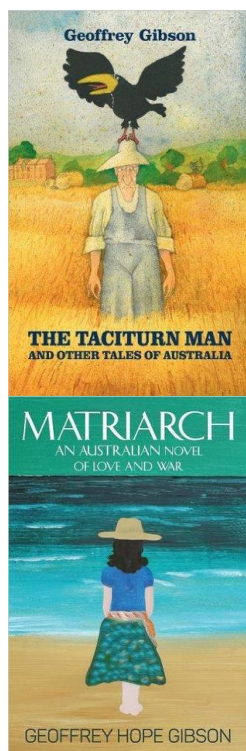


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## Book Review



Geoffrey Gibson, *Taciturn Man and Other Tales of Australia*,  
Ann Arbor: Modern History Press, 2011.  
ISBN 9781615991211

Geoffrey Hope Gibson, *Matriarch: An Australian Novel of Love and War*, Ann Arbor: Modern History Press, 2016.  
ISBN 9781615992706

## On Fencing, Corner Groceries, and Running Barefoot: A Memoir of a pre-Baby Boomer

Jean Page

It is not so common these days to come across what Bill Ashcroft might call a “white settler” account of growing up in the Australian bush. In *Taciturn Man and Other Tales of Australia* Geoffrey Gibson, a pre Baby-Boomer, of the same generation and rural provenance as Les Murray, writes of growing up in the 1940s in rural New South Wales, and also, the earlier rural life of his father Alexander (1905-1965). Alexander Gibson, the “taciturn” man of this tribute by memoir published by the Ann Arbor-based Modern History Press, was born in Somerset, and one of a number of English who migrated to Australia sometime after WWI. (D. H. Lawrence had also considered migrating but only stopped for six weeks to gather material for and write, or help write, two novels.)

The first 30 pages of Part I offers the son’s account of his father Alexander’s struggle to set up, with little experience, as a sheep farmer in the isolated grazing blocks of the New England plateau of NSW. While it involves the all too common passage through bushfires, drought, the 1929 Great Depression, illness, failure and selling out, it is recounted nonetheless with unfailing humour that brings to life the personality of the author’s taciturn father. Alexander Gibson is portrayed as happier in his rural home cooking dinner on the living-room fire than cooped up in the family’s next adventure, the Double Bay grocery, where he helped out “selling groceries to the fussy ladies” (11). This larger-than-life character infinitely preferred retreating to the “cold, remote hills” (11) of his new bush block near Inverell, “where he kept hens, milked a cow, killed a fowl every now and then” (9). While Gibson doesn’t desist from passing comment on the essentially Australian *topos* surrounding his father’s and his family’s early life: “The stoic and lone, battling farmer is not

a myth ...” (3), his touch is light. While painting his picture truthfully (early morning fencing (13), fitting a plough to a tractor, (19) eating nothing but tins of herrings in tomato sauce (9)), his aim is to tell his father’s story, and its constant rural thread, in an entertaining way. There are some bursts of lyrical writing on the rural landscape, though: “the endless path of the Milky Way, ... like a heavenly pathway of a million candelabras!” (22). But these are quickly followed, in Gibson’s concrete matter-of-fact, unsentimental style, by a return to the multitude of physical and human activities involved in farming—from lambing and road building to attending Country Women’s Association meetings. Part I concludes with stories of family life based in the grocery in Double Bay, a situation reflecting the shift to suburbia throughout Australia after WWII. The narrator *persona* of the youthful Geoffrey Gibson, an affable and gregarious youth becoming man, in contrast to his hermit father, brings to life his new world, the streets around the Double Bay grocery, of harbour ocean pools, running barefoot all year except for school. “Playground Diplomacy” portraying the neighbourhood bully “Fishhead” Williams is one of Gilbert’s gems.

Parts II to IV—Young Adulthood, The Middle Years and Saying Goodbyes—are divided into short accounts of 2-3 page chapters with subtitle, offering anecdotal accounts of the progress of the author-subject Geoffrey Gibson. These tales “written for entertainment” (105) recount amusing anecdotes, short character sketches, including a number of good one-liners, and are grounded in Sydney suburban experience, albeit the comfortable area abutting the harbour. Autobiographical incidents, brief character sketches; and iconic rites of passage are well suggested by their titles: “Acceptable Dress,” “The Interview,” “A Tennis Match,” “A Song for a Trooper,” “Donkeys at the Races.” They are all, as described in the Forward, “picturesque storytelling” (iv).

Gibson’s anecdotes have something in common with the family-inspired newspaper columns such as those by Ross Campbell for the Sydney’s *Daily Telegraph* or the *Women’s Weekly* from the 1950s to the 1970s and make for good easy reading. As that comedian of suburbia Barry Humphries once dubbed Campbell, in playful vengeance, as “that Melbourne wag,” so Gibson might deserve to be dubbed “that Sydney wag,” were he better known. Some of his language, while not quite politically correct, (making “something worthwhile out of clapped-out wilderness” (23)), can be explained by their historical context.

This world of a past brought to life by Gibson in Part I, and even Parts II-IV is appealing, seemingly innocent, a more provincial world, belonging to family memory but increasingly less recognisable, the world of our parents, grandparents, great-grandparents. Gibson’s childhood heralded the increasing internationalisation of Australia, with post-war immigration and the growing influence of the United States, as seen in the US servicemen whose hired motorboats the young Gilbert would help remove from being the shallows of Sydney harbour. Arguably, the main purpose of memoir is to preserve personal accounts of history. Gilbert does this well and with unfailing humour. The author asks in an end note: “So what have we lost?” (104) and suggests—the ability to entertain ourselves. It seems also to reflect on differences and their significance.

Gibson’s publisher is based in North America where memoir is a genre of growing importance, both for creative and therapeutic writing. Another of its purported purposes is to aid healing. Australia’s is certainly not an innocent past and Gibson, for all his stories of a largely wholesome phase in our social history, is quick to recognise where significant injustices have occurred.

One of his lyrical tributes to place alludes to its major victim, the original, indigenous population: “This is so fragile a place where, until the coming of the white man, for many thousands of years, humans have barely left their mark. The passing of the original inhabitants in the soft valleys and slopes of this ancient mountain range has largely gone unrecorded” (18).

This quite different perspective, nearly but not quite extraneous to the drift of Gilbert’s humorous anecdotes about his real estate experience and work in a trustee’s office, is contained in the chapter titled “Looking for My Brother.” It is presented as an excerpt from Gilbert’s novel “The Dust of their Dreaming” about two indigenous children who spent their early childhood on a cattle station. This appears to be the precursor of the second publication *Matriarch*, which, as Gibson explains in its introduction, has its genesis as a personal apology “for the raw deal” meted out to the indigenous people “since Captain Phillip sailed to these shores” (“Author’s Note) but more specifically in remembrance of a specific act of indifference on the part of him and his father when on a drive to town, they passed by an aboriginal man lying beside the track without giving aid (“About the Author”). His saga about four generations of an Aboriginal family on a cattle station in the Northern Territory, from about 1900 to present time, with its focus on the brother and sister of “Looking for my Brother,” covers many of the horrors of postcolonial indigenous history, the colonial occupation of traditional lands, the arrival of missionaries, the removal of indigenous children, orphanages and training homes, which the family experience in their successive generations.

Gilbert’s brother and sister protagonists are depicted in the setting of post-WWII contemporary Australian history. If their history weren’t already rich enough they are exposed to a gamut of recent contemporary experiences and problems, in a roller coaster plot involving the high-end catering industry: the sister, Alkina, inherits the role of matriarch and storyteller from her great-grandmother namesake, while the brother Darain, a Vietnam war serviceman, suffers from infertility from chemical defoliants, drug addiction, etc., in a plot which shifts strangely to murder mystery. Eventually all ends almost well. One can’t help admire Gilbert’s intention to set things right if only in his story, which is sympathetic to its indigenous protagonists. But it shows in his own text, *Taciturn Man*, in its wit, knowledge and ease, that Gilbert writes most authentically his own memoir, as now the Alkinas and Darains are writing so effectively their own.