

REINVENT – How I reinvented myself in my 80th year

Extracts from a manuscript by Elizabeth Durack recording events of the last five years of her life. Commences April 24 1995 and concludes late at night May 10 2000. Contains illuminating information about the phenomenon of Eddie Burrup — his emergence, his ascendancy and his art.

start of mss

12.30 PM Monday, April 24 1995

My great fear now is that Eddie will be lost to me. I have had no chance to get back to him since my return from Broome a week ago at Easter where we were together so happily. How I loved sitting under the mango tree with him in the dappled shade with the brilliant sunshine splashing over the fresh Buffel Grass and on to the red ground while he told me of his life before we met – every moment drawing closer as we shared so much of past experiences and life in the north when it was still a closed secret ...

Where is he now? Is he still there in Broome? Or has he taken off somewhere over the Leopolds meeting up with all his friends? They'll see him coming and sing out to him from the high rocky summits of the range – and then he will forget all about me. When and how dare I call him up? So many other matters have intruded on my time since we parted – So much here demands my attention and is keeping us apart ...

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Monday, October 2 1995. This is an attempt to put the script into some order. It is all over the place. Starting with the missing page 2

I shall leaf through the pages of this Eddie Burrup file and see what it tells us of his history from the beginning. No, not from the beginning as that lies for both of us too far back in the misty past but just as far back as a bright summer morning when he first emerged with neither name nor persona and yet fully formed like a classical mythic creature all ready to go.

Eddie was not conceived for such would entail slow gestation, growth, birth. He just arrived – not so different on that first day – December 28 1994 – than in the photos of him taken in Broome at Easter time – April 1995.

But first I must digress about the morphological works —

Thursday, December 1 1994

These morphological works – what are they about? From where do they stem?

I suppose they are actually about what I am about – what I have always been about, all my life, I guess, but only now coming out in this particular form – quite quickly too, daily in fact – daily for a number of years – 15? or 20 years? – in sketch and small form (find in the red folders on sheets of A4) but now sizing up to larger proportions – about 3’x2’ – vertical mostly although earlier, in direct line of provenance from the wild “Flightless Birds” and the wilder still, “The Rim, the rim of our brittle and disintegrating world...” all of which were, almost invariably, horizontal like laid back sprawling Australia – but thinking about it – or about anything, is always vertical ...

These Morphological works are any way up and they are very private. They are removed from the work I might exhibit or be asked for or the work I guess with which I am associated ...

These are creatures and stuff – an essence of – animal vegetable mineral – not separate but all interchangeable ...

When I was small – perhaps three or four years old – I looked down at my two feet heels together and toes out and saw the tail of a fish ...

I was somewhat older when I stretched out my arm and felt the membrane between the fingers of my hand – bone matching bone ... so fish and bats are continually in mind. I see them where the shadows of leaves are thrown against a wall and sometimes hints of how they came about accident? blind chance? deliberate action?

I am concerned with form and structure – rock faces – pre-Darwinian classification – the similarities of fundamental characteristics – forms, relationships, metamorphoses – the phylogenic development of organs quite apart from their function although function is crucial – but there can be too much of it and it is a relief to escape back into rocks particularly erosional and corroding forms and shapes which cross over into the sentient world – geomorphology and the androgynous ...

Do rocks feel? If not why should they have gone through so many traumatic convulsions before coming to present themselves to us – you and me – as static, fixed in time and fixing time – conveniently for us – so cute, so smart, to

reckon with. I wonder – take another look at the Gondwanan Dispersion and think again ...

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I shall spare the reader and myself more of these meanderings on what I was then calling my *morphological* works (just before the personal tumult of the next few weeks)* and before they merged into the trauma of the Totemic Tumult, the Totemic ideograms, wherein they found a focus through the eye and hand of Eddie Burrup.

Alter ego: (Latin lit.) a second self (a) a trusted friend (b) a confidential representative (c) a guardian spirit ... in S. America a carving of an animal on head, back or shoulders of a human being... (so much for Webster's – try Roget's Thesaurus).

Self: I, myself/subconscious ... friend ... close acquaintance, bosom friend, best friend ... fellow man ... lover... likeness ... analogue, counterpart, reciprocal ... mate, soul mate ... companion, twine, second self ... fidus Achates, confidant, alter ego...

(*editor's note: refers to the death of her beloved sister, Mary.)

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P was looking at these paintings – the Morphological works – down in the rear studio early one morning a few days after Christmas.

They must have emitted a potency or charge of some sort for she became excited as she studied them. Then it wasn't long before admiration turned to anger and then into something more like exasperation. Although it was not as though they had sprung out of the blue. She was familiar enough with their derivation – 30 years of it in a direct line and earlier again back to the wanderings with the Goanna men when the Cord to Altcheringa was still intact although hanging by a thread and further back again when the faded Wandjina leaped at me off the cave ceiling over 60 years ago ...

The drift of P's anger seemed to run: Why do this mad "morphological" stuff when you must know you'll never be able to exhibit it and even if you did it wouldn't be looked at, let alone receive any intelligent comment, let alone be understood, let alone sell?

"But," she paused for breath, then ran on still angry and looking at them intently, "if these had been painted by a man the galleries would be

clambering for them.” There was a pregnant pause – “If they had been painted by an Aboriginal man the National Gallery would have them hanging on their walls ... but the trouble with you — you have always played things so straight and above board you’d never come at signing them with another name.”

We went for a walk around the river on that gold and silver morning and we talked of other things – of grief, of effort, of hope. A pelican floated on the water, two little ducks quarreled in the seaweed by the retaining wall. A kurrajong tree was coming into pale pink flower and as I stopped under it, rather to my surprise, I heard myself saying: “I am not totally opposed to the idea of presenting those morphological works under a pseudonym.”

The shadow of Eddie Burrup, hat and all, fell on the ground between us.

The game was on and time was of the essence. P was catching the plane back to Broome on New Year’s Day.

The Eddie Burrup originals she was now taking with her had to be sorted, photographed, catalogued and signed. A biography required composition.

More important still, a photograph of the artist would have to accompany the above.

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We searched the Yellow Pages under Fancy Dress.

“Silly Nonsense” in Subiaco, the nearest suburb, had gone out of business due to a fire. We were told by answering machine to re-contact them in a few months time. “Apparitions”, in Claremont, had three premises – one in Kalgoorlie (I could see Paddy Hannan masquerading as Claude de Benarles) but was closed for the long holiday. “Stepping Out” was a long way out and so too was “The Fun Room” and “Copy Cat”. P opted for “Jingles” over the Causeway in Victoria Park.

“You get on with the biog. I’ll be back as soon as I can.” But she returned with very little – some glues and solvents, some very frizzy hair – eyebrows perhaps but useless otherwise.

Our options were narrowing and the whole day was nearly gone. However, guided providentially, we were getting closer all the time to “Doyle’s Fancy Costumes” in Scarborough Beach Road, Osborne Park. Now my heart always sinks at the prospect of entering upon this part of the city. Back in the 1920s a sand track overlaid with jarrah planks set end to end was the only access from Perth to the glorious rolling surf of Scarborough Beach. Sometimes of a Sunday when Dad was down from the north we would undertake this hazardous adventure in the Dodge with a picnic basket. It was a whole day’s outing.

Since that time Scarborough Beach Road has become a major artery down which traffic of all descriptions thunders night and day. From where all the vehicles come and to where they all go no one knows – what with the desert to the east and the ocean to the west ...

There was a serious almost a reverential atmosphere within the walls of Doyle's Fancy Costumes. Oh! and what walls!. From floor to high ceiling they were lined with a phantasmagoria of every article of apparel and every object of disguise ever devised by man or woman to camouflage and conceal, to deceive and belie, to falsify and to misrepresent, to inspire laughter and merriment, to evoke tears, fears, horror or dismay.

Doyle's have been in the serious business of make-believe for three generations.

Mr. Doyle was courteous and helpful. What was it we were after?

"Something for a bushman – an old bushman – the old style of bushman – not the Reg Williams, not the Tamworth Country-and-Western bushman ..." And my eyes were combing the shelves.

"Something more along the lines of Waltzing Matilda?"

"Yes. More like that – like that!" and I pointed to Eddie Burrup's hat on the second row from the top.

The long retrieving pole required an extension but eventually a soft furry object with a battered brim and a hole in the crown landed on the counter.

From a long row of wigs and beards one intuitively found its way beside the hat. We walked out of the shop with Eddie Burrup's materialising shadow in hand.

Early the next morning up on the flat roof over the west studio at 47 Browne Avenue, Dalkeith – the idea was to have only sky as background – No.1 set of photographs was taken.

"It's hopeless, it's hopeless," said P. "The light's all wrong. It doesn't even vaguely look like the tropics."

Then we shall have to take some more in Broome later on ...

(note – insert here the first Eddie B. biog, and a selection of the No.1 set of photos).

Also insert selection from EB file concerning contact made by P with GP at the GP Gallery, Melbourne – P's trip to Melbourne via Alice Springs leaving Broome March 31st with originals to show – meeting with GP – return to Broome via Perth April 4 1995

I was in Broome for Easter. (14–18 April 1995)

Another biog. was prepared – Also a transcript from a tape in which Eddie Burrup tells the story of his life. The paintings were given descriptive titles in Eddie B.'s own words – he speaks Aboriginal English. Three more sets of photos were taken.

I returned to Perth just before my exhibition – “From Archival to Recent” – at the Stafford Studios, Cottesloe closed on Friday April 21st. The exhibition at the Art Gallery of Western Australia – “Derivations and Directions – the work of Elizabeth Durack 1930s to 1950s” was still running.

I felt happy and confident and full of optimism about Eddie Burrup. He was on his way. ED could relax now, hand the reins over to him and settle back into the understood and acceptable role of “wonderful-old-woman.”

But nothing – but nothing – was going to be as simple as that.

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(The manuscript, largely unedited, contains about 180,000 words.)

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