbons* - which had similarly provided their own mirror images for public exploration - *Keyhole* revealed the hidden devices of the screenplay: the trial under scrutiny was merely the subject matter of the inner drama, the content of which Sumner had drawn from his own earlier screenplay *Dusty Portrait*, a play he had based on the factual Maybrick murder trial from 1890s England. In using this same material in a new way in *Keyhole*, Sumner adopted similar techniques to those of Impressionist painters in their 'series' artworks where the identical subject is drawn and shaded under differing lights and conditions and emerges as a distinctly individual study in each painting. While *Dusty Portrait* and *Keyhole* may bear some inner likeness, they yet remain quite distinct through their different modes of telling and diverse focus. Such techniques of likeness and distinction later became trademarks of Sumner's novels. In terms of his artistic development of such techniques, he clearly owed much to his television experimentation with narrative and structure.

Thus the 'real' focus of *Dusty Portrait* was not the drama of a court trial - the evidence from witnesses, the questions from opposing counsels - nor was it the guilt or innocence of an accused; the 'real' focus was the interaction between the principal players

who were character X, the camera, and the members of the viewing audience.

X:

You are watching a trial for murder. It is taking place in an English city, in the year 1889. We have changed the names of the participants in this trial but the events remain the same as they did in real life. I am, like you, an impartial observer... .

(*Keyhole*, ACT I-1)

From this opening claim of empathy and impartiality by character X, audience distrust is already alerted; as the character makes overt the usually covert role of any narrator (and by implication any camera). The play's ultimate lack of resolution, raising more questions than it answers, is confrontational and challenging to the structures of cohesive and enclosed storylines, then the main fare of the television industry. In *Keyhole* the final judgment of both the play and the trial is left to the viewer. In the process there are revelations: truth, it is implied, is shaped by perspective which can in turn distort vision, whether it be through the camera or the eye. The play's experimental format, which Sumner described as "a technical nightmare", exposed both the inadequacy and dangers of the compliant reception of facts as filtered through any medium. Ultimately the play was testimony against any claim of impartiality as well as being a challenge to the nature of truth and judgment.

X:

Well, the courtroom is silent - the lights are dimmed. And what do you think? Predatory killer

or wronged woman? No one ever saw her actually give her husband any of the powders. There was nothing to suggest that she lied. On the other hand - what about the letter? And why the flypapers? Is your verdict - guilty or not guilty? Into which scale will you place the feather? Or you? Or you? Yes, but how am I expected to give you the answer? I am not omnipotent. I have only allowed you to peep through a keyhole. Can you see the whole room?

(*Keyhole*, ACT III-10)

Like Sumner's more innovative stage plays, *Keyhole* was an unmasking of its own form and became another step in his artistic progression towards a final unmasking of himself throughout his novels. In all forms of his writing Sumner Locke Elliott's ultimate interest was the self-portrait.

The importance which Fred Coe and NBC placed on *Keyhole* as a screenplay can be measured by the expense they incurred in casting the part of character X. Sumner had written the role for E.G. Marshall, who was then appearing on Broadway in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. When the play's producer, Michael Myerberg, could not be persuaded to either close the show for a night or put on the understudy to allow Marshall's release, NBC bought the house for that evening's performance. This led to Sumner's pseudo boast to a friend, "[h]owever, I did close a Broadway play which was sort of historic".²⁴

²⁴ SLE, Letter from America, 8 June 1956.

While writing for NBC's *Sunday Night Playhouse*, Sumner shared in the 1954 Peabody Award and in 1957 basked in reflected glory when Helen Hayes won an Emmy for her performance in his play, *Mrs. Gilling and the Skyscraper*.²⁵ Like so many of the stage and film actors he had long admired, Helen Hayes became one of the stars he included under the slightly inaccurate heading of "Fifteen Years of the Great Stars".²⁶ Mathematics had never been Sumner's strong suit - his television career spanned 14 years!

In the first half of the 1950s, Sumner's television plays had been performed by actors who were then just beginning their rise to fame. But as television shed its 'seven day wonder' tag, many already established actors turned to it to extend or revive their careers, and many celebrities began to appear in his screenplays. Among them were Mary Astor, Mary Martin, Roddy McDowall, Siobhan McKenna, McDonald Carey, Maggie Smith, Alice Ghostly, Hedda Hopper, Frederick March, Ann Todd, Farley Granger, Angela Lansbury, Tom Ewell, Christopher Plummer, Joseph Cotton, and Maureen O'Hara. Some of these actors became Sumner's friends. He described Frederick March as "one of the great gentlemen of the screen, and so considerate of other actors", and Angela Lansbury

²⁵ SLE, *Mrs Gilling and the Skyscraper* is about a woman who challenges the notion that 'change is progress' and was prompted by the demolition of old NYC buildings to make way for new skyscrapers.

²⁶ SLE, to Gwen Plumb, *The Gwen Plumb Show*, 2GB Sydney Radio 1974, and to Hazel De Berg, 1970.

was always “wonderful, divine and heaven to work with.”²⁷ Lansbury, at a critical time in her career, appeared in his 1959 original screen drama *The Grey Nurse Said Nothing*, which was loosely based on the Sydney shark arm murder case, a bizarre underworld mystery which had intrigued the Australian press and public in 1935. Sumner’s dramatisation of the case was very successful when it screened in America in 1950. However, its Australian production was another matter. Filmed by Sydney’s ATN Channel 7 which proposed to broadcast it early in 1960, *Grey Nurse’s* appearance on television was delayed when Patrick Brady, one of the two men tried for - and subsequently acquitted of - the shark arm murder in 1935, applied for a Supreme Court injunction against its screening. It must have seemed like ‘*Rusty Bugles* revisited’ to Sumner when he learned that a NSW Supreme Court Judge was evaluating the script of *Grey Nurse* and that press up and down the country’s eastern seaboard carried major articles about the controversy, including previews of the show. This was the first piece of work that Sumner had offered for Australian consumption since *Bugles*, 12 years earlier. *Grey Nurse* was broadcast in May 1960 after Brady’s application was denied by the court, but the teleplay failed to emulate *Bugles’* Australian theatre success and received only moderate reviews. In this instance, all the publicity had proved too much. As Sumner told a friend at the time: “*Grey*

Nurse is not a strong enough play to withstand such a tremendous build up.”²⁸ During the ensuing years, however, *The Grey Nurse Said Nothing* has gained the status of a modern classic.

Although Sumner claimed an indecisive nature, he formed strong opinions about people, and had great faith in first impressions. However, he had to modify his first, favourable opinion of Helen Hayes, whom he first met in 1953, when he thought her “gracious, lovely but somehow so sad.”²⁹ After he began working with her on his play *Mrs. Gilling and the Skyscraper*, in 1957, he admitted to finding her “difficult, strange, with a viperish sense of humour and a charm she turns on and off like a light”,³⁰ even as he admired her performance. But, of all the actors he worked with in television, Sumner declared only one “impossible”: Shelley Winters. His 1955 colour adaptation of *The Women* included an all-star cast, though most of these stars were fading. His circular letter to Australian friends gave a detailed account of the production and cast.

Three weeks of working with a galaxy of ladies who in their time have been not unknown, is rather like a harassed Queen Mother preparing for an unexpected coronation of eight queens. We began in a flurry of “darlings” and mink coats... . Ruth Hussey is simply an enchanting and gracious person... . Mary Boland a delicious old warhorse

28 SLE, Letter from America, 17 June 1960.

29 SLE, Letter from America, 15 Aug 1953..

30 SLE, Letter from America, 11 July 1957.

who mistakenly called me "Fowler" all the time. Nancy Olsen just the nicest girl ever to come out of Vassar, Cathleen Nesbit withdrawn and rather arch, but alright, Mary Astor delicious - humorous, charming, a little sad and Miss Goddard - well all I can say is how did I come to miss her for twenty years. Had been warned that she was the Bride of Bitchery. She arrived wearing the famous emeralds and a sable coat that cost \$75,000 and the first thing she wanted was a steak sandwich. "Darling", she said to me, "I'm just a working girl" and by gum she is. For three weeks, she threw herself into the part...[and] we were all budsy budsy for a week until metamorphosis enters in the SHAPE of Miss Shelley Winters. Miss Attila the hun. It was like a hurricane blowing up from Key West Florida - almost instantly we were plunged into chaos and dark night. She is a dead end kid in drag. We had trouble over pictures, over dialogue, and she is a girl who likes to direct... . Then...Miss Winters turned on the temperament... . She got sick... . Doctors summoned - rehearsals held up... . By this time no-one was speaking to Shelley... . Nevertheless somehow miraculously everything went off alright to an audience of an estimated forty million... .

(SLE, Letter from America, 26 Feb 1955.)

Sumner had greatly admired Shelley Winters' performance in the film *A Place in the Sun*, but he never again spoke a kind word about her. His one fond memory of her in *The Women* was due to the fact that "she got stuck in the bathtub in her big scene and we were all delighted".³¹

³¹ SLE to Gwen Plumb, *The Gwen Plumb Show*.

Friends and contacts in the television world introduced Sumner to the celebrity party circuit of New York. At an occasion organised by his long-time friend, Ronnie Randell, he dined with Olivia de Havilland, whom he later described as “shy as a jaybird... . She keeps looking at her feet the entire time as though to make sure Joan Fontaine hasn’t whipped them away. A peculiar psychological study of sister hatred; they’ve loathed each other since they were 8 years old...”³²

Sumner was “the satirist with a highly critical view of human nature” as his old mentor, Doris Fitton, described him, and his accounts of the celebrities in this social circuit were not always flattering. British actor Michael Redgrave he deemed “a boring actor and the dullest most humorless man in the world; [he is] literally speechless most of the time.”³³ He considered Redgrave worse even than Grace Kelly whom he summed up as “a girl with no conversation.” Sumner had travelled back from White Plains with Kelly one evening after a viewing of her movie *A Country Girl*.

[I] am probably the only boy in the US who [ever] drove...back alone in a car with Grace Kelly and the chauffeur and went to sleep. Nice girl, prim and proper and quite dull really... .³⁴

(SLE, Letter from America, 22 April 1955.)

³² SLE, Letter from America, 17 June 1952.

³³ SLE, Letter from America, 20 Oct 1955.

³⁴ Of course Kelly’s great sex appeal, which attracted so many of her admirers, was lost on Sumner who, at this time, remained an undeclared homosexual, especially to most of his old friends in Australia.

Sumner's first published prose was an amusing portrayal of the Hollywood columnist and actress Hedda Hopper and the people with whom she wheeled and dealed. He had dinner at a Hollywood restaurant one night with Miss Hopper who "fixed the waiter with a glare [and said] "What do you make these drinks with, *eyedroppers*?"³⁵ His observations of her physical expressions were skilful: "When Hedda makes a decision, her eyebrows fly up, her lids narrow, her chin moves up pointedly, and she is a moving shaft of triangles."³⁶ Sumner's sharp, funny observations filled his letters and eventually appeared in his novels, which relied greatly on character explorations, and dialogue with the minimum of plot.

As he came to know some of these stars of America, Sumner's reports of them became more matter-of-fact. Some of them lost their glamour for him, but the exotic and reclusive still fascinated him, especially in 1954 when he went shopping in Sloan's department store.

...Yesterday in Sloan's wandering lonely as a cloud thru and pricing old bronze table lamps a face came into contact with mine across a Worcester china-silk-shade-fixture-attached-\$39.50 and exactly three inches from my nose was the nose of Miss Garbo. It always *makes* my day to see her. The blue eyes looked at me for a second like a startled hare

³⁵ SLE, Original Manuscript of *The Cracked Lens*, excerpts from which appeared in *Harper's* magazine and the anthology *Humor from Harper's*. Orig. ms, SLE Collection, BU.

³⁶ SLE, *The Cracked Lens*.

through those incredible eyelashes (real) and then vanished behind a bed-bracket-American-gothic-\$45.65. I followed like a limp snake fascinated by the spell of a pipe player. Everything she picked up, I picked up too. She wandered alone thru a forest of pale lampshades mountains high and I followed too, putting on only the smallest semblance of looking at labels. She had on the grubbiest old coat I have ever seen, worn [galoshes] and carried a rolled up umbrella. Had a blue felt flower pot on her head with no brim. But she could wear anything... . The great Face wandered slowly like Queen Christina to the chinaware, lost in some deep personal sense of tragedy she walked like a lone panther taking great strides. I had several peeks close up but she soon was aware she was being followed and started to [dodge] me by going around corners suddenly then taking a short frantic little run like a trapped hind, slackening to a slow crawl for the look of the thing. I finally had to go... . I'm absolutely infatuated...and take several quicker heartbeats when near her at all. Wish I had the courage to speak. One day I will... .

(SLE, Letter from America, 2 March 1954.)

Sumner, the successful New York television dramatist still had a vestige of the "movies boy" from Australia but that child-self from half a world away had become a little more discriminating in his worship.

Although so many stars passed through Sumner's television years, his most vivid memory was of Fred Coe's talent and inspiration: "All the time there was Fred - Pappy, giving us what my friend Enid

Bagnold calls *The Oxygen of Praise*: 'it's great, it's terrific! *But*: it's the story *behind* the story: dig it out!' he always said."³⁷ Coe's enthusiasm and involvement is evident in Sumner's description of the day-to-day workings, the conception and development of every screenplay.

The way it functioned was this: when you thought about your idea, you did about a page and a half or two-page rough synopsis, which was then taken to Fred Coe who had the eye of an eagle and the heart of a lion, and befriended writers from evil sponsors and meddlers and everything else that one is often subjected to in the very vast commercial world. I remember there were only two taboos, I think, at that time and that was children in danger...and to show any sort of really bad violence or airplanes crashing, you know, that kind of thing - there weren't very many taboos, and when you'd gone through your synopsis, you then wrote your first draft, which in those days would take me perhaps two or three weeks at the outside. It was then almost immediately cast. You went in, again with Fred, who would make helpful suggestions - always, I thought, brilliant. In nineteen plays we only ever had one set-to in which I felt that he was wrong; it was a comedy, and comedy was not his forte, it was an Australian comedy based on the Ern Malley scandal and I felt that he didn't really quite understand what I was doing and the play turned out to be somewhat of a mess, but otherwise he was...the most evocative and fantastic producer I've ever worked with, and what he [could] bring out of a writer through strength and through encouragement...³⁸

³⁷ SLE, Address to Adelaide Writers' Week, 1974.

³⁸ Hazel De Berg Interview, 1970.

As protector of his “family”, Coe went to bat for one of Sumner’s plays just a year after the writer had joined his team. Sumner’s letter to friends in Australia made it plain that he relished having someone standing up for his work.

Also completed a new Philco *All Through The Night* and all hell has broken loose because the agency dubbed it an “immoral” story. Adultery dears. Of course one can have machine gun shootings, sex murder, rape, anything but not a girl in love with a married man even though he’s dead when the story opens... . I think it is my best to date - Fred has raised the roof and even threatened to take the whole show off the air if Philco won’t do it because of the subject matter so I’m the vortex of a hotbed of NBC intrigue at the moment... .

(SLE, Letter from America, 5 May 1953.)

But, above all else, Sumner found Fred Coe’s artistic guidance intoxicating. “He had a capacity for listening to an outline with his whole being,” he recalled, “then making one trenchant remark like: ‘Take out the Mother’. Horrors! But he was almost always right: Mother got in the way.”³⁹

Coe pushed his writers to challenge expectations, to shift perspective, to pare down a story to the bare essentials, and then look behind it for another.

I wrote a disappearance story. I was pleased with it. He said: It's good pappy, you are always good - but it is only a routine thriller. What is important and separates it from the routine is what happened to the people left behind. How did this girl's disappearance change their lives?

I completely rewrote it from the opposite point of view.

In the end the man, middle aged, met the girl who disappeared in a London pub. She had become a whore. There was a moment of pity, a tender moment between them.

After dress rehearsal - only twenty minutes to air time, Fred said: "We are wrong - I didn't see it before. If we are sorry for her, it is not ending. The man will never get her out of his mind. She must say something dreadful to him."

In the dressing room: Cut this. Cut that. Smile at him and say "Buy me a drink". The moment was shattering. People stopped me in the street, saying "that is the best scene you ever wrote"...⁴⁰

The screenplay Sumner refers to here is *Whereabouts Unknown*, the story of a girl who escapes from the elite conformist society of San Francisco's Nob Hill on the night of her engagement in order to become her alter ego.⁴¹ Sumner took Coe's advice and made the play focus on the devastation the girl's departure wreaks on the lives of others. When the jilted lover discovers the girl years later during an air raid on London in World War II, both characters, camouflaged by fictional names, confront the remnants of their past.

⁴⁰ SLE, Address to Adelaide Writers Week, 1974.

⁴¹ This plot, in some ways, foreshadowed his later novel *About Tilly Beamis*.

HOWARD: And, didn't you ever think of the man who had loved her? Of the years he might have spent searching? Did you ever think once that -- maybe he went mad -- or drank -- or died?

VALDA: But the girl he loved was dead. The other girl was dead. I had to kill her so that I could live! Tom, you see, she belonged in that safe, stupid world of his. I belonged to a life that was beautiful and exciting.

HOWARD: And has it been beautiful and exciting, Valda?

VALDA: Yes.

(Sound: All clear signal)

HOWARD: Is there -- anything I can do?

VALDA: Yes. You can buy me another drink, Tom.

(He puts money on bar and exits...Ruby [the barmaid] closes the door.)

RUBY: *(Crosses behind bar):* You're acting very queer. Almost as if you knew 'im.

VALDA: I did. Once. Gin and It[alian vermouth] dear. And don't be stingy.

(Fade Out)

(Whereabouts Unknown ACT II-37)⁴²

The final undercutting of sympathy for Valda overturned the 'woman victim' stereotype so prevalent in 1950s television and film, and revived something of the female figure popular in the 1940s - the complex, radical character Bette Davis so often

portrayed.

As is the case in these telling revisions, Sumner maintained that writing for live television taught him economy, and he was always intolerant of anything verbose.

...[Y]ou went into the studio, into the technical first rehearsal in the studio, [with] at least eight minutes for commercial time...and what they call safety time, so that you didn't have to cut on the very night of the play itself, which went on like a theatrical performance, nationwide, so you had to beware of that, and there were...terrible things that would go wrong, and you'd sit up in that little viewing room knowing that this was going out coast to coast all over the United States of America and Canada, and that once they were on, if the scenery fell down and if an actor dried up or if somebody didn't make an entrance, you were on coast to coast, there was absolutely nothing that could be done about it... . But, curiously enough, it drove the actors to a pack of nerves that has never been the same since we had the tape, because there's the psychological reaction on tape that if the worst happens, we can stop and do it over...it was just like a small edition of a movie...it was never as...intriguing or nerve-ridden and violent...as it was when you were up against that 35 million people, which...was only a fair audience... .43

Even in the latter half of the 1950s, the future of live television was growing more uncertain by the day. Fred Coe took

on extra work for NBC in Hollywood and the sponsors in New York became agitated, demanding more action, more violence. The world was changing and so was television.

...[T]he coming of tape, the coming of colour and the coming, unfortunately, of what we now know as the special, the big special show...began to veer away from original writing into the old well known properties, and so vanished, like the Mastodon, from television...original writing is practically gone... .44

Sumner's success with screenplays continued, and his own original big show special for NBC, *The King and Mrs. Candle*, was showcased twice - as a musical in colour on the second occasion. But to remain writing for television in New York, he was forced to return to adaptations, work he loathed.

...[I]t began to become very much bigger money, very much more involved...with the Hollywood star names, very much less interesting to the writer. The stars got bigger and the writers got smaller and at one particular point I knew that sooner or later it was all going to leave New York... .45

From 1957, Sumner worked at anything he could find as long as it was in New York, and this often meant condensing classics for CBS and *Studio One*, the network from which he had escaped five years earlier. He went to Hollywood for four separate television

44 Hazel De Berg Interview, 1970.

45 Hazel De Berg Interview, 1970.

assignments, knowing that this was the only forum now for original screenwriting. But New York was home and Hollywood was still the depressing country of the orange, where that old antipathy towards New Yorkers persisted.

“Oh, you’re a *New York* writer,” they said. And there was the caste system - like ancient India: Thou shalt not lunch with an assistant director... . I could not live in Hollywood...where you are forbidden to walk in Beverly Hills. How can you work with thinking that organizes such paradoxes... . It broke up our group. We went our separate ways... .⁴⁶

The last television show Sumner wrote in Hollywood was for the columnist Hedda Hopper. He later recalled this as “a terrible sort of documentary...involving all the great stars of the past and present in Hollywood.”⁴⁷ Even Gary Cooper and Debbie Reynolds were among the thirty-one stars for whom Sumner had written sketches portraying ‘then and now’ Hollywood lives. But the show was plagued with embarrassing debacles from start to finish. He recalled vividly just how he had first come to be lured into a contract to write the show and just how soon doubt had crept in.

It was to be an hour show...loaded with stars who were already clamoring to appear; it was to touch on all facets of life in Hollywood and (a coup) permission had been granted by eager studios to photograph their back lots - ordinarily forbidden -

⁴⁶ SLE, Address to Adelaide Writers’ Week, 1974.

⁴⁷ SLE to me, 1990.

and by famous home owners to invade the privacy of their fabulous estates... . As a child brought up in Australia and fed on Saturday matinees at what we called "the Pictures", I had acquired a thirst for inside knowledge of Hollywood folk-lore of an earlier day... . It seemed possible that the gates of the past could be opened to me... . I was snared...two nights later Hedda was putting a scotch into my hand in her study. "Now these are the people I know we can get...Jimmy Stewart, Gary Cooper, Sinatra, Bob Hope...Disney, Stephen Boyd and Charlton Heston...Lucy Ball...Bette Davis, Joan Crawford..."

We went on over dinner and far into the night... . Some of [Hedda's] suggestions were a little bizarre. Did I know for instance that director Mervyn le Roy did a very cute little tap dance and we could *use* entertainment... . Also King Vidor, another distinguished director, played the banjo quite well - and was I aware (here Hedda paused dramatically) that Mae West was a deeply religious girl and might consent to appear in the show, coming out of church? At that time of night it didn't seem a bad idea at all... .⁴⁸

This assignment spanned several weeks of chaos and made Sumner lose 10 pounds in weight. On the final day of shooting he realised that another opportunity had been squandered.

Gary Cooper had picked up the revised speech I had written and gazed at it for ten minutes until I [suggested] that it was "short and simple this way." "Yep. Short and simple"... . Mr. Cooper had remained monosyllabic until, after the second take had been pronounced a perfect one, [when] he relaxed and grew loquacious, telling us story after story of the greener days of motion pictures while

I reflected that now would be the time to scrap the entire show and begin again with the knowledge which we now possessed - too late - that we had a gold mine of personalities and data and that through haste and indecision we had mined for pebbles. Behind the show we had put together in three weeks, there was an image of something infinitely more penetrating. Hindsight is the stable door of television... .⁴⁹

When the final frantic rush of dubbing and editing was miraculously completed, Sumner returned to New York, haggard, exhausted and knowing that the future was even more bleak. But memories of making *Hedda Hopper's Hollywood* pestered him and when he realised how funny these incidents were, he decided to write them for a magazine piece.

It was really my first experience...of prose, I began to find that this was very interesting, that I could explore...go into people's minds, and it was a solo effort. For the first time in my life, it was just me. It was published by *Harper's* magazine and I was...as proud of myself as I've ever been...when it came out in the Christmas issue and I saw myself actually in print. Playwrights are like that. All authors, of course, want to see a play on Broadway, want to see the curtain go up, want to see actors manipulating themselves around their ideas and quite often destroying their ideas, if only they knew it, poor simps... .⁵⁰

49 SLE, *The Cracked Lens*.

50 Hazel De Berg Interview, 1970.

An edited version of this article, *The Cracked Lens*, was well received when it appeared in *Harper's* Christmas issue, although Hedda Hopper threatened Sumner with a libel suit.

Sent you my Harper's article...it's very cut, but nevertheless has already caused a lot of ruffled feathers and understand Hedda was most incensed and threatening to sue me... . Some of the most amusing incidents had to be deleted [as there] simply was not the space and I'm learning about the limitations of the published word and that they are not so different from television or the theatre. But it does fascinate me as a new medium and expression of writing and I want to do more... .

(SLE, Letter from America, 3 Dec 1960.)

Sumner wrote his last television adaptations for Fred Coe, his friend and mentor, between 1960 and 1962. "It was a sad exit...to watch the glory we had once had, being back in the same old studios out in Brooklyn, but doing two old films, adaptations of Alfred Hitchcock...*Notorious* and...*Spellbound*..."⁵¹

Then came a new invitation to Broadway and to his own surprise Sumner turned it down and declared a change of direction.

I was sitting in the Palm Court of the Plaza Hotel being offered a Broadway musical to star Ray Bolger, which was to be about an emigrant and I was an emigrant, so I was what they needed; this at least was their thinking. But I got up and, was slightly surprised to hear myself say, "No! No,

51 Hazel De Berg Interview, 1970.

thank you, I'm sorry but I'm not available. I'm going to write a novel".⁵²

With only \$1500 in the bank, and in financial straits again, Sumner bravely entered the working world of the novelist.

Chapter Thirteen: New York is Where I Live

Memory is the strongest power I have, it's my lifeline to the truth. And whereas I didn't write at all well about Australia while I lived there...I can do it now - from a distance of both geography and time... . I still see the Sydney of 1937 in my mind's eye...the trams in George Street, I know they are all gone - but that's my city of Sydney, locked like a fly in amber... .

(SLE to Jeremy Eccles, "Careful He Remembers",
Sydney Morning Herald, 27 Feb 1989.)

Early in 1964 Sumner Locke Elliott waited anxiously to hear how his first novel, *Careful, He Might Hear You*, was performing in the international marketplace. In August 1963 it had been released in England, Australia, Germany and France. This was in advance of the US publication, delayed by negotiations with Reader's Digest which had agreed to produce three million copies of the condensed version to be sent out to their American readers in January 1964 as "book of the month". This selection had delighted and surprised Sumner. "They hardly ever take a book without an American background," he proudly told his friends in Australia.¹ Readers Digest had paid \$US35,000 for the rights to the US condensed version, a sum shared equally between Sumner and his publisher,

¹ SLE, Letter from America, 14 March 1963.

Harper and Row. Film options were pending,² and so were offers for serialisations, paperback release and further translations. But now what he really longed to know was what Australia thought of *Careful, He Might Hear You*. His book had revealed many of Australia's blemishes, and Sumner braced himself for some form of rebuttal from his native land. What he was ill prepared for was its indifference.

Despite his years in America, a place where he now belonged, Sumner was surprised to discover he still felt affection for his birthland, and forgiveness of all past wrongs. This had become apparent as he brought to life his memories of Sydney and the people he had known in his childhood during the writing process of *Careful*. Only Jessie remained the exception. Sumner had confronted his former self, the child Putty, and translated him as the character, P.S., through whom he came to understand and accept his past. As Putty, he dedicated the book to his mother: "For H.S.L."³ Now, sitting in his New York apartment, waiting for news of his Australian sales, it was still Sumner's child self, "Putty", who cried out for some form of blessing from the country of his birth.

2 Poorly advised by his agent, SLE agreed to an outright sale rather than an option of the film rights to Hollywood producer, Joshua Logan in early 1964, repeating his mother's mistake: the outright sale of her first book, *Mum Dawson, Boss*. At the time, SLE received good money but years later, he regretted his sale of the rights. Logan eventually resold the rights to Australian filmmaker Jill Robb. From *Careful, He Might Hear You*, Robb's 1983 film, SLE received only a small share of the profits.

3 Helena Sumner Locke: her legal name but one she never used.

Sumner's agent, Annie Laurie Williams, rang, at last, to tell him how his book was faring overseas.

Apart from the thousands of copies sold in England and Ireland, and the rave critical reviews it received on the BBC, I distinctly remember that she told me 50,000 copies had already been sold in Germany, where there had been three editions in six months, and naturally I was elated. Then I asked about Australia, and she said, 'seven'. And I said, with some delight, 'Well 7,000, that's not bad at all - it's only a small country.' But she said, 'Not 7,000, just seven - seven copies.' And you know, I just couldn't believe it - my own country and only seven copies!⁴

After several aborted attempts to write the story - which was to become *Careful, He Might Hear You* - as a stage play,⁵ Sumner had spent two long and, sometimes, tedious years (1961 and 1962) on the novel. "And so after so many years of not wanting to become a novelist because of the shadow of my mother, I finally became an author and felt immediately that this was my true medium of writing," he explained.⁶ His letters to friends in Australia during this period charted his progress with the book and revealed how he oscillated between euphoria and despondency.

⁴ SLE to me, 1990.

⁵ This was probably *Hear The Gentle Lark*, a play SLE said he abandoned, because the story was too complex, with too many characters and locations and an off-stage ferry accident. When *Careful* came out "How really smart of you" one friend wrote, "not to call it *Hear the Rainbird Cry* or some other such nonsense..." A musical stage production of *Careful, He Might Hear You* is proposed for 1996/7 by Sydney writer/producer David Sale.

⁶ SLE to me, 1990.

I'm plugging away at my novel and it grows as the months go by. I am by turns elated by it and in black despair that no-one will ever read it, let alone publish it...

(22 Sept 1961)

Sometimes it roars ahead and I'm dizzy, other times (as at the moment) it crawls along not even sure if it will make the next page. Oh well. At least it's an experience and right or wrong, I'm pretty sure I will not want to do another in this lifetime...

(5 March 1962)

I'm racing through revisions now and towards the end - though no-one but my agents have read it yet...

(8 June 1962

)

Much harder than writing the damn thing [now] filling in pot holes such as how on earth does the mother know without eavesdropping or why does the sister really dislike her and so forth which require long hours alone communing with God...

(13 July 1962)

All the time he was writing *Careful* Sumner had felt unsure of its worth until he presented it to the publisher Harper and Row, who had signed him immediately. When the novel was released to bookshops in America in October 1963, most reviews were extremely favourable and Sumner plunged into a hectic schedule of speaking engagements, as well as press, radio and television interviews. Even his old TV network joined the long line of those wishing to bestow accolades. "NBC [is] doing a whole 15 minutes

segment of the *TV Today* show for me on the 29th," he told friends.⁷ *Cosmopolitan Magazine* ran a full-page review by critic and writer Jean Stafford, who had been on the judging panel of the 1962 National Book Awards. Her enthusiasm for *Careful* shone from every paragraph.

Mr Elliott is a storyteller of the first rank...His characters for all their egocentricity...rouse our interest and concern...The glimpses of Australian metropolitan literati are superb...Mr. Elliott's ear is perfect and his prose is a joy; one hopes to read much more of it.⁸

After such positive advance publicity the novel was rushed off the shelves when it was released in New York, and the rest of the world - Australia excepted - followed suit. Editions appeared in Spain and Mexico and, when East Germany accepted it, Sumner wrote to friends, "...so I am at last behind the iron curtain."⁹

Careful's American release was greeted with affection and respect from Sumner's New York colleagues and friends. At Sardi's restaurant copies of the novel were displayed by Mr. Sardi himself on the restaurant's inner stairway. This began a tradition: thereafter every one of Sumner's books was displayed in like manner by Sardi's when it came out. This more than made up for

7 SLE, Letter from America, 16 Oct 1963.

8 Jean Stafford, "Battle for a Child's Love", *Cosmopolitan*, April 1963.

9 SLE, Letter from America, 12 Dec 1968.

that early gloomy occasion at the restaurant when *Buy Me Blue Ribbons* was confirmed as a disaster. As his books appeared every two to three years, Sumner became a regular part of Sardi's celebrity world.¹⁰ Mr. Sardi's esteem for Sumner was evident, as Whit Cook remembers: "He was always given the best table, the number one table, reserved for those special guests by Sardi himself."¹¹

Sumner not only wrote himself into the hearts and minds of the American people, but had an enormous impact on West Germany. The West Germany edition of *Careful*, which Sumner described as the most beautiful of all the editions, remained on their bestseller list for two years, and was still in seventh place after the first year. It was sold to four bookclubs and serialised by *Der Spiegel*, then the biggest Sunday paper where it also appeared on its bestseller list. On a trip to the World Book Fair in Frankfurt in 1965, Sumner was also surprised to find himself prominent in the German section, which, he explained with a kind of bemused pleasure, had "a huge blown up picture of me over the exhibit and [I] was given a dinner party in Princess Fredericka's fabulous Schloss and such star treatment that I thought I better get the hell out and flew to London a day early".¹² West Germany was always

¹⁰ Sardi's restaurant is famous for its caricatures of show business personalities sketched by three successive generations of artists; these cover all available wall space.

¹¹ Whit Cook to me, 1991. SLE was also honoured in American Letters by being made a Literary Lion in 1983 by the New York Public Library.

¹² SLE, Letter from America, Dec 1965.

eager for Sumner Locke Elliott's books and they continued to receive such accolades: in 1988 *Waiting For Childhood*, another Australian family saga, also became a best seller there. "The Germans, funny race that they are," Sumner later observed, "are terribly sentimental at heart..."¹³ Perhaps some of this support also came from the fact that in so far as the majority of Sumner's books can be classified as Bildungsroman, Erziehungsroman, or Künstlerroman, they follow long established German literary traditions.

Of all the countries to publish *Careful, He Might Hear You*, only Australia seemed indifferent. This confirmed Sumner's long opinion that his own country gave only grudging praise to its own artists. Yet praise did eventually trickle through. Despite poor sales and scant attention from the media, *Careful* won one of Australia's most prestigious literary prizes, the Miles Franklin Award, for the best novel of 1963. As a reviewer from *The Age* noted, after he had won the Miles Franklin Award: "Elliott must feel an ironic edge to his pleasure in winning the Miles Franklin...[as he] has had reason to feel Australia had lost interest in him since he left for America 17 years ago..."¹⁴ Later in his career another reviewer cited Sumner as just one example among many artistic Australians neglected by

13 SLE to Susan Wyndham, "Careful, he's made himself heard at last", *The Australian*, 16-17 June 1990.

14 *The Age* (Melbourne), April 16, 1964.

their homeland.

Sumner Locke Elliott is an American writer who was once an Australian writer but who took his nationality where his talent was recognised - and paid for. His is not a lone case - the list is shameful - just one more who writes in America, is published in England and whose works usually reach home at the tail end of the distribution line...¹⁵

Yet Sumner, who had come to expect nothing from Australia in the way of support (although, privately, he still craved his country's approval and recognition), was overwhelmed by the Miles Franklin Award.

It means a great deal to me to win this award in my own country. I knew Miles Franklin. She used to come to our house and she knew my mother very well. I was tremendously honoured and thrilled. You could say it's my Oscar. Well, that's how I feel about it.

(*Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 April 1964.)

Sumner's writing was also making an impression upon Australian literary luminaries, such as Patrick White and Christina Stead. Stead pored over his novels, and made copious notes about them which she hoped to be able to discuss with him one day, although the two never met.¹⁶ Sumner did, however, meet Patrick

¹⁵ George Turner, "A quietly triumphant death at the end", *The Age* (Melbourne) April 12, 1975.

¹⁶ My thanks for such information from Heather Stewart, who took Stead into her home when the author returned to Australia in her old age as penniless and forgotten.

White in 1968 in New York through a mutual friend, the Australian actress Zoe Caldwell.

Zoe Caldwell (an entire pet and hugely good actress I think) got me with Patrick White, a formidable gent and not entirely the most nodding violet I've ever met but nevertheless a crisp, acerbic wit and graciously nice about my work. That sounded pompous, I didn't mean it to be... .

(SLE, Letter from America, 12 Dec 1968.)

At the time of this meeting, Sumner had not read White's work. Later he came to think of him as a genius and of his novel *The Aunt's Story* as "a literary masterpiece".¹⁷ White wrote to Sumner some years later with glowing praise for *Careful* and *Edens Lost*.

Your book *Careful, He Might Hear You*, made a great impression on me... . I have just finished reading [*Edens Lost*]. Well! What a relief to read a novel about people of flesh and blood after the Australian stodge I struggle with on and off. I had come to the conclusion there was something missing from me which prevented me understanding an Australian novel. At the moment oafs and thugs are all the fashion, who express themselves in a stream of strine. The first once or twice was refreshing enough, but there is a little more than that to this place which I don't exactly love. And you have brought it out so beautifully, both in atmosphere and place, tone of voice, and the characters, above all the characters... . How, I wonder, is your marvellous novel unknown in Australia... . I feel I want to buy a cartload and thrust copies into the hands of all those people who think I damn Australian novels

not simply because they are deadly dull, but because, they think, I am jealous... .¹⁸

This, from the writer who shortly after won the Nobel Prize for literature was praise that Sumner never forgot. White's amazement at Australia's disregard of Sumner (he'd finally had to order *Edens Lost* from New York) is comment enough. After *Water Under the Bridge* was published, Sumner won the Patrick White Award in 1977 for a body of work which included White's, by then, favourite of Sumner's novels: *Going* (1975). Sumner used the money from the Patrick White Award to sponsor a round-world trip for Doris Fitton in gratitude for her part in his success.¹⁹

In 1974 worldwide sales of *Careful, He Might Hear You* reached about 10 million copies, and Sumner visited Australia as a guest of the Adelaide Writers' Week. During this visit he realised that his publishers were partly to blame for slow sales in Australia, because Australian booksellers still relied then on English stocks of his books.²⁰ Thereafter he arranged for the publication of Australian editions of his novels.

Sumner's low profile in Australia could not entirely be blamed on publishers. After *Water Under the Bridge* had come out (1977)

¹⁸ Patrick White, Letter to SLE, 28 Jan 1973. SLE Collection, BU.

¹⁹ Tad Mosel to me, 1994.

²⁰ SLE, "Where are all my books?", *The Australian Author*, Spring Issue, Oct 1974.

and Sumner had won the Patrick White Literary Award, Sydney's *Sun* published a lengthy article by Bruce Wilson who tried to grapple with the issue. Noting that *Water* was Sumner's sixth novel, he wrote "...yet he is curiously unsung in Australia. *Rusty Bugles* probably remains his best-known work here. Elliott blames this on poor publicity and bad publishers."²¹ While discussing Sumner's overseas success, Wilson made a careless error - or was it a translations error - over the title of *Careful, He Might Hear You*: "One book, *Careful, He May Be Listening*, was on the best seller list...in West Germany."²² Perhaps Australia's general attitude to Sumner was expressed by Wilson's summing up. "*Bridge* already has won the Patrick White prize for the best Australian novel of last year [1977], even if its author is, and chooses to continue to be, such a long-term expatriate that he is virtually an American commenting with the advantage of hindsight..."²³ As it was for many other Australian artists of his generation, Sumner's lengthy stay in the wilderness had incurred the penalty of neglect.

Towards the end of the 1970s, Sumner's frustration over his failure to gain recognition as a novelist in Australia, and over the fact that plans to produce a film of *Careful* had again been stymied, coloured his very public response to the offer he received from

21 Bruce Wilson, "The hindquarters, with the benefit of hindsight", *Sun*, Sydney, 11 March 1978.

22 Bruce Wilson, "The hindquarters, with the benefit of hindsight".

23 Bruce Wilson, "The hindquarters, with the benefit of hindsight".

Hollywood to adapt Colleen McCullough's *The Thorn Birds* for the small screen. The books, *Water Under the Bridge* and *The Thorn Birds* had appeared in the same year (1977) and the enthusiasm shown by Australian readers for the latter rather than the former, must have discouraged Sumner, who had genuinely disliked McCullough's novel when he'd read it. John Kingsmill, one of Sumner's friend from the Independent Theatre days and an original cast member of *Rusty Bugles*, was visiting New York at the time of the Hollywood offer, and remembers Sumner's call to him late one evening.

It was around 11 o'clock when the phone rang and Sumner, sounding like he'd had a few drinks, said in his American accent: "John, I have some news for you...I got in around 5.30 this afternoon and my answering machine said they'd been calling me from the Coast all day long - they'd been calling my agent and she'd been trying to get me... ." And I said: "Sumner, what is it?" He said, "John, don't get too excited, but they've asked me to do the screenplay for *The Thorn Birds*." And by then Colleen McCullough's book was such a run-away bestseller that I started to say, "Sumner, how marv..." And he said, "Don't say 'marvellous', John: I turned them down." And then he repeated it: "I turned them down." I said, "Oh, Sumner!" And he said: "She can describe very few things successfully - there's a very good storm scene in *The Thorn Birds* but the rest of it is shit - and I turned them down." And I knew what was going on: he thought none of his books would ever make the movies and here was someone he assumed had

written one book (although she'd written *Tim*) and suddenly she was an instantaneous millionairess success and they'd asked *him* to do the screenplay and his ego - and he was entitled to be egotistical - wouldn't let him play second fiddle to an upstart Australian writer whom he thought didn't write well. If it had've been Shirley Hazzard, I think he'd have done it happily, but it was McCullough and he said: "It is absolute shit, John, and I turned them down."²⁴

During a time when Colleen McCullough was enjoying such high prominence with Australian readers - particularly those readers of popular fiction - Sumner's public damning of her work, over a period of weeks in the Australian and New York press, did little to reduce his sentence in the wilderness of Australia's neglect, even if his observations were endorsed by those of the serious writing community. His public comments reiterated what he had said to John Kingsmill on the phone that night. But, as Kingsmill also remembers: "Sumner was never afraid to say just what he thought, no matter the consequences." Finally, an editor from New York's Harper and Row, the house that had published several of Sumner's books and, more recently, McCullough's novel, spoke to him about his constant stream of criticism. "For God's sake, Sumner, can you lay off *The Thorn Birds!*" the editor pleaded.²⁵

The first signs of Sumner's re-acceptance into Australian

²⁴ John Kingsmill to me, 1991.

²⁵ Whit Cook to me, 1994.

hearts came in 1980 when the nine-part television mini-series of *Water Under the Bridge* was screened. While this series was generally considered to have rated poorly, it nevertheless lifted Sumner's profile. He returned yet again to his birthland for the premiere. But, in 1983, with the release of Jill Robb's award-winning feature film of *Careful, He Might Hear You*, all was forgiven and Australia once more claimed the trinity of "P.S.", "Putty" and Sumner Locke Elliott for its own. In turn, Sumner was very proud of this film, developed by Australians with such love, attention to detail, and adherence to the novel. He saw the film a number of times in New York; the first time he lined up to buy tickets with the public, was the most memorable.

...*Careful* ran for thirteen weeks at The Paris, you know, which is the small picture theatre near the Plaza Hotel in New York. Well that sort of run was almost unheard of for an imported film. And there we stood in this longish queue in the rain, waiting to buy a ticket. And I wanted to call out: 'This is my movie! This is my movie!'.²⁶

And all through those years in the wilderness of Australia's disregard, Sumner had never given up on his "own country". Several of his books were set in America, (*Some Doves and Pythons*, *The Man Who Got Away*, *Going*, and *Signs of Life*), but these were his least successful novels. He once said that he thought he would

have to leave America to write about it well.²⁷ Whether by choice or by instinct, he wrote most of his fiction about the Australia of his past, breaking through spatial and temporal boundaries, to discover and revive his land of imagination. “America is where I live but Australia is what I write about,” Sumner reflected late in his life.²⁸ His appraisals of his country and family were at times ruthless but also understanding and forgiving.

His life as a novelist brought him into contact with many great literary figures. When Joshua Logan bought the screen rights to *Careful*, and Sumner attended the celebration party, he met Enid Bagnold, whose work he greatly admired, particularly her play *The Chalk Garden*.

The Logans gave a nice party recently and...so very complimentary about my book [was]...wonderful old Enid Bagnold, 76, and fascinating with bright alert eyes and stunning looks and glittering with acerbic wit. She told me she never never knows the end of anything she starts to write - which astounded me. We disagreed about everything but thoroughly enjoyed it... .

(SLE, Letter from America, 28 March 1964.)

Enid Bagnold became a close friend and Sumner visited her in England and maintained a regular correspondence with her until her death. Her phrase “the oxygen of praise” was one that he often

²⁷ SLE to me, 1990.

²⁸ SLE to me, 1990.

quoted.²⁹ Another literary colleague whose guidance he valued was the American satirist, S.J. Perelman, who, with his wife, Laura, gave Sumner great support throughout the loneliness that many writers have to contend with. Writing was never easy for Sumner and it consoled him that he shared the creative torture with Perelman, whose words he also often quoted: “It was Sid who said, ‘There’s nothing to writing, you sit down at the typewriter and pause, put one word after another and pause, and watch the spatters of blood gather’.”³⁰

Shirley Hazzard and Francis Steegmuller also became close friends of Sumner’s.

I think it’s a bad thing for writers to be with writers... . You must follow your own star. There are exceptions. Shirley Hazzard and Francis Steegmuller are close friends of mine. But they never intrude. And they are full of deep, wonderful encouragement... .³¹

Shirley Hazzard had also grown up in Australia and for Sumner she was a kindred spirit who shared his ambivalent, sometimes painful affection for his native country. Letters between Shirley and Sumner, sometimes contained the colloquialisms of the Australia of Shirley’s childhood and Sumner’s youth, and usually began with “Dear Cob”. Shirley had spent her childhood in Sydney, listening to

²⁹ Whit Cook to me, 1991.

³⁰ SLE to Candida Baker, *Yacker 2*.

³¹ SLE to Kate Jennings, “Pleasing Yourself”.

the radio serials that Sumner had written and performed in, “a bond” they only discovered after they met in 1974.³² Sumner spoke of Shirley Hazzard with respect and admiration as “a writer of beautiful limpid prose”.³³ He envied her working schedule of seven to eight hours a day. As he grew older he lamented that his own daily writing time had shrunk to just two or three hours in the morning. Like so many other friendships in his life, laughter was the key ingredient Sumner shared with Shirley. The last time they spoke was by phone, between Italy and New York, just two weeks before Sumner’s death, this time to say goodbye: “...he was very weak, and his voice reflected that,” Shirley remembered. “But we laughed just as ever”.³⁴

After their first meeting in New York in 1968, Patrick White and Sumner corresponded for several years, and became reacquainted when Sumner made his first return visit to Sydney in 1974 for the Adelaide Writers’ Week, an invitation White had encouraged him to accept. Four years later, after winning the Patrick White Literary Award, Sumner returned to Sydney again and White and Manoly Lascaris gave a special dinner for him at their Centennial Park home. The dinner was a great success, but when Sumner was leaving the party he fell prey to a touch of

32 Shirley Hazzard to me, 3 Sept,1991.

33 SLE to me, 1990.

34 Shirley Hazzard to me, 3 Sept,1991.

White's acidity.

After saying our goodbyes, with Patrick standing at the top of the stairs, I began walking down and I heard him cry out behind me: 'Come back! Come back!'. As I was returning to New York within the following days, I thought he meant to Australia, and perhaps even to visit with him and Manoly again. So, with my back still to him, and wanting to immediately reassure him, I also called out my reply. 'I will! I will!' I exclaimed most delightedly, glad I'd made a good impression. "Not *you*," I heard Patrick say, caustically, behind me. "I was talking to the dogs." Apparently his schnauzer dogs had begun to follow me down the stairs.³⁵

In the years since this dinner, this story has been widely circulated in Australian literary circles - told so often in fact that some have declared it fiction. Sumner, however, endorsed its authenticity. But his interpretation of that comment - which could have been merely an insensitive joke on the part of White - reveals Sumner's own hypersensitive need and longing for approval from 'home'. No doubt, Sumner's telling of this story was also coloured by the later rift in the relationship between White and himself.

During his next whirlwind visit to Melbourne and Sydney in 1980 - accompanied by his friend, and then agent, Gloria Safire - to launch the nine-hour television mini-series of *Water Under the Bridge*, Sumner failed to contact White, who was well-known to be

intolerant of disloyalty from friends and colleagues. For this sin, Sumner was excommunicated, and joined the throng of White's former friends. "Despite my apologies and excuses of there being absolutely no time in my schedule to see anyone, I was on Patrick's shit list," Sumner commented, just after White's death, but he added: "Dear Patrick, it's so sad, he was really a true genius."³⁶

Sumner Locke Elliott wrote ten novels and left an incomplete manuscript of an eleventh. His aunt Blanche - the last of his immediate family - died soon after his first book was published. "To say that I was unhappy about it would be very false," he told friends, "because of her being so lonely and in hospital for so long...and she had not been clear in her mind for some time...she was buried with my mother and her sister Jessie which was her wish...".³⁷ At least Blanche had a chance to bask in the reflected glory of Sumner's first novel before her death. The burden she had become in the last years of her life had gone, yet this left Sumner feeling strangely hollow. Over the years that followed, he contemplated Blanche, Lily, Jessie, Agnes, his mother and father, and all the relatives who had either filled or left absences in his young life. From his need to restore this family came his books.

During the thirty years of Sumner's life as a novelist, his need

³⁶ SLE to me, 1990.

³⁷ SLE, Letter from America, 28 March 1964.

for a family never waned. As he became part of Whitfield Cook's life, he became part of the Cook family and the small community of Jefferson, New Hampshire, where he spent every summer with Whit. Here, high up in the White Mountains, Sumner felt so much at home that he referred to his favourite family there, the Fosters, as his "cousins" and they returned the compliment, always calling him "cousin" rather than Sumner. Through all the years, Sumner's own family was kept alive in his writing - he became the custodian of the Locke family memory.

At the end of his life, when "all work had been put aside", Sumner was still extending his family. In his final illness, Colette Louis-Joseph, his nurse, became his friend and his confidant. One day, after Colette had attended to him, he said: "What can I call you? I need to call you something more. I know. I will call you 'sister', 'my sister'," ³⁸ which he did thereafter. Colette in turn called Sumner "brother". During one of Sumner's dreaded stays in hospital for treatment, he introduced Colette to the nursing staff as "my sister, whom I've often mentioned to you." ³⁹ There were astounded faces, as Colette was a French Caribbean with a café au lait complexion.

During the last days of Sumner's illness, he had a small stroke

38 Colette Louis-Joseph to me, 1991.

39 Colette Louis-Joseph to me, 1991.

and began to wander in his mind. Thinking he was back in Australia, he spent his waking hours reliving his youth. His memory, which he had always regarded as his “strongest power” remained in his possession until the end, this seems appropriate.

Aged 73, “in his favourite sleeping position”,⁴⁰ Sumner Locke Elliott died in his New York apartment in the early hours of 24 June 1991. But his last flight, a flight of fancy, took place just three years before his death.

FINAL FLIGHT

Travel was always an important aspect of Sumner's life. It meant flight: of body, mind and spirit, out of Australia and away from his past to America, freedom and identity. Then back to Australia to reassert himself, and eventually to England, Europe, and points around the globe. Always, like his mother before him, he was gathering "copy" on such trips, especially characters. He observed and absorbed the customs and traits of those he encountered in every land, in all walks of life, and he stored away their mannerisms, expressions and reactions.

First he travelled as an Australian, then as an American, but as he discovered new places, he began to think that being defined by any citizenship was a constraint. "I really would like to think of myself as a citizen of the world rather than of one specific country," he said towards the end of his life.¹ Sumner's books eventually became his passport to other places, as they were published in nations as diverse as Japan and Mexico, England and Germany, so in a sense he did become a citizen of the world. Whether he was in England, West Germany, or his most cherished city, Rome, or in New Hampshire or New York, Sumner was at last at ease.

¹ SLE to me, 1990.

In November 1988, after attending the London premiere of Margaret Fink's television mini-series of *Edens Lost*, a production which he thought "enchanting and brilliant", Sumner returned to New York with Whit Cook on the Concorde. Buoyed by the success of the television show, Sumner had insisted on taking the three-hour trans-Atlantic service, which was something of a financial splurge. Perhaps he had a premonition that this would be his final flight.

A trip on the supersonic Concorde was an adventure, just as his first flight was - from Australia in 1948, well before jet passenger travel. As on that first flight, he entered the Concorde with some trepidation until he noticed the actor Christopher Reeve asleep nearby. "I'm sure we'll be safe now," Sumner assured Whit, "because we're flying with Superman."² Sumner's final flight was a flight of fancy: he was still the "little movies boy" he had always been, and he had lost none of his whimsical humour. Even throughout his difficult last days of illness, he still managed to be funny and to laugh with friends.

During the final three years of his life Sumner produced his tenth novel and worked on another until he became too ill to continue. His days of physical travel were over, but he journeyed imaginatively until the end, dreaming of Australia.

² Whit Cook to me, 1991.

For Sumner, identity was not defined by where he lived, nor by where he had come from, but eventually by his recognition of his spiritual and imaginative self: Sumner Locke Elliott, the writer.

His writing was his way in life and through it he asserted his identity. His books called out his difference, his distinction from his mother, and they were his ultimate claim of his own name. The importance Sumner placed on claiming his name was declared in his first novel through his closest fictional counterpart, P.S.

So he...said to all their backs fussing with teapots..."Who am I?"

They all laughed... . He was playing a game they thought, and...they said, "You're P.S."

..."No," he said, "I'm not anymore."

Lila put down her cup in the silence.

"...What's my *name*?" he said

...Lila wiped crumbs from her mouth and said in her once-upon-a-time voice: "Well, you're William after your grandfather and Scott for your mother. You're William Scott Marriott."

"No," he said. "I'm Bill."

He...went out through the hall and down the front steps into the deserted garden... . "I'm Bill," he shouted back to the big sad house, to the nextdoor dog, who looked at him, surprised. He climbed on the front fence to be taller and shouted it again.

"I'm Bill!"

(Careful, He Might Hear You p. 339)

Sumner Locke Elliott's books celebrate that most vital of all life's revelations - the discovery of self.

APPENDICES

Through Others' Eyes

I am over seventy, and half the people I knew in Australia and worked with are gone. Doris Fitton and George Edwards and Harry Dearth, the people I knew in radio, and writers, they are nearly all gone. Sometimes at night when I can't sleep, I might think of a play I was in, and it occurs to me, oh my god, she's gone, he's gone...but it doesn't affect me to a great degree. When you talk about friends being the audience to your life, the marvellous thing is that the audience is always being replenished, the next show is coming on. I have always felt that.

(Sumner Locke Elliott,
to Kate Jennings, *Island* (Tasmania), 1991.)

Some of the audience who attended the play that was Sumner Locke Elliott's life here share their own reviews.

Gwen Plumb

(Independent Theatre colleague and friend of 50 years.)

'I'm not sure if I first met Summie at Doris Fitton's Independent Theatre or maybe even earlier in George Edward's radio factory; Summie was still only a boy when he used to act and write for the Edwards radio shows. I used to have to go out to Homebush by train where Edwards recorded all the radio serials and many a time I would miss the train and I'd have to thumb a ride. The world was a different place back then.

Appendix 1

Summie wrote plays for the Independent some of which, when you read them later in life, seemed really appalling. We all had delusions of grandeur back then and one play, I distinctly remember, his *Goodbye to the Music* was especially awful. He generally wrote me into his plays as a dim-witted maid. And I often came on too early or too late. It was bushweek in those days - none of us knew anything about anything: writing, directing, or acting.

Summie was one person who could have a full room and have everyone convulsed with laughter. The Independent was a small company but we could talk all night, sharing a 2/9d bottle of sherry. We were innocents.

Summie and I had fifty years of friendship. It just never ceased - our interest in each other never waned. It was the bond of humour - an enormous bond.'

(Gwen Plumb to me, 1991)

Hal Prince

(Broadway Producer)

'Sumner was the sort of person who radiated such warmth and enthusiasm that you came to believe he was an old friend. I

Appendix 1

wish I'd had more time with him. I recollect that he was an early investor in my shows, most likely through Gloria Safire, an excellent literary agent and a good friend of all of ours. And I remember some days we had in Melbourne when Sumner was promoting a television series based on one of his novels and I was directing *Evita*. We were both staying at The Windsor Hotel. I'm thrilled that his biography is being written. He well deserves the recognition.'

(Hal Prince to me, 1994.)

Gordon Chater

(Theatre friend from Sydney and Fellow New Yorker for years)

'I first remember Sumner when I came to Australia. I was in the Navy and I was demobilised here in 1946. Those were the days when the Minerva Theatre in Sydney was thriving and the late Catherine Robinson was in charge and her partner was Richard Parry and they were great friends of Sumner's.

Almost as soon as I'd arrived, I'd had an introduction to Catherine and it was just one of those very lucky things - I did an audition for a part in a play that was to tour New Zealand and I got the part. And then I was just waiting around until the tour and trying my hand in radio and whatever because all I had was my severance pay. And one night there was a party on the stage at the Minerva, a welcome back party for the Australian actor, John Wood,

Appendix 1

who'd been in Changi gaol in Singapore and also for Sid Piddington. And the only people I knew were from the company I'd been rehearsing with. And Jessica Noad was very sweet to me and she said "Oh, you must meet Sumner Locke Elliott." And I said "How do you do." And he said "How do you do." Then he turned around and within my earshot said: "Oh, another arrogant pommy bastard!" That was the beginning of the friendship.

And in that same theatre, about a year later in 1947, Sumner and I shared a dressingroom in a revue called "Sweet and Low", because he was a marvellous and very funny actor and should have been a director too because he could make the most ordinary things funny.

However we shared a dressingroom and all the drama that accompanies a revue production. And there was an American actress, Fifi Banvard, who'd been very big on Broadway and had come to Australia and stayed. And she was in a sketch, Eureka Stockade, which Sumner had written and which he and I were also in. And during rehearsals, Fifi, who was in her fifties, (I was 24) was always asking me out for coffee. And Sumner finally said, "Why does she always ask *you* for coffee. Why doesn't she ever ask *me*?" Well I didn't know and finally he asked her and she said, "Well Sumner, you're the *mind* but Gordon's the *body*." I was

Appendix 1

concave then. So that was his answer. And we laughed about that one for all the years to come.'

(Gordon Chater to me, 1992.)

Roddy McDowall

(Actor in *American* and friend from television days)

'Sumner is indeed a most happy memory in my life. He was a fellow of such good nature and any time I was fortunate enough to be with him was full of laughter and intelligence. He was most supportive during my early days in New York theater and television. That was in the 1950's and one of the highlights of that period was when I worked under the direction of Arthur Penn in Sumner's *Buy Me Blue Ribbons*...it was such a dandy buoyant comedy.'

While we did not see a great deal of each other in the later years, as we lived so far apart, happily we did keep in touch and any communique was like a ray of sunlight. I thoroughly enjoyed his books and I thoroughly enjoyed his mind.

(Roddy McDowall to me, 1994.)

Irene Thirkell

(Friend of 50 years from the Independent)

'To be with Sumner was to be laughing.'

(Irene Thirkell to me, 1991.)

Elaine Steinbeck

(Close New York friend, widow of John Steinbeck)

I first recall meeting Sumner when I went with my husband John to the literary parties in New York. And we clicked, Sumner and I: an Australian and a Texan. We became very close in later years, sharing the same neighbourhood in Manhattan and I was proud to be his friend.

(Elaine Steinbeck to me, 1992.)

Colette Louis-Joseph

(Nurse, Carer, friend and confidant of his final months)

Suffering is terrible. Sudden death is also. Thanks to God I was around "Brother", as I called Sumner Locke Elliott. I remember sharing very pleasant moments: even though he was sick he managed to be funny almost till the end. He was very special to me and I was very special to him. He was very special in general. Love was very important to him. Love was his first and greatest medicine. "Brother" and I had so many things in common. He was very neat and organised, I am the same way. Like him, I hate sport on TV. I saw the snow at age 31 and I learned that he, too, was 31 when he first saw snow. He was very outspoken and I am no different. Because he grew up in warm Australia and I am from the Carribean, we both did not like the heat that most Americans enjoy:

for us the airconditioning had to be on cool.

He always wanted a sister and he was waiting and waiting. But he got one all right: not only to protect him but also to take care of him. He wanted her older, I was younger: but I did things with my old experience and I guess that made the difference. I always wanted a brother - a little one - I got one when I was 52 and he was over 70 - but still it's never too late.

"Brother" had very beautiful feet and loved beautiful shoes. He always gave me compliments about my shoes. He had a very nice collection of shoes and, after he died, I gave so many of his things away, but I refused to give away his shoes. They meant so much to him. I think I will make bookends with them sometime.

(Colette Louis-Joseph to me, 1994.)

Josephine Jacobsen

(American poet and friend from New Hampshire)

Sumner Locke Elliott was as rewarding to know as to read - it is hard to think of higher praise. His was a most wonderful and complicated mixture of qualities - a scathing wit, together with real gentleness and sensibility, a craftsmanship as unobtrusive as it was admirable. In rereadings, one has the same sense of delight and total involvement. His reputation will continue to spread.

(Josephine Jacobsen to me, 1994.)

Gwenda Schanzle

(Fellow Australian expatriate in New Hampshire)

'Sumner and I would meet during the summer in Whitefield or Sugar Hill, New Hampshire, what we colloquially called the north country. We came together as fellow Australians, not expatriates living in Boston or New York.

Once we were discussing the movie of his book *Careful, He Might Hear You* and I said: "You were that little boy." A shadow passed over his face. Almost with tears in his eyes, he answered: "Yes. And the scene when the child is driven away from the judge's chambers in the big limo brought it all back. That was my feeling of being totally helpless in an adult world." The poignance of that moment and his memory is still with me.'

(Gwenda Schanzle to me, 1994.)

Gloria Kinna

(Australian Locke cousin)

I remember my cousin Sumner as a quiet beautiful young man with lovely brown eyes that looked like my mother's. We used to sit around the radio and listen to the "Lux Radio Theatre" and to other plays that Sumner was in at the time. When I was a little girl, I remember staying with my auntie Lily and going to visit my auntie Blanche with my mother Gwen - who was the daughter of Sumner's uncle Fred Locke.

Appendix 1

Once when we were in Sydney and staying with auntie Lily, I got whooping cough and Sumner was very kind to me, giving me some of his very favourite books. Among these were *Peter Rabbit*, *The Tale of Mrs. Tittlemouse* and *The Tale of Jeremy Fisher*, all by Beatrix Potter. I still have them today - well worn and well loved, read in their turn by my own children. And I still have photos of that young man with the lovely brown eyes - "Locke" eyes like those of my mother that were inherited by my brother Graeme but unfortunately not by me.

(Gloria Kinna to me, 1994.)

Leslie Rees

(Sydney theatre friend, ABC radio producer)

I knew Sumner throughout his career in Australia when he was with the Independent Theatre and writing for radio. We went to the same parties; we mixed with the same people; we were friends.

The first time he came back to Australia from America in 1950, he kept this same group of friends entertained with the most hilarious stories about his early utter failure to make an impression on anyone in the States with either his writing or his acting. Sumner was someone who could put a humorous slant upon

Appendix 1

everything; his stories were always about himself. I formed the impression back then that there are two sorts of people: an egotist, who is self-obsessed in a swanky show-off kind of way; and an egocentric who is constantly interested in himself but not necessarily with self-approval. Sumner was of the latter category: I never heard him praise himself. He was at his best when he told those witheringly funny stories about his own failures and inadequacies, whatever semi-faith in his abilities may have lingered underneath.

My wife Coral and I saw him in New York in 1954 when he was writing for television there and by then he was really "big time", I mean one of the top television writers in the whole country.

I remember we arrived in New York from London on board the Queen Elizabeth and it took all day for the ship to berth and the passengers to pass through immigration - 300 at a time. As it was winter, and snowing, we decided to avoid the crush and wait until the disembarking lines were shorter. We remained comfortable throughout the day, being served meals and drinks on board the ship. And all the while - although we didn't know it - Sumner was waiting on the wharf, where he was no doubt terribly uncomfortable in the winter freeze. But this experience failed to dampen his enthusiasm and he still greeted us with the excitement of a boy - he was so keen to show us New York, a place which by

Appendix 1

then he'd really become a part of. He took us to the Rockefeller Center (skyscrapers), a flash hotel for cocktails, to the Museum of Modern Art and to Macy's Department Store's ladies hosiery section where he pointed out the new seamless stockings for women.

As I was interested to see what I could of television which hadn't then begun broadcasting in Australia, he arranged for us to see "a hot cine" and commandeered a small studio where he screened some of his own TV plays.

Sumner arranged a party to introduce us to all his friends and to return hospitality. Among the guests I met was Eva Marie Saint and there was something about her that distinguished her - an impression of style that made you realise she wasn't just another Hollywood Dame. But my fondest memory of that visit to America was not of the glamour, the excitement of the big city.

After a party out on Long Island at the home of Marie Rubinfeld, my wife, myself, Joyce Lambert and Sumner, all more than adequately enlivened, drove in a car back into Manhattan. I have no idea who was driving certainly not Sumner, as he couldn't drive. And all the way home we all sang Australian songs, on and on into the night, laughing in between, until someone would remember another song from home and we'd all join in.

(Leslie Rees to me, 1994.)

Castle Campbell

(Friend from Texas and New York)

I had known Sumner for many years, but not until Christmas 1974 did he come to West Texas and Dallas to spend the holidays with my family. He complained about the heat as being like Sydney; however after two days, a blue Norther came down from the Rockies and the temperature dropped 65-70 degrees and he said, "Now it is like Christmas should be!" He had long ago become assimilated as a Northern Hemisphere dweller: for him Christmas now meant winter.

My family and friends fell for him right away and his usual good temperament, humor and story telling kept all entertained. He was the first real writer any of them had been around and the first Australian. He has been missed since he left us.

(Castle Campbell to me, 1994.)

Jennifer Foster

(New Hampshire "cousin")

I knew Sumner in Jefferson, New Hampshire, where he spent the summers with Whit Cook. I managed their house and prepared food for their parties and dinners. But like Whit, Sumner never flaunted his achievements as a writer - nor the life he lived in New York among educated and famous people. I remember once telling my daughter, Jessica, that both Sumner and Whit were successful,

Appendix 1

well-known writers - to us they were just nice people. Because of this I considered Sumner humble; he was also kind, warm-hearted and very witty.

He'd come into the kitchen when I was doing dishes or cooking and say: "Now honey, come sit and talk to me," and he'd pat my hand and we'd just chat. He loved to talk. He'd ask me about my life and family - he was always interested in my kids and what they were doing. And he'd tell me about his youth in Australia. But he never told me about the pain of being gay. He was never open about that side of himself with me. (I read *Fairyland* after he died to learn about that.) Instead he told me he could have married different women when he'd been younger - "I had my chances," was what he said.

We became "cousins" while we were picking apples in the small orchard opposite the house. He kissed me on the cheek about something I'd said or done and told me we were "kissing cousins" and my family and I called him "cousin" from then on. He was like one of our own."

(Jennifer Foster to me, NH 1994.)

Tad Mosel

(American Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright, TV dramatist and author.)

In 1953 I was a late-comer to Fred Coe's group of television writers at NBC where I first met Sumner. "Met" hardly seems the

Appendix 1

right word. You just didn't get introduced to Sumner - he was like some marvellous new restaurant, a new Broadway show, or a country you had to see. His voice rose in the room then you discovered him for yourself as he became your own. Sumner knew a greater variety of people than anyone else I've ever known. If you put all the people who loved him in one room, they wouldn't get along. You didn't know *all* of Sumner - he was always a little mysterious. For all his effusiveness, there was something hidden: you could see it in his eyes. It's the most attractive feature anyone can have - not to be fully known.

There is a comic spirit that inhabits some people. Sumner had it. I was one of his best audiences. I would just collapse with laughter. We were very close friends for a long time and we used to have long lunches and it was always the laughter - he told the most tremendously funny stories about people we knew and he'd get the essence of them, but he was never unkind.

After we both left television, we became telephone friends. He was a great listener as well as a great talker. He loved the telephone - I think because at that time he was a very lonely man. Sometimes I'd bump into him in a restaurant where he'd be having supper alone, reading a book. We drifted apart but on an urgent impulse I wrote to him a couple of years before he died and we

renewed our friendship over afternoon teas.

I think Sumner really found his field when he turned to writing prose. Language isn't as important in television plays as it is in novels. He was an expansive writer, held back by the form of the TV play. I always remember Mary Astor saying to him: "Your characters are too thick we can play it *all!*" The novel gave his language a depth that television didn't allow. What was cleverness on television became profundity in his novels. Something that astonished me about his books was his knowledge - he had total recall. All of us - those he'd worked with in TV - turn up in his books: it was the greatest compliment he could pay us. And I was enormously flattered and proud that he dedicated his book *The Man Who Got Away* to me.

(Tad Mosel to me, New Hampshire, 1994.)

Jill Robb

(Australian film producer of *Careful, He Might Hear You*)

I am tremendously in Sumner's debt. With no producing credits to my name, and without Sumner knowing me, he firstly agreed to sell me the Television rights to *Water Under the Bridge*, and then later, by the sheer force of his personality and determination, persuaded Joshua Logan the American producer, to relinquish his 'rights of perpetuity' to *Careful, He Might Hear You*, in

favour of me.

I remember clearly my first excited and nervous meeting with him in New York in 1978, wearing a borrowed fur coat to give me confidence to pitch this admired author the slender reasons to give me, an unknown unproven Australian, the rights to his wonderful novel.

Sumner was a warm, perspicacious, witty man, whose sense of mimicry was fantastic. In that first dinner date he brought to life every major character in *Water Under the Bridge*. His recollection of the nuances of Australian class distinctions of the 30's were resonant and remarkable.

And his generosity in deciding to trust me with his work on that first evening was typical of the man.

One of the clearest memories of the making of *Careful, He Might Hear You* was that every actor had a copy of the novel alongside their script and they referred to it as often as to the screenplay. As one actor said to me..."Everything I want to know about my character is in the pages of this book."

I remember so clearly my nervousness at screening *Careful* for Sumner in New York in 1983 in a small private screening room

Appendix 1

just off Broadway. He'd invited, at my insistence, a few friends to join us, and was both excited and terrified. We sat together and I remember as if it was yesterday, how he grabbed my hand in excitement when one of the major opening credits was FROM THE NOVEL BY SUMNER LOCKE ELLIOTT.

The film was very well received and I remember my sense of enormous relief when I realised he was crying at some scenes and so were most of the rest of the audience.

For the director, Carl Schultz, and the actors, this was the best accolade...if Sumner had been disappointed we'd have been devastated!

Sumner's death has reminded me how precious people and special friendships are, and how easy it is to let time pass and forget to write or call. I am still devastated by his death and the fact that I didn't realise how ill he was till he was gone. Sumner might have made his home in America, but I think he captured part of the Australian psyche that will make him live for a very long time. I miss him.

(Jill Robb to me, 1994.)

John Kingsmill

(Original cast member of *Rusty Bugles* and an Australian writer)

In 1948...I joined the Independent Theatre...and Doris put me

Appendix 1

as an understudy in *The Little Foxes* - she was to play the leading role and Sumner played the son of one of the evil brothers - and somehow I ended up sitting next to him at one of the rehearsals and we were friends almost instantaneously. He was so friendly...but what he wanted more than anything else was somebody to laugh at his laugh lines and I did. He was the first person I'd ever known that spoke in an immensely literate theatrical way. He was highly sophisticated with touches of Noel Coward and Cole Porter about him - he wore a bow tie and often a velvet jacket - and he already, by that time, had tinges of an American accent which probably had something to do with the fact that he was film crazy and all the movies came from America. He projected himself in the theatre as though he were in a wonderful American film and he was playing a role - himself. Sumner, even though, he was a shining star, never boasted - he was brought up to be modest, it was the generation. He didn't fit into the outside world in Australia, so he escaped. Everyone else chose London, he chose New York, a much harder nut to crack. He was an anti-colonialist - he would have got that from his family - and he had come to despise the Australian way of life by 1948. He went to America an absolutely accomplished script writer and I was never surprised that he succeeded in New York television and later as a novelist.

(John Kingsmill to me, 1991.)

Shirley Hazzard

(Australian novelist and fellow New Yorker)

Sumner was a current running through our lives - my husband Francis [Steegmuller] loved him as much as I did. Whenever I was talking to Sumner on the phone, Francis could tell by the laughter and the tears running down my face. Sumner was the wittiest man I have ever known. We actually met on the phone, just before Sumner left for the Adelaide Writers' Week in 1974. I was to go as well but had cancelled my trip just before he rang to suggest we might travel to Australia together. He promised to phone again when he returned and he did, and came to afternoon tea to tell me all the stories from his time in Adelaide. The one I remember most vividly concerned an esteemed Asian gentleman who was one of the group of writers taking part in the various events of the festival. Sumner had noticed that this man was often on his own and that he didn't speak much English. As Sumner always felt sympathy for anyone left out, he sat next to the man on the bus for one of the outings and made a great effort to be friendly. The man, who had represented himself as an academic and writer, I think, from China, took a shine to Sumner and sought his company on all future group activities. Before the week was over, however, it was discovered that Sumner's 'shadow' was in fact an imposter who was sent home in disgrace. "So, of all the people I could have attached myself to," Sumner told me, "I had to pick the one person who, in

Appendix 1

the history of the Adelaide Writers' Week, was found to be a charlatan!" But that was Sumner, you see, led by a kind heart.

(Shirley Hazzard to me, 1994.)

THE BOOKS

Careful, He Might Hear You (1963)
Victor Gollancz Ltd, London. Also
published in USA by Harper & Row,
New York.

Some Doves and Pythons (1966)
Victor Gollancz Ltd, London. First
published in USA by Harper & Row,
New York,

Edens Lost (1970) Michael Joseph Ltd,
London. First published in USA by
Harper & Row, New York.

The Man Who Got Away (1973)
Michael Joseph Ltd, London.

Going (1975) The Macmillan Company
of Australia Pty Ltd, Melbourne and
Sydney. First published by Harper and
Row, New York.

Water Under the Bridge (1977) The
Macmillan Company of Australia Pty
Ltd, Melbourne, Sydney. First
published by Simon & Schuster, NYC
and London, 1977.

Signs of Life (1982) Penguin Books,
Australia. First published in USA by
Ticknor & Fields, 1981.

About Tilly Beamis (1984) Pan Books
Australia Pty Ltd, (Parvanne).

Waiting For Childhood (1988) Pan
Books Australia Pty Ltd, Sydney. First
published in USA by Harper & Row,
New York, 1987.

Appendix 2

Fairyland (1991) Pan Macmillan Publishers, Australia. First published in USA by Harper & Row, 1990.

Radio Days (1993) First published by Angus & Robertson, an Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, Sydney.

THE PLAYS

First produced at The Independent Theatre, Sydney

- 1937 *The Cow Jumped Over the Moon* (Unpublished)
 (Also produced at The Call Board Theatre, Hollywood, 1938)
- 1939 *Interval* (published by Melbourne University Press, 1942)
- 1941 *Little Sheep Run Fast* (Unpublished)
- 1942 *Goodbye to the Music* (Unpublished)
- 1943 *Your Obedient Servant* (Unpublished)
- 1946 *Invisible Circus* (Unpublished)
- 1948 *Rusty Bugles* (published by Currency Press, Sydney, 1980)

First produced at The Empire Theatre, Broadway, New York.

- 1951 *Buy Me Blue Ribbons* Acting Edition published 1952 by
 Dramatist Play Service Inc (NY)

THE TELEVISION PLAYS

1949

“Wicked is the Vine” *Kraft*. Directed by Stanley Quinn N.B.C.
(Cast: Margaret Philips, Ron Randell, Margerie Maude)

“The Crater” *Lights Out*. N.B.C.
(Cast: Richard Fraser)

“Pengallen’s Bell” *Lights Out*. N.B.C. Directed by Delbert Mann.
(Cast: Neva Patterson)

“Of Human Bondage” *Studio One*. C.B.S. Directed by Paul Nickel.
(Cast: Charlton Heston, Felicia Montelegre, Faith Brook)

1950

“Jane Eyre” (A) *Studio One*. C.B.S. Directed by Franklyn Shaffner.
(Cast: Charlton Heston, Priscilla Gillette, Joan Wetmore, Viola Roach)

“The Willow Cabin” (A) *Studio One*. C.B.S. Directed by Paul Nickel
(Cast: Charlton Heston, Priscilla Gillette, Joan Wetmore)

“The Trap” (A) *Studio One* C.B.S. Directed by Yul Brynner.
(Cast: E.G. Marshall, Herbert Berghof)

“The Passionate Pilgrim” (A) *Studio One*. C.B.S. Directed by Paul Nickel

“Shadow of a Man” (A) *Studio One*. C.B.S. Directed by Paul Nickel
(Cast: Ilona Massey)

1951

“Little Women” (A) *Studio One*. C.B.S. Directed by Lela Swift.
(Cast: Mary Sinclair, Nancy Marshard, June Dayton, Kent Smith, John Baragrey, Elizabeth Patterson, Richard Purdy, Una O’Connor.)

“Old Jim’s Other Woman” *The Web*. C.B.S. (Cast: Joanna Roos.)

“The Rose Garden” (A) *Suspense*. C.B.S. Directed by Robert Stevens.
(Cast: Mildred Natwick, Estelle Winwood.)

“The Devil in Velvet” (A) *Studio One*. Directed by Paul Nickel.
(Cast: Phyllis Kirk, Whit Bissel, Joan Wetmore.)

1952

“Miss Hargreaves” (A) *Studio One*. C.B.S. Directed by Franklyn Shaffner.
(Cast: Mary Wickes, Robert Duke, Phillippa Bevans)

“Dusty Portrait” *Philco*. N.B.C. Directed by Delbert Mann.
(Cast: John Newland, Audra Lindley, Rita Vale, Ronald Adam.)

“We Were Children” *Philco*. N.B.C. Directed by Gordon Duff.
(Cast: James Gregory, Polly Rowles, Joan Wetmore, Ann Burr.)

“The Thin Air” *Philco*. N.B.C. Directed by Vincent J. Donehue.
(Cast: Jo Van Fleet, Scott Forbes, Joan Loring, Francis Compton.)

1953

“Elegy” (A) *Philco*. N.B.C. Directed by Delbert Mann.
(Cast: Charlton Heston, Constance Ford, William Prince, Marian Seldes.)

“Wish on the Moon” *Philco*. N.B.C. Directed by Gordon Duff.
(Cast: Betty Field, Ward Costello, Vicki Cummings, Muriel Williams, Jack Klugman.)

“Fade Out” *Philco*. N.B.C. Directed by Delbert Mann.
Jessie Royce Landis, Sidney Blackmer, Hedda Hopper, David White.)

“The Girl with the Stopwatch” *Philco*. N.B.C. Directed by Arthur Penn.
(Cast: Betty Miller, Martin Brooks, Lois Wilson, Brett Somers, Bert Thorn.)

1954

“Panic” (A) *Philco*. N.B.C. Directed by Vincent Donehue
(Cast: Gene Lyons, Felicia Montelegre, Barbara Baxley, Betty Sinclair.)

“Buy Me Blue Ribbons” *Philco*. N.B.C. Directed by Arthur Penn.
(Cast: Roddy McDowall, Enid Markey, Gail Page, Nathalie Shaffer, Cynthia Latham, Phillipa Bevans, Geoffrey Lumb.)

"The King and Mrs. Candle" (First) *Philco*. N.B.C. Directed by Arthur Penn.

(Cast: Cyril Ritchard, Joan Greenwood, Irene Manning, Helen Raymond.)

"Friday the Thirteenth" *Philco*. N.B.C. Directed by Arthur Penn.

(Cast: Mark Roberts, Brett Somers, Philip Abbott, Julie Follansbee.)

"Time Bomb" (A) *Philco*. N.B.C. Directed by Robert Mulligan.

(Cast: John Ireland, Nancy Kelly, Katherine Bard, David White.)

1955

"Run, Girl, Run" *Philco*. N.B.C. Directed by Robert Mulligan.

(Cast: Lee Ann Merriwether, Mary Astor, Lyn McCarthy, Ann Shoemaker, Robert Simon.)

"The Women" (A) Colour. *Producer's Showcase*. N.B.C. Directed by Vincent J. Donehue

"Beloved Stranger" *Philco*. N.B.C. Directed by Robert Mulligan.

(Cast: Hugh Reilly, Constance Ford, Maureen Hurley, Margaret Hamilton.)

"Peter Pan" (A) Colour *Producer's Showcase*. N.B.C. Jerome Robbins and Clark Jones.

(Cast: Mary Martin, Cyril Ritchard, Kathy Nolan, Margalo Gilmore.)

"The King and Mrs. Candle" (Second) Colour. N.B.C. *Producer's Showcase*. Directed by Arthur Penn.

(Cast: Cyril Ritchard, Joan Greenwood, Richard Haydn, Irene Manning, Theodore Bikel, Donald Marye.) Music by Moose Charlap, Choreography by Tony Charmoli.)

"Daisy, Daisy" *Playwrights 56*. N.B.C. Directed by Arthur Penn.

(Cast: Tom Ewell, Jane Wyatt, Edith Neiser, Lou Vernon)

1956

"You and Me and the Gatepost" *Playwrights 56*. N.B.C. Directed by Delbert Mann.

(Cast: Arlene Francis, Mary Astor, George Grizzard, Paula Laurence, Patricia Smith, John Emery, David White.)

"Keyhole" *Playwrights 56*. N.B.C. Directed by Fred Coe.

(Cast: E.G. Marshall, Lee Grant, Meg Mundy, John Sutton, Maureen Hurley, Peter Pagan.)

1957

"Love at Fourth Sight" *Studio One*. C.B.S. Directed by Robert Mulligan.

(Cast: Gisele MacKenzie, William Redfield, Maggie Smith, Evelyn Varden, Alice Ghostley.) Music by Gene Sines.

"Whereabouts Unknown" (Remake of "The Thin Air") *Kaiser*. N.B.C.

Directed by Paul Bogart.

(Cast: Kim Hunter, McDonald Carey, Jan Sterling, Barbara Barrie, Norah Howard, Elspeth March, Nydia Westman.)

"Babe in the Woods" *Studio One*. C.B.S. Directed by Tom Donovan.

(Cast: Jody McCrea, Betty Furness, Murray Mathieson, Tammy Grimes, Nancy Rennet, Evan Evans.)

"Mrs. Gilling and the Skyscraper" *Alcoa*. N.B.C. Directed by Daniel Petrie.

(Cast: Helen Hayes, Jack Klugman, Leureen MacGrath, Wilfred Hyde-White, Joanna Roos.)

1958

"The Laughing Willow" *Studio One*. N.B.C. Directed by Tom Donovan.

(Hollywood)

(Cast: Nina Foch, Lee Bowman, Jane Wyatt, Richard Denning, Lee Patrick.)

"We Haven't Seen Her Lately" (A) *Kraft*. N.B.C. Directed by Paul Bogart.

(Cast: George C.Scott, Angela Thornton, Louis Edmonds, Mary Finney.)

"The Count of Monte Cristo" (A) *Dupont*. C.B.S. Directed by Sidney Lumet.

(Cast: Hurd Hatfield, Colleen Dewhurst, Elizabeth Sellars, Torin Thatcher, Max Adrian, Douglas Campbell, George Voscovec, John Colocos.)

"The Winslow Boy" (A) *Dupont*. C.B.S. Directed by Alex Segal.

(Cast: Frederick March, Florence Eldredge, Siobhan McKenna, Noel Wilman, Peter Bathurst, Jean Campbell.)

1959

“The Grey Nurse Said Nothing” *Playhouse 90*. C.B.S. Directed by Ron Winston. (Hollywood)

(Cast: Angela Lansbury, Ann Todd, Hugh Griffith, Pat Comi, Norah Howard, Angela Thornton.)

(Remade by A.T.N. Channel 7, Sydney,. 1960.)

“Hedda Hopper’s Hollywood” (Hollywood) *Special*. N.B.C. Directed by William Corrigan.

1960

“The Prisoner of Zenda” (A) *Dupont*. C.B.S. Directed by Alex Segal.

(Cast: Christopher Plummer, Inger Stevens, Farley Granger, Nancy Wickwire, John Williams, Philip Bozco.)

1961

“I Heard You Calling Me” *Way Out*. C.B.S. Directed by Daniel Petrie.

(Cast: Constance Ford, Anthony Dawson, Angela Thornton. Jean Campbell.)

“Notorious” (A) *Selznick*. N.B.C. Directed by Jack Smight.

(Cast: Joseph Cotton, Barbara Rush, George Grizzard, Cathleen Nesbit, Edward Andrews, Mark O’Daniels.)

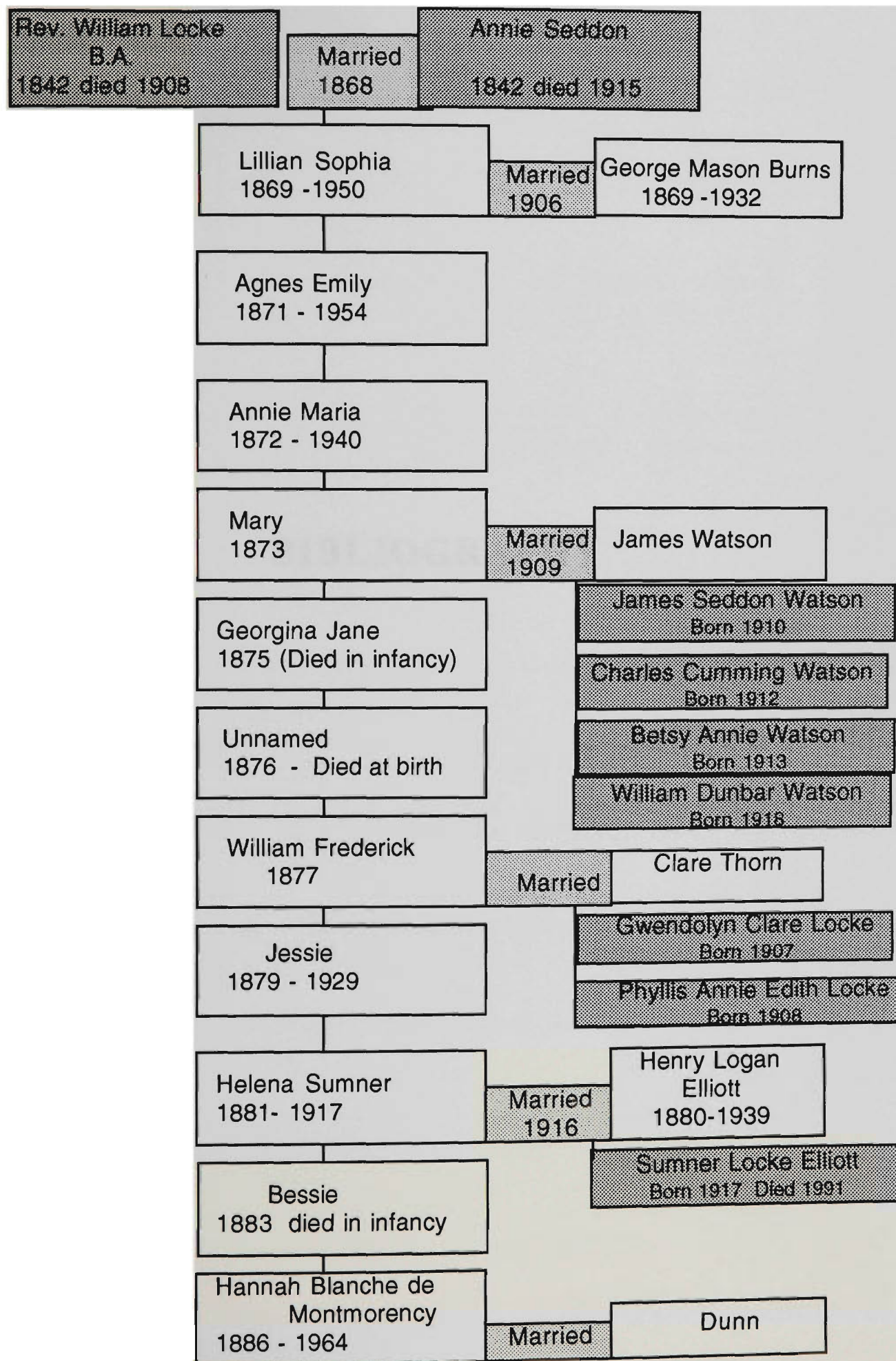
1962

“Spellbound” (A) *Selznick*. N.B.C. Directed by Paul Bogart.

(Cast: Maureen O’Hara, Hugh O’Brien, Oscar Homolka, Paul McGrath.)

(A) denotes Adaptation.

Locke Family Tree



BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books

- Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 5th ed. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1985.
- Baker, Candida. *Yacker 2*. Sydney: Pan Books Australia Pty Ltd, 1987.
- Bakhtin, M. M. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992.
- Bairn, Bede, and Serle, Geoffrey, eds. *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. Vol. 10 1891-1939. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1986.
- Blain, Virginia, Clements, Patricia, and Grundy, Isobel, eds. *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English*. London: B.T. Batsford Ltd, 1990.
- Carroll, Lewis. *The Annotated Alice*. Ed. Martin Gardner. London: Penguin Books, 1970.
- Dundy, Elaine. *Finch, Bloody Finch*. London: Methuen, 1987.
- Dutton, Geoffrey, ed. *Modern Australian Writing*. Manchester: Collins, The Fontana Library, 1966.
- Elliott, Sumner Locke. *About Tilly Beamis*. Sydney: Pan Books Australia Pty Ltd, (Parvanne), 1984.
- . *Buy Me Blue Ribbons*. Acting Edition, New York: Dramatist Play Service, 1952.
- . *Careful, He Might Hear You*. London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1963. Also London: The Reader' Digest Condensed Book Edition, 1964.
- . *Edens Lost*. London: Michael Joseph Ltd, 1970.
- . *Going*. Melbourne and Sydney: The Macmillan Company of Australia Pty Ltd, 1975.

- . *Interval*. 2nd ed. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1947.
- . *Signs of Life*. Melbourne: Penguin Books, Australia, 1982.
- . *Some Doves and Pythons*. London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1966.
- . *The Man Who Got Away*. London: Michael Joseph Ltd, 1973.
- . *Water Under the Bridge*. Melbourne and Sydney: The Macmillan Company of Australia Pty Ltd, 1977.
- . *Waiting For Childhood*. Sydney: Pan Books Australia Pty Ltd, 1988.
- . *Fairyland*. Sydney: Pan Books Australia Pty Ltd, 1991.
- . *Radio Days*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, an Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 1993.
- . *Rusty Bugles*. Sydney: Currency Press, 1980.
- Fitton, Doris. *Not Without Dust and Heat*. Sydney: Harper & Row, 1981.
- Foster, Hal, ed. *Postmodern Culture*. London: Pluto Press, 1989.
- Fox, Len, ed. *Dream at a Graveside*. "The History of the Fellowship of Australian Writers 1928-1988". Sydney: The Fellowship of Australian Writers, 1989.
- Frame, Janet. *To The Is-land*. London: Paladin Grafton Books, 1987.
- Green, H.M. *A History of Australian Literature*. 2 Vols. Revised edition by Dorothy Green. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1984.
- Halliwell's Film Goers and Video Viewers Companion*. London: Palidin Publications, 1994.

- Locke, Sumner. *In Memoriam: Sumner Locke*. Eds: Katharine Susannah Prichard et al. Melbourne: Sydney J. Endacott, 1921.
- . *Mum Dawson, Boss*. 11th ed. Sydney: NSW Bookstall Co. Ltd, 1921.
- . *The Dawson's Uncle George*. Sydney: NSW Bookstall Co. Ltd, 1914.
- . *Samaritan Mary*. New York: Henry Holt, 1916.
- . *Skeeter Farm Takes a Spell*. Sydney: NSW Bookstall Co. Ltd, 1915.
- Luck, Peter. *A Time to Remember*. Richmond, Victoria: William Heinemann, Australia, 1988.
- Marr, David. *Patrick White: A Life*. Sydney: Random House Australia, 1991.
- Olivier, Laurence. *Confessions of an Actor*. London: Coronet, 1982.
- Packer, Clyde. *No Return Ticket*. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1984.
- Park, Ruth. *Fishing in the Styx*. Melbourne: Penguin, 1994.
- Plumb, Gwen. *Plumb Crazy*. Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 1994.
- Prichard, Katharine Susannah. *The Pioneers*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1916.
- Programme. Sumner Locke Elliott's *Invisible Circus*. New Theatre Production. Sydney Festival of Arts. Sydney: 1992.
- Rees, Leslie. *A History of Australian Drama*. Vol. 1: "The Making of Australian Drama 1830s to 1960s". Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1978.
- Searle, Betty. *Silk & Calico: Class, Gender and The Vote*. Sydney: Hale and Iremonger, 1988.

Souvenir Booklet: *40th Birthday - Independent Theatre 30th May 1930- 30th May,1970* . Sydney: 1970.

Stewart, Walter. *The Early History of Bacchus Marsh Schools*. Maryborough: The Dominion Press Hedges and Bell P/L Maryborough for the Bacchus Marsh & District Historical Society, 1983.

Wilde, William H., Hooton, Joy, and Andrews, Barry. *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1986.

Original Manuscripts, Documents, Scrapbooks, Journals and Unpublished Letters

Held in Sumner Locke Elliott Collection, Mugar Memorial Library, Boston University, Boston, Mass, USA.

Court Documents. Proceeding of the Supreme Court of New South Wales. Case No. 4309. "Guardianship of infant Sumner Locke Elliott". July-August, 1927.

Elliott, Henry Logan. Letters. 1917-1921.

---. Telegram. Ballan, Victoria: 17 Oct 1938.

Elliott, Sumner Locke. Juvenilia.

Stories: "The Flame". "Mrs. Jonquil's Great Idea". "After a Substantial Reward".

Plays: "Twins of Twinmount". "Storm". "The Doctor's Debtors". "Lady Lydia". "Dynella Comes to Dinner".

Poems: "Corner of Glenara Garden".

---. Collection of Childhood Playbills.

---. Scrapbook, 1917-1948.

---. "The Cracked Lens". Original ms. Edited version published in *Harper's*, 1960, under the title "Hedda, Hollywood and Me".

---. Television Plays. Original scripts. 1949-1962. Including: "Whereabouts Unknown", "The King and Mrs. Candle",

“Keyhole”, “The Thin Air”, “Mrs. Gilling and the Skyscraper”, “The Grey Nurse Said Nothing.”, “Daisy, Daisy”, “We Were Children”, “Love at Fourth Sight”, “Beloved Stranger”, “I Heard You Calling Me”, “You and Me and the Gatepost”, “Friday the Thirteenth”, and “Wicked is the Vine”.

---. “The Sameness and the Difference: Writing in two countries for four mediums”. Original ms. Address to Adelaide Writers’ Week, Festival of Arts, Adelaide, Australia. 13 March 1974.

Locke, Agnes Letters. 1948-1954.

Locke, Blanche. Letters. 1948-1963.

---. Poetry. 1915-1918.

Locke, Helena Sumner. Journal, America, 1917.

---. Letters. 1912-1917.

---. Original manuscripts of poetry, plays and short stories. 1908-1917.

---. Scrapbook. Including the following press clippings. *The Detroit Free Press* (March 1916); *Newark Morning News* (10 March, 1916); *The Living Age*, Boston (8 April, 1916); *The Evening Mail*, New York (15 March, 1916); *Christian Endeavour World* (22 April, 1916); *Boston Herald* (20 March, 1916); *The World*, New York (11 March, 1916); *The Pittsburgh Gazette Time* (4 March, 1916); *Democrat & Chronicle*, Rochester NY (3 April, 1916); *Washington Star* (18 March, 1916); *San Francisco Chronicle* (24 April, 1916).

---. Unsigned Will (invalid)

Locke, Lilian. Letters. 1948-1950.

---. Poetry. 1910-1934.

White, Patrick. Letters. 1973-1978.

Held in The Miles Franklin Papers, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia.

Elliott, Sumner Locke. Letter to Miles Franklin in Carlton, Sydney.
New York: 7 December, 1948.

---. Letter to Miles Franklin in Carlton, Sydney. New York: 26
November, 1951.

Franklin, Miles. Letter to Sumner Locke Elliott in New York.
Sydney: 31 October 1948.

Held in private collection of Ms. Gloria Kinna, Qld.

Locke Family. Family documents and memorabilia.

Held in private collection of Miss Gwen Plumb, Kirribilli, Sydney.

Elliott, Sumner Locke. Letters. America. New York: 1948-1960.

Held in private collection of Miss Irene Thirkell, Double Bay, Sydney.

Elliott, Sumner Locke. Letters. World War II. Country New South
Wales and Mataranka, Northern Territory: 1941-1944.

---. Letters. America. Hollywood and New York: 1948-1978.

Held in private collection of Ms. Sharon Clarke, Bonnet Bay, Sydney.

Carey, Peter. Letters. New York: 1994.

Elliott, Sumner Locke. Letters. New York: 1990-91.

Hazzard, Shirley. Letters. New York and Italy: 1991-1994.

Kenny, Janice. Letter. Tanja, New South Wales: 1991.

Kinna, Gloria. Letter. Qld: 1994.

Louis-Joseph, Colette. Letter. New York: 1994.

McDowall, Roddy. Letters. Los Angeles: 1994.

Prince, Hal. Letters. New York: 1994.

Robb, Jill. Letter. Melbourne: 1994.

Schanzle, Gwenda. Letter. Boston: 1994.

Watson, Bill and Ruby. Letters. Adelaide: 1992.

Held in Archives of Como Hotel, Como

Historical Documents of The Como Hotel, held by the publican.

Newspaper, Magazine and Journal Articles

ABC Weekly. Sydney: 18 Nov 1944.

---. Sydney: 19 Nov 1944.

Akerman, Piers. "Prize for a prodigal who didn't come back". *The Age*. Melbourne: 28 Nov 1977.

Australian Theatre Review and Preview. Sydney: Oct 1943.

Australian Women's Weekly. Sydney: 10 Feb 1948.

---. Sydney: 10 Feb 1964.

---. Sydney: Jan 1964.

Beresford, Bruce. "Obituary Notice: Sumner Locke Elliott (1917-1991)". London: *The Independent*. 29 June 1991.

Blazey, Peter. "Heterosexuals given the whip hand". Review of *Australian Gay and Lesbian Writing: An Anthology*. Ed. Robert Dessaix. Weekend Review, *The Australian*. Sydney: 18-19 Sept. 1993.

Broadcasting Business. Sydney: 9 March 1939.

- Bulletin*. "Obituary Notice: Sumner Locke". Sydney: 18 Oct 1917.
- . Sydney: 11 Dec 1935.
- . Sydney: 17 Aug 1938.
- . Sydney: Jan, 1947.
- . "PS: We Hear You", Literary Supplement. Sydney: 27 Dec 1983.
- Christian Science Monitor*. Boston: Dec 1930.
- Courier Mail*. Brisbane: 1 Nov 1938.
- Daily Mirror*. "Murder Play at Minerva". Sydney: 30 Oct 1945.
- Daily Telegraph*. "Genius is Reborn". Sydney: Dec 1931.
- . Sydney: 1 Nov 1937.
- Eccles, Jeremy. "Careful He Remembers". *Sydney Morning Herald*. Sydney: 27 Feb 1989.
- Elliott, Sumner Locke. *The Broadcaster*. Perth: 17 Jan 1948.
- . *Daily Telegraph*. Sydney: 26 Oct 1948.
- . "You Must Like Your Work". Australian Writers in Profile: 12. Sydney: *Southerly*.
- . "Where are all my books?". *The Australian Author*. Spring Issue. Oct 1974.
- . "The Man of 1000 Voices". *Bulletin*. Sydney: 22 July 1980.
- . "Against Nostalgia". *The Writer*. Boston: The Writer Inc, Publishers, 1988
- Evans, Trish. "Sumner of the Three Dolls". *The Age*. Melbourne: 4 Sept 1980.

- Evening News*. "Obituary Notice: Sumner Locke". Sydney: 18 Oct 1917.
- Everyone's Journal*. Sydney: June 1936.
- Field, Michelle. "Steinbeck's secret ambition". *The Australian*. Sydney: 2-3 July 1994.
- Frizell, Helen. "Author home for a taste of Australia". *Sydney Morning Herald*. Sydney: 1 April 1974.
- Herald*. Melbourne: 19 Dec 1916.
- Herald Tribune*. New York: 29 May 1954.
- . New York: Nov 1958.
- Home Beautiful*. Sydney: April 1935.
- Hunter, James. "Success: being able to afford to say 'no'." *The Age*. Melbourne: 5 Nov 1977.
- Hutton, Nan. "Australian with an East Side accent". *The Age*. Melbourne: 23 March 1974.
- Jennings, Kate. "Pleasing Yourself". *Island*. Hobart, Tasmania: Spring, 1991.
- Lambert, Joyce. "He's a New Yorker Now". *Woman*. Sydney: 24 July 1950.
- Macmillan, Sally. "Sumner Locke Elliott: The fuse that sparks a masterpiece". *Weekend Australian*. Sydney: 8-9 Feb 1986.
- My Lady's Journal*. Mosman, Sydney: 6 Dec 1930.
- New York World Telegram and Sun*. New York: 11 Dec 1953.
- Nicholls, Jane. "Signs of Living: About Sumner Locke Elliott". *FOLLOW me*. Sydney: June 1988.
- Orange Leader*. Orange, NSW: 17 July 1934.

- Post*. "Young Playwright Visits North". Cairns, Qld: Aug 1946.
- Prichard, Katharine Susannah. "Two of a Kind - Yet Different: Australian Girls who have succeeded". *Everybody's Journal*. London: 6 Jan 1915.
- . *The Book Lover*. Melbourne: 1 July 1916.
- Radio Pictorial of Australia*. Sydney: Oct 1935.
- . Sydney: 1 July 1941.
- . Sydney: Aug 1944.
- Reddy, Muriel. New York: "The years are sweet for Sumner". *Sun*. Sydney: 2 Jan 1988.
- Rees, Leslie. *Sydney Morning Herald*. Sydney: 25 Oct 1948.
- Stafford, Jean. "Battle for a Child's Love". *Cosmopolitan*. New York: April 1963.
- Sun*. "As the Twig is Bent". Sydney: 20 April 1930.
- . Sydney: 9 July 1934.
- . Sydney: 10 Aug 1938.
- Sunday Sun*. Sydney ; 15 July 1934.
- . Social column. Sydney: 17 Feb 1935.
- Sunday Telegraph*. "Bourgeois at home - and abroad". Sydney: Oct 1945.
- Sydney Morning Herald*. "Children's Matinee, 'Cox and Box' and 'Pinafore'". Sydney: Nov 1931.
- . Sydney: 26 Oct 1948.
- . "Author home for a taste of Australia". Sydney: 1 April 1974.

---. "The Novel Approach". *The Guide*. Sydney: 27 Feb 1989.

The Age. Melbourne: 16 April 1964.

The Argus. 10 Oct 1941.

The Courier. Brisbane: 17 Oct 1937.

The Listener In. Sydney: 8-24 Nov 1944.

The New Yorker. New York: 27 Oct 1951.

The Troppo Tribune. Mataranka, Northern Territory: 26 June 1944.

The Weekend Australian. "Review". Sydney: 16-17 June 1990.

The World. Sydney: Dec 1931.

Times. Los Angeles: 3 July 1938.

Turner, George. "A quietly triumphant death at the end". *The Age*.
Melbourne: 12 April 1975.

Wilson, Bruce. "The hindquarters with the benefit of hindsight".
Sun. Sydney: 11 March 1978.

Wireless Weekly. Sydney: 30 May 1935.

---. Sydney: 26 June 1941.

Woman. Sydney: Sept 1935.

Wyndham, Susan. "Careful, he's made himself heard at last". *The
Weekend Australian*. Sydney: 16-17 June 1990.

Published and Broadcast Interviews

Palmer, Jenny. "PS: We Hear You - Sumner Locke-Elliott: An interview in New York". *Bulletin* 27 Dec 1983

Plumb, Gwen. "An interview with Sumner Locke Elliott". *The Gwen Plumb Show*, Sydney Radio 2UW, 1974.

Unpublished Interviews

Clarke, Sharon. Interviews with Ted Cary, Como, Sydney, 1991-4.

---. Interview with Castle Campbell, New York, 1994.

---. Interview with Gordon Chater, Sydney, 1992.

---. Interviews with Whit Cook New York and New Hampshire, 1991-1995.

---. Interview with Howard and Margot Craven, Sydney, 1991.

---. Interviews with Sumner Locke Elliott, 1990.

---. Interviews with Jennifer Foster, Jefferson, New Hampshire, 1991-1994.

---. Interview with Eileen Grieves, Sydney, 1991.

---. Interview with Shirley Hazzard, New York, 1994.

---. Interview with Gordon Kimberley, Coffs Harbour, 1991.

---. Interview with John Kingsmill, Sydney, 1991.

---. Interview with Gloria Kinna, Qld, 1991.

---. Interviews with Colette Louis-Joseph, New York, 1991 and 1994.

---. Interview with Gwen Loxton, Cronulla, Sydney, 1992.

- . Interview with Tad Mosel, New Hampshire, 1994.
- . Interview with Gwen Plumb, Wollongong, 1991.
- . Interview with Leslie Rees, Sydney, 1994.
- . Interview with Carolyn Ross, Sydney, 1992.
- . Interview with Gwenda Schanzle, Boston, 1994.
- . Interview with Peter Seddon, Sydney, 1991.
- . Interview with Heather Shugg, Bacchus Marsh, 1992.
- . Interview with Elaine Steinbeck, New York 1991.
- . Interviews with Heather Stewart, Sydney, 1990, 1991, 1992.
- . Interview with Irene Thirkell, Double Bay, Sydney, 1990.
- . Interview with Archie Tyrrell, 1991.
- . Interview with Doug Watson, Bacchus Marsh, 1992.

De Berg, Hazel. "Interview with Sumner Locke Elliott" Taped Interview No. 505, National Library, Canberra, Australia, 1970.

Tipping, Richard Kelly. "An Interview with Sumner Locke Elliott, New York, Dec 1985.
