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Family chronicles: The novels of Maurice Gee

Abstract
Maurice Gee, the New Zealand novelist, is not a prolific writer; during some twenty years he has produced only a handful of novels and one collection of short stories. Nor, it seems true to say, has he been widely known outside his own country. All his novels have been published in England first, but even there, where New Zealand writers have sometimes managed to establish a firm reputation whilst remaining prophets in their own land, his work has attracted no wide-spread attention.

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Maurice Gee, the New Zealand novelist, is not a prolific writer; during some twenty years he has produced only a handful of novels and one collection of short stories. Nor, it seems true to say, has he been widely known outside his own country. All his novels have been published in England first, but even there, where New Zealand writers have sometimes managed to establish a firm reputation whilst remaining prophets in their own land, his work has attracted no wide-spread attention.

Perhaps one reason for this neglect has been that his novels always seem to have a rather restricted spectrum of interest in their resolute concentration upon New Zealanders living in New Zealand, all of them apparently preoccupied with specifically New Zealand concerns. His first novel, *The Big Season* (1962), for example, is mainly devoted to criticizing one of the cherished ideals of New Zealand life. An English newspaper reviewing it at the time it was published wrote that 'it is about a man's rebellion against the clean-limbed, rugger-club values of New Zealand suburban life'.

This is, at best, only a half-truth: it is much truer to describe *The Big Season* as a *bildungsroman* which traces the growth to maturity of Rob Andrews, the young protagonist. A *bildungsroman* then, certainly, but one that does, nevertheless, deal with a fairly limited field of interest. The crucial stage in Rob Andrews' youthful development is reached when he finally rebels against the cult of rugby-football, in Wainui, the small town where he lives, by stubbornly refusing to play in the team's next match in what promises to be their big season. 'I think you've slapped this town in the face', his father, one of the club's most fervent supporters, shouts at him:

Rob lost his temper then.

'The town', he cried, 'what do you mean by the town? What you really mean is
you and all your cobs. You want to use me and the rest of us to keep some bloody stupid tin cup for you so you can all gather round it and pat yourselves on the back and say what a great little footballing town you live in. God, you're like a bunch of kids! Why don't you grow up?'

This criticism of the cult of rugger in New Zealand with its attendant belief in the virtues of clean tackling and hard drinking cannot seem other than rather small beer for the reader outside this closed-in world. And although the way in which support of the local team becomes almost a complete way of life to its followers is indeed vividly and convincingly illustrated in The Big Season, one misses in this novel the sense of gruelling, physical strain, the sweat and the whole feel of the game itself so starkly conveyed in David Storey's This Sporting Life, for example.

If the novel in the main centres upon the local football ground, it also however marks an entry into another arena. Mr Andrews is an ardent supporter of the team — and a heavily repressive father; his son's action not only lets the side down, it therefore also marks a rebellion against the restraints of the family. At the end of the novel Rob has rejected his home and his family and has no longer any place in the town where he has spent all his youth. Like so many other protagonists in the bildungsroman he stands on the threshold of a new life, but even here one can note a restriction of interest. He too will no longer serve. Stephen Dedalus leaves Ireland to go into exile to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge, what he magniloquently calls, the uncreated conscience of his race; Paul Morel puts Bestwood and the darkness of death behind him to follow his destiny into the light; Rob Andrews leaves Wainui to move to Auckland. The flight of the godwit, so important in Robin Hyde's novel and covering such vast distances, for him is one that is kept well within the shores of New Zealand.

Donald Pinnock, the main character of A Special Flower (1965), Maurice Gee's next novel, is nearing staid and sober middle-age, and is, on the face of it, an unlikely enough choice to play the same rebellious role as the young Rob Andrews. He is unmarried, has always been a devoted son and lives at home with his mother in a house which is the epitome of middle-class respectability and of all the virtues of gentility. Donald, however, is attracted to Coralie and finally tells his mother that he has decided to marry her. Coralie is impulsive, loud, but above all 'vulgar', the antithesis of everything that Mrs Pinnock represents.

After the wedding Mrs Pinnock and her married daughter, Jean, who is cast in the same middle-class mould as her mother, survey the situation:
'Mother.'

The tremble in her voice annoyed Mrs Pinnock. She felt contemptuous. Jean was not going to be much help.

'Mother, I can't believe it,'

Mrs Pinnock turned and walked across the veranda. Her feet made even drum-taps on the wood. 'Things are very far from over yet', she said.²

And indeed they are not. The newly-married couple make their home with Mrs Pinnock and, as a — fairly predictable — consequence, the conflict between the two ways of life takes on an ever-greater momentum.

A New Zealand reader familiar with the values, social mores and general middle-class way of life represented by Mrs Pinnock will presumably note time and again a criticism of this that strikes directly home and rings true. But the book gives another echo, equally loud. Readers of E.M. Forster's early novels with their array of snobbish, genteel, frigidly repressive, middle-class characters will note a strong family likeness, particularly with the Herritons of Where Angels Fear to Tread. Mrs Herriton's values are similarly challenged by the vulgar, loud, warm-blooded Lilia and the mésalliance she contracts. Forster's early fiction also has a very explicit message, the inevitably quoted 'only connect', but whereas in Forster, this explicitness is made the basis for a play of subtle social comedy and a delicately nuanced satirical wit which give a density of texture to his novels, the message of A Special Flower, stripped of this dimension, becomes a very bald and direct one.

A scene during which Coralie's mother visits the Pinnocks and a favourite vase of Mrs Pinnock's is accidentally broken can perhaps sufficiently indicate how prominent this quality is in the novel:

She looked admiringly at the coffee-table where a graceful Venetian-glass vase with paper flowers in it stood beside a plaster dog... Coralie, in control, had insisted on having it on the table: a vase should hold flowers, she said, not be stuck away in a corner. Mrs Pinnock hated to see it out as though it were some ordinary thing, hated the cheap flowers and the vulgar dog... (SF, p. 55)

Calmly, with a calm on which she had space to congratulate herself, she saw that at this moment her Venetian glass was to be broken. It did not pain her. The actual destruction now seemed unimportant. Had not destruction been going on all through this evening, all through this year? The vase had been breaking, with a sharp sound like the cracking of ice, ever since Coralie had entered this house. (SF, p. 42)

The struggle between Mrs Pinnock and Coralie for possession of
Donald is not really brought to any conclusion. He dies very suddenly of a heart-attack and Coralie has moved out; only however, at the end of the novel, to be invited to return by Mrs Pinnock and her daughter, Jean. In the closing pages Jean asks Coralie:

'But can you understand I'm glad you came back?' ... For a moment she could not carry on. Then she brought words out in a rush. 'And because there's life in you and very little in me and I must try to understand.' (SF, pp 188-9)

And Mrs Pinnock is left with the reflection that 'really, this business of Coralie shows there are still areas of freedom in life' (SF, p. 192).

* * *

In the light of Mrs Pinnock's complacent reflection that there are still areas of freedom in life, the very title of In My Father's Den (1972) acquires a deeply ironical significance. Paul Prior, the narrator, remarks of his father at the beginning of the novel that 'his years of manhood were a struggle for privacy — no less desperate for being secret — first from his housekeeper sister, Jane, then from my mother'. Paul's own struggle as a boy and as an adolescent is also a desperate attempt to be free from his mother. He succeeds in breaking free of her influence when he finds
his father's den, a refuge he has established for himself in a shed in the garden. Here Paul is allowed to spend his time lost in his reading, here, and here only, he feels safely cut off from the world that contains his mother and everything she represents — in particular, her Presbyterianism, 'grim and fundamental' (FD, p. 14). Mrs Pinnock's life was conducted according to a rigid code of middle-class gentility and convention; 'the rules of conduct that governed (Mrs Prior's) life were moral though she believed them religious ... the demon of godliness would not let her rest' (FD, pp. 18-20).

From the start of *In My Father's Den*, then, one can discern the outline of the pattern of significance so frequently drawn in Gee's novels. It is one that centres upon the family — increasingly so as his work develops. But contained within the circle of these relationships, and eventually disrupting it, are issues that embrace life in New Zealand society as a whole — both past and present. The fiercely puritanical morality of Paul's mother is a key-element in the novel, it is a decisive influence in the upbringing of her family, and it has also played an essential role in the formation of New Zealand society. As Keith Sinclair in *A History of New Zealand* remarks: 'the moral attitudes of society were moulded ... by puritanical forms of Christianity and by the evangelism which permeated most Christian churches last century.'

The remark can also cast light on the significance of the narrative structure adopted for this book. It opens by quoting a newspaper account dated 13 May 1969, recording the discovery of the strangled body of Celia Inverarity, a seventeen year old girl. Suspicion at once falls upon Paul Prior, forty-one years old, the murdered girl's teacher of English, and the last person known to have seen her alive. Both his parents are dead and he lives alone in their house, spending much of his free time in his father's den. Six days elapse before the crime is finally solved and it is these days that form the core of the novel. This is not, however, an encapsulated period of time, but it rather serves as a springboard from which Paul, convinced that somewhere there he will find the key to the present, plunges into the depths of his past. In order to follow him, the narrative structure is divided into sections which move back and forth between present and past.

Paul has a brother living in the town and; whereas Paul believes that he has succeeded in liberating himself from his background, Andrew has remained devoted to his mother's memory. Always fiercely censorious of Paul, he has observed Celia on her frequent visits to his brother and, convinced that Paul is desecrating everything that his mother stood for,
he murders her. Paul finally discovers the truth, and his brother is arrested.

It will be clear from this account that the novel has much of the suspense of the detective story and possibly some of its sensationalism as well. But, more important, not only is the murderer finally tracked down, Paul also reaches a clearer insight into the salient features of the past that have moulded his life into its present shape. He has freed himself from his family, from his mother and from everything she represents — or so he has confidently believed. Now, looking back, he describes his childhood to Celia:

'I got rid of God when I was ten or eleven, by my own efforts.... But ever since then — I've been incomplete. I've got this sense of being hollow. I keep shifting from thing to thing. That's why I have to have a den. To stop me being completely slippery. Lightweight.'

I listened to this confession with dismay. I had never questioned my identity; but nor had I made any attempt to recognize it. Why should I do it now? ...

I described a Presbyterian upbringing. Its straitness was something I had managed to forget; so now I was awed by the number of my secular choices that echoed lessons taken in those first ten years. My libertarian habits, it seemed, were Presbyterian after all, by simple inversion. Everything took its tone from Mother. (FD, p. 131)

Wordsworth believed that shades of the prison-house begin to close upon the growing boy; Paul's boyhood, on the contrary, from the very beginning was spent in a prison watched over by his mother. The den thought of for so long as a safe boyhood refuge turns out, ironically, to be a place of family bondage for the adult as well.

Any summary of the book does it less than justice for one of its major achievements lies in the self-description of Paul Prior whose consciousness and awareness is the medium through which the narrative is told. It is an analysis and characterisation which in its considerable subtlety and economy anticipates the even greater achievement of Gee’s later novel, Plumb. Moreover, although the story is narrated by Paul in the first person, and although it is through his eyes the reader sees the whole story, nevertheless he is ironically placed and distanced throughout. Paul is not an impartial witness. He reaches an understanding of his past and its links with the present — so too does the reader; but the reader also gains an even clearer insight into Paul himself. What remains in doubt, however, is the extent to which he is fully aware that his past has rendered him an emotional cripple in the present and that it is, in the last analysis, his life that is really responsible for Celia’s death. The finely
muted epilogue contains in fact the sharpest stroke of irony in the whole book:

I live in a house by the sea in Nelson Province. It’s here I’ve written this story — cultivating my garden, so to speak. It does not surprise me that what began as the story of Celia’s death should have become the story of my life. What could be more natural?

I mourn Celia now and then. But what I really mourn is my books. My poor, burned books. I have orders placed all over the country. The postman curses me.

In his next novel, *Games of Choice* (1976), Maurice Gee does not follow the firmly demarcated story-line with its clear sequence of chronological events that characterises his previous fiction. The process by which Paul Prior examines his past is one that is set in train by events outside himself; in *Games of Choice*, however, Kingsley Pratt’s habit of continually mulling over the past is an integral part of his personality. Paul is forced to remember in order to uncover the truth of the present; Kingsley Pratt indulges in introspection so as to veil the truth from himself. The result is a closely-woven texture which, instead of a story, really consists of a description of a family situation or state of affairs — affairs in all senses of the word.

The family, consisting of Kingsley, his wife, Alison, their two teenage children, Malcolm and Miranda, and Kingsley’s father, now retired and living in a garden-shack that has been fitted up as a home for him, are assembled for the Christmas holiday. Both Kingsley’s major characteristic and the significance of the novel’s title are made clear near the beginning where Kingsley vows to himself that on this Christmas morning at least he will use ‘every trick he knew to keep himself from any sort of backward glance at his life. That could only lead to the game of choices, to the dreaming of other ways’. The vow, however, is difficult to keep, Kingsley’s marriage is a failure, and has been so for years. A few days later, Alison finally leaves him.

Despite the fact, however, that this does bring about a major change in the family, it is not this marriage relationship that the novel focuses upon. As with the rest of Gee’s fiction, the centre of interest remains largely fixed upon that between parent and child. The focus, then, remains the same, but the viewpoint has changed. Time has moved on — and Maurice Gee with it. Now the main character is himself a father, and it is from this new perspective that our conception of the family relationships chronicled in *Games of Choice* is governed.

The times have also changed in another sense; Miranda is both her
father's daughter and a child of the late 1960s in general. In the past year she tells her father:

She had joined in the burning of an American flag and picketed the offices of the security police; she had helped produce a satirical broadsheet, she had been to pot parties and tried mixed flatting, tried yoga, a macrobiotic diet, and (only once) LSD. (GC, p. 26)

After the home breaks up, she also moves out with the man with whom she is having her current affair.

Malcolm's rebellion against the family takes an opposite course; he too leaves home, but to go into the army as a volunteer, to become what his father bitterly describes as 'a man-butcher'.

Summarized thus, *Games of Choice* is reduced to a conventional account in a New Zealand setting of that international phenomenon 'the generation gap', and there is, in fact, one place in the novel where Kingsley does use the term. 'It seemed there were generation gaps wherever one looked. He felt relief as the jargon clouded his thought. There was no longer any point in thinking clearly' (GC, p. 62). But the novel really belies this since *Games of Choice* is not, in fact, a study of an oppressive parent trying, in vain, to quell his children's rebellion. On the contrary the reader gradually becomes aware — as Kingsley does too — that beneath all the dissension and conflict the children still retain much sympathy and affection for their father and that these feelings are reciprocated. The novel closes with Kingsley recognizing clearly at last that Malcolm and Miranda are now individuals with their own lives to lead — and accepting, equally clearly, that this will be done outside the family:

He walked down to the river. In his mind he wrote to Miranda: *Miranda, I love you. Be happy ...* and to Malcolm: *Malcolm, Be happy, be kind.* He was moved almost to open speech by his love for them and knew that they would find no use for it.... He walked up the line of the iron fence and into the shade of the walnut tree. They would always cause him pain, the children, and fill him with a love that could not be spoken, yet they were as acceptable to him as the tree itself. Beyond the emotions they caused him they were neutral, firm in their places. (GC, pp. 163-4)

It is Maurice Gee's novels that are the most significant part of his writing and his short stories are really best seen as supplementary to these. There is, for example, an episode in a short story which casts much light on the parent-child relationship depicted in *Games of Choice*. It is also an episode which clearly has some marked degree of significance for
Gee since it is later elaborated into the main situation of another story, 'A Glorious Morning, Comrade' which, in turn, is also the title-piece of the whole volume of short stories first published in 1975.

At the end of the story, 'A Retired Life', the main character, Cliff Poulson, is walking one evening on the beach near his home when he is passed by an old man who has clearly escaped for a time from the care of his two middle-aged daughters. Then he notices the two women running in pursuit of their father in order to catch him and take him back home:

Poor bitches, he thought, watching them catch Mr Webb. They brought him back past Cliff; sturdy figures, supporting the old man so that his feet only touched the sand lightly. The tender sounds they made died away.

'Naughty boy. Running away from the ones who love him.'

The old man must be wet, Cliff thought. He'd catch pneumonia.

Running away from the ones who love them; it would be difficult to find a phrase which — mutatis mutandis — more accurately characterises the family situation at the end of Games of Choice, and moreover, to find one which more strongly suggests many of the paradoxes — painful or otherwise — which can surround the whole relationship between children and parents as the child grows up and approaches adult independence. In a sense it is this essential paradox which lies at the very heart of all the relationships between parents and children dealt with in Gee's novels, even in the earlier ones. Games of Choice, however, ends on a markedly optimistic note: the bonds of the family have been snapped — the ties of affection remain.

* * *

It seems appropriate enough that at least part of the fascination derived from reading Plumb can be found in tracing its family likeness to the rest of Gee's fiction. Not all of these likenesses are explored in depth, but even so, they are established with a very sure economy of touch. Moreover, by an unfailingly firm control of material these similarities are all made to contribute to the major concerns of the novel — the establishment of George Plumb's character, the exploration of the factors in the past that have made him what he is in the present, and finally, the way in which these have crucially affected his relationship with his children.

As is the case with In My Father's Den, many of the events are viewed in retrospect and are clarified by this perspective. Like Kingsley Pratt, Plumb too is a father, but a much older one. In his eighties when the
novel opens, all of his children are now grown up and have established families of their own. His wife, Edie, has been dead for many years, but in recalling her, the tenderness aroused by her memory does not blind him to a flaw in her character: 'gentility had been Edie's vice. And I thought, gentility is the enemy of life, it gets in the way of natural response.' Plumb thinks of his wife; the reader recalls *A Special Flower*. He had first noticed her when he was playing cricket. Sport has played a part in Plumb's life as it did in Rob Andrews's, but its role is a rather different one: 'Let me say now, I have always been impatient of those who sneer at sport. Nothing better promotes deep and free breathing, which is the basis of health' (*P*, p. 16).

There is, however, another similarity between *Plumb* and *In My Father's Den*. Presbyterianism is a key-factor in both novels. In the earlier, Presbyterianism, although a formative influence in Paul's life through his mother, is, nevertheless, presented entirely from his point of view, and we are never allowed into her consciousness to see things from this vantage-point. After listening to his brother, who has remained steadfastly within the fold of the church, preaching at him, Paul 'started to work up a rage. That cretin, I thought, that half-man, that self-castrated, mother-worshipping, obscurantist, priestly, wosser prick. What a mind!' (*FD*, p. 146). In *Plumb* we are taken inside that mind and follow its working. Paul is an inverted Presbyterian; in *Plumb* the balance is righted.

George Plumb, in the early part of the book, joins the Presbyterian church and then becomes a minister of it. The step is one that is taken only after much mental anguish, soul-searching and spiritual turmoil. The ceaseless struggle of the nonconformist with his conscience which Plumb's life presents at this stage, the way in which he and his wife are incessantly engaged in the struggle of 'mapping out our lives under God' (*P*, p. 23), their burning conviction that every thought, word and deed has a deeper significance — that every act is 'a spiritual act, an act of praise' (*P*, p. 13), that all things are performed in the sight of the Lord and are judged accordingly; all these processes are presented with great insight and sympathetic understanding. In its comprehension of the working of the puritan conscience it does not seem entirely unjustified to place this early part of the book beside, for example, Bunyan in the tradition of English nonconformist writing or, say, Hawthorne in that of New England puritanism.

In order to describe this early stage of Plumb's life, Gee has drawn upon, as he states in an 'author's note', the writings of his own grand-
parents, James and Florence Chapple, to whose memory it is dedicated. The note is worth quoting since it brings out more clearly than anywhere else the specific strands which are woven together to form *Plumb* and which also constitute more indirectly — but just as fundamentally — the basis of Gee’s work as a whole:

Much of George and Edith Plumb’s early history is Chapple history. Not all.... He was though a Presbyterian minister ... and he was sent to prison for sedition. His religious career, his opinions, his wanderings, were very like George Plumb’s. However, George and Edith’s domestic life is largely imaginary.... The twelve Plumb children are not the fourteen Chapple children ... Felicity, Oliver, Robert, Alfred — the twelve — are fictional beings....

Chapple and Plumb; the true-life record of a New Zealand nonconformist and an imaginary domestic life; fact and fiction; in grafting these elements together to produce *Plumb* Gee has again, but more fully than ever and from a very different standpoint than before, both recorded a page of New Zealand history and at the same time written a notable contribution to world fiction.

The book opens when Plumb is in his eighties on the morning of his departure from his home to visit his children. The immediate impulse behind this is the way in which one of his daughters has reminded him of his long-dead wife. The expression on her face is the same as her mother’s and constitutes for him ‘thorns of remembrance. They start in me a pleasurable pain. It prompts me to my journey, my gathering in of my children; prompts me to a searching of my past’ (*P*, p. 9). The account of this journey becomes in turn a record of the spiritual odyssey of his life.

The novel does not present in detail the various episodes of this — from the zeal of his early Presbyterianism in the previous century, then his evolution through Christian Socialism to militant pacifism during the first world war, when he is sent to prison for sedition, then on to socialism and, finally, to the position of a freethinker. Nor does it dwell upon the stages of his domestic life, from courtship, to marriage, to becoming a father, widower and grandfather. Enough, however, is given to draw a full and rounded portrait of the man and to establish the salient features of his personality. Moreover these are enhanced by the narrative technique. As the title implies, Plumb is the centre around which all revolves; written in the first person (again like *In My Father’s Den*), his is the consciousness through which everything in the novel is mediated.

Through all the changing scenes of Plumb’s life, what, if anything,
remains constant? Paramount amongst these stages is his early life as a Presbyterian minister. When he follows the dictates of his conscience and resigns from the ministry despite all the sacrifices this calls for — not least from his family — basically the change is not really a great one. ‘New Presbyter is but Old Priest writ large’; Milton’s line is also relevant here. The Rev. George Plumb forsakes the Presbyterian ministry, yes, but he remains in all essentials a nonconformist all his life. The scene of the battle with his conscience shifts, but the fight goes on — cost what it may.

There is also another aspect of the novel which remains the same throughout. In Hasting’s Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics the definition of the duties of a Presbyterian minister which are laid down there can also be used to define one of the main qualities of the novel: ‘His office entitles him to preach, to administer the sacraments, to exercise discipline, to admonish and exhort.’

When Plumb withdraws from the ministry he ceases indeed to administer the sacraments, but the other duties are still pursued with unshakeable conviction in the need to do so and, if anything, even more zealously than before, Plumb is a man with a mission in life, and the reader is kept aware of this fact throughout the book by the prose-style in which it is written. This is not the neutral style of Gee’s previous fiction: lucid, vivid, terse. It still retains these qualities, but something else is added as well. The style is one strongly coloured throughout by the personality of Plumb. Plumb’s unswerving conviction that his sole guidance in life is to be derived from following what his conscience, and his conscience alone, dictates leads to an adamant self-righteousness which sets its stamp indelibly on every page of the novel — ‘My children have brought little comfort to me, but that is no proper complaint. I have never wished for comfort, but for thorns, for battle in the soul’s arena’ (P, p. 11); or:

Do I still have evil passions? No! I have conquered. My ideal was Wordsworth’s, plain living and high thinking, and all I have ever known of lust or rage or envy or greed I have plucked from my heart and put from me and the very places where they had their life I have burned in the cleansing flame. (P, pp. 11-12)

or:

And I thought, gentility is the enemy of life, it gets in the way of natural response, it’s like trying to eat your food with gloves on or drink tea from a timble. Gentility had been Edie’s vice. Not puritanism. Nothing wrong with that, it’s maligned by the ignorant and self-indulgent. I have been a puritan all my life. (P, p. 48)
'To preach, to exercise discipline, to admonish and exhort'; if this sums up much of Plumb's vocation in life it also affords a precise description of the language in which much of the book is written from first to last.

'George', his wife asks near the beginning of the novel, 'do you think a person should put off doing something he believes is right because he knows it will hurt somebody else?' (P, p. 22). Couched in a hesitant, low-key tone, the question is nevertheless one that resounds throughout the book. Plumb's answer is no, and it is an answer charting a course of action from which he never deviates an inch whatever the price to be paid or the sacrifice demanded of himself, his friends, his wife, children and family. Many of his children bear the scars this doctrine inflicts upon them; chief amongst these is his son, Alfred. Plumb discovers that he is a homosexual in love with John Willis, a friend of the family, and, in a scene where he takes on some of the dimensions of a figure from the Old Testament, he denounces Alfred and exercises discipline with a vengeance:

Alfred and John were coming over the bridge. I met them, raised my palm to ward them off.

'Don't come into my house. You are dead. You are dead to me, Alfred. Never come here again.' And I flung the sovereigns on the bricks in front of him. 'Your name isn't Plumb. There's money to change your name.' And I fled again, for I saw the danger of his face becoming human.

I shut myself in our bedroom. I lay trembling on the bed in which Alfred had been conceived and borne. It was my right to kill him, kill the beast, as God had killed these creatures of filth long ago.

So in my mind I killed him; and killed him again. (P, p. 215)

This son is now numbered amongst the children Plumb seeks to gather in. Twenty-five years have elapsed since he pronounced judgement and their meeting again at the end of the book is very far from being one of reconciliation. Alfred repudiates the role of the prodigal son, refuses to have any communication with the man once his father, and smashes Plumb's ear-trumpet into fragments.

For many years Plumb has been afflicted with deafness and has used this ear-trumpet. Its symbolism has the same clarity which one finds in the symbols in Gee's other novels. In the first paragraph of the book we are told that although on festive or family occasions, 'I carry the instrument with me, more to satisfy expectations than out of a wish to hear, in normal times I'm allowed my aural blackness. Indeed I enjoy it. It sharpens my other senses, especially my sense of otherness'. Now, at the
end of the book, his isolation and sense of otherness is total: ‘I heard nothing. Being without my trumpet was an advantage. I knew I would not buy another one’ (P, p. 269). He knows too that he is near death and adds: ‘I did not judge myself. The time for judgements had gone’ (P, p. 270).

But have they? It may be so for Plumb — but for the reader? The moral dilemma posed in the question put by Plumb’s wife not only echoes through the book, but also carries a resonance that extends far beyond the last page. Does the price for following the dictates of conscience at the cost of inflicting suffering upon others ever become too high to pay? If so — when? Is the conviction of being in the right always and invariably a sufficient guide for moral conduct? What then can replace this conviction? Gee’s explicitness, that one has noted time and again in the previous novels, here gives way before a clear-sighted and steady recognition of the moral complexities involved. Plumb neither provides any easy answer to these questions, nor does it allow the reader any; this too is one of its achievements.

As for George Plumb himself, if the salient features of his character are clear-cut, what is much more complex is the reaction induced in the reader. The stubborn, rigid, doctrinaire bigotry of his beliefs can be roundly condemned; the tenacious, unflinching courage with which he maintains and defends them extorts a reluctant admiration. He may remain constant; the reader’s attitude to him continually oscillates between these two poles.

The end of his journey has really, it becomes apparent, been clear from the start. ‘In my begining is my end’: Eliot’s line from ‘East Coker’ also applies to Plumb. In a discussion with Bluey, formerly a lapsed Catholic, but now again a believer, Plumb is told that he needs a priest as an intermediary with God. True to his nonconformist faith, Plumb replies “‘No, Bluey. No. That doesn’t follow at all. There’s just man and his Maker. Man facing God. Nobody in between’” (P, p. 116). Instead of a gathering in of his children, he discovers finally that they are more widely dispersed than ever. Bereft at the end of his wife and of his family, with no meaningful communication possible with anyone, Plumb is no longer a parent seeking his children. ‘Man facing God. Nobody in between’; George Plumb is left facing the only father and with the only relationship that has, ultimately, any meaning for him.

Gee is still writing and may well, one has every ground for hoping, publish another novel as good; it will prove much more difficult to produce a better.
NOTES

2. *A Special Flower* (Hutchinson, London, 1965), p. 25. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
3. *In My Father's Den* (Faber & Faber, London, 1972), p. 13. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
5. *Games of Choice* (Faber & Faber, London, 1976), p. 16. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
7. *Plumb* (Faber & Faber, London, 1978), p. 48. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.

This essay is a much revised and extended version of a paper on Maurice Gee given at a conference on New Zealand literature held at the University of Aarhus in October, 1980. Its publication enables me to place on record the gratitude felt by all the participants in the conference to Anna Rutherford, who organised it, and to the government of New Zealand, who, through its embassy, generously funded and actively encouraged the conference throughout all its stages.