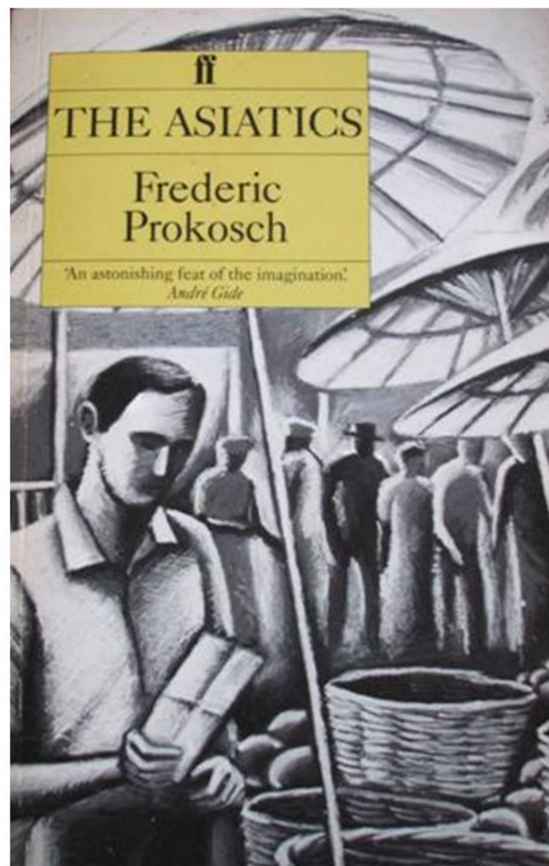
Copyright David Walker 2010. Not for circulation or citation.

Chapter 1

Not Dark Yet (3,604 words)

There I was, reading Frederic Prokosch's *The Asiatics: A Novel.* I was well into it and half-way down a right-hand page when the line of print appeared to warp and bend. I didn't pay much attention to this at first. It was certainly odd but, as far as I could judge, about as serious as a pebble in my shoe. On a wintry Sunday afternoon it was a good time and place to be indoors reading. I could see the tree ferns and Himalayan bamboos out the window. A nasty wind was bullying the bamboos. I blinked. Perhaps there was some grit in my eye.



It had taken some time to find a copy of *The Asiatics*. I happened upon it at a church fête. As always, I'd headed to the books — the usual mixed bag of Georgette Heyer, Eric Lustbader and Tom Clancy. I was skimming the titles when, suddenly and unexpectedly, I saw *The Asiatics* keeping some pretty poor company. All around me I sensed people wanting that very book. I beat them to it. It was not the Chatto and Windus first edition

Copyright David Walker 2010. Not for circulation or citation.

of 1935, but the elegant and entirely acceptable 1983 Faber and Faber paperback. On the front cover André Gide called *The Asiatics* 'an astonishing feat of the imagination' while Albert Camus praised Prokosch as 'a master of moods and undertones, a virtuoso in the feeling of place …'.

Prokosch was an American writer, born in 1908, the same year as my father Gilbert John Walker, generally known as Gil. I doubt whether my father would have read *The Asiatics*. He might have been a primary school-teacher with a brief for education, but I have no recollection of him ever sitting down and reading. The Adelaide *Advertiser* was delivered to the house daily, but my father invariably skimmed through it, standing at the kitchen table. His main interest was the share market, although he also kept an eye on the 'hatchy/matchy', that record of the hatched, matched and dispatched otherwise known as Births, Deaths and Marriages. In 2005 my father made his own appearance in the Deaths column, not far short of his century and much later than Prokosch, who had died in 1989.

Even if he didn't read much, my father always seemed to have a fair idea of what was going on in the world, but not in the world of books and readers. He had grown up in the copper mining town of Burra in the mid- north of South Australia. In 1979 the town gave its name to the Burra Charter, a document that spelt out a more exacting standard for conserving and managing cultural heritage. Burra and its surrounding villages certainly have a distinctive mining history. Copper was discovered there in 1845 drawing miners, builders, engineers and assorted adventurers from all around the world. Most of the miners came from Cornwall. Others came from Wales, Scotland, England, China, South America, and Germany. Separate villages grew up around the mines: Aberdeen, Redruth, Hampton, Llwchwr, Lostwithiel and Kooringa. The mines closed in 1877, but at its peak Burra was one of the largest and richest copper producing regions in the world. Handsome fortunes were made there. Shareholders who got in on the ground floor with the South Australian Mining Association did very nicely indeed. I discovered that Gil and the poet Rex Ingamells had gone to Burra Primary School at around the same time. Had he known Ingamells, I wondered? He had, but not as the poet and literary front-man for the Jindyworobaks. My father was well into his eighties when I asked him. He shot me a distressed look: 'He was a terrible fellow, an awful bully. He made me scared to go to school.'

Copyright David Walker 2010. Not for circulation or citation.

My mother was more of a reader than my father. She was a member of the local library and liked popular fiction. However, she rationed her borrowing in the fixed belief that reading caused short-sightedness and weakened the eyes. Tennis was a much healthier option for her adolescent sons. My parents did not dismiss books and reading outright. They were not loudly philistine, just troubled about an unhealthy pursuit. Years later I was struck by a disciplinary case I came across from the 1920s involving a young public servant accused of laziness. His supervising officer reported that the lad spent a lot of time in the State Library reading ‘Shakespeare and that sort of subject. For a boy of 18 years there seems to be something lacking.’ He had clearly caught the reading disease without much hope of a cure.

Although my father did not read, he seemed pleased enough when my book collection first began to grow, aided by Adelaide’s Mary Martin bookshop and the ubiquitous Max Harris, writer and book collector. The family home notwithstanding, Adelaide was a bookish kind of city. Mary Martin’s would have stocked Prokosch. Recommendations from Gide and Camus commanded respect. Mary Martin’s was well-stocked with ‘critically acclaimed’ books and, unusually for the 1950s, there was quite a bit on Asia. Mary Martin had fallen deeply in love with India and had spent a number of years there. Some of Prokosch’s best writing was on India. My own interests were not well-developed at that time — it was books I was drawn to, old ones especially. I was not sure what to make of Dr Andrew Ure’s account of cotton manufacture in Great Britain when

Copyright David Walker 2010. Not for circulation or citation.

I saw it in a Red Cross op. shop, but I remember that I had to buy it. My first serious venture into book-collecting came as two beautiful leather-bound volumes published in 1834, decorated with an embossed floral design. The flower design struck a discordant note. This was one of the first manuals describing how to set up and operate the satanic mills of the new factory system. Had Ure's book first come to South Australia in the wooden trunk of a Wakefieldian settler who dreamt of factories rather than forests and farming?

In the forty years since I acquired Dr Ure's volumes, I have accumulated many books. Increasingly they have dealt with aspects of Asia. It would be a bit too grand to call mine a library, but it includes some great finds. Bookshops now are more and more organised, making lucky discoveries a rarity. The thrill of the chase is much more likely to be gratified at fêtes these days, though even they are now picked over by booksellers with an inside running. The internet creates new opportunities for the collector. Books that link Australia and Asia, like Alfred Deakin's *Irrigated India,* published in 1893, are my particular thing. I am still looking for his other India book, *Temple and Tomb in India*. Few people have any appreciation now of Deakin's interest in India's architectural and religious heritage. I was also surprised to find *Banzai!*, a story of Asian invasion, published in 1908 and written by an anonymous German styling himself 'Parabellum'. I had fed the details into Google with no great expectations and there it was, a handsome, smartly got up *Banzai!* The same source tells me that Dr Ure's *Cotton Manufacture* is exceptionally rare and worth rather more than the 1/6d I paid for it. Google *The Asiatics* and a range of choices and prices appears, including a 'spectacular' first edition signed by the author and dedicated to his mum: yours for just US $4500.

The year 2008 provided rich pickings for centenary speculation and historical reflection, though my father's birth did not feature prominently. Prokosch had also slipped from view. In 1908 Theodore Roosevelt's Great White Fleet had travelled to Australia, a new assertion of the power of the United States and the growing geo-political significance of the Asia-Pacific. In Australia rapturous crowds had visited the Fleet at all its ports of call. Torrents of bad poetry poured forth.

The powers of the earth are as lions
That scent afar feast on the gale;

Copyright David Walker 2010. Not for circulation or citation.

For the sake of our race of the future
Hail! Men of America, Hail!

In Western Australia the people's poet 'Dryblower' Murphy caught the mood with:

We'll all stand together boys,
If the foe wants a flutter or a fuss;
And we are hanging out the sign
From the Leeuwin to the Line:
This bit o' the world belongs to us.

The 'foe' was Japan, as it was in 'Parabellum's' tale of a Japanese assault on America that led on to the downfall of white Australia. C. H. Kirmess addressed a similar theme in *The Australian Crisis*, a chilling tale of Japanese invasion and heroic resistance. My copy, published in London by the Walter Scott Publishing Company in April 1909, bears the names of two previous owners, both of whom looked after it very well, for it remains in excellent condition.

We remember our books: where they were purchased, the settings and the circumstances. Their history builds as we live with them. They draw closer. My copy of *The Asiatics* has its special place as the book that alerted me to that strange wobble in the line. While the left-hand side of the page seemed largely unaffected, on the far right the line distorted. My immediate thought was that the line itself was flawed: a printing error. I held the book up at different angles to test this hypothesis. When I closed one eye, the line straightened out — suddenly — like a guilty school cadet caught napping. So much for the print-related theory.

I entertained another idea. As a student in Canberra I'd had eye-trouble when my cornea suffered some damage — perhaps this had happened again. The earlier experience had been unpleasant, but the outcome was not at all bad. I had taken the name of an eye-specialist at random from the Canberra phone-book. He did the necessary tests and said he could fix me up; he also remarked on my extreme short-sightedness. He was actually blunter than that: 'Your eyes are pretty rotten, aren't they?', he had said. 'Good enough for the Australian army', I told him. He wanted to know more. I explained how I'd been

Copyright David Walker 2010. Not for circulation or citation.

conscripted for service in Vietnam and passed the preliminary medical with flying colours. This, I am prepared to admit, was my own fault. I had formed the view that the Australian digger was a tall, sun-bronzed, barrel-chested, athletic figure. This was not me. I could play a handy game of tennis, but I could not picture myself running up cliffs, laughing defiantly while I bayoneted Turks. So I'd been confident that the Australian army would (quite rightly) spurn a poor specimen like me. My opinion of the Anzacs was dealt a terrible blow when I was accepted. Perhaps I shouldn't have memorised the eye-chart? My mother had been pleased when I passed the medical; she took the view that a spell in the army would make a man of me. My counter-suggestion that it might make a corpse of me left her unmoved. She could be a tough old chook.

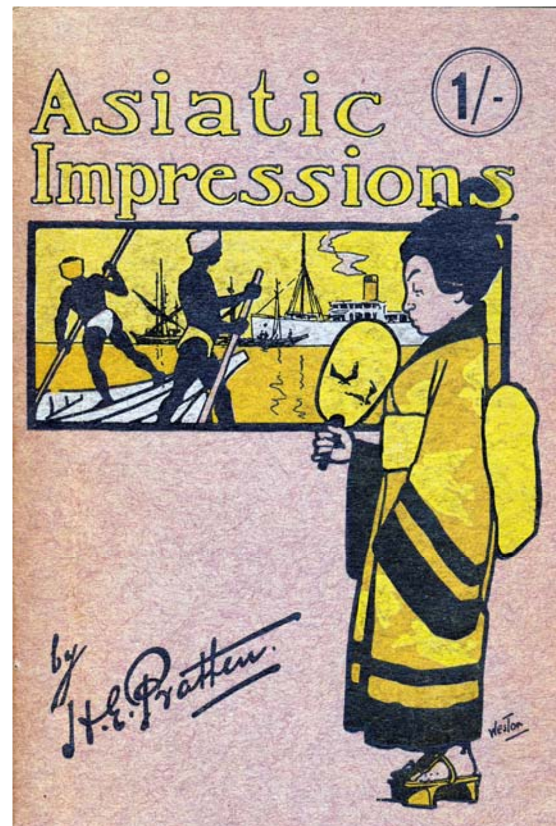
But luck was on my side. I had met the right Canberra eye-specialist. He conducted eye-tests for the army and made it clear that he would have failed me outright as a conscript. Australia, with my absence from the army, would inevitably become more vulnerable to the downward thrust of communism. What use was a conscript unable to notice this menacing advance? Short-sighted soldiers were also going out of favour. A South Australian conscript with poor sight had just been blown up by a land-mine in Vietnam. Questions were being asked in federal parliament. I was now found to be unfit for service.

My mother had made me rather ashamed of short-sightedness. I am sure that somewhere in the 1930s (or earlier) she had imbibed the notion that a run of short-sightedness in a family signalled racial unfitness, a poor omen for 'our race of the future'. Eugenic thinking was common at the time, especially amongst her trainee teacher colleagues. Unluckily, she then bore three 'defective' children, all of whom were extremely short-sighted. I was the last and the most defective of all. We were not allowed to advertise our shame. The wearing of glasses (when we eventually got them) was forbidden in the home and discouraged elsewhere. We grew accustomed to living with poor vision and learnt, for special occasions, to fake better sight. I developed a rare talent for learning the top four or five lines of the eye-chart on the infrequent occasions that I visited an optometrist. While my father (always my father, my mother did not want to sup with the devil) was introducing himself, I'd wander over to the eye-chart and memorise the letters; then I'd take the tests and await the news that my eyes were not too bad after all. My father always seemed quite gratified to learn this. I had applied the same skill to the eye-

Copyright David Walker 2010. Not for circulation or citation.

chart for the army medical. In retrospect, this was not gifted behaviour, but it had become an ingrained habit to conceal my poor sight.

All this might help explain my fascination with books. Lots of books implies lots of reading; it implies seeing well. Once started, this reading business became addictive. In any event, I ended up with my own large collection to be hauled around in boxes for years to come. I too had succumbed to the reading disorder. So, when the wobbly line that first appeared in *The Asiatics* persisted, it did not seem to augur well, but I still assumed the problem would sort itself out. It did not. Cars now seemed misshapen, not badly, but askew nonetheless. Their movement had an indirect, crab-like quality. I was reminded of visits to the Easter Show and the fun to be had in front of the distorting mirrors with their satirical bulges and witty elongations.



The main problem with my new wavy and corrugated world was that it was always there. No escape. And then, over just three days of one week in November 2004, my sight collapsed. On the Monday I was driving to work, reading all I needed to, managing well; on Friday I was 'legally blind'. People reacted strangely. Often I was congratulated on not looking blind — no dog, no white stick, no dark glasses, no fixed look into the middle distance: or were their comments a rebuke? Perhaps I was not performing blindness well

enough. Actors could do it so much better: the stare, the faltering stumble, the wandering hand searching for support. In fact, I did not feel up to the role. Faking sight was my forte, not signalling the lack of it. Of course, we all think we know what being blind looks like. The best exponents are the people my eye-specialist terms NPLs, folks with No Perception of Light. NPLs are incontrovertibly blind. I am not an NPL, far from it. The centre of my field of vision is blurred. I can no longer read a book, see faces or drive a car, but peripheral vision allows me to walk around, make a cup of coffee and put on a CD, though not always the one I expect. It is uncomfortable not appearing to be blind while, at the same time, having to answer to that clumsy label 'legally' blind. Witty fellow that I am, I asked my specialist if there were any illegally blind people. 'Certainly', he replied, 'some people fake it.' A sad state of affairs, but it underlines my problem of authenticity. Some of the fake blind were probably very good at what they did, brilliant exponents of the ancient art of faking authentic blindness. Did I now have to compete with these wily performers? And who was to say that I might not be taken as a wily performer myself?

I did pass the test, there is always a test, permitting me to have a white stick. But the stick did not resolve the authenticity problem. If peripheral vision enables me to move around well enough, mightn't using a white stick look like over-acting? I tend not to use the stick. What about dark glasses? Same problem. I have no seeing-eye dog. I was told I was not entitled to one. That was a blow. I'd much prefer a dog to a stick. I'd been looking forward to walking the suburbs with man's best friend, but it wouldn't work, I was told. I saw too much. It would confuse the animal. We'd quarrel at street corners, fighting over who was boss.

My father was shocked to learn that I was legally blind. He was then in his mid-nineties, frail and bed-ridden, but mentally alert. He wanted to know what was going on in Iraq. There were few takers for this topic in his nursing home. Old dodderers like him were jollied along with brighter topics. He had come to assume that I was an authority on almost everything, and so we talked on the phone for almost an hour about Bush, Blair, Howard and Iraq. I was planning to visit him in Adelaide, where I would put on a fine show of being a capable son. I'd enter his room briskly and grasp him by the shoulder, firmly, nothing too intimate. I'd sit in the chair next to his bed and look at him directly. I'd comment that he was looking in good shape and add, no doubt, that this was a poor

Copyright David Walker 2010. Not for circulation or citation.

compliment coming from a blind man. He'd agree and laugh. We'd wordlessly reassure each other that the show went on, his and mine. This visit was planned for his 97th birthday, in November. I managed to get to China twice before I made it to Adelaide. My father died late in August, before I could see him again. I could only give a speech at his funeral. I gave such a good speech that some people wondered if I was blind after all. I hadn't realised that giving a bad funeral speech was yet another sign of low vision. Perhaps I could have improved my performance by gazing steadfastly in the wrong direction, delivering my address to the side-wall of the chapel. That might have provided better value. Given her phobias about eyesight, it was just as well that my mother had also died a number of years before and never known that her youngest child had ended up as a blind man.

Macular degeneration is the technical term for my condition, and thousands have it. If we macular degenerates could see each other we'd be quite a force. We can't see each other because our central field of vision is damaged by rogue blood vessels that bleed into the retina. Gaps appear. Macular degeneration destroys one's ability to see faces and read books. Faces blur and the image is unstable. Letters and words disappear. Lines of text collide, crumble and run into each other. Numbers are bad news. They dance, jig around and hide like badly disciplined adolescents wanting to humiliate a struggling teacher. Signing a cheque requires concentration and some luck in keeping the signature straight. Computers help a lot: keyboards can be adjusted, text enlarged, new software installed. Even so, magnifying the text doesn't lessen the guesswork about reading. Tasks that were once simple invariably become much slower.

I still receive email notification from my library about new books, events and competitions. A recent notice announced that Vision Australia, the helpful body that provided my stick (and denied me the dog), was offering a prize for the first correct answer to a short quiz. I didn't get round to entering the competition. Later, an email arrived announcing the lucky winner. The prize was a copy of some talking book called *Rubber Under Arms*. Vindication! I was quite right not to have entered a competition with such a ridiculous prize. What a title — clearly the work of an over-promoted author straining for a laugh. I then looked along the emailed line, to the left, my better side, trying to decipher who the author was, and gradually the name Rolf Boldrewood swam gently towards me. Not a bad prize after all, *Robbery Under Arms*.

Copyright David Walker 2010. Not for circulation or citation.

When I first achieved my status as a macular degenerate, there was no cure. There were laser treatments for the rogue blood vessels. I had about five. The laser zapped the blood vessels. It slowed the degeneration but at the risk of scarring the retina. None of that did anything to restore sight, however. Then, suddenly, no more talk of laser treatment; a miracle one day and gone the next. The laser was superseded by a new drug. The good news was that it promised some improvement. The bad news was that it had to be injected directly into the eye. 'No' was my first response. I could not face it. My eye-specialist held back. It was my choice, he said. But it was hardly a choice at all — any possible improvement is hard to say no to. I am now on the new therapy, hoping for the best. And the best may be better than anyone could have hoped. Longer term, it may be possible to regrow the damaged retina with stem cells harvested from the healthier cells that provide me with peripheral vision. For the time being, the books will stay where they are. Perhaps affable Alfred's *Temple and Tomb in India* will one day join *Irrigated India* on the shelves. But I'm not going to get too carried away. Not when I can't shake off that annoying Bob Dylan line rasping in my ear: 'It ain't dark yet, but it's gettin' there'.