

From the Back Verandah

Oscar Peterson's piano technique is legendary. Have you ever heard the devastating *Indiana* by Peterson, Ray Brown and Herb Ellis at 360 beats per minute?

To me, Peterson's phenomenal dexterity seems all the more remarkable given his immense size. I remember seeing him larger-than-life at the Sydney Opera House in a duo with guitarist Joe Pass. When he first walked on I was struck by how his arms hung virtually motionless at the sides of his huge frame. Yet although he was 52 then (March 1978), he swung with the power of an 20-year-old.

Still, I can wonder about his awkward bulk all I like, but clearly O. P. came to terms with it early in life, as the following interview,

which I found in Gene Lees' *Oscar Peterson, the Will to Swing* (ISBN 0 333 46547 4), reveals.

It's 11 July 1944, and on the CBC's *Merchant Navy Show* the star is an 18-year-old Oscar, already 1.9 m and 101.7 kg.

"Oscar, that was terrific! Tell me, boy, how many hands you got?"

"Just two, Mr. Davis, just two. But I like to make 'em work hard."

"You're not kidding. Tell me, Oscar, you're still going to school, aren't you?"

"That's right. My folks would tan my hide if I missed a day."

"Your dad would have his hands full there!"

"That's what you say. My pop ain't no pygmy either."

— Fizzgig

Bikwil Addresses

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As Usual, Oddballs Galore

It is a long time ago now that I was first introduced to the Twelve Billiard Balls problem. After weeks of struggle I thought I'd cracked it, but I omitted to record my solution. Not that it's simple to express your solution clearly, as I recently found when I revisited it. Solving it was easier, but it was still a chore to document it intelligibly.

So here's a holiday task for you.

Solve it, if you haven't already, then try your hand at laying out the solution so that's it's easily understandable, and expedite it to *Bikwil*. But don't cheat and copy the method from a Gardner or de Bono book (or anywhere else, for that matter). Your own words, please.

This is how it goes:

There are twelve billiard balls, all the same size and colour. They all weigh the same with the exception of one which is slightly lighter or heavier, but not noticeably so in the hand.

Your challenge is to discover the odd ball and whether it is lighter or heavier. You must use a beam balance only, and you are restricted to *three* weighing operations.

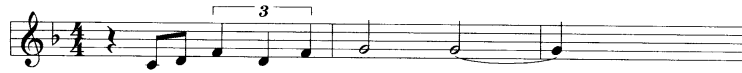
The clearest correct solution will be printed in *Bikwil*, in the March 1998 issue (No. 6). No fabulous prize for you, however, just the quiet inner radiance of nonchalant, suave self-satisfaction.

Merry Christmas to everyone. Especially to any readers in ill-health.

What's Inside?

What a Difference a Tree Makes!	2	Web Line	13
Transatlantic Messages	8	Off-key in the Kitchen	15
Quintessential Quirky Quotes	10	From the Back Verandah	16
A Word in Your Pink Shell-like	11		

What a Difference a Tree Makes!



Years ago John and I planned to write a book in praise of trees. We conceived the idea while driving to Wentworth Falls. The long and winding ascent through the villages and magnificent wilderness of the Blue Mountains allows ample opportunities to observe how trees grace the landscape singly, in small groups and en masse as nature decrees and as a gardener with skill and imagination can design. That day, John, the long-experienced horticulturist and I, his trusting assistant, saw the passing country, natural and man-made, with shared wonder and excitement. At each turn of the highway, wherever we looked, both the vista of the wild and the closer view of cottage gardens, lovingly planned, refreshed and stimulated our perceptions. As often happened between us our thoughts connected: we were in tune. A glance, a smile and an enthusiastic exchange of ideas flowed. Then one of us said what we were both thinking: "What a difference a tree makes!" And the idea of writing a book with that title was born.

A song we knew influenced us, too. We must have heard it at the time on the car radio: Dinah Washington or Sarah Vaughan singing *What a Difference a Day Made*. For we hummed along, then sang the opening bars in our own words: "What a difference a tree makes!" Convinced that they worked we agreed we could feature them like a bar of music on the cover or title page.

We never wrote the book. Seeds of the ideas we discussed remain however, in notes. John wrote on four unnumbered scraps of paper. The theme of the book was to be man in the landscape. Under a heading "General Focus" he outlined our reasons for writing it: aesthetic was one, another was "us (people, he meant) as custodians of trees". He then encapsulated these ideas in this statement "About Trees":

They are the oxygen banks, clean the air, prevent erosion, give shade, shelter and privacy. Their wood builds our houses, their fruit help feed us, their dead tissue converts to fossil fuels: coal, gas, oil, that we are so dependent on. They control pollution by

Off-key in the Kitchen

[Dreadful Doggerel No. 1]

Trying to tune
To a bent tablespoon
Would be just a little bit awkward.

Why hit the thing,
When you know it won't ring
As well as a new tuning fork would?

— Percy

Bluthal (recently seen on TV in McDonald's ads and *The Vicar of Dibley* and in the big-screen movie *The Fifth Element*) had just died, but if this is so, *DPS* certainly hasn't mentioned the fact.

And now from the graveyard to the refectory — *Find the Spam*, which introduces itself and its photograph in the following straight-faced manner:

Somewhere in the picture below is spam. If you think you've found the spam, click on it to find out if you're right. You probably don't think there is any spam in the picture, but look closely. Many people only find the spam after staring intently at the picture for several hours.

A pointless site, awesomely so, which I heartily approve of. There's even a count of how many people have succeeded in finding the Spam and how many have failed.

Not so pointless is the site of the *Klingon Language Institute*, devoted to the study and spread of "the fastest growing language in the galaxy". Over 1000 individuals have joined the KLI, from more than 30 nations.

Our primary means of pursuing our goals is our quarterly journal, *Ho/QeD*. Not simply a newsletter, *Ho/QeD* is a refereed journal utilizing peer review. Each issue includes columns, articles, interviews, and letters exploring the Klingon language.

All deadly earnest, and you don't have to be a Harlish Goop to realise it. Although it helps if you're a linguist (most of its contributors are language academics), beginners are nevertheless well catered for with:

- ◊ audio files for pronunciation practice
- ◊ a list of Klingon words not in the published Klingon dictionary
- ◊ books (including the dictionary) and tapes for sale
- ◊ a free postal course
- ◊ an email facility.

What more could a loyal Trekkie ask for? Well for starters, how about lending a hand on the Institute's two ambitious undertakings: the Klingon Bible Translation Project, and the so-called Klingon Shakespeare Restoration Project? There, that ought to keep you busy.

— TR

Internet sites referred to above:

<http://www.city-net.com/~lmann/dps>

<http://www.smalltime.com/nowhere/findthespam>

<http://www.kli.org/KLIhome.html>



converting carbon dioxide. The future depends on trees.

He also listed seven chapters or sections describing trees in settings in town and country and trees in relationships with people and animals. For section headings he suggested using short literary or musical allusions to relate to photographs therein and for a cover illustration "something like Village Smithy tree imagery". I wonder now what prompted the latter. Was he remembering a real smithy, one he had perhaps known as a boy growing up in the 1920s in Trafalgar, Victoria? Or, as seems more likely, was he thinking of Longfellow's poem *The Village Blacksmith* which begins:

Under a spreading chestnut tree
The village smithy stands;
The smith, a mighty man is he,
With large and sinewy hands;
And the muscles of his brawny arms
Are strong as iron bands.

I think John would have known the poem; it has been round a long time as a poem and a song. Longfellow wrote the poem in 1839 and it was set to music in 1854 by an English opera and oratorio singer Willoughby Hunter Weiss who made a fortune from it but whose compositions apart from this are forgotten.

Longfellow was well-acquainted with blacksmiths. An

ancestor of his was a blacksmith at Newberry. The purpose of his poem was to praise him; it also describes an actual smithy that stood under a chestnut tree on Brattle Street, Cambridge, Massachusetts near the poet's house. The vivid image in the poem of strength and endurance of tree and smithy would have looked well on the cover of our book and been a fine example of the theme of tree and man in relationship.

Another evocative example of that theme comes from our own colonial history. While reading journals of the First Fleeters I learned that the first divine service in Port Jackson was conducted by Rev. Richard Johnson, chaplain to the settlement, on Sunday 3 February 1788. According to Captain Watkin Tench, one of the most reliable of contemporary observers and an elegant recorder of its scenes, the service was performed "under a great tree . . . in the presence of the troops and convicts, whose behaviour on the occasion was equally regular and attentive." That tree, according to a later source, stood either on the site of Macquarie Place or George Street North. We may never know.

Although we never wrote the book, and I regret that, we lived the ideas, which are still valid.

More than ever the future of man and the landscape, indeed the planet, does depend on trees and the future of trees depends on us. The idea of us as custodians I endorse, but see with dismay our continuing failure. Despite our knowledge of the value of trees, despite protest from many who are staunch guardians we are still wilfully and ruthlessly exploiting the world's forests, destroying vast tracts of wilderness and denuding the planet to its and our own detriment.

The death of a tree, like the death of a child is a tragedy, a death to be mourned by all people. When John and I came to live in Lane Cove in 1988 there was a silky oak growing in a neighbour's garden. From my back door I could see it standing strong and majestic, at every point beautiful, from base to top of its straight, stout trunk to the spread of its graceful limbs. Each year it blossomed into gold. One summer it was especially abundant, a full blaze of blossom. Nightly, flying foxes came to feast. A year or so later, about 1992 it died. To my untutored eyes its death was sudden. Was it age? To me the tree had seemed young and vigorous. If it was age, perhaps that very profuse flowering the season before its death was part of the

process of its dying, a defiant final blossoming. When I saw what was once beneficent limbs bare and grey like scaffolding round the trunk I grieved for the tree, for its loss of life and for the loss to the lives of the flying-foxes which had depended on it for sustenance. For me it was like losing a friend. It compounded my own great personal loss. For John had died in 1990.

My one consolation for the loss of the silky oak was that while it lived I had propagated some of its offspring. Over several seasons dozens of its seeds had propelled themselves like little helicopters into my garden. Wherever they landed they had grown strongly. Save for one seedling which I left where it was thriving I potted the rest, nurtured them and eventually gave them to friends. So the life of the original one now goes on in others planted and settled in other gardens in Sydney and elsewhere in the State. The tree I kept at home is flourishing, a young tree slender and beautiful, straight and strong, and it promises to be as graceful and elegant as its parent.

John and I were custodians. We loved trees, loved planting them, in effect creating our own parks. I'd always cherished a dream of living in a place where I had planted all the trees, had grown up

Web Line

Reader interest has been shown in the eccentric sites so far considered in this column, so this issue I'll acquaint you with some more of the same.

First something for those boasting a sick streak – *The Dead People Server*. Here the morbidly inquisitive can find out if such and such a famous person is still alive, or, if not, when they died. Some entries even give cause of death. Here's what the site says about its idiosyncratic self (incidentally, "to be spaced" = "to have your ashes shot into space"):

The Dead People Server is simply a list of interesting celebrities who are, or might plausibly be dead, and even those who have been spaced, with information as to who has really Rung Down the Curtain and Joined the Choir Invisible, and who's Just Resting. "Interesting," in the previous sentence, means "I felt like putting them on this list".

Some examples straight from the site (with minor typos amended):

Mel Blanc (voice) -- Th-th-th-that's all, folks. Heart disease. Jul 10, 1989. Born May 30, 1908.

Denholm Elliott (actor) -- Dead. AIDS. Oct 6, 1992.

Grace Hopper (computer scientist, inventor of the term "bug") -- Dead. Jan 1, 1992. Born Dec 9, 1906.

John Gielgud (British actor) — Alive. Still doing Shakespeare. Born Apr 14, 1904.

Stephen Hawking (physicist) — Alive. Born 1942. (Yes, he's still alive. Even recently remarried and paid off a bet he'd lost.)

Peggy Lee (singer) -- Alive. Born May 26, 1920.

Terry Nation (writer) — Dead. Mar 9, 1997 (Wrote many Dalek episodes of *Dr. Who* and most of *Blake's 7*.)

Charles Schulz (cartoonist) -- Alive and working.

OJ Simpson (ex-everything/"alleged" double-murderer) — Alive. Born Jul 9, 1947. (But many DPS fans "remain hopeful.")

As facetiously written as a few entries are, no doubt this site has its serious uses as well. You might be doing some research, for instance, and need to know if a contemporary figure is still living. The Internet being a generally helpful tool for really current stuff, *DPS* might well come into its own here, especially since your other main sources (encyclopaedias and biographical dictionaries, whether in print or on CD-ROM) must of necessity be out-of-date as soon as published.

Even so, as you might expect, not every well-known dead person appears in the *DPS* list, non-Americans being frequently overlooked. The other day someone suggested to me that Polish-born expatriate Australian actor John

mentioned in an earlier column (Issue 2, July 1997), such as Phillip Howard's *Weasel Words* (1978) or Nick Renton's *Elements of Style and Good Writing* (1990).

Good clean fun, all of them (very clean), but as style guides go *The Cambridge Australian English Style Guide* has achieved something really special. As is sometimes the case, it's really two books in one, the two aspects being style as applied to writing (language usage) and style in the publisher's sense (editorial policy). Yet you are hardly aware of it, partly by virtue of the book's single alphabetical arrangement, but chiefly because Pam Peters succeeds in seamlessly weaving the two strands together by cross-references, or by introducing useful linguistic information into articles on editorial style and vice versa. (Have a look at the first-class entry on hyphens.)

Much of the appeal of this reference work is its own informal style, a feature commented on by every reviewer, because of its freshness. Pam Peters may be an academic linguist (Macquarie Uni in Sydney) and her book may be a whopping 800-odd pages, but you can actually sit down, open it at virtually any page and read it for pleasure.

I like the conversational abbreviations (e.g. *it's*, *there's*), plus the

frequent rhetorical questions as introductions to tricky points, e.g.:

Does the *gerund* require a possessive?

There are wry quips, too:

[installment or instalment] If you have the next repayment on your layby hanging over you, it seems beside the point to ask whether it's spelled with one / or two

The pronoun *me* comes very close to us all, though grammarians and other language commentators of the past have made us rather self-conscious about it

... computer grammar checkers ... are always at their most reliable on the most mechanical aspects of language.

Before I wind up, I'll try to whet your appetite some more by pointing to a random selection of her thorough yet easy-to-read essays:

- ◇ clichés
- ◇ collective nouns
- ◇ its *or* it's
- ◇ man
- ◇ prelims
- ◇ taboo words
- ◇ though *or* although.

And let's not forget those useful articles on specific prefixes and suffixes, either (e.g. "-ise/-ize").

\$75 in hard-cover, \$30 in soft. O.K. Out you go right now. Get it.

— Harlish Goop

with them and had my own park or forest to walk in, in solitude and silence. Together John and I achieved aspects of that dream several times. On an average-sized residential block at St Leonards, our first home where we lived for seventeen years, we created a little park. We retained an old plum tree near the back fence and in the gardens back and front of the house we planted about thirty native trees, mostly eucalypts and bottlebrush, and along a side fence a hedge of appleblossom hibiscus. On our acre at Wentworth Falls during the 70s and 80s the pattern was similar: we added to natives already growing there. After clearing away blackberries and other scrub and weeds, we planted more natives and a few deciduous trees like weeping willows and box elders and along one boundary between us and a neighbour a hedge of photinia: a judicious mix of natives and exotics which John advocated as appropriate in the right setting. In 1987 at Fountaindale on the Central Coast, on a hillside which was once home to fowls and sheep, we created a miniature forest on less than two acres we planted more than two hundred native trees, "our contribution to the Bicentenary," I said to John, half in jest, adding in earnest, "better still, to the greening of Australia!"

I wanted to go on planting trees with him. Without him and his guidance and skill, without the sharing, I no longer have the desire. Yet I am not deprived. I live in this leafy hollow with aspects of the old dream around me: trees in my neighbour's gardens, trees in my own where I can, when I choose, work and walk in solitude and silence. And I am, in my own way, still a custodian. I still care deeply about what happens to them.

The beauty and value of trees to my life, in truth to all lives, is above price: it comes as a gift. Poets in praise recognise this. Reading them delights me. So many beautiful poems have been written. A few of my favourites leap to mind: John Shaw Neilson's *The Orange Tree*, Philip Larkin's *The Trees*, several of John Blight's: *Trees in the City*, *Garden Eucalypts* and "*Old Man Planting Trees*", David Campbell's "*Scribbly-Gums*" and "*The Silence of Trees*", James McAuley's "*Palm*", Judith Wright's "*Rainforest*" and Joyce Kilmer's "*Trees*". How easy it would be to compile an anthology! I could start with Kilmer's. Who, I wonder, has not heard these opening lines:

I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree.

I first heard them being sung at home. My father sang them accompanied at the piano by my mother. Dad had a lovely voice. He sounded a bit like John Charles Thomas whose voice I often heard on the radio as I was growing up. Thomas sang *Trees*, too. It was probably one of his most popular recordings. I hadn't heard him for years but did quite recently. The quality of his singing and his diction is as pleasing now as it was before.

Trees brought fame to composer and poet, too. Like Thomas they were American. Oscar Rasbach composed the music and G. Schirmer published the song in 1922. Schirmer, in fact published it in five languages. Rasbach gained national recognition after it was performed by famous Wagnerian contralto, Ernestine Schumann-Heink who recorded it as well. Among others who also recorded it were Nelson Eddy, Robert Merrill and Paul Robeson. To my surprise and delight I discovered recently among my collection of old LPs I have Robeson singing it. Now there's a splendid voice! He, like Thomas, enriches every word of the song,

Long before Rasbach was acclaimed Joyce Kilmer had won national fame when his poem was published in *Poetry Chicago*

August 1913. Though it has the title *Trees* the twelve lines refer throughout to "a tree", as it happens "an oak tree at Ryder's Lane and Route 1, New Brunswick, New Jersey", the town where Kilmer was born. (I found this information in *The Great Song Thesaurus* (1989), a fascinating book full of such little treasures as its title implies.) Oak trees are renowned for their longevity. It would be a joy to know that Kilmer's is still standing. Kilmer did not live to hear his words given further life in song. In 1918 he was killed in action in France in the second battle of the Marne. He was 32. His widow, Aline, also a poet, gave permission for his poem to be set to music. Though the oak tree is probably long gone as are the makers of its song and some of its singers, words and music and voices remain: in a way custodians of its memory.

"Poems are made by fools like me", Kilmer wrote. Here's another fool. Over the years I've written a few, some finished, some not, about trees living and dead. One, unfinished, is about a Phoenix palm at dusk with birds in its crown. It grew on Sydney University's campus near the spot where the little Darlington Post Office once stood. I wrote a couple of poems about the old plum tree at

A Word in Your Pink Shell-like

Before I forget, the tenth Style Council conference (State Library of NSW, 22-23 November) has now issued its agenda. Those interested should contact (02)9850 9800 a.s.a.p. As hinted in the previous issue of *Bikwil*, the cost for late birds is higher (\$275) and it's an extra \$25 for the Friday arvo seminar on the Mac. Dict. 3rd ed.

OK. Onward.

When I was doing some German at Sydney Uni in the late 1950s, the Professor was Ralph Farrell. Apart from his interest in the poetry of Eduard Mörike, he had a passion — doubtless born of frustration in marking student prose attempts — for explaining differences between German words that English speakers imagine are synonymous. (Germans rarely confuse them, of course.) Who better, then, as a guide than a German expert whose native language was English?

So for years he worked on his *Dictionary of German Synonyms*, and in 1953 Cambridge University Press published it. Its main innovation is that the words are arranged alphabetically by English concept,

not German. Needless to say, his many real-world German examples complete the picture. For my part, I was always impressed by Farrell's ability to explain shades of meaning, emphasis and tone, as well as the more obvious distinctions of informal versus literary usage.

Today I'd like to refer you wholeheartedly to another CUP publication, *The Cambridge Australian English Style Guide* (1995+), by Pam Peters. Over 40 years separate these two language reference books, and, leaving aside their language of focus, in at least one other aspect they are as different as the passing of those decades might suggest. That aspect is that of their formality: Farrell is a bit dry; Peters, as we will see below, is quite chatty. Yet both have a persuasive, credible feel — a tribute in each case to their flawless scholarship and gifted explanations.

Presumably you need little introduction to publications of their ilk, and will be well-acquainted with H. W. Fowler's *Modern English Usage* (1926+) and similarly respected works, like Eric Partridge's *Usage and Abusage* (1947+) and Ernest Gower's *Plain Words* (1948-51). Some of you may even have been tempted to look into more recent or more local volumes from that multitude of language watchmen I

Transatlantic Messages

Born in Manchester in 1908, the son of a metal craftsman and lay preacher, he was educated at Cambridge, Yale and Harvard. He joined the BBC as a journalist in 1934. In 1937 he moved permanently to New York, continuing to report for the BBC on U.S. politics, and after 1939 on the American perspective on World War II.

After the war the BBC Director of the Spoken Word suggested:

Why don't you start a series about — well, all the things in American life you've talked to me about: anything and everything?

Thus, in March 1946, Alistair Cooke's *Letter from America* was born, but with this proviso:

Even if your Letter is a sensational success, we cannot finance it beyond two series, namely, twenty-six weeks.

Not quite a six-month assignment, though, was it? *Letter from America* is the longest running one-man series in broadcasting history, heard in over 50 countries. He's been at it now for over 51 years. How long can he keep it up? You see, about this time next year — all being well — he will turn 90.

Alistair Cooke and his wife, portrait painter Jane White, live in New York City and Long Island. It is long ago now that Cooke became an American citizen (1941), but in all those years he has faded neither from the airwaves in England nor the hearts of the English, and in 1973 he was made an honorary KBE, to honour "his outstanding contribution to Anglo-American mutual understanding".

Some of the *Letters* have found their way into essay anthologies. They make ideal essays, too, for that intimate yet scholarly and digressive yet well-directed literary genre shares much with the style, length and format of Cooke's unique radio broadcasts.

Described by *Booklist* as "an international treasure", Cooke has also written numerous books, including *Alistair Cooke's America*, *A Generation on Trial*, *Fun & Games with Alistair Cooke* (on sport — he's a mad golf fan) and *The Vintage Mencken* (as editor).

Alistair Cooke's America is a particular favourite of mine. It is the *Letter* writ large, and is in fact the text of a TV series he made for the BBC. The book was a best-seller in the United States in 1973.

In the U.S. he also became well known to millions of Americans as the host of the pioneer cultural

television program *Omnibus*, and later as the host of *Masterpiece Theatre*.

In 1990, the North America Center of the Royal Television Society instituted an annual address which they named *The Alistair Cooke Lecture*. Each lecture concerns some aspect of television. The inaugural speaker was Robert MacNeil, who retired in 1996 as co-anchor of the PBS *MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour* (seen in Australia on weeknights on SBS TV). In 1994 the speaker was Australian-born Robert Hughes.

A double cassette album of some of Cooke's early broadcasts of *Letter from America* (1947-68), selected by Cooke himself, was issued by the BBC in 1993. You can buy it from any ABC shop. Listen, for example, to the graceful way he presents his information in *A Baby Is Missing* (1950) or *Alcatraz* (1959) or *Watts 1965*. A lot of the pleasure is Cooke's voice, of course. Mind you, because once heard it's never forgotten, to read *Alistair Cooke's America*, say, carries the same magic resonance. As *The Times* put it, "Mr Cooke reads as well as he sounds".

Indeed, many laudatory epithets have been used over the last half-century to describe Alistair Cooke's presentation in his *Letter*.

Believe me, they all apply. Absolutely marvellous stuff, every sentence he utters: urbane, charming, informed, informal, shrewd, erudite, witty, perceptive, enlightening, elegant.

In late 1996 Cooke suddenly ran foul of special powers-that-be, possibly for the first time ever. I am indebted to John Corry of *The American Spectator* for the following information, which I found on the Internet.

It seems that Cooke was commenting on recent sexual harassment scandals in the U.S. Army, and remarked that "the men had shown remarkable restraint". Immediately, certain British radical feminists leapt to the attack, demanding an inquiry . . . the BBC launched an internal investigation.

John Corry continues:

The 88-year-old Cooke had not advocated rape, of course. He only had pointed out, in his civilized way, that when the Army puts young men and women into unisex quarters, sensible people know what will happen. It is unlikely the BBC will now can him for this -- Cooke is a popular fixture . . .

Speaking of radio Aunties, by the way, the ABC is the place where we Australians can enjoy Cooke's weekly broadcast. You have several choices on Sydney Radio National: Tuesday 11.45 am, Sunday 1.45 pm and 7.10 pm.