Transmitting the Impulse:
The Creative Treatment of Ronald McCuaig's Poetry and Actuality

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ABSTRACT

The object of this research is to expand the practice of archiveology, a term coined by Joel Katz in 1991 and theorised more recently by Catherine Russell to describe the process of reusing found archival footage in expository documentary to "produce new modes of thinking about the past" (2018, 47). This research will experiment with poetry as a source of archive, adding to the more commonly deployed materials such as film, still photographs, or letters used in documentary production. The intention of the work is to illuminate the literary career of the Australian poet Ronald McCuaig (1908–1993), who was also my grandfather. Ronald McCuaig was described by Australian author Geoffrey Dutton as "Australia's first modern poet" (1986, 49), and was widely respected for his literary contribution, which spanned from the 1930s to the 1990s. In recent years, however, his work and career had begun to fade from view. As an established documentary filmmaker, I have completed a significant practice-based study, experimenting with production methods for multiplatform outcomes. The rich archive collection that emerged throughout the study led me to question how it is possible to do justice to literature through my usual documentary practice. I have initiated a hermeneutical experiment, re-versioning McCuaig's literary work—predominantly poetry—through the methodologies of archiveology and videopoetry.

Over the past ten years, audience screening options and spaces have changed dramatically, providing opportunities to develop work that provides for a multifaceted viewing experience, adding online spaces to traditional cinema or television viewing. These options provide an opportunity to experiment with archiveological practices for new viewing artefacts such as videopoems. I aim to demonstrate the impact of Ronald McCuaig's original work and its potential to provide powerful social commentary, still of relevance in 2020, using Walter Benjamin's 'dialectical image' as a conceptual framework. The outcome of poetry from the 1930s, reimagined into videopoetry with companion documentary sequences, results in a synthesis and an unusual and expanded outcome for a documentary filmmaker: a gallery exhibition. Rather than a single screening event, the exhibition includes multiple screening spaces, a material culture collection, furniture installations, an exhibition publication, digitised original anthologies, and an online space. The combination of these outputs and proposed future endeavours provides audiences with a more visceral connection to the poet, his life and work.

DECLARATION

This is to certify that "Transmitting the Impulse: The Creative Treatment of Ronald McCuaig's Poetry and Actuality" has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge, this paper contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made within the research paper itself.

Nicole McCuaig

Contents

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FOREWORD

I have a vivid memory of sitting in an English class at Canberra High School one day in 1984. The teacher had decided we would read some poetry, so we opened our textbooks to a poem about a paperboy. I was not very interested in poetry or paperboys; rather, Adam Ant's "Jukebox" was most likely screaming around in my teenage head. After a few stanzas, the teacher stopped reading and called the class's attention to the name of the poet and asked me if I knew Ronald McCuaig, as we shared the same last name. I had never heard of Ronald McCuaig, so she continued on with the poem about the paperboy. Later that evening, I asked my father if we knew Ronald McCuaig and he confirmed that he was my grandfather whom I had only ever referred to as 'Pop', and that my father was the paperboy observed in the poem. He was the same man we looked forward to seeing on holidays in Sydney, where he would quietly roam our uncle and aunt's garden in a stylish dressing gown and fedora hat. He lived in a granny flat that had Bach pouring out of it. And he would spend time with my brother and cousin making elaborate Meccano creations. It wasn't that we didn't know him—it was that I had never heard him referred to as a poet or journalist.

Twenty years later, in the aftermath of being made redundant from my day job as a documentary director for an Australian television network, I started to read some of Ronald McCuaig's poetry. Libraries and the internet offered scant mention of his work stored as anthologies, newspaper articles, and some biographical detail. But the minimal artefacts that initially surfaced belied his significant contribution to Australian literature. I decided to further research his life and make a documentary, but this project would raise more creative dilemmas than any I had embarked on as a filmmaker. It would require a new approach to my creative practice and the way I have viewed and used archives in the past.

The question from the outset of this research project was how would I create an interesting documentary about a literary figure who is no longer alive? Moreover, as a filmmaker, how would I visually tell a story that is focused around the written word, and Ronald McCuaig's imagination? Considering his career started in the 1930s, I knew I would have very little access to footage (often the first question from a broadcaster), some photos, books, and letters, which would not visually demonstrate the energy inherent in the actual literature created by him. To appeal to a contemporary audience, I would have to experiment outside of my usual practice

to find ways to reimagine his literary works and demonstrate the initial impulse that led him to write literature that was respected and enjoyed by audiences and critics of his time.

For the past twenty years, I have made documentaries on many different communities about a wide variety of subject matter for national broadcast in Australia. I have had an increasing interest in the use of archives in documentary and many of my projects have required me trawling through the personal archives of other people's families as well as formal archives and libraries. Some of the documentaries I have made entailed the complex use of archival material to develop the story within the documentary, while others required the use of still or moving images to illustrate a back story. I have predominantly used a traditional approach to archives in production: using them to augment and illustrate an interview; and to cover cuts and gaps in the edit. Archival practice in documentary filmmaking can be haphazard due to the difficulty of finding material within the production timeframe and due to budgetary constraints.

But as I have subsequently used different production techniques in documentary, particularly greenscreen interviews, the use of archive has become more of an aesthetic aspect of the style of the documentary. Rather than using a static location backdrop for an interview, I started to film interviews on greenscreen to be replaced by a carefully constructed archive behind the participant. My first experience of seeing a documentary that used greenscreen interviews intertwined with archive was Michael Cordell's *The Original Mermaid* (2002). The documentary screened at the Sydney Writers' Festival and subsequently on ABC TV. I was looking for an opportunity to use the greenscreen interview and archive in an independent documentary as a director and it came in the form of the documentary *Black Soldier Blues* (2005). This project was a one-hour documentary for SBSi. I wanted to adopt the style of green screen interview but didn't realise how this would impact the edit process, due to the significant amount of archive necessary to build a backdrop for the story. Although obvious now, filming all interviews on greenscreen, and having a largely undocumented subject—African American soldiers in Australia—meant the editing for the film was complicated, and created costs and scheduling complexities not immediately apparent to me when I made the aesthetic choice.

For a large proportion of my career, I have been employed and commissioned as a documentary filmmaker and my work has consistently screened and been broadcast nationally, which is a rare and fortunate trajectory. Some of the credits are listed on the following Screen Australia database: https://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/the-screen-guide/p/nicole-mccuaig/14315/.

I have worked with experienced crew and had access to broadcast production and post-production equipment and resources. This project, within the doctoral framework, has required that I work for four years largely alone in the research and production. I have revisited technical skills of camera and editing, experimenting at intervals to advance creative ideas. My grandfather's life and career has been a subject rich with visual questions and possibilities that has buoyed me constantly over the long process to the end of this work. At the completion of the research, I intend to pursue funding opportunities to expand on the work I have done over the course of this doctorate.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the notoriety that surrounded Ezra Pound (1885–1972) at the end of his life, he was instrumental in developing radical ideas in the formative years of the modernist poetry movement, and his influence remained for generations to come. He recognised the strength of the original idea, image, and scene that underpinned a poem, but warned "There's no use in a strong impulse if it is all or nearly all lost in bungling transmission and technique". He saw the goal in construction of a striking poem was "transmission of the impulse intact" (Pound and Paige 1971, 60). My aim and the challenge of this study and creative output was to find a way to transmit the original impulse that ignited Ronald McCuaig to write his first poetry collection, *Vaudeville* (1938).

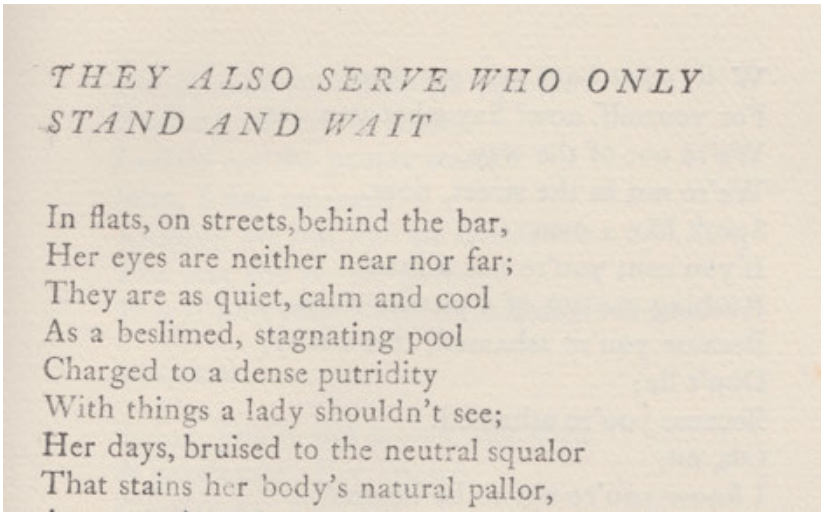
With a large body of documentary work behind me that demonstrates a fascination with the use of archive in documentary, albeit conventionally, I pursued a subject close to my heart that would push me even further to experiment with new methods of treating archives. As mentioned, more than any other documentary project I have directed, I was concerned with how I would visually realise the story of Ronald McCuaig's literary career. The projects I have directed to date involve more recent history and access to visual material has been easier to obtain. The dilemma of visual realisation of literary texts would lead me to explore the concept of archival use in documentary and studies around the subject. Current research recognises the new possibilities of archival material, particularly how film archives can be reimagined to create historical memory. Catherine Russell developed an extensive study around the term 'archiveology', describing the intention of the practice as follows:

> Exploring the potential of audio visual fragments to construct new ways of accessing and framing history that might otherwise have been forgotten and neglected—and to make these histories relevant to contemporary concerns. (2018, 30)

As I looked at ways of bringing literary works to a screen platform, I realised the above quote could be modified to include poetry instead of audio visual fragments. This was a daunting prospect as I was unsure of the outcome, but looked forward to the opportunity to experiment. Assistant Professor of Film Reece Auguiste (2015) describes the hermeneutical responsibility

of documentary practitioners to use archival material in more than the traditional approach as a "marker of evidence" (11), where it is used as proof of what is being outlined in narration or interview. I questioned if the poems of *Vaudeville* could be similar to undiscovered films that capture the daily lives of Sydney residents. For example, McCuaig's poem "They Also Serve Who Only Stand and Wait" describes a Sydney prostitute in lines such as:

Her eyes are neither near nor far;
They are as quiet, calm and cool
As a beslimed, stagnating pool
Charged to a dense putridity
With things a lady shouldn't see (1938, 21)



THEY ALSO SERVE WHO ONLY
STAND AND WAIT

In flats, on streets, behind the bar,
Her eyes are neither near nor far;
They are as quiet, calm and cool
As a beslimed, stagnating pool
Charged to a dense putridity
With things a lady shouldn't see;
Her days, bruised to the neutral squalor
That stains her body's natural pallor,

The poem as it appears in *Vaudeville.*

But there was a long research period before I would determine if this was possible. When I first searched for Ronald McCuaig on the internet, there was no *Wikipedia* page for him in English; instead, there was a short entry with three sentences in Norwegian. The entry related to a children's book he wrote in retirement, which was titled *Gangles* in Australia and was redistributed in Norway as *Fresi Fantastika*. I knew there was more to his story than this and subsequent searches returned more information about his work as a poet and journalist. In June 2016, I approached author and *Wikipedia* writer Robert Whyte to advise on how I might create an Australian *Wikipedia* entry, expanding on the record of Ronald McCuaig's literary career. After additional research, Whyte recognised the value of this missing history and redeveloped

Ronald McCuaig's *Wikipedia* page to include the career details that were readily available through libraries, papers, and books. The more I read of his life and work in my own research, the more I felt compelled to document his life story, but I could not have imagined that it would result in such a vast archival collection and satisfying creative outcomes.

Although Ronald McCuaig is not well known now, he was respected by colleagues and writers up to the 1980s. The description by Geoffrey Dutton of Ronald McCuaig as "Australia's first modern poet" (1986, 49) suggests he is respected in Australia's literary history. Dutton uses "modernist" and "modern" interchangeably throughout his book that focuses on the rise of modernism in Sydney in the period between 1930 and 1960. He provides a definition of the modernist as someone who simply has "sympathy for what is modern" (1986, xiii) and elaborates by explaining how the subject matter and "contrary images" (1986, 50) used in the poetry of Ronald McCuaig put him in company with the better known modernists Pound and T. S. Eliot (1888–1965). But there are many studies that now point to earlier Australian poetry as having modernist characteristics. Ann Vickery describes the work of Australian poet Lesbia Harford in the early 1900s as exploring a "radical modernism" (2009, 90) before Ronald McCuaig started experimenting within the movement. But Ronald McCuaig spent many years researching and experimenting with various poetic styles. He studied and wrote articles for the *Bulletin* about Pound and Eliot and incorporated some of their ideas into his work, which observed urban themes and characters.

Ronald McCuaig wrote about the city, transport, relationships, office workers and domestic life. The characteristics of modern poetry would make the connection recognisable, as Dutton observes:

> But McCuaig has one great advantage as all poets do over non-figurative artists—he can arouse laughter and self-pity simultaneously. Modern poetry, from Laforgue, to Pound, to Eliot, in the manner of the English seventeenth-century metaphysical poets, juxtaposes seemingly contrary images. Dreams of love, sex and beauty catch like low clouds on the spires and concrete of defined reality. (1986, 50)

This modernist subject matter, particularly the erotic, would see his work censored to the point where even Sydney printers refused to print his poetry.

The movement ‘imagism’, coined by Pound in 1912, challenged poets to strive for directness, intensity, purity, and immediacy in their work. He demonstrates the concept famously in his poem “In a Station of the Metro” (Pound and Gunn 2005), a simple four-line poem that had been condensed over months from a longer version, which he destroyed (Langdon 2012). McCuaig reviewed Pound’s essays around imagism for the *Bulletin* in 1935 (1935, 1) and later expressed how these concepts impacted him as a young poet (1948). The era of this work is marked by intense epochs of history—war, depression, industrial innovation and social upheaval—and the poetry captures this combination. The characteristic imagist style can be recognised in poems such as McCuaig’s “The Razor”:

Edged with incuriosity
Whom it cuts, or if, or why,
Her beauty is a lazy razor
Drawn across the brain that has her;
Death so alive is mere illusion
So is her beauty, which, being gone,
Stays as a razor cold, and jagg’d,
Lazily over the brain is dragg’d
(1938, 14)

In addition to my early research and collection of archival material, I set about making a feature documentary that could turn into a broadcast program. I intended to perform all the production roles, leaving the process open to my own experimentation and observation of the work as it developed. I wrote, directed, and edited a large majority of the creative output, apart from one small shoot where I collaborated with a cameraperson and sound recordist. This is a very different way of directing for me, as I have always worked with at least a three-person crew on location, as well as an experienced editor, and an experienced post-production team. Nevertheless, I have always maintained the ability to operate equipment and I spent many years as an editor prior to becoming a director, so the technical aspects of the work did not intimidate me.

During the course of this doctoral project I pitched the project to broadcasters and production companies. I also entered the project in the 2018 Arts ABC/Create NSW round that would fund an ABC documentary. I collaborated with producer Erin McBean and we developed a

submission and a nearly $1 million budget. We completed the extensive application process but were unsuccessful. One of the Create NSW representatives informed Erin that there was interest in the project, but because it didn't have a distributor attached, the panel felt uneasy supporting it. The project received positive feedback from various pitches but there was often a question around how I would visually interpret the poetry, so I decided to make the film with my own resources for this doctorate and try for broadcaster interest at a later time.

Pursuing a project without a funding infrastructure has distinct advantages, such as creative freedom. This led me to experiment with different production techniques that I would not normally have time to perfect when budget and delivery are driven by a broadcaster. These experiments included text manipulation, handwriting on screen, short stop frame animations, recording hip hop versions of the poetry, performance of poetry, and various editing combinations. These experiments led me to an artistic genre that is popular in the online space—videopoetry—which I have explored as an addition to the traditional biographical documentary production and will be described and discussed further in the following chapters. Experimenting with archive and what archive could include would be a large part of the production work.

In describing the origins of and concept of the word 'archive', Jacques Derrida concluded that the committees and institutions that decide where and how it is interpreted have it "under house arrest" (1995, 10). He explains the term archive, derived from the Greek word for house, represents a place where documents are collected, but this also infers the materials are organised and described according to the institution that houses them. Even in documentary, where archive is used as part of a creative form, it is also 'under house arrest', used for the most part to verify and illustrate narration and interview. By contrast, poetry can be a unique record of observation: it is not edited for publication in the way a newspaper article is; it does not have to meet the political persuasion of an institution; and it is free from the usual organising principles of the archive and therefore provides a different historical perspective. Experimenting with poetry as a form of documentary archive supports the direction suggested by Auguiste: that "invention is essentially a modality of practice that posits the notion that constitutive elements of the archive are not necessarily a repository of collective memory" (2015, 14). Modifying the documentary practice to incorporate the narratives of poetry extends the perspective of a given history outside of the established archive of newspapers or still images that may not recognise a breadth of stories or characters.

In addition to exploring Ronald McCuaig as a public literary figure, I have had access to the private life of the poet. Over the course of this research, I have amassed a large family archive that was previously dispersed between me and many relatives that had never previously been viewed as a collection. Boxes of photos, personal letters, music, books, and travel paraphernalia have been brought together as a material collection, and I became the collector. This has been explored through the writings of Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project, describing the intricacies of Parisian shopping arcades. Of the personality of the collector, Benjamin writes,

> The collector dreams his way not only into a distant or bygone world but into a better one—one in which, to be sure, human beings are no better provided with what they need than in the everyday world, but in which things are freed from the drudgery of being useful. (1940/1999, 11)

Taking on the role of collector for Ronald McCuaig's private and public history would require a more diligent undertaking than I was used to in a broadcast environment.

Early in the production process, I interviewed family members for their experiences of knowing and living with the poet. Their memories are notably in stark contrast to each other. My father talks about a distracted, harsh father who could only concentrate on his writing, whereas my cousin talks of a grandfather who was able to be a father figure to his granddaughter, attentive to her needs and endlessly patient. I believe the creative treatment of the documentary is important to achieving a tone that seeks to explore a more rounded character with flaws and complexities that will help avoid the documentary falling into hagiography.

The challenge of this project on my creative practice was unremitting during the early stages of research. I was discovering a larger body of Ronald McCuaig's literary work than first expected, but the question of how to make this interesting and demonstrate the life of the poet of the 1930s was unresolved. Usually in historical documentary work, I have had access to archival footage, even if I use it impressionistically. For this project, there was no footage to draw on of Ronald McCuaig and no footage that represented the imagery in his literary work; the archive materials were two-dimensional books, magazines, photos and illustrations, which wouldn't sustain the project visually. I needed to find a new way of conceptualising documentary archive to bring the vibrancy of Ronald McCuaig's imagination to life.

Interview with Michael McCuaig Ronald McCuaig's son 2016.

Literature Review

Historical documentaries are tasked with the responsibility of accuracy, and these films have often been held to scrutiny by academics and historians wedded to a field that becomes the subject of a documentary. Historian Clifford Kuhn provides a historian's perspective of the filmmaker's haphazard approach to placement of archive as "fundamentally misleading whether intentionally or not" (Kuhn 1996, 320). Documentary film theorist Bill Nichols sees documentary film as a more rhetorical platform where the audience are being delivered a point of view, he notes that "style, form and voice are at the heart and soul of persuasive engagement" (2016, 110) In an effort for a filmmaker to communicate perspectives within a documentary he boldly suggests that "facts need to be in an interpretive frame" (2016, 99). Where historians see misuse of artefacts, Nichols recognises the creative component required to make a documentary that captures an audience.

Although I have made multiple documentaries within and for a general broadcast structure (as an independent filmmaker), I have experimented with stylistic components that are obvious within documentary films, such as motion, text on screen, and montage. I have used these to highlight a theme or exaggerate a story component and aimed to push this further throughout this research. Documentary film theorist Michael Renov wrote a significant paper that details

the impacts of an arts-based approach to documentary through examining the work of contemporary artist/documentary filmmakers. Of the film *Tongues Untied* (1989), he observes we learnt:

> that documentary could be visceral, sexy, funny, personal and polemical all at once. And the key to its effectiveness was not the gritty realism, its use of rational persuasion but rather its recourse to the stylized, the expressive, the subjective, and the evocative. (Renov 2007, 19)

This kind of approach is key to the creative experimentation in this research. Renov also highlights the work of filmmaker Peter Forgacs and his use of archival footage from the Holocaust played in various motions, with layers of text and dramatic music. He describes the filmmaker as having an "obsessive concern for historicity and clear disdain for verisimilitude" (Renov 2007, 27), with the outcome being a more artistic style that moves an audience to react to the disturbing historical event. The intention is not just to educate but to impact.

A more conservative approach to archive—at least in early films—is seen in the films of Ken Burns, which are long American history episodes, such as *The Civil War* (1990), that incorporate narration and supportive archival materials. In 1995, historian David Thelan interviewed Burns about his research and general approach to history in documentary filmmaking. The twenty-page transcript appears in the *Journal of American History*. In the interview, Burns talks about his work with historian consultants during the filmmaking; conflicts with academics; the unique stories that emerge looking outside established historical record; and his determination to be viewed as "primarily an artist". In response to a final question about a recent survey that finds historians have lost touch, Burns replies:

> I believe you have failed and lost touch absolutely in communicating history to the public and that it has fallen to the amateur historians [which he counts himself] to try to rescue that history. (Thelen 1994, 1050)

Based on the description of the production process around *The Civil War* series, it would be reasonable to suggest the budget for the series was significant. The most poignant part of the interview with Burns is his satisfaction at being able to uncover and reveal many stories that highlighted marginalised histories. In *Australian Documentary History, Practices*, *and Genres*

the rich history of Australian documentary production highlights an eclectic and significant trajectory. But a low point is described when the largest budget from government was allocated to historical filmmaking and the outcomes were documentaries about "explorers, prime ministers, and generals", due largely to the conservative government of the time that influenced the development process (FitzSimons, Laughren, and Williamson 2011, 155). This is far from the only historical documentary series produced in Australia but nevertheless is a missed opportunity to seek at least some new perspectives. Outside of this type of national project, the costs associated with securing archival footage in Australia often deter filmmakers from pursuing projects that rely on its use.

There are well-known documentary filmmakers who divide opinion based on their use of archives. Professor Zoe Druick (2007, 17) argues that filmmaker Errol Morris has been the subject of a "prodigious amount of attention" from film studies, legal studies and popular media, yet little attention has been given to the subject of history and his films. His early films such as *The Thin Blue Line* (1988) explored the creative textures of archive with great affect. But he also used archive to shock audiences or used unrelated archive for narrative emphasis, such as the 1903 footage of an elephant being electrocuted in *Mr. Death* (1999), a film that Druick focuses her attention on. In following a character that subscribes to a false history (the main subject is a Holocaust denier), Morris opened himself to much criticism, but Druick concludes he was able to demonstrate that documentary could include "popular culture, personal narrative and historical consciousness" (Druick 2007, 217). This is a significant point for this study, as I experimented with poetry narratives to demonstrate the urban milieu of 1930s Sydney, a departure from what would usually be considered reliable archive for documentary.

Filmmaker Alan Berliner has amassed an apartment building full of archival materials such as film reels, audio cassettes, still images, and documents that he uses extensively in his films, often more interested in creating an impression than proving a historical point. In *First Cousin Once Removed* (2012), he documents the descent into dementia of his relative who was the poet Edwin Honig. (Rincón, Cuevas, and Torregrosa 2018, 23) suggest that "he uses archive as a sign of absence through different visual metaphors representing forgetfulness and lack of memory". This is a brief example of his large body of documentary, constructed from archive and found footage. *Intimate Stranger* (1991), about Honig's maternal grandfather, is wall to wall archive and—against documentary convention—we never see his interview participants;

rather, we only hear their voices. In his book of interviews with filmmakers, film critic Scott MacDonald started his interview with Alan Berliner by reminding him of early criticism from critic Fred Camper who saw "no real values being expressed, no real subject-matter, merely effects for their own sake or for the sake of manipulating the audience" (2006, 147). As his body of work has continued, mainly focused on family members, respect for his style has grown and his experimental structure is seen to reflect "his deeply compassionate connection to others" (Roger 2012, 153). It can be misconstrued that experimenting with the documentary form can render the work emotionless.

A focus of this research is how archives might be used in creative practice to highlight the relatively unknown history of an Australian literary figure. It draws largely on the practice of archiveology, which Catherine Russell connects to theories developed by Walter Benjamin. Her book *Archiveology: Walter Benjamin and Archival Film Practices* (2018) explores the use of film archive in expositional documentary through Benjamin's many fields of study, including: collection, exhibition, criticism, and historiography. Russell provides a detailed but limited space for archiveological practice, concentrating on work by found footage filmmakers and expositional documentary. This project recognises a gap in the research and practice around archive and endeavours to expand the scope to demonstrate that archiveology can make use of literary fragments in video production to creating new archival artefacts.

Russell also refers to Benjamin's theory of the dialectical image to realise the potential of archiveological practice to create a distinguishing moment. Rather than just an impression of the past, there is a discernible connection between past and present to create new meaning and historical perspectives. In discussing the creative outcome of the work, I have used Benjamin's theory of the dialectical image. Philosophy professor Max Pensky details criticism of the controversial term, highlighting that even Benjamin was vague in the description of his theory (2004, 177). Hegel's theory of dialectics goes some way towards explaining Benjamin's methodology. Simplified as thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, the concept recognises the union of idea and argument. Professor of comparative literature Abbas Ackbar notes that Benjamin sees the dialectical image as combining the old and the new at a "moment of stasis" (1988, 229), with the resulting energy from the past and present meeting in a place of recognition.

Even in its nebulous form, the theory of the dialectical image is a concept that can be used to describe work that reveals a tension between past and present and the synthesis that emerges

at that moment. While this will be further examined in the exegesis in relation to the creative work and to observations from the audience, an introductory example is worth providing Ronald McCuaig's poem "The Letter", written in 1934, details a brutally violent, domestic scene. Producing a new version of the poem using contemporary images, text, music, and voiceover highlights the ongoing social issue of domestic violence. This challenges the idea that this issue is either a historical or contemporary problem only, suggesting instead that we have not progressed very far at all in addressing the subject. When I first read "The Letter", I experienced a shock that Ronald McCuaig had observed this scene as a young poet. Lecturer in art theory Uros Cvoro asserts that the dialectical image is a rare moment that produces this kind of shock and subsequent "rethinking of history" (Cvoro 2008, 91). The realisation that this domestic scene is not just a contemporary social issue but has been known and observed in the past potentially places it on a broader historical plane.

This exegesis traverses various fields of study in addition to film. In researching the history of Ronald McCuaig, I was required to develop my understanding of the history of Australian literature, McCuaig's place in this history, and more specifically his significance as a modernist poet. The many sources associated with the literary field will be detailed in Chapter 1.

Methodologies

This research is both practice-based, in that there are "creative outcomes" (Candy 2006, 3) highlighting the biographical story of Ronald McCuaig and his contribution to Australia's literary history, and practice-led, in that it demonstrates "operational significance for the practice" (Candy 2006, 3) in its exploration of documentary, archiveology, videopoetry, and exhibition.

The outcomes of the practice-based research include two creative digital artefacts: a 25-minute narrative documentary and a 12-minute videopoetry anthology reimagining the original poetry of Ronald McCuaig into short audio-visual sequences. Videopoetry is described as "a genre of poetry displayed on a screen, distinguished by its time-based, poetic juxtaposition of images with text and sound" (Konyves 2011). The original poetry is rich with imagery and scenes of 1930s Sydney, so I set out to experiment with videopoetry as a means to create video versions of the poetry for a new platform and a contemporary space.

The work was initially shown in an exhibition at the gallery at Queensland College of Art, Griffith University, in January 2020. The exhibition combined the archive collection, video artefacts, scanned electronic anthologies, and furniture installations. Documentation of this exhibition and its process of coming into being is incorporated in a website where the audio-visual works can be seen. The audio-visual works combine various video production techniques including research and archive collection, filming interviews, experimenting with text on screen, drama production and editing. The exhibition component included research around exhibition curation; creative works using poetry printed on fabric; and a full setup of the exhibition space. These processes will be further explored in the body of the exegesis.

The creative output of this doctorate is available to view on the following website: https://sites.google.com/view/nicole-mccuaig-dva. The website contains: the biographical documentary, videopoetry anthology, behind-the-scenes still photographs, video of the project development leading to exhibition, exhibition booklet, exhibition artwork, archive fragments from various Trove discoveries, archive and biographical details, and photos of my filmmaking history.

Various methodologies were employed throughout the course of this research. The documentary production process can be viewed as a qualitative methodology as many of the stages mimic traditional research gathering techniques, such as interviewing, transcribing, interpreting the data and sharing results (Friend and Caruthers 2016, 38). Closely connected to this methodology is narrative inquiry. The research includes filmed interviews to structure the narrative of the central character: his history, contribution to literary history, literary practice, work history, and family life. These were recorded on green screen and were then structured as a documentary narrative; these interviews have also informed the extended study of the process throughout the exegesis.

Archive collection and historical inquiry have been used to build a more accurate and complete picture of Ronald McCuaig's literary career and personal life. This is a usual documentary practice, but became a significant outcome in itself as the archive located was larger than first imagined. The archive contains early poetry collections, including a handmade copy of *Vaudeville* (1938), anthologies bound in fabric by Ronald McCuaig, other rare books, and original sketches. There was a significant family collection of well-preserved photographs gifted to me by a cousin. I arranged for them to be professionally scanned at high resolution to collect digital versions and to use in creative projects. I also gathered the many articles and

other archival artefacts that were online into one space. The exegesis will outline the process of archive collection and study. Throughout the study of the archive, reference to Walter Benjamin's work on collection is of relevance, particularly the way he describes the new image that is created from the passionate collection endeavour, as Annie Pfeifer notes on the practice: "By extricating the object from its former context, the collection endows it with the freedom to achieve a new kind of expression within its transformative framework" (Pfeifer 2018, 50).

The studio practice includes aspects of the documentary production but also includes a significant amount of video experimentation that was used throughout the process of creating the documentary project and the videopoetry anthology, as mentioned. Just as my grandfather had undertaken the process of book production for his first poetry collection *Vaudeville* after printers refused to print it, so I approached screen production in an artisanal fashion. Prior to working on the project, I purchased a copy online of *Vaudeville* (1938) for $300 (Appendix 2). The copy was signed to Cecil Mann from Ronald McCuaig (Cecil Mann was a colleague at *The Bulletin*). There was also a letter in the cover that was from my grandfather to an unknown publisher which detailed the process of being rejected by the printers and then printing the collection himself. The letter explained that McCuaig bought a printing press, and that he went through a protracted process of having all the letters of the font individually mailed to his apartment at Potts Point.

Archiveolgy is a creative practice, but the study of how to bring the historical literary figure and literature to life in film requires an examination of the process. For the purposes of this research, archiveology is a methodology that provides a framework for the creative practice component to be open to further inquiry. As Russell writes, "The convergence of research and representation, searching and exhibiting that are all part of archiveology tends to align it with both curating and criticism" (2018, 17). The exegesis will express this inquiry through auto-ethnomethodology, a methodology coined by senior lecturer Lyle Skains that requires communication of the creative process as it is happening rather than purely an expression of what has happened, which Skains suggests "fails to offer insights into the cognitive processes of creation" (2018, 3). Evidence of the development of ideas and the progress of creative thought will be explained using examples of the works in progress; still images of the practice; and behind-the-scenes video footage of the creative process leading to the exhibition of the work.

The process has not been premeditated but rather has evolved non-linearly over the course of the study, which is not unusual for practice-based research, as it often requires "exploration and discovery, with many key insights arriving via serendipity, rather than as part of experiment design" (Skains 2018, 93). Experimenting with production and post-production techniques has led to unexpected and creatively gratifying outcomes that will be demonstrated throughout the exegesis.

Contributions to the Field

As mentioned, this research has both practice-led and practice-based outcomes unique to the field of documentary, literature, and Australian history studies. The creative practice as research has been "primarily directed toward making artefacts" (Candy and Edmonds 2018, 68). The artefacts produced around the Australian literary figure Ronald McCuaig present a combination of family history and public career; the videopoetry sequences reimagine what are considered by some to be the first Australian modernist poetry onto a new platform. The exhibition provided a distinctive viewing space with the creative artefacts; collected material artefacts placed in cabinets; and installation items around the construction of settings for audience to sit, watch, listen, or read poetry. In addition, a large archive has been uncovered. As I will describe, I have discovered that a ten-year body of work for *Wireless Weekly* under the pseudonym 'James' was written by Ronald McCuaig; I have located a weekly humour column written by Ronald McCuaig for the early publication *ABC Weekly*; and I have collaborated with a collection librarian to uncover five boxes of uncatalogued archive relating to Ronald McCuaig in the State Library of New South Wales.

The outcomes of the practice-led research are extensions and combinations of the practices of documentary, archiveology, videopoetry, and exhibition. The usual practice of researching the documentary led to reading and discovering Ronald McCuaig's literary works, which led to experimentation around how to represent the literary work, which led to videopoetry sequences that are also documentary sequences, as they make use of archive and observation of nineteen thirties Sydney. It is possible to view these as 'documentary videopoetry', which is a rare coupling.

The extension of the documentary viewing space to include the three dimensions of the gallery is based around Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project, where fragments of documentation around

the Parisian arcades are brought together in what Benjamin himself describes as 'literary montage'(1940/1999, N1a.8). The work is aimed at demonstrating Benjamin's 'dialectical image', where historical artefacts are brought into the present to create a new interpretation of history as he writes of the phenomenon:

> It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. (1940/1999, 238)

The creative work aims to capture the original impulse experienced by the poet and combine this with fragments of Ronald McCuaig's life to a platform where the imaginative impulses from the past are demonstrated using techniques of the present in the exhibition setting—a place of recognisability. The exegesis expands on the processes, theories, and methodologies that have informed these outcomes.

Thesis Structure

The first chapter details the research effort to build a more complete picture of Ronald McCuaig's life and career. Researching the subject to get a sense of how a story might develop or if there is a story to tell is usual practice for documentary development. Although McCuaig had been written about and I had read some of his work, I was determined to gather as much material as possible to build the potential narrative. I realised he had nearly faded from view, although some of his work was listed in Austlit, the Australian literary database. The chapter explores the life history and the influences on his poetry juxtaposed with his career as a columnist and literary journalist. Research into his poetic endeavours reveals his determination to write as a modernist. Throughout this chapter there are also specific artefacts that lead to the discovery of pseudonyms that McCuaig wrote under for various publications.

The second chapter explores my previous practice with archive in documentary production and reintroduces the concept of archiveology; positing an extension of the concept. Recognising my connection to the subject, I will explore the work of other filmmakers who grappled with where they were positioned in documentaries about a family member. This chapter will then provide a study of how literary subjects have been treated in documentary, and a breakdown

of the documentary modes that would be considered for the biographical treatment of the Ronald McCuaig story.

The final chapter maps the creative progression of the practice-based research, from early production of documentary segments to experiments with recontextualising the poetry into a videopoetry anthology to the development of an exhibition that was opened in January 2020. The chapter concludes with a description of the development of the exhibition which demonstrates the combination of many fragments of Ronald McCuaig's life and career that have been collected, documented, filmed, and reimagined to create a connection between his past and my present and placing the work in a place of "recognizability" (Benjamin 1940/1999, 243).

CHAPTER 1. RONALD MCCUAIG AND HIS LIFE IN LETTERS

This chapter introduces and details the extant sources relating to the poet and journalist Ronald McCuaig (1908–93), who had a significant literary career working in radio and print journalism, predominantly in Sydney. He wrote for the early ABC radio 2BL, was a war correspondent and satirist for the lively *Smith's Weekly*, worked as a journalist at the *Sydney Morning Herald*, and wrote a significant body of work as a feuilletonist, or writer of light verse, for the *Bulletin*. I also uncovered large collections of articles for publications such as *Wireless Weekly* and *ABC Weekly* that were previously mentioned in passing as part of biographical records.

However, McCuaig's overriding passion was writing poetry, and he is recognised by writers and academics as being significant in Australia's literary history. As a result of his first self-published and self-printed collection, *Vaudeville* (1938), he was seen to be the instigator of a new direction in Australian poetry. Much better known Australian poet and author Douglas Stewart, when asked to give the 1977 Boyer lectures series "Writers of the Bulletin" (1977), argued that McCuaig "ushered Australian literature into the twenty-first century" (1977, 50); and poet Kenneth Slessor placed him in the "front rank of Australian poetry" (1992, ix). Unlike these creatives, and many of his colleagues, McCuaig remains largely out of view in Australia's literary history. As will be discussed below, there are various theories about his relative obscurity: his day job as a humourist, his distance from academia, shy personality, his criticism of academia, his detachment from Norman Lindsay's then very dominating influence on Australian cultural circles, and his limited serious poetry output.

McCuaig's long creative career, respected body of poetry, news articles, light humour, children's books, literary criticism, archival material, letters, humour, and family lore provide rich narrative choices but required production experimentation to realise visually. Choices about use of archive, animation as re-creation, and performance of the poetry present some experimental possibilities that I have not explored with other films I have made. These haven't been in the more straightforward broadcast documentary arena where length, format, and aesthetics are much more strictly delimited.

In addition, the character of McCuaig shifts through differing perceptions and eras of his life. As a young poet, he was brave, funny, focused, determined, shy, clever, passionate,

compassionate, and radical. Letters reveal a dedication to his work, close connection with colleagues, revelations about his sons, a close relationship with his wife, and commitment to literature. As a father, he was aloof, distracted, moody, disinterested and preoccupied, while as grandfather, he was kind, funny, thoughtful, and patient. The complexity of his character is enhanced by the minutiae of family anecdotes; his professional life is explored through the large body of work he amassed over his lifetime; and his interior life is mostly revealed in letters and some of his poetry.

Ronald McCuaig and Modernism

Image of Ronald McCuaig (McCuaig family collection)

The *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* describes modernism as a "general term applied retrospectively to the wide range of experimental and avant-garde trends in literature of early 20th century" (Baldick 2015, 737) . Not unlike the word 'documentary', modernism is multi-faceted, and debates about definition, period, and characteristics are ongoing. There is some consensus the most prolific era of modernist artwork and literature started just before the turn of the twentieth century and went until the 1940s. Julian Croft describes Australian poetry in the 1930s as being torn between the modernist idea to "make it new" and exploitation of styles

from the past (1986, 84). *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernist Poetry* warns against using the term "modernist" to define all poets from a particular era:

> Applying 'modernist' as a period term like 'Victorian' has become popular recently, because it gives a claim to equal treatment for many writers pushed off the poetic map by a mid-century belief that Eliot or Pound's sort of poetry was the only sort adequate to modernity, a belief Eliot and Pound had done a good deal to encourage. (Howarth 2011, 3)

Modernist work was generally recognised for going against traditional form and these poets used new and unconventional techniques. World War 1, industrialisation, and technological advancement were all seen as influences of a new direction and critical of aspects of progress. The tragedy of war against the relentless push forward was critiqued in the new modernist forms by artists who saw a "personal and social disintegration" in contemporary society and therefore their work was intended to shock and challenge audiences (Howarth 2011, 10).

The urban subject matter and characters in Ronald McCuaig's poetry, in addition to stylistic characteristics of the work, would lead authors to include him as part of the modernist movement in Australian literature (Croft 1986, 91). The collection *Vaudeville* (1938) was surprising to his contemporaries such as Douglas Stewart, who detailed his reaction to the work in his Boyer Lectures. Stewart (1977) remembers being "startled" when reading the poetry and described its "extraordinary rhyming", which had an impact on the young poet when he first read the verse in New Zealand.

In Julian Croft's paper that explores Australian poetry of the 1930s, he describes *Vaudeville* as the "most interesting collection of minor poetry" of the decade, ascribing a metaphysical quality to the work with its portrayal of city and domestic life. Of the poems, he writes:

> Though they use rhyme intelligently, they capture contemporary speech rhythms with a wit and verve that no other poet was to do until Bruce Dawe in the 'sixties. They are a fine philippics against the shallowness of modern urban life and its effect on the vital instincts. (1986, 91)

An example of contemporary speech is evident in the poem “The Artist’s Model”, where a model is railing at her lover ‘the artist’ with barbs such as “Swine, you’re not a man, not even a gentleman”; the language throughout the poem stays similarly colloquial.

The source of poetic inspiration for Ronald McCuaig’s urban observations could be seen to be rooted in journalism. He was writing for Australian newspapers and journal publications for some years before writing the poetry of *Vaudeville* (1938). The people he came into contact with and wrote about as part of his day job may have impacted his style. But the development of his poetry into modernism was a result of determined research and experimentation over many years. He would write about his personal trajectory to discover modernism for the Australian literary journal *Southerly* in 1948. This autobiographical paper recounts elocution lessons initiated by his mother; having to recite “The Man from Snowy River” for his father; and winning the writing prize of a Tennyson collection at school (McCuaig 1948).

McCuaig recounts his early experiences leading to reading Eliot and Pound, significant figures in the literature of the modernist period. A recognisable new direction in modernist poetry was a move away from complicated, romantic language to a conversational tone in the verse, which surprised McCuaig:

> Eliot and Pound changed so much; they showed how English poetry could reproduce the inflections of contemporary English speech—the young poet could speak naturally. They showed how Milton had perverted the English tradition—the young poet need not be grandiose. They showed that the best subject-matter of poetry was the poet's everyday experience—and the young poet could put away Bulfinch's Classical Encyclopedia. (1948, 209)

The influence of this independent study is evident in the *Vaudeville* poetry, as mentioned with “The Artist’s Model”.

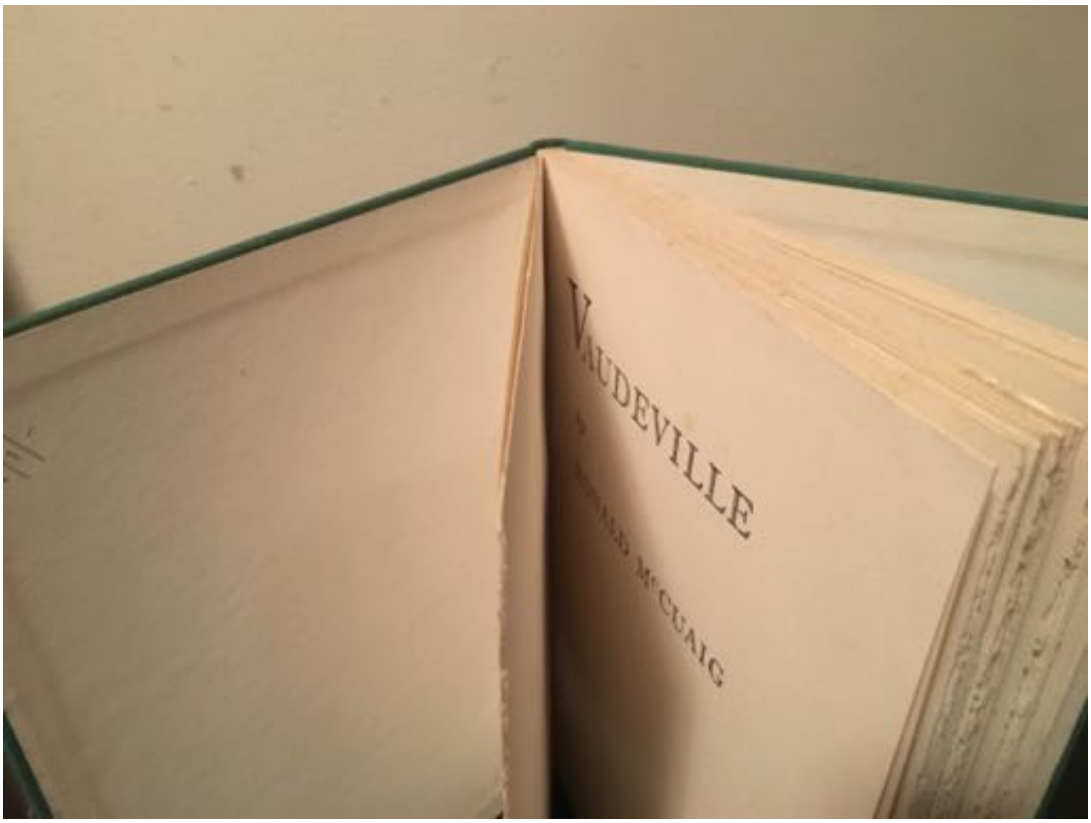
Another aspect of modernist poetry was experimentation and the rejection of established techniques. The most effective experimentation came from Ronald McCuaig’s study and understanding of literary history. Before McCuaig discovered Pound and Eliot, he spent years in his youth experimenting with form. He wrote and rewrote verse, tried French forms, studied Elizabethan songwriters, and even spent a year trying to write poetry as music—at one point using the sonata to structure a poem. Some of these efforts were printed in the *Bulletin*, but he

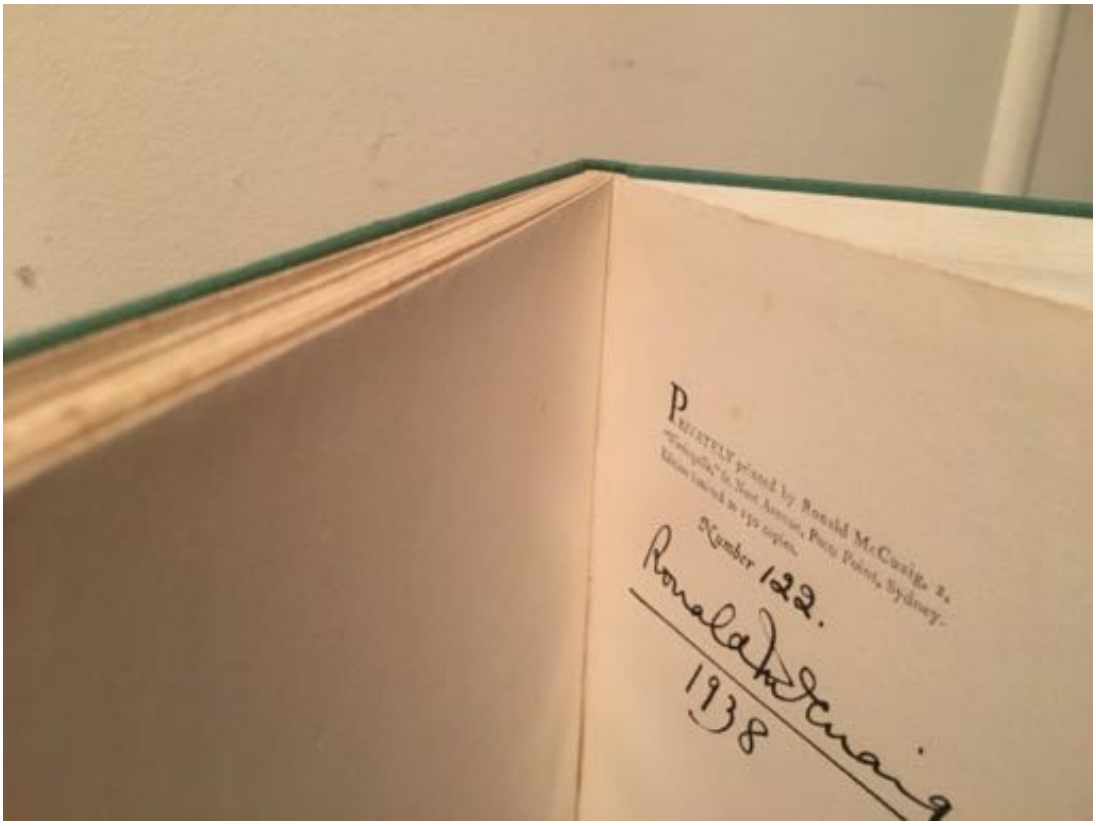
'scrapped' most of it in the end, concluding "music is music and poetry is poetry"; this history detailed in the same *Southerly* article mentioned above (1948). None of it was in vain though, because when he finally compiled his first collection *Vaudeville* (1938), he feverishly put all of these years of study into one extraordinary collection and he did not seem concerned about people's opinions about his work: "Many did not like my poems when they were written; many do not like them now: my own faith in them has never faltered" (McCuaig 1948, 210).

The collection would face scrutiny over a four-year period before publication, but this was not unusual for modernists. In the introduction to his book about modernism, Jeff Wallace emphasizes the reaction to some of the stylistic approaches to art and literature when he describes how an early Eliot poem was rejected by publisher Harold Monro, who described it as "absolutely insane" (Wallace 2011, 5). In a conversation with Dutton, McCuaig recalled that when he showed his *Vaudeville* poems to the influential Sydney artist, critic, and novelist Norman Lindsay, Lindsay wanted to modify the structure until it was a completely "Lindsay view of life" (Dutton 1986, 53): sentimental, arcadian , and overtly sexual. Dutton determines that McCuaig's success as a modernist can be partly attributed to his "strength of mind to detach himself from Lindsay" (1986, 52).

Ultimately, his approach to self-publish, and then self-print, was very much in keeping with other modernists in Europe who were also self-publishing. This confidence to pursue a publication in the face of such rejection is distinguishing. It has also been observed that many of these modernists "went missing" (Howarth 2011, 4), because their work was not commercial enough to sustain a living and this may be another contributing factor in McCuaig's disappearance from view. As a self-made literary scholar and practitioner without any formal qualifications, he could not rely on an institution, such as a university, as a place to continue his experiments of the poetic and had to pursue paid work as a journalist and satirist. Although *Smith's Weekly* and the *Bulletin* encouraged literary pursuits, they were also publications for a broader audience; therefore, most of his energy was spent providing content in the form of daily news, light verse, and literary criticism.

Vaudeville Biographical Sequence
https://vimeo.com/332915747
Password: V





Still images of *Vaudeville.*

Dutton directly connects the work of McCuaig with the infinitely better-known British poets Eliot and Pound, noting the three shared the ability to "juxtapose seemingly contrary imagery" and were "masters of the music of poetry" (1986, 49). Ronald McCuaig had already shown a fascination for music, particularly classical music, by the time he came to write *Vaudeville*. Pound once wrote in a paper: "poets who are not interested in music are, or become, bad poets" (Stock 1964, 84) McCuaig was influenced by music in every part of the process of *Vaudeville*; he talks about arranging the book so that differing styles were alternated as inspired by the Bach's preludes and fugues (1948, 210), but his attention to rhythm, the deft placement of words, and the characters he created were part of the determination to create something special:

> The clearest intention I remember was to write so simply that the poem would appear to be ordinary conversation, and yet take the reader by surprise; I wanted my verse to have the tightness and purity which enables musicians to enjoy Bach's music when they are tired of everything else. (1948, 4)

This description of his process aligns directly with the modernist style 'imagism', which is known to be at the forefront of modernist poetic form and aesthetics. Pound developed tenets for the technique that included: direct treatment of the subject; limited use of unnecessary words, and use of the musical phrase rather than the metronome (Howarth 2011, 37). The imagist poems were often short, had an unusual rhythm in the placement of words and were based on description rather than narrative. Ronald McCuaig would adapt this style in poems such as "The Razor", as introduced previously.

The first appearance of this poem, before it was printed in the *Vaudeville* collection was in 1934 in the magazine *Wireless Weekly*. Ronald McCuaig wrote a column under the pseudonym 'James' (this will be discussed in more detail shortly). The article is humorous, based around a performance of 'Judas', played by the Australian actor and producer Lawrence Cecil. James notes:

> If you look into your heart, you will find treason enough to betray everyone in Sydney if you had the opportunity, and this is all thanks to Dr. Freud. But Judas didn't know Dr. Freud and went and hanged himself. (McCuaig) 1934)

At the top of the article is a quote from Eliot, who was prominent as an imagist:
The tiger springs in the new year;

Us he devours.

This quote, published alongside Ronald McCuaig's early modernist poetry four years before *Vaudeville* was printed, demonstrates the connections that suggest Ronald McCuaig was applying modernist ideas to his poetry at the age of twenty-two, while writing humour for a living. "The Razor" was considered a distinctive poem for its sleek imagism and for the way he broke with rhyming rules. Stewart elaborates on his reaction to "The Razor" in his Boyer Lectures:

> Now here was this outrageous new poet saying that his girlfriend's beauty was a lazy razor. What did this mean? How could you say that beauty was a razor? Was this permissible? Was this poetry? And then there was the extraordinary rhyming. In those days rhyming was correct. Could you really rhyme razor with has her? Apparently you could. (1977, 49)

These poems were part of a quiet literary revolution that had an impact on colleagues and Australian poetry into the future.

10 WIRELESS WEEKLY, MARCH 30, 1934

BETWEEN YOU & ME & THE MICROPHONE

About Judas

The tiger springs in the new year: Us he devours.
—*T. S. Eliot.*

THEY said to me, "Here's Laurence Cecil as Judas," holding out about five different photographs; "Which do you want? Of course, you'll take the one with the silver in his hands, gloating."

But I said, "No, that one."

"Oh, don't you want the one with the silver in his hands? What's Judas without silver in his hands?"

I remembered five faces of five prominent Sydney citizens, but said nothing. They don't go round with silver in their hands. And I came

Because that is the supreme tragedy of traitors; not that they betray other people, but that they betray themselves; they are no good for anything any more; they might as well go and hang themselves, probably; that is, that is what happens in the grand style, but we no longer live in the grand style. Nowadays, we find that the people we betrayed had something the matter with them, and wipe them out. There is something childish about calling people traitors nowadays; there was an enthusiastic young man in a place where I used to go, once, who was always complaining bitterly that someone or other had betrayed him; this betrayer was a trrraitor, as though he was spitting. I was never brave enough, but I often thought of going over to him, although we were not introduced, and asking him what he found in himself for anyone to betray; it would be a difficult question to put to any sane man

ing of society. There was the late great English novelist, who might have been one of the greatest artists this world has ever seen; but he wanted people to do what he said; he believed he had Found the Way; he wanted people to believe what he believed. Well he was met halfway by an English critic who was as great a critic as the other was a novelist; this critic wanted something to believe in. The result was interesting and instructive. The critic found out the novelist, the novelist found out the critic; the public buried the novelist and proclaimed the critic Judas. And I doubt whether we have heard the last of this affair.

I just remark these things to show how dangerous it is to try to believe anything; a girl once said to me, "They can say what they like, but I will NOT believe I am insane," which is about the only belief we can safely permit ourselves, I think, and this is the kind of belief I admire most. There are plenty of Judases hanging round these days, but the only ones I have any time for are the ones who don't moan about it when they are found out. There are the ones who get sent to prison, and write long books in prison or when they come out, saying how they strayed from the straight path, how they saw the light suddenly, how very, very sorry they are, and how, in future they will go straight; these books generally succeed in involving several other men, and they sell well. There are also the little Judases who specialise, when a big Judas has got in bad, in exclusive stories of his private life, or gossip over the fence on what a trickster he was.

These seem to me to be all pretty greasy people; the proper Judas is the man who goes down with a bang and all flags flying, like the bad English

JAMES, HIS SOLILOQUY

Edged with incuriosity
Whom it cuts, or if, or why,
Her beauty is a lazy razor
Drawn across the brain that has her;
Death so alive is mere illusion,
So is her beauty, which, being gone,
Stays as a razor, cold and jagged,
Lazily over the brain is dragg'd.

UPON the CRUEL RAZOR

Article by McCuaig under the pseudonym 'James' for *Wireless Weekly*. The first appearance of the poem, "The Razor" (out of copyright)

Vaudeville was as well known for its modernist poetry as for the way it was printed. The content of the work had become notorious and one Sydney printer refused to print *Vaudeville* because of the seemingly unsavoury nature of the poetry. The printer then convinced the whole industry to boycott it. Out of frustration, McCuaig bought a printing press, and printed the work himself in a small apartment in Potts Point. I was able to verify these details when I discovered a letter written by McCuaig in 1938 left on the inside sleeve of a copy of *Vaudeville* I purchased online (Appendix 2). The event was also summarised by Stewart in the Boyer Lecturer forty years later:

> This was just about the most outrageous act of censorship I have ever heard of, and all the worse because nobody would have known that it had been committed. McCuaig's lively, meticulously written adventure into modern life and modern poetry, pleasantly

> bawdy as it may have been from time to time, would simply have been secretly suppressed, like somebody done to death in a dungeon. (1977, 51)

In this unusual instance, the printers became a powerful gatekeeper that Ronald McCuaig would eventually find a way around by making his own book. Later, the act of crafting the book would garner praise in addition to his poetry.

The modernism of McCuaig's poetry was most obvious in poems such as "The Letter", which is a love letter that suddenly branches into a scene, heard by the narrator, where a man comes home drunk and beats and rapes his wife. The language McCuaig used was shocking at the time:

The opposite flat is dark and dumb,
Yet I feel certain he will come
Home to his love as drunk as ever
And, in a slowly rising fever,
Noting the whisky bottle gone,
Will trip and curse and stumble on
Into the bathroom, pull the chain,
Fumble the cabinet, curse again;
Will ask the slut where she has hid
His toothbrush; blunder back to bed,
Find his pyjamas tied in knots
And give her, as he puts it, what's
Coming to her. She won't escape
Her deeply meditated rape.
(McCuaig 1938, 34)

Ronald McCuaig undertook writing his poetry with fervour, and this resulted in work that was well respected at various times in literary circles since it was first written. But when I came to research his life, Ronald McCuaig had all but disappeared from view, and it would take considerable time and effort to draw the archival fragments together for a more complete picture of the larger body of work as a literary journalist.

Searching for Ronald McCuaig

When I first started researching my grandfather's history, his absence on the internet was surprising. Initially, I found that there were some misspellings of his surname, most often the addition of a 'q' somewhere within the 'c's', which meant his work was randomly, and often wrongly, catalogued. His contemporaries Kenneth Slessor, Douglas Stewart, and Geoffrey Dutton all had detailed entries on *Wikipedia*. As mentioned, Ronald McCuaig's page was located in Norway and was a short entry. Consequently, Robert Whyte undertook to relocate the *Wikipedia* page to Australia and rewrite it. In an interview, he told me of his experience of seeing this initial entry:

> Well, okay, he's famous in Norway but why isn't he famous in Australia? He mustn't have written anything, or he was obscure, or he didn't write anything good, or he wasn't known in any circles, and I found that was completely false. There was quite a lot of information about him and a lot of people saying he was incredibly important, and I thought this is outrageous. (video interview with the author, 18 April 2017)

But there have been some rare moments where an author or academic has taken an interest in McCuaig. Professor Peter Kirkpatrick's reaction to the poetry was immediate:

> In about 1980, I acquired a second-hand copy of *The Ballad of Bloodthirsty Bessie*, the 1962 collection of Ron's, and it just blew me away. I just thought the verse was extraordinary. It was beautifully crafted, it was engaging, and I guess I sort of wondered why we didn't hear more about Ron and his work. (video interview with the author, 25 April 2017)

To Kirkpatrick's delight, he discovered the author was alive and living in a "grandpa flat" in suburban Sydney, and he would be the last to interview McCuaig before he passed away in 1993. Kirkpatrick's collaboration with McCuaig resulted in a collection of his work being reprinted as part of the Angus & Robertson Modern Poets series, released as *Modern Poets: Ronald McCuaig* (1991). This experience would prove fraught for Kirkpatrick because McCuaig was quite elderly at the time and had started to display signs of dementia. He was suspicious of Kirkpatrick's motivation for collating the collection and would try to have the re-publication of his work halted at the last minute (video interview with the author, 25 April 2017).

When the collection finally appeared, McCuaig was very pleased with the result, and the words written in the small foreword by Kirkpatrick meant a lot to him. In interview, my cousin Julia, who was very close to our grandfather, talks of visiting him in the nursing home and reading and rereading the book's foreword to him at his request on each and every visit as he was losing all other memory.

In the late 1990s, a young postgraduate student named Susan Hill wrote a significant body of work about Ronald McCuaig, not long after he had passed away. She interviewed family members, spent long hours at the State Library of New South Wales (NSW) and the National Library of Australia, interviewed significant literary figures including Geoffrey Dutton, and wrote four drafts of a thesis under the supervision of poet and author Michael Sharkey. She had developed a connection with my uncle John McCuaig who would provide family insights and support for the project. A draft of the work was sent to John to provide corrections where he could. As the study wasn't complete, I had the draft version but no way of making contact.

After two years of searching for Hill (a name that floods Google with possibilities when entered), I found her in her hometown of Newcastle, under the married name Susan Francis. Unable to complete the work for personal reasons, she was grateful to hear from me, as my grandfather had meant a great deal to her. Susan offered her research materials for my work, and I subsequently interviewed Susan for this research.

Her original study provides thorough observations and insights into McCuaig's poetry and highlights his fascination for the urban:

> McCuaig's scrutiny encompasses local settings from the inner city and beachside suburbs of Sydney. The images are drawn from contemporary street life. The Australian surf is juxtaposed with the red roofed houses and the bank's plate glass windows. The notorious hoodlum razor gangs from Sydney in the thirties are used to express the violent effect of a girlfriend's beauty. (2000, 06)

Hill's dedication at this time provided me with a significant body of research. Her perspectives on the women Ronald McCuaig wrote about would encourage me to examine this further.

Ronald McCuaig paid particular attention to women in the *Vaudeville* poems, but not in a romantic way. He described women who were struggling to survive the Great Depression of 1930s' Sydney. In "They Also Serve Who Only Stand and Wait", he writes of the prostitute:

Her days bruised to the neutral squalor
That stains her body's natural pallor,
Are sometimes brightened up in streaks,
Like her red, poster-painted cheeks,
With haemorrhage of brains unbarred
And roses charming wives discard:
The labourer, the artisan,
The guzzle-gutted businessman,
Find her a cheap, convenient sewer
For any good turn they care to do her;
Sometimes abuse her, sometimes pet her,
And, having used her well, forget her.
(McCuaig 1938, 21)

In "The Artist's Model", he writes:

I've had
Gentlemen, do you hear?
But you're the only one
Utterly bad.
(McCuaig 1938, 22)

These two poems demonstrate the differing perspectives in *Vaudeville*. Poet and critic Gary Catalano describes this in more detail in his essay "Rude Life and Immaculate Art" (1999), where he dissects the structure of the collection. He describes a 'see-sawing' between observer and first-person perspectives which use differing techniques. He writes: "Just as poems written in tetrameter all use the third person and seek to create a quick character sketch of an individual, so the other poems employ the first person and are inherently dramatic" (1999, 66).

In her unpublished thesis, Hill concludes that the poems of *Vaudeville* should contribute to our understanding of McCuaig's modernism:

> Concern for women is not strictly part of the definition of modern literature. However, McCuaig's fracturing of female stereotypes, his deconstruction of the myth of romantic love, and the unusual achievement of publishing a book of poetry all offering a 'performance' by various female characters needs to be acknowledged as part of McCuaig's modernist side. (2000, 98)

There are similarly distinctions that Dutton uses to separate McCuaig from other poets of his time. He notes the use of a different style of writing that made use of contemporary language as opposed to the "fossilised 19th century diction" which had "no relation to the present day world" (1999, 2). The style and the themes of the work, particularly the *Vaudeville* collection, were to become a significant influence on the creative work for this doctorate. The observations of women and urban life rich with visual potential would provide an opportunity to expand the archiveological practice to view this collection as an archive component shedding light on this part of Australia's history. But before I expand on the creative practice, I will continue to detail the collection of archives relevant to McCuaig's multifaceted literary career as a journalist and columnist.

McCuaig's Body of Work in Publications

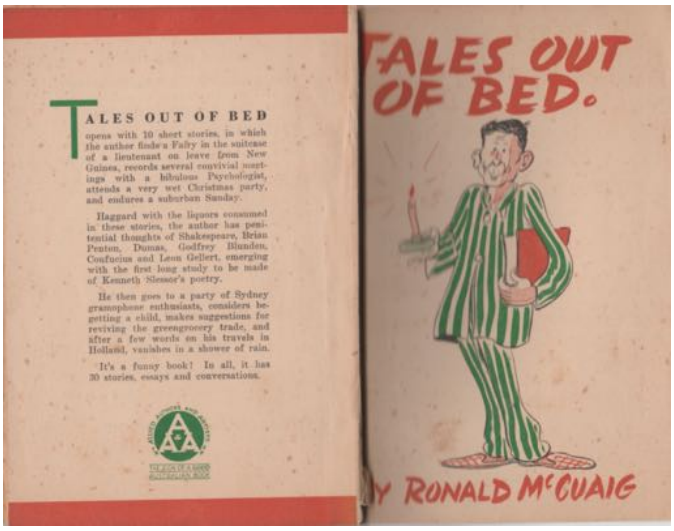
Ronald McCuaig thought the best of his writing was in the poems of *Vaudeville*, noting to Associate Professor Peter Kirkpatrick that after that, he "should have shut up shop. I really said my piece with the *Vaudeville* poems" (Kirkpatrick 1991, 279). This comment is surprising considering he spent another five decades writing: it was only a small part of his literary story. The larger part of his career was as a literary journalist and writer of light verse rather than serious, or highbrow endeavours. Humour would become a driving force in his day job, first as a columnist for *Wireless Weekly*, then as a quasi-war correspondent for *Smith's Weekly*, and finally as a writer of light verse for the *Bulletin*. Kirkpatrick has written about the light verse McCuaig wrote for the *Bulletin*, but his work in other publications has only been mentioned in passing as part of a chronological biography. These publications were mass circulations and part of an Australian tradition of literary journalism, as described by Emeritus Professor David Carter:

> The dimension that has been left out of Australian literary history is that alongside an emerging modernist high culture we also find a thickening of the middlebrow in a range of new commercial magazines with a serious interest in books, culture, taste and entertainment—and an interest in boosting their Australian production and consumption. (2013, 141)

McCuaig wrote for many publications that would be considered part of this middlebrow, where journalism is intertwined with literary writing and criticism. An indication of the intersection between the years of studying poetry and his literary journalism, can be seen in a small book he compiled during the war years titled *Tales Out of Bed* (1944). The book has autobiographical domestic humour, combined with literary criticism as the back-cover claims:

> The author has penitential thoughts of Shakespeare, Brian Penton, Dumas, Godfrey Blunden, Confucius and Leon Gellert, emerging with the first long study to be made of Kenneth Slessor's poetry. He then goes to a party of Sydney gramophone enthusiasts. (McCuaig 1944)

In his Boyer lecture series, Stewart further observed of the publication that it sold well to American soldiers in Sydney during this period, suggesting they were attracted to the story about a naked fairy that could produce beer out of a suitcase at a moment's notice, titled *The Fairy in the Suitcase*. But he continues to wonder, "Heaven knows what they thought when they came upon his learned disquisitions on the prosody of Sir John Suckling and the juvenilia of T.S. Eliot" (Stewart 1977, 47). This highlights McCuaig's attraction to the high and middle brow.



Cover of the book *Tales Out of Bed* published by Allied Authors and Artists, 1944 (Out of copyright).

Fairy in the Suitcase first published in *Smith's Weekly* 1942. (Out of copyright)

My research to find his work within these popular volumes was extensive, and fruitful, uncovering pseudonyms and popular columns of the 1930s and '40s. As he had not pursued a place in academia, and there weren't many opportunities in universities at that time, McCuaig

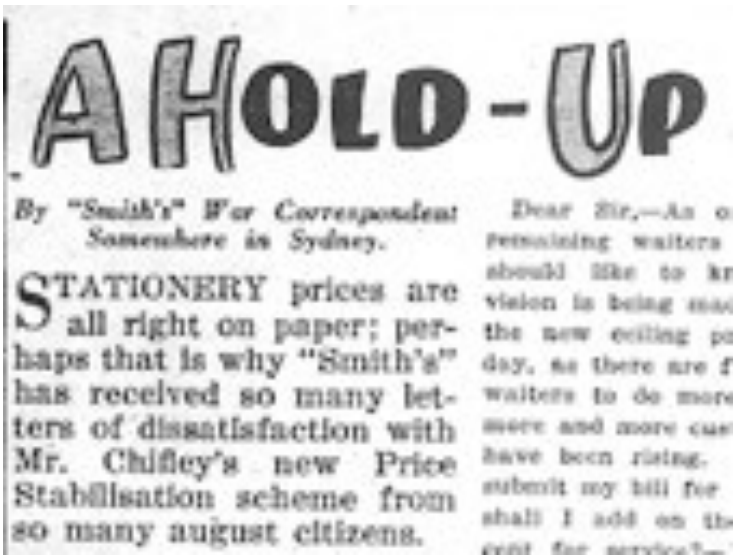
pursued jobs in the popular middle. This was not uncommon for writers even better known than McCuaig, and these roles in literary journalism afforded him an interesting creative space:

> This was also a necessity turned into a virtue. Hence their deeply ambiguous sense of the reading public, of modernism, of writing as a craft or profession and of themselves as literary intellectuals. (Carter 2013, 147)

In addition, Ronald McCuaig's attachment to the publications span years in which time he developed strong collegial connections with other writers such as Douglas Stewart, Kenneth Slessor, Godfrey Blunden, David Campbell among others.

To discover more specifics about his work in Australian publications, I first researched *Smith's Weekly,* as I wanted to solve a mystery surrounding his work during World War 2. Based on what I had read in fleeting mentions, there was some notoriety surrounding his work for *Smith's Weekly.* I had seen a photocopy of a war correspondent's identification but there was no memorabilia suggesting he had travelled to theatres of war or family stories indicating he went to war zones. I spent weeks searching through microfiche in the State Library of Queensland until I finally was able to piece together his war correspondent story. Ronald McCuaig was the official war correspondent that never left Sydney. The government refused to grant the publication permission to travel to war zones because they had been critical of treatment of returning soldiers in the lead up to World War 2. McCuaig became a popular, satirical voice challenging government decisions in wartime, his by-line became taunts at the situation; for example,

> By Smith's War Correspondent somewhere in Sydney (24 April 1943)
> By Smith's War Correspondent somewhere on the waterfront (10 April 1943)
> By Smith's War correspondent reporting from the file room of the Sydney Public Library. (19 June 1943)



A HOLD-UP

By "Smith's" War Correspondent Somewhere in Sydney.

STATIONERY prices are all right on paper; perhaps that is why "Smith's" has received so many letters of dissatisfaction with Mr. Chifley's new Price Stabilisation scheme from so many august citizens.

Dear Sir,—As o
remaining waiters
should like to kn
vision is being ma
the new ceiling pr
day, as there are f
waiters to do more
more and more cus
have been rising.
submit my bill for
shall I add on th
cost for service?—

Smith's Weekly war correspondent by-line 24 April 1943. (Out of copyright)

Smith's Weekly

GREAT WAR CORRESPONDENT MYSTERY

Preference To Females

U.S. CUCKOO PRESS "TIME" PRINTED IN SYDNEY

BEER

Smith's Weekly frontpage story about the government not allowing their war correspondent to go to the front line 13 March 1943. (Out of copyright)

Smith's Weekly was a paper for diggers and one of the first to champion the cause of the returning soldier George Blaikie's book detailing its history noted *Smith's Weekly* was "rumoured to have been the inspiration behind the formation of the Legacy movement" (Blaikie 1966, 157). Blaikie confirms McCuaig's status as war correspondent and goes further to suggest he wore a full army uniform to work each day, which provided some laughs in the publication's staffroom (Blaikie 1966, 165). Ronald McCuaig was not the only poet that

worked for the paper. Kenneth Slessor wrote extensively for the publication during the 1930s and established the craft of film reviewing in an Australian context. He was aware of the publication's audience and considered this in his writing style:

> He [Slessor] did not copy the more serious-minded model of *The Observer*. *Smith's Weekly* was a 'fun paper'—variously populist, sensationalist, satirical, iconoclastic, idiosyncratic, and out for a laugh. It was also a self-styled Digger's paper for ex-servicemen. Its film reviewing needed to be lively, engaging and focused upon incident, arresting detail, and word play. (O'Regan and Walmsley-Evans 2016, 213)

This tone would have suited the sardonic tendencies in Ronald McCuaig's writing more than if he had been appointed to the frontline.

Kenneth Slessor left the paper to be a serious war correspondent around the time McCuaig joined. McCuaig's column was on page two of the weekly paper and made humorous observations of Sydney in wartime, government decision-making and his own experiences. In one of his articles, he decides to start his own political party called the "War Correspondent's party" and he is the only member able to join at the present time (as the others were overseas covering the war). He writes:

> "Although Australia has been at war for nearly four years," says WC [war correspondent's] Party's brochure, with which "Smith's" has been liberally supplied, "there is still no War Correspondent in Federal Cabinet; this, despite the fact that war correspondents can give authoritative and exhaustive commentaries, explanations, justifications, prophesies, hypothetical instances, demonstrations, facts and figures at a moment's notice on any matter pertaining to any war any place. (McCuaig 1943, 2)

Even with this kind of satire he would also note the serious in passing; for example, later in the same article, he writes "our soldiers are fighting in malarial swamps, sweating with the heat, shivering with fever. War must be shifted to a more temperate climate", showing his humour could lead to empathy at times. The final article of this period of his work is titled "The Memoirs of Smith's War Correspondent". Written as the war is about to be declared over, it details the trials and tribulations of McCuaig's time having to iron uniforms of all different

types all while stuck in Sydney: “But do not jest at the scars of one who never felt a wound. I have had my difficulties. Such as getting news out of Army Public Relations” (McCuaig 1945, 2).

According to Susan Hill’s chronological table of Ronald McCuaig’s career, he stayed with *Smith’s Weekly* until September of 1945 when he joined the *Sydney Morning Herald* where he wrote as a journalist (2000, 23). He was only with the *Sydney Morning Herald* for a short time before he left, according to Douglas Stewart, because he was “worried they would make him a prefect”. The atmosphere so stifling he took a job folding boxes in a packing company until he secured a job at the *Bulletin* in 1949 (Stewart 1977). My father remembers times like this as very difficult for the family; they endured long periods of being a no-income household.

McCuaig joined the *Bulletin* on a full-time basis, working there for over ten years as a journalist and writer of a significant body of light verse under the nom de plume Swilliam. The work sometimes reflected knowledge of highbrow literature but the humour exhibited an effort to bring it to the middle, as previously mentioned where “high culture values are folded into the commodity form of quality entertainment or discerning lifestyle choice” (Carter 2013, 129). The weekly verse covered a huge range of topics, such as the purchase of a harpsichord by the University of Sydney, the increased reliance on plastics, Katherine Hepburn’s Sydney visit, the machinations of politics, and a jab at London critics using Australian slang to describe the success of Ray Lawler’s *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*:

We were pleased, Mr. London-town critic,
That you liked Mr. Ray Lawler’s play;
You might have been more analytic,
But we wouldn’t dictate what you say,
Except well, there’s things we can’t sponsor,
We don’t want to start a dispute,
But we’d rather you didn’t say “bonzer”,
And we wish that you wouldn’t say “beaut”.

We’re fond of our slang in all places
Where the people who made it are found,
But when Englishmen speak them, our phrases

Take on a peculiar sound:
It's what's known to Frenchmen as "ton", sir,
Our hearing is rather acute,
And if only you wouldn't say "bonzer"
We'd really consider it beaut.
(Swilliam 1957)

Writer, poet, and *Bulletin* colleague Nancy Keesing writes of McCuaig and his pseudonym Swilliam:

> He will be remembered for his wise and witty poetry, but he also wrote, as 'Swilliam', a weekly topical verse. Ron's enjoyment of his weekly stint was joyful to overhear. 'Swilliam' often based his verse on some popular song or tune of the day, and hummed it as he prowled his office, or a corridor, finding words. When the words that came were right, and amused him, he'd stand still, stretch mightily—he is a tall man—and shout with laughter. (1988, 97)

Music is once again here recognised as a significant muse for Ronald McCuaig's literary process, one that would last into old age. But despite the enjoyment he seemed to get in writing the weekly light verse, he was not proud of it. The humour he practiced in his day job would become detrimental to his standing as a poet.

It is possible his long years writing as Swilliam somehow negated the effect of his early 'serious' work on his reputation. In his foreword to McCuaig's rerelease, Kirkpatrick (1992, xvi) suggests many reviewers were critical of McCuaig's later collection *The Ballad of Bloodthirsty Bessie* (1961), because the title suggested a book of whimsy. Emeritus Professor A. D. Moody was particularly brutal in his review of *Bessie* and of McCuaig as a modernist and poet. He suggested "His tone and attitudes are fairly consistently man-to-man-over-the-beer-keg", then questioned McCuaig's place as a modernist: "The relation with Pound and Eliot claimed for 'Vaudeville' is the same debased kind" (1961, 301). Catalano would dispute the notion that McCuaig's work was only suitable for the pub, with a detailed description of his technique, structure and influences. He concluded that his poems "were the product of a

life-long meditation on the relationship between art and life", and ultimately saw them as "immaculate art" (1999, 68).

The criticism from Moody of the *Bessie* collection would have impacted McCuaig as he had written it to offset the work he was doing in light verse. Kirkpatrick attributes negative criticism of the collection to the title of the book *The Ballad of Bloodthirsty Bessie*, indicating to readers the verse would be largely humorous (McCuaig 1992, 8). But the work was intended to be predominantly serious and sometimes autobiographical, with poems such as "*Au Tombeau de Mon Pere*" ("At the Tomb of My Father"). Stewart described the poem as a "moving elegy for his father" on the *Bulletin*'s Red Page in praise of its inclusion in the 1959 collection of Australian poetry edited by Nancy Keesing. (1961, 2)

McCuaig was self-critical of his light verse, particularly with regard to what he wrote for The *Bulletin*. As he commented to Kirkpatrick: "I looked through what was there—I must have written about four hundred pieces in that twelve years I was with *The Bulletin*—and I don't feel satisfied with about more than seven of them" (1991). But it was obvious across his career that humour was important to McCuaig, and my creative practice would be an opportunity to explore this providing entertaining juxtapositions to the more serious aspects of his life and career.

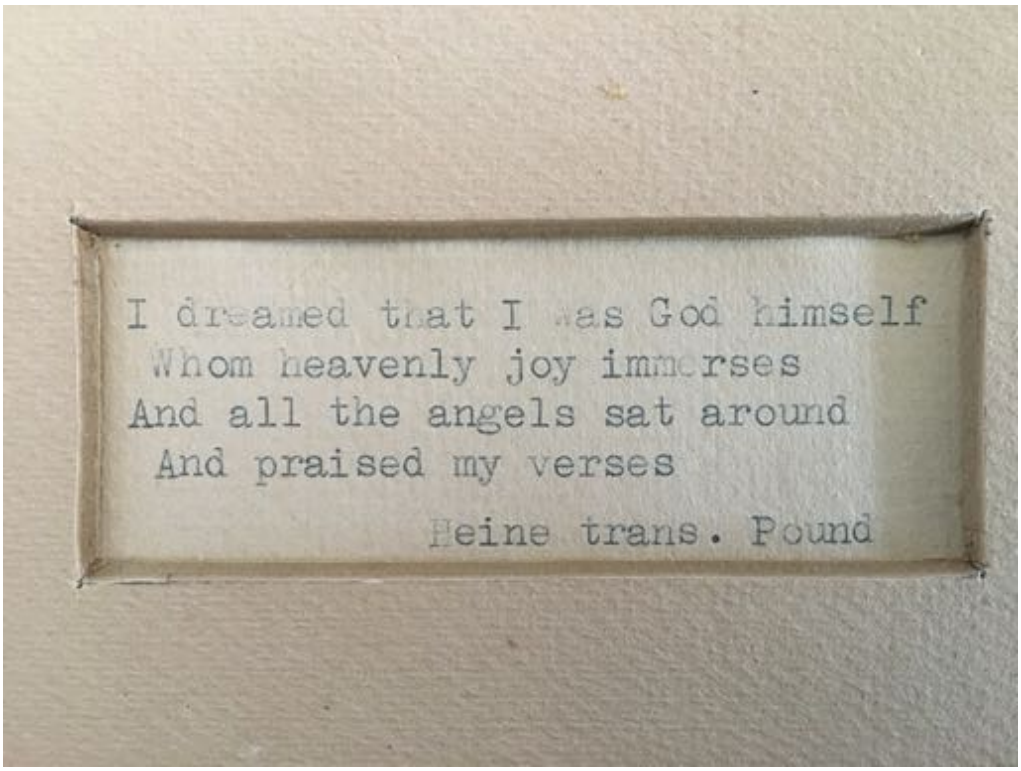
Finding James in the *Wireless Weekly*

On Christmas Day 2017, my father gave me a framed, original illustration that depicted a young man dressed in a loin cloth and sandals, surrounded by three naked women. The man was reading from a book to the adoring women. It was a framed illustration that he had acquired after his father's death but didn't know any details about it. We assumed the illustration was of the young poet McCuaig.

Although there was no signature, I assumed the illustration had been drawn by artist Victoria Cowdroy, who was friends to both Ronald and his wife Beryl and had illustrated the first of McCuaig's published poetry anthologies. I later found out that Cowdroy worked with McCuaig at *Wireless Weekly*, a publication that will be discussed later in the chapter. Inside the frame was a cut cardboard frame and another small cut area with a poem which read as follows:

I dreamed that I was God himself
Whom heavenly joy immerses
And all the angels sat around
And praised my verses

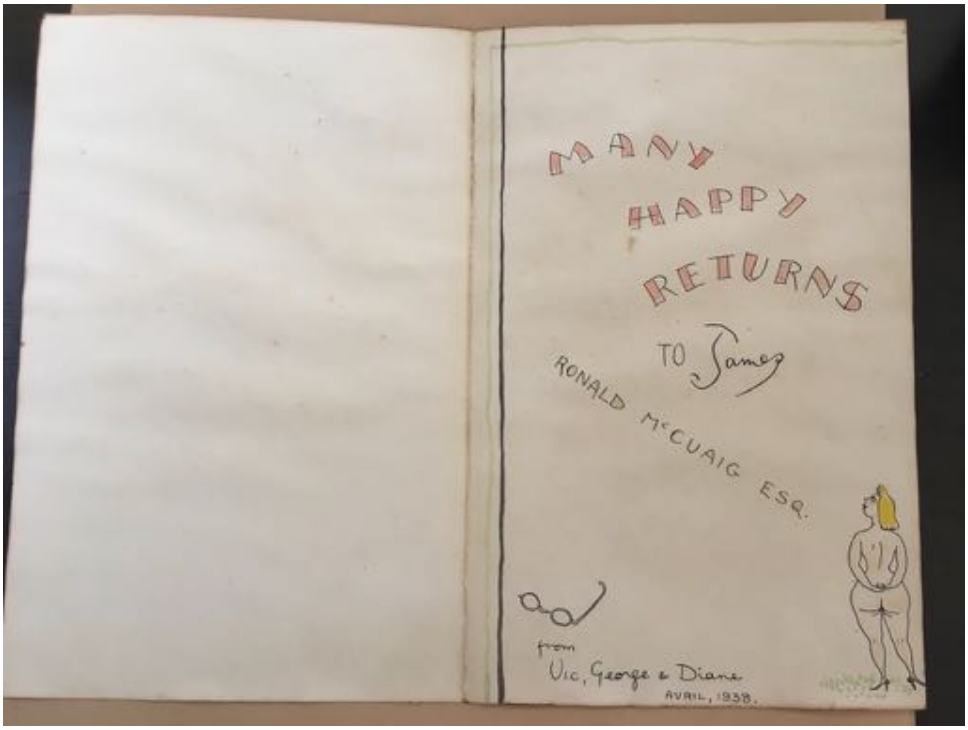
Heine trans. Pound.



It is likely that McCuaig cut the cardboard frame himself because that was the type of handiwork he was known for—crafted around work that was important to him. After being made redundant from the *Bulletin* in 1969, when Frank Packer dismissed his literary writers, McCuaig spent a great deal of time binding his own anthologies carefully in leather and cloth. Heinrich Heine was a German/Jewish poet, journalist and literary critic. The radical political views in his poetry led to the work being banned by German authorities. It is possible McCuaig felt a connection to the poet who had experienced similar censorship as he had with *Vaudeville.* McCuaig has written about the influence of Pound on his work and the use of the translation is further acknowledgement of this. However, Pound's interest in Heine's work has been baffling to some historians:

> Perhaps the oddest case of Heine reception among American writers is that of Ezra Pound, who published translations and adaptations of seven poems along with an ironic verse epistle in 1909. How the anti-Semite and subsequently fascist collaborator came to be an admirer of a Jewish and politically radical poet is one of the incongruous puzzles of Heine reception. (Gelber and Horch 1992)

While the illustration and Heine quote were intriguing, I was interested to find out if Cowdroy left any signature on the work and so I set about carefully pulling the illustration from the frame. Indeed, the illustration revealed itself to be the front cover of a birthday card sent to McCuaig in 1938 from Victoria Cowdroy.



Birthday card inscription by illustrator Victoria Cowdroy 1938.

The next confounding element was why the card would be addressed 'To James'. It was obvious from the 'Ronald McCuaig esq' that the card had been sent to McCuaig, so I assumed James was a nickname or joke that Cowdroy and he or a small group of colleagues and friends shared. My father was also mystified by the name and could think of no family reference that would solve its meaning or origin. There was never any mention of James in academic sources or biographical information that would suggest a pseudonym. Thus, the question remained unresolved and I moved onto other research.

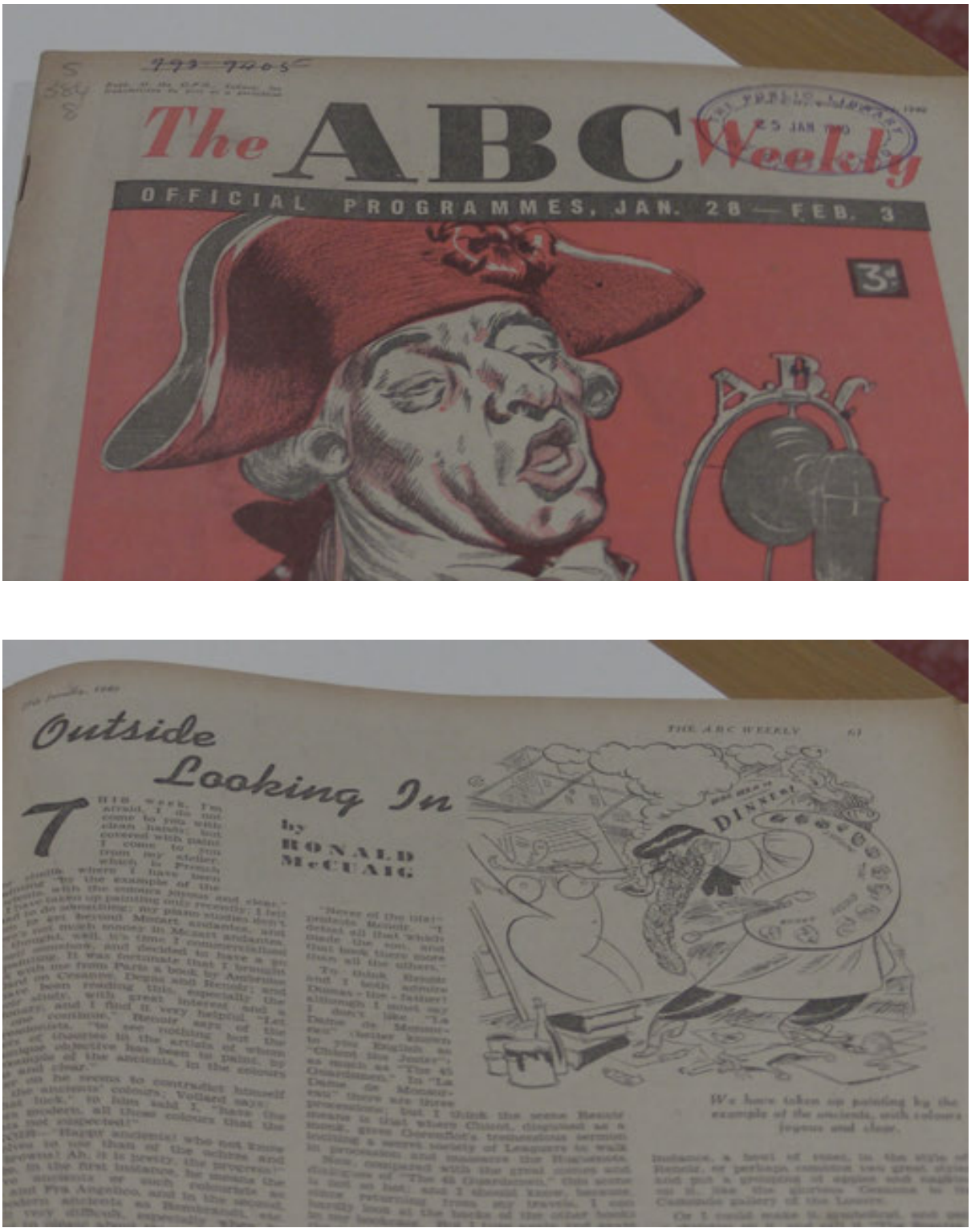
Trove Database as a Resource

My research into the life of Ronald McCuaig has coincided with the ongoing construction of the National Library of Australia (NLA) digital archive, Trove, which is said at the time of writing to have over 90 million items from over 1,000 libraries. The collection is an enormous

database coordinated by the NLA in collaboration with contributors and state libraries. It is "one of the most well respected and accessed GLAM [galleries, libraries, archives and museums] services in Australia" (Wikipedia 2020). Anyone can search through its collection, which includes images, manuscripts, books, oral histories, music, videos, research papers, diaries, letters, maps and archived websites (Australia 2010). This free search engine continues to grow, with artefacts being scanned and included in its huge database at a rapid rate. As the scanning continues, more and more material from the era of Ronald McCuaig's early writing career has become readily available online. Because this is happening slowly, I have needed to consult Trove every few months to see what else has appeared under the name Ronald McCuaig and his pseudonyms.

When I first went to Trove in 2015 and entered "Ronald McCuaig" in the search engine, there were a few entries including his anthologies, letters, interviews, a poetry reading with Hazel de Burg, and a number of articles written for the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Canberra Times*. There were no references to the *Bulletin* or the early publications that he had written for, such as the *Wireless Weekly* and *ABC Weekly*, both early radio broadcast publications that I knew Ronald McCuaig wrote for as a result of research initiated by Peter Kirkpatrick and Susan Hill.

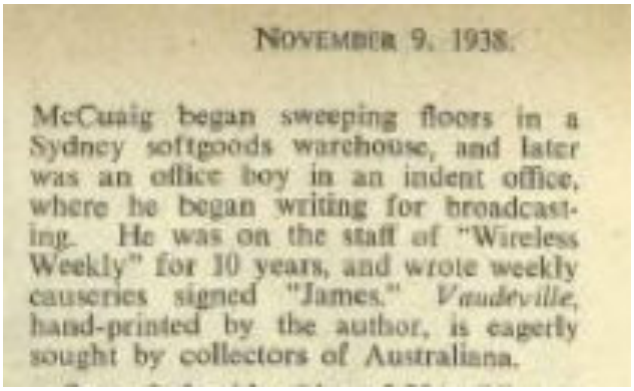
In trying to locate early entries by McCuaig in these publications, I went to the State Library of Queensland (SLQ) to search for the *ABC Weekly* and *Wireless Weekly*. I was able to find a small number of articles written by McCuaig in *ABC Weekly*, but nothing in the large volumes of *Wireless Weekly* held by SLQ. I presumed that it was possible McCuaig only wrote a small number of articles for this publication or wrote as a staff writer without a by-line, so his work could not be identified.



Humour page *ABC Weekly* 1940. (Out of copyright)

Several months later, I consulted Trove again and located a few articles written by Ronald McCuaig in the *Bulletin*. One small mention of his name appeared under the column "Personal Items" on page 18, a regular feature that talked about Sydney identities. This small entry referred to a ten-year period where McCuaig wrote under the pseudonym 'James' for the

publication *Wireless Weekly*. In Susan Hill's chronological list of Ronald McCuaig's career, she details this period as "Employed at the *Wireless Weekly* as a reporter" (2000, 23).

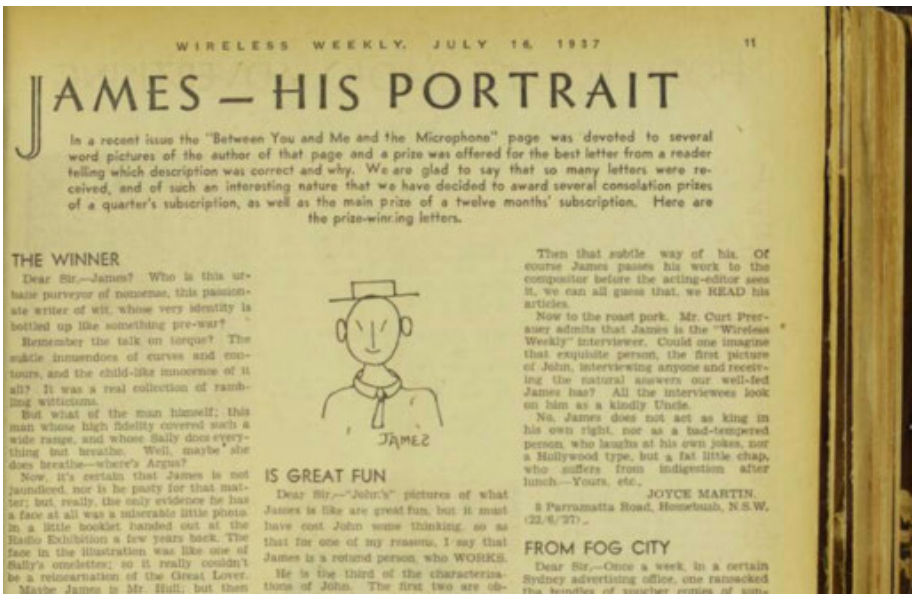


NOVEMBER 9, 1938.

McCuaig began sweeping floors in a Sydney softgoods warehouse, and later was an office boy in an indent office, where he began writing for broadcasting. He was on the staff of "Wireless Weekly" for 10 years, and wrote weekly causeries signed "James." *Vaudeville*, hand-printed by the author, is eagerly sought by collectors of Australiana.

Taken from the *Bulletin's* 'Personal Items' page November 9, 1938. (Out of copyright)

Armed with this new knowledge and a combination of new affordances of Trove I searched for James. My initial search of "Wireless Weekly" and "James" produced 9,000 entries. Eventually, I discovered that McCuaig wrote a column each week titled "Between You & Me & the Microphone". Initially, he took over the column under his own name but eventually changed to sign off as "James", which he wrote under from the early to late 1930s. James was popular; one entry from a guest columnist 'John' describes three versions of the character of James—from a flamboyant, extravagant writer to an energetic, young, ambitious type to a grumpy unapproachable columnist with writer's block (League 1937, 11). There was even a prize for the fan who could write the best letter supporting the description they thought fit their James.



WIRELESS WEEKLY, JULY 16, 1937 11

JAMES — HIS PORTRAIT

In a recent issue the "Between You and Me and the Microphone" page was devoted to several word pictures of the author of that page and a prize was offered for the best letter from a reader telling which description was correct and why. We are glad to say that so many letters were received, and of such an interesting nature that we have decided to award several consolation prizes of a quarter's subscription, as well as the main prize of a twelve months' subscription. Here are the prize-winning letters.

THE WINNER

Dear Sir,—James? Who is this urbane purveyor of nonsense, this passionate writer of wit, whose very identity is bottled up like something pre-war?

Remember the talk on torque? The subtle innuendoes of curves and contours, and the child-like innocence of it all? It was a real collection of rambling witticisms.

But what of the man himself; this man whose high fidelity covered such a wide range, and whose Sally does everything but breathe. Well, maybe she does breathe—where's Argus?

Now, it's certain that James is not jaundiced, nor is he pasty for that matter; but, really, the only evidence he has a face at all was a miserable little photo. in a little booklet handed out at the Radio Exhibition a few years back. The face in the illustration was like one of Sally's omelettes; so it really couldn't be a reincarnation of the Great Lover.

Maybe James is Mr. Hull; but then

IS GREAT FUN

Dear Sir,—"John's" pictures of what James is like are great fun, but it must have cost John some thinking, so as that for one of my reasons, I say that James is a rotund person who WORKS.

He is the third of the characterisations of John. The first two are ob-

Then that subtle way of his. Of course James passes his work to the compositor before the acting-editor sees it, we can all guess that, we READ his articles.

Now to the roast pork. Mr. Curt Prerauer admits that James is the "Wireless Weekly" interviewer. Could one imagine that exquisite person, the first picture of John, interviewing anyone and receiving the natural answers our well-fed James has? All the interviewees look on him as a kindly Uncle.

No, James does not act as king in his own right, nor as a bad-tempered person who laughs at his own jokes, nor a Hollywood type, but a fat little chap, who suffers from indigestion after lunch.—Yours, etc.,

JOYCE MARTIN.

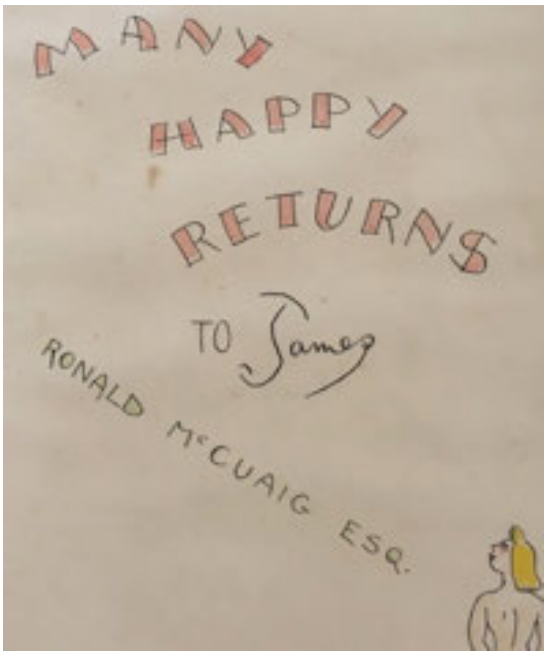
3 Parramatta Road, Homebush, N.S.W. (22/6/37).

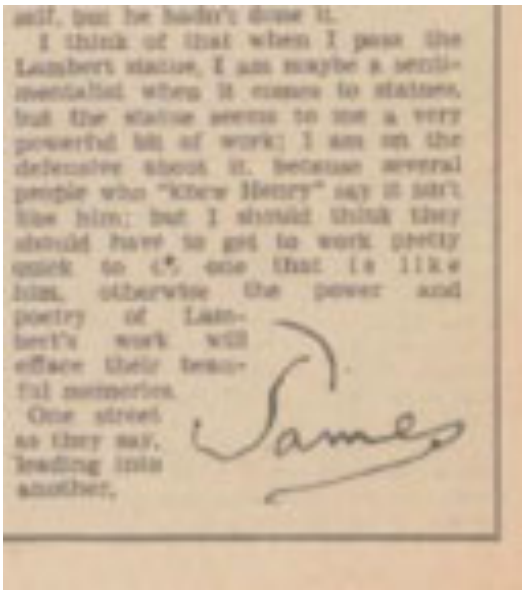
FROM FOG CITY

Dear Sir,—Once a week, in a certain Sydney advertising office, one ransacked

Letters from the public in a competition for a yearly subscription to write the best letter outlining their version of a description of James. July 16, 1937. (Out of copyright)

The articles were usually whimsical, observing Sydney life and the experiences that McCuaig had with radio performers, transport, the theatre, his relationships to colleagues, and his young wife (my grandmother Beryl) whom he referred to as “Sally”. The signature is replicated from the articles to the birthday card from Cowdroy and this discovery solved the mystery of why she used the name James in the birthday greeting.





Ronald McCuaig's signature as James, appearing in the birthday card and at the end of each article. (Out of copyright)

One of the most poignant articles of "Between You & Me & the Microphone" was McCuaig's description of a literary walk through the streets of Sydney. McCuaig walked most places or used public transport throughout his life, as he never owned a car. In this article, dated October 1934, not only does he walk his readers around the city, but there are indications of his early discoveries of poets such as Eliot and John Keats, as he writes:

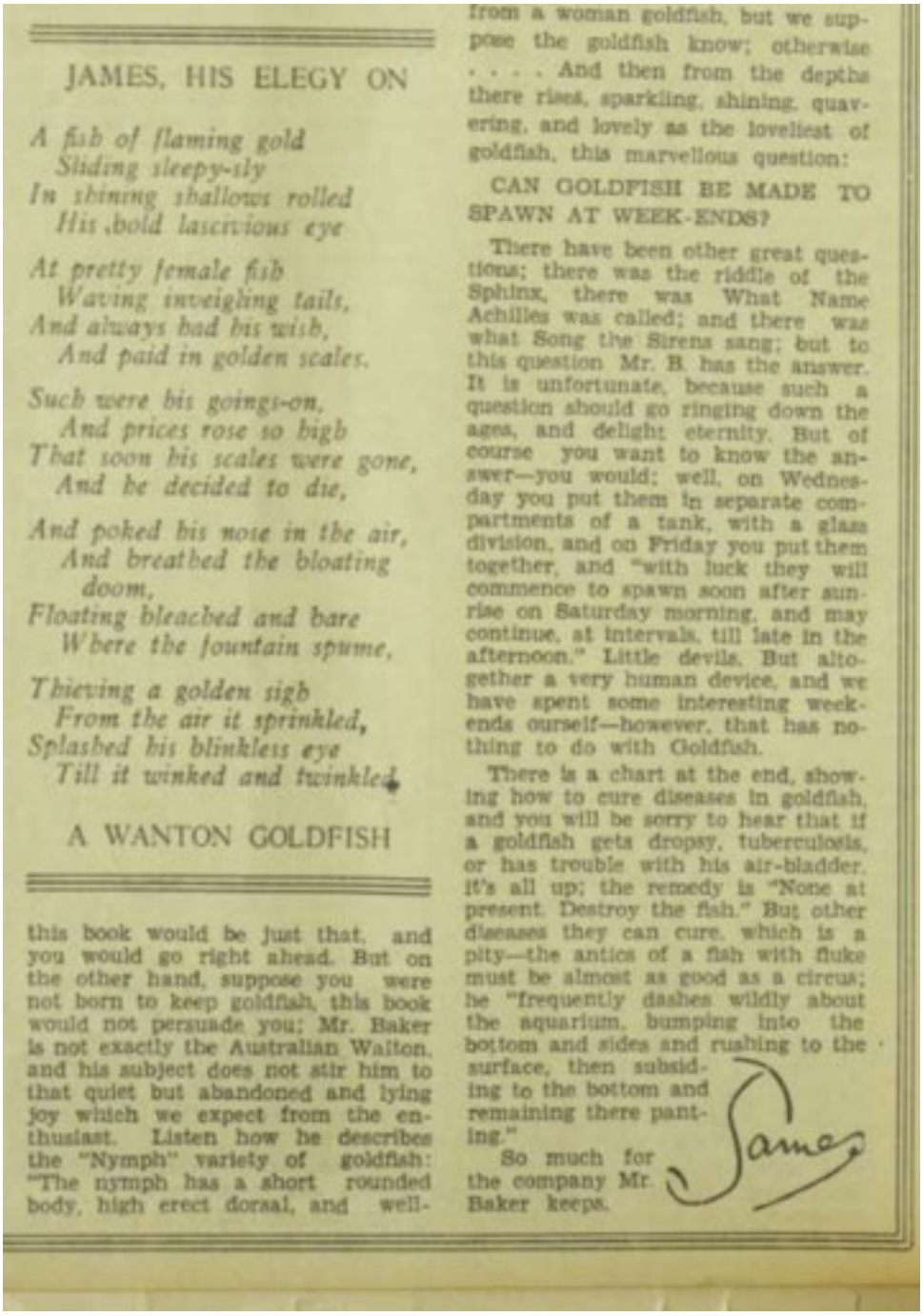
> …life is like that; you pass from one street to another, thinking, ah; at last I am in a street that leads somewhere; but what do you find? You find you are in-
> "Streets that wander like a tedious argument
> If insidious intent,
> To lead you to an overwhelming question—
>
> "Oh, do not ask. What is it?" as Mr Eliot continues; maybe we have both wandered too far to ask that; myself wandering up and down streets is what I have done nothing else but:
>
> "Much have I wandered in the haunts of men." As Keats says so finely. I am an indomitable street walker. (McCuaig 1934, 18)

Later in the article as he walks from the city and the Harbour Bridge toward the Domain, he writes:

> And this walk down to the Domain of which I was speaking to you, is in the very best taste; as you go in you pass Shakespeare, and on the way to the end, you pass Henry Lawson listening for the Perfect Poem which never came; which never comes. (1934, 18)

The *Wireless Weekly* column has never featured in biographical, autobiographical, or interview versions of his life, but many significant events took place during his time there. For example, McCuaig wrote his collection *Vaudeville*. In biographical pieces, such as the foreword written by Kirkpatrick, it is mentioned that McCuaig "worked as a journalist" for *Wireless Weekly*. It would be difficult to see the body of work connected to the pseudonym 'James' without a clear

confirmation they were one and the same. I have been able to make this confirmation due to the small entry in the *Bulletin* and the clue in my family personal archive. Many of his poems were first published in either *Wireless Weekly* or the *Bulletin* alongside his columns, as with the poem "The Wanton Goldfish", first published in 1933 alongside a biting book review for the book *Goldfish in Australia*. He notes at the outset of the review that "if you are a goldfish or have anything to do with goldfish, then this book will help you". The book may not have become a bestseller, but it inspired McCuaig to write one of his enduring poems about the goldfish with a "bold lascivious eye".



JAMES, HIS ELEGY ON

A fish of flaming gold
Sliding sleepy-sly
In shining shallows rolled
His bold lascivious eye

At pretty female fish
Waving inveigling tails,
And always had his wish,
And paid in golden scales.

Such were his goings-on,
And prices rose so high
That soon his scales were gone,
And he decided to die,

And poked his nose in the air,
And breathed the bloating doom,
Floating bleached and bare
Where the fountain spume,

Thieving a golden sigh
From the air it sprinkled,
Splashed his blinkless eye
Till it winked and twinkled.

A WANTON GOLDFISH

this book would be just that, and you would go right ahead. But on the other hand, suppose you were not born to keep goldfish, this book would not persuade you; Mr. Baker is not exactly the Australian Walton, and his subject does not stir him to that quiet but abandoned and lying joy which we expect from the enthusiast. Listen how he describes the "Nymph" variety of goldfish: "The nymph has a short rounded body, high erect dorsal, and well-

from a woman goldfish, but we suppose the goldfish know; otherwise . . . . And then from the depths there rises, sparkling, shining, quavering, and lovely as the loveliest of goldfish, this marvellous question:

CAN GOLDFISH BE MADE TO SPAWN AT WEEK-ENDS?

There have been other great questions; there was the riddle of the Sphinx, there was What Name Achilles was called; and there was what Song the Sirens sang; but to this question Mr. B. has the answer. It is unfortunate, because such a question should go ringing down the ages, and delight eternity. But of course you want to know the answer—you would; well, on Wednesday you put them in separate compartments of a tank, with a glass division, and on Friday you put them together, and "with luck they will commence to spawn soon after sunrise on Saturday morning, and may continue, at intervals, till late in the afternoon." Little devils. But altogether a very human device, and we have spent some interesting weekends ourself—however, that has nothing to do with Goldfish.

There is a chart at the end, showing how to cure diseases in goldfish, and you will be sorry to hear that if a goldfish gets dropsy, tuberculosis, or has trouble with his air-bladder, it's all up; the remedy is "None at present. Destroy the fish." But other diseases they can cure, which is a pity—the antics of a fish with fluke must be almost as good as a circus; he "frequently dashes wildly about the aquarium, bumping into the bottom and sides and rushing to the surface, then subsiding to the bottom and remaining there panting."

So much for the company Mr. Baker keeps.

James

The Wanton Goldfish first appears in Wireless Weekly 1933. (Out of copyright)

All of this research indicates there was a much greater depth to Ronald McCuaig's contribution to high- and middle-brow Australian literature. What may have appeared at first to be scant articles and newspaper entries have proven throughout this research to include satire, humour, light verse and commentary through significant moments in Australia's history examining war, urban development, and cultural identity. In his critique of my work at confirmation, Professor Tom O'Regan recognised the interchangeability between the serious poetry and journalism; how one would contribute to the other and there were few options for writers to make a living. Ronald McCuaig's observations as a journalist would lead to beautiful expressions of the lifestyles and characters of Sydney in poetry:

> The project is important for what it can, through the biographical documentary form, disclose about both a largely forgotten writer and the cultural, journalistic and aesthetic contexts in which he worked from the 1930s to the end of the 1960s. Ronald McCuaig provides a way into what it meant to live a literary and journalistic life at a time when most poets, novelists and essayists did not have any opportunity to work as academics but typically worked as journalists. (O'Regan 2018)

There is no indication that he pursued academic aspirations or serious journalism but seemed content to occupy the middle, which would keep his family afloat. At times, a new publication or collaboration would see him branch out to new expressions.

During the *Wireless Weekly* period, McCuaig also secured a long collaboration with artist Victoria Cowdroy about whom he wrote a humorous and detailed column in "Between You & Me & the Microphone" regarding an illustration she drew for a Wagner concert which excited his male colleagues. This kind of relationship would continue as he started a weekly humour column for *ABC Weekly* where he was featured in the illustrations often with the illustrator in unlikely situations.

ABC Weekly

As mentioned previously, I had found some articles written by McCuaig in *ABC Weekly* at the SLQ. In a similar way to the discovery of the body of *Wireless Weekly* articles, I discovered

that despite biographies (Hill 2000, 25) mentioning *ABC Weekly* in passing as part of McCuaig's work history, he wrote a column for two years that was specifically titled "Humour by Ronald McCuaig". Trove has now digitised many of these magazines and consequently they have appeared in a search on his name. The notable aspect of this column is the individual illustrations that feature caricatures of McCuaig in the situations around his humorous musings. At first look, the illustrations seemed to be general characters, but on closer inspection McCuaig's facial characteristics are in each one. He can be seen, visiting events around Sydney, managing a young family, and making madcap observations of urban Sydney life in wartime. In one of the articles, McCuaig talks about losing concentration in the midst of musical performances and the illustration depicts him in his pyjamas, surrounded by well-dressed concert attendees looking down their noses at his behaviour. The character evident in these articles was paradoxical to the private man described by colleagues and family alike.

A weekly caricature of McCuaig in *ABC Weekly* seen here in his dressing gown at a symphony 1940. (Out of copyright)

At the end of the row is another recurring character in the columns, a man with a long curly beard who is referred to as 'the illustrator' within the article stories. McCuaig has conscripted his illustrator as an unwitting participant in the many humorous scenarios he dreamed up. Based on an illustration of McCuaig appearing in the *Bulletin* and comparing this to an illustration in one of the *ABC Weekly* columns, I have surmised the illustrator is possibly Arthur Horner but have not been able to confirm this.

The *Bulletin* page with illustration of McCuaig credited to Artur Horner 1938. (Out of copyright)

Similar illustration in ABC Weekly 1941. (Out of copyright)

From any account of his life and work as a literary figure and even his own comments, these publications seemed insignificant for him in his career progression. The digitisation of these bodies of work, their discoveries in the course of my research, and the ways that they

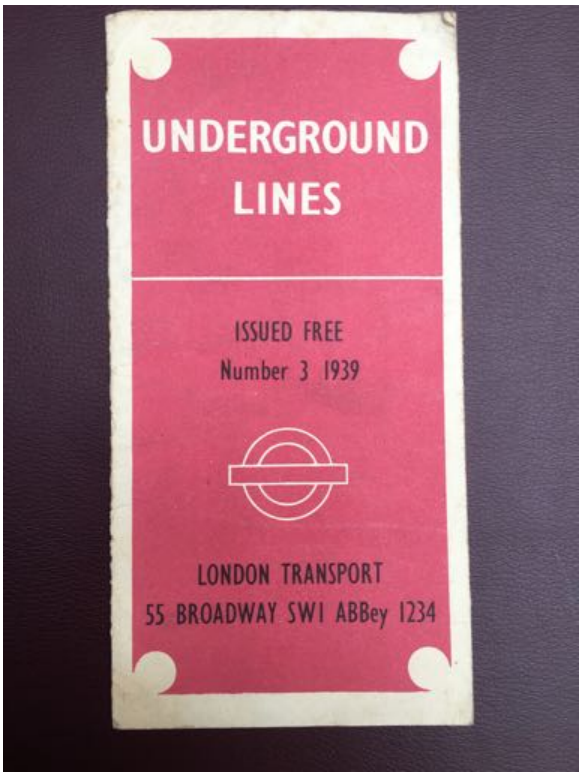
complement existing work about him has revealed Ronald McCuaig as a kind of Sydney identity, rather than an anonymous staff writer. He was entertaining readers with revelations of his personal life, meeting his young wife, starting a family, and making light of but also revealing significant events happening in Australia through several key decades of the twentieth century.

Library Collections

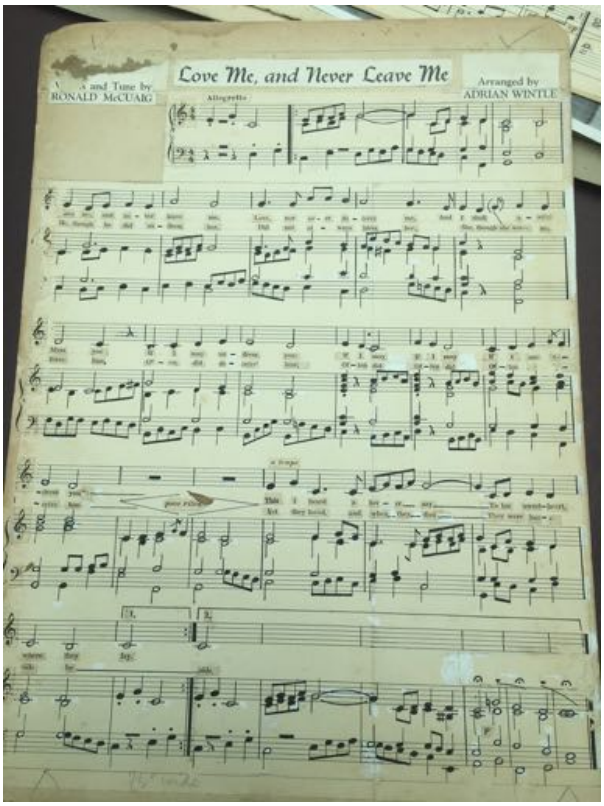
I continued to research the life of McCuaig on a sporadic basis. For example, I would email libraries asking for help to locate certain collections or fragments of his story. This included McCuaig letters in the catalogue of the NLA, and the musical piece *Music in the Air* in the catalogue of the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA), which is accompanied by an interview with composer George Dreyfus. There were some instances where important archival artefacts were stored under different spellings of McCuaig and this much harder to find. Often a 'q' is added or a 'g', so an item would be catalogued under 'McGaige' or 'McQuaig'. But the library research was ultimately fruitful. An email to the State Library of NSW returned five boxes of uncatalogued archives pertaining to McCuaig. My uncle John had started negotiating with the Library but had never actually signed final permission for the Library to acquire the materials before he passed away. These boxes sat in the corner of a back room until a dedicated junior library assistant located them in response to my queries and contacted me. I flew to Sydney the following morning to look through the boxes of archive. They contained original drawings from Victoria Cowdroy; original letters from a mix of colleagues and family; some photos; unpublished poetry; notebooks; and travel memorabilia from the world trip Ronald completed with his wife Beryl in 1939.

Elements of the Mitchell Library McCuaig collection.

Original illustration by Victoria Cowdroy.

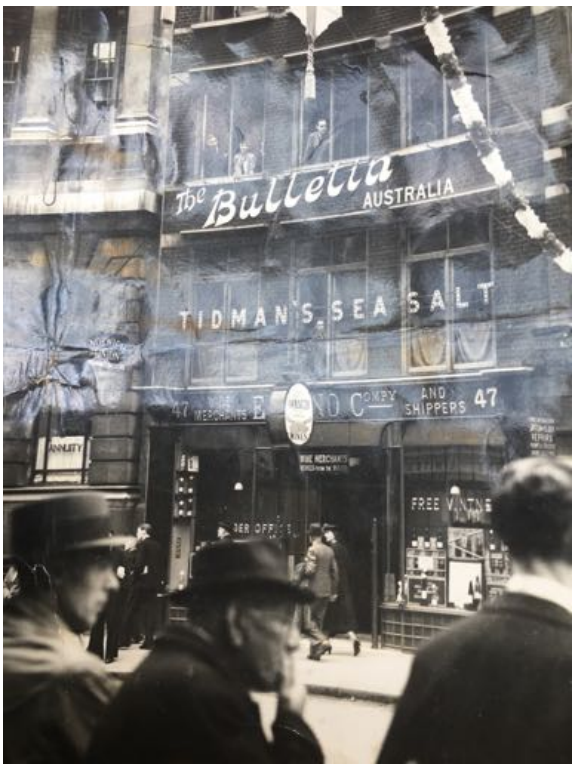


Memorabilia from Ronald and Beryl McCuaig's holiday to Europe 1939.

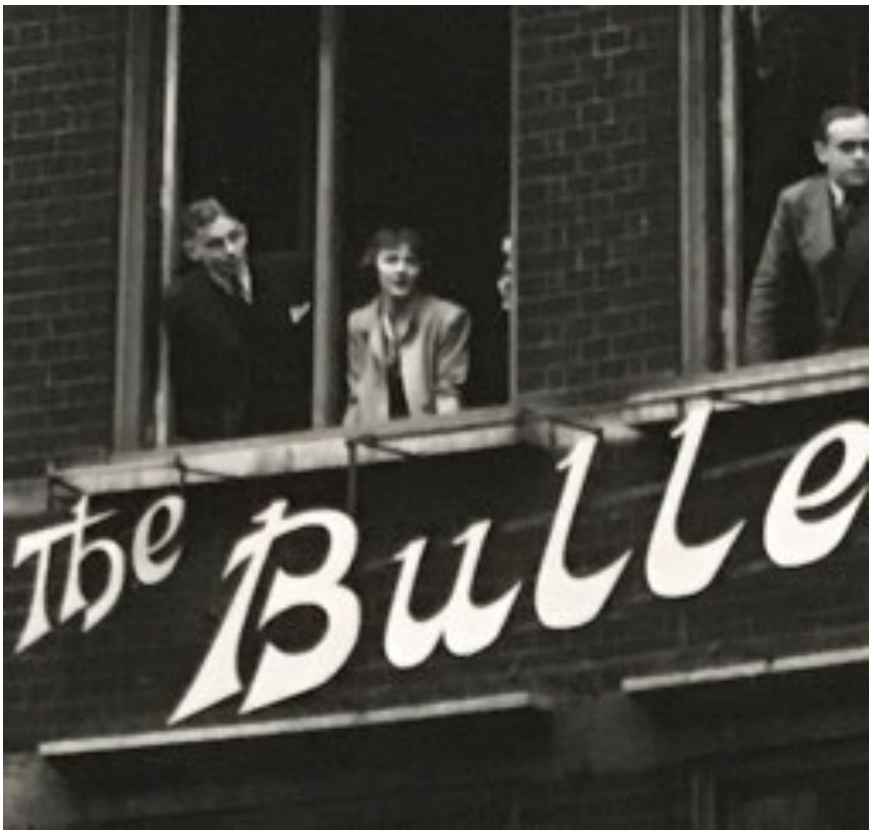


Composition written for Ronald McCuaig by Adrian Wintle.

Passports, press pass, and war correspondent's pass.



This is the first 'phone' photo I took of this image while looking through the boxes at the library. When I later properly scanned it, I realised the two people in the top left-hand window are Ronald McCuaig and wife Beryl.



After documenting the contents of the boxes in the State Library of NSW, I set about securing the items in the catalogue. I filled in the paperwork on behalf of my father and the collection went onto a waiting list to be examined and then admitted to the library catalogue, which happened sometime later (McCuaig 1939).
Library NSW Collection Entry - http://archival.sl.nsw.gov.au/Details/archive/110634049

Family Collections

In addition to what I was able to locate in libraries, I was given large collections of family archive. My cousin Julia had a photo collection of beautifully preserved photos that include images of several generations of McCuaig family, some marked with information, and images of McCuaig as a boy and young man. My father gave me several copies of anthologies including copies of *The Wanton Goldfish* and a fabric bound version of the small collection inscribed to his wife Beryl. I was also given several framed original Cowdroy illustrations, including the image described earlier that turned out to be the birthday card.

There is some basic information detailing Ronald McCuaig's childhood collated beautifully by Susan Hill for her research project, as previously mentioned. Hill references letters, newspaper

entries, and autobiographical poetry to plot the details of the early part of McCuaig's life, and some details of his greater family history. A Newcastle resident herself, Hill describes the area of Maitland where Ronald McCuaig grew up in a "middle class family in an affluent area" (2000, 27) prior to the arrival of the mining companies. There was a twenty-four-year age gap between his parents, his mother being the younger, who died of pneumonia when he was just seven. McCuaig's father was listed on his birth certificate as an ironmonger aged fifty-two. His mother was a talented pianist and there is a record of her winning a medal for junior university pass at the University of Sydney (Hill 2000, 23). The poems "*Au Tombeau de Mon Pere*" ("At the Tomb of my Father") and "Mrs. Agnes McCuaig at the Piano" (both 1965) are about the relationship between Ronald McCuaig and his father and memories of his mother*:*

Enchant me with the void where we belong
My mother of memory,
My man of melody,
My child of song. (McCuaig 1961, 148)

Ronald McCuaig attended Headfort Milton Grammar School, a small private boys' high school in Sydney but didn't receive a leaving certificate. He worked for a short time as a travelling salesman before starting with 2BL writing a nightly chorus.

Ronald McCuaig and his mother Agnes McCuaig.

Ronald McCuaig as a young boy around the age his mother Agnes McCuaig passed away.

Ronald McCuaig early teens.

Ronald McCuaig late teens.

This research has enabled me to bring together previously unconnected sources at a time where Ronald McCuaig was disappearing from view. In examining Walter Benjamin's Russian toy collection historian, Annie Pfiefer asks the question:

> If collecting becomes a self-conscious preservation of a lost or disappearing world, does it entail a certain practice of history, transforming the collector into historian and the historian into collector? If so, collecting becomes a time-sensitive battle against the threat of dispersion, and the prospect of destruction gives the collection a particular urgency. (2018, 50)

This collection could not have happened with the same limited research period afforded the standard documentary. It has taken years to follow 'the trail of breadcrumbs' and discover the mass archive that affirms Ronald McCuaig's presence in the literary timeline until now dispersed across locations, publications, and formats. My family connection has given me access to archive and clues that additional archive could exist, but it has also given me an internal fortitude to pursue the clues, based on a feeling of connectedness to his story and the preservation of it.

The process of collecting has inspired the creative practice. As certain archival components or bodies of work have come to light, I have looked for ways to bring them to life audio-visually. Archiveology provided a methodological framework for the practice and experimentation that I was doing. As Russell describes of the process:

> Archiveolgy teaches us that history does not need to be written or to tell stories. It can be constructed, cut and pasted together, which is to say that archive lends itself to practices of searching and collecting, and the materialist historian is one who respects that piecemeal construction of historical experience. (2018, 53)

Through examination of the collection, I was able to recognise the significance of the literary work and felt compelled to demonstrate this for a contemporary audience. The process of experimenting with aspects of the collection resulted in a spark of recognition that the literary works were fragments of archive able to present their own historical significance in the audio-visual artefacts.

CHAPTER 2. CREATIVE AND THEORETICAL DILEMMAS IN THE TREATMENT OF RONALD MCCUAIG'S LITERARY ACHIEVEMENTS

The common practice of producing historical narratives in documentary is to combine interviews and archival images to create authenticity around stories. In contemporary documentary, participants are often filmed observationally to complement interviews. As this is not possible with historical documentary, filmmakers rely on many archival sources to "escape the present-tense limitations of an observational mode and [to] allow for more overt forms of authorial or rhetorical representation" (Nichols 1993, 176). Another option for historical documentary is to use re-enactments to visualise the narrative, but documentary theorist Bill Nichols points to a realisation by filmmakers that archival footage became more reliable than re-enactments "with their embarrassing failures in authenticity" (1993, 176). Ken Burns's exhaustive research process and attention to detail with the use of archive is respected by historians, but some are critical of his methods:

> In addition to differences of interpretation and emphasis, certain historian-critics have pointed out various errors of fact in the series, including Burns' s occasional use of photographs out of their specific historical context. Sometimes this practice seems essentially innocuous and inconsequential, as with the juxtaposition of an 1862 photograph of Abraham Lincoln with a discussion of Lincoln in 1864; other times, however, the dissonance between photograph and narrative is more pronounced and of greater significance. (Kuhn 1996, 316)

This kind of criticism is often levelled at documentary filmmakers from institutions that have a long-established connection to a particular archive or history. If the conventional practice of using archive in documentary film is often criticised as being imperfect, then archiveology moves even further from the strictly factual. The use of archival materials for new ways of seeing history challenges traditional ways of viewing archive in documentary. The practice of archiveology is a creative endeavour, "a poetics of collage and a creative use of sound make this very much an art practice" (Russell 2018, 24). In my case, this exciting approach to archives challenges, or rather enhances, my usual practice, providing a space for experimentation.

Archive Placement in Documentary

Based on my professional history of working with archives to produce documentaries, I have mostly in the past used them in the conventional way—to describe events, support a story and demonstrate an era. But there have been moments where I have used archives in a more artistic and impressionistic way. *Black Soldier Blues* (2005) contains a story about a war veteran who has a vivid memory of playing basketball in the Pacific theatre in World War 2. In interview, this story was extremely powerful as it detailed the collegial relationship African American soldiers had with Australian soldiers. But when we went to edit this, there were no stills or film of the event, so I used a basketball archive from the general period, trying to establish the era for the viewer. The footage is from a city game, the floorboards are shiny wood. This is not a makeshift army basketball court in the jungle. This sequence does not demonstrate the actual story but creates a moment where what is on screen is hopefully then reimagined to the setting of the war, from the interview we are hearing. From a historian's perspective, this may be viewed as historically incorrect and even irresponsible.

These experiences of using archive material from personal, organisational, public and library collections have been used in the construction of documentary narratives and also in service of the documentary style. Although I have great respect for the materials and anyone who offers access to the materials for these documentaries, I have not previously questioned the bigger implications of archive and its structuring influence on historical perspectives. Nor have I considered archives that are created as a result of the filmmaking process. When one is in the throes of production schedules, there is very little time to reflect on the process of incorporating archival materials. Moreover, there is usually little consideration for possible implications of the accepted practice of using archival images, film, and documents to support the narrative. I have rarely used archives in a subversive or interrogatory way to challenge perspectives of a historical event. The additional materials support a Perspective either me or the broadcaster have established during the process.

Documentary filmmaker and academic Associate Professor Reece Auguiste, in his study of the archive in practice-based research, writes:

> Though evidently a slippery term, the archive has historically maintained its tendency to enunciate and re-enunciate its presence in the structuring of historical consciousness and its structuring effect has found its greatest ally in the methods and forms of documentary film practices where its value as evidence is essential to narrative structure and historical authenticity. (2015, 8)

This summarises how I would traditionally use archives for a documentary film: a structuring influence that provides evidence for interview or narration, moulding it to a recognisable, predetermined story. Auguiste implores documentary filmmakers who have the opportunity to explore archives in practice-based research that "archival materials should be deployed in documentary practice-based research as legitimate sites of hermeneutical inquiry into the formation of historical consciousness" (2015, 12). Archiveology provides a methodology with which to explore the use of archive in the construction of audio-visual artefacts that explore the history around the subject with more imagination. The practice seeks to highlight forgotten histories, using archival materials to question interpretations of history, as Russell explains:

> Exploring the potential of audio-visual fragments to construct new ways of accessing and framing histories that might otherwise have been forgotten and neglected—and to make these histories relevant to contemporary concerns. (Russell 2018)

Ronald McCuaig and many poets from Australia's recent history have been forgotten or neglected. Bringing the words, characters, and narratives of the poetry to life through an audio-visual medium is a way to connect the work to new audiences and to generate enthusiasm around this history that has nearly disappeared from view. My practice experiments with poetry as archive and in turn becomes a hermeneutical exercise that brings the literature to life in an archiveological project. This chapter details how I produced new artefacts based on Ronald McCuaig's literary fragments and the ways in which the research and reading I carried out around the use of archive deepened my understanding and experimentation with the poetry. It also analyses how my being the granddaughter of the subject influenced my film practice and places my work into the context of other films about poets and poetry.

Archiveology and Finding New Narratives in Archives

Even though I have gathered a large archive for this project, there is very little moving imagery that demonstrates the era that Ronald McCuaig first started writing his poetry in. He was living and writing in Sydney between the world wars and witnessed the depression privation on the streets as he moved around town as a working journalist. Much of the filmed news was a record of "planned events" in Sydney and the equipment required to record these, during a time that sound was being incorporated into the process, was "cumbersome enough to require a dedicated van" (FitzSimons, Laughren, and Williamson 2011, 45). I started to consider the narratives of McCuaig's poetry as archive components. Rather than large events, the poems observe individual characters and scenes of this period, providing rare historical perspectives. Initially, it is worth examining some of the narratives in more detail to determine what those perspectives might be. As I collected large amounts of archive that make up McCuaig's rich literary career, the strength of his writing to engage and influence became more obvious. The more time I have spent interrogating the first collection *Vaudeville*, the more detailed and uncommon his observations seem. "The Letter", which I have included above, is about a young man writing a letter to his girlfriend about what he hears beyond his walls of the neighbours in the building. He details an extreme scene of domestic abuse:

Will ask the slut where she has hid
His toothbrush; blunder back to bed,
Find his pyjamas tied in knots
And give her, as he puts it, what's
Coming to her. She won't escape
Her deeply meditated rape.
(1938, 34)

In thinking of this narrative in the context of today's discussion about domestic violence, it is possible to suggest we have not progressed much further in our understanding around the subject. Women are still suffering and dying at the hands of husbands and partners. It is reported in *ABC News* at the time of writing that Queensland is about to reach a 'milestone' of 100,000 police interactions with members of the community that are related to incidents of domestic violence (Riga 2020). In "The Letter", the man in the apartment across the way predicts what his neighbour is about to experience; in fact, according to the poem, he is "certain" that it is about to happen, and he is not going to raise any alarm about it. He just knows he will hear it, a meditated rape. The focus of domestic abuse in narratives and

representations is usually that of the victim or the perpetrator; for example, the poetry of Dorothy Molloy, who "uses the first person narrator to explore, from an inner perspective, the psychological effects sexual violence exerts on women" (Villar-Argáiz 2010). The film *What's Love Got to Do with It?* (1993), based on Ike and Tina Turner's story has a similar portrayal of rape within a marriage to that portrayed in "The Letter". In Diane Shoos's study of the film, she notes how the portrayal explores Ike's motivation for violence:

> Ike's battering is symptomatic of his need to manipulate all aspects of Anna Mae's life, from her emotions and her personal life to her work and professional achievements. This need in turn stems from Ike's fear of abandonment, suggested in the film through his repeated comment to Tina, "I suppose you gonna leave me now." (Shoos 2003, 68)

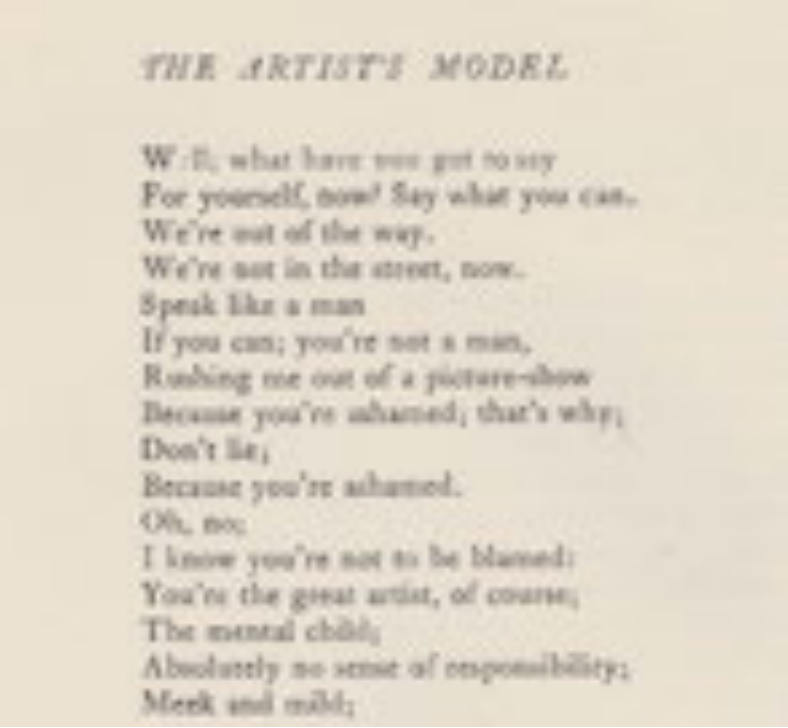
In "The Letter", the focus is on the bystander and the brutality of the scene is not a narrative we would usually associate with 1930s' Sydney: it is surprising and powerful for its connection to what is still being discussed around the subject today.

Archiveology has the potential to present a perspective of history that is unexpected: "it is a means of shocking the past to attention" (Russell 2018). The use of the word 'slut' stands out as a surprising bridge from past to present, as it still delivers the same punch. Archiveology is a means to recognise and challenge assumptions about history using Walter Benjamin's theoretical framework:

> Benjamin's historiography is based on a nonlinear conception of correspondences between past and future and on the shock or crystallization produced through juxtaposition and montage. (Russell 2018, 52)

Within the audio-visual sequences or videopoetry of my documentary is the crystallisation, contextualising past and present into a new form, revealing to the audience that domestic violence is not a contemporary problem; rather, it has been observed in poetry of 1930s' Sydney.

Similarly, in 'The Artist's Model' a picture is created of an artist's model railing against the unfaithful, shallow, artist for whom she has a simple and unexamined function:



THE ARTIST'S MODEL

Well, what have you got to say
For yourself, now? Say what you can.
We're out of the way.
We're not in the street, now.
Speak like a man
If you can; you're not a man,
Rushing me out of a picture-show
Because you're ashamed; that's why;
Don't lie;
Because you're ashamed.
Oh, no;
I know you're not to be blamed:
You're the great artist, of course;
The mental child;
Absolutely no sense of responsibility;
Meek and mild;

Still image from *Vaudeville* 1938.

As mentioned, across the *Vaudeville* collection, it is clear that McCuaig is adopting some of the ideas associated with the European modernists that had come before him. The anti-romanticism clear in "The Artist's Model", as the character rants at the artist. The use of 'dialogue' from the model's perspective sets a different perspective to the poetry, which is recognised as a modernist technique: "Conversations are dramatic situations, with tension, reaction and uncertain outcomes that stop the listener bracketing poetry as high and noble thoughts" (Howarth 2011, 189).

We hear and see in our minds 'the model': her language is heated, sarcastic, and definite. She is not being cute or traditionally feminine; she is not holding back her true feelings about the way the artist is treating her. Pound refers to the 'image' as an "emotional and intellectual complex in an instant of time", one that is "more charged than a simple description" (Howarth 2011, 39). In this poem, Ronald McCuaig has created a striking image for the reader and once again the focus of the narrative is the person who is generally 'behind the scenes'. The artist's model is rarely given the limelight as a speaker to the art or the artistic process, and the poem is 'charged' through its use of colloquial dialogue.

McCuaig's poetry is such a rich visual mine that it became important to explore creatively; allowing his words to speak for themselves—augmented by traditional visual archive, images and documents, surrounded by contemporary settings—was more interesting than trying to elevate the story of an introverted literary figure. As Muenz concludes of the archiveological method:

> Russell's work is most useful for film archivists as a shift in awareness about a potential inherent in their materials through archiveology: the possibility of use for creative research, for activism, and for artistic expression. (Muenz 2019, 2)

The aim was to produce creative output where the archive has more impact and a level of surprise, which harks back to Pound's cry to 'make the work new', thus transmitting Ronald McCuaig's original impulse. The impulse is the inherent spark in the first versions of this poetry which connected with many colleagues, critics and audiences alike, as mentioned previously.

I will shortly detail the creative process and the intended outcomes but before this I will briefly discuss my connection to the subject and the implications of my relationship on the work.

Being a Relative

I have always made films about other people, other families, and other communities; I am firmly behind the scenes. It is possible to attribute my absence from my previous documentary work to two factors. Firstly, when I started my career in documentary, the dominant broadcast style was a combination of interview and observation. I had some creative freedoms but was at the mercy of television executives whose expectations on commissioning a program would reinforce that sometimes "a particular voice is expected by an enabling institution" (FitzSimons, Laughren, and Williamson 2011, 16). Documentary programs were structured around a character journey and viewers would see what they were doing and hear from them about their lives. The craft is to structure the narrative around interviews, which FitzSimons likens to ventriloquism:

> At one level, this seems an apt metaphor to describe the way in which interview-based documentaries tend to express the filmmaker's position through the selection and

> organization of documentary subjects rather than the more direct address of films with extensive narrations. (FitzSimons 2009, 5)

It was rare, in my experience, for the filmmaker to be seen or heard. I had viewed the filmmaker's absence as a position of being 'humble observer', helping participants to tell their stories and not distracting an audience with the presence of an outsider. Renov is critical of this filmmaker distance, and describes it as the "symptomatic silence of the empowered" (Renov 2004, 94). This is a surprising perspective to me, and it caused me to rethink my position in the films I had made as a director. I find the concept of autobiography being part of the filmmaking process jarring, as I have spent so long in the shadows of the production process. As a viewer, I have reacted to the filmmaker presence variously as self-conscious, irritating, or at times touching. My main criticism is that the presence of the filmmaker can overshadow the central narrative and appear self-serving, even narcissistic.

Secondly, I have never desired to be part of the narrative and have not sought stories with any direct connection to my own. This approach differs from that of my colleague Peter Hegedus, who found that he was essential to the stories he was making from the outset, and concluded this was integral to his style: "My autobiographical style of filmmaking is my stamp and my signature, and could arguably be regarded as signifying my authorship as filmmaker" (Hegedus 2008, 10). Making a film about my grandfather's life and work has intrinsically required me to reflect on and resolve my relation to the work in a way that none of my previous work has required. Discussing the familial connection to documentary participants, Renov describes domestic ethnography as an autobiographical approach through which one follows and interviews family members, and where the outcome is "self-portraiture refracted through a familial Other" (Renov 2004, 44). I would consider my work around my grandfather is biographical rather than autobiographical, but the familial connection and similarities in our pursuit of creative careers have had an impact on my approach to this project.

There are certain aspects of my career trajectory that mirror my grandfather's experience. We have both worked in large media organisations where shifts in the environment of mass publishing has impacted our creative outputs; he worked at the *Bulletin* (1950–1960) and I worked at Network Ten (2007–2015). At the *Bulletin*, McCuaig wrote a large volume of light verse, which may have impacted his 'serious poetry' output and reputation. Likewise, as a documentary filmmaker, I was able and required to make four one-hour programs each year in

the Ten environment. By contrast, it would take me up to two years to complete a single hour for broadcast as an independent documentary filmmaker in my working life prior to joining network Ten. Having performed these jobs for a similar period of time, we were both made redundant from these organisations as the surrounding media landscape changed. These connections further bind our stories together, as Renov suggests, and although I was not aiming for an overtly autobiographical style, at times my story is refracted through my grandfather's and this creative challenge is explored and documented through this exegesis.

It would be disingenuous to make a film about a close relative and not indicate my place in the story. Another filmmaker who has similarly grappled with the idea of making a first-person film is Michael Chanan, who made the film *The American Who Electrified Russia* (2009) about his maternal grandmother's cousin. From this experience, he concluded that a film about his family inevitably becomes a film about him no matter how subtle his actual presence is (2012, 28).

In the same collection of essays, Andres Di Tella brought my attention to a different perspective on following the familial, which he reveals in his essay "The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime", where he details the experience of going to India in search of his mother's heritage. Growing up in Argentina, he predicted the experience would be dramatic and emotional, but he wanted to reveal this journey for the camera. He reacts strongly to the criticism of autobiographical elements as being egotistical or narcissistic, arguing:

> To put into a film autobiographical substance, to sacrifice one's own family, to expose intimacies of experience, all of that is kind of a public offering. An autobiographical documentary is a curious act of responsibility. I assume responsibility for this story. (2012, 35)

I recognise this responsibility but also feel its weight because the subject, my grandfather, has a known literary reputation—one that has arguably not been sufficiently represented in literary history. I am a filmmaker and not a literary scholar, so there is some pressure to adequately represent his literary career and this requires additional research to develop my understanding of the field. His family story is also important, so I need to be mindful of achieving the right tone and balance.

As introduced in the literature review, filmmaker Alan Berliner is not easy to define because his films are an eclectic mix of experimental, personal, autobiographical, and archival. He has made films about his grandfather (*Intimate Stranger*, 1991), father (*Nobody's Business,* 1996), and cousin (*First Cousin Once Removed* 2012), who is also a poet. His style is confrontational and challenging as he argues with his father, follows his cousin through years of dementia, and offers his immediate family's experience and his own on a first-person journey into insomnia. The documentaries are not easy to watch, but he cautions a group at the Scottish Documentary Institute:

> If you are thinking of doing personal work, there are some traps, there are some pitfalls. Sentimentality. If the audience knows that you're making this film out of sentimental reasons and that's why you're doing it and that's what you want them to think, [it's] not going to work. The key here is irony. Personal stories have to be filled with irony. (Berliner 2015)

This note of caution prompted me to look at the developing audio-visual work with a more critical eye.

As I researched my grandfather's life in more detail, I found myself becoming more attached to him as a historical figure and relative. My research has uncovered a much richer literary career than I had anticipated, and late in life he became a substitute father to his two Sydney grandchildren (my cousins) while one of his sons struggled with mental illness. This is captured movingly in an interview with my cousin Julia (video interview with the author, 17 March 2017). But there is no lack of irony demonstrated in the contradictory expressions of what it is to be a father down the McCuaig line, some of which is captured in his poetry. McCuaig lost his mother at the age of seven and grew up in a quiet household with a strict father. He writes about this in his poem "*Au Tombeau de mon Pere*":

…Or maybe merely practising
Never saying anything,
Since he could go, when deeply stirred,
Months at home, without a word.
(McCuaig 1961)

My father, Michael McCuaig, experienced a similar aloofness from his father, as he says in an interview:

> I don't think I ever went to him with anything. He came to us if needs be or we'd go to my mother and our mother would communicate it somehow in ways that the both of them understood but I don't think he initiated a whole lot. He'd been brought up in a very strong, almost repressive atmosphere. (video interview with the author, 3 March 2017)

I explored my father's relationship with his father in a small artistic piece titled *The Poet's Son*, which I detail later in this exegesis.

Interviewing my father Michael McCuaig 2016.

Alan Berliner also recognises the complexities of the family relationship he will reveal in his films. But even as these films have turned Berliner's style of filmmaking inward and revealed more about his personal life, he hopes they are a catalyst for the audience to consider their own family situation. As he continues in his talk at the Scottish Documentary Institute:

> It's not about some narcissistic personal thing that's all about me and my family. I'm trying to do it in a way that turns the window into a mirror and makes you think of you

and yours. Your relationships, your family, your memory and your family history. (Berliner 2015)

But unlike Berliner, I was not interested in being visible or even narrating the work. I experimented with writing a series of notes to the audience, with the smallest piece of information about my connection to the subject, “This is my grandfather”, written next to a picture of my grandfather. This would indicate from the outset the autobiographical component of the film. As I wished to handwrite on the film, I needed to work out how to do this. I came up with an idea to use a ‘green glove’ so the text would appear, but my hand would be keyed out later. I set up a small green screen studio with a piece of green felt covered by a piece of glass. I bought several colours and nib sizes and started to draw on the screen with these. I would then ingest the clips into Final Cut Pro and experiment with the key. Surprisingly, my first few attempts did show promise, but the glove was not adequately keying out because of the creases in the glove fingers. There was still an impression of the hand and some green bleed from the glove. Eventually, after much trial and error, I decided to use a white chalk, medium size nib ink, and a green cover, rather than a glove. The key started to work, and I would experiment with the text.

Early Handwriting Experiments

https://vimeo.com/418303735
password: Handwriting

The duration of this experimental fragment is 57 seconds.

Handwriting production and lighting setup.

In addition to the personal aspects of Ronald McCuaig's life I would like to challenge the audience to see how contemporary the themes are in the poetry. My aim is for them to feel a jolt of recognition at the impact McCuaig's observations and imagination had when he first expressed them in various forms; and of the potential for this work to still impact an audience today. This is what I experienced when I focused on the literature and the greatest challenge became how to represent it on screen for a contemporary audience. There are many examples of similar attempts to highlight poetry in documentary and creative work.

Poetry and Poets in Documentary

I should like to differentiate this section from discussions about the 'poetic mode' further down in the paper, which is about documentary practice. The poetic mode in documentary is a description designed by Bill Nichols to describe style characteristics which differentiate documentaries, and the poetic mode utilises creative production devices to enhance mood (Nichols 2010). I would like to discuss here the representation of poets and poetry in documentary.

Wikipedia offers a list of forty-five documentary films about poets (Wikipedia 2014). The list is an eclectic mix, and some are difficult to find while others in the list are not easily accessible. Documentaries about Australian poets are even rarer. The streaming site Kanopy has a small number of documentaries about Australian poets, most of which are linked to the National Film and Sound Archive. The poets Bruce Dawe and Elizabeth Riddell (who knew Ronald McCuaig) feature in half-hour documentaries that are part of the Film Australia/SBS series, *Biography* (1991–1994). Both programs subscribe to the standard TV documentary form, constructed with interview, overlay of the participant's non-synchronised narration, and sequences where the poets read their poetry.

Similarly, another documentary linked to Kanopy from the NFSA is *An Imaginary Life* (Featherstone, 1997), which is about the poet and author David Malouf. This documentary is a beautifully crafted film that drifts between two narrating voices. The first we hear is Geoffrey Rush, who reads Malouf's words and we see images of the world his stories live in. The second is the voice of actor Ken Radley, who provides the biographical detail of the Malouf life story. The documentary has many other interview participants, including Malouf himself, but the tone of these entwined central voices creates a visual experience around the literary work. The documentary is directed by Don Featherstone who, together with his wife Judy from their

production company Featherstone Productions, have made many documentary films featuring, artists, poets, and writers.

Documentaries about contemporary poets usually have access to some form of TV, news, or film footage to drive the story and illustrate the writer's life and work. Therefore, the narrative has the potential to be more engaging due to the moving imagery that can illustrate their life story. Examples include *Ladies and Gentlemen…Mr Leonard Cohen* (1966), an early film that travels between life-story and poetry recitation; the award-winning *The Life and Times of Allen Ginsberg* (1997), a personal film about the poet's family life and career; *Al Purdy Was Here* (2003), a feature documentary about the eccentric Canadian poet who was interviewed on television many times.

Making documentaries about dead poets from a more distant time is more challenging. Having viewed examples from Australia and around the world, I identified the dilemma of bringing the interior life and the energy that is obvious in the literature to the screen. The interview participants are often intelligent academics and colleagues who have wonderful insights into the life of the poet but don't convey the imagery and impact of the written words. There are many examples of TV documentaries that feature biographical stories around historical literary identities that are usually parts of bigger documentary series. T. S. Eliot is featured in an episode of the BBC series *Arena* (2009) and Ezra Pound features in an episode of the series *Voices and Visions* (1988). Both programs have a traditional TV documentary approach with narration, interview and archive. Neither bring a distinctive style to the narrative, which seems aimed at an audience already familiar with the subject. Kanopy offers a half-hour documentary *Geoffrey Chaucer: Poet and Pilgrim* (1986) that focuses on Chaucer's opus *Canterbury Tales*. The film is limited to narration, a voiceover of the poetry, and medieval art to represent the poet's work.

An exception to this somewhat standardised representation of the dead poet and his work is *Dylan Thomas* (1961), which won the Academy Award for Best Short Documentary 1965. The documentary is narrated by a young Richard Burton, who also seamlessly moves from narrating the poet's life to reciting the poetry. As with the contemporary presenter style we have become accustomed to on TV, Burton appears in some of the locations and directly addresses the audience, at one point sitting in a pub between two elderly people having a drink. The poetry is overlaid with images of people and locations, long-held shots that draw attention to the

beauty of the poetry. The consistent look and style create the atmosphere of the poetic mode, as will be elaborated on shortly, and steers away from more recent TV documentary style with people talking about a historical figure and reciting their work while sitting in their domestic, current setting.

Australian director John Hughes has made significant films with literary characters and themes, adopting a poetic style and veering away from direct statement toward the elliptical. In 2013, *Love and Fury* screened on ABC TV about the relationship between the Australian poet Judith Wright and the policy maker 'Nugget' Coombs. The half-hour film uses interview, film archive, sound, photos and documents to tell the story of the late blooming relationship of the unlikely couple. The film opens with magnificent scenery of Kakadu and Judith's daughter relaying her fear that the elderly couple had wandered into the bush to die, as that was something Judith Wright had once mentioned she might do. She found them nearby soon after sitting peacefully together chatting. Hughes has the ability to combine the documentary components he has gathered to create a poetic rhythm and multiple textual layers to the narrative.

Hughes also undertook the task of bringing to life the complicated figure of Walter Benjamin in the one-hour documentary, *One Way Street: Fragments for Walter Benjamin* (1993). He used dramatisations of the poet/philosopher's life, adding dramatised characters from his life, and interviews with academics from around the world who speak to the large body of work. The complicated mix is deftly organised into a cohesive documentary that plots the biographical narrative but also manages to infuse the film with the atmosphere of the written work.

The creative challenge in making the McCuaig story has been to convey the impact the poetry had when it was first written and released and to unify the style of the documentary so that family members, historians, and academics look like they are part of the same narrative.

Early Australian Documentary Influences

While researching McCuaig's poetry, I have also studied some of Australia's early documentaries for examples that combine documentary's observation of people with an expressive and at times poetic style. These were all pre–broadcast era documentaries. Three

have particularly taken my interest and I have studied these films in more detail with reference to McCuaig's work and the development of my own documentary. They are *Take Notice* (1938), *The Back of Beyond* (1954), and *Mike and Stefani* (1952).

Take Notice is a film that highlights the struggle for inner-city Sydney residents to pay rising rents. It has been described as using "lyrical and beautifully composed cinematography to express the pain that tenants experienced in the private rental market in pre-war Sydney" (FitzSimons, Laughren, and Williamson 2011, 15). The low-budget film was made in 1938, the same year as *Vaudeville,* and toured throughout NSW to small cinemas.

The Back of Beyond is a surreal visual journey following a mail truck through the Australian desert. In her detailed review of the film, Sylvia Lawson asserts that *Back of Beyond* could probably not have been made in the current broadcast environment, writing "The pre-television documentary genre matches visual with verbal poetry; takes care of pictorial values, considers composition in every shot, and looks at individuals and society with a careful humane benevolence" (Lawson and Archive 2013, 2). It's worth noting Ronald McCuaig's colleague and friend Australian poet Douglas Stewart was a co-writer on this iconic Australian film.

In his book about post-war Australian documentary, Deane Williams (2008) describes *Mike and Stefani* as having a neo-realist style. The film follows the plight of a young couple who attempt to emigrate to Australia after World War 2. The director was aiming to show the long journey in an effort to create audience empathy:

> Australians will be on their side. But you have to get down to the guts of the thing and show them reality. It's no good telling them they've had a bad time you have to show them. (Williams 2008, 124)

There are connections to be made with these documentaries and the early poetry of McCuaig, as they all try to show the lived experiences of characters and point to unifying truths. McCuaig described the realisation that his immediate world could be reflected in his poetry as follows:

> I was just coming to see that even the dullest detail of my uneventful life and daily observation could be more interesting than the conventional fantasy which passes so often for poetry. My studies of Eliot and Pound, my efforts to write poetry as music,

> my observations of people, all boiled together in one pot. In two months at the end of 1933, writing in a King's Cross room from 10 at night until 7 in the morning, I wrote twenty poems which I afterwards called *Vaudeville*. (McCuaig 1948, 210)

Although the poetry appeared to be a frenzied creative output, Ronald McCuaig spent years experimenting with various forms and published some of the work to gauge initial responses. In an effort to convey this narrative, development of my creative practice would initially be around the documentary project. The choice of documentary mode had a significant impact on how the creative work would develop, and as a result of the experimentation around the documentary, a completely different output emerged.

Documentary Modes

Early in the creative practice I determined the documentary component would utilise different modes such as those outlined by Bill Nichols (2010) to help differentiate documentary styles and evolve documentary away from the idea of it as a single genre. Nichols proposes six modes: poetic, expository, participatory, observational, performative, and reflexive.

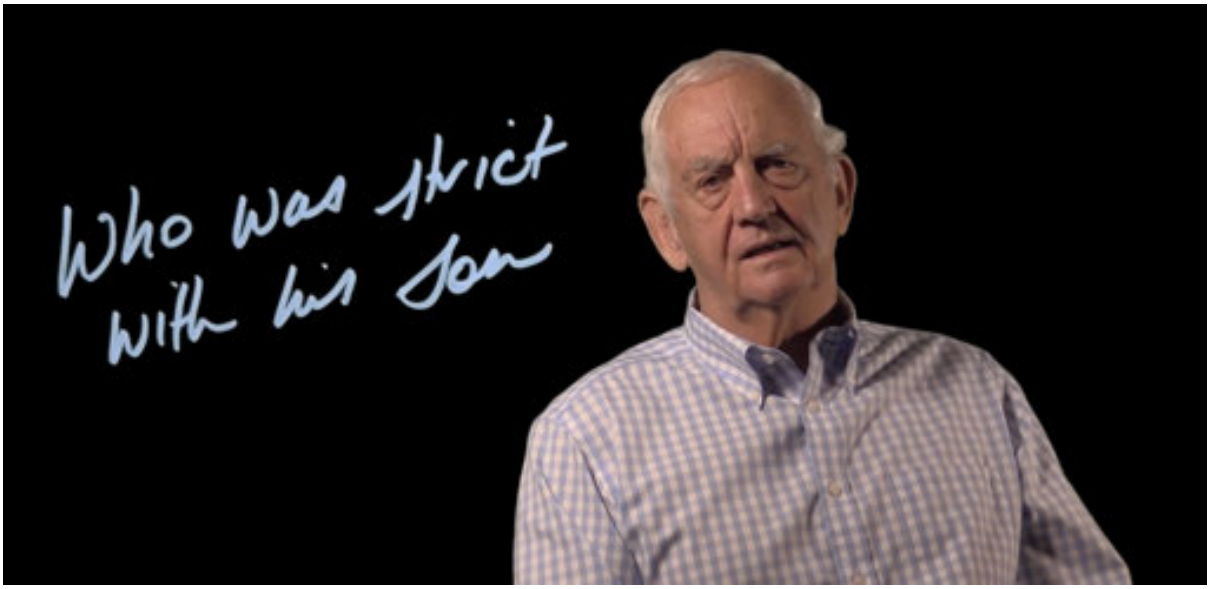
The documentary part of the work is predominantly participatory; interviews with family members and other participants drive the narrative. Of this mode, Nichols writes:

> As viewers we have the sense that we are witness to a form of dialogue between the filmmaker and his or her subject—be it an issue like a labor strike or a person like the filmmaker's mother—that stresses situated engagement, negotiated interaction, and emotion-laden encounter. (2010, 123)

The greenscreen interviews were an example of this exchange and a familiar process for me as I have interviewed hundreds of participants throughout my career. These interviews illuminated different aspects of Ronald McCuaig's life and career; these are the most personal interviews I have done because the participants are talking about my family history.

But I have also experimented with the poetic mode in the documentary component and the videopoetry, which "stresses mood, tone, and affect much more than displays of factual knowledge or acts of rhetorical persuasion" (Nichols 2010, 103). I have also made a four-

minute film titled *The Poet's Son* to reinforce the concepts of modernism evident in McCuaig's poetry and also aspects of the family story, using my father's interview as the central narrative. Instead of my usual approach to green screen, I turned the green to black and left the frame black around my father except for the white writing and a few still images. I also used parts of the poetry of McCuaig that is about his father and then son.



https://vimeo.com/332915119
Password: Father

In this experiment, I used an excerpt from an interview I did with my father. I also used short text that appears next to him, with him switching to the opposite sides of the frame for the next note. The notes form a familial line from father to grandfather to me as he talks about the subject of the documentary, my grandfather:

This is my father
Talking about his father
Who wrote about his father
Who was strict with his son
Who wrote about his son
Who is talking to his daughter
About her grandfather
The poet

These are spread across the interview of my father talking about Ronald McCuaig's poetry and his father, about the poem Ronald wrote about my father, and about the distance between himself and the poet.

In considering how I would incorporate McCuaig's poetry into a film, it seemed appropriate to consider a performative interpretation. McCuaig himself noted that poetry has a significant performance element. In an interview with Kirkpatrick, he stated:

> I remember, too, my father seeing that I was interested in poetry, got me a Banjo Paterson. And I was on one of his interminable walks—he used to walk around the district, and I would walk with him—so I said to him, when was he going to give me another poetry book? I had piles and piles, a big box ottoman full of books, but this was the first poetry book he'd given me. And he said, "But you haven't learnt that one yet!" That's the way it was in the days before television and broadcasting. That was what Banjo Paterson was for. He wrote the poems and people recited them at concerts. Kodak O'Ferrall once began a poem, "Out in the suburbs howls the wild reciter…" [laughs] (Kirkpatrick 1991, 269)

Documentary is a visual medium and the performance of poetry takes the original written words off the page and into the minds of the viewers in a more impactful way. Rather than having a participant reciting poetry from *Vaudeville*, I experimented with a creative reimagining of the work. Nichols further elaborates on how the performative mode contributes to a deeper connection to the subject in documentary:

> Performative documentaries bring the emotional intensities of embodied experience and knowledge to the fore rather than attempt to do something tangible. If they set out to do something, it is to help us sense what a certain situation or experience feels like. (Nichols 2010, 132)

I want people to experience on a visceral level the impact that McCuaig's poetry had when it was first read in the 1930s. Stewart thought it was "outrageous", Kenneth Slessor described it as "remarkable", and Dutton years later would say: "McCuaig, a true modern, remains fresh, wry, rueful and unreformed" (Dutton 1986, 49). It was clear that his words were 'felt' and

experienced in a memorable way and my challenge has been to emulate this in ways that are true to my own creative style.

Remembering the concept raised by Hill that McCuaig's poetry was "drawn from contemporary street life", I considered the idea of reinterpreting the poetry as hip hop, which has the intensity of delivery that was intended when McCuaig first wrote the work. As the descriptions by Stewart and others have pointed to, the poetry was shocking at the time. Dutton further uses the word "plangent"—defined as "loud and resonant with a mournful tone" (Stevenson 2010)—to describe McCuaig's poetry (Dutton 1986, 50), which seems a fitting way to connect his work directly to hip hop. Dr Sarah Attfield recognises the aggressive street tone in the lyrics of the Australian hip hop group The Hilltop Hoods as working-class observations of "dropping out of school, getting into trouble with the police, and working low paying jobs" (2013, 33). There is potentially a similarity of purpose between McCuaig and Australia hip hop artists.

Incorporating Hip hop into the style is influenced by two significant documentaries that have embraced the performative: *Drinking for England* (1998) and *Prison Songs* (2015). The former sees Londoners struggling with alcoholism sing their experiences in the milieu of their drinking habits such as the pub. The latter, set in the gaol in Darwin, sees the prisoners sing their experiences of crime, misfortune, love, and addiction. Both films undertake an ambitious creative style that could alienate an audience in the wrong directorial hands. Participants singing their stories has a surprise component because audiences have a preconceived idea about the documentary viewing experience. But the skill of the filmmakers in deftly incorporating the character in a musical sequence without the participant seeming self-conscious has the potential to create greater empathy:

> As a performative documentary, *Prison Songs* challenges audiences to respond differently to the genre by emphasizing the humanity of Berrimah inmates who convey their stories through song, which is here privileged over social-problem discourse. (Speed 2019, 334)

Through the performative mode, I would aim for the reimagining of Ronald McCuaig's poetry to affect an audience on an emotional level that may not be achieved if the work is simply read off the page. Feedback from producer Sue Maslin in a meeting about my project encouraged

my idea of a hip hop artist being able to express the poetry in a contemporary context. I felt it was important to spend some time developing a collaboration with a hip hop artist to experiment with some performative ideas. It would take over a year to find the right artist with whom to collaborate.

Crooked White

The first hip hop artists I wanted to work with were the well-established Adelaide group Hilltop Hoods. Not only are they the most popular hip hop artists in Australia at the time of writing, but I have also enjoyed their music for many years. *The Monster's Ball* album was my introduction to hip hop, which they performed in collaboration with the Adelaide Symphony Orchestra. This was an influence in considering how modern poetry might be reimagined into hip hop.

Their work has been an influence on the project for its musicality and connection with their audience. Also, the aggressive tone of their hip hop, combined with urban stories resonated with me when considering the modern style of McCuaig's poetry. Even though I would not end up working with this group, I would use these characteristics as a guide for determining who would be right for the project.

After spending over a year searching for the right person, talking with potential artists, and recording some samples, I eventually found a young Brisbane-based artist to work with. Crooked White had been working in the music industry for at least ten years both as a solo artist, and with a successful touring band, which performed throughout rural and remote Queensland, garnering a following and a collection of music with big sounds. Crooked himself is from North Queensland and left a fractured family to escape to Byron Bay, where he spent time picking up odd jobs and partying. At a certain point, he started writing down some of these experiences and later found he could transfer this to music, forming a band.

My introduction to Crooked White was "Crooked", a track from Crooked White's then recently released solo album. The YouTube clip has Crooked White sitting with his collaborator 7ravesty, both in high vis vests, presumably on a smoko break, reading the paper. The scene is quintessentially Australian, and the working-class scene is indicative in tone of some of the

observations in Ronald McCuaig's poetry. In addition, the track was witty, and Crooked's tone was edgy and lyrical, a combination I had been looking for.

Crooked:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JOYNrDu7-dk

When I first researched Crooked White, he had just won Queensland hip hop artist of the year at the Queensland Music Awards and had finished his solo album. I made contact with him on Facebook and we met to talk about possibilities of collaborating for my project. Crooked was enthusiastic about the project and serious about looking for new creative opportunities. But I had also caught him at a time where finances were difficult, and he had taken a job in a hospital as an orderly to make ends meet.

From the outset of this research, I have been determined to cover the poetry as hip hop in an effort to demonstrate the modernism of the work. The idea has received mixed reactions, largely positive, but I know the concept would have to be done well to work. It would not be the sort of experiment that could be done with limited resources. My intention was to work with Crooked on just two of the poems to create contemporary versions of them.

In July 2019 I was able to record "The Letter" as a voice over, which I then used as an audio base, editing onto it still images, text, music, and sound effects. After presenting this work to the candidature review panel, I was encouraged to push this idea further. Consequently, I arranged a shoot where Crooked would perform the poem, which would form part of the videopoetry anthology that I will detail shortly.

"The Letter" first cover:
https://vimeo.com/418317087
password: L1

This collaboration has proven to be successful and Crooked was a supportive and thoughtful participant, embracing the poetry of *Vaudeville* and injecting the contemporary aggression of hip hop that I had been hoping for. This was one of many experiments that would lead to a rare combination of documentary and videopoetry artefacts as outcomes of the creative practice, extending my usual documentary production.

Initially, in an effort to bring some of these style considerations into shape, I wrote a treatment for a stand-alone documentary. The treatment included a loose collection of style ideas, interview grabs, and images to present the documentary to a production company or finance body to give a sense of the documentary before production (Appendix 1). The documentary presented in the treatment is titled "Australia's Bohemian Rapper", which ties the poetry of McCuaig to a potential contemporary hip hop story that has larger-scale production incorporating the hip hop concept in its entirety. This was part of the production development process used for the submission to ABC Arts/Screen NSW funding submission 2016; for pitching at the World Congress of Science and Factual Programming 2018; and for distributing to a small number of production companies. The treatment continues to represent a potential feature documentary that I will use in future if a suitable funding round emerges that I could apply for. This is also a part of the artefacts that combine to form the creative practice of this research. The project didn't receive any funding, but it is a competitive field.

I then made a small promotional video that would suggest a direction for the style.
https://vimeo.com/213978186
Password: ABR

Watching other documentaries, experimenting with style and modes, and writing a comprehensive documentary treatment would eventually lead to a place where I felt the work would benefit from a different space to that of a linear documentary. The collection included rare books that have a texture more destined for display, and the poetry was taking on a creative life of its own. The documentary component, while important, was a part of the bigger picture and research trajectory that I was experiencing so I made the decision to combine the documentary, videopoetry and aspects of the collection into an exhibition.

CHAPTER 3. ROAD TO EXHIBITION

Having tried unsuccessfully to secure funding at different times, I had to continue to use my own resources to complete the visual practice components of the projects. I considered different ways I might deliver the work, which included potential opportunities to use QCA gallery space as a possible viewing platform. The creative component of the research has resulted in an expanded collection of technical skills and potential for future artistic endeavours.

As his life and career progressed, Ronald McCuaig's impact and recognition as a radical poet diminished, but his dedication to literature in newspapers, magazines, and then in the Australian Department of Communications in Canberra never waned, and these changes of focus also provided opportunities for creative experimentation. There were a few production dilemmas from the outset: How to make the literary work come to life in audio-visual form? How to re-create the era without any footage of the participant? And how to demonstrate my connection to the subject? I wanted a performative component to the documentary and a poetic component to the documentary. The following are examples of how his work has pushed me to find new techniques to express this story and my place in it.

Videopoetry

During the course of the doctoral documentary production, as indicated, I have experimented with various styles and story narration devices through filming and editing fragments. This coupled with a long history of experimentation as an editor would lead me to discover the flourishing genre of videopoetry. I would experiment with this form to create contemporary versions of Ronald McCuaig's poetry, which would eventually lead to a videopoetry anthology. When I started researching videopoetry as a style, I discovered it was an established video form that has garnered popular attention online (Bonta 2012).

The intention of videopoetry is to create a visual experience of the original poem. There is a definite aversion to it being an 'illustration'; rather, it needs to create an experience for the viewer, as outlined by Canadian poet Tom Konyves in his manifesto on videopoetry:

> The principal function of a videopoem is to demonstrate the process of thought and the simultaneity of experience, expressed in words—visible and/or audible—whose meaning is blended with, but not illustrated by, the images and the soundtrack. (2011, 4)

In 2010, Peter Lutze, James Armstrong, and Laura Woodworth-Ney collaborated on a project using videopoetry to "convey a cultural history of the irrigated dessert of southern Idaho". As they commented, they aimed for the work to do more than present historical images in a poetic style; they wished "the visual images and sound effects to evoke an experience in which the action and events of the poem occur" (2010, 53). Initially, I reinterpreted five of McCuaig's poems into videopoetry to be placed throughout the biographical sequences of interview and overlay. I used a combination of archival materials, contemporary vision, a voice recording of the poetry, and text. This evolved into a complete videopoetry anthology to be screened on its own in a loop as part of the exhibition that I will detail below.

The videopoetry sequences attempt to take hold of images, characters, and poetry from 1930s' Sydney, and propel these into a contemporary artistic space, demonstrating the recurring scenes in urban Australian culture and subverting the linear perception of history. Kobialka observes that "the process of exploding the continuum of history signifies the process not of breaking the momentum of historical linearity but of not seeing the past as a continuum" (2007, 79). Benjamin's angel of history similarly looks back to examine the present, Handelman explains: "Through remembrance comes redemption; by going back one also moves toward the future—like the angel of history who faces the past and is blown forward" (1991, 6). The poetic texts as archival media, with video imagery, music, text, and voice provide a platform for the narratives and create a link to the past; as Russell writes, "it is specifically the reuse of archival material that can produce this mode of recognition" (2018, 23).

Archiveology is a practice that is described as being predominantly the use of images, found footage, and historical documents to present different interpretations of historical perspectives. Russell elaborates on its function as "the process by which the image bank in its fundamental

contingency and instability becomes a means by which history can speak back to the present" (2018, 103). I have been experimenting with poetry as archive to demonstrate an addition to this practice.

The following will detail the process of making the videopoetry sequences that have become standalone aspects of the documentary production. These will be combined into a videopoetry anthology, and become a focus driving the decision to move away from the traditional single screening outcome of documentary programs to an exhibition with multiple screening spaces.

This Vimeo link is the complete videopoetry anthology that was part of the exhibition detailed below.

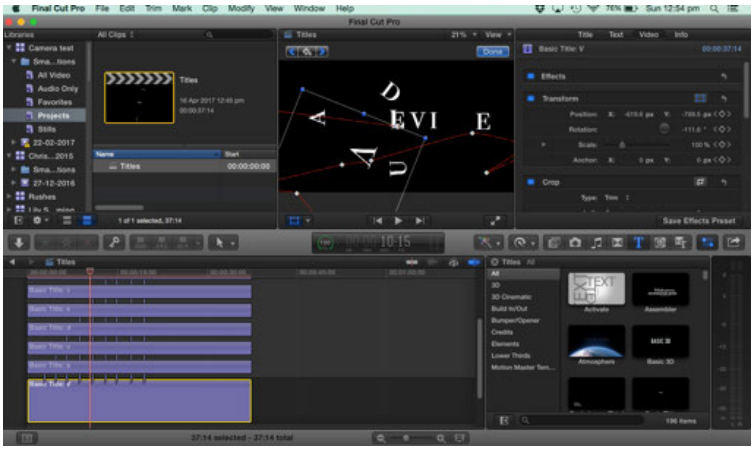
Vaudeville: A Videopoetry Anthology:
https://vimeo.com/357510897
password: vp (lowercase)

Production of "Vaudeville – A Videopoetry Anthology"

I created a title sequence and produced ten of the poems into videopoetry segments. These would eventually screen as a continual loop on a large wall in the Queensland College of Art gallery as part of the *Vaudeville* exhibition that I will detail shortly. The darkened room had a sofa with cushions made from fabric printed with one of Ronald McCuaig's well-known poems and a glass cabinet that housed a single original version of the collection in a pool of light.

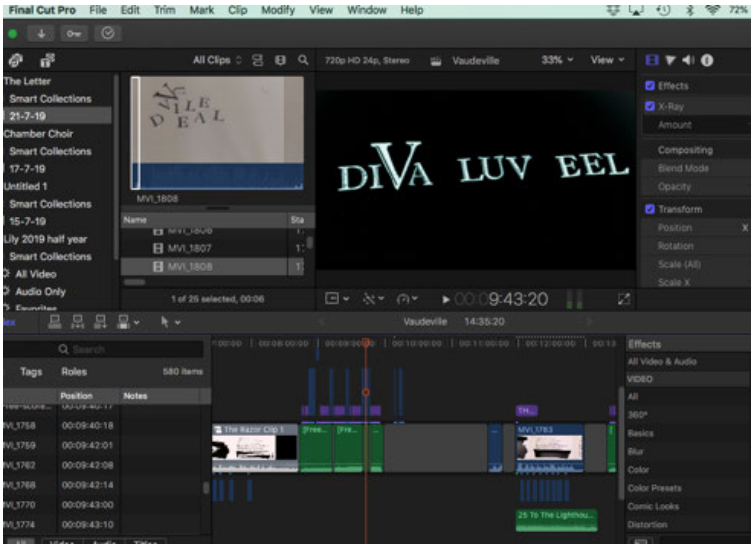
Because of my grandfather's love of words, I wanted to bring individual letters of the alphabet to life on the screen. I photocopied the title of *Vaudeville* from the inside cover of the book, then cut out each individual letter and stop-framed them around the screen. I later tried this using the text function in Final Cut Pro. This combination of old-style stop-frame animation and the movement of text in Final Cut Pro would eventually result in a title sequence for the videopoetry anthology and a visual introduction to past meeting the present that would continue in the videopoetry segments.

Stop frame experiment 2016.



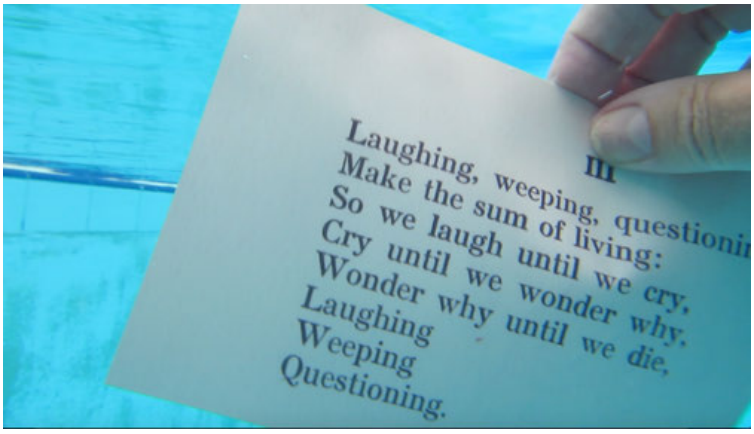
Finalcut Pro x experiment 2016.

For the title sequence, I used Bach's Little Fugue in G minor to bring the *Vaudeville* letters to life. A fugue is a piece of music where complexity of the tune is added with each phrase. Initially, there are single notes in the piece, and I used these to spell out "Vaudeville", with Final Cut Pro text. I then had the original poetry collection text of *Vaudeville* printed on thick cardboard. I cut each individual letter out and filmed these, which I cut into the sequence of individual notes. The old letters and the new letters work with the first notes of the fugue. I stop-frame animated "Vaudeville" racing onto the screen in time with the music and had it peeling off again, which is different to the Final Cut Pro "Vaudeville", which cuts on and off. Using Final Cut Pro text, I used the next part of the fugue where there are increased notes to edit a list of words together that have three letters and can be formed out of the word "Vaudeville". Each time the music adds another layer, I added another letter, finishing with words from Vaudeville that contain six letters. Using the cut-out letters, I stop-frame animated the letters into words using three-letter words, then four-letter words, then nonsensical sentences, demonstrating the way a poet structures and creates.



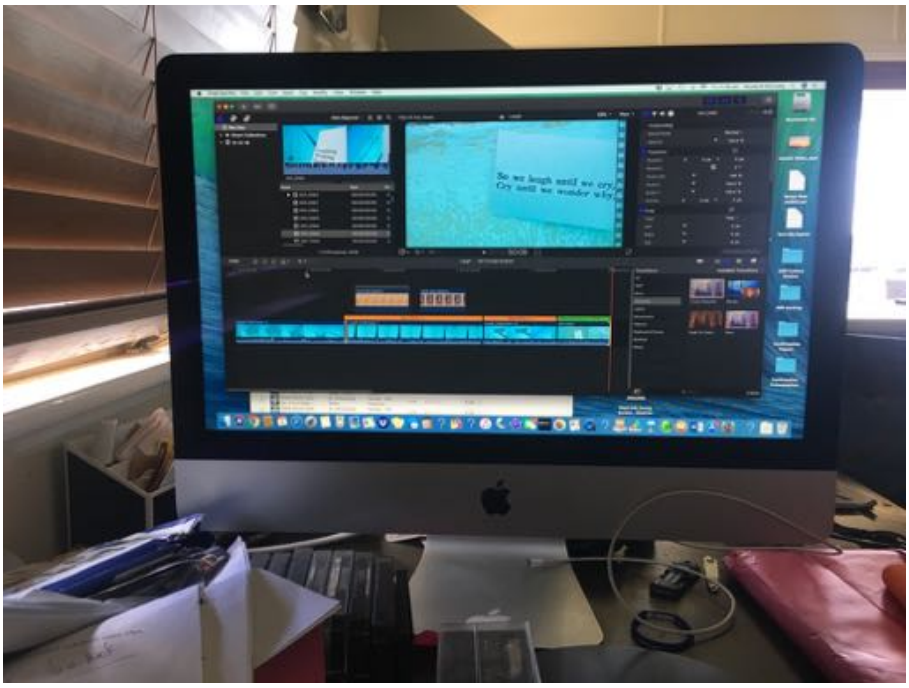
The letters of the original *Vaudeville* are copied to cardboard, cut out and filmed as stop frame animation sequences 2019.

Madrigal



The photographed poem is filmed floating underwater 2018.

For this poem, I drew on the concept of weeping and situated the poem underwater. I photographed and printed the poem and then each of the lines. In an Olympic pool I let the photographs of the poetry drift through the water and down into deeper water. My father reads the poem and I edited in additional images of unknown relatives from the family archive. The use of the word “weeping” in the poem insinuates more than a couple of tears and not only are the words in water but the images themselves all appear to be weeping through my use of an effect in Final Cut Pro.



The videopoetry sequences edited on Finalcut Pro x and Premiere Pro 2018.

The use of images of unknown female relatives is a response to my own considerations of how history is preserved according to perceived importance. Highlighting these fragments, as Russell suggests, has the potential to take them out of their "passive" space to generate "new insights" and present "unexpected statements and perspectives" (Russell 2018, 115). During the long process of collecting archival material, I was delighted to discover many remnants from Ronald McCuaig's life and career. Looking at the faces of the women in these photos that were part of a big family photograph archive I know nothing about them even though we are somehow related. Similarly, my grandmother Beryl, Ronald's wife, has little of her story left behind, but she had a rich imagination and spent many years trying to publish her partly autobiographical fiction. The poem speaks of this questioning and placing unknown faces among the poetry alludes to a potential to question what archive organisational structures deem historically significant.

They Often Serve Who Only Stand and Wait

This poem is a grim but simultaneously beautiful depiction of Sydney prostitutes as seen by McCuaig in 1934. Images of advertising scenes in Sydney depict mugshots of women who had been charged with prostitution in the 1930s. The mugshots are part of the NSW police historical collection, photographed at various stations. The intention of placing the mugshots on the

boards was to illustrate the unlikelihood of the faces of these charged prostitutes being recognised and are in stark contrast to faces we would normally associate with the contemporary, commercial public space. The streaking effect used on public passing by is to emphasise the focus of the poetry being the street women.

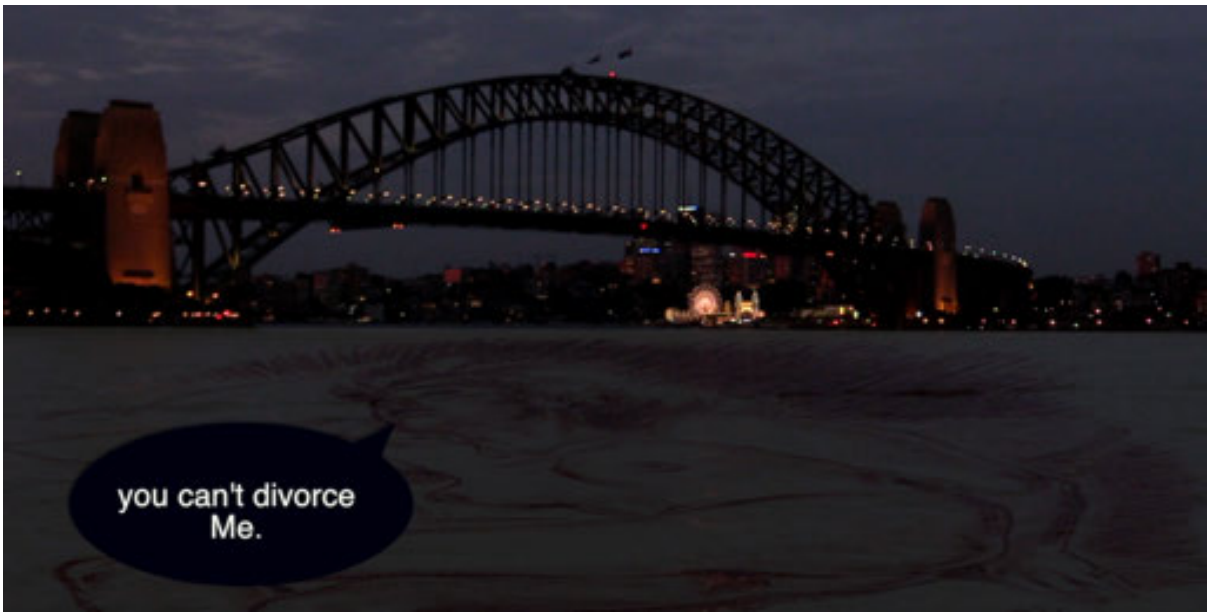
Sydney billboards replaced with images of 1930s mugshots of prostitutes.

The Artist's Model

"The Artist's Model" is a poem that paints the picture of a model who is disgruntled with her artist, whom she has been having an affair with. As detailed previously, it is an acerbic rant about the treatment of her from the artist and is both humorous and sad. Initially, I used an

illustration of my grandmother by Victoria Cowdroy and placed it in various contemporary settings with speech bubbles occasionally revealing lines from the poem.

Illustration of Beryl McCuaig by Victoria Cowdroy.



The initial screening of “The Artist’s Model” would encourage me to rethink the concept and reshoot the poem working with an actress. The feedback I received suggested I be more ambitious with the character and consider an actress to bring a more performative aspect to the videopoem. Using the same sketch, I explored the idea that the artist’s model is talking to the artist after the sketch of her has been drawn. She is getting dressed behind a screen and we hear her frustration as described in the poem. The sketch is constantly in the foreground of the frame and we don’t see her apart from moments where she pops her head out to direct a comment at the artist. I was fortunate to work with local actress Elise Greig, who performed the unusual poem beautifully using her years of experience.

Second version of the poem perform by actor Elise Greig 2019.

When I edited the new version, I put an image of the full poem to the side of the frame to reinforce that the words being performed are actually a poem. The modernism of the structure is such that it is possible, when hearing it for the first time, to seem more like a drama script. This technique of giving the audience Ronald McCuaig's words as text, as well as performance, reinforced the audience's access to his artistry and the power of his words.

Videopoetry and the Dialectical Image

On completion of the videopoetry anthology, I received feedback via email from two literary sources who had some connection to the McCuaig story. Michael Sharkey, former editor of the *Australian Poetry Journal*, had asked to see the videopoetry anthology when I approached him about the exhibition that I was planning around Ronald McCuaig's life and work. When I mentioned a videopoetry anthology, he responded with a request to see the work as it had piqued his interest. Sharkey is familiar with Ronald McCuaig's work and has written about him previously. On seeing the new work, he wrote:

> Your movie captivates me, visually & aurally. You've really conveyed the spirit of each poem. The violence and the beauty flipsides of a coin, as it were and McCuaig certainly

> got the danger of love in the razor-gang/Darlinghurst/Kings Cross/ Woollomooloo underworld ambience spot-on in the poems you selected.
>
> I like the readings and the graphics—the police museum photos and the black-and-white art of *Smith's Weekly's* versions of the poems are just right. I rarely see a movie version of a poem that I take to straight off—but your film not only keeps to the tone, and gist of the words and the rhythms, but subtly adds point to all these elements. (Michael Sharkey, email to the author, September 8, 2019)

This first review was encouraging as it had come from someone who knew Ronald McCuaig's work, understood its place in Australia's literary history, and would be critical of an attempt at interpretation.

The second piece of feedback from the literary corner came from Associate Professor Peter Kirkpatrick, who has been mentioned extensively in this exegesis for his work around Ronald McCuaig's poetry. He wrote:

> The clip from the documentary and the example of videopoetry both look amazing. I love the way you've used those old criminal mugshots on advertising spaces and hoardings. They remind me of that puzzling term coined by Walter Benjamin to account for those moments when the past erupts into the present in modernity: "dialectical images". Older, poorer, grimier Sydney re- emerging into its shiny new present. (Peter Kirkpatrick, email to the author, June 2, 2019)

These responses to the work were reassuring, considering my intention of reimagining the modernist poetry as archiveological videopoetry was to create interest and this type of reaction. It also compelled me to explore the concept of the dialectical image further and to position the work in this framework for a better understanding of how this approach to archiveology can have an impression on the audience. Although Walter Benjamin does not provide a definitive explanation of the dialectical image, we infer a clash of two components, one from the past and one from the present to form what Benjamin visualises is a constellation. But having support from the literary, academic community was encouraging because it isn't my field. Sharkey kindly supported the project further by writing a letter of support for a submission for an Australia Arts Council grant that was unsuccessful (Appendix 3).

In reimagining the poetry, there are moments where past and present additionally clash due to a different perception of the characters and stories held between Ronald McCuaig and me. The aim is the creation of a new version, reflecting past and present. To explore this further, I will discuss the videopoem "Betty by the Sea", in which a woman is reminiscing about her life as a wife and mother. The illustration to this poem in *Quod McCuaig* (1945), where some of the poetry was republished in the 1950s, is of an elderly woman sitting in a deck chair, flowers drooping, and a worn expression. To create a video version of the poem, I filmed my mother, Beverley McCuaig, sitting looking out at the ocean. The words of the original poem are read by Elise Grieg, mentioned above. We see black-and-white images of Beverley as a young mother, smiling with various babies, children, toddlers by her side, and images of her by herself. The implication is that as she sits and contemplates, many of the memories are revitalising. She might be tired with age as she lets soft sand drift through her fingers, but the memories are vivid. This is where a clash is visible: my grandfather has reduced elderly Betty to a forlorn character, whereas my Betty has a lively memory at work, and motherhood is a story worth remembering. The words of the original poem are so beautifully constructed, beyond what I could articulate, and worth preserving in their original form, but the images of the present insinuate the potential of a new way to see the character of an elderly woman.

BETTY BY THE SEA

Her drooping flowers dabble upon
Drooping breasts of crisp cretonne;
The thirsty sun has drained her breasts
Of milk of human interests
In babies, clothing, recipes,
Husband's pleasing lewderies
And gossip over the kitchen fence,
And left this earthy innocence;
The kindly sun has drained away
Her life, like suds on washing day,
And left her in this chair on the sands,
Clasping her flowers with laundered hands:
As though a storm of breeding pains
And work and worry, which scoured her veins,
Had passed, she opens her tired eyes,
Like still seas, to vacant skies.

1930s Betty, an illustration by Victoria Cowdroy for Quod Ronald McCuaig collection. (Out of copyright)

As we hear the same poem, we see 2020 Betty, Beverley McCuaig and see images from her life as a mother.

This approach to archiveology is in step with the overarching methodology as outlined by Russell, “As a technique of collecting, fragmenting, and reassembling, archiveology involves a recognition of the thingness of images, and for Benjamin this gives them a secret power of revelation” (2018, 101). In this case, the thingness includes the poetry itself.

I needed to understand how this larger collection worked together with the concepts of archiveology before deciding how it might fit into one viewing platform.

Exhibition and Archiveology

As detailed previously in this exegesis, there was a long process of 'collecting' associated with this project. As the work and archive associated with Ronald McCuaig's life had disappeared from view, it seemed important to bring as much of it together as possible. Walter Benjamin himself was an obsessive collector and wrote about his passion in the Arcades Project, his collection of books art and old Russian toys. Germanic languages academic Annie Pfiefer notes of the motivation to collect: "the threat of extinction is a central impetus of collecting" (2018, 49). The long and fruitful process of collecting led me to the idea of exhibiting the work rather than screening it as a traditional narrative documentary. Pensky emphasises the importance of "representation and recognition" for the dialectical image to become a "shocking force" (2004, 185).

In an effort to provide a space for recognition of the collection, I decided to take the segments that demonstrate the whole and put it together in a gallery space. This had the two-fold outcome of amassing the work in one place as a conclusion to my doctoral work and creating a multi-dimensional version of the documentary, videopoetry, and physical artefacts such as books, poetry, column entries, newspaper articles, and personal possessions. This platform of recognisability is frequently used in the practice of archiveology:

> In keeping with a general trend of experimental media, the makers of archiveology have tended to shift their sites of exhibition from the theatre to the gallery. As cinema is rendered obsolete, it seems to have moved into the gallery as an old media from which artists are constructing new works. (Russell 2018, 49)

This was a daunting prospect for me as I was used to the process and the comfort of completing one program for a screening space, usually a national broadcast, that has me well at arms-length from an audience. The exhibition concept was a different outcome and would put me in direct contact with the audience and would require extensive additional planning and organisation. Initially, I felt so out of depth that I sought out potential curators to setup the exhibition but as

I walked around the space and thought more about the construction of an exhibition, I could see a clear picture of how I wanted the space to look. In addition, I would organise the publication of an exhibition booklet that would be a lasting artefact.

***Vaudeville – Ronald McCuaig's Life in Letters*, an Exhibition by Nicole McCuaig**

After successfully applying late in 2019 to the Queensland College of Arts to hold an exhibition in the Project Gallery space at Southbank in early 2020, I met with established curators for advice and direction. This also led to a more detailed exploration of Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project, an unfinished study which he spent ten years collecting and collating for. During the development of this study, Benjamin embraced the concept of montage, bringing small seemingly insignificant fragments together to generate a more complete, meaningful picture. This became the intention of the McCuaig exhibition: I wished to present an audience with more than the two-dimensional documentary that I would normally screen and to rather include multi-dimensional experience where many fragments were brought together to create one large kaleidoscope of McCuaig's literary life. Benjamin writes of the Arcades Project:

> The first stage in this undertaking will be to carry over the principle of montage into history. That is, to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components. Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual moments the crystal of the total event. (1940/1999, 237)

The selection and placement of the various fragments of Ronald McCuaig's life and work would be an important process leading to the exhibition event.

Pensky concludes that the method of combining historical fragments using montage creates a "series of textual juxtapositions that results in a 'constellation' or new interpretation of the fragment's relationship with one another" (2004, 186). He makes the graphic, visual metaphor that history is forcefully "shoved in the face of the present" (2004, 181). Ronald McCuaig's work had almost completely disappeared and the breadth of it was scattered in small collections and libraries. Putting his work together in a collection was intended to have the impact on the present described by Pensky. Benjamin's Arcades Project was intended to question the "endless progress of capitalism" using fragments of commodity culture (2004, 182). My exhibition was intended to demonstrate Ronald McCuaig's lifelong commitment to literature, and to use contemporary videos to illustrate the strength of the original work for a new audience.

In the months leading up to the exhibition, I decided to combine the biographical components into a 30-minute documentary rather than a series of shorter segments as they had been originally created. As the deadline approached, the pieces fell into a structure built around chapters that would combine to form a broad brushstroke of McCuaig's life in a documentary. Although I uncovered significant bodies of work relating to McCuaig's career progression, I was able to condense these into short montages that would allude to the larger output but not drown the story in literary history that would be difficult to illustrate visually. Segments emerged unexpectedly, such as a short biographical segment about Beryl McCuaig, Ronald's wife. Also a writer, Beryl spent a significant amount of time trying to publish her work but was unsuccessful, illustrated through rejection letters that were not entirely dismissive of her work. But the feedback stung and there are stories of her throwing whole manuscripts down the apartment garbage chute. Susan Francis (née Hill) was also able to shed significant light on Beryl's career ambitions, noting that she started writing for a children's publication at a well-known department store well before she met Ronald.

The biographical documentary concludes with stories from Ronald McCuaig's granddaughter, Julia McCuaig, who was closest to him toward the end of his life. Ronald lived with the family in suburban Sydney until his death and they formed a particularly close bond as Julia spent a lot of time with her grandfather when she was growing up. Some of the segments already detailed in the exegesis were able to be combined into the larger documentary, such as Kirkpatrick's interview detailing the writing, publishing, and printing of *Vaudeville*. The biographical documentary was screened on a smaller screen to the video poetry anthology, indicating a more intimate TV experience than the larger screen allocated to the videopoetry.

Ronald McCuaig documentary:
https://vimeo.com/385185816

Password – RM

The exhibition space was divided between two rooms. One was a large space with no windows that was curtained off as a screening room for the videopoetry. In one corner of the room, a plinth displayed the original *Vaudeville* collection, which sat in a pool of light. Outside the curtain at the entrance to the videopoetry anthology room was a sandwich board sign that read "Warning: This poetry was censored", creating a sense of mystery around the darkened screening room. There was a sofa with two large cushions with fabric printed with Ronald McCuaig's poem "Love Me and Never Leave Me". The sofa was for visitors to sit on and watch the videopoetry.
https://sites.google.com/view/nicole-mccuaig-dva/exhibition\

The screening room at the exhibition launch with the original *Vaudeville* in display plinth.

In the second room, which was more visible from the outside, there were three wall spaces to work with. On the main wall, a smaller screen played the biographical documentary in a loop. Opposite the documentary there was a small area with two comfortable chairs and a coffee table. On the coffee table there was a typewriter and iPads with scanned iBooks of the poetry anthologies *Vaudeville* and *The Ballad of Bloodthirsty Bessie*. On the walls in this area were original framed illustrations by Victoria Cowdroy, generating the feeling of a loungeroom sitting area. On the wall next to the documentary was a life-size version of a 1938 illustration by Arthur Horner of McCuaig walking away. It had previously appeared in the *Bulletin* in the personal notes section. This became the signature exhibition image and was used on promotional cards, the exhibition launch invitation, and the exhibition booklet (discussed below).

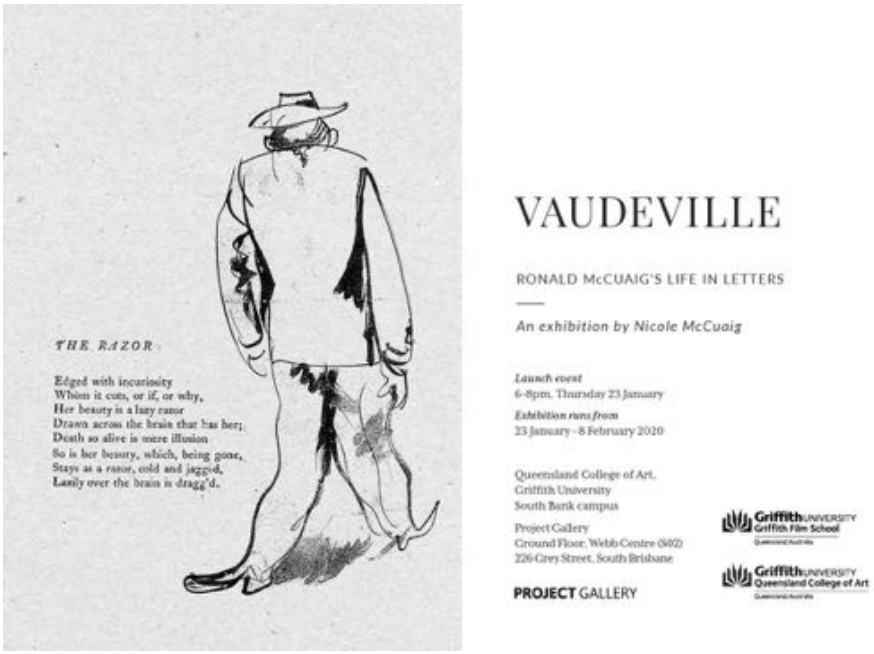
Exhibition room with artefacts from Ronald McCuaig's life, furniture printed with his poetry, life size illustration by Arthur Horner and biographical documentary on a loop.

In a separate corner there was a rug, ottoman, and table with photos in frames. The ottoman was covered in fabric that had been printed with one of Ronald McCuaig's poems, which I also used on cushions for the sitting room and screening room, linking the style across spaces of the exhibition.

Sitting room setting with original Victoria Cowdroy illustrations and electronic anthologies for visitors to read the poetry.

The signature exhibition image. Illustration of Ronald McCuaig by artist Arthur Horner The *Bulletin* 1938.

The exhibition platform also afforded the opportunity to print a booklet for visitors to read on arrival at the gallery. I worked closely with Griffith University's Liveworm, and under the guidance of my supervisor Trish FitzSimons to design and publish the booklet. The booklet included two papers regarding the project, written by Associate Professor Pat Laughren and Associate Professor Peter Kirkpatrick. I also contributed with 'artist's notes' that offered a personal family perspective of Ronald McCuaig and my connection to him as a granddaughter (Appendix 4). The Arthur Horner illustration became the signature exhibition image and was used on promotional cards, the exhibition launch invitation, and the exhibition booklet.



Exhibition invite.

The launch of the exhibition was small but well attended, and feedback for the event was positive. The exhibition coincided with the Australasian Humour Studies Conference 2020, where Kirkpatrick presented a paper about Ronald McCuaig the feuilletonist, talking about "the dying art of light verse". When I learned of the conference, I arranged to promote the exhibition at the event. Response to the exhibition from the conference delegates was positive and Kirkpatrick offered a special evening tour of the exhibition. Approximately twenty delegates walked through the exhibition with him as he talked about Ronald McCuaig's literary career.

Launch evening 23 January 2020.

The exhibition provided an example of the outcome of archiveological practice, demonstrating the 'collecting, fragmenting and reassembling' for a multidimensional space. By screening the videopoetry anthology in a room on its own, I was able to differentiate the videopoetry from the biographical documentary and emphasise the 'poetry as archive' original concept. The other components of the exhibition provided a combination of biography and atmosphere; the biographical details were drifting through the first room from the documentary screening on the monitor. The audience didn't need to stand and watch the program but could hear parts of Ronald McCuaig's life while looking at books, papers, and installations. The textual layers associated the material archive with relevant years of production. The exhibition booklet examines Ronald McCuaig the poet and journalist; it details the documentary and experimental audio-visual work that I have completed; and it was an opportunity to provide a personal insight into my relationship with my grandfather and the work I have undertaken to retrieve and recontextualise his literary career. The exhibition acted like a montage of fragments from the literary life of Ronald McCuaig. Pensky theorises of this reorganisation of historical

components: “Formerly insignificant fragments, rescued and redeployed in a critical text, would shatter the ‘philosophy of history’ that determined them as insignificant” (2004, 186).

The exhibition was a space of recognisability, where the fragments helped to build a more complete picture of the years Ronald McCuaig dedicated to his literary output. It was a celebration of his rich imagination and undying love for the crafting of literature. The exhibition was a public display of the arts-based research, but beyond the exhibition the work will continue to be used to apply for documentary funding, submissions to film festivals, and pursuit of drama adaptations based on the literary works.

CONCLUSION

At the outset of this research, the main creative dilemma I faced was how to represent a literary character's life and imagination through my usual documentary practice. The studio work led me to experiment with archival materials in more inventive ways, connecting the work with the methodology archiveology. Through the study of archiveology, the research led to the realisation, and contribution to practice, that the poetry itself was a powerful archival component. The texts shed new light on the social realities of 1930s' Sydney, whereas the film of this era was predominantly newsreel of public events. Characters like the prostitute, battered woman and artist's model are brought to life within Ronald McCuaig's modernist poetry, providing strong visual potential for video production. The outcome of the research led to production of a videopoetry anthology, transporting poetry of the past into the present and creating a version of Walter Benjamin's 'dialectical image', the outcome being a synthesis of past and present for a contemporary audience. *Vaudeville: A Videopoetry Anthology*, a video version of the first collection written by McCuaig, demonstrates the potential of this concept.

The reimagining of McCuaig's poetry was a visual, hermeneutic experiment. Its visual interpretation incorporated a contemporary space as well, filming contemporary scenery to surround traditional archive imagery. This is to my knowledge the first attempt at visually interpreting McCuaig's literary works, adding to his biographical narrative and providing new story planes for the artistic use of archive material. In this space in the creative output, the archive is free from the expected need to verify and support interview or narration, or even be explained. The poetry provided narratives and observations that communicate a different emotional layer about the history.

In addition to the videopoetry, I used the large body of archives collated over four years to tell the biographical story of Ronald McCuaig, uncovering literary history that has not been explored in this way before, such as: bodies of work in the publications *Wireless Weekly* and *ABC Weekly*; the work of Australian illustrator and artist Victoria Cowdroy; and anecdotal interviews from public and private recordings. The combination of the videopoetry anthology, the biographical documentary and the artefacts themselves were ideal for a multiplatform viewing experience initially in a gallery and then online:

https://sites.google.com/view/nicole-mccuaig-dva/home

The online space includes an additional 'behind-the-scenes' video that documents some of this process. The whole research experience has been fulfilling and thorough in a way I could not achieve in a broadcast environment. But, as mentioned, I intend to further use the research and creative outcomes to explore other potential production avenues. The research process has resulted in an archive and collection that complements the work of literary academics, not least in bringing knowledge of Ronald McCuaig's work to a slightly wider audience. If festival or broadcast screenings come to pass, this widening would be even further.

A few months after I discovered my grandfather's poetry in Year 8 English at Canberra High School, our family visited the extended family in Sydney where my grandfather lived in a modest flat in the backyard. Around the dinner table in the evening, I mentioned that we had studied his poem "Mokies Madrigal" in class, the anecdote mentioned at the outset of this exegesis. My memory is that he chuckled and when I asked further about his poetry, he shut the conversation down by dismissing the subject, or changing it; my memory is hazy. I do remember feeling a little bruised but not enough for the experience to have been scarring because I had no idea of the significance of his career.

If we were to talk now—with my subsequent years of experience interviewing self-effacing participants—I would know how to coax him into conversation. I would know the questions to ask and use the tone that I have developed to encourage participants to reveal their stories. I wish I had had this personal experience but have been able to discover the depth of his work through creative practice. Having researched his life, I have a respect for his work and dedication to literature; at the outset, I had little understanding of his field and how much he accomplished. As a filmmaker, I feel a connection to his pursuit of the creative endeavour and the struggle to have the work acknowledged and recognised. I understand the need to find a way to make a living in the creative industries through my work such as an in-house producer for Network Ten, and a location producer on more recent documentary/factual television series. These jobs were similar to the middlebrow work Ronald McCuaig did for *ABC Weekly* and the *Bulletin* to earn a living and raise a family.

Reading his poetry was a revelation to me because I had not studied poetry in my academic studies. I embarked on interviews and general life story research at first; it wasn't until long after the research started that I studied the poetry in detail to understand what he was trying to

do with the work, particularly his first collection *Vaudeville*. The story of him not being able to publish *Vaudeville* or even have it printed at his own expense in Sydney in 1938 was well known, but I wanted to understand how he could have had the confidence to self-publish and print the work. He was able to make a book that is still available in various Australian libraries and private collections today and was highly regarded in literary circles at the time. The research gave me the opportunity to uncover where this confidence originated through an understanding of how dedicated he was to writing many forms of literature; reviewing the work of others such as Eliot and Pound for publications like the *Bulletin*; and experimenting outside of his day job with many styles of poetry. He found ways to put the poetry out to an audience via his own columns and independent submissions to the publications he was familiar with. This was the equivalent of test screenings in film, he was able to gauge how individual poems were being received by the time he decided to release the collection, as confirmed by Douglas Stewart in his Boyer Lectures (1977). The research was an extended form of my usual practice of researching participants before a shoot, but the breadth and depth of this has contributed to the knowledge around a significant Australian literary figure. The large body of primary research led to questions of practice and how to interpret and represent the work today where I would contribute to knowledge around archiveology and videpoetry through experimentation.

I was able to recognise and transmit Ronald McCuaig's initial impulse generations after he first felt it, compelling me to explore the creative potential of the work outside the confines of libraries and books; consequently, the work is released from an imprisoned archive that marks only its original place in history. In the "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", Walter Benjamin (1935/2008) writes about the potential in the early days of film and photography of bringing these historical sparks to a broader audience. The poetry springs from an era where there is very little moving imagery apart from newsreels that featured "events that allowed the coverage to be pre-planned such as public processions" (FitzSimons, Laughren, and Williamson 2011, 40). The observations, characters and narratives in Ronald McCuaig's poetry provide a wealth of additional archive, with a rare perspective on urban culture that is not yet mined for use in archiveological projects.

The personal nature of the project has meant that my family have been involved from the outset, which has been a unique experience for me as my previous documentary participants have typically been strangers to me. On this project, I worked with my family to discover archival collections and interviewed my father and cousin about their experiences of knowing Ronald

McCuaig personally. I was nervous the experience could potentially cause friction if there were questions of who 'owned' the history. But the opposite has been the case, and my father has been generous and supportive from the outset. I recently asked my father to answer some questions about the research and he was able to provide observations and anecdotes. Many people have asked what my grandfather would have thought of this research or have said he would be proud, but my father's response was more complex than that:

> During Nicole's research I have often thought of situations that have placed my father in a position where his published work or external examination of his published work, appeared to bring to him a conflicting alarm and at the same time, sheer enchantment at the possibility of critical acclaim.
>
> [One example of this was] When he was recognised at the NSW Premier's Literary Awards, for his contribution to Australian literature in 1992. He was living with my brother John at the time and was unable to attend, so John went to the presentation ceremony on his behalf. According to John's family, he became more and more perturbed waiting for John to return with news (and awards) from the function.
>
> So, he could easily be disturbed and worried about situations while anticipating approval and enjoyment of his work. In the modern situation, however, because of his closeness to Nicole and her work, I concluded that he would have found the experience overwhelmingly gratifying. (Michael McCuaig, Email to the author, September 7, 2020)

This formal response for the purposes of this conclusion was helpful but it's worth pointing out the less formal, spontaneous feedback, across the years of research has been enjoyable. I would share each new discovery of Ronald with my father and often the reply would simply read, "WOW!!!!"

Placing the collected archive, biographical documentary, and videopoetry in the exhibition space has brought the collection a platform of recognisability, which is not possible in a single screening. This was a significant moment in my own creative trajectory, displacing the work from a hidden dispersion and allowing me to embody Benjamin's 'materialist historian' and

collector (Eiland and Jennings 2014, 660). I was able to catch this history as it became recognisable through years of searching and uncovering archival fragments, placing them in a visible space of interconnectedness. The experience was also able to be experienced by my father, who wrote of the exhibition:

> To enter the rooms where the exhibition was set up was wonderfully pleasing because of the reactions of other peoples. These were, I believe, people who may have known of his work but were almost total strangers to Ron and our family. There, however, they were. Some just standing, observing, reading material, listening to commentary, carefully following video of recoded interviews and other presentations and still others reading his published works.
>
> As well there were more who appeared to be from academia, pointedly discussing with each other pertinent facts with which they were familiar, flitting from one display to the next, laughing, waving hands, making their points and generally giving a superb impression of being thoroughly immersed with the material manifest. (Michael McCuaig, Email to the author, September 7, 2020)

In addition to having feedback from literary circles detailed earlier, feedback from the family was important to me at the conclusion of the exhibition.

Academics Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings explore Benjamin's angel of history and detail how he likens the experience of finding a distinctive archive to a "flash": an opportunity to catch remnants of history before he suggests it "flits by" (Eiland and Jennings 2014, 660). Using contemporary production techniques and my own creative practice, I have been able to combine Ronald McCuaig's literary history with a contemporary platform for a new experience. Through the combination of exhibition, documentary film, videopoetry anthology, furniture installations, original anthologies, electronically scanned anthologies, exhibition booklet and companion website, audiences are able to see a more complete picture of Ronald McCuaig's contribution to Australian literature. Experimentation with archiveological practice, videopoetry, collection, and display allow for rumination of the atmosphere around the collection, its themes of urban life, drama, and humour that have potency today. The experience of discovering the visual and vivid life inside poetry produced a recognisable jolt in my own creative experience; the dilemma of visually realising the literary component was

genuinely perplexing and required the years of experimentation to arrive at the final platform. Exhibiting the combination of my collecting and production into documentary, videopoetry and installation, was an immensely satisfying outcome; however, “the dialectics of now and then are integral to archiveology, giving rise to works that are frequently infinitely incomplete” (2019, 83). As such, this creative practice provides a launchpad for future work of my own and a collection publicly available online and in libraries for others to research, interpret, and enjoy.

Appendix 1 – Australia's Bohemian Rapper Treatment

Australia's Bohemian Rapper

Written and directed by Nicole McCuaig

Ronald McCuaig's poetry shocked colleagues and the literary elite in 1930's Sydney. The re-versioning of his work into hip hop brings a literary enigma out of hiding and demonstrates how he was described as Australia's first modern poet.

Australia's Bohemian Rapper
Documentary Treatment
Written and Directed by Nicole McCuaig

Documentary Synopsis

He wrote poems that would change the course of Australian literature, whose leading ladies were battered women, Sydney prostitutes and an axe wielding, murderous farm girl. He shunned Norman Lindsay's influence but was respected by colleagues. Seven printers refused to print his first collection, *Vaudeville*, for fear of prosecution so he physically printed the work himself. It captured the imagination of our literary elite and would later see Ronald McCuaig described as Australia's first modern poet. But he is largely unknown today and his absence from our history is mysterious, rumours painting him at one time as a hobo. This documentary reveals a literary enigma and uniquely re-versions his poetry into Hip Hop demonstrating the impact it had in the 1930s and the strength of his characters to entertain and shock us today.

Narrative outline

We are in a dingy car workshop and two guys in the corner are mumbling to each other enthusiastically. It could be sinister, they are decked out in gangsta gear with baggy trackies and baseball caps.

As we dissolve in again, we see they are holding a book. It's a green, cloth covered book and they are fascinated. Saying words to each other from the pages in front of them. "Meditated rape" one says to the other. "Her beauty is a lazy razor". We see their fascination is POETRY. They bash out a couple of lines as hip hop as a whisper to each other.

Rapper one: "He wrote this in 1934."

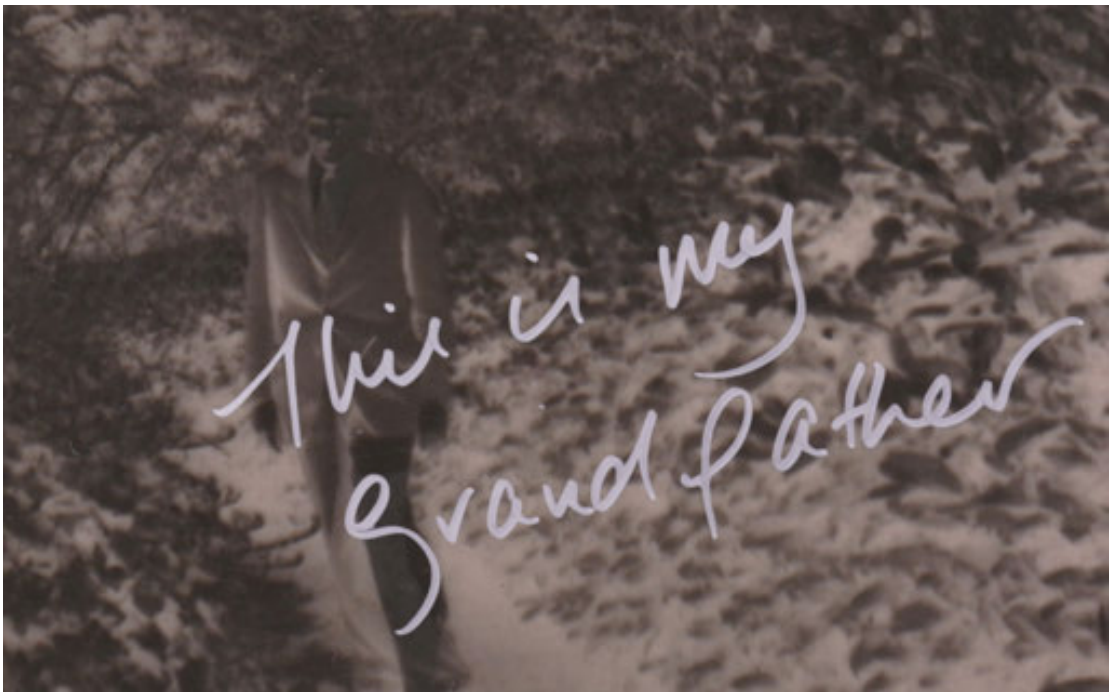
We leave them slowly as they jam without music. Reading from the book.

Music builds and we see a 1930's negative of a man in a garden. The scratches hinting at authenticity.

A pen nib comes into frame and writes to the audience on the negative.

"This is my grandfather"

The negative dissolves to reveal its positive, a young man in his twenties.



The negative dissolves through the positive with the hand written narration

Music picks up and we see a montage of beautifully preserved photos from the thirties. Young writers at the Sydney literary awards fancy dressed, a dapper group of journos standing with a beer at the bar, a young couple at the window of The Bulletin building, and a young woman in a grand 1930's car, in the background construction of the Sydney harbor bridge is near completion, with both sides of the bridge about to meet.

In internet searches for McCuaig, author and Wikipedia expert Robert Whyte comes across the only Wikipedia entry for the poet, and it is in Norwegian. There is nothing recorded of his literary career in Australia.

Ronald McCuaig

Fra Wikipedia, den frie encyklopedi

Ronald McCuaig (født 2. april 1908 i Newcastle, New South Wales, død 1. mars 1993 i Sydney) var en australsk lyriker, journalist, humorist

Han begynte å skrive for radio allerede i 1927, og fikk etter hvert et bredt spekter av oppgaver i pressen.

Til norsk er han bare oversatt med barneboken *Fresi Fantastika* (original *Gangles*) i 1975. Fresi er en «australsk utgave av Pippi Langstrømp glamorøs og velkledd»[1]. Den norske utgaven var illustrert av Finn Graff, som fikk Kirke- og undervisningsdepartementets illustrasjonspris

Robert Whyte: As someone who has written a lot for Wikipedia I was surprised at McCuaig's entry. He's famous in Norway but why isn't he known in Australia? He mustn't have written anything or he was obscure, or he didn't write anything good, or he wasn't known in any circles," and I found that all of these assumptions proved completely false. There was quite a lot of information about him and a lot of people saying he was incredibly important and I thought this is outrageous.

There were some in the literary community that thought his work changed the course of Australian literature.

A note goes out to the audience:

Mr. Geoffrey Dutton wrote this about my grandfather.

The book "The Innovators" flicks open to a page where the following phrase is circled:

Ronald McCuaig is Australia's first modern poet.

Literary Awards fancy dress Sydney 1938

Letters swirl around the page and we hear music reminiscent of the Vaudevillians. We hear the voice of Australian poet Douglas Stewart in his 1977 Boyer lectures:

In 1938 McCuaig put his own verses together for his book to be called Vaudeville. In contrast to his personality the Vaudeville poems, when in my rustic haunt in New Zealand I first made their acquaintance in the Bulletin, were anything but self-effacing they were startling.

As many modernist poets experienced in Europe, McCuaig couldn't find anyone to publish the unique collection. Norman Lindsay wanted to completely rewrite the work but McCuaig stuck to his guns and kept the work as he originally wrote it.

What would happen next was viewed in literary circles as an act of

BRUTAL CENSORSHIP (reinforced by our hip hop artists).

When he finally decided to self-publish printers in Sydney became scared they would land in court, because the poems had an abusive husband calling his wife a slut, and a prostitute described as having the eyes of a beslimed, stagnating pool.

We zoom in on some of the unique verse as we hear Douglas Stewart again:
It was intended to be published at his own expense but the printers refused to set it in type this was just about the most outrageous act of censorship I have ever heard of and all the worse because nobody would have known it had been committed. McCuaig's lively meticulously written adventure into modern life and modern poetry would have secretly suppressed like somebody done to death in a dungeon.

So he bought a printing press and PRINTED the work himself.

Animation - We jump into a small apartment room and see an animated McCuaig with his sleeves rolled up performing the detailed and bizarre extreme of printing his own work. The work is physical and there are pages all over the place.

We hear a young McCuaig (an actor) reading a letter he has written to a bookseller that details his experience.

2 Wirringulla,
St. Neot Avenue,
POTTS POINT.

September 20, 1938.

Dear Mr Williams,

When the work was completed, and on the morning I arrived at the printing office with the final corrected proofs, the manager told me, "I have some bad news for you, Mr. McCuaig; we've decided not to go on with the job."

So I went down to S. Cooke and bought a Freemont Proof Press, an ink roller and some ink. Then I had all the type sent out to my home, page after page of handset type packed precariously in cardboard, and when all the pages were lined up on the bow window of my living room, I set to work in the second bedroom of my flat to print my book.

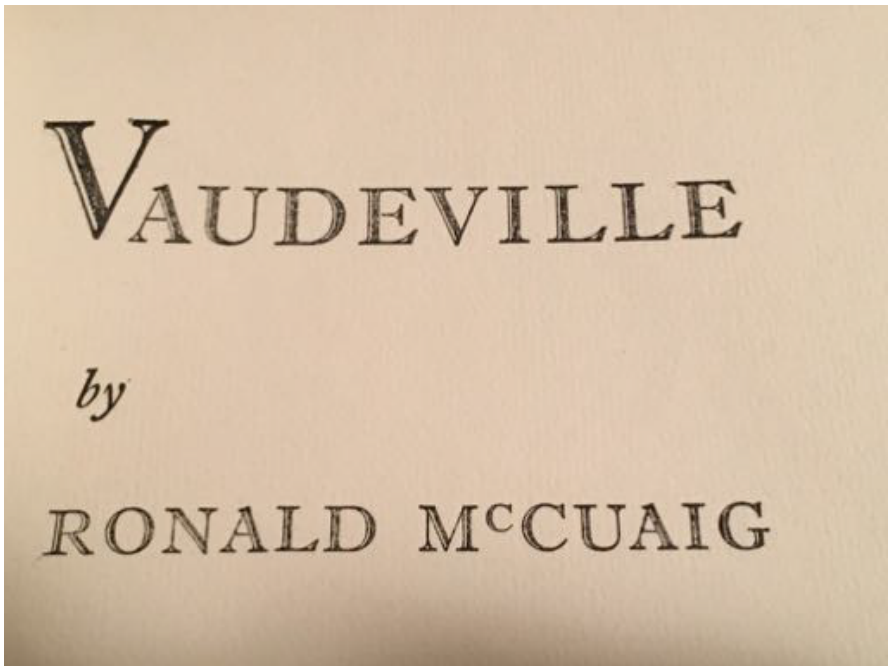
We smash back into the hip hop artists as they sing about a man who has come home drunk and angry. His wife cowers as he smashes around the house. It could be written today with the prominence domestic violence is garnering, but it wasn't. The hip hop artists are saying words with the type of aggression they were written in an apartment in Potts Point in 1934; when men still beat and raped their wives. Other poets were writing the romantic. McCuaig confused the literary establishment

They sing/rap the words that he wrote:

The opposite flat is dark and dumb,
Yet I feel certain he will come
Home to his love as drunk as ever
And, in a slowly rising fever,
Noting the whisky bottle gone,
Will trip and curse and stumble on
Into the bathroom, pull the chain,
Fumble the cabinet, curse again;

Will ask the slut where she has hid
His toothbrush; blunder back to bed,
Find his pyjamas tied in knots
And give her, as he puts it, what's
Coming to her. She won't escape
Her deeply meditated rape.

Australian author Robert Whyte: I thought this is as strongly feminist and a picture of the ugly Australian as anything that has ever been written in Australia and yet in terms of being out there and being part of our literary heritage it was overlooked.



When the collection was released colleagues knew it was something special.

Douglas Stewart's Voice: So far as my experience went it was in these poems of Ronald McCuaig's that the twentieth century moved into Australian poetry.

Professor Peter Kirkpatrick University of Sydney: No-one else in Australia was doing anything like Ron at the time. The comparison would be to TS Eliot, I think,

to some of the images in The Wasteland, 'the Titus arriving home'. That passage in The Wasteland is closer to what Ron is doing than anything else in Australian poetry at that time.

A facebook message bubble appears and the following types onto the screen:

Nicole McCuaig - Are you the Susan who wrote about Ronald McCuaig?

Susan Francis - Yes my name is Sue Francis now. I wrote about Ronald McCuaig but I abandoned the work for family reasons.

Nicole McCuaig - I've been searching for you for over a year. Would you still have materials from your research into Ron?

Susan Francis – Yes loads I would love to talk to you.

Susan Francis:

Next to the book that I was using for Henry Lawson was Geoffrey Dutton's The innovators. I open it up, and it accidentally fell open on the most beautiful photograph of Ron in a suit. I think it was taken 1948, it was black and white, and he was such a handsome man and very arresting, and you could see the intelligence and I started reading, and I just couldn't believe what I was reading. You know here is a poet who people were saying he's the poet's poet, the feminist poet, self-published, impeccable writing. I was hooked. I spent five years of my life researching McCuaig only to have to abandon it.

Prior to McCuaig, Australian poets set their romantic characters in clichéd settings and gave them a life of fantasy. McCuaig introduced us to the real people he observed in Sydney. And most of them were women; with sagging skin and desperate lives.

Many poets were under the heavy influence of artist Norman Lindsay. McCuaig refused to be aligned with him:

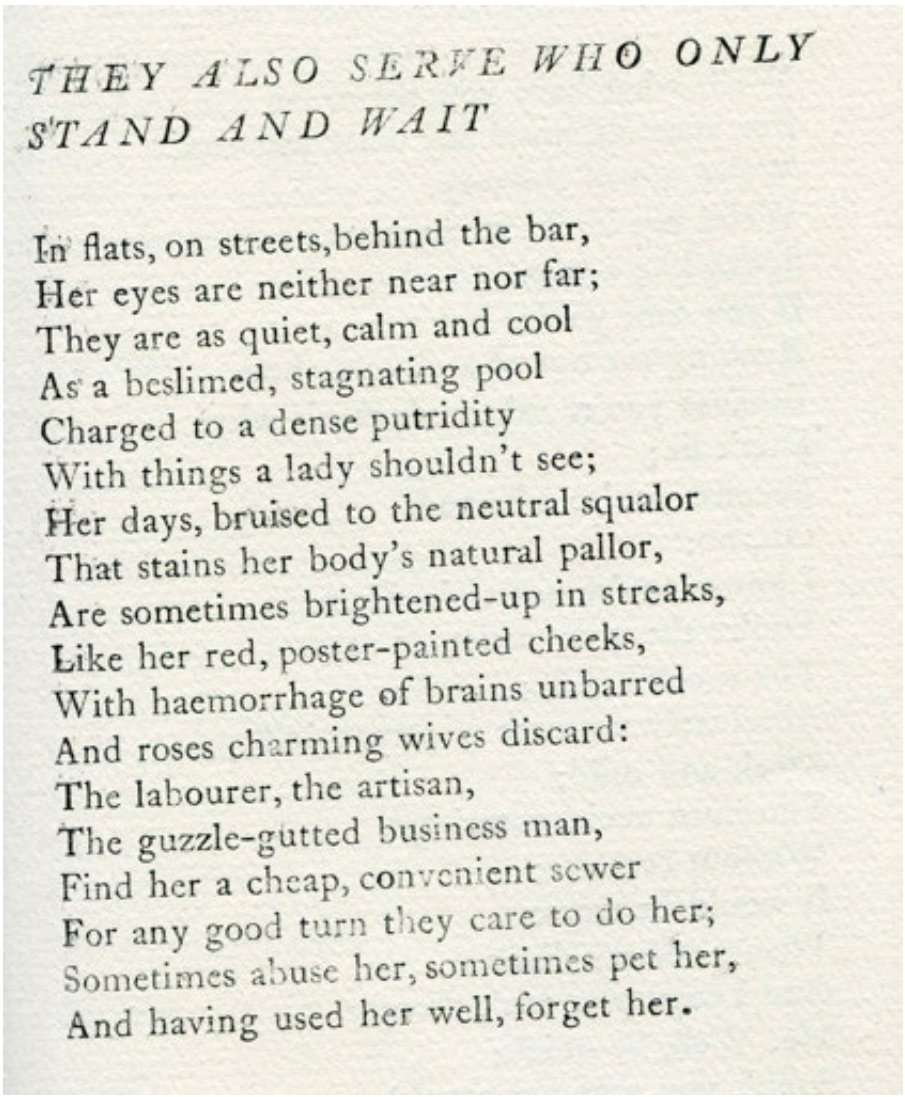
Meg Stewart author and daughter of Douglas Stewart: I think Ron, because his own poetry was so modern and if he had a greater interest in modernism generally in art and all forms of culture, he might have found it hard to be around Norman. There's a dryness to Ron's wit and Norman was quite a romantic. I mean Norman really would like to have lived in the time of Atlantis, really, and somehow my father seemed to go his own way and leave Norman's particular domination aside, but I can understand why somebody might just really not want to be involved with Norman as well.

The same hip hop artists or a different duo are in their studio working through a poem from Vaudeville, McCuaig's first collection. It's about a Sydney prostitute. They discuss the words and their meaning. They work through beats and experiment with lines. At the end of it they talk about where the poem is set and about the streets of Sydney. It's a short sequence observed.

There are reviews of Vaudeville at the time. Kenneth Slessor writes in Smith's Weekly:

It is a strange reproach to Australian letters that "Vaudeville," the most remarkable book of Australian poetry produced this year, should have been brought into the world in the second bedroom of a Potts Point flat.
The view taken by each of the seven printers approached by the author was that the book might possibly contain words or ideas wicked enough to involve them in police-court proceedings.
The chuckleheaded deeds of Australia's literary policemen have already made the Commonwealth a joke in other countries…

The hip hop artists recount McCuaig's Sydney streets and the prostitute who stars in the poem. Their re-versioning has a film noir feel about it.



THEY ALSO SERVE WHO ONLY STAND AND WAIT

In flats, on streets, behind the bar,
Her eyes are neither near nor far;
They are as quiet, calm and cool
As a beslimed, stagnating pool
Charged to a dense putridity
With things a lady shouldn't see;
Her days, bruised to the neutral squalor
That stains her body's natural pallor,
Are sometimes brightened-up in streaks,
Like her red, poster-painted cheeks,
With haemorrhage of brains unbarred
And roses charming wives discard:
The labourer, the artisan,
The guzzle-gutted business man,
Find her a cheap, convenient sewer
For any good turn they care to do her;
Sometimes abuse her, sometimes pet her,
And having used her well, forget her.

At the end of the song the poem falls across the scene in slow motion and we hear a thunder crack and rain. Drops hit the poem and the words start to weep. 'Forget her' most of all.

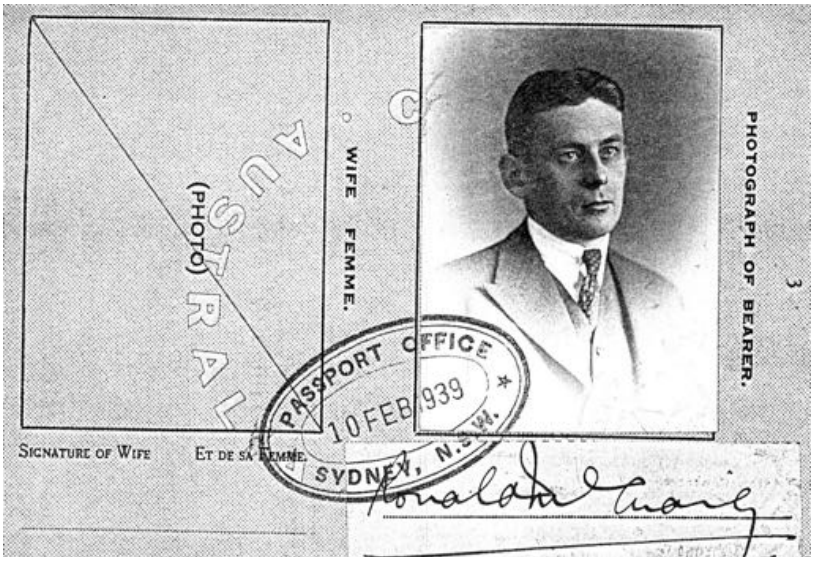
Animation: And in the midst of all this modernism the anti-romantic meets the love of his life in the most romantic cliché possible. The poem from the scene before provides the backdrop for the animated, silhouetted lovers to meet, raining words about a prostitute on them.

Narration note:

This is my grandmother. She met my grandfather in a thunderstorm in Rushcutters Bay.

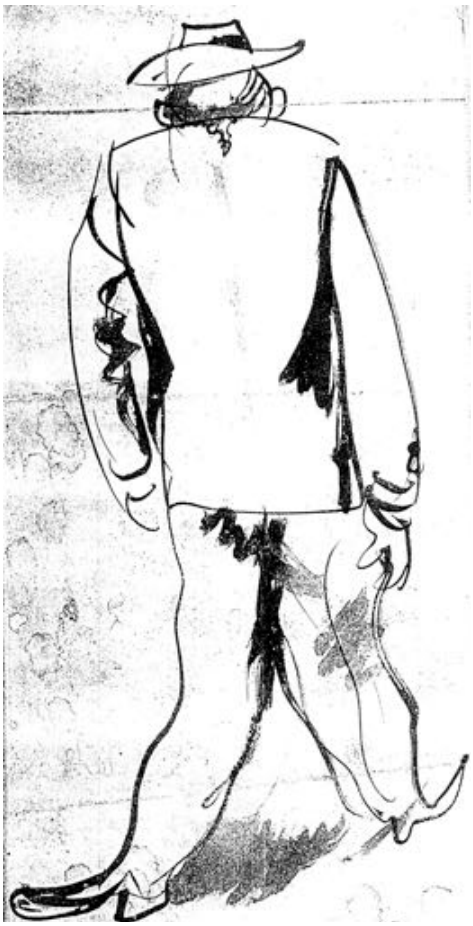
Susan Francis: So it's interesting because the story about him and Beryl is so romantic and she was a beautiful woman. She was a beautiful, beautiful woman, and he loved her, unconditionally. She put up with a lot. So it's interesting because the story is so romantic and that romance of his life is what drew me into the story and yet it's at odds with what he was writing about.

After they married Ron squandered his small inheritance and took his wife around the world. True to bohemia.



After nine months of travel through Europe and the UK they would be forced to return home as World War Two broke so the young couple returned to Australia.

Animation: Out of the black we are on the move in Sydney. Walking behind an animated Ron in the forties through the streets. He wears a fedora hat and black suit. This is journalist Ron.



An illustration of McCuaig by cartoonist Arthur Horner 1940 and inspiration for the animation.

We cut to black words at the top of the page in a straight line. They read 'Smith's Weekly'. A snare drum starts up and then a gruff Australian Voice commands the letters:

"Alright lads, move forward, in a straight line to the middle of the page"

The letters progress marching to the middle of the page.

"Company halt" The letters stop.

"Dismissed" the letters scatter. Some group together and we hear laughing and the clinking of glasses. Some gather to dance.

It's a chaos of letters.

Smith's weekly was an unruly publication. Sexist, racist and blokey.
Initially Ron was hired to write a funny page. But his work on the publication became more notorious.

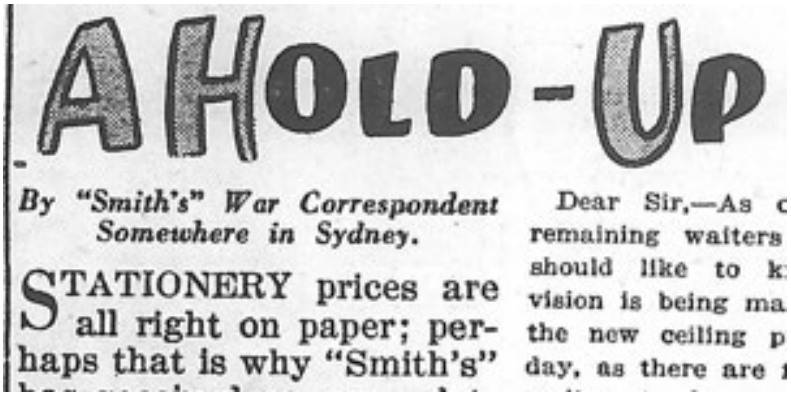
He spent the war years writing satire; usually critical of the blunderings of government.

Susan Francis introduces us to Smith's weekly and Ron's experience at the publication:

They would not allow the Smith's correspondent to leave Australia it was a ludicrous situation for a war correspondent. Everyday Ron would come to the Smith's office dressed in full military uniform which the rest of the staff found hilarious. Ron hated the uniform because it was rumored he was a pacifist. Never the less he persisted with it and turned up at the Victoria barracks each day to receive the press release; then spend time pulling apart the government's decisions with biting satire.

The editor of the paper Claude McKay said it was a gross understatement that Smith's was frowned on by authority more accurately they were hated, the brass hats found McCuaig's wit infuriating but the troops read his home-front communiques joyously.

While other war correspondents were writing from Egypt and New Guinea McCuaig's byline was versions of "Somewhere in Sydney"



A HOLD-UP

By "Smith's" War Correspondent Somewhere in Sydney.

STATIONERY prices are all right on paper; perhaps that is why "Smith's"

Dear Sir,—As c
remaining waiters
should like to k
vision is being ma
the new ceiling p
day, as there are

At the paper Ron also formed a strong connection with illustrator Les Dixon who would illustrate his satire.

AUSTRALIA AT WAR! BY LES DIXON

Ten years ago, Les Dixon was driving a truck for a big oil company. To-day, a prominent staff artist on "Smith's Weekly," he is recognised as one of Australia's leading Black and White humorists.

It is no accident that Dixon is achieving fame as a cartoonist, for he has made this his goal since boyhood, but it was an accident which forced him to abandon his job as a truck driver and take up art professionally. A hole in the road—a sudden swerve of the truck—a crash. And Dixon with a fractured skull was unable to continue as a driver.

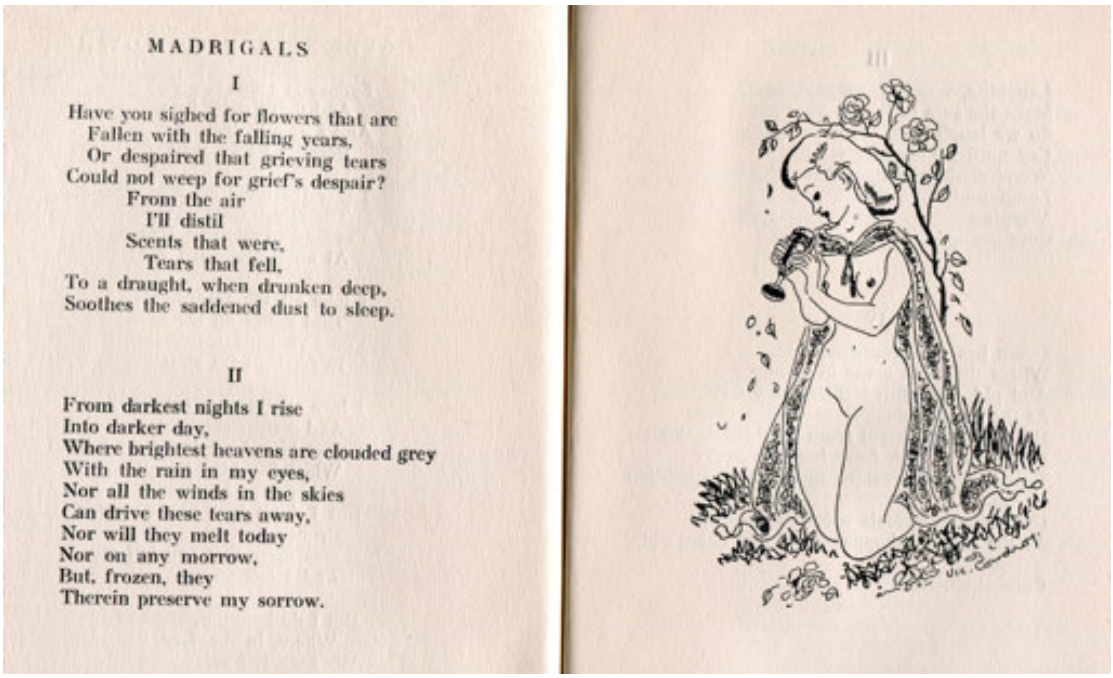
To-day he feels that the accident was a blessing, for, jobless, he turned to the one thing he could do best—cartooning.

The following years were hard. Sales were few and far between, but gradually editors began to realise that Dixon's humour was something different. After a time in the army (from which he was discharged medically unfit) he joined "Smith's" staff where to-day he continues to produce the bubblesome humour you will enjoy in this his first book of collected work.

Les recounted his connection to Ron for Susan Francis:
Ron used to walk in the botanical gardens with Les where they talked about their lives. Ron talked about not being into 'isms' he was apolitical and disconnected from any religion or ideology.

In full army uniform the hip hop guys are walking on a bleak long road to nowhere with rifles slung over their backs.

They reversion McCuaig's melancholic Madrigals representative of the mood in Sydney at the end of the war.



MADRIGALS

I

Have you sighed for flowers that are
Fallen with the falling years,
Or despaired that grieving tears
Could not weep for grief's despair?
From the air
I'll distil
Scents that were,
Tears that fell,
To a draught, when drunken deep,
Soothes the saddened dust to sleep.

II

From darkest nights I rise
Into darker day,
Where brightest heavens are clouded grey
With the rain in my eyes,
Nor all the winds in the skies
Can drive these tears away,
Nor will they melt today
Nor on any morrow,
But, frozen, they
Therein preserve my sorrow.

From darkest nights I rise
Into darker day.
Where brightest heavens are clouded grey
With the rain in my eyes,
Nor all the winds in the skies
Can drive these tears away,
Now will they melt today
Nor on any morrow,
But, frozen, they
Therein preserve my sorrow.

On the final words "my sorrow" they aggressively walk past the camera and the bleak empty landscape is left for a few beats.
The war is over.

We see a slow montage of domestic life of the McCuaig family. Ron, Beryl, and their two sons John and Michael.

Michael McCuaig dissolves into a photo and a narration note indicates:

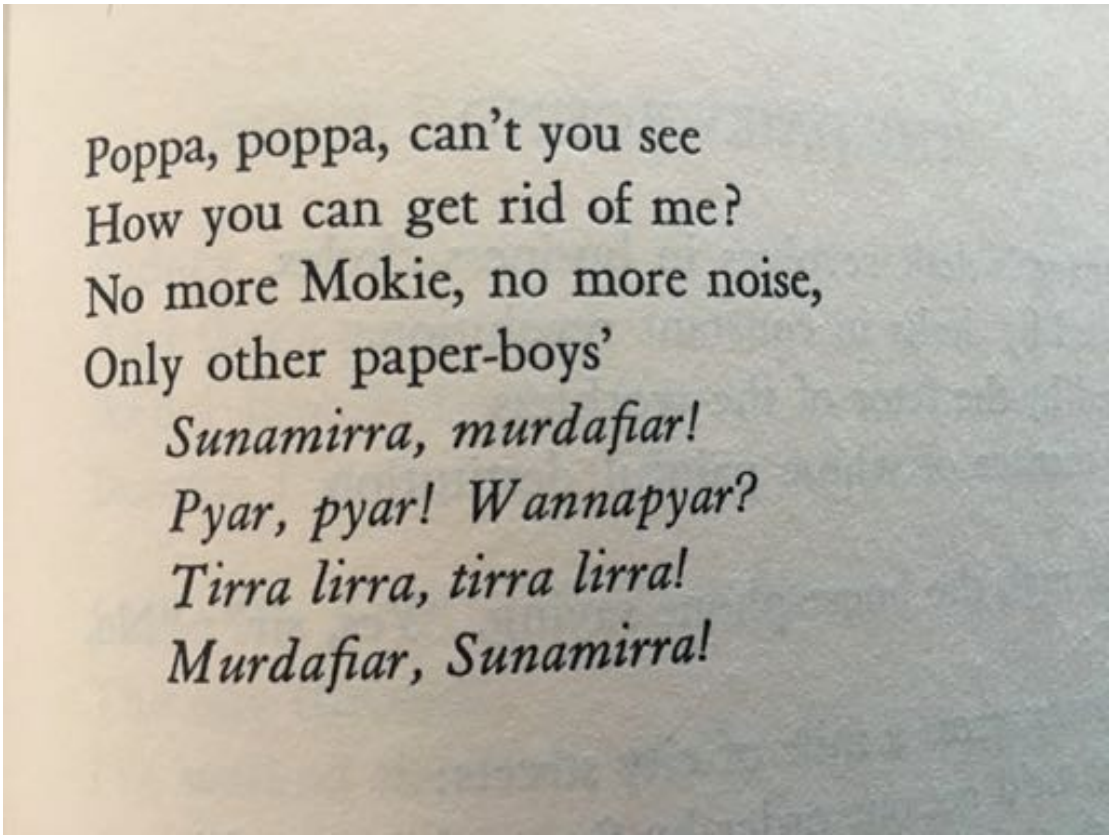
This is my father.

Michael McCuaig:

I always knew that he did something really good because of other people, like school teachers and people like that. They used to say, "Oh, your father is Ronald McCuaig. Oh, he wrote for the – oh, he writes this," and then I used to think, "Yeah, right. Well, so what?" because I just didn't understand it.

Narration note – Talking about his father

The first I really came to think more about it was when he wrote Mokies Madrigal and I got to learn because – he won the Sydney Morning Herald prize with that and I got to learn that it was really an important step in my life to have a poem composed about me wanting to be a paperboy, so that really was the beginning of any understanding. But I don't really think I ever had enough understanding of how talented and how capable and how well-received he was by other people.



Poppa, poppa, can't you see
How you can get rid of me?
No more Mokie, no more noise,
Only other paper-boys'
Sunamirra, murdafiar!
Pyar, pyar! Wannapyar?
Tirra lirra, tirra lirra!
Murdafiar, Sunamirra!

Animation: We hear typewriter tapping and we cut to the animated silhouetted Ronald McCuaig at his desk hunched over the typewriter. He throws his head back and laughs at his own work he's so chuffed with it.

Douglas Stewart's voice is heard from his 1977 Boyer lectures:

We could hear him down the corridor laughing at his own work. Chuckling when he wrote a line that he found amusing. It was as if the whole ten years at the bulletin were for his own amusement.

Peter Kirkpatrick:

His main job at The Bulletin was to pen light verse under the name Swilliam. He has probably the record for light verse published in newspapers with over 540 to his name by the time he came to leave.

He would take a contemporary story and write about it. Not so different to his approach to poetry but faster and more whimsical. In the following example he mocks English critics when they used Australianisms to praise Ray Lawler's "Summer of the Seventeenth Doll" which was in theatres in London:

We were pleased, Mr. London-town critic,
That you liked Mr. Ray Lawler's play;
You might have been more analytic,
But we wouldn't dictate what you say,
Except well, there's things we can't sponsor,
We don't want to start a dispute,
But we'd rather you didn't say "bonzer",
And we wish that you wouldn't say "beaut".

We're fond of our slang in all places
Where the people who made it are found,
But when Englishmen speak them, our phrases
Take on a peculiar sound:
It's what's known to Frenchmen as "ton", sir,
Our hearing is rather acute,
And if only you wouldn't say "bonzer"
We'd really consider it beaut.

Swilliam The Bulletin 15/5/57

Kirkpatrick:

McCuaig was the last feuilletonist of Australian newspapers. Comic verse, as much as comic art, was an old revered cornerstone of the Bulletin's style, and the prior family who owned the paper were determined to maintain the tradition,

even though topical verse had died out in most other newspapers, and even the salaried McCuaig was by then virtually the only poet still regularly churning it out for publication.

The hip hop artists perform a mashup of the light verse. Lines that are distinctly Sydney outline some of the most outrageous stories that McCuaig parodied. The locations speak to the verse as we traverse the city. The song is light and has the best of his humor.

Harsh cut to a slow push into an illustration of Ron at the end of his Bulletin years. It was a gift from the staff.

A narration note:

My grandfather was a difficult father.

Michael McCuaig: I don't think I ever went to him with anything. He came to us if it needs be or we'd go to my mother and our mother would communicate it somehow in ways that the both of them understood but I don't think he initiated a whole lot. He'd been brought up in a very strong, almost repressive atmosphere. As you know his mother died early and his father had the responsibility of looking after him.

We see images of a young seven-year old Ron. He is standing next to his mum and then in a dreamlike photograph next to a waterfall. Alone.

The times he did communicate with us when we would be doing things wrong at the table or using the English language in a wrong way but he told us that his father used to strap him into the chair at dinner table to make sure he sat the right way, and held his knife and fork the right way, and did all the things that were demanded of a young British Isles gentleman.

Au Tombeau de mon Pere

(At the tomb of my father)

So, as my father thought and thought
(Considering lines of saws he'd bought,
Or, silence both his church and club,
Feeling close to Nature's hub,

Or maybe merely practising
Never saying anything,
Since he could go, when deeply stirred,
Months, at home, without a word,

Or pondering the indignity
Of having to put up with me),
I contemplated, half awake,
The flashing wine, the glowing cake:

An audio recording of James McNeish's 1964 "Australian Poets Talking" introduces Ronald McCuaig with his disappearance:

McCuaig's verse seemed to have a wry subtlety it's almost alone in the antipodes the trouble was nobody knew where McCuaig was. He disappeared I was told like a hobo. It took me a week to find him I was unprepared to discover in Canberra a spry and gracious civil servant whose hobby is shyness.

Michael McCuaig:

The hobo part was almost true. After Ron was fired from the Bulletin we had some really tough years we were absolutely broke. After a number of years he finally got a job in Canberra as part of the communications department with the government writing papers about Australian literature.

He moves to Sydney to setup an apartment and to start his new job. He writes to Beryl about the move. She writes back of feeling ill and concerned about having to move to Canberra. We hear their exchange over images of the capital.

Narration note: In 1965 my grandmother died suddenly of a heart attack.

The words of one of Ron's early poems float down line by line onto a photo of Ron and Beryl.

Laughing, weeping, questioning,

Make the sum of living:
So we laugh until we cry,
Cry until we wonder why,
Wonder why until we die,
Laughing
Weeping
Questioning.

Michael McCuaig:

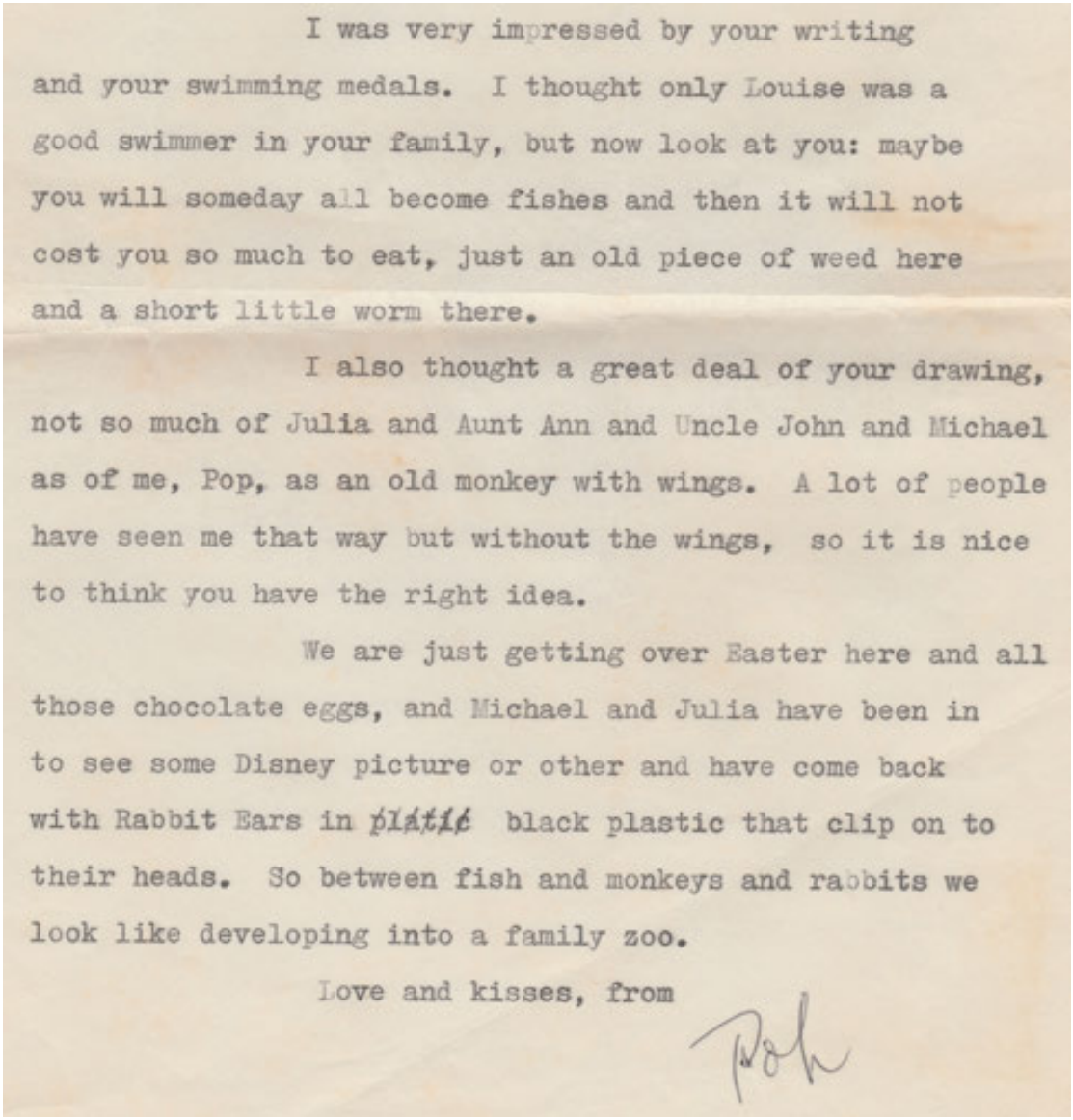
It was a big shock when my mother died.

Ron continued to work at the department of communications in Canberra but he no longer seemed to want to write poetry. And although he was a major contributor of articles about Australia's writers and literary history he wasn't recognized by the universities. He went into his shell.

Until the grandkids turned up.

An elderly voice is heard reading a letter.

Dear Nicole,



I was very impressed by your writing and your swimming medals. I thought only Louise was a good swimmer in your family, but now look at you: maybe you will someday all become fishes and then it will not cost you so much to eat, just an old piece of weed here and a short little worm there.

I also thought a great deal of your drawing, not so much of Julia and Aunt Ann and Uncle John and Michael as of me, Pop, as an old monkey with wings. A lot of people have seen me that way but without the wings, so it is nice to think you have the right idea.

We are just getting over Easter here and all those chocolate eggs, and Michael and Julia have been in to see some Disney picture or other and have come back with Rabbit Ears in ~~plátic~~ black plastic that clip on to their heads. So between fish and monkeys and rabbits we look like developing into a family zoo.

Love and kisses, from

Pop

As the voice talks of a family of flying monkeys and fishes we see images of a family in the seventies in Sydney drift through as a slide show, they are middleclass and average. The distinguished grandfather in the scenes mostly appears in his dressing gown and slippers. Animated fish swim over the top of the photos and a flying monkey drifts past.

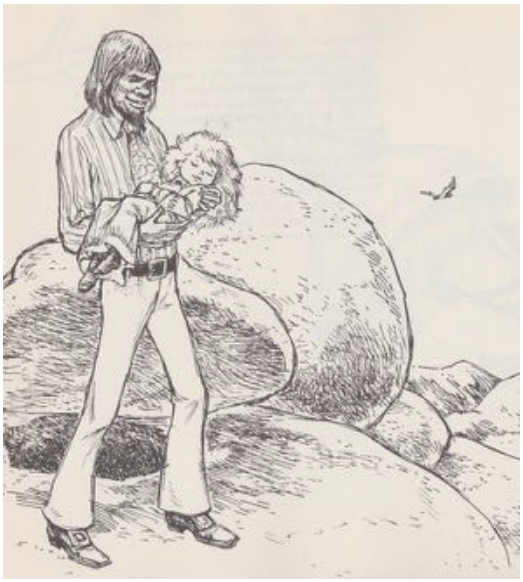
The stories they told and the adventures they dreamed of reinvigorated the poet. And the once modernist discovers fantasy.

A young (animated) girl walks to the middle of the screen.

Animation:
"Heeeellooo I'm Gangles. I live at the top of the waterspout in Candybar and I often visit Sidley to be a presenter on TV. I go surfing, chase whales and I visited central Australia one time.

An (animated) aboriginal man walks on wearing sixties gear; flares, a fat tie and groovy shoes.

Yuree: It's true man she came and saw us out in Central Australia just last year.



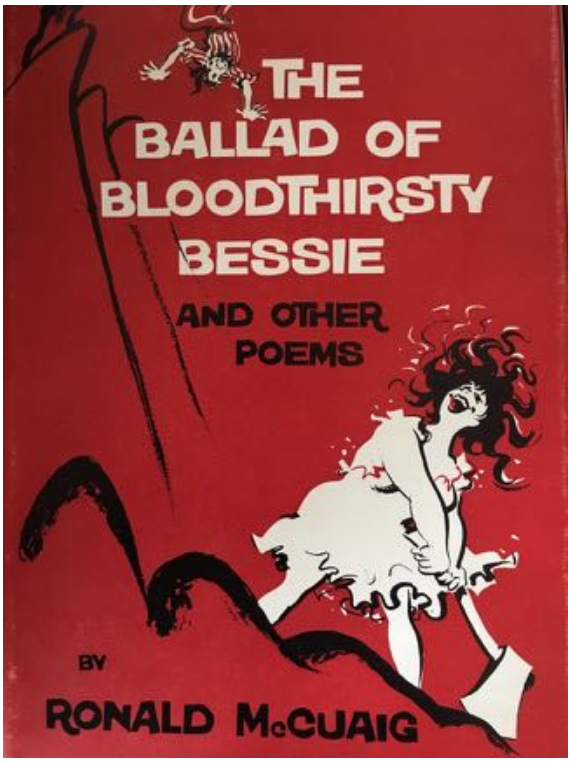
Louise McCuaig:

When I was a girl I used to have an imaginary friend called Gangles who lived at the top of the spout in Canberra. Pop and I used to talk about her like she was real. We'd dream up adventures that she went on. Then he wrote a book based on these adventures. The book sold OK here but was really well received in Norway where it was called Fresi Fantastika and is still well loved today.

The waterspout in Canberra where Louise discovered Gangles.

Toward the end of Ron's life professor Peter Kirkpatrick develops an interest in Ron's work.

I was in a bookshop and I found a copy of McCuaigs "The Ballad of Bloodthirsty Bessie" it just blew me away. I just thought the verse was extraordinary. It was beautifully crafted, it was engaging and I guess I sort of wondered why we didn't hear more about Ron and his work. (recent interview with Nicole McCuaig)



I'd been working in Victoria. I'd been teaching in Ballarat. I came back to live in Sydney in the very late 1980s and spoke to Elizabeth Webby who was then the professor of Australian Literature in Sydney University.

I knew her from having done my doctorate there and I think it was Liz that mentioned that she thought Ron was still alive and living at somewhere like Kirrawee, and I thought, "Oh, that's interesting." So I went to the white pages and sure enough, there was a McCuaig there, and I rang the number and it was his son John, and sure enough Ron was living out the back in a kind of grandpa flat.

Kirkpatrick is the last person to interview McCuaig before he dies and we hear some of the exchange but our characters are animated.

An animated Professor Kirkpatrick and an elderly animated Ronald McCuaig are in his small, g randpa shed together. McCuaig explains to Kirkpatrick that he would call himself a clarificationist – he likes poetry to be clear. But he would prefer to talk about other poets, other literature.

Kirkpatrick tells Ron how beautiful his Vaudeville collection is and how precise his poetry is but there is a long, awkward silence. Ron won't be drawn into the compliment indicating his lifetime of refusing to self-promote.

Kirkpatrick persists, developing a relationship with McCuaig and eventually manages to secure a book deal with Angus and Robertson as part of their modern poets series to rerelease McCuag's poetry. But Ron has started to exhibit signs of dementia and thinks that Kirkpatrick has an ulterior motive for publishing his work. At the last moment before printing the book McCuaig tries to shut it down writing to the publisher and Kirkpatrick to stop the rerelease from going ahead.

We bring the murderous farm-girl bloodthirsty Bessie to life as if her madness is somehow siding with McCuaig's own mind that is slipping away.

The Ballad of Bloodthirsty Bessie mocks Australia's obsession with bush ballads. Bessie and her father kill itinerant workers who come to their farm to work and fall for the seemingly innocent farm girl.

Our hip hop artist is at the edge of a cliff in the bush.

When Tom, interested in Nature,
Leaned forward a little to peer,
The farmer said, 'Fly there, poor creature!'
And gave him a push from the rear.
Tom flew down the cliff-face, and landed
At the bottom, spread-eagled and lax,
Where Bessie by custom attended
To chop off his head with an axe.

The women are mostly a willing
But slummocky kind of a mob,
But Bessie was fond of her killing
And took a great pride in the job;
But struck with a wild exultation,
Aglow like a beautiful pearl;
She was lovely in all her elation-
Though hardly a nice type of girl.

Kirkpatrick sends a heartfelt five-page letter to Ron imploring him to reconsider and finally the publication goes ahead.

Julia McCuaig (my Sydney cousin), who considered Ron a father figure rather than a grandfather, recounts that on his deathbed she would read to him the foreword of the rerelease of his poetry as his eyesight had gone. It gave him a lot

of comfort at the end of his life to hear the respectful words about his career in literature.

Bloodthirsty Bessie's death signifies the death of our poet. Shot in the end by her father, betrayed by her lifelong collaborator in murder. As McCuaig's mind starts to deteriorate and his eyesight fails, his literary faculties betray him and he can no longer read or make sense of anything. He passes away for the most part in obscurity.

For some to be foiled in their passion
Is more than their reason can stand:
The farmer saw firelight flash on
The axe Bessie held in her hand.
He shouted 'No Bess! You're my daughter!
To threaten your dad is a crime!'
Then he out with a pistol, and shot her
Through the heart, for the first and last time.

Documentary style

Re-versioning the poetry in collaboration with hip hop artists – the use of hip hop artists is intended to represent the modernism of McCuaig's work. The forcefulness of the sound, the street language and the working class narratives demonstrate what he was trying to do and a comparison of its place in the poetry of the time.

Animation – based on the illustration of McCuaig walking through the streets the black line animation will illustrate certain parts of the poet's life that cannot be illustrated using moving images. The animation will illustrate the printing of Vaudeville, his days as a journalist and war correspondent, his work as a satirist on The Bulletin and his work as a children's author.

Green screen – All interview will be on green screen and a backdrop of archive will progress the narrative along with the interviews. The textures of the backdrop preserving the literary heritage inherent in the story and highlight the loss of books and papers we are starting to experience in the digitization of literature.

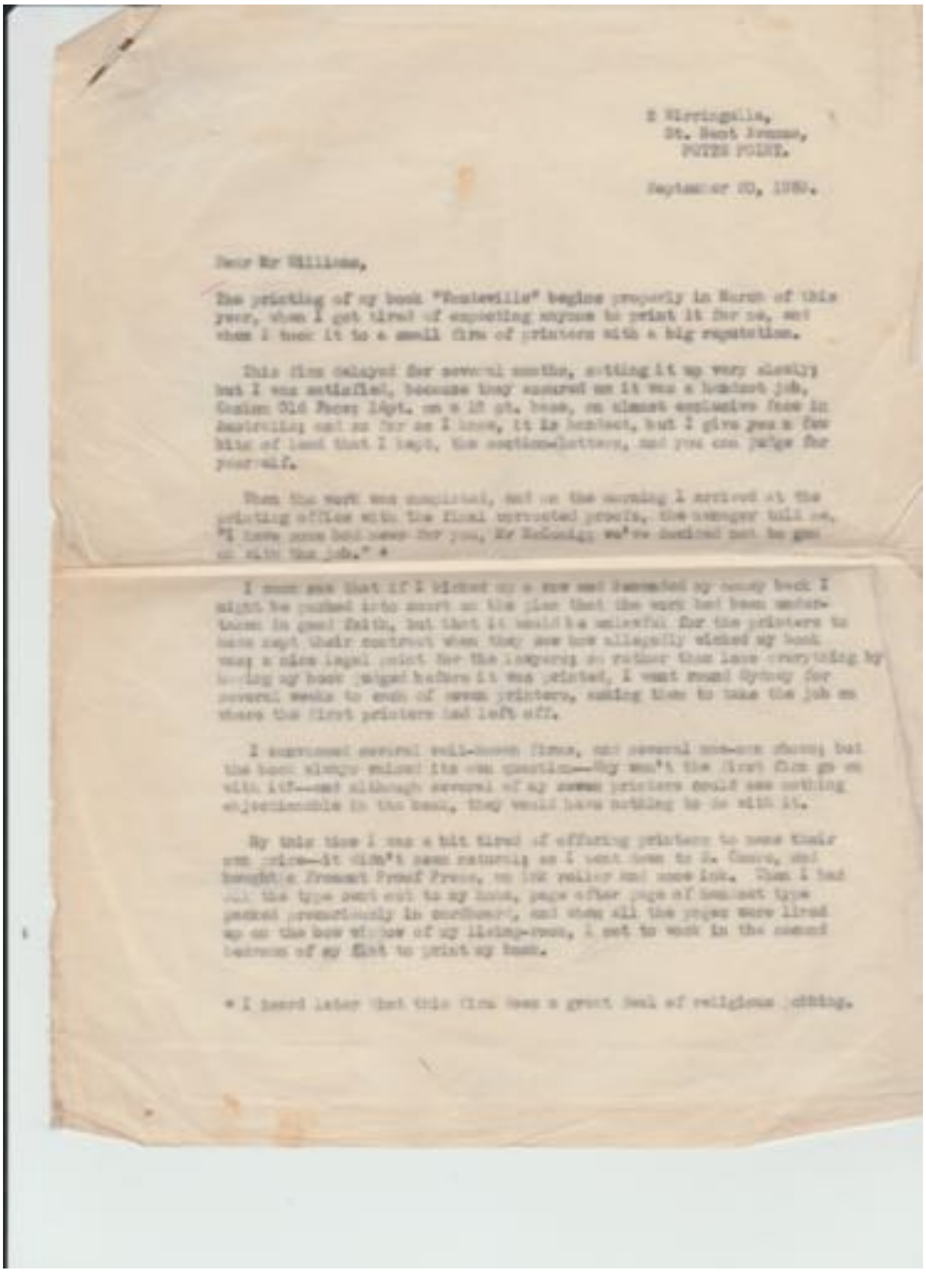
Text on screen and letters – the use of text on screen brings in the subtle presence of the filmmaker as narrator and the use of letters read by actors will help convey information not in the interviews.

Director's Notes

I don't intend this documentary to be a hagiography in spite of my connection to the subject. Many of the quotes in the treatment favour his work and indeed anyone who has been approached to be part of the documentary has been enthusiastic. But McCuaig had his critics and even the title of 'first modern Australian poet' would be up for debate. We will find these voices to battle the praise.

I was sitting in an English class at Canberra High School when my teacher opened the book to a poem we were about to read. She looked at me and asked if I knew the author as we had the same name. I said I'd never heard of the guy. I went home and mentioned we read a poem about a Sydney paper boy by this guy Ronald McCuaig. My father said "That's pop. And the kid in the poem is me."

Appendix 2 – Letter from Ronald McCuaig regarding the making of Vaudeville



2 Nirringulla,
St. Neot Avenue,
POTTS POINT.

September 20, 1939.

Dear Mr Williams,

The printing of my book "Vaudeville" began properly in March of this year, when I got tired of expecting anyone to print it for me, and when I took it to a small firm of printers with a big reputation.

This firm delayed for several months, setting it up very slowly; but I was satisfied, because they assured me it was a handset job, Caslon Old Face; 14pt. on a 18 pt. base, an almost exclusive face in Australia; and as far as I know, it is handset, but I give you a few bits of lead that I kept, the section-letters, and you can judge for yourself.

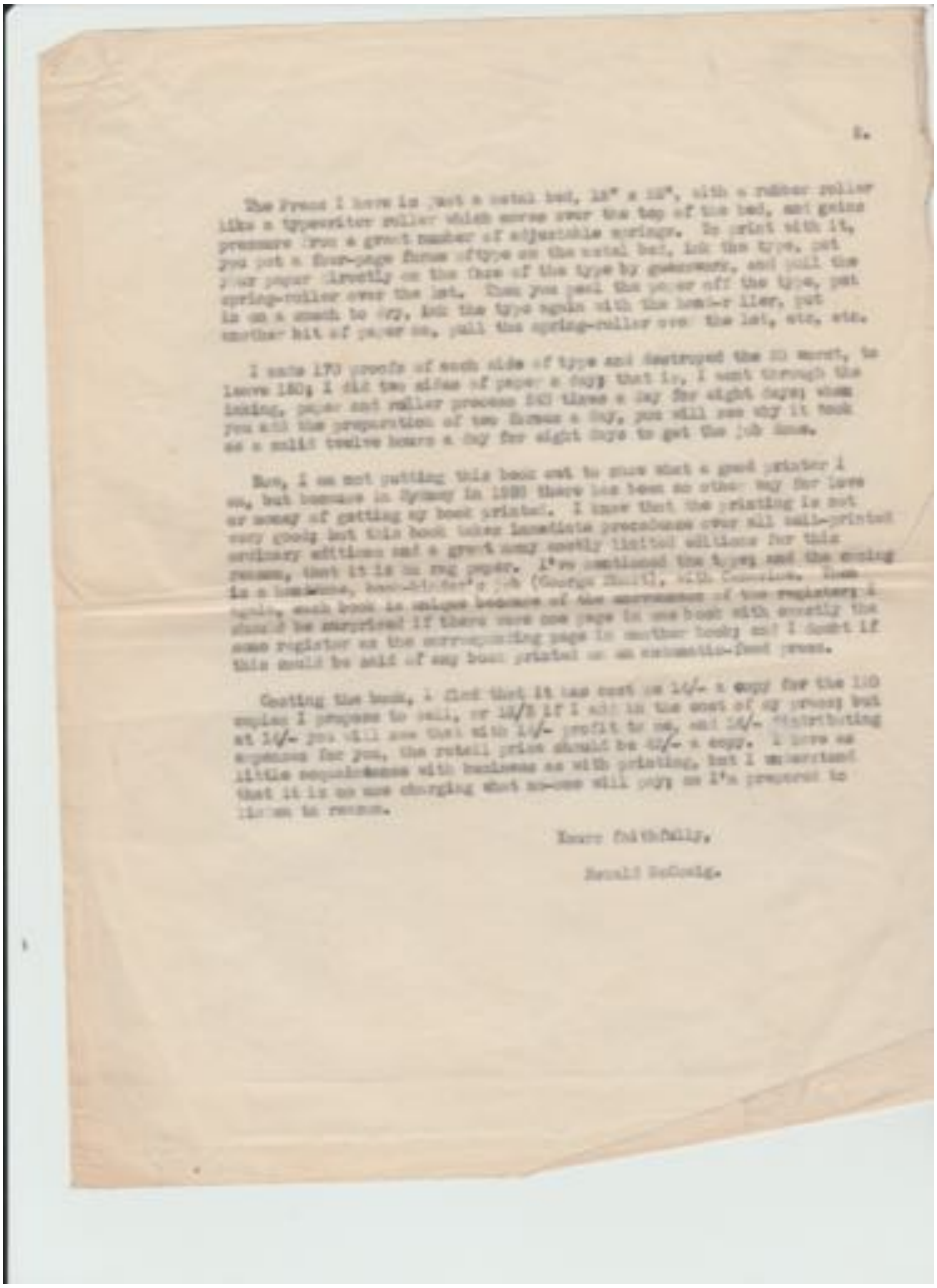
When the work was completed, and on the morning I arrived at the printing office with the final corrected proofs, the manager told me, "I have some bad news for you, Mr McCuaig; we've decided not to go on with the job." *

I soon saw that if I kicked up a row and demanded my money back I might be pushed into court on the plea that the work had been undertaken in good faith, but that it would be unlawful for the printers to have kept their contract when they saw how allegedly wicked my book was; a nice legal point for the lawyers; so rather than lose everything by having my book judged before it was printed, I went round Sydney for several weeks to each of seven printers, asking them to take the job on where the first printers had left off.

I approached several well-known firms, and several one-man shops; but the book always raised its own question—why won't the first firm go on with it?—and although several of my seven printers could see nothing objectionable in the book, they would have nothing to do with it.

By this time I was a bit tired of offering printers to name their own price—it didn't seem natural; so I went down to [illegible], and bought a Fremont Proof Press, an ink roller and some ink. Then I had all the type sent out to my home, page after page of handset type packed precariously in cardboard, and when all the pages were lined up on the bow window of my living-room, I set to work in the second bedroom of my flat to print my book.

* I heard later that this firm does a great deal of religious jobbing.



2.

The Press I have is just a metal bed, 18" x 18", with a rubber roller like a typewriter roller which moves over the top of the bed, and gains pressure from a great number of adjustable springs. To print with it, you put a four-page forme of type on the metal bed, ink the type, put your paper directly on the face of the type by guesswork, and pull the spring-roller over the lot. Then you peel the paper off the type, put it on a couch to dry, ink the type again with the hand-roller, put another bit of paper on, pull the spring-roller over the lot, etc. etc.

I made 170 proofs of each side of type and destroyed the 20 worst, to leave 150; I did two sides of paper a day; that is, I went through the inking, paper and roller process 340 times a day for eight days; when you add the preparation of two formes a day, you will see why it took me a solid twelve hours a day for eight days to get the job done.

Now, I am not putting this book out to show what a good printer I am, but because in Sydney in 1938 there has been no other way for love or money of getting my book printed. I know that the printing is not very good; but this book takes immediate precedence over all well-printed ordinary editions and a great many costly limited editions for this reason, that it is on rag paper. I've mentioned the type; and the sewing is a handsome, book-binder's job ([illegible]), with [illegible]. Then again, each book is unique because of the unevenness of the registers; I should be surprised if there were one page in one book with exactly the same register as the corresponding page in another book; and I doubt if this could be said of any book printed on an automatic-feed press.

Costing the book, I find that it has cost me 14/- a copy for the 150 copies I propose to sell, or 18/6 if I add in the cost of my press; but at 14/- you will see that with 14/- profit to me, and 14/- distributing expenses for you, the retail price should be 42/- a copy. I have as little acquaintance with business as with printing, but I understand that it is no use charging what no-one will pay; so I'm prepared to listen to reason.

Yours faithfully,

Ronald McCuaig.

Appendix 3 – Letter from Michael Sharkey support Australian Arts Council submission

To whom it may concern,

I am writing to support an application by Nicole McCuaig, video/film producer and director, for funding assistance for a project that will highlight the poetry of her grandfather Ronald McCuaig (1908-1993), an outstanding Modernist Australian poet and printer whose work has been highly esteemed by both poets and rare book collectors.

McCuaig was a legendary talent among distinguished Australian poets and critics such as Ken Slessor, Douglas Stewart, and R.D. FitzGerald, in a generation that helped advance Australian Modernist poetry in the 1930s and 40s. His reputation endured among those who followed up to and including Peter Kirkpatrick (now Professor of English at Sydney University), who edited an edition of McCuaig's work inn the early 1990s. Emeritus Professor Julian Croft, a former colleague of mine at the University of New England, also believed McCuaig was one of the outstanding poets of the generation before the 'New Australian Poets' of the 1960s and 70s. The late writer, *Bulletin* editor and anthologist Geoffrey Dutton claimed that McCuaig was 'the first modern Australian poet'. The late Barrett Reid AM, poet, librarian and literary editor of *Overland* magazine, with whom I worked in the late 1980s, held McCuaig's poetry in such esteem that he could recite long excerpts from McCuaig's collected poems.

I have also long been an admirer of Ronald McCuaig's poems, and first reviewed a reprint of his *Selected Poems* (edited by Peter Kirkpatrick for Angus and Robertson) in 1992 for the *Australian Book Review*. I attach a copy of that review.

In light of Nicole McCuaig's research into her grandfather's literary work (conducted in the course of a PhD), and her unrivalled access to original recordings relating to Ronald McCuaig's work, I believe that her video anthology (incorporating historic recordings) will prove revelatory to viewers and listeners who have an interest in the evolution of a poet we should regard as a trailblazing Modernist and national treasure.

I unreservedly support Nicole McCuaig's appeal for assistance to all arts funding organizations and individuals with an interest in Australian cultural history. Her application seems tailor-made to conform to the aims of State and National Arts Councils — in view of the scope and influence of the poet's work, and of Nicole McCuaig's efforts in several States to promote that work.

Yours sincerely,

Michael Sharkey
(formerly Editor, *Australian Poetry Journal*, and recently (2019) author of *Many Such as She: Victorian Australian Women Poets of World War 1*)

Appendix 4. - Vaudeville Exhibition Booklet

VAUDEVILLE

RONALD McCUAIG'S LIFE IN LETTERS

An exhibition by Nicole McCuaig

VAUDEVILLE

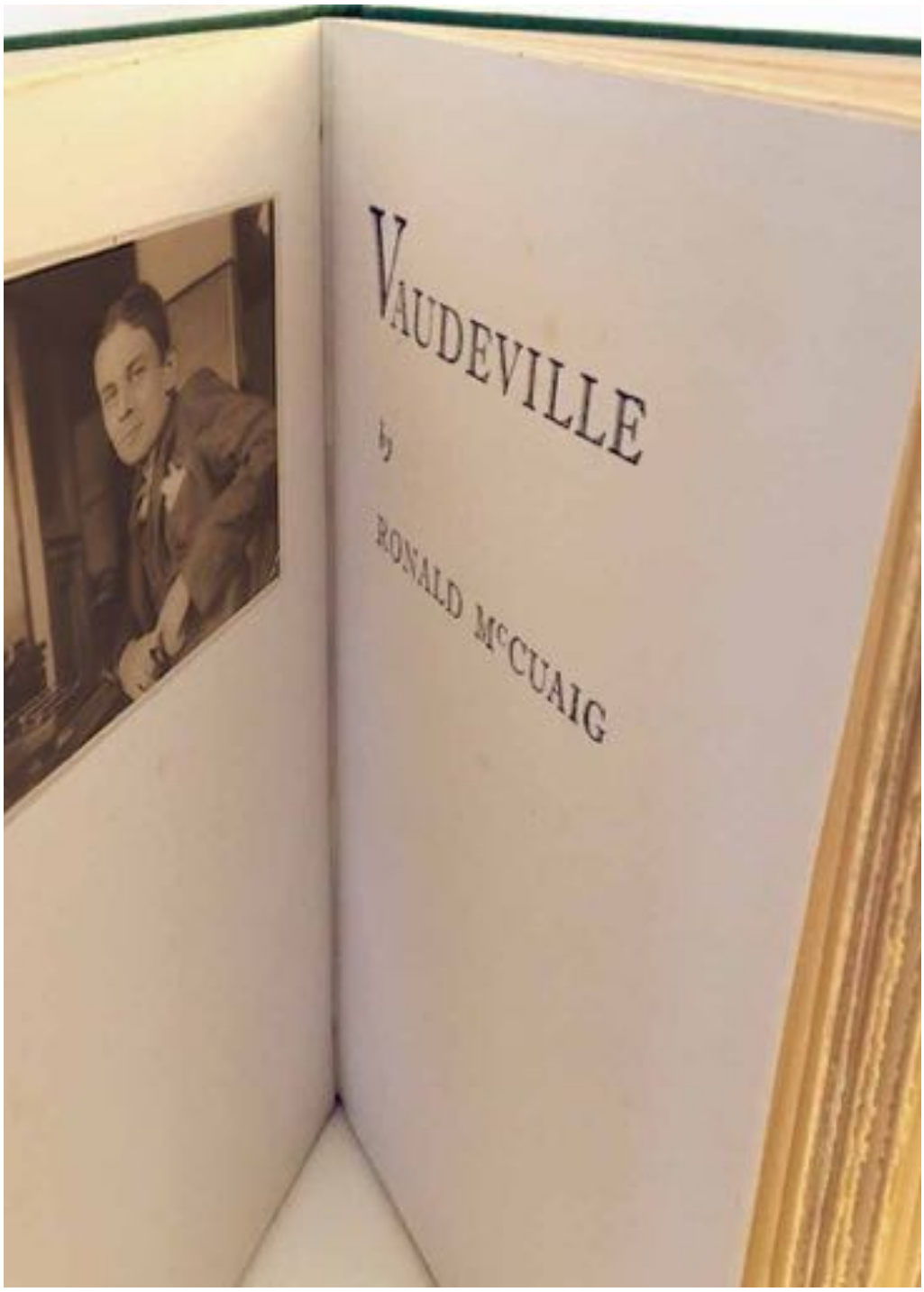
RONALD McCUAIG'S LIFE IN LETTERS

An exhibition by Nicole McCuaig

Nicole McCuaig is an award winning documentary filmmaker who has produced and directed documentaries in Australia for twenty five years. Research and production around the literary career of her grandfather Ronald McCuaig is part of a Doctorate of Visual arts.

Vaudeville exhibition
Queensland College of Art
Project Gallery
January 23 – February 8 2020

CONTENTS



Vaudeville, privately published and printed by
Ronald McCuaig St. Neots Avenue, Potts Point, Sydney, 1938

TRANSMITTING THE IMPULSE

Associate Professor Pat Laughren

Nicole McCuaig's exhibition draws our attention to an unlikely cultural revolutionary, her grandfather, the poet Ronald McCuaig.

In 1938, McCuaig published *Vaudeville*, a collection which his contemporary, Douglas Stewart, described as a 'lively, meticulously written adventure into modern life and modern poetry'. *Vaudeville* was an expression of a wider Modernist impulse charting a new course for Australian culture. With others, such as Lesbia Harford, McCuaig sought to avoid the self consciously poetic and embrace instead the thoughts, feelings and characters of the Sydney streets around him. Inspired by the likes of Eliot, Pound, Yeats — and their critical champion, F R Leavis— McCuaig's modernist verse employed a clear-eyed vernacular wit grounded in irony and empathy.

Modernism notoriously resists simple definition; embracing as it does all art forms while offering an umbrella for movements as diverse as Symbolism, Surrealism, Naturalism, Expressionism, Futurism and Dadaism. Nonetheless, it is generally conceded that it was the carnage of the First World War and the upheaval of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 that announced undeniably the arrival of the Modern age. By the 1930s, as Pat Buckridge has pointed out, even in sleepy Brisbane the local daily, the Courier-Mail, played host to 'a vigorous critical debate over "modernistic poetry" '; and the evening daily, *The Telegraph*, published self consciously modernist poems.

Needless to say, advocates of modernism and its revolutionary impulses were robustly answered. A year after the publication of *Vaudeville*, the 1939 Herald Exhibition of French and British Contemporary Art was condemned by the Director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, J S MacDonald, as the product of 'perverts and degenerates' against which Australia's national traditions should be protected. And, in 1944, the tensions between cultural conservatives and modernists exploded in the notorious Ern Malley affair.

So much for the broad cultural context; let us now consider how this exhibition and its underpinning research represents and resuscitates the poet and journalist, Ronald McCuaig, a figure at risk of slipping away in plain sight.

Documentary and Exhibition

In the course of Nicole's research, the major outcome of her studio project transitioned from a linear arts documentary biography to a more fragmented, curated exhibition that contributes to the 'documentary turn' in contemporary art. The exhibition itself now includes elements of video poetry, kinetic typography and oral history, alongside selected objects, artefacts and memorabilia. Unsurprisingly, particular attention is paid to the expanding corpus of poems and other writing retrieved from Trove, the collaborative digital research platform for building new knowledge.

1

These poems offer privileged access to a time and place from which comparatively little survives by way of moving image. Potentially, they enable Nicole to communicate what Raymond Williams has termed the 'structure of feeling' of the period. They hold the promise that, properly considered, Ronald McCuaig's poetry can serve as a portal into the different ways of thinking that were struggling to emerge at the time of its composition and publication. So that the exhibition itself acts on Pound's injunction for modernist artists to revive the past in a living way; to 'transmit the impulse' and 'make it new'.

Documentary Process

Nicole's research in Trove has revealed a body of hitherto unexamined literary work produced by Ronald McCuaig under a number of sobriquets and in some unexpected forums. Sometimes 10 years worth of articles surfaced in a single session. Needless to say, such abundance produces its own research and editorial challenges. But it also links the project back to classic documentary practice. For, unlike the 'ambulance chasers' of news and current affairs or the assembly line procedures of contemporary factual entertainment production, classic documentary demands thorough research, and reflective and artful construction.

Almost a century ago, John Grierson, popularized the term 'documentary' and its definition as 'the creative treatment of actuality'. As the head of the GPO documentary production unit in the 1930s, Grierson welcomed creative collaboration with artists, including the poet, W H Auden, the experimental filmmakers, Len Lye and Lotte Reiniger, the composer, Benjamin Britten, and the surrealist, Humphrey Jennings. Unsurprisingly, the documentary canon produced at the GPO unit suggests that documentary is best understood not as a single, stable object but as an evolving set of co-existing processes.

Nicole McCuaig's exhibition sits squarely in this tradition. And as a very experienced professional documentarian, McCuaig readily acknowledges the differing purposes that can motivate documentary projects. As codified by Michael Renov, these include the urge to record, reveal, or preserve; to persuade or promote; to analyze or interrogate; or to express. In order to realise these various aims, Nicole has gathered and produced a range of elements: narration, talking heads, social actors, montage, archival materials, interview, observational filming, dramatization, provocation, graphics, kinetic typography, sound effects, and music.

These elements have been composed and curated in an exhibition that allows viewers to construct their own understanding of Ronald McCuaig and his cultural significance. This contrasts with a conventional linear documentary where the finished text is expressly designed to render invisible the work of its construction and to confirm the author's interpretation as inevitable.

A Note on Experimentation

In 1968, after reviewing the opening decade of home-grown documentary on Australian television, the critic, Kit Denton, dubbed the first five years, the

'Soporific Age' — where the documentary was defined by 'servile adherence to explanatory-pictures-plus-explanatory-voice, with few concessions to imaginative treatment or the desire to arouse interest'. He contrasted this with the emergence of documentaries

whose 'relationship to the older and more static type is that of a government handbook and Dylan Thomas' letters – they use the same language and rules of grammar and syntax, but in radically different ways'.

In the early 1950s, a decade or so before Denton's musings, Grierson's contemporary, the Brazilian-born film pioneer, Alberto Cavalcanti, offered his 'Advice to Young Producers of Documentary Film'. Cavalcanti stressed that for documentary, 'three fundamental elements exist: the social, the poetic, and the technical'. In conclusion, he urged, 'Don't lose the opportunity to experiment; the prestige of the documentary film has been acquired solely by experimentation. Without experimentation, the documentary loses its value; without experimentation, the documentary ceases to exist'.

Nicole McCuaig has been true to Cavalcanti; and Ronald McCuaig again walks among us.

Associate Professor Pat Laughren,
Griffith University

Illustrator Victoria Cowdroy and Ronald McCuaig had a long collaboration. This is Ron's wife Beryl McCuaig circa 1930.

Caricature of Ronald McCuaig from his "Humour" column in ABC Weekly 17th August, 1940. Illustrator unknown.

4

POETRY OF THE JOURNALIST

Associate Professor Peter Kirkpatrick

In the poem 'Berceuse de Newcastle' Ronald McCuaig (1908-1993) recalled the town's steel rolling mill ringing in his youthful ears:

> A minute's pause when all is still,
> Then: *roddle-toddle-toddle*,
> Shaking the windows in their frames
> With *roddle-toddle-toddle*,
> Blurring the contours of my dreams
> With *roddle-toddle-toddle*.

Yet the steelworks' harsh lullaby also formed a prelude. For the sights and sounds of industrial modernity would become the backdrop to McCuaig's finely-wrought poetic examinations of twentieth-century Australian life, both the serious and the light-hearted.

Though he would later discover Anglo-American modernism through F.R. Leavis's *New Bearings in English Poetry*, and be ranked by Geoffrey Dutton as 'Australia's first modern poet', his earliest literary encounters were positively Victorian. The years before and during the Great War were the heyday of public recitation, and as a child McCuaig was introduced to poetry as a performance art through elocution lessons. His very first book of poems was A.B. Paterson's *The Man from Snowy River and Other Verses*, which his father expected him to memorise.

Bush ballads were not his style, though, and as a young office worker in Sydney in the 1920s McCuaig became fascinated by the complex relationship between poetry and song. He was crafting elegant love lyrics for the *Bulletin* –

Associate Professor Peter Kirkpatrick
Interview, *Vaudeville* documentary segment

rarefied short poems in a Cavalier style (Sir John Suckling was a favourite poet) – when in 1927 he began writing the nightly Topical Chorus on radio station 2BL: verses about recent news items composed each day for musical performance live to air. McCuaig would come to preserve the best of his love lyrics in an exquisite tiny book, *The Wanton Goldfish*, in 1941:

> Love me, and never leave me,
> Love, nor ever deceive me,
> And I shall always bless you
> If I may undress you.

But it was the slummier Topical Choruses which gave him entry into what the *Bulletin* called the Inky Way of journalism and a day job shaping words. McCuaig worked at *Wireless Weekly* (1928-38), *A.B.C. Weekly* (1940-42), and *Smith's Weekly* (1942-45), gradually gaining a name as a humorous writer. Like fellow poet and journalist and Kenneth Slessor, who once complained about the 'uninteresting facts' that he was bound to report and which kept him from higher things,

McCuaig had a professional duty to some of those dull and seemingly uneventful details, yet they would provide the substance of his groundbreaking first volume, *Vaudeville*, in 1938, and indeed all of his mature poetry.

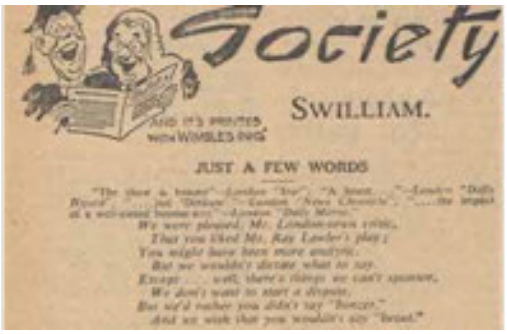
Much has already been written about *Vaudeville*, whose contents proved so scandalous that the poet was forced to print the book himself in his Potts Point apartment. In a series of short vignettes that echo the acts in a variety theatre, the poems describe contemporary urban life and lovemaking with a frankness that's still confronting in the #MeToo era. If McCuaig's women seem to make bad life choices, his menfolk remain callous and self-obsessed. 'The Artist's Model' berates her man for publicly humiliating her:

> I'm pleased you make no excuse,
> Rushing me out of there.
> I could see the people stare –
> John, I was amazed;
> Rushing me out like an arrest.
> The way the people gazed.
> Was it hurrying home to its little love-nest?

So too, the speaker of 'The Art of Love' finally lays his cards on the table:

> 'You know what I want,' I says.
> 'Right or wrong,
> We haven't got always.
> We haven't got long
> To live,' I says:
> We haven't got long.

Then there's the frustrated would-be lothario of 'A Meditation' who 'watch[es] the virtuous hands of the clock/Turning the afternoon into a lock/ On shadows coinciding with my gloom.' The cast of *Vaudeville* stare out at us with the unfazed intensity of the contemporary Sydney police photographs in Peter Doyle's *City of Shadows*.


Society

SWILLIAM.

JUST A FEW WORDS

Light verse by Swilliam AKA Ronald McCuaig
The Bulletin 15th May 1957

At *Smith's Weekly* McCuaig became their 'Official War Correspondent, Somewhere in Sydney'. Denied government accreditation on account of the paper's larrikin style, each week the poet would, in the words of *Smith's* historian George Blaikie, file 'a mock report which neatly peeled the skin off the politicians who held him in chains'. A collection of his humorous prose, *Tales Out of Bed*, appeared in 1944 (much later he would return to fiction and publish two children's books). Shortly after the War McCuaig briefly rose to the fragrant heights of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, where he hoped to become a literary reviewer. Instead, he found himself consigned to uncongenial tasks like race reporting.

After an hiatus from journalism, Douglas Stewart eventually secured his friend Ron a job at the *Bulletin* where, among other duties, he took over the role of resident writer of topical verse. Here his literary career flourished and, alongside his *Bulletin* poems, McCuaig produced two major autobiographical sequences: 'Scenes from Childhood', from which 'Berceuse de Newcastle' comes, and 'Holiday Farm', a series of bittersweet pastorals, also recalling aspects of the poet's early life.

In ‘Schubertian Aria’ from the latter, all that time hides within the landscape is vividly rendered in an ironic anthropomorphosis:

> The sad she-oaks bemoan
> Their urchin-stream’s disgrace:
> In lonely pools of stone
> He stole and hid my face.
>
> > The floods of thirty seasons
> > Since then have scoured the pools,
> > And several summer sessions
> > Have broiled their tiddler-schools.
>
> And still the trees complain,
> And still the thieving brook
> Could help me find my face again,
> If I cared to look.

For his topical poems McCuaig chose the nom de plume Swilliam – a slurring of the hero’s name from the folk ballad “Fair Margaret and Sweet William” – and the vast bulk of his poetic output would be written under that moniker. The *AustLit* database lists 580 poems written by Swilliam in all manner of poetic forms between 1949 and 1961, a professional achievement which was exceptional in the 1950s and is unimaginable today. Each satirised an aspect of contemporary life or politics, though in ‘The Old Master’ McCuaig also brilliantly elegised the great stage comic Roy Rene (vaudeville again!):

> Too tongue-tied to the words
> he made and spoke
> To trade upon the international stream,
> He was the coiner of our secret joke
> On the reverse of the Australian dream.

A cross-section of Swilliam’s output arbitrarily taken from 1958 turns up poems about: a rogue beach umbrella that impaled a man’s neck; a drinking song based on a report that British, Russian and American scientists were working on ‘a substance that falls upwards’; the installation of washing machines on coastal steamers; plans for a mashed potato factory in Queensland; and the curious fact reported by a South Australian doctor that one in three youngsters admitted to Adelaide Children’s Hospital had swallowed kerosene. McCuaig even wrote a poem in the form of a cryptic crossword puzzle. There are also clever parodies of famous poems, such as ‘To One’s Coy Wife’, which riffs on Andrew Marvell:

> Such dalliance might seem no crime
> Had we but world enough, and time;
> But, passing on Time’s wingèd cart,
> Opportunities depart
> And shrink our hopes to less and less
> Under the Law of Averages;
> And yonder all before us lie
> Deserts of conjugality.

McCuaig’s light verse has been seriously undervalued, more particularly after he included some of it in what amounted to his collected works, *The Ballad of Bloodthirsty Bessie and Other Poems* in 1961. But Swilliam’s poems don’t so much lower the tone as suggest the essence of McCuaig’s art, going right back to the Topical Choruses and their impact on *Vaudeville*, and that is its truthfulness to the unique character of modern Australian life. In a much quoted line, the media scholar John Hartley has written that ‘As the sense-making practice of modernity, journalism is the most important textual system in the world’. As a literary academic I’d like to think that poetry had that role, but must concede the point. Still, it allows me to propose that the poetry of Ronald McCuaig the journalist may also be seen in just that light.

Associate Professor Peter Kirkpatrick,
University of Sydney

Nicole McCuaig, *Vaudeville Videopoetry Anthology*, "The Letter" read by Crooked White.

Nicole McCuaig, Documentary Segment, Interview with Michael McCuaig, Ronald McCuaig's son.

Nicole McCuaig, *Vaudeville Videpoetry Anthology*, "Betty by the Sea" read by Elise Grieg.

ARTIST'S NOTES

Nicole McCuaig

I remember my grandfather as a tall, gentle, funny man who listened to classical music and wandered around the garden in a dressing gown wearing a fedora hat. He was also mechanical, often constructing or refurbishing furniture and devices. He lived with my uncle, aunty, and two cousins, and we visited their family in Sydney from our hometown Canberra. Pop never spoke of his literary life, and I wouldn't have appreciated the significance of it anyway. In year eight English at Canberra High School our teacher asked us to open our text books to a poem called 'Mokie's Madrigal' by Ronald McCuaig. She asked me if I knew the poet as we shared the same last name but it rang no bells and I disclaimed all knowledge of him. At home my father explained that Ronald McCuaig was 'Pop', and further, the poem about the paperboy was based on my father's childhood; Mokie was dad.

Thirty-five years later I embarked on research to compile a more complete picture of my grandfather's career. Well known literary figures had written respectfully of his poetry. Australian poet Kenneth Slessor put him in the front rank of Australian poets. The art critic and poet Gary Catalano described his poetry as "immaculate art", and Geoffrey Dutton described him as "Australia's first modern poet". But more widely he is not very well known. An initial search found only a three line Wikipedia entry in Norwegian, where his 1960's children's novel had been popular. In addition, I found scant library entries for his

Ronald McCuaig and granddaughter Nicole McCuaig

books and associations with much better known literary colleagues. Associate Professor Peter Kirkpatrick made a significant contribution to Ron's recognition in Australia's literary history. He was the last to interview Ron and compiled a collection of his work for rerelease as an Angus & Robertson Selected Poems anthology,(1992) writing a thoughtful forward to the collection, which Ron would treasure. But over the years of my doctoral research the extent and scale of his career emerged. As well as modern poetry published under his own name, Ron wrote under multiple pseudonyms, producing copious light verse and often humorous commentary on life in the McCuaig household and in the city of Sydney, which he loved. My father, uncle, and grandmother's lives were observed and shared over many years. As the National Library of

Australia's Trove gradually digitised our nation's publication history, more of his work appeared in my searches, constantly surprising me with his creative output and rich imagination. At times the research was more consuming than the creative production practice.

Being a documentary filmmaker it was a natural process to research archives, and I had the intention of making a documentary, the usual outcome of my work. But the poetry of Vaudeville got under my skin. I have no background in literary studies and I avoided reading too much of his work at first, or studying where the work fitted in the literary landscape, as I was in the throes of archive retrieval and interviews. But slowly the beautiful words permeated, and I felt the jolt that Ezra Pound refers to with regard to modern poetry. While the poems presented images and characters of nineteen thirties Sydney they resonated with me, eighty-five years after being written.

The characters in the poems are mostly women, depicted with a complicated, timeless, humanity. The sad resignation in the eyes of a street prostitute painted as 'beslimed stagnating pools'; an artist's model railing 'I'm not a whore John' at the artist who paints her naked body; Betty on the beach remembering a life of motherhood as 'the storm of breeding pains'; and the terror of a woman trapped in domestic abuse culminating in her 'meditated rape'. The grit was too much for publishers and even printers of the time who thought they would be locked up for any association with the publication *Vaudeville*.

The question became how can I represent these words on screen and demonstrate the impact they had when first released? There is no dramatic arc in Ronald McCuaig's biographical story, he was a quiet, smart, good guy with a great sense of humour, so I would struggle to answer the question broadcasters demand in documentary pitches, "What's at stake in this story?". But the characters and stories of his imagination are full of life, love, conflict, humour, and despair.

Studying videopoetry and the new practice described by Catherine Russell as archiveology I set about to create a standalone videopoetry anthology. This provided new and experimental production opportunities, working with archive, music, performance and text. The collection includes reversions of some of the poetry by Brisbane based hip hop artist Crooked White; a recording of the Sydney Conservatorium of Music Chamber Choir singing one of Ron's poems to music composed by Georg Tintner; a performance of Ron's popular poem The Commercial Traveller's Wife by year ten students at Whanganui High School New Zealand, to name a few. I also experimented with the traditional documentary form to create biographical segments that chart various stages of Ronald McCuaig's story, using green screen and the many archival artefacts that I have found as backdrop to the interviews. These experiences and collaborations have been creatively satisfying, and I could not have experimented in this way without the doctoral structure, my supervisor Professor Trish FitzSimons' relentless encouragement, and the support of my family.

Ron was not known for braggadocio but was brave and original in his literary pursuits. So it has been a great privilege to rediscover his work, inject its energy into a digital platform, and present it along with artefacts of his life as part of this exhibition and the forthcoming doctorate.

MADRIGALS

I

Have you sighed for flowers that are
Fallen with the falling years,
Or despaired that grieving tears
Could not weep for grief's despair?
From the air
I'll distil
Scents that were,
Tears that fell,
To a draught, when drunken deep,
Soothes the saddened ghost to sleep.

II

From darkest nights I rise
Into darker day,
Where brightest heavens are clouded grey
With the rain in my eyes,
Nor all the winds in the skies
Can drive these tears away,
Nor will they melt today
Nor on any morrow.
But, frozen, they
Therein preserve my sorrow.

From *Quod Ronald McCuaig*
Angus and Robertson 1946

Illustration: Victoria Cowdroy

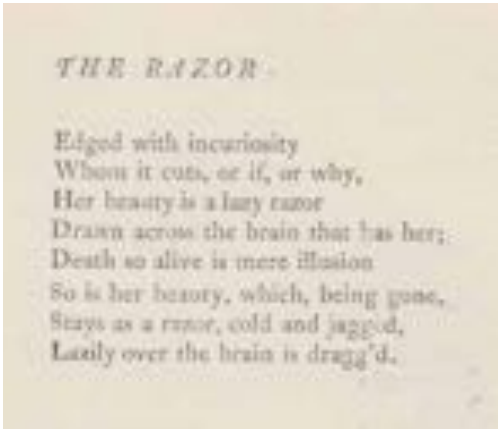
McCUAIG MADE POETRY TALK

Michael Sharkey

"Vaudeville", McCuaig's title for a sequence of lyrics about average lives, was inspired. *Voix de ville*: transforming and transmitting contemporary life in 1933 in different voices strikes some people still as a revelation. Who is not to say that he did for poetry what the talkies were doing for the silent movies? McCuaig's characters might want to engage with objects of desire, but they are edgy with irresolution, numb with apathy when it comes to enacting their desire, afraid that life might say Yes. If Eliot's *The Waste Land* was the first extended poem in the twentieth century to draw certain parallels between poetry's condition and the neurasthenic boredom of consumption and commuting, he was far from the first to depict the condition of anxiety in lyric form. Browning and Tennyson had been there, done that: "Come into the Garden Maud," from a sequence about somebody going crackers, was an old-time hit. Edith Sitwell's *Façade* went upmarket in 1922 when Walton took the megaphone away from the politicians and gave it to the poetry performer in the concert-hall.

Nor was Australia the Ozarks of twentieth-century poetry that some literary revisionists claim it to have been until 1968. While Slessor carried on the lyric tradition in verse on topical news and gossip and arranged blue moods in a poem about a drowned man, Robert Fitzgerald contemplated memory's role in defining humanity, and Hugh McCrae depicted contemporary society a ship of fools embarked for Cockayne. Serious poet and comedian, McCuaig was close to the most readable of the lot.

Michael Sharkey is a biographer, poet and reviewer of Australian and New Zealand poetry and journalism was editor of *Australian poetry Journal*. This is an excerpt from a larger review that appeared in *The Poetic Eye: Occasional writings 1982 – 2012 Michael Sharkey 2017.*



THE RAZOR

Edged with incuriosity
Whom it cuts, or if, or why,
Her beauty is a lazy razor
Drawn across the brain that has her;
Death so alive is mere illusion
So is her beauty, which, being gone,
Stays as a razor, cold and jagged,
Lazily over the brain is dragg'd.

The Razor
Vaudeville 1938

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