Lost in the *Syrup and the Ashes*: Reclaiming John Naish, sugar country author and playwright

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Introduction

Welsh-born John Naish, or Jack as he was known to family and friends, is not a luminary in the records of Australia's literary heritage. Yet, in 1963, Olaf Ruhen opined in the *Bulletin* that the calibre of Naish's autobiographical *The Clean Breast*[1] and first novel *The Cruel Field*[2] indicated that he was 'the finest acquisition from abroad in the Australian literary foundation' and that he would assume a 'dominant position' in Australian literature.[3] When Naish succumbed to suicide in 1963 at the age of 40, his bright potential was extinguished.

In the succeeding years, the curious may have stumbled across Naish in the Australian Live Performance and AustLit databases, and as an entry in the *Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*. They may have discovered the discussion of his two novels by Cheryl Taylor and Elizabeth Perkins in *By the Book: A Literary History of Queensland*,[4] and/or my hefty utilisation of his quintessential sugar country novel *The Cruel Field* in *Gentlemen of the Flashing Blade*[5]—a study of the post–World War II (WWII) displaced person canecutters' experiences. A long familiarity with his sugar country books, lived experience of the times and places he wrote about has propelled me on a journey to find John Naish, the man, and the wellspring of his creative energy. As I suspected that his descent into literary oblivion was circumstantial rather than deserved, I pondered how a twenty-first-century audience could engage with his works, thereby giving him more prominence in Australia's literary heritage.

When I embarked on that journey, I was unaware that several literary scholars had simultaneously picked up his sugar country works for serious analysis. Believing that I was alone in my interest, I was concerned that I may have been seeing worth where there was none—that I was over-identifying and elevating him out of proportion.

1 John Naish, *The Clean Breast: An Autobiography in Eleven Episodes* (London: New Authors Limited Hutchinson, 1961).

2 John Naish, *The Cruel Field* (London: Hutchinson, 1962).

3 Olaf Ruhen, 'The Canefields', *Bulletin*, 16 February 1963, 41.

4 Cheryl Taylor and Elizabeth Perkins, 'Warm Words: North Queensland Writing', in *By the Book: A Literary History of Queensland*, ed. Patrick Buckridge and Belinda McKay (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2007), 239–40.

5 Bianka Vidonja Balanzategui, *Gentlemen of the Flashing Blade* (Townsville: James Cook University, 1990).

Such accusations are often levelled at historical biographers, the biographer Angela V. John has opined.[6] Nevertheless, as she observes, the foci of biography are shifting, becoming more democratic, making space for lesser heard voices, such as those of women and people of colour. She discerns that other academic disciplines, such as history, are legitimising the biographical form. That is not to say that historians have not long contributed to biographical compendiums, examples being the prestigious *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* or the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. I wrote a biographical entry of Naish for the *Y Bywgraffiadur Cymreig/Dictionary of Welsh Biography.*[7]

Naish originated from the Welsh industrial town of Port Talbot, which has produced a disproportionate number of famous actors, including the 'triumvirate' of Richard Burton (formerly Jenkins), Sir Anthony Hopkins and Michael Sheen; and the inspirational literature teacher and mentor Philip Henry Burton whose name Jenkins would adopt. Two and a half years younger than Naish, Jenkins was a junior when Naish was a senior at the school they both attended. The 'magic' of Burton's literature classes inspired innumerable students over the decades to pursue a career in the dramatic arts or to study literature at university.[8] Included in these was Lily, Naish's sister, who studied literature at Aberystwyth University. She recalled Burton's powerful renditions of Shakespeare, of whom Burton became a leading world authority.[9] He inspired her brother John, too, who, because of his reputation as an author, is recalled proudly in Wales as one of its 'local worthies'[10] and a '"lost" prose writer' of Taibach.[11]

What has saved Naish from falling into the interstices of literary history is that, in 2021, in his adopted country of Australia, several scholars across both history and literary disciplines rediscovered him and his published works.[12] My investigative

6 Angela V. John, 'Lifers: Modern Welsh History and the Writing of Biography', *Welsh History Review* 25, no. 2 (2010): 251–70.

7 Bianka Vidonja Balanzategui, 'Naish, John (Jack) (1923–1963), author and playwright', *Dictionary of Welsh Biography* (2023), biography.wales/article/s14-NAIS-JOH-1923.

8 Angela V. John, *The Actors' Crucible: Port Talbot and the Making of Burton, Hopkins, Sheen and All the Others* (Cardigan: Parthian Books, 2015), 23–4.

9 Email correspondence, Naish family to author, 9 and 14 April 2022; John, *The Actors' Crucible*, 18.

10 A. Leslie Evans, *The Story of Taibach and District* (Port Talbot: A. Leslie Evans, 1963), 215.

11 Sally Roberts Jones, 'The Literary Tradition of the Neath and Afan Valleys and Tir Iarll (Maesteg and Porthcawl)' (Master of Philosophy thesis, Swansea University, 2007), 172, cronfa.swan.ac.uk/Record/cronfa42483/Description.

12 Elizabeth A. Smyth, 'Sugarcane and the Wet Tropics: Reading the Georgic Mode and Region in John Naish's Farm Novel *The Cruel Field* (1962)', *JASAL* 21, no. 2 (2021): 1–12, openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/index.php/JASAL/article/view/14901; Kerry Boyne, 'The Legend of the 'Gentlemen of the Flashing Blade': The Canecutter in the Australian Imagination', *Australian Journal of Popular Culture* 11, no. 1–2 (2022): 45–61, doi.org/10.1386/ajpc_00050_1; Bianka Vidonja Balanzategui, 'A Beaut of a Cut Near Cairns: The Butty Gang System in the Cane Fields in John Naish's *The Cruel Field*', *Labour History* 124, no. 1 (2023): 31–62, doi.org/10.3828/labourhistory.2023.3; 'World Literature in World Histories: Sugar with Victoria Kuttainen and Bianka Vidonja Balanzategui', Transnational Commonwealth Speaker Series video recording, South Pacific Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies, (June 2021), southpacificaclals.wixsite.com/website/post/world-literature-in-world-histories-sugar-with-victoria-kuttainen-and-bianka-vidonja-balanzategui; Cheryl Taylor and Bianka Vidonja Balanzategui, 'John Naish's Contribution to the Literature and History of the Queensland Canefields', *Queensland Review* 30, no. 2 (2024), doi.org/10.1558/qre.25954.

endeavours located Naish's two sons and a hitherto unknown cache of works, including plays of both social realism and non-realism, modes of dramatic expression he was experimenting with simultaneously. These original scripts have since been donated to James Cook University, Townsville, forming the John Naish Archive.[13] Now digitised, they are a valuable and accessible resource.

Of those scripts, a number are set in the cane fields, timely additions to what Elizabeth Smyth suggests should be a new literary genre[14]—one comprising writers connected with the Australian cane fields, many of whom are familiar names: Jean Devanny, William (Bill) Scott, Ray Lawler, F. E. Baume, Faith Bandler and Nancy Cato to name a few. Kerry Boyne goes further, identifying a subgenre within that cane field genre, being 'canecutter narrative[s]'.[15] No longer regarded as simply cultural artefacts, these often out-of-print works are being re-read and reinterpreted with a more nuanced appreciation.

We cannot be sure when Naish first started putting pen to paper, but if he began writing after his arrival in Australia in 1950, his entire opus—17 plays,[16] three books and a short story—was produced over a 13-year period. Naish's published works are his best-known sugar country novel, *The Cruel Field* (initially entitled *Mark, the Syrup and the Ashes*);[17] an autobiography *The Clean Breast*; his final novel, released the year he died, *That Men Should Fear*;[18] and two published plays, *Deuteronomy 24-1*[19] and *The Claw*.[20]

Biographical details paired with scrutiny of his writings reveal that he employed his sugar country narratives to make a perceptive outsider's commentary on the Australian mateship ethos, migrant-Anglo-Australian relationships, and tropical north Queensland's small-town class consciousness and pretensions. He evoked a sensorily evocative atmosphere through geographical description of the tropical environ, with its cloying, humid, tropical heat, the fecundity of its flora, the strangeness and proliferation of its fauna, and its geographical remoteness, which simultaneously attract and repulse. Boyne recognises that these evocative descriptions reflect Naish's own deeply personal engagement with the sugar country environment.[21] Smyth argues that Naish employed the conventions of the georgic mode (which focuses on

13 James Cook University (JCU), 'John Naish Archive', accessed 17 March 2025, nqheritage.jcu.edu.au/891/. The unpublished plays referred to in this article are held in the John Naish Archive. Two of Naish's books are also in the JCU collection. The diaries, letters, photographs and paintings referred to here are held by his family.

14 Smyth, 'Sugarcane and the Wet Tropics', 2.

15 Boyne, 'The Legend', 57.

16 Strictly speaking, there are 15 plays, as *Deuteronomy 24-1* and *The First Mrs Peters* are identical, and *Mark, the Syrup and the Ashes* and *The Strange Black Creatures* only differ slightly from each other.

17 Naish, *The Cruel Field*; Memorandum of Agreement, 9 October 1961, Penguin Random House Archive, Northants, UK.

18 John Naish, *That Men Should Fear* (London: Hutchinson, 1963).

19 John Naish, *Deuteronomy 24-1* (Hobart: Tasmanian Adult Education Board, 1957).

20 John Naish, 'The Claw', in *Australian One-Act Plays, Book 2*, ed. Greg Branson (Adelaide: Rigby Ltd, 1962), 35–54.

21 Boyne, 'The Legend', 51.

labour and the uncertainty of nature) to 'convey insights into seasons, rainforest, and the lives of Indigenous people and women in the 1950s' in what she designates 'as the Wet Tropics Bioregion'.[22]

Perhaps one of the most significant legacies of *The Cruel Field* is that, for the first time, there was a novel that accurately described the cane cutting way of life and work in an Australian setting. This was possible because Naish actually cut cane (as pictured in Figure 1) and did so for at least six seasons. It afforded an introspective, first-person account of a labouring method and lifestyle that has since vanished from the Australian rural and labour landscape. This is particularly important in a labour history context, as I demonstrate in 'A Beaut of a Cut Near Cairns',[23] in which I employ fiction as a plausible alternative to conventional methods to examine labour history. As Victoria Kuttainen argues, 'fiction can sometimes foreground links that have otherwise, for various reasons, become obscured to a nation's past and a nation's literature'.[24]

In 'World Literature in World Histories: Sugar with Victoria Kuttainen and Bianka Vidonja Balanzategui', *The Cruel Field* is considered along with other Australian and Caribbean narratives published between the 1930s and the 1960s to exemplify both unique and shared aspects of the cultural imprint of sugar in critical transition decades, illuminating the ways in which ostensibly free workers were bound by, and implicated in, a system of continued exploitation and inequality.[25] Naish made an authentic and scathing condemnation of Indigenous–white relationships, highlighting the institutionalised postcolonial legacy of disadvantage and dependence resulting from the enforcement of the protection system. This was a legacy that spilled over into the Queensland cane fields. Comparing Naish's work with other sugar country works, it is obvious that he was ahead of his time in his appreciation of the reality of Indigenous dispossession and the tensions of a multiracial society. He did this sensitively and realistically and, as Smyth observes, gave his Indigenous characters 'agency and subversive powers'.[26] Naish also demonstrated an awareness of female difference that exceeded that of most Anglo-Australian men of his generation. Women characters are more powerful than the space allotted to them in the narratives suggests. All his alter egos suffer from women's actions. His fictional selves, who are always outsiders, unmask small-town attitudes as constraining the actions and interactions of both genders.[27]

22 Smyth, 'Sugarcane and the Wet Tropics', 9.
23 Vidonja Balanzategui, 'A Beaut of a Cut Near Cairns'.
24 'World Literature in World Histories'.
25 'World Literature in World Histories'. See Frederick Ehrenfried (Eric) Baume, *Burnt Sugar* (Sydney: The MacQuarie Head Press, [1934]); George Lamming, *In the Castle of My Skin* (Harlow: Longman, 1979); Ralph de Boissiere, *Rum and Coca-Cola* (Melbourne: Australasian Book Society, 1956).
26 Smyth, 'Sugarcane and the Wet Tropics', 2.
27 Taylor and Vidonja Balanzategui, 'John Naish's Contribution'.

Figure 1: Naish cutting cane, north Queensland, c. 1960–61.
Note: This was one of several photographs taken to be used for the dust jacket of *The Cruel Field*.
Source: Naish family photograph.

Also discernible in his sugar country works is an anti-war stance, a vehement response to worker exploitation and a critical view of dogmatic religiosity. Particularly potent themes are the anger of frustrated talent, mental illness and suicide. His non-realism plays reveal that the scope of his interest was much broader than his sugar country works. Fear of nuclear war, concerns about the power of the media and the dissemination of misinformation; alarm about industrial pollution and environmental

damage; and a demand for the legalisation of euthanasia were among the themes that Naish explored. If his works are viewed as a sum, what emerges is an authentic grappling with universal themes that retain their potency.

A paucity of sources is challenging for a biographer. The fictional works of a marginalised or lost writer present to the biographer an alternative source for understanding that individual and the times they lived in. This biographical study not only introduces John Naish, man, author and playwright, to a new audience, but also addresses the critical questions of why and how we should re-engage with his works in the twenty-first century. It is compiled from public records, his wife's diaries, letters and communication with his sons and relatives together with a careful analysis of his opus.

'Through his writing, I got to know him better': The formative years[28]

The Clean Breast is an important primary source, but critics have been divided on its autobiographical credibility, one believing that Naish's self-portrait was delivered with 'absolute candour',[29] another suggesting that he had 'avoided revealing himself directly'.[30] Perhaps because of the explicit nature of some of his teenage experiences, it is understandable that his niece was advised by her mother 'not to believe everything' in it.[31]

I agree with the *Times Literary Supplement* reviewer who drew the conclusion that *The Clean Breast* fell midway between fiction and fact.[32] With privileged access to primary resources and reading between the lines, it is clear that, although he obfuscated in parts, undoubtedly to anonymise, John Naish himself emerges loud and clear. That identity aligns with the chief protagonists of his novels and plays who unmistakably voice Naish's own opinions, fears and struggles. Of course, this is not unusual in fictional narratives. Tennessee Williams, whose work Naish admired, staged and performed, wrote with similar subjectivity.[33] Who then, was John Naish?

28 John Naish, *That Men Should Fear*, unpublished play, 57.
29 Sid Chaplin, 'The Clean Breast: A Rave Review for John Naish', [*Guardian*, but published in] *Times*, 29 June 1961, 15.
30 Ray Matthews, 'From Wales to Queensland', *Bulletin*, 22 July 1961, 35.
31 Email correspondence, Naish family to author, 11 April 2022.
32 'The Clean Breast', *Times Literary Supplement*, 11 August 1962, 510.
33 Rosemary West [Naish], diary entry, 18 September 1957. Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* was staged and performed in Ba, 18 September 1957.

The 'brooding Celt'[34]

Photographs confirm that Naish was a good-looking man, fit and tanned. His wife said he cut 'quite a fine figure'.[35] He stood around five feet ten inches (177.8 cm) tall and had brown hair and blue eyes. Intelligent and eloquent, he could, at times, be overbearing in imposing his will and opinion. With 'all the stamina and stickability in the world',[36] he was pedantic and dogmatic. Occasionally truculent, unsociable and moody, he was nonetheless a loving and faithful son, favourite brother, determined suitor, solicitous husband, and doting and involved father. A competent swimmer, keen hiker, partial to a bet on the horses, and adept at snooker and chess, he also carved wood and painted. He was an avid film goer, keen reader of poetry, novels and plays, and was a member of theatre groups and acted in and produced plays. Any task he would attack with verve, whether it be fixing a bike, constructing a ladder, digging a drain, housecleaning or cooking. He was of sober habits, his favourite tipple a stout and sarsaparilla.

Born to Sarah Ann Naish (née Griffiths), a primary school teacher, and William John Naish, a carpenter, on 20 April 1923 at Port Talbot, Neath, Glamorganshire, Wales, Naish had two older brothers, William and Edward (Ted), and a younger sister Lilian (Lily), to whom he was particularly close. His Welsh origins were explicitly and frequently referenced in his books and plays and suggest a nostalgic deep longing—an *hiraeth*, which is often connected with Wales and Welsh culture.[37] He identified as a 'brooding Celt'[38] and, in the early days of courting his future wife, described himself to her as her 'cute little Welshman'.[39] A name plate for their first home in Cairns identified the place as 'Rosyn Glas', Blue Rose in Welsh, and a nod to Tennessee Williams's *Glass Menagerie.* The author Tom Hungerford, critiquing *That Men Should Fear,* recognised in the work a 'fateful air, perhaps deriving from the gloomy valleys and tortured heritage of his [Naish's] own heritage'.[40]

The formative years

The nuanced engagement with *The Cruel Field* being undertaken in the twenty-first century is already elevating Naish to a more deserved prominence in Australia's literary heritage. However, each of the works in Naish's opus, including his autobiography, *The Clean Breast*, touch on themes that will resonate with twenty-first-century readers. According to *The Clean Breast*, Naish had an unremarkable childhood, wandering free on the beaches and hills that defined Port Talbot, and getting up to mischief with his

34 Naish, *The Clean Breast*, 128.
35 West [Naish], diary entry, 29 June 1957.
36 West [Naish], diary entry, 14 December 1957.
37 Email correspondence, Naish family to author, 11 April 2022.
38 Naish, *The Clean Breast*, 128.
39 West [Naish], diary entry, 2 March 1957.
40 T. A. G. Hungerford, 'Review of "That Men Should Fear"', Press Cutting, source unknown, [1963].

gang of friends. The landscape is foreboding and gloomy. He described a Port Talbot that sat on foothills where industrial works and dockside dominated. Grabs gorged 'into pyramids of anthracite and iron-ore', closing and 'spinning away under the towering gantries to the holds that brought meat and pit-props, and would sail way to Rio and Oslo leaving a black, scarred Wales behind'.[41] A criticism of heavy industry, the industrial corporations that controlled that industry and the environmental damage that ensued are implied in several of his works.

Naish intimated that he was doted upon, loved and rarely smacked, and that he rarely heard a parental voice raised in anger; however, he wished that he had had parents 'who treated him in warm rough-and-ready style, as one of themselves, and understood him'.[42] He hinted at family tensions, particularly between himself and his father. Those father–son tensions flow over into his works. In the play *Oliver in Aden*, Oliver North's father accuses him of being a failure and a waster. He responds to Oliver's announcement that he is going to Australia with: 'WASTERS!! And they are better … off … dead!! Go to Australia! Go to the Dead Heart for preference! YOUR KIND IS BETTER OFF DEAD!!'[43]

Naish described his father as a perfectionist, and, as his father aged, as 'aloof', perhaps because of his deafness.[44] His father had served in the navy in World War I (WWI). Was he, by nature, aloof or did his wartime experience leave residual damage? In *That Men Should Fear*, Naish's alter ego Jim Pearce derided 'the War God' that stole from his father 'his last years of youth and zest in its cause'.[45] Naish's father's customers were not always forthcoming with their payments, nor he at sending out invoices or insisting that he be paid. His mother was gentle and softly spoken with a strong Welsh accent. Despite that gentleness, she held strong opinions and was fearless in pursuing payment from clients.[46]

Naish was baptised into the Church of England. Personal loss drove his mother to find comfort in Spiritualism, which, after WWI, emerged across the British Isles as a response to mass loss,[47] but in South Wales was already entrenched.[48] She favoured religious books and disapproved of alcohol consumption, except at Christmas. His mother's preoccupation with her religious texts and the occasional conflict between the boys and their father caused some discord in the Naish home.[49] Where religion was clearly a comfort to his mother, to the young Naish it signalled prohibition.

41 Naish, *The Clean Breast*, 16.
42 Naish, *The Clean Breast*, 51.
43 John Naish, *Oliver in Aden: A Play for Voices*, unpublished play, 15.
44 Email correspondence, Naish family to author, 12 April 2022.
45 Naish, *That Men Should Fear*, 11.
46 Email correspondence, Naish family to author, 12 April 2022.
47 Russell Davies, *Sex, Sects and Society: 'Pain and Pleasure': A Social History of Wales and the Welsh, 1870–1945* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2018), 34, 75, doi.org/10.2307/jj.14491603.
48 Nicola Harper, 'A South Wales Ferment: To What Extent and Why Were Spiritualism and Socialism Linked in South Wales, 1900–1930?' (Student dissertation, Open University, 2021), 11.
49 Email correspondence, author with Naish family, 11 and 12 April 2022.

Perhaps her preoccupation with Spiritualism informed the critical view of dogmatic religiosity found in her son's works—none more so than in the character of long-suffering Grace Pearce in *That Men Should Fear.* Seventeen-year-old Mary Vaughan, complaining to her father about her stepmother, a woman who clung 'obstinately and coldly to a puritanical outlook',[50] asks him in exasperation:

> How do you put up with it? She interferes and domineers until someone stands up to her—and when she finds she can't have things her way, in comes God—dragged in by the scruff of His neck, and if He can't win the day either—there's work in the kitchen![51]

Happy family memories, nonetheless, were formed near Nash Point in rented accommodation called St John's House, where his mother would take the children on holidays. Naish painted from an early age and a pen and ink drawing of the place survives, as do other seascapes.[52] On the dustjacket of *The Clean Breast*, Naish wrote in his biographical note that 'writing, being more convenient, has replaced painting as my main interest'.[53] How seriously he took painting cannot be determined, but his alter ego, Welshman Jack Williams in *The Claw* turns to writing and painting in an effort to lift himself from the drudgery of manual labour and make himself feel worthy of his wife who had abandoned a professional career for life in the cane fields. Naish, too, hoped to escape cane cutting by writing professionally, and his wife had abandoned work in a medical practice for housewife duties in a barracks. Williams harbours a 'mad-keen ambition to write a book' but fails in that attempt and, in his wife's estimation, his paintings are 'pretty awful'.[54] Other of Naish's alter egos, Emery Carol and Jim Pearce, are also frustrated writers.

In *The Clean Breast*, we meet Naish the observer, the outsider navigating ways to fit in on his own terms. His alter egos are similarly outsiders, observing how to carve out a space for themselves. Characters like Jim Pearce of *The Men Should Fear* are acutely conscious that they are excluded—in Pearce's case, he feels that he and his mother are 'permanent visitors' in the Vaughan home.[55] There are always tougher 'boys' who have to be outwitted—characters like the brash, rough diamond Mark Westcott in *The Cruel Field* and David Vaughan, the bullying farmer's son, in *That Men Should Fear.*

Naish commenced his schooling at the Eastern Primary School and then, in 1934, went on to the 'Sec' (Port Talbot Secondary School). The school magazine, the *Wayfarer*, mentioned Naish playing both rugby and cricket, as a junior and a senior, and at representative level.[56] Also mentioned was his only known performance

50 Naish, *That Men Should Fear*, 7.
51 Naish, *That Men Should Fear*, 10.
52 Email correspondence, Naish family with author, 17 May 2022.
53 Naish, *The Clean Breast*, dust jacket bio.
54 Naish, 'The Claw', 39.
55 Naish, *That Men Should Fear*, 23.
56 *Wayfarer*, June 1936, December 1936, July 1937, December 1938, July 1939, December 1939, December 1940.

in a school play. In 1939, in his final year at the Sec, the sixth form put on the school's fourth consecutive George Bernand Shaw play, the controversial *The Doctor's Dilemma*, in which Naish played the fated Louis Dubedat:

> In the latter part we had Jack Naish, who is to be congratulated on such a good performance in an arduous part and the first that he has taken in a school play. He was best in the scene of his dying.[57]

It is an amusing critique, but, in retrospect, also somewhat ironic. His works would feature death by a variety of means. Suicide predominated, with the play *The Paul Davis Affair* set in a suicide centre in a futuristic dictatorship. The play is a manifesto for 'speedy death—"the only freedom"'—by legalised suicide.[58]

Overseeing drama activity at the Sec was Philip Burton,[59] who, during Naish's time, ran the English department and a school drama club. Burton began a school tradition of polished performances of challenging plays featuring costumes hired from London.[60] It was from him that Naish would have gained insights into the machinations of radio play production, for Burton gave his pupils unparalleled opportunities to participate in radio broadcasts. The town's proximity to Cardiff, where a distinct Welsh region of the BBC with its own wavelength had been established in 1937, enabled pupils to travel there to take part in recordings, and the BBC also came to the school.

Naish received an exemption from matriculation,[61] which meant he had attained a standard to enter further education.[62] Instead, at 16 years of age, he started work as an articled clerk with a chartered accountant. In May 1942, he enlisted at Caterham in the Welsh Guards Corp – Armoured Training Wing, but did not see active service until three months after war's end when he was sent to Norway with the Allied Military Mission.[63] Then, nine months after his return, in late 1946, he was deployed to Germany with the British Army of the Rhine occupation forces. In March 1947, he was discharged from active duty to the Royal Army Reserve.[64] This wartime inactivity seems to have plagued him. In *The Lease of Life*, when his alter ego Paul Davis is asked what he did in the war, he replied: 'I did nothing.' Another character confirmed this: 'He did nothing in the war … but drink our beer.'[65] Naish remarked ruefully in *The Clean Breast* that wartime is a 'darkness … is night-time'.[66] During his

57 'The Doctor's Dilemma', *Wayfarer*, December 1939, 14.
58 John Naish, *The Paul Davis Affair*, unpublished play.
59 Philip Burton taught at the Sec from 1925 to 1945. Email correspondence, Angela V. John to author, 26 August 2022.
60 John, *The Actors' Crucible*, 19.
61 'C. W. B. School Certificate 1939', *Wayfarer*, December 1939.
62 Email correspondence, Rebecca Shields, receptionist West Glamorgan Archive Service, with author, 2 November 2022.
63 Service and Casualty Form, John Naish, Army Personnel Centre, Support Division, Historical Disclosures, Glasgow, Scotland.
64 Service and Casualty Form.
65 John Naish, *The Lease of Life*, unpublished play, 31.
66 Naish, *The Clean Breast*, 98.

service he suffered severe burns to his legs when trapped in a tank fire.[67] The episode was graphically recreated in *Oliver in Aden*, where it was attributed as the reason he did not end up seeing active service. His military experience engendered a strong anti-war stance and pessimism for the future. This is not surprising given the tension-filled atmosphere of the Cold War and proxy wars breaking out soon after WWII had ended. In *The Lease of Life*, Naish wrote:

> Why are we, semi-survivors, with finger-tip gear-change and television sport growing up and growing grey in the shadow of world war three with four and five and six and seven a mere hazy thought away.[68]

Army life also prompted Naish to turn a critical eye on mental illness (including what today is recognised as post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD]) and on how those with mental illness were perceived. A number of characters in his works suffered PTSD. Among them, in *The Clean Breast*, was Hellyer who survived the Dunkirk withdrawal. He was confined to the base after murdering a woman while on leave and appeared to be quite frighteningly 'mad'. Reflecting an all-too-common attitude of incomprehension and disbelief directed at those suffering mental illness, Naish's superior thought the prisoner was 'actin' off his rocker' to get out of the sentence that awaited him.[69] For Scottie McRoberts in *Oliver in Aden*, the only release was suicide. Resorting to drink or taking advantage of an assisted fare to Australia offered insufficient escape from the demons that pursued him:

> Och, so you're leaving the Shadow of Death for the Land of Hope, are ye? Well, they have their bombs too, and their rocket ranges, an' you canna escape! You canna escape for 10 pounds![70]

Once demobbed, Naish worked as an assistant to the secretary of a motor car and agricultural machinery distributor in Swansea and then as a clerk for the management of a picture theatre in London until 1950. The tension between his own drive to write and the need to work at humdrum jobs to support himself was palpable. Unimpressed with the 'sort of peanut that writes books',[71] he was also disdainful of work-a-day life—the 'daily routine that, added and added and added, totals civilization'.[72] He expressed cynicism and impatience with intellectual discussion given the postwar conditions: 'What difference did it make whether you talked or fiddled or slept while Joan burned or Rome burned, while England slipped or that the world drifted?'[73]

67 Service and Casualty Form.
68 Naish, *The Lease of Life*, 27.
69 Naish, *The Clean Breast*, 90.
70 Naish, *Oliver in Aden*, 23.
71 Naish, *The Clean Breast,* 135.
72 Naish, *The Clean Breast*, 137.
73 Naish, *The Clean Breast*, 135.

The £10 Pom

Naish was always on the run, metaphorically and physically speaking. A despondency and disenchantment with life emerging from WWII made him consider immigration. On 31 May 1947, the British and Australian governments forged the United Kingdom – Australia Free and Assisted Passage Agreement, offering fares subsidised equally by both governments. Other schemes, too, such as that instituted by the newly created International Refugee Organization created immigration opportunities for millions of displaced people. But Naish was cynical of the opportunities these schemes offered and the racist White Australia policy that underpinned Australia's migrant intake:

> Migrants! Consider the word MIGRANT! Is there any such measly, miserable, maudlin word? You're driven up the gangway of a great white ship, like a herd, into its bowels, with your precious knick-knacks in cases and bags, and your drab dreary little dreams bulging out of your homesick eyes! Shipped! One government glad to be rid o' you, and the other indifferent whether it receives you! For I tell you: Greeks would do, or Poles or Spaniards, Danes or Dutchmen, ay, or Germans or Ities too, as long as their skin is white![74]

In late 1949, Naish nevertheless applied for an assisted passage to Australia. Like his protagonists, he disdained the 'big magnetic cities'[75] and 'the cynical disillusioned drift'[76] towards them. Rejecting the greyness of city workers' lives, he asked to be directed to farm or mine work in New South Wales.[77] This request would unwittingly destine him to spend a good part of the rest of his working life in a labouring job that was brutal and dirty and whose workers were scarcely considered human.

Though Naish retained a close relationship with his family despite the distance that would come to separate them, he suspected that they were disappointed in him.[78] In his works, the protagonists felt that they had disappointed their fathers because of their choice to leave home, not only Oliver North in *Oliver in Aden*, but also Carol in *The Cruel Field*, whose father wrote to him that he hoped he 'will see his folly and return' home.[79]

Naish was 27 years old when, on 4 May 1950, he boarded the *Ontranto* in the Tilbury Docks. Spending the best part of May at sea, he arrived at Fremantle on 30 May 1950, before finally disembarking in Sydney from where he left for Queensland to arrive in Brisbane on 10 June.[80] The conditions of the assisted passage stipulated that he must remain in Australia for two years. A decade would pass before he returned to Wales.

74 Naish, *Oliver in Aden*, 23.
75 Naish, *That Men Should Fear*, 254.
76 Naish, *That Men Should Fear*.
77 Commonwealth of Australia, 'Application for an Assisted Passage to Australia under the United Kingdom and Australian Government Agreement', 1 December 1949, 2, National Archives of Australia (NAA): BP23/1, 7404.
78 Naish, *The Clean Breast*, 114.
79 Naish, *The Cruel Field*, 38.
80 State Immigration Office, John Naish file card, file no. 10482, Queensland State Archives (QSA): ID678428.

Life and work in Queensland

Naish was initially provided accommodation in Brisbane but then, in the coldest months of the Australian winter, he commenced work in the forestry at Kalpowar near Monto.[81] As the beginning of the sugar cane harvest drew close, around Queen Elizabeth II's birthday holiday traditionally celebrated on the second Thursday of June, the return flight to the cane fields began. Somebody at Kalpowar must have been heading for the cane fields and Naish travelled with him, deciding to try his luck there.[82]

He arrived at Mackay after the season had begun and secured a cut. Working and socialising with Indigenous men, he learnt of their experiences of exploitation under the protection system. 'De Pr'tector git a quid: I git ten bob', Aboriginal man, Harry says, adding: 'In de Ole Days … I wuk neely ten yeers, neely ten years—chained to a log'.[83] Already disillusioned by the White Australia policy that gave precedence to European immigrants, the guilt of being identified by the Indigenous people he encountered as culpable in the colonisation of Australia sat heavily. When, in *The Cruel Field*, the Indigenous sisters Hope and Pearl sang 'Land of Hope and Glory' looking directly at Emery, 'the words shocked … like a crime of violence'.[84] In the same novel, Naish explicitly acknowledged the dispossession of Aboriginal lands: the 'long-lost freedoms, ploughed under the caneland like bean'; hunting grounds and a life living off the earth, 'the seas and the tree, the cooling earth with its grass and its moon'.[85]

Cane cutting under a searing tropical sun was brutal work, but, after the initial months of hardening up, cutters found their rhythm. As the cooler months set in, the work of burning, cutting, laying portable rail and loading began to be less onerous. Despite the long, arduous days, 'bones aching', a 'hundred cuts and splinters festering', march flies stinging, trudging 'home in the dusk, wet, cold and longing for rest',[86] Naish was writing, carrying his notebook with him even on a fishing trip.[87]

Naish's most polemical work, *Cutters at White Road*, introduced his recurrent class theme, reflecting the working-class individualist attitudes he would have observed on the cane fields in the 1950s and 1960s. When most strongly expressed, they ring clearly as a political manifesto. Through the character bearing his own name, 'Jack', he even-handedly attacks the arbitration system, the union representative and the greedy farmer.

81 Arrival record, file no. 10482, QSA: ID678428; Naish, *The Clean Breast*, 143–4; John Naish to parents, 1 January 1951; John Naish to parents, 23–24 January 1951.
82 John Naish to parents, 17 December 1950.
83 Naish, *The Clean Breast*, 151, 159.
84 Naish, *The Cruel Field*, 100.
85 Naish, *The Cruel Field*, 103.
86 John Naish, *Mark, the Syrup and the Ashes*, unpublished play, 49.
87 John Naish to parents, 1 January 1951.

Naish also observes with amusing accuracy small-town class consciousness and pretensions:

> Virginia Trimboth saw little of the country on her journey home: she never did. For a as soon as her envious eyes encountered Mrs Ruby Delaware's great mansion of a homestead on a rise overlooking the town—a residence worthy of the president of Nagonda Ladies' Bowling Club—the old prides and cravings welled up into her bosom like blood from beef-steaks.[88]

As for canecutters, he wrote: 'Human? You ask the Nagonda socialites whether we're human. Cane cutters are bloody animals.'[89]

'Cut out day' was welcomed with a savage joy: 'With a cry of ecstasy and a great exaggerated slash, the ganger ended the season.'[90] Then came the 'slack' (the five-month period between harvest seasons): 'the distant yearned for goal'[91] and the flight south; 'peanuts in Kingaroy, wheat on the Downs … the orchards of the south for the fruit-picking season'.[92] Naish listed his occupations in the slack as, variously, navvy, gravedigger, fettler, miner, axeman, bookmaker, barman, clerk and fruit picker.[93] The first slack found him securing lodgings at New Farm, Brisbane, and, after a well-earned rest, he began work at a railway camp 20 miles (32 km) from the capital.

Canecutters often pondered why they came back season after season. Naish answered the question in *Mark, the Syrup and the Ashes*:

> So you think back to the farm in the good months, September and October, when you can go out and throw up your nine or ten ton before smoko, and things go right, and you feel almost free. The cane is not your vicious master any more, and does not cause you pain. Your effing and blinding are less bitter … and you cut your ten ton for the next day all right, and maybe go into town and skite about it round the bar … then afterwards, in a little world of your own making, you can sit around the fire, with the best mates on earth … telling lies.[94]

As a 'Pom', Naish was always the new chum regardless of his years of cutting cane. Being accepted as a mate was elusive. We find him grappling with the Australian code of mateship, writing:

> That was half the battle, getting used to the carelessness, the unpunctiliousness of his attitudes and expressions; the drinking protocol of the alternate indefinite shout; the sub-status they conferred on you, New Australian; the intellectual vacuum, the sport craze, the suspicion of culture; the ambiguous slang, the beloved nicknames, the sentimental cult of mateship.[95]

88 Naish, *The Cruel Field*, 120.
89 Naish, *The Cruel Field*, 37.
90 Naish, *The Cruel Field*, 213.
91 Naish, *Mark, the Syrup and the Ashes*, 48.
92 Naish, *Mark, the Syrup and the Ashes*, 48.
93 Naish, *The Clean Breast*, dust jacket, author blurb.
94 Nasih, *Mark, the Syrup and the Ashes*, 49.
95 Naish, *The Cruel Field*, 39.

As an outsider, Naish was acutely attuned to how foreigners were regarded by Anglo-Australians:

> Mark looked around the bar at the other customers and glared at a bunch of money-hungry Italian farmers chattering away, polluting their lager with sarsaparilla. No wonder they were excited: they were taking the bloody country over.[96]

On his return from his first slack, Naish travelled further north to Babinda in far north Queensland for the seasons of 1951–53 and then to Gordonvale in 1954–55, followed by the usual flights south for the slack.

All the elements of his cane cutting experience were recounted in *The Clean Breast* and *The Cruel Field* and associated plays. In the front matter of *The Cruel Field*, the publisher asserted that its 'outstanding merit' was 'the quality of the descriptive writing':

> It is a hard world, that of the vindictive cane. John Naish superbly captures in his prose the heat, the boredom, the boozing, the exultation in physical effort, and the comradeship of this alien world. A straight-from-the-shoulder novel dedicated to 'the gentlemen of the Flashing Blade', *The Cruel Field*, completely authentic in background, is an experience not easily to be forgotten.[97]

Shooting over the blue Pacific — the Fiji years

Naish wrote of Queensland, 'the ramshackle north', that 'you either loved and lived in, or sneered at and escaped from in time'.[98] Having fulfilled the residential obligations of his assisted passage, he left Australia by plane on 25 February 1956 to return home. He broke the journey with a stopover in Fiji where he secured a position in Ba as a shipping clerk with Burns Philp.[99] *The Cruel Field* gave some intimation of what he might have been thinking. With the slack looming, his alter ego canecutter Carol decided:

> His situation seemed to be squeezing him like a claw squeezing an orange-pip: sudden flight was becoming imperative. He would have to shoot out over the blue Pacific—to New Caledonia or Fiji or the Tongan isles.[100]

In Ba, Naish resided in the single men's quarters, colloquially referred to as the 'batch'.[101] Within the year, he met his future wife, the graduate doctor Rosemary Ruth West.

96 Naish, *The Cruel Field*, 19.
97 Naish, *The Cruel Field*, frontmatter.
98 Naish, *The Cruel Field*, 181.
99 T. M. Nulty to Commonwealth migration officer to the United Kingdom passport officer, Canberra, 17 February 1956; T. M. Nulty to state migration officer, Yungaba, Kangaroo Point, Brisbane, 17 February 1956; and Nominated Immigrants file no. 10482/1948, QSA: ID 678428.
100 Naish, *The Cruel Field*, 172.
101 West [Naish], diary entry, 8 October 1957.

Meeting Rosemary West

Rosemary West arrived in Fiji in April 1956 to take up the position of medical superintendent at the Methodist Hospital in Ba. Meeting Naish at a play reading or on a visit to the Burns Philp 'boys', their friendship began in mid-December 1956 when Naish asked her out. Her Fijian diaries described their developing relationship and reveal much about Naish's character. In retrospect, the warning signs were there of the critical tensions that would beleaguer their short, married life. It is clear that Naish was enamoured by West and pursued her, but she was initially ambivalent. Back in Adelaide, she had had an intense relationship with a fellow graduate who shared her love of classical music.[102] Her friends and family believed she was destined to marry him.[103] However, the relationship ended acrimoniously with him leaving on an expedition to Antarctica and she to Fiji. Naish met her parents when they visited in June 1957, despite West still feeling unsure of Naish and finding his jealousy particularly worrying.[104]

West and Naish connected over a love of literature. Both were writing plays; they read his, which was about cane cutting, at one of their play readings.[105] Though they and their fellow expatriates enthusiastically enjoyed play readings, Naish's intensity could be unpleasant.[106] It is clear that this period of comparative leisure allowed him to fully indulge his creativity and he swept West along in his wake. She helped him with productions, including Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* in which she played the lead female character, Amanda Wingfield. She also assisted him with the first production of his own play, *Deuteronomy 24-1*, which he entered in a play competition held at the Parish Hall, Suva, in June 1957.[107] West played Bella, the ninth wife of Tim Peters, played by Naish.[108] Apart from cultural activities, Fiji afforded plenty of scope for long hikes, bike rides, swims in waterholes and the ocean, sunbaking and fishing. In West, Naish found a fitting companion for those athletic activities. For West, who was a keen observer of the natural world around her, these activities must have been a welcome respite from the intensity foisted on her by Naish's preoccupation with dramatic performance and production.

102 Email correspondence, Naish family with author, 23 June 2021.
103 West [Naish], diary entry, 19 February 1956.
104 West [Naish], diary entry, 2 June 1957.
105 West [Naish], diary entry, 11 June 1957, 9 April 1957.
106 West [Naish], diary entry, 22 May 1957.
107 Naish, *Deuteronomy 24*-1; West [Naish], diary entry, 30 June 1957.
108 West [Naish], diary entry, 24 July 1957.

Naish's personality traits

At the inquest into Naish's death, West acknowledged that her husband had 'suffered from fits of depression and had so suffered for some years, even prior to our marriage'.[109] West had not recorded any particular signs of the mental illness that would consume Naish in the last years of his life in her diary, but she had repeatedly described some worrying traits. Naish could be inexplicably and unpredictably possessive, unsociable, moody, miserable, sensitive, argumentative and obsessive. She observed that he lacked the charm of her other friends, and only rarely showed comedic traits in his work. It is not surprising that she hardly ever described him as cheerful or happy. Nonetheless, she found him kind and even 'ideal' company. Children seemed attracted to him and he naturally assumed an 'Uncle Jack' role.[110]

Naish was not one for making romantic gestures, but he was generous with his time, energy and money, giving West practical gifts, such as a bicycle and a clock.[111] By July 1957, he was firmly entrenched in her life, fixing her bike, cooking her evening meals, even doing her laundry. He had also, it seems, convinced her to abandon the religious practices that had previously sustained her: 'For Jack's sake am trying out agnosticism for 1/12.' She justified this decision by claiming that it 'is more honest for certainly Jack takes 1st place'.[112] However, it is more likely that West's religious questioning was, in part, a reaction to the racism she witnessed in Fiji and the condescending attitudes of the missionaries towards their Indigenous congregations. She enjoyed non-mission company and was entertained frequently in Indian homes. Despising the 'polite afternoon tea session[s]' and the 'awful "aren't we Europeans grand" sort of conversation', she wished she 'could get to know the Indians better, especially a few non-Christian ones'.[113]

The engagement

Naish and West's relationship settled into a comfortable routine and they become very 'Darby and Joan'.[114]

By September 1957, Naish was planning to leave Fiji but hoped to return. West had no intention of leaving Fiji. She liked being the Ba mission doctor.[115] Then, in a sudden turn of events, Naish proposed to West, who was happy and excited but nervous about telling her mother. Finally, she did and her parents and Naish's mother all responded happily. West resigned in October, scheduling her departure for the

109 Death Inquest, John Naish, QSA: Item ID 350053, Inquest file no. 452/1963.
110 West [Naish], diary entry, 25 December 1957.
111 West [Naish], diary entry, 3 October 1957.
112 West [Naish], diary entry, 10 October 1957.
113 West [Naish], diary entry, 7 November 1956.
114 West [Naish], diary entry, 29 September 1957.
115 West [Naish], diary entry, 3 September 1957.

following February. Naish's return journey to Wales was shelved. Instead, the couple would return to Australia where Naish would resume cane cutting. Despite having witnessed cane cutting in Fiji, West was somewhat naive about the work: 'Tonight he taught me how to cut cane—[it's] wonderful', she gushed.[116] Less than three weeks after tendering her resignation, it was accepted and her successor appointed. Having not wholly committed to the idea of leaving Fiji, and holding onto the possibility that she might be employed by the hospital rather than the mission, she was dismayed that things had progressed so quickly.[117] Her despondency increased when an idyllic Christmas spent at a guesthouse soured due to Naish's inexcusably bad behaviour. Unfortunately, in close quarters, she bore the brunt of his frustration. In exasperation she wrote: 'I truly have done all I could for him. I can't see how it can work out.'[118] This was ominous because she was already pregnant.

Pregnancy and marriage

West told Naish around the end of January 1958 that she was pregnant. A month later, he resigned from Burns Philp. She did not explicitly mention how he felt about the unplanned pregnancy, but she did write that: 'Life isn't a bed of roses these days.'[119] They returned to Australia separately in early March, he to Brisbane and she to Adelaide.[120] There she caught up with friends and relatives and prepared and equipped the car and trailer for their journey to Queensland. He arrived in Adelaide on 20 March, the day of their marriage. His joy for once was patently clear: 'The plane came in, & out shot Jack, hair & coat flying, grinning all over.'[121]

Naish claimed publicly that they had married in Fiji before returning to Australia.[122] West, by contrast, was not so coy, openly declaring in a pro-abortion letter to the *Bulletin* that she had been 'pregnant and unmarried'.[123] His opaqueness may have been attributable to West's mother's change of attitude after she realised that her pregnant daughter would be marrying an immigrant labourer of no substantial means.[124] There were others, too, who did not approve of West's marriage and the tactlessly communicated opinions of friends cut Naish deeply.[125] It is possible that the emphasis on illegitimacy in *The Cruel Field* and associated plays was an articulation of his conflicted feelings about his culpability in the unplanned pregnancy.[126]

116 West [Naish], diary entry, 21 October 1957.
117 West [Naish], diary entry, 29 October 1957.
118 West [Naish], diary entry, 28 December 1957.
119 West [Naish], diary entry, 29 January 1958.
120 Commonwealth of Australia, 'Incoming Passenger Card (Aircraft)', 1 March 1958, Rosemary Ruth West, Passenger Arrivals Index, 1898–1972, NAA; Commonwealth of Australia, 'Incoming Passenger Card (Aircraft)', 12 March 1958, John Naish, Passenger Arrivals Index, 1898–1972, NAA.
121 West [Naish], diary entry, 20 March 1958.
122 Dust jacket of *The Cruel Field* and the author 'bio' of *Deuteronomy 24-1.*
123 Rosemary Naish, 'Legalizing Abortion', *Bulletin*, 5 January 1963, 31.
124 West [Naish], diary entry, 21 March 1958.
125 West [Naish], diary entry, 24 October 1957.
126 John Naish, *The Maoris,* unpublished play; John Naish, *The Strange Black Creatures*, unpublished play.

Born into a privileged and educated Adelaide family, West had followed her father, Esmond, into medicine. During her university years, she was active in the Student Christian Movement and regularly convened events that featured in the social pages of Adelaide's newspapers. She and her family had attended society weddings, and she had organised pre-wedding parties and officiated resplendently as bridesmaid. In contrast, Naish and West's marriage at the Adelaide Registry Office was without fanfare. The circumstances of their wedding and her mother's unveiled disapproval[127] found expression in Naish's play *The Claw* when William's wife, Veronica, identified herself as 'the silly daughter who did the unforgivable thing—gave her [mother] an unsophisticated son-in-law'.[128]

Northbound

Two days after their wedding, the couple left on their honeymoon, destination Cairns. Along the way they camped in their tent, or stayed in B & Bs, boardings houses and the occasional hotel. In Melbourne, Naish paid for somebody to type up scripts, but in Brisbane they bought a typewriter, which they had to learn to use.[129] Every piece of writing to follow would be typed on that typewriter. A month and a half after leaving Adelaide they arrived in Babinda, a location Naish seemed to have developed a fondness for because he told West a lot about it. A day later, they were in Cairns. The sandflies drove them from their camp at Machans Beach to Naish's ex-boarding house where, West wrote, 'everyone opens the conversation by telling him Irene is married and is in Mt Moresby'.[130] Evidently, Irene must have been a former love interest. Naish introduced West to his cane cutting and theatre friends. (Formerly, he had been part of the Machans Beach Play Reading Group.[131])

Naish soon secured a three-man cut at Bartle Frere (Babinda). West would live in the barracks with him and cook for the men. She recorded excitedly that 'Jack got a very hopeful letter about "TFMP" [the First Mrs Peters]'.[132] A mention of Naish still working on short stories indicates that he was writing episodes of *The Clean Breast* at this time. As in Fiji, the couple immersed themselves in the little theatre scene, attending play readings, theatre and concert performances, and the North Queensland Drama festival at Innisfail. It did not take them long to settle on a house to purchase in suburban Cairns, for which Naish would proudly make the nameplate 'Rosyn Glas'. Once the season began, they spent the week in the barracks and weekends in Cairns at 45 Mayers Street.

127 West [Naish], diary entry, 21 March 1958.
128 Naish, 'The Claw', 38.
129 West [Naish], diary entry, 19 April 1958.
130 West [Naish], diary entry, 9 May 1958.
131 'Mackan's Beach Notes', *Cairns Post*, 26 May 1954, 4.
132 West [Naish], diary entry, 9 May 1958. Probably its acceptance for publication as *Deuteronomy 24-1*.

West delighted in her days at the barracks, cooking on the wood stove, the early mornings, the bird song, the surrounding cane fields and rain forest, and the stream close by. Her spare time was taken up typing and revising Naish's short stories and plays. Indeed, her diaries show that she was a creative influence and Naish's equal as he channelled his disquiet about the evils of the world into coherent prose. In a family copy of *The Clean Breast*, an inscription, reads: 'To Rose. Whose love and encouragement made this little book possible. Jack.' The inscription is dated '1/4/63'—three and half months before his death.[133] Those were happy and tender days. West especially liked the nights:

> bathing and massaging Jack (I prop him in a tub of hot water, and I rub him with warm oil), giving him a good night cuddle, and listening to the locos as they rumble over the bridge.[134]

Between jobs around their home, Naish would spend his Saturdays writing. West began typing up a four-act play and Naish was 'full of a new play he's just thought of'.[135] They later held a play reading of the four-act play on their back lawn followed by a reading of the non-realism play *Woman at Sundown*, which Naish intended to submit to a television competition.[136] The new medium offered authors fresh opportunities and it proved possible for a playwright who got his start in local theatre to make the transition to writing for television. Innisfail local Vince (real name, Vivian) Moran, scriptwriter for *Homicide*, *All the Rivers Run* and *Flying Doctors* (Crawford Productions), is one such example.[137]

In *The Claw*, Jack's wife Veronica tells her brother that the cane cutting lifestyle is hard. 'The novelty soon wore off for me', she told him, adding: 'There's not much glamour in sweated labour'.[138] In West's diaries, we catch glimpses of the unglamourous aspects of cane cutting: 'the men all caked with mud and sopping wet, and all their clothes wet and gritty';[139] and 'Jack had a very bad night with his arm'.[140] She made shoulder pads for his work shirts to help minimise the impact of loading cane (the most onerous task of cane cutting) on his shoulders.

Just before their first baby was due, the farmer decided that the cut could be finished with one man and so Naish and his mate Larry had to find another cut and leave the barracks. They searched from South Johnstone to Gordonvale with no luck. The uncertainty must have been nerve-racking for West with the baby imminent. Their first son, Guy, was born on 7 September 1958 in Babinda. Qualifying the joy was an evaporated contract and a house and family to maintain. However, Naish and Larry

133 Email correspondence, Guy West to author, 2 July 2020.
134 Rosemary West [Naish], diary entry, 17 June 1958.
135 Rosemary West [Naish], diary entry, 1 June 1958.
136 John Naish, *Woman at Sundown*, unpublished play.
137 Tom Hegarty, 'Memories of Vince', 25 November 2004, crawfordproductions.tv/webstuff/moran.html.
138 Naish, 'The Claw', 39.
139 West [Naish], diary entry, 23 June 1958.
140 West [Naish], diary entry, 8 August 1958.

soon secured a cut at Green Hill (Cairns) and Larry would board with them for the rest of the season. At this time, their happiness was replete. West thought Naish and Guy 'the 2 most perfect men in the world',[141] and Naish made it clear to her how important she was to him.[142] Despite the disruptions and difficulties of that season, and the demands of a newborn, Naish was still writing and West typing and editing.

Around this time, George Holland came into their lives. A former drama critic of the London *Illustrated News*, he had retired to north Queensland to be close to family. He conducted drama lectures and worked as a theatre critic and adjudicator of drama festivals conducted by the Far North Queensland Amateur Theatrical Association (FNQATA). Naish and West befriended him, going to Gordonvale to pick him up and bring him back to Rosyn Glas for 'a very enjoyable evening, talking, and listening to their recording of "Under Milk Wood"'.[143] So impressed was Naish by Holland that he would dedicate his book *That Men Should Fear* to him.

Their social life was busy despite the baby. West's brother John, who was living in England, came to visit, and she took him out to Green Hill to see the men cutting. This visit found its way into *The Claw* when Veronica's brother, Gerald Beddow, a theatre critic, visited from England. After moving on from Green Hill to Woree to cut, the season ended, Larry left for the slack and they started readying their house for a sale that did not eventuate. Now registered with the Queensland Medical Board to practise in Queensland, West started looking for locum positions for the slack and secured one in Herberton.

During quiet times at work, she typed Naish's stories. Then came the news that one of Naish's plays had been commended in the General Holden Motors National Playwrights Competition. During one of her outpatient clinics, West tended a Huntington's chorea case. She recorded: 'All the way home J. and I thought of a play [*That Men Should Fear*] about it.'[144] They had 'fun' writing the play, which gave rise to Naish's second novel of the same name.[145] By the new year, 1959, Naish had written two more short stories and sketched out another.[146] From Herberton, they returned to Cairns to let 45 Mayers Street and then moved to Atherton to a flat provided by the Atherton Hospital.

Those days working and exploring the Atherton Tablelands, stopping at picturesque waterholes to swim on the way back from clinics, were largely without tension. *That Men Should Fear* is set in the cane fields of far north Queensland, yet the instantly recognisable geomorphic feature of the Atherton Tablelands, the eerie Mount Hypipamee Crater, a huge volcanic blowhole 142 meters deep, is a constant malign presence in the narrative. On the way home from clinics, as they toured the

141 West [Naish], diary entry, 17 September 1958.
142 West [Naish], diary entry, 5 November 1958.
143 West [Naish], diary entry, 8 November 1958.
144 West [Naish], diary entry, 22 December 1958. The play would be built on to become the novel of the same name.
145 West [Naish], diary entry, 24 December 1958.
146 Water damage of West's diary obliterated what type of piece he was working on.

countryside, they undoubtedly would have visited the crater, which, even then, was a popular tourist sight. Naish, relishing a well-earned respite from cane cutting, spent his time writing, caring for Guy and chauffeuring West to her outpatient clinics. He described their life at this time as 'all anticipatory instead of backward looking'.[147] They planned to settle in Cairns with the idea of buying another house, since 45 Mayers Street was let.

Back to Wales

Then West fell pregnant again. In what seems to have been a spur of the moment decision, they decided to journey back to Wales. On 12 June, they set sail from Sydney. Perhaps Naish wanted to introduce West and toddler Guy to his family?[148] Maybe there was still that unfilled desire to return home? Perhaps, as he wrote in *The Clean Breast*: 'If you didn't go back you were always in a state of suspension, doubt?'[149] The decision meant that West gave birth to their second son, Lee, in the Naish family home at Port Talbot.

Professionally, the trip opened opportunities for Naish. He engaged the literary agent A. M. Heath & Company, and with that firm's assistance secured his first book contract, resulting in the publication of *The Clean Breast* by New Authors Limited, an initiative begun in 1957 by one of Britain's oldest publishing houses, Hutchinson of London.[150] New Authors Limited aimed 'to reconcile the frustrations of the new writer who has a clear talent … with the harsh economic climate of publishing as it is today'.[151] Authors from both the British Isles and the Antipodes were considered.

While they enjoyed much of their stay, particularly catching up with Naish's mother and Lilian and her family, the challenge of wintery weather (drying nappies and amusing a toddler indoors) and tensions of cohabiting with family soon saw them eager to return home. They returned to Australia separately. The sea journey over had been 'a horror trip', with Guy falling very sick, so West decided that she and the children would return to Australia by plane via Fiji.[152] To save money, Naish travelled by sea on the *Fairsky*. They arrived back in Cairns in plenty of time for the harvest. In 1960, Naish was cutting at Mossman and they were living back at 45 Mayers Street where West resumed the role of housewife.

147 West [Naish], diary entry, 1 January 1959.
148 Email correspondence, Naish family to author, 4 August 2020.
149 Naish, *The Clean Breast*, 116.
150 *The Clean Breast* – Naish–Head contract, 16 November 1960, Penguin Random House Archive, Northants. Hutchinson had offices in Sydney and Melbourne and suitable manuscripts were sent to London for consideration. Naish would visit those offices in 1962.
151 Robert Lusty, 'A note on NEW AUTHORS LIMITED', in Naish, *The Clean Breast.*
152 Email correspondence, Naish family to author, 11 August 2020.

Writing challenges

As Naish would learn, writing from the depths of tropical north Queensland presented its own set of challenges. While securing book publishing contracts did not seem insurmountable, attracting publishing and performance opportunities for his 17 plays was another matter. It was not for want of initiative. Among his surviving files is an introduction to an anthology—*Six Plays on Sex*: *Picture Night*, *Glamour*, *The Claw*, *The Factory*, *The Maoris* and *The First Mrs Peters*. These were plays he thought Australians could recognise themselves in and could be reasonably easily cast and staged by small amateur groups.[153] Little theatres that favoured and fostered Australian drama were commonplace in Australia prior to WWII.[154] After the war, a renewed little theatre movement flourished. In north Queensland in the 1950s, numerous groups formed in towns extending from Ingham, north to Weipa and west to the Atherton Tablelands. Little theatres looked to provide theatre-going opportunities to communities distant from the metropolitan centres and the commercial theatre circuit. They also provided local playwrights with performance opportunities.[155]

The main vector for aspiring playwrights in north Queensland was FNQATA, which had been founded in 1958 under the auspices of the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust (AETT), which in turn had been founded in 1954 on the impetus of the little theatre movement. The AETT's aim was 'to provide a theatre of Australians by Australians for Australians'.[156] One initiative was to conduct playwriting competitions and provide opportunities for the winning plays to be performed. The AETT played a part in thrusting into the limelight a number of eminent Australian playwrights. In 1958, when both Naish and the Sydney actor Peter Kenna entered in the AETT's Australian Play Competition, there were 202 entries. Kenna won with *The Slaughter of St Teresa's Day*, while Naish's *The Strange Black Creatures* was one of 12 plays given special commendation.[157]

The FNQATA, like its sponsor body, conducted one-act play drama festivals and annual playwriting competitions. J. W. L. Donovan, president of the FNQATA in 1963, wrote that upon the little theatres rested 'the responsibility of keeping theatre alive in the Far North'.[158] And so they did, but unfortunately their programs mainly featured plays written by internationally renowned playwrights and only occasionally north Queensland playwrights such as Vince Moran or Naish.[159] *The First Mrs*

153 John Naish, Introduction, *Six Plays on Sex* (unpublished anthology).
154 Jennifer J. Radbourne, 'Little Theatre: Its Development, since World War II, in Australia, with Particular Reference to Queensland' (Master of Arts thesis, University of Queensland, 1978), 10.
155 J. W. L. Donovan, 'Theatre in the Far North', *Programme for the Seventh Annual Drama Festival of the Far North Queensland Amateur Theatrical Association*, Innisfail 1–15 June 1963.
156 *The Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust: The First Year* (Sydney: Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust, 1956), 10.
157 'A Play Contest Won by Sydney Actor', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 December 1958, 5. Which of his plays he submitted is unknown. I conclude that the submitted play was *The Strange Black Creatures* (otherwise titled *Mark, the Syrup and the Ashes*).
158 Donovan, 'Theatre in the Far North'.
159 See Vince Moran's plays, *Find Me at the Federal*, *A Custom More Honoured* and *Manly Ferry*.

Peters was performed by The Atherton Players in Cairns in the Hibernian Hall on 24 June 1960. Submitting the script under an alternative title to the original[160] to the FNQATA's 1960 playwriting competition qualified it for entry under conditions that specified Queensland residency and that the play had not been published or previously performed.[161] George Holland adjudicated and rated it highly for its atmosphere, dialogue and 'instinct for humour and character'. He found it 'refreshing' to see 'a little bit of Australia' portrayed on stage.[162] In 1962, Naish won the FNQATA playwriting competition with the one-act play *The Maoris*.[163] He was awarded the £30 first prize and an additional £10 for 'the best play submitted with an Australian theme'.[164] His play was judged to be deceptively simple but with dialogue that was 'taut and alive',[165] and was applauded for 'its fundamental honesty of feeling and its sureness in translation into stage terms'.[166]

Such competitions played an important role in encouraging Australian playwrights and Australian themes; however, while a winning play might get staged, there was no guarantee of wider audiences. There is no record of *The Maoris* having been performed. In fact, there was no known extant copy of the play until, in response to my enquiries, a copy was found in the collection of the Atherton Performing Arts Group. The actor, playwright, university lecturer and collector of unpublished play scripts Eunice Hanger lamented:

> There have been a great many plays written by Queenslanders, many on Queensland themes. But few Queenslanders, even if they have seen one or two such plays, have seen many or all of them. Few of the playwrights have seen many of them.[167]

There are many reasons why the bulk of Naish's plays were not published or performed, none of which are unique to Naish. According to Hanger, 'no publisher with any sense will publish plays … because there is no sale for them and little prestige in the publishing'.[168] She believed that the AETT did not live up to its promise of nurturing and promoting local playwrights.[169] Recognising the difficulties facing local playwrights and the neglect of their unpublished scripts, she designated herself

160 Published in 1958 as *Deuteronomy 24-1*.
161 'Competition', *Torres News*, 29 December 1959, 9.
162 'Drama Festival. Three Plays Last Night', *Cairns Post*, 25 June 1960, 5.
163 The word 'Maoris' is a play on words. If said with a broad Australian accent it is pronounced 'marries'. The 'Maoris' are the married canecutters, the 'Singalese', the single canecutters.
164 R. Stocker, C. Eustance and G. Holland, 'Far North Queensland Amateur Theatrical Association Playwriting Competition', Program, Sixth Annual Drama Festival of the Far North Queensland Amateur Theatrical Association, Cairns, 7–9 June 1962.
165 Stocker, Eustance and Holland, 'Far North Queensland Amateur Theatrical Association'.
166 Stocker, Eustance and Holland, 'Far North Queensland Amateur Theatrical Association'.
167 Eunice Hanger, 'Queensland Drama', *Southerly* 20, no. 4 (1959): 216.
168 Hanger, 'Queensland Drama'.
169 Richard Fotheringham, 'Eunice Hanger (1922–1972)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, The Australian National University, published first in hardcopy 1966, adb.anu.edu.au/biography/hanger-eunice-10407.

'a wet nurse to the orphans abandoned by the [Australian Elizabethan] Trust'.[170] In order to forestall their loss, Hanger collected those she judged meritorious and suitable to little theatre production. Numbering around 2,000, they are now held in the Hanger Collection in the Fryer Memorial Library, University of Queensland, Brisbane. Among the first 30 manuscripts she collected were Naish's *The Paul Davis Affair* and *The Strange Black Creatures*.[171]

Living in the parochial cultural space of far north Queensland, and sinking into deepening depression, Naish was poorly placed to appreciate that lack of critical acclaim and performance and publication opportunities for his plays were not, as he perceived it, personal failures, but a perversely contradictory disinterest in north Queensland–produced material. *The Claw*'s protagonist expressed those feelings of failure and fear: 'We'll never get away … I'll die on the canefields … I'll have failed again like I been failing for thirty-six years.'[172]

While his sugar country and outback plays were defined by social realism, Naish was searching for an alternative voice. He and a number of other Australian playwrights—dubbed the 'lonely playwrights'—were moving in the direction of non-realism in the 1950s.[173] Peter Fitzpatrick described them as isolated, geographically, from most of the places where Australian plays might be performed, and as having declined membership of the school of realistic writing that dominated the era.[174] Naish's new voice can be heard in *The Paul Davis Affair*, *Peace Polony* and *The Lease of Life*.

The Cruel Field was released in 1962 alongside new works by Thea Astley, Dymphna Cusack, John O'Grady and Patrick White. Published by Hutchinson of London, it was well received. The novelist, poet and conservationist Nancy Cato wrote that Naish had an extraordinary ability to do what Joseph Conrad said was the novelist's first duty—to 'make see'.[175] Another writer commented on Naish's 'gift of narrative' and asserted that 'the critics who saw Naish's promise in his initial effort have not erred in their estimation'.[176] In the character of the British immigrant and canecutter Carol, Naish was clearly channelling his own angst. An aspiring playwright, Carol struggled to bring characters to life. 'Blank page after blank identical page of his own experience and his own failure' tormented him.[177] That *The Clean Breast* and *The Cruel Field* were published to critical approbation might have been affirming. However, Naish's unravelling mental state between 1962 and 1963 clouded his ability to find comfort in his work or to distance himself from the psychological and circumstantial tensions so brutally blatant in his fiction.

170 Fotheringham, 'Eunice Hanger'.
171 'A Playwright's Collection of Plays', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 May 1960, 29.
172 Naish, 'The Claw', 43.
173 Peter Fitzpatrick, *After 'The Doll': Australian Drama since* 1955 (Melbourne: Edward Arnold, 1979), 69.
174 Fitzpatrick, *After 'The Doll'*.
175 Nancy Cato, 'Cutters and Snakehips', *Australian Book Review*, October (1962): 153.
176 'The Cruel Field', *Cairns Post*, 3 November 1962, 6.
177 Naish, *The Cruel Field*, 113.

The final years

When West took the position of medical superintendent at the Cooktown Hospital, Naish ceased cane cutting, was writing full-time and caring for the children. In Figure 2 we see Naish with his children, Guy and Lee. Even before she left Wales, West was anticipating taking on such a role back in Australia. Whether it was a mutual decision, enabling them both to pursue the careers they loved, or one foisted upon them by Naish's deteriorating mental condition, is unclear. But, for the time being, writing full-time, Naish described himself as being 'in very good circumstances and should be producing manuscripts regularly'.[178]

In Cooktown, Naish joined the local theatre group, The Cooktown Players. In 1962, he produced and acted in a Harold Pinter play, *The Dumb Waiter*, performed at the sixth annual drama festival of the FNQATA at the Hibernian Hall, Cairns.

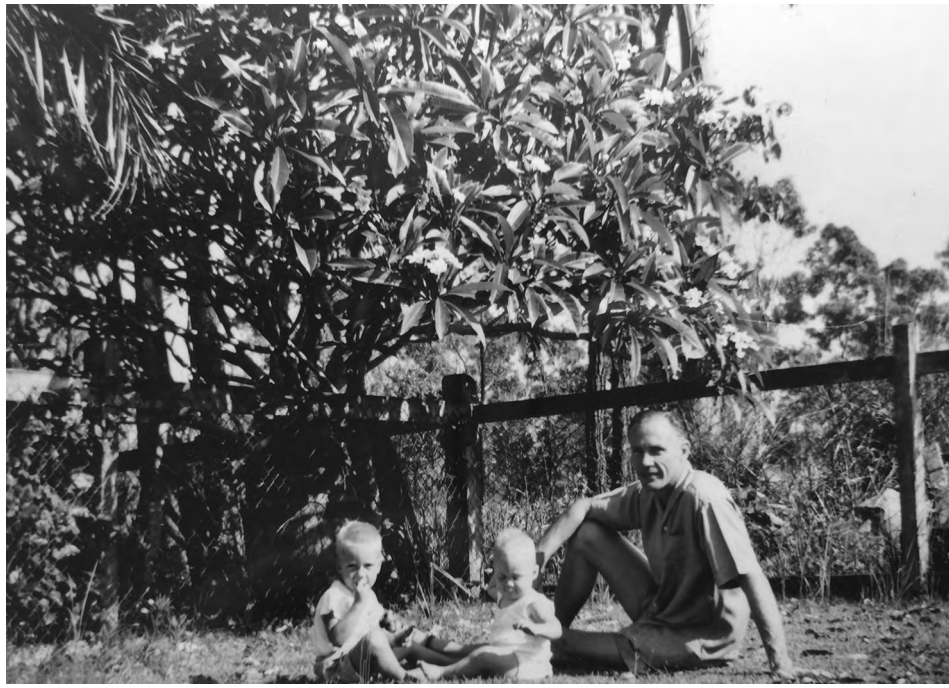

Figure 2: John Naish and his children, c. late 1960.
Source: Naish family photograph.

178 John Naish to Mr Nicol, 20 February 1962, Penguin Random House Archives, Northants, UK.

When Naish began exhibiting severe symptoms of acute depression, anxiety and sleeplessness, West prescribed and supervised his treatment and consulted other physicians who, in turn, each prescribed a cocktail of medications. None seemed to offer sustained relief. His condition suddenly deteriorated in 1963, exposing his family to violent outbursts and threats of suicide and harm.[179] Friends began to distance themselves.[180] *That Men Should Fear* was released in early 1963 by Hutchinson and published in both hard back and pocket editions in the Red Arrow series. The 'unmitigated gloom' of the work could hardly have been good for his state of mind.[181] His yearning for release and the way it could be achieved was exposed in the character of Mary. Her two brothers had already committed suicide because of the spectre of Huntington's chorea, and she faced the possibility of the same fate. Naish wrote:

> She was not a religionist who sanctified suffering as doggedly as human life itself: she was a doctor, with access to any and every means of painless release—if the slaughter of millions was made in sacrifice to the War God, to say nothing of blinding and crippling—then euthanasia was by comparison sanity, humanitarianism.[182]

The alternative was messy: 'phone calls, ambulances, funerals, people held on suspicion, inquests, post-mortems, trouble with the newspapers'—exactly what ensued after his suicide.[183] Around April 1963, West took time off work and took Naish to Sydney where he voluntarily admitted himself to the psychiatric ward of North Ryde Hospital. He spent three months there. Meanwhile, *Deuteronomy 24-1* was performed by the Tully Dramatic Society at Innisfail in June. It was possible he did not know about this performance. Shortly after his return from Sydney, he died on 19 July 1963 of a self-administered barbiturate overdose.

An inquest into his death took four months due to suspicions about the excessive number of tablets dispensed to Naish given his critical mental condition. However, the inquest found no third-party culpability.[184] After his burial in the Cairns Cemetery, West and the children left Cooktown. As these events unfolded, *That Men Should Fear*, one of 29 works submitted by Australian novelists and playwrights for the 1963 Miles Franklin Literary Award, was among nine commended for their qualities. The award was won by playwright Sumner Locke Elliott for his first novel, *Careful, He Might Hear You*.[185] Poignantly, in what turned out to be a posthumous review, a critic wrote that Naish's *That Men Should Fear* showed that he was 'becoming one of Australia's most impressive new writers'.[186]

179 Evidence provided at inquest—John Naish, 1 November 1963, QSA: Item ID 350053.
180 Email correspondence, JS to author (transcription of conversation with D. L.), 25 November 2020. Informants requested anonymity.
181 'New Fiction', *Times*, 23 May 1963, 15.
182 Naish, *That Men Should Fear*, 247.
183 Naish, *The Paul Davis Affair*, 19.
184 Findings, E. N. Loane, coroner, Inquest—John Naish, 1963, QSA: Item ID 350053.
185 'Miles Franklin Literary Award Won by Sydney Playwright', Sydney Morning Herald, 15 April 1964, 9.
186 'Fiction still has a Future in Australia', *Sydney Morning Herald,* 24 August 1963, 15.

Conclusion

This biographical examination not only introduces John Naish, author and playwright, to a new audience but also addresses the critical questions of why and how we should engage with his works in the twenty-first century. Cheryl Taylor and Elizabeth Perkins argue that, although north Queensland writing does not have a high profile in world literature, its uniqueness and diversity make it important for the insights it affords 'into the contending subliminal forces that continue to shape the region's politics and history'.[187] In recent years, various scholars from the history and literary disciplines have studied Naish's works, finding new perspectives and relevancies for twenty-first-century audiences. With this renewed interest, his works are shifting from musty cultural artefacts to dynamic sources prime for re-reading and reinterpretation.

In the 1950s, *The Cruel Field* was predictably identified as a man's novel populated by men who were boozy, matey and brutish in their capacity for hard, dirty, physical work. More nuanced twenty-first-century readings suggest that Naish gives perceptive insights into the tropical environs, the lives of women, immigrants and Indigenous people in the 1950s. Fictional writing like Naish's sugar country works is indispensable to an analysis of world literature and sugar world histories in a postcolonial context. Naish explicitly acknowledged that the sugar industry was complicit in the disruption of Aboriginal traditional ways of life, and wrote with insight, sensitivity and sympathy of the institutionalised and casual racism he observed in rural north Queensland in the 1950s.

I have demonstrated here that some of Naish's other works—his autobiography and his plays—show that he was much more than his sugar country works, and that, through those works, he was authentically grappling with universal themes that retain their potency. They reveal his anti-war stance, fear of nuclear war, and concerns about the power of the media and the dissemination of misinformation; his alarm about industrial pollution and environmental damage; a vehement response to worker exploitation; a critical view of dogmatic religiosity; and a powerful argument for the legalisation of euthanasia.

Naish's descent into literary oblivion was circumstantial rather than deserved. Critical consensus was that Naish was a 'born storyteller'.[188] It is regrettable that his premature death meant that he could not consolidate his reputation and fulfil the promise that many clearly recognised in him. With digitisation of his plays and online access, Naish's entire oeuvre is now open to twenty-first-century scrutiny and hitherto unexplored themes can be examined. Sixty years after his death, Naish is not only being recognised for his storytelling ability but also as a voice that demands our attention for being uncomfortably contemporary.

187 Taylor and Perkins, 'Warm Words', 255.
188 'The Clean Breast: A Rave Review for John Naish', *Times*, 29 June 1961, 15.