

CHAPTER 2:

**NICHOLAS HASLUCK:
LIFE AND WORKS**

CHAPTER 2:

NICHOLAS HASLUCK: LIFE AND WORKS

1) CHILDHOOD AND EARLY LIFE:

Nicholas Paul Hasluck was born on 17 October 1942 in Canberra, Australia. However, he spent much of his childhood in the Perth suburb of Claremont and completed his junior certificate at Perth's Scotch College. At the age of 15 he returned to Canberra with his father who was serving as a minister in the Menzies government. He completed his secondary education at Canberra Grammar School in 1959. In 1960 Hasluck returned to Perth from Canberra and enrolled in the faculty of Law at the University of Western Australia. After graduating in 1963 he spent nine months in articles to David Anderson and, then, he decided to travel to England where he enrolled at Oxford University and began studying for his Bachelor of Civil Law. In 1966 he graduated from Oxford and married Sally Anne. He got a job there working for the legal publishers Sweet and Maxwell, as editor of the Criminal Appeal Reports. Later, he became sub-editor of 'The Police Review', the journal of the British police force. This experience kindled his literary aspirations. The work also broadened his reach giving him a deeper understanding of how the law was laced with human-interest dramas and stories.

Nicholas is the second child of Sir Paul Hasluck, former federal politician and Governor General, and Dame Alexandra Hasluck, a distinguished historian, but became heir to Sir Paul following his brother's sudden death in 1973. His parents were both life-long writers and had created Freshwater Bay Press in the late 1930s. Nicholas revived this dormant press in the 1970s due to his interest in the local publications of limited editions. This reflects what Max Harris called the Haslucks--- "a writing family" and one that is grounded in local community, but with international impact. Sir Paul Hasluck who spent his life as a journalist, historian author and politician was a major influence in young Nicholas' life. The exposure to politics and government that Sir Paul gave to his son had a lasting impact. Through his father's involvement in Papua New Guinea, Nicholas was able to witness firsthand the benefits which government activity can have on the development of a new country. Years later this experience was to stimulate his interest in local government and constitutional law. In the early 1970s he became involved in the Liberal Party to which his father had served with great distinction. Initially, he envisaged that he would seek pre-selection for a government seat. However, his political aspirations were pushed into the background when in 1978 he was appointed Deputy Chair of the Australia Council.

2) WRITING CAREER:

Nicholas Hasluck started writing at school, producing poetry and essays for school magazine and was first professionally published in 1964 with a poem appearing in *Westerly* literary magazine. Since then, his works have appeared in various magazines. Today, he is regarded as one of Western Australia's most eminent authors. His ability to combine his legal career with a second life as an eminent and prize-winning author has made him truly remarkable. This combination of literature and law was evident in his undergraduate days in a volume of recollections of the University of Western Australia commissioned by the University for its Anniversary in 1988.

Hasluck is a prolific author of fiction, poems, essays, short stories and plays. His gift for writing was formally recognised in 1984 when he won *The Age* Book of the Year Award for *The Bellarmine Jug*. In 1990 he shared the *Western Australian Premier's Award* –with Tom Winton's *Cloudstreet* – for *The Country without Music*. His novels *Truant State* and *The Country without Music* were shortlisted for *The Miles Franklin Award* in 1987 and 1991 respectively. He has to his credit ten works of fiction, two collections of short stories, four volumes of poetry and four books of essays. Thus, as a novelist, a former editor, a member of the Order of

Australia and the son of a Governor-General, Nicholas Paul Hasluck is no ordinary man.

Hasluck's wealth of experience in literature was recognised and he was made a member of the General Division of the Order of Australia for services to literature in 1986. He was a member of the committee of Management of the Australian Society of Authors from 1990 to 1993. He served as Chair of the Literature Board of Australia Council from 1998 to 2001. He has also been Deputy Chair of the Western Australia Academy of Performing Arts, a member of the Copyright Law Review Committee Experts Group and the Western Australia Arts Council. On 14th March 2006 Nicholas Hasluck stepped into the Chair of the Commonwealth Writer's Prize (CWP) Advisory Committee. Throughout his life Nicholas, like his parents, is committed to the encouragement and support of authors and the publication of their works. He was a founding member of the Association for the Study of Australasia. His other activities in this field include leading a delegation of Australian writers to China in 1981, a period as writer in residence at the National University of Singapore in 1985.

3) LEGAL CAREER:

Nicholas Hasluck has lived a parallel life in the legal profession, having been admitted to legal practice in Western

Australia in 1968. His distinction in an evolving legal career saw him take silk in 1988 when he became a Queen's Counsel and then he served as a President of the Western Australia Equal Opportunity Tribunal for a decade from 1990. He was Deputy Chair of the Australia Council from 1978 to 1984. On 1st May 2000 his talent and contribution to the legal profession were recognised by his appointment as a justice of the Supreme Court of Western Australia, which is the highest ranking court in the Australian State of Western Australia. This transition to the bench has required Hasluck to make some adjustment to his natural style as the freedom to speak on any subject, a luxury he enjoyed as a barrister, and his leisure pursuits, including bushwalking, tennis and travelling the world gaining inspiration for his writing, to which he is left with less time. Hasluck has valued every phase of his extraordinary legal career: the adventure of starting a new law firm, the collegiality of a middle-sized firm of like minded colleagues, the intellectual freedom of the independent bar and finally the responsibility of being a Supreme Court judge.

4) NICHOLAS HASLUCK'S WORKS:

1) HASLUCK'S NOVELS:

Hasluck's novels fall into two categories, which he describes as moral thriller genre and satire, with the thriller interesting him the

most. Hasluck is a Western Australian author whose work takes seriously, while at the same time parodies, the institutions of both Australia and Western Society. His early work is largely concerned with the examination of the institutions of society, the way they function and the human dimensions and dilemmas they raise. His later works, however, create their own fictional world within which to problematize and examine the conditions and assumptions of the world we currently inhabit, analysing the process of meaning-making in literature, history, and Australian culture.

Hasluck's novels can be read in many different ways. They can be read generically through the mystery-thriller and negative thriller genres. They can also be read as satires. The open-endedness of all of Hasluck's work means the issues raised remain unresolved, and, therefore, their political impact remains as a troublesome provocation to the official narratives of the nation. They threaten the wholeness of the nation's narratives about its people and its history and they raise uncomfortable stories and possibilities which do not sit easily with the accepted narrative. However, the development in Hasluck's novels can be seen from modern to the post-modern concerns. This is exemplified by the transition in his work from universal considerations to local interests, and this, in turn, has coincided with his movement from overseas to regional

publishing. So it would be better to deal with his novels in the chronological order of their publications:

1) QUARANTINE (1979):

This first published novel of Hasluck is set in an exotic location. *Quarantine*, like William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, is a cautionary tale of a small community which finds itself insulated from the outside world. It is about moral pressures in a Middle Eastern quarantine station. It introduces the combination of intrigue, dark humour and fable that have become characteristic of Hasluck's style. In an ominous rundown hotel on the bank of the Suez Canal, the passengers of a cruise ship are unaccountably held in isolation under the sinister charge of the proprietor Shewfik Arud and the dipsomaniac Dr. Margo. The exiles themselves are caught between the menacing Burgess and the moral hero of the story, David Shears who loses his life through the moral cowardice of the narrator. The primary focus of the novel appears to be a justification of the narrator's complicity through inaction in the events of the quarantine. However, the fact that the conspiracy is more in the minds of the main characters than in any specific event make this novel largely an internal exploration of fear and guilt, the thriller mode being used to parody the internal human condition rather than the situation in the world at large. The novel explores the issues of

the abdication of personal responsibility, the deceptive nature of the collective guilt, the insidious overtones of dictatorial incompetence and the evil of mob-hysteria. *Quarantine*, particularly, questions the relationship of human society and the law, and it explores these concerns within somewhat elastic parameters of the mystery-thriller genre.

2) *THE BLUE GUITAR* (1980):

Hasluck's second novel *The Blue Guitar*, set in a vividly-evoked urban jungle (recognisably Sydney), is concerned with commerce. Published in 1980 it is a harbinger of the heady entrepreneurial days which were experienced in Perth in the following decade. It focuses mainly the social concerns, especially the issues of integrity and honesty in the worlds of business and family life. It raises the questions of morality and truth; the ethics of trading with another person's intellectual property; and the issues concerned with denial and withholding of vital information to gain an economic advantage. Dyson Garrick, the protagonist, attempts to promote the inventor Herman's "blue guitar" that automatically creates music. He, however, is tangled in the temptations of commercial exploitation, and this conflict leads to Garrick's own moral disintegration as he finally betrays his friend. The novel, thus, is about moral pressures in the world of pop music.

3) THE HAND THAT FEEDS YOU (1982):

Hasluck's third novel *The Hand That Feeds You*, subtitled "A Satiric Nightmare", is specifically located in Sydney, with the Domain, the Opera House and the Bridge featuring in the landscape. It is in the tradition of Swift and Pope in its attempt to lampoon contemporary Australian social and political life. It ridicules the practices in the era of Malcolm Fraser's Prime Ministership (with a good dose of critical reflection on the times of Gough Whitlam). While Hasluck's first two novels were predominantly modernist, liberal humanist works having universal applications, *The Hand That Feeds You* was the first of Hasluck's novels to be published by a regional publishing house, the Fremantle Arts Centre Press, and is entirely Australian in its themes and content. Its themes are particularly antipodean being a satire on the institutions of Australian democracy, covering such issues as unionism, egalitarianism, the social welfare net, and the political system of the democratic representations and the ideology of self-interest. Thus, it is about corruption in a future Republican Australia. It is the most explicit satiric text.

4) THE BELLARMINE JUG (1984):

Hasluck's fourth award-winning and most complex novel to date, *The Bellarmine Jug* is about the efforts of 20th century historian

to track down a document about a 17th century massacre. It explores the roots of Australian identity on both personal and social levels, using techniques from the spy thriller and a legal examination that probes each layer of truth to reveal alternative realities. The plot of the novel moves between Holland, London, Netherlands, Indonesia and Australia, implicating issues such as the British atomic tests in the Monte Bellow islands, and Australian involvement in Sukarno's independence movement, to question the nature of international law, human rights, and individual morality. The novel is primarily set around a series of student disturbances at the Grotius Institute in 1948, which put at risk the noble character of the founder of the Institute, Hugo Grotius, the father of international law. Leon, the protagonist, loses his way in the complexity of the situation but Van Riebeck, the Warden of the Institute, compromises justice and truth, as well as his own reputation, to uphold the integrity and reputation of Grotius and the Institute. Helen Daniel praises the novel as it is rich in suspense and intrigue and a major novel of the eighties.

5) *TRUANT STATE* (1987):

Hasluck's fifth novel, *Truant State* (1987), is based on fictional representations of the officially recorded history of the Secession movement of the 1930s. Its themes are the heady days of the 1920s

and the depressions of the 1930s. It is the most transparently regional of Hasluck's novels as it is almost entirely in Western Australia, from the elite suburb of Peppermint Grove in Perth to Kalgoorlie on the goldfields and Norhtcliffe in the giant karri country of the South-West. It is narrated by the young Jack Taverne, an immigrant from England, whose father becomes caught in the illusory hopes of the era. It is an attempt to listen in the ancestral undertone, the multiple histories and past memories of Western Australia. Some of the stories in *Truant State* are full of nostalgia mixed with fantasy and truth while other stories and incidents related are built on tiny fragments of long forgotten memories. The novel shows Hasluck's characteristic interweaving of personal, social and metaphysical issues. *Truant State*, however, is the end of the era in which Hasluck's work has been seen to succeed or fail on its merits as a mystery-thriller.

6) *THE COUNTRY WITHOUT MUSIC* (1990):

Hasluck's sixth novel, *The Country without Music*, is set on imaginary pair of islands off the Western Australian Coast. It forms a trilogy with the following two novels *The Blosseville File* (1992), and *A Grain of Truth* (1994). These three novels employ a fictional-critical approach, integrating and interrogating the theoretical and historical possibilities of French and British history and social theory.

In addition, they depict an imaginary world, combining elements of different geographical places and various cultural groupings. They also contest the production of meaning of identity, history and community in Australia. Hasluck, like John O'Hara and William Faulkner, has created an imaginary territory through which to explore contemporary actuality. *The Country without Music* is set on island of Gournay, the site of a penal colony founded by French Revolutionaries, and the island of Dupuis where the imposing structure of the 'Panoptique' stands. Isolation, oppression, mystical silence or an altered state engendered by a profound experience are the themes in the novel. Music, however, is an important theme in *The Country without Music*. Music is projected in it as playing a central role in the defining of communities of people, creating national identities and providing a medium for rebellion and difference. The novel begins with a quote from Shakespeare:

The man that hath no music in himself,
Nor is not mov'd with concord of sweet sounds,
Is fit for treasons, stratagems and spoils....¹

The Country without Music is full of treasons, stratagems and political spoils in number of ways. The island country has no anthem and, hence, the inhabitants lack a sense of identity. It is a country without music, either because its mystical bone flute has been stolen by Lieutenant Bottineau or because it has never created its

own, and so it is a country without a soul, without intimate, inner perception, without a past and without a future.

7) *THE BLOSSEVILLE FILE* (1992):

Hasluck's seventh fictional work, *The Blosseville File* (1992), is a novel loosely constructed from short stories set in the former French colony of Blosseville on the mainland of the Western Australian coast. The geographical and historical world already established in *The Country without Music* forms the background for *The Blosseville File*. It is true that the novel is a compilation of unrelated or at best partially connected stories and the stories range over a wide spectrum of themes, characters, contexts, styles and points of view, however, as the title of the novel indicates, the location Blosseville forms a link for all the stories in the novel. The novel is best read as a direct satire, of Perth and various aspects of life in Western Australia in the 1980s. It also criticises the literary world through the work of Lucien Chabot, the freelance journalist. The literary world is criticised especially through the stories such as 'Lucien Chabot', 'The Case against Writer's Week', 'The Case against the Interview' and 'The Case for Rumour'. Some of the stories are concerned with mystery and murder, stories such as 'Approaching the Centrepoint', 'Airport and Centrepoint; etc. These short crime stories are almost "real life" narratives, being fictional

accounts of lived events which highlight legal and judicial issues, rather than thriller, with sudden reversals in expectations.

8) A GRAIN OF TRUTH (1994):

Hasluck's eighth novel, *A Grain of Truth* (1994), deals with legal corruption, drug-dealing and the struggles of a lawyer to find his identity. It too, like *The Blossenville File*, is set in the imaginary colony of *Baie de Baudin* on the West Australian coast. In it the speculative history and imaginative sense of place are strangely mixed with familiar elements from Western Australia's history and environment. The plot of the novel revolves around the members of the law firm, Jeffcott, Carrick and Cheyne, who scheme to pervert the course of justice. However, Michael Cheyne, though weak, the protagonist and member of the law partnership, finally decides to take a moral stand against the conspiracy which is permeating all aspects of the firm's business. The novel has an optimistic ending. The story, however, remains open-ended in that the final passage sowing a seed of doubt that the moral decision made in the interest of truth, may have been motivated by self-interest. Thus, the novel's primary subject is the legal system in Western Australia, and it especially targets the fickle nature of the law, and the self-serving interests of many in the legal profession. It also criticises the massive physical changes in the legal world, brought about by

modernisation such as the introduction of computers to replace archivists and typists. The trilogy, consisting *The Country without Music*, *The Blossville File* and *A Grain of Truth*, deals with a common theme that the counter-knowledge produced through arts such as music, literature and painting in the three novels respectively empower the oppressed to take a strategic stand.

9) OUR MAN K (1999):

Hasluck's most recent novel is *Our Man K* which was published in 1999. In it Hasluck revisits and revives the famous and incredible case of Egon Erwin Kisch. Kisch was born in Prague towards the end of 19th century. He got popularity as a foreign correspondent after the Great War, pioneering the genre known as reportage. He was proficient in ten European languages. Kisch, then, known as "the rampaging reporter", came to Australia in 1934 at the invitation of the world committee Against War and Fascism. The government, however, refused him the permission to land at Fremantle. Kisch bypassed the ban by leaping ashore at Melbourne, a well-publicised jump which led him through various legal proceedings that took him all the way to the High Court. The government resorted to testing Kisch in Scottish Gaelic. Kisch duly failed the rather bizarre test and, then, he was declared a prohibited immigrant. Nicholas Hasluck tackles the Kisch dilemma with great

elegance in *Our Man K*. He has, in addition to mentioning Kisch's Marxist leanings, portrayed him in the novel as a writer with long standing literary connections, not only to his former classmate, Franz Kafka, but also to a group of hacks and poets who argue feverishly with each other at the fictional Café Arco. The Kisch case, by deflecting the light of history through the prism of fiction, provides Hasluck a golden opportunity to comment upon various contemporary issues—protracted litigation, denunciations of the High Court, Centenary celebrations, the move towards an Australian Republic. The novel offers an extra dimension that authentic history cannot approach, not only by providing opportunities to know the larger-than-life figures of history through their imagined thoughts and acts but by using fictional characters to reflect the mood of the times.

II) HASLUCK'S POETRY AND OTHER WRITINGS:

Nicholas Hasluck is also well-known as a poet. His volume *Anchor and Other Poems* appeared in 1976. Hasluck wrote *On the Edge* (1980) in collaboration with William Grono while *Chinese Journey* (1985) with C. J. Koch. The poetry in the first two volumes is conservative. Recently, his volume *A Dream Divided* appeared in 2005.

Hasluck has also written four books of essays: *Collage: Recollections and Images of the University of Western Australia* (1987), *Offcuts from a Legal Literary Life* (1993), *The Legal Labyrinth* (2003) and *Somewhere in the Atlas* (2007). His first work of recollections, as the title itself suggests, tells us about his undergraduate days at the University. These recollections are also of satirical writing for student revues: the Student Apathy Group (SAG), Student politics, the Guild and Prosh; his presidency of the Blackstone Society; and debating alongside Robert Holmes a court and work on Fleet Street. His second work, *Offcuts from a Legal Literary Life*, is a collection of essays, reviews and travel pieces. It deals with provocative and wide-ranging subjects: from artists' colonies to penal colonies: Australian bushrangers to the nature of the deep south of America: the Australia Council's funding of the arts to WA Inc.'s funding of business: Hasluck's own writing to the work of others. In this collection the themes such as the influence of the past on contemporary issues, the place of law and justice in society, and the relationship between fact and fiction etc. are explored with intelligence and compassion. Here, Hasluck reveals with insight and self-deprecating humour how the lawyer has shaped the writer, the writer the traveller, the traveller the observer. The work, thus, is challenging and entertaining.

Hasluck's *The Legal Labyrinth* contains his account of the travels he undertook and the discoveries he made in the course of reconstructing the Kisch case which forms the basis for his novel *Our Man K*. His *Somewhere in the Atlas* also provides a vivid account of the journeys undertaken by him to Papua New Guinea, China, Vietnam and Bolivia. These travel pieces show how each of these countries, at a time of transition, swerved towards the flow of a changing world.

III) NICHOLAS HASLUCK'S SHORT STORIES:

Nicholas Hasluck has written a number of short stories which have appeared in various magazines since 1973. He draws on variety of themes and concerns in his stories. Some of his stories have appeared with little variations in his novels. This proves Hasluck's strength as a short story writer. His short stories were first published in a book form in 1978 in a collection entitled *The Hat on the Letter O and Other Stories*. This highly acclaimed collection of short stories was reissued with four outstanding new works in 1990. The collection provides an exciting insight into the range and craftsmanship of Hasluck as a literary figure. The short stories in *The Hat on the Letter O and Other Stories* show Hasluck's technical versatility and they are interesting as background to the novels. Here, Hasluck creates a wide range of unusual characters and

situations with his customary blend of wit and insight. The collection establishes his reputation as a promising author. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, for instance, comments that Hasluck is one of the best writers to have emerged in Australia in recent years. Similarly, *The Financial Times* hailed that Nicholas Hasluck is, whatever fashion may dictate, Australia's bright new star of fiction.

After a brief survey of Hasluck's fictional works in this chapter, an attempt is made to study Hasluck's short stories collected in his book *The Hat on the Letter O and Other Stories* with special reference to the thematic concerns in the next chapter.

REFERENCES:

1. Nicholas Hasluck, *The Country without Music* (Penguin Books Ltd., 1990), p.v.