

MY SHIRALEE. RUSSELL DRYSDALE: DRAWINGS

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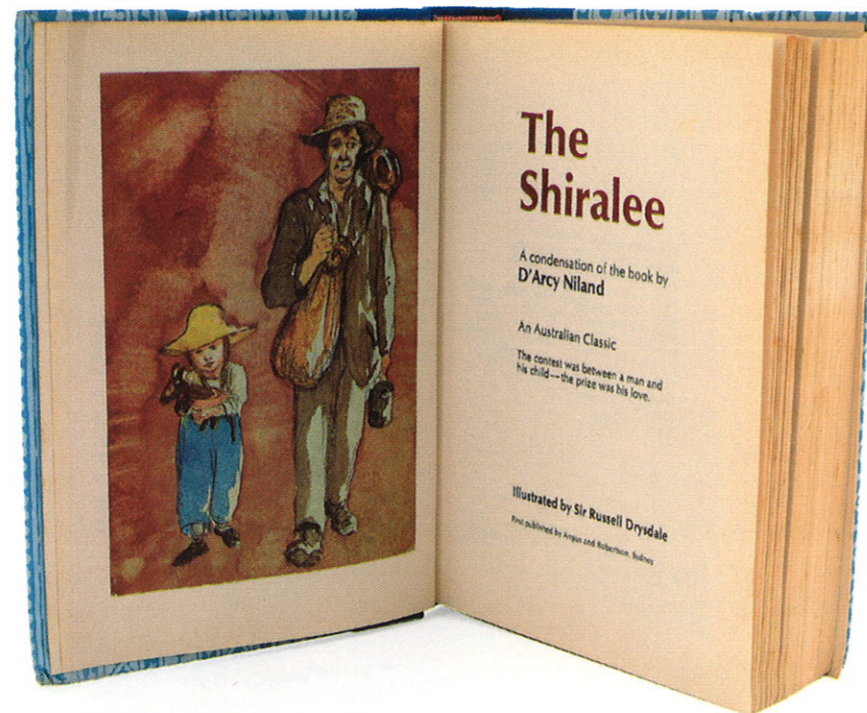
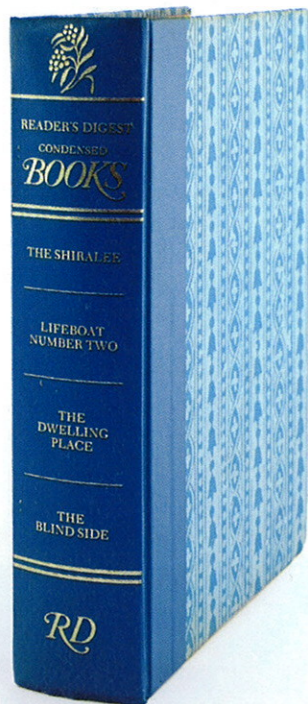
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Regarding *The Shiralee*, D'Arcy Niland wrote: 'It is a biblical truth that all men have burdens. This is the simple story of a man with a burden, a swagman with his swag, or shiralee, which in this case happens to be a child. I have often thought that if all burdens were examined, they would be found to be like a swagman's shiralee – not only a responsibility and a heavy load, but a shelter, a castle and sometimes a necessity.' (Niland 1955)¹

Reader's Digest: Condensed Books

The Shiralee

Written by D'Arcy Niland, Illustrated by Russell Drysdale
Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1973



The trouble with writing about icons is that they are icons for a good reason. Their work has become part of the way people define and measure themselves, even without being consciously aware that they are doing so. When a national treasure such as Bernard Smith calls Sir Russell Drysdale a 'national treasure', we could almost double its effect. If you are asked what you think of Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* or Pollock's *Blue Poles*, there is a sense that anything you say or think cannot ever measure up to the import of the work itself and the countless associations it can conjure up. Thus, when I was asked to write about Sir Russell Drysdale's drawings, I am ashamed to confess that, along with mental images of Drysdale's more famous paintings such as *The Rabbits* 1947 and *The Cricketers* 1948, I simultaneously envisaged *The Ettamogah Pub* and *Joliffe's*

Outback. As a consequence of this, I realised that I had, unthinkingly and unfairly, consigned one of the aforesaid national treasures of Australian art to the same bucket as *The Australasian Post*.

To understand and get past this sense of 'knowing without knowledge' I attempted to understand my prejudices and work out how to get around them. The first reason for my assumptions, I suspect, is that I had unconsciously associated Drysdale with my grandfather's generation, a generation that grew up and lived in a different era, a different Australia. This generation now seems heroic in stature because of what they had to cope with: the Great Depression, cataclysmic droughts, World War II – an era when no self-respecting Australian male or female went outside without a hat (something I will return to). Like all younger generations, we tend to distance ourselves from our more recent forebears in an attempt to define ourselves, and to assume that we 'know' what they were all about (the 'teaching grandmothers to suck eggs' phenomenon).

The generation of artists to which Drysdale, Sidney Nolan and Albert Tucker belonged has become part of our artistic landscape. As Bernard Smith points out about Drysdale: 'Few contemporary Australian painters of landscape have been able to escape entirely from his broad terms of reference that his Albury paintings of 1941 began to lay down.'²

As artists, they became part of the story of Australian art – cast as 'the Australian Modernist Heroes, carving out our national identity'. When the painter Margaret Olley died, she was fêted in death with a state funeral, in a manner akin to that accorded a World War I 'Digger', the other great hero of Australian culture. Olley's philanthropy and friendship were rightly celebrated, even if her artistic significance must be seen as relatively minor; whereas for Bernard Smith, who died soon after Olley and had a far greater influence on Australian art, there was no state funeral or significant national commemoration. Perhaps this

was the consequence of being seen as a contributing author and not as the hero of a story.

Some of the myths and clichés derived from this grand narrative of Australian art, and which seem to be associated with Russell Drysdale, include: 'Australian light', 'the sunburnt country' and 'the laconic man/battler/larrikin on the land' (the Australian version of America's 'lonesome cowboy'). Before we experience Drysdale, then, we need to get past all the artworks supposedly inspired by him.

Works produced based on Drysdale's sunburnt colour palette are churned out by art society members and artists such as the late Pro Hart. Invariably, they emphasise the saccharine and are banner-waving affairs for rose- (or ochre-) tinted nostalgia and reactionary tendencies. I have a clear memory of my grandfather pugnaciously declaring that the toilet door calendar nature of such landscape works, executed with a brown sponge and a stick, was 'really how the landscape is'. The irony that he lived in a suburban house in a particularly lush area of Hobart near the Derwent River escaped him, but it was a sincerely held view of the landscape and had clearly been moulded and defined by the influence of Drysdale's work without his knowledge. (And irony seems to be my generation's artistic curse, not his.)

Even more recently, I heard a fellow examiner state that the visual arts student whom we were assessing hadn't understood 'Australian light'. I thought the student, who had recently emigrated from Iran, looked justifiably puzzled. I'm sure she hadn't realised that our sun, in defiance of Galileo, is obviously different from the one that had shone down on her all her life prior to coming to Australia. I was equally puzzled. I grew up in Tasmania and now live in Toowoomba, and I have experienced many a foggy, overcast day with no brown land or harsh sunlight. Even during my years in Brisbane, the light was more often filtered through the sweltering humidity and smog of a major urban centre with traffic problems, not the dry heat of the Mulga.

The art of Drysdale's era is now so much a part of an ever-present backdrop, or background noise, that contemporary artists have to move away from and develop in and around it in the same way that Drysdale and his generation reacted to the Heidelberg School. Sometimes artists manage to do this through rejection, reaction and wilful memory loss. Drysdale's work defines and haunts us, a feeling that contemporary artists in turn have to deal with either consciously or unconsciously. The evidence of this haunting can be seen in the work of Tim Storrier. Storrier's landscape images often seem to have been baked in the same oven as Drysdale's, as Steve Meacham pointed out in a 2003 interview with the artist: 'Storrier's friend Brett Whiteley once remarked you risked getting scurvy from looking at Storrier paintings because there was so little green in them.'³

While discussing his recent work, *The Histrionic Wayfarer*, the 62-year-old Storrier claimed that he had not done figurative work 'since schoolboy attempts to emulate Russell Drysdale'.⁴



Russell DRYSDALE
Sketch of Soldiers undated
ink on paper
Albury City Collection
Bequest of Justice John
Flood Nagle AO, 2010



Russell DRYSDALE
Sketch of Stockman c.1970
ink and ink wash on paper
Albury City Collection
Bequest of Justice John
Flood Nagle AO, 2010

Journeys among men

To get past this sense of 'knowing without knowledge', I employed several strategies, including studying the various materials relating to Drysdale written by his contemporaries. I read Drysdale's letters to Donald Friend and Friend's diary entries; and I tried to get a sense of the cultural background of the period through reading George Johnson's *My Brother Jack*, D'Arcy Niland's *The Shiralee*, Ruth Park's excellent autobiography *Fishing in the Styx*, and Bernard Smith, among others.

I found in the footnote to the 1973 Reader's Digest edition of *The Shiralee*, for which Drysdale was commissioned to do the illustrations, that he and Niland had never met, but that Niland often kept images of Drysdale's work pinned to his manuscripts as they 'represented to him the very essence of the Australian outback about which he wrote'.⁵

For Drysdale and Niland, the Australia they depicted was one based upon personal experience. Niland had 'humped his swag' during the Depression

years, and Drysdale had been a jackaroo. Drysdale's images are inspired by his direct experience and repeated travels, as captured by his own photographs.⁶

There are some simple and obvious observations that we can make about the era in which Drysdale lived, and which to our contemporary eyes makes his artworks appear nostalgic:

- People were a lot thinner, on average.
- Almost everyone routinely wore hats.
- Men tended to hang around with other men a lot more than they do now.

It is easy to forget that, during the era depicted in Drysdale's work, men and women led far more separate group lives than we lead today. Even up to the early 1960s, as depicted in the TV series *Mad Men*,⁷ men still wore hats and essentially lived separate lives from their womenfolk (though the knowing wink acknowledges that this is no longer considered acceptable behaviour for men).

Drysdale had good and enduring friendships, most of them with men. (There is no sexual subtext to these friendships.) Drysdale's interests and influences are inextricably linked with his relationships (for good or ill), so much so that we can use some of the key relationships as illustrations for his personal and chronological time frame from the late 1930s to the late 1960s.

- **George Bell** (1878–1966): Teacher, artist and mentor. Allowed Drysdale to use his studio for a year in 1939.
- **Peter Purves Smith** (1912–49): Artist and friend.
- **Bon Drysdale**: Drysdale's first wife (married 1935–63). Committed suicide in 1963.
- **Lucy Swanton**: Bon and Lucy were in-laws. Lucy was a partner in the Macquarie Galleries in Sydney. Influential in Drysdale's first exhibition through Riddell Gallery, Melbourne in 1938, and then represented him through Macquarie Galleries (1938–56).

- **Donald Friend** (1915–89): Artist and friend. Friendship drifts apart after Bon's death in 1963.
- **Tim Drysdale** (1940–61): Drysdale's son. Committed suicide in 1961.
- **Jock Marshall** (1911–67): Friend and travel companion.

Geoffrey Smith, in an essay written to accompany the *Russell Drysdale 1912–81* exhibition held at the National Gallery of Victoria from 19 December 1997 to 9 March 1998, quoted Geoffrey Dutton as saying:⁸ 'Often for Drysdale, the most disruptive periods in his life were accompanied by the greatest creativity in his art.'⁹

If we look at the time frame of his friendships it would seem that even though the period from the 1930s to the late 1950s was tumultuous in terms of news, it was one of the happiest in terms of friendships. The traumatic personal events of the 1960s do not seem to have been associated with the same creative energy.

Drysdale's artistic influences seem to be refracted through the lenses of these relationships; Bell's teachings on looking at form, as distinct to detail or accuracy, and the School of Paris; Purves Smith and English surrealism; Bon and Lucy encouraging his awareness of and openness to the French artists of the time – in particular, Chaim Soutine, whom Drysdale refers to in his interview with Geoffrey Dutton. Donald Friend's influence as a source of encouragement and openness seems to have been vital; the Albury drawings owe much to Friend. Dutton, who disputed the level of Drysdale's awareness of the influence on his work of artists such as Henry Moore,¹⁰ helps reinforce this claim.

However, this knowledge of Drysdale and his context, of the history and mechanisms of his artistic practice, did not help me break through the sense of 'knowing' or cause me to reassess Drysdale's art as much as I had hoped. The most convincing method was, finally, the one that was literally staring me in the face: Drysdale's drawings themselves.

It's not archetypal – it's personal.

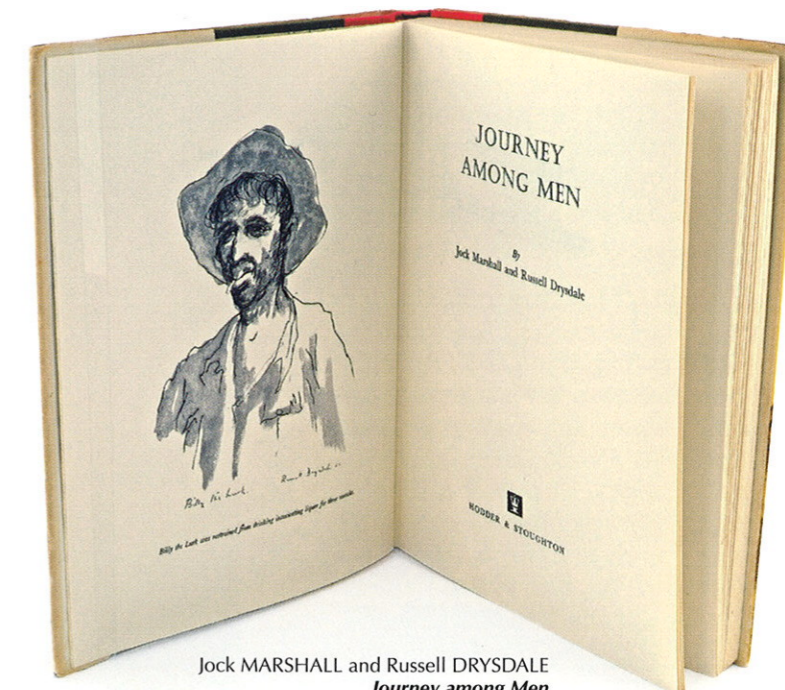
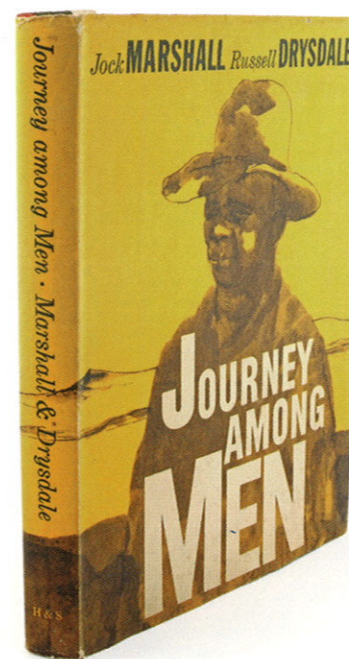
'I have always found painting a very difficult thing, it's never been easy.'¹¹

A drawing has the ability to cut to the quick of the subject and the desired idea; to express eloquently what may have to be laboured for in a painting. This is a quality that I believe exists in Drysdale's drawings. It was also found in the drawings of Antoine Watteau, whose work has been similarly besmirched by over-eager copyists, dollar shop figurines, concrete lawn ornaments and toilet roll cover dollies, and raises similar difficulties in being perceived on its own terms.

It was Drysdale's talent in drawing that first brought him attention while he was convalescing from an eye operation. Then, towards the end of his life when he was partially incapacitated through illness, it was drawing that again occupied him.

Both Drysdale and Watteau laboured at their paintings, and both are rightly famous for their achievements in that medium, but their drawings are what excite me. This is partly because of my own personal bias towards drawing, but it is also because of the quality of the drawings themselves: they entice. To draw another parallel, and to paraphrase Kenneth Clark, Drysdale's paintings are nude, but his drawings are naked. By this, I mean that Drysdale's painterly ambition was to grasp the essence of what he felt Australia was and what it was to be Australian, but in his drawings we see a much more personal aspect.

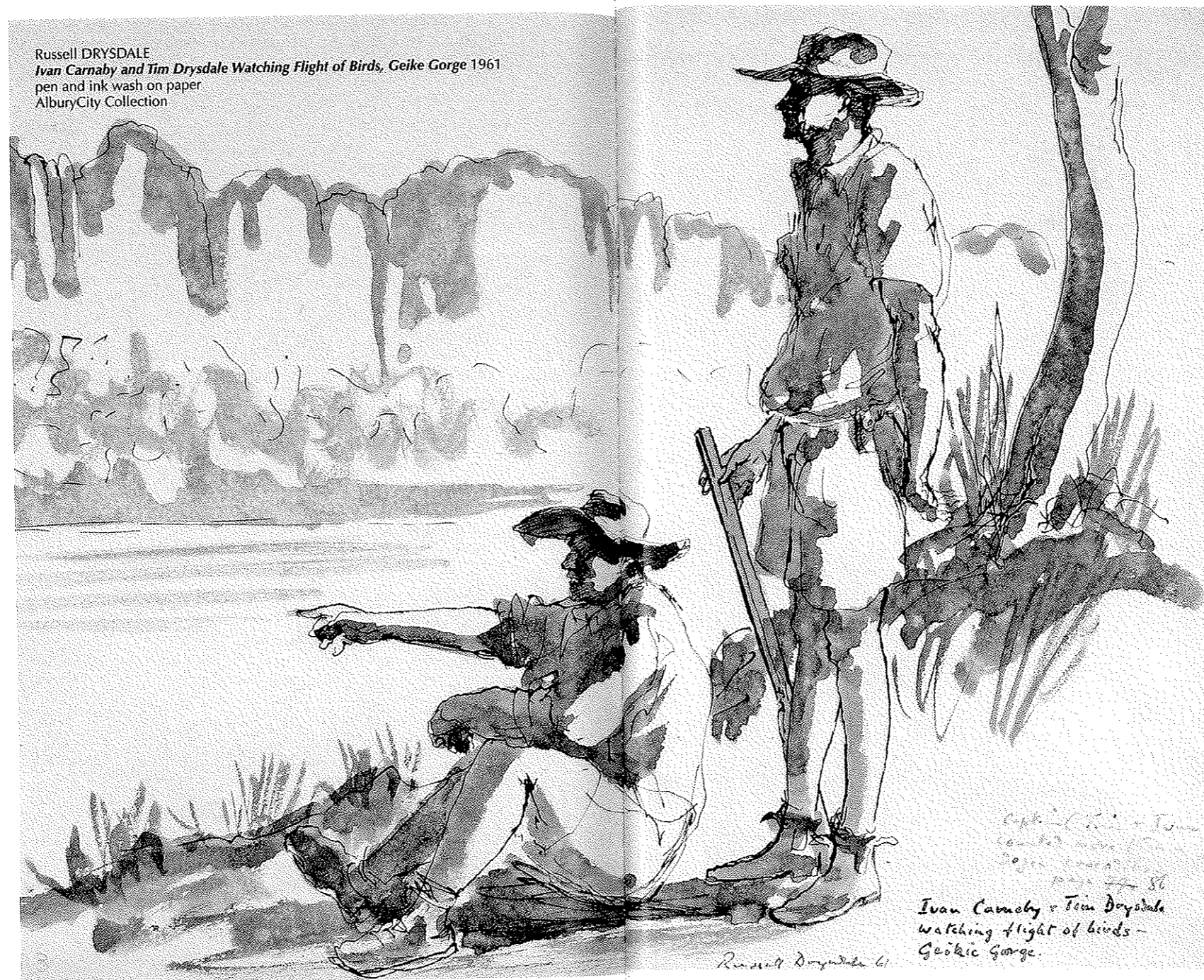
This effect of intimacy and immediacy is doubled by Drysdale's preferred medium, pen and ink wash – a drawing form that is not for the faint-hearted, as every mark is made and kept, unlike in his oils where an image can be worked and reworked, layered and added to.



Jock MARSHALL and Russell DRYSDALE
Journey among Men
Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1962

Drysdale's drawings for Jock Marshall's book *Journey among Men* have a special poignancy, evoking his long road trips with Bon, Tim and his mate Marshall. This is especially true of his drawing of Ivan Carnaby and Tim Drysdale watching a flight of birds and counting crocodiles in Geikie Gorge. This drawing, with its line of cliffs delicately accentuated with ink wash, has an almost Chinese ink-and-brush effect. There is a fine balance between the landscape and the figures, and the artist's affection for the man and teenager being portrayed is obvious. It is hard not to read into the drawing some of the fraught relationship that existed between father and son. In the right-hand figure, which we presume to be Tim based on the age and carriage, there is a sense of tension. Around the face there is an intensity of marks, darker and more scribbled than in the face of Ivan Carnaby on the left; it's as if Carnaby is the adult struggling to engage the teenager's interest, with only moderate success. In the year that Drysdale created this work, 1961, Tim took his own life. Soon after that tragic event, Drysdale wrote to Jock Marshall about Tim: '... he had a great affection for you and you always treated him as a man.'¹²

Ultimately, what helps me transcend this sense of 'knowing', or prejudice, is the personal quality of the drawings. Drysdale's drawings, like Watteau's, make you feel you know the people even if they are not strictly portraits. In the drawings for *The Shiralee* and *Journey among Men*, it's as if he relaxes his goal of carving out Australian archetypes and allows himself to focus on characters and the situations in which they are cast. The men in *Evening Camp* are recognisably and affectionately human, something that is reflected in the hand-written caption at the bottom: 'It was good to stretch out in the arms of Matilda at the end of the



Russell DRYSDALE
Ivan Carnaby and Tim Drysdale Watching Flight of Birds, Geike Gorge 1961
pen and ink wash on paper
AlburyCity Collection

day.' In each of the drawn figures you recognise the character's intrinsic common humanity; it is as if by focusing less on the archetypal, Drysdale has revealed the universal.

Drysdale's artistic influence is pervasive, but it is ultimately also our very own shiralee; and so, like Niland's Macauley, we can learn that Drysdale is 'not only a responsibility and a heavy load, but a shelter, a castle and sometimes a necessity'. We could all benefit from Drysdale's sincerity, his affection for what makes us tick and the lasting quality of his artwork, and – because I'm prejudiced – especially his drawings.

¹ D'Arcy Niland, *The Shiralee* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1955).

² Bernard Smith, Terry Smith and Christopher Heathcote, *Australia Painting 1788–2000*, 4th ed. (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2001), Chapter 8, 'Rebirth', p. 251.

³ Steve Meacham, 'Australian Storrier', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 March 2003.

⁴ Steve Meacham, 'A Life in Pictures', *The Age*, 3 November 2011.

⁵ D'Arcy Niland, *The Shiralee* (Sydney: Reader's Digest Pty Ltd, 1973).

⁶ www.abc.net.au/arts/drysdale/exhibit/photo.htm#top.

⁷ *Mad Men* (TV Series, 2007–), AMC Productions, USA.

⁸ Geoffrey Dutton, *Russell Drysdale* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1964), p. 21.

⁹ Geoffrey Smith, 'Russell Drysdale, 1912', ABC and NGV production, 1999, accessed 28 November 2011.

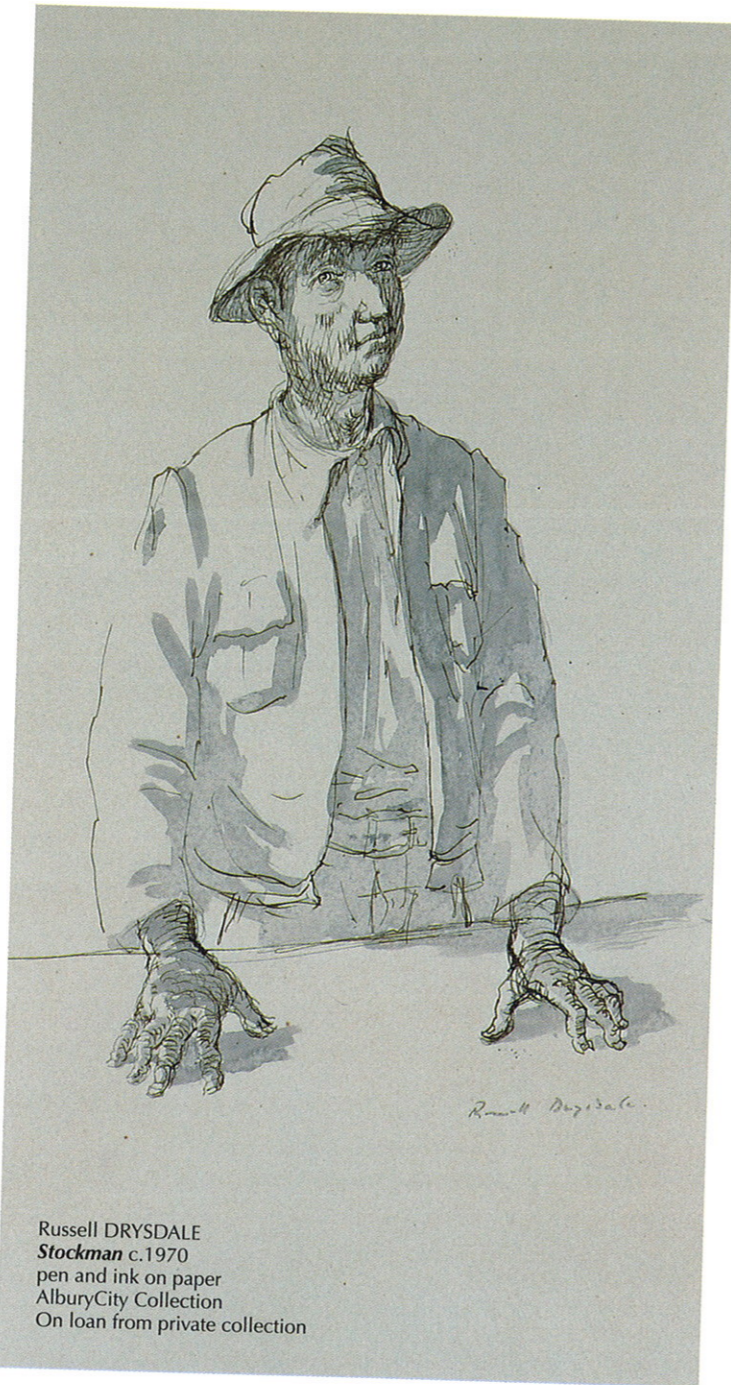
¹⁰ Dutton, *Russell Drysdale*, p. 31.

¹¹ Dutton, *Russell Drysdale*, p. 96.

¹² Jane Marshall, *Jock Marshall: One Armed Warrior*, Chapter 17. Published by the on, 25 February 1998, prepared by Elissa Tenkate, www.asap.unimelb.edu.au/bsparcs/exhib/marshall/m_ch17.htm

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Russell DRYSDALE
Stockman c.1970
pen and ink on paper
AlburyCity Collection
On loan from private collection



Russell DRYSDALE
Untitled (Smoko) 1937
pen and wash on paper
AlburyCity Collection
On loan from private collection