MEG

A MEMOIR

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Margaret L Coten

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This memoir has been left largely as Meg wrote it. Aside from minor corrections and formatting for readability, her original words and voice have been preserved.

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INTRODUCTION

Thank you for taking the time to read this book.

It was written by our wonderful mother, Meg Coten – known to many as a social worker, a storyteller, a traveller, a friend, and a pioneer. But to us, she was simply Mum: warm, wise, endlessly curious, and always thinking of others.

After our father died when we were very young, Mum raised us on her own. She never had a lot of money, and life was certainly not without its challenges. But what we remember – what we treasure – are the stories, the laughter, the encouragement, and the love. We both feel incredibly lucky for the upbringing we had, and we know that so much of who we are today is a direct result of the values she lived and shared with us.

Over the years, we've heard countless stories about Meg from others – of her kindness, her sharp humour, her sense of justice, and her strength in the face of hardship. As children, we would sit wide-eyed as she told us about her days in the WAAAF, her travels across Europe, or her time living in a tent on the Nullarbor. She had a way of making the world feel large, exciting, and full of possibility, even from the kitchen table.

Mum passed away in 2020, just a few weeks prior to turning 97 years of age. Not long before, she completed the handwritten manuscript that is now before you. With the help of family and friends, we've been able to have it transcribed and prepared for publication – something she always hoped would happen.

This is, at its heart, an autobiography. But it's also something more: a vivid, firsthand account of rural life in early 20th-century Western Australia, a record of war and peace, of social change, and of a remarkable woman who quietly helped shape her community. What you will read is almost entirely

unchanged from mum's handwritten words. We felt that it was important to have her story told in her way.

The appendices – articles written by and about Mum, tributes from her life, and records of the places she lived – offer further insight into her world, and into the times she lived through. The last of these provides more insight to our father, a previously untold story about his family and the search to find them.

We are honoured to share this story with you. For us, it is a permanent record of Mum's life – for our children, for her friends and family, and for anyone interested in the rich tapestry of Australia's history, told through one woman's voice.

Mum gave us so many gifts throughout her life. This book is one of the best.

We present *Meg: A Memoir* in loving memory of our beautiful mother, Meg Coten.

Ned and Jim Coten
October 2025

1923–1942

CHAPTER ONE

BEGINNING

Early memories are as unsubstantial as fleeting cloud shadows sweeping across a hillside. A colour, smell or music can recall some early event in one's life but, when it has become family folklore, it is hard to identify the memory as one's own.

I remember being put into a large, wicker laundry basket on wheels out of harms' way, buttoned into a voluminous garment which made me look like a Christmas pudding.

I do not remember the earliest of my achievements but they brought fame in the eyes of my two brothers. At three weeks of age, I killed a fly on my pillow with a blow of my fist, a useful talent for someone about to be brought up in the Australian bush and, while being bathed in a china basin, cracked it with a hearty kick. These events did not augur well for my mother's plan to bring me up (turn me into) a gentle, docile and biddable young lady. To her credit, she never gave up trying.

I do remember an exciting event which took place when I was very young. A rail breakdown on the line stranded a train at the Highbury siding, which was carrying a circus. It was two and half miles north of the farm. The cages with the animals on board were pulled up to the Hall to be near the rain water tank which could supply their needs. The whole district gathered to see the animals, our family included. One look at the lions and tigers was enough to send me into hysterics. My brother Dick tried to pacify me but I struggled out of his arms and clutched the nearest support which turned out to be the dungaree-clad legs of old Billy Poole.

Billy Poole was an old bushman who had been a government guide for new settlers and was sometimes employed on farms. He lived in a bush humpy up behind the hall. Most days, he sat on the store verandah, chewing tobacco and, at regular intervals, spitting brown globs of juice across it onto

the ground. Sometimes he did not make the distance which maddened the storekeeper's wife. She would come out with a broom and ostentatiously sweep around him and brush dirt over his spits.

He picked me up and consoled me. He smelt of wood smoke and tobacco and I loved it. I spent the afternoon in his arms, lovingly running my fingers through his tobacco-stained beard. I refused to leave him in spite of my mother giving it her best shot trying to wheedle me away.

Perhaps that day laid the groundwork for my early terror of the King of the Beasts and tigers. For many years, I was sure a lion lived in our washhouse and hated going past it and a whole group of fierce animals led by a tiger lived behind the rain water tank outside the bathroom. Another lion lived in the sewing room at the Lodge, the house at Cuballing where my grandparents lived after they left the farm. Not long before he died, Dick told me he had thought a lion lived in that room, too.

The only real savagery I faced in those days was from a pet lamb called Billy Buttons who used to bowl me over every time I ventured outside. The capeweed was in flower and I remember lying in it, flat on my back and this malevolent creature standing over me, woolly face speckled with pollen lowered in my face, displaying his new, pearly buds of horns, until my screams brought help.



Tom, Meg and Dick at an unknown location in 1941.
Meg adored her two older brothers, Tom and Dick, though they teased her mercilessly at times. They grew up together on Linton, the family farm in Highbury, WA, during the Depression years, with Meg often escaping school to ride her mischievous pony, Myrtle.

My birthday falls in spring. In the Great Southern District of WA, where I spent my early years on the family mixed farm, it is a season of fickle weather. There are sudden storms, bursts of warm sunshine when fluffy white clouds mingle and divide in a blue sky, casting shadows on the paddocks below, golden with capeweed flowers. The creeks run clear after winter floods and the young lambs frolic together or nudge into their mothers to suckle.

My mother was aggrieved when I arrived on the day of the local show. She was a very sociable person and resented missing it. It was the one day of the year when everyone in the district came to Narrogin and met their friends, displayed their stock, admired the show of produce and enjoyed the delights of sideshow alley.

In the early days, when most people came by horse and sulky or in buggies, groups of friends spread rugs on the grass and shared a picnic lunch while they caught up with the news. Later on lunches, morning and afternoon teas were available in a big tin shed. Customers sat on rough plank benches at trestle tables spread with white sheets for tablecloths and decorated with vases of spring flowers. A special table was set in one corner for the official party, comprised of the Show President, the local member who usually opened the show, various other dignitaries and their wives. The hardworking committee arrived early in the morning, laden with cooked meat, bread, salads, scones, cakes, trifles and jellies to feed the multitude. Good carvers among the men were called into slice the legs of mutton, and hams, a guard with a fly swat in hand to watch for blowies, and to fill and lift the huge white teapots and pour the tea. The helpers took turns to slip away to watch the Grand Parade of animals, the horses in action or to look at the displays of fruit, flowers and handcraft in the Exhibition shed.

In subsequent years, I found the clash of the show and my birthday irritating. With both dates so close together, I have never been able to give each event its fair share of nervous excitement, such an integral part of complete happiness.

For ladies, a new dress was an important constituent of the show ritual, generally homemade and a frilly concoction of voile and lace. There was considerable chagrin if show day turned out to be wet and windy, as if often was, and concealing winter coats had to be worn. The highlight of the show for me was the merry-go-round and I rode the gaily caparisoned steeds until the supply of threepences ran out.

In the late afternoon, people began to pack up, sideshow alley folded, to move on to the next show, goodbyes were said reluctantly, animals led away. Tired, fractious children were told that if they did not behave, they would

never come to another show, which even parents realized was an idle threat. The long drive home to feed horses, milk cows and lock up the chooks did nothing to temper the pleasure of the day. It lingered for some time as the merits and otherwise of section prizes, etc, were discussed with neighbours and friends.

By family tradition, the birthday person always had a wreath of flowers around their place at the breakfast table on the day. There was always a profusion around mine. The garden at the front of the house was a mosaic of colour in spring. Both my mother and my grandmother before her had been gardeners and sweet-smelling roses, violets, pansies, lavender, love-in-the-mist and many more bloomed profusely. Over the years, jonquils, freesias, spraxia and lupins spread out into the orchard like a beautiful carpet. I always felt sorry for my mother who had a late summer birthday. She had to make do with fronds of asparagus fern and some of the straggling red geraniums that grew in painted green kerosene tins kept alive with bath water.

My two brothers Dick and Tom were several years older than me. I have always felt my parents missed a great opportunity in not calling me Harriet. Then we could have been called Tom, Dick and Harry. My mother probably thought it too tomboyish and I was christened Margaret after, I think, the heroine of Dickens' *The Cricket on the Hearth*, one of her favourite fictional characters.

She was a good, caring mother but we did not always see eye to eye. She was overprotective in her anxiety to prevent me becoming coarse and rough, living as we did on a farm where the facts of life were so blatant. I think, however, in time she came to forgive the lusty infant who spoilt her Show Day in October 1923.

February 2009

Since writing this, Tom, quite recently, told me the following about the circus:

> While it was stranded in Highbury the circus owners put on a performance for the locals which was well attended. During lessons at school next day, one of the children put up her hand and told the teacher she saw a lion coming down the road. The teacher told her to get on with her work and not to be silly but, when he looked through the window, he realized there was a lion walking down the road!

CHAPTER TWO

FAMILY

My father, Robert James Porter, was born into a farming family in Tandragee, County Armagh now part of Northern Ireland. There was a large family connection, mostly on farms, in the district. Both his parents had been to America (his mother taking a position as a governess and chasing his father – according to legend) but they came back to Ireland and married. They had six children, four boys and two girls.

The farm, in the townland of Moyrourkan, consisted of 40 acres of good land but there was not enough to support four sons so my father emigrated at a young age. First, he went to New Zealand and worked for two years on isolated sheep stations and then he came to Victoria, to relatives in Kerang for some time. Later, he came to the Highbury district in WA and leased land west of the little siding and settlement.

He married twice before he married my mother. His first wife died a few years after marriage during a thyroid operation in Kerang. She left a four-year-old daughter, Eileen, who was to remain with the Kerang relatives and never came to WA to live with us. She became a teacher and married a teacher. They had twin daughters and two sons.

I felt quite overcome with emotion when I realized I actually had a sister. We got on very well together when we met, although she was so much older. If it was possible, she was even more of a bookworm than I am.

My father's second marriage was equally tragic, as Edith, his second wife, died in childbirth. She and, I presume, the baby are buried in the Narrogin cemetery where my parents and my mother's parents also lie.

Dad never spoke about his marriages. Mother said it was because he felt he was unlucky, which no one would dispute. He did not speak much about his early life although he kept a tenuous connection with his family

and ironically, in the fullness of time, his three brothers also came out to farm in Highbury.

Sometimes, in the mornings when he was feeding and grooming the horses he would sing 'Macushla, Macushla' and 'Where the Mountains of Mourne Swape [sic] Down to the Sea', very out of tune. He never lost his soft brogue.

His mother paid a visit to see the boys after their father died but it was not a success. Tom and Jack, the twins, were living in fairly rough conditions on their lease and she did not hit it off with my mother at all. She rented a house in Narrogin for six months and then returned to Ireland saying, 'all Australians lived like pigs!' Visiting my Irish relatives years later, they told me she was very bad tempered and sharp but suffered from migraines. They added 'no one could make apple pies like Aunt Mary!'

James Porter, my grandfather was described as a very kind, quiet man. He would have needed to be long-suffering too, by the sound of it. My father did tell me how he was nearly arrested by police in Chicago when they raided a bar where some Sinn Feiners were drinking and they thought he was one of them, and how a man also in Chicago, eyeing off his gold watch chain, asked him the time. Grandfather brought his watch out of one back pocket and his revolver out of another, whereupon the enquirer faded away.

I sometimes wonder if my grandmother's personality had something to do with her sons leaving home. My father told me one of the reasons he left home, apart from lack of opportunity, was because of the social injustice he had seen. He had no time for the Roman Catholic Church because of the way the priests extorted money from the poor. He also felt strongly about what he saw as unfair treatment meted out to the labourers on the family farm. Although everyone had meals in the same room, the family sat at a separate table and had fresh bread while the labourers had the stale!

Soon after I started going to the little one-teacher school in Highbury, a letter was sent to all parents asking if they would agree to the aboriginal children, of a family who had come to the district, attending. My mother, brought up in a sheltered environment, raised objections, saying they would be dirty and rough. My father exploded, 'Good God, woman, they are human beings aren't they? They have every right to an education.'

In fact the children were neither dirty nor rough but I had mixed feelings when the event took place. Being a spoilt, sheltered child, I fell an early victim to the subtle bullying of an older aboriginal girl. She threatened to 'tell the police' if I did not do as she commanded, give her my lunch, books and toys. I never told anyone of the mental torture she put me through, nor the punching and hitting that went on surreptitiously. Instead, I plotted to

avoid school. Feeling sick, headaches, tummy pains, even inability to find my pony, became regular ploys.

My pony, Myrtle, had been given to me by a girl leaving the district and she became my regular mode of travel after Tom left school. Until then we had driven to school together in the sulky.

Myrtle was a flea-bitten grey who had been taking children to school for many years and hated it as much as I did. She was pastured in the cow paddock and on very foggy mornings she blended into the landscape so well she was often quite hard to find – not impossibly so but enough to offer a wild hope. She was also adept at throwing her rider, shying and pig-rooting unexpectedly. If I fell off on the way to school we could turn round and canter briskly home, me crying theatrically on arrival. Both Tom and my mother said they would show me how to ride but she threw them both and my mother came home hobbling, leaning on a waddy she had picked up in the bush. I was secretly pleased that while she always waited for me to remount when she threw them she galloped home leaving them to walk back!

In spite of her mischievous ways, Myrtle was my closest friend and confidante for many years. As I fed and groomed her, I told her all my grievances, sobbed onto her neck and wiped my eyes with the coarse hair of her mane. She was an ideal counsellor as she listened unmoved, munching her chaff and after the outburst I felt better.

It was a mystery to me even then how I managed to get away with so much truancy but as my mother had an anxious disposition and never knew whether my complaints were real or feigned, she almost always gave me the benefit of the doubt. By mid-morning I usually felt well enough to face the day and, if my father came in for morning tea, although he would say I was 'a notty wee thing', usually let me come out in the paddock with him. I hated the deception and my guilt added to my general misery. But once out in the freedom of the farm, my remorse tended to fade.

It was only when I had been absent for two weeks, after I had fallen off Myrtle and she trod on me so I had hoof-mark bruises and obvious proof of injury, the teacher paid us a visit and said, if I did not come back to school, she would have to report me to the Welfare Officer. That struck cold fear in my heart and I made a quick recovery. As there were only two Welfare Officers in the Education Department in WA at that time, there was little chance of the threat being carried out but I was not to know that. I came from a long line of truants as my brothers and my mother's younger siblings were also reluctant starters. They all had to walk the two-and-a-half miles each way, while I at least had a horse.

Sometimes the men going up and down checking the railway line which ran past the house would give the children a lift on their trikes. Occasionally a kind-hearted freight-train driver stopped to let them pile into the guard's van as far as the siding.

Although the neighbour's six children who drove past the farm were usually late, they would offer my aunts and uncle a lift in their spring cart. Ernie, the eldest and the driver, was a great tease and would whip up the horse and say they would have to jump on if they wanted to come! One of my aunts missed her step one day, fell under the wheel and fractured her collar bone. She did not tell granny for two weeks because she did not want to say how it happened. As Ernie was one of the kindest people I have ever met, I cannot believe he left any of the children behind.

My youngest aunt, Marjorie, told me that all she remembers about school was learning to spell 'cat'. She learnt more when she helped the old storekeeper sort the mail when the train came in after school. He taught her how to break string which she said was one of the most useful things she ever learnt. She must have picked up more knowledge than that because she and her two sisters went on to be nurses.

Although my brother Dick did not start school until he was seven and my father had to chase him through the creek and down the road to get him started each morning, he went on to win one of the fifty state scholarships given each year. He went on to Northam High School and, in spite of health setbacks, later completed his medical studies.

Tom had health problems when he was young and missed a lot of school as a result. He did not have the same opportunity for further study but took over the farm after our father's death.

Our exploits pale by comparison to two children, a boy and a girl who came after our time. Riding ponies from opposite directions, they met each day at a crossroad and rode off to an isolated patch of bush reserve and set up camp. They played cards, hunted rabbits, boiled the billy and ate their lunches. When they judged by the look of the sun that it was home time, they went their respective ways. The teacher thought they must be sick and did not worry too much at first. It was only when a commercial traveller, taking a short cut along a bush track, noticed a wisp of smoke above the trees and went to investigate that their escapade was brought to light.

There were major drawbacks in missing so much school because the more I missed, the further behind I became. I remember the teacher telling the little boy sitting next to me to show me how to do long division, after one of my absences, because she could not be bothered. He did his best but as I had never learnt my tables, it was a lost cause. This particular teacher

had a short temper and was not above laying about her with a cane. The glorious day came when not only was she transferred but the aboriginal family moved on.

Life changed overnight for Myrtle and me. No more lazy days in the cow paddock for her as I became a keen and interested student. My earliest school experiences left me with the greatest sympathy for truants because I believe it is not a case of naughty children but a poor system.

My father was a quiet, thoughtful man, stocky, with deep-set, blue eyes. He wore his hat at a jaunty angle which gave him a debonair look. He had only four years schooling but he was an avid reader of anything he could lay his hands on. He liked cowboy stories; Zane Grey was his favourite author but he took a keen interest in local and world affairs, especially Irish politics. He showed little enthusiasm for the Royal Family. He was hard-working, thrifty but generous to a fault. He loved farm stock sales and auctions, where he could meet with other men and discuss all the things dear to a farmer's heart and pick up bargains on the side.

Women rarely participated in these events, except to make and serve lunches and teas. Wearing their best pinnies and showing off their cooking skills, it was a good chance for a gossip for them, too.

My father was a crack shot and going to the monthly meetings of the local Rifle Club was one of his regular commitments. For many years, he was the local representative on the Narrogin Roads Board and he participated in the local community affairs.

His passion was card playing and whenever possible would round up a table of likeminded friends for bridge or euchre. The bachelor sons of neighbours sometimes came for tea and an evening of bridge, driving up in a spring cart. They would play until the early hours of the morning, my mother stoking up the fire while she was dummy, to boil the kettle for further cups of tea. Sometimes the horse got tired of waiting, slipped its neck-rope and went home. Once it took several yards of the fence with it and got caught up in the bush. I loved it when the boys had to stay the night as I adored them.

Dad never wore a watch but could always judge the time. He was a demon for punctuality and my mother's tardiness sometimes irritated him. 'What are you doing, now, woman?' He would say as he sat in the sulky ready to go to Narrogin and she tore back into the house to check something at the last minute. For all that, they were a very happy couple and I cannot remember any real rows. If someone left a gate open or did something equally reprehensible, he would explode but generally he was fairly calm.

My mother had been brought up in a culture where a woman's place was in the home, looking after her man and their children and the role suited her. She loved gaiety and music. Coming from a large, close-knit family, she was at her happiest with people around her.

Her family on the maternal side were sheep farmers in the Orkneys and sea captains. There was also a Highland strain of scholars and noted ecclesiastics. Her grandfather, Adam Robertson, brought his family to the newly opened colony of South Australia in 1839. They are believed to have landed at Encounter Bay where his wife, Betsy, had twins on the beach, one of whom died.

They took up land twelve miles out of Adelaide and named it 'Golden Grove', after a ship Adam had commanded. A solid stone house was built in 1842. It is now protected under the National Trust but with little money to maintain it, it is in a depressingly neglected state. It is no longer owned by the family. The Robertsons regarded themselves as old establishment in Adelaide, as no doubt they were, but a certain amount of profligacy by the next generation and unfortunate circumstances somewhat tarnished the image.

My mother's father, Matthew Leishman, also came from Scotland. At the age of twenty two he arrived in South Australia seeking a fortune and adventure. The fortune never materialized but he did have some adventures. He overlanded across the Nullarbor twice, firstly as a member of the McKenzie Grant expedition in 1876, looking for water to open a stock route and, on the second, he was accompanied only by an Afghan camel driver, called Buckshoe. No water or suitable stock route was found and both journeys were not without hardship. He undertook the second journey to investigate the prospects of work in the newly-opened goldfields near Menzies. One of his brothers had also come from Scotland and set up business there.

He was married by now and had two daughters, Christina and my mother, Agnes. My grandparents had married in a lavish Adelaide wedding. Pipers had played and my grandmother had six bridesmaids. After the wedding they travelled to an isolated sheep station at Tiatucka near the Bight. I have been told there was a solid stone house on the property with rifle slits in the walls, a precaution in case of an attack by 'blacks'.

To my knowledge no such attack took place, although there is an often repeated story about Betsy Robertson's confrontation with a tribe at Golden Grove. The men had taken the bullock wagons to Adelaide for stores and she was alone with the children when a mob of aboriginal men came to the homestead and began taking the blankets from the men's quarters. She

was quite a small person but she marched down and told them to put them back. According to the history, an aboriginal advanced, raising his spear, but the chief stopped him and said she was a brave white woman and told the men to put the blankets back. But when she went back to the house, she had to watch through a window while they speared her little terrier and roasted it over the fire they had lit, in the hollow of one of the gum trees by the creek. My mother remembered seeing the tree. Betsy left a note to someone saying there had been some 'wild times with the blacks' but unhappily there is no further record.

Not long after my grandparents moved to Tiatucka, wool prices on the London market plummeted and they had to give up the lease. While grandfather set off on his second trip across the Nullarbor with Buckshoe, Granny, in the meantime, with her two little daughters, went back to Golden Grove to await the arrival of their third child. Grandfather received the telegram telling him of the safe arrival of his first son, Thomas, when he and Buckshoe called in at the telegraph station at Ooldea on the Nullarbor. By the time grandfather and Buckshoe reached Menzies, their stores had dwindled to a tin of raspberry jam and a few of sardines.

Grandfather, because of his experience with Afghans and camels, became the manager of the Camel Carrying Co. He was responsible for organizing supply parties, taking water and stores to the finds and setting up government expeditions. It was sometime before he could find any sort of housing for the family but eventually a small place became available. It was primitive, with hessian walls inside, but when granny arrived she went to work with whitewash and ingenuity and soon made it homelike.

Aunt Ina and my mother often spoke of the happy life they had on the goldfields. They remembered going out with their father to see the camel trains leave. Grandfather would shake hands with the white men leading on horseback and then the camels, stores and flat water cans loaded on their backs, would rise reluctantly, grunting and moaning as if in pain. Led by their drivers, they would follow in a line.

Grandfather was well liked and respected by the Afghans and they frequently invited him to bring his family to their camp to watch camel races and to other festivities. During the day there would be various races and competitions but it was the night time entertainment, the children liked most.

Even in her nineties, my aunt, Ina, vividly recalled her feelings of excitement and mystery as they were led into a large bell-tent and seated on bales of hay around an arena. Smoky lanterns lit the tent, drums would start to beat and suddenly twenty or more camel drivers would burst into the

ring, wearing baggy trousers and loose shirts, whirling, colourful puggarees around their heads. They would gyrate round and round in a frenzied dance, uttering wild cries.

Later, when the dancing stopped, they were served supper, little iced cakes and strong tea, dipped out of a kerosene bucket. Wrestling bouts and other competitions would follow and once the four-year-old Tom was lifted onto their prize dromedary and led round the ring to loud applause. My mother loved riding the camels but my aunt was not so keen.

Aunt Ina, as she was called, remembered the wonder of seeing a green lawn displayed at an Exhibition in Menzies – a wonder in that dry country where my grandmother at one stage had to buy water at 2/6 a gallon. A waxworks had a terrifying tableau of Ned Kelly with an axe chasing white women in long, white nightgowns.

Grandfather met a number of mining men and surveyors who frequently came home with him for a meal. The children loved to hear them talk about their explorations. They especially liked to walk through the street in the evenings and see the colourful mixture of people, lured to the west by the promise of gold, from every corner of the globe. Mother's stories were a constant source of delight to me and I was always pleading with her to 'tell me about when you were a little girl.'

She would recount how frightened granny was of the camels wandering through the settlement, sometimes sitting on the tents and knocking them down. She thought they might knock her house down. How she was nearly left with an aboriginal baby she had admired. She loved babies and the mother left it at the door and went bush. Fortunately grandfather arrived home in time to find the mother before she went too far and returned the child.

My mother and her brother, Tom, became inseparable companions and spent many happy hours prospecting for gold.

Some sad things happened too. Granny had twins, Janet and John. The little boy died of whooping cough when he was eleven months old and granny became almost mad with grief. She had to be physically restrained from constantly wanting to go to his grave. His headstone is among the scattered graves in the Menzies cemetery. It is a peaceful place, where birds sing in the encroaching bush and, in spring, wildflowers are scattered among the grass. Nearly all those around him are young, struck down by accidents on illness.

The surviving twin, 'Jean' as she was called, nearly finished herself off at an early age by swallowing the internal workings of a watch which got stuck in her throat and falling head first into a bucket of dirty water. By

chance, as granny walked past a door, a breeze lifted the curtain across it and she saw Jean's little fat legs waving in the air.

Granny was a remarkable woman and in spite of all the difficulties she faced in life, she never failed in her love and care for her family. Both she and grandfather enriched the lives of their children with their love of music, literature and their unfailing Christian faith. What they lacked in a material sense was compensated for by laughter and love.

About 1904-05, grandfather was left a legacy when his father died and he somewhat unadvisedly bought a farm at Highbury, a recently opened up settlement. He called it Linton after the manse in Scotland where he was born. He had no farming experience and there were enormous obstacles to be overcome to make it productive. It was largely virgin bush which had to be cleared by heavy manual labour.

It was a struggle to survive, as by now there were eight children, but they were a happy family in spite of its shortcomings.

However, when Tom, the eldest son, enlisted in the army in World War 1 and then was killed at Messines[1], grandfather's health broke down, and things reached crisis point. Grandfather was unable to pay the loan he had taken out on the farm, or his other creditors. To avoid his bankruptcy, my father, by then married to my mother, took over the debt and my parents and their two little boys moved to Linton.

My grandparents moved to the Lodge, where the phantom lion lived in the sewing room, a smaller property at Cuballing, several miles north of Narrogin. After my grandfather's death, granny moved to a house in Perth.

1 Tom Leishman was killed in action in Flanders on the first day of the Battle of Messines, 4 June 1917. He is buried at Strand Military Cemetery at Hainaut in Belgium.

CHAPTER THREE

THE HOUSE

None of the houses in the district could be described as 'flash' and Linton was no exception. The main part of the house was built of corrugated iron with an addition, on the north side, of two weatherboard rooms, lined with pine. The roof was red and the outside walls, whitewashed. There were verandahs on three sides.

Many settlers started off living in tents and adding bush outhouses until they were able to build a house. Crushed ant-bed, well-watered and stamped down, made reasonable flooring. I always liked the natural feeling of these surfaces but, later in life, I was to learn that dirt floors do have their disadvantages.

Young, single men striking out on isolated blocks lived in primitive conditions. I especially remember one who always bought me lollies when we met him at the store. He was a fair-haired, gentle, young man and I liked him very much, not only because he spoilt me.

I was about ten when we heard that a neighbour, calling in to visit him had found him dead in his tent from an attack of influenza that had turned to pneumonia. I was deeply shocked and saddened. I have often thought of him and his lonely death over the years. Not long ago, quite by chance, I came upon his grave in the little St Werburgh's churchyard near Mt Barker, among other members of his family.

In spite of their idiosyncrasies, these dwellings had character and atmosphere few modern, desirable residences can boast. I especially envied our next door neighbours because, not only did they have a coloured-paper, string-bead curtain in the doorway of their dining room that rustled in the breeze, to keep the flies out, but their lavatory seat had two holes in it, a big one for grown-ups and a small one for children.

Our lavatory was some distance from the house, also built of galvanized iron. Whitewashed, it stood out like a lighthouse and, in spite of all her efforts, my mother could never grow a creeper to fling itself over it. Even the hardy *Dolichos* gave up the ghost.

Before the water table rose, bringing up the salt and destroying it, there was a thriving orchard around the house. The fruit enticed the parrots and the lavatory make a perfect hide. For many years we kept a .22 rifle there and a supply of ammunition. Frequently, a visit was punctuated by a shot and a shout of 'Got him.'

Although our father had drummed firearm safety rules into us at an early age, our attitude towards them was fairly casual. Rifles lent nonchalantly, but never loaded, against the wall on the back verandah and we usually carried a few .22 shots around in our pockets, ready for use. Especially hazardous during harvest when the men brought in bits of hay on their clothes, the bullets fell out of their pocket, when they got undressed. Swept up off the floor with the hay and unnoticed, they now and again were tossed into the kitchen fire. The resulting explosions added a bit of drama to the day.

Aunt Ina's efforts outdid ours. She had married Frank Stokes and lived on a property called 'Wonnaminta', northwest of Narrogin. Twice she tossed .303 bullets in the stove which produced a resounding result. The first time only her tail feathers got singed as she shot out of the door but the second ricocheted and caught her between her eyes. Fortunately, it hit hard bone but she carried the scar for life.

The stark appearance of the outside of the two additional weatherboard rooms at Linton was tempered by two beautiful banksia roses, one white, one cream, which covered the front wall. The connecting door into these two rooms was so narrow that it was difficult for a fat person, or someone with an armful of roots for the fire, to get through.

The first room was our sitting room and we had huge fires in there in winter. Sometimes it was so hot we had to move back to the opposite wall. The wooden mantelpiece became too hot to touch and the varnish on the underside was permanently blistered.

'Careful the chimney doesn't go up!' was the cry, as another large root was flung onto the coals and flames and sparks shot up. Sometimes the chimney did catch alight and someone had to climb up on the roof and put a wet bag over it. The mess below is best left to the imagination.

It was a great place for storytelling, making toast and looking for pictures in the coals.

The piano was in this room and, as my mother was an accomplished pianist and singer, we often had sing-songs in the evenings. We loved the

old favourites from the *Student Song Book* and we always sang hymns on Sundays.

There was a 'Rosewood' brand seat, made from the pine boxes, the four-gallon tins of kerosene were packed in. One box laid flat with two more tacked on the ends in an upright position made a surprisingly comfortable seat. Padded and covered with cretonne, it looked quite attractive, although I doubt if my mother ever became reconciled to it.

Many uses were found for these sturdy boxes and the empty kerosene tins, with their tops cut off and handles attached, made useful buckets, after they had been well scrubbed. Not having the benefits of plastic in its many forms, any container was treasured.

The second of these rooms was a bedroom, always referred to as the end room.

Flour and sugar bags were useful too. After they were emptied, they were washed, unpicked and used for aprons, potholders, even towels for the men to use when they washed before meals. They were often decorated with a border of cretonne.

In the early fifties when I was privileged to live for some months on a mission station in the Kimberley, one of the aboriginal women made me a flour bag sun frock. It was the most comfortable garment I have ever owned and I loved the brand of a red dingo standing on a rock in the front. The Dingo Flour Mill was one of the earliest industries in Narrogin so the brand on my dress struck a chord with me.

During the depression years, many people used these bags stitched together to make 'Wogga' covers. Filled with sheets of newspaper stitched in place, they were very warm.

Newspapers were used to line cupboard shelves and when I was young, kitchen mantelpieces were sometimes covered with folded newspaper, on which a decorative pattern had been cut along the edge.

Living in the bush after my marriage, I decided to try my skill with scissors and felt very pleased with the result. One day I was standing in front of the stove when my husband came in and gave me a warm embrace. I closed my eyes to savour the moment but after a suspiciously long pause, I opened them to find he was reading the real estate advertisements behind my head.

My mother had developed rheumatoid arthritis in her twenties, possibly a legacy from a 'low fever' she had contracted as a child. In spite of her painful and swollen hands, she played the piano almost every day, even in her eighties when she could only pick out notes with one finger. She tried a variety of treatments from gold injections to getting stung by bees, mooted

as a sure cure for pain relief. None of them worked and the bee stings made her swell up all over. She had to take to her bed for some days.

In her teens, she had been shipped off to an aunt in South Australia to help her with her five children, as well as being tutored in French and music. Her uncle was a busy general practitioner and the family did a lot of entertaining. They lived in some style so there was plenty to do.

Aunty Day was an exacting housekeeper with very high standards and mother kept to those methodical standards in her own house. When visitors were expected, the whole place was turned upside down. Sometimes we children were turned out of our beds to sleep on the floor on mattresses.

Learning to sleep like a stunned mullet anywhere, as a child, has stood me in good stead throughout my life, when I have spent many nights in strange places. I have slept on the floors of railway carriages, under benches in bus shelters, in swags under the stars, on the backs of utes, sitting up on the front seat of utes, the decks of ferries, in dry irrigation ditches in Italian vineyards, in pine forests in France, in a police cell in Northern Queensland, for shelter not crime, and even sitting upright on a hard wooden chair one hot, exhausting day at the Brussels Exhibition in the fifties. I was completely impervious to the people whose handbags hit my head or who tripped over my feet!

Mondays were regular wash days and hard work for my mother. The copper had to be filled with buckets of water from the rainwater tank, grated soap added in and the whites added to boil. They had to be drained, rinsed, starched and blued, where necessary. (The cubes of Reckitt's Blue were supposed to be a panacea for insect bites but they did nothing for mother's bee stings.) Then the coloureds went through and, finally, the work clothes that dad usually did.

Everything had to be hung out and brought in late in the afternoon, crisp and sweet smelling. When the sheets were folded I was allowed to 'take an end'. The ironing was damped down to be tackled next day with the flat irons, heated on top of the stove. The handkerchiefs and tea towels were my province.

The washing water was bailed out and flung under a big fig tree nearby. In spring, tall, pale green marshmallows thrived around it, providing secret places for any hens sneaking into the house yard to lay. There were always one or two who liked to lay under the house if they could get in. The first alert of this illicit practice often came when the eggs began to go off and popped, making an awful smell. Someone had to go under the house with a rake and drag the rest of the eggs out.

If the nest was in an inaccessible place, floorboards had to be pulled up, always a cause for excitement, as over the years little brooches, hairclips and even small coins had fallen through the cracks. The eggs were buried in the orchard and we jumped on the spot to hear them pop.

My mother's younger sisters often visited us and there was always a lot of talking and laughter. I loved their visits and hearing their reminiscences because they had done so many of the things I enjoyed, paddling in the creek, catching tadpoles and playing in the sandpit in the orchard.

My mother and her brother, Tom, had been very close and his name came up frequently. Although I was born several years after he had been killed, I was aware of her deep and continuing grief. My father's brother, Abel, also died in World War 1 and his body was never recovered[2].

Many young men had gone from the district, many never returned after the war. It was a frequent subject of discussion. There were photos in the house, of my uncle wearing uniform, but they did nothing to dispel my belief that soldiers looked like some alien figures carrying rifles and made of a translucent golden brown substance like Pear's soap. In bed at night I imagined them in the driveway. They never reached the gate because their legs were stuck together like jelly babies.

Through these stories I heard, I almost felt the presence of the people who had lived in the house. One was very vivid. That was Mattie, the Irish cook my grandmother brought with her to the farm from Golden Grove. Her cooking skills were unexceptional and her bread making uncertain. She was very bad tempered if the dough did not rise and while she was in charge in the kitchen, the children added a postscript to their evening prayers, 'Please, God, let the bread rise!'

Mattie rarely left the farm but periodically she needed to see the doctor in Narrogin about her bad leg. This entailed catching the morning passenger train at the Highbury siding, returning in the afternoon. It was doubtful if she ever got past the hotel as she came home from these excursions, drunk as a lord and singing at the top of her voice.

Once when Aunt Ina went up with her, she was so disgusted by her behaviour, she sat in another carriage coming home. When they reached the farm, Mattie thrust a parcel of steak into my mother's hand and flung her arms around her neck, saying, 'Ach, sure, it's me darlin'. Miss Aggie – she's not stuck up like Miss Ina!' She took to her bed for several days after these benders and granny kept finding empty bottles under her bed. She

2 Abel Porter was killed on 25 July 1916 during the Battle of the Somme. His sacrifice is commemorated on the Australian National Memorial at Villers-Bretonneux, east of Amiens, France.

had a little room at the end of the kitchen, which was always known as 'Mattie's room' when I was small, although she was long gone.

Eventually, my father decided to knock down the dividing wall and extend the kitchen. It was certainly an improvement and, encouraged by his success, he decided to put a window in one of the walls to improve the light and ventilation. He was not a handy man with tools but no one could deny that he was innovative. He cut a hole through the corrugated iron and, rather than put in a conventional window, he inserted the door of an old, green Buick he had picked up at a sale – the door, not the car. He had never come to terms with cars, even later when he reluctantly bought a second-hand Ford. He used to tell it 'Whoa, boy', 'steady on' and 'Gee up'!

I thought the door was a brilliant idea but my mother was less impressed and tried to hide it with a blue check curtain. It was a constant source of interest to visitors, especially to children who loved to wind the window up and down and run their hands lovingly over the plush upholstery. It did not fit particularly well so it certainly allowed for ventilation, especially when gales blew from the north.

Mother did manage to restrain his enthusiasm after he painted the dining room ceiling vivid blue and wanted to decorate it with a silver moon and stars. He cemented the front and side verandahs too, when the floor boards finally gave up the ghost. It was quite successful and certainly gave us more room as he extended them well beyond the roof line.

We slept on the verandahs for most of the year, looking out at the stars and the dark familiar outline of the trees against the sky, sometimes seeing the late moon setting in the west.

Some nights the passenger trains, rushing past the house in the early hours of the morning, woke us. With lights blazing from the windows, they looked like fiery dragons, sending coal smoke from their funnels. The smell of smoke and the sound would linger in the still air, until the silence stole back, broken only by the twitter of a sleepy bird or the rustling of a dog camped under the bed.

If a sudden storm hit us there would be shrieks of consternation as we gathered up our bedding and rushed inside to spend the rest of the night on the floor.

The back verandah had grain bag mats, a conglomeration of boots, brooms, hats, a meat safe and a hessian Coolgardie safe, with flannel strips dripping water down the sides from the tray on top. The latter stood in a tray of water and the legs of the meat safe in jam tins, full of kerosene, to keep the ants at bay. A cylindrical canvas waterbag filled with rain water hung from a rafter giving us cool if not iced water to drink in hot weather.

Men going out to work in the paddocks took smaller versions – about 30 cm square – and hung them under carts or on tree branches in the shade and where they caught any breeze.

There was a storeroom at one end of the verandah, dim and dusty. It had amassed an enormous collection of paraphernalia over the years. It was rarely cleaned out because of the enormity of the task. Jams, pickles, preserved eggs, melons, homemade soap and tins of fat, filled the shelves. Lamps, lanterns, and the tins of kerosene to fill them, were stored there, as well as boot jacks, old hats and coats, boots and my father's bottles of homemade hop beer and mulberry wine. In hot weather, when the beer worked too powerfully, it often blew the corks or broke the bottles so the all-pervading smell of hops overcame the many others contributing to the interesting atmosphere.

Best of all were cabin trunks filled with relics of the past. Old velvet evening dresses, sequined jackets, pearl-encrusted scarves, moth-eaten Shetland scarves, button-up boots, a riding habit and many other treasures, wonderful for dressing up.

Linton was neither a beautiful, nor convenient, house but it had history and atmosphere.

When I lay in bed at night and heard the drumming tattoo of rain on the roof, the grief stricken cry of the curlew in the front paddock or the drawn out honking and beating of wings, as the black swans flew over, going west to water, I knew total security and contentment.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE FARM

One of the first white men to come to Highbury district was Michael Quinn who shepherded sheep through the area. My mother remembered him calling at the farm, an unkempt old bushman with a long, white beard. Granny gave him his meals on the verandah and was very distant in her manner.

The original Linton block, as it was to become, was taken up in 1904 by a Mr Matthews who, with a Mr English, began building the house. They cleared some land and planted a ten-acre orchard of apples, pears, stone and citrus fruits and a garden.

A year on grandfather came to take over the farm. Granny followed later with her four children, Mattie the cook and Miss Benham, a demure governess from South Australia. They had been at Golden Grove and came by sea to Albany. They arrived on the Highbury siding in the early hours of the morning, having travelled up on the night passenger train. Grandfather met them with a spring cart and, as they drove through the front gate to the house, he said, 'It's not much of a place but at least we have flowers.' Aunt Ina said the pungent smell of chrysanthemums that greeted them stayed with her all her life.

'Not much of a place,' was an understatement, as the house was only partly built. My mother's expectations of a gracious manor house, set among rolling green hills, where fat, woolly, white sheep grazed, were rudely shattered.

It was May 1905 when they arrived and the rains had already set in. They had to live in tents and granny and Mattie had to hold umbrellas over the fire while they cooked. In the end Miss Benham and the older children had been sent back to Albany to stay with distant relatives, who ran a boarding

house in the town, until the building was completed. 'We were always hungry and had to do lessons, which made us very bitter,' mother said.

My grandfather had taken out a loan from Sir Josiah Symons, a South Australian developer. The rate of interest was high and it was when he could no longer meet this commitment that my father took over the farm and the debt.

The great southern district has very hot summers and cold winters, when biting winds from the south sweep in, chilling to the bone. The sky is overcast and bleak and severe frosts turn the grass white, crunching underfoot. But when the sun catches the cobwebs in the bush, they turn into diamond studded jewels. On these mornings we stoked up the kitchen fire and sat huddled round it, kicking off our shoes and warming our feet in the oven. Track suits were unheard of and I wore short skirts, even when riding. I suffered agony from the cold and pinching from the stirrup leathers.

Farming was very labour-intensive in the early days. I remember lying in bed on the front verandah and hearing my father get out of bed, go to the kitchen and light the fire just as dawn was breaking every morning. There would be the rattle of saucepans as he took one off the rack and 'set the porridge' and stood it on the hob.

I was eleven before I realized that not everyone had porridge, bacon and eggs and bread, toasted over the hot coals with an extendable metal fork, every morning.

The garden gate would clang shut as he, followed by the dogs, sluggishly risen from their grain sack mats on the back verandah, slunk silently after him to the stables. The fifteen or so horses had to be fed and groomed and given extra oats if they were working. All their fodder had to be grown on the farm, as it was for the cows, pigs and hens, and some hay cut for chaff.

My father was a hard-working man of the soil, hopeless mechanically, generous to a fault, methodical and of high principles.

However, if we were still in bed, as the evocative smell of wood smoke drifted through the house and we were relishing those precious last minutes of bliss before facing the reality of the day, harsh words could be said.

Sometimes on frosty, full moon nights, the horses got stirred up and staged a break into the orchard. The leader was a nondescript, rusty black, light draught called Darkie. His intelligence outweighed his looks and there was no gate on the farm he could not open if he set his mind, shoulder and teeth to the task.

I vividly remember waking up one night to hear noisy crunching at the foot of my bed. Simultaneously my mother burst onto the verandah, ghostly in her long white nightgown, uttering anguished cries. 'You brute!

You brute! Get away from my roses – Oh Bob!' to my father, 'It's not fair!' as she flung one of my father's boots ineffectually after the departing cow. Cursing and hopping through the frosty grass, looking for his boot, he berated her. 'Woman, woman, what did ye have to do that for?' Rumbled, the whole troop began a wild stampede round and round the house and through the garden. Pounding hooves, manes and tails flying, the horses were followed by a string of other supporters. The cow's tails and necks stretched out, udders swinging wildly, dogs barking and pet lambs bleating brought up the rear.

Eventually they were headed off at the gulch, or more precisely the washhouse and peeled through the gate. Inevitably they knocked down, and usually broke, the clothes props, almost garrotting themselves on the clothes lines in the process. The horses were normally very docile as my father was very patient handling them but, now and again, a rebel entered the ranks. A graceful, light bay mare, called Georgette, was intractable and earned a bad reputation for kicking spring carts to pieces.

Tom told me that, when he was very young, dad bought a chestnut gelding from a man who brought a mob of horses down from Sandstone. Dad got it cheaply but was a bit worried as it showed a lot of white in its eyes. It was a big, magnificent animal, settled down well and would travel all day in the sulky without tiring.

Mother decided to drive it over to visit a friend, Mrs Radford, who lived on a farm four miles away. All went well until on the way home it began to play up when she got out to open a gate. She had left Tom holding the reins, so she told him to drop them, climb out of the back of the sulky and get through a fence for safety, while she led it through. Unfortunately, Tom's little, white hat blew off and the horse took fright. Mother managed to jump out of the way as it galloped across the paddock. It went between two saplings taking off both wheels and the sulky body. It eventually came home, trotting past a paddock where dad and Dick were grubbing poison bush. When he saw the horse with the wrecked harness and only one shaft attached, Dad raced back to the house to ring the neighbour. Mother and Tom had walked to the house and, when the call came through, he said, 'My wife, is she there?' Mrs Radford told him she was. 'And the sulky? Is it badly damaged?' he asked. Mrs Radford was so furious that he seemed more concerned about the sulky than mother and Tom, she hung up on him.

Dad sold the horse to the local baker, according to Tom, and was relieved when he met the van driver a few weeks later and he was full of praise for

the chestnut. 'It's a great horse,' he said. 'It does just what I tell it and is as quiet as a lamb.'

Weeks went by and he saw the van driver again, only this time he was on crutches. 'You'd better cross the street, Porter,' he told dad, 'before the boss catches up with you, for selling him that chestnut.'

'That brute of a horse kicked the cart to pieces and nearly killed me!' When he settled down, dad asked him what the baker was going to do with the horse. 'Oh he's putting him in the sale-yards,' he said.

Before I was born, my grandfather and then my father employed Black Allan, an aboriginal man from the Kimberley, under licence. My aunts told me he was very tall and there were always problems getting boots for his huge feet. He used to sit by his little camp fire at night and croon corroboree songs. Poor man must have been very lonely, so far from his own country, and he felt the cold terribly.

Sometimes he played games in the evenings with the children. Once when granny was playing chasey with them too, he caught her and said, 'Got you, granny!'

'Fancy him calling me that!' she said.

A couple of men worked for dad, doing some clearing, for quite a long time. They camped in a tent near the house and had meals with us. I was very young and I sensed rather than was told that one of them sniffed cocaine and it was a bad thing to do. It must have been a bleak existence for them and I don't blame him!

Without up-to-date weather forecasts, farmers had to wait and hope for a break in the season so they could start seeding. No one had radios, apart from a few with crystal sets. When I was four, I remember we visited friends who put headphones on me and told me the chimes I heard on the hour were from Big Ben in London.

There was a constant look out for fires as summer progressed. Sparks from the train engines could start one in the long, dry grass alongside the line and, in windy conditions, it could spread very quickly. A match, cigarette butt or camp fire, not extinguished carefully, could start a conflagration that it would take days to put out. A watch for wisps of smoke along the horizon became habit in summer.

The whole district would rally to help the men to burn back on the fire, or plough firebreaks, although, with only horse teams, this was a slow process. The women made sandwiches and tea to be ferried to those trying to beat back the flames.

With the approach of autumn and cooler weather, the legal burning off season would open. Newly cleared land had piles of trees, stumps and roots

to be burnt before cultivation could begin. This was a lovely time of the year. The days became shorter and more mellow, trees began to lose their bark and the shadows and colours seemed deeper. We picnicked as we went round heaping the wood together on the fires, boiled the billy and grilled chops on the coals. At night the fires looked like a lighted city.

This was the time to rob the beehives my father had found during the year. First, he would smoke the bees out and, if necessary, chop the tree down to get to the hive. Anyone participating in the robbery dressed in chaff bags and net veils before the onslaught was made. My mother, for obvious reasons, never involved herself in these activities.

The comb was brought back to the house and hung in sugar bags underneath the grape vines, with basins below to catch the drips. It was a strong, flavoursome honey and there were usually a few dead flies and ants in the finished product.

As the season progressed, dad would search the horizon, day after day, looking for break in the weather but, apart from a diaphanous wisp of white hanging along the northern horizon, there would be no sign of rain. Usually it was mother who forecast a change. 'It must be going to rain,' she would say. 'My hands are giving me jip.' But when the orchestra of frogs in the dry creek bed began their overture, we knew relief was at hand. There were different groups of frogs along the creek but the Banjo frogs were our favourites with their steady, slow 'Plonk'.

The smell of the first drops of rain on the parched earth was intoxicating and we would run onto the verandah feeling rejuvenated ourselves as the steady downpour drummed on the earth.

Then there was the anticipation of the creek coming down and watching the swift, brown flow of water spreading, in a relentless tide, across the lower paddocks and almost reaching the house. Sticks and branches twisted and turned as they were borne along and majestic mother ducks sailed past, followed by flotillas of their fluffy, yellow offspring. When the flood subsided, the creek bed had a changed face, as new channels and sandbanks appeared.

Mushrooms popped up soon after the rains came and we walked over the paddocks with buckets and knives, harvesting the creamy little caps with their pinky-brown undersides and looked for mysterious fairy rings.

Once seeding began, the turned earth made patchwork of the paddocks, as seed and 'super' were ploughed in. Wheat had to be pickled to prevent insect infestation before it was sown. It was dipped in a solution, spread out to dry, bagged and taken, with bags of super-phosphate, in the spring cart to the paddock.

The horses were given extra oats when they were doing heavy work, eight of them in a team. The stables had the dusty smell of age. The mangers were lengths of hollow gum trees, with tin at each end to prevent spillage when the horse tossed the chaff around and blew into it. The chooks liked laying in the mangers and, whenever there was cackle from the stable, mother would say, 'Run down and get that egg before the horses get in.' Horses had a penchant for eggs.

Sometimes the horses, hungry for the new green feed, pulled it up, roots and all, and got 'sanded'. Dad treated them with a mixture of ginger, carb soda, treacle and warm milk. He poured it in the side of its mouth out of a beer bottle, attached to its head stall and while someone hung on a rope straddling a rafter to keep its head up. 'Shay, now, shay' he would say as he hung precariously on the railings of the stall while eyes rolled and hooves thrashed.

He shod all the horses too, except Myrtle, who became frenzied when he tried. He said I could ride her up to Narrogin and get the blacksmith to do it. I was about ten and very pleased with myself, doing the journey alone. He had no better luck and looked quite pale and shaken when I went to pick her up. Henceforth, she continued to go barefoot.

Sometimes I helped drive a mob of sheep to the sale-yards in Narrogin where I swaggered around the town, the complete country girl. I was not so cocky on one occasion when I mounted Myrtle with such élan I overshot the saddle and was left hanging upside down, clutching the stirrup leather. I hoped no one saw me drop to the ground like a stone. The twenty-four mile ride usually knocked the stuffing out of both Myrtle and me.

Lambing coincided with seeding and I was sometimes detailed off to go round the ewes when I came home from school. Dad was taken aback when he said he had better show me how to take a lamb from a ewe in trouble and I airily replied, 'That's okay. Uncle Bill showed me how to do that last year!'

Uncle Bill had married mother's youngest sister, Marjorie, and they farmed at Bruce Rock in the wheat-belt. I had wonderful holidays on Windyridge. The wheat-belt country was harsher and more expansive than the Great Southern. There were big, bare paddocks, stretching to the horizon.

Uncle Bill had a reputation of recklessness as a young man, for racing and doing tricks on a motorbike. Once when the boys were small and they had been to a church service in the little Highbury hall, Dick walked outside and saw him coming up the road, standing up on the back with his arms outstretched, he thought he was Jesus.

There was still a lot of uncleared land on Windyridge and I loved the responsibility of being sent out on a fractious horse to bring a mob of cattle out of the timber. The animals up there were bigger and wilder than ours. Uncle Bill loved machinery but it was anathema to dad who was a stockman through and through.

I have always loved sheep and every year insisted on keeping at least one pet lamb. There were usually several contenders, tiny, quivering things, orphaned or abandoned by their mothers. A number succumbed in spite of being wrapped in old jumpers and kept warm in a box by the kitchen stove. Their sad, stiff little bodies were buried under a pear tree in the orchard.

Pet lambs were a great nuisance as they got older, breaking into the sheds, scattering grain and eating the chooks' mash. They kept getting into the garden and creating havoc. They often bonded very closely with their carer. I had one that followed me everywhere and, when she could, slept on the end of my bed. Even when they were put out with the mob, they still came up to say hello in the yards.

There is a lulling effect in the unrelenting monotony of driving a mob of sheep, especially when they are in full wool and moving slowly. Drifting behind their undulating, closely-packed backs they look like some amorphous monster. A mob off shears is a different matter as they can travel like the wind.

For many years, we did our shearing at a neighbour's shed. It was always done in spring and no one even tried to send me to school. We took the mobs through bush where flannel flowers, kangaroo paws, delicate orchids, *Lechenaultia* and dainty pink everlastings made a carpet underfoot. Big clumps of pink, white and yellow *Verticordia* were so thick they looked as if coloured tablecloths had been flung on top of the bushes.

There was no automatic wool press in those days and I was allowed to trample the fleeces in the bale. When I got tired of the shed, I went up to the house and got under the feet of the farmer's wife and daughter. They were a wonderful, generous family and my father boasted that in the thirty years they shared together, there had never been an angry word spoken.

For a number of years, dad leased a big stretch of river country, some miles south of these neighbours' farm, and after fencing and poison grubbing some of it, ran sheep there.

Originally it had been taken up, sight unseen, by an English couple who had no experience of farming. Mr Foote was the third son of a countess who staked him in his many and varied ventures. Mrs Foote was an Oxford graduate, tall and elegant. She wore floating dresses and flowery hats. She was never parted from her little terrier and chain-smoked using a long

cigarette holder. She was a gifted raconteur. I adored her and hung on her words when she visited us. She told us about a ghost she had seen in Oxford, haunted Indian ruins on the *estançia* they had owned in Argentina, cowboys and life in some of the other exotic places where they had lived. 'Footes', as it became known, seemed rather an anti-climax after the exciting life they had led but they battled on there for a number of years.

Mrs Foote must have found living in a primitive house and having to cook for shearers with no help, rather daunting but she seemed to be quite indomitable. The shearers had a few yarns about her cooking, making porridge out of the chooks pollard and giving them dubious, scrambled eggs. 'I found this big nest of eggs, boys!' it is reported she told them. 'The hens must have been laying there for weeks.'

Although Mr Foote and my father were so different, I think dad enjoyed talking to him and hearing his many ideas. I remember, starting a direct air service from Perth to Johannesburg was one of them. The couple eventually retired to Perth but frequently came back to stay with us.

As the property was some distance from Linton, dad and the boys, or sometimes the boys on their own, camped there for a few days at a time, working on the place. I pestered to be allowed to go with them to camp when I was quite small and finally dad said I could come when he and Dick went down for an overnight camp.

We arrived late on a hot afternoon. Dick and I went into a small river pool for a dip. The water was dark and forbidding, overhung with paperbarks. It was full of snags and had thick, black mud at the bottom. I, inadvertently, swallowed a mouthful of the brackish water and had to scramble out to be violently sick. To add insult to injury, a leech was attached to my leg and had to be burnt off. The night spent on one of my father's bush bunks, constructed from grain sacks and saplings, was refined torture.

Next morning, I stayed in the camp while the men went off to cut fence-posts from the jam trees. Mother had recently read me *Dot and the Kangaroo* and it was not long before the bush began to close in around me and everywhere bunyip eyes were watching. I could hear the axe strokes but, for the only time in my life, I was filled with an overwhelming fear of the bush. I have been frightened since but never like this. My relief when dad and Dick came back and we broke camp was only surpassed when we came out of the bush, on the sandy track across the creek and saw the lights of home.

In later years I helped drive sheep to Footes and had some great rides in the rough bush, checking fences and putting Myrtle at small logs to jump. Once Tom and I had a marvellous chase after a kangaroo which we

cornered in a fence and he killed. I cannot remember feeling any remorse for the poor thing as I rode back to the camp with it draped triumphantly over the front of my saddle.

I had two traumatic stints in hospital. I once spent ten days in a verandah bed in the Narrogin Hospital, watching the sunlight glinting on the leaves of the nearby gum tree, as they moved in the wind, and seeing the stars come out at night and thinking I was going to die of unhappiness. The mother of a teenage boy in a nearby bed brought me a beautiful doll which she said had belonged to her daughter who had wanted me to have it. Years later, I met the daughter who said she had hated me ever since her mother had taken her favourite doll away from her to give me! Every morning we were given greasy, green-pea soup which I had to drink. Equally awful, but shorter, was admission for a tonsillectomy.

Being so much younger than Dick and Tom, I never remember a time when they were not at school. Although I missed them, I filled in the time very happily until their return from school each day. My father took me out a lot with him and I had a large family of dolls which kept me busy for long hours. I had a cubby under the gracefully drooping boughs of a huge pepper tree near the house. In spring, I made daisy chains from capeweed flowers for the dolls, pet lambs and the cats.

By late afternoon, I would run down to the front gate and stand under a big clump of she-oaks, looking along the white track for two black specks, heralding the boys' return. We spent a lot of time looking down that track, watching for visitors or expected travellers.

'Run down and see if they are coming yet,' mother would say.

At night we took a lantern to wave a welcoming light and would stand, holding our breath, listening for the steady clop of horse's feet. Sometimes there was only the rustling in the she-oaks around us, as their long harsh tentacles moved in the breeze, whispering secrets.

I liked bringing the cows in for milking. They walked along their well-worn path in single file, switching flies with their long, glossy tails, their full udders swinging rhythmically and tendrils of dust rising from each glossy black hoof.

There was excitement when each cow calved, the old hands hiding their new babies in thick bush, in the hope no one would notice and separation could be avoided. The calves were taken away and hand fed with separated skim milk and an added supplement so we could have the milk and cream for butter.

The young heifers were wild-eyed and confused after calving. In later years when I worked in maternity wards, I often saw the same bewilderment on the faces of young, first-time mothers.

The calves had to learn to drink from a bucket, sucking on fingers and having their heads pushed down into the bucket of milk. It was painful as they developed teeth early and butted and stamped with their sharp little hooves. The relinquishing mothers, in the meantime, kept up a steady, grief-stricken bellow of complaint on the other side of the fence.

Milking was a constant night and morning job, with only a brief respite between the cows being dried off and their next calving.

Cream was churned into butter which was rinsed when it coagulated and patted into blocks for sale or our own use. I liked to make pretty shapes for the table, using the wooden pats to make shells, little balls and curls.

When I was a student in Sydney, I took a holiday job at a large bed and breakfast boarding house at Bondi and my prowess in making butter pats for the tables made a big impression. I was only there for two weeks but, when I left, I was told I could have a job anytime I wanted it.

Except what was kept for our own use, the cream, butter and eggs were sold, the money helping with the grocery bill when times were hard. The cream was put into metal cans and taken or sent by train to the Butter Factory in Narrogin and the butter and eggs sold to the store. Later an Egg Board was established and we sold the eggs at the Board Factory in Narrogin.

When things got a bit easier, mother bought a dining room table with some of her egg money. My father swore that he woke up the night after it arrived and found her in the dining room, polishing it by candlelight. She would be very happy to know that Kylie and Jim now have it in their home.

Mother loved her chooks and had her favourites. They were fed wheat, hot mashes and house scraps. Tom trapped rabbits for the skins which he sold for pocket money and we cooked up the carcases on the stove to feed the hens. Their egg production sky-rocketed as a result. Sometimes an old sheep met the same fate, or, if not, was buried under a rose bush with equally good results in a plethora of blooms.

Two or three times a year, old hens and young cockerels were drafted out and sent to the Perth market for sale. A coop was ordered from Perth for the unlucky victims. On the night before shipment, we would make our way by lantern light to the chook yard and feel under the hunches of black feathers roosting on the perches for legs. I hated the feel of the feathers and especially the horny, scaly legs.

'What about this one, mum?' we would ask, holding the sleepy bird up to the light. The reply might come.

'No, not that one, I know her, she's a layer, get that old girl on the back with the pale comb.'

Inevitably, all hell let loose and a wild chase started up. The chosen birds had their legs together and put in twos or threes into chaff bags, in which ventilation holes had been cut, to await their journey to the siding and ultimately their unhappy end in Perth.

Next morning they were taken to Highbury and packed in the coop. A bag of grain and a bottle of water were always supplied so the guard could give them a feed and drink on the long trip. Once or twice an athletic cockerel broke loose and escaped into the nearby bush. Tension ran high as we chased it to bring it back before the train arrived.

Not that drivers took these timetables very seriously, being known to wait for anyone they passed on the road, if they saw by their frenzied gestures they wanted to catch the train. They regularly stopped the midnight passenger trains at our front gate to let visitors off, when requested. For many years there was a well-known joke about Western Australian trains, that their theme song was 'I'll Walk Beside You!'

The freight trains going past the house were a source of great interest to my father. In summer, when a long line of water tanks passed south, or sheep were shipped north, he would surmise,

'Must be dry out east, a lot of sheep going up to Midland Markets,' and 'they must be getting pretty short of water out there.'

A water scheme in the region was far in the future and every year water had to be trucked to the marginal lands to the east on a branch line out of Wagin, thirty or so miles south of Narrogin.

Mallet bark was a profitable cash crop in the early days. Stripped off the slim trunks of the mallet trees with a long handled knife, it was packed in bundles and sent to Perth for export to the German leather tanning factories. Of course the trees died but they made good rails.

Keeping the wood-box filled was, by tradition, men's business and men who went off to the paddock without fulfilling their duty usually got a cool reception on their return. My father and the boys were pretty reliable but there were times when my mother had to wield an axe or drag in lengths of white gum and prop one end up on a chair, to be fed into the fire as it burnt down. Tom said it was a good place to hang the tea towels to dry!

I quite liked chopping wood and years later, when I had to do it, found it very satisfying and a good way to keep warm in the Narrogin winters. I remember a lady who was giving me a dissertation on all the things that had gone wrong in her life, who added 'and then someone from the Lions[3]

3 The Lions were, and are, a group of young men who gave volunteer help to assist those in their own communities.

came and chopped up my woodheap so I haven't even got that to work out my feelings on!'

Dad always picked out a prime sheep for a killer every ten days or so, as mutton was our staple meat diet. I was never allowed to watch the awful deed and I know he hated cutting the poor thing's throat.

When it was hung up, I was allowed to go down, with a basin to get the liver, kidneys and fat. The fat around the kidneys came out like a lacy shawl and dad liked to tease me by throwing it around my shoulders. I hated it because it was warm and greasy and tangled in my hair. I put up with his little joke as I had a vested interest in the head and I needed his help to gouge out the brains and the eyes. After that, my mother could have the head for brawn or the dogs could take it to bury it against leaner days. On killing days, they had a bonanza of spare parts but knew less affluent days lay ahead.

I washed the brains in salty water and skinned them, then cooked in my own little blackened saucepan on the stove and consumed forthwith. Purloining the strictly forbidden killing knife, I would take the eyes out to the wood-heap for dissection. Surrounded by a coterie of cats and rather like a surgeon demonstrating a delicate procedure to medical students, I would spread out the irises so we could admire their beautiful coloured lining and, picking out the lens, feed them to my favourite cat.

The sheep, carefully covered with a calico bag, so flies, crows and magpies could not attack it, was hung overnight in the washhouse to set. In the morning it was cut in half and dismembered into suitable cuts. Again, this was the male province and harsh words could ensue if they failed in their duty. A friend of my mother's, left with half a sheep to cut up, was so blinded by anger, she missed her target and chopped off the finger of her unfortunate daughter who was hanging onto the forequarter for her.

Mother's young brother, Rob, chopped his own finger off when he was a little boy playing with a tomahawk on the woodheap. Aunt Ina, always considered to be the dreamiest and least practical of the family, picked it up, dusted it and stuck it firmly back on, with four matches as splints. When the doctor eventually saw it, he wouldn't touch it and said he could not have done a better job himself.

When we killed a chook, someone had to hold its legs while someone else chopped off its head. 'Poor brute', mother would say as she struck the fatal blow and the headless body gyrated round in its spasmodic, bizarre dance. Plucking and cleaning chooks was not an appealing job, although interesting objects, like bits of coloured glass, sometimes turned up in their crops

None of these bloody rites ever spoilt our appetites. We lived richly on roasts, surrounded by potatoes, carrots, onions and parsnips, crisping in a sea of fat, steamed puddings dripping with custard and cream, bread and jam and cream, hot buttered scones for morning teas, cream sponges and a range of other tantalizing delicacies for afternoon and supper snacks!

We loved the mornings when bread was short and mother made big, golden brown, delectable fritters, fried in fat. We ate until our eyes bulged. At the end, there was one huge one, cooked as a treat for the dogs. Cholesterol had never been heard of and I still contend nothing can compete with a tender, home killed mutton chop with a generous edge of succulent, white fat grilled on coals.

By November the crops began to ripen and the heavy golden heads of grain rippled in the wind. Anxious eyes watched the weather, hoping rain would hold off. As the horses pulled the harvester round and round, the bags of grain were stood in groups to be rammed firmly and sewn up with binder twine threaded through lethal looking, curved bag-needles. Then they were taken on the dray to be stacked in a shed. Some was kept for seed the following year, some was sold and some oats were kept for stock feed.

Grain for sale was taken to the siding for railing to Perth and I loved to do these trips with my father. I liked to lie back on the load and look up through the leafy overhanging branches as we went along, until I became mesmerized by the sound of the horse's hooves and the murmur of the iron wheels on the sand.

My father sat in front holding the reins lightly, hat pulled low, his pipe clenched in his teeth. The peace was only broken when a swift flight of green and yellow parrots passed overhead, screeching their raucous call of 'Twenty-eight! Twenty-eight.' as my father slapped the reins adjuring the horses 'Gee up will ye' or to me 'Will you not sit down?' if I ventured too near the edge of the dray.

Some of the oats were left standing for hay, then cut, the sheaves[4] stooked in pyramids to dry off and, when dried off, carted in to be stacked for stock food. As the stack was used, we slid down the sloping sides on sheaves, which usually landed us in trouble as it messed up the hay.

Snakes and mice sometimes harboured in the sheds and stack. Cats and dogs were added to the labour force when grain was being moved, to catch the marauders. I had no qualms as I dealt out the tiny, blind, hairless, pink baby mice to the cats.

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4 Bundles of stalks, or sheaves, were gathered into groups of about 20 or so and stood on end in a pyramid, or stook, to dry out before being carted in and built into a stack.

We played in the sheds, jumping onto the piles of bags, eating handfuls of bran and pollard, even nibbling the sheep supplement of Meggitts nuts, probably made from blood and bone and other disgusting ingredients.

I loved to go to the sheds to lie on the stacks of grain and read. It was quiet and there was a mysterious isolated atmosphere, like being in another small world.

Cutting hay for chaff was a job I hated as I had to drive a horse round and round in a circle to activate a belt that kept the actual cutter working. My father fed sheaves into it and chaff ran down a chute. I did it because I was told if I did not Myrtle would have no feed. It was so monotonous that both the horse and I would drift into a stupor and the pace get slower and slower. A roar from my father usually jerked us both out of our torpor suddenly and the belt would fly off the wheel, leading to further recriminations.

With harvest over, excitement began to build up as Christmas approached. I loved helping my mother with the five or six cakes and puddings she always made. There were almonds to be shelled and raisins seeded, presents bought and wrapped and when parcels arrived in the mail, they were smelt and squeezed before being put aside until Christmas morning.

The day before, a large branch of pine tree was brought in and decorated, filling the house with its pungent smell. We always picked some of the bright orange, parasitic, native Christmas tree too, but that never came inside until after Christmas, as it was unlucky to bring it in before. It was just as well, as it was thick with ants. It was left standing in a bucket of water on the tank stand.

After our Christmas feast and a rest we usually joined other families in the district at Wolwolling Pool for a swim in the dark brown water and a picnic tea.

As summer burnt its way across the land, the heat bleached the colour from the paddocks and at midday stock gathered in patient tableaux in the dense shade of the trees.

Dad brought a cartload of water and rock melons in to store in the shed and buckets of sweet tomatoes. He grew them in a wet patch in a front paddock which he had fenced off. We feasted on sweet red watermelons that melted in our mouths, the rock melons and tomatoes. Every visitor who came to the farm left loaded with spoils. He grew our year's supply of potatoes too, in winter, and in spring planted a band of peas on the edge of the crop. I used to go out with a bucket and sit among them, shelling and eating them.

After tea, in the dusk, we lay on the verandah beds, watching the stars come out, talking and waiting for the 'Albany Doctor' to arrive. It is the

wind which comes almost every night in summer to the Great Southern, from the south coast, a hundred and fifty miles away. Sometimes it is only a movement in the air before it dies away but on others it can be heard ten miles away, a roaring gale coming through the trees. Then we had to dash inside to put on warm clothes and extra blankets on the beds as the temperature drops dramatically.

It was the dusk one night when we were waiting for relief that Dad spoke about his experience as a young man in New Zealand. Mother had gone to Perth for a few days, the boys were away and Dad was looking after Helen Love, a young friend who spent most of her holidays on the farm, and me.

We asked him to tell us a story and in the gathering dark; this is what he told us.

When he first arrived in New Zealand, he went to work for a man on an isolated sheep station. The owner was taciturn and moody but dad was at an out-camp and saw him only when he came in for stores.

One day out on the run, he found a Maori who had injured himself badly while hunting. At that time Maoris lived on reserves and it was illegal for them to trespass on private property. Dad put the man up on his horse and took him back to the reserve. The injured man was the chief of the tribe and before dad left, he cut a vein in dad's arm and one in his own, held them together and said they were now blood brothers.

After that dad visited the Maori people often and became very friendly with them. One night the chief told him he was going to show him something no white man had ever seen. He took him deep into the forest until they came to an open square about 200 yards across. He told dad to wait behind a bush and watch.

It was a bright moonlight night and dad said suddenly the square was filled with Maori warriors, dancing. He could see them clearly and realized they wore ancient dress and that their weapons were of much earlier origin than those used by the Maoris dad knew. He was aghast. He blinked and suddenly the square was empty.

Dad went on to say that later he lived with Maoris for some months after there had been 'troubles' and they were very good to him. The chief wanted him to marry his daughter and stay with them.

Helen and I sat beside him barely breathing as he recounted this story but he went on. Sometime after rescuing the chief, he was riding into the homestead, to collect his stores, when he met a golden-haired, very beautiful woman riding away. He opened the gate for her and she thanked him. He said she was using a side saddle and rode very well. The station-owner

did not mention her when dad came in and he collected his stores and went back to his out-camp.

Some weeks later when dad went to the homestead, there was a storm brewing. It was hot and sultry and dark by the time he had unsaddled and fed his horse. There was strange horse in the stable but dad thought nothing of it.

As soon as he went into the house, he could see by the owner's face something was wrong. He was sitting at the rough table and, by the light of a candle, dad saw a half empty bottle of whisky and a carving knife on it.

A puff of wind heralded the approaching storm and the candle light flickered. When it steadied, dad saw the apparition of the golden-haired visitor he had met on the gate. She was pointing under the bunk and her throat was cut from ear to ear.

Dad said the owner must have seen it too, because he made a grab for the knife and lunged at dad knocking over the candle as he did so. Dad fled to the stable, sprang on his horse bareback and galloped away. Looking back he could see the homestead beginning to burn.

The storm broke and he made his way through it to the Maori camp. A few days later he went to the police and took them to the homestead. It was reduced to ashes and they found the charred remains of the owner. They dug up the ground where the bunk had stood and in a shallow grave found the body of the woman with her throat cut from ear to ear. It was after this, he went to live with the Maoris for some months.

Although I have asked family members, dad never told them, or to my knowledge anyone else, these stories about his life in New Zealand.

Dad was a very practical man but I think he might have had a fey[5] streak in his nature. I believed him when he told me there were fairies and little green men living among the rocks and jam trees on the hill at the back of the farm. In spite of a constant watch, I never saw them.

I remember the embarrassed look on the face of our young next door neighbour when dad told him there were little green men on the river flats in one of his paddocks. He did not know if dad was teasing him or had gone mad. Faery talk was beyond the ken of most Australian males.

Do I believe there are still fairies and little green men living in those places? While I think I do not believe, I am not sure. Just as I am still not sure that there are no bunyips along the river at Footes, hidden in the paperbarks.

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5 Fey, in the sense of supernatural powers or unworldliness, with perhaps a gift of second sight.

CHAPTER FIVE

SCHOOL

Looking back over my years at the Highbury School, in spite of the teasing and always being 'he' in 'Red Rover all Over' and other running games, because I was so slow, there were some mitigating factors. The smell of books and crayons delighted me and there was excitement when I was given a new pad. The latter was a rare occurrence, as first we had to fill every space on every page, both back and front on the old one.

The whole school had singing lessons together as well as poetry and I liked our monotonous droning as one voice. Australian bush ballads were delivered with sing-song gusto – up and down – 'and the beat and the beat of our swift horses feet,' etc.

The world map hanging on one wall filled me with complacency. The many red patches clearly showed that Britannia ruled not only the waves but a big chunk of the land as well and it clearly indicated that we were a superior race.

My personal superiority suffered a blow when quite early we were introduced to writing with pen and ink. The ink was a watery blue ink powder mixed in a big bottle with water and poured into the little ink pots, slotted into each desk. Smudges and blots were the order of the day in my work as we laboriously copied out phrases in our book. I hated the children who wrote perfectly. 'James VI of Scotland, James I of England,' is one phrase that stands out as a particular disaster in my mind.

I never see red and black together without recalling my first sewing effort. It was a hessian potholder over which I laboured earnestly. Pick up five threads in one colour, miss five threads, pick up five for five lines then change to the other colour, reversing the order to give a check appearance. My counting may have been a little amiss but I was dismayed when I took

my work out one day and found the teacher had unpicked it and started a simpler pattern in anaemic pink and blue thread. The same thing happened to my button holes in my last year at school. The teacher redid them the night before the work was to be sent to Perth for examination. I do not know whose reputation was being saved. Even in High School the domestic science teacher virtually drafted and machined the skirt I had to present for my junior certificate examination.

Some play-times were fun. We girls could not wait to get out of school quickly enough so we could run up behind the shed to play school. We sat on logs and our lessons were usually embroidery. With our little scissors, smuggled out of the sewing cupboard, we cut the seeds out of the wattle pods or patterns around the edges of the big, flat leaves of the gum trees growing around us. The older girls who were the teachers sometimes gave us stubs of pencils and little pieces of paper with sums or spelling on them for us to do. There was considerable dissention as to who should be teacher which eroded our recess time.

My first teacher became friendly with a guard on a freight train which came into the siding every morning. When his train was due, she would leave us in the care of the older children and go to the siding. She usually had some pretext of 'needing to send a parcel', but none of us had any illusions. As soon as she was a safe distance away, bedlam let loose – paper aeroplanes, loaded with nibs dipped in ink, sailed through the air, children chased one another over the desks and fights broke out. A sentry stood on a desk looking out of the high window to warn of her return. 'Quick, shut up! She's just getting through the fence into the cow paddock' and everything fell into place. When she came through the door we were absorbed in our work.

Sometimes in spring the whole school went bush at lunch time, ostensibly to go to the caves. I never found out where they were, or even if they existed. These expeditions usually broke up when the big boys chased us little girls, making us cry, trying to put lizards, or even worse bobtail goannas, down the backs of our dresses.

If we could avoid the boys, we sometimes went picking fruits from the wild cranberry bushes or looking for 'kick ups'[6] to get the pale green, juicy berries underneath. We ravished the bush, picking spider orchids which grew near the school.

The school-room was not very large and was backed by the teacher's accommodation, three small rooms and a bathroom. It was built of timber,

6 Kick ups grew in a green 'mat' about the size of a dinner plate and the berries formed on the underside.

jarrah no doubt, dark and unappealing and had a red, tin roof. It was very hot in summer and cold in winter, although there was a fireplace. The big boys used to chop the wood and keep it going during the day but its effect was limited.

There was a small porch where we hung our school bags and washed our hands in a basin inlaid with the grime of many years. We had to be sparing with water because it came from the rainwater tank outside, which also supplied the teacher's quarters. It had its own unique smell, a mingling of damp, old leather boots, sweaty socks and stale sandwiches. It was a smell never to be forgotten.

One day when Tom was still at school, the boys found a beehive in the bush and borrowed the teacher's axe to cut it out. They were away all afternoon and then news came that, 'Tommy Porter has chopped his leg!' The axe slipped, and sliced down Tom's shin. The hotel proprietor, who had considerable medical skills, bandaged it very professionally and I cannot remember Tom having any trouble with it. But we were rather subdued driving home with the leg, in its snowy white bandage, propped up on the dashboard of the sulky.

Later on, when I rode Myrtle to school, I carried a bag of chaff across the front of the saddle every Monday morning for her feed for the week. The horses were stabled in a bough shed.

In summer, those of us with horses were allowed to take them for a drink at lunch time, to the government dam, some distance away through the bush. We rode bareback, double dinking at least one of the non-horse people. Every day we were told we were not to go into the dam enclosure or race the horses but the words fell on deaf ears. Someone had to get through the fence to get a jam tin full of water to prime the pump and the horses needed no encouragement to race back to the stable. Racing round corners on the way back, pillion passengers shot off like peas out of a pod. One of mine hit his head and was mildly concussed and wandered off into the bush. We had to round him up to get him back to school.

One of the best things about the school was the small library. There was a whole series by someone called E S Ellis about Canada. I read them all and burned with desire to go to Canada, run a trap line, wear snowshoes and avoiding cunning half breeds, marauding Indians and the bad-lands, take my furs on my dog sled to trade at the Hudson Bay Company store. I read my father's Wild West stories and yearned for wilder frontiers. I read under the desk at school, riding home and whenever I had a free hand to hold a book.

Neighbours who subscribed to the weekly *Western Mail* passed their copies on to us when they had finished them. They tied the rolled-up copies

on the front gate and my father and I vied with each other to get them first and read the action serial called *Tim Tyler's Luck*, a space odyssey saga.

I poured over 'Aunt Mary's Children's Page'. Children sent in drawings, poems and stories to win awards, 'Tiny Trickle' and 'Babbling Brook', being the pinnacle of my achievement, through various other stages to 'Rushing River', which only very clever children reached. Aunt Mary began an appeal to raise funds for the Silver Chain Nursing Service, asking every child in the state who could, to take an egg to school on a certain date, to be sent to Perth for sale. It raised quite a good sum. I took about two dozen, all carefully wrapped in newspaper. I remember mother saying, 'Try not to let her put you off this morning,' as she handed me up the parcel.

As time progressed, we had more enlightened teachers and lessons became a pleasure. We read about the Australian early explorers and their constant struggles against the unrelenting Australian bush, lack of water, dying men and horses and attacks from hostile blacks. Our history books were thin, red covered Swan publications. It was difficult to remember who went where, with whom and when. Years later, when I visited many places along their routes, I realized the magnitude of their courage and achievements.

When I finished Primary School, I stayed on at the Highbury School doing First Year High School correspondence lessons on my own. There were only twelve children in the school by now.

In theory, the teacher was to give me guidance. He was a sports enthusiast and a great coach. All winter we played hockey with suitably-shaped mallee roots we picked up in the bush and in summer we played tennis. We played hockey six-a-side, even the Grade Ones taking part, and tennis on a rough court where the sand got looser with every set. We never stopped a game in mid-stream so lesson time became shorter and shorter.

I did some study at home at night. Correspondence lessons are very exacting and mistakes came back, time after time, for correction. I began the year with a flourish and comments on the first sets were glowing but they became less so as the year progressed. By December, when I still had five sets to finish the year's work, they were positively caustic.

On Thursdays for part of the year, I travelled to and from Narrogin by train, firstly for piano lessons and in the afternoons for a domestic science lesson at the Primary School. This was followed by hockey training in winter after school. Draped in a white apron and mob cap, I was taught how to make Cornish pasties, lemon butter and Christmas cakes. At hockey training, I was supplied with a real hockey stick, smelling deliciously of linseed oil. Our team was the Brownies – brown uniforms – and we played in the

local Association on Saturdays which meant another trip to Narrogin. It was good being with girls my own age and I loved the team feeling.

Fortunately for me, my parents were able to send me away to school the next year and I went into Second Year, as it was called, at the Albany High School.

My mother and I travelled to Albany by train and I was installed with four other students in a boarding house run by two sisters. They kept a firm hand on the reins and, as I shared a room with a girl doing her Leaving Year, there were few options in the evening except study. As a result I did very well in class.

I was not unhappy there but it was hardly a barrel of laughs.

My brief encounter with French, the previous year, had born little fruit so a senior student, who was on crutches from a sports injury, spent the daily morning physical exercise period hearing another late starter and me read in French. As a result, my pronunciation became passable but fundamentals, like grammar, lagged behind. However, to my huge delight, because I grew to love the language, later on when I visited France, I found that after a few days I could converse quite freely with the people we met. It was remarkable because I rarely got more than 50% in any French exam I took.

Those marks, with my abysmal maths results, had a sobering influence on my overall performance, but I did well in other subjects.

I loved school and realized how lucky I was to be able to continue my studies. Times were hard, money scarce, so we were the lucky ones. Our motto was 'Keep Troth', our uniforms brown, embellished in Upper School with what must be the worst blazers in Christendom. They consisted of brown, bright yellow and vicious green stripes. I always felt like a '28 parrot' when I wore mine and am amazed they are still school uniform!

Boys and girls had segregated classes in Junior School but combined for Years Four and Five. Numbers dropped dramatically in Upper School. I think there were only about a dozen in my last year. Most students left after Third Year to take up jobs, some boys to go home to work on the farm or go on to an Agricultural College.

Discipline was strict, girls wore hats, gloves and stockings and no make-up was allowed. Anyone caught smoking was threatened with expulsion, certainly dropped from any sports team. One very good hockey player did smoke and we were all on tenterhooks in case she was caught. The headmistress, a wonderful teacher but a stern disciplinarian, by some miracle never found her out!

Due to my excellent coach at the Highbury School, I went straight into the school tennis and hockey teams.

The teachers wore gowns to all their classes and we respected them and their dedication. It did not stop us from mimicking their idiosyncrasies, the tall, commanding, Scottish, English master who swept into class like an eagle or the abundantly endowed art mistress who favoured flowing dresses and picture hats, who sang snatches of opera on good days but wept when we played up, making us feel guilty. But it was she who always took the Year Threes to the beach for a picnic on the weekend before the start of final exams so we would have a break from study and not turn up for the ordeal like 'limp lettuces'.

A social and concert, organized by the prefects, was held at the end of each term. It was not an onerous task as they always followed the same format. The same amount of bread and corned beef for sandwiches, the same number of bottles of raspberry vinegar cordial to be mixed for drinks for supper at socials. Concerts, too, followed a regular pattern, musical items, recitations and singing. One of the maths masters had a rich baritone voice and was always beseeched to sing 'The Road to Mandalay'. It was a ritual.

A school magazine was produced annually, with class and sports teams' photos, reports from each class and contributions. A less formal newsletter was printed at the end of each term.

A fancy dress ball was held in the Town Hall every July, less sophisticated and much less extravagant affairs than current school balls.

Owing to distance and the expense involved, the school sent sports teams to Perth for Country Week only every second year. I went in the hockey team in 1939 and, although we did not win the trophy, we did not discredit ourselves. We were hustled to various ovals for games and it was over so quickly, it is just a blur in my memory. The only other country high schools then were at Bunbury, Northam, Goldfields and Geraldton. When war broke out not long after, Country Week was cancelled.

Before breaking up for the winter term, the school had a day off to go into the bush to pick *Boronia* to take home. *Boronia* was the school's emblem. Although it is not a spectacular plant, having small, heath-like leaves and inconspicuous brown and yellow cup flowers, the perfume is very sweet and pungent. It grows in peaty swamps and we walked miles to plunder the best spots. No doubt we, coupled with land development, contributed towards wiping out its native habitats. It is now quite expensive to buy in florists' shops. Many of us lived in towns or on farms along the Great Southern line and travelled to and from school by train. When we clambered aboard with our armfuls of *Boronia*, the whole train smelt of it.

The train trips were not comfortable but were a fact of life. Highbury is almost halfway between Albany and Perth so I always arrived, or departed,

in the middle of the night. We travelled in dog box compartments, usually with our friends. There was a lot of talk and laughing to begin with and shrieks of consternation as the boys, acting in bravado, climbed out of the windows and walked along the ledge of the carriages, negotiating their way perilously between them, to clamber into the girls' compartments.

As the train dragged itself along, screeching and jolting to stop at every siding to let people off and unload empty cream cans, returned from the Albany Butter Factory, everything quietened down and we dozed. Not many students remained by the time we left Wagin, the town south of Narrogin, but my tension began to grow as we drew near Highbury. I pressed my face to the window peering out for the dark, tall silhouette of the two pine trees in our drive and a light in the house behind.

Driving home in the dark with my father, silence enveloped us as the train moved on up the line. We did not talk much. My mother always had the kettle on the boil and a laden supper table. As I lay in bed the peace and quiet enveloped me and school slipped away.

I was never homesick at school but the thought of leaving home to return after holidays was an almost physical pain. I learnt to say goodbye to everything before the last day, all the animals and special places – the pool in the creek where the wattle boughs hung down and were reflected in the water, special trees and rocks where ferns grew on the shady side. Then I shut off my feelings.

Going to the siding with my father in the sulky, a lighted lantern to wave to stop the train, holding our breath, listening for the first whisper of its approach and feeling sick in the pit of my stomach. There was a feeling of relief after I boarded it and it pulled away to gather speed and hasten south, giving me only a glimpse of the light at the house; mother waved in farewell.

During the latter year-and-a-half of my school days, I boarded at The Priory, a gracious, old home set in park-like gardens, near the school. It was run by Mr and Mrs Mills, with the help of a matron, as a hostel for thirty girls. We made our own beds, tidied our dormitories and did our own ironing. I slept out on the upstairs balcony, protected from inclement weather by a canvas cover over the bed. It faced north and looked across to the dark blue line of the Stirling Ranges.

The hot water supply was limited, so we were allocated one hot bath a week. About four or five people went through each night, only hot water being added as bodies went through. We had cold showers in the morning. I loved hot baths and negotiated with cunning to hop in with someone else or after the last man in, as it where, before the plug was pulled.

Two of us were selected as house prefects in my last year. We had very few duties and the privilege of having afternoon tea with Mr and Mrs Mills and Miss Duncan, the matron. Mr Mills, who was English, collected antiques and we drank our tea from exquisite, china cups and ate elegantly thin slices of bread and butter and seed or Madeira cake while we listened to a news broadcast on the radio.

Sometimes, after church on Sundays, Mr Mills invited the senior girls to see some of his antique collection in the drawing room. He gave us the history of each item and a lot of information about the crafts-people who had produced them. Just being in the drawing room was a joy to me. Possibly it had been a ballroom originally as it was so big. Windows looked out over the gardens and lawns below and it was not hard to imagine it full of ladies in elegant silks and satins, waltzing with gallant swains in full evening dress. There was a grand piano in here, where we did our piano practice, beautiful old furniture and a large, pale pink, velvety carpet square over polished boards in the middle of the room. I was very happy at The Priory and grateful for the chance to have spent time in such lovely surroundings.

While I was at school, I always attended the Anzac Day dawn service held on top of Mount Clarence which rose up behind the school. A small group of people gathered there in memory of the troops leaving to go to fight in World War 1. For many, it was their last contact with Australia. We stood in complete silence and, at sunrise, a small rowing boat left the shore below and dropped a wreath into the water. I believe dawn services on Anzac Day originated here, introduced by the Reverend White who had served in World War 1. He was the Church of England minister, a gentle, spiritual man. He prepared me for confirmation while I was at school and I loved the lessons held in St John's Church. The church was built by Archdeacon Wollaston, mainly through his own labours. He was the first minister to come to the new colony, a remarkable man who, with his family, suffered almost insurmountable difficulties to survive, let alone preach the gospel and build a church. I loved the light coming through the stained glass windows and the feeling it gave me of sanctity. The setting for instruction affected me more than the lessons, I must confess.

The war had little influence on our lives, or studies. We continued to read about British and European history while the face of Europe was changing daily. We were all affected, though, by the sad news that two ex-students, who were seniors when I first went to Albany and who had trained as pilots, had been shot down over Germany and presumed dead.

I studied methodically, more from a competitive desire to get top marks than with any aim in view! Our career counselling, from the headmistress

in my case, lasted about ten minutes. Some of the girls were planning to go to teachers' training college, that and nursing being the two professions acceptable for girls.

My main intent was to return to the farm, although the thought of being a radio announcer had some appeal. I realized it would be almost impossible to break into that field but when, in reply to questioning about my intentions, I said this, the headmistress smothered a snort of disgust and said dismissively: 'I would have thought you, at least, would have gone into a profession!'

Sad farewells, the last trip home and it was all over.

CHAPTER SIX

VISITORS

As well as Helen being a regular visitor, many others came. Helen said, not long ago, she did all her 'growing' on the farm. Her brother John, who was older, also spent many school holidays with us. Sadly, he was shot down flying over Germany in World War 2 and his body was never recovered.

There was a lot of visiting among friends and neighbours. People came for the day, for meals, evening cards or musical evenings and no one seemed to mind harnessing up horses at midnight for a long drive home. Everyone was offered a wash on arrival and, if only the ladies came for the day, they rested after the midday meal, removing their dresses and lying down on the beds in their petticoats where they could laugh and gossip in comfort. They exchanged recipes and had a walk around the garden to discuss the plants and to take cuttings to see if they would 'strike'. I remember when I was very young the ladies often wore dust coats while driving the horse and sulky. Mother's was a deep cream tussore silk, long, belted and very martial looking. I hated it. It was a joyful day for me if children came and we could play with my dolls in my cubby.

On these long afternoons, unmarried daughters displayed their glory boxes, embroidered doyleys, runners, tablecloths, hand sewn nighties and household goods being gathered up against the happy day when an eager swain would sweep them off their feet into holy matrimony.

Most local girls were expected to marry early, preferably a farmer's son in the district and not too far from home, when they would perpetuate the pattern of their mother's lives.

As well as granny and my aunts being regular visitors, several of my mother's friends came to stay and the house rang with their laughter. After a meal, they would sit around the table, drinking endless cups of tea, yarning.

By the time the washing up was done, the cups had to be set up for the next round.

In self-defence, the men usually took their crib out into the paddock instead of coming back to the house. In winter, we sometimes took a billy of hot tea out to them on horseback but it was a rather tricky business if the horse was a bit edgy and the hot liquid splashed. Dad preferred a couple of beer bottles full of cold, sweet, black tea.

My joy knew no bounds when my mother's sister, Helen, came home on furlough from Melanesia and stayed with us for weeks. She was a medical missionary, full of stories about the native people whom she loved and lived among for thirty years. She brought us beautiful shells and woven baskets. She had many adventures, walking along jungle tracks to treat sick people, or travelling by canoe to remote islands. She had a lovely sense of humour and an infectious giggle.

During World War 2 when the Japanese invaded the island where she and the three other women missionaries lived, the people hid them in caves in the mountains. They took nothing with them, except the clothes they stood up in and Aunt Helen said it was the happiest time of her life.

My mother never cooked a meal that she did not cook extra. 'In case someone turns up,' she would say. And very often they did. Stock agents were regular visitors, neighbours bringing us fruit or a kangaroo tail, the mounted policeman from Narrogin, coming to check gun licences and keeping an ear to the ground. In winter, unwary car drivers tackled the creek crossing and got bogged, needing to be pulled out by a horse and chains and were grateful for a hot meal and a warm up by the fire.

The Afghan trader came two or three times a year, his wares loaded in packs on his camels' saddles. There was always a rush to shut the horses in the stable when he arrived, in case they broke the gate down and started fighting with the camels. I cannot remember him having meals with us. I think he preferred to cook his own on his little camp fire near the front gate, where he tied up the camels. He unpacked his goods on the back verandah; materials, laces, buttons, elastic and cottons. It was exciting when he came. He was very quiet, well-mannered and contained, and had an exotic air of mystery to me.

The Rawleighs man, with a car load of patent medicines, was assured of a welcome from my mother. She swore by his liniment – equally good for man or beast – and his black sticks of Bates salve, which cleared up infected cuts in no time. She, and many others, mourned his demise as trade fell off and he gave up his country round.

Another regular visitor was the grey-haired chief of the local aborigines, carrying boomerangs, sometimes a kangaroo tail or a possum he had killed, a sugar bag strung across his back, tied with binder twine. He called in for tea, sugar, flour, tobacco and matches. He knew everything about our family and always enquired about absent members. Many years before, when he told my grandmother she should not be on the farm because it was his country, she was most indignant. 'What a cheek!' she said after he had gone.

Earlier, either he or his predecessor had stolen the red-headed toddler son of our next door neighbours. When the little boy was found, hidden in a burrow in the bush, he readily admitted his crime, saying he wanted to introduce red hair into the tribe.

Professional swaggies called in on their annual perambulations. 'Humping their bluey' was their way of life and it was said they left signs on the road, indicating which farmers would give them a handout, for the benefit of their brethren.

During the depression years, there was a stream of unemployed men who called in looking for work, choosing to leave the dole queues in the city to try their luck in the bush. They walked along the railway line and enquired at farms they passed. Some went straight to the woodheap to chop a pile of wood before coming to the kitchen to ask for a job. Most of them had no farming experience, some even having just arrived from Britain, seeking their Australian dream. My father always tried to give them a few days' work and a bit of a grubstake to send them on their way. They camped in one of the sheds and at least had good meals and tobacco to give them a respite. With her sympathetic manner, my mother opened many floodgates and there were some sad and depressing stories.

One or two were deeply depressed and on the edge of a nervous breakdown. I remember mother taking the carving knife out of the drawer and putting it on a shelf behind the kitchen door in case they became violent. 'He seems a bit queer, to me,' she would say.

She was no mean hand with a carving knife. I remember when one of our flightier horses got its neck-rope twisted and choked down, she streaked down to the yard with it in her hand and, in spite of thrashing hooves, hacked the rope through. She was still wearing her apron and she looked like a cross between a Russell Drysdale masterpiece and the farmer's wife in 'Three Blind Mice'.

Whatever the gentlemen of the road were like, none were turned away and their tucker bags were always filled before they left.

On one rare occasion, a batch of scones mother made and of which she was dab hand, turned out like bullets. She put them in the meat-safe on the

verandah, to feed the dogs later, before we went out for the day. Upon our return, we found the scones had gone and there was a note from a swaggie, apologizing for taking them but saying he was starving. Mother was overwhelmed by emotion. 'Oh, poor man,' she kept saying, 'those dreadful scones! What will he think of my cooking!'

She, quite rightly, prided herself on her cooking and one of her most treasured possessions was a wire egg beater she swore by, which she bought from a swaggie for 2/6. 'Probably cut the wire off my fence!' was my father's cynical remark when he saw it.

Mother always took the beater with her when she went to stay with friends because she had a light hand with sponges and knew she would be asked to make one. 'It's infallible,' she would say.

Mother never seemed to mind how many young people were around her, no matter what antics we got up to. If she did remonstrate with us, we knew it was no more than a token rebuke. During the Christmas holidays we had wonderful water fights on the back verandah, heaving water over each other, bailed out of a bucket with a dipper or saucepan. Then we would run out into the sun to dry off.

On the long, hot afternoons, we lay on the dining room floor, with all the doors open hoping to catch any errant breeze, and read, or looked through photo albums or play cards. We liked going through mother's jewel case and dressing up. We cajoled her into telling us the history of each piece of family jewellery. 'Is this the ring granny gave Miss Benham?' We knew it was and that Miss Benham died after her marriage and, because she and her husband had no daughters, he gave it back to Granny, but we liked to have it told. 'And did this brooch come from Scotland?' and so it went on.

We had a wonderful fortune-telling book and spent absorbing hours reading our palms, feeling the bumps on our heads and making talismans to tell us our futures.

Later, we might go up to one of the dams for a swim in the muddy water and where the mud on the bottom was ice cold. After tea we played games outside in the gathering dark and then joined the grown-ups on the verandah and watched the stars come out.

CHAPTER SEVEN

COMMUNITY

Until cars became common, extending the distances people could travel in a day, most of the social life of the community centred round the little township of Highbury. From the beginning it was a lively and active neighbourhood.

The railway siding consisted of a raised platform and a small shed where goods could be left or intending passengers wait for trains. The Perth to Albany was a single line, 3' 6" gauge, but there was a loop line with a loading platform. There were sturdy yards for holding stock awaiting shipment.

The buildings were west of the siding and planned in a square. The Post Office-cum-store and the hotel fronted the road to Narrogin and the hall and school lay behind them. Each was about 400 yards apart from the others.

The Post Office-store was the hub of activity as everyone called in for mail and stores. Horses were tethered at hitching rails under a shady sugar gum tree in the front of it.

The store carried a wide variety of goods and, as it was not well lit, walking in over the worn doorstep was like entering an Aladdin's cave. Lanterns, ropes, harness and galvanized iron buckets hung from the rafters and the back of the room was piled high with bags of grain, stock feed, potatoes, flour and sugar, flanked by tins of kerosene. Groceries, candles, tobacco and matches filled the shelves and, behind the counter, there was a row of jars filled with mouth-watering lollies. With the loaves of fresh bread coming down on the afternoon trains adding their aroma, the smells were very agreeable.

Neighbours calling in for mail took their time to exchange the time of day and gossip with each other. When someone came back from the store, there were two stock questions asked, 'Any mail?' and 'Any news?'

There were several committees, a hall committee, Parents and Citizens and each of the sporting groups, football, cricket and tennis, had their own. Meetings did not always run smoothly and some fiery interludes and heated debates took place. A long-running feud between my grandfather and another city father went on in the very early days. Highbury was originally called Wolwolling after the nearby pool in the Arthur River. Grandfather wanted that name to remain but the opposition won out and it became Highbury.

The hall was used for a variety of purposes. The Anglican minister came down once a month to hold an afternoon Evensong service. Mother sat at the piano on the stage and played for the hymns. When the sermon began, she turned her chair round to face what would be the pulpit and, no matter how hard I tried not to, I kept meeting her glance and getting the giggles. As there were usually only about eight people in the congregation there was no way of remaining inconspicuous. Dropping my penny for collection was always a cause for smothered mirth too.

Once in summer when we reached the hall, we found a dog had died under the floor and we had to decamp into the bush for the service, which was a pleasant break. Less so when, on a day that I had caught a gilgie[7] in one of the dams, cooked it and eaten it, I had to make a quick exit outside and round behind the tank. I have never touched shellfish since that day.

I loved the Harvest Festival service held each autumn. People brought in sheaves of hay, grain, huge pumpkins and other vegetables, fruit and masses of chrysanthemums to decorate the makeshift altar. We sang all the lovely festival hymns with great gusto. I loved

Come ye faithful people come.
Raise the song of harvest home

and

We plough the fields and scatter
The good seed on the ground.

They were very relevant with cropping just round the corner, as soon as the season broke.

I missed out on Sunday school lessons but we had bible stories at home every Sunday. When I was older, I had to learn a collect each Sunday and eventually the Catechism. Starting as it does: 'What is your name? M or N?' I still wonder what answers those whose names do not start with M

7 A gilgie or *Cherax quinquecarinatus* is a small freshwater crayfish.

or N give? Just as puzzling is the question, why do Roman Catholics have two collections?

Dances to raise funds for various causes took place regularly. They were always well attended and went on until quite late. My earliest recollection of them is being rolled in a bush rug and pushed under a seat on the stage to sleep. Whenever I hear 'The Skater's Waltz', I have a sensation, more than a memory, of a forest of legs, the smell of dust and the vibration from the piano and drums.

When I was older, I joined the throng of children who gathered around in the gloom while the Tilley lamps were being pumped up until they blossomed in their clear white light, or hung around while the floor was being swept and candles chopped up on it. We were allowed to slide up and down or pull each other round on bags to work in the grease and make it slippery. As soon as the music struck up, it was 'all children off the floor' and we had to dance with each other disconsolately in the corners. Or we went outside, gathering round the blazing fire where two kerosene tins of water, hanging over it on a cross bar, were heating up for supper.

The card players, my father to the fore, quickly established themselves on the stage by the inside fire. By some unwritten law, they always got the best of the supper. Ladies, with aprons over their pretty dresses setting out supper, would say, 'Save those cream puffs for the card players' or 'Mr so and so loves cream sponges, keep those for his card table!'

Outside we played in the semi dark. Sometimes boys threw stones on the roof and, on one glorious occasion, one of them climbed up and put a wet bag over the chimney. It had an immediate effect. The card players shot out like rabbits from a burrow with a ferret after them but we were hidden in the bushes by then.

When the time came to make the tea and coffee for supper, we would gather round the fire again in spite of injunctions of 'You children stand back or you will be scolded.' After the large, white, enamel teapots were filled, we would scamper inside and sit demurely on the long wooden seats along the wall, nearest the point of entrance for the supper. We wanted to be sure we got piping hot tea in the thick white cups and first selection of the individual saucers of food.

In earlier days, New Year's dances were a great time for practical jokes. My father's two young brothers were great pranksters and responsible for some of them. A couple drove into the dance with a brand new buggy of which they were very proud. When they went out to drive home, they found someone had whitewashed not only the buggy but both the horses as well. Uncle Jack was always held responsible for switching the babies. He

changed them around in their baskets and some of the unsuspecting parents reached their homes before they discovered the mistake!

The annual children's Sports Day was a highlight in our lives. A running track of sorts was scraped out on the sports ground and we ran in our age groups and in sacks, egg and spoon and other novelty events. Periodically boiled lollies were tossed out to us, like wheat to chooks, and we scrabbled on the ground for them.

The highlight was the arrival of the ice cream churn from the Ice Works in Narrogin. Ice cream was a rarity in our lives and the drum was packed in ice and salt to keep it solid. It was thick, creamy and yellow, flavoured with vanilla and it melted quickly. One of the committee drove up to Narrogin to collect it and bring it back to Highbury. When we saw the sulky coming down the road, we all ran to meet it and escort it in like royalty. We had two or three serves doled out to us during the afternoon in little biscuit cups we called penny licks.

At five o'clock we were summoned to the hall for tea for a spread of sandwiches, sausage rolls, lamingtons, sponges and cream puffs lashed with cream. We drank the inevitable raspberry vinegar. A fancy dress party followed. Facilities were limited and we changed in the bush, near the horse and sulky. I remember sitting on a log while my mother washed my feet in a tin basin. Tom was dressed as a sailor and I went as Little Bo Peep. I think Dick must have been away at high school by this time.

Eager to launch me socially, mother took me to the Annual Children's Fancy Dress Ball in Narrogin. I wore the same costume and the local member, whom I always thought like the caterpillar in our illustrated copy of *Alice in Wonderland*, presented the prizes. He gave me kookaburra brooch, kissed me and said I was a pretty little girl.

When the dancing began, mother approached a very handsome dark-eyed little boy, dressed as a pink and white ice cream cornet, part of a set. In dulcet tones she asked him,

'Would you like to dance with my little girl?'

His cryptic reply as he turned his back, deflated us both.

'I don't dance with tarts,' he said.

It was a long, cold drive home. 'Little brute!' mother kept muttering as she slapped the horse with the reins angrily.

My night of nights came when I was about nine and friends took me to a performance of Wirth's Circus in Narrogin. Sitting on a hard plank bench, oblivious to the cold wind sweeping in under the tent, I was transported to a magic world. The lighting was indifferent and as the night progressed, dust kicked up in the ring cast a haze over the scene but, for me, it was unalloyed

joy. Girl acrobats wearing pink tutus and ballet shoes rode around the ring on snowy white ponies, standing up on their backs, doing handstands and forming pyramids. Then wearing head bands and attached to an apparatus that raised them to the roof of the tent, they swung round and round.

Many years later when I saw Margot Fonteyn dance at Covent Garden, I thought again of that night at the circus. Marvellous as the ballet was, I knew nothing will ever eclipse the enchantment of that cold night in Narrogin at the circus. In spite of months of trying, and even when she stood like a rock, I could never stand up on Myrtle's back and, in time, my dream of becoming a circus rider faded.

Surprise parties were common for twenty-first birthdays and 'tin kettling' for young marrieds just returned from their honeymoon.

During the summer picnics were often held at Wolwolling Pool on Sundays. By tradition the ladies crossed to the far side, over a shallow ford at one end of the pool, changed in the bush and bathed on that side. One Sunday some of the young men sneaked round, gathered up all their clothes and took them back to the picnic area where they strung them up in the trees. There were shrieks of consternation from the ladies when they saw their intimate apparel on show. None of them could swim across the pool and they had to endure taunting across the water from boys. Finally some kindly older lady made them get the garments down and she carried the bundle back to the other side.

Most people from farms went into Narrogin on Thursdays which were regular stock sale days. As we drove in, the first thing we saw above the trees was the high water tank above the Dingo brand Flour Mill, with a picture of a dingo painted on the side. Sometimes we took bags of grain there to be crushed into wheat-meal or bran. I liked going into the dim interior, smelling the floury dust and watching the belts working, turning wheels up in the high ceiling.

We dropped off the cream cans at the Butter Factory on our way past, and then drove up to the two lines of shady pine trees, where people brought their horses and sulkies or buggies. We unharnessed the horse, watered and fed it, so it could be rested for the twelve-mile drive home.

Once when mother came to town on her own, and had harnessed up, ready to leave, she noticed a bag of kittens someone had slipped into the back of the sulky. She adroitly slid them into a nearby buggy and left town. She was jubilant when some weeks later, she heard on the bush telegraph that the unsuspecting owner had taken them home again.

The town straggled along dirt roads. The houses were on big blocks and most were surrounded by fruit trees. Rain water tanks, at the back door,

supplied the household needs and in summer was used sparingly. Hardy plants, like asparagus fern and geraniums, survived in kerosene tins on the verandahs and chooks scratched in the red dirt.

There were two drapery stores where goods were displayed on tables in the street, stock firms, two hotels, several churches, banks, a police station and school. Various other businesses were scattered around the centre of the town and houses both sides of the railway lines. The library, which we patronized every week without fail, was housed in a dark room in the impressive Town Hall.

Not many aborigines lived in the area. I have been told the tribe was decimated by a measles epidemic some years before. Those who came into town, lived on a reserve on the outskirts. There was a curfew which made it illegal for them to be on the town precincts after sunset.

After completing their business, men gathered in groups in the main street, to meet their friends and talk. The ladies, who always wore hats and gloves, shopped with friends, visited those who lived in town and took each other to afternoon tea in the Canberra Café. We usually met there for lunch, a pie and tomato sauce and for me, the height of bliss – a 'spider' – ice cream in cool drink, served in a tall glass with a straw and a long-handled spoon to scrape out the last delicious morsel of fluff.

Finally, sated with the pleasures of the day, we would set off on the long trip home in the late afternoon.

Now, many changes have taken place in the district. Mechanization has speeded up farming procedures, no longer dependent on horse power. I think it nearly broke my father's heart to have to finally sell the horses. Myrtle had died of old age in the back paddock, where she spent her last, peaceful days. The Highbury Post Office has closed and mail is sorted in Narrogin. The store is open but is no longer the hub of the neighbourhood as people can travel further to shop. The hotel is open for business but the school closed many years ago. Buses take farm children daily to Narrogin, often over long distances. The hall, no longer ringing to the sound of dance music, is rarely used and the trains no longer run.

There are many descendants of the early settlers still on the family farms, and the same neighbourly spirit exists. Some years ago it was decided to set up a Welfare Trust Fund and busy bees are held from time to time, to raise funds by doing contract work, putting up fences, taking off crops, any job for which the owner would have to employ a commercial operator.

In October 2001, Highbury celebrated its Centenary and it is reassuring to know the spirit of the pioneers lives on.

1942–1949

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE WAAAF

Per ardua ad astra
Through adversity to the stars

It was good to be back on the farm with no more pressing thought than the arrival of the Leaving results, after Christmas. That did not weigh heavily upon me as I had worked steadily and expected to pass in all subjects. I neither yearned for high honours nor expected to receive them. In fact I failed social history and economics, a new subject on the syllabus that year. As only one person in the class passed, I felt the fault may not have lain entirely with me.

Harvest was over, grain and hay stacked and the sheep, like Ruth and Naomi, were collecting the fallen grain among the golden stubble.

Christmas came with all its ritual and visitors arrived. We young ones frolicked through the days, swimming in the cold, muddy water of the dam, gorging ourselves on mulberries and then pelting each other with the fruit until we were covered in purple splotches. We played tennis on the courts at the siding and had shooting competitions, using jam tins propped on fence-posts as targets.

Someone had given us a wind-up gramophone and we played our limited collection of records endlessly. Our library was reduced when someone left Melba singing the aria from *Madame Butterfly*, 'Land of Hope and Glory', 'Old Faithful' and 'Home on the Range' under a bush rug on a verandah bed and my father, taking his after dinner spell, flung himself on the bed and broke the lot. He also nearly crushed the cat and her four kittens which had sought refuge there.

At night we sat on the verandah waiting for the 'Albany Doctor' to arrive. I felt completely happy on the farm and, although I knew I had to move on eventually, could not think beyond the present.



Meg's WAAAF photograph, used in all her official records. Meg joined the Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force (WAAAF) in 1942, serving during WWII as a Radar Operator in Geraldton, Western Australia. This experience marked an important period of her life and greatly shaped her later love of travel and resilience in challenging situations.

If I had no plans for my future, my mother certainly had. It was ordained that I was to train as a nurse at Royal Perth Hospital and, with no active resistance on my part, arrangements were set in train for me to be interviewed by the matron. It was an obvious choice as there was a strong emphasis on the nobility of caring for others within the family. Dick was studying medicine in Melbourne and no less than five of my aunts were nurses, my father's two sisters in Northern Ireland and three of my mother's younger sisters.

News of the bombing of Darwin had sent a frisson of fear through the community hub. News was scarce; Darwin seemed so far away, it could have been in another country. It was not until I visited Darwin in the 80's that I fully realized the number of raids which had taken place and the enormity of the assault. Also that the radar station on the coast had given prior warning of a large number of aircraft approaching the town but the authorities assumed it was British reinforcements and took no action. As a result, all the aircraft waiting at the aerodrome were wiped out, along with most of Darwin, the radar station and the crew.

The fall of Singapore had been a great blow as so many Australians had been taken prisoner and it was felt Britain had abandoned them.

No one could have been unmoved by the plight of the women and children who had managed to escape to Perth from Singapore and Malaya. Abandoning their worldly goods and a comfortable lifestyle with plenty of servants, they also had to leave their husbands to an uncertain fate. Although they were given a lot of support locally, having to learn to cook and run a household, which Australian women took in their stride, must have been a great culture shock.

It was rumoured that those who were being flown south and killed, when they and the Catalina flying boats were bombed in Broome, had been carrying jewellery and gold which was lost in the harbour. There has never been any evidence that this was true.

Rationing had come in and coupons were needed for butter, sugar, tea – which hit my mother hard – and tobacco – my father. Petrol was rationed, too. We had a Ford car by now and, like most people, resorted to a charcoal-burning gas producer for trips to Narrogin. It got us around but the drum of lighted coals, strapped on the back of the car, had to be watched in case a spark flew out and started a fire in dry grass.

My father was too old to join up and, as a farmer, was in a reserved occupation. I think he would have dearly loved to be in the thick of it but, as it was, had to be satisfied with joining the local Home Guard. He came home from their regular Sunday manoeuvres and target practices exhilarated, with sparkling eyes.

We regularly sent food parcels to friends and relatives in the United Kingdom. Many parcels were sunk while in transit but were joyously received when they did reach their destination. Having plenty of butter and eggs, my mother made endless fruit cakes, not only to send overseas but to Tom and me when we were away. Special, light, air-tight tins could be bought for mailing. She tried to send eggs, four at a time, buried in mutton fat and packed into a treacle tin, to the UK but the voyage through the tropics proved disastrous.

Tom had been a member of the Narrogin 10th Light Horse Troop before war broke out. The Light Horse were always a highlight of the local show. Their skills in riding, jumping and novelty events, like tent pegging and tilting the ring, always brought great applause. With polished saddlery, ropes pipe-clayed white, beautiful horses and the riders with bunches of emu feathers fluttering on their slouch hats, they were a breath-catching sight.

Early in the war, the troop was dispatched to patrol the west coast from Geraldton south, on the lookout for any enemy activities. Most of the men came from farms and were given leave to come home to help during the busy seasons of seeding, shearing and harvesting. We loved to listen to Tom's yarns, when he came home, of the tricks the men played on each other to break the deadly monotony of their lives.

At that time, the coastal country north of Perth was almost uninhabited and consisted of sand dunes and low scrub. The men lived on the rations they could carry on their horses, or what they could shoot, for several days at a time. They camped rough, pestered by mosquitoes and flies. Now and then, someone let their horse slip its rope, whereupon it would head home, necessitating the trooper returning back to collect it. Tom said the journey often took them via Perth where they could enjoy the bright lights for a day or two before proceeding.

My mother was constantly worried Tom would be sent overseas. This did happen when the Light Horse was disbanded and he was sent to an army unit – the 26th Infantry Battalion, an independent unit. After a training period at Bathurst and a stint at the Canungra Jungle Training School in Queensland, where the instructors used live ammunition to hasten the troops along, sometimes with unfortunate results, he was sent to the Islands. He remained there, fighting the Japanese until they capitulated.

I helped my father on the farm in the meantime and waited with little interest for a call to attend the hospital interview. One day, a small news item in the paper caught my eye. Girls of intelligence and integrity were needed in the WAAAF to train for secret work as radio location operators. When I showed it to my mother and said it sounded interesting, she poured cold water on it. 'Oh no, darling, I don't think the services sound very nice!'

There the matter rested until I was called up for my nursing interview and dutifully set forth. The trainee nurse who showed me into the matron's office was someone I already knew and liked. Dick did too as, when he graduated and took a job at Royal Perth, he met and later married her. I found the matron very forbidding and five minutes was enough to convince me, there was no way I was going nursing.

I went straight down to the WAAAF recruiting office and picked up enlistment papers. The telegram I sent home: 'Am not going nursing. Am joining the WAAAF' brought a quick reply:

'Come home immediately!' Being under 21, my parents had to give their permission before I could be accepted. My mother put up a good fight but in the face of my determination, finally gave way and resigned herself to the fact that I faced a fate worse than death. Many years after my father's death, she said that at the time he remarked 'Thank goodness she is showing some initiative.'

It was the hint of secrecy that appealed to me, not burning patriotic zeal. It went without saying that we should support England and it never occurred to me to question our loyalty, unlike my uncle. When war broke out in Europe and Australian men were called upon to join up, his application was rejected because of his age. He said: 'Let them fight their own bloody wars.' But he changed his tune when Japan attacked Australia. The army took anyone by then.

When I was called up for an interview for the WAAAF, I set off eagerly. I was shown into a large, bare room and went to sit beside the only occupant, a small, dark-haired girl enveloped in a large brown overcoat. From its depths came a deep voice, 'I'm from the bush, where do you come from?' We were kindred spirits, both hoping to become radio operators and it was the beginning of a close friendship that lasted until her recent death.

We were given a demoralizing medical examination, when modesty was cast aside with our clothes, and several written tests. An interview with an RAAF officer followed and he said my maths were so poor, he did not think I would qualify for radio location training. He asked me several more, simple maths questions all of which, predictably, I got wrong.

Years later, my new friend who was also in the room, reminded me that he also asked me if I could make bread. Apparently, I told him I never had but was sure I could and volunteered the information that I could drive an eight-horse team and skin a sheep. I did not add that my furrows wavered a bit and when my father saw my butchering efforts, he enquired acidly: 'Which do we eat, the skin or the bones?'

The officer must have felt that in the face of such brash confidence, he should give me a chance, as he sent me off with twenty maths lessons,

he said trainee pilots had to do, and told me to study them. In retrospect, he probably had no idea what the work entailed as maths was used very little. There were a couple of equations we used, to estimate aircraft height and speed. I soon learnt that if the first answer was too bizarre, to turn the numbers upside down to get a logical result.

I went home and worked my way earnestly through the lessons, hardly daring to hope. To my huge delight, call-up papers came a few weeks later.

This time I set off for Perth with eager anticipation and on 21st September 1942, I and about sixty other girls assembled outside Anzac House in St George's Terrace, to be taken in buses to the Karrinyup Golf Course where we were to do our 'rookie' training. It was a perfect spring day, a few fluffy, white clouds in a soft, blue sky and a slight breeze blowing. Now, it is hard to believe that there were hardly any houses out that way, just paddocks, gold with capeweed in flower, and a few black and white cows grazing.

No time was lost in showing us the long dormitories where we were to sleep, the four cold showers, open to the world, which we were to share, and the mess. There were girls from every walk of life hoping to train as transport drivers, cooks, telegraphists, stewardesses, clerks and eight of us, radio operators.

We were divided into two squads with a WAAAF corporal in charge of each. We were lined up for various injections and smallpox vaccinations, the latter causing some of the girls misery. I was lucky to have only a slight reaction as I had already been vaccinated in Narrogin two months before. I knew what these poor things were going through as I had suffered greatly, with high fever and a painful, swollen arm. To make matters worse, we were issued with 'goons', heavy denim overalls. We had to put our legs in first, pull them up and slide our arms into the sleeves. For several days, there were cries of 'Mind my vacc!' if anyone came too close to the sufferers.

The clothing store issued each of us with the regulation messing gear, an enamel plate, mug, knife, fork and spoon, three grey blankets and two towels. Also a clothing issue was made to everyone – except me. Being a large girl, I got only the basic requirements. This had advantages as I had to go to a tailor in Perth to get a drab skirt – in officer-type material – and to buy shoes. I only ever had one skirt, though, whereas everyone else got two. It was just as well the drab skirt was made of good material because, although no one knew at the time, it would be July and I would be in Melbourne before I got my full uniform of 'blues'. In the meantime, the skirt was washed, starched, ironed and sponged clean until it shone like glass.

We spent part of each day at lectures, learning Air Force protocol, aircraft identification, gas mask drill, etc. Our quarters were inspected daily to see

if our blankets were folded with the required exactitude and placed neatly on the palliasse mattress, folded in three, and shoes, towels and messing gear laid out as stipulated.

We were drilled relentlessly, morning and afternoon, arms swinging shoulder high and learnt the meaning of 'right dress', 'left turn' and how to salute. Before long, we worked like a well-oiled machine. I loved the feeling of unison in marching as a squad and pride in our perfection. We were route-marched to the beach, over the cross cuts of jarrah logs, on the road built by convicts in the previous century.

Our lecturers spoke to us about *esprit de corps* and I began to realize the significance of the term as we became closer to one another.

One or two girls found the prospect of lining-up naked with everyone else for our morning showers more than they could cope with, one even sneaking out in the early hours of the morning for her ablutions by torch-light. Generally, the rest of us were in too much of a hurry to worry about such a thing as girlish modesty. No doubt having been to boarding school was an advantage.

A very gung-ho WAAAF officer came for two days to teach us unarmed combat. To my chagrin, I was pulled out on the first morning because, she said, she was frightened I would kill someone. Later I discovered she was a good friend of my Uncle Rob's wife, Mavis, and used to practice on her until she threw her and broke Mavis's collar bone. I had to sit in the shade of a gum tree and watch, swatting flies and flicking ants off my legs. I felt very bitter.

We were all very proud as we marched at our pass-out parade in front of the top brass, friends and relatives. We were given our postings and our little group went into transports of delight when we heard we had to travel to Richmond in New South Wales to do our preliminary training. Only one of the eight of us had ever been out of the state so it loomed as a huge adventure.

For Western Australians, in those days, the Eastern states might have been on the other side of the world. There was only a dirt track across the Nullarbor and travellers either went by sea or on the single railway line, via Kalgoorlie to Port Augusta. Holiday makers were more inclined to take a cruise to Singapore or Ceylon (Sri Lanka), both popular, rather than face the train journey or the uncertainties of the Bight.

We were classified as low priority, so we had to wait several weeks until space for us became available on a troop train. It was mid-December before we embarked, for what turned out to be an eight-day journey to Richmond.

In the meantime, we were sent to the Filter Room in Mt Lawley which was the control centre for all aircraft movements in the southern half of

the state. A grid map was superimposed on a very large table showing that area and a number of girls sat around it, wearing headphones which were linked to Voluntary Observers stationed in isolated areas and the two radio location (later radar) stations, one at Busselton and one at Jurien Bay. As a sighting came through, a token was placed on the relevant grid map position. A duty officer, perched on a dais above the table, could see at a glance what movements were taking place.

We worked ten-hour day shifts and fourteen hours at night. Sometimes, if things were quiet in the early hours of the morning, two or three of us at a time were given a break to try and catch up on sleep. As the only floor space was in the empty CO's office, we did not get much. We lay on lumpy palliasses in stifling heat.

We were billeted several streets away in suburban houses and marched back and forth to the operations unit and the mess for meals. I had no trouble sleeping during the day but some girls found it difficult to adjust. One day, a young man climbed through the open window into the room where three of us were sleeping. I did not stir but the girl in the next bed heaved a shoe at him and sent him back the way he came.

It was hot and we were marched to have an early dinner in a small hall, like a furnace. It was only hunger that drove us to eat the pallid roasts, overcooked vegetables and steamed puddings we were served regularly.

We had weekend leave and I spent most of mine with friends who lived in a lovely rambling house on Mt Eliza in King's Park. Mr Hickson was the city engineer for the water supply. There were several reservoirs near the house, all strictly out of bounds. He and Mrs Hickson had a large family and were most hospitable. I loved being with them.

In spite of the sporadic news and rumours of enemy successes, to all outward appearance Perth was still a haven of serenity. At dawn, newspapers still landed on verandahs with a thump and the milkman's horse and cart clopped up and down each street. The milkman ran up the path of each house with a can of milk to fill the billies or jugs left out the night before and collect the money left for him on verandahs. Doves cooed softly, sprinklers were turned on, and little birds flew in and out of the spray or sat among the blue plumbago or colourful hibiscus for their bath. As the heat increased and the air became more languorous, they sought refuge in the trees and fell silent.

Other tradesmen drove horses and carts around the streets, giving their cries of 'Bak – er', 'Fish – oh', 'Butcher'. Apron-clad housewives hurried out of their houses, carrying baskets on their arms and clutching little money purses to make their selection for the day. The grocers delivered

orders, usually with some cheery greeting as they dumped the boxes on kitchen tables.

Trams still ran through the city, with their torturous rattles and screeching wheels but smooth-running, electric trolley buses began to take over. Bouncy, maroon Parlour Cars serviced the Perth-Fremantle run. The seats ran crosswise and passengers had to climb in and out over the legs of the other patrons. Fares had to be passed up to the driver by the passengers in front and change handed back the same way. In spite of the apparent normality, big and lasting changes were taking place in the community.

Attitudes, to married women working, changed, as they had to fill the places left by the men joining-up and were needed for services to help the war effort.

In spite of the long hours of work and juggling the duties on the home front, many found they enjoyed the camaraderie of the workplace, the money and the independence it gave them. Instead of long lunches with friends in town, many women, casting off the hats and gloves, *de rigueur* for such occasions, began working instead, for Red Cross, knitting, raising funds for comfort parcels for the troops and in canteens run for service personnel.

American troops came to the city, causing a stir among female hearts. They brought other benefits for newly-acquainted girlfriends, such as nylon stockings and Camel cigarettes. Women took up smoking in public places. Silk stockings had been hard to get. Most of us painted our legs tan with a special lotion on sale and then carefully drew a line up the back of our legs with an eyebrow pencil! It looked a quite realistic seam but the tan came off on everything. Waffles and chewing gum became all the rage.

The Americans had established a Catalina Flying Base in Crawley Bay and the flying boats, coming and going on patrols off the coast, became a familiar sight.

War gloom was far from our minds when our great day arrived and we climbed on board the train to Kalgoorlie, farewelled by family and well-wishers, loaded with fruits and other treats to sustain us on the trip.

As the gauges throughout Australia were different in several sections, we had to negotiate these during the trip. We reached Kalgoorlie about 10.30 am the next day. The heat was already over the century and it was considerably hotter in the large tent at Parkeston where we had breakfast of synthetic egg, cold toast and scalding hot tea. Flies were rampant and we were glad to get on the Overland and settle in.

The eight of us were put in two, double-bunked, first-class compartments with a pleasant WAAAF sergeant in charge. We had to sleep head to toe but we were luckier than the AIF troops and RAAF airmen who were

packed into dog boxes. Often the men had to travel in open stock trucks which must have been very uncomfortable.

The heat on the Nullarbor can be seering during the day but, even in summer, temperatures can drop at night dramatically as icy winds blow in over the Bight. Add to that, the odd blinding dust storm and the ingredients are there for a journey in hell.

Our progress was slow. Often we were pulled off the main, single line onto a loop to let a high priority train pass. The train was very long and had two engines. Neither of them was in their first flush of youth and were often held up by 'hot boxes', whatever they were, breaking down or some other catastrophe.

There was a big demand for rolling stock now. There was so much movement across the continent and old and discarded equipment had been brought in to cope. The sheer logistics of moving so many troops were massive. Water, and any other necessities, had to be taken to strategic points along the line from either Kalgoorlie or Port Augusta just to keep the engines running.

The train pulled up for meals. Trestles were set up beside the cookhouse van and we filed past the cooks who slapped our rations on our enamel plates. Then we scuffed a clear patch of ground clear of rocks and spinifex to sit and eat it. Myxomatosis had recently hit the rabbit population and dead bodies lay all around us, whiffy to say the least. Small black flies crawled over us too, but we had eaten all our extra supplies and were hungry so could not afford to be too choosy.

Since water was at a premium, we had to wash our messing gear in one of two tubs of water which became greasier and greyer as more of the 200-300 of us on the train dipped our plates, mugs and cutlery into it.

Neither could we do more than have a lick and a promise with a face-washer to get clean when a dust storm hit us one night. Fine red dust sifted into our carriage and penetrated everything. We were on a loop line at the time and when I looked out of the window next morning, I found two camels just beside us, sheltering against the train. We ran out of water completely before we reached Port Augusta.

The discomfort did not worry us too much. We were good friends. The two youngest members of our group could always see the funny side of anything and had us all laughing with their dry witticisms. Our chaperone was easy going and one hot afternoon while she was asleep, we took the laces out of her shoes, tied one round each big toe and lashed them to the end of her bunk. Fortunately, she took it all in good part.

There was plenty to hold our interest on the trip. We stopped at all the little settlements where the settlers, who kept each section of the line in good repair, lived with their families. Mostly there were only six or eight houses in each place, side by side and identical. Their water tanks were replenished by 'water trains' when necessary, there was no electricity and an unbroken view of stony desert all around. Supplies came from the tea and sugar train which travelled between Kalgoorlie and Port Augusta, and return, each week. It had a well-stocked grocery van, butcher's shop and, sometimes, a child health sister did the trip.

Most of the women we spoke to said they liked living on the Nullarbor even though the men might be away from home a week at a time, camping on the job. They taught their children by correspondence and the Flying Doctor could be called up in an emergency.

At one stop, a small family group of aborigines came up to the train and were given food from the cookhouse. They were thin and bedraggled, wearing tattered clothing. Understandably, lack of water to wash in contributed to the state of their hair but after the dust storm, ours was not much better.

We had a long stop at one small settlement. It was memorable because there was a hotel about 400 yards away across the spinifex plain. Troops disgorged as one and there was a mad dash to the bar. We brought up the rear and had no hope of reaching it but a kindly airman fought his way in and passed us our schooner each. It was my first taste of real beer and I felt I was living the life! We ran back to the train when we heard the engines first 'cock-a-doodle-do' but it took half an hour to get everyone on board. At last, the train began to slowly move and the last hardened drinkers caught it up at a curve on the line half a mile on.

Now, there is a fast diesel service on the Indian Pacific, the only scheduled stop at Cook, and passengers have little chance of interacting with the desert. I am glad I had the chance to travel across the Nullarbor in 'the old days' – several chances as it turned out.

After four days of travel, we were taken off the train at Port Pirie in the early hours of the morning and driven in the back of a tender[8] to the RAAF station. We dossed down for what was left of the night in the rec hut on dusty, lumpy palliasses. We felt the latter, and the blankets we were given, had harboured many transient bodies.

We were roused at the crack of dawn to dress in our regimental khaki formal dress – no more slouching in goonskins – and put on a passenger

8 This was a utility vehicle, in other words a ute.

train to Adelaide. From thence, a passenger train to Melbourne, where I saw Dick briefly, before catching a train to Albury – all change – and on to Sydney. The train to Richmond was a tram-like little, huffing billy and it took three hours to reach its destination.

We arrived on a Saturday afternoon when the whole station was on stand down. It was hot and humid and we were left standing in a squad outside the orderly room for twenty minutes, until one of our number fainted. Someone did come then and we were shown to our quarters.

We were given palliasse covers, like hessian wool bales, and told to take them to the hay shed a quarter of a mile away and fill them. We must have looked quite a sight, staggering back with our loads of straw – like the First Little Pig. We were dirty, bedraggled and had bits of hay sticking to us.

Richmond was a permanent RAAF station and the quarters were a number of identical, two-storey, brick blocks. Each floor had passages down the middle, double rooms each side and an ablution block in the centre. Because they were all alike, we kept rushing into the wrong ones by mistake, leading to some moments of embarrassment as most were for the airmen.

As well as No 1 Radio School, to which we were attached, there was a Training Flying School. For the first week we were there, an RAF Spitfire Squadron was also on the site. Sad to say, they went to Darwin and were wiped out soon afterwards by the Japanese but we only heard this months later.

We were always rushing at Richmond. We had to have all our cleaning duties, which consisted of polishing the length of the central passage on hands and knees, or cleaning the ablutions block, have our rooms ready for inspection, palliasses and blankets folded in the regulation way, shoes polished, uniform immaculate, have breakfast and be ready for parade by 7 am.

We began our course. There were fifty girls, including us. The others came from Queensland, New South Wales and Victoria. We became good friends but there was keen state rivalry when we had our weekly tests.

We learnt that no one had wanted to take on training the WAAAF radio operators but eventually a RAAF sergeant from WA and a corporal from Queensland agreed to do it. They were very good to us and the sergeant became a friend for life for several of us Western Australians.

Our luggage travelled with us and although everyone else had theirs, my kitbag was missing. My persistent enquiries at the orderly room, for both my kitbag and the missing bits of my uniform, were met with a stock reply – 'We'll, check for the kitbag' and 'apply when you get a permanent posting for the missing bits of uniform.' Finally, I took the law into my own hands, requested leave to go to Sydney to check the railway station cloakroom for myself and surprisingly it was given.

I stalked behind the counter of the cloakroom when I reached the Sydney station and announced my intentions to the disinterested, lethargic attendants. No one demurred, so I started heaving through the huge pile of luggage. After about twenty minutes, I saw it – 'ACW Porter 103302' – seized it and marched out. It had probably been there ever since we arrived.

It was good to be able to go on parade, regimentally clad. Previously I had to wear my goons and join a squad of other misfits at the back. When we route-marched around Richmond every Tuesday morning after CO's parade, we were so far back we could not hear the band.

Parades were huge and were taken by a terrifying warrant officer who, it was said, could see the blink of an eye at 300 paces. No one dared to move an inch in spite of the flies crawling over us. Things were enlivened once or twice when someone fainted but no one dared to even look as the medical orderlies dragged the defaulter away!

We relaxed briefly in the rec hut in the evenings where everyone not on duty foregathered. We had sing-songs round the piano and enjoyed the tea and biscuits provided for us by a local group of dedicated ladies. Usually we were glad to get to bed early.

It was almost Christmas when we arrived and we were to have leave. A concert was arranged just before that and one afternoon I was called to the Orderly Room where a WAAAF officer told me my friends had said I could sing and she had put my name down on the programme.

It was the first I knew of it and it was due to take place that night. I cannot remember even having a rehearsal but the compère, the pianist and I at least found some music for 'The White Cliffs of Dover' and 'Vienna, City of My Dreams', both of which I knew. A dray, decorated with hay bales, served as a stage and was drawn up in front of some pine trees hung with discreet fairy lights.

My friends had the decency to applaud vociferiously and I must say I rather enjoyed it, standing up on the dray singing with all my heart. I felt some of the familiar Christmas magic, looking down on the audience stretching into the darkness on that calm, still night, under a starry sky.

We had four days leave and the eight of us went to Sydney together. We stayed at a large Service Women's Club which *The Australian Women's Weekly* established. It was very luxurious to our eyes, we had nice meals and the cost was within our budget. As a trainee, under 21, I was paid 2/10 a day.

The Club was in the centre of King's Cross. Before we left home, we had all been warned not to go near King's Cross under any circumstances, as it was considered to be a hot bed of sin throughout Australia. This hint

of wickedness enhanced our enjoyment, mingling with the crowds on the streets. The Club was run by marvellous, friendly volunteers.

Wherever we went in Sydney, we were met with kindness. People in the street invited us home for meals or to stay and when they asked us where we came from and we said 'The West', and they finally realized we meant Western Australia and not the back of Bourke, they were overwhelming.

Service personnel were given free travel on public transport and free entry to all the main attractions like Taronga Park Zoo, Luna Park and the races.

Several of us went to Wentworth House and I had my first taste of an historic building. Apart from the fact I had always been interested in the MacArthur family, because of their links to the Merino sheep industry, the elegance of the house and lush beauty of the gardens enchanted me. The magnolia trees were flowering and it was the first time I had seen their creamy blossoms. Wisteria hung along the front of the house with great bunches of purple blooms, like grapes. I loved the patina of age on the furnishings, the sweeping staircase and the worn flagged kitchen and outhouse floors. I return whenever I go to Sydney and, although it looks smaller and less imposing than I remembered, I still find the magic there.

On Christmas Eve we went to see *The White Horse Inn* and cried when someone said 'I wish I was home', during the interval. Our tears soon dried, mine certainly were not heartfelt. I had fallen in love with Sydney and have never had reason to change my mind.

We had the New Year off too and all went back to Sydney. It was wet and we got soaked. Also racing someone down the steps at Central Station, I dropped my wallet which disappeared in thin air.

Before we went to bed, I stood on a bed and harangued the other seven, about my misfortunes. First, I couldn't get a full kit, then my kitbag had been the only one not to arrive, now I had lost not only my wallet but my money and my leave pass. The reason for these disasters, I laid at the feet of my ancestors, great-great-grandparents and all family members in between, including my father, who had stolen land from the aborigines. I had an aboriginal hex on me, I told them – where would it end, I asked? A friend reminded me of this tirade a few years ago, as mercifully it had slipped my mind.

The last train from Sydney after leave departed at midnight. Trying to get back into the station at 3 am without a leave pass presented some problems but eventually the duty guard let me in. I fell into bed briefly before reveille.

My troubles did not end there as two days later, my jaw swelled up and I was admitted to sick bay with mumps! Sitting up in bed with my jaw bandaged and speaking through clenched teeth, 'This,' I told my friends,

solicitously gathered round the foot of the bed, 'proved my point, I was hexed!' Only one other girl on the course, a Queenslander with whom I had barely passed the time of day, was also laid low with the same complaint.

Meantime, my friends finished the course and to a woman were posted to WA.

When I recovered, I was given a week's leave. I had several invitations to visit friends and relatives of our friends at home, who had made contact. I spent a few days with two elderly sisters in a wonderful old home up the north shore. They invited a young man whose family were friends. He was quite a nice boy. He had a gammy leg so had been rejected for enlistment into the services. He told me he was working at a factory which manufactured plastics and explained what they were. It didn't make much of an impression on me at the time but no doubt it was very much in the vanguard of the industry. Before I went back to Richmond, I visited a family in Mosman who took me sailing on the harbour in their yacht. I decided Sydney was a great place to convalesce.

When I arrived back at the station, I joined another group of trainees and, in spite of great support from the two lecturers, felt very out of place. The mess came as a bit of a shock too, after having been spoiled by my good friends whose aim seemed to have been to build me up! Previous trainees and the messing staff had done battle when the former trainees had been insolent to the mess staff and left tips after a meal. Subsequent trainees suffered for our predecessors' actions.

There were strict rules that we must wear hats outside but never inside. Meals were served outside, main meal on one plate, sweets on another, boiling hot tea in our enamel mugs. To conform, we had to put our plates down on the verandah, remove our hats, hitching them over one shoulder, pick up the first plate, balance the other on our mug and enter the mess. More often than not, the hat fell down and knocked the food flying, even before we entered the mess. A sergeant stood at the door, hoping to catch some poor, harassed miscreant still wearing a hat and slap them on a charge. There was a mat at the door and we were sure the floor underneath had an extra polishing as, now and again, some unfortunate slipped and skidded across the floor in a shower of food.

To add to my discontent, our group was told that because so much radar gear – which at that stage was almost all manufactured in England – had been lost at sea, no more radar operators were needed and we would have to re-muster. It was definitely bad news but I applied to become a rigger.

Our course finished and I was put on standby waiting for a posting. On the second afternoon, I was mowing a lawn (with a hand mower) when

I was told I had two hours to pack, get my clearances and catch the train to Sydney in time for the evening train to Melbourne. Getting a clearance meant going round all the station sections and getting signatures to verify I had no station equipment, outstanding charges, etc. It was a race to empty my palliasse in the hay shed, and return it, with blankets to the store and so on.

When I got to Sydney, I discovered I was posted to the Orderly room at the Laverton RAAF station. I had no idea where it was and couldn't have cared less.

On reaching the station, however, I found the WAAAF Officer, or Madam as she was addressed, had been at Karrinyup when we did our rookie training. Her warm welcome went some way to smoothing my ruffled feathers.

Two other Western Australians, who had followed me from Sydney, did not get quite the same reception – when the train had stopped at Albury for the changeover, they expected a long wait and they decided to have a good wash in the ladies room. As it was midnight, they were in pyjamas, so they put on great coats, gathered their toilet bags and padded off. Preoccupied with washing and talking, they missed hearing the train whistle. When they went out, they were confronted by an empty station and the long platforms stretching away into the darkness. The station staff had left and it was some time before they found anyone to help them. Madam was less than cordial when they arrived at Laverton, still with overcoats over their pyjamas and clutching toilet bags, under armed guard.

In the orderly room I worked with a Flight Lieutenant and a Sergeant. Both men were friendly and my duties were simple. I was there for ten days and finding my way around, feeling quite settled, when I was given an urgent message, to pack up and go to Airmen's records in Chappell Street, Prahran in Melbourne.

Six trainee radar operators had been brought in to do what we were told was vital work. We were never convinced about this, although we were told we had been especially selected because of our high intelligence. We had been told we had been selected for radar too, because of our high intelligence, but recently this was debunked in a book written by someone who had been very senior in WAAAF ranks. She wrote that all radar operators thought they were the chosen people and acted accordingly but no special talent was needed for the work! I wondered which operators had trodden on her toes.

The six of us were stationed on the fourth floor of a draughty warehouse, supervised by a sergeant who had just returned from two-and-a-half years

in the islands, fighting the Japanese. He was skeleton thin and bright yellow from the Atabrine he had taken to ward off malaria. It had not been very effective as he kept getting high temperatures and fever, and was often shaky.

We had to work on a plan for the orderly discharge of airmen when hostilities ceased. Points were allocated for various things and those with the highest score would be discharged first. Two points each were given for marriage, each child and overseas service. The latter was complicated because of squadron movements while the airman was in it. Very soon we could recite the dates and movements of every squadron in the RAAF since the beginning of hostilities.

We worked with a will but, after being set to check everything twice and then being told the system was being completely changed, we began to have doubts about the vital role part. Our enthusiasm faded and we slackened our efforts, becoming more disillusioned by the day.

Led by a pocked-sized Venus from South Australia, whose husband was a prisoner of war in Germany, we wrote to the CO stating our dissatisfaction and virtually demanding posting. Only the pleading of our, almost tearful, sergeant, of whom we had all become fond, stopped us. He said if more than one of us signed it, it would be mutiny and we would be court-martialled. We did not want to go that far, so sunk back into a sullen acceptance.

The saving grace for me was making friends with a girl from Sydney, whom I met when we were billeted in Toorak Road. Several beautiful mansions had been taken over for WAAAF quarters and we were almost the first to move in. The WAAAF sergeant was very accommodating and let us have the run of the house. There was a swimming pool as well as lovely gardens.

But our content was soon shattered as more and more girls arrived. We both liked peace and quiet so we asked the sergeant to let us move to the next house, still unoccupied. After a few days we were overrun again. There were only four houses in all so, rather than put up with the noise and hustle as they filled up, we looked for an alternative.

The garden of the fourth house was large and, down the back, we discovered a broken-down potting-shed-cum-glasshouse. Surreptitiously, we moved beds, bedding and our gear down there. It was very peaceful and I don't think anyone ever found out we were there. There was no electricity so we had to buy candles. It was getting colder now and it was difficult to read at night and not tip the candle up, while huddled under five grey blankets each and our overcoats.

We had to go up to the house for showers and the mess still and it is a wonder no one saw us skulking through the bushes. At meal times about a hundred of us sat at long tables and were waited on by stewardesses.

One morning when the duty officer came in and asked, 'Any complaints?' I stood up and said the porridge was burnt! In fact it was burnt every morning but, fortunately, I didn't say that. From then on, I was a marked woman. While I was not physically abused, from the increasingly snide remarks directed towards me, I felt it was only a matter of time before a plate of hot soup was tipped down my back.

I gave up going to meals and Gaye, my loyal friend, stood by me which was all very well but we had to eat and our pay (mine was 2/10 a day) would not go far. So we turned to a life of crime. We discovered the window of the kitchen store room was never locked, so late at night we would sneak through the garden and ease the window up. We brought an empty kitbag which Gaye held open while I climbed in and slid down the metal lid of the bread bin to the floor. I had to strike matches to see what was on offer and then plundered the shelves. I collected bread, apples, chunks of cold meat and cheese, milk and anything else that looked edible. Our main danger came from our bursts of hysterical giggles which bent us double and were probably fired by nervous tension, cold and hunger. We survived like this for three months and no rumours that the thieving was detected ever reached us.

When we were in funds, we treated ourselves to real coffee and toasted raisin bread at a café in Toorak Village. It was run by a Viennese couple who managed to get to Australia just before war broke out. I loved walking down the dimly lit Toorak Road, shuffling through the fallen autumn leaves. Some had been raked up and set alight. There was an acrid smell of smoke and lazy trails rose through the bare branches above.

On leave I spent a lot of time with Dick, who was still in the midst of medical studies. Also, I met Eileen, my half-sister, which was very exciting, especially as we got on so well. We shared a passion for reading. She was a primary school teacher and did not retire until she was 70. She thoroughly disliked housework and preferred to read. She never learnt to drive and was picked up and returned home each day by taxi. The lady next door came in daily, washed up, made the beds and generally kept the home fires burning. The system worked very well.

The Melbourne people showed none of the friendliness we had found in Sydney. The WAAAF in particular had a bad name. I travelled to work by tram and was often met with unpleasant stares. Mature ladies have made no effort to lower their voices when they made comments implying we were no better than we should be. As a result, I felt an antipathy towards Melbournites for many years. Fortunately, I have changed my mind after more recent visits when everyone has been very friendly.

My efforts to get a full kit at Laverton had been aborted by my posting to Melbourne but finally I hit pay dirt. I was detailed off to be fitted by a tailor for my winter jacket. After several fittings and about a month later, it turned up. It was unfortunate I was to get so little wear out of it.

One of the girls invited the five of us for a visit to her sister's farm in Warragul one weekend. I was delayed for some reason and travelled up on a later train on the Friday evening. The compartment was very hot and the relationship with my fellow travellers deteriorated as I kept opening the window to let in a blast of icy air and they kept closing it. It was a relief to step out onto the platform at Warragul and be hit by the freezing air. I am sure they were glad to see me go, although in retrospect, I may have left them a legacy.

My host met me and we drove to the farm in an open ute. It felt so good. Very soon, I was sitting by a roaring fire, drinking port. A few minutes later, someone lent across to me and said, 'Meg, your face is covered with spots.'

As I had had measles as a child, it was clear this was the German variety. To say I was embarrassed is an understatement. Not only did sleeping arrangements have to be changed, not easy for six extra in a three-bedroomed house, but it was obvious I could not to go back to Melbourne until I had recovered. Added to that, my hostess not only had two small children but was in advanced pregnancy with a third. Also she and her husband were milking sixty cows, night and morning, getting up each day before dawn so they had milk at the gate for a 10 am pickup.

Fortunately, the damage rubella can cause unborn children was not known then and, in any case, she was past the danger period. As it turned out, none of the family caught the infection but at times I have wondered about my travelling companions in the train.

For the ten days of my enforced stay, this couple was always cheerful and unbelievably kind and caring. I was lent nighties, brought delicious meals lavishly garnished with homemade butter and cream, and given loving care. I lay in bed reading or looking out of the window at a range of blue hills capped by early snow and feeling guilty about being idle and causing so much extra work.

After a week, the spots cleared up and, as I needed a medical certificate to take back with me, my hostess and I drove into town to see the doctor. We were met with a tirade from the elderly, irascible and probably overworked GP who blasted me for daring to bring disease to a country town and both of us for coming to the surgery. Explanations fell on deaf ears but he gave me the certificate and we slunk off home feeling like lepers.

Our little group was still very glum when I returned to Melbourne. We still did not know if we were to be re-mustered but in fact none of us ever heard any more about that. Our discontent was fuelled by letters from friends, already on radar stations, telling us what a marvellous time they were having. We held a council of war and decided there was more than one way to kill a cat, the cat in this case being the CO.

We decided we would try the cold stare treatment. Every time he came on the floor, our eyes followed him. Our faces were stony. It took about six weeks before he cracked. We heard later, on our well-established grapevine, that he went to the posting officer and said,

'Get rid of those six radar trainees on the fourth floor. Send them anywhere in Australia but get them out of here.'

We were jubilant when the news came through. The posting officer already knew three of us wanted to go to Geraldton, to join up with my mates, and did the needful. It was sad leaving my potting-shed friend, Dick and Eileen, but wonderful to be on the move at last.

Two of us travelled back to Perth on a passenger train which was dull by comparison to our previous trip. We had a few days home leave before catching a troop train to Geraldton. It was on the old Midland line and the journey took twenty four hours.

Most of the large RAAF population in Geraldton was stationed at the aerodrome, a few miles out of town, where there was a Flying Training School. We were going to Group 447, designated a hush-hush establishment.

We travelled in a dog box with five girls from the 'drome and, as we were outsiders, we were well down the pecking order when it came to sleeping arrangements. I spent the night on the floor with my head by the door, a cold draught of air on my neck and my feet in the toilet.

The train dragged along until it stopped fourteen hours later and everyone was ordered off to trail some couple of hundred yards through bush to an army kitchen set up in a bough shed for breakfast. We had tinned sausages and dog biscuits. We trailed back to the train clasping our lunch – a slab of bully beef between two dog biscuits, to keep us going until we reached Geraldton.

All tribulations were forgotten when we arrived at the unit and were welcomed by our friends. Our beds were set up ready for us and, stopping only to drop our luggage and powder our noses, we were whisked back into town to dine in luxury at the Victoria Hotel.

The Victoria became our happy hunting ground when we felt like treating ourselves. Dinner, consisting of soup, grilled dhufish, a selection of roasts of meat or poultry and a sweet, cost 5/. Afterwards, we sat in the

deep leather chairs in the lounge, decorated with the obligatory palms and cooled by the overhead fans. We drank black coffee out of little cups and advocaat with crème de menthe, which was all the go. The legal drinking age was twenty-one but no one ever questioned us.

There was a café in town, run by a kindly Greek gentleman, and sometimes we went there for the best sausages, bacon, eggs, chips and salad I have ever tasted for the princely sum of 2/6.

When we presented ourselves at the orderly room next morning, Madam greeted us coldly, reminding us the unit was not a hotel and asking if we had forgotten that the first port of call when arriving on posting was to report to the orderly room? We were suitably contrite and in fact it was only a token rebuke as Madam, herself, was living it up and gave us plenty of leeway.

The unit consisted of several houses which had been commandeered on the southern outskirts of the town. There was low scrub, sand-hills and, only a short distance away, the back beach.

The operations complex, two rooms sandbagged all round, with an aerial like a big bedstead turning round on top, was about 200 yards from the nearest house and situated on a sandy hill. It was camouflaged and the track leading up to it had a camouflage cover so that, from the air, it would not appear to be in constant use. There was a high fence all around the complex and a guard was on duty outside at all times. When we approached the locked gate to go on night shift, we were challenged and had to give the password for the night, before we could be admitted.

There were few rules apart from having regular cleaning duties. I really enjoyed emu duty – ie tidying up the area around the quarters. I always felt it was a task in which I shone and I found it very satisfying.

We had only one parade a week, on the road outside the WAAAF quarters. It was a casual affair. That and the CO's inspection on Tuesday mornings were the only formalities, otherwise, apart from duty, we were free to do what we liked. Mainly we liked the beach and getting a good tan was our main aim.

Goldie, a South Australian, and I were put on a shift together. We still had to do three months' training before we qualified and we were lucky to have a dedicated corporal who gave us a lot of practice during slack periods until we were needle sharp.

Every crew had a mechanic on duty with them. Mostly they were boys who had been doing engineering at uni and had another year's specialist training before they were qualified as radar mechanics.

Our first mechanic was a cheerful boy from Sydney who had a crop of chestnut curls. One day, not long after we arrived, he said he and the senior mechanic were going swimming when he came off shift. We knew the back beach had a reputation for being dangerous and told him to be careful. He laughed and said it was funny that although he had always played a lot of sport, he was not a strong swimmer. Goldie leant over and grabbed a handful of his curls and said: 'This looks like seaweed.'

The boys went off but the treacherous undertow caught him and he disappeared. His body was washed up three days later at the mouth of the Greenough River.

I have since learnt actually that Brian[9] went swimming alone, to try out a surfboard he had made. It was very heavy and when his body was found, he had a bruise on his temple and it was thought he had been hit and knocked out.

When I have been to Geraldton, I have gone to the little military cemetery just out of town and put flowers on his grave. I have often thought about his family in Sydney and how saddened they must have been to be so far away from him.

I also think about six other airmen buried there who crashed at night near Northampton, travelling south. I was plotting their route on the tube when the blip suddenly disappeared. 'Oh, they're gone! They have crashed!' I gasped, not really believing it could have happened. Verification from an Air Observer Post came through minutes later.[10]

Brian's drowning cast a gloom over us and probably, like me, everyone thought about him when we went to the beach. Goldie and I spent hours on the beach, sometimes accompanied by Lassie, the unit dog. We lay immobile on the hot, white sand, melded to it, completely relaxed, with only the sound of the gulls and the waves breaking and whispering up the sand. Sometimes we found a curving trail, like a visiting card, beside us letting us know a snake had passed us by. Burning from sunburn, we would go home, shower, smother each other with Turtle Oil, our favourite soother, and feel ridiculously fit and happy. Had fate not decreed otherwise, a beach combing life would have suited me very well.

While we led a lotus-eating life off duty, we were very keen when it came to our work. WAAAF were not allowed to go further north than Townsville in Queensland and Geraldton. We itched to be nearer the action.

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9 Brian Joseph Lacey, died on Thursday, 19 August 1943. He was 19.

10 The six airmen who died on Sunday, 24 October 1943 were JJ Andre, J Brock, DM Forbes, JM Randall, TN Raston and HW Smith, all buried at Geraldton War Cemetery.

In fact, we may have been nearer than we realized. Due to the temperature inversion along the Batavia coast, as it is now called, our radio waves often went lower and further than expected. We sometimes picked up blips close to the coast which moved and were therefore easy to pick up as different to the permanent echoes of the Abrolhos Islands which we picked up on every sweep of the aerial. As there were still several fishing boats operating from Geraldton, these were designated surface vessels – SV 1, 2, 3, etc.

However, not so long ago, a Japanese ex-submarine commander visited Perth and said his craft had travelled down the coast and surfaced close to Geraldton at night. They heard music and singing and thought the war must have finished and everyone was celebrating a victory, so they submerged and hurried away. The music and frivolity probably came from the Yacht Club near the beach, where dances for the troops were held regularly. A lot of army units were stationed along the coast. The dances were great for the girls because there were about ten men to each girl. Most of the women and children had been evacuated south or inland.

War seemed closer when the fiancé of one of the operators died in the islands and another heard her fiancé was a prisoner of war of the Japanese.

But we were all young and soon regained our spirits. Most of the operational crew had twenty-first birthdays on the unit. The rec hut was decorated with gum leaves, rations were pooled for the cake and we danced to the music on the wind-up gramophone. Among our favorite tunes were 'Tumbling Tumble Weed', 'Buttermilk Sky', 'I Lost My Heart at the Stage Door Canteen', and 'The Anniversary Waltz'.

Apart from the bathrooms, all internal walls of our quarters had been knocked down to make one big area. A little hut at the back of the yard served as sleeping quarters for the night shift crew.

When the WAAAF Anniversary came round, all the airwomen and Madam went out to dinner at the Victoria and had a very happy evening.

Chaos greeted us upon our return. The airmen had taken the opportunity to 'do over' our quarters. They had taken their time and done it very effectively. The beds, wardrobes, cupboards had been changed around, even the clothes in the wardrobes moved around, shoes mixed up and dried peas lovingly piled into our mosquito nets so that, when we pulled them down, they showered everywhere.

They did not have the temerity to give Madam the treatment which we felt was a bit chicken-hearted but they must have felt there were limits. We said little but bided our time until some weeks later, by cunning and good staff work, wreaked a very satisfying revenge.

On hot evenings, water fights sometimes broke out. Little provocation was needed to start one, a cheeky remark or a cup of water tossed over someone and it was on for young and old. Dippers and buckets of water were flung around with gay abandon and several times, in the heat of battle, one of the boys would direct a stream of water from the hose in the front door of our quarters which soaked beds and anything in the line of fire. These encounters were always accompanied by yells and shrieks. The CO and Madam very sensibly withdrew to their quarters.

Goldie and I travelled to Northampton for a break overnight on one off duty leave. We caught the train which went on to Yuna and back next day. It was only thirty-three miles to Northampton but because the line wound round on itself so many times and it travelled so slowly, it took three hours. We were the only passengers and the guard climbed down as we crawled along, picked us a bunch of wildflowers and climbed back into his van on the next bend.

There is a story that a magistrate who was travelling up to take the court at Northampton, shot a bush turkey, got down and collected it, before getting back on the train at the following bend.

We were also told about the ceremonial opening of the railway station at Northampton many years before. The Governor came up to perform the ceremony but it was marred because the planning was a little out. When the train pulled in, it became obvious the gap between the engine and the platform was not wide enough and it took a big slice right along the edge.

When we got off the train, the crew tried to persuade us to come on to Yuna with them but we waved them goodbye and said we would see them at midday next day on their return.

Northampton was hardly a seething metropolis. There was only a café-cum-store, the hotel and a few houses. The road we walked along to the hotel was a stretch of red dust and the only other moving life was a cattle dog chasing a brown paper bag, lifted along the gutter by the wind. The people at the hotel were kindness itself. We had an excellent dinner, slept like logs and felt very relaxed.

We went along to the café for a light lunch before the return trip. While we were there, the phone rang. 'Yes', we heard the owner say, 'They are here. I'll tell them.'

'That was the train driver', he told us. 'The crew wants to know if you two girls want to go back to Geraldton today. They have been waiting for an hour. Oh! Don't hurry!' As we sprang up, 'They will wait.' We had relaxed too much and misjudged the time. Vaguely, at the back of our consciousness, we had been aware of a lot of 'Cock a doodle does', coming from the

station but it had not dawned on us, it was a summons. The crew cheered when we arrived and we were red-faced as we scrambled on board.

Sometimes we went out to the RAAF station to see old films, all piled in the back of the tender. It was a nerve-wracking journey as both transport drivers were racing enthusiasts and liked to practice on the rough, dirt road to the 'drome. At Christmas-time, Goldie and I were detailed off to go with Madam and two drivers to pick some of the brilliant, orange-flowering Christmas bush for decorating the Recreation Hut. There was a large stand of the trees near Walkaway, a small settlement some way south of Geraldton. It was very hot and on the way home, when we came near the beach, as one we whipped off our shoes and socks and raced into the water, fully clothed. 'Don't tell anyone,' said Madam as she, stopping only to remove her shoulder rank badges, joined us – some hope!

Goldie and I shared a love of horses and we borrowed two hacks from one of the local tradesmen to go for ride. They were pretty rough and not too happy having extra work. Goldie's mount tossed her neatly over its head into a prickle bush. It was killingly funny for me but Goldie was infuriated. My come-uppence came when we returned our mounts. The owner baled me up in a stall and got a bit boyish. A kick in the shins straightened him out but we decided not to be return.

I soon had to eat humble pie over the tradesman's horse. Shortly afterwards, I was summoned to the orderly room and told I was to accompany, a very important US Colonel who was visiting the RAAF station and wanted to go riding. I was to go to the stables to get a horse and act as his guide. The Colonel, I need hardly say, had been lent a thoroughbred. My reception at the stables was frigid but I was supplied with a docile-looking mare. I think it was a subtle revenge. In spite of being manageable, otherwise, no amount of pulling and kicking could stop her tail-gating the Colonel's horse. In irritation, it kept pig-rooting. The Colonel snapped at me to control my horse and I snapped back. It was a dreadful ride, saved only by a good gallop along the beach when my mount could not keep up with his. But he and I were barely on speaking terms as we parted.

As the unit had only one cook, each crew was rostered in turn to take over in the kitchen on Sundays, so she could have some time off. As well as the two officers, there were over thirty hungry people to feed and sometimes stress levels in the kitchen were high. One crew who looked very hot and flustered when they served us confessed, after the meal, someone had dropped the large roast and potatoes, all swimming in hot fat, on the floor just before we arrived and they had to scrape it up.

By the end of 1944, it was clear that the war would not last much longer. Dismantling of southern radar stations began. It was a case of last in, first out, and marching orders came for the two of us who had travelled together from Melbourne the previous year. I was posted to the clothing store at 5 Embarkation Depot in Wembley.

We were sad to leave and almost the whole unit came to see us off. We went to the Victoria to ease the pain of parting with a few drinks – quite a few gin and oranges, if I remember correctly. There was a big farewell on the station and we reluctantly climbed on board the train.

As dusk approached, I felt a bit chilly and decided to put on a jacket. At that moment I realized that while my companion's kitbag was on board, mine was not. It was still in the back of the tender. We had left the luggage handling to the boys and they had failed me.

There was quite a lot of explaining to do when I reached Perth but the Transport Officer contacted the unit and gave me a message to say one of the guards, coming down on leave next day, would bring the luggage with him. When I met the poor man on the station, he told me he had sent his own luggage ahead several days previously so he would not have to be bothered with it on the trip.

5 Embarkation Depot was in bush, a large fenced off area in Wembley, and I had trouble talking my way past the duty guard when I arrived there, as all my documents were in my kitbag. Eventually a message came through from the duty officer giving me a clearance.

I shared a Nissan hut with about thirty other girls and the wire stretcher beds were so close together, I had to climb in over the end of mine to get into it.

There were two other girls and four men in the store and a very large Wing Commander in charge. He was about six foot four and twenty stone. We girls were behind a counter and had to supply uniforms, and so on, mainly to airmen and officers on posting north or to other states. Everything had a classification and had to be recorded as it was issued or returned. I still remember 'chin straps airman for the use of L/19!'

Tuesdays were CO's inspection days and when the CO and his entourage came round on the first one after my arrival and went into the Wing Commander's office, I heard great guffaws of mirth issuing forth. When the official party left, I was called into the office. Chuckling, the Wing said, 'Guess what the CO has just said to me? I see you've got your sister working for you now!' I was outraged. I was a big girl but not in his class!

After that he always called me sister and if he wanted anything I would be summoned, 'Sister, sister, I want you!' He was a great tease and loved to

call me into the office when he had a roomful of supercilious young pilots, all sitting round, smoking and with their feet on the table. 'Gentlemen', he would say, 'I would like you to meet my sister!' Needless to say I would blush scarlet with embarrassment and felt like murdering him. Then he would issue a string of commands – 'Sister, would you please get such and such piece of clothing for Flight Lieutenant so and so. Even if I remembered the list he gave me, I didn't know where to find the things. The other girls were very good and helped me. They thought it was a great joke.

The main satisfaction from working in the store was in handing out the advice I had been given so often, 'Ask at the store when you get your permanent posting.'

It was hot. I missed my friends and the casual lifestyle at Geraldton. Two of my friends had been posted to the radar station on Rottnest and my heart was full of black envy.

Recently, I stayed on the island for a few days and wonder why so many people love it. I thought it was dull, the scenery nothing to write home about and I saw four snakes in two days. My opinion may be coloured by the unfortunate effect the crossing had on me. A bad sailor at the best of times, I found the trip very unsettling.

I had been sent to the Orderly Room with a message one day and was walking beside the parade ground when I saw one of the Group 447 mechanics who had spent some months up north on the other side. He saw me at the same moment and with a shout ran towards me. We met in the middle and hugged each other in relief at seeing a familiar face. Our reunion did not last long. Over the loud speaker came a summons:

'Will the WAAAF and RAAF in the middle of the parade ground come to the Orderly Room immediately?'

'Did we not know the Parade Ground was hallowed ground and no one walked on it, except for parades?' Neither of us had had much experience of parades since we left Richmond but we hung our heads as reprimands came thick and fast. Luckily, we were not put on a charge.

Parades were another obstacle when I came south. Being tall, I was a target to be squad marker and, as I had forgotten the drill, used to slink round, hunched down, until someone else was chosen each morning.

I felt I was in limbo. There was no possibility now of being posted to a radar station. The ground was ripe for change so when, in some mysterious way, my mother found out that Red Cross was giving scholarships for social work training, I was not totally opposed to the idea.

Thinking there was very little chance of being accepted and having no idea what social work entailed, I made an application. My mother said she thought it sounded nice!

I was interviewed by a kindly social worker in the Red Cross office in the city and she explained that when the troops were demobilized at the end of the war, they and their families would need skilled help with the problems of resettlement; employment and housing they would face.

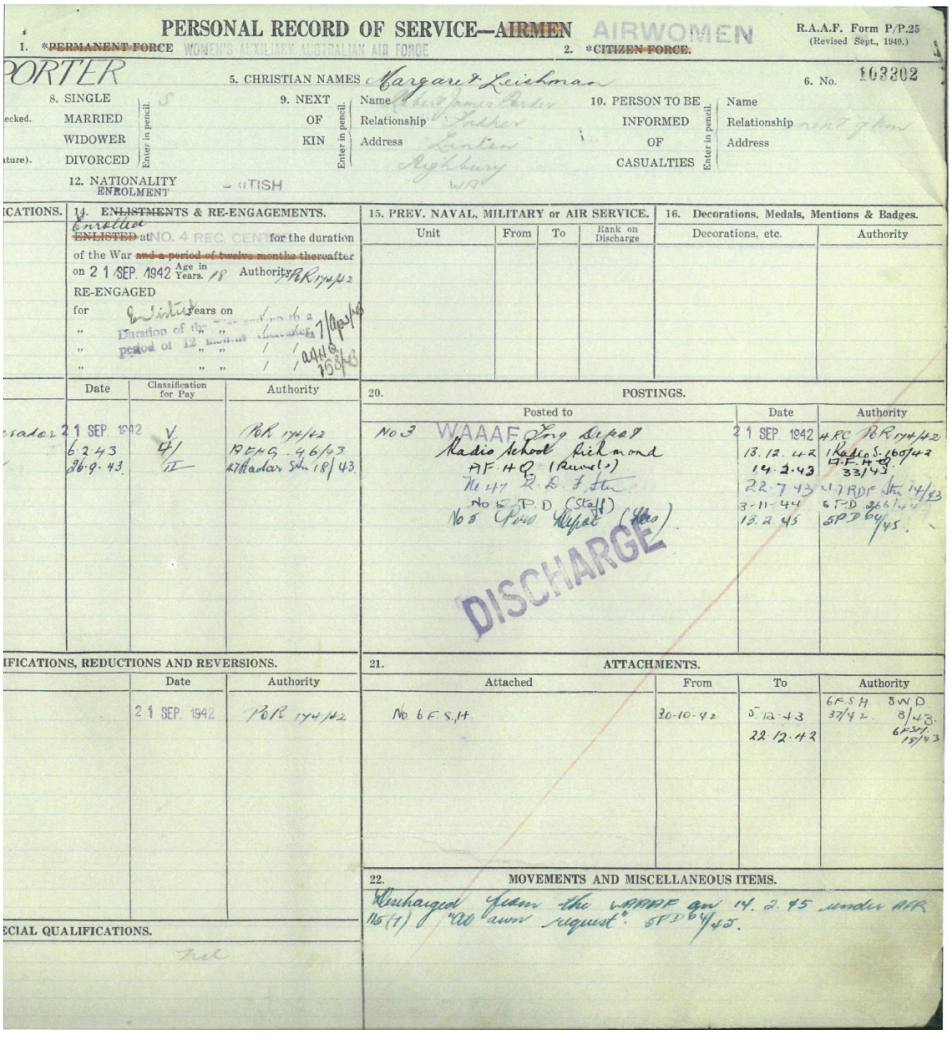
Six scholarships were being awarded each in WA and Queensland, as neither state had a School of Social Work. My application was late and I really did not want a discharge, so I gave little thought to the outcome. A week or so later, I was summoned to the Wing's office with the usual bellow of 'sister'! He told me I had been granted a scholarship. He could not have been more proud of me if he had been my father. He said the service was proud of me and his words were echoed by the senior WAAAF officer who happened to be visiting the unit a few days later.

Unhappily, I was in the sick bay during her visit. I had been struck down by an attack of collywobbles due to eating over-ripe plums. I met her and her entourage as I emerged from the bathroom after one of my many visits and was not my sparkling best. With unwashed, lank hair tied back with a bootlace and less than regimentally correct in my attire, I felt very much at a disadvantage.

It was hard to feel enthusiastic – I discovered later that one of the six girls, selected for the course before my application arrived, had withdrawn and I was given her place. I have always thought I must have been the only other applicant.

Although things were winding down, the war was not yet over. More of my friends had been discharged and I felt like a deserter when I was given some clothing coupons, my fifteen pounds deferred pay and cast back into civilian life.

I had contributed very little to the war effort but my life in the service had not only given me special friends and happy days, but it had widened my horizons and given me the confidence to explore them.



PERSONAL RECORD OF SERVICE—~~AIRMEN~~ AIRWOMEN

R.A.A.F. Form P/P.25 (Revised Sept., 1940.)

1. *~~PERMANENT FORCE~~ WOMEN'S AUXILIARY AUSTRALIAN AIR FORCE 2. *CITIZEN FORCE.

PORTER 5. CHRISTIAN NAMES Margaret Leishman 6. No. 163302

8. SINGLE / MARRIED / WIDOWER / DIVORCED — Enter in pencil.

9. NEXT OF KIN — Name Mrs Jane Porter; Relationship Mother; Address Linden Highbury WA — Enter in pencil.

10. PERSON TO BE INFORMED OF CASUALTIES — Name [illegible]; Relationship [illegible]; Address [illegible] — Enter in pencil.

12. NATIONALITY ENROLMENT — BRITISH

14. ENLISTMENTS & RE-ENGAGEMENTS.

Enrolled ~~ENLISTED~~ at NO. 4 REC. CENTRE for the duration of the War ~~and a period of twelve months thereafter~~ on 21 SEP. 1942 Age in Years. 18 Authority AK 174/42

RE-ENGAGED for [illegible] years on [illegible]

" Duration of the War " " [illegible]

" period of 12 months " " [illegible]

" " " [illegible]

Date	Classification for Pay	Authority
21 SEP. 1942	V	AK 174/42
6.2.43	4/	ACHQ. 46/43
26.9.43.	12	447 Radar Sqn 18/43

15. PREV. NAVAL, MILITARY or AIR SERVICE.

Unit	From	To	Rank on Discharge

16. Decorations, Medals, Mentions & Badges.

Decorations, etc.	Authority

20. POSTINGS.

Posted to	Date	Authority
No 3 WAAAF Reg Depot	21 SEP. 1942	HQ AK 174/42
Radio School Richmond	13.12.42	Radio S. 460/42
AF HQ (Rewd.)	14.2.43	HQ 33/43
No 447 R.D.F. Stn	22.7.43	447 RDF Stn 14/43
No 5 P.D (Staff)	3-11-44	5 P.D 266/44
No 8 Pers Depot (Hos)	13.2.45	8PD 69/45.

DISCHARGE

IFICATIONS, REDUCTIONS AND REVERSIONS.

Date	Authority
21 SEP. 1942	AK 174/42

21. ATTACHMENTS.

Attached	From	To	Authority
No 6 F.S.H.	20-10-42	5-12-43	6 F.S.H 37/42
		22.12.43	8 W.D 8/43.
			6 F.S.H. 19/43

22. MOVEMENTS AND MISCELLANEOUS ITEMS.

Discharged from the WAAAF on 14.2.45 under AIR 116(1) "A" at own request. 8PD 69/45.

ECIAL QUALIFICATIONS.

National Archives – Extract from Meg's WAAAF Service Records.

An extract from Meg's WAAAF (Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force) service records from her time at Group 447 Radar Station in Geraldton during World War II. The unit, a "hush-hush establishment," was based in sandbagged rooms on a sandy hill outside town. Life in Geraldton was a mixture of hard work– plotting radar signals for coastal defence – and high-spirited camaraderie, with beach outings, water fights, and mischief between the WAAAF and RAAF crews. As Meg wrote, "We itched to be nearer the action," and often were – sometimes unknowingly – as Japanese submarines patrolled nearby waters.

CHAPTER NINE

UNIVERSITY

Prior to discharge, I was sent to an army unit and given a series of intelligence tests. No one enlightened me as to the reason but soon afterwards I was notified that, as I was under twenty-one when I joined up, I was eligible for a grant from the Commonwealth Training Scheme. The benefits under the latter were better than Red Cross so I was very happy to make the switch.

In March 1945, I was once again on the Trans train heading east, with the other five scholarship winners. The trip was marginally faster than my first.

We arrived in Adelaide early in the morning that the university term began and two of us made our way straight to the university. The head of social work, a large erudite lady, gave us a lukewarm welcome. Neither of us had degrees and she regarded us as if we were made of lesser clay. If she did indeed feel this way, I proved her right but my friend went on to achieve excellent results, including several distinctions during the two-year course.

'Did we have notebooks? Pens?'

'No.'

Thrusting a sheet of paper and a pencil at each of us, she commanded us to follow her and, showing a surprising turn of speed for one so large, led us down stairs and along subterranean passages, up more stairs and to an imposing wooden door with 'Philosophy' written on it in gold. She opened it and, without ceremony, ushered us in, shutting the door behind us. A sea of faces turned to look at us as we slunk onto two hard wooden chairs.

A gentle little professor was giving a lecture on social psychology, most of which went over my head, both then and subsequently. He must have felt sorry for me because he was always very kind and gave me a very good mark at the end of the year.

An interview with the elderly course organizer followed. She wrote the subjects I was to take on the back of an envelope which, in all the confusion of settling in, went astray.

During the year my friends often remarked on how much free time I had but I countered these, saying,

'Oh yes! But I'm doing economics.'

Economics were the bugbear of many social work students but by studying it assiduously, I finally saw the light and passed. I remember the first question on the final exam paper was:

'Teach a parrot to say supply and demand and you have an economist. Discuss this statement.'

When I returned for the second year, the course organizer rang me and said 'Miss Porter, as you failed social history last year, you will need to take two more years to complete the course!' I replied cheerfully,

'Oh! – Dr Davies, I didn't fail social history, I didn't take it,' and, through gritted teeth,

'Don't worry, I can do it all in one.'

Academia was not my milieu and although there were parts of the course I enjoyed studying, the thought of two more years in Adelaide horrified me.

The fact that I had been a reluctant starter, probably explained my feeling of alienation at university. My friends in the Air Force wrote and told me about the fun they were having, I missed them, missed the camaraderie, the lifestyle and the beaches in the west.

When the war ended, I decided I might as well knuckle down and get on with it. Social history presented no problems and our hygiene and physiology lectures were pretty basic. Not only had I done both at High School but the latter had been in the curriculum when I did correspondence lessons at the Highbury School. I was a dab hand at drawing body parts, especially a cross section of the eye of which I had years of dissecting experience.

My first placement, at the Adelaide Hospital, and my next, with Catholic Welfare, showed me something of the difficulties illness and poverty bring. The manner in which people coped with adversity, their strength and humour made a very deep impression on me and, almost reluctantly, I felt drawn to the field.

I enjoyed working at Catholic Welfare. It had a feeling of security in its religious base, acceptance of failings and the infallibility of God. There were some unorthodox methods.

The social worker, an angelic-looking person, liked to smoke but was always worried that the Bishop would pay us an impromptu visit and catch her. His office was across a quadrangle opposite us and, as our windows were

high up, I was posted to stand on a chair to keep watch and let her know if he left his office when she indulged. Also, she was not above hiding when a certain difficult patient came to see her, leaving me to make her excuses.

Two young Irish priests joined us regularly for morning tea and teased me promising 'Rome will get you in the end!' They were half right.

I was sent off to escort forty children to the circus, loaded with two six-pound bags of peanuts. Unhappily, the Daughters of Mary beat me to the line and I did not catch up with them until they were inside the tent.

We always wore stockings, hats and gloves when home visiting which seems laughable now.

Life was not all gloom and doom. My relatives were wonderfully kind. I spent many weekends at Victor Harbour with my mother's aunt and uncle. He had a medical practice and was a legend in the district. They were the family my mother had lived with when she was young. They lived in some style, entertaining many of the upper echelon of Adelaide society at weekends, which rather overawed me. One daughter was at home and we played tennis and went riding which pleased me more than the cocktail and dinner parties.

I stayed at a hostel for ex-service women near the university in my second year and a friend, also living there, took several of us to her family's orange block on the Murray. We went by bus and I had my first experience of crossing the Murray River on a punt. As well as eating her parents out of house and home, we made hay among the navel oranges nestled so picturesquely among the glossy dark green leaves of the trees. I went for an early morning swim in the river, running swiftly and overhung by a diaphanous mist. The water was icy and the current so strong I had to hold onto the bushes on the bank to prevent being swept away.

In the final year, there were over a hundred ex-service personnel discharged to start or continuing studies. There were only six of us girls, five doing social work and one medicine. The men decided we should have a party. They assured us girls they would organize it. It proved to be an incredibly boring evening. We stood round talking or, more precisely, listening to the boys talk about their war experiences. It was held in a barren-looking hall and the comestibles consisted of two kegs of beer and five cartons of pig's trotters.

The dramatic society was quite strong at the university, led by Don Dunstan, future Premier of South Australia, who was spoken of with bated breath. I cannot remember seeing him but I did take part in several plays, rather mediocre and best forgotten. When the Guild had a Festival to raise funds, I dressed up as a gypsy and sat in a tent reading palms for two shillings

a turn. Recalling the hot summer afternoons at home during the holidays, when we pored over the tattered fortune-telling book, I at least sounded convincing and did quite well financially at least.

I passed all my subjects, not meritoriously like some of my friends but enough to qualify. I felt sufficiently inspired with the work to want to do the third year in Sydney. I was interviewed by a panel and accepted.

My friend Ruby, who had done very well, and I travelled back to Western Australia together. We were old hands at the trip by now and, at one of the longer stops, struck up a conversation with the engine driver and fireman who invited us to do the next stretch in the engine with them. It certainly broke the monotony and no doubt the rules, especially when Ruby took over the controls.

My father became ill over Christmas and died in early February. As Tom was still having recurring attacks of malaria from his time in the islands and mother was needing support, I gave up my plans to go to Sydney. It was a sad year and my mother was devastated. It was hard for Tom to take on the responsibility of the farm while he was so unwell.

Later on I bought a very large bay horse for ten pounds. I was told he was very quiet and was named Noble. I was very pleased with him but later we heard he had been an outlaw in the Light Horse, named the Snake. Apart from being very strong and having a hard mouth, I had no problems. He had been taught to chase cars and trains, though, which was a bit disconcerting when, day-dreaming on him with loose reins, he suddenly took off after a car or diesel which had come up behind us quietly.

After living with horses in the early days of the war, when the Light Horse patrolled the coast, Tom said he never wanted another horse on the farm, so it had been very forbearing of him to put up with Noble.

But when I finally set off to finish my training in Sydney, I was told that Tom had advertised him for sale in *Elders Weekly* before I was airborne!

CHAPTER TEN

SYDNEY 1948

How good it was to be back in bustling Sydney again and see the sparkling water of the harbour with its fringe of sandy bays and the fingers of land stretching into it.

Accommodation was at a premium but I stayed with a WAAAF friend who had married and was living in North Sydney while I looked for a place.

Before I left home, I had received a letter from an Adelaide friend who had just completed her almoner year in Sydney saying she had suggested to the five girls she had been flatting with in Elizabeth Bay that I would be a good replacement when she left. One of the girls would be on the course with me so they planned that she should invite me for dinner so they could meet me and make their own judgment. My friend had not told them she was forewarning me and implied that if I was interested, I should put my best foot forward.

When I fronted up at Sydney Hospital the day the course began, I met two girls who had been a year behind in Adelaide and whom I knew slightly. A third, Tess Hayward was due to arrive the following week. One of the girls, Barbara Le Cornu, who was also looking for somewhere to live, suggested we join forces.

By chance, Barb had met a lady in a tea shop in Adelaide who, hearing she was going to Sydney and needed somewhere to live, gave her the name of her daughter whom she felt might like to have someone share her house for company. Barbara did not have the information with her but remembered the unusual surname, so we checked the phone directory. There were only two entries and, predictably, we rang the wrong one. However, the lady I spoke to said she would be pleased to have us come and stay with her, her husband and little girl in their flat in Double Bay. In no time at all, we were

happily ensconced with these kind people in Flat 9, 522 New South Head Road. It was on the third floor of a high rise apartment block, that alone being a novelty to us, and it had a spectacular view of the harbour.

Fortunately, by the time Tess arrived, I had received my invitation to dinner at the flat and as tactfully as possible let it be known, I had found somewhere to live.

Kate Ogilvie ran the almoner course and was notorious for her mercurial personality, ranging from fiery outbursts to great kindness and compassion. She had a reputation of putting the fear of God into her students.

During the year, we had four separate blocks of field work on various welfare agencies four days a week, and one day a week at the hospital, of lectures from Kate or other health professionals. We all had one placement with Kate.

We wore depressing brown uniforms, with white collars and cuffs, and were sometimes thought to be the lavatory attendants.

Our bible was *Gregory's Road Directory*, in constant use as we found our way around the nooks and crannies of the city, paying home visits.

My first placement was at St Vincent's Hospital and the second at the Rachel Forster Hospital for Women in Redfern. I do not remember doing much of note at either but my supervisor at the latter gave me a day off to go to the wool sales. The stock agent who took me under his wing must have thought I was the daughter of a rich WA grazier, judging by the royal treatment he gave me.

I became very friendly with the assistant almoner and the physiotherapist at Rachel Forster. The latter's father was a wine merchant who had business dealings with some of the Chinese merchants in Campbell Street. He arranged for us to have a banquet at one of the restaurants. We had a private room and special service. It was an exciting experience for me as I had never tasted Asian food before and Campbell Street had a dubious reputation.

I felt very daring. In fact, the one Chinese person I remembered seeing before was a little old man in Narrogin who had a market garden just out of town. He drove his horse and cart around the streets selling his produce. He seemed to lead an isolated life apart from having contact with aborigines.

We had sometimes bought things marked 'Made in China' but my mother automatically classified them as rubbish. Australian goods, too, were dubious in her eyes but British made was quite the best and beyond reproach.

There was a terrible famine in China when I was quite young and I was urged to finish all my dinner because the Chinese children had no food. In spite of pondering on these commands, I could see no connection.

Even at that tender age, I felt the logistics of getting my leftovers to China would be insurmountable.

Later in the year, I had a brief encounter with the Chinese community in Sydney. When I was at Sydney Hospital, a seriously ill Chinese seaman was admitted when his ship called in. I was supposed to make aftercare arrangements following his discharge. As he spoke no English, I had to arrange for an interpreter. The little man who came did not have a great command of English himself but he told me he was a court interpreter. I think he told me that in court when the accused was not putting a good spin on his plea of innocence, he made a few adjustments in the translation to make it favourable for the person in the dock.

He came to see me every day in the students' room, his approach heralded by the mouth-watering aroma of the large bag of spring rolls he brought me. My fellow students were most appreciative but I was going through a bad patch with Kate, I had other things on my mind. God took over the aftercare arrangements as the poor patient very suddenly died.

Our two friends from Rachel Forster, Barbara and I had a weekend in the Blue Mountains. We caught a train to Mt Victoria. When we climbed out of the train it was into the teeth of a howling gale. We walked to Hartley, refreshing our flagging spirits by stopping for a glass of cider on what had been an old coaching inn. It had 1837 AD carved into the lintel above the door and mine host, who brought us our drinks, told us a lot of about the place. He told our fortunes by reading our palms, not very accurately as far as I was concerned. At least I thought so at the time. He said I should not do social work because it was too stressful. He was certainly right about the stress.

Hartley seemed a dead town but we were shown over the old gaol and saw manacles, blunderbusses and the separate cells for convicts and bush-rangers. Names were carved on the thick wooden door of the bushrangers' cells, including Frank Gardiner and Dan Morgan who had carved 'Mad Dog', spelt backwards after his. The lady who showed us round made us get down on the floor and feel the handmade nail heads. Having been an avid reader of bush-ranging tales, the stories our guide told us enthralled me. The scenery was so beautiful and unlike anything I had ever seen. I was in raptures.

We had hoped to find somewhere to stay overnight on our travels but our luck was out so we had to catch a bus back to Mt Victoria. As we left, dusk was drawing in and the sky above the dark line of the mountains turned from a flush of pink to the palest shade of green.

We managed to get a room at Cooper's Grand Hotel where the arrival of four hearty bushwalkers, complete with packs and a black billy, caused quite a stir among the rather conservative guests, sitting around the fire waiting for dinner.

However, their surprise soon wore off and they plied us with questions and gave a lot of advice about where we should go the next day. It was so cold that even after hot baths, three of us piled into the double bed with everything we could find on top.

In the few minutes before I fell asleep, my mind seethed with images of purple mountains and stage coaches, the clink of saddlery, stamp of horses' hooves, boots on cobbles, voices and bushrangers galloping down winding roads.

Next morning we walked to Victoria Falls where we picnicked, cooling off in the icy stream. The climb, down the precipitous side of the valley and up the other side, was more strenuous than we had thought. The day was closing in and we were frozen when we reached the Mt Victoria station to catch the train back to Sydney. The kindly engine driver gave us a billy of hot water so we could make a cup of tea on the way.

After this excursion, Barbara and I decided we must see more of the country. She had a friend who had told her about hitch-hiking.

'What's that?' I asked.

'You just get out on the road and people give you lifts.'

'Do they really?' I asked, unbelieving.

'Well she says so,' Barb replied.

We decided to give it a go and when the Easter break came, set off for the Blue Mountains filled with trepidation.

The first night we camped near a little monument to Lawson, Blaxland and Wentworth, marking their crossing into the hinterland in 1813. It was an historic site but not the best for camping. The mosquitoes were savage and, having left our clothes uncovered, they were drenched by dew. The traffic was sparse but we saw quite a lot of the mountain country and reached the Hawkesbury River.

Everyone was unfailingly kind and interested in what we were doing, then, with a long weekend coming up, we decided to go south.

We caught a train to Bomaderry, slept in a wood-yard, where we got covered in woodchips, and decided to head inland to Braidwood. It did not look far on the map and we thought it would be easy to get lifts, there and back to Sydney, to complete a triangle. Apart from brief rests, we walked when waiting for lifts. We walked all day and the only vehicle we saw was coming towards us. There were four men in the car who told us

there was not much traffic on the road. As it was afternoon by then, we had realized that ourselves. Also, apart from their tracks, there were no others visible. It never occurred to us to turn back.

The sun had set and light rain was falling when a horseman appeared ahead of us. He told us there was a drovers' hut about two miles further on where we could get shelter. He said it was just off the road so we would have to hurry to see it before dark. Anxiety lent speed to our feet and we were greatly relieved when we came upon it, just as complete darkness fell. There were cattle yards and a small tin hut with a water tank outside, dry wood and a huge open fireplace inside. No five star luxury hotels could have been more welcome. Fortunately, it was unoccupied and we wasted no time lighting a fire and putting the billy on.

We had no idea the country would be so wild and uninhabited and had assumed we would be able to find shops to buy food. We had a little tea, two strips of bacon, half a packet of Dad's biscuits, and a little flour which we made into a damper and wolfed down. We estimated, from reading the map by the firelight, that we had walked twenty-eight miles. Braidwood was clearly off the agenda but the map showed a minor road, a couple of miles further on which looked as if it would take us to the Highway. It meant a thirteen-mile hike from the turn off.

In spite of our tough day with the prospect of another hard slog next day and the very least of creature comforts, the floor felt as hard as a rock, we were perfectly happy as we lay watching the dancing flames of the fire and talking far into the night.

Barbara and I were very different but a strong bond of trust and understanding had grown between us. I can never remember us having even a disagreement in all our travels, in spite of some tough times.

When we dragged our stiff bodies out of our bags next morning and went outside, there was a heavy mist and a mob of kangaroos feeding by the tank. As we had to be in Sydney that night, we wasted no time in having a frugal breakfast, replenishing the woodpile, stamping out the fire and heading off down the track.

We took what we hoped was the right turn off and were reassured when the only vehicle we saw all morning met us and the lady driving it said we had about ten miles to go. Our legs were dragging by the time we came onto the highway near the only building in sight, a petrol station. The only food they could produce was chocolate but we were glad to get it. We collapsed by the side of the road.

A mini-van pulled in for fuel, soon after. There were three young men in it. They had been on a roo shoot and had all their camping gear and rifles,

etc, packed in the back – no trophies luckily. They said, if we didn't mind lying on everything, they would take us back to Sydney. We would have lain on a bed of nails! It proved to be a hair-raising ride as they decided to go via Kangaroo valley and, when we dropped down the steep decline, we felt we might shoot through the windscreen.

They took us to our door for which we were deeply grateful in our exhausted state. Hardship faded as we recounted our adventures to the Syreds who were greatly relieved to see us; they were beginning to fear the worst.

In addition to being well looked after by Mrs Syred, Mr Syred, too, was kindness itself. His brother had recently gone overseas for an extended stay and had left him his car and boat while he was absent. He took us for many drives and excursions. He was a very gentle man and his voice was very soft. Some years before, he had been deafened by a major explosion in the factory where he worked.

Every weekend he would say to us 'Well girlies, what's it to be this weekend' – the mountains, or the harbour – and we would make a choice, depending on our social and study commitments. When we went out in the boat, he would take it into the harbour and then say, 'There you are girlies, take her wherever you want to but try not to hit anything." He would then go and lie down in the cabin while we roamed around the Harbour.

Their daughter had become a very good ice skater. Her lessons and competitions took up a lot of her time and her mother's. Mrs Syred was a skilful dressmaker and made all her daughter's costumes, as well as those for her teacher who was one of Australia's top skaters. She was probably glad to have us all out of the house although she was always unruffled.

One weekend Mr Syred took us to the Burragorang Valley. There was only one steep road into it and when we descended into the valley it was filled with fog. As the morning advanced, it cleared and trails of mist, like scarves, weaved away over the ranges.

It was a fertile, beautiful place, watered by the Cox's River from which the Nattai branched off in the north and the Wollondilly in the south. The valley was seventy miles long but only about ten across. The creek beds were packed with little round stones, worn smooth by the running water. We felt sad that such a beautiful place was to be flooded into the Warragamba Dam to supply water in the future for Sydney.

An old man on horseback talked to us for a long time, telling us about the discovery of the valley and its history. The valley was originally discovered by a Frenchman looking for a way over the mountains. He missed it by just three miles. Later, an Englishman, aptly called Bullock, and a native boy went looking for some lost cattle and tracked a mob in the valley.

They belonged to a Mr Cartrell at Picton who, when he saw the country, hastened back to Sydney and put in a claim for 1,400 acres. Some of his friends took up the rest and their descendants, according to our informant, had lived, married and died there. He himself had married into one of the families. He hinted that the original grants may have been obtained by influence in high places and also that there was a feud in the valley, but unhappily he did not enlarge on it. The old man also told us that one of his grandfathers had fought with Napoleon and the other with Wellington, at Waterloo.

A priest showed us round the little Catholic Church built in 1839. He said the place reminded him of *How Green Was My Valley* and he thought that when the dam was built and the people moved, they would just die off. He also told us Captain Thunderbolt was supposed to have hidden his gold in the valley, adding a romantic touch to happy memories of a very special place.

Barbara smoked fairly heavily, which no doubt led to her final downfall, and stretched her finances. She got a job waitressing on Monday evenings at an exclusive Double Bay restaurant. I went along too, but only lasted one night because I was so inept. I wasn't sacked but I could not face the stress of remembering orders and the mayhem in the kitchen. I was sorry to leave as the patrons were very understanding and tipped me handsomely.

Instead of dampening our enthusiasm for hitch-hiking, our aborted trip to Braidwood only whetted our appetites so when our first holiday loomed, we decided we would head north and see how far we could go.

Neither of us had good sleeping bags, mine in particular, being made largely of canvas, was heavy and did little to keep out the cold. We heard on the grape vine that Paddy Pallin made the ultimate in sleeping bags but due to difficulty in getting the necessary materials, he only released them three or four times a year, fifty at a time. A batch was due to go on sale not long before our departure so on the due morning, we were up before dawn and by 4.30 am had joined the queue on the narrow stairs of his shabby little office in the city. We were lucky. They were expensive but proved their worth many times over the years.

We reached Newcastle late in the afternoon on the first day of our journey and were sitting on a bench discussing our next move when an elderly lady came out of a little house opposite and invited us in for a cup of tea. She was a very cultured person and told us how she envied us and wished she could have gone hitch-hiking when she was young. She would not hear of us leaving and told us very firmly we were to stay the night. She was a wonderful person, made no fuss and let us cook our own meal, which we

insisted on her sharing. We tested our new bags on her sitting room floor. She refused to let us pay her so after breakfast and warm farewells, we headed north. We later wrote and gave her a description of our travels and we kept in touch for some time.

Had we ever had doubts about the goodness of human nature, hitch-hiking would have soon proved us wrong. We met wonderful, warm-hearted people wherever we went and almost all were interested in our trip. We met a wide variety of people, farmers, business people and truck drivers, all of whom had much to talk about. When we parted company, there was always a mutual glow of friendship. We wrote to a lot of them to thank them and tell them about our journey and kept in touch with some of them for years.

Some funny things happened. There had been severe floods in northern NSW shortly before we left Sydney and we got a lift with four men driving to the area. They were government officials going to assess the flood damage and organize relief. They said they could take us to a major town about two hour's drive further on but would have to drop us off at the outskirts. They were apologetic but said they had to go to the police station to fill up with fuel, 'And it would not look good if we had two girls on board.' We agreed and said we were very appreciative of them taking us so far. They were nice men and we had a lot of laughs together.

As it happened, the car broke down about twenty miles before we reached our destination. To their obvious relief, we said we would push on and, after farewelling them, soon got a lift on the back of a truck into town.

We had decided early in our travels that when we were looking for somewhere to camp, the best course of action was to ask at the police station and identify ourselves as responsible students and not vagrants.

Knowing our friends were well behind us, we had no hesitation in fronting up at the police station. The constable at the counter was nonplussed by our request but his snappily dressed superior came out of his office and, after asking us a few pertinent questions, said we could camp in the police stables. He added that they were expecting a very important government party to call in, to fill up at the fuel pump there, on their way through and we must keep very quiet while they were there as, 'It would never do for them to find out there were two girls there.' Barb and I were squirming with embarrassment so when he made us promise not to smoke, because not only was the fuel pump next to the stables but so was the hay shed, we faithfully gave him our word.

He drove us to the stables, which were some distance from the station, and upon leaving, said he would get the constable on night duty to keep an eye on the stables so we would be safe. He also added that he did not know

what had happened to the official party as they should have come through some time before. We could have told him.

With the threat of more embarrassment, if by some awful chance all was revealed, we bedded down as soon as we could. It had been a stressful day one way and another and we were soon asleep. At 3 am we were aroused by a flash of torchlight and a voice saying, 'Are youse girls awake?' Blurrily, we sat up in our sleeping bags to find that the elderly duty constable had come to visit us, complete with a thermos of coffee and hot pies. So we sat there in our sleeping bag and had a midnight feast.

When we finished, he dragged out a packet of cigarettes and said, 'Have a fag. But for Christ's sake don't spill the ash or the Chief will murder us!' Barbara was dying for a smoke, so we lit up and puffed away, cringing with guilt. I felt I was in the middle of some mediocre farce.

The pink flush of piccaninny dawn edged the eastern horizon as our guest, after giving us each a resounding farewell kiss, departed. Sleep was out of the question and we were up and packing as the sun came up. With it, the chief arrived:

'I don't want to hurry you girls but the party might come for petrol. Their car broke down yesterday and they had to stay overnight. They will probably be making an early start!'

In the stress of the moment, I crushed my toilet bag down on the half dozen eggs I had in my pack, with sickening results. We thanked him effusively and left, getting out of town as fast as we could hoping desperately that 'the party' would not catch up with us and add to our sense of complicity.

Within the two weeks, we reached Bundaberg on the coast. We swam on the almost deserted Gold Coast and Noosa beach *en route*, saw pineapples growing for the first time and in the warm sunny weather, felt we had reached Paradise. We headed inland and a kindly, down to earth, dairy farmer and his wife gave us a lift in the back of the ute and invited us to spend the night on the farm. Their younger daughter had gone to New Zealand for a holiday, while the cows were drying off. The other daughter was married to a banana grower in the district. They asked us to come again if we were ever back in Queensland. We had fallen in love with the country and vowed to return.

Kate made us sit down and tell her all about our adventures when we returned and chortled over our tangle with the police.

Sydney was in the throes of an electricity strike about this time, making life difficult for industry and the population.

We decided to head west in our spring break. It was raining on the day of our departure and Mr Syred insisted on seeing us on our way. He took

us almost to Goulburn before he stopped. 'It will give you a start, girlies', he said, in his soft voice as we set off. We soon got a lift with a commercial traveller which took us a long way in a short time. Generally commercial travellers were good to ride with, as they covered long distances and were glad of company.

We arrived at Hay on the morning of Sheep Sale Day. It looked dry and barren but had a feeling of established squattery. There were a lot of men wearing flattened crowns to their Akubras who stared at us. We were glad to leave.

A truck driver going to Booligal picked us up and the country became even more uninviting. He told us the saying of 'Hay, Hell and Booligal,' but I am not sure if we ever did reach Booligal. The truck was very large and he was pulled in by police on the road and fined for overloading and speeding!

It was just before he pulled into a little pub, sitting in the middle of nowhere, which he said we had to see as he might have been charged with being over the limit as well. The proprietress looked like a figure from a Drysdale painting. She wore a grubby apron over a voluminous floral dress and sandshoes without laces on her feet. We sat primly on a horse-hair sofa, drinking neat whisky while she made half-hearted attempts to hunt the chooks, several dogs and six little piglets who joined us.

No one we travelled with seemed to worry about being picked up for drunk driving and stopping at each hotel on the road to 'wet the whistle', was an accepted practice. Drinking whisky before 10 am was a new experience for us and I remember saying to Barbara, when we parted from our convivial friend that I felt like a turkey when I walked: the ground rose up to meet me.

We were picked up by four men who were driving to Mildura to judge the sheep and cattle at the show. One of them was a middle-aged bachelor and the other three had a lot of fun matching him with one of us. They insisted we stay for the show next day so they could escort us, after the judging. We stayed at a hotel and washed and scrubbed the dust off our clothes and ourselves and did our best to tidy up.

We had planned to head back to Sydney but one of them was going on to Kerang and suggested we go with him. When we reached the town he pulled up outside a post office, got out and said, 'I'll just tell mum we're home!' We stayed with them for a couple of days and they were to become long-time friends.

One of the sheep judges came and looked us up in Sydney. He said he had come to see his brother but as he hadn't bothered about him for eighteen years, we flattered ourselves, we may have been the attraction.

We did not plan to go to Melbourne but somehow, after we left Kerang, we got a ride in a ute straight through. Having no set plans gave us a delicious sense of freedom, although it sometimes meant hardship. I think one of those times was landing in the outskirts of Melbourne, late in the evening. Fortunately, I have no recollection of how or where we spent the rest of the night. Getting back to Sydney was a breeze.

We were all fired-up to take off back to Queensland when our studies were completed and to try to reach Townsville.

Before that, however, I had to serve my time with Kate. All went well for the first few weeks and I remarked to the other students, 'I think Kate is okay. I quite enjoy the work I'm doing.' There were few comments from my friends.

Late one afternoon I was summoned to her office with all my files. In a conversational tone, she told me, pleasantly, that if I had an evening engagement I could ring up and cancel it, as she had decided to check my work. Then, fixing me with a steely gaze, added! 'And don't think a wide smile and a pair of bright blue eyes will get you through this course!' She went through my notes, interviews recorded verbatim after the event, which we had been trained to do, and tore me apart:

'Had I read the medical notes and seen that this patient had other problems besides a dicky heart? What were Mrs So and So's home conditions? Did the house have stairs? Where were the shops? Were her family supportive? Why had I not visited this child's family and written a report for the specialist's round next morning? Could I not see an opening here for discussion? Why did I not discuss this further?'

Two hours later, completely demoralized, I plunged out into the dark and down Martin Place, convinced I was a complete failure and should never have contemplated a social work career. For the next six weeks I dreaded the bellowed summons:

'Where's Miss Porter? I want Miss Porter!'

Kate believed savage confrontation was the best way to train students. It terrified me and I felt like one of the sheep in a mob I had tried to push through a gate so often on the farm, confused and frenzied, going round in circles. It might have worked for some people but she sapped any confidence about my work I had ever had. She could be kind and she had a wide knowledge of the conditions among the underprivileged in Sydney.

Bea Mills, a well-known bag-lady often came and sat in the waiting room. She was well-educated but an attack of meningitis had affected her mentally. She use to spread papers and documents around her, quoted

Shakespeare and once when Kate went out to see her, she said to her, 'Get out of my way, bitch, you're in my light!'

My last placement was at the more rarefied atmosphere of Red Cross from where I was given a good report. I passed but I think Kate felt I still had a long way to go. In our final interview she told me I was intelligent, had common sense, related well with people but I had a psychic gap! She did not tell me how to fix it so I suppose it is still with me.

Uppermost in my mind was our impending trip to Queensland.

Barbara had stayed on at her last placement to do a month's locum so I went to the employment agency looking for a job. I was sent to help a lady spring clean her house for a few days. She was a very nice person and the house was as neat and clean as new pin. I washed down woodwork and tidied a few cupboards while she hovered beside me talking. Her husband and one precious son were out west on their sheep station and I think she was lonely. Each day at 11.30 am she made me sit down with my feet up on a stool while she gave me a sherry and made our lunch. She wanted to know all about our planned trip. She said: 'I took one look at you and knew you were no ordinary cleaning lady!' I was quite put out as I had worn my brown student uniform and thought I looked very professional. She wanted me to delay our trip until shearing was over on the station so I could come to dinner and meet her son. I was flattered that she thought I was daughter-in-law material but declined tactfully as our plans were laid.

A friend of Mrs Syred's wanted a few days' help too, as her husband was a professor and they were entertaining friends. They had a lovely house and garden in Darling Point and she was mad about flowers. All I did was pick and arrange camellias, frangipani and other beautiful blooms until every vase was filled and there was no space left on the flat surfaces. It was sheer delight.

The agency sent me then to the bed and breakfast place at Bondi where I earned my stripes making butter pats. There were over a hundred guests, mostly families, who had come to the seaside from inland. After making mountains of toast and having endless cups of tea and coffee from the huge, white enamel pots, beds had to be made and the rooms swept and tidied.

When I finished each day I had a swim in the Bondi surf before going home. When I left, I was invited to come back for a holiday anytime I was in Sydney.

I decided that if couldn't succeed as a social worker, I could always eke out a living as a domestic. At that stage, I felt the latter might be a pleasanter career path.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

QUEENSLAND

We felt very carefree as we headed north. A ride with a paper delivery van, organized beforehand, meant an early start but it got us well on our way. Before we parted, the driver gave us a bundle of Ellery Queen paperbacks which were to prove their worth in the ensuing weeks.

We had lifts from an interesting and wide variety of people who wanted to know all about us and our plans. Time flew as we travelled with truck drivers, a chicken feed man, a vicar who had come to Australia from Scotland ten years before and told us he felt there was scope for our profession in the colonies and a doctor who took us home for morning tea and to meet his wife and new baby daughter.

We did a delivery run with an ice cream van driver, an elderly couple drove us very sedately into Tweed Heads and an ex-Pathfinder pilot, on hearing we were both ex-WAAAF, took us to his home in Byron Bay to meet his wife, have a swim and stay overnight.

An elderly gentleman, who took us a short distance, proved to be an uncle of Mr Phillips, the station-master at Narrogin! We had another short ride with a racy vet and were then picked up by a charming Austrian who took us to Brisbane. He told us that before the war, he had studied music at the Vienna Conservatory and had been an Intelligence Officer in the Australian Army. Two of his cousins were professors in the USA, one at Yale, the other at Harvard.

He wanted to visit a sick friend at Surfer's Paradise and suggested we have a swim to fill in time. We needed no further prompting and disported ourselves, frolicking in the white crested, green waves which seethed up on the beach. We had the whole beautiful stretch to ourselves, a few houses tucked away in the bush, the only sign of habitation. Curt came and joined us. We were all reluctant to leave such a lovely place.

We had seen some spectacular scenery on our trip up the coast, ferny waterfalls and little creeks running crystal clear. When we passed through the Moonbi Ranges, we were told they had been used by Thunderbolt as his headquarters for his raids. We passed vivid green sugar cane plantations as we came further north and the air was warm and balmy.

It was late when we reached Brisbane and asked Curt to drop us at the station. The Travellers' Aid lady was somewhat startled by our enquiry regarding accommodation at that hour but rose nobly to the occasion and found us floor space on the verandah of a home for old ladies.

We didn't spend much time in Brisbane before heading north. We wanted to see the Dawsons, our friends on the dairy farm and a lovely couple who owned the Gayndah Hotel, Mr and Mrs Hansen. The latter had given us a lift and taken us to the hotel for a couple of days on our first trip.

We headed west from Maryborough and were picked up by a lady travelling back to the cattle station she ran with her elderly mother. She took us all the way to the farm gate and as she was going through Gayndah and knew the Hansens, said she would tell them we were on our way.

The Dawsons gave us a great welcome and we did not need much encouragement to stay a few days. Their youngest daughter was home and we enjoyed each other's company. On the Sunday, they took us over to the banana plantation to meet their eldest daughter and her family. We sat in the back of the ute, nursing the cold roast turkey, wrapped in a tea towel which was for our meal.

Afterwards, we were given a tour of the property. We had thought milking seventy odd cows, night and morning, plus doing all the other jobs associated with dairy farming was hard work, but we decided growing bananas was just as arduous. The plants grew on a very steep hillside, which made even walking up and down difficult, let alone doing all the cultivation and picking the fruit. The hands were dropped to the packing shed about 250 feet below on a flying fox.

Bidding our kind hosts a fond farewell, we set off for Gayndah. Traffic was local and sparse so we did a lot of walking.

We had a precarious ride of some distance with a large family in an old model car. There was no room for us inside, so we stood on the running boards and lay on the front wheel mudguards, hanging on like limpets! The road was narrow, rough and winding, clinging to the sides of the hills, but our driver sped along with gay abandon, singing snatches of opera.

A kindly farmer who gave us a short lift stopped at Ban Ban Springs, so we could have a drink. It meant we would come back, he told us.

The countryside was like a primitive painting, vivid, green grass, dotted here and there with stark, bare, dead trees, reaching white arms to the sky and, along the horizon, a never-ending frieze of dark blue ranges.

We arrived finally at the hotel door. Mrs Hansen had hoped we would have arrived sooner as she had planned to go to a wedding in Bowen, leaving us in charge. She did, in fact, go off to Maryborough on a shopping spree and we kept the home fires burning while she was away. There was a very good staff, so we had very little to do. Mr Hansen taught us to pour beer and while we were not very proficient, he said we did wonders for the bar trade as everyone came to look at us.

They were a lovely couple and Mrs Hansen's only regret was that we could not stay to meet Alan, their one precious son, who was due home the following week.

She organized a lift to Bowen for us with a very nice young man, Bob, who had been a Catalina pilot and was a traveller for International Harvesters. The trip took several days as he was doing business *en route*. He let us sleep on the back of the ute at night which he parked in secluded spots so we would not be disturbed. Unhappily, he could do nothing about the battalions of mosquitoes which honed in on us all night. Mosquitoes at night outdid the fly attacks by day but after a while we became philosophical about both.

We spent a couple of days at Monto and after touring the township on the first day, decided to camp in the shade and write letters, etc. on the second, while Bob was at work. No sooner had we settled ourselves than the heavens opened. Immediately, a lady ran out of a building across the road and rushed us back to the house for shelter and morning tea.

She was a very attractive young woman who told us that she and her husband, who was a builder, were living in the garage while they finished their house. It was large and well set up and we were made very welcome. We spent the day with her, had baths, washed and ironed our clothes and were generally made at home, before we left for our rendezvous with Bob.

The roads became rougher as we travelled further north and cut by creek crossings. The sun was setting in a blaze of gold as we passed through the Dawes Ranges and into Thangool. Our dinner at the hotel was remarkable because everything came out of tins, meat, peas, beetroot, butter, peaches, cream and the condensed milk for our tea.

We pushed on to Biloela and while Bob did business, we explored the town. There was not a lot to see. Apart from the inevitable solid bank buildings and a two-storey hotel with a balcony, the place looked ramshackle.

Several cowboys wearing high-heeled boots and wide hats completed its Wild West atmosphere.

Bob had received a telegram telling him to wait in Biloela as his boss was coming up from Brisbane to see him, so we said our farewells and pushed on.

We had a hard day, mostly walking and with only kangaroos for company but eventually reached Gogango. Vague news of cyclones and floods on the coast had reached us but we did not think much about them. However, when we arrived in the town, we discovered it was flooded out and the Nogoa River impassable.

We camped in a tin hut on the racecourse during our enforced stay, where we were reasonably dry. Barb slept on the large, rough timber table and I lay on a spare door I discovered. By the messages written on the walls we were not the first wayfarers to seek shelter there. We were taken by this verse scrawled on the door:

> On the racecourse at the foot of the rise,
> Where the Go Go range starts her way to the skies.
> When the range grew purple and the evening dies,
> Camped these travelers at the foot of the rise.
>
> Signed, The Battlers 1-8-1939.

We were not the only ones held up at Gogango. A train full of passengers, heading towards the coast, was also delayed. We became friendly with several of the passengers and we made billy tea for one elderly man who said he hadn't tasted it for years! In appreciation, he presented us with a ringed *gidgee* walking stick to help us on our way. Our first reaction was dismay but in time we became very attached to it. We took turns carrying it, swaggering along the road, swiping the grasses growing on the verges as we strode along.

Other entertainment each day entailed a walk to the river with most of the local population to see if there were any signs of it receding and discussing the situation with all and sundry. A large herd of goats helped keep us amused when on their daily perambulations through the town. They walked along, jumping onto all the parked cars, down again, then up on the next one. No one took the slightest notice of them.

We were sorry to leave our little hut when the river finally became passable and we could go on our way. It had atmosphere and we felt a bonding with the ghostly figures in the past who had sheltered there over the years. It made us feel part of the fellowship of wanderers.

Eventually, we reached Rockhampton. One of our benefactors who had dropped us off just before the town, bestowed on us a large champagne watermelon. We staggered into Rockhampton clutching it and feeling like the bandicoot in Norman Lindsay's *Magic Pudding*.

A lot of showgrounds in Queensland had camping facilities so we made our way to the Rockhampton grounds. We found there was a resident secretary living there and he and his wife made us very welcome and installed us in the nearby drovers' hut. This couple, the Pilbeams, had a son who was studying veterinary science, who was also a hitch-hiker, so they set about making us comfortable, asking us in for meals and giving us the run of the house. The watermelon went in the fridge and we lit the copper and did a large wash.

While we were there, Bob, our International Harvester friend, arrived in Rockhampton and tracked us down. He discovered that he had known the Pilbeams some years before in Warwick, so we became one happy family. He took us for drives and showed us the local sights. When the time came to leave, Mr Pilbeam said he would write to all the show secretaries up the coast to say we may call in and to look after us if we did.

It was hard to break away from these kindly people but in fact, after a futile effort to head north along the coast, we were blocked by floods. We had to return and rethink our route. We were advised to take the inland defence road to Emerald, hence to Clermont, Charters Towers and finally Townsville.

It was becoming imperative that we reach Townsville soon as we had sent our signatures to the Bank there and could not get any money until we reached the town. Optimistically, we had assumed we would have no trouble getting there quickly but we had not taken the northern 'wet' into consideration. At this stage our pride would not allow us to wire home for help.

There was very little traffic and we made heavy going. An elderly farmer gave us a lift in his ute and let us down at a deserted siding on the rail line. As he was about to drive off, he said, 'There's a goods train due here in half an hour. The best thing you can do is jump the rattler!' We stood looking like startled rabbits, watching him disappear round a bend.

It didn't take us long to reach a decision and when the train came, screeching, grinding and jolting to a stop, we climbed into the dog box carriage next to the guard's van. Fortunately, it was empty and we sat filled with apprehension. We jumped with fright when the door opened suddenly and the guard poked his head in.

'Have you girls got tickets?' he asked.

'We aren't buying tickets,' we said timidly.

'Oh!' he said – then after a pause,

'Lie down on the seats and keep out of sight when we stop at Dingo because sometimes the inspector is there.' He shut the door and soon the train slowly and painfully began to move.

We had just begun to relax when there was a sharp tap on the window. We sprang to open it and look out. A black billy hanging on the end of a long hooked pole swung out and towards us. We waved our thanks to the guard as we unhooked it and we blessed him for the strong, black tea it contained.

The day dragged on and it was night before we reached Dingo. We duly lay down on the seats but again leapt up in fright when the door opened suddenly. An unseen hand pushed a brown paper bag across the floor to us and the door banged shut. The bag contained half a dozen currant buns.

Well fed, and past the danger point of the journey, we lay down and fell into a deep sleep. When we woke, it was broad daylight and very quiet. We had been shunted onto a loop line and we were surrounded by rolling stock. There was no sign of life, so we climbed down and walked into town. Our only regret was that we never had a chance to thank the guard. We were in Emerald.

We found we could stay in the CWA cottage very cheaply and, as the weather was closing in, decided to have a rest day. It was as well as steady rain fell for the next two days. Fortunately, the cottage had a small library so we indulged ourselves by reading.

When the weather cleared and we ventured out, we met a couple travelling in what they termed the 'turnout'. It was a semi-trailer converted to a caravan and drapery store. They were on a combined pleasure and business trip, going to outback stations, selling the drapery and clothing in their stock. As they were heading for Clermont too, said we could travel with them when the roads dried out.

He was an Irishman and his very attractive wife told us she had been an adagio dancer, partnered by her brother and that they had been booked to go to Poland but were stopped by the outbreak of war. She had only been out of hospital a few days, after having treatment for a serious infection in her leg, and we felt she might have been happier in the comfort of her own home. She seemed glad to have some female company and we were able to take over the camp chores so she could rest.

Also in the party was a 19-year-old boy who had been trying to get to his home in Clermont on his motorbike. The bike was piled on board and away we went. We camped by some lovely pools on our way and when we finally

reached Clermont, found the road north was cut by the Belyando River. The motor cyclist left us to go home to his mother, who had been worried stiff about him, and we camped by a lagoon on the outskirts of the town.

Our friends were waiting here for some merchandise to come on the train and then, when the flood eased, were travelling to Townsville through the back station country, doing business. They were happy to take us with them and, as other prospects looked bleak, we decided to stick with them.

Our finances were such that the time had come to swallow our pride so Barbara sent a telegram to her father asking for some money to be sent to us. It came accompanied by parental advice about being careful, etc. but we had expected that. Both our families had voiced their disapproval of our trip in no uncertain manner before we left, but we were just glad to get the money.

In all, we waited for ten days in Clermont because, even though the river dropped, the goods for the store were delayed. The water in the lagoon had been stirred up by the floods to a muddy red but we swam in it and washed in it, regardless. The weather was perfect and at night we sat round the campfire yarning and watching the fat, yellow moon rise behind the tall, white trunks of the gum trees growing on the bank of the lagoon. A camp of aborigines, a bit further down the lagoon, entertained us each night singing cowboy songs to a guitar accompaniment. Barbara and I slept on the stony ground beside the turnout and in spite of the rough ground, a full moon and mosquitoes, hardly stirred all night.

Finally, the goods arrived and we hit the road for Charters Towers, travelling to a number of stations through the back country.

Our arrival at a station created a shopping spree for black and white alike and there was a steady flow of business in cotton frocks, hats, working clothes, boots and haberdashery. Apart from the station store, the opportunities for these people to shop were few and far between.

We camped by picturesque billabongs and tried to catch fish in the beautiful, swift-flowing Cape River but without success. We sat under shady trees on the sandy banks but kept a sharp lookout for predatory crocodiles.

The only traveller we met was a swaggie who told us he had been on the road for five days and seen no one. There was plenty of water but he was grateful to have his tucker bag replenished before going on his way, seemingly undaunted by the lonely stretch ahead of him.

The dry, rock-strewn country and vivid colours of the mine cuts and slag heaps looked harsh and inhospitable when we reached the outskirts of Charters Towers but, in the township itself, we noticed some of the loveliest gardens we had seen on our trip.

We did not linger but pushed on towards the coast. We arrived on Pallarenda Beach, a few miles out of Townsville, just as the sun set behind us, turning the crests of the waves, breaking on the sand, a delicate pink. There were palm trees and coconuts and we felt dizzy with excitement to think we had reached our goal.

Our friends were heading west, to travel south via a different road, and we said our fond farewells when they dropped us in Townsville next morning.

We made haste to collect our mail from the post office and collect money from the bank. We decided to book into the YWCA hostel for the night, which was just as well as it rained ten inches and next morning the deep gutters were overflowing.

When it cleared, we set out to see the town. As we walked past a hotel, a man shot out from the bar and, after talking to us for a few minutes, said he managed the local radio station and asked us to come there for an interview. So we piled into his car and were taken to the office, where we told our story dutifully and met the very pleasant girl who was the announcer.

She asked us to come and stay with her during our time in Townsville, so we decamped to her house and were made very welcome. It was roomy and comfortable but a strong wind blew incessantly and everything creaked, rattled or flapped, the whole time we were there.

Our story came over in the evening news and subsequently almost everyone me met said,

'Oh yes! I heard about you girls, with your walking stick and black billy, on the wireless.'

We had a lovely day exploring Magnetic Island, seeing only a handful of people moving around the small resort.

As we stepped off the ferry in Townsville, we were hailed by two boys, also hitch-hiking. They were the only ones we met in all our travels. They had just arrived from Cairns and convinced us we should go there. Although Townsville had been our objective, we were now in funds and our time was our own so we caught the overnight train. The boys had not told us that the town was underwater. We made our way soggily to the show grounds and as there appeared to be no one to say to us yea or nay, we settled into the driest place we could find, the cattle stalls.

We noticed that everyone was going barefoot, girls going to work carried their shoes in baskets over their arms. There was eighteen inches of water on the streets. It gave us a chance to have our shoes, which were falling apart, mended. We made good friends with the Austrian bootmaker and called in to see him every morning, taking a currant bun and boiling the billy for tea in his workshop.

We had an idyllic day on Green Island, looking at coral and giant clams, swimming all day in the warm clear water. Apart from the crew, there were only two other people on the island and we felt we were Robinson Crusoe and Man Friday. Rollicking back to Cairns exhausted, sunburnt and blissfully happy, we felt life could not be better.

We went to see a cowboy film in the open air theatre, sitting in deck chairs. We were at the back and the aboriginal patrons were herded into the front rows. A small lake lay between them and the screen. Only the mosquitoes showed no discrimination in whom they attacked, judging by the slaps and muttered curses of the entire audience.

Three days on the Atherton Tableland was like a trip to fairyland. As we wound our way up the mountainside on the scenic railway we passed Barron Falls in full flood, ferny dells and a panorama of Cairns and the coast. Rides were hard to come by but it was a magical place for walking. There were clear, green pools, inviting to swim in and water lilies swaying gently in the current at the outlet to little, fern-fringed creeks. We were given a ride on the Gillies Highway where the speed limit on one twelve-mile stretch was 15 mph as the road had 628 bends. The traffic was one way, changing direction on the hour. A light, misty rain fell most of the day, so camping out was not an option. A kindly policeman let us sleep in a cell at the station one night. Fortunately there were no prisoners.

When we returned to Cairns, we found that not only were the roads closed but there had been washaways on the line and no trains were running. We went to the dock to see if there were any ferries going south but our hopes were dashed. As we turned away, a bystander said, 'Ask the skipper of that little cargo boat – he's going south!' The skipper and engineer were sitting on the hatch of the MV *Leisha*, drinking tea.

'Yes, you'll be welcome', the skipper said, when we asked if he could take us south. 'Come on board and have a cup of tea. We are going south in the morning' but, he added, 'we are leaving in a couple of hours to take a load of timber up to Cooktown. It will just be an overnight trip and then we go south. You can come with us if you like.' We needed no second invitation and, swallowing our tea, we hurried back to collect our gear from the showground and, stopping only to say goodbye to our hostess and bootmaker friend, hastened back to the wharf.

The skipper moved out of his cabin, assuring us he would be very comfortable sleeping in the day bed in the tiny chart room. He was a laconic Yorkshireman with a dry sense of humour. The crew consisted of the engineer, Chuck the deck hard and a cabin boy who, among other duties, did the cooking.

It was a calm trip and when we woke next morning the *Leisha* was tied up at a battered wharf in the Endeavour River at Cooktown.

After the timber was unloaded, the skipper took us up to the hotel to meet the owner. The whole place looked derelict. A couple of dreary buildings and the hotel, which was very ramshackle, seemed to constitute the main street. The roofs of several houses showed up over the sand dunes and low scrub. The proprietoress of the hotel gave us all a warm welcome, especially the skipper for whom she obviously had a soft spot. She said the hotel was called the Sovereign but, since the last cyclone took half of it away, they had changed the name to the Half Sovereign.

She took us into the bar to show us a mural about a metre in depth, painted on three walls and depicting Cooktown and the Palmer River goldrush in the 1870s. It was done in sepia and showed miners with picks and shovels, poppets, dry blowers, wheelbarrows and Chinese with long pigtails. A down-on-his-luck artist, who had come to make his fortune but fell on hard times like so many others, did it to cut out his bill.

She told us that Cooktown had boomed during the rush and at one stage the population in the area rose to 30,000 and that there were 5,000 Chinese on the fields. It had been rumoured that all the gold they discovered went back to China. The boom did not last long because of the difficulty in extracting the gold and the tropical weather. After it fizzled out, many miners were trapped by floods and, without sufficient food, many died. Disease, too, became rife. There had been a railway between Cooktown and Laura but that, too, had closed. Trouble with aggressive aboriginals had also caused difficulties.

When she heard we were about to leave, she said, 'Oh no! Skip. You have to stay tonight so we can have a party. We haven't had a boat in for weeks and especially now the girls are here. We must have a party for the girls!' The skip said he supposed we could stay and go south next morning. It was hardly a riotous affair as we made up the bulk of the partygoers. Apart from us, our hostess, I think a girl who was housemaid-cum-barmaid and the yardman, there was the hotel's only permanent guest.

She was an attractive middle-aged woman. Her husband had a cattle station inland but she could not bear the isolation and had settled in at the hotel. Perhaps settled in at the bar would be a better description as she seemed to sit there, drinking quietly, most of the time. To our eyes, however, she never seemed the worse for wear and was very friendly and pleasant.

The fact that the *Leisha* was tied up in such an historic place had not escaped us and we studied the two nearby monuments, one to Captain Cook

and the other to the explorer, Kennedy. Captain Cook careened his ship, *Endeavour*, near this spot after it hit a reef on the night of June 11th, 1770.

Many years later, I have learnt that Phillip Parker King, probably Australia's most talented surveyor, called into this same anchorage during his trips in the *Mermaid* in 1819 and again twelve months later, to do repairs to his ship. Phillip King's achievements seem to have largely been overlooked or overshadowed by Cook and Flinders.

Kennedy, I remembered reading about at the Highbury School, in one of the little red-covered, very dull, Swan history books. I found the journeys of all the explorers very confusing but I did remember that Kennedy had been speared by aborigines and that Jackey Jackey had stuck with him.

Again, more recently, I have learnt that the purpose of Kennedy's journey was to explore the country through Cape York. He was to rendezvous with a relief ship, the *Ariel*, which was to wait for the expedition at Point Albany on the top of the Cape. They were landed at Rockingham Bay in May 1848. The party was cumbersome to say the least. There were 12 men, 27 horses, 100 sheep, 4 dogs, carts and equipment.

They fell foul of the aborigines early on. They were less than welcoming and, after a member of the expedition shot and killed one, they were followed and constantly harassed. Equipment had to be abandoned, the horses killed for food and, in a desperate bid to reach the rendezvous, Kennedy went ahead with Jackey Jackey. They were within thirty miles of their goal when Kennedy, who had been speared, died. It was left to Jackey Jackey to take Kennedy's reports back to civilization but, being under constant attack and fearing for his life, he buried them. He survived and later led a party back to retrieve the documents but they had been dug up, possibly by possums, and were illegible. It is good to know that Jackey Jackey's name appeared on Kennedy's memorial.

Even though we knew so little about these valiant men and less about their achievements at the time, it was still quite daunting to be anchored in the Endeavour River. They all had skirmishes with the aboriginals but the only one we saw was a shy, pretty young girl who slipped into the back of the hotel to work in the kitchen.

While we did not share Captain Cook's and Phillip King's experiences with the unwelcoming aboriginals, we certainly did when it came to getting out of the Endeavour River. A fierce blow sprang up overnight, the sky was overcast and angry seas lashed the sides of the boat. The skipper put to sea and we crossed the bar but it was so rough, we were tossed around like a cork and he decided to return to our previous berth. After a sickening turn, we crashed back over the bar to tie up in the comparative calm of the river.

The only casualty was a large bowl of eggs which slid off a bench in the galley and crashed on the floor. It was unfortunate as they would have been a welcome addition to our rather Spartan diet during the next ten days, while we were storm-bound. The cook did his best but our staple diet of stale bread, jam and pieces of tough steak, pink on the inside and curiously black on the exterior, was hardly gourmet fare. There was plenty of strong, black tea to wash it down, however.

We had plenty of time during our enforced stay to explore Cooktown. We had one or two forays into the bush nearby but after we had been attacked by green tree ants, which had bites like red hot needles, we rather lost our enthusiasm and stayed on board.

> Two small luggers called in briefly to unload their cargo one day during our stay. They were crewed by magnificent-looking Murray Island men. They wore bright red or blue lap laps which contrasted vividly against their shining black skins and the dull setting of grey-green vegetation, the gloomy, storm-tossed clouds and river around us.
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> The weather remained overcast and there were frequent skiffy showers. There was not much we could do in the galley, so we took our turns swabbing the decks. We pored over the charts and were given elementary lessons in navigation and seamanship. It blew 8 on the Beaufort scale (with spindrift) for most of the time during our enforced stay.
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> One Sunday, our friend from the hotel took us for a drive to the upper reaches of the Endeavour and Annan rivers, passing the crumpled wrecks of RAAF and USAF aircraft, being rapidly submerged by the encroaching jungle. She took us to an airstrip used during the Coral Sea battle. We were all crammed into the back of an old ute. The skipper was sitting on the rear and it was hard to restrain our mirth when, in roaring out of bog on the road of muddy, black sludge, a deluge was thrown up all over him by the front wheel. 'This is what you call a PSA (pleasant Sunday afternoon)' was his only comment, through gritty teeth as we wiped his face and, what had been a pristine, white shirt front.
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> Every night we all went up to the hotel to 'party'. This consisted of one or two beers and a sing-song round the piano. The weather began to settle and the night before we were hoping to put to sea again, the permanent guest came trotting down in high heels to invite us up for one last night of frivolity.

Afterwards, she said she was watching the skipper combing his hair. She could just see his head when she looked through the porthole and thinking how nice he looked rather than where she was going. Whatever the reason, she tripped on the edge of the wharf and fell into the narrow space between the ship and the barnacle-covered timbers below. There was a shout as we heard the splash and the skipper and Chuck were over the side immediately. We dragged her up on deck while her rescuers dived for her spaniel, from whom she was inseparable, her torch, shoes and spectacles. Barb and I wrapped her in blankets while we wrung out her clothes which she insisted on putting back on, saying they would soon dry. No way could we persuade her to leave off her stays! It all became a great joke, now everyone was safely back on board, but it was largely relief that she hadn't split her head open and no one had been attacked by the many crocodiles in the river.

We were sad when the time came to leave the little settlement and our friends sad to realize we were turning back on our journey.

'It's manyana land', they told us when we said our final goodbyes. 'You will always want to come back.' To us, the whole of Queensland was manyana land. We had met such warm and hospitable people and seen so many beautiful places, it was hard to face leaving it all behind. The turning point on any journey always depressed us and leaving Cooktown made us especially gloomy.

The weather may have abated in the skipper's judgment but for me it was torture during our trip back to Cairns. Although it meant leaving our shipmates, stepping back on dry land was a sublime moment.

Due to our delay the *Leisha's* plans had changed and in fact ours did, too.

We sent reassuring telegrams home as soon as we could after arriving in Cairns and Barbara had a swift reply. She had applied for a position at the Dawes Road Repat Hospital in Adelaide and an interview had been arranged for five days hence.

Following frantic telegraphic communication, her father arranged for her to be interviewed in Sydney in two weeks' time. It was a rude awakening and rather sobering to realize our idyll was coming to an end and that we needed to put our skates on.

Although the roads were still closed, the trains were running so we caught one to Townsville and lost no time in getting on the road to

Ayr. We were grateful to get a lift but it was rather nerve-wracking as at every creek crossing the water seemed to be rising. Our driver, a very nice, friendly man kept stopping in the middle of the flow so we could admire the water lilies and myriads of vividly-coloured butterflies which hovered around us. Then he would put his foot down on the accelerator to make a rush up the bank, heavy with thick, black mud. Sometimes it took several attempts as we held our breath. I, at least, imagined us doing an Ophelia and being swept downstream, clutching water lilies to our bosoms, but our driver was unperturbed and we finally reached Ayr.

With road closures south, we again resorted to the train. It was due at 2 am next morning and I tried to sleep on a luggage trolley at the station while Barb lay on a bench. It was a black night; the few lights on the station platform gave only a dim, depressing glow. The air was so heavy, it felt like a blanket but the mosquitoes managed to navigate through it and give us curry.

We thought we had a fast ride to Rockhampton but our driver was a pig-buyer and we visited every farm on the road. To avoid the rain-soaked coast, we headed west to Toowoomba and down the inland road. We arrived in Sydney a day before Barbara's interview.

We had sent all out luggage home before we left on the trip so had only our travel-worn clothes with us. We decided the best thing to do would be for us both to go into the interview, packs and all, so she could explain her situation more authentically.

Eyes hopped as we entered the Repatriation building in Sydney. Barb was interviewed for an hour by a panel of six men, or rather she held them spellbound while she gave an account of her journey. Later she said none of them asked her any questions about her qualifications, they just wanted her to talk. Needless to say, she got the job on the spot.

We had one last remarkable night at the Royal Easter Show before saying sad farewells to the Syred family, our fellow students, to Sydney itself and our wonderful year there.

It was all an anti-climax as we hitched south to Adelaide, through the immaculate vineyards in the Barossa Valley. The wine festival had been held the previous week and everyone looked very hung over.

From Adelaide, we caught a bus to Barbara's home in Yorktown on the Peninsula where we were welcomed like conquering heroes, now.

Her parents were very proud of Barbara and had already organized an evening gathering of more than twenty of their friends to come and hear the story of our travels. We were fêted and could do no wrong.

Before I left to travel back to Adelaide, to catch the Overland to Perth, we sat down and wrote to all the people who had been so good to us and who had begged us to let them know how we fared from the time we left them. In any case, we wanted to thank them.

There were well over thirty and it took us two days, and well into the nights, to complete the task.

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Parting from Barbara was difficult. We never hitch-hiked together again and our lives took very different paths. It was a number of years before we met again and it was on the other side of the world.

CHAPTER TWELVE

ROYAL PERTH HOSPITAL, WA

In 1949, medical social workers, or almoners as we were still called, were so scarce in Perth that a job was assured. I had applied to Royal Perth Hospital for a position and was appointed, sight unseen.

Once again, I crossed the Nullabor by train, somewhat faster and in greater comfort than before. Memories of Sydney and Queensland, the beautiful places I had seen and the friends I was leaving behind, flooded my mind as I gazed sightlessly at the flat, desert country the train sped across. No more carefree, gypsy life but conformity and responsibility lay ahead. I had a few days at home before returning to Perth to start my new career.

Helen, a childhood friend of Barbara's from South Australia, was already installed at the hospital. I knew her slightly as she had been in Barbara's year at university but she had just completed her final year in Melbourne. A nursing sister had been in charge of the department but had taken leave to do the social work training, so it was left in the hands of two new graduates.

Royal Perth Hospital served not only the mass of the metropolitan area but many country patients who needed specialist treatment as well. There were over three hundred beds and innumerable outpatient clinics, serviced in those days by honorary specialists.

We decided our best course of action was to divide the work in two, willy nilly, and take half each. We had a very nice office, three very competent staff to deal with phone calls, typing, filing, supplying appliances and organizing patient transport, and with the wonderful volunteers who were nearly all wives of the honoraries. The staff even organized the laundry and put the shank buttons in our starched white coats. It was a service never

repeated in my career. These coats had numerous pockets, invaluable for holding notebooks, forms, pens, medical certificates, pills and all the other paraphernalia we seemed to collect on our daily rounds of the hospital.

The Perth public never regarded appointments very seriously but worked on the assumption that we would always be available to see them whenever they arrived. Beepers had not arrived and the only way we could be contacted when we were on the wards was over the public address system, which reverberated through the hospital and must have been distressing for sick patients.

We were in the new part of the hospital where lifts had been installed. If the liftman was not on duty, we often found ourselves filling in, as many people were not used to them and were apprehensive about pushing the buttons.

All the staff were very helpful and accepting of us. It was just as well they were, as we were run off our feet from day one. There was a great spirit of pride in service in the hospital and I cannot remember any cattiness or vicious gossip, unlike many places where I worked later on.

Unhappily, Dick was one of the patients for several months after my arrival. He had been dogged by ill health throughout his career, having contracted tuberculosis while studying medicine in Melbourne. He had spent some time in a sanitarium in Victoria but been able to complete his training and his residency at Royal Perth Hospital. He had met and married Anne, been in practice in Collie and then taken a sole practice in the mining town of Reedy. The work proved too strenuous and he had another breakdown.

He was well respected at the hospital and I would be less than honest if I did not say that my pathway was made easier because I was his sister. He was never able to return to the irregular hours of general practice again but worked at the Wooroloo Sanatorium where he was loved and respected by patients and staff alike for his compassion and understanding. He had been an early campaigner against smoking and later became the Director of the Chest Clinic. After several years retirement, he was asked to take over the Alcohol and Drug Authority and, almost until his death, worked with the Palliative Care Service. Instead of living only until he was in his forties as he expected, he reached the ripe old age of eighty-three.

Without the constraining influence of constant supervision, being responsible for my actions and in applying the principles of social work I had learnt, my confidence grew daily. I became aware of the privilege I was given in sharing with people the after traumatic events illness brings in its train and being able to give some support and help.

We both worked back home most evenings. Now and again, we went to a film, snatching a meal at the hospital café on our way to the theatre. The lack of social life never bothered me. There was so much drama during my days, I did not miss it.

Welfare agencies were thin on the ground and we did a lot of things that now could be referred to another agency. We soon developed good networks among those that were established: Child and Native Welfare, Social Security – although I think that had another name – Red Cross, to name a few and, of course, the handful of other social workers.

Clearing the beds of elderly patients who had deteriorated beyond the point of returning to their homes was as much a problem then as it is now. Harassed resident doctors kept pushing us to find nursing home beds for their patients. They in turn were under pressure from their registrars and consultants. Unfortunately, we did not have magic wands but had to wait for Divine Providence to take a hand when we would get a phone call from a home saying a bed was available. It was like a macabre chess game. Care given varied in the nursing homes around the city and we had to be sure each one fitted the needs of the patient. In their desperation, the residents were not above gilding the lily in describing a patient's abilities so we had to double check everything, not only to ensure the best care for the patients but our own reputation of being reliable.

All this was quite apart from trying to help the patient come to terms with the inevitable, as most resisted the move, and giving support to harassed relatives. This kind of event, like a death, unearthed a lot of emotions, anguish, hostility and guilt, to name a few. Parents often felt their children should care for them till the end and, as few families had the actual space in their homes to accommodate a sick person and the unfortunate daughter or daughter-in-law was already overworked caring for her own family, a lot of misery was endured by all concerned.

Later, in another situation where I was trying to come to a solution of what seemed an insurmountable problem, the patient had her revenge when she finally, grudgingly agreed to move. She was a stubborn, domineering old lady who had lived with her son and unfortunate daughter-in-law ever since they married and the latter was at the end of her tether, the family in despair. The patient died the first night after the move.

The Casualty Department lay within my province and I was frequently summoned to it. The resident was a delightful young man and we became firm friends, each no doubt as naïve as the other. We both felt particularly concerned for one personable young Englishman who told me that he had neither money nor food and was living in a cave on Cottesloe beach.

After helping him fill in forms for statutory assistance, the resident and I felt emergency relief was warranted. I broached our Samaritan fund for thirty shillings which he accepted gratefully and departed, leaving us with a warm feeling of a job well done. Next day, we were deflated when another resident told us he had seen our patient later the previous day spending our patrimony on a liquid lunch at the Palace Hotel bar!

There was a better outcome for a very depressed young man who had tried to drown himself in the river, was rescued, brought to Casualty and later admitted. He was a newly arrived European migrant who could speak very little English and had been unable to get work. He had no contacts, had pawned his possessions and decided to end it all. With a few days of good food and care, he became much happier. He intimated that all he wanted was a job so he could make his own way. Employment was hard to find for someone in his situation. There was work at a mine some hundreds of miles from Perth, mainly because it had a reputation for being heavy work with long hours and low pay and I was loathe to suggest it. When I did, he leapt at the chance to take it. Red Cross supplied some work clothes for him and Dick, rather reluctantly, handed over a favourite sports jacket. I collected him at the crack of dawn one morning and put him on the bus with a little pocket money and a cut lunch.

A letter came from him a few weeks later, thanking me for helping him and saying he had settled in and was teaching himself English. Judging by his very passable letter, he was doing well. Several letters followed saying he had met some countrymen at the mine who had given him news from home. There was a long silence and then a final letter from Sydney, forwarded on to me after I left the hospital. He had moved after he had traced an old school friend and heard she and her husband had migrated to Sydney. The husband had died in an accident. He was now going to marry the girl.

We had little time to ponder on the quality of our work but, whatever we did, our patients were grateful to us, judging by the presents they brought us. Many of them lived on blocks big enough to have a cow and a few hens, even in suburbs like Victoria Park. Hardly a day went by without one of us being given flowers, fruit, cream or eggs. A patient brought Helen an enormous watermelon one hot Friday and, after we all had our fill, it was, inadvertently, left on the cloakroom floor over the weekend. On Monday morning, the specialist on the floor below starting his clinic was puzzled by the pink drips descending on him until he looked up and saw a wide pink stain on the ceiling. Neither he nor the unfortunate Works Department were pleased with us.

Christmas came and following tradition every department held a party, some being drop in for a drink affairs starting several days before the event.

We held ours late one afternoon. I cannot remember the food but we had buckets of fruit punch, laced with gin – quite a lot, I do remember. It became very noisy and riotous as more and more people crowded into our waiting room.

It was also a farewell for Helen and me. She was returning to Adelaide while I was going to the Hollywood Repatriation Hospital. For some time Ruby, with whom I had trained in Adelaide, had been urging me to join her there. The administrator was not happy with us, me in particular, but I had made up my mind. Apart from a slightly higher salary, being Commonwealth rather than a state position, I could live in.

While the boarding house where I had been living was quite comfortable, I had to share a room with a mother and her daughter. It did not worry me but I felt it was very demeaning for the mother who had been used to better things.

There was a general expectation that one stayed put in a job and to change around indicated a certain lack of commitment. I consoled myself then and when I made later changes, at least I moved up and to better prospects.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

REPATRIATION GENERAL HOSPITAL, HOLLYWOOD

Hollywood, as it was generally called, catered for patients from both the First and Second World Wars. The staff were nearly all ex-service, from the Medical Superintendent to the gardeners, who had been prisoners of war of the Japanese and were on light duties, still suffering the effects of their deprivation.

The hospital was very spread out. The wards ran off a central corridor with attractive lawns and gardens between each one, giving patients a pleasant outlook. I walked miles every day trying to get to see my patients. Interviews had to be fitted in each morning between doctor's rounds which were sacrosanct, meals, visiting hours and rest periods. As I covered the four wards of patients with tuberculosis, who had extra rest periods, my access was even more limited. Added to which, as most of the patients were still in the infectious stage, I had to put on a mask and gown before entering.

Ruby and I had an office each, with a public toilet in between, which meant that at least people knew where we were. The pace of life was so much slower than Royal Perth, it took some time to adjust. In my spare time, I taught myself to type. We had a very beautiful young secretary but, not long after my arrival, she entered a beauty contest and won a trip to the USA and a wardrobe of clothes. Needless to say it was a stressful time for us all and, although we loved her dearly, it was a relief when she moved on. Her replacement, although plainer, was so efficient, we were hard pressed to keep her busy. Frequently the psychiatrists came into our office, ostensibly for case discussions but more precisely for tea, sympathy and bolstering up.

Not only did they seem to find their work depressing but their skills did not seem to be of much help in sorting out their personal problems.

Only close relatives were allowed into the wards. Children could be seen through the windows on the lawns outside. Visiting hours were restricted and curtains round the beds provided the only privacy. There was no TV of course and the use of radios restricted to certain times. Patients who had reached the convalescent stage were allowed out of bed and had short periods of occupational therapy which, in those days, consisted mainly of basket-weaving and light woodwork.

Looking back, now that modern treatment has almost eradicated the disease in Australia at least, and remembering all those young men lying supine for months under pristine white quilts, it seems like a bad dream. During my time at Hollywood, few were discharged and two died not long after I left. Throughout it all, their cheerfulness and fortitude made me realize that not all valour is won on the battlefield.

The hospital had a distinct military atmosphere. Ruby and I had our midday meal in the Sister's Mess. It was presided over by the Matron, an ex-Lieutenant Colonel in the nursing service. I would have preferred a more casual venue as I always seemed to be sitting opposite her at the long table having to make polite conversation.

As there was a staff overflow for accommodation at the hospital, Ruby and I, as well as other ancillary staff, were billeted in a gracious old house in West Perth opposite King's Park. We travelled the short distance to work by bus. The domestic staff, who looked after us, spoilt us even to the extent of bringing us breakfast in bed on our days off.

I bought a small radio on hire purchase, not from necessity but for the experience. It was the only time, I have ever used hire-purchase. I got fed up remembering to make the payments and cleared it halfway through. I lay in bed listening to the ABC programme until the station closed down at 10 pm!

Some evenings we sat round in the kitchen, drinking tea and talking. We gossiped and discussed our future plans, if we had any. I certainly did not. I was very happy where I was. Several girls were saving up to go to England which was the mecca of all young Australians. Barbara had been writing from Adelaide urging me to travel to the UK the following year. I had said I would but felt no strong conviction.

We were within walking distance of the city and it was easy to get to the beach at weekends. The occupational therapist, Pat McMicking, and I had much in common as she had been brought up on a sheep station, Cashmere Downs. Her two brothers, Torrance and John, had a droving contract in the Kimberley. Pat and I went to concerts together, enrolled in a water-colour

painting course and spent happy autumn afternoons, sketching the golden poplars reflected in the pool at the university.

We attended services at St Mary's Anglican Church nearby. The Australian Board of Missions, under whose auspices my mother's sister, Helen, was working as a medical missionary in Melanesia, was based there. When it was discovered I was her niece, we were invited to join the mission sewing group. Once a month we went along to knit eye bandages for the Forrest River Mission in the Kimberley. The members were dedicated women and, although we were not so earnest, we enjoyed their company.

One evening, several of us from the hospital went to have our fortunes told at a rundown little house in Fremantle. The practice was illegal in those days and we were very furtive as we awaited our turn on a small enclosed verandah in pitch darkness. When I went into the overcrowded, dimly lit, little room, a wizened old lady, swathed in a black shawl, motioned to the seat at a small table opposite her. I crossed her hand with the mandatory silver (two shillings) and she dealt cards and gazed into a crystal. She told me that a dark-haired friend wanted me to go overseas but I would not go – I would go north. Barbara certainly had black hair but the part about going north seemed ludicrous.

I enjoyed study and decided to start Italian lessons. My teacher was a small man who was a council worker by day. He and his very tall wife lived in North Perth and I went to their house every Monday evening. I did not make much headway, in some small way because he was very nervous of me so that he shook. Still, it was a beginning.

When Easter came, I invited Pat, Mary the young dietician, and an English speech therapist home to the farm for the break. As a joke, we decided to split into two couples and hitchhike. Mary and I were paired off. It was to be a race to see who reached the farm first. A friend was driving through to Albany and said she could take two of us. We refused the offer saying there were to be no lifts from friends or use of public transport.

Mary and I won the toss to take the rear position and when this friend pulled up for us, we nobly refused to get in the car. The other two had no such scruples and to our disgust accepted the offer. What is more they caught the midnight train at Narrogin and an obliging engine driver dropped them off at the farm gate!

We got a lift from a very nice couple with two small children who were going through Williams. We stopped for a meal at Halfway House but the owners were so tired from all the travellers going through, they told us to go into the kitchen and help ourselves. Mary and I made sandwiches, from the remains of a luscious ham, and tea, while the mother fed her baby.

From Williams we got a lift with two young men going to play tennis in the Easter Carnival in Narrogin and an elderly farmer, returning home after an evening at the club, took us a couple of miles out of Narrogin. It was all a hard trudge after that and it was just as dawn broke that we reached home. My mother, wild-eyed with anxiety about us, was up, fully dressed, and had the kettle on the boil. For Mary, it was an unorthodox introduction to her future home, as sometime later she married Tom and spend most of her life there.

The English speech therapist and I decided to hitchhike to Geraldton and back one hot summer weekend. We arrived at Geraldton about midnight on the Friday night and camped on the beach. We got incinerated next day and by the following day, when we headed south, the skin on my back and face was already blistering and flaking off.

There was very little traffic and we were only halfway back to Perth in the early hours of Monday morning. We took turns sleeping and watching. I can understand how people get run over sleeping on the bitumen. In our case, it was the only level, clear area among rocky ground and thick scrub. Finally, an old truck came along and, seeing our wild gestures, the driver drew to a grinding halt. He was taking a load of crayfish to the Perth market and we gratefully climbed on board. The driver became as worried as we were about us getting to work on time. The truck's top speed was only forty miles an hour and he kept the accelerator flat to the floor as we rattled through the night. We just had time to catch a taxi to the quarters to shower, change and get to work, red-eyed and in my case, skin flaking off my face. A doctor I met at the door exclaimed 'Good God! Whatever happened to you?'

Winter came and went and with the warmer days, I began to feel restless. One day I was sitting at my desk, gazing out of the window at the trees, blue sky and riot of flowers in the garden, wishing I was out there when Pat walked through the door with a letter in her hand. 'How would you like to go droving in the Kimberley?' she asked me. Without hesitation I replied, 'I can't think of anything I'd like better.'

Pat's brothers had suggested she came to Wyndham to meet them, when they brought the last mob of cattle for the season into the Wyndham meatworks, then ride back with them to Argyle Station to leave the plant – the horses, equipment, etc. They planned to fly back to Wyndham and catch the coastal steamer for their return to Perth for the off season break.

It sounded wonderful but the Medical Superintendent was not too happy at losing two of his staff, although Pat, being more prudent than me, had in fact applied for unpaid leave.

I was rather surprised when, in answer to my enquiry about how we would travel, she said 'hitch-hike'. Needless to say, my mother did not approve of the trip, especially when she heard we were hitch-hiking.

I had forgotten I was supposed to be going to Europe with Barbara but she was very understanding and, in fact, another friend wanted to go with her.

Later still, I remembered the fortune teller's prophecy – 'I would not travel overseas with my dark haired friend but was going north!'

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE NORTH WEST

The ladies on the missionary committee were a bit startled to hear our plans but rallied and said we must visit Forrest River Mission and promised to notify the superintendent of our likely arrival.

It was raining when we left on our adventure and we had trouble convincing Pat's mother, with whom we had been staying, that we were not going to take an umbrella. We thought we looked very smart, in blue jeans, check shirts, bush hats and sturdy shoes, as we headed north from Midland, our packs on our backs and a spring in our step. The continuing rain and sparsity of traffic reduced our momentum as the day went on and we did not reach Geraldton until nightfall. Not relishing a wet camp, we booked into a B and B.

The weather had cleared by morning as we headed out of town. The bitumen cut out after Northampton, about 30 miles north of Geraldton, and the road deteriorated to a sandy track. The bush, on each side of the track, was low scrub, the monotony only broken by low, flat-topped hills in the east.

It was late afternoon before a Gascoyne Traders' truck, going to Carnarvon to pick up bananas, came along and stopped for us. We piled in the back. The young driver and his mate seemed glad of company and we carried on a shouted conversation with them above the noise of the truck.

A tyre blew in the early hours of the morning and while the boys changed it, Pat and I made a fire, boiled the billy and made a meal. The moon was bright and we were surrounded by white everlastings which scented the air. It was very quiet, just the fire's crackle and tinkle of a spanner on metal or a muttered curse until the repairs were made and our companions joined us. We were all tired and conversation lapsed as we sat draining the billy and

gazing into the coals, as the fire died down. It was an effort to get up and push on.

Before leaving Perth, we had both been attending watercolour classes and had brought our materials with us. We decided to go out along the Carnarvon jetty and spend a few relaxed hours dabbling. A cargo boat, tied up nearby, made a good focal point. We had barely begun when one of the officers came down from the boat and suggested we come aboard and paint from the bridge – 'because the view would be better!' Although we did not think it would be, we packed up with alacrity and followed him.

We did very little painting but had a very pleasant day, being shown over the boat and having lunch in the mess. We hoped our visit went towards relieving the monotony for the crew while they were waiting the completion of loading.

We went out to the whaling station and watched the flensers slice through the flesh of whales with their long-handled, vicious-looking knives as easily as if they were cutting butter. Blubber was boiling in huge cauldrons, blood and gore lay around like a carpet but I cannot remember either of us ever blenching.

Pat had relatives at Doorawarrah Station east of Carnarvon, who had invited us to visit. They arranged a lift for us with a stock agent and, although he took us, he was rather reluctant. When we remarked on this, Pat's aunt said, 'He was probably worried that news he was driving two girls around the Gascoyne would reach his fiancée in Perth.' When we looked puzzled, because the telegraph line only went to Geraldton, she laughed and said, 'Oh, don't worry, she'll hear about it on the bush telegraph!'

The days at Doorawarrah were not long enough and we stayed longer than we meant to. Pat's young cousins, on holiday from boarding school in Perth, drove us around the station in an old jeep with gay abandon. The days were clear and sunny and the warm air was scented with the wildflowers in full bloom; pink, white and yellow everlastings, purple mulla-mullas and sturt pea, scarlet with centres like black, watching eyes. The wattles were a blaze of gold against the blue sky. We rode the horses and swam in a clear pool, left from winter floods in the sandy river bed, overhung by large gum trees where a myriad of birds chattered. It was with reluctance, we booked ourselves on a flight to Onslow and left such a magic place.

From the small plane, we looked down on a moonscape, brown earth with a patchwork of salt pans reaching to the horizon.

A dusty, red track ran down the centre of Onslow to the jetty where, in earlier days, coastal steamers had loaded wool, brought in on camel-trains from surrounding stations. A Streeter & Male agency, a single-storey,

whitewashed, galvanized warehouse, stood on one side of the road and further on, across the other side, the solid Beadon Hotel seemed to be the only notable buildings. The little settlement was surrounded by sand-hills, sprouting grey and green rushes bent double by the cold, searching wind which blew the whole time we were there. Town water came from a bore which made our hair matted when we washed in it. We were the only guests at the hotel. My feeling about Onslow was that it would make a good scenario for a murder.

Pat had another, strategically placed, relative on Mardie station, halfway between Onslow and Roebourne who invited us to stay on our way north. We had already arranged to get a lift with the mailman. Robert Sharpe said we were welcome but his wife was in Perth, having just had their third son. Some months later, when I met his wife, Phyll, she said that she had been told by a friend that Robert had two girls staying at the station, the day after we arrived.

Mardie, long-established, stretched ninety miles along the coast, including the mouth of the Fortescue River and some miles east to ranges, where cattle were run. It was a sheep station and all mustering was done on horseback. There were about seventy stock horses, one or two ex-racehorses, and previously Mardie had supplied horses for the Mounted Police.

A cyclone, seven years before, had almost flattened the homestead and had taken out most of the mills but, when we were there, it had been largely rebuilt. A carpenter was still employed full-time and was working on the shearing shed at Balmoral, an out station some distance away.

The house was stone with wide, creeper-covered verandahs and surrounded by lawns, palms, frangipani, bougainvillea and hibiscus. A creaking windmill pumped water into a tank on a high stand and sprinklers, on long arms, sprayed arcs of water onto the garden all day.

It was the sole duty of a little, wizened man, who limped badly, to move the sprinklers. Robert told us he had been a Portuguese crew member, of a ship which sank off the coast, and he came ashore on a bale of wool, many years before. He had no documents, spoke little English and had never been registered anywhere. He worked as a stockman until he had a stroke and was now the gardener. A flask with four fingers of rum was put out each evening for him by one of the verandah posts to 'stop his hide from cracking'.

The only other person, apart from those who ate with the owner's family, overseers, jackaroos and governesses, who was allowed alcohol, was the book-keeper, an elderly, white-haired, Englishman who spoke with an Oxford accent. He consumed a good deal of whisky and mellowed as the day progressed. Possibly because of his lubrication, he was not totally reliable



Meg on the track near Wooroloo in 1951.
Taken during one of Meg's many adventures across Western Australia. At this time, she had already worked at Royal Perth Hospital and at Repatriation General Hospital in Hollywood, WA. Her spirit of independence and love of the bush were already well-formed.

about ordering goods or relaying things like the expected arrival times of the mail truck or the Flying Doctor plane. His mistakes he put down to being 'a bit of a bloomer'.

A more recent English arrival was John, who had been put on the staff when he walked in asking for a job. Robert put him on and doubled his wages after the first week because he was such a good worker. He had been put on to spray mesquite, which was a thorny tree spreading throughout the run and causing a threat to sheep which got caught in its thorny branches. Originally mesquite, which came from Mexico, was planted as a thornless ornamental tree but had mutated to thorns and was spreading like wildfire as sheep ate the pods and spread the seeds.

John, we were told, had written to the agricultural authorities in Mexico and was using a spray mixture they recommended which was effective but it was a tedious job, going round the station with a horse and cart and meticulously treating every thicket. He was considered rather unusual for a station hand because he was studying mathematics by correspondence from the London School of Economics. In his spare time, he had re-established the station vegetable garden which now supplied the kitchen.

One of the stockmen was using an alias to avoid certain commitments down south, a common practice in remote parts of the bush. Pat told me when her eldest brother, Torrance, first took up droving in the Kimberley, he met up with an elderly family friend. He shook hands with Torrance, slapped him on the back and said, 'What name are you travelling under, boy?'

Robert kept us entertained as we drove around the station with him in a jeep. Station cooks, very important in the scheme of things on a station because a good cook, especially a good bread-maker, can keep up the morale of the staff, came in for special mention. They seemed to be sensitive souls who took umbrage quickly at the first hint of criticism. A Chinese cook in the past had cut his throat with the carving knife and it was sometimes a problem to keep up the supply of essences because some cooks drank them. One even went so far as to drain the brake fluid out of a visitor's car and drink it.

The station was like a game park, mobs of kangaroos raised their heads enquiringly as we passed, 'as many roos as sheep', Robert remarked bitterly. Now and then, an emu, with its long neck, feather-duster body and piston-like legs, would race us along the dusty tracks.

As well as the white staff, there were about eighty aborigines on the station, living in tin huts about a quarter of a mile from the homestead. These were the stock boys and their families, ranging from old people to

babies. The women worked at the homestead, in various capacities. All were fed from the kitchen. Every meal-time, the ladies came to the kitchen and were served food by the cook and then strode back to the camp with the large, white enamel pie dishes on their heads. They were yamidgees, fine-looking people with a great sense of humour.

Two sheep were killed every night and on the rare occasions when the cattle were brought in, a beast was killed. That lasted about three days. In the days before the NW became a tourist mecca, all comers were given hospitality although social distinctions were clear. The mailman and itinerants ate in the men's mess but ministers of religion, government officials and stock agents, as well as relatives and friends had entrée to the upper echelons of the main house. As tourism boomed and some travellers took advantage of this generosity, the tradition disappeared for practical and economic reasons.

Every evening we had pre-dinner drinks on the verandah and watched the horses galloping in to the water trough. It was a wonderful sight to witness, snorting and cavorting, coats shining, manes and tails flowing, they stampeded through a pall of red dust.

We sat on the verandah after dinner, to drink coffee and to yarn, as the flying foxes chattered in the palm trees nearby.

One night we sat, spellbound, while Robert and an elderly, spare, station-owner, a family friend who was staying briefly, talked. He sat on the steps and I remember a story he began with the words: 'It was on a night like this – a night when the stars were so bright, you could reach up and grasp them in your hand.'

A truck came through, going to Roebourne, so we packed and took the opportunity to move on. Before we left, Robert asked me if I would consider coming back after Christmas as governess for his eldest son who would be starting correspondence lessons, but I was non-committal.

The ride to Roebourne was memorable because, at every gate, the driver cracked open a bottle of beer, we each had a swig and left the bottle hanging on a tree branch. The landscape became more arid the further north we went. It was stony, spinifex country, red earth with strange, flat-topped ranges in the distance.

A lot of the buildings in Roebourne were built of stone or red, rammed earth, more interesting and attractive than the other towns we had passed through.

We booked into the hotel and got a lift to Port Sampson, eight miles away on the coast. Only a couple of rammed earth structures gave witness to its historic settlement. It was on an estuary and we had been warned not

to swim because of sharks, but there was a long stretch of beach of firm, white sand. We walked for miles, collecting shells and poking the anemones in the rock pools, to make them clutch our fingers. Late in the day, the sandflies came out in swarms, so we were glad to beat a retreat.

It was hot and each afternoon we camped on our balcony beds. On the third afternoon when we went out, I heard an amazed voice shout 'Meg!' Mia, a WAAAF friend from Geraldton days, was sitting on a bed with some other girls, part of a team of tennis players who had come to Roebourne from Port Hedland for a tournament.

When we told them our story, they said we must come on to Port Hedland with them and Mia invited us to stay with her. We flung our gear together and were packed into one of the two utes the team travelled in. It was dusk when we left and dust skurled over us. The road was just a track, two wheel cuts through sand. We bogged several times and we all had to get out and push. About 3 am our ute broke down and we girls sat on the side of the road, talking, until the men fixed it. It was dawn when we reached Mia's home and, thankfully stretched out on our sleeping bags on her lounge room floor.

As well as Alan, her husband, who was at the local RAAF station, they had two little girls and Mia's elderly English parents were holidaying with them.

We were there for over a week, spending most of each day down on the long, hot jetty fishing with her father. He was a very precise man and not only lent us lines but gave us instruction as well. He showed us how to jag for bait, which was very satisfying because we always caught something. He stressed the importance of tying the end of our lines onto something secure before throwing them out. It was a glorious moment when he forgot to anchor his own and threw it in, hook, line and sinker. With assistance from a fellow fisherman it was recovered. It was much more difficult to catch the large fish, although we could see them swimming round below us. Pat did get a huge cod which kept us fed for days.

Twice daily, we joined the locals at the hotel, for the sessions. Beer seemed to be the panacea for keeping boredom at bay in Port Hedland. Or at least it dulled the edges.

We had almost given up hope of a ride to Broome and were thinking we would have to fly when we heard that the government travelling dentist was going through. When approached, he said he would be happy to take us if we did not mind travelling on the back of his ute. So, once more, we packed hastily and bidding a fond farewell to our kind hosts, climbed on board, fitting in among metal boxes containing dental equipment, drums of water, fuel, food and luggage.

The dentist had just married and he and his new wife were making that trip their honeymoon. They were accompanied by a middle-aged dental mechanic so we did not feel we were intruding on their connubial bliss. His wife seemed glad of some female company.

We set off in the late afternoon and, sitting up on the tin boxes, we soon lost our freshly-laundered, pristine appearance. As the road became rougher, we bounced around on our seats, hanging on for dear life to the canopy bars overhead. 'Ever seen a spider monkey?' Pat asked through gritty teeth.

Besides improving dental health in the NW, the dentist planned to shoot anything that moved. As well as a new wife, he had acquired a new rifle and we had several stops while he blazed away. He went down considerably in our estimation when he started shooting at a group of brolgas. Fortunately, they were over 200 yards away so they were safe and carried on with their graceful, stately dancing without missing a beat.

Mill tracks criss-crossed the road and the moon had just risen as we went off of a tangent and came to a mill. Cattle tracks had covered anything that looked like a distinct road. Both the dentist and the mechanic were from the city and the atmosphere in the cab became tense as they argued about which direction to take. Pat and I hung onto the bars above us as we swung dizzily around, our seats leaping up beneath us and the moon, too, went first to our right and then our left. An hour later, we got back on track but had not gone far before we bogged in sand. We were driving through the Pardoo sands and at one stage bogged five times in as many miles.

We stopped in the early hours of the morning and stretched out wherever we could find a patch of sand free of spinifex. We were just over the sand-hills from the Eighty Mile beach and could hear the surf crashing in.

Flies woke us before dawn and we pushed on to a mill where we sat in the shade of the only tree in sight and had a sketchy breakfast. The young couple drank only lemonade and the mechanic brandy, neither of which appealed to us. Although we were dying for a cup of tea, we did not have time to boil the billy and made do with water.

The mechanic got through two bottles of brandy on the trip. He had them wrapped in his jacket at the back of the ute and had a swig at every gate. He pressed us to join him but we declined gracefully. He probably had the most painless trip of us all.

We travelled ninety miles without seeing a tree, apart from those on the horizon beside the shimmering lakes, mirages, hazy and ephemeral.

Pat and I tied our neck scarves over our faces to protect us from the dust, causing a ripple of mirth among a group of aborigines sitting in the shade of the store as we rolled into Anna Plains Station. It was lunch time and we

felt very uncomfortable that the manager's wife was duty bound to invite us for the meal, as there were five of us and we had arrived unannounced. Even so it did not mar my enjoyment of the meal, cold meat, salad and cups of tea, served in a spinifex cool room. We sat there for an hour, during which time I slept, sitting bolt upright.

Trails of smoke from mustering fires rose up along the horizon as we drove along. Near sunset, the dentist spotted a bush turkey and, after a fusillade of shots, managed to hit it, which made him very happy.

We stopped for a meal at sunset. Food, the cool of evening, combined with the knowledge that we were in almost in Broome, raised our spirits so we were singing as we bounced over the last few miles. The road ran through tidal flats and as the tide was in, our troubles were not over. We got well and truly bogged and covered in mud trying to get the ute out. We were rescued when someone came along in a truck and gave us a tow out.

It was after 10 pm when we drew up with a flourish outside the Continental Hotel. While the dentist hurried off with his turkey to hand it over to the kitchen staff, we three girls made a bee line for the bathroom.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

BROOME

It was hot and humid when we left the hotel to explore the town, early next morning. The wide main street was almost empty of traffic and, on first appearances, the town belied the romantic picture of this port of pearls we had built in our minds.

Scarlet-flowered poincianas and the bottle-shaped boabs lined the streets. There were tropical-looking houses on stilts, with wide verandahs and set in green lawns, which looked attractive but it was hardly a thriving metropolis. Businesses and the few shops were opening up and people were very friendly. No one seemed to be in a hurry, later we were to hear of 'Broome time' and learnt life took on a slower pace in the north.

Most of the people here were European. Chinatown, we were told, was down on Willie Creek where the pearling luggers were at anchor and that the fleet was in, for a few days, loading up for their next trip to the pearling grounds.

We followed a straggling dirt road for half a mile and came to the settlement, a shanty town of galvanized iron. There were a couple of shops selling groceries, clothes, pearl shell ornaments and a hotch potch of other goods, and several large sheds where the oyster shells were opened, examined for pearls and then packed for export to be made into buttons and ornaments.

The divers, almost all Malays now, Chinese merchants and a few aborigines and their families lived in neat little whitewashed cottages, each with a gaily painted door.

Willie Creek looked muddy and uninviting, lined on both sides with dark green mangroves. About twenty luggers lay at anchor, rocking gently on the tide. Crews were busy running up and down the small jetty with stores, ropes and equipment, loading it on board the vessels.

We joined the throng of families and business people on the shore next day, when the fleet was leaving. There was tension and excitement as last minute preparations and farewells were made, anchors pulled and the vessels set out, down the creek in single file, on the outgoing tide. The sails were up as they came out into the bay and they looked like kites skimming across the water. They were heading out 160 miles to the pearling grounds. Morgan's Chinese crew was leading, we were told. We watched as they diminished. Two hours later, they passed over the horizon.

Broome was a dying town, we were also told. Its decline had begun when the original fleet of well over a hundred luggers had been caught at sea during a cyclone in the late 1920s and had never recovered its former glory. The pearl market had declined and the trade relied on the sale of pearl shell. Added to which there was difficulty getting experienced divers. Prior to the war, Japanese divers were given special indemnity from the White Australia Policy because it was recognized that the success of the industry was largely due to their daring and skill. The indemnity was revoked in 1945 and the Malay divers who replaced them were not so intrepid or prepared to risk their lives to the same extent as the Japanese.

The Japanese cemetery, just out of town, bore testimony of the dangers. There were rows of graves of the men who had given their lives, seeking treasure in foreign seas. Some of the shrines and headstones, engraved with Japanese names, had flowers and small bowls of rice laid beside them. At least some of them were remembered by others in the small community.

A bust of Dampier, in a shady park, faced the bay named after his ship the *Roebuck*. The tide goes out for two miles and when it was low, we could see the wrecks of some of the Catalina Flying Boats, bombed by the Japanese when they raided Broome.

The days were hot and humid and we were glad to return to the cool of the hotel after our excursions. We soon adopted the local custom of a siesta in the afternoon and gathering in the bar later, joining the local identities. Several old pearling masters, immaculate in tropical whites, and their wives regaled us with enthralling yarns about old Broome days, when pearls of great price had been found and there was intrigue and murders were not uncommon.

The dentist and his entourage had moved on and our half-hearted attempts to hear of traffic travelling through, had not borne fruit. We were resigned to flying to Wyndham but were reluctant to leave. The enchantment of Broome held us in its thrall. It seemed quite alien to the Australia I knew, a magic backwater, forgotten by civilization.

One of the pearling masters took us to his house to show us his wonderful collection of shells, garnered from the deep over many years by his divers. The school teacher, a relative of our travelling companion, the dental mechanic, and his family took us shelling at low tide. The children taught us the scientific way to keep the sheen on shells; to take the live animal and leave the shell on an ant heap until its occupant is eaten. We did collect some but as we subsequently did not stop anywhere long enough for the ants to do their work, we eventually had to discard them because the smell was overwhelming. Personally, I am just as happy with the dead shell and their twists, curls, delicately shaded in pastel pinks and yellow.

The king tides were in, the perfect time to see the dinosaur tracks, just south of the half-moon of white sand at Cable Beach. We went to Roebuck Bay as the full moon rose and saw its shimmering light on the water cast a golden pathway on it.

A girl working at the hotel took us to a dance at the Roebuck Bay Hotel. It had a dubious reputation as a venue, being mainly patronized by the people from nearby Chinatown and supposedly a hot bed of gambling and vice.

We were warmly welcomed by some very made-up, flashily-dressed older ladies whom in retrospect we thought may have hoped we were new recruits, otherwise there were a few Malay people. I cannot remember any dancing but we had a sing-song round the piano and Pat and I rendered our party piece – 'As I walked out on the streets of Laredo', which was well received.

We heard of a truck driver planning a trip to Derby who, when approached, said he would be pleased to take us and arranged to pick us up from the hotel when he was ready to leave.

A geologist's wife, who had come into Broome for a few days and who was living on a station near the Leopold Ranges, wanted us to go back with her for a long stay. 'I'd love you girls to come back for a few months with me. I never see another white woman,' she pleaded. We would have loved to stay but our objective was Wyndham, so we had to refuse.

A RAAF plane came in and the crew offered us a trip back to Darwin with them and again we had to say, 'Thanks, but no thanks'. We also refused their invitation to visit the gambling dens in Chinatown which in retrospect seems to have been very unadventurous.

The truck driver sent a message to say he was ready to go and would pick us up next day. Immaculate in clean clothes, we were waiting on the verandah ahead of the time when the geologist's wife burst out of the hotel

saying, 'Heh! I've just heard Dick Kennedy's going through to Wyndham. He'll take you. Come and meet his mates in the bar.'

'You'll take these girls to Wyndham, won't you?' she asked the two young khaki-clad men leaning on the bar. They rose nobly to the occasion and after a moments' hesitation said,

'Sure it's ok by us, but we'll have to ask Dick,' and after we had refused their offer of a drink, downed theirs and said, 'Wait here! We'll be back. Don't move.' And they drove off in their jeep.

Ten minutes later, one was back in a Land Rover, 'Dick says we'll have to take the Rover if there are five of us. Hop in!' A quick call to the truck driver to cancel our trip with him, a farewell wave to the bystanders gathered on the verandah, including the three old men propped up against the wall who had taken a keen interest in these rapid developments, and we were off.

Dick was tall, friendly and apparently unperturbed by the prospect of packing us and our luggage into an already heavily-loaded Land Rover. Drums of fuel, water and survey equipment, took up most of the space in the back but there was room for one person to squeeze in. Four of us fitted in the front seat like sardines.

We introduced ourselves as we drove off. Dick and Keith were civil engineers, Ron a surveyor. They worked for the government and were travelling to Wyndham inspecting airstrips and looking for sites for new ones. None of them had done the trip before and they planned to see as much of the country as they could. We could hardly believe our luck.

The thought of the adventure ahead dulled some of my sadness in leaving. A last look at the milky green sweep of Roebuck Bay and we were back on a red dirt road heading north to Derby, 120 miles on.

None of us could foresee the changes that would take place over the years. Broome is now one of the greatest tourist attractions in WA. Unhappily, beautiful as it is, inevitable development has taken place and a lot of the old magic has gone.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE KIMBERLEY

At dusk, we stopped briefly for a meal and pushed on until, a few miles out of Derby, we came to a cattle camp. The softly spoken aboriginal overseer said they were holding the cattle until they could be loaded at the port next day. A bore pipe gushed water and the beasts were horning and jostling each other to get in for a drink. Flames from the blazing camp fire cast a flickering red light over everything and I felt a rush of excitement – the Kimberley at last.

We were touched to discover that before we left Broome, Dick had sent a telegram to the Derby Hotel booking a room for us. It was a nice thought but hardly necessary. There were ten beds in the room allotted to us, black iron with neat white marcella quilts. All the rooms opened onto balconies, through French doors at each end. When we retired early, we found a noisy card game was going on next door, so we resigned ourselves to letter writing. Fortunately, one of the players walked onto the balcony for a breath of fresh air and caught a glimpse of us sitting demurely on our beds. There was a muttered curse as he shot back into the room and, in a stage whisper said, 'Christ you blokes, cut out the language, there's a coupla Sheilas next door!' Scuffling of boots, muttered curses, the clink of bottles and the party goers took off. Apart from our smothered giggles, quiet descended.

A mob of cattle were being driven out to a ship tied up at the jetty, when we looked out from the balcony next morning. The tide had receded to the horizon and they were walking across grey mud to be loaded directly up a gangway. Later, when the tide came swirling back, the water was murky and unappealing. I was reminded of the 'grey, greasy Limpopo' in Kipling's story, 'Elephant's Child'.

Apart from the imposing hotel, a store and a few other buildings, all looking dilapidated, there was not much in the straggling town.

There was another store a few miles out of the town, near the famous longest trough in Australia and the Prison Boab tree. In the old days, the large, hollow bole of the tree was used as a cell by troopers bringing a miscreant in for justice to deal with the crime in the Derby Court. The store carried all the basic stock station people might need. These was a fascinating mix of bush hats, stock whips, saddlery, spurs, ropes, check shirts, dungarees, high-heeled boots, flour, sugar, kerosene, hurricane lanterns, floral dresses and various sundries. For those lucky enough to come to it, personal shopping would make an exciting change from perusing catalogues and sometimes waiting many weeks for goods ordered to arrive. There were a handful of stock-boys in the store and on the verandah two men yarned, looking as if they were reluctant to leave this centre of gossip and commerce.

We pushed on out of town after the boys had been out to look at an air-strip. By midday it was 106 degrees and we were glad to find a pool for our dinner camp. The water was muddy and an overwhelming smell suggested the proximity of goats but we plunged in, clothes and all.

In the mid-afternoon, we lost the road and came up to a mill where the elderly station-owner was giving his eight Pomeranians a drink at the trough. He invited us to follow him to the homestead to have a cup of tea and meet his wife and son. Unbeknown to us, the boys had heard about the son and later told us they planned to call into the station anyway to introduce us to him. On the way they teased us about what a great catch he would be for one of us. We were given a great welcome and taken out to a shade house and given strong, black tea. We met the son, barefoot, hardly an Adonis, who barely uttered a word during our visit. His mother made up for it, telling us about their struggle to become established in the early days. Her husband was often away for months at a time, shearing, to make enough money to get them started and she was on her own.

Although the homestead was bare of luxury, it was homely and no doubt a lot better than the humpy they had to begin with. Life was much better now she told us; the Flying Doctor plane came to their airstrip, once a fortnight, bringing mail and stores. Perishables could be bought now, too, as she had a kerosene refrigerator. She had been to Perth for a visit four years before but there was too much hustle and bustle and she only stayed for two weeks.

Throughout our visit, we were surrounded by a moving carpet of Pomeranians. Besides the eight we had already encountered, there were

another twenty odd. 'Well', our hostess explained, 'the licence fee is the same for thirty as it is for one!'

The boys kept teasing us with surreptitious winks and nudges and we were hard-pressed to keep straight faces and ignore them.

We reached Fitzroy Crossing after night fell. Pat and I got a great welcome from the owner's wife as we walked into the hotel. 'Hello', she greeted us, 'where have you girls been? We expected you weeks ago.' A mutual friend of Pat's and hers had written to say we might call in. She was a delightful person, graceful and elegant, in spite of the rigours of heat and dust.

Our bedroom seemed to be a public thoroughfare to and from the bathroom. At least three male guests burst through the door, clad only with towels wrapped round them and, with horrified apologies, withdrew in great haste. One slipped on the mat inside the door and skidded under the bed, to his huge embarrassment and our smothered mirth.

The country was becoming more rugged as we headed for Halls Creek. There were rocky outcrops and tall anthills stood like sentinels, scattered haphazardly between low, fragile-looking gum trees. Here and there, along the side of the track, low bushes of kapok grew. They were a legacy from the Afghan camel trains which carried wool clips from stations to the ports in the early days. Seeds from the kapok used as stuffing for the pack saddles had escaped and flourished. The yellow flowers and fluffy white seedpods looked delicate and out of place in such harsh terrain.

We dug out the two Ellery Queen stories we had kept and, to break the monotony, we took turns reading aloud, a page each. As we bounced over the rocky track, it was hard to hear and there were many interruptions:

'What was that?'

'I missed that bit, what did he say?'

In spite of the red dust, spinning up from the wheels, we sang as we rocked along, told jokes and talked.

There was great excitement in Halls Creek, as a white baby had just been born. Most pregnant European women went south for their deliveries but this mother had put her trust in the sister at the bush hospital and the Flying Doctor, who had not failed her.

Beer was very expensive at Halls Creek as it had to be overlanded from Derby. Sometimes, such as in floods when the truck could not get through, the town went dry which was a disaster for the heavy drinkers whose 'hides were cracking'. There was no shortage on this night and it seemed as if the whole town was in the bar wetting the baby's head.

Pat and I slept in a cottage in the hotel backyard and when I woke at sunrise and went outside, I was surprised to be accosted by a very good-looking young trooper who wanted to know who I was travelling with and our planned route. As he talked to me, he recorded our details in a notebook, explaining it was a regular practice that he would notify the policeman at Turkey Creek, and the stations we would pass through, to look out for us in case we ran into trouble.

The boys wanted to inspect the airstrip before we left and when we arrived, I found an old friend from Perth working there. It called for a celebration needless to say. The cold beer was very refreshing but not the best start for a hot drive and we made an early dinner camp, hoping strong, black tea would act as a panacea for our lethargy. The flies soon sent us back on the track.

We passed two rough homesteads, more like sheds than houses. At one, some aboriginal women, sitting in the sparse shade of straggly trees, gave us lethargic waves. A few goats scuffling around in the dust were the only other sign of life.

We stopped at a tripod set on the side of the road. It was crowned with a bunch of dry leaves and trail of sticks, laid in a line down a minor road. It must have been a message for some wayfarer. We pondered on who it was meant for as, on our whole trip, we had seen no one else on the track.

Although the area was so vast and empty, no one passed through it unnoticed. Several months later, further south, I was introduced to a man who, as he shook my hand said,

'Oh yes, of course weren't you one of the two girls who travelled from Derby to Wyndham with that survey party?' When I said I was but did not remember meeting him, he laughed,

'Oh no, you didn't. I was at' and he mentioned a station two hundred miles off the track, 'but I heard all about you girls at the Race Meeting.'

The country opened up as we headed north. Small, delicate-looking eucalypts, with slim white trunks, their colour drained in the glare, grew sparsely among the rocks.

Ron shot a bush turkey after much effort, in the late afternoon, and as we were so far from civilization and had to camp, we put it in the camp oven with rice and onions, hoping to dine on it in some style. It was still tough several hours later and we finally crawled into our swags, tired, dirty and hungry. In spite of savage attacks by mosquitoes and a bed that felt like a cheese grater, I slept until flies crawled into my eyes in the tender light of the piccaninny dawn.

We rallied with strong, black tea. The turkey, which had been left simmering on the coals, was now so tender the meat fell of the bones but with the flies honing in on every mouthful, we soon lost our appetite for it and threw it out.

We called into the lonely Turkey Creek police station and duly reported our safe passage to the young trooper. He was very interested to meet Pat. 'Where have you been?' he asked her, 'the boys have been worried about you. They expected you weeks ago!' It turned out that he knew both John and Torrance. He told us they had returned from Argyle and were at the Six Mile Hotel out of Wyndham, waiting for the coastal steamer to come back from Darwin, going south. We were disappointed but hardly surprised to hear we had missed our trip taking the plant – the horses and the gear – back.

Anxious to reach our destination, we stopped only briefly for a scratch midday meal. Rugged, rangy hills and red outcrops rose on each side as we bowled along in a skurl of dust. Our spirits rose as the miles fell away. Dusk had fallen as we came past an airstrip, the white windsock sagging on its pole and then, through the gloom, the welcome winking lights of the Six Mile Hotel.

Dirty, tired, red with dusk, we moved as one to the bar. There was a sudden hush among the few drinkers leaning on the wide, high counter. Then, with a wild yell, the barman leapt over the barrier, engulfed Pat in a bear hug. 'Sis, where have you been?' Torrance shouted.

It was a fitting end to our journey.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

WYNDHAM

The Six Mile Hotel was a home away from home, for the stockmen and drovers bringing in mobs of cattle for shipping, run by a warm-hearted, middle-aged lady called Mrs Burton. After Torrance and John had returned from Argyle, and were waiting for the *Koolinda* to return from Darwin on its southern trip, she had put them both on the staff, Torrance in the bar and John as yardman.

Pat and the boys had a lot of catching up on family news to do but, in appreciation for them bringing us to Wyndham, we had told our survey friends, we would do their washing for them and this kept us busy all next day. They had been on the road for a month and had not done any laundry for the whole time, judging by the pile of clothes they brought us.

Troughs and a copper were housed in a bough shed in the backyard and we slaved away all day, under the watchful eye of the laundry maid, a six foot aboriginal lady who periodically disappeared behind the shed, convulsed with mirth.

In return for our labours, the boys took us out for dinner at the Wyndham Hotel and to an open air showing of *Madame Bovary* where we sat in deck chairs and slapped mosquitoes. It was nice to dress up in our one respectable outfit and our hosts were duly impressed.

Torrance and John wanted to take us all for a picnic at the grotto, some distance from town, on the Sunday. Keith, the engineer had to go south and the other two said they could not spare the time as they had to chain and level a nearby aerodrome site, which would take two days. When Pat and I volunteered to help them, so it could be done in one day, they accepted the offer with alacrity.

We set off at dawn next morning with theodolite, level and other necessities, and laboured all day. The ground was rough, spinifex pricked our legs, flies crawled into our eyes and the temperature soared to 110 degrees, but by dusk we had the job done.

Early Sunday morning, the boys, their girlfriends, who worked at the meat-works, and the four of us set off in a battered old ute, bouncing along the rough, dusty road. After some distance, Torrance swung into a dry creek bed and we ground our way over rocks and young boulders until finally he drew up and said we would have to walk the rest of the way. The grotto, when we reached it, was a deep, dark stretch of water, strewn with water lilies, at the foot of a high cliff and we wasted no time diving in.

Our survey friends left next day, neatly pressed after our efforts with the flat irons, heated on the kitchen stove.

We had sent a telegram to Forrest River Mission, notifying them of our arrival and a reply had come saying they would notify us when the launch was coming into Wyndham next. While we waited Mrs Burton put us on the staff.

'It's silly for you girls to pay board,' she said. 'You can help me and I'll give you a pound a day.'

We were not overworked. There were more staff than guests. Apart from the stockmen, who slept on a long verandah outside our room, there was only a clandestine couple who were accommodated on the other side of the hotel.

Our responsibilities including making early morning tea for the men, most of whom laced their first mug of strong, sweet, scalding hot drink with two fingers of rum as a heart starter, setting tables, putting ice in the butter dishes, hopefully to keep the butter from liquefying, washing up, making beds, and turning up at the bar for staff pre-lunch and dinner drinks. When the cook, who was about our age, had one more than was good for her and scalded her hand, we filled in as much as we could with the cooking. After lunch, man and dog alike crawled under the hotel and rested on grey blankets, hopeful of catching any movement of air.

I had my birthday at the Six Mile and the boys plied us with beer with a lavish hand, while I threw caution to the wind. The result was disastrous. As dawn broke next morning, I woke just in time to leap out of bed to the verandah rail which I hung over, disgracing myself.

'What's up?' came the ribald remark from the verandah beds: 'You're not chucking it very far. Got a weak stomach?' and to the occupant of the bed nearest our door: 'Lucky, she missed you, mate!' I was not allowed to forget my indiscretion in a hurry.

The *Koolinda* arrived and we bid the boys farewell. Soon after they left, a telegram came from the mission stating the launch would be in Wyndham on such and such date, a cryptic message to 'be at the Wyndham Wharf at 8 pm on the appointed day, sailing with the tide!'

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

FORREST RIVER MISSION

At the appointed hour, we stood by the broken-down little jetty running off the Wyndham wharf. It was a very dark night and we could just see the pale shape of a launch, tied to it, rising and falling, as waves surged in, sending spouts of water through the gaps in the broken planks.

A tall shape passed us, dropped an object on the roof of the vessel where unseen hands removed it below. The shape came back and introduced himself as the Reverend Keith Coaldrake, the Anglican priest in charge of the mission. Presently, Sheila, his wife, appeared nursing a young baby and introduced herself.

She also had a torch and in the will o' the wisp light, we saw a black face, the launch, the white crest of a wave slapping into it, Keith's long, brown legs as he hurried back and forth with more stores and, more unnerving, the narrow plank he ran along. Later, we heard that he had fallen off the plank into the crocodile-infested water with a bag of flour on his back one night but clearly it had not affected his confidence. Even so, I was filled with trepidation when he called out: 'Loading's finished. Tide's turning, get on board.'

'Come on,' said Sheila, stepping lightly along the plank, babe in arms. Gingerly, we followed, dropping onto the roof of the launch as it rose on the crest of a wave and scrambling below. The engine started, the anchor pulled, ropes untied and we swung out into the buffeting waves racing out of the Cambridge Gulf. The baby was tucked away safely in the cabin and we found places for ourselves among the stores on board.

Keith told us we would travel about fifty miles up the Gulf and then swing into the mouth of the Forrest River on the west side of the Gulf to anchor until the next incoming tide brought enough water for us to

carry on the thirty odd miles to the mission. There seemed no discernible landmarks in the darkness but he and the boatman, with a feat of seamanship, brought us neatly into the river mouth and dropped the anchor in calmer waters.

It was past midnight. Sheila, Pat and I were allocated the roof of the launch for bed space. A late moon rose and laid a golden light across the black, oily-looking river bed. I felt too excited to sleep and lay looking up at the last expense of sky, listening to the soft, slapping noise of waves on the sides of the launch as the water receded. The air was warm and heavy, smelling of salt. Soon mosquitoes made a savage attack, I was trying to decide whether to ignore them or climb into my sleeping bag and risk drowning in it if I rolled off into the water when I fell asleep.

The sun on my face, flies and Peter, the baby, crying, brought me to my senses. My feet were hanging in thin air. In daylight, we looked each other over and sorted ourselves out in the crowded space below. We had a meal and Pat and I took turns nursing the baby, while we looked around.

Mangroves flanked the river on both sides, with tall, dry cane grass standing further back. The river bed was nearly empty of water, leaving stretches of black mud on both banks.

Mid-morning, the tide started coming in, gently at first, spreading over the mangroves. Mud around the roots popped and sucked and, as the relentless flow began to surge in more strongly, the launch began to rock and swing. As the river bed filled, we started up the many twists and turns of the river itself. Sometimes we saw the bulbous eyes of crocodiles just breaking the surface of the water as they watched us pass.

When we came to high cliffs on each side of the river, Sheila told us that in 1913, when Bishop Trower came to make a second attempt to start the mission, the first having failed, a huge storm hit the party at this point and they expected to be shipwrecked. At the height of the storm, the Bishop saw a vision of St Michael and All Angels and took it as a sign from God that they would be saved. He vowed to build a church at the mission and name it in honour of the saint. In time, a church was built and called for St Michael and his minions. Considering the events that followed, God could have been telling the Bishop to turn back.

There was a crowd of people waiting on the river bank to welcome us as we came round the last bend and dropped anchor at the landing. Landing was a courtesy title only, hitching post would have been a more accurate description. We were told later that all attempts to build a landing had been swept away by the force of the tides.

Numerous children ran back and forth along the water's edge, calling out 'Mana! Mana!' to Sheila, 'Judja Judja' to Keith (mother and father respectively). Two white men were among the crowd. Bruce, Keith's brother who had come from Queensland to help on the mission, and Les Hahn, a young priest who had been sent up from Perth to help out, as well, for three months. He looked distinctly unclerical in shorts, a cream silk shirt with sleeves ripped out and a red sweat rag round his neck. He had been teaching the schoolchildren, who until his arrival had had no formal education for two years.

We had to climb over the side of the launch into knee-deep, black mud so hardly cut a dash as we scrambled up the bank. Eager hands took our packs, the stores were unloaded onto the tray of a battered red truck, the only mechanized transport on the mission and we set off after Keith with the mailbag and Sheila with Peter, along a track of hot sand.

We turned off at the mission house, where we were to stay with Sheila and Keith during our visit. Two Madagascar cassias stood each side of the path, golden cones, vivid against the blue sky. Darkest Africa, I felt as I walked up the wooden steps onto a wide verandah, could not be better than this.

The mission house was a solid building and had wooden floors, a distinction shared only by the store. Hot tea revived us and we took turns in the bathroom, a sketchy enclosure off the verandah, where we tried to wash off the mud under a kerosene bucket shower. We soon settled in and made ourselves as useful as possible.

We met the other white staff, Joyce, the nursing sister, and Matron, who supervised about fifteen girls sent in from various stations for education. They lived in a dormitory where they learnt some household management. The Jamiesons, Bill a mechanic and Mary his wife, who taught the girls sewing in the afternoon, were due for furlough and leaving shortly. *Oblah* (Brother) Tenny[11] was an older man who ran the store. His wife had taken their children south for schooling. Bruce Coaldrake lived at the mission house with his family and Les had meals with the other staff at the dormitory. Les had been recalled by the Bishop and was also leaving shortly.

The dormitory, school and church, still duly called for St Michael and all Angels, were built on similar lines, tin roofs, steel supports and walls only four feet high to allow a free flow of air, made with spinifex pushed between netting sides.

11 His full name was Tennyson but he was always known as Tenny.

All the other buildings were made of mud brick. A number of families lived on the mission, each in their own small house with cooking facilities.

The older people who chose to keep to their tribal way of life lived in humpies down by a bend in the river. In spite of rejecting mission edicts, the two communities interacted both with the younger ones on the mission and the white staff. The old people kept tribal law, planned corroborees and other ceremonies to do with marriage and relationships.

Everyone who was able worked, in return for food and clothing. Joyce visited the camp daily to check on the frailer old people to ensure they were being fed. The camp had a pack of about thirty dogs of every variety and colour, kept for hunting, which had to be taken out bush whenever a visitor arrived at the camp. Lacking a front door, it was etiquette to shout when making an approach so the pack could be rounded up.

David, the elderly, frail king of the tribe, lived there with his wife but it was his second son, Peter, who managed tribal affairs. He was a big, fine looking man who, we were told, was banned from living on the settlement because he had two wives. Under tribal law, he was bound to take two and whether he wanted to live on the mission or not, I felt it was very unjust.

The families were given stores and did their own cooking but some of the women cooked for the old people in what was called the people's kitchen. It was a shed with a tin roof and open netting walls. The food was cooked in two large coppers and the old women came up from the camp with billy cans and dilly bags to carry their rations back.

The shed was all that remained of an ill-fated attempt to establish the Victorian Pastoral Company in 1886. The party had landed further north with 2,000 sheep and a number of horses but was not welcomed by the aborigines who speared the sheep and drove the horses into mud flats. The horses died and their manes and tails were cut off for hair belts. The settlers moved south to a lagoon, near the present mission site, where they built a rock house but they continued to be harassed and in the end, the project was abandoned. A white woman in the party, Mrs Wilkes, had a baby there who unhappily died. It was buried under a spreading boab tree which was still standing. It must have been anguish for the parents to have to leave it in that lonely wild place.

Sheila told us a lot about the history of the mission. In 1897, the Anglican Church was given a huge tract of land for its establishment. Bishop Hale and three other men made the first attempt and moved into the abandoned rock house. There were continual attacks on them and their boat was stolen. They would probably have all died but the boat was seen drifting in the Gulf and a search party for them set out from Wyndham led by the police.

The missionaries were rescued but took part in a ruse to lure the aborigines into a hut where they were arrested and the ring leaders were taken back to Wyndham. They were given various sentences and each one received fifteen lashes! British justice at its best!

The mission was abandoned until Bishop Trower made his attempt. He had a small but well-equipped party. They build a solid mud batt house with rifle slits in the walls, surrounding it with a barbed wire fence. In spite of this, they were under constant attack and finally withdrew.

The Bishop called on the Reverend Ernest Gribble who had many years' experience on a Queensland mission. He came and stayed until 1928. He had been a controversial figure in mission history but certainly had a far reaching influence. Even the children who showed Pat and me around the mission told us about him, about the pet monkey he kept chained up on a platform, in the shade of a boab tree, and the peanuts he grew. He was certainly a strict disciplinarian, meting out physical punishment where he felt it was due. In spite of the poor water supply, he established fruitful gardens and set the people to work making mud bricks for houses.

Hearing this, even in the euphoria I was feeling to be in this remote and exciting place, I did give pause to wonder why people had persisted in trying to force Christianity onto people, who even from the little I had seen, appeared to have a rich cultural and spiritual life within the tribal system. I could only marvel at the acceptance and friendliness of the people towards us.

Not only had the people resisted the first missionaries but the land itself was harsh and forbidding. The heat in summer could be overwhelming and the river, with all the vagaries of uncertain tides, the only viable route to Wyndham in those early days. To reach the town by land entailed a journey round the bottom of the Gulf and through several, crocodile-infested river deltas. Sometimes an aboriginal runner had been sent, with telegrams or other 'paper talk' and to collect mail. Letters were placed in the fork of a stick so it could be held out of the water when crossing the rivers. Several launches had been lost in the past, swamped by big tides and sucked down into the black river mud. A barge carrying the first lot of pipes for a water scheme, currently being built, had been lost in the Gulf.

An iron cross, set in a cairn of stones on top of the jump up, overlooked the mission. It was a memorial for the aborigines killed in a police raid, after a white station-owner had been speared by an aboriginal in 1926. There are several versions of the story: that an aboriginal stole cattle, that the white man assaulted an aboriginal woman, or that the police killed a lot of people, or that no one had died. Any of the aborigines I spoke

to about it, believed there had been a massacre and it was one of the first places the children showed Pat and me, when they took us on our guided tour.

The Forrest River people still spoke their own language, *Gwini* I believe, kept their skin relationships and carried out men's and women's business.

The mission ran on central time, one-and-a-half hours ahead of WA, to get the benefit of the cool morning hours. There was a three-hour break from noon, so the worst heat of the day could be avoided. Already, it was up to 114°F most days.

Apart from the fortnightly visit from the Flying Doctor, bringing mail as well as the doctor, radio contact was made twice daily with Wyndham. The afternoon call was usually a wipe-out from static.

The Anglican Board of Missions supported Forrest River. All stores came on the coastal steamers, taking a fortnight from Perth to Wyndham, calling on all ports *en route*. Perishables failed to survive the journey so all fruits, vegetables, milk and butter, which turned to oil before it could be eaten, came in tins.

Church services were held at 6.30 am and again in the evening, every day. While the people were encouraged to attend, very few did. The white staff and the dormitory girls, who were dragooned in by Matron, usually made up the congregation. Pat and I showed willing, and our knees, dusty from kneeling on the ant-bed floor, gave testimony of our righteousness.

Although the families on the mission were free to corroboree with the tribal members at weekends and go walkabout at holiday time, I felt that in many ways they fell between full tribal life and Christianity. Having been brought up to believe there were few more noble callings than those on the mission fields, I pushed my doubts aside. There was certainly no doubt about the dedication and commitment of the members of the staff. I could only admire their patience and fortitude. Most of them had studied at least some anthropology, so they had an understanding of tribal law. Forrest River administration was probably much more flexible at that time, than that of many other missions. I did not give the matter much thought as there were so many other interesting things to do and see.

The girls, Matron and Joyce took us to Camera Pool on our first Sunday. It entailed a seven-mile walk to reach it, up the jump up, across a wide plateau and down a decline to the water. This pool was to be the source of the water scheme. An engine, yet to arrive, would pump the water along the route we had travelled to a tank on the top of the jump up and gravity would help to take it to the tanks on the mission. It was a Herculean task and all the men and even older camp women were working on the project.

The latter carted flat stones to make a road of sorts, sweeping rubble into the spaces with brush brooms.

The pool was above the salt water barrier, safe from dangerous crocodiles. There were some Johnston's crocodiles in it but they were shy and comparatively harmless. We walked down onto a sandy beach, shaded by big trees and palms while a cliff rose straight up to a height of about 40 feet on the other side. The face was striated with tawny colours and these were reflected in the wide expanse of calm water. It was very beautiful.

We swam most of the day, joining the girls diving off a ledge on the cliff to catch pebbles they threw in, before they reached the bottom. No matter how hard I tried, I could never win. Black shadows sped past me, only the many pairs of pink soles of their feet identifying them as bodies.

Black tea, damper cooked in the ashes and spread with jam, was the first of many camp meals I was to enjoy.

We swam among water lilies, picking the long stems and swimming out to deep water to drink through them to get the colder water below. The girls liked to examine our teeth, unhappily not as strong and white as their own. My gold fillings were a source of wonder – 'Arlee, Arlee! She's got gold teeth!' But Matron held the trump card as she had an upper plate she could drop down, causing shrieks of delight.

We had planned to fly to Darwin where Pat had a friend she wanted to visit before returning to her work at Hollywood Hospital. Before we had booked our flight, however, Keith asked me if I would stay on and take over the school when Les left. It would give them a chance to find a more permanent missionary teacher. I knew he was reluctant to approach the government for help in case the appointee did not hold Christian beliefs! I pointed out my lack of training but Keith said I would be better than nothing! Sheila added her pleas, saying even if I kept the children occupied it would help!

Making a decision was not hard. I felt I could go to Darwin anytime but a chance to live at Forrest River would probably never come again. I was fascinated by the place but it was not from altruistic missionary zeal that I accepted the offer.

Sheila had told us that every wet season the old people went walkabout the 400 miles to the Roman Catholic Mission, Drysdale (now called Kalumburu), on the coast, and I thought if I stayed and they got to know me, they might let me go with them.

I went back to Wyndham to see Pat off and buy a few essentials, mainly dress material to augment my wardrobe. The store was a long, dim shed run by Chinese. A great variety of goods were laid out on trestle tables and

I was able to buy what I thought I would need in the foreseeable future. It was my last shopping spree for many months, which was just as well as my salary as a teacher was to be the standard rate for the staff of one pound a week.

In fact, I hardly spent any money while I was there. Sheila's group of sewing ladies not only made up the material I had bought but unpicked and remodelled some of the more unsuitable second-hand dresses which had come up in the mission boxes for me, too. There was a standard sun-frock pattern we all wore and, because of the heat, we sometimes needed two or three changes daily.

The camp ladies unpicked flour bags for their dresses. They bleached them by washing them in the water holes until the 'dingo' pattern faded and sewed them up with the recycled cotton. I was delighted when the girls made me one as they were so comfortable. The camp ladies also did our washing, squatting around big tubs set out under shady trees in the backyard of the mission house. They chattered, laughed and broke into corroboree songs while they worked. Their shear enjoyment of wash days allayed my guilt feelings about having them do my washing. As the heat increased, I lost any finer feelings I may have had, too, about the girls doing my ironing with flat irons, heated on the hot stove.

There had been horses at the mission but they had all died from walk-about disease, thought to be caused by a certain poison bush. They went blind and got the staggers, eventually dying of starvation. The afflicted mob had strayed into the backyard one wash day, staggering into the tubs and getting wound up in the sheets drying on the line. Sheila said it was bedlam, with both ladies and horses panicking, screaming and neighing respectively.

There were a number of donkeys and mules, as they were immune to the disease. They were used by the stock boys to round up cattle to pick out a killer and to pull the dray for carting. A team of a dozen or so was needed to take loads of pipes up the jump up and along the line for the water scheme. The incline was quite steep and the team swayed from side to side, straining to pull the dray through the rocks and sand to the top. There was much shouting from the teamsters and cracking of whips to urge the poor brutes on. Everyone down below stopped to watch and there were cries of 'Arlee! Arlee!' when they staggered to the top.

The lack of water meant there was no hope of establishing gardens. The only flowers were the two Madagascar cassias at the front of the mission house and those on the boab trees which Judja Gribble had planted in an avenue each side of the track to the landing. Their big, creamy blossoms, nestled among their vivid green leaves, always reminded me of stars.

Water had to be carted from a lagoon several miles from the mission, in a tank on the back of the truck and decanted into the several tanks on the mission. The people had to cart it in buckets to their houses. Some of the women had no problem walking along with a full four-gallon bucket balanced on their heads.

Drinking water at the mission house was stored in two large drums, just inside the kitchen back door. Bruce swore it was the best water he had ever tasted, that it tasted of water lilies. As I had seen several large green frogs disporting themselves in it, I was not so sure.

The white staff shared a communal shower, a few sheets of tin to provide privacy and a kerosene bucket on a pulley with a string which, when pulled, released the plug covering the holes at the bottom. It was similar to the one at the mission house and we were allowed one bucketful of water a day. Speed was the essence of the process but it was at least refreshing. Otherwise, we had to make do with a wash in a bucket. I soon learnt that any type of ablution was referred to as having a 'bogey' in the Kimberley.

When I returned from Wyndham, Sheila asked me to stay on and have meals with them, rather than to go to the dormitory with the others. When I told her I wanted to learn to make bread, she was more than happy to hand over that duty. As time went on, I did quite a lot of the cooking, too.

Until the Jamiesons left, when I was to move into their house, I shared Joyce's quarters at the hospital and we became good friends.

One very dark night, not long after I moved in, I was awoken from a deep sleep by her shaking me and shouting, 'Quick, quick! Get up! Come on! The donkeys are eating the people's porridge!' Barefoot, clad in skimpy nighties, we ran to the people's kitchen nearby to find it packed with donkeys and mules, all fighting each other, to get to the two coppers where the porridge was soaking, to be cooked in the morning. By the light of Joyce's torch, we saw a grey hump here, a flashing eye there, shiny black hooves and switching tails. We rushed through the pack, hitting and shoving them until we got them out of the gate, which the more enterprising of them had nudged open. Paralytic with laughter over the sight we must have looked, we staggered back to bed.

Everyone had porridge every morning. The wheat was milled by hand each day by two tribal elders who worked in the shade of a bough shed. They took turns at turning the handle of the mill, one worked while the other reclined, resting on the ground crooning corroborees songs to the staccato accompaniment of his click sticks.

There was a mob of milking cows brought in at dawn each day, jostling and butting, in a cloud of dust, reddened by the first rays of the sun.

No gentle kine these, but rangy wild-eyed beasts, poor yielders. What milk the boys did drag out of them was given to the children and, personally, I was pleased to forego a share and stick to the tinned variety.

There were thirty or more chooks but they were a dispirited lot and rarely produced more than half a dozen eggs, even on a good day. As the heat intensified, some of them gave up the ghost altogether.

The mob of three hundred goats, on the other hand, flourished on the rough herbage, the nannies reproducing enthusiastically, quite a lot having twins. A picturesque elder, clad only in a *ngaga*, or loin cloth, and carrying a handful of spears and other weaponry, took them out to graze early each day and brought them home at sunset. The nannies often settled their babies in shady nooks while they went out to feed but whether some of them felt they were not cut out for motherhood or forgot them, no one knew because now and again some did not bring their offspring home. One of the staff had to check them every night as the shepherd was rather vague about numbers and, if some were missing, go out and find the kids before a dingo or a python devoured them. Usually the task fell to Bruce and several times I went with him and found them still tucked away in their cribs. They were most appealing little creatures and, in spite of their lapse, their mothers seemed pleased to see them when they were reunited.

Then there was Reggie, the pet brolga, who flew in late each afternoon. Whenever I wore a certain blue-grey patterned dress, Reggie mistook me for a possible mate. He would land with a flurry of long legs at my feet and begin his stately dance around, much to the delight of the children who would cry out: 'Arlee! Arlee! Reggie loves sister! Reggie loves sister!'

The settlement was established on a flat, open plain, the site being a traditional meeting place for ten sub-tribes. It was bounded by the river in the east, the jump up to the south and a line of blue ranges seen in the distance to the north.

The mission had been set up as a cattle station and in the early days mobs had been overlanded round the Gulf to the Wyndham Meat Works but that stopped when it became unprofitable. With the horses gone and only the mules and donkeys left for stock work, there were just a few hundred head which kept near adjacent watering holes.

Every Tuesday, a mob was rounded up and a killer picked out for the mission. There was always a frisson of excitement among the people on killer days, rising as the fatal shot was heard and the red truck arrived loaded with the bloodied carcass.

A ration of fresh meat was handed out to everyone, a number of parties involved in the allocation. Two of the older aboriginal ladies brought the

share for the mission house to the back door, still quivering in the enamel basin. We were always favoured with a piece of fillet which, sliced very thinly and quickly grilled on top of the stove, had to be tasted to be believed. Our meat, stored in the fridge, kept fresh for three days but as none of the families had such a luxury, they cooked and ate theirs straightaway. The rest of the kill was salted and handed out later in the week. Our hunk of spare ribs or flap hung on a hook in the kitchen. Its unprepossessing patches of yellow and purple, caused by the salting, belied its gourmet properties. Soaked to remove the salt, boiled for a long time and served with rice, it was delicious.

Sheila and I were bidding each other goodnight on the front verandah, one evening, when we were startled by the sound of a shot at the back. When we rushed to the kitchen, we saw Keith emerge out of the dark yard with a revolver on one hand and our meat ration in the other. 'Dingo took it,' he said, dusting it off on his shorts, hanging it back on the hook and disappearing into the dark to dispose of the remains of the thief.

Some evenings, the men borrowed a gun from Keith and went hunting kangaroos. They had to travel well into the bush because the area around the mission had been cleared out of game. Keith said that if a kangaroo even showed its ears over the top of the jump up, it was as good as dead.

The women and children went bush after goannas and lizards in their spare time, too. In spite of the lack of rain, they also found bush fruits. The children sometimes brought me 'goondi', little black berries like black currants.

There was great excitement when an eighteen-foot python was found in a small depression near the mission. It lay immobilized by two large swellings in its gut – two ducks it had taken. I never heard what happened to it but no doubt it was eaten, ducks and all.

Someone was always fishing on the incoming tide and every evening a pack of little boys patrolled the river bank trying to spear tiddlers with their *gidgee* spears. The little girls wandered off into the bush looking for bush tucker. They always sang, usually hymns. The Jubilate chorus was a great favourite and their strong, clear voices rang out across the mission in the evening air. No one ever worried about them getting lost or drowning, even the youngest of them being self-sufficient and uncomplaining. Some of the men speared a crocodile in a river tributary one weekend and everyone went off to eat it on the spot.

Bread was certainly the staff of life and I made three big loaves every second day. I cooked it at lunch time and sometimes it rose quickly before school came out. Sheila would send a little black runner over to tell me,

'Mana say, the bread him rise too much sister; you come or Mana bash him back?'

The wood stove in the mission kitchen stood on legs and was set in an opening that had been cut in the wall to let the air flow through. Even so, with the fire going, the kitchen was a hot box and the fridge battled. Also, if the wind blew from a certain direction, it blew the lamp out and everything defrosted. Kerosene in the fridge tank had to be topped up every other day, the wick had to be cleaned and levelled, as well as soot cleaned from the chimney with a rod. It was a filthy job but fortunately Keith usually did it.

Learning which was the best wood to use for bread-making, checking the wind direction and remembering to feed the yeast, kept in a beer bottle, each night, was part of the science of bread-making. Sometimes the aboriginal ladies came to get a new starter for their yeast and, once or twice, I had to beg a favour from them to restart mine.

My bread became acceptable but Bruce implied it was not as good as that produced by several of the older dormitory girls. He did complement my ingenuity though, when I served goanna tail in aspic and goanna vol au vents as entrées. Economy of speech and frankness were Coaldrake traits.

In spite of the basic diet, everyone seemed healthy. Joyce held a clinic every morning but cuts and bruises were the main complaints. There were some exceptions. A strange young man appeared one morning with a wound in the calf of his leg, obviously caused by a spear, and presumably it was tribal punishment.

As the heat increased, black clouds rolled by, storms threatened with vivid lightning displays but no rain came, tempers grew short and now and then fights broke out. The first signal was the sound of a 'bonk' as wood hit a skull. It was followed by shrieks and pounding feet heralding a posse of women rushing to the mission house, shouting, 'Father, father, they're fighting!' Keith handed out rough justice and things settled down. Joyce stitched up the wounds as required and healing, both physical and emotional, took place very quickly.

Alcohol was not allowed on the mission, no one had diabetes and apart from one or two older ladies who were well endowed, no one was overweight. Headaches were treated by wrapping a piece of cloth around the offending member.

Several people from Forrest River had been sent to the Leprosarium at Derby, 400 miles away, diagnosed with leprosy, or Hansen's disease as it is now known. A young man was diagnosed with the disease while I was there, causing his family much grief. There was no cure at that time and it meant a lifetime of separation from relatives and country.

An old man who had been sent to Derby years before, turned up one day in the old people's camp. He denied there was anything wrong with him. The Flying Doctor plane came to take him back and while he sat on a box in the mission kitchen having a mug of tea and some biscuits, the man was asked about the lesion on his arm. He replied, 'A crocodile bin bite me!'

Everything about the mission was tidy and everyone had their jobs to do. Two of the tribal elders did a lavatory patrol every morning. They emptied and disinfected the drums, carrying the waste away in a bucket on a pole between them. Fore and aft, they held masks of leaves and grasses to their noses.

I was full of apprehension when, a few days after I returned from seeing Pat off, the time came for Les to go and for me to take over the school. He was very reassuring, saying he had no teaching training either, before he was flung in off the deep end.

He had told me some of the things that had happened during his stay. Far and away the worst was having to do an emergency trip to Wyndham in a dingy, because the launch had broken down. An old lady and a very sick baby had to be taken to Wyndham Hospital for treatment. They were hit by a wild storm in the Gulf. The old lady died and he thought they were all doomed.

I had one day with him at school, to learn the ropes. He had been very popular with everyone on the mission and there was sadness at his leaving. All the people gathered at the landing to see him off in the launch on the evening tide. There was silence as it moved out into the middle of the river and then one perfectly synchronized wild, grief-stricken cry came from the people. They stood, again in complete silence until the launch disappeared around a bend in the river.

In spite of his short stay, Les had established a curriculum for the twenty-three older children, now in my care. Even more importantly, he had sorted them out in classes. This must have been easier said than done because of the hiatus before he came and the disparity of the children's backgrounds and previous schooling.

There were about forty children altogether but the little ones were taught by an aboriginal girl who had spent two years at Alice Springs, training as a kindergarten aide. She had two groups, morning and afternoon shifts, whom she taught at the back of the school. She was a tower of strength, very calm, loved by her little pupils and, unlike me, extremely competent.

One nine-year-old girl had only recently come to the mission. She had been living in the bush with a group of nomads who brought her to Keith

as they felt she would have a better life at the mission. She was highly intelligent, spoke very little English as yet but had fitted in, apparently very happily, among the children. She stood as straight as a spear and, like most of them, could read the bush as we would a book.

The day began with a prayer and then twenty minutes practicing tables, both exercises being of most benefit to me. There was a depressing lack of materials for teaching, barely enough pads and pencils, dilapidated and out of date reading books. The chalks and plasticine were broken and overworked.

The children in my group had been divided into Grades II to VI. They were models of good behaviour, cheerful, obedient and even more surprising to me, they loved school.

I can only recall two occasions when there were absentees. One was an older boy, away for two days on tribal business, and a four-year-old boy who was late for kindy one day. His mother had not wakened him in time from his afternoon sleep and he came running up the hot sandy track, wearing only a red sweat rag round his neck and crying his eyes out.

There were, of course, odd scuffles and I soon realized it was pointless trying to keep anyone's attention on Tuesday mornings when the stock boys brought the cattle onto the nearby airstrip and the truck churned out to collect the killer, or when the donkey and mule team struggled up the jump up with the drag load of pipes. All the action could have been clearly followed over the low walls.

Having such an open-air school made it much cooler but on windy days a lot of dust blew in, laying a covering of grit over everything.

One day, two of the little boys sprang up and raced out into the surrounding bush. Remonstrations died on my lips when they came back carrying a large goanna, giving it to me and saying, 'You have him for your tea, sister, him properly sweet meat!'

The children behaved much better than I did because there were days when my inadequacy and the heat overcame me. By Friday afternoon especially, when mental torpor overcame us all, I raved at them. Finally, I gave up any idea of trying to give them formal lessons then and let them draw. They made meticulous sketches of the things they knew, boab trees, the launch, ranges, the river and the Flying Doctor plane.

They were very long-suffering of my moods. Like all the people, they were intuitive and very solicitous. I felt they knew me a lot better than I knew any of them.

Hand signals, economical and casual, were used to convey messages over a distance and I often knew I was being 'talked' about when I walked around the mission by the glint of laughter in the children's eyes or their

smothered giggles when I passed by them, or I knew someone was walking behind me, mimicking my every move.

When I moved into the Jamieson's house, Sheila used to keep an eye out after school finished and when she saw me go to my house, sent the gardener, a tall gentle old man down to me with a thermos of hot, sweet, black tea. I lay on a blanket on the ant-bed floor and drank it in thirsty gulps until I revived. It was just one of her many kindnesses to me.

Moving into the house was more a figure of speech than a fact as I was hardly ever in it. There were three rooms and a collection of rough bush furniture. Most of my time after school was spent at the mission house and out bush on weekends.

My beautifully laundered dresses hung in the wardrobe, which took a beating one day when I hacked a snake sleeping there to death with a hoe. A small mirror, hanging on a nail on the wall, gave me some indication of where I was going with the scissors, when I trimmed my hair. The bits of hair seemed to disappear out of the waste paper basket with mysterious speed. When I mentioned this to Sheila, she laughed and told me it was being taken to be given to the tribal elders for their hair belts, fair hair being prized especially.

Shortly after my arrival, I was told I had been adopted into a skin but I never found out who my tribal connections were, nor my obligations. Sometimes I had requests for 'chented choap' from one or two of the camp ladies and I presumed they were my skin sisters. Even scrap ends of soap were gratefully received.

The house did give me privacy to have a bogey in a basin and to dress but, unless it was stormy, I slept on a stretcher in the backyard. It was cooler under the canopy of stars and after 10 pm, when the lighting engine was turned off, very peaceful.

At weekends when corroborees were held over the river, the fire lit up the eastern horizon and faint sounds of singing drifted across the mission. Sometimes the spine-chilling sound of dingoes, in the ranges calling to each other, rang out.

One hot, still night, there was a puzzling, steady, crunching noise nearby, which on investigation proved to come from white ants, eating a rake handle which had been lent against the shell of a post near my bed. They devoured anything they could get their jaws into, which included one of the cassias by the mission house. It quietly fell over, one day while we were having lunch.

Enmeshed in the community life, my plan to accompany the old people on their walkabout to Drysdale had faded. It was a pipe dream but, because there was a drought that year, no one from Forrest River undertook the

journey. Some of the younger Drysdale men did come over, when Keith contacted the mission to ask for help with labour to work on the pipeline. Although there was no sign or signal of their progress, the old camp men predicted the time of their arrival and on cue the party turned up at sunset three days later. There was much shouting and excitement when they came in view, ensuring a warm welcome.

One morning while we were having breakfast, a very tall, wild-looking stranger bounded up the steps and into the room. His face and hair were covered in white clay, he carried a handful of long, deadly-looking spears and was clad only in a torn khaki shirt. He waved his arms round and spoke volubly to Keith in a guttural tongue. Keith very calmly led him onto the verandah, laid his spears down, indicated the cowbell, visitors were supposed to ring rather than enter the house, and listened to the tirade. Then he went into the kitchen, rummaged in a cupboard, came out and handed over a box of matches! Our precipitous visitor smiled delightedly and left. A party of nomads, of which he was one, was mourning the death of one of the group and had come to the camp for a tribal ceremony.

There was a break from work at the weekends and most of the people went bush. There was an air of anticipation as the men dressed in *ngagas*, checked their spears and throwing sticks with the same enthusiasm European men looked out their sporting gear, cricket equipment, tennis rackets, footy boots or golf clubs.

The spear heads varied, three-pronged wire *gidgees* for spearing fish, thin metal leaf-shaped, or, most deadly of all, cone-shaped and made from glass or quartz chipped into facets for other prey. The heads were bound to the long, slender shafts of the weapons by kangaroo tail sinews and spinifex gum, heated by fire, worked over the join as a fixative.

Whenever I could slip away, unaccompanied, not an easy task with so many sharp eyes on the lookout, I enjoyed walking in the bush, looking at rocks, plants and now and again coming across paintings. It was good to be alone and feel part of the bush.

Once, when I managed to get across the river at low tide, I noticed a tall, old aboriginal man slipping through the trees some distance away. He did not acknowledge me.

I happened to mention it to Sheila and she said that, whenever I went for a walk, I would be followed by someone to make sure I was safe and that the old man I had seen over the river was also making sure I did not stumble across the place where the sacred totems were kept. It took me aback and in future I never went over the river without company to guide me so I did not offend against tribal law.

While we women were excluded from the big corroborees, we were made welcome at 'playabouts' down at the camp every Thursday night. Joyce came sometimes but I never missed. I was invited to sit in the women's group on one side of the fire, while the men practiced their routines on the other. There was singing, the rhythmic beat of click sticks. The women made a very satisfying sound clapping their hands between their thighs.

Sometimes a fat naked baby climbed onto my knee and at a half-time break, a chipped enamel cup of strong, black, sweet tea was passed around like a communion cup.

'*Him mulagru* tea, sister,' they told me as I took a cautious sip.

There were never any dire consequences from '*mulagru*' tea[12], nor from going barefoot, although every time the Flying Doctor came, he gave me a lecture and said I would get hookworm. Unless I had to walk on hot sand on midday, when I slipped on a pair of sandals, I went barefoot all the time I was at the mission. My feet had hardened up so much I could walk through the roughest bush without difficulty.

As the evening progressed and the dancing feet stirred the dust, a fine haze, red in the firelight, hung over us all. The lithe black figures following the dance patterns handed down from their ancestors, the rhythm of the singing and the click sticks had a hypnotic effect. It was broken at ten o'clock when the lighting engine went off and Keith's disembodied shout came from the mission: 'Finish up! Bedtime!' brought festivities to a halt.

The incongruity of the curfew never ceased to amuse me but if a halt was not called, the dancing would have gone on all night and no one would be fit for work the next day.

One morning a great wailing began around the settlement. Joyce told me 'the king is dead'. We had heard that King George VI was very near death, so his demise was not unexpected but I felt amazed that he should be mourned so deeply by his subjects in this far-flung place. Later in the day, I expressed my surprise to Sheila. She said, 'Oh, it's not George, it's David who died!'

A few days before, I had seen David lying naked on the bare earth, no more than a fragile shell of skin and bones. His wife sat beside him in the shade, fanning him with a leafy twig to keep the flies away. One could only ponder on the different circumstances of the two monarchs, one surrounded by the opulence and trappings of wealth and power while the other lay melded into the red earth of his country.

King George died not long afterwards.

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12 I am not sure how this herbal tea might be spelt.

Two other elderly men died while I was there and both were given Christian burials. Joyce prepared the bodies, sewing them in sacking shrouds. Four elders acted as pall bearers, carrying the bodies to the little cemetery beyond the goat yard. There was unnatural silence around the mission as everyone disappeared into the bush. I went to the services but felt very strongly that the people should have been allowed to bury their own according to tribal law.

A young couple were married in the church, the groom immaculate and the bride in a white dress with a veil and carrying a bouquet of artificial flowers. They seemed very happy but to me, it seemed rather out of place.

Keith met a young man, an ex-sailor, on one trip to Wyndham in the launch and as he was keen to come back with Keith and had assured him he could turn his hand to anything, he arrived among us. Keith thought he could join the pipe-laying party but he had not been out from England long and crumbled in the heat.

He had rather overstated his talents and was at a loose end until he said he had worked as a machinist in a clothing factory, so he was co-opted by Sheila to join the group of sewing ladies she was running. He was not interested in cutting and sewing the utilitarian clothes needed on the mission but turned his hand to machine embroidery, embellishing the garments with colourful parrots and flowers.

His popularity, never very high, waned further when he borrowed a .22 rifle and inadvertently shot holes low down on one of the main water tanks.

Thinking that as an ex-sailor, it should be safe to send him into Wyndham with the boat boys for stores, at least, Keith sent him off with the mail and necessary instructions. According to the boys, the party arrived safely and tied up at the jetty but in climbing out of the launch, he dropped the rifle over the side. He jumped over the side to retrieve it, cutting his feet to ribbons on broken glass and had to be admitted to the hospital. To everyone's relief, he did not come back.

Preparations for Christmas began. There was to be a midnight mass, races in the morning of the big day and every one of the 320 souls on strength would receive new clothes, extra rations and a present off the Christmas tree.

Several packing cases had arrived from Perth full of presents and clothes for distribution. It was interesting to be on the receiving end of the mission boxes but sorting out suitable presents for everyone was difficult. The mission house looked like a warehouse. Anything black was cast aside as Sheila said the people liked coloured clothing and black did not suit them. The articles were sorted into heaps for age groups, camp people, men's and women's before we began the arduous task of wrapping.

Perhaps the most useless articles were a black lace evening dress with matching high-heeled velvet shoes, decorated with diamanté buckles. While no doubt haut couture in Peppermint Grove, the shoes were particularly inappropriate at Forrest River and the sandy tracks where almost everyone went barefoot. All was not lost as Sheila ripped off the buckles and gave them to one of the elders who wore them in his hair at corroborees. The six pairs of outsize ladies' pink wincey bloomers were rather unsuitable but were distributed in parcels for the camp ladies. Their husbands, in fact, took them to wear hunting but they were soon cast aside and left hanging on bushes.

There was to be a break of a week over the Christmas season, a longer holiday deferred till the weather cooled off. Excitement grew as the big day drew near. On Christmas Eve, a large tree was brought in and decorated by the children, the church swept, decorated with green branches and the brasses polished.

Midnight mass was very special, in spite of the fact that a storm hit midway through. The fierce wind caught the blue curtain at the back of the altar making it billow in, knocking over the candles. Keith saved the host with practiced ease and carried on with the service without missing a beat.

The races were held straight after morning church and the presents distributed. Sheila had invited the four aboriginal staff couples to afternoon tea. They all came, very smart in their new clothes, for tea out of china cups and Christmas cake.

For me, the best part of the day was in the evening at the mission house, sitting round our little Christmas tree – a whitewashed bare branch, decorated with coloured paper and birthday candles – and singing our favourite Christmas carols until the candles burnt down and set fire to the decorations.

Joyce and I planned to escape at the New Year and camp over the river by ourselves. Sheila gave us a tin of sheep's tongues, she had saved for a special occasion, to add to our basic supplies of tea, sugar, flour and jam. By the time we reached the river, we had an entourage of ten or more children and young girls, all clamouring to come with us. We turned all but two back, an older girl and a young one she cared for.

After crossing the almost dry but very muddy river bed, we walked some distance to a place I had never been to before and set up camp under a shady tree.

A narrow footpath between dry, cane-grass higher than our heads led to a picturesque little pool, tucked under a high cliff and covered at one end with water lilies. It was a miniature Camera Pool with a sandy beach on one side. When we came out of the water, we smelt of water lilies. Sadly, in the

heat, it did not last long. We left the sheep's tongues in the water to keep cool for our festive meal next day.

We sat round the fire talking after our tea and, as darkness fell, the girls moved closer and closer to us and kept glancing around. The older girl began talking about spirits and devils and all our efforts to reassure them fell on deaf ears.

Finally, the older girl said she was afraid she would be stolen, that a young man had come from a distant tribe wanting a wife and he wanted to take her to his people. She did not want to go but she thought he was watching us, waiting for his chance to snatch her.

It was rather unnerving and I did not know what to think as I had, in fact, seen very briefly, a strange young man at the old people's camp. We convinced the girls to come to the pool for a last swim before we settled down for the night. We walked down the track, Indian file, holding hands.

In spite of the warm night, the girls cuddled in as close as they could get between Joyce and me. I lay looking up at the stars, wondering if there was any truth in the abduction story until I fell asleep.

I was awakened in the early hours of the morning from a deep sleep by wild screams and being trodden on.

'My God', I thought, 'he's got her!'

I sprang up to see the girls waving lighted sticks around, about to set fire to the grass. In the hubbub, Joyce said the girls insisted a snake had wiggled through between us. Setting fire to the bush was a common practice when a snake was sighted but to me the fire was more dangerous than the reptile. Eventually, we settled down for what was left of the dark before the flies heralded the dawn.

We swam in the scented water, feasted on a sliver of tongue each, on damper, packed up and headed for home. We had to time our departure to cross the river before the tide surged in.

Upon our arrival at the Mission, we no longer smelt of water lilies but wore the usual legacy from a river bed crossing of black mud to our knees.

Another day, Joyce and I, in a carefree burst of madness, joined a crowd of children sliding in the river mud. Wearing bathers, we joined their frolic. In no time and to the huge delight of the onlookers, we fell over, were sliding on our tummies and were soon as black as they were. It was an overcast day and we both got badly sunburnt. Later, trying to get the black mud off with our meagre, water ration sobered us, considerably.

A good wet never eventuated that year but there were rain-bearing storms after Christmas. The first deluge came in the middle of one night and Joyce and I rejoiced with everyone else, running out and having a

shower under the runoff from the roof. The country turned green almost overnight, water birds flew in and stalked around for a few days on the flooded flats. Instant little waterfalls flowed down the face of the jump up.

Every effort was being put into the water scheme and a young engineer, seconded from government to help with the final installation arrived. He was another Keith who was easy-going and who stayed for some weeks.

The engine for the scheme had arrived on a Bristol bomber. It was the biggest plane ever to land on the strip. There was always a rush to clear the donkeys, mules, goats, cattle and any wildlife off the strip when a plane was due and everyone went to welcome the arrivals. But when this monster landed and opened its jaws, everyone took flight, back off the strip into the bush.

The engine must have been taken to Camera Pool but I cannot remember that. After it was on site, Sheila, leaving Peter with Joyce, and I went over in the truck with the two Keith's who were working on it. It took an hour to do the seven-mile trip and sitting in the front of the truck as we bumped over rocks was torture. All the springs had gone and the seat was covered with cow hide, hair side outside.

We swam while the men worked. I had a moment of triumph that day because I crawled out along the bough of a paper bark, dropped in a line, baited with a piece of orange peel and caught four fat, black bream. They were delicious, cooked in palm leaves on the coals.

With so much focus on the water scheme, I did not feel it was the time to push for school requirements. We made up little books, illustrated with stick figures carrying out activities the children could relate to and writing about them. Paste, coloured pink with cochineal for finger painting, diverted them and they were never tired of drawing.

Sheila suggested we have an Open Day for the parents and camp people. The children were very proud to display their work and some of the old ladies dabbled in the pink paste, making designs on sheets of brown paper of which we did, at least have a supply.

In a burst of optimism, I decided to have a party for the schoolchildren, the little ones first and a second session for my group. Joyce and Connie volunteered to help. Wanting to give it an educational focus, I wrote out invitations for each child which they found quite puzzling as we were together every day! We decided to have it in the shade from the house in my backyard one afternoon, setting out the food on tables, after a games session for each group.

Sweets and hundreds-and-thousands were all the Wyndham store could supply from the list I sent in with the launch. Sheila had found a bottle

of raspberry cordial essence at the back of a cupboard and she gave me the one egg the chooks had produced. There was always bread and beef dripping. I made bread rolls in the shape of each child's initial, spread squares of bread with dripping coloured pink with the precious cochineal and sprinkled on hundreds-and-thousands. The egg was squandered in a large cake made of flour, sugar, dried milk and treacle which miraculously hung together.

The little ones arrived on cue and their teacher entertained them nobly with games and singing, while I rode herd along the fence line where the older children were leaning on the wire and threatening to break in and join the festivities. Harsh words were spoken before I could hunt them off.

The first group polished off their party food and lined up for their liquid refreshment, raspberry vinegar mixed in a bucket and doled out by Joyce. The great thrill was that each ration was poured into one of my glass tumblers. As I only had four, Joyce had to wash each one between servings which delayed the process. We gave each child a few sweets and bid them farewell before preparing for Act II, for the older guests who were already baying at our heels.

During siesta, feeling very clever, sure no one would see me, I had done a wide circuit of the mission, putting down written clues for a treasure hunt, along the jump up, down by the river, behind the cattle and goat yards, laying a trail. I thought it would give us a breathing space to prepare for the second round. How wrong I was, they were back in less than ten minutes.

'How did you find the clues so quickly?' I asked them. They gave a condescending laugh and said,

'Oh! Sister! We bin follow your tracks!'

I had forgotten that even the youngest among them could identify the owner of every one of the thousands of footprints around the mission.

Festivities were wild and exhausting but, if it did nothing else, it broke the monotony for us all.

School went on holidays at the end of March, as the weather cooled a little, and the dormitory girls were taken to camp at Camera Pool by a wonderful aboriginal couple, to learn bush law. Joyce, Matron and I went out and stayed with them for a few days.

We were very well looked after, fresh leaves put down for us to sleep on each night and little fires lit between each sleeping place to keep mosquitoes, and worse, at bay. No matter what hour of the night I woke, someone was going round the fires, adding sticks to keep them going. They even prepared a special toilet for us, two poles laid 18 inches apart and supported by four forked posts set over a pit. They built a humpy around it for privacy.

The girls were taken out each day to look for bush tucker. Robert had a gun and shot a large kangaroo. It was cooked in a deep pit, laid on hot stones at the bottom and covered with branches. Dirt was poured in and a huge fire kept burning for thirty-six hours. Finally, the blackened carcass was disinterred and feasted on with relish. I had some reservations about a certain pink juiciness round the joints but chewed on a bit of tail with what enthusiasm I could muster.

Louisa taught the girls to make a paper bark raft. She was no sylph but they swam her across the pool on it looking like a duchess. They did corroboree dances at night, some with lighted sticks that looked like fireflies in the dark.

I got a vicious fly bite in one of my eyes while we were camping. Fortunately, Joyce had medical supplies and, after she had doctored my eye, I was able to test first-hand the efficacy of the cotton eye patches the good missionary ladies down south had knitted.

A snake slithered through the camp one night. This time, the bush was set on fire but the screams of alarm should have been enough to frighten it. Fortunately, the flames burnt themselves out among the rocks.

I had been at the mission for six months and there seemed to be no move toward finding a trained teacher for the school. My feelings were very mixed. I knew the children needed more than I could give them and they needed adequate equipment. In spite of my deficiencies, I felt sleeping dogs would lie unless I made a move.

On the other hand, I did not want to go. I felt deeply attached to the people especially the children, the country itself and the thought of returning to city life horrified me.

Finishing the water scheme took precedence over everything else and it was a bad time to leave. Also, I was very much an outsider. A lot went on with the administration, I was not privy to, even though so much time was spent at the mission house. For instance, I never did find out whether the threatened abduction was a real threat or not.

The answer to my dilemma arrived in a telegram from the Sharpes at Mardie, asking me to come back as governess. After considerable thought, I accepted the offer.

Sheila agreed with me that the government should be asked to supply a teacher, but Keith was adamant that only a missionary trained person would do, which would have been all right if there had been one available. It meant leaving the older children in limbo if I left but I felt no move would be made to get a replacement if I stayed.

Leaving was very hard but fortunately the people were on holiday, out bush with the children, or I do not think I could have gone. It was bad enough saying goodbye to the mission staff who remained.

As it was, when the plane took off and I looked down on the river and scattering of little buildings, grief overcame me and I sobbed. The pilot and doctor on board tried to console me with little effect. Not only was it goodbye to the people, it was the end of an adventure and the Kimberley.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

MARDIE

My spirits rose when I found we were landing at Drysdale River Mission, now Kalumburu. At least I would see the place.

The demarcation between the harsh, dry plateau landscape and the verdant coastal strip was dramatic. Drysdale enjoyed a 100-inch annual rainfall in sharp contrast to the hinterland. Driving from the strip to the mission in a utility, we passed lush gardens of corn, bananas, pineapples and fruit trees where aboriginal people were working.

The Spanish Abbot, a tall, distinguished-looking man, invited us to breakfast. Several monks joined us and the conversation was lively. We were served goat chops, eggs, custard apples, which I had never seen before let alone eaten, and white wine, sent from the companion mission at New Norcia. Unhappily, I lost the lot on the next leg of the journey and was in no fit state to appreciate the feast laid out for us in a bough shed when we landed at Kurunji. Cold roast beef, stew, and rice pudding in enormous white enamel pie dishes, as well as capacious teapots full of strong, black tea, was presided over by two tall, majestic-looking aboriginal ladies.

The white owner was hungry for news from the outside world. He had a rather colourful turn of phrase and after each string of oaths, he apologized to me. 'Christ, miss I'm sorry but I haven't seen a white woman for months!' I could have pointed out there were other ladies within hearing but they were probably impervious to his language.

The trip took eight-and-a-half hours. It was hot and the small plane was tossed around over the barren landscape by air pockets. I was quite unable to face the large cream sponge, made from emu eggs, our hostess at Gibb River Station told us, when we landed there in the mid-afternoon.

All I wanted, as we flew over Derby, was to feel solid ground underfoot, but the pilot, probably out of devilment, thought I might like to have a look on the surroundings from the air. We made several wide sweeps over the town and harbour and, to give me a better view, he dipped the wings in a sickening fashion.

I had booked to fly from Derby to Roebourne where someone from Mardie would collect me but as the *Koolinda* was in port and it was going south and leaving before the next plane was due, I changed my plans and booked a passage for the two-day trip.

Before I left Forrest River, I had promised her family I would try to visit a girl who was a patient at the Leprosarium in Derby and give her their messages. The Mother Superior gave me permission to visit and, as the hospital was some distance out of town, I arranged for the local taxi driver to take me there and collect me.

The settlement was very orderly with whitewashed buildings standing among green lawns and lush flower gardens. The girl was about my own age and showed no physical signs of the disease. I told her as much as I could about the place and the people. She was inarticulate with shyness and her longing for her family and the country was almost tangible. Her misery triggered my own feeling of loss and we were both in tears when I left.

The voyage was calm and luxurious, another world for me. The local trooper, under instruction from Robert Sharpe, met me at Roebourne and installed me, once again, in the hotel.

Phyll, Robert's wife, came to pick me up next morning, accompanied by her mother and Graeme, the six-month-old baby. My pupil Ben, seven, and Jamie, three, were at home with their father. Not having met each other, Phyll and I were rather wary of how we would get on, but almost her first words broke the ice. 'Can you paint?' she asked me, 'and I don't mean landscapes, I mean lavatory doors?'

She went on to tell me that Sir Charles and Lady Gairdner, the Governor and his wife, would be spending several days on Mardie shortly, when they toured the North West and she wanted to spruce up the homestead. I never did do any painting and after the buildings I had seen in the Kimberley, Mardie looked like paradise.

Phyll's parents, who had come up from Perth for the winter, were warm, friendly people and I soon felt one of the family. But often when I lay awake at night on my verandah bed, my thoughts would go back to the Kimberley country and the people I had grown to love.

Ben was doing correspondence lessons and the methods had changed very little since my days at the Highbury School. He had not done very well with his first governess whom I replaced. Ben was not a keen student and corrections to his work were sent back monotonously, from his supervisor in Perth, which was discouraging and I had to resist my urge to do it for him.

Bribery proved my best tool. A promise to read stories to him, if he worked hard, bore fruit and he and Jamie sat spellbound while I read *Coral Island*, *Swiss Family Robinson*, *Treasure Island*, and other adventure stories in the afternoons.

It was autumn by now and, on most mornings, a mean little easterly blew dust and dried leaves into the spinifex room where we had school, sitting with rugs around our knees. Even now on some sharp, clear windy mornings, I have a sensation of being back in the spinifex room.

Mardie was a very well run station and while Robert worked out on the run, Phyll dragooned her workforce of a dozen or more aboriginal girls and women around the house and garden like a major domo.

They were a happy workforce, giggling and chiacking each other as they dusted, swept, pulled weeds in the garden, moving lethargically and only speeded up in short bursts when Phyll came out to urge them on. 'Come on, you *yamidjees*, hurry up', or 'You be careful of those fellas' on silver-cleaning mornings when they banged the silverware down too hard on the cement verandah.

One of my duties was to fill the little bottle with four fingers of rum and leave it discreetly against a certain verandah post for the old, Portuguese gardener to collect in the late afternoon.

I had lost a front filling not long after my arrival at Mardie but Phyll, who had been left some gutta-percha and old dental tools by a passing dentist, did an excellent job filling it for me. It lasted until I reached civilization. All the aboriginal ladies came to watch and their comments and laughter set both of us off. We were crying with laughter by the time the job was done.

Phyll was generous, kind and had a good sense of humour. She preferred city life to the station, with its unchanging routine. It was quite an easy life with so much help around the place and no cooking.

The menu rarely varied. Breakfast everyday consisted of porridge, a selection of chops, bacon, lamb's fry, eggs, toast and marmalade. Tea, of course, was served with breakfast and lunch but coffee after dinner. Lunch was cold lamb and salad; dinner was roast lamb, vegetables and a sweet – usually a baked custard or rice.

At 2.30 every afternoon the cook, a thin little man draped in a large apron and wearing off-white sandshoes without laces, strolled up from the detached kitchen and called out,

'Can I have a coupla eggs and a puddin' dish, Mrs Sharpe?'

The egg supply was sparse and Phyll kept those rendered up by the chooks under her control.

Thanks to John, we had a good supply of vegetables and sometimes the boys and I went to the garden to collect some for the cook. If John was in from mesquite spraying, we saw and talked to him. He was very fond of the boys and they loved him. But that was the sum total of our acquaintance.

The Vice-Regal party, when they arrived, were friendly and easy guests. The overseer and I were detailed off to take Sir Charles riding, which he loved.

Numerous other travellers passed through, a number staying overnight. Before Phyll's parents went south, we all packed up and went to Roebourne for the Annual Race Meeting.

For three weeks beforehand, the race hopefuls were trained on the airstrip. Every morning, just at the break of dawn, I joined the boss, the overseer and stock boys for our breath-taking gallops. My mount was an ex-Cup winner, a big chestnut, enough of a challenge to test me to the limit.

The logistics of getting the horses, family, most of the staff, plus swags and luggage, was like a military exercise. Food for the troops, as well as the cook's contribution for the social occasions, various cakes, and ten dozen meringues were loaded on board and we took off in stages.

We stayed at the Shire Clerk's house, sharing one room and sleeping on the verandah. Phyll's parents slept inside and sat up in the double bed as we scuttled in and out looking for our clothes. Robert remarked that when he bent down to do up his shoelaces, he came up wearing an evening dress!

The race meeting was run very professionally and jockeys were flown in from Perth. Robert said it had been much more casual before the war. At one meeting, when he was riding a young horse, it broke away, galloped across the course and came past the winning post well ahead of the field. The judges wanted to give him the prize because the dust was so thick they had not seen him leave the track.

The dust was still very much in evidence and it was hardly a sparkling social occasion, but it gave people from a wide, isolated region the opportunity to meet friends and catch up on news. The children, too, had an opportunity to play with their peers. There were two days of racing and a rather lack lustre ball but I was glad to get back to the station.

We had several fishing trips to the mouth of Fortescue River and came home with good catches which gave everyone a much appreciated change of diet. Sharks and stonefish prevented us swimming but I was able to collect beautiful shells which lay on the beach for the picking.

Exciting times lay ahead. The Sharpes were advised that Great Britain was sending several naval vessels to the Montebello Islands and would be holding atomic tests. The islands were fifty miles off the coast; Mardie, the closest inhabited area. We were all sworn to secrecy. Robert had several meetings with some of the scientists, including Sir William Penny.

Only in later years did I discover that the British Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, had negotiated the deal with Sir Robert Menzies some time previously. He had advised Sir Robert of the effect the fallout would have on the area, contaminating it for some years in the future, but, as no one lived on the islands, there was little concern. We were told the explosion would only take place when the weather conditions were suitable, that is when the wind would take the cloud west, over the Indian Ocean.

Our social life sparked up as a number of the naval officers flew in off the ships for a few days relaxation on Mardie.

Keeping up with the bed-making and laundry became a priority and I remember Phyll running out onto the front lawn in her underwear, with a clean dress draped over her arm, as she gazed up at an aircraft overhead. 'Is it landing?' she called out, 'I'm not putting on a clean dress unless it does!'

Sometime in August or September, the press arrived in force. Local, eastern states and Reuters' journalists asked for permission to set up camp on Mardie so they could rush news of Britain's first atomic test to the world.

Robert directed them to Rough Range, some distance north, and, for security reasons, was less than welcoming. After they had settled in, however, we were invited to visit the camp for afternoon tea. I had the honour of being the only woman to visit the camp. It was on top of a steep rise and very basic. They had built stone walls to give some protection from the wind but it was open to the elements, otherwise.

They had commissioned a much more welcome guest, Captain Jimmy Woods, a veteran pilot, to wait at Mardie with his small plane, ready to take off with the first news releases of the explosion. No one had any idea of when the event would take place.

Jimmy Woods was a family friend and kept Phyll and me greatly entertained after dinner each evening telling us about his flights from England to Australia in the early days and his other adventures. He was full of theories about mineral deposits and we pored over his detailed map of the state, planning excursions to look for gold and other treasures.

We were having breakfast on October 3rd when suddenly there was a deafening roar and everything in the house shook. 'The bomb!' we all shouted and dashed outside. A fountain of white smoke was rising in the northwest sky and as we watched it folded gracefully over onto itself into a mushroom shape. The press rushed down with their reports to the airstrip where Jimmy Woods had his plane ticking over. He took off with his off-sider, George, still hanging half out of the open door.

The journalists and the navy left and our life quietened down. Ben and I made a heroic effort to finish the years' work winning guarded praise from his elderly supervisor in the Perth office.

The heat increased and heavy rains closed the roads. The humidity was like a stifling blanket, sapping our energy.

As the mail truck could not get through, none of the Christmas orders arrived so we had to improvise with Christmas presents.

Phyll, the children and I were to fly south just after the New Year. Before we left, John came to say goodbye. He was taking a month off and planned to go bush, taking the barest necessities and walking along the Fortescue River, prospecting for gold.

Three days after we arrived in Perth, I became ill and was taken by ambulance to the Royal Perth Hospital where, after I had turned bright yellow, I was diagnosed with hepatitis A.

1953 was a depressing year as I kept getting relapses of nausea, slight jaundice and tiredness. It was clear I could not return north, so I stayed on the farm for some months.

Later, I went to Wooroloo where Dick was working, to help Anne and look after the children. Probably I was more of a hindrance than a help but by the end of the year I was much better and decided the time had come to make the delayed trip to England.

My mother, of course, was worried but also, I think, quite pleased that I would be going 'home'.

I had enough money for the fare and a little to spare. There was a demand for almoners in Great Britain so finding work would not be difficult. It was necessary to do a three-week orientation course arranged by the Almoner Association in London so I wrote to advise them of my arrival and also booked accommodation, a bed-sitter in Kensington, which had been recommended to me.

I booked a berth in a six-berth cabin on the P&O boat, the *Maloja*, sailing in early February 1954.



Passport photographs, probably taken around 1953.
By this stage, Meg was preparing to embark on the adventure of a lifetime: heading overseas. Her memoir recounts the excitement and freedom she felt travelling alone – still a rare thing for young women at the time.

The weeks before leaving were busy, having typhoid and smallpox injections and shopping for suitable clothes. Finding winter clothes in Perth's high summer was not easy. Most memorable was a winter coat, the only one I could find, very expensive, hideously patterned in black and a sickly green, but pure wool. It was to prove a valuable bulwark against the northern winters.

Advice from friends and relatives who had travelled, poured in. A minimum of four evening frocks was essential, to ring in the changes in the evenings for the long voyage, and old hands always took a Fancy Dress

costume for the ball. A little black dress was essential. Black underwear was best when living in London, also because of the sooty dirt, and winter clothes should be packed in a tin trunk to be stored in the hold until they were needed in the northern waters. Arrangements could be made to switch over one's wardrobe mid-voyage.

The second sitting for meals, which the Captain traditionally attended, was more socially acceptable than the first and be prepared to be ducked in the swimming pool at the 'Crossing The Line' ceremony.

I had a huge amount of luggage, two big suitcases, the tin trunk and a rather amazing, large basket with a fitted lid, secured by a leather strap, which must have come from Golden Grove to the Goldfields and finally to Linton.

Everyone had given me addresses of relatives and friends I must visit in England, Scotland and Ireland. A number had already written to me, asking me to visit or stay.

Thus armed, I finally embarked. It was very exciting and I felt very little nostalgia as the last streamers of farewell were thrown, stretched, snapped and sagged into the churning water, as the little tug boat pulled the *Maloja* away from the wharf to set forth on her journey.

1954-1956

CHAPTER TWENTY

TO ENGLAND

The *Maloja* was a one-class ship, the smallest and, at 31 years, the oldest in the P&O line. She was destined for the scrap heap at the end of the voyage which seemed a pity as, although she was shabby, she was very comfortable and stable.

According to an article in the *West Australian* describing her departure, she also had the deepest draught of any ship of the line. The article went on to state that more than 2,000 people had gathered on the wharf to farewell her and that she was carrying a record 4,600 tons of cargo, 2,500 of which was frozen, also a record. The crew would be dispersed to other P&O ships at the end of the trip. This included the five or six cats which would not be allowed to set paw on land in England.

A band played and people threw streamers to and from the ship, a regular practice then. The rainbow of streamers stretched, snapped and drooped into the water as we were pulled away from the berth and every other ship in the harbour saluted the old lady with blasts of their sirens as we sailed away. She was farewelled in a similar fashion at each port we left on the journey.

It was exhilarating to be finally on our way. I was well down below in a six-berth cabin with two young nurses and two older ladies who were travelling with their husbands, back to England to visit relatives.

A Goanese steward looked after us, making up beds, tidying up after us, bringing early morning tea and running hot salt water baths for us. A basin of fresh water and a dipper were left for us to rinse off the salt. At first, it was all a great novelty but we soon became blasé.

The trip across the Indian Ocean was an idyll of blue and gold days and star-studded nights.

We soon settled into the shipboard routine of three lavish meals each day, soup on deck mid-morning, dainty afternoon teas, booking for deck games, betting on our distance covered each twenty-four hours, watching for dolphins, flying fish and spouting whales.

Dressing for dinner was a serious matter for the ladies on board, taking up most of the late afternoon, and there was excitement when invitations went out for the Captain's cocktail parties. There was a Fancy Dress Ball and dancing each night when the officers were charming to everyone and with whom we flirted mildly.

Romances blossomed among the younger passengers, almost all Australians making their first overseas trip, and faded like autumn flowers. These provided topics for gossip among the older generation, watching from the side-lines.

As we crossed the Line, Neptune came on board, dressed in what passed as seaweed and a binder twine wig to initiate us first-timers into his watery kingdom. No one escaped. We were rounded up by the swimming pool, made to walk a plank, sit on a stool at the end, plastered with a flour and water paste, before being tipped into the water below.

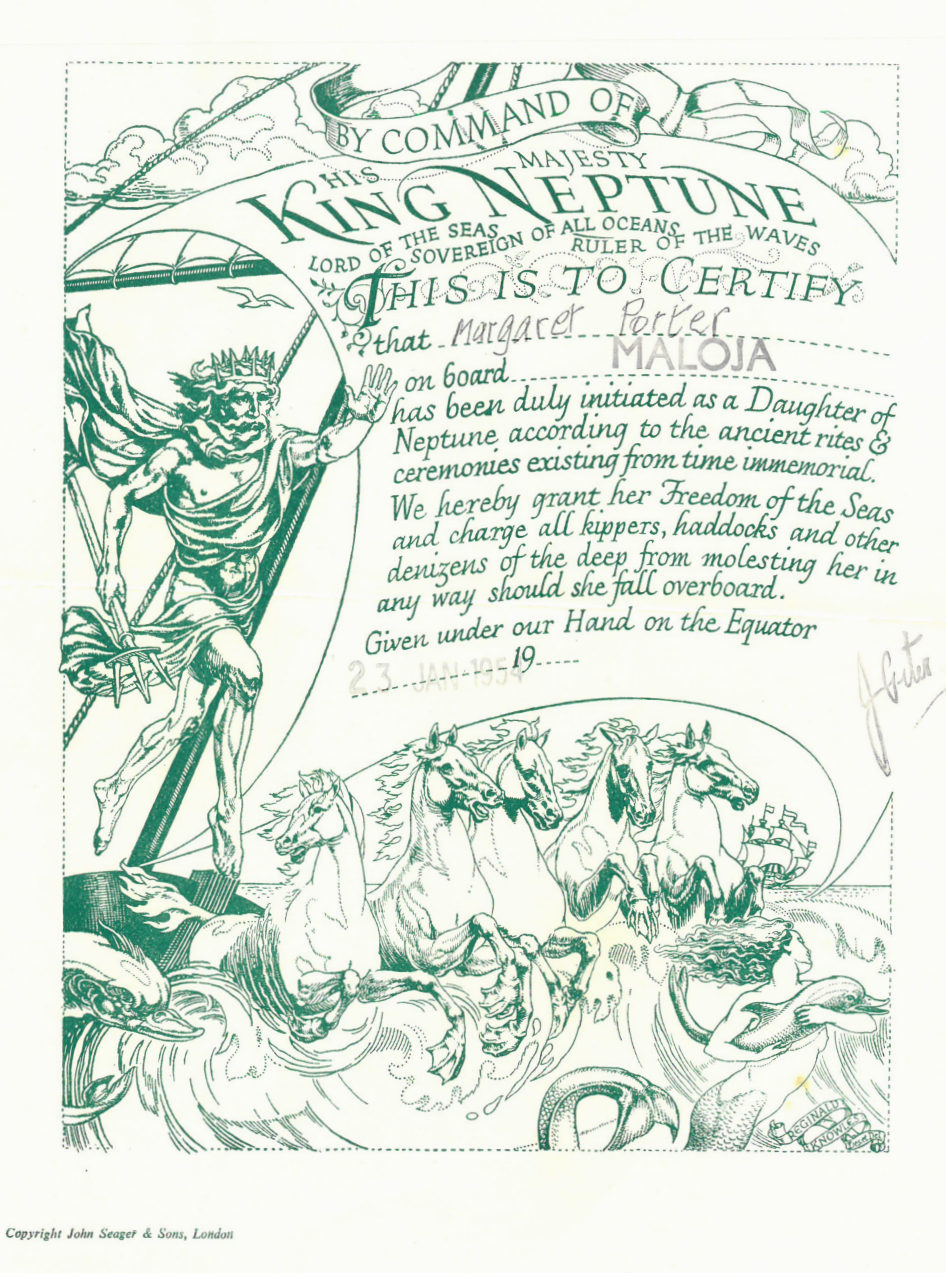
At least it was more civilized than in the old days when first-timers crossing the Equator were tarred, feathered and tossed overboard on the end of a line tied round their waist, being dragged through the water to get clean.

I was duly presented with a certificate granting me 'Freedom of the Seas' and 'charging kippers, haddocks and other denizens of the deep not to molest me should I fall overboard.'

We lunched on a blindingly hot curry at the famous Galle Face Hotel and swam in the milky green sea, down the cliff below. There was a half moon bay of white sand, studded with palms. It was paradise and proved to be my last good swim for a long time.

As we approached Bombay, we were warned that there had been riots in the city very recently and fifteen policemen had been hospitalized, to take care if we went ashore.

Beryl and I were undeterred and set off walking down a wide, tree-lined road to a native market. We were beset on all sides by beggars, most with severe deformities, urchins wanting money and stall holders pressing us to buy their colourful and varied goods. Although there was pressure on all sides, no one was abusive, but it was rather unnerving and we were glad to leave the hubbub and find our way to the imposing Prince of Wales Museum. The building was beautiful and we spent a long time wandering around looking at the exquisite Kashmiri shawls, saris, silks, friezes, pottery and brasses on display.



King Neptune certificate presented to Meg during her sea voyage to the United Kingdom in 1954.

Meg sailed to the UK, passing through the equator as tradition dictated. Her memoir captures the sense of wonder she felt seeing the world beyond Australia.

The sun was hot and dazzling when we left the building, added to which we were swamped by a seething mass, almost entirely of men who emerged like a river in flood from the entrance of a railway station. They were all going in the opposite direction to us, all dressed in white and various national dress. Beryl and I must have looked like nervous hens as we dodged around them. We were very conspicuous and pale among so many brown faces but we met kindness on all sides. We were shown over the university by an Economics student, anxious to practice English. The building was beautiful, shining white, decorated with carving and statues. The teak doors were huge and we went up a wide sweeping staircase to the library to see the stained glass windows. He told us there were twenty-six colleges and about 20,000 students which was mind-boggling to us.

In the afternoon we went to the bazaar, to the fruit and vegetable market where stalls, piled high with exotic, colourful fruits and vegetables, stretched away into dimness in an enormously long shed. Again we were beset by sales-people but a middle-aged Hindu gentleman, who had an air of authority about him, took us under his wing, shooing people aside and, telling us to follow him, cut a swathe through the throng. We threaded our way after him, past bullocks festooned with flowers and beads, ancient carts, cars and fat merchants, until we reached the animal market. In a dusty arena, placid bullocks and cows, assured of long and happy lives among the Hindu population and decorated with floral wreaths, lay in straw, chewing their cuds, while restless goats weaved around each other, bunting and bleating. There was movement, colour and the cacophony of many languages around us as our guide led us to the sari and silk bazaars, the gold, silver and precious gemstone sections.

A feeling of unreality came over me. Was I really in the midst of this exotic scene? Was it a dream or perhaps I was lying on one of the verandah beds at home reading our battered copy of *Tales of the Arabian Nights*, which had lost the first five pages, had a broken spine and had to be held in both hands or the middle fell out?

Beryl had been rather edgy about us blindly following our self-appointed guide but she had no cause to worry. He was extremely polite and kind, put us on a bus to go to the top of Malabar Hill, wishing us Godspeed as he did so.

When we alighted, we could look down on the panorama of the city, with its beautiful buildings, the dome roofs of the mosques, minarets and throng-filled streets. In the distance, to our left, we could see to Towers of Silence where the Parsees laid their dead. Vultures hung above, looking like pieces of torn black paper waiting to carry out their grisly duties.

Back in the city, a businessman asked us if we needed help and walked a quarter of a mile to put us on a bus going to the port. We had seen very few women and no other Europeans all day.

Standing at the ship's rail, watching the sun set behind the romantic skyline of mosques and minarets of the city, before we sailed, I was joined by a handsome, older man. He told me he was Irish but had spent many years in India and that he made his living following the race round in India and the UK where he was now going for Ascot and the racing season. Having only ever placed one bet in my life, 2/- on the favourite of the Roebourne races, and lost, I was duly impressed.

He was a mine of information, telling me the recent riots were due partly to the Hindus, who were in the majority, wanting to nationalize the industries owned by the Parsees and partly because of a new law that enforced all children to attend schools of their mother-tongue, eliminating 264 English schools in the area. He went on to talk about the prohibition of alcohol and the vicious hooch sold in sly grog shops, of the mysticism of the people in Southern India, a cult called the Blackhearts and many other fascinating tales. Not only was he fascinating but gregarious and kind. Before the trip was over, he had befriended everyone on board, including the children.

A large number of young Indian men embarked at Bombay also. Mainly they were Hindus and Parsees, going to England for further study. The two nurses and I became friendly with some of them, a doctor hoping to get his FRCS, an engineer who told me his family were close friends of Nehru, and one going to study banking on a scholarship to the Midland Bank. He said he would not be able to communicate with his mother while he was away, as she spoke only Urdu which neither of them could read nor write. Telephonic communication was not even a consideration. He came from Patiala, one of the more northerly states. It was interesting talking with them about their families, culture and vision for the future of India. No one voiced animosity towards England's colonial rule for so many years but were probably too young to remember much about it.

The heat increased as we passed through the Gulf of Aden and we young ones slept on deck. A French family, travelling to Marseilles, kindly lent me a rubber mattress so I was very comfortable. A tummy upset prevented me from going ashore at Aden. The remedy I was advised to take, equal parts of whisky, port and brandy, did little to cure the complaint but made me glad to retire to my bunk.

Our progress through the narrow waters of the Suez Canal was slow and stately. Sand dunes stretched to the horizon on both sides. Here and

there small settlements of tents pitched among palm trees, men in long robes leading brightly caparisoned camels and women washing clothes at the water's edge, looked like pictures from a children's illustrated *Bible*. Our passing did not evince the slightest flicker of interest from either shore. At the locks we had to wait our turn. Scarab sellers came on board and a *ghali-ghali*, or 'gully-gully' man, entertained us as he skilfully produced coloured scarves, eggs and yellow chickens, which delighted the children, from most unexpected places like the hats and pockets of the spectators, yards distant from him.

We berthed at Suez briefly, in the early hours of the morning, and wandered along dark streets to the few open shops. In spite of dire warnings, we returned to the ship unscathed. We passed the Anzac Memorial at Ismailia in the dusk. Now, of course, it is situated on Mt Clarence in Albany, as it was damaged during the troubles over the Canal.

It was getting colder as we sailed across the Mediterranean and we went on roster to the hold, where our luggage was set out for us, to pack away our summer clothes and take out our warmer garments. Among mine was the sealskin coat, a relic of some long dead ancestor, which I had been persuaded to add to my wardrobe. It was large and voluptuous but, although an anachronism even then, I was not too proud to wear it when we struck rough weather.

When we berthed in Marseilles, there was a scattering of snow in the streets but the French family insisted that Beryl and I should go to the old port with them and have a farewell drink. The sky was leaden, the street trees' bare branches silhouetted against it, but the quaint shop fronts and hearing the language spoken as a matter of course delighted me. It was everything I had seen in my text books and I fell in love with France on the spot.

We were at Gibraltar long enough to see the famous apes living in caves on the rock and have afternoon tea in a café in the picture-book main street. Rough seas and cold winds met us as we passed through the strait and came into the Atlantic and, apart from the hardiest souls, most people sought shelter in the saloons.

The mood on board changed as we approached our destination. There was some apprehension at the thought of leaving the security of the ship for the unknown. Addresses were exchanged, promises to meet and farewells taken, as we made our painfully slow passage through thick fog to berth at London docks.

The trip had taken four weeks. I have no memory of what happened to the sealskin coat. I only know it did not return to Australia.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

LONDON

Jean McDougall (soon to be Waller) met me. Her parents had emigrated to WA after World War 1 and lived with my parents while her father was employed on the farm, employment he was quite unused to. They became lifelong friends of my family and eventually went back to the UK.

Jean had been born in Narrogin and was four when she left but we had recently become reacquainted when she came to Australia on a working holiday.

She and the taxi driver were rather startled by the amount and character of my luggage but it was stowed on board and we were driven to the establishment recommended to me by a physiotherapy friend and where I had booked a room for two weeks.

My room was on the second floor of one of the many semi-detached houses surrounding a dispirited-looking little park, fenced by high iron railings. The room had basic furniture, bedraggled lace curtains on the window, a gas ring and a heater, both operated by a shilling in the slot. It was clean but rather gloomy, hardly welcoming. Neither was the landlady who greeted me with a warning about not running too much water into the bath in the bathroom, shared with other tenants and on the floor below, because if water slopped on the floor, it could seep through the ceiling of the room beneath. 'Australians are the worst,' she went on, 'always having baths and using too much water!'

It was not the best beginning of my big adventure but I refused to let sombre thoughts dampen my spirits and I set off to explore London. I walked miles drinking in its wonders.

Piles of masonry and other debris on vacant blocks were dotted throughout the city, evidence still of the damage caused by the war. The skies were

leaden, the streets and buildings drab and sooty, the atmosphere thick with fog most days but the romance was still there.

Sometime before I left home, my mother had befriended a homesick English boy, recently arrived in Australia, at church. He was working as a railway guard, living in the barracks and fending for himself. She took him under her wing, inviting him home for meals and to spend his off duty breaks. To his credit, he stuck at it and eventually achieved considerable success in his career.

In appreciation, his family in Croydon invited me to come and stay with them when I arrived in England. After two weeks in the bed-sitter I was more than ready to take up their offer.

The Crabbe family were kindness itself and their home became my London base during my stay. I was always made welcome no matter how or when I arrived at their door.

Cecil (later Sir Cecil, knighted for his service as Registrar of Friendly Societies in Britain) used to tell people I came back from an excursion, took over the bathroom for a day, washed my smalls, ratted round in the attic and took off again. The attic, reached by a ladder hooked down from the ceiling which intrigued me, was a life-saver as it was spacious and in my many forays up and down, I deposited my unwanted luggage up there.

Michael's younger brother and sister were still at home and I was treated like one of the family. They took me with them at Easter to their flat in Bexhill, near Eastbourne, and I had my first taste of the English seaside, a far cry from Cottesloe.

The dog, usually left on guard at home, came with us, which was a mistake as the house was burgled in our absence. A lot of valuables were stolen and the house left in disarray. I lost some money and all my jewellery. Rather to my dismay, I found an elephant gun, a relic of Cecil's days in India, flung onto my bed.

Prior to being employed in the National Health Service, I had to do a three-week orientation course, arranged by the British Almoners' Association. I was sent to King's College Hospital and attached to the almoner in the maternity ward.

It was a completely new field for me. Every mother, at that time, had at least a week on the ward before being sent to a convalescent home for a fortnight – all on the National Health. We interviewed every patient and helped with any problems they may have had and also made the, often complex, arrangements for their transfers.

I was still struggling to find my way around the hospital, let alone sort out the system and do the paperwork, when my mentor announced she was going on holiday, leaving me in charge after the first week.

It was a horrendous two weeks and I was thankful to get away unscathed. There was no monetary reward of course and my financial situation was precarious but when Gretchen, a Western Australian girl I had met on the *Maloja* rang me and suggested we hitch-hike round England, I agreed with alacrity.

We joined the Youth Hostel Association, bought back-packs and set off.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

HITCH-HIKING – UK

Early March, very cold, with drifts of snow still on the ground, was hardly the best time to set out on such a venture but there was so much to see and absorb, we hardly noticed the weather.

We went west, taking a train to the outskirts of London, and were offered a lift in a truck to Langley. As soon as we stepped onto the road another, carrying 22 tons of sugar, took us to Reading and a third, on to Oxford, where we stayed the night at the youth hostel.

We came through beautiful scenery, along the Thames, to Henley and rich agricultural country of checkered fields. The villages we passed, with their greens surrounded by quaint-looking shop-fronts and houses, to our eyes, seemed like pages from a storybook.

Next morning at Oxford some kindly road-menders offered to look after our packs in their tent while we explored the precincts of the famous university and town. We spent the day wandering around the beautiful university buildings and the town shops: the place seethed with students, needless to say, some striding earnestly along, carrying an armful of books, others weaving their way along the streets on bicycles, nearly all wearing their gowns, flapping around their legs.

We had been advised to go to Cirencester and, although it was off our planned route, we were glad we had as, not only was it interesting but also because, at night, we stayed at the Duntisbourne Abbots' hostel nearby. It was a lovely old house on top of a hill and, apart from the warden, we had it to ourselves. A rising full moon cast the bare branches of the old trees surrounding the house into silhouette, and shone on the snow. Snowdrops and crocuses were beginning to poke up, the air was crisp and there was silence everywhere. To make the evening more memorable, Gretchen cooked a

superb stew, a butcher having given us double our meat ration, in spite of the fact that probably we needed it less than anyone in the British Isles.

Cirencester is a Roman town and five straight roads lead into the market square. We looked down on them when we climbed up the tower of the grey, Norman church, up 204 steps of the narrow, winding staircase. In the mellow light of late afternoon, we could see the reflection of swans, drifting along the calm waters of a rivulet below, to green fields, woods and rolling hills to the horizon. The streets and square below us were busy with people, cars, bicycles and buses but there was still a medieval feel about the place.

This was in the early days of hitch-hiking and we had no trouble getting lifts, although a lot were short and mostly in trucks. When people discovered we were Australians, they bombarded us with questions about the country and ourselves.

As this was the off-season, we frequently had the youth hostels to ourselves. They were very good, cheap, clean and usually in interesting parts of the country. They ranged from cottages to manor houses and the wardens were helpful with travel information. Bunks, pillows, mattresses and blankets, were supplied in the dormitories but it was mandatory for hostellers to provide sleeping bag sheets. Utensils and cooking facilities were available in the common kitchen and, before leaving, everyone had to do an allocated cleaning duty.

Jean's mother, Mrs McDougall, now a widow, had invited us to visit her in North Wales. Jean was on holiday, preparing for her wedding, so we headed north, wending our way through the verdant countryside of the western counties. The hedgerows were budding and fat sheep and cattle grazed in green feed up to their hocks.

We were awe-struck by Gloucester Cathedral, its age and history. Initially an abbey, built in 1327, additions and rebuilding were made possible when, in an entrepreneurial move, the monks accepted the body of the murdered Edward II for burial and it became a centre of pilgrimage. Money rolled in from the worshippers' offerings. It was, we were told, the birthplace of the perpendicular Gothic style. A magnificent stained glass window, 72 feet by 38 feet, dating from the mid-14th century, replaced the apse and commemorated those who fought at Crécy in 1346. A beautiful alabaster effigy of the unfortunate monarch lay in a canopied tomb. The size, vaulted roof, tombs, chapels and central tower, 225 feet high, held us in a spell, wondering at the marvel of its construction. The medieval, great bell was the only one in England.

As I sat in a pew gazing at the wonder of it all, I cast my mind back to the evensong services held once in a month in the Highbury Hall, freezing

in winter, blisteringly hot in summer, when my mother sat at the piano on the stage and frowned at me when I dropped my collection penny. It was a far cry from where I sat now.

On our way to Hereford, a kind driver took us to the top of a mountain, near Symond's Yat, where we could look at the view of the Wye River, like a silver ribbon, winding its way through hills covered with brown furze. It was a crisp sunshiny day and we could see green fields interspersed with rich brown fallowed land, making a checker board to the horizon.

We caught a train to Monmouth, a dull grey town with ugly houses, a sharp contrast to what we had seen, and hitched on to Hereford, with its black and white Tudor architecture, Ludlow, Oswestry on the border, and into Wales.

A truck driver, taking a load to the west coast and returning, took us with him to show us the scenery. It became wilder and the road wound between snow-capped mountains. Here and there we saw lonely, grey cottages in sheltered places and unkempt-looking, long-haired sheep feeding on steep hillsides. I have no recollection of where we went but the bleak wildness and isolation of the country left a strong impression.

While we were waiting for lifts and came to particularly inviting drifts of snow, we could never resist the temptation to jump into it and play, usually ending in a snow fight or when a vehicle came in sight.

I am sure neither of us fully comprehended the historical significance of the land we travelled over. Vaguely, I knew there had been battles between the Welsh and English but nothing of the bloodshed, murder, incarceration, treachery and intrigue, which had taken place.

The history of Conway Castle gave us a glimmer of the troubled times. It was built over 700 years ago, very quickly and at great expense by Edward I to set the seal on his conquest of Wales. It has massively thick walls and eight great, drum towers, still standing but in ruins, inside.

In 1826, Thomas Telford built one of his first suspension bridges across the Conway River to the castle. It is no longer safe for vehicular traffic, but from it we had a spectacular view of the snow-capped mountains on one side and the Conway Estuary on the other.

Although we arrived at Mrs McDougall's door windswept and dirty, we were given a great welcome and thoroughly spoilt during our brief visit. We talked far into the night, catching up on news. We went walking in nearby glens, hemmed in by snow-clad mountains. The melting snow fed a hundred little cascades of water, sweet and as clear as glass, that flow into streams meandering through golden-brown bracken. Lavish meals awaited us on our return and we did them full justice.

On Sunday, we all went to church and I remember telling the family in a letter they must feel especially blessed because of all the prayers I had offered up on their behalf in the many places of worship I had visited.

One soft, misty day, we hitched to nearby Caernarvon Castle where traditionally the Princes of Wales receive their investiture. It too, is in ruins internally but the walls and turrets seemed as solid as when they were built in 1283. It was also built to impress the Welsh with the supremacy of England. It is thought to have been inspired by the great fortress of Constantinople. The walls are irregularly angled and have alternate, horizontal bands of sandstone and limestone which give it a mellow look. We sat high up on the ramparts to eat our picnic lunch, looking down on the gentle landscape and the Menai Straits.

Bidding our kind hostesses au revoir, as we expected to see them at the wedding when we returned to London, we headed south to Wales's highest mountain, Snowdon.

The only habitation we could see in the snow-covered landscape when we reached the bottom of the mountain, was a modest cottage offering bed and breakfast, so we booked in for the night before we tackled our onslaught on the heights. The landlady was rather stern and intimidating and we felt we had to be on our best behaviour. Everything was spotless, lace curtains at the windows and a plethora of antimacassars covering the furniture.

A little train line ran to the top of the mountain but it only operated in summer. It made a defined track for us to walk on, however, even if a lot of it was covered with snow. This was the easy route, despised by intrepid climbers, who tackled it from the steep sides, but it was adventurous enough for us. We plodded up in our entirely unsuitable footwear, which quickly became sodden, to the summit at 1,085 metres above sea level. We met no one all day and, standing on the very top in that wonderland of snow, ice, grey skies and silence, felt a little of the exhilaration and euphoria experienced climbers must have, when they achieve their aim.

Chester, on the England/Wales border, was rich in interest and history. We lingered to admire the black and white, Tudor architecture in so many buildings and the old merchant shops, still in use, where the owners lived above their commercial premises. We were told that they locked themselves in there, with as much of their stock as they could manage, when marauding pirates sailed up the estuary of the River Dee to plunder the town. It had been a trading port in those early days and, later, canals had been used to carry cargo by boat for dispersal throughout the country. One canal was still there but no longer in use.

The cathedral was not as spectacular as Gloucester but, on a later foray when travelling alone, I came to Chester again and remember resting on the grass surrounding it, drinking in the sunshine while I had a late lunch.

We by-passed a number of big cities and towns, to push on to Kendal and the beautiful lake district. We saw Beatrix Potter's house, not then open to the public. It was a hazy day and, in the muted afternoon sunlight, the countryside looked so like her illustrations, I half expected to see cheeky Peter Rabbit or Jemima Puddle-Duck come through the woods.

Filling our billy from Lake Windermere and lighting a fire on the white pebbly beach seemed sacrilegious but it was such a beautiful place for a picnic, I laid my burden of guilt aside.

We came onto rough fell country and a truck driver told us the farms we passed were mostly 60 or so acres and some had rights to graze up to 1,500 sheep on the fells, only bringing them down in severe weather and for shearing. Each sheep cut 4-5 lbs of coarse hairy wool, used locally I think, for carpet manufacture.

Our family had kept in close contact with their Scottish connection and several of these relatives had invited me to visit them.

One cousin, Frances, as she was always referred to, most respectfully, lived in a retirement hotel in Glasgow and had been insistent that I come and see her. She was an indefatigable letter-writer, to all her Australian cousins, and hardly a month went by without her sending me a postcard, almost always about the little princesses, Elizabeth and Margaret Rose, and I felt duty-bound to visit her.

We travelled via Carlisle, a depressing place but our stay was leavened by the cheery, friendly crowd at the youth hostel. We were given a lift by a truck driver who, when he heard we wanted to go to Glasgow, altered his route to take us there. It was a very uncomfortable ride as we had to take turns sitting hunched up on the gear box.

It was Sunday and after crossing the border into Scotland, everything was closed, including the 'caffs', as most truck drivers called the cafés. We were all hungry, so finally we suggested we stop and boil the billy, even though our supplies were limited, consisting of two chops, flour and jam. We pulled into a pine wood and soon had a fire lit and the billy on. Our driver was fascinated as we grilled the chops and made johnnycakes on the coals. 'Smashin', just smashing, he kept saying. We were all sad to say goodbye when he dropped us off in Glasgow.

We booked into the youth hostel and tried to spruce ourselves up for our visit. When I rang Frances[13] next morning, she said we must come straight over to see her, but it was with some trepidation on my part, as she had always sounded so proper, we set out. We were given a great welcome, not only by Frances but also the hotel staff and other residents, most of whom, like Frances, were crippled by arthritis and in varying degrees of decrepitude.

From the outset, Frances made it clear that we were her guests and guarded us accordingly. She had booked us into the hotel for a night and refused to let us pay for ourselves although I knew she was not affluent. She was excited and delighted to see us, bombarding me with questions about the family.

She had a younger brother, Tom, his wife Alison and their seven-year-old daughter, Catriona, living nearby, but I felt the Australian connection meant more to her. We took a taxi to visit them in the afternoon and although Alison was a warm, kindly person, it was apparent as soon as Tom returned from his law practice that relations between him and Frances were strained. He was very tall, dark and taciturn so it was a relief when Catriona came home from school and we sat and watched the children's session on the BBC. I had not seen TV before. I wrote home saying I did not think much of it.

Sometime later, Tom and Alison invited me to visit them for a weekend and I discovered that he improved on acquaintance. He was quite cynical but had quite a sense of humour. Tom became a Christian Scientist; later the family moved to America and he became a leading figure in the organization.

Frances was so loathe to let us go next morning, we had a late start.

The country was breathtakingly beautiful as we passed Loch Lomond and into the wilder Highlands. Our truck driver dropped us off near Glencoe Gorge and we walked through pine and larch woods to the youth hostel. It was only a mile from the scene of the massacre, where the McDonalds had met their awful fate.

After our meal in the evening, we walked down to the little village, a cluster of houses and a small store, to buy milk and bread. The moonlight shone on the snow, covering the mountains enclosing the valley, and was reflected in the pools of frozen water. From the trees at the side of the path, just ahead of us a deer sprang away, trying to distract us from her little spotted faun, standing in the shadows. It was an enchanted moment and distracted me from the feeling I had, that the valley was haunted by

13 Frances Donald, a Scottish cousin of my mother's on the paternal side.

tragedy. Many years later when I visited Port Arthur, once a penal colony in Tasmania, I had the same feeling of doom.

The roads became rougher and wilder, as we hitched to Loch Ness. The hostel was on the edge of the loch but, although we watched assiduously, no monster broke the placid waters.

On the strength of my family connection to the McLeods, we paid a flying visit to Skye, the home of the clan. We travelled through forests of trees, just bursting into leaf. The limbs were festooned with delicate streamers of lichen, translucent against the sun. Pines had been planted on some of the slopes and their resinous smell filled the air.

The round trip on the ferry, from Lochalsh to Kyleakin on Skye, was enough to make us both vow to return another time when we would stay on the island.

Men sat mending nets outside whitewashed cottages and the water was so calm and peaceful, we could see big fish swimming around the piles of the jetty. In the distance, lay the blue range of the far Cuillins.

Anne Duke, another of my mother's cousins[14], who lived in Brechin on the east coast, was expecting us so we hastened past Inverness and Elgin, elegant cities with impressive solid buildings but bleak, to Aberdeen, the centre of the herring trade and hence to the Lodge gates of Bearehill, the family home.

I knew the family owned a flax mill in the town and were well off but I had not expected the extensive parklands surrounding a beautiful Georgian mansion which came into view as we walked up the sweeping drive. Nervously, I wondered what they were expecting, probably not two travel-stained girls carrying backpacks and a billy.

Anne, who cared for Archie, her invalid husband, was out when we arrived but Tom, her older brother, greeted us warmly and took us to the smoking-room wing, attached to one side of the main house, where he and his wife, Marjorie, were living temporarily until they could move into their own home. Tom had recently returned from Argentina where he had been a mining engineer for many years.

As well as Marjorie, we met their five black labradors which wove around our legs as we came in and, preceding us into the drawing room, settled in the chairs closest to the fire. Shouting and striking out at them, Tom knocked two off their chairs. 'Sit down', he roared to us. We flung ourselves down, beating the dogs by a paws' length.

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14 Anne Duke, née Leishman, a cousin of my mother on the paternal side.

Tom and Marjorie told us they spent most of the time training the dogs and travelling around the country showing them. They showed us various awards the dogs had won, including a couple from the Scottish Kennel Club Show, the well-known annual dog show in Edinburgh. The following year, Tom and Marjorie very kindly took me to it. There were dogs of every size and description and the noise from their barking was deafening.

What with the heat from the fire, the strong presence of dog and cigarette smoke, as both Tom and Marjorie, as well as Anne we discovered, chain-smoked, we were not sorry when Anne came home and we went into the main house. There we were greeted by three old English mastiffs, also Scottish Kennel Club trophy holders. The parents and Calum, the 'pup', were the size of young calves and had heads like buckets but seemed docile and friendly.

We were made very welcome and settled into an enormous bedroom looking over the park. After tea, Anne took me up to meet Archie. As I leant across the bed to shake his hand, there was a loud 'woof' and Calum, launching himself from a mattress in the corner of the room, where he had been lying, landed on the bed and took my hand in his jaws. 'Oh! The naughty baby!' Anne laughed as she prised his jaws apart, 'he is so possessive of Archie!'

She went on to explain why the bedside table lay on its side over Archie's legs. It was to prevent Calum getting on the bed and lying on top of him! Poor Archie, a dear, gentle man, looked so frail and ill that a puff of wind would be too much for him, let alone 200 lbs of dog lying on him. Owing to Calum's overweening passion for him, I saw less of Archie during my visit that I should have liked.

Anne, who was short, sprightly and as far as we could see never stopped, looked after him herself as well as running the house.

A young man was employed as a chauffeur gardener and lived with his widowed mother and younger sister in the Lodge and two local ladies came one morning a week each to clean but otherwise there was no other help. Anne told us that during the harvesting of the potato crop, these ladies, along with everyone else available in the town, went off to work in the fields. Even the schools closed, so the children could join the workforce.

Brechin was in a rich agricultural area, famous for its Angus beef and, as well, potatoes, sugar beet, some grain and other crops flourished. We had been mystified by the long barrows of built up soil we had seen near the farm buildings and Anne told us they contained mangelwurzels, a coarse, swede-like root, grown for winter fodder for the cattle when, in severe weather, they were shedded. Packed in the frozen soil, they kept well and could be disterred when needed.

Archie and Anne had two sons, David and Matthew. David had been a Lieutenant Colonel in the Black Watch but resigned his commission, when his father became ill, to take over management of the mill. He lived in a large house in the street next to Bearehill with Heather, his wife, two small children, their governess and five chows. The latter were very pretty dogs, light-coloured, fluffy and slightly less overwhelming than the labradors, and mastiffs.

Matthew was a Commander in the Royal Navy, currently ashore in Portsmouth, where he lived with Tina, his Swedish wife and two little boys.

David came to see his father every evening after work and then came upstairs to the smoking-room where we were having a late afternoon tea. He was a very nice person, easy to talk to and very considerate towards his parents.

Anne had decided to teach us Scottish country dancing and he obligingly made up a foursome as we danced reels to Jimmy Shand's band playing on the gramophone. Gretchen was an accomplished pianist and we sometimes had very enjoyable musical evenings.

Mealtimes were about three hours later than what we regarded as normal. Sometimes we had dinner at 10 or 11 pm.

Anne said we made her feel twenty years younger. She was quite lonely and talked late into the night, often until two or three in the morning.

Needless to say, we slept in but Anne seemed tireless and had been up early, ridden her bike to the bakers to get fresh baps for our breakfast or to the fishmongers for Arbroath smokies for us, as well as showered Archie and done the necessary chores.

We explored the house, from the small roof promenade, attics, many bedrooms which still had ornamental bell pulls which rang in the kitchen on the ground floor but alas to no avail, and several reception rooms. The kitchen was large, there were several pantries, one filled with large bales of dog biscuits and the cellars beneath.

The drawing room was particularly elegant and one day when I picked up a very attractive cushion to examine it, I was not a little surprised to see the thigh bone of an ox tucked under it. 'Oh, look!' said Anne lovingly, 'Calum's hidden his bookie!' The mastiffs had a predilection for literature and, if left for any length of time in a room with a book case, systematically removed every volume from the shelves.

There was an extensive garden behind the house, beds of flowers, vegetables and fruit trees espaliered on a mellow brick wall. Geese and other poultry were kept, there were old stables, now a garage, and a hot house

where more delicate plants were grown and a grape vine, reputed to be 400 years old, on a par with the one in Hampton Court.

Every morning vegetables and flowers needed for the house were brought to the kitchen. While we were there, the gardener also brought a bunch of grapes in a flat basket. When Gretchen and I saw the grapes, we fell on them with happy cries and polished them off. It was not until the third day we realized, much to our embarrassment, that the one bunch was meant for everyone. They were so special that every season single bunches were carefully packed in padded boxes and sent by courier to friends, some as far away as Dundee.

One day Tom and Marjorie took us for a drive up the Esk Valley to see Edzell Castle, where Cromwell had billeted his men during the '45, and various other places of historic interest. Tom had encyclopaedic knowledge of Scottish history which he shared with us, without pause all day. It was all very interesting but would have been better if Tom had paused now and again and we had remembered to bring the thermos for tea for our picnic lunch.

David took us over the mill one day, to watch flax being spun and woven. We were the focus of all eyes, as we walked through the work rooms. Linen tea-towels were produced for markets in most of the Commonwealth countries and the USA. David told us his grandfather started the business as a cottage industry but it had grown to become one of the main industries in Brechin, employing three hundred people. It needed new, more modern, equipment but the cost would be prohibitive, so he was in the horns of a dilemma, whether he should take the plunge, or sell. In an effort to streamline production, he had introduced a work/time study which the staff resented and made them felt threatened.

I really admired David, firstly for giving up his army career to run the mill but also for being sensitive to the family tradition, knowing what the mill meant to Archie. Eventually the mill was sold and David became the marketing manager for the new buyer.

We were enjoying our stay so much it was hard to leave but, as the date for Jean's wedding drew near, we headed south as quickly as we could and arrived back in London with a day to spare.

Unhappily, we completely disgraced ourselves as, although we had been given exact directions to get to the wedding venue, we became totally and hopelessly lost, finally arriving at the reception when the festivities were nearly over.

Gretchen went off on a tour of the continent before returning to WA and I went to an interview at the Worcester Royal Infirmary.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

WORCESTER

Another girl had also applied for the job at the Infirmary and although it was offered to me, I did not want to commit to staying for a year which she was, so she was appointed. I was offered the locum until she could start and gladly accepted it.

I discovered that Margaret Plunkett, an ex-WAAAF radar operator with whom I studied social work at the Adelaide University, was already on the staff and she arranged temporary accommodation for me at the hostel where she was staying. I advertised in the local paper – 'Australian girl requires short-term accommodation' – and had 27 replies. Some of the writers said they had had Australian cricketers and footballers stay with them and almost all stated they would like me to come as their guest.

Miss Schlesinger, the head almoner who had only recently removed to the country from Guy's Hospital in London and was regarded with some awe by her staff, remarked rather acidly that she and her friend, with whom she shared an old farmhouse, had been advertising a Baby Belling electric stove for six weeks and had no takers to buy it. She wondered if she changed the advertisement to 'Australian wants to sell Baby Belling', she would have success!

Before I could make a choice from these many offers, I was scooped up by the catering officer from a smaller hospital in the group, Ravenswood, who announced I was coming to stay with her. She lived in a lovely old house, the Old Rectory, entered through a blue door into a walled garden. I slept in an attic with views over the city on one side and the racecourse on the other. My hostess was a tall, commanding lady who, with her late husband, had managed a hotel on the south coast. In theory, I was to look

after myself but every evening when I returned from work, a delicious meal was ready for me.

I fell in love with the house and Worcester, the staff at the Infirmary were friendly and I rather regretted my decision not to stay longer.

Margaret Plunkett had become a legend at the hospital because of her enthusiasm for exploring the countryside, often covering long distances on her bicycle, which she had bought from a departing Western Australian social worker, also a friend of mine, for the princely sum of two pounds. One weekend, we went to Stratford-upon-Avon and stayed at the youth hostel while we explored the town. I caught buses or hitched to various places of interest nearby.

There was plenty to see and learn about Worcester itself and I never tired of wandering around the city, looking at the shops and old buildings. Historically, it had more than a fair share of romance, war and disasters. It was used by the Romans but was never a Roman station and monks from Whitby established a monastery there very early. Alfred granted a charter for the fortification of the settlement, remnants of which are still standing and, in the tenth century, Bishop Oswald turned the Saxon monastery into a Benedictine house. Through his influence, Worcester became a centre of civic and ecclesiastical government.

The Normans saw the strategic importance of the town as an operational base for their forces to repel their enemies in the west, the Irish and Welsh, and it suffered from the warring parties throughout the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Being on the banks of the River Severn, it was subject not only to flooding but also raiding pirates. There is an account of one pirate raid when the cathedral was desecrated and the booty stolen. One unfortunate, who lagged behind to take the *sanctus* bell, was set upon by the people and flayed alive. His skin was tanned and pieces of it nailed on the doors of all the churches as a warning.

Before the end of the 12th century, Richard granted the earliest of its several royal charters. Nearly five hundred years later, in the 1640s, Charles II added to the burdens of the population, twice demanding tributes from them. After the Battle of Worcester when Cromwell, advancing with a strong force from Evesham, laid rout to Charles and his supporters, his men razed the city, the cathedral and the walls and then set fire to it. In all the cost was £180,000. I visited the Tudor house where Charles was supposed to have lived and heard the many stories of his escapes. At school, I had been taught that he hid in an oak tree while Cromwell's troops searched for

him below and when I walked through the countryside, I used to look up into the thick canopies of the oaks and wonder, 'Was that the one?'

When times became more settled, Worcester developed as a thriving centre of trade. It was well situated for river transport and when railways were established, for the export of goods. Glove-making was one of the first industries with Dent, and Allgood & Co, still famous names. In 1954 when I was there, Webbs carpets, Lea & Perrins Worcester sauce and, of course, the porcelain works were still operating. Mining, engineering, metal trades, clothing, leather and furniture factories were in full swing.

I spent hours wandering through the stalls in the shambles on market days, when seconds from the factories were sold for a song. Constrained by my financial state and the already overabundance of worldly goods, I could only look longingly at the treasures on show.

There was not a lot of work for me at the Infirmary so I was quite pleased when Miss Schlesinger asked me if I would go to Ravenswood Hospital for two weeks to help their almoner, who had recently had a bereavement in the family and was overloaded with cases.

I shared an office with Miss Moncaster which was not altogether good for our work, as we talked so much. She kept asking me about Australia and, never one to hold back, I discoursed at length. She was young and we got on well together. In between, we did cover quite a lot and I felt the break in routine probably helped as much as clearing up back work.

As the hospital was some miles out of the city, I travelled by bus and, running late on my second morning, charged through the main door and almost knocked down a tall, stately lady standing in the foyer. She was very kind, as I apologized and introduced myself and, on the spot, much to my surprise especially when I realized she was the matron, said she would like to take me for a drive one afternoon and show me the Cotswold countryside. She was as good as her word and drove me to the lovely Vale of Evesham where the orchards were in full flower and through little villages with quaint-sounding names and the magically lovely country.

In spite of our talk fests, I did clear up quite a lot of work for Miss Moncaster. One case I remember vividly. I was asked to visit an older woman who had given birth to twins in a boarding house where she lived. The babies had been found dead in a suitcase and there was a suspicion that they might have been smothered. The police had been informed. Although she seemed pleased to see me, the woman was not very forthcoming. She assured me she was fine and would go back to work in a few days. She did

not appear to be in shock and seemed philosophical about the death of the babies. I gave her our phone number and she thanked me for coming. I left the hospital soon after and never heard what happened.

Miss Schlesinger asked me if I would go to the Royal Gwent Hospital in Newport, Monmouthshire, as Miss Bevan, the almoner, was on her own and needed an assistant.

The Almoner Association in London had arranged a locum at St Thomas' in London for me but I liked the idea of staying in the country and meeting the people so I agreed to go to Newport.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

NEWPORT

Newport's main claim to glory was that it had one of only two transporter bridges in the world. It spanned the River Severn, a prominent landmark. It had a large and busy dockyard but the town itself was not very interesting.

The Royal Gwent, my fourth hospital in a little over a month, was the main medical centre for the region, which included half-a-dozen cottage hospitals up the valleys. The old poorhouse had been converted into a mental institution but was administered separately. Each establishment had 300 beds and, in the case of the Royal Gwent, numerous outpatient clinics.

Miss Bevan proved to be quite young, tall, rangy and not very forthcoming, as I was to discover. She was helpful when I asked for advice and, while not unfriendly, did not emanate bonhomie.

She was on the Almoners' Association Board in London and had a disconcerting habit of disappearing for several days at a time to attend meetings and conferences, without telling me. I was left holding the fort.

However, she did offer to take me to London one weekend, when she and her sister were driving up and invited me to spend the Friday night at their house, so we could make an early start. I fully expected her to take me home with her after work but instead, she told me where to catch the bus to Chepstow where they lived and how to get to their house from the stop.

At 9 pm I was trailing my suitcase through meadows, on footpaths overhung with long, wet grass, completely lost. I found my way eventually.

Accommodation had been arranged for me with a young widow whose husband had been lost at sea during the war. She was very nice and we got on well together. She had twelve-year-old twins who were at a school for the daughters of naval officers in Sevenoaks and she herself worked as the supervisor of a clothing manufacturer. Her hours were long and on most

nights we had our evening meal in front of the black and white TV, watching some inane cabaret show and went to bed early. She took me over the factory one day. It was a large company, owned by two brothers with the wonderful names of Joshua and Caleb Griffiths.

My office at the hospital was at the other end to the almoner department and was a pokey little room leading off a large waiting room in the orthopaedic department. I was given most of the orthopaedic work, which consisted mainly of men injured in the mines and some medical cases.

The Miners Board gave free health cover to everyone, including family members, as well as convalescence and rehabilitation. A lot of my work involved arranging transfers to these places; several of the rehab centres were in Wolverhampton and South Shields.

Everyone wanted to convalesce at a home in Llandrindod Wells because the scenery was beautiful and the matron had a reputation for spoiling her patients, feeding them up with her cooking and abundant local produce, like fresh vegetables and cream.

Later, when I happened to be near the home, I called in and soon realized why patients loved it. The verandah was lined with happy guests, eating scones, jam and cream with their tea. For many, the women especially, it was possibly the best holiday they had ever had.

Almost every morning the waiting-room was packed with men in wheelchairs or on crutches, referred to the specialists who, in turn, referred those requiring convalescence or rehabilitation to me. Getting a wheelchair into my office was only the first hurdle.

To my surprise, I found some patients could not understand me. I certainly found it hard to understand many of them. In the end, when Davies from Llanover, or Jones Thomas-Jones from Blaen-y-pant, followed by 'Di' this and 'Di' that, a clutch of Griffiths and one of two Williams, announced themselves, I got them to write down their names and addresses so I could sort them out later. The referral slips were not much help, because half the time I could not read the doctor's script.

I had enjoyed listening to the different dialects I had heard but here it was a real hurdle. And that was not the end of my difficulties as two of the specialists I worked with were called Gwynne Jones, as was one registrar. The houseman was an Indian who could barely speak English.

It was a fast learning curve but I battled through. One patient was a company director from the Midlands who had had an accident in his Rolls Royce, near Newport. The only patient I ever had who wrapped a Rolls Royce around a light pole. He was a nice man and when he was ready to be discharged, his secretary came down to accompany him home.

I had to entertain her until he was ready to leave. She looked at me appraisingly and asked if I had done any training for my job? 'I realize you must be trained', she said 'but you look too young.' It was not reassuring.

At weekends, I caught buses or hitched into the outlying country and spent two golden days in Somerset staying in a youth hostel overnight. The weather was perfect, gardens and orchards in full bloom. The air was heavy with the perfume of ripe strawberries. Punnets for sale were everywhere, the best I have ever tasted. The burring speech of the people sounded like the buzz of the bees as they went from flower to flower collecting nectar. I went to Cheddar Gorge, saw Wells Cathedral in the distance at dusk but my clearest memory is of the lush beauty and strawberry sweet air.

I went to Cardiff and explored that elegant city. A lot of the valley people were there, noisy and talkative, much despised by the urban dwellers, I was told. The museum was large and full of interest. A display showing the processes in coal mining whetted my interest and when I queried the possibility of seeing a mine with Miss Bevan, she suggested I ring the Oakdale colliery, the nearest working mine.

The manager said I would be welcome to visit the training face with a tour arranged for twenty Danish schoolboys in a few days' time.

When I arrived at his office he said that, as I worked with injured miners, he and the supervisor had decided I should see the men working on the actual coal seam. I was given overalls, boots and a miner's hard hat with a lamp, to change into and, with the supervisor, dropped to what felt like the bowels of the earth, in a small, open, ricketty cage. The supervisor gave me a lot of information about the mine, water pumps, air compressors, etc, but I did not absorb a lot. I recall, it was opened in 1911 and of three pits, the one we were in, the North, was the only one still operating. Approximately 600,000 tons of coal was produced annually.

We walked along a barely lit, narrow, side shaft. A railway line ran along the centre and we had to step aside and press ourselves against the wall as a line of bogeys, filled with coal, rattled past us. The line had a down grade so that the weight of coal in the bogeys ran them down to the unloading station by gravitation. A pulley system brought them back.

To get into the cramped space where the miners were at work, we had to get down on hands and knees and crawl several yards through a narrow tunnel. The roof was so low, it was impossible to stand up straight and the six men, working in an area no bigger than ten feet by sixteen, had to work bent over or on their knees. The only light came from our lamps and they were so blackened by coal dust, I could only see their teeth and the whites of their eyes. The lamps moving in the blackness looked like fireflies. It was

hard to understand how they could swing their picks to chip out the lumps of coal in such a confined space without hitting each other.

The primitive conditions shocked me. How men would go down each day to work at such a dangerous job for long hours at a time, was beyond my comprehension. It was not as if they lived in Elysian Fields when they surfaced. The countryside was pitted with mine shafts and dumps, the villages grey and the weather depressing. I had been on a trip to a re-employment centre at Merthyr with a group of visiting almoners. It was up the Rhonda Valley and the houses in the villages we passed were in rows of identical dwellings, semi-detached, right up against the street, with no chance of a garden.

I had purposely shut off my mind to any thought of roof collapses while I was underground but was very relieved to come up to the surface. To my surprise, we had been underground for several hours and I was more than ready for the strong tea and sandwiches awaiting me.

The office girl gave me soap, a towel and took me to a shower room where I saw in the mirror that my face, too, was black with coal dust. It had even penetrated my underwear. I left the mine a wiser woman, filled with admiration for the stoicism and courage of men who worked in the mines and the strength of their women who awaited them at home.

I was puzzled when several of the patients' wives who had come to see me for various reasons, but mainly financial, bewailed the difficulty, they were having in buying new clothes and dappers for their children for Whitsun. The office girls explained new clothes were very important for the celebration and that dappers were sandshoes.

The girls in the department were a friendly lot and, when I managed to join them for tea breaks, they begged me to tell them about my life and Australia, so our allocated recess often stretched out. Miss Bevan seemed to enjoy them, too, but never commented.

A referral from the medical superintendent of Sully Chest Hospital, on the other side of Cardiff, was passed on to me. He requested assistance for a young farmer who needed urgent heart surgery but could not afford to employ anyone to run the farm in his absence.

The farm was in hill country near the course of the River Usk. Black cattle fed on lush pasture and the scenery was spectacular. The man and his shy, pretty, red-headed wife lived in an old stone house on top of a hill. It had few creature comforts and when I was taken upstairs to see him, the bedroom was depressingly bare. He lay among tangled blankets, clearly distressed and very ill. There was no glass in the window and a chill wind added to the bleakness.

The main problem, he told me, was getting the mangelwurzel crop harvested and stored. As it was summer, the cattle did not have to be shedded but without the mangelwurzels, there would be no winter feed. Once he had the operation, he went on, he would be able to manage. (I sent a prayer of thanks to Anne Duke who had told me about mangelwurzels.) He looked so fragile I was assailed by doubt. Both he and his wife were desperate with worry. They looked so vulnerable, my heart bled for them and I have never forgotten them. I promised them faithfully I would get them help, although I did not have the remotest idea how I could manage it.

I had already discovered the almoner's bible, a thick, red-covered *Directory of Social Services in the United Kingdom* and I turned to it now. There were societies offering help for everyone from shipwrecked sailors to Distressed Gentlewomen and, sure enough, needy farmers. The director was AG Street, a well-known writer and, I think editor of an agricultural journal. An answer to my request for assistance came on the return mail stating, a cheque to cover six weeks' wages for a labourer was on its way to the young farmer. When I rang the medical superintendent of Sully Hospital to tell him the way was now clear for the patient to be admitted, he realized I was Australian and asked me to come and work with him at Sully.

He was a New Zealander and, in spite of my hedging, saying I did not want a long term commitment, he was most insistent I should see the hospital before I decided. He was coming to Newport in a few days' time and arranged to take me back to Sully and give me a guided tour. He was very nice and the hospital, built on the coast, had huge windows so every bed had a view of the ocean. He wanted me to stay for a year but I felt I had seen enough of mines and miners and was ready for pastures new. He accepted my refusal with good grace and took me home to meet his young family and charming wife before I went back to Newport.

By a strange coincidence, Dick visited Sully many years later when he was on an overseas trip.

Very sadly the young farmer died before he left hospital.

By now, I had learnt the ropes of my job, had a good relationship with the doctors, sorted out the Gwynne Joneses and even the Indian houseman and I could understand one another. On the other hand I had never even seen the matron, nor the medical superintendent, let alone met them and the few ward sisters I had met, were not very friendly. I had never felt less part of a hospital. There was no set arrangement about how long I should stay and I felt I had given the hospital a fair crack of the whip. I worked an extra week (and weekend) to tie up loose ends. Miss Bevan had disappeared

into the wide blue yonder, without saying goodbye or kiss my foot, so I felt I owed the place no loyalty.

Thanks to the shortage of trained almoners, jobs were not hard to come by. I wanted to work in Scotland and decided where, by sticking a pin in the map. It landed on Perth and although there was no vacancy at their infirmary, I was directed to the Bridge of Earn Hospital, five miles outside the city, where an assistant was needed. I duly applied for the job and was asked to attend for an interview.

It meant travelling to Crewe and changing onto the Aberdeen train. We reached Crewe at midnight and, in my frenzy to make the connection, caught an express by mistake. It never occurred to me that two trains would be going to the same place within twenty minutes of each other. I fell asleep and awoke at dawn just in time to see 'Perth' written up as we pulled out of the station. The next stop was Pitlochry, much further on, where I was decanted onto an almost deserted platform. The station master told me a freight train would be along several hours later and the guard might let me take it back to Perth, before he left to go home.

Pitlochry is very scenic but I was cold, hungry and concerned about the inconvenience I would cause Joan Cable, the almoner, who had written to say she would meet me. Eventually, the freight train arrived and I was installed in the guards' van. Joan was on the station, mildly frenzied, but was very kind and drove me back to the hospital. Strong tea and the hot rolls, lashed with butter, the regular morning tea fare, soon restored me. I may have met the medical superintendent but I certainly had no formal interview. It seemed to be a foregone conclusion that I was appointed.

The hospital itself was not impressive. It consisted of a series of Nissan huts, scattered round a wide area. There were 800 beds and it had been set up as an emergency hospital during the war. The quarters for ancillary staff, like us, were comfortable and each room heated. Our building was connected to a similar structure for resident medical staff.

Arrangements were made for me to start in a month's time. In the meantime, I had organized a trip to Ireland, a few days in Dublin to see the Horse Show and then to the north to meet my Irish relations.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

IRELAND

I crossed to Eire on an early ferry, packed with light-hearted, long-haired, wild-looking Irishmen going home for the August Bank Holiday.

The atmosphere from the bar was soon thick with smoke, the smell of whisky and Guinness, the sounds of joking and laughing, as they greeted one another in their rich brogue. Someone on deck began playing a mouth organ and soon a group of men were dancing jigs, picking their way daintily around the disreputable bundles of rugs and battered suitcases flung down with gay abandon in the rush to the bar.

Dublin looked dirty and there were beggars on the streets. Barefoot little boys in ragged, ill-fitting clothes and unkempt hair pleaded to carry luggage or hail taxis for a few pence. There were horse-drawn cabs on the streets and several donkey carts, driven by fat old men and crowded with little children, wending their way among the traffic.

I had booked into a bed and breakfast establishment for 10/6 a night (light supper included). It seemed to be run by four sisters, their husbands and numerous children, all with vivid red hair and speech so thick, it could be cut with a knife.

I was the only guest and my meals were served in an immaculate parlour. It was cold, richly embellished with crochet whatnots and rather unnerving pictures of the Sacred Heart. The meals were more than generous, each dish brought to me by a different family member, so they could all get a good look at me. In spite of the numbers in the kitchen, breakfast never appeared before 10 am so an early start was out of the question.

There were contrasts in the city, beautiful, classical public buildings, bespeaking an opulent past, elegant shops in Grafton Street, displaying antiques, Waterford glass, Belleek china, exquisite Donegal tweeds and

handmade sweaters, all much sought after by the tourists, but very different goods in the many cheap-jack shops. Here, there was a glorious mixture of painted, plaster models of the Holy Family, Christ on the Cross, shamrocks, ashtrays, the Sacred Heart, in with crucifixes, holy medals, rosaries, snow-storms, sweets and cheap cigarettes.

Everyone was friendly and spoke with delightful turns of phrase, reminding me of my father. The memorials and place names, honouring the heroes of the Troubles and the Easter Rising, were grim reminders of the City's stormy past.

I went to a revue at the university and to a rather mystical play at the Abbey Theatre, where I sat next to a young man wearing a pair of remarkable, bright yellow, calfskin boots. After the show, he took me to a noisy, smoky bar for a drink and drove me back to my lodgings in his utility, which pleased me. My hosts questioned me closely about my evening out and means of transport home. Obviously, they had stayed awake until my return.

The Horse Show was a wonderful spectacle. The emerald green grass, white-railed judging rings and colourful crowd made a spectacular backdrop for the stars of the show and their riders, as they went through their paces.

Eight hundred horses, the pick of bloodstock from Europe and the British Isles gathered together, with shining coats and beautiful manners were magical to watch. The long, sunny August day passed like a dream and I vowed to return.

I travelled north by train to visit my cousin, Gladys Clarke, and her family, husband Jack and three children, Peter, Patricia and Barbara, a toddler. We got on well together and spent the time trying to trace our connections and picnicking at the beach.

While staying at Bangor, I wrote this letter to my mother with my first impressions of Northern Ireland and the cousins that I was meeting for the first time:

> I got up here on Saturday night. I had a lovely trip as it was clear sunshine and the line followed the coast most of the way. There were people out haymaking and little whitewashed cottages and women and children out in the fields.
>
> At Belfast, I had to get a bus out and, when I arrived here, I found Jack Clarke and the kids had been meeting every train. Gladys[15] is a beaut. person – like Pat in ways and Nan in looks[16], as near as anyone we know.

15 Gladys Clarke, née Blakely, was my cousin. Her mother was one of my father's sisters.

16 Pat and Nan Porter were my cousins, the daughters of Jack Porter, one of my father's brothers.

Jack is very nice too and the kids are beaut. Patricia is six-and-a-half and like Robin in independence, Peter is five and a real character, very lazy by contrast. He has two bottom teeth missing and says the most incredibly quaint things. Barbara is sixteen months and the healthiest baby I have seen over here. She is fat, tanned with pink cheeks and coppery curls and is always good. They all speak northern Irish and it kills me. Jack works in the gas works. The house is two-storied and very comfortable but not flash. Harold Brown[17] has lent Jack a car for the next three weeks as the latter is having holidays and we have been for some drives and hope to go out more next week. We are going to Armagh one day to see the Bests[18] and to look for the farm.

Yesterday I went into Belfast and had lunch with Muriel[19]. She lives with her father who is a dear old boy but has had a stroke and is a bit vague. She has two very nice, shy kids. Caroline is about 17 and is going to start modern languages at the university this year and Royston is about 15. She still has her house in Spain but is staying on with her father. Their house is lovely, in a very quiet, select part of Belfast. It is a very big and attractive house. Muriel is very nice. They also had a difficult little French boy, who is supposed to be learning English over here. I thoroughly enjoyed it. After lunch, Harold Brown came in. He now looks after the Box Factory and has a wife and three kids who live in Belfast. He doesn't look like anyone I've seen before. Actually, he came to have a quick look at me, he later told me. Anyway he started to take Muriel and me down town and then decided we'd go and have tea so we drove out to a roadhouse along the Antrim Road. It was very kind of him and I liked him very much indeed. Muriel and Harold have another sister, Betty, who is married with a couple of kids, I think, and is away at present. Gladys has one brother, Russell, married, in Nairobi. Muriel is very anxious to get hold of a family tree, which she says her mother sent out to Australia at some stage. Did you get it? She would like a copy if you or Aunt Ida have it. Needless to say, they were all busting with curiosity to see me. Gladys thinks I am like Sheena Best, the doctor, daughter of Jack Best and I hope to see them and have a look for myself.

Bangor is a nice little town and the headland is lovely. Belfast is a clean sort of place with wide streets but all the north lacks the warmth of

17 Harold Brown was also a cousin, son of my father's other sister.
18 My father's mother's family.
19 Muriel Dennis, née Brown, Harold's sister.

> the south I am told. I can't understand how two lots of people can live so close and speak so differently. Coming over the border, the Customs searched us very thoroughly. I had forgotten about it and could easily have been copped. Things are very cheap in Eire but you just can't get them out apparently.
>
> The sun is shining now and I think we might go out this afternoon in the car, down the southern peninsula. My plans are indefinite at present. I haven't anything organized. I'd like to stay in Ireland for ages but I do think the south probably has more to commend it than the north. There are lot of lovely parks and pretty trees round about these parts. The air is very soft and everyone looks very healthy. They make all sorts of nice home-baked breads and scones and, of course, at every dinner table there is a huge dish of potatoes boiled fluffy in their skins and everyone has about four but they are lovely.

The cousins that I was meeting in Northern Ireland were from my father's side of the family. They seemed to be as keen to meet me as I was them. One day, we drove down to Poyntzpass, near the border, to meet more relations, the Bests. My Irish grandmother had been a Best but I had no idea there was such a wide connection.

I was welcomed like a prodigal daughter, with warmth and love by Uncle Jack and his wife, Aunt Tiny, who if she had not actually prepared the fatted calf, fed us royally. Uncle Jack was a cousin of my father's, although much younger. Uncle Jim, who called in from The Hill farm, had grown up with dad and recalled many boyhood adventures they had enjoyed in their youth. He was a big, rangy, stooped old man who came through the door with a battered hat, on sideways, and a sheep dog at his heels, shouting: 'Where is she? I'll kiss her first and look at her afterwards.'

I thought the house, Acton, was the most beautiful I had ever seen. The dining room was oval, half timber-panelled and the matching oval table seated twenty, which in some of my later visits it did. The main bedroom above was also oval and from the bed where I often slept, I could see the dark blue line of the Mountains of Mourne. There was a three-hundred-acre farm attached, where to my eyes an amazing amount of stock was carried in the lush green fields.

Uncle Jack had established the first auction ring in the north and he and Don, his son, regularly travelled to Londonderry, Armagh and other centres, to sell. Buyers came from 'over the wather', on a regular basis I was told.

Previously stock was sold on market days in each small centre and by private negotiation. I remembered my father telling me that when a buyer

made an offer, the seller would slap his hand if he agreed, otherwise whack his shoulder or some other part of his anatomy, to let him know he did not accept it.

This article that I wrote for publication gives a picture of market day at Markethill, the town nearest Moyrourkan where Dad's family farmed:

> A large white Ulster pig was scuffling with a collie dog in the main street as we drove into Markethill County Armagh, Northern Ireland, on the monthly Fair day.
>
> The sow butted the dog in the ribs, snorted with satisfaction and trotted down the road. I was afraid she would be lost – 'Och, not at all,' said my companion, 'someone will have an eye on her.'
>
> This fair is one of the few remaining ones now all cattle and most other stock is sold by auction. The cattle selling has to be regulated so it can be controlled.
>
> Both sides of the streets were lined with vehicles, sheep, and pigs and men in sombre colours. The latter wore cloth caps, almost to a man and many carried nobly walking sticks.
>
> The stock came in various ways. Five pigs arrived in the back of a van and two Border Leicesters stood in stolid resignation.
>
> A mob of pretty Blackface lambs had been trucked from the bare, windswept hills of Donegal, Eire.
>
> Dealing was going on apace, but as it was still early, few sales had been put through. It is a long time until 4 o'clock.
>
> I hear one farmer, when asked if he had sold his sheep say 'Och, sure, and there's always tomorrow.' When a bidder names his price and the seller agrees, they slap hands mightily.
>
> When the seller is holding out he gets a number of hard hits on various parts of his anatomy. Sometimes a bystander interferes and there is much laughter. The Fair may not be scientific but everyone enjoys themselves very much.
>
> We went on to the more methodical selling by auction in the cattle mart at Armagh. Beef cattle were sold here every week.
>
> The auction is a new process to Northern Ireland and many of the buyers come from 'over the wather,' to buy for English consumption. Selling is by the hundredweight and the average beast weighed

approximately 10½ - 11 hundredweight. Prices were down by several shillings to about £6 a hundredweight.

Each beast passes over a weighbridge, entering the ring. At present the Government guarantees £5/17/- a hundredweight and I hear that there is sometimes shady work on the Border as this subsidy does not apply to cattle from the Republic.

This sale was more business-like than the Fair where personal enjoyment figures largely and deals are settled in a gentlemanly fashion in smoky Irish whisky the colour of the September sunshine.



The monthly fair at Markethill, Co Armagh, Northern Ireland
From a newspaper cutting in the collection of the author

Aunt Tiny and Uncle Jack had three children, Sheena who was a doctor and had married Dudley Good, also a medical practitioner, living not far away, at Tandragee, with three little boys, Don, married to Margaret, living in the nearby Lodge with their two children, and Betty, who was working in England.

When Margaret heard I was going to Bridge of Earn Hospital, she said Fred Moore, her sister's brother-in-law was an orthopaedic registrar there and she would tell him to look me up, 'although', she added, 'he's very shy'.

It was not hard to accept the pressing invitation to come back and stay as long as I liked at Acton. I felt I had come home.

1956-1957

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

BRIDGE OF EARN

My second arrival at Perth railway station was more orderly than my first and I was soon settled into the quarters and at work at the hospital.

Initially, some of the staff seemed very formal and stiff; several of the older ward sisters put the fear of God into me until the day I left. The patients were much warmer and, apart from some mutual difficulties in understanding each other, for them my accent and for me some of the phrases and words they used, we got on very well.

Once again, I was working with mining accident cases, sent from the Fife mines to the large Rehabilitation Unit, attached to the hospital and funded by the Coal Board. I also covered a tuberculosis ward, mainly filled with men from Glasgow sent to Bridge of Earn in the bracing air of the Highlands.

Many came from the slum area of the Gorbals and some were on probation from prison. They were a rough, tough, cheerful crew but very likeable. A stern ward sister kept them in order. Another such ruled the men's and women's geriatric wards. The patients seemed incredibly old to me and nearly all were crippled by arthritis. They lay in their beds, each side of the long wards, under immaculate white bedspreads and the only highlights in their lives were seeing those visitors who were able to travel to the hospital for two hours on Wednesdays and weekends and being got out of bed every Monday for a hot bath!

Ancillary staff like Joan, me, the physiotherapists, occupational therapists, etc, lived in a long building next door to a similar structure where the medical staff had rooms. It was cheap, comfortable and warmed by hot water pipes. The rooms were large and there was plenty of hot water.

The meals in the dining room were ample but rather stodgy and I never came to terms with a frequent midday meal of fried black pudding, chips and beetroot. The evening high tea was early and, while the light lasted, some of us went for walks over the moors surrounding the hospital.

They were covered by heather in full bloom and, as I brushed through the purple haze, I recalled the tiny, pressed sprigs our Scottish relatives used to send us in their letters and how we treasured them, using them for bookmarks in our prayer books.

I met Fred Moore, nuggetty, dark and quite good-looking, and was told that not only had he played rugby for the north of Scotland but also that he was the hospitals No 1 pin up! There was a lot of social life at the hospital, especially with our group and the doctors, who were all young and full of fun.

There were sometimes impromptu parties or they came over for coffee and a yarn. I was introduced to Hallowe'en at a fantastic night of dressing up, hilarious games and Scottish country dancing. I learnt to do Strathspeys and twosome and foursome reels, enthusiastically, if not well.

One of the male nurses had worked with Ralph Reader during the war, putting on concert parties for the troops and he was the prime mover in social events. He was very professional and, with help from all hospital staff, produced a Christmas Pantomime, *Cinderella*, which proved a huge success. I was thrilled to be cast as a burlesque Fairy Godmother where I sang 'No one loves a fairy when she is forty.' I made a tutu, frilly bloomers, embellished with gauze bandages purloined from theatre, Fred's rugby boots and black and white striped socks.

Every spare moment was spent painting backdrops and working on special effects under the direction of a student from the local art school. The show was to run for three nights so all the patients could see it, some being wheeled in on their beds. When I went into the male orthopaedic ward on the morning after our first night, I was greeted with 'Three cheers for the Fairy Godmother!' I had never had that sort of recognition before and wondered if I had missed my vocation.

Snow fell just before Christmas and our switchboard ran hot with messages, 'Tell Meg it's snowing!' Joan had a stock reply, 'She's out in it, dancing around.' It covered everything in a thick, white blanket and we had to wear capes and gum boots to plough through it, to reach the wards. Its beauty never ceased to enchant me. It fell so softly and silently, the world changed before our eyes. As we were in the country, it lay undisturbed and pristine for weeks. The days were short now; it was dark by mid-afternoon and

I gasped with wonder when, after visiting the wards after midday dinner, I stepped out into darkness and a star-studded sky above me.

The hospital lay under a goose corridor and as winter approached, we were in the direct path of the thousands of birds flying south. Like swift arrow heads, echelons flew over us in immaculate formation. The sun, a pale yellow, hazy orb, seemed to barely clear the eastern horizon each day and the cold air bit into our lungs.

On Christmas Eve, I travelled to Brechin by bus to spend the festive season with Anne and family. The countryside was a misty wonderland of bare, brown trees and blinding, white snow, in places piled to the top of fences and walls. A weasel, in winter white, slid along the roadside and under a hedge as we passed.

Margaret Plunkett, with whom I had been reunited at Worcester, had moved to the Infirmary at Aberdeen and at Ann's generous invitation, joined us at Bearehill. I am not sure whether it was then or during a later visit that she mooted the suggestion that we should join forces and go to Spain in the following autumn, riding bikes. As I did not have a bike and had always been an uncertain rider during my limited experience of cycling, I did not take her seriously. Unwilling to dampen her enthusiasm, I jokingly said it was a great idea.

Anne took her much more seriously and produced a copy of Washington Irving's *Tales of the Alhambra*, which she said I must read. I took it out of politeness but, in fact, became absorbed by it. Even at that stage, though, I felt it was a pipe dream.

Fred Moore invited me to join him and the hospital engineer to go to the Rangers v. Celtic game in Glasgow, on New Year's Day. I did not even know what the sport was but was happy to go.

Mounted police were controlling the crowd outside the stadium and, when we fought our way in, I saw forty more with walkie-talkies standing around the oval. When Fred said 'We'll get up against this rail, it will give us some protection if there is a surge,' I realized it must be a rather special occasion. Celtic supporters were behind the goals but we landed among the Rangers fans – the Scottish fanatics. Needless to say, we were barracking for the Irish Celtic team. 'Don't barrack!' Fred hissed, 'Or we'll be killed!' I could well believe it as emotion was running high, even before the game started, and many of those around us had been welcoming in the New Year, not wisely but too well. Large opposition flags were being displayed and burnt in all parts of the stadium. Snow fell all day, covering our heads and shoulders, but it was far too exciting to notice.

It was a great way to welcome the New Year in. The boys had been sharing some obscure joke all day but it was not until next morning, when someone told me to look at the flagpole, that I realized what it was. Instead of the Union Jack, my frilly panto bloomers, fluttered in the breeze. They were returned several days later with a letter, supposedly sent to the Medical Superintendent from the CO of the nearby RAF Station, saying they had become entangled with a low-flying aircraft and, as he recognized them as part of a costume from a player in the recent pantomime, he wanted to return them to their owner!

The perpetrators, who were easily recognized as my companions at the soccer match, certainly worked hard on their pranks.

The Medical Superintendent himself was not immune as the door of his office was removed and placed on top of the administration block, until discovered six weeks later.

I was the butt of 'Kilroy was here' jokes, too, finding sketches of the little face peeping over a brick wall in all sorts of unexpected places. One morning, I found my office had been transformed into a tropical jungle overnight and the stuffed crocodile, part of the Peter Pan set at the recent Fancy Dress Ball, lay stretched out across my table.

Later, when the weather warmed up, Fred, John and I drove to St Andrews and played a game of golf on the Eden public course adjoining the famous, hallowed Royal and Ancient, after work. It was a mild, calm evening and magic to walk the course in the long twilight.

In the meantime, some of us took up Scottish country dancing lessons in the nearby village hall. We were rugged up against the cold but within ten minutes we were throwing off all that was decent as it was so strenuous. Two fiddlers provided the music and a handsome young man, wearing full Highland dress, took us through our paces.

We built a huge snowman outside our quarters and had regular snow fights after work with the doctors. There were no holds barred, even when the senior physiotherapist cracked a rib. We were rolled in snow, had it pushed down our coats and I remember one enthusiastic houseman emptied the fire bucket of icy water over me. Fred, coming in at 2 am after a stint in theatre, threw a snowball at my window to wake me up. It was very successful as it broke the window and I woke up in a shower of glass!

One of the appliance makers in the orthopaedic workshop, which adjoined our office, was arranging a bus trip to the Braemar Gathering and suggested I ask for the day off so I could go, too. Joan was quite shocked

when I asked her and said it was most unlikely the Medical Superintendent would agree but he said, 'Of course she can go. She's Australian. She will possibly never have another chance.' Joan, herself, had never been to a Gathering, so the following year, emboldened by the precedent I had set, asked for leave which was granted.

The bus left early and we drove north through wild and lonely country on a winding road. We stepped out into a muddy field; it was cold and a misty rain fell.

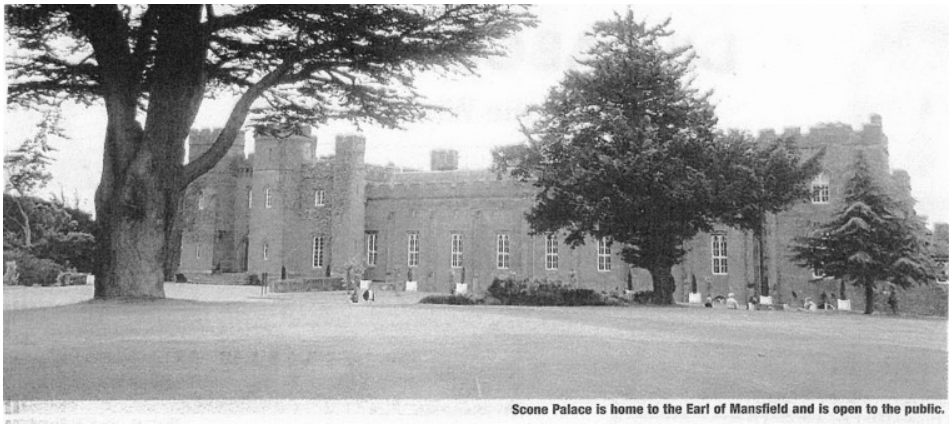
The only shelter was a marquee where the Royal Party came and sat, well wrapped up in tartan rugs. Fortunately, my friend had a flash of whisky which he generously shared with me.

Joan took me to her home in Forfar one weekend and, as the local lake was frozen over, decided we would go skating. I had learnt to skate in Perth but the boots she dug out of the attic for me were several sizes too big and, even with three pairs of thick socks, I wobbled in them. They belonged to her brother who was in Africa trying to hold the Mau Mau at bay. The lake was ringed with round stones, covered with ice and very slippery. I got onto the lake and wobbled my way around but I fell over when I tried to get off and had to crawl back to the car on hands and knees.

As the weather cleared, I sometimes took bus trips out into the country and went for long walks through lonely moors and glens. I took my lunch and drank the icy water in the little streams running over smooth stones. Sometimes I saw a lonely deer on a hillside but rarely another human.

We put on a highly successful Minstrel Show with a mock court where Rastus was charged with stealing a chicken. It took ages to remove the black grease-paint afterwards. Fortunately, it was a one-night show.

My mother sent me this cutting from home:



Scone Palace is home to the Earl of Mansfield and is open to the public.

Discovering the other Perth

Castles, myths and royalty have put Perth's namesake in Scotland on the map, as **Sarah Young** discovers.

AS FAR as cities go, Scotland is a tale of two. Travellers from far and wide can usually name numerous examples of Scottish culture and life, but ask them to give you the names of some of its cities and they will usually fire just Edinburgh and Glasgow back at you.

I, too, am guilty of this, for though I knew of Aberdeen, Dundee and Perth, I knew very little about them, never mind where on the map they are. In fact, I only decided to visit Perth on a recent trip to Scotland because my home city in WA was named after it.

Perth was once the capital of medieval Scotland and was voted the best place to live in Britain for quality of life at the end of the last century. Nestled on the banks of the wonderfully clean and fresh-looking river Tay, Perth has a population of just over 50,000 lucky residents.

The city's historical importance is linked to the nearby village of Scone (pronounced Scoon); home to Scone Palace and the Stone of Destiny, the rock upon which all Scottish kings were invested.

As history goes it dates back to 838 when Kenneth MacAlpin brought the stone to Scone when he became the first king of a united Scotland.

An abbey was built on the site and for time immemorial Scottish kings were invested at Scone, even after Edward I of England stole the sacred stone and carried it to Westminster Abbey in 1296.

There the stone remained until 1996 when then British prime minister John Major persuaded the Queen to return it to Scotland. However, instead of returning it to its rightful home at Scone, the stone went to Edinburgh Castle, where it now features as a main attraction.

Scone Palace today is home to the Earl of Mansfield and is open to the public. This magnificent building has a stunning interior and contains many priceless antiquities, paintings and brilliant tour guides who are the full bottle on the history of the palace.

The fabulously kept traditional English grounds come complete with a replica stone of destiny beside a replica church and a wonderful 60m-wide maze in the shape of a five-pointed star, which is taken from the Earl's family's crest.

In more recent times, Scone Palace was one of the only palaces in Scotland to be in the fortunate position to be visited by Queen Victoria when she conducted her tour of Britain in 1842.

The Palace staff and residents were given two years notice of her intention to visit, in which time a "suitable" driveway was built and a suite of rooms specially prepared for her visit.

A place of great beauty and a city of green, Perth is fortunate to have benefited from the foresight of city planners who framed it with two stunning parks — South Inch and North Inch, the latter the scene of the battle of the clans in 1396.

The Perth Sculpture walk follows the banks along the eastern riverbank and is decorated to dramatic effect with pieces by local artisans.

Scottish Perthites are similar to their antipodean counterparts in their pride of their city and their willingness to chat.

Glamis Castle, the family home of the late Queen Mother and the ghostly castle where Shakespeare's Macbeth killed King Duncan, is only an hour from Perth and well worth a visit. The region also boats splendid glen walks and is perfectly located for a trip to the Highlands and the Lochs, with Fort William and Ben Nevis nearby. If you fancy a spot of golf at about $300 a round, then the home of golf at St Andrew's is on your doorstep.

Accommodation in Perth ranges from cheap and cheerful hostels at about $22 each a night, moderately priced B&Bs starting at around $40 to the high end of the scale with hotels reaching upwards of $120 per person each night.

Information on accommodation and a multitude of things to see and do can be provided by the friendly tourist bureau staff.

So just how similar is Perth, Scotland, to Perth, WA? Well, on the surface not a great deal. True, it was built alongside a river, it is surrounded by gardens and parks and is a clean and modern city. But on the flip side, it lacks the proximity to the ocean, the endless blue skies and the good weather, which means the lifestyle couldn't be more different.

To check it out for yourself, go to www.perthshire.co.uk.

FACT FILE

Perth is within easy reach of the international airports of Edinburgh and Glasgow. Qantas flies tr London Heathrow twice a day from Perth. There are 12 connecting flights from Heathrow to Edinburgh and Glasgow. By car, Perth is less than an hour from Edinburgh and Glasgow and is linked to the cities by motorways and highways. Express rail services from Edinburgh, which run every two hours, take about one hour and 25 minutes and pass along the Fife coast. Or from Glasgow, the train runs hourly from Queen Street and takes an hour. For information on rail to Perth, go to www.nationalrail.co.uk or call +44 (0)8457 484 950.

xtra Saturday

In the meantime, Marg was busy planning our Spanish trip and it dawned on me, the die was cast. I bought a three-speed Raleigh bike in Perth and managed to ride the five miles back to the hospital without falling off.

A New Zealand physiotherapist, Miriam Simpson, had joined the staff and when Mick, as she was called, heard our plans, she asked if she could join us. Marg met her and was agreeable. She already had a bike.

I had great admiration for Mick because she had backdated her birth certificate, so she was eligible to join the VAD nursing service and go overseas with the New Zealand troops at the beginning of World War 2. She was 19 when she was nursing in a theatre of war in Africa.

Together, we went for long rides around Perthshire and my cycling skills improved. Snow lay in patches still, the trees were just coming into bud and crocuses and snowdrops were pushing up. There was very little traffic and sometimes the soft hiss of the tyres was the only sound to break the silence.

It was a wrench to leave Bridge of Earn but I wanted to go back to Ireland before we left for Spain in mid-September. I arranged to do a locum at the Belfast Children's Hospital and planned not only to see more of my new-found relations but also to go to the Dublin Horse Show again.

A farewell party was mooted, not only for me but also for Wanda, an occupational therapist from Sydney, who was leaving at the same time as I was. She had not lived-in but found digs, five miles away in the converted stable of a castle, which she shared with 'Mademoiselle', the retired family governess. It was tucked away among pine forests and looked very romantic when snow fell. Getting back and forth on her bike proved less so for Wanda but she was very resourceful. She and I decided we would give the party to all our friends, and put on a barbecue.

A nearby farmer agreed to let us use his field and the butcher in Perth was persuaded to part with a vast number of sausages, Wanda said everyone had to make their own johnnycakes, bought golden syrup as a spread and we sent out invitations.

At dark we lit the fire with all the wood we could scrounge and ushered our guests through a wire fence to sit on rugs around it. They had been asked to bring their own mugs and when the billy boiled poured them strong black tea. Wanda doled out dough and there was much mirth and juggling for a place on the coals to cook the johnnycakes. Later she confessed she had felt a little trepidation dolloping a spoonful of golden syrup to one of the senior doctors, still in his natty consultant's suiting! It was a great night and we sat singing songs and talking until, at a late hour, the fire died down.

Before I left for Ireland, I decided to cycle across to the west coast, partly to see Skye and more of the highlands and partly to prove whether or not I could cope with the trip to Spain.

I was very touched that almost every ward sister I had worked with, gave me a Cairngorm brooch. There were two exceptions, one of the orthopaedic sisters with whom I never came to terms and the TB ward sister. The latter told me she said she had collected from each patient, saying 'Miss Porter has helped you all a lot and I want you to show your appreciation!'

I cringed with embarrassment as I knew how little pocket-money each one had but I treasured the lily of the valley scent spray they gave me, for many years.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

SKYE AND THE HIGHLANDS

There was very little traffic as I set off west to Crianlarich and was encouraged when I rode fifty miles with no ill effects on the first day. Thanks to a lift in a truck with two men, I reached Morar, on the coast, next morning.

It was only a further eight miles to Mallaig and I thought I would be in time to catch the one ferry a day to Skye, which left at midday. Unfortunately not only had the bike been thrown on the load of sand in the truck and some had got into its working parts, so that I had to clean it and oil it, but the road was a rough white ribbon, up and down steep hills. As I topped the rise above the little port, the ferry gave one toot and cast off. I careered down the hill, waving my arms, and hallooing but all to no avail.

I found a neat little B & B cottage and, after booking in for the night, took myself off to the beach where I lazed the day away, swimming in the crystal clear sea and sunbathing on the white sand. As night approached, I made a driftwood fire, boiled the billy and cooked a meal before returning to my lodgings.

Next day was clear and sunny as we steamed over a sparkling, blue sea, past little islands and promontories to Portree. There was still enough time to reach the hostel at Uig, even though the weather had changed and I had to struggle against a head wind.

I planned to stay a day at Harlosh, my next part of call, as it was a Sunday and hostellers in Scotland, especially the Highlands, were asked not to travel, out of respect to the population on the Sabbath.

There were about twenty of us at the hostel and before we retired, I said to them, 'Wouldn't it be nice if we do all the cleaning duties and tidy up

so the warden can have the day free?' Everyone agreed like lambs and the place was a hive of industry as we scrubbed, washed, swept and emptied the rubbish. I planned to spend the day on the beach near a Smugglers Cave so I packed a lunch and headed off, feeling very virtuous, before there was a stir from the warden's cottage.

It was a wonderful day. The sea was a kaleidoscope of aquamarine blue reflecting blue sky and the moving clouds. The dark blue bulk of the Cuillins lay along the horizon and only the cries of the gulls and the waves, lapping gently on the beach, broke the silence. I swam, read, collected shells and explored the Smugglers' Cave. Now and again, black-faced sheep, feeding on the grassy cliff above, looked down curiously at me.

When I arrived back at the hostel, I was greeted with cries of, 'Oo, you're in trouble! The warden is mad at you!' They were right; he was lying in wait for me. 'What did I mean, taking over his duties? How dare I order the hostellers around?' Explanations fell on deaf ears! My comrades had not hesitated to let him know who had undermined his authority! I think they were mildly triumphant, as he had made them redo all the cleaning. As for me, after everyone left, I had to face another tirade next morning and to scrub the kitchen and recreation hut floors before he would return my hostel card!

Gentle rain was falling when I eventually set off for Glenbrittle on the south side of the island. I came to Dunvegan Castle, the hereditary home of the McLeods but it was too early for visiting hours. Dame Flora, in residence at the time, had a reputation for hospitality, especially to far-flung relations coming from a distance, but I felt my connection was very far-flung indeed. I stood in a bluebell wood, opposite the baronial halls, cogitating, but decided my appearance, drenched by rain, somewhat bedraggled, barely clean, especially since my earlier domestic chores and with sandshoes beginning to show signs of wear and tear, were rather too informal to visit, even for Dame Flora. Reluctantly, I headed on my way to Glenbrittle hostel.

It was built of timber, along Norwegian lines and had a large central stove, where I was able to dry my sodden gear. It was the launching pad for climbers tackling the Cuillins.

Fishermen, coming in with their catch to the little bay below, gave me four plump fish, which I shared with an Australian girl who had just arrived in on the bus.

Evening brought in the climbers and the recreation room was soon cluttered up with rucksacks, heavy, studded climbing boots, ropes, thick socks and sweaters, drying off around the stove and abuzz with talk of chimneys, corries and other terms meaning nothing to me.

Next morning, there was a great commotion, when a girl staggered in at first light, saying her boyfriend was stuck on a ledge, too panic stricken to move. Although there was a heavy fog and visibility was down to a few yards, she had managed to find her way back to the settlement. An alert went out the Mountain Rescue team, volunteers to whom such an occurrence was common, when inexperienced climbers set out ill-prepared. This young couple had arrived from London the day before and set off immediately without telling anyone their plans. It was a call to arms for the hostellers, teams were formed, maps consulted, plans drawn up, and kitted up they set off like baying hounds.

My new Australian friend and I, neither of us adequately clad for such inclement weather, were left like shags on a rock. As the fog showed no sign of lifting, I decided to catch the afternoon bus out to Kyleakin where I could get the ferry back to the mainland. There was a store at the hostel, so in the meantime we bought bread, etc, and made piles of sandwiches for the climbers when they returned from their shifts. There was no news of a rescue before we caught the bus out but I heard, several days later, the boy had been found and survived, hopefully much wiser.

The bus crawled along the rough road through the fog, the driver tooting his horn to scare the black-faced sheep out of his way. The weather had cleared when I reached the mainland and I was hot and sweaty by the time I crawled up the last steep hill to the Balmacarra hostel, six miles from the port. I turned and looked back across the water to Skye and the islands, the mountains deepening to purple as the sun set behind me and weariness fell from me.

A young Englishman sitting on a nearby rock with a set of bagpipes at his side, added romance to the scene. Unfortunately, however, they were not working properly, he told me because he did not have any treacle with which to lubricate them! I laughed, but he assured me bagpipes did need lubrication with treacle. I had a tin of golden syrups in my pack which he borrowed, trickling a spoonful into the works of the instrument. More blowing, squeezing and banshee shrieks until he finally produced a tune but sadly there were other deficiencies besides lubrication. Even so, it all looked very authentic.

My plan was to have what at Forrest River was described as a good 'bogey' – that is a wash and general clean up, but the hostel warden was a young Australian teacher from Sydney who said he had not seen another Australian for weeks and because I had arrived, we would have a party.

We had a riotous night with the other dozen or so hostellers joining in, playing hilarious party games and dancing. It was a marvellous night,

a marked difference from my Harlosh experience. I crawled into my bunk well after the curfew hour, after only a lick and a promise with a wet face-washer.

Mistaking directions from a lady standing in her garden, I set off on the wrong road next morning and had to retrace my steps. By the time I reached Plockton, I was dripping with perspiration and immediately attacked by a plague of midges. Benefitting from the warm Gulf Stream and sheltered, it is a veritable Garden of Eden and a haven for artists. The little village looked like a picture on a chocolate box, quaint white houses with verdant gardens and the shining blue sea in the background. Everywhere huge forests of rhododendrons burgeoned forth in pinks, whites and red.

It was not proving to be one of my better days because, as I headed north along the coast to Stromeferry, I again somehow missed the road and had to walk some distance along an overgrown rail track and drag my bike through scrubby brush and woods until I found the road.

The day had been exhausting, and I had not covered many miles for all my effort, but the Strome hostel was comfortable and my welcome warm. The view of the waters of Loch Carron eased my tiredness too.

There were flowers everywhere along the sides of the road, bog iris, wild violets and forget-me-nots, foxgloves in tall stands and the hillsides, were covered with golden whin. When I pulled off the road for a snack and a rest, it was hard not to fall asleep. Time did not seem to matter on those long, sunny days. It was a fantasy of a set for *A Midsummer's Night Dream*, I, of course, being Titania.

Directed to a short-cut to Kinlochewe, I took a rough forestry track through spruce and pine plantations. Some felling had been done and the air was heavy with the smell of spicy sap. It was a hard pull, up a steep elevation, and as I crested the top, I came face to face with a magnificent stag with huge antlers. I gasped for air and with delight. For one, magic, moment we looked at each other in amazement before he sprang away down the ridge.

Gratefully, I accepted a lift from a man in a utility when I reached the road and, because it was so steep and rough, he took me some miles past his own destination.

I was very hungry by the time I reached the Loch Ewe hostel (Aultbea) which fortunately had a store so I could buy supplies and cook a good meal. Buying food in these more remote places was difficult as the village stores had limited supplies. People relied on travelling vans which called regularly. Usually I could get bread and milk, which sometimes was either thick or went thick before I could drink it. However, I developed a passion for the

small gingerbreads they all carried. They were always stale but washed down with milk, on the good days, they were food for the gods – or in this case a hungry cyclist.

Financial transactions were rather vague, too. Twice when I shopped, the elderly ladies behind the counter were so intrigued and anxious to drain every bit of news from me that, by the time I came to leave, neither of us could remember if I had paid for my purchases. Totting up the bill seemed difficult too and I felt the prices might fluctuate according to the mood of the vendor. We compromised as best we could.

As I came north, the character of the country had changed. It was rougher scrub than further south and Loch Maree looked dark and bleak. But the coast was unchangingly beautiful, the sea bluey-green, lined with snowy beaches, around the little bays and inlets and dotted with islands.

I came to a set of yards and a little croft; a fresh-faced, young man was standing among a small mob of black-faced sheep with a set of blades in his hands. One sheep was tied up at his feet and he was looking helplessly at it as I stopped. He said he had just arrived from England, had never been on a farm before and knew nothing about sheep, certainly nothing about blade shearing. There was a little croft nearby but no sign of life. My experience of blade shearing was crutching a few sheep under my father's critical eye but I showed him how to prop the animal against his knees and managed to hack the fleece off his first victim. I rode off leaving him looking bemused, with nineteen still to go.

Time was running out but I hoped to reach Ullapool before heading south. I was told there was a track through woods which would bring me out on the west side of Loch Broom and I could cross the loch on the little ferry which ran from Ullapool, to save the long ride around the loch. It was a rough track and a lot of the road was uphill. I reached the summit and looked down on the loch in time to see a small rowing boat, full of passengers, chug away from the shore. I let out a wild yell and scrambled and crashed down the steep, scrubby hillside, dragging the bike beside me. Thankfully, I saw the boat stop and make a wide circle back to the shore.

The passengers were all very respectable, well-dressed ladies on a group excursion for the day. Fortunately, they had seen my wild descent and made the skipper come back for me. I was even more grateful to them when I heard it was the last run for the day. They were kindness itself, tutting and twittering, moving up so I could sit down and helping to hold the bike amidships. They plied me with drinks, food and questions, on the short trip, and I think my un-ceremonial arrival added considerable colour to their lives.

The youth hostel was one of a row of small houses, close to the water. Some had been painted in bright colours but had been weathered to pastel. A launch trip to the Summer Isles was advertised for the following day and, although my time was short, it was too tempting to miss.

As we headed out next morning, the sky was overcast and the water of the loch was like polished grey silk. The deep blue of the mountains were reflected in a mirror image as we sailed out around the many little islands. We stopped at one which was a bird sanctuary and the air filled with the raucous cries of gulls and terns. I dived in for a swim and came up gasping at the shock of the icy cold water. As I struggled to reach the shore over slippery round stones, long strands of weaving kelp wound round my ankles and knees, like sinister tentacles. I have never felt more grateful to finally reach the shore and, once I warmed up, never felt so fit and healthy. I admired the seals which flopped in and out of the water with impunity as we passed.

The skipper, a blue-eyed, blonde giant, told me all about his recent heart attack as we went along. His wife, who was a nurse, tried to keep him on a diet while his mother tried to feed him up. He said I must meet his younger, bachelor brother when we returned, implying he needed a wife and was a good catch. His brother turned out to be slightly smaller but equally good-looking. Unfortunately, he was inarticulate with shyness, so our acquaintance never blossomed.

A wave of sadness struck me as I turned and, looking back on the little port, the boats at anchor and the faded houses reflected in the loch, realized I might never be back to this beautiful place. My heart was certainly a captive of the Highlands.

The roads south were good and I sped along. I was sitting on the side to the road next day, when an elderly man, driving a small car, pulled up opposite and called out. 'Come over here, I want to talk to you.' I strolled over. He opened the passenger door and said, 'Get in! He proceeded to ask me a battery of questions about who I was, where I came from, what I did, for ten minutes until he seemed satisfied. As I climbed out of the car, his parting shot, after a disparaging look at me was, 'I have always heard Australians don't care what they look like and now I believe it!' I could have suggested he mend his manners but to be fair he had a point. My striped orange shirt had a split side seam, my jeans needed a good scrub and my sandshoes, which had finally given up the ghost, were tied on with string around my insteps.

There was little time for regrets as I collected my luggage from the hospital and headed off to Stranraer to catch the ferry to Ireland and my new job at the Belfast Children's Hospital.

Joan and I still exchange Christmas cards (2006) and she gives me news of several old friends. The hospital has been knocked down and the site is to be developed as a housing estate. It was a happy chance that the stab of a pin on the map took me to such a beautiful place.

Sometimes I reminisce about those days, recalling the snow-covered countryside, the stretches of purple heather on the moors, the lovely glens and purple mountains, snow-capped, reflected in the still waters of the lochs. In my mind's eye, I can still see the skeins of geese flying low against a grey sky. I remember the snow fights, the music, the dancing and think how very fortunate I am to have memories of such sheer, unadulterated fun and beauty.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

SKYE MAGIC

Some notes on the McLeods Researched by Meg Coten, June 2001

I had grown up on my maternal grandmother's stories of the McLeods of Skye from whom she was descended. Our ancestors included the Reverend Norman Macleod who was born on Skye and became Minister there in 1779. He could repeat large portions of the Latin classics from memory and his own children, of whom there were 17, knew Horace, Virgil and Ovid from an early age. They also knew about the turbulent history of Skye as well as stories from the bible and of the 'little people' who shared their landscape. After my brief visit to Skye, when I rode a bike around the island, I can understand why the people there believe in fairies, as it is a magical place. Although it is quite small, parts are quite isolated.

Skye has a warlike history[20] and besides fighting off invaders, each clan seems to have been against each other. According to Otta Swire, the people in the north are different from the smaller darker people of the south.

There is a good deal of information about the McLeods and Dunvegan Castle. This castle has been in the McLeod family for 700 years. Once the family owned most of the north of Skye, and they too, were no strangers to fighting.

The story of the Fairy Flag is recounted in this book. The flag is now framed and it hangs in the drawing room of the Castle, originally the banqueting hall. It is described as about the size of a large handkerchief, of silk, now brown with age, embossed with 'elf spots'. It has been examined by

20 Much of this information comes from Otta F Swire's book, Skye: The Island and its Legends, Second Edition, London: Blackie & Sons, 1961.

experts at the British Museum, who decided it was of Eastern silk, probably a relic of the Crusades. They said the 'elf spots' were very fine darns made to repair the flag.

At the time, Sir Reginald McLeod said, 'You believe it is a relic of the Crusades. I know it was given to my ancestors by the fairies.'

To which the curator said, 'I bow to your superior knowledge, sir.'

There are other possibilities of the flag's origin. One is that Harold Hardrada (of Norse origin, from whom, it is said, the McLeods might be descended) may have been given the flag as a young man in Constantinople. He married a Russian princess who had a lavish dowry, which could have included the flag. Harald bought half the Kingdom of Norway from his cousin Magnus, and during his many raids on England and the Islands, the flag may have come into the hands of the McLeods.

Vaguely I remember a story Granny Leishman told me about an early McLeod chief who married a fairy maiden. When she had their son, she had to leave the baby, for some reason, and return to her own people. The chief was very sad, but the celebrations for the birth of his son went ahead as planned. The baby was left alone, even by his nurse, who slipped away to join the rejoicing. He must have wakened and kicked off his coverings. His fairy mother came back and covered him with a silken coverlet and began singing him a lullaby.

When the nurse came back, she found the baby awake and smiling at something she could not see. Everyone in the castle heard the singing and then a voice saying, the silken cloth had the power to save the McLeods three times, if trouble came. To save the clan, it could be waved.

The flag was put away and a standard bearer appointed. The office remained in the family for 300 years. The Chief and a guard of twelve swore to die in its defence.

The nurse always sang the lullaby to the baby. She remembered the words but not the tune, and she believed the child had the protection of the fairies as he had a safe and healthy childhood. The Dunvegan Cradle song is very old and written in an almost forgotten form of Gaelic.

Various claims have been made about the special properties of the fairy flag. Supposedly it has saved the McLeods three times in battle. In the Second World War, three pictures of the flag went into battle, carried by McLeods. One flew in a modern bomber over Berlin, one landed on the beaches of Normandy, and one was carried on the dusty sands of Africa.

The prophecy was made about the flag by Coinneach Odhar, aka Kenneth Mackenzie of Lewis, who had second sight, a gift from his mother. She gave him a special stone which, for want of a better, word, an apparition

had given her before his birth. She told her to give it to her seventh child on its seventh birthday. Kenneth was her seventh child and made this prophecy which was recorded and verified.

He said that when the fourth Norman, son of the hard slender English lady should perish by accident, when McLeod Maidens (rocky outcrops in the loch) should become the property of the McLeod's arch enemies, the Campbells, and when a fox should have a litter in the castle turret, then the fairy flag should, for the last time, be exhibited and the power of the McLeods would depart. In fact these things did happen, even to the fox having a litter in the castle turret.

Also preserved in the castle are Rory Mor's horn and the Dunvegan Cup. The horn, which holds nearly half a gallon, was supposed to be filled with white wine, and drunk in one draught by the heir apparent on his coming of age. No doubt that would end his active participation of any other festivities for the evening. The cup is supposedly of Irish origin. It is made of wood, probably of bog oak, and round the rim is an inscription saying it was made in 1493 for Katherine, daughter of King Neil and the wife of Macguire, Prince of Fermanagh.

The McLeod crest is a bull's head and the motto, 'Stand fast'.

Another legend says that if danger threatens McLeod of McLeod, balls of fire can be seen to dance over the castle and loch. Also the Swan Folk fly over the castle every five years, bringing good luck to anyone who sees them. Sometimes they appear as soft white clouds.

The MacCrimmons are the hereditary pipers of the McLeods, and the safe-keeping of the flag was entrusted to them. They had a piping school at Barreaig in Glendale on Skye. Tradition has it that the first MacCrimmon was given a silver, magic chanter by a beautiful fairy lady who came out of a knoll. She said that when he played and was merry, everyone hearing him would be merry, but when he played and was sad, all who heard him would be sad and weep. She said he could have the chanter on the understanding that, when she called, he must leave all and go to her. He agreed, and of course with the infallibility of all fairy stories, she did call and he went off into the great cave at Harlosh and was never heard of again.

Having spent a day on the beach at Harlosh near the cave I shall never forget, I am prepared to vouch for the magic in the air, although I did not know the story then. It was a day of June sunshine, white sands, lapped by wavelets of a sea which colours no words can describe. The only living thing I saw all day were some black-faced sheep who peered down at me from the top of grassy cliffs, from time to time.

There are said to be many entrances to the Piper's Cave, as it became known, and even that leads it to fairyland itself. MacCrimmon went into

the cave, piping and followed by his terrier; the music faded, but the dog's barking could be heard, until suddenly the dog came out of the cave with all its hair burnt off.

Fairy stories abound on Skye. There was a knoll at the manse in Duirinish (where young Archibald Clerk took his pretty bride, Jessie McLeod, after their marriage in 1846) where fairies danced.

Cows seem to have special properties, besides giving milk. One, called '*Glas Ghoillan*' or 'Grey Shoulders', was said to give eleven gallons of milk a day and was a great talker using a human voice. She spoke many wise proverbs.

Fairy cattle used to live in the sea and come out on land to graze until a fairy herder called them back to the sea. Someone watched them one day, and while grazing on land, he sprinkled a mixture of soil from a graveyard and from a mole hill in their path, so they could not cross it to return to the sea. They had to stay on Skye and that is why all Skye cattle have fairy blood.

This cutting, from *The West Australian*, reports on the need to repair Dunvegan Castle in 2000:



Skye-high price for heritage

EDINBURGH

A Scottish clan chief has applied to give a mountai range to the nation in return for having his crumblin castle repaired in a £30 million ($75 million) deal fo National Lottery funding.

The application is one of the biggest submitted anc if successful, it will bring the rugged Black Cuilli mountains on the Isle of Skye into communit ownership.

The mountains, a major tourist attraction and popular challenge for climbers, are owned b John MacLeod of MacLeod, the 29th chief c his clan.

He caused an outcry six years ago when he tried t sell the mountains for £10 million to raise mone needed to fix damage caused by the leaking roof on h ancestral home, Dunvegan Castle.

The move infuriated islanders, fuelled a debate o "who owns Scotland?" and prompted an investigatio of ancient title deeds to establish whether his owne ship was legal. The prospect of a foreign millionai buying one of Britain's most famous mountain rang also prompted public agencies and conservation bodi to broker a deal with Mr MacLeod.

They devised a scheme under which the mountai and the castle would be taken into charitable owne ship. But it foundered two years ago when consultan estimated that the project would cost nearly £2 million.

Water has continued to pour into the castle throug the copper roof installed 50 years ago by an ill-advis predecessor. It was feared that the most popular visit attraction on the island could eventually be lost.

But an application was submitted a week ago to t Big Lottery Fund, a new body that supports maj projects of national significance.

A consortium has put forward a £30 million projec in the hope of a 75 per cent grant that would not on restore the castle but develop the gardens and create £4 million visitor centre.

The mountains would benefit from a ranger servi and interpretation facilities, and would be run as a for of wilderness park.

If the bid is successfu Mr MacLeod will give u ownership of Dunveg Castle and the mountair

Separate communi trusts would be set up run them, with M MacLeod, 69, retaining right of residence a apartments in the 16t century building.

The landowner sa he was delighted t project was moving fo ward.

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I wrote to my mother:

> I had a really gruelling two days from Ullapool back to Bridge of Earn. I nearly died at leaving the Highlands, which are just glorious, not to mention the kindly people and it took a whole day of Perthshire at the height of her glory with all the buttercups, wild violets, daisies and fat cattle in lush clover to get me back into a cheerful mood.

It was sad to say goodbye to the Bridge of Earn people. When I got back to the hospital, I found another presentation, from orthopaedic sisters this time, a cairngorm set on an eagle's claw, which was very kind of them. I was touched too when the little typist cried, something I had not expected from her at all. I was quite disorganized over this move because of that minstrel show immediately before going to Skye but ahead lay exciting new horizons.

I tried to write to my mother every week and her regular letters with papers and news kept me in touch with home. My enthusiasm for these different and varied experiences permeated my letters.

> On Wednesday I came to Glasgow and crossed last night on the steamer. It was a very calm crossing and I stayed up until 1 am to see the Clyde and all the shipping at Arran Island. I met up with a Glasgow businessman and a diamond-ring merchant – can you beat it? I felt it should be Cairo at least, instead of Belfast.
>
> I really do enjoy these adventurous moves into new environments, although when you stop to think, it is sheer hell with all the hopeless chaos of luggage and digs and meeting new people.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

ROYAL BELFAST CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL

The Royal Belfast Children's Hospital and the Royal Infirmary were next door to each other in the Falls Road, the Catholic stronghold. It was not far from the Shankhill, regarded as the Protestant area and even then (1955) tension between the two was not unknown. Although there was not a lot of outward violence, it lay close to the surface. Advertisements in the Situations Vacant section of the paper frequently had an addendum, 'Protestant or RC preferred', or only.

I described to my mother my first day in Belfast:

> I have had quite a day here. I went straight to work. I shot into the chest clinic this afternoon and it was like Royal Perth Hospital at its best. The hospital is very small, only 100 beds, but the outpatient department is new and nice – gay and very pretty. There is a nice canteen where everyone eats, from consultants down, and I have a nice office.
>
> It is so funny coming bang into the different Irish tongues after the Scots, with all the religious biases. I think it will be interesting though.
>
> I had a bit of a mix up over this accommodation but am settled now and my bike has arrived which cheers me no end, as I can ride to work very much quicker than getting public transport.
>
> In fact I feel this evening, that if I can come up the way I look now, all fresh and still full of sparkle after the day I have had, pouring rain too, and Belfast people all a bit too busy calculating how much they can get out of you, that I must be really tough.

The hospital gathered in seriously ill children, from all over the north, who were cared for in two fifty-bed wards, one medical and one surgical. The sisters in charge were like guard dogs and clearly did not like me or else had a thing about lady almoners! I found it very difficult to get in to see my small patients.

Visiting hours were limited to two hours on Wednesdays and at weekends and, I felt, that even when the unfortunate relatives could get themselves to the hospital, from often remote parts of the north where public transport was infrequent, they were not given a warm reception, as it was felt seeing family members 'upset the children'.

They were kept in their beds or cots and, apart from a book or two and a few toys, had no organized activities, as far as I could see. My office was across a small garden patch from the medical ward and I had to steel myself to block out the constant sound of crying children. There were a lot of burns cases, lamps or candles tipping over or tea spilt on small children at family gatherings where probably hot tea was not the only liquid involved.

There was a large outpatient department and the Almoner-in-Charge, Helena Eaves, and I were supposed to interview all the parents who came to the hospital to let them know we were available, should they need help. I could not see the point of it but, as a locum, it was not for me to question the practice.

Helena was older, gentle and rather prim. Her family owned a flax mill and she and her brothers spent their holidays sailing around the Scottish Isles in their yacht. I doubt if she needed to work and she was a very private person. If she approved of anything, she referred to it as very 'Protestant'. In spite of our differences, Helena and I got on well and kept in touch until she died in 2003.

Our secretary was a young married woman who was most informative and helpful but with an Irish name I could never get my tongue round.

Generally, the hospital was a very friendly place, although one of the registrars told me it was 'lousy with intrigue'! Everyone, from the professor to the cleaning staff, had morning and afternoon tea in the canteen. For 3d, we could have tea or coffee, biscuits or slabs of hot, buttered wholemeal soda loaves, to which I became addicted, unfortunately. A hearty, two-course, mid-day meal was available for 1s 4d and we were encouraged to help ourselves to various vitamin tablets available on the counter. Some of our patients were not so lucky and I saw my first and only case of rickets while there.

A lot of the doctors at the hospital had been in Perth in the navy or knew Perth doctors in the Services and without exception they raved about it and the people, which was lovely and made me feel quite at home.

Steadily, I got used to the Belfast accent, which is very harsh and rather American I think, and well into the middle of the religious battle between the Roman Catholics, in the Falls Road area, and the Protestants, in the Shankhill. The people seem easier to get on with than the Scots or maybe they just talk more. I also became used to the mild, very moist air which I found rather tiring to begin with. When I wasn't working, I began to explore the city, though I was not impressed by the Art Gallery and Museum which needed to be reorganised and was not nearly as exciting as the Dublin one which was chaotic and fascinating.

On my first day, Helena had suggested we go to the Royal Infirmary to meet the almoners working there and on the way into the large, sombre building, she said, 'I'll just take you in to meet my favourite ward sister.' As we went in, a tall, strikingly attractive, chestnut-haired girl, wearing a deep red uniform with white veil, cuffs and belt, approached. I suddenly remembered the family telling me a cousin was a sister at the hospital.

Almost before Helena could introduce us, we both recognized the connection and gasped, 'We are cousins!' She was Peggy Moore and her mother had been a Best before marrying. Later, we went to Acton together once or twice for weekends and had a lot of fun. Too much for me on one occasion when, coming to work on the following Monday and opening my suitcase, I found a dead rat that the men at Acton had killed in the pigsty, carefully wrapped in newspaper and put in with my clothes. Later she wrote a history of the Royal Infirmary called, *Yes, matron: History of Nurses and Nursing at the Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast* and married Noel Donaldson, then one of the registrars at the Royal Belfast Children's Hospital whom I knew. He, although now retired, became Director of Health for Northern Ireland. They have been out to WA and visited Linton.

Almost half a century later Peggy wrote to me from Dundonald, County Down:

> Dear Meg,
>
> This is a long overdue letter which I am attempting to write on Noel's computer. I did have a great little word processor which was much simpler but which has finally expired from lack of ribbons which are no longer made. This is the fourth or fifth time I have started a letter and produced an unreadable tangle of script. As the only alternative is to write it in my now almost totally illegible handwriting – one of the many side effects of Parkinsons' – here goes again then.
>
> The main event of the past year for the Donaldson family was my admission to the Ulster hospital with a fractured femur, the result

of a fall in the kitchen. It was a traumatic stay, 11 weeks 2 days, and was stressful for all the family especially Noel who took over all the different housekeeping chores as well as visiting me in hospital twice a day. I had a repeat of a very bad reaction I had had to the anaesthetic for a previous operation there. The worst of these were hallucinations, which continued until I came home, or as Noel prefers 'escaped'.

We still don't know why I was kept in so long and hope never to repeat the experience. I am slowly improving but am still walking with a Zimmer and poor Noel is still cook, washerman, baker, nurse, etc. Neil has been a real brick. John rang every day from Australia. Neil came up at least every week from Portrush to help Noel and visit me. I was not aware until later that I had been cause of so much worry as I was quite unaware of anything from the operation until a week or more afterwards. People kept asking me had I had a lot of pain and all I could honestly say was that I had felt nothing for at least a week. The nursing was not the greatest, most of the care given by 'our' nurses falling below the care given by the girls and men from the Phillipines. Enough of my woes.

You kindly sent family photos which I put into my family file. My eldest nephew is an enthusiastic gatherer of family records, so soon afterwards I loaned him my file and have still to get it back because John wanted to contact Ned. When he went to make contact he found the paper on which he had written Ned's phone number was missing. Searches were carried out in Ballycarry, here and Melbourne when I was in hospital and no trace could be found of it. To complicate matters my nephew had a car accident and got a badly fractured foot. John's office roof leaked and a lot of his papers were destroyed and those that weren't were destroyed by a faulty computer. A long tale of woes indeed.

I haven't heard from Betty or Sheena recently and our two eldest relatives, my sister Babs and Kitty Ferris are both dementing gently. I have been almost house and hospital bound now for over four months but we are going to brave the outside world tomorrow to see Babs who is in Whitehead.

Hope this finds you well

Love Peggy

Helena never quite recovered from the coincidence of introducing us!

★ ★ ★

When I first arrived in Belfast, I stayed in a small private hotel for a few days, until I found lodgings with two elderly sisters, the Misses Fallow who had come to Belfast from Omagh, the wonders which they were constantly extolling to me. I had a little attic room, with a sloping roof, an exciting beam and a minute window, and use of the kitchen and shared a sitting room with another almoner, a rather disgruntled girl from Killarney. I relayed my initial impression to my mother:

> It looks a really snug sort of Irish set up so I hope I shall be okay. 30/- a week which isn't too bad, but I have to provide my own sheets. It is only about seven minutes on my bike from the hospital.

The sisters were very good to me, always doing kindly things. They were very interested in my connection with Ireland, my relatives and my weekend excursions. I was close enough to the hospital to ride my bike to work and in my spare time I explored Belfast. Belfast, I felt, wasn't a place that I would dream of, however, I did find the complete industrialization rather an exciting atmosphere to be in.

A number of patients lived near the docks where their fathers worked for Harland and Wolff, the big shipbuilding firm. In those days, business was booming and the yards were a hive of industry. It was exciting to watch the activity. However, few of the profits reached the workers whose wages, to keep a family, were considerably less than mine and barely above the payment made in Unemployment Benefits by Social Security. Many lived in poor, damp and overcrowded houses so it was not surprising that respiratory diseases were common among the children.

A week after my arrival in Belfast, I wrote to my mother:

> 2.7.55
>
> Dear Mother,
>
> Another letter and one sea mail. Thank you very much. I am sorry to hear it is so cold. I can never convince people here that Australia isn't a furnace. All the same, it is no wonder I have had to wear my thick coat almost every day I have been here, partly from rain, but largely the 'cault'!
>
> I expect I am right in the slums here but by gee it is grim – dirty kids, dirty streets and when you know what most of these families are living on, it makes you think! I don't suppose these kids are any dirtier

than Australians on a wet day but the point is, that it is always wet here and they are such puny weeds compared to Australian children. I think of Richard when I see these kids and you wouldn't believe they were members of the same race. I had the first child I have ever had with a gross vitamin A deficiency the other day! There is little chance of us suffering though because, now and again, they put out little dishes of vitamin pills and we go round pecking like birds!

I have moved into my digs which are manna compared to that terrible hotel! The Misses Fallow are just so nice to me! I only get one bath a week which is going to rot me to bits but I am lucky to have gone so long so well! The place is very clean and nice and they are very easy to get on with that it is great. Coming by bike is goodah, too!

It is Saturday afternoon and I pray nothing happens. I work every second Saturday, all day, and have the other one off, as well as having half a day off once a 2/52. It is a marvellous idea! I don't plan to kill myself with work here either. Even with a big outpatient department, I feel I should be able to cope with 50 beds without anything devastating happening. When all is said and done, I had about 350 at Bridge of Earn and seemed to cover the ground all right.

I thought my article on the Races much better when I read it in print, and I don't think it was changed much. I wish I could win £100 on something spectacular but I suppose even the odd quid helps.

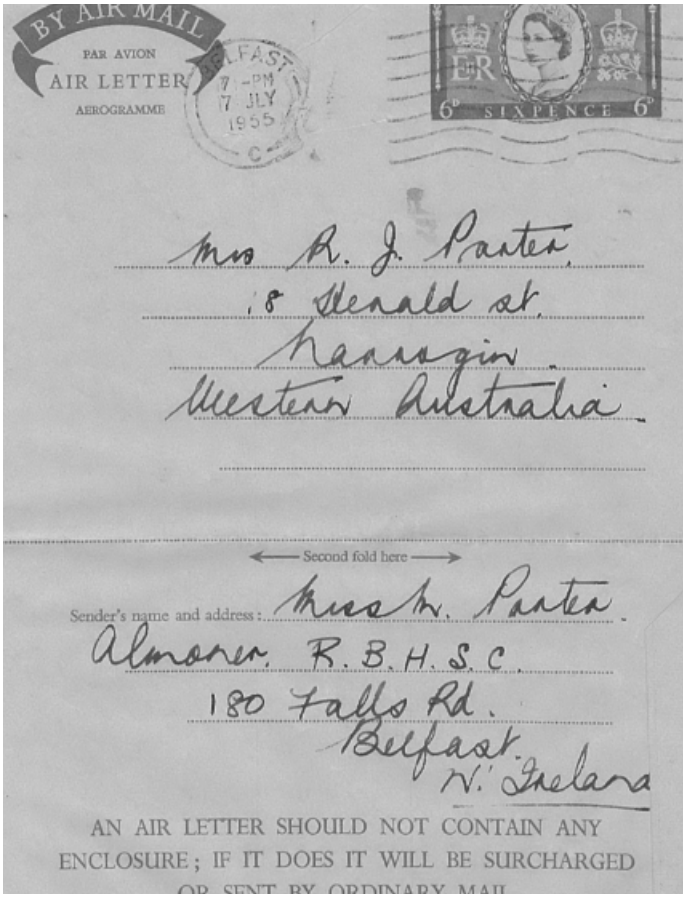
I don't know if I have told you our plans for Spain. The thing is that Margaret Plunkett, almoner (SA), Miriam Simpson, one physiotherapist (NZ), both aged about 36+ and Margaret Porter, almoner (WA), set sail from London on September 19th for the Continent, on bikes! We are taking £50 each and our play lunch, heading for Spain and the sky is the limit.

I was full of apprehension before my fabulous Highland tour but now, September can't come soon enough. After the Continental tour, I guess I'll have to start saving to come home but I would love to get a job in Rome, or somewhere in France, for a few months. Actually I never expected to find the UK so fascinating but it really is, and you just can't imagine what a wonderful experience it is to work in all these places and all people as workmates rather than just shoot through. I must say, I think I have as good a life as anyone I can think of, including the Aga Khan, even with all those horses. The only thing I'd like is a bit more cash, to send home some of the lovely things I see

over here, like Belleek and Waterford glass, old silver and lovely furniture and tweeds, but I guess we can't have everything and, you never know, I might win the Irish Sweep when I go to the Republic!

Bags of love to all, Meg

The following week I wrote, perhaps not so reassuringly:


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AIR LETTER
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E R
6d SIXPENCE 6d
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7.7.55

Dear Mother,

One nice thing about this job is that I seem to have a lot of spare time so far. I must say I appreciate it, too! I seem to have settled in OK, have been here 2/52 today and know most of the ropes! Everything is so handy that travelling from ward to ward does not come into it, like it did at Bridge of Earn. I must say, I miss all my friends in Perthshire

tho', as I am pretty sure I knew most people in that hospital. I like the work here much better though. I have done three or four home visits – hurtling about on the grid which is certainly earning its keep. The only thing that alarms me is the number of smashed milk bottles and lamps which are an awful hazard to the tyres. I think the Irish must drink toasts out of milk bottles and then smash them dramatically in the gutters!!!

We have had quite a lot of excitement here and I feel flattered to think it has all happened since I came. First, a very murky murder in the docks and then Big Drama – a Republican brought a bomb up from Dublin and tried to blow up Stormont – Parliament House. It blew up before he got it there, though, in the street and he was killed. I simply electrified the canteen at morning tea by remarking in clear tones that I thought it was pretty bad luck that, after bringing it all the way from Dublin it should explode before it reached its objective. I realized then what I had done – rocked the Loyal Hearts of NI to the core! Still it was all very thrilling – the bomber's father keeps a little shop near here where he sells holy plasters and things. They gave him a good funeral; the coffin was draped in a Republican flag.

I had a lovely bike ride on Sunday, all round Antrim and Lough Neagh. It isn't frightfully exciting country but very picturesque indeed. I picked briar roses, honeysuckle and pink clover, which is lovely. Also I passed a gypsy encampment, spread out along the narrow verge of the road – a gay confusion of washing on the hedge, quaint circular tents, drifting smoke, some tired horses, ladies with their hair in long plaits, children and dogs, gentlemen lying back at ease against a cart wheel and, over all, goats tripping delicately! They carry on their daily chores with utter disregard of passers-by, as though they had brick walls all round them but, in actual fact, I am sure they don't miss a trick! Anyhow, I covered about 50 miles and had a heavenly run home for the last few miles.

My two landladies are wonderfully kind to me and are always doing odd things for me. I feel as if I had been installed for months. They couldn't be nicer. I am very lucky indeed. The other almoner seems quite a nice girl, if a bit disgruntled. She comes from Tipperary. We share a sitting room and have our own bedrooms. The landladies spoil me – are always doing this and that for me. They are sweet. I have certainly fallen on my feet in that regard.

> I have this weekend off and I think I'll be going down to see Isabel and Harold who have a cottage down past Strangford Lough, about 30 miles south of Belfast, on the coast. I am going to see Gladys and Jack tonight. I may ride down on the bike as it is such a lovely evening – or promises to be. It is quite warm but so cloudy. The sun just never seems to shine here. It is no wonder everyone is so pale and sick-looking. I know I look very fit anywhere, but in Belfast I feel I stand out like a sore thumb with the remains of my tan and my general air of well-being. I never realized before how many children get bad burns and scalds. There is a whole separate unit here for them in surgical ward.
>
> Much love, Meg

I visited the Clarkes at Bangor for weekends and also met Harold Brown, whose mother, Sarah, had been my father's sister, and his pretty blonde wife Isabel. They owned a profitable cardboard box factory and lived in an affluent suburb in Belfast. They had two little blonde boys, Gerald and Peter; later a daughter, Judith, was born. They had a very pretty house and big garden and I always came away loaded with flowers, fruit and vegetables. They also took me to their holiday cottage, previously a light-house keeper's living quarters on Strangford Lough. I like Harold a lot. He is quiet but very kind. I also met Muriel, Harold's sister, who until her husband's death had lived in Barcelona where he had had business interests. She had a daughter, Caroline, whom I did not meet.

Another invitation came from the Bests, with whom I had lunch when they came up to town. They didn't recognize me when I walked into the café. Perhaps last year I looked rather prim and now everyone was amazed at the difference. I thought it was rather fun! While I was at Acton, the family took me out to Moyrourkan, the Porter's farm where dad grew up and met the lady who owned it. She showed me a cupboard that James Porter, my grandfather, had made. (When she left the farm years later, she contacted Dick who visited much later and he bought it. I think Richard has it now.) The house was quite small but very solid, made, I think, of stone. There was a big kitchen and a couple of rooms downstairs and several bedrooms up above. It had a homely air and I liked the pretty curved banisters on the stairs. Uncle Jack said he remembered the pear tree that had such delicious fruit that dad had told me about. Also he said Aunt Mary was very stern and had a hot temper but she made the best apple pies he had ever tasted. Several people said I was like her and in some ways they are probably right.

We went to Armagh and saw the Church of Ireland Cathedral, St Patrick's, which stands high on a ridge overlooking the town. Although the cathedral has been rebuilt many times over its long existence, it still holds many Celtic and medieval carvings alongside eighteenth and nineteenth century sculpture. I could imagine the scriptures being read in this hallowed place and thought of the beautiful illuminated *Book of Kells* which I had seen in Dublin.

Uncle Jack told me that not long before I was there, in Armagh, the police had raided the imposing Roman Catholic Cathedral, built on a neighbouring hill, and found a cache of IRA weaponry and explosives under the altar. The priest was reputed to have been involved.

I saw Josie Hughes several times while I was at Acton. Her mother was another sister of James Porter and married a Milligan. Josie had married an American, whom she always referred to as Mr Hughes, and lived in America until his death, when she came back to Newry to live with her unmarried sister. Josie was a feisty little person, dressed smartly, and told me she and her mother had seen dad off when he left for New Zealand. They gave him a gold watch chain. She had no children and gave me a gold bracelet. I never discovered the name of her sister because Josie always called her 'Sister', and everyone else addressed her, as 'Miss Milligan'. She had very strong principles and did not hold with strong drink. Josie circumnavigated this by hiding her modest bottle of sherry in her wardrobe.

I only met Miss Milligan briefly as she still worked in the leading drapery shop in spite of being 82. The store sold high quality goods and she presided over the material department, stocked with beautiful tweeds and other luxurious fabrics. She was a little lady but Aunt Tiny told me she ran the business and everyone stood in awe of her, including the 60-year-old owner – 'Young Mr so and so.' Aunt Tiny also said, she charged according to what she thought people could pay and as a result, added 1.00 to the price of anything she went in to purchase!

Josie wrote these two letters in July the following year. Each one was addressed as from: c/= Miss Milligan, Ash Grove, Newry, Northern Ireland.

My dear Meg,

Somehow I have mislaid your last letter. I can't find it, but we are having a funny summer, one day nice and warm, next like Fall. I have little news, sister here will be going away on her holidays last two weeks in August, me, I'll head for Bangor, if Gladys can put me up. I always think she has her hands full with her three children. I'll see. We keep about the same here, two old ladies. I always loved to go

places; even now, I'd have the nerve to go to Australia, even if I didn't go driving. Meg, take my advice, and get yourself a Partner. I have only been once in Belfast since the day I saw you, but over the border many times, as its handy here. Lots of tourists here from England and Scotland and Yanks and will be to September. Do you like Keighley any better? I also want to go to Dungannon again, for a change. You *must* start a hope chest and no place better to begin than Ireland. Put the patchwork quilt in the bottom and build up, find enclosed for same. Keep your heart up and take an old lady's advice.

Lots of love, Always,

Josie

My dear Meg

Yours of 13th such a surprise. I had been asking Gladys about you several times and she said you owed her a letter. So you better get squared up. We both keep about same, my youngest sister, in Co Tyrone, had a heart attack, had been in bed for four-and-a-half months. I went down and stayed a couple of weeks after we finished our spring cleaning. It was a change for me. A's nephew has an old used car. So I got places.

We sure are having freaky weather, one day warm, the next day freezing, somehow one is more contented when busy and I should like going from one hospital to another, and it's nice to keep in touch with home too.

Meg, I thought you had more sense than start a patchwork quilt. No one uses them anymore. They have such nice spreads nowadays, yet, as I read your letter, maybe it's for your *Hope Chest*, I hope so, get some nice fellow and boss him. I always heard Yorkshire was a nice place, but maybe not near you.

Gladys and Russell and Mona home from South Africa. They were all over and are going back end of this month. They came late in February. I did not see them this trip. I can hardly believe it's three years since he called here with his father, time sure is flying and us with it.

Enjoy yourself all you can while here. I love to go but have slowed up and just takes it easy. On 20th we have our annual Fete for our Church, I'm helping one of the tables and hope we get nice day and while I'm not *goody goody*, I go to church each Sunday, gets me out.

> After this month is out, the days will be on the turn again and September is a lovely month and you will enjoy getting back to Ireland again. It was nice hearing from you and I do love writing and getting letters. You will have lots to tell about your trip, also when you get back again, all the best from both of us and lots of love, too.
>
> Always,
>
> Josie
>
> PS This little hankie is sheer linen, made in C0 Tyrone. I thought you would like a coloured one. Jo

Acton was like home for me and I loved spending weekends there. Uncle Jack had two older sisters, Kitty and Sadie, very tall upstanding ladies, both of whom had been district nurses. Sadie had retired to live in a nearby cottage. She had recently fractured her leg and could only get about on crutches. One weekend, while I was visiting, Aunt Tiny decided that both she and Uncle Jim, who could only walk with two sticks because of his severe arthritis, would benefit from a trip to the sea.

There was some distance between the car park and the sea and I wrote home that we must have looked like a procession to Lourdes as we struggled to get the two over the sand-hills to the water. Uncle Jim loved the water and had been a champion swimmer in his youth. We helped him into the water with his sticks and when it reached his waist, took them away and pushed him over. It was all hands to the pump to get him upright again when he was ready to get out. The water was freezing but no one seemed to notice it but me.

One of my provisions for taking the job at the hospital had been that I could take time off to go down to Dublin for the Horse show. In spite of my arrogance, no one demurred and I had another wonderful four days there. This time I went to the sales of young horses, held after the show and sat among a conglomeration of rich Americans in Stetsons, Europeans and shrewd-looking Irishmen paying vast amounts for the beautiful creatures paraded around the ring.

Any spare weekends, I spent cycling round the north and hostelling overnight. The country is so small, it was not hard to reach the Giant's Causeway, Londonderry and cross the border into that improbable bit of Eire tacked onto the top of Northern Ireland, Donegal.

Most of the time the weather was sunny and being midsummer, the days long. The hedges were in full flower and the wayside a Garden of Eden with

violets, roses, honeysuckle and foxgloves, even taller than the Scottish ones, growing in abundance. Here, too, were stands of pine, aromatic in the heat of the day. I swam in the River Foyle, drank and washed from and in the many small, clear streams I passed and at night slept like the dead.

Coming back into Belfast after one of my excursions, I was apprehensive when a policeman stopped me. The officer had such a thick brogue, it took me a minute or two to understand what he was saying. He told me he stopped me to tell me he thought I must be the healthiest young lady in Belfast because I certainly looked it! I certainly felt as if I could conquer the world!

Although there was not the wild beauty of the Highlands here, there was a mellowness and softer beauty in the country and, as I rode along, I often pondered on how my father must have missed this gentle land and his warm and loving family.

The family at Acton had told me about marches and the Battle of the Boyne of 1690 when King James and King Billy faced off against each other across the River Boyne, one on a white horse and one on a black. It was still re-enacted every year in the avenue of Scarva House which belonged to the Bullers, Margaret's (Don's wife) family. She told me the costumes were kept in the attic at Scarva House. Her mother, 'Aunty Mum' as she was referred to, lived there with Margaret's brother, Bill, who had taken over after his father's death. It was a dream of a house, rose red, two-storied with diamond-paned windows and built in a U-shape, enclosing a fragrant garden. I always thought of it as the setting for some Shakespearean folly. It was to be another three years before I saw this pageant for myself.

In this letter, dated 12th July 1955, I told my mother what I had done over the long holiday weekend.

> I had Saturday and Sunday off, likewise Tuesday and Wednesday because of it being July 12th and all the Orangemen are out marching with big banners depicting William III on a white horse, etc. Every minute village, in fact, has flags up and things written on roads and walls. Awful things, I think, like 'no Popery here', 'never surrender' and 'remember 1690' and 'Derry and Aughrim and the Boyne'! It is very serious! Anyhow, we get two days holiday.
>
> On Saturday, I set off up the Antrim Coast Road which is really beautiful. It is supposed to be very scenic and, I must say, I was most impressed. The weather has been simply wonderful and the sea and islands looked wonderful. I saw the Giant's Causeway which is really an incredibly neat thing and very hard to believe.

> I rode down the inland road and took a bus for the last 30 miles, from Ballymena. As I cycled over 110 miles in the two days, I thought I had done pretty well. I don't think Ireland has much in the way of scenery apart from odd bits here and there, but the people sure are nice, and the honeysuckle and wild roses and strawberries, wow! People go to no end of bother to put you on the right road tho!
>
> Yesterday evening, I took a train to Armagh and then rode seven miles out to Gortin Gap, right into the heart of the Sperrin Mounts in Co. Tyrone. It was a lovely spot – quite a lot of coniferous forest and the air smelt wonderful. But the marvellous things were the foxgloves. They seemed nearly as big as trees – simply lovely. I went and had a bogey in a creek – clear, icy water – it was heavenly.
>
> Today I came on to Strabane – through a heavenly pass in the Glen and hurtling down hills, barefoot actually, which probably startled the locals. I am nearly as brown as when I was at home and I don't know just how it has happened to me because no one else seems to have it just the same! I crossed into Co. Donegal – Eire – very briefly and spent about two hours swimming in the River Foyle. It was really warm – gosh how I loved it! Then, I came on out here to Learmount Castle from which I am now writing – looking across to the Sperrins all purple and lovely! It is in the middle of Learmount Forest. I had another swim tonight which was great too. I have only cycled about 30 miles today.

After that night at Learmount, I had a really lovely day coming down from the Sperrin Mountains. It was a hot and mountainous ride but I was amazed to cover 65 miles on the bike, sailing along and stopping for swims in every bit of water I saw.

The following day, back at work, we had a dreadful time, after the holidays and the unexpectedly hot weather. Half the children in the Falls Road were in with sunburn, some quite bad who had to be admitted.

By now, I was feeling settled and happy; the hospital was small and I knew just about everyone. I felt, though, that it would be too small to stay here very long. I told my mother that I didn't think she would like to live in Ireland however wonderful it was to see it all. Undoubtedly Australia is well off as far as the standard of living is concerned.

We were not under too much pressure at work and looked forward to a visit to a home at Ballycarry, where we sent convalescent children. We travelled in Helena's father's streamlined, incandescent-blue car. Helena made

me laugh and I disgraced myself by getting the giggles every time she tried to tell me anything, until she too became infected.

No one refers me any work and I am having a heaven-sent opportunity to catch up on mail, etc. Next week when Helena goes on leave, I will be very busy. Helena is very nice and is sparking up a bit more each day – she will be almost ribald yet.

I was beginning to wonder if I was doing anything worthwhile after hearing a sobering talk about the Belfast slums with some of the almoners from the Royal Victoria Hospital. What hit me most was that these girls were so anti-Catholic. When a thing is in good taste, they refer to it as 'Protestant'! They are quite blatant about how they feel towards southerners. You have to be here a while before it all comes out! It is hard to imagine people thinking that way. I am not sure if the south take it as seriously as all that. It certainly is confusing. On the other hand, it is hard to imagine how fiercely anti-British all the patriotic Irish are. In one breath they shout 'God Save Elizabeth', and minutes later, in a deprecating way, 'he is *English*, so what *would* you expect?'

One afternoon, when I went into town, my visit coincided with a boat-load of rich Americans on a luxury tour and all I heard were their loud 'Look'ee here Elmer's', and so on; not my class at all! Americans always look so dead keen, I often wonder if they see the wood for the trees.

The weather was wonderful that summer, six weeks with only one wet day. Apparently, it had never happened before. Helena was on leave and I enjoyed being on my own in the office. It was nice to have some real work to do. 'I have just had a ring from a mother who asked for the Australian lady which is fast becoming my nomination around Falls Road!' I wrote home.

> I am going down to spend the weekend with Isabel and Harold in their cottage at Ballyhalbert. I hope the weather stays fine. The drought has broken, at last, and it is very much cooler now.

I was off to spend the weekend with the Browns at their cottage on the Ards peninsula and hoping to cycle down there.

Among the hospital staff, I made quite a few good friends. One of the almoners had just returned from a Fulbright Scholarship Tour. She took me home and showed some slides of America. It was quite fun but I was introduced as 'Miss Porter from Australia. She lived with the Blacks!' I felt like an Englishwoman in the desert or an African Queen or something! I enjoyed going out to have tea with one of the women consultants who studied at John Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore; she is a good sort. She and I have sessions discussing the Northern Irish character – she comes from Dublin!

Time was getting so very short and of course I felt reluctant to leave Ireland. There was so much to do and I enjoyed the job, the freedom and spending time with cousins I had heard so much about. However, in one of my letters I expressed my opinion of Belfast itself very clearly.

> Belfast is pretty dull and deadly. I don't think it could be very gay, whichever strata of society one moved in. Not like that delightful Dublin City. You just can't imagine how elegant and alive it is. I don't know why we don't hear more about it!

I shall be sorry in a lot of ways to leave all the people I have met here in the hospital, even if the place is riddled with intrigue. I don't really think people here work as hard as Australians. Australians sit around a lot but I am sure they do work when it is there. We can take bags of time off here – go early, arrive late, and no one minds at all.

My plan had been to leave Belfast on 7th September and go over to the West of Ireland but, I told my mother, 'Gladys would like me to stay a day or two there and I would like to see a bit more of Acton, so I may not get there.' The West of Ireland, despite being so near, seemed to be harder to get to than Tibet. I am sure it is fascinating but when there are so many nice people this side, it is hard to go.

Spare time was spent making things for Spain – red and white cotton pyjamas, a sprigged seersucker blouse, a black cotton sun-frock and a green linen skirt. I also managed to make a red flannel jacket cum shirt, keeping myself busy one way and another! I resurrected a green linen sunhat from the Red Cross clothes box which should be just the job.

One of the boys, who was at Bridge of Earn, and who is lending us a sleeping bag, came through on Saturday from Donegal and left it with me, so that is under control. I am steadily getting sorted out and seemed to be surprisingly well organized so far. I could only hope that everything continued to go to plan. I was packed and sorted and sending my gear over to the Crabbe's ahead of time. Mrs Crabbe says I can leave my gear with them, which is great.

I wrote to my mother enthusiastically telling her of my plans, as far as I knew them.

> This is my very last day here. I have made my farewells and everyone has been very nice but I do loathe saying goodbye to them all.
>
> I am going down to Gladys tonight until 12th and then coming back to Belfast to send off all my gear before going down to Acton until 17th when I cross to London via Liverpool. Isn't it all just terribly

thrilling? I get an immense thrill over the idea of going to Liverpool but they tell me it is just a dump.

Everyone here insists that I come back next summer and Ireland is just so beaut. I can't bear to think that I might never see it again.

As far as I know, about our famous Continental trip, we leave London about 19th September and are meeting somewhere on the road to Southampton on Tuesday 20th. We cross to St Malo in Brittany, cycle down through the Loire Valley, with its chateaux, and south to cross into Spain near the Basque country. Then it is what-oh for the maquis and brigands! It should be great.

September should be rather a good time as the worst heat will be over and the snows, we hope, not begun! It should be a great adventure, and aren't I lucky. So many people have to dash around and miss seeing everything that is really worthwhile. We will be able to linger on the roadside, swim in little creeks and eat our frugal meals of goat cheese and johnnycakes on the top of mountains. I can see by looking at the map that a lot of it will be hilly.

It will be great fun being on the road with money in our pockets (for a while) and wind in our hair. We might get work with the grape harvest and I reckon I should get double pay trampling ye purple fruit with my weight. I am reading all about the Alhambra which is apparently a Moorish ruined castle in Granada. I had *never* heard of it and thought they were talking about a fish and chip place! I expect we will miss the bull fights.

CHAPTER THIRTY

FRANCE

This was written some years ago from letters about the trip which my mother had kept. If I ever finish the saga I might re-write it. M. Coten. August 2006.

⋆ ⋆ ⋆

In spite of all my trepidation and disbelief that it would ever happen, departure day for Spain finally arrived.

By now, I was reasonably confident on the bike and gathered together the necessities for the trip. As we knew shorts and slacks were taboo in Spain, we had made ourselves divided skirts which were to be our *pièces de résistance*. Mick had a well-tailored grey one already, I made a less elegant copy and Marg made hers of dark green corduroy. It looked very nice at the outset but, as we progressed, it began to wear in patches until Marg said she felt like a dog with mange!

We had two changes of shirts, socks and underclothes each, our toilet needs, bathers, hats and Marg and I had bright yellow capes with hoods, which in theory would not only keep us dry but also cover the packs strapped on our luggage carriers. They were reasonably effective but dangerous when we turned our heads to look at something on the left or right as we rode along because all we could see was the inside of the hood. Mick had a blue raincoat and her hood was even more of a hazard.

We had one lot of good clothes and respectable shoes for special occasions and I had a scarlet flannel duffle coat which I liked very much but made me very conspicuous. We put all our clothes in small back packs on the carriers and a sleeping bag and small army pack hung down each side

of the carrier. Add to that, a basket on the front. Mine was an old wicker one, in which we carried our daily needs – food, drink, hats, etc, and the bikes assumed the beaten down look of very old horses who were being overworked!

I had been detailed off to get a serviceable handbag, in which we could carry our passports and money. There were no smart wallets and belted purses for travellers in those days and I ended up with a black, patent-leather bag with a strong gold clasp and firm handles. It had a red silk lining and it cost 5/- in Marks and Spencer.

Everyone was full of doom about our trip, predicting we were unlikely to return. Franco held sway in Spain at this time and the political climate was dictatorial and enclosed. Unfortunately, also during the summer, an English girl, cycling through France, had been murdered in the woods and it was clear our friends thought we were headed for a similar fate!

In Ireland, just before we were due to leave, Uncle Jack Best was so worried about my plans, he made me promise I would go to his insurance firm in London and take out a policy for the trip. I think he even rang and made an appointment for me. I duly went along the Thames Embankment on a hot September day, walking on the dappling leaf patterns on the pavement to the narrow, dark insurance building. I pushed the heavy door open and stood blinking in the gloom. A dapper gentleman, respectability written all over him, listened in obvious dismay to my request. He told me gently that there was no way in the world his company would consider insurance under the circumstances. I had the feeling as he ushered me out that he thought I was decidedly off balance! Relieved and with a clear conscience, I walked back along the Embankment.

We had decided to travel from Southampton to St Malo and ride through Brittany and along the west coast of France. We had booked on the ferry for the 21st September. As we were coming from different places, we met in Winchester and stayed overnight with social worker friends of Mick before pushing on the 30-odd miles to Southampton to catch the afternoon ferry.

Mick and I agreed to meet at Reading and ride to Winchester together but it proved a rather disastrous trip. We ended up catching trains, three changes, and got intoxicated on cider when we still had 10 miles to ride into Winchester. It was dark by then, our lights didn't work so we ended up walking our bikes in.

There was skiffy rain next day, making the tarmac slippery. The road to Southampton was heavy with traffic and we were relieved to get on board, find our cabin and have an early night. Mick and I felt rather frail as

her friends had put on a farewell party for us the evening before and that, coupled with our previous excesses, had taken its toll.

We were like bewildered puppies with excitement when we reached St Malo and rode round in circles until we pulled ourselves together. We purchased a directory of '*Les auberge de la jeunesse*' – youth hostels – and set off around the coast road to Dinard.

We had to take a perilous ferry, a launch with a sail, across the water to Dinard. Our skipper was a very blue-eyed Breton and was more confident than us about the rather rough sea. Dinard was an idyllic resort, pretty houses with clumps of pines growing behind it.

We set off through open country which looked like pictures from a child's story book, neat orchards of apple trees, loaded with scarlet cider apples, and rows of potatoes, cabbages, maize and sugar beet. The cattle were grazing along the road, tethered by chains. They looked as productive as the orchards.

On that first day, we had one of the many blissful lunch-breaks we were to enjoy subsequently: crunchy bread, cheese, grapes, red wine and some of the windfall apples scattered so prolifically along the road verge. We picked some beet tops and boiled them for our dinner at the St Brieux youth hostel where we stayed the night. We wondered if the Bretons ate them. We certainly enjoyed them.

There was a sparkling clarity in the air next day and we dawdled along the coast, enjoying the warmth, the silvery-blue sea punctuated by needle rocks. As a result, we did not get far. A farmer let us sleep under a pear tree near his house and gave us a bale of hay for a mattress. We lay under the stars in our sleeping bags, washed by moonlight.

It was not so good next morning when we found all our belongings drenched by heavy dew. But the day was sunny and we soon dried out.

The country was quite hilly with rocky outcrops. Bracken grew profusely and whin bloomed in patches, looking like golden blankets carelessly flung on the hillsides. Blackberries grew thickly in the hedges and we gorged ourselves on the shining, black fruit. A downpour nearly drowned us near Morlaix but when the sun came out and dried us, we pushed on as happy as larks.

The Bretons originally came from Britain in the 5th and 6th centuries and still have some traits similar to their other Celtic counterparts, Welsh, Scots and Irish. They only became part of the French empire in 1532 but seemed to us to be different from other parts of France we saw later.

In 1955, almost everyone wore their national costume. The men wore baggy trousers and short jackets of dark blue, black berets and clogs.

The women also wore clogs and unrelieved black, voluminous skirts and tops. Their saving grace was their coiffes, pristine white head dresses varying in style from place to place. In the north, they were large, winged bonnets, some with ribbons down the back rather like one of the religious orders. Others were flat, like pancakes, edged with lace, small lace caps and, perhaps the most precarious, starched 18-inch-high rolls, which looked incredibly difficult to keep on.

Everyone was very friendly and called out greetings – '*Bonjour m'selles*,' '*Bonsoir,*' (Good morning or day, young ladies, or good evening). Whenever we stopped for a meal, passers-by called out '*Bon appetite*' and we soon found ourselves doing the same, automatically.

I was delighted, and surprised, that increasingly my French was coming back and not only could people understand me but I could comprehend their replies; Marg spoke no other languages and Mick had only a smattering of French so I became the interpreter. I felt quite smug because I had never achieved high marks in French at school. This was largely due to the fact that I am constitutionally unable to follow the rules of grammar in any language but also that I missed doing First Year French and went straight into Second Year at Albany High School. I have no doubt my French was very broken but at least people understood me.

We allocated 10/- a day each for our expenses and took turns in carrying the kitty-bag, buying the morning croissants taking responsibility for the maps and planning the route and shopping and cooking the evening meal. Later on, in Spain, we also took turns in having the single bed. Most of the rooms had a double and a single bed and two of us had to share the double. But that was all in the future.

We stayed in a picturesque little town, Huelgoat, with little winding streets. After our evening meal, we wandered through it admiring its two street lamps and the reflection of the moon in a small lake.

Next morning, Marg's suspected puncture proved to be real, so we sought out the bike shop. While we waited, we went for a walk through lovely beech woods. We saw so many in France and never tired of the misty, pale green vistas of the smooth boles of the trees under their canopy of leaves. Some were just starting to turn to gold and flutter down onto the grass. There are many strange granite rock formations in Brittany and we saw *La Roche Tremblante* – a balancing rock, and the Devil's Grotto.

Marg paid a few francs for her bike repair and we set off for Pontlivy, towards the south. For a while we still caught glimpses of the sea on our right but we were soon deep into farmland. The road was narrow and seemed at times to go right through the middle of farm buildings. We had to keep an

eye out for chooks, geese, ducks and cattle, being driven or wandering in front of us. Beautiful, dapple-grey Percheron horses passed us on the road, sometimes pulling high wooden carts loaded with produce or sometimes being ridden bareback by a farmer coming home from the fields for his dinner or returning to work. We loved to see these horses. They were so huge and looked so noble with their creamy manes and feathered fetlocks. We also wondered how the riders managed to get up on them. Perhaps they had some sort of mounting pulleys, like knights in armour in olden days.

We were not so impressed by the smells which greeted us from these farmyards but, now and again near midday, we caught delicious whiffs of savoury cooking coming from the houses. Most of the buildings were beautifully solid, built of granite and probably centuries old. In spite of the fact that the living quarters were right beside cattle yards, sometimes even above them, the windows sparkled and all had pristine white, lace curtains. Some of the curtains had patterns of goats and angels and flowers, etc, on them. All these interesting sights, apple trees laden with red apples, golden whin on the hillsides and balmy air, made the day memorable. We had to ride 50 miles to the youth hostel and, because of our delayed start and a long lunch in the sunshine, it was late before we finally reached out destination.

The hostel was quite new and it even had a little swimming pool, overhung by trees, but it was deep in the heart of the forest. We had great difficulty finding it in the dark as the track wound around, among huge tree trunks, for about two kilometres before we saw it.

The bad news was that *le clef* (the key) was about four miles back in the village, at the local store. Fortunately, two young electricians, who had been working on the hostel, were still there and one of them offered to drive me there to collect it. Gratefully, I climbed into his bouncy, little, grey Peugeot, abandoning Mick and Marg who were left sitting on the steps in pitch dark like the Babes in the Wood.

It was my first ride in a French car and being driven on the right (it had taken us a couple of days to get use to cycling on the right) and it felt like aquaplaning.

The storekeeper was having his supper when we arrived and, as he went to get the key, I glimpsed his family seated round a big table, lit by the mellow light of a kerosene lamp. It looked like a beautiful painting by a Dutch master. Armed with the key and bread and wine which the obliging storekeeper sold me, I was warmly welcomed on my return and, after bidding Sir Galahad and his trusty steed a fond farewell, turned our thoughts to wining and dining.

At lunch time next day, I wrote in my diary that:

> 'we were in a pine forest. The warmth of the sun brings out the aroma of the pine needles. Our bikes are leaning drunkenly against trees, looking like tired horses. Having neatly dispatched a long loaf with 4 slices of meat, marmite and honey, walnuts, and several apples apiece, it is a good thing we do not have to feed them as well.'

About this time, we started to feel the effects of the crusty bread we were eating. Our gums became quite tender and we had to start 'dunking' the crusts. Also, we realized the effect of wine at lunch time was becoming a hazard in the rather erratic traffic on the roads. We carried a litre bottle which we used to take into cafés and have half filled – or was it filled? With *vin blanc* or *rouge*, depending on our fancy but now we changed to milk for lunch and kept our wine bibbing to the evening.

Earlier in the day, we had found the little town of Pontlivy and duly returned *le clef* to the storekeeper. We explored the *vieux château* in ruins but with a few beautiful bits of masonry still remaining. Women were lined up along the canal, washing, as we passed out the town.

'*Vous êtes bien chargé*' (You are heavy laden) they called out.

'And you have your work cut out too,' I answered in my execrable French.

In fact, I had been having my work cut out, keeping up with Marg and Mick for the last day-and-a-half and was feeling very tired and depressed, beginning to wonder if I would be able to keep up with them for the trip. Later in the afternoon, after a break, Marg moved my bike. 'Meggie' she ejaculated, 'whatever is wrong with your grid?' She investigated and found the weight of my pack had jammed the brake onto the back wheel. A brief visit to the bike shop in the next village and the problem was rectified. Like hitting one's head against a brick wall, the relief when the back wheel was free again was so exquisite, it was all nearly worthwhile!

It was a gusty, sunny day, golden leaves scurried round my bike wheels and I can still feel the sense of exhilaration and release that swept over me as we spun along the road towards Lorient.

It was dark when we crossed the Pont Sainte-Christophe and saw the lights of the town before us. We asked three gendarmes standing on a street corner the way to the hostel and each turned from one to the other say '*Où est l'auberge?*' In their theatrical uniform they looked so like characters out of musical comedy, we burst out laughing. After consultation with passers-by, one of them, very helpfully, took us to *l'auberge* which the hostel directory and he led us to believe was *Le château-de-Soye*. It was, in fact, the greenhouse of the *château* and, apart from the fact it had no gas, adequate enough.

Earlier in the day, we had optimistically bought a pound of stewing steak. That in itself was a pantomime as we had to demonstrate the part we wanted by pointing it out on the butcher. He thought it was a huge joke. That cost us 190 francs, and we also purchased tomatoes for 80 francs a kilo, and chestnuts, for which we were developing a passion, at 20 francs a kilo. Now the problem was how to cook it all. We eventually located an aged primus and after 20, rather tense, moments when we expected to be blown sky high, got it settled down to a steady roar and cooked a very savoury meal.

In this area the women wore very pretty, flat, pancake coiffes, even when they appeared to be just hopping down to the shops. I recalled pictures I had seen in *National Geographic* magazines of women wearing these quaint hats when I was a child. I felt a sudden excited burst of disbelief that it was really me, here in France. Later that day, I heard a small boy singing in a clear, little treble voice. '*Sur le Pont d'Avignon*' and my enchantment was total.

Lorient had suffered badly from bomb damage, like so many other cities we were to see on our travels, and a lot of rebuilding was going on. It had been occupied by Nazi forces for five years and, in fact, the bomb damage had been caused by the advancing American forces. It was hard for us, carefree Australians, to understand the tragedy and hardships the French people had undergone. These friendly people with whom we daily exchanged greetings had endured hunger, fear and loss, to an extent beyond our comprehension.

We visited the market before leaving and revelled in the activity and colour. Every sort of fish and shellfish, for which the region is renowned, sausages of every shape and size, fresh butter pats, lovingly decorated cheeses, great piles of fruit and vegetables and beautiful, locally-made lace, delighted our eyes. We bought food for our lunch with a wonderful gay abandon. Providentially, we had each brought a string bag with us and, as we rode off, they hung on our handlebars, bulging with our purchases.

When our friends in England voiced their concern about our foolhardy trip, we all reassured them with the stock reply. 'But there will be three of us and we will all be together.' In fact, nothing could have been further from the truth. We were strung out like Brown's cows! The indomitable Marg was always at least a mile ahead of Mick and me who rode at least a quarter of a mile apart. Even, with the back wheel free of the brake, I could never keep up with Marg. We met up at pre-arranged points, for shopping or a break or to see some special point of interest. We found it irritating to have to keep pace with each other and I personally enjoyed my reveries as I rode along.

As our journey took us through forests of oak trees, laden with acorns, and wide-spreading beeches, I used to imagine what I would do and where I would go, had I been a member of the Maquis. Stories I had read about the exploits of this resistance group had always filled me with admiration and sometimes my fantasies became real. They took on a certain regret that I, too, could not have promised to lay down my life for *La Belle France*! It was easy when one had never known hardship.

We again faced a ferry trip across the bay to Port-Louis and hence to Quiberon. We had to wait for half an hour for Marg whom we had last seen five kilometres back springing lightly into a field of sugar beet to gather some tops for our dinner. We had decided she had either stopped to pick blackberries as well as been apprehended by the local gendarmerie for stealing, when she turned up.

Marg and I had become accomplished scavengers in this land of plenty, helping ourselves, but only from piles which were obviously discarded for stock food, to apples, greens, potatoes and corn. Mick disapproved but did not reject our spoils. If there was anyone around, we asked if we could help ourselves and offered to pay, but the farmers waved our money aside and implied we could have as much as we wanted.

After a pleasant ferry trip, we found a little café, bought wine and sat at a table on the pavement. We loved the custom of being able to take your own food to a café to eat and buying wine. In spite of our recent resolution about wine drinking during the day, we allowed exceptions.

We caused quite a stir among the regular clientele and Madame, who ran the café, was intrigued and came to find out all about us. Between mouthfuls, I found myself giving a potted history. A boy waiting for the bus to Nantes could hardly tear himself away when the bus arrived. Some sardine fishermen came in for a glass of wine before leaving on the tide and they too hung on my every ungrammatical phrase. Trying to keep up my end of the conversation, while I struggled to eat crumbling cream cheese and gouge out walnuts stuck in their shells, left me exhausted.

Yet another ferry trip awaited us because of 'the bridge which was not!' Like many others it had been bombed and not yet rebuilt. We and our bikes were packed into a tiny boat but arrived safely.

Quiberon was a sleepy, little village at the end of a peninsula 30 kilometres long. It was no more than a sandy spit reaching out into an azure sea, at times so narrow we could see the water on both sides as we rode along. Only a few low pines and tamarisks grew on the dunes, here and there some rushes and low scrub.

Our delight quickly turned to consternation when enquiring at the one store for the hostel, they, we were told, had already closed for the winter. No one was expected so late in the season so it had closed early!

There was a very pretty girl with waist-long, black hair in the store. Telling us in crisp English 'to wait' she jumped on a quaint, low-slung, continental bike and sped away. She was back in no time and told us that 'Maman says come!' Monique, as she was called, explained as we rode along, that she and her mother had stayed behind while the rest of the family had returned to Paris after their holidays. They were packing up and cleaning up the beach house, where she was taking us, before following them. She told us she had spent two years in Scotland as an *au pair* which accounted for her excellent English.

Maman, a warm-hearted, motherly lady, took us into her house and heart with admirable aplomb, considering our appearance. We felt the cleaning up process would be seriously delayed by our invasion but we settled in, like homing pigeons.

The house, called the 'Voice of the Sea', was a modern, brick bungalow, already immaculate. We blenched when we saw the snowy sheets on the beds and the lace-edged pillow cases. We begged to sleep in our bags on the floor but they would not hear of it. We were given licence to cook our own dinner and maman approved of our use of garlic – *un soupçon*!

After we had eaten, we sat and talked. Monique, clearly feeling the constraints of family life after the freedom of her two years in Scotland, was full of questions about ourselves, our families and our trip. Wearing old slacks, an ill-fitting, well-washed jumper, a white muffler flung round her neck and her long black hair casually swept up on top of her head, she had a chic, none of us could ever hope to emulate. She was beautiful.

She and her mother, whom we had by now discovered was Madame Ruand, told us some of the terrible things that had happened to their friends in Paris and the people around Quiberon during the war.

On a happier note, maman gave us a French lesson, making us practice 'r' sounds the Parisian way – rolling it around on our back molars. She was quite complementary about my accent which pleased me enormously.

We slept well, in spite of our anxiety about leaving dusty marks on the bed linen and our first encounter with a bidet. Croissants and bowls of steaming milky coffee greeted us next morning in the big sunny dining room.

We were reluctant to leave such nice people and Monique certainly did not want us to hurry away, so we packed a picnic lunch and set off on our bikes to explore Quiberon. We saw La Belle Isle lying offshore where I believe there are many caves and grottoes. We saw the sardine canning

factory, where the little silver fishes lay in great heaps, and found a tiny sheltered cove where we sun-baked and had our lunch before returning to pick up our belongings from the bungalow and say goodbye. Madame Ruand and Monique made us promise to visit them in Paris but of course we never did.

We knew there were some standing stones in the area around Carnac but we could not find them and were sitting on the grass verge, pouring over the map, when an old crone approached and started talking about '*les pierres*' (stones) and what I later realized were menhirs! I was interested when I was in Sulawesi in 1986 to be shown a field of these 'menhirs' – tall, flat rocks, upstanding in a grassy field in Toraja, in the north, and told each one was a memorial to prominent families in the district. Menhir must be a universal word.

This elderly lady led us unresisting to a wooden gate in the hillside and we suddenly found ourselves in a gloomy subterranean tunnel. She allayed our fears for our bikes and belongings still scattered over the grass and from a niche in the wall, took down a candle for each of us. Still uncertain of what was going on, we followed her flickering candle light along the black tunnel. She kept stopping at little alcoves where sticks and ashes indicated a fire had been. Our hearts jumped into our throats when the next alcove had what appeared to be a human skeleton crouched up against the wall. It was a relief to get out in the sunshine and head off on our bikes.

We had one more night sleeping *al fresco* before reaching Saint-Nazaire. Fortunately the weather was fine and calm. A pine wood on a cliff overlooking a picturesque bay looked inviting, so we lit a fire, cooked our meal and yarned around the dying embers until darkness came. The pine needles made a soft bed and we expected a pleasant sleep. All seemed perfection as fishing boats pulled out from the shore, their lights like fireflies and strong melodious voices singing snatches of opera and ballads, drifted to us across the water.

Unfortunately, the night deteriorated. We had camped on sloping ground and I found it hard not to roll down with the land. I began to have nightmares about rolling over the edge onto the rocks below. Finally, I moved to lie against a tree to keep me stable. Then an errant breeze blew up and no matter how I tried to wrap my sleeping bag around my head, it found chinks to chill me. It was a relief when dawn broke and we got on the road again.

The hostel at Saint-Nazaire was an old fort, complete with a moat and drawbridge. Like Lorient, Saint-Nazaire had been almost flattened by the Americans and rebuilding was going on everywhere. Although we caught

cameo glimpses of elegant and graceful bits of buildings still standing, in fact a new city was arising.

We saw some fine, white blocks of units with wrought iron balconies and pretty lime-green shutters but we were quite pleased to leave. The ride out was flat and depressing but we came into the grape country. Marg and I, grape hungry, were not above helping ourselves and fortunately a family gave Mick a huge bunch so appetite and honour were satisfied.

The country was richly productive. Fields of corn, vegetables, including whole patches of vividly-coloured little marrows which we later sampled, near rows of vines looked like one huge Harvest Festival.

We fell in love with Nantes and as the hostel was comfortable, decided to take a rest day and explore it. There was a very lonely Australian girl at the hostel who talked to us non-stop until lights out. It was her birthday so we drank her health and tried to cheer her up. There were two English boys there as well. They looked at our bikes rather disparagingly and said they were 'shooting through', hitch-hiking.

They looked at our breakfast next morning, as well. We stolidly munched our way through stewed apple with the creamy top of the milk, omelettes, *petit pain* spread with blackberry jam (which we had started making!) and lashings of hot milky coffee. They had packet mushroom soup and sausages!

We washed everything we were not wearing and strung it from one end of the hostel to the other. We then set out to sightsee in earnest. We attended a service in the Gothic cathedral, notable mainly for its lovely porches and interior, and were startled to see people taking change out of the collection plate. Later, we realized this was commonplace in France and Spain.

We treated ourselves to hot chocolate in a café in La place Royale, overlooking a fountain ringed by the colourful stalls of flower-sellers. We wandered happily through the little streets of the city and bought pastries for our lunch in a fascinating arcade called Le passage Pommeraye.

We had our lunch in the gardens, enjoying watching the children playing games. It was hard to distinguish the boys from the girls as they wore little check smocks over their short pants. They all looked immaculate, with white socks, black shoes and smart little bow ties. It was hardly the way Australian children at play would look.

We spent an interesting two hours in the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nantes and the Château des ducs de Bretagne, which had a moat and was floodlit at night. I found the château courtyard most beautiful. An avenue of elms grew down the centre and the almost bare branches made a delicate tracery against the mellow walls beyond.

In the evening, we decided to treat ourselves to dining out, with the surplus from our kitty. Washed, brushed and clad in our best, after much cogitation, we selected the appropriately named Café des Voyageurs (travellers). I had veal with mushrooms and a compote of plums and apricots in kirsch. It was good beyond words after our rather simple fare.

There was a fairground lit by coloured lights beside the cathedral and we had a wonderful evening wandering through the crowds, indulging ourselves with slabs of delicious nougat. The floodlighting of the cathedral highlighted the beautiful masonry, making it a lovely backdrop to the festivities of the fair and the gaiety of the crowd. With all this and the music from the carousel, it reminded me of scenes from the film *Gigi*.

I was so busy trying to see everything, as we rode out of Nantes next morning, I was nearly run down by a truck. Apart from that, we had an easy day, riding only 40 miles to La Roche-sur-Yon. We rode through agricultural country, every bend in the road revealing new facets of rural life. We passed creamy oxen pulling single furrow ploughs, turning over ribbons of chocolate-coloured soil or drawing loaded wooden carts. 'Olla! olla! olla!' cried their drivers with no effect whatever.

We stayed in the Surgères hostel, sleeping in a loft. All the buildings in the town were built of a creamy stone and regimental lines of poplars, almost bare, grew in the square.

The next day, we rode 77 miles through much poorer country. The weather was perfect which was just as well as we had to camp. Sunset found us still 20 miles from the next hostel, so we lit a little fire on the side of the road and cooked eggs, tomatoes and greens. As we were near a trough, I had a bath in it. For one awful moment, I thought I was in a field with some bulls which came snorting around in the dark but they were only cows picking at the hedge.

We pushed on in the moonlight looking for a haystack without success. We had to make do with a grassy bank in the lee of a wood. After our chilly night under the pines, we had become cunning about protection from the wind. Everything looked beautiful in the silvery light and I had time to enjoy it as sleep was elusive. But then, how many people can look back in their old age and remember a night they lay on a grassy bank in France in the moonlight?

We made a late getaway next morning and faced a savage wind. We passed through Saint-Jean-d'Angély and plodded all day to reach Saintes in the late afternoon. We had not been so hard pressed, however, to enjoy a lunch-break under poplars on a carpet of little pink flowers, like crocuses.

The cathedral in Saintes and the Abbaye aux Dames were old Roman buildings and huge chestnut trees overhung the wide main street. After our rather scrappy roadside meal the night before, we rather spread ourselves and made a delicious *ragoût* type of stew and pancakes. We spread the latter thickly with the batch of blackberry jam we had made at Nantes.

The hostel was nice and, I noted in my diary, how difficult it was to concentrate on it while having a laborious conversation in French, the joys of cycling to Bordeaux, holidays in Scotland and the difficulties of the French language. All this was accompanied by endless shaking of hands as new hostellers arrived. We rather like the custom of everyone shaking hands but it was disconcerting to have to stop halfway through scrubbing a dirty saucepan to do it. I also noted that my nails were almost clean and my blackberry gashes were healing.

We broke all records next day and covered 80 miles to reach Bordeaux. The road was hilly at first but then it flattened out and we fairly spun along through the gusty, golden October day. The country looked lovely. Leaves were changing colour everywhere, there were glossy brown chestnuts on the trees – we had given up buying them and just picked them up on the roadside – the red apples shone and we passed mile after mile of vineyards. As the wind swept across the vines, it looked like a sea of vivid greeny-blues, russet, crimson and purple.

Grape pickers waved and called out '*Bonjour*', '*Bon Voyage*!' as we passed. It was dark as we came through some hills and swept over the bridge across the wide Dordogne River into Bordeaux. The lights of the city came on, turning it into fairyland.

That impression rapidly vanished as our wheels hit the square set cobbles, and we clattered our way into the town centre. We bought, oh foolish maidens, a dozen eggs for our tea.

We got hopelessly lost and it was after 8 pm before we eventually found the hostel, well out of town, through an obscure turn-style and in the middle of a large field. We were tired and disgruntled from our long ride and the cobbles and it was the last straw to open the common room door and find it full of hostellers, barely visible through clouds of steam and cigarette smoke. But we were greeted by three hearty British cheers and, through the haze, saw the two English boys we had met at Nantes. We soon discovered that ten of the hostellers were Australians. We were treated like heroines when they found out we had ridden our bikes all the way from St Malo and given cups of tea and help to unpack.

We rallied quickly and even the fact we had to cart our water from a tap by the turn-style, 300 metres away, did not depress us unduly. We were soon

sitting down to omelettes – made with what eggs and bits we could retrieve from the bag, savoury onion and tomato washed down by hot coffee.

The hostel was pretty basic – the one toilet was a quaint little construction, just a hut with a plank with a hole in it hanging out over a small creek! The dormitory was crowded. I lost the toss and had to sleep on the floor but I passed out like a light.

We were hoping to collect mail in Bordeaux but before we set out, we had a cup of tea with three Australian girls travelling by car. We were most amused as they had everything but the kitchen sink on board. Unhappily, Marg's mail had not arrived but Mick and I had some. We sat in a café drinking chocolate and devouring our first news from home since we left England.

The traffic was scary after peaceful country roads, where the most likely hazard was a stray cow wandering across it. Jolting over cobbles was sheer hell. We lunched in the Place de Tournay where there was some interesting statuary and saw some lovely, delicate treasures in the Musée des Beaux-Arts. We wandered through Cathédrale Saint-André with its awe inspiring high arches. I sat and watched while a workman and a priest fixed a panel in the altar and when it was mended saw them kneel side by side at the altar rail and pray.

We spent another night at the Bordeaux hostel. It was less crowded but quite exhausting as five French boys came in and all wanted to talk to me. My French was really strained to the limit. One of the boys checked our bikes for us tightening all the nuts that had been jolted loose by the cobbles. He did it in between eating grapes, cracking walnuts, asking questions and looking up an English dictionary.

Another of them was a mechanic working temporarily in the district and staying at the hostel, which seemed permissible in France. He cooked a very appetizing meal of tomatoes sautéed in oil, to which he added oil and a handful of chopped parsley.

Faced with a long haul south on the morrow, we opted for an early night. We left about 11 am next morning, clattering out of town over cobbles. We had planned to take two days to cover the 100 miles to Biarritz but a lift in a truck for 40 encouraged us to push on.

We passed through beautiful forest country. Tall pines stretched back on each side of the road to dim, arched vistas. There were plantations of baby pines, oaks, elms and mile after mile of poplar avenues. Enormous chestnut trees formed dark green glossy canopies above the road.

There was a carpet of purple heath under the pines and here and there an ash, changing to autumn colours, looked like a golden sheaf on the

hillside. Leaves like sovereigns rained down on us and skurled away from our spinning wheels. It rained a bit but I hardly noticed it.

There had been a terrible fire in these woods in 1949 when 82 people were burnt to death. We passed a memorial to them. The pines were tapped for resin and all the mature trees had little cups attached to their trunks, below long gashes in the bark. I am sure these were just the sort of woods for bears and wolves where Goldilocks and Red Riding Hood had such a nerve-racking time.

We had lunch under a huge oak tree and an old woman came over and told us to be careful of gunshot as it was a hunting reserve. We saw many old women gathering wood and nuts in the forest. Dressed in black, bundles of twigs under one arm, they became a familiar sight among the trees. It seemed a very useful and healthy pursuit for the aged. Sometimes we saw them, or young children, shepherding animals, usually they were knitting or sewing as they watched.

The ride on the truck was soul shatteringly rough. Marg, who had not wanted to accept the offer but was overruled, two to one, looked very self-righteous as Mick and I staggered off it complaining of aches and pains.

The approaching dusk caught up with us, as did two gendarmes – '*Pas de lumières*! *Pas de lumières*!' ('No lights! No lights!'), they called. Fortunately, Mick demonstrated that she did have a *lumière*, although the battery was nearly flat. They departed, not knowing it was our only functional light. Even that gave up the ghost shortly afterwards and, as we could not get the right batteries, we abandoned all three.

Shortly after that, it rained and we hit wet tar and loose gravel, a ghastly combination. We reached Biarritz about 9 pm and, by taking a long short cut, did not reach the hostel until 10 pm. The two English boys were at the hostel. They said they had profited by our example and no longer had soup for breakfast but prepared a proper meal. The warden at the hostel was very nice and only showed some agitation when we were still pounding around at 11.45 pm. Regulations said lights must be out by 10 pm.

By daylight, the youth hostel looked like a mustering camp – all roof and no walls. We had certainly had hell's delight finding the place. It always seemed to be the same story with youth hostels, we nearly always had trouble finding them. On the rare occasions that we arrived early, they were shut and we had to sit and wait for them to open.

Next morning, Mick and I were still feeling stiff from our truck ride but were not saying anything about it. We were glad we had only a 24-kilometre ride to the border. The truck ride had not been good for my bike either, as the brake-cable broke and had to be fixed. Before we left the hostel, the

English boys sold us their mince. They lived to regret it because all the shops were shut and when we all turned up at the Hendaye hostel on the border, they had to watch us eat it while they only had bread and cheese. We felt real heels but there was not enough to share around.

Everything was shut down around Biarritz and Bayonne. Shutters on the windows and very few people in the streets gave it the typical, depressed, winter look of a beach resort. All along the Basque coast were beautiful little bays and the surf rolling in, it made us feel home-sick. Marg and I had an invigorating swim when we stopped for lunch at an idyllic little cove. It was wonderful to feel the surge of surf and smell the lovely salty tang of open sea. We had cheese for lunch every day. The big decision was which of the two, neatly-packaged, cream cheeses to choose – The Laughing Cow or the Sad Cow Cheese. The taste was almost the same but the process of choice was always important.

After leaving Biarritz, we began to catch glimpses of the Pyrenees – purple peaks through mist. All around us the bracken had turned golden-brown and, on our right, the sea crashed in against cliffs. We passed through Saint-Jean-de-Luz and the houses began to look more Spanish-styled. We passed a fairy-tale château, with tall, delicate, pointed spires and square battlements, set among dark green pines. With the mountains as a backdrop, it was hard to believe it was real.

The warden at the Hendaye hostel was a frigid, untrusting lady and we were glad to leave. Her suspicions were well founded, as far as I was concerned, because I stole a copy of Hugo's *Teach Yourself Spanish* which I found in the common room. It turned out to be invaluable. I think another hosteller had left it there but all the same, as we pedalled down the drive, I could feel shivers up my spine expecting to hear cries of 'Stop! Thief' from behind me.

Although we had chosen the lowest pass through the Pyrenees, it was still quite a climb and I had to push my bike most of the way. At lunch-time, we sat on a grassy bank, speckled with wildflowers, and gazed at an awe-inspiring view. It was a sunny day with some powder-puff, white clouds above the mountain peaks. I remember singing the aria from *Madame Butterfly* at the top of my voice, in sheer joy and exhilaration: 'I shall stand there on the brow of the hill,' etc. Fortunately my only audience, apart from Marg and Mick, was a mob of goats grazing nearby.

We changed some money into pesetas, 111 to £1.00 sterling, and approached the Border Station. No one had told us about the Civil Guard, or more specifically, their marvellous uniforms. They wore superbly-tailored, olive-green suits with shiny black boots, belts and hats. The hats

were Napoleonic in style but had broad, turned-back brims straight across the front. The final touch was white gloves.

By degrees, as we journeyed on, it dawned on us that these guards were part and parcel of Franco's military rule. We saw them everywhere, always in twos, in the most unexpected places. Sometimes they were standing by bridges or crossroads in the middle of nowhere, on trains, in cities. Almost without exception, we were stopped and asked to produce our passports. Examinations of these were prolonged and we were often questioned about Australia and our personal lives. It was not long before we realized there was more than military duty in these enquiries but, as again, almost without exception, they were the most handsome men we had ever seen, we were not too indignant about it.

We were not so impressed with the border guards when they told us we each had to pay a deposit of 400 pesetas on our bikes, reclaimable when we took them out of Spain. This was to discourage people from selling bikes in Spain, illegal because of tax avoidance thereby.

As far as I could gather from the combination of my consultation with Hugo and body language of both border and civil guards, their considered opinion of us getting out of Spain alive, let alone reclaiming the bike deposits, compared favourably with those of our English friends. In a word – nil.

The fact that we now had three bike deposit receipts to guard with our lives, along with our passports, money, belongings and bikes was an added burden. Notwithstanding, it was with great excitement, we completed negotiations with these doubting Thomases, climbed on the grids and swept down the road and into Spain.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

SPAIN – THE NORTH WEST

It was a short, easy ride along the indented coastline to San Sebastian where we planned to have a rest day. We found a *pensão* on the third floor of a tall, gloomy-looking building next door to the cathedral. It was classified as third rate but after youth hostelling through France, we thought it was superb. It was immaculately clean, had a shower and the food was excellent. For lunch we had the most marvellous omelette, about two inches high and stuffed with fresh sardines, very memorable.

We left our bikes in the ground floor entrance hall on our landlady's assurance they would be safe, as the huge wooden front door of the building was locked at night. We had just snuggled down to sleep when she burst into the room saying something about '*bicyclettas*'. That was enough for us and, regardless of being barefoot and clad only in our flowery wincey pyjamas, we flew downstairs. A gentleman, in some sort of uniform, was parking the bikes outside in the gutter! I can still see Mick wrestling the handlebars of her bike away from the *concierge* or whoever he was. We got the message, the *bicyclettas* could not be left in the hall.

With the blessing and help of our *señora*, we hauled them up to our bedroom on the third floor. As the stairs curved and every step was embellished with a potted fern or a china ornament, it was a perilous undertaking but we managed. We lay in bed giggling about having a fight in the street of San Sebastian, clad in pyjamas and within the precincts of the cathedral.

After that episode, we nearly always took the bikes into our bedrooms. They proved to be great assets. We could hang our washing on them and had our food on hand if we needed a snack. We certainly felt safer, having them under our wings.

We had a relaxed day in the elegant city of San Sebastian. It stretched around the half-moon Bay of La Concha (shell) which was dotted with colourful small craft. Our first castle in Spain overlooked it from a hill. It was lit up at night and looked like fairyland. We had a swim and a sunbake which we all relished.

San Sebastian was the favoured resort of rich Spaniards and the Diplomatic Corps. Beautiful shop window displays featured fine leather goods, high fashion clothes and finely embroidered linens.

It was my birthday and, in the evening to celebrate, we had a bottle of sherry and two delicious pastries each. Then, giggly and silly, we went to the wide promenade along the beach front and watched the world walk up and down the tree-lined street. We were surprised to see small children still up so late and walking sedately by with parents or nannies. The little girls, dressed in embroidered and be-frilled white dresses, and the boys, in white shirts, bow ties, short pants, shoes and white socks, seemed very restrained and too good to be true to us, used to carefree, casual, Australian children.

We had found the late meal times rather a shock to our systems – lunch at 2.30 pm and dinner at 9.30 pm, at the earliest. Breakfast, consisting of a bowl of coffee and sugary bun, was rather too meagre a start to the day as well. We soon learnt to get down to the markets and buy bread, cheese, milk and fruit to keep us going. We had a break at 10 am and another about 4 pm, for substantial snacks.

We also discovered that the Spaniards went to bars or cafés at about 6 pm for a drink and some pastries and we decided to allow ourselves this luxury. There were no youth hostels in Spain and we never found an accommodation guide. When we needed somewhere to stay, we usually went up to the nearest bystander and bleated '*Pensão, pensão*?' with good results. A night in a *pension*, including a four-course dinner and breakfast, was never more than ten shillings, hardly extravagant.

We revelled in the lovely coastline as we rode out of San Sebastian. Rocky headlands, perfect sandy bays, surf crashing in on our right hand side, made it hard to keep our eyes on the road. Small fishing villages nestled in the more sheltered coves, one overlooked by a large Moorish-looking church. The cottages were prettily painted and the cobbled streets attractive.

There were few vehicles on the road. Men on bikes rode along with us here and there. They nearly all wore blue denim clothes, big hats and rope-soled shoes with strings crisscrossed like ballet shoes to keep them on. Most people carried umbrellas and it was not long before we realized why. Eliza Doolittle may have had the impression that 'the rain in Spain stayed mainly on the plain' but we found out there was also a lot in the mountains.

People were walking, carrying goods to market, cheerful, barefoot women with loads of hay on their heads, small children with bundles, all strode up and down the hilly, rough roads. There were neat-stepping, grey donkeys with panniers each side and sometimes with pretty plump *señoras* perched sideways on their rumps. We saw several panniers filled with delicate blue and pink hydrangea blooms being taken to market.

We became used to the calls of '*burro, burro*!' to hasten the donkeys. It made no perceptible difference to their speed and we felt these calls were from habit rather than any hope of a change in pace. Everyone called out 'Good day' to us and we responded heartily, enjoying being part of the friendly throng.

A traveller called Stanley, whom we did not appreciate was an Englishman, who was also cycling through Spain (he had done it before), set himself up as our guide and mentor. We had met him originally in Bordeaux and had not been especially impressed but, as we were probably the only four cyclists touring Spain on bikes and following the same route, we could hardly avoid him.

We hid in villages, forests and side roads but inevitably met up with him again and he would try to take us under his wing. Mick sabotaged our efforts for a couple of days, saying he was lonely, until he led us astray looking for a *pensão* he knew; when we floundered round in the dark, miles off course, to end up at a very mediocre *fonda* and I told her he was saying to all the passers-by in Spanish: 'These hills are too hard for these *señoritas* but they are nothing to me!' The last we saw of him were his dimpled brown knees silhouetted against the skyline. He had fallen asleep after his lunch on a grassy bank by the roadside and we crept past him.

As Bilboa was heavily industrialized we decided to entrain through it. This proved quite a nerve-racking experience as we had to fight for tickets, were worried about our bikes in the van and when we did scramble into the train, found we were the focus of all eyes. We passed along near the coast and to Santander, being rebuilt after devastation by the Civil War. It seemed, like Bilboa, to be headed for an industrial future.

Marg had been lent, on pain of death if she lost it, a detailed guide book to Spain which was to prove invaluable. We took turns in reading up about where we were heading and picking our places of interest. What with finding a lodging each night, washing, writing letters and diaries, all in fairly indifferent lighting, we did not each have time to keep up with the guide as well.

It described some very special caves and paintings near Santillana del Mar. Recalling the episode at Carnac, we were lukewarm about going

20 odd kilometres out of our way to see them but finally made the decision to go there.

The Cueva de Altamira was 'discovered by a hunter in 1878', we were told by our youthful guide as we toiled uphill to reach the entrance. Most of the rest of his commentary was beyond us but I have since discovered they are over 13,000 years old and of utmost archaeological importance.

I realized I had seen photographs of some of the paintings when we went into the caves. It was quite dark but the guide played his torch around the roof so we could view them. This was best done lying on our backs on a big flat rock. Even to our undiscerning eyes, the drawings were beautiful, giving a sense of vitality and movement. Depicted in charcoal and rich earthy colours, there were stags, bison and boars. There were stalagmites in another cave and we were glad we had made the effort to go. I believe the caves were closed not long after our visit and opened to the public, only recently, under strict supervision.

Somewhat bemused, we took the wrong road and found we were going east instead of west, so had to change course feeling rather silly. We came to a lovely little town, Santilla, where a small palace overlooked the cobbled square. I have the impression that Queen Isabella had once reviewed troops from the balcony not many, surely, as it was so small.

A group of a dozen or so children followed us along the road, gazing at us lovingly, and insisted on kissing me goodbye when we finally came to a parting of our ways.

We were in real mountains now and felt there should be brigands but there were none. Instead, as we toiled uphill and skimmed down the other side, we saw all the colours and moods of the mountains – green, cloud-wrapped, purple-shadowed and misty, in soaking rain and sunshine.

Even the rain could not dampen our spirits and I sang as I rode along, much to the surprise of the people we passed. The mountain air went completely to my head. Late in the day, we came to the lovely town of San Vicente de la Barquera, on a peninsula. There was a nice old church with the tomb of an Inquisitor in it. Fishing boats, at anchor within the bar, were reflected in the still water but, beyond, surf crashed in on the sand.

We stayed at a very good *pensão* at Unquera, where the proprietor talked to me for over an hour. It was here, we had the first inkling of what it would be like living under a dictatorship. We discussed politics but I sensed a real fear, even from a mention of the name Franco. I became aware for the first time in my life that, for many people, freedom of speech is a privilege and not a right.

We rode into Asturias next day. Most of the houses we passed, clinging to the sides of the mountains, had sharply inclined straw-thatched roofs. The golden spearheads of drying corncobs hung like fringes under the eaves. Below lay fertile valleys, patchwork blocks of various crops and endless orchards, trees laden with scarlet cider apples. We sometimes drank cider instead of wine and found it very refreshing and exhilarating. A mezzana[21] a sort of fruit cheese made, we presumed from the pulp left over from the cider pressing, had featured regularly on the dinner menu. We saw several stands of eucalypts which made us nostalgic for home.

To save time, we had planned to catch a train from Gijon to Vegadeo and then south to the Portuguese border. We were somewhat stunned to find we had left the railhead well behind us and we would have to get to Lugo before we came to another railway. That meant a 250-kilometre ride through mountains.

We posted mail from Gijon and I remember seeing a man in the post office whose job it was to write telegrams for people who were illiterate. I need hardly say that three girls on bikes were not a common sight in Gijon and it would be no exaggeration to say we stopped the traffic. Everyone was very friendly and talked to us and were also very helpful.

We went off along the coast, up and down the mountainous road. It poured with rain and we lunched in a café on thick, rice soup, studded with mussel shells, and something that was called calamares. It was quite foreign to us but we eventually deduced it was squid cooked in its own ink. We felt a little uncertain about it and I still do, although calamares is a common dish here now.

At Aviles, we became hopelessly mixed up with construction work, vehicles and detours. It looked like a Wild West town but Aviles, too, had been flattened by the Civil War and was being rebuilt with evidence of industries burgeoning. We met various interesting people along the way including a rather pompous, elderly gentleman. He wore a brown suit, a black beret and had a rush of gold teeth to the front. He seemed to have an important message to impart but we could not understand him. He seemed to want to put us on a bus but in the end appeared satisfied to mark an arrow on our map, for what purpose we never discovered, and let us go on our way.

Later riding through a village, I was stopped by the civil guards and asked for my passport. They had clearly been intrigued to see Marg ride through and were on the lookout. They were so busy holding me up that Mick shot through before they could stop her.

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21 This was probably a quince fruit cheese, *dulce de membrillo*.

I had great difficulty convincing them I was neither French nor Austrian and finally had to use the magic word '*Kangourou! Kangourou!*' and hop to prove I was Australian. Their ruse in stopping me was so obviously curiosity and they looked so like characters from an opera, I got the giggles and at one stage thought I might be gaoled for contempt. Finally, their curiosity satisfied and with handshakes all round, I was allowed to proceed.

By now, we had left Asturias behind and were in Galicia, in the north-west corner of Spain. I would have liked to go to Corunna but it would have taken a long time and we had to take that into account.

At Luarca, we were besieged by children. They followed us to the *fonda* (hostelry) and watched our every move as we unpacked our bikes and settled in for the night.

Our way out early next morning was up a very steep mountain but it was made interesting by the throng of people taking goods to market. Flowers, vegetables, fruit, cans of milk and nearly patted fresh butter, animals were being carried or driven down the mountain. The women carried great loads on their heads looking beautiful with their proud, erect carriage.

At Vegadeo, we found a branch of the Bank of Spain and, with the combined effort of the manager and his staff of four clerks, were able to cash some travellers' cheques. We gathered such transactions were rare but created a great diversion for all concerned.

From here we turned south towards Lugo where we hoped to get a train into Portugal. A *guardia* told us there was a *pensão* at Panto Nuova, about 20 miles along the road and as it was mid-afternoon, we decided to push on. We found ourselves on a very rough, narrow road following the bed of the River Eo where the *guardia* had also told us, with bated breath, Franco came to fish for salmon.

It took us longer than we expected and we had time to enjoy a most wonderful sunset. Banks of salmon-pink clouds, edged with gold, hung above the darkening mountains surrounding us and later a half moon coming up behind a belt of pines looked like a magic lantern in the luminous-looking sky.

It was 20 kilometres twice over and 9.30 pm when we straggled into the wide, dusty and dimly lit street of Panto Nuova. A gusty wind had sprung up and leaves scuttled across the road as we rode along looking for the *pensão*.

As we approached it, several men came out of the shadows, directing us and helping us take our bikes up the steps. Mick was later to remark, 'What I like about Spanish men is that they treat a girl as if she were riding in a Cadillac, not on a dusty old grid.'

The *pensão* was a weary travellers' delight – warmth, welcome, hot water and good food, in that order, soon put us to rights. It was immaculately clean and the bed linen was deeply edged with crocheted lace.

After dinner, we sat on in the candle-lit room, drinking wine, eating walnuts and talking – in English of sorts – with a Spanish gentleman, who had lived in the USA and Cuba, and a young Basque commercial traveller, who told us he 'played around fighting bulls!' As the candles burnt lower and lower, we yarned on, forgetting our tiredness. It was a magical evening when time stood still.

Next morning the son of the house took me to buy bread. It was cooked in a huge communal oven. I remember I bought a kilo loaf of crisp dark rye. I admired an ornamental knife he used to cut us some cheese and he promptly gave it to me. It looked as if it had been used to cut throats and kill wolves and I cherished it for many years until, sadly, it went missing.

We had been told there were bears and wolves in the Asturian Mountains and I, at least, felt faintly disappointed that we did not see any. We were also told to look for brigands on the road we were taking but no luck there, either. Everyone told us the road was '*Mala! Mala*!' (bad) but we never found out whether they meant because of the aforementioned hazards or because of the actual road itself. Then later, we all agreed it was '*molto mala*!' It rained solidly and the road, going up and down, was a mudslide, punctuated by rocks. Not only did we have to push our bikes uphill, we also had to lead them down the other side as well.

We plunged on through the bracken-covered mountains, now and again seeing a huddle of primitive houses. The few people we saw looked very poor, the women all in black and unkempt. They were very shy but friendly when we greeted them. I felt sure we did see a brigand. He was leaning out of a window and appeared to be wearing a nightie! He nearly fell out when he saw us; we must have looked very different and somewhat surprising but perhaps it was shock at the missed opportunity of robbing us.

Whenever we crested a rise, a chill wind, like a wall of moving ice, hit us. In spite of being chilled to the bone, we felt exhilarated by the spaciousness and wild beauty around us. However, those feelings wore thin by early afternoon and when we came to a settlement called Muna, we decided to look for a café for lunch.

The café was a long, narrow, bare room which we reached by walking past a sloppy cow-yard, full of bellowing cattle, to which it was attached. We must have looked like something from an alien world. All talk ceased in the crowded room. It was full of men, drinking wine and smoking. A thick smoke haze hung in the air. We explained our need for food and warmth

to the café proprietress and were shaken when she refused to serve us. At that, all the other patrons rose up and demanded she gave us food. Eager hands helped us out of our wet capes. Finally, the *señora* capitulated and we discovered she had thought her café was not good enough for us! Not good enough! It was heaven. Her diffidence overcome, she lavished us with tender, loving care. She hustled us into a huge kitchen behind the café and sat us at benches surrounding her enormous central stove. She made us take off our wet jackets, shoes and socks and soon had them steaming by the flames.

From a huge black pot, she ladled out soup, cut up a wonderful crusty loaf of bread and stood back, ladle in hand, ready to reload our plates. Roast hare, wine, goat cheese and *mezzana* followed and we began to glow with warmth. Two dogs lay at our feet and half a dozen brigands seated at a long side table across the room, watched and discussed us, as they picked and sucked their teeth. They were probably honest labourers but all the men looked like brigands in this part of Spain and it was a romantic thought. We were, in fact, very impressed by the friendliness of all the Spaniards we met. Even the poorest had an air of independence and quiet dignity. Most had strong, clear cut features and noble bearing, no doubt a legacy from their Moorish ancestors.

Facing the elements again, was very unpleasant. We nearly hit an elderly gentleman, slightly drunk, who was standing in the middle of the road having an argument with a horse and a donkey. He was the only person we saw in Spain affected by alcohol. At least we were sure he was the one inebriated, although we had imbibed freely with our lunch, too!

It was 8.30 pm before we finally slipped and slid into Lugo, frozen and drenched. We thought the *pensão* was heaven, even if there were chooks in the kitchen.

Lugo proved to be a beautiful old town. The church had flying buttresses and ornamental work outside. Inside, there was a lot of gilt work and several small altars with a warm and comforting feeling from the glow of the many lighted candles. It felt well-loved. We wandered around the square and through a huge, colourful market where enormous piles of red and green pimentos and other vegetables, fruit and flowers made a kaleidoscope of colour.

We found we needed to shop fast when we reached a market or prices would skyrocket. We were soon haggling with the best of them, however, and enjoying the camaraderie of friendly bargaining. We also had a confusing amount of help. Quiet old ladies would tell us prices were '*barato, barato*' (cheap) and then the opposition would begin shouting '*caro, caro*' (expensive)

and try to persuade us to go elsewhere. We learnt to keep calm and laugh a lot.

We were not laughing when we tried to get our bikes on the midday train for the Portuguese border, however. The luggage man insisted we take everything off our bikes, even the pumps and our black billy. We stood there surrounded by our belongings, 24 articles in fact, impatient for our bike receipts.

I lost my temper as he got slower and slower and the trains' departure time grew nearer. I said several unmentionable things about him which, I can only assume from his ingratiating smiles, he took to be compliments. Finally, at the actual time of the train's leaving, our anxiety crashed the tension barrier and we tipped him. Magically, the receipts were handed over, the bikes put in the van and he even helped carry our belongings to the train and heaved us into a carriage.

We travelled third class because that was the only way we could actually have the bikes on the same train with us. We were certainly not going to leave them to the mercy of the Spanish rail system. The carriages were of open design, with long wooden seats and unspeakable toilets, but trains took us through the dreary bits of road much faster than we could cycle.

Our somewhat dramatic entrance to the carriage startled our fellow travellers, which included two immaculate civil guards on the seat opposite. It was well past our lunch time so we ravenously attacked the food we had bought at the market. We suddenly realized all eyes were upon us. The people at the other end of the coach had moved down and were crowding over behind the *guardia* to observe us. We became acutely embarrassed and I felt like choking on my bread and cheese, mainly because I felt our onlookers needed it more than we did. Marg, in a nervous gesture, spilt the sugar everywhere and that really broke the ice especially with the *guardia*.

One of them became very effusive and insisted on giving us a photo of himself in ceremonial rig. With the help of Hugo, we managed to carry on a non-stop conversation. He let us examine his incredible shiny, black hat really closely. Mick almost created an international incident and some hastily muffled applause when she put it on back to front, sprang up on the seat before the assembly and, with her right arm across her chest in a Napoleonic gesture, shouted '*Guess who*?'

The *guardia* went scarlet, everyone looked out of the windows and we realized it had been a major *faux pas*. Fortunately, an old man playing Spanish melodies on a guitar came into the carriage at that moment and the tension was broken. He wore an old overcoat with what looked like all his worldly possessions bulging out of the pockets and had an umbrella tied

across his back with string. He played to us for a little while, collected a few pesetas from the company and moved on.

We were soon chatting away again to the guards, their equilibrium restored. Ours, however, was thrown well off balance as we drew into Montefort and we were told we had to change trains. From the rush, as everyone left the carriage, we assumed we had no time to spare. Fortunately, the tail-enders and the guards came to our aid and helped carry our gear up, over the bridge and onto another platform. I have happy memories of our elegant friend, string bag in one white-gloved hand, a black billy in the other crying '*Calmo, calmo*!'

Anything but '*calmo*', Mick and I left Marg standing in the small sea of our luggage and raced to the van to collect the bikes. Afraid we would miss the connection, we dropped them onto the lines and across the intervening platforms, rather than drag them up the steps and over the bridge. Reunited with Marg, we then sat and waited for three quarters of an hour for the train to arrive!

The train, when it did come, was making up lost time and we scrambled to get on board. But we had ready hands to help us and the luggage man here was a delight. He shouted with laughter when a passing man made a mock bull rush at my red duffle coat and Mick and I, as one, began singing the Toreador's song from *Carmen*.

It was another absorbing trip. A young pilot tried to teach me some Portuguese but I found it very difficult and did not get beyond '*Bom diaz*' (good morning). Someone else took my address in Australia and promised to send me a photo, of what I never found out. An elderly lady spent most of the trip organizing two large sacks of potatoes. Presently, to our amazement, after peering out into what had now passed from twilight to dark, she got up and standing on one sack, heaved the other through the window. Next, a huge round loaf of bread went hurtling out into the blackness. Then, hefting the remaining sack of potatoes onto her hip, she bid everyone '*Adios*' and left the train at the next station.

Eventually we reached Tui near the Portuguese border, loaded up and pedalled down some dimly-lit, unprepossessing streets until we located a *pensão*. Our meal, by Spanish standards, was frugal, soup, boiled fish and potatoes, wine and a banana. We felt a bit dubious about Tui. We did not like the atmosphere of the town and thought we had been followed from the station by an unsavoury-looking gentleman, with probable evil intent. Our fears were justified, because someone got into the room where Marg was sleeping but left hurriedly when she yelled and threw her shoe at him.

He left, somewhat unceremoniously through the skylight without, apparently, taking anything with him.

When Marg came bursting into the room Mick and I shared, to tell us of the intrusion, our immediate concern was for our bikes, stowed in the kitchen below. We spent a sleepless night going down to check them and finally setting up a booby trap with all the pots and pans we could find in the kitchen! Eventually the *señora* came to see what was happening. She did not know what to make of it, just rolled her eyes, threw up her hands and went back to bed.

The sun shone next day and the worries of the night left us as we pedalled across a graceful bridge and up to a blue door with 'PORTUGAL' on it. Alice in Wonderland could not have asked for more.

At this point in the trip, we had to decide whether to go to Cadiz and cross to Algiers in North Africa or head off for the Mediterranean and catch a ferry to Majorca. Clearly, we could not afford to do both, from neither the time nor finance angle. The fact that Marg had been assuring us that she had American friends living in Palma, Majorca, who would take us to their bosoms, swayed us and we opted for the latter course.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

PORTUGAL

We did indeed feel as if we were in a different world. Everyone looked so poor. Barefoot women and little children, ragged and unkempt, some with enormous loads of hay or heavy baskets on their heads, stared at us curiously. But there were no cheerful greetings here.

Instead, we were beset by children begging. One child was leading an elderly lady who was blind. We gave them a few small coins but they became even more raucous and demanding. Later, Marg, who as usual was riding well ahead of Mick and me, admitted she had hit a child who was trying to take something out of her basket. In the afternoon, we were to be on the receiving end. Riding past some young girls on the road, we were chased and hit by stones they pelted at us on two occasions. They were like wild animals defending their territory but fortunately not very good shots.

The country was hilly, rocky and rugged, reminding me of the Forrest River country until we reached the flat coastal strip. Here, every inch of land was cultivated, tiny pockets of land divided by stone walls, built no doubt for protection from the sea winds. There were rows and rows of grape vines. The leaves glowed with rich autumn colours in the sunlight and behind the fields the purple line of hills were lightly clad by trails of mist. The beauty of the countryside did a lot to smooth our ruffled feathers.

We stopped and bought roasted chestnuts and salted corn from an old lady with a burner on the side of the road. We were glad to warm our hands by her fire. There was a bleak wind coming off the sea. We saw some small cattle with wide sweeping horns, like water buffalos. There were a few fishing villages dotted along the coast. We decided the hard-wrought, depressed-looking people did not have a great deal to be cheerful about. The keen wind, if it persisted all the year, would wipe the smile off anyone's face.

We came into Oviana [*Viana do Castelo*] late in the afternoon with an escort of small boys. They took us to the Casa Zita which seemed to be some sort of a convent. We had no complaints about the kindness and hospitality here. They seemed to be full and took us in only because of the goodness in their hearts. At first they put us into the schoolroom, where a number of young girls were ironing, but, before bedtime, moved us into rooms. These were very sparse, white with holy pictures and the most highly polished and coldest floor boards I have ever known. The redeeming features were the beds, made up with spotless linen and the most marvellous, thick mohair blankets in muted, subtle tones of brown and grey.

A lavish dinner was served in a big dining room. Spotless linen and a vast expanse of more highly polished floorboards greeted us. Language was a major stumbling block and our guide book did not extend to Portugal but we eventually realized we were near some place of importance connected with the Fatima shrine. We were clearly a source of disappointment to our kind hosts when they kept saying 'Fatima! Fatima!' and we continued looking blank. By putting two and two together and that strange animal instinct we have of reading body language, attitude, tones of voice and coupling it with probability, we partly got the message that we should detour off to see the shrine. Disenchanted as we were with the Portuguese, we decided against it. Pity in retrospect.

Much, much later, I read about the Fatima shrine. On May 10th, 1917, three children shepherding sheep claimed that the Virgin Mary appeared to them in this place and told them three secrets. The first was a vision of hell, the second a prophecy that World War 1 would soon end but that another war would break out and to beware the power of Russia. The third has been kept secret. Pope John Paul has decreed that nothing would be added to Christian belief by its revelation so, to this day, the Vatican holds the secret. The children said the vision appeared every month but no one else ever saw it. A shrine was built on the place where the vision appeared and people from all over the world make pilgrimage to it.

There were several other guests who were all friendly in intent, although we had no common language. A young priest staying there kept playing and replaying some nagging religious dirge. It must have had some special significance for him but less and less for us as the night wore on. It haunted me for days and became a sort of musical accompaniment to the paranoia I was developing about Portugal. I had also caught a chill on our mountain ride to Lugo and was feeling quite off colour. I was beginning to get on Marg's nerves, particularly with my complaints and in the end she said: 'Look, Meggie, none of us like them (the Portuguese) much but for God's

sake shut up about them.' I took the hint and used to say twenty times a day, to myself, 'I love the Portuguese. I *do* love the Portuguese', and did stop my complaints.

After our miserable night at Tui, we slept like logs under our mohair blankets and, after a warm farewell from the kind people at Casa Zita, set off for Oporto [*Porto*].

In spite of our resolution never to land into a city at night, we did just this. I remember sweeping down a long, winding hill, in some competition with vehicles and more particularly a train, and seeing the lights of Oporto coming on through the dusk like a thousand stars. We rode into a main square in the midst of a melee of vehicles, policemen and banks of men who stood four deep along the edge of the road staring at us.

We had landed up outside the main post office but it was shut so we could not get our eagerly-awaited mail. We rode off to look for somewhere to stay and, in the chaos, Mick and I became separated from Marg. We kept circling back on our tracks for over an hour, bleating to the police. 'Have you seen a *señorita* on a *bicycletta*?' unfruitfully, each time we passed them. The men at the post office found the drama riveting and surged forward each time we reappeared. A lady standing nearby tried to sell us bananas each time we came past, until we were on the verge of telling her where she could put them!

Eventually Marg came back to the post office and, in a release of tension, I turned to our audience and snarled: 'Haven't you ever seen an Australian? Well, take a good look now.' This seemed to encourage some of them, who set off to follow us. A theatrical-looking young man, accompanied by several friends all wrapped in what appeared to be yards of black crepe, appeared and in broken English told us he would take us to a *pensione*. We realized they were university students and they were wearing capes. He was willing but not much use. We managed to find a *pensione* by our own efforts.

My feeling about the Portuguese had not changed much but I loved Oporto, bright and clean, with beautiful buildings. The post office, when we returned for mail next day, proved to be a spun-sugar edifice, painted pale pink with the ornamentation picked out in white. There was a striking statue of a lion standing over a dead eagle on a high pedestal I liked especially.

Oporto is very hilly and the cathedral stood high and imposing above the city. It had two, square, Moorish towers and beautiful Roman cloisters. Holy pictures and blue and white tiling decorated their shadowy interior.

We took a train to the beach and the port and watched the Atlantic surf crashing in on the golden sand. We wandered around the wharves on the

Rio Douro and saw long barges loaded with wine casks. We were, of course, in the heart of the fine wine and sherry producing area of the country. It was exciting to think of the trade exporting all over the world.

Again, we saw women working like animals, carrying enormous loads on their heads. Their bare feet were coarse and splayed, their ankles thickened, and dressed in drab brown or black, they were a depressing sight. On the brighter side, we fell in love with the tiling we saw everywhere, on houses and walls. Green, blue or flowery tiles sometimes covered large blocks of wall surfaces and looked cheerful as well as artistic.

People stared at us wherever we went and we found it rather trying. My back brake stuck again and a nice man mended it for me, refusing payment and tying everything up with yards of string. I renewed my efforts to love the Portuguese on the strength of this and was almost convinced I did, as we headed out of Oporto.

Aveiro, down the coast, did much to reinforce my feeling. The architecture was consistently beautiful. The Portuguese Bank Building was painted the palest pink and the vast ornamentation of cherubs, flowers and curlicues were pristine white. We later saw it in the moonlight and it seemed to sparkle. The cobbled streets had insets of fish and sailing ships. It was a very attractive place.

When we arrived, we were stopped at an intersection wondering where to begin looking for a *pensione* when a young man approached us and, in excellent English, offered to help us. Raw from the crowds at Oporto, we brushed him off but we had to eat humble pie when we tried to get directions from a café. He took us to a very nice lodging and then invited us out for coffee.

He wore a marvellous leather coat with a fur collar, quite Tibetan-looking, but we found he had lived in South America where he learnt English and no doubt acquired his coat. While we were having coffee, he looked into the middle distance and looking at no one in particular said, 'Last night in Oporto, I heard one of you, I do not know which one, say: 'Have you never seen an Australian? Well, take a good look now!' To say I was embarrassed would be an understatement.

That evening Mick and Marg went for a drive with a couple of lads who wanted to show us the town but I opted for an early night. These boys wanted us to stay longer, so they could drive us around the champagne-growing country and take us out for a Portuguese dinner, but we decided to push on. We were not too impressed with the suave Portuguese men, who seemed to have all the time in the world to stand around in their good, dark suits and

well-polished, pointy-toed shoes and spit, while their unfortunate women staggered along barefoot with half a haystack on their heads.

About this time, writing home to mother, and telling her not to worry about me, no doubt in reply to a frenzied appeal in the 'to take care and not speak to strangers' mode, I said that it was in my nature to travel whenever I had tuppence-ha'penny to rub together and that a fortune teller in Scotland had said, 'I liked spending money but I would always have it to spend!' But also I told her about the spitting in Portugal and how it would horrify her. With total disregard for all and sundry, these nattily-suited gentlemen would spit left, right and centre and you had to keep a sharp lookout or you would cop it.

We went by train to Coimbra, where we had to wait several hours for a connection to Leiria. Coimbra has one of the oldest universities in the world and, soon after our arrival, we were engulfed by young male students, all wearing romantic-looking black capes, all wanting to show us around and practice English.

They took us up to a beautiful, new, white university being built on a hill overlooking the city. They were very friendly and pleasant. We saw no female students. My memories of Coimbra are of hot sunshine, clear light, blinding-white, elegant buildings cascading down the hillside with a backdrop of purple ranges, and black-caped students dotted about like so many crows.

We found a nice place to stay at Leiria and our spirits began to rise, the further south we travelled. We were back on our bikes next day too, and we much preferred that. The country was very dry with stands of olives and eucalypts. In several fields, we saw lines of men turning over the ground with picks. The night was warm and we camped by a ruined castle. We were able to boil the billy and have our first cup of tea in two weeks.

Determined not to arrive in Lisbon in the dark, we did just that but luck was with us and we found the *Pensione Chile*, quite near the city centre, very easily. It was comfortable and we had a chance to do our washing and sort out our gear.

We spent several days sightseeing and thoroughly enjoyed it. We usually split up and went our separate ways when we stopped like this. It meant we could each do our own thing and have a break from each other's company. Also, we could compare notes and that helped us decide on ensuing excursions.

I saw the gracious, tree-lined, Campo Parade leading to various parks and the tiny museum of Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro. It had a lot of statues and allegorical sketches and a marvellous display of porcelain. There were huge plates heaped with fruit and flowers, vases down to tiny plaques. We all

went to the Vasco da Gama Aquarium and saw sharks, squid and tropical fish performing their constant ballets, and seals. There were also some awful-looking eels living in a rock complex full of holes. Every hole had a head or tail hanging out of it and it looked like the sort of thing nightmares are made of. There was a beautiful collection of shells gathered by the late Carlos II. The poor man was the last king of Portugal and was assassinated in 1910.

We were all enchanted by the beautiful Monastery of San Geronimo and its pillars within exquisite cloisters. We were besieged by begging children but gave them short shrift, monastery or no monastery. Part of the building was set up as an ethnological museum displaying mummies, pottery, some nice basketry and embroidery, but more to our taste was the Folk Museum showing phases of Portuguese life. Beautiful rugs, porcelain, lace, ornamental candles, bridles, regional costume, even head boards for cattle, kept us absorbed. We left only at closing time.

We visited the resort of Estoril and in the afternoon went by bus to Sintra, described by Byron as 'a very Eden'. It had been the resort of monarchs and was still thick with summer palaces. We had lunch on the bus going out. It was one of the roughest roads I have ever travelled on. Half the time, we were jolted so much, our jaws snapped at air. One of our staple picnic meals was bananas sliced onto fresh rolls or bread and sprinkled with sugar. Later, we added dates and that was even better.

The staple diet at the *Pensione Chile* seemed to be rice with black olives and chunks of goat meat mixed through it. Not only did we do it justice but became addicted to it. We had a few problems there. An ancient lady kept turning the water off and I fought a losing battle with her for the duration of our stay. Also Marg, somehow managed to break her bed and the manager had to leave the comfort of his office, get nails and a hammer and fix it. Normally he sat there all day, twisting his ruby ring round and round with his elegant white hands.

But I digress from Sintra where we wandered in the old quarter of San Pedro and climbed up to the Palace of Pena, which looked like a real fairy castle. A new part had been added to an old convent adjoining it and there was a lot of decorative pink, blue and green tiling and attractive cupolas. Inside there were displays of Dresden china, Venetian glass and, in the chapel, an alabaster altar. It had been a weekender for King Carlos I. It was set in a heavily wooded park where 80 gardeners were employed and the paths swept every day.

It was a very satisfying castle and, from the top, there was a spectacular view over the park, to the River Tagus, Lisbon and miles of brown plains

beyond. On the way back to Lisbon, thundery black clouds were forming. They gave a melodramatic effect to a ruined Moorish castle standing, twin-towered, high on a peak above us.

We had thoroughly enjoyed our time in Lisbon. The city felt very alive and had a sense of history. It was thrilling to be in such a romantic place where so many seafarers had set out for unknown oceans and far places. Two of the elegant squares in the city, the Comércio and the Liberté[22], led to the port, melding them together and giving the city unity with the sea.

We would have liked to go further south in Portugal to see the famous Algarve but we had to cut corners somewhere as it was now the end of October. We had to face the facts, that if we lingered too long we would be overtaken by winter, miles from England and broke to boot.

We planned to take a fast train to Seville leaving at 8.30 in the morning. We had to take a ferry across the harbour to catch it, so it meant a very early start. Marg and Mick stayed awaken most of the night and with the help of the boots at the *Pensione Chile* and the manager's wife, who true to Portuguese form, seemed to do all the work around the place, we made it.

Our trip began in a very civilized way in quite a fast train which actually had padded seats. The country was flat and rough, with olive and cork plantations the main features. We were told it was one of the best bull raising (for fighting) regions in the world.

We had no sooner settled comfortably when we discovered we had to change trains. With help from fellow travellers, we switched luggage, and our bikes, and scrambled on board, virtually as the new train pulled out of the station. We thought this augured well but were soon disillusioned. It was in fact a very slow train and took ages to reach the Portuguese border at Elvas where we went through the formalities of shaking the dust of Portugal off our, by now, well-worn shoes.

The train dragged on the few kilometres to Badajoz and the Spanish Customs. It was so good to be back in Spain, we could have kissed the *guardia*.

A cutting from *The Australian Magazine*, part of an article by Padraic P McGuinness from 1993, after the resignation of Mr Leo McLeay as Speaker of the House of Representatives, concludes with a Flann O'Brien quotation on cycling: 'Perhaps Mr McLeay has had far too much to do with bicycles in his life in any case.'

The great Irish humorous writer, Flann O'Brien, in his book *The Third Policeman*, developed a theory of bicycle riding: 'The gross and net result of it,' explains the policemen, 'is that people who spent most of their natural

22 Perhaps the Avenue da Liberdade, or Rossio or Figueira Square, I cannot recall the name.

lives riding iron bicycles over the rocky roads of this parish get their personalities mixed up with the personalities of their bicycle as a result of the interchanging of the atoms of each of them and you would be surprised at the number of people in these parts who nearly are half people and half bicycles… And you would be flabbergasted at the number of bicycles that are half-human almost half-man, half-partaking of humanity.'

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

SPAIN – THE SOUTH

On reaching Badajoz, the bad news was that we could not take our bikes on the connecting train so had several hours to kill before we could move on. By now, it was late afternoon but we set out to explore the environs. The station seemed to be miles away from the town, surrounded by a flat, black sand plain. It felt like the end of the world or a set for one of those heavy, anguished films about life in Russia in the last century. Men, looking like the usual brigands, all wore marvellous leather coats with fur collars and, as the wind cut into us, we envied them.

Badajoz had been a well-fortified city with a Moorish Castle but Wellington laid siege to it in 1812, during the Peninsular War against the French. Was Napoleon not busy retreating from Russia just then? Anyway, Wellington seemed to have had an open go and nearly flattened it. When darkness fell, we returned to the uninviting station to await our iron steed.

'Having an open go' was one of Marg's favourite expressions. It originated from 'her reprobate uncle' as she called him. He liked to frequent the pubs and she related the problems her brother encountered while trying to get him home. He tended to slip off behind a bush in some unsuspecting home-owner's driveway and call out in a stage whisper, 'We've got an open go, here, mate!' to her brother.

It became our slogan too, when nature called for us to seek out bushes. As the weather got colder, on our homeward journey through France, her calls were more frequent and the slogan somewhat overworked.

We were glad to get out of the wind and into a carriage when our train eventually came in. We settled down comfortably with friendly fellow passengers but when we arrived at Merida, an hour-and-a-half later, we found it was another case of one out, all out.

The civil guards took us to a *fonda* (hostelry) where we had a meal and some much needed coffee. We had a two-hour wait. A Spanish test pilot came and talked to us and a nice little man who spoke French and who later led us a wild goose chase through stationary trains, along lines and finally onto the one we needed.

There was also a plump, elegantly-dressed lady, dripping furs and jewels, who was travelling with her husband and two small sons, waiting for another connection. She had been to school in England, she told us. She clasped me to her warm, scented bosom and cried, 'My husband says you must not travel on that train – it is too terrible.' We had been warned about the train but we told her cheerfully we really did not mind having no lights and no water, as long as it got us to Seville. It did not, of course, but we did not know that at the time. She shook her head sadly as she waved goodbye and our little French-speaking gentleman led us off into the darkness.

He spent the time we sat in the train waiting to depart, trying to teach me French and Spanish for everything connected with railways and trains. Eventually the train stirred to life and we set off for the south and Seville. He then explained that, at 1.30 am, we would have to make another change at Leirina and wait until 6 am for the connection to Seville.

We duly arrived at Leirina at 2.30 am and were ushered into the *sala d'espera* or waiting room. We sat on hard kitchen chairs, set in a circle, with three gentlemen wrapped in colourful blankets, who filled in the time by regular spitting practice, a woman, also in a blanket, and two nuns who sat sweet-faced and uncomplaining, looking as if they would be more at home at a tea party.

It was a long, cold, hard wait and the atmosphere grew thicker as our male companions smoked some deadly cigarettes. After about an hour, six more tough-looking Spanish gentlemen arrived, who also peppered the floor with shots until the train came in and we all climbed on board.

It was without doubt the roughest train ride I have ever endured but there was room on the seats to stretch out and I, at least, slept. At last, thirty hours after we left Lisbon, we reached Seville, so much for our fast train.

We found the *Pensão Gonzales* in Seville and settled in like homing pigeons. There were hot showers, the first we had encountered in three weeks, and marvellous food. We sampled both and did our washing before venturing out on the town. At no time did we see anything as sophisticated as a washing machine on our trip, so we did everything by hand.

The sun was shining strongly and we were glad of the shutters on the windows to stop the glare. Our own private balcony overlooked a tiny

walled courtyard with a palm tree and one duck disporting itself in the fishpond.

We loved everything about Seville. Although it was not fiesta time, the city felt gay and the people were cheerful and friendly. It is set in a vast plain, watered by the Guadalquivir River, and was once a capital of a Spanish Moorish kingdom. The Moorish legacy is very strong and nowhere more apparent than in the Alcázar, the Moorish Palace.

Vistas of elegant columns, cool spacious rooms, beautiful stucco work and mosaics, and balconies with exquisite wrought iron work, gave us an insight into the magnificent work of the Moorish craftsman. We wandered on through colourful gardens, courtyards and ponds. Geraniums were much favoured and, of course, the famous Seville orange trees grew everywhere, laden with golden fruit.

Avenues of orange trees lined the street and we had to pass through a formal courtyard filled with them to reach the cathedral. Second in size in the world only to St Pauls, it was rather overwhelming. Its huge pillars gave the impression of a vast forest. It had some wonderful German stained glass.

We had a brief siesta before going out to explore the Santa Cruz district. Built by the Moors but taken over by the Jews, it seemed the very essence of Spain. Narrow cobbled streets ran between high, white, creeper-draped walls. Through beautiful wrought iron gates, we caught glimpses of tiled, cool courtyards, shaded by palms and gay with geraniums in pots.

We slept like the dead that night. Next morning, it was off to the Mercato to wander around admiring the black lace mantillas, high combs and other traps for tourists. We spent several hours in the Art Gallery and I found myself coming back time and again to the Murillos. Murillo had lived in Seville. His paintings seemed so delicate and pure. There were some paintings by Zurbarán, I remember especially, and some lovely modern art.

After a substantial meal, we rode our bikes along the bank of the Guadalquivir River, over it to the traditional area of Triana. The homes were beautiful and we rode on to the delightful Maria Luisa Gardens. We were tagged by a group of young Spanish men on bicycles, who in spite of our circling around among fern gardens, lily ponds and lions spouting water, always met up with us with lovely smiles. In the end, we gave up and they escorted us to the Plaza de España to see a huge U-shaped building with towers and a moat. It started to rain and our gay cabelleros beat a hasty retreat as we did, back to the *Pensão Gonzales*.

Seville is a major bull-fighting centre but there were no fights on while we were there, as the season was officially over. Mick and Marg were very anti-bullfighting but I would like to have seen one.

From our balcony, we could watch the activity in the street below. Boys on bikes with musical horns wove their way amongst donkeys and bullocks carrying picturesque loads, a constant stream of pedestrians and a knife grinder going up and down announcing his presence by playing a scale on a Pan-like pipe.

Probably the most distinctive building we saw in Seville was the Giralda Tower. Formerly a minaret from the enormous Moorish mosque, it had a tower 300 feet high, topped with gold. A spiral ramp climbed inside the tower up which kings, queens and grandees could ride their horses two abreast to the top.

As I climbed round and round and up and up, my mind ran riot thinking of the richly caparisoned horses and riders which must have jostled their way up the tower. The view was breathtaking. We could see the course of the Guadalquivir River stretching away to the horizon. We looked down on the cathedral and the Alcázar and could see a myriad of narrow, winding streets running between high white walls and houses.

It was pouring with rain on November 4th when we, regretfully, left Seville to ride the 150 kilometres to Córdoba. I nearly did not make it, as I caught my front tyre in tramlines outside the cathedral and crashed, melodramatically, at the feet of the point-duty policeman. He gallantly helped me pick myself up, and the contents of my basket, and launch me after the other two.

We were splashed by cars, wet in spite of our capes and depressed to be leaving Seville. We planned to take two days to reach Córdoba and camp that night. But we had hardly left the city before a truck pulled up, our bikes were piled on board and we were taken all the way to Córdoba. We passed through some lovely country, wide brown plains and, now and again, ranges in the distance. They looked purply-blue and splashed with gold when the clouds broke and the sun's rays touched them.

We found a *pensione* and had a pleasant meal at 4 pm – a tomato and leek salad, soup, beans, potatoes and an omelette, wine and fruit, and with all, a caring and friendly service. We could not help comparing it with the sort of reception we would get in Australia under similar circumstances. 'Meals off!' or 'Dining room's shut!' were the two kindest of our suggestions. The Spaniards always served us as if we were honoured guests, no matter how humble the establishment.

We set off to visit the famous mosque/cathedral in spite of a downpour which turned the unpaved streets to red mud and filled the gutters to overflowing. The mosque, which later became the Roman Catholic cathedral, was second in size only to the Kaaba in Mecca. It had a thousand slender

pillars of marble, jasper and granite. Red and white double arches supported each one. It had been built originally by the Moors in the 10th century and modified over the years.

The fury of the storm outside added to the gloom as we entered. At first, we saw only vistas of the pale, stalk-like pillars disappearing into darkness and, here and there, the ruby glow of a lamp above an altar. The air was heavy with the smells of smoky oil-lamps, hot candle grease and incense. We wandered about in the half light, losing each other in the vastness, spell-bound at the atmosphere and awed by the splendour of the wood carvings, mosaics and high altars.

As a child at home, I had pored over a battered copy of the *Arabian Nights* and this place seemed a perfect setting for the stories I had read. Beautiful daughters of rich merchants, clad in finest silks in rainbow colours, grandees and their richly caparisoned wives, sultans robed in gold, came into my imagination, a kaleidoscope of wraith-like visions in the dimness.

It was a shock when we finally emerged from the mosque to find the storm had passed and the sun was shining. We were soon exclaiming with delight at the beautiful gardens and statuary of the Alcázar. It looked even more beautiful when we saw it floodlit that night.

The next day, we set off for Granada. The sun was shining and the air felt clear and we were delighted to be back on the open road. We passed ploughed fields and, here and there, a white farmhouse nestled in a hollow, guarded by poplars like golden spears. Purple shadows moved across the land as clouds passed before the sun and we heard a man singing as he ploughed. We passed through several small villages and then turned south east towards Jaen. As we crested a hill, later in the afternoon, we saw a long line of purple mountains and in front of us, perched on a hill, the lovely little town of Parcuda with its church spire reaching to heaven.

We were clearly a great novelty in Parcuda and had collected a curious crowd by the time we reached the main street. It was the hour of promenade and virtually everyone followed us on our way to the *pensione*. The street lights came on and, as we walked over the cobbled street, we saw whitewashed walls, great wooden doors half open revealing fascinating glimpses of family life. Strings of chillies on walls, gaily decorated mule trappings, holy pictures lit by candlelight, secluded patios behind beautiful wrought iron gates, all were briefly revealed as we passed.

Everyone spoke an Andalusian dialect of which I could understand not one word but I held the troops at bay while Marg and Mick negotiated for our lodging. No sooner had we reached our room when a gentleman entered on our heels and tried to sell us a tablecloth! Not a necessity of

life for us, alas! We had a good dinner including an interesting soup full of cockleshells.

Next morning, indicating I wanted to buy milk, I was conducted out the back door, between two mules into a sort of barn. Two cows, sixteen goats and a fast-gathering crowd were assembling. Someone rushed round collecting up little bits of milk from various dippers and finally tried to drag a bit more out of the cows with indifferent success.

It was better than nothing, however, when after spinning away downhill, we stopped and had breakfast in an olive grove. We climbed through mountains all morning arriving at midday at Torredonjimeno, a town where the buildings were so white they seemed to sparkle in the clear mountain air.

We stopped at the village pump to fill our water bottles, in company with an exciting-looking gentleman, draped in a colourful blanket who was giving his mule a drink at the trough. In no time, we were surrounded by several cows, a herd of goats and most of the population.

As we rode, we saw men in pairs, or singly, riding off into the mountains. It seemed as if they were going to the edge of the world and probably for them it was, at least to the edge of their world. The mules and donkeys were decked out in ornamental saddlery, plaited reins made of straw, lots of tassels in the primary colours, red, blue, yellow, and green. I even saw one mule sporting a tiny mirror on its forehead.

The scenery was breath-taking as we climbed up along the road to Jaen. Olive groves grew in the yellow clay soil on the hillsides and before us, stretched the red, purple and blue of the ranges. It looked like what I expected Colorado to be like. I was so enraptured that I somehow lost my companions and it took the combined efforts of a first aid officer and a policeman to reunite us, an hour later in Jaen.

We were late moving on and stopped for lunch in a rocky outcrop on the side of the road. Looking back, Jaen, overlooked by the ruins of a Moorish castle, bathed in mellow golden light seemed unreal and like a biblical city.

The road followed a river and we looked in vain for a campsite. It was just as well, it turned out, as it poured most of the night. It got dark as we stumbled along the rough road and through a high pass.

We came to Campillo de Arenas with an escort which seemed to materialize out of thin air at our approach and were led to the one inn. We entered through the stable, where several mules and horses were tethered and a sleeping muleteer lay in the straw, covered by a gay blanket and using his saddle for a pillow. We were booked in at seven pesetas (1/6) each, for dinner and room. We realized we had booked into 'one of those awful inns in the south of Spain', our good friends had warned us about. We decided

to enjoy it. It was certainly primitive and to reach our room we had to go through another, where some mule drivers were installed. The mattresses were lumpy and everything felt damp but seemed clean.

Downstairs two mule-drivers were sharing a rich-looking stew from the same bowl. They looked like cut-throats but probably had hearts of gold. The proprietor, a large prosperous-looking gentleman wearing a smart grey Stetson had quite a night as he had to keep shooing out the population who came in to look at us. Finally, he let in half a dozen of his best mates then locked the door. That left him free to relax and discuss us and our '*bicyclettas*'. I had a fascinated audience while I oiled mine and tightened the nuts. Our host gave an animated commentary until a grim-faced *señora* came to the door and called him off to eat.

We had some of the excellent stew and then made a quick getaway to bed, ahead of the mule drivers settling in. Also, we wanted to get up the stairs before the proprietor came back as we had each discovered his propensity to station himself at the bend of the stairs and pinch out bottoms as we went past. We tried to jam our door shut with a chair without success but were so tired we decided to go to bed and leave our fate to Providence.

She was kind to us and we suffered no mishap. Campillo de Arenas, when viewed in the morning had a definite Wild West air about it and we loved it. I went off to buy bread, an obliging man moving a horse away from the counter so I could make my purchase. I bought a large round loaf, heavy and sour but we ate it because we had nothing else. We bought milk for five pesetas from a boy milking a goat and, later in the day, a man filled our bottle and refused payment.

We left town with an escort of bicycles and a man on a mule. They peeled off one by one, the last mule and his rider disappearing down a winding track to nowhere. '*Adios*' echoed in the crisp air.

About 20 hours from Granada, we first glimpsed the mountains of the Sierra Nevada, draped in mist and capped with snow. And a little further on, we saw the town spread across the hillside in the mountain's shadow. We passed some gypsies with a mule cart laden with possessions. Two, pretty, barefoot girls with long, dark hair wearing the traditional bright, flounced long dresses walked behind. Soon we came to the famous cave dwellings, where only doorways set into the hillside and whiffs of smoke from holes in the ground, indicated their presence.

When we reached Granada, we went to the tourist bureau at Casa de los Tiros. A nice little man who had no arms, just hands on his shoulders, personally took us to a *pensione* and booked us in at family rates which were much cheaper. He could hardly bear to leave us.

Likewise, the child of the *pensione*, Maria, was fascinated by us and watched our every move, transfixed. The food was good and there was a shower which, apart from a tendency to regurgitate the waste water round our feet, was warm and a lot better that many we had encountered.

There were several students living in the house who were friendly and talkative. We were rather startled by their recreational habit of leaning out over the balcony and taking pot shots with a .22 rifle at sparrows flying over neighbours' roofs.

The Alhambra Palace was all I had ever imagined and more. We set off next morning through an elm wood, supposedly established by Wellington during his occupation, to spend the day among the gardens and buildings. The latter, of red ochre and cream, were set out among tranquil settings of formal gardens and trees. The trees' changing leaves blended with the colours of the buildings and here and there the dark green of cypresses stood out in stark relief. Gardeners and workmen were busy restoring the neglect of years but in a natural way with some continued disorder. There seemed to be few other people and we were free to wander at will.

We lingered by the Court of the Lions with its twelve marble columns and its great statues guarding the pool, admiring the high ceiling and delicate masonry. In the Royal Baths we saw where, in the time of Moorish occupation, three spigots gushed, hot, cold and perfumed water. Everywhere we saw sanded cedar ceilings, mosaics and symbols and writings from the Koran inscribed on walls and above doorways.

On the top floor, every window and doorway framed a cameo of woods and mountains and, from the balcony, we could look down on the gypsy caves on the hillside opposite and the busy thoroughfare below. We saw the rooms where Washington Irving had lived in the Hall of the Ambassadors and I felt a fierce envy for the enchanted hours he must have spent there. The weather was crisp and sunny and in that elevated place of space and light, I felt I could fly.

An aqueduct, built by the Moors, still brought water from the snow-clad Sierra Nevada to Granada and ice-cold water ran in the narrow channels of the Generalife Gardens to the elegant Summer Palace where the Sultan and his Court wiled away the hot Granada days.

Mick and I noticed strange movements in a fig tree near the Palace and, on investigation, found Marg seated on a bough having her fill of luscious, sweet, small green figs. We needed no invitation to join her.

Once again, we wandered through the Palace. We were tailed by a Spanish gentleman who seemed to be lying in wait behind every pillar.

Bowing, he would usher us along our way. Mick remarked it was like a Tom and Jerry film.

We met two young doctors in Granada, who as well as taking us out for coffee, regaled us in a mixture of languages with an account of their afternoon spent in the operating theatre. The detail was graphic. It was fortunate that we were all used to hospital talk. They took us to a small café where a gypsy band played flamenco guitar music and girls with trailing frilled skirts, long black hair and flashing eyes, stamped their feet as they danced to the rhythm of their castanets. It was wonderfully exhilarating. One of the doctors proposed to me but I said I thought it was all a bit sudden. His opening gambit had been to admire the kitty purse which I had been carrying that evening and which was beginning to show signs of wear and tear. My mirth at his remarks was not conducive to a romantic atmosphere.

Persistent, if nothing else, he invited me to go with him to the family ranch in the Sierra Nevada. When he showed me photos of the bulls they were breeding for fighting and their horses, I was very keen to go. Marg and Mick poured cold water on the suggestion, pointing out we had other plans for the morrow. The fact that I listened to them is one of the few regrets I have in my life.

Next day we did in fact go up into the Sierra Nevada Mountains but by an electric train. It wound round and round, clinging to ledges as the elevation rose and the river below looked like a silver thread. Every patch of arable land was cultivated. I remember seeing a herd of black goats frolicking among poplar trees where leaves like gold coins fluttered down on them. We saw a herd of sheep, tended by a young boy, looking like a nonchalant Pan, as he leant against a tall trunk, whittling wood.

We saw jagged purple mountain peaks all around us, some white with late snow, and the great aqueduct taking water to Granada. The people were very fine-looking and even the men had beautiful well-cared-for hands. I blenched when I looked on my own. About this time, I thought I had picked up fleas and began itching but it was only the power of Marg's suggestion. In fact, everywhere we went in Spain was immaculately clean.

We went back again to the Alhambra, visited the Cathedral of the Incarnation, huge, with a marvellous collection of ecclesiastical robes, an impressive organ loft and wonderful paintings, and the university. In between having a major wash, we leant over the balcony and watched the activity in the street below. It was a procession of the citizen's daily life punctuated by the pitter patter of the little grey donkeys who moved like busy workmen plying their trade.

We left Granada with many regrets and caught an early morning train to Murcia from whence we planned to ride to Alicante and catch the boat to Majorca.

We had remarkably trouble free day, arriving in Murcia only two hours late, at 10 pm. This surprised us as no less than five times the train had stopped and the engine was whipped from the front to the back and we seemed to retrace our steps.

There were a number of civil guards on the train and, after walking up and down several times, their officer came up and asked to see my passport. The usual repartee took place, none of it having any bearing on my presence in the country.

My age 'But you look younger, not married' – Shock horror all round at that! Was I affianced? The final straw! And of course we had the usual quips about the kangaroos, imitations of them hopping by either the guards or us and mirth right round the carriage!

The train wound its way behind the Sierra Nevada and huge, snowy peaks, wreathed in mist, towered over us. The country looked barren and windswept as we left the rich plains behind and we saw little human life. Now and again, we passed mule trains or a lonely rider coming from one isolated mountain place to another.

In Murcia, we found a reasonable place to stay, in spite of, rather than because of, the help of our many advisers. It boasted hot water and after our long and dusty journey, we did it justice.

The 70-kilometres ride next day to Alicante was a breeze and we arrived in good time to check the departure schedule for the boat to Majorca. All the way over, Mick had been saying: 'Don't worry, its Saturday tomorrow, boats always sail on Saturdays!' Sure enough, the once-a-week ferry did leave late next day.

We had time to explore Alicante, set on the broad, rich plains of the Levant. Much milder than the harsh interior, cotton, rice and dates flourished. One date plantation, we were told, had a million palms, many were old, established during Moorish occupation. The farmers seemed very hardworking and skilled but we felt they were cruel to their animals. There were no festive-looking mules with gay trappings here and the people seemed different. There were orange trees laden with fruit, lovely hills and the pretty blue of the Mediterranean with gaily-painted fishing boats in the port but I think we were all pining a little for Andalusia.

We had become connoisseurs of dates after a daily intake of dates and bananas sliced on bread as sustenance food and now, with both dripping

from the trees around us, we decided this was the mecca of all banana and date-eaters.

We washed everything we possessed that we were not wearing and hung it on our improvised clothes line, nylon stockings tied end to end and a packet of safety pins. It had been given to us by some Australians we had met at Bordeaux and was one of our more valuable possessions.

We had a pleasant day, riding out to the San Juan beach and then up to the Santa Barbara Castle, where we sat and watched the small boats moving about the harbour, until it was time for us to head down there. At 8.55 pm, having been held at bay by the *guardia* until then, we went aboard the *Rey Jaime II* due to sail at 9 pm.

It did not of course, so we had time to get comfortably settled for the night. Our fellow travellers were varied and many and included some gypsies. We discovered we were calling at Ibiza and also the trip we believed was to take seven or eight hours, would in fact take twenty!

Two nice National Service boys helped us with our luggage, purloined three deck chairs and set them up for us. Later they, and a man with a puppy, helped us into our sleeping bags, no mean feat in a ship that had begun to roll.

Every space on deck had a body on it, some men, much to our amusement, spreading out a hanky and lying down with their face on it. The sea got very rough and, about midnight, a wave came over us and our packs and shoes were washed down towards the scuppers. I managed to get out of my bag and rescue them, anchoring them securely before weaving my way back into my bag, now sopping wet.

I tied a scarf over my eyes because the moving scene above me of huge green seas one moment and a thousand stars the next became very unnerving. I slept well until some brutal, hearty sailors woke me up and we had to move as they needed our space to tie up at the wharf at Ibiza.

Our fellow passengers looked as if they had had a very rough night, especially the gypsies who were in the saloon. We went for a walk, had some bread and cheese and milk for breakfast and got back into our deckchairs where we stayed until we reached the Palma harbour at 4.30 pm. Why people go for cruises on the Mediterranean, I shall never know.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

MAJORCA

We felt like the gypsies looked, by the time we got our bikes off the boat, loaded up and set off in eager anticipation to meet Marg's friends. She assured us we would be warmly welcomed. It was by now November 13th and winter was approaching but our mood was relaxed and cheerful as we located the house on the waterfront and Marg went in to announce our arrival.

Subsequently, Mick and I passed no recriminations but we both felt it was a pity Marg had forgotten the letter she had had from her friends, saying they were returning to the States in September.

The Spanish lady who answered the door had some long-winded story to tell us. We did not understand but the message was clear. Deflated, dirty and tired, we were caught like flies in a spider's web and, unresisting, accepted the accommodation she offered at a grossly-inflated price. We were in no mood to argue.

After a meal, though, we gathered ourselves together and got our money's worth in the cleaning up line. We actually stayed at our benefactor's daughter's house and felt we would long be remembered. We not only washed ourselves but filled the washing lines and cleaned our bikes, to remove the dust and salt collected on the voyage.

The husband, who was in the Police Force, came in and was very helpful, putting up hangers and replacing a light globe, in spite of the lateness of the hour. The good thing about Spain was that we never felt we were keeping people up late. He had made a pretty speech when he first came in, telling us to make ourselves at home but faltered rather when he saw us. I was standing barefoot on his back step, cleaning my shoes, Marg was creating

havoc among the pigeons and rabbits and Mick, clad only in pyjamas, was hanging out her washing.

Next morning our landlady set us on our way with half a bun, a wine-glass of coffee and a banana each. We had hoped to find work in Palma but, after a fruitless wild goose chase which was great fun at least, we decided to cut our losses and ride round the island in the few days before the departure of the weekly boat to Valencia, our next part of call.

The weather was delightful and the country very pretty. We camped at night in a thick pine wood. We lit a fire and had a much relished billy of tea and a stew. Next day was hot and we sang as we rode around this idyllic jewel of the Mediterranean. We visited a museum at Artà filled with relics from the Roman occupation of the island. We sunbathed in the afternoon and got sunburned but it felt blissful.

Dark clouds began to gather as we shopped in a small village. We bought bread, cheese, milk, eggs, bananas and mandarins before we hurried out to look for a camp site. I was left behind in the quickly fallen dusk and fell off my bike, twisting the handlebars. The mandarins shot out of my basket, accompanied by the cork of the milk bottle. Miraculously the eggs, wrapped in my black sweater, survived.

There was a lot of traffic on the road and I was nearly run over by a mule cart before two Majorcan gentlemen, one with a torch, answered my bleats for help and straightened out the handlebars and I wavered off down the road. It was raining hard by the time I caught up with Marg and Mick, and the clay on the road was like a slippery dip. Marg was lamenting the fact that three of our six rolls had bounced out of her basket. The bananas had gone too but we only discovered that at supper time.

We plodded on blindly, as the heavens opened and the wind reached gale force. We were soon drenched, in spite of our capes, and were shivering and in misery. We crouched up against a wall for a while but as the storm showed no sign of abating, we set off again through the unrelenting gale and darkness.

A kilometre further on, we saw a black shape against the skyline and headed for it. We circled it and felt, rather than saw, a locked door and then an open space, which we huddled into. We were out of the wind and managed to light a candle and see we were in a small stable with a cart and a tethered mule in a stall. The presence of the mule gave the place a homely air and in no time we had settled in. We took care to put the candle in a niche in the wall in case we set fire to the straw underfoot.

We had a meagre supper, changed into pyjamas and Mick and I lay down in the straw near the mule. Marg had discovered a ladder leading to a loft and decided to sleep there but the awesome gap between the top of the

ladder and the entrance to the loft was more than Mick and I could face. There was not much room but we were soon curled up around the wagon wheels and to the sound of the mule crunching oats and giving contented little sighs, we fell fast asleep.

Next morning we discovered a pig, a dog, a cat and some chooks. It felt like a variation of the script for the *Musicians of Bremen*. The mule gave great, dry, hacking sobs as we left but we thought that might just be normal mule sounds and not perhaps desolation at our departure.

The rain had cleared up but the gale still blew. The road ran by the sea and great surges of surf were flung against the low sea wall, drenching us with spray. But we managed to find a sheltered spot and miraculously get a fire going. A hot cup of tea and the eggs gave us heart to face the day.

We reached a small settlement and set off to find the store to buy sardines for lunch. We were given an escort by the local *guardia* which amused us very much. There were no tinned sardines so we had to settle for salted fish.

We headed off for Formentor, one of the world's beauty spots favoured by the rich and famous. We had to climb a mountain and the wind whipped our breath away as we reached the crest and looked down on the green sea, ruffled by lacy surf pounding the white sandy beach far below.

Marg, ahead as usual, shot away down the serpentine road but Mick and I retreated to the shelter of some rocks and decided not to risk it. While we waited for Marg's return, we got a fire going and cooked some rice in the billy. Lack of water and space made it a messy glug but we added the fish heads and all and hoped for the best.

Marg eventually came back disgusted with us both, for lack of enterprise and as cooks. The fish still had their scales on as well as their heads and these were well-distributed through the rice. We sat picking and spitting as we had nothing else. The salt fish gave us a savage thirst and we had to get down the mountain before we could find water.

It was dusk and rain had begun to fall before we saw any habitation. A farmhouse was tucked away among trees so we went in to ask if we could sleep in their stables. The farmer and his wife let us sleep in the main room of the house, large, high-ceilinged and empty of any furniture – a double staircase at one end led to the family sleeping quarters and they took us into the kitchen to sit and warm up by a large open fire. We gathered the cooking was done here. The only light was from bowls of oil with wicks floating in them. They were made of wrought iron and hung on the walls casting off smoke. As neither party could understand the other, we soon retired to sleep on the cold, polished boards of our large bedroom.

The road back to Palma looked innocent enough on the map and we were confident we could easily ride the 70-odd kilometres, with time to spare, to catch the boat for Valencia, sailing at 5 pm. We wanted to see the famous rose window in the cathedral, one of the largest and most splendid in the world, before we left.

We had not banked on the first 20 kilometres being uphill and having to walk a lot of the way. The scenery was wild and spectacular, with densely forested mountains and rocky outcrops. Mick was having trouble keeping her pack on the carrier and swore it had the divil himself in it and other things, too. Later, she swore blind that, on one of her re-strapping stops, she had seen a huge panther-like beast lying on a rock in the sun. Sometime after this, I read an article which stated there was a possibility that some large cat-like animals did, in fact, live in these mountains. It was certainly a wild and isolated road.

We managed to buy bread and a tin of sardines for lunch but as we had made such slow progress decided to get further along the road before stopping. I paused to admire the view as the others shot away down the winding road and out of sight. It was then I discovered my flat back tyre! Despairing, I set out to walk. Round the first bend, I came on a little group of men by a mule cart. Obviously they had been startled by the sight of Mick and Marg, hurtling past them.

Communication in the Majorcan dialect was almost impossible for me and, as no one seemed to understand my pleas for help, I made off down the hill. The bike was snatched from my hands, the bundles flung up on the cart and the bike tied on the back. As it looked as if I was the next to go, I put my foot on the hub and vaulted into the cart beside the aged driver. I landed in between baskets, earthenware pitchers and hens with their legs tied.

One of the men, in half some sort of forestry uniform, sprang onto his bike and disappeared round the next bend. From his cries of '*Señoritas, bicyclettas*', I gathered he was off to bear the glad tidings to Margie and Mick. Marg was on her way back to find me when he met her and, from the ensuing pantomime, she thought both I and the bike had fallen over a cliff. He had to almost forcibly restrain her from coming to look for me and it was sometime before she and Mick understood some of what had happened.

In the meantime, the remaining two gentlemen, who wore red scarves pirate fashion round their heads went bush, the mule driver lifted his whip and whacked the mule. He continued to do this in a savage fashion throughout our three-hour trip to the village, ten kilometres away, where, the

brigands intimated, they would have the mechanic on standby. Fortunately, the mule wore an all-enveloping skin blanket. Was it from an unsuccessful fighting bull or the last earthly remains of his own mother? A mystery never to be unravelled. In any case, the whip had no effect whatsoever on the speed of its slow walk.

The road proved to be one of the steepest I have ever travelled, winding back on itself with only yards apart. At most bends, we met the brigands, travelling on foot the direct route. They turned their faces away to hide their mirth at such an ill-assorted trio. It dawned on me slowly that they had given up their seats in the cart for me and the bike. They were equally gallant, if slightly less amused, when they went to collect their coats from the cart and found our water bottle had leaked all over them.

Marg and Mick were waiting for us by a stream. Marg swore she did commiserate with me over my plight but I say her greeting was, 'Meggie, for God's sake, give us the key to the sardine tin. It's in your coat pocket and we are starving.' Like a duchess dispensing largesse, I tossed it to them as we passed. They told me later, when they felt it was safe, that as we passed out of sight, they rolled in the grass laughing.

We had all brakes on, the mule kept stumbling and the road unwound in a sickening fashion. Our conversation was limited because my new chum had never left Majorca and knew no *castellano*. After about an hour's solid effort, I gathered there was a *mechánico* at Selva which he would pass through on his way to the market at Inca and that all else being equal, I should be in Palma in time for the boat leaving at 7 pm.

I settled back and enjoyed the sunshine and the scenery – pines growing among the rocks and caves and fantastic mountains in the background. We passed through a village and everyone stood transfixed with shock, not a smile nor a greeting. The driver, I and the mule looked straight ahead.

After what seemed like a hundred years, measured in terms of anxiety, my friend raised his hand indicating '*El Cementario de Selva – la casa de todos*!' I was never more pleased to see a cemetery. The brigands were waiting outside the *mechánico*'s shop, looking as if they had been there all day and soon had the bike off the cart and into the *mechánico*'s hands. The mule driver refused payment, bowed gallantly, whipped up the mule and took off out of my life.

Marg and Mick arrived with a slab of bread and sardine for me. I sat on the step of the shop and wolfed it down. In no time, after goodbyes all round, we were away down the road to Palma. We had time to see the cathedral and admire the rose window. The choir was practising. The chanting

was beautiful and, from the back of the cathedral, the robed figures of the choristers, lit only by candlelight, looked like a freeze in some wonderful old painting.

We got tickets and went on board the *Ciudad de Ibiza*, a very classy ship. We stowed our bikes in the hold personally, got deck chairs and settled down under a covered deck to finally relax after the rigours of our trip around the Honeymoon Isle.

The trip back was marvellous compared to our previous one from Alicante. A lot of people slept on the hatch and I remember a cameo of an old man in a shepherd's smock lying asleep among coils of rope and wine casks. Some sailors danced for us in the early dawn and we met a young American headed for Gibraltar to catch a ship back to the States.

We reached Valencia at 7 am and had breakfast in the Botanical Gardens. We gave a roll and a banana to a girl who looked as if she had spent the night there. We felt deeply for those who were cold and hungry through no fault of their own. We knew something of how they must feel but at least we still had some money.

We stayed at a marvellous *pensione* recommended to us by some Australians we had met at the Bordeaux hostel, all those light years ago. It was cheap and the food was superb, even though meal times were like an auction with everyone shouting. It was a hurly burly sort of place but fun and no one except us ever seemed to go to bed.

We loved Valencia and wandered around all one day. We saw the Apostles door where a water tribunal, a legacy from the Moors, was held every Thursday to settle disputes.

Next morning, we caught the train to Madrid and chugged our way through those many tunnels and 250 miles, to arrive there at 8.30 pm.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

MADRID TO LONDON

We passed through the *meseta* on our way to Madrid, miles of gorges and bare brown hills. We wondered how the people, in the small towns we passed through, survived in such a barren land.

We were fascinated when a man and his wife got on the train carrying two roosters, with their legs tied together, and a large grey rabbit. The man tied the rabbit by its hind leg to the rear support, where it remained quite docile until Madrid. The man went to get some wine while we were stopped at a junction and his wife became apprehensive when he did not return after about ten minutes. She became hysterical and a picturesque-looking priest tried to pacify her until her spouse reappeared, in a rather jovial mood.

We had no sooner pulled out when the conductor came round and found that another man was on the wrong train. Although the train was gathering speed, the man grabbed his hat and suitcase and made a dash for the exit. The conductor and two *guardia* brought him down with a flying tackle. After a shouting match, he returned to his seat quite peaceably and in no time was cracking jokes with the *guardia*. What delighted us was that throughout the engagement he was sucking a huge lollipop.

We had found people often ran lotteries for bags of sweets on Spanish trains and this one was no exception. Beggars came through the carriages, too. I never saw anyone, however poor-looking, refuse to make a donation.

With all this activity around us, we were taken unawares when the train drew into Madrid and we had a mad scramble to collect our belongings and the bikes. We had the address of a *pensione* but became hopelessly entangled among heavy traffic in one of the main thoroughfares of the city just as dusk fell.

We were quite confused and when I approached a duty policeman to ask the way, my mental state at least did not improve. He was without doubt the most handsome man I have ever seen. He was well over six feet of magnificence and his tailored greatcoat, white helmet and gloves did nothing to detract from his looks. Smiling, to show perfect white teeth, he beckoned a replacement to take over point duty and obligingly took us to the *pensione*. We followed in a trance. The *pensione* was full but he took us to another one, where we were given a palatial room three flights up. Still smiling, he saluted and left us.

Madrid, because of its altitude and the season, it was now near the end of November, was cold beyond belief. In spite of my reduced circumstances, I splashed out on a pair of long, white bullfighter stockings and 1½ metres of white wincey with pink roses scattered over it. During siesta time, which now meant snuggling up under everything we could find, to keep us warm, I manufactured a pair of pantaloons reaching to below my knees.

To demonstrate their excellence, I put them on and rode my bike round the room, much to the delight of Mick and Marg. The room, as well as being large, sported a huge marble mantelpiece. It proved a useful place to boil our billy for tea, with the few cubes of canned meat we still had left. Augmented with pieces of cane from my basket, which was rapidly disintegrating, we enjoyed several tea parties. We felt real vandals desecrating such a noble edifice but it stood up to it well. We gave it a good clean before we left.

We spent a day-and-a-half in the Prado, partly because of the paintings and partly because it was centrally heated. Mick initiated us into 'Sellenger's Round' and I remember we danced in the Goya gallery while no attendants were around. Humming the tune quietly as we danced, we managed to keep our blood moving.

We wandered through the city shops, wishing we could afford to buy some of the lovely things on display. We knew we would be lucky to get out of Spain solvent. We did indulge ourselves in the good Madrid custom of having a drink of hot, very sweet milk and a pastry at 6 pm. Fortunately the meals at the *pensione* were good, just very far apart.

We did the two-hour train trip to Toledo where we spent an absorbing day, in spite of wet, cold weather. Built high on a hill and almost surrounded by walls and the raging Tagus River, it is the old Moorish capital and birthplace of El Greco. It is also, of course, a steel-manufacturing centre.

We each went our separate ways, following the narrow winding streets which twined around corners and courtyards and back on themselves. In spite of the inclement weather, it was not hard to imagine dark faced Moors

in flowing robes striding along under the overhanging balconies and to ponder on the intrigues and mysteries of the past.

I saw the house where El Greco once lived and several of his sombre works in the museum. His famous burial picture hangs in the church of Santo Tomé but by the time I got there, I felt I had enough of the grief of El Greco. I was glad to climb up to an old ruined mosque and, from the tower, I could look down on the savage, churning brown Tagus and the road encircling the city walls, where the Romans had raced their chariots during their occupation of the city.

I met my companions in the cathedral, smaller than the one in Seville although similar. We thought it was much nicer. The stained glass windows were exquisite and behind the high altar there was a 'rising cloud' of beautiful statuary. Lit from the windows, it looked ethereal. The only jarring note was a painting of Christ, 40 feet high and quite bizarre in such a setting.

I found my new pantaloons and stockings life-saving on their first official outing. I hardly took them off again until we reached Dieppe two weeks later.

We were to catch a late evening train to Barcelona next day and as it was wet I spent the morning in a cinema. I saw a Gary Cooper film, with captions in Spanish, and an extravaganza called *Andalusians' Nights*[23]. Full of bullfights, gypsies and intrigue, it was fun. We all went to bed in the afternoon to get some sleep before facing our marathon trip.

As it turned out, the journey was not too bad. We each had a slug of red wine which dulled our senses. We tried to organize our fellow travellers so we could each have maximum room but with little success. I slept on the floor but the heating which came from under the seats became so intense, I had to keep getting up and turning it down to cool off.

We loved Barcelona but it did not feel very Spanish. We went off separately to explore and each got lost many times among the winding little streets with a myriad of specialty shops. The port was huge and there was a feeling of excitement and enterprise about, which we found stimulating.

Even so it was good to get on our bicycles again and spin along the 85 kilometres to Gerona. We were missing out on the tourist coastline of the Costa Brava but our road took us through beautiful pine woods. The air was frosty by the time we reached our destination. We walked in the streets before dinner and saw some evidence of the Roman and Moorish occupations and the cathedral standing tall and beautiful by moonlight. We

23 Perhaps the 1938 film *Andalusische Nächte*, a German musical based on Bizet's opera Carmen.

had a delicious hot meal which was just as well as there was no hot water to wash in and the room had icy tiles on the floor.

I remember watching the patch of moonlight shining through the window onto the floor, before I went to sleep. This was our last night in Spain and as I watched the lighted patch creep across the tiles, a feeling of sadness swept over me. Pictures flashed into my mind like a reel of film unwinding. Donkeys, laden with baskets of hydrangeas tripping down mountainsides, castles, mosques, palm trees, wide brown plains, proud-looking Spaniards, lonely mule riders, the red walls of the Alhambra, trains and orange groves crowded in, until I fell asleep.

We wore everything we could put on next morning before facing the frosty ride to the border at La Jonquera. The morning was clear and sunny but there was snow on the mountain tops. We stopped to warm ourselves when we came to an old man raking and burning leaves and we could see ice in the river below us.

We made our last lunch in Spain a good one, with fresh rolls, sausage, melon and bananas, before we climbed the last stiff haul to the border post. There were endless formalities but we finally were reimbursed our 400 pesetas each, on our bike deposit, and crossed into France. Mick spent her last few pesetas on a block of chocolate which went some way to raising our spirits.

From the high point of the border, we looked across the Pyrenees and back into Spain. For me, at least, it had been a trip into a land of enchantment and wonder.

No one could have ridden down the winding road through the Pyrenees that afternoon and failed to feel a lifting of spirits and exhilaration. Sweeping down the winding road, past purple mountains, darkening as the sun sank behind them, I felt I was flying. The sky turned pink, faded to green. The moon came up and one star hung in the sky like a fairy lamp.

We swept into Perpignan in the dark and found the youth hostel, in a park among tall slender trunked trees. A fair was in progress, with twinkling coloured lights and gay music next door so, after a quick snack, we joined the merry crowd. French seemed much harder to understand but the feeling of delight in everything French was still there. It had a satisfying mellowness in the countryside, old buildings and the people.

We had a 120-kilometres stretch ahead of us next day to reach the walled city of Carcassonne. The nights were drawing in earlier each day as we headed north and it was dark when we arrived. As we rode across the plain, we could see the city on a hill, lit up like a fairy castle.

We crossed a drawbridge and between thick walls to enter. This was the original city and Europe's largest and best preserved medieval castle. It was built by the Romans and the Visigoths enlarged it in the fourth and fifth centuries. Charlemagne laid siege to it for five years. According to an anecdote, a certain Dame Carcas broke the siege by ringing an alarm bell and throwing a pig, stuffed with wheat, almost the last supplies of the city, over the battlement. Charlemagne decided if they could squander food like that, they must still have plenty and lifted the siege. The town became Carcas-sonne (bell) after the Dame.

Restoration began in 1884 but it seemed to us that it still had a long way to go as the youth hostel was almost a ruin. It had a great sense of history but after our long ride that did not keep us awake. We walked round the walls next morning and could see wide green plains and pine woods stretching out towards the snow-capped Pyrenees on the horizon.

The country along the road to Toulouse did not look very promising at first, being stony and rough. Unfortunately, our reception at the youth hostel was equally cold. We were told later, by four French students who appeared to be living there permanently and did as they pleased, that the warden hated Australians. They said some Australian girls who had been there earlier had not liked being ordered round and were cheeky to him.

This was unfortunate for us, as we had planned a stopover and clean-up. He followed us around nagging us about everything but mainly what he considered our extravagant use of gas. We eventually offered to pay more but he refused.

He took a particular dislike to me and followed me around especially saying, 'Margaret should do this, that or the other.' In fact, we out-manoeuvred him because not only did we heat water to wash ourselves, hair and clothes, but managed to cook a good meal and make a batch of jam from some damsons we had picked in the hedges on the ride.

At one stage he locked Margie in the dormitory and harangued Mick and me while we were in the kitchen. Margie had to climb out of the window. When I had our hostel cards safely in my hand, I felt free to give him some cheek. I asked him if he was a woman-hater but he said he loved '*tout le monde*'. I told him I thought he had been pretty foul to us, so he qualified his statement by saying he 'loved everyone who was correct'. Marg had been muttering insults to him in English and he started shouting at me. 'What is she saying?' I ignored him, but Mick called out,

'She says she has a headache,' as we rode away.

We were soon out among rolling hills which were quite stiff to cycle up. The trees were bare and men were raking up the leaves and burning them. Aromatic smoke, like lilac gauze, drifted up into the bare branches.

Farmers were turning the rich dark soil, following ploughs pulled by big, slow-moving oxen. We rode through avenues of leafless trees, horizons were hazy with mist and it seemed as if the land itself was heavy, wanting to settle into a deep winter sleep. White sheep were scattered over the fields and the water in the streams and ponds seemed like grey mirrors reflecting the sky above.

A lot of youth hostels had closed for winter so we had several long hauls to reach ones that were open. It was too cold to linger over lunch these days and we ate hastily by the roadside, hopping from one leg to the other. Frost formed on our hair when we cycled up and down the hilly road.

We did 128 kilometres one day, the last 30 or so in moonlight, without lights of course. We came down out of steep hills into a valley wreathed in trailers of mist and very beautiful. We were often late reaching our destination for the night and then we had to track down the key, light the fire and cook our meal. If we had energy left, we heated water for a lick and a promise and a chance to soak our frozen feet.

We were usually the only people in the hostels and most of them were pretty rough. One had no light but we still had the stub of our candle from Majorca and by its meagre light, tried to light the stove. It was covered with soot and grease. The warden was charming but vague. He went to borrow a saw for us to cut wood but came in, saw the candle and went away again saying, 'Oh! You have light!' We managed to boil some eggs by 9.30 pm.

Another hostel was just a hut in the woods. Marg and Mick told me later that, while I was cooking the meal, they removed a dead rat from the dormitory. Nonetheless, I thought it a very romantic spot, as on the way in we passed a small encampment of gypsies. They were huddled around the glowing coals of a fire and one was strumming a haunting melody on a guitar.

We planned to have a day stopover at Tours, where we hoped to get mail. It was shrouded in thick white fog when we arrived but our delight knew no bounds when we found the youth hostel was a picture-book *chateau* and we had it to ourselves. Even the fact that we had to sleep on camp stretchers, without mattresses, did not dim our delight. We rapidly turned the common room into a Chinese laundry which we felt was rather a desecration but necessary to get our clothes dry.

We spent some time in the cathedral at Chartres just sitting and looking at the stained glass windows and the rays of the sun coming through them

making rainbows among the pews. It was quite early on a Monday morning and I thought about all the women dutifully washing and here was I, in this wonderful place; what a wonderful Monday!

We were enveloped in fog nearly all the way to Dieppe. Rouen was memorable for its ruins and the cobbled streets which loosened all our nuts again.

In Louviers, I was apprehended by a *gendarme* for riding without lights.

'*Mlle, pas de lumières*,' I heard. I was caught like a rabbit in a trap.

I hung my head demurely telling '*Elle a éclaté, en Espagne*'. (It broke, in Spain.) He took in my Daniel Boone appearance, bedraggled gear, dirty white stockings concertinaed round my ankles and his tone softened. He advised me to walk which I did, until I rounded the next bend.

Dieppe looked pretty, all lit up, as we rode in. As a gesture, as we left the youth hostel, I tossed my, by now grey, pantaloons in the bin.

We crossed to England in the afternoon, a rough crossing during which Mick and I suffered greatly. The feeling of anti-climax lay heavily upon us as we arrived and spent our last night together at the Newhaven youth hostel. Mick estimated we had cycled 507 miles (1,288 kms) from Barcelona in fourteen days, and about 3,000 kilometres in all.

After we said our fond farewells next morning, I headed back to the long-suffering Crabbes. I had not gone far before my back tyre shredded completely. It was a weekend but fortunately I found a bicycle shop open and even more fortunate because I had received a cheque when I picked up mail at Tours, from the *West Australian* for an article I had sent them about the Dublin Horse Show, and was able to pay for the new one.

It was strange to be riding on the left side of the road and hearing English spoken. To console myself, I finished off the left-over wine I carried and hid the bottle under a bush in someone's garden. So, I was in quite a convivial mood when I arrived at my destination to discover a cocktail party of select and elegant guests in progress.

My kind hosts, if startled, did not show it, gave me a glass of sherry and introduced me before I headed upstairs to their bathroom!

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

LONDON AND ST JAMES'S HOSPITAL

Margie and I needed to find work urgently to remain solvent. In spite of being almost Christmas time, I was lucky to get a three-month locum at St James's Hospital in Balham. Margie took the only other vacancy in London at that stage and Mick had no trouble finding a physiotherapy position. Before we went our separate ways, we had a night out to see *Salad Days* which was having a long run in London.

The Crabbe's had very kindly asked me to stay with them for Christmas and in answer to an advertisement in Australia House, I arranged to join eight Victorian girls in a large flat at 50 Wynnstay Gardens, Kensington, in the New Year. I was to take the place of one of them going to Norway for a month. It was not until I moved in that I discovered she was not leaving for a month, so during that time I slept on a mattress on the floor of her room.

Just before Christmas, Judith Crabbe and I went into nearby woods to pick greenery and holly to 'deck the halls'. We went to midnight service on Christmas Eve and came out to snow falling gently and a hushed Christmas morn. We had a lovely traditional day and following their family custom, we went to the pantomime on Boxing Day.

In the meantime, I had started at St James', riding my bicycle and parking it in what had been stables at the back. The buildings were grim and forbidding. I was to work in the Out-Patients' Department, a recently remodelled complex which, I was told, was the most modern in Europe. With cherry-red curtains and a silver and blue colour scheme, it would not have been out of place in an Ideal Homes Exhibition but I had still to share

a small office with another almoner. Fortunately, she was a cheerful, friendly girl from Dublin.

The almoners worked in clinics on specialist teams, referred to as Mr or Dr so and so's firm. My Dublin colleague and I were assigned to a surgical firm headed by Mr Norman Tanner, renowned for his skill in abdominal surgery. People flew in from, or flew him out, all over the world for his treatment. One day I saw an Arab Sheik, and his retinue, walking down the corridor for a consultation.

We were expected to see every patient attending on his clinic days and write up a potted social history before they were ushered into his presence. He went through his patients, like the proverbial dose of salts, and I could never keep up. As we had no further contact with the patients, I could not see why a clerk could not have taken down the basic information just as well.

We had one white uniform a week. They were horrible, button-up coats with a belt and by mid-week, mine looked as if I had been scrubbing floors in it. In the laundry room below, I discovered a rack of pristine starched doctors' coats so I raided them regularly.

My different attire was never remarked on and on the one occasion I was ushered into 'the Presence', I had a vicarious pleasure in the fact that I was wearing one of his white coats.

I have little memory of my work with patients, except for one unhappy event in the one ward I visited. The sister in the ward was very severe and, I felt, reluctant to accept me. Tuesday mornings were consultant's round mornings and, normally, I kept out of the way until the coast was clear. One morning, I had to see a patient urgently to complete some forms and, although it was nearly round time, I was allowed to go in, with an admonition to be quick. The ward was immaculate and sister herself, from her frilly cap, tied under her chin, her uniform, starched cuffs, belt and white pinny over her blue dress, to her polished shoes, looked as if she had come out of a band box.

I was a pack of nerves and was just completing the paper-work when she came up quietly behind me. I got such fright. I jumped off the chair and swinging round knocked a tumbler full of lemon squash all over her front. Death, where is thy sting? I thought. The glass was smashed, she was dripping, the floor awash. Amazingly, not only did it break the glass but the ice as well. She could not have been kinder and, from that moment on, became a different person to me. I used to wonder if I tipped squash over all these severe sisters, would they mellow too?

St James' was a post graduate school and several Australian doctors were there. In 1978, when I was working at the hospital in Narrogin, Arthur Nurick arrived to take up a post there and I discovered that he had worked at St James's with Mr Tanner at the same time as I had. He and his wife, Jane, became good friends.

There were quite a number of Irish on the staff and one, the Registrar on the Ear, Nose and Throat firm, came into our office every day to have a yarn. It was no surprise to me that he later married my work-mate. I became good friends with another young Irish almoner who had a lovely sense of humour, although I was rather shocked by her disorganized personal life. She could not live within her means and had to regularly pawn her watch, for reclamation when we got our salaries. I'd never met anyone who used a pawnbroker.

I had another revealing experience when one of the other girls asked me to the evening meal at a Settlement House in the East End, where she lived. She not only lived there but helped with the management and the young people in the area who used it as a drop-in centre. It was very drab, the meeting rooms unpainted and bare, with little in the way of entertainment, only a few tattered magazines and a table tennis set. I met the young people who came in during the evening and they seemed very comfortable in their relationship with the staff and at home with the environment, in spite of it looking so depressing. I certainly admired my friend for living there and giving up her spare time.

Life at the flat was very pleasant as we all got on very well. We cooked individually but every Saturday had a midday roast dinner together. There was always someone for company to visit places of interest, like galleries, museums or the theatre, and Changing the Guard. Two of us regularly went to the Sunday Proms and sat in 'the gods' on sheets of newspaper, among students, teddy boys and other young people from around the world. I loved the proms and, with everyone at the end singing 'Jerusalem' or 'Rule Britannia' followed by the 'National Anthem', came home glowing with patriotic zeal. Whenever I could afford to, I went to see Margot Fonteyn dance at the Royal Ballet, squinting down at the stage from 'the gods', entranced.

I rode round London on my bike, dodging buses, taxis and cars in the narrow streets. I had to give it up after I saw a boy nearly go under a bus, when his tyres slipped on the icy road, and I nearly hit a pedestrian when I was riding home from work in the dark one evening.

Fred Moore and the Bridge of Earn engineer, John Duncan, drove down one weekend and took me to Twickenham to see Wales play England. They,

and various other of our friends from time to time, camped on the floor before driving back to Scotland. Other Australians, passing through, left luggage at the flat while they toured, so life was never dull.

The flat had a very large drawing room, its past elegance somewhat tarnished. We had to keep an armchair, somewhat incongruously placed, in the centre of the room to conceal the large hole in the carpet. However, there were seven bedrooms and, the best of all, it had two bathrooms, a constant supply of hot water and central heating.

The flat was on the top of one of four, identical blocks of flats just off Kensington High Street. Coming home, late one night, I mistakenly went into the wrong block. After struggling to get my key into the lock, I looked round the landing and realized I was on unfamiliar ground and fled in haste.

Most of my flat mates had temporary jobs in offices and stores. Two nurses, who were friends, shared the one room with a double bed. One had to work to survive and bravely went out relief night-nursing but the other, who had a rich father who sent her money, had no need, nor could face the challenge. She was house mother, collecting our rent and paying bills which were convenient for us. In between, she lay in a hot bath reading.

When my room-mate returned from holiday, I was offered the spare side of the double bed which I happily agreed to, vacating it in time for the shift worker to climb in. As a result we joked our side never got cold. On the rare nights the worker-bee was home, I reverted to the floor.

Near the end of my locum, I applied for a job at the Bingley, Keighley, Skipton and Settle group of hospitals in Yorkshire and travelled north to Keighley for an interview. First impressions when I got off the train were not promising. The cold was chilling, smoke from mill chimneys rose to a leaden sky and the buildings looked dark and forbidding against blindingly white banks of snow. The hospital looked equally cheerless, being the old poor house originally.

Everything changed when I was welcomed warmly into the almoners' office, pulsating with heat from a blazing coal fire. Audrey, the almoner, Mrs Howgate, the attractive middle-aged secretary, and I were soon huddled up by the fire, with our feet on the fender, making toast and drinking cups of strong tea. I decided on the spot that I liked Yorkshire.

My interview on this occasion was formal. I met the members of the staffing committee, chaired by Mrs Mitchell, which was very satisfactory. It was arranged that I should start as soon as my locum at St James's was completed. A big advantage was that I could live in at the nurses' home, use the sisters' sitting room and have meals included in my board. In that climate, having central heating and plenty of hot water, was a big draw card.

Not only was I moving on from Wynnstay Gardens but the lease was running out and everyone else was moving out, too. We decided to have a farewell party which was a great success, except for the lady in the flat below being upset. We had invited her to come as we knew it would be rowdy but she refused. A hundred guests came and the noise could be heard in the High Street.

We were to leave at Easter and, as a final farewell, we decided to have a little private pancake party. We sat round talking and drinking coffee until the early hours. About 3 am on Shrove Tuesday night, two of us decided to catch a bus to Covent Garden market. No buses came but two burly policemen who accosted us, wanting to know what we were doing walking along at that hour, stopped a truck coming along the road and hoisted us into the back. We landed on cabbages, from the West Country our driver told us, when we clambered out and thanked him.

It was cold and misty and in the mellow lamp lights, we wandered around among stalls of flowers, tulips from Holland, daffodils from the Scilly Isles, violets, roses, rosy apples, oranges and vegetables from Europe and the British Isles. We fought our way to a bar for hot coffee among a pack of men, caps on their heads and speaking a variety of languages.

We fell into our beds when we reached the flat and slept the sleep of the just.

It was ironic that when the lady from the flat below knocked on the door, sobbing, saying she would have to move because all night it was 'feet going pitter patter, pitter patter' and she was going mad, the only person awake to open the door was the nurse just in from night duty, the only one of us not at the party! She apologized and reassured her saying we were leaving. I like to think we gave her flowers but I cannot remember.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

BINGLEY, KEIGHLEY, SKIPTON AND SETTLE

Keighley, grim and overhung by smog from the mills, was not a picturesque town. Likewise, the Victoria Hospital was old and gloomy.

As there was no office space in the administration block, I was relegated to a spare bedroom in the resident doctors' quarters, upstairs. Several of them were Sikhs and, on sunny days, I could see them through my window on the balcony outside, drying their long dark locks and colourful turbans. Otherwise I was completely cut off, as none of my patients could climb the stairs to reach me. I had to interview them where I could.

There was not a great deal for me to do so I spent a lot of time in Audrey's office and talking to Mrs Howgate. Her family had owned a worsted mill and she was mine of information about the different skills needed to produce the finished products and the relationship between particular job categories and the operator's place on the social scale.

As the mills were the main employers in the town, some of the workers were admitted to hospital, a result of accidents or for other reasons. Mrs Howgate seemed to know them all, including their background for two generations.

Included in my duties was a half-day service, once a fortnight, at Bingley and Skipton Cottage Hospitals respectively. Both were used by general practitioners only and I needed their referrals before I could see their patients. I met several who were pleasant enough, apart from one who was frankly hostile to 'do-gooders', but they never referred anyone, so I sat and wrote letters or read. Several of the sisters would have liked me to see their patients but their hands were tied.

Bingley was a dark, smoggy little town as it had some industries. Its saving grace was a sweetie shop which looked like an illustration from a child's storybook and where, on each visit, I bought a pink sugar-mouse as consolation.

Skipton, on the other hand, was beautiful, almost medieval, with mellow old buildings, white swans and ducks on the mill pond and a fairy-tale castle at the top of the High Street. Irish labourers still came from 'over the water' for the harvest and stood in the market square while the farmers walked among them, selecting their labour force with a slap on the shoulder. Unhappily, however, no one ever tapped me on the shoulder as I sat in lonely state in my temporary office.

Once a month, Audrey purloined the little hospital van and we drove to see patients at the 20-bed nursing home at Settle. The countryside was beautiful and I always enjoyed those days, even though we achieved nothing beyond brightening the life of the matron, who was very isolated and lonely.

On arrival we were ushered into her sanctum for morning tea with hot scones, jam and cream. A hiatus of roughly an hour occurred, when I might manage an interview or two with patients, before a message came saying I was wanted in matron's office. This was for pre-luncheon sherry, a three-course meal and a gossip, as the patients were resting. Then afternoon tea and fond farewells before we set off for home.

Our purpose was to get patients home but, as most of them had only come in as a last ditch solution anyway, it was a lost cause. Space for a private conversation was limited and I remember one interview with a very deaf old lady when she was pushed into a small bathroom in a wheel chair and I had to perch on the edge of the bath. With my shouting and accent and her deafness, it's not surprising no satisfactory solution was reached.

All was not lost, as the matron enjoyed our company and, on the way home, we stopped to pick primroses and collect wood for Audrey, who lived with a friend in a cottage in a nearby village. When I complained about the lack of work to Audrey, she told me not to worry about it, she never did if she was not busy. The infirmary was such an old depressing place it looked a fitting backdrop for a Dickens film.

I remember coming back from one of our trips to Settle late on a cold grey snowy afternoon and being greeted by an elderly gentleman wearing only a trilby (a hospital gown) swinging his catheter. He was barefoot standing on the front steps.

The catering officer, Izzie Ross, was a big-hearted Glaswegian who mothered me and always kept meals for me, if I was late. When she found I had a passion for bilberry pie, it appeared on the menu twice a week and,

if I had been out in the evening, I often found a large slice placed on my dressing table with half a tumbler full of neat whisky, which Izzie considered one of life's little niceties, beside it.

Sharing the sisters' sitting room was interesting, watching various power plays, such as getting the best chair, choosing the TV programme and reading the daily paper first, played out. They were quite friendly towards me and, in fact, the gruffest of them all became a good friend, especially after I cut her hair for her. We corresponded after I left and when I came home, for two or three years.

Their recapping of their day's work was rather tedious, especially when the theatre sister held forth on the day's operations, not sparing the gory details.

The plump little maternity nurse was a cricket addict and we went to Leeds together to see Richie Benaud's team slaughtered in an Ashes test. She was asked to judge the baby show at a nearby village fair and asked me to do the clerking for her. There were about thirty babies whom she judged methodically, on a ten-point scale, weight for age, muscle tone, alertness and so on, rather like a farmer at a stock sale. We had been invited to have high tea of ham and salad in the refreshment tent and we soon realized, from the dirty looks directed our way, that the relatives of the defeated babies were having dark thoughts about us. We were glad to make our escape.

The sisters put on a party one weekend and invited the doctors. It was a very noisy and riotous affair that went on until 4 am, so they could kick up their heels given the opportunity.

There were tennis courts at the hospital but no one used them, so when several nurses told me they played, I went to the secretary and asked if the nets could be put up and the courts re-lined. I said if he got me some lime and an old teapot, I'd do the lining. He said he would see to it and as I thanked him and was leaving his office, I remarked that I did not know whose job to make the request. 'And you don't care a darn, do you?' he said. 'You're all the same you Aussies!' To give him his due, he set the groundsman to work within an hour and we played a lot on fine, long evenings after work.

The hospital was situated on the edge of the town and was very close to the moors. I loved to ramble across them, leaving all habitation behind, and walk through the heather and furze, with only the cry of curlews or lark song for company. Some miles away, in a lonely place, lay the ruins of an old house and I was told it was the inspiration for *Wuthering Heights*. Whether that was true or not, I do not know, but I was there once when dark storm

clouds rolled in, low and threatening, and a gale blew-up. It was not hard to imagine cries of 'Cathy, Cathy' echoing through the storm.

At weekends, I explored on my bike and youth hostelled to the lonely reaches of Wharfedale, to Ilkley, Otley and across to Harrogate, where we sometimes referred patients for treatment at the spas. There were a lot of American tourists there and the shops were full of luxury goods to tempt them. Haworth was nearby, the Parsonage, the Black Bull where Branwell Brontë led his dissipated life, and the little High Street all looked as if they had been frozen in time.

Quite out of the blue, one day, I had a call from Mrs Mitchell, the chairperson of the committee who interviewed me for the job, asking if I would like to go pot-holing the next weekend. I had no idea what she was talking about but it sounded a bit like ferretting which I had enjoyed the one time I had done it, so I said yes. She said we would go to Gaping Ghyll which did not mean anything either. When I told Audrey and Mrs Howgate, they gasped and then told me Gaping Ghyll was the largest underground cave in the British Isles and, except for a very dangerous route through tunnels, it could only be entered by being dropped in on a bosun's chair

Mrs Mitchell duly picked me up and took me home to meet her husband, a small man, the editor of the local paper, the *Craven Herald*. He was very nice but he was suffering very badly from a gastric ulcer, which was giving him gyp, a candidate for Mr Tanner at St James's and his magic scalpel if ever there was one. It was thought then, that gastric ulcers were caused by stress and psychological factors and surgery, the best treatment.

Before we left the house, my mentor filled our pockets with little essence bottles, containing brandy, sherry and whisky to keep out the cold!

We drove thirty odd miles to Clapham and walked another two or so to reach Gaping Ghyll, up Ingleborough Hill on rough stony ground. A group of about thirty people were gathered round a generator and winch beside a sinister hole in the ground, roughly twenty feet across.

My respect for the organizers and importance of the event grew when I heard it was only set up once in two years, because of the physical difficulty of carrying the heavy equipment from the car park. The gear was set up and people began the descent wrapped in a raincoat as, to reach the bottom of the 365 foot drop, the chair passed through a waterfall. It took two minutes for the chair to reach the bottom, longer to come up, so it was a lengthy process getting us all into the cave.

Apart from a glimmer of light, from the small hole in the roof, it was pitch black. The water, from the deluge we had passed through, fell onto a sandy bank and disappeared to an unknown source. By torchlight, we could

see the immensity of the cave. I was told it was 260 yards long, 120 feet high, large enough to fit York Minister in.

We explored some of the tunnels leading off from the sides, crawling through several on our hands and knees in primeval mud. I understood why Mrs M had told me to wear old clothes. In one such tunnel, our guide brought us to an abrupt halt before a deep hole. We took turns peering over the edge, waiting to hear the sound of the pebbles we dropped hit the bottom, far below.

It was terrifying but a nice young man held my hand and after we had all shuffled out backwards and were talking, he told me he was a Knight of the Round Table and said that I must come to the Knights next Pie and Pea meeting to talk to them about Australia. I was hard put not to burst out laughing but I found out that the Knights were like Apexians, a group of young business and professional men, banded together for fellowship and to do good works.

During the day, and while waiting for my turn for the lift out in the chair, I was glad of my little nips from the essence bottles, in spite of the even temperature of 45°F.

Three cavers had joined us, having entered through the very dangerous route, rarely used even by experienced people. They were triumphant but very glad to come up in the chair with us rather than retrace their tortuous tracks.

True to his word, I was invited to give a talk about Australia to the Knights of the Round Table. I was picked up one evening by an elegant, tweedy young man, driving a luxurious Humber Hawk. His family owned a cotton mill. I found out later that Knights came from all walks of life.

The meeting was at Barnoldswick in Lancashire. I spoke for about three quarters of an hour on the speech I had spent some time preparing but was not sure what to think when, in his vote of thanks, the chairman said he was so fascinated by my accent that he would have been just as happy if I had spoken about the working conditions of the mill girls in Lancashire! It never ceased to surprise me when people mentioned my accent but Australians were few and far between in the provinces and after the grey days of the war and where, in Yorkshire at least, it rained almost every day, I suppose Australia did seem the Promised Land.

After our pies in a bed of mushy peas, a traditional supper, I was driven home. But not before I was asked if I would open the Knights' Charity Fund Raising Fashion Show at a future date. Unfortunately, I was leaving before it was to take place so had to decline gracefully.

Several mills in the area were owned by Quaker families and sometimes the wives came to discuss welfare matters with us. Obviously very wealthy, but completely unassuming, they did a lot of philanthropic work in a down-to-earth practical manner. They had purchased an old home in North Yorkshire called Spofforth Hall, as a holiday-cum-training centre for deprived families with multiple problems and financed all running costs and staffing. Audrey and I visited it one day, were very impressed with the caring staff and obvious happiness of the families staying there. Mothers and children stayed for several weeks with fathers staying for weekends. While the children went to school, the mothers were taught household and financial skills, which in some were lacking completely. The countryside was beautiful and for the worn-out, overburdened mother, it must have seemed like paradise, and it gave them a chance to make a new start.

I went to York when Fred stopped over for a day, on his way to a conference in London, and we explored the city, fascinated by its history. At least I found it absorbing.

Uncle Jack came through on his way to cattle sales in Newcastle and insisted I go with him and his cattle-buying mates. Betty was to have come but was ill, so I went by myself. The sales were interesting, more for the people, than the beasts. I met Uncle Jack's best friend and associate, also called John Best but not related. The family at Acton had told me he was the nephew of a Dublin judge but had been run out of Eire for cattle stealing! He drove us to an abattoir and to a farm in Sunderland, where we had a meal and there were more talks about the meat trade. The trip was hardly light entertainment but I enjoyed listening to the brogue and turn of phrases. We drove over to Whitby, grey, windswept and bleak, before we returned. Even if I knew then, I certainly did not recall that it was not far from Captain Cook's birthplace.

Arriving at Skipton Hospital one day, I was met by an excited sister saying an Australian lady had been admitted and I must see her. She took me into the room and introduced me to Mrs McKinnon, rather, I felt like the rabbit being produced out of his hat by a conjuror! Mrs McKinnon and her husband, who soon became known as Pop, were a retired couple from Sydney, come to Europe for the grand tour. She, poor lady, looked very fragile and exhausted and having reached Skipton felt she could travel no further. She had not been well before they left home but Pop wanted to take her on this trip because all their friends had been going. It had turned out a nightmare for her and a great disappointment for him. They had one daughter and I was immediately adopted as her surrogate. Whenever possible, I visited her and, when she was moved to Leeds, spent a weekend at the

hospital before she was moved to London and eventually returned home. Unhappily, she died two years later but I saw Pop and their daughter after I returned to Australia and visited Sydney.

Pop McKinnon wrote effusively to my mother:

> No! Not Strangers! We feel we know you so well, for recently my wife and I had the good fortune to meet your lovely daughter in dreary Yorkshire. The pleasure and joy of our meeting her was infinitely the greater by reason of the unhappy circumstances which brought her to our side when we both needed that inherent solace and companionship which is so much a part of the true Australian character.
>
> I know that Meg has told you about us but I felt that I should like to write to you as her mother, and let you know what a wonderful comfort she has been to Mrs McKinnon during her prolonged stayed in both the hospital at Skipton and here again at Leeds. In so doing, she has also been a tower of strength to me personally for it is no easy task for one, so alone, to keep up a patient's spirits when 'so much' pain has to be endured. But in this, Meg was a typical girl of the Golden West. By her happy and radiant expression, infectious smile and encouraging chatter, she soon had Mrs McK joining in with a humorous reminiscence which helped her through periods when she felt so lonely and so far from home and her very own daughter, wee grandson and son-in-law, of whom we both are mighty proud.
>
> To know Meg is to love her. We both love her for her cheery disposition, complete lack of affectation, her ingrained gentleness and thoughtfulness, as well as the unforgettable comfort she has been to both of us in the unfortunate plight in which she found us nearly five weeks ago. She's a dinkum Aussie and we like to think of her as another treasured daughter. She will always be most welcome in our Sydney home.
>
> I am happy to say that though progress is slow, Mrs McK is now on the mend and if she can continue this in convalescence, we will soon have her out of hospital.
>
> With our very kindest regards and many thanks for having such a lovely daughter.

One sunny Saturday, Mrs Howgate took Audrey and me for a picnic in the bluebell woods, quite close to Keighley, where she used to play as a child.

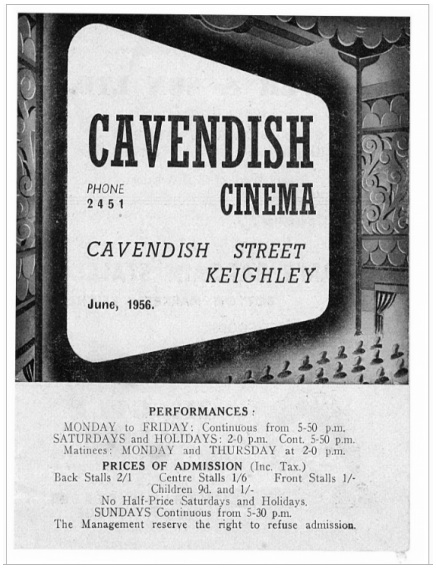
A hazy, blue carpet stretched beneath the trees as far as the eye could see. It was a lovely day, very peaceful and calm, only birdsong to break the silence.

I caught a bus to Bolton Abbey on another sunny Saturday and watched sheep dog trials. Swathes of bluebells grew beneath the trees and near the stately, old, ruined monastery.

I remember only two doctors in Keighley, one was Mr Ling, a tall, authoritative figure, who put the fear of God into me when I asked him to sign a certificate for a patient. I remember him especially because Mrs Howgate worshipped him, saying how kind and compassionate he had been when her husband was dying. The other was the psychiatrist at the mental hospital. I never met him but we had a number of telephone conversations. He told me he had been a medical missionary in India for ten years and I remember because he said he would miss me when I left!

I did very little work in Yorkshire but it was a wonderful experience to live there and get to know the people, as well to see the magnificent countryside. I felt very much at home in Yorkshire and was sad my locum had finished. But the gypsy blood was stirring and I knew the time had come to move on.

Extracts from the June 1956 programme for Keighley's cinema provide a glimpse of the time:





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William Holden *and* Nancy Olson
in
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Sunday, June 24th

Mitzi Gaynor *and* Scott Brady
in
BLOODHOUNDS OF BROADWAY Ⓐ

Cosy

Sunday, June 3rd

Burt Lancaster *and* Virginia Mayo
in
SOUTH SEA WOMAN Ⓐ

Sunday, June 10th

Cornel Wilde - Steve Cochran
and Phyllis Thaxter *in*
OPERATION SECRET Ⓤ

Sunday, June 17th

Stephen McNally *and* Alexis Smith
in
WYOMING TRAIL Ⓤ
(Technicolor)
also Dirk Bogarde *and* Mai Zetterling
in **BLACKMAILED Ⓐ**
(Shown once only)

Sunday, June 24th

Paul Douglas *and* Barbara Bel Geddes
in
FOURTEEN HOURS Ⓐ
(Will set the whole town talking)

DEREK REDMAN

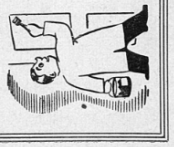
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CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

EDINBURGH

Deciding I wanted to return to Scotland, I applied for a job advertised at the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary and was duly appointed. Accommodation for me had been arranged with a Mrs McGregor at 28 Craigmillar Park, a pleasant part of the city not far from the hospital.

She proved to be a warm-hearted Glaswegian, unfortunately in reduced circumstances. She took in mainly students to supplement her allowance and already had in residence a tall, blonde Californian, Christine, who was studying English at the university. Christine and I became good friends and the arrangement worked well. She was 19. Her father, OJ, was a cardiologist. Her mother died when Christine was a baby. She had two older sisters. Her parents were originally Swedish and OJ, as she referred to him, must have had a difficult time raising three daughters in an American society. We did our own cooking but managed to share the kitchen amicably, a good test for our relationship. We lived in the top apartment of a gracious old house, while the elderly owner lived below.

The Royal Infirmary, now sadly gone, was a wonderful, old, grey building with turrets on each corner giving it a castle-like appearance. The actual castle lay a short distance away and overlooked Princes Street below. It was within the precincts of the Royal Mile.

There were six almoners working at the hospital, one being the senior who rarely emerged from her office and whose only duty, apart from theoretically supervising us, was to arrange delivery of orthopaedic shoes for patients when they were requested. I shared a large office with a very pretty Edinburgh girl, Audrey Boyle, who became a lifetime friend. Within the first half hour, I discovered that not only had she been to Australia and worked for six months at a Melbourne hospital but was a close friend of

the Baldwin family, my mother's cousins! Needless to say, we spent a lot of time talking. I sat at a small rickety table on a kitchen chair and was given responsibility for eye, orthopaedic and neuro-surgery cases. Locums were nearly always given orthopaedics, I had discovered, because they were regarded generally as not so rewarding as medical cases. I enjoyed the work because it covered a lot of accidents, a crisis time for families, and sometimes long periods of hospitalization for the patient and possibly employment and lifestyle changes. I learnt a lot about eye diseases as well. At that time, a cataract operation meant the patient had to lie flat on their back with their head sand-bagged each side to prevent movement and dislodgement of the lens for ten days.

Although I did not get many referrals from Professor Dobbs, the neuro-surgeon, I used every excuse to visit his office to read his case notes. This was partly because his office was in one of the turrets, partly because his work was so delicate and skilful and his recording of operations so beautifully worded (described to me once as an exciting novel) that I loved to read them and largely because it was such a special place. His secretary was charming and the professor kept his tabby cat there. I have the happiest memories of sitting in an easy-chair with sun coming through the big windows the cat purring on my knee while I read the notes or talked to the secretary.

Just to walk along the cold, grey passages and through the wards was exciting, thinking of all the famous medical practitioners who had worked in the hospital. Portraits of many of them, including two of my ancestors, a Leishman and a McLeod among them, hung on the wall beside a winding staircase leading to the first floor. Even in my small way, I felt very privileged to walk in their footsteps.

As well as medical students, there was a unit for post graduates training for their FRCS qualification, attached from the university. A lot were from the 'dominions', especially from India and Pakistan. Audrey regularly talked to them about social work. Usually I went with her or filled in, while she was on leave.

Our hours seemed strange to me. We started at 9.30 am, had an hour-and-a-half for lunch, finishing at 5.30 pm. We also worked on Saturday mornings, with one in four free. Nothing ever happened on Saturdays and, as far as I could see, all it did was spoil our weekends.

During our midday break, I explored the Royal Mile. Winter was approaching, often the clouds hung low and leaden, frost made the cobbles slippery and the cold was penetrating but the historic buildings, the quaint shops, the beautiful wares for sale, made my midday prowling a delight.

My regret now is how little I knew of Scottish history and the dramatic events that had taken place, both here and in Perth.

For some unknown reason, we were not permitted to pay home visits during work hours. Audrey had a number of elderly patients who lived in small cottages in the Grassmarket, a very old part of the city, just below the castle, which at that time was considered a dubious slum area, and who needed follow up after their discharge from hospital. Although it was within walking distance of the hospital, it was very dark by the time we left work, so I often went with her for company. I remember an old man became very agitated, when he had to come in for treatment, because there was no one to look after his cat, so we went daily to feed it – a huge, black monster – until he was better. One Saturday afternoon, we went to another cottage and, with the owner's consent, gave it a good spring clean before he left hospital.

Life at 28 Craigmillar Park went smoothly. Mrs McGregor, who played bridge twice a week, regaled us with descriptions of the 'absolutely delicious' delicacies she had enjoyed for tea. We convinced Christine she could not survive permanently on tinned carrots and began teaching her to cook and she insisted that I should spend time writing. Before long she was absorbed in the kitchen, while I tapped away on her typewriter. She was planning to write the novel of the year but apart from the title, *The Moon Is Down*, did not make much progress.

The fourth member of the household was Clyde, a lovely, docile, golden labrador, who spent his life lying on an armchair in front of the fire in the sitting room or being taken for sedate walks up and down the street. It seemed a deadly boring life for a dog so, with permission, I began to take him with me when I went for rambles on weekends. I had discovered a beautiful park on the edge of the city and it became one of my favourite haunts. It was called the Hermitage and had extensive woodland. I never saw anyone else there and for all I know may have been private property. The drawback was that it was bounded by a six-foot brick wall. I never discovered a gate so it meant I had to scramble over the top and drop down the other side. I could do it but getting Clyde over was quite a problem and I don't think the drop, even onto soft, leaf-strewn ground, did him much good. He adored our adventures and as soon as he saw me wearing my red duffle coat and pick up his lead, he became ecstatic with delight. He was usually tired after these perambulations and finally Mrs McGregor vetoed all but sedate strolls along the street. When I left, I gave him my duffle coat which had done such good service so he could cuddle down in its

scarlet depths, in front of the fire and dream of chasing birds and the falling, autumn leaves in our magic wood.

Gracie Davidson, a cousin of mother's, lived in Braid Hills Farmhouse on the outskirts of Edinburgh with Tom, her husband, and her eldest daughter Pod (Gracie) who had learning difficulties. They had two other daughters, Brownie, married to an RAF pilot, and Rosemary, who later married Ian MacDiarmid. Their only son had drowned while yacht-racing at Cowes, when in his teens. His body was never recovered and his parents never became reconciled to the loss.

Tom had been a prisoner of war in World War 1 and suffered from nerve problems. His only interest was in gliding and one weekend he took me for a flight, which was a wonderful experience. Coupled with Pod's problems it was a sad household but I visited them quite often and became fond of them. While I was quite young, I had been asked to correspond with Pod, so I was interested to meet her. With direction, she was quite capable around the house and could not do enough for me. I took her to the pictures several times which was quite a challenge as she made very personal remarks about the other passengers in the tram and events during the films which she did not approve of, all in her strong Scottish accent, very loudly.

I remember when Rosemary Locke came over from the USA, where she had been nursing, and we stayed at Braid Hills Farmhouse. Pod brought us breakfast in bed and enquired, 'How are my wee moosies this morning – wee moosies snuggled up in bed!' The 'wee moosies' were indeed snuggled up in bed for warmth. The farmhouse, reputedly built in the 15th century, was constructed in cold, grey stone and, apart from the Aga cooker in the kitchen, the only other heating was a fire in the sitting room. The large, family dog, which claimed the prime position spread across the hearth rug, was the main beneficiary from what heat it did give out. It was supposed to have been the home of one of Robert Burns' lady loves and their initials had been scratched on a window with a diamond ring.

Bay Leishman, yet another of mother's cousins, lived in a delightful cottage in Peebleshire and I had several happy visits there. She was a tall rangy lady, rather plain but a woman after my own heart. She had been a Guide Leader, loved the country and adventure. When younger she had hiked alone through the Redwood forests in Oregon. After her mother's death, she had cared for her father, the Reverend James Leishman (a younger brother of my grandfather, Matthew Leishman) and helped him with his church histories (see *A Son of Knox* and *Matthew Leishman of Govan*), finishing them after his death.

Her cottage was set on its own with sweeping views of open land, where sheep grazed peacefully. Some years before, a fire had destroyed almost all her possessions. The dwelling had been rebuilt and was very cosy and artistically furnished. Unknown to me then, one of the few treasures which had survived the fire, was a remnant of the wedding dress worn by Jane Gibb when she married John Smith, Baillie of Paisley in about 1730. When I married John, Bay sent us this remnant, mounted on a tray, as a present. It has since been reframed as a picture and hangs on my wall and, apart from my family, is my greatest treasure. Because there were no industries in Scotland producing such fine and delicate products, it could have been made in France. At that time, privateers were plundering French trading vessels and from notes in Agnes Maxwell's diaries, Patrick Hamilton and others were among these entrepreneurs who hid their spoils in caves on remote Scottish islands to avoid excise. Being of a romantic turn of mind, I like to think this material may have come through these channels.

Bay sent these notes with her gift:

> 'The story of the Brocade from a pencilled note by our Aunt Jean Cowan (Matthew Leishman's sister) written on the paper which was wrapped around it.
>
> "Part of my great, great grandmother's wedding gown, Mrs Jane Gibb (or Smith) after whom her granddaughter, Mrs Matilda Fleming was called Jane, and I after Mrs Matilda Fleming, my grandmother."
>
> signed J.E.F. Cowan.'

(Note: Christina Fleming was Matthew Leishman's mother.)

Bay added in 1963:

> 'This may seem rather an enigma but, as far as I can make out, the brocade must have been part of your great, great, great grandmother's wedding dress as your grandfather was our Aunt Jean's brother. Anyway, I think it must be around 200 years old. – Bay Leishman.'

The romantic aspect of this story for me, is that Jane's mother, Margaret Park (later Gibb), born 1713, eloped, aged fifteen, with James Gibb (born 1710) aged eighteen. He rode pillion on the horse to escape legal consequences as she was an heiress. (Had she ridden pillion, he could have been charged with her abduction.)

During the week, Bay worked as secretary to the Edinburgh branch of the Victoria League, the organization set up to offer assistance and hospitality for visitors to Britain who came from Commonwealth countries.

Invitations to some of the stately homes for weekend house-parties were offered and Bay arranged these for anyone interested.

She organized a Burns' Night dinner for visitors and asked me if I would make the reply to the toast of the lassies. I knew nothing about such events, apart from the haggis being involved, and the thought of eating some did not appeal to me. However, I had survived a straight diet of black pudding at Bridge of Earn so I said I would. In spite of not liking Burns' poetry much, the speech sounded easy enough and I went along on the night quite confident. We speakers sat on the top table and the proceedings were very formal. When prompted, I said my few words of thanks and sat down thinking I had done quite well. I realized my inadequacy when the tall, black Singaporean doctor, next to whom I was sitting, rose to his feet and, without notes, not only spoke at length about the poet's brilliance but recited lengthy passages from his poems.

Bay was arranging a morning tea for the wives of Bishops who had come to Edinburgh from Commonwealth countries for a conference. She said it was a very informal gathering and would I come and give a brief talk about Australia. In spite of my less than inspiring effort at the Burns' dinner, I felt I was on firmer ground and said I would, if I could get time off. My superior readily gave her permission, obviously impressed that one of her staff should be asked. The ladies were a lovely, friendly, warm group and I yarned away for nearly an hour. They applauded enthusiastically and the whole thing was such a success, the committee asked if I would be a speaker at the Regional meeting at the League to be held several weeks hence. Even when I heard it was to be held at Wemyss Castle, buoyed on by my success with the Bishops' wives, I had no hesitation in agreeing to do it.

Finally, the weather warmed up and one glorious, sunny, Sunday afternoon, Christine and I climbed out of a window onto the roof of the conservatory at the back of the apartment below. We had only luxuriated in the warmth for about fifteen minutes and Christine had taken off her shirt when Mrs McGregor appeared at the window and ordered us inside. Poor lady! Half a dozen people from the street behind had rung her to say, 'Her girrrrls were on the roof, sunbathing – breaking the Sabbath!'

Mrs McGregor was a regular church goer and impressed me by not only by remembering the text but recounting the sermon to us. She was a strict Presbyterian and no doubt felt Christine and I were backsliders, with our less than regular church attendances. I rarely remembered texts and used sermon time as a chance to float off into day dreams.

My six-month locum was drawing to an end and, although I could have extended it, I decided to set off on my bike to explore more of the

Continent. I had no specific plans beyond sailing from Hull to the Hook of Holland and heading east. Fred, who was now at the Dundee Infirmary, when he heard my plans, said that he and John, his engineer friend from Bridge of Earn, had booked a three-week holiday at a new French Club – Club Mediterranée on Corfu and why not join them? Their booking was from mid-August which would give me time to reach Brindisi and catch the ferry to Corfu, if all went well. It sounded like fun and, regardless of possible impediments, I made a booking for the same period.

The day for my talk to the Victoria League loomed up. I was to be met at the bus-stop nearest the castle and escorted there. The Countess had kindly invited me to lunch before the meeting. It was a cold, grey day and the bus stopped on a stretch of isolated heath. A 'haugh' (pronounced harr) a thick rolling fog was coming in from the sea. Through it emerged an ex-naval gentleman, Captain Hardy, who had been detailed off to drive me to the castle. As we came through the extensive parklands and it came into view, I gasped at its size. My escort told me that at some stage, the interior had been gutted by fire and because of its size and the expense only one wing, where the family lived, had been restored. It was a copy of Blenheim. He went on to tell me the Countess was South African and had been the Earl's private secretary when he was stationed there, subsequently marrying him.

Both the Countess and the Earl met us at the entrance and welcomed us warmly. They were both quite young, he tall and good-looking and the Countess tall, slim and blonde, elegantly dressed in a tweed suit, twin-set and pearls. They were very friendly and unpretentious.

A magnificent, wide marble staircase led up to a landing, divided and rose to the gallery where, we were told, the meeting was to be held. We were ushered into the drawing room and introduced to Sir and Lady Someone, whose names I forget. He was also a guest speaker. He was the Governor of some British Protectorate. We had a very pleasant meal and afterwards the Countess took me down to the kitchen to meet the cook because she was a fellow Australian. She was a friendly girl from Sydney and, judging by the afternoon tea she laid on after the meeting, very efficient as well. The Countess explained the only other help they had in the Castle were a couple of women who came in from the village two days a week.

She took me up to her bedroom to freshen up and asked if I would like her to leave me so I could go over my notes. 'Oh! I haven't got any,' I told her cheerfully.

'How very brave,' she replied. As we went out to the meeting, she announced, 'I am not lighting any fires because it makes too much mess

to clean up.' With which statement, she flung a fur stole around her slim shoulders.

There were more than fifty people seated in the gallery as we entered and I was shown to my place, beside the chairman, Lord Tweedale. He was a delightful, tall, stooped old man with a ferocious moustache. After his introduction, I started off my talk full of confidence but somewhere in the middle, panic set in and although I continued, at the back of my mind doubts arose. 'How could I have got into this situation?' 'No one is interested.' It was a huge relief to sit down, swearing mentally never to speak in public again!

The sense of failure was relieved slightly when a kind lady came and spoke to me during tea time. She confided to me that the large attendance was driven by curiosity. It was a once in a lifetime chance to see the castle and see the Earl and Countess. I had noticed during my talk that the audience had been casting surreptitious glances at the Countess in particular and the two blue, velvet coronation chairs, standing in pride of place.

In spite of that I felt drained when I eventually reached Edinburgh.

I wrote a thank you letter for lunch to the Countess and not long afterwards she wrote back inviting me to come and stay for a weekend. My feelings of failure were so strong, I delayed replying, finally saying, I had not received her letter until I left for the continent, in a post card from Italy.

Once again, it was goodbye to my friends; most of them thought I was foolhardy, if not mad. Christine, who was returning to her family in California, very much more to the point gave me one of her white shirts which I had admired. Later I discovered she had tucked a $1 US dollar bill in the pocket which was to save the day down the track.

As well as not writing to the Countess, there was another misdemeanour on my slate.

Sometime before, and completely out of the blue, I received a letter from John Coten whom I had not seen or heard of since I left Mardie. It was post-marked Coolgardie and he wrote that he had taken a job pulling sandalwood in the Eastern Goldfields. He said the wildflowers were magnificent and that he was going to send me some everlastings. I presumed Phyll Sharpe had given him my address and thought, 'That's nice!' I decided to wait until the flowers arrived and then write and thank him. When he had no answer to his letter, as I discovered years later, he took it as a brush off, so he never sent them! Finally, I decided he would have moved on and even if I wrote, he would not get the letter. The hand of fate!

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

TO CORFU

I left Edinburgh in mid-July, giving me a month to reach Corfu by the date I was booked into Club Mediterranée. After a brief stopover in Keighley, I peddled on my way to Harwich where I planned to cross to the Hook of Holland and begin my European adventure.

The weather was warm and, apart from the occasional drenching rain, the skies clear. The days were long and I made good time. The countryside was verdant with summer growth.

As far as possible, I had kept to minor roads and it was on one of these that I had accepted a lift in a truck through Sherwood Forest to Nottingham. The narrow road was overhung by the canopies of huge trees, it was dark and forbidding, only the pale blooms of a myriad of tall foxgloves lighting the dimness. Nary a sign of a ghostly band or a flash of an arrow. I had been relieved to reach Nottingham for, although nothing untoward occurred, it was one of the rare times in all my travels I had doubts about the truck driver.

Passing a strawberry farm with a sign saying 'Pickers Wanted', I went in and asked for a job. The manager was reluctant to put me on when he heard I had no experience but finally gave me a basket full of 'chips', small boxes, and indicated a row where I could start.

There were about twenty middle-aged women and children bent over between rows, picking for their lives. It was not long before one of them came over to me to give some advice. She said she was from Wales. She shook the chips I had filled and cried: 'Spread them out, spread them out, my beauty, or you will never make a fortune.'

I thanked her but, by the way, Beauty's back was beginning to ache; she had already decided there must be easier ways to make a fortune. She went on to tell me we would get 5d for every chip filled and that the pickers

worked from 8 am -11 am, 12 noon – 3 pm and 5 pm -8 pm. I would have stayed if accommodation had been available but the nearest hostel was at Ely, 30 miles on, so I reclaimed my bike from the shed, collected my pay of 10/6 for the session and headed east.

The country around Ely was burgeoning with fruit and flowers. I saw the cathedral in the distance and now regret not going to explore it.

One hot afternoon, I called into a cottage to ask for water to fill my bottle. After a few minutes conversation, the lady of the house admitted she had at first thought I was the wife of the new vicar come to visit her! I felt I must look suitably respectable in spite of my unorthodox lifestyle.

There was doubt I would get a ticket for the ferry when I reached Harwich and, as there were several hours to spare, I found a secluded nook on the beach and had a sleep.

Fortunately, not only did I get on the boat but I got a berth as well so I arrived at the Hook next morning as fresh as a daisy. I shared the cabin with a pleasant German lady who spoke some English and was opulently wrapped in furs. Her parting words were some I would hear often on my journey, to 'never speak to strangers!'

I rode to Delft, after an altercation with an exchange clerk who tried to short change me a thousand guilders on a traveller's cheque. It looked exactly like my mental image of Holland. The men wore baggy pants, waistcoats and little black caps while the women wore long black skirts and immaculate, white, starched caps with side flaps; everyone wore wooden clogs. Barges, laden with bales, flowers, vegetables, and rounds of cheese were being poled down the canals. The shop windows displayed beautiful, blue and white Delftware, the women bustled along to the market with baskets on their arms and everything was neat and clean. There were bicycle tracks everywhere and the traffic tightly controlled. It was not long before I became confused and began riding the wrong way. Immediately everyone from other cyclists, truck drivers, even little old ladies yelled incomprehensively to me, so it was a relief to finally get out onto the road to Rotterdam. People here were much friendlier and more helpful.

The Rotterdam harbour fascinated me. There were ships in berth from all over the world, noise, many different languages being spoken and activity on all sides. Barges, piled with cargo, glided in and around the bigger vessels like ants. I explored the city on foot and visited the art galleries and museums before heading south. I decided not to go to Amsterdam, as I was told the road lay between high walls and was very tedious. Also, at the back of my mind, I realized that many miles lay between me and Corfu, no

doubt some obstacles and I had no idea of how long it would take me to reach my objective. I was, in fact, flying blind.

Whenever I did miss some important landmark, I consoled myself with the thought that I would see it next time. This was to prove true in the case of the capital. I rode through unremarkable country, fields of sugar beet and vegetables, here and there the horizon relieved by a windmill, white sails spinning in the stiff breeze.

I passed through Breda to the youth hostel at Chaam. Everything along the way was very tidy and neat, buildings painted predominantly in blue and white and the women seemed never to have a broom out of their hands. I even saw a woman cleaning a stable window. In some houses, in the streets I rode along, I was intrigued to see mirrors fixed on the outside of windows and later I was told it was to enable those living within to watch who was walking along the footpaths while they sat in warmth and comfort inside.

In Holland, most of the managers of the hostels were married couples and referred to as *Moeder* and *Vadar*. They seemed more involved with the hostellers than in other countries, welcoming, friendly and helpful. The facilities were basic, cold showers and some had no cooking areas. In such hostels, cheap meals were available.

It was school holiday time and there was a camp of schoolchildren at Chaam. After our evening meal, we all joined in their games and they sang their school songs. At 9 pm, we were given very hot, sweet black tea and gingerbread and sent to bed.

Next morning, breakfast consisted of more black tea, bread with jam, powdered Swiss cheese or brown or pink sugar sprinkled on our bread. Again, everything was immaculately clean and the tables had blue and white check cloths. That evening, I reached Bergen op Zoom hostel on the Zuiderzee. There was a school camp here, too, as well as some Scots and English hostellers, so I had someone to talk to. The evening meal was satisfying but hardly cordon bleu, consisting of potatoes boiled in their jackets, peas, carrots in white sauce and, surprisingly, stewed rhubarb. Several of us thought the latter was meant for sweets but no, because later custard appeared.

In spite of the lack-lustre menu, I have happy memories of that hostel because, after our meal and the customary minute's silence for everyone to give thanks for their food, a common practice in Dutch hostels, Vader gathered us all up and took us for a long walk through the surrounding woods in the twilight. He told us about the flowers and trees, as well as giving us a lot of information about that part of the country. I was impressed by his knowledge and passion for the country, as well as surprised at how

much of it was wooded. We were sent to bed with Vader playing folk tunes on his guitar and awakened next morning with the same. It was a very happy episode in my journey.

My knowledge of Belgium was vague. I discovered it was divided into two parts, Wallonia, the French-speaking, Catholic side, and Flanders, where the people were of Protestant, Dutch origin, speaking Dutch or Flemish, incomprehensible to me. Brussels the capital, although in Flanders, fortunately for me, had many French-speaking inhabitants.

The city rose in the 6th century as a trading post on an island in the River Senne, a tributary of the River Dyle, as it was on a trade route between Cologne and Bruges. Over the years it expanded and became a major textile centre, specializing in woollen goods and lace-making and the capital of the Low Countries. It was said that at the height of its wealth 50,000 weavers were employed. Magnificent municipal buildings were erected by wealthy city fathers. Originally, part of the Duchy of Brabant, in 1430 it passed to the Duchy of Burgundy and thence to the Hapsburg Empire. At the end of the seventeenth century, during the Nine Years' War, Louis XIV of France laid siege to Brussels several times, razing much of the city to ruins, but, from the rubble, municipal buildings were erected and elegant Guild Halls were financed by the flourishing trades and now surround the Grande Place. Through the eighteenth century, Brussels was ruled in turn by Austria and France until the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo in 1815. In 1830, after a short period of British rule, the Belgian revolution took place and Belgium gained its independence under Leopold, King of the Belgians and Brussels became its capital. There was an enormous increase in population which led to much redevelopment, including the central boulevards, now considered characteristic of the city. Although occupied by German forces during both world wars, Brussels was spared significant damage.

The constant rain next day did not spoil my exploration, the buildings, shops and museums. In the museum of musical instruments, I found my way down to the basement where I saw a wonderful collection of pianos, cellos, bassoons, flutes, violins, to name a few, all covered in dust, lying hugger mugger in the huge expanse. Perhaps they had been hastily taken there during the war and had not seen the light of day since.

There were beautiful clothes, leather goods, shoes and laces in the shop windows, all well beyond my means. Even though I did not know the history of Brussels, it felt to me, as Florence was later, a merchant city thriving on commerce.

The Courts of Justice were in a huge building with elegant columns and staircases curving to the upper reaches. Happily, as in the basement of the

musical museum, I did not see a single person and I could wander round quite alone with no distraction to my pleasure. The Grande Place or central square, graced by the superb guild halls, even on a wet day, was the highlight of my day. The buildings were decorated with gold leaf, adding to their opulence. All I had heard before about Brussels was the naughtiness of the statue of the *Mannekin Pis*, the little, naked boy, weeing into a pool, so I was happily surprised by its more significant wonders.

There is an uneasy relationship still between the richer Flemish population, who feel they are supporting the Roman Catholic French region, but I saw none of that and the people were friendly and helpful.

Next morning I went back to the Grande Place for a last look before leaving. The sun was shining, the light glinting on the gold leaf on the buildings, everything was washed clean by the rain and the whole square was a riot of colour as flower-sellers set up their stalls, I asked a group of policemen the way to the Post Office and not only did the whole squad take me to it but they lent me a pen, waited while I wrote a post card, bought me a stamp and sent a junior cadet off to post it.

My reluctance to leave such a lovely city was exacerbated by the cobbled road out, which played havoc with the nuts and bolts on the bike, as well as me, and the fact that not only was it uphill for some distance but that there was an unrelenting head-wind.

After that, although the wind blew all day, the road levelled out and ran between expansive fields of ripening corn, reminding me of home. The manicured stands of trees looked very different to the raggle taggle of eucalypts which rather spoilt the illusion. The sun broke through the scattered clouds every now and then making cycling very pleasant.

Although I passed close to Waterloo and Mons, I was not tempted to detour and visit them. War was far from my mind and I spent a peaceful interlude having my lunch by a river. I sat on a grassy bank watching a man fishing and the reflection in the water of a little, old, pink church on the bank opposite.

I spent the night at the Dinant hostel, which was run on martial lines but had the benison of hot water. I made good use of the latter, in spite of the suspicious looks of the warden who finally chased me out of the washroom where I was doing my smalls. 'Wasting' gas was a common bone of contention in the many hostels on the continent.

From Dinant, I entered the Ardennes on a minor road which seemed only to lead upwards. I was surrounded by thick forest. Many of the trees I could not identify but I had plenty of time to admire them as I pushed the bike up the steep inclines most of the morning. It was a cloudy, humid

day and sweat poured off me. Midges came out in hordes but, in spite of the discomfort, I revelled in the peace of the green world around me. I saw no one all day but I passed two signs warning these were the King's Forests and not to shoot the deer. It felt like another world.

On the verges, nestled in the undergrowth, I discovered wild strawberries with tiny scarlet fruit and white flowers like stars. They were sweet morsels and I hoped the King, as well as the fairies who must surely have equal sovereign rights with him, would not object to my plundering their harvest.

By mid-afternoon, I had only ridden 50 kilometres. Grumelange, the nearest hostel, was 35 kilometres further on. At the only village I saw, I bought a loaf of bread for six francs. It was heavy, sour and very hard but, by dipping it in water, I was able to gnaw into it.

Fortunately, the road flattened out and the sun appeared. Shadows of the tree trunks lay across it like black bars and, in the fields each side of the road, horses and foals frolicked in their pasture. The fields became larger, green-gold corn, punctuated with scarlet poppies and blue cornflowers, extended to the horizon. By the roadside, butterflies hovered over cow parsley, candytuft and wild daisies. The pleasant reverie I had fallen into was rudely shattered when I caught up with the Belgian Army on manoeuvers and, slowed by their cumbersome progress, I was cheated of a long run down into a deep misty valley.

The youth hostel seemed always to be five kilometres further on, another mountain to climb, but at last I reached the village of Martelange and, yet further again, the hostel. It was a farmhouse attached to cow-yards but despite the all-pervading smell of kine, to me it was heaven. I was applauded by the farmer and the several boys hostelling there, Irish, Canadian, Dutch and English, when they heard where I had travelled. Their approbation and food restored me and, when I retired to bed upstairs, in spite of the cow-flavoured, night air, I slept like the dead.

Next morning, I looked down from the window onto the cow-yard and saw the farmer and the cows, plunging around, hock deep in black mud and manure. To add to their misery, rain bucketed down.

Before setting out on my journey, I had made myself what I thought was a smart duffle coat, from navy flannel. Being summer, I optimistically assumed it would not rain but might be chilly. Unhappily, setting out in an unrelenting downpour, it quickly became saturated, but worse, the navy dye began to run. The rivers of navy, running down my legs, did nothing to enhance my appearance.

I doubt that I had ever heard of Luxembourg until I saw the name on the map and realized it was on my route. There were no border formalities when I entered the little Duchy, about 4 pm, and made my way to the youth hostel. There was a warm welcome awaiting me from the warden and, perhaps even better considering the state I was in, hot water.

The capital, also called Luxembourg, is built around a rugged gorge. There are catacombs, or casements as they are called, cut deeply into the faces of the cliffs. Everyone was friendly, in spite of the fact I could not understand a word that was said to me. The only way I could explain that I was neither Dutch nor German, which was the general assumption, but Australian, was by the time-honoured method of hopping like a kangaroo. This always brought gales of laughter and applause.

At the hostel, I shared my meal with a young Canadian reporter who, like me, was travelling alone. We agreed it was the best way to go, being free to make spur of the moment decisions and giving better options.

The weather was gentle when I set off next morning, riding past cornfields and woods. I passed through one or two quaint villages and watched two huntsmen dressed in green, with feathers in their Tyrolean hats, carrying rifles, getting off a ferry. The little, fairy-tale state was so charming I could easily have stayed longer.

There was a small drama when I came to the border of Germany, because the guardroom was locked and the boy on guard did not have a key. I helped him climb through the window to get the stamp for my passport.

I rode through Trier and reached the Wittlich hostel, deep in the woods, in good time. Hans, a kind boy in from Dusseldorf, gave my bike an overhaul for which I was most grateful as riding over cobbles had loosened the nuts.

Next morning, he and the five other German boys staying at the hostel insisted on loading my bike, Hans pressing three good maps on me. With many *auf Wiedersehen*s and handshakes I set off – or tried to. In their enthusiasm, they had lashed the pack on my carrier to the back wheel. After much laughter, reloading and repeated farewells, I shot away.

It was holiday time here, too, and it seemed as if half the teenaged boys in Germany were on the roads, cycling. They were unfailingly polite and gave a lovely greeting as they passed – a wide sweep of the hand and calling out '*savos*'. They were all anxious to practice English and often rode beside me while we carried on a tortured conversation. Five boys from Berlin accompanied me for quite a distance. Periodically, they took off in a burst, ahead of me, and then came screaming back to encircle me, which completely unnerved me.

Godenheim was a much more comfortable companion and we rode together for a whole, mellow day alongside the gently-flowing Moselle. He was fourteen and communication between us was almost non-existent but we sat beside each other, on the river bank, watching an eagle soaring up above us while we had lunch. His, like all the young cyclists, seemed to consist of a slice of the large, rye loaf he carried and a slab of long sausage. When we reached Koblenz, he intimated he would like to travel with me next day but I was non-committal and, in fact, did not see him again.

The Moselle joined the broad, silver Rhine at Koblenz. As it was holiday time, there were crowds of people thronging the shores. Steamers, tugs and canoes were sailing on the water while hundreds of holiday makers on the banks were enjoying the beer gardens, music and dancing.

The youth hostel was an awe-inspiring fortress, high above the city. I climbed up to it only to find it was booked out but was given the address of a canoeists' hostel which I eventually found and spent a comfortable night. I sat for some time on a rock near the hostel, watching the activity on the broad sweep of river below me.

Next day I followed the Rhine, the short distance to Rüdesheim. In the evening, I sat beside the river and wrote home, describing the fairy-tale castle on a woody ridge across the river, the plains beyond turning blue in the fading light and the neat rows of grapevines planted on each side of the river. As I wrote, church bells began to ring.

Communication was difficult and I rued the day when, because I started late at school, I was advised not to study German. I was getting used to marks and pfennigs, had picked up a few German words but shopping and asking for directions was very difficult. I gathered wages were low and food, which I thought very basic, expensive. In the hostels, we were mainly given soup or a mixture of vegetables. I had not fully understood how deprived the people had been during the war. But I did appreciate their kindness and efforts to help me.

The road followed the Rhine, passed Mannheim to the Speyer hostel, near Heidelberg, where I spent the next night. The country looked fertile, wheat, corn, apples, and vines, flourishing. The verges were covered with pink, white and yellow daisies, cow parsley, poppies and cornflowers.

Next day, I had a solid pull up a mountain to Baden-Baden, pressing against a tiring head-wind to the edge of the Black Forest. From there, I headed deep into fir-clad mountains to the Lahr hostel. The hostel father himself came out to unpack my bike and store it away.

Three young German boys asked if they could ride with me next day to Freiburg. We set off like a royal procession – Hilmar, Gerhardt, Gunther

and me bringing up the rear, feeling like their mother. Two of the boys spoke some English, which was a help. Along the way, we added two more German boys and a girl, which was a pleasant change. They were all very solicitous towards me, asking if I was alright or needed a rest every few miles. My troupe were continuing on by train from Freiburg and we had a prolonged farewell before going our separate ways.

Freiburg was very interesting, being an old university town, and I enjoyed a few hours prowling around, looking at the old buildings and shops, before pushing on to the Rhein Falls at the Swiss border, which I reached on a Sunday morning.

I planned to avoid Switzerland because I had heard it was expensive and people over 25 were not allowed to stay in youth hostels. Also, I thought the mountains would be too much for me. Unhappily, looking for a place to have a rest, I caught the front wheel of the bike in a tramline and had a crashing fall. There was only a slight graze on my ankle but I hit my head and most have concussed myself because when I got up and dragged the bike to a nearby bench so I could sit down, I had no idea where or who I was. Church-goers walked past giving me disparaging looks as I scrabbled in my pack for a band aid but no one spoke to me. After some moments, some memory returned and I remembered my name and that I came from Narrogin but beyond that my mind was a blank.

Finally, I recalled that I had a passport and, after studying it, the pieces began to come together. I was badly shaken and realized I needed to get to a hostel and rest. The nearest was Küssaberg, on the German side of its border with Switzerland, but it was on top of a mountain and it was a long haul to reach it. It took me a long time to climb up to it and one way and another I was exhausted by the time I arrived.

The hostel building was a Norwegian type structure quite close to the ruins of the Küssaberg Castle. There were only German hostellers staying there and no one spoke English. I decided to stay two nights to fully recover from my little mishap. The hostel remained open all day, not closing from 10 am – 4 pm as most did, to encourage, or force, hostellers out of doors. It was as well it was open, as rain bucketed down all day. Fortunately, too, meals were available, as my food supplies had dwindled. I spent the day writing letters, taking care not to mention my fall to my anxious mother, and I gradually recovered.

The weather cleared in the evening and I went to explore the castle. The warden, very kindly, gave me an English translation of its history. It dated back to Roman times and was the scene of many battles. The Swiss had it, then the Germans until 1642 when the Swedes raided it and burnt

it. Now, only the ruins remained. I sat on a rock nearby and enjoyed the breath-taking view of peak after peak of the Swiss Alps to the south and, to the north, the Black Forest. Spread out below lay pocket-handkerchief fields of ripening corn, green fields and copses. Washed by the rays of the setting sun, the panorama had an overall golden glow and is a scene I shall never forget.

I had an easy ride, down the mountain, next morning, feeling much refreshed after my rest day. I dodged in and out of Switzerland to the Singen Hostel. The countryside was beautiful. I stopped to drink from the little streamlets I passed. The water was sweet and clear, running over small coloured pebbles. Wild strawberries, nestled among the wildflowers, gave me an excuse to stop and fossick for the tiny scarlet berries.

I enjoyed staying at the youth hostel as a number of the hostellers spoke English which was a nice change after my social isolation at Küssaberg.

Next morning, as I set off, I was joined by a tall, blonde, very blue-eyed Scot, Bill Houston, who announced he would see me down the road a few miles. The few miles became many and we travelled together for the next three days. It was good to have someone to talk to, albeit in a broad Scots' accent.

He was a typically dour Scot. I never understood why he attached himself to me because not only was he a much faster cyclist than I was but, at the outset, he gave me a dissertation on what he thought about Australian hostellers and none of it was complimentary. According to him, we were all a lazy, dirty, scrounging lot of free-loaders. I am not sure where I fitted in but paradoxically, while we travelled together, he point blank refused to use any of my provender but insisted on using all his own for us both, cooking all our meals and using his utensils from his highly organized kit. He even carried a primus on which he cooked stew, boiled eggs and made tea.

He was an interesting character and, in a kinder mood, told me he worked underground in coal mines in Scotland all winter, to earn enough money to spend the summer months cycling around Europe. He had travelled through most of Europe, the previous year through Lapland where the wildflowers were superb but the midges dreadful and his destination on this trip was the south of France, to lie on the beach and watch girls!

We rode along the Bodensee through flat country, which was just as well as we kept up a cracking pace, and I reached Bregenz a day ahead of my schedule. The youth hostel was a dirty, dubious sort of place, so I went to a B & B with two Australian girls we met and Bill wandered off somewhere else. The Australian girls were nurses travelling by car, dressed in Sportscraft skirts – a must for any respectable young Australian girl travelling in those

days – twin sets, stockings and sturdy shoes. They spent most of the time complaining about the small inconveniences in their travels and, although they were friendly enough, I felt I was on another planet.

We stopped along our way, as we continued our journey, at fascinating little villages, to wander round the quaint streets and shops. Despite my protests, Bill shopped for our supplies. I had been concerned about the Alpine stretch, which lay ahead, and decided to take the train to Landeck on the other side. Bill said he would meet me there but I thought it unlikely, as it was a tough road.

Although short, the journey was spectacular as we passed over the mountains looking out over snow-covered peaks on either side. And it was pleasant to sit in warm-cushioned comfort, as they flashed by. Sure enough, as we pulled into the Landeck station, there was my mentor awaiting me. The youth hostel was very good and after my cook had made our dinner, we went for a walk through the little town. Rain had been falling gently but it cleared away and pinpricks of stars appeared above us. We came to a little, white church with a slender spire and heard voices singing *Silent Night, Holy Night* – probably the choir practising for Christmas. The stained glass glowed softly from the light within and we stopped and listened, enchanted.

It was clear and sunny next day and we set off, downhill, for Innsbruck at a cracking pace. It was too much for me as I crashed into Bill's back wheel and fell off. He was all solicitude, although I had bent his back wheel badly. Out came his immaculate first aid kit and I was patched up. Still, from time to time, I was subjected to further examples of the bad behaviour of Australians he had met on his travels, and I could only think I must be the exception that proved the rule. To give him his due, I had met a few Australians who did little credit to their country of birth, too, but I thought lumping us all in one basket was a bit unfair.

We parted ways at Innsbruck, he to ride to Vienna, then south and me to Italy. We met in Edinburgh the following year to compare notes on our travels and wrote to each other for a year or so. He had another string to his bow by writing about his travels for his local newspaper in Scotland, which was an extra money-spinner for him.

I regret that I followed his advice not to go to Venice because, he said, it was expensive and dirty. He was not wholly to blame because I had no idea how long it would take me to ride down the Adriatic coast to Brindisi, to catch the ferry to Corfu, and making a detour to Venice would have taken two or three days.

Innsbruck was a delight. The weather was perfect, the hostel excellent and I had a chance to do my washing and sort myself out in comfort.

The city seemed to sparkle with cleanliness, white buildings with red roofs and high spires on the churches. I had a lovely relaxing stay, visiting galleries and museums.

Hannibal might have been prepared to tackle the Alps with his elephants but I knew I would never make it on my bike, so I bought a rail ticket to Bolzano in the north of Italy, to take me through the Brenner Pass. As the train passed the cruel, jagged mountain peaks, still with snowy caps, and I saw the precipitous drops to valleys far below, I pondered on the bravery of those who had tried to escape capture by enemies during the time of war, travelling to Italy and the south, by this route. My thoughts made me all the more appreciative of the comfort of my travel.

This road to Bolzano and to the Adriatic coast, originally the Via Emilia, built by the Romans, was still a main route south. In all the cities and towns I was to pass through, there was evidence of Roman occupation. Unfortunately, I was too ignorant to fully appreciate it. I felt a change in the air as soon as I stepped out of the train at Bolzano. It was warmer and more mellow. Many of the old buildings were made of rich-red brick and I wandered through the streets, enjoying the feeling of antiquity.

Bolzano and Trento, which I reached next day, have a strong German culture as they were only passed to Italy from Germany in 1919, as part of the peace settlement following World War 1. Trento came to prominence between 1545 and 1563, when the Roman Catholic hierarchy called the Council of Trent to stop the threat of Lutherism.

It was an easy ride through fertile country to Lake Garda, a great expanse of warm, blue water, where I spent the next day swimming and sunbathing. As an added bonus, I found a very good pair of sunglasses on the side of the road. Stupidly, I had forgotten to bring mine so it was a lucky find.

There were no hostels nearby, so I climbed a hill at dusk and made camp among trellises of vines. I looked down on the darkening waters of the lake and watched the lights, on the opposite side, cast reflections on its surface until I fell asleep.

My road led through Mantua and Ferrara. An old man took me under his wing at Ravenna and guided me around the mosaics for which, among other things, this part of the country is famed.

By a lucky chance, I took a wrong turn when I left Rimini and rode 17 kilometres inland, arriving at the tiny state of San Marino, on the slopes of Monte Titano, only 61 square kilometres in size and independent for sixteen centuries. It was a Roman town in miniature and I wrote home saying I felt everyone should be wearing togas. The streets were narrow and shady with high walls on either side. I saw an old lady, dressed in black, with an

earthenware pitcher on her shoulder and followed her and a man with a donkey to a market where people were calling out their wares. From the top of the town, there was a wonderful view of the Adriatic and the coastline.

Back on the road, I passed through Pesaro to Ancona where I had a late lunch of the fresh rolls and juicy peaches I had bought at the market. I swam and sunbathed, gloriously happy to feel the warmth of the sun and the blue sky and sea, after my sojourn in the north.

I stayed at the Ancona youth hostel that night but, as there were no hostels near my route for the rest of my trip, I camped each night until I reached Brindisi. Deep drains ran about six metres from the road and I found that at the bottom they were level and dry, wide enough for comfort and deep enough to conceal both me and the bike.

I also realized very quickly that as soon as I stopped for a rest, I gathered an audience around me. One evening I sat down to have my supper and in no time a man on a bike stopped and stared at me and a huge wooden cart, drawn by a beautiful draught horse, with a family of seventeen people on board plus tubs of grapes, stopped. As the driver climbed out of the cart to bring me an enormous bunch of juicy, black grapes, a red roadster with two immaculately groomed, young policemen screamed to a halt.

I had a frisson of apprehension, thinking I must be breaking the law, but one of them climbed out, leaned over to the back seat and, picking up a litre bottle of milk, came over and begged me, in plausible English, to take it. He said his wife always gave him a bottle of milk for his meal when he was on duty and become very angry if he did not drink it. He hated milk, would I please accept it? My audience clapped at this stage and it was only after many '*grazie*'s and '*buonasera*'s that everyone departed.

I had studied Italian for a year when I was working at Repatriation General Hospital, Hollywood, and the further I travelled, the more basic words came back to me, so it was not long before I could carry on some sort of communication with people I met.

At night I had to make sure the road was clear before dropping my bike into the drain and hopping down after it. I usually had my meal and then rode a few kilometres until just before complete darkness fell to do my disappearing act.

I thought a lot about the Forrest River people as I rode along, blessing them for teaching me so much about camping and their example of fortitude and strength in less than salubrious surroundings.

I did not show much fortitude when it came to the semi-trailers travelling from Ancona to Bari and Brindisi. The road was narrow and every time one approached, I had to get off on the loose gravel on the side. Because

I was on the right hand side, as were their exhausts, I got a hot blast of black smoke with each one passing, without fail. Also, the drivers lent out of the cab calling '*Bella bionda*!' (Beautiful blonde!) Bb often replied in a less than lady-like way but her rude words were wafted away in the black smoke.

By now, it was well into August and the further south I rode, the hotter it became during the day. I changed my routine, making a dawn start and resting during the intense midday heat, then continuing when the day cooled? Fortunately, the road was crossed by small streams, coming from the high country of the Apennine Mountains. They were channelled to irrigate the orchards and vineyards growing on the flatter plain country. These were crossed by small arched, stone bridges and provided cool and secluded resting places for my lunch-breaks. Traffic eased off during this siesta period and I took the chance to have a good wash and rinse out my smalls. In the heat of the sun, everything dried very quickly.

There was not much space to sit under these bridges without having my feet in the water. It was very cooling but unfortunately it was the habitat for little mountain trout which had very sharp teeth and a penchant for flesh. Every time one bit me, I moved my feet, stirring up a swathe of the yellow clay on the bottom.

One day, I decided to have a good wash, changed into bathers and washed everything I was wearing, hanging it on nearly bushes to dry. Suddenly, I heard the tinkle of a bell and patter of little hooves, a mob of sheep was coming down the road. I snatched my washing off the bushes, expecting them to pass on but I heard the shepherd talking to the sheep as they trotted on to it and a red plastic bucket came over the side, tied to a rope and was filled and hauled up. It dawned on me that the sheep were being watered.

Feeling very silly, I sat tight but just as the bucket came over the side, a trout bit my foot and I jumped. There was a sharp ejaculation above as the cloud of yellow mud sailed downstream – a pause, while I held my breath, the sheep were asked for their opinion, silence, as I sat like a statue and the bucket came down again. Again, I was nipped and moved involuntarily – more mud, more one sided discussion. Luckily, the approach to my lair was difficult to reach and the shepherd would have had a long walk back, and had to leave his sheep, to get under the bridge. Feeling like one of the Three Trolls, I sighed with relief when I heard him shooing the sheep on their way, still muttering to himself.

Many times as I rode along, farmers would give me beautiful, ripe peaches and tomatoes which grew everywhere. Several times I was invited to their houses for a midday meal. Stupidly, I never accepted their offers.

I now regret not meeting their families and enjoying their hospitality, so generously offered.

The farmhouses I rode past, were uninspiring blocks of white cement, unadorned by gardens or any vegetation, apart from sometimes a few straggling eucalypts. The small villages were equally depressing, just a few houses beside a dusty street. Usually there was a village pump and, as I went further south, groups of men standing by a piles of watermelons. No doubt they were waiting for the one excitement of the day, a truck to pick them up.

Whenever I asked to buy one, one of the bystanders would pick one out and, putting it in my basket, wave money away. Often a peach, tomatoes or a bunch of grapes went in as well.

Bread, or any food, was difficult to get as there seemed to be no shops in these villages. For a lot of the latter part of the journey, I was living on watermelon and tomatoes. The larger towns were more interesting and I wandered round Vasto and Termoli looking at Roman remains. Also, I could buy supplies in shops there.

The beaches along the Adriatic coast were pebbly and the sea flat and unappealing. The only other tourists I saw were a French couple and their adult son who stopped for lunch near me when I had also taken a break. Their lunch looked more inviting than mine, as they set out food and wine on a folding table covered with a red and white checked cloth. The son, with whom I had a brief conversation in the ocean, said they were touring from Paris.

I headed inland from Termoli towards Foggia. The country was flat, dusty and bare; the heat at midday was like a burning brand. I remember this part of my trip as the harshest and most unforgiving.

Mail was due to me at Bari and I was anxious for it. Also, I needed money as I had been unable to cash cheques in any of the towns I had passed through.

Unfortunately, I arrived in the late afternoon when both the post office and bank had closed. As well, I hoped to get information about the times that ferries left Brindisi for Corfu, as I had drawn blanks wherever I had made enquiries. Even next day, no one I asked could give me any help nor produce a ferry timetable.

Bari was a nightmare of congestion, as trucks, pedestrians, bicycles and donkey carts choked the road and a pall of dust hung over all, blood red in the rays of the setting sun.

I was hot, tired and dirty and, to add to my woes, the youth hostel, where I planned to stay, was eleven kilometres out of the town. It proved to be basic but clean and I was in no mood to quibble. I still had the one

US dollar Christine had put in the pocket of the shirt she gave me when I left Edinburgh and I hoped the warden would accept it as payment.

Next morning was very hot; the warden would not take the dollar and, daunted by the thought of riding into the bank and out again, very much against my principles and with Bill Houston's words about Australians ringing in my ears, I asked an English girl at the hostel if she would lend me the 20 lira (one shilling and ten pence sterling) needed and I would return it when I got back to UK. By the look on her face, I knew she thought it was a scam but reluctantly gave it to me. I had every intention of sending it to the address she gave me, which I put in a safe place but somehow it got lost and her doubts were valid.

I changed my cheque and collected mail, much to my delight, and headed south.

Unhappily, the letters from home brought the bad news that Dick's health had broken down and he was in hospital. I knew my mother and the family would be sick with worry and had the added burden of guilt because, I knew, she in particular worried about me. She had been appalled when I had told her my plans for the trip and she had written to say Dick had said I was completely mad! However, there was nothing I could do, except write back at the earliest opportunity. The news did cast a gloom over me, needless to say.

With unbelievable luck I found, when I reached Brindisi that the Corfu ferry left that evening. It only ran once a week.

As I did not want to take the bike with me, I cast about until I found a bike shop. Gino, the young man who owned the business, promised to take care of it until my return. What is more, he drove me around the town and countryside, out to a farming friend's place where we sat in the shade of the house and ate watermelon, and then back to catch the ferry.

When I went on board, I lay down on a bench and slept, the sleep of the just, only waking as we docked at the port of Kerkyra.

CHAPTER FORTY

CORFU

As we were not booked into the Club until the following day, I decided to camp out. After a quick tour of the city and buying some bread, cheese and fruit, I set off down a white, dusty road along the coast, towards the resort.

I had been told the Club was several kilometres round the bay – in fact it was about eleven. The sea was calm, the sky cloudless blue, and pink and white oleanders dotted the hillsides. I felt I was on an enchanted island where time did not exist. I lost all track of it.

There were plantations of olive trees all the way and, as dusk fell, I had no trouble in finding a sheltered nook to have my repast and settle down for the night.

I was up and on my way early next morning. I had not gone far when I was overtaken by a man driving a horse pulling a large open dray. He stopped and indicated I should get on board. I did not hesitate to accept his offer. Conversation was impossible but our gestures said a lot. I was certainly grateful for the lift.

Thanks to my kind dray driver I had booked in at the office, settled into my accommodation and was on the beach to welcome the boys when they arrived, I think from Paris, by flying boat.

They, and other new arrivals coming in a rather more circumspect fashion than me, were greeted with songs of welcome, decked with leis[24] of fresh flowers and helped to wade ashore. John and Fred said they expected me to have arrived before them!

The Corfu Club was among the earliest of the many set up by the company and still very much a novelty. It was laid out to look like a Tahitian

24 Leis or garlands.

village and a number of the staff had been brought from Tahiti. We were accommodated in grass huts, three guests to a hut. There were a number of avenues and each hut had a French name for an animal. I was in La Tortue (the tortoise) and shared very happily with two girls from Paris.

Wooden tables and benches, overhung by shady trees made a delightful restaurant. Local girls in traditional dress served the meals which were excellent and ample, which was as well as I paid full justice to them after my previously meagre diet. Fruit, croissants and bowls of coffee were served for breakfast and three-course lunches and dinners kept us well satisfied.

Everything was provided, except drinks at the bar. In view of the lavish wine supplied at meals, we had no desire to drink more. Money was not used but could be exchanged for pop beads which people bought, wore round their necks and used for purchases.

There were various activities to enjoy, lessons given in water skiing, at which I was so hopeless (much to my chagrin) that the coach finally told me to go away and not come back!

Apart from about a dozen English people, the group of tourists nearly all came from Paris. In the second week, some young men from Athens arrived. People wandered around in bathers, barefoot, which made me feel very much at home. A lot of the men wore sarongs which was an exotic touch in those days.

Music was played every evening, evocative French current hits, and people danced on the small floor by the bar. It was all very romantic.

Some days, we went for long walks through the rough hills and olive groves away from the club. We followed narrow, steep tracks, rarely meeting anyone. Otherwise, we swam snorkelled, sunbathed, talked to other tourists, or gossiped about them, and read.

There was a frisson of excitement one day when we heard on the grape vine that three people from the club who had hired a *kaiki* for a sail, had inadvertently strayed into Albanian waters, been arrested and put in prison. They came back next day and were greeted like conquering heroes.

Fred and John left, flying out serenaded with sad songs of farewell, several days before my ferry back to Brindisi was due. I decided to catch a boat to the Greek mainland, about one-and-a-half hours away. I left from Kerkyra and landed at a small port, Igoumeritsa.

I decided, optimistically, to hitch inland for a day or two and see where I could get to. After trudging along a rocky, white road leading inland between barren, brown hills, for about three miles, I began to have doubts about the plan, wondering if I should turn back. I had met no one.

Quite suddenly, a very tall, handsome, immaculately-clad man appeared, coming down the hillside towards me. He wore a khaki shirt and pants, pressed with knife-edged creases, a highly polished and loaded, brown leather cartridge belt and carried a shot gun. He asked me in perfect English where I was going, and I told him, hopefully hitching to Ioannina, not only the next town I could see on my rough map, but the only one. It looked to be about 80 kilometres inland. He looked completely shocked and said that virtually, the only likely vehicle to use the road was the local bus, which was due in a few moments. I must take it and he would pay my fare.

I thanked him very much, assured him I could pay my own way and we stood and talked for a few minutes when, true to his word, a rattling old bus came along and he hailed it. He climbed in and explained my situation to the driver with the captive audience of other passengers, black-clad women and workmen, all listening avidly. Whereupon, the driver said I need not pay and all the passengers said they would pay my fare. Finally, I was allowed to pay the driver. My mentor climbed off to continue his shooting expedition and we set off bumping along the rocky road. The other passengers nodded to me and smiled whenever they caught my eye.

The only vegetation I could see were a few stunted bushes and clumps of tussocky-grass growing between rocks on the steep hillsides lining both sides of the road. There was no traffic and I realized how fortunate I was to have been advised to take the bus.

Ioannina was a small town, the skyline dominated by the spire of a minaret rising from the mosque. I wandered along the street wondering what to do. There was very little to see in shop windows, a few tins of olive oil, but no groceries or bread.

A young man came up to me, breaking into my thoughts, and asked in halting English if he could help me. He told me his name was Nick and he was the Welfare Officer for CARE, a Canadian charity set up to help in the rehabilitation of Greece after the years of devastation during World War 2 and the communist regime.

To my shame, I knew almost nothing about these recent events and it was many years and a good deal of reading before I grasped the enormity of what the ordinary people had suffered. I thought they were very poor and it was hard to buy food.

Nick took me to the CARE office and introduced me to the staff of several men and girls. When they heard I was Australian, I was given a great welcome. I met an older man who, Nick told me, had hidden an Australian soldier for several weeks in the attic of his house while German soldiers patrolled the streets. Discovery would have meant his death. Now the

Australian, who lived in Melbourne, had sponsored his saviour and his family and he was waiting for his documents to come through before departing.

It seemed a foregone conclusion that Nick would look after me while I was in Ioannina. He spoke little English but he spoke French very well and we managed to converse in a mixture of two languages.

He gave me a guided tour of the town, to the mosque, where we climbed a narrow, winding, stone staircase to the top, and, in the evening, we sailed across quite a large lake in the middle of the town to an island. There was not much on it except a small *taverna* and we paused to look through a window where we saw a group of men deeply absorbed in a game of cards. The soft glow of an oil lamp mellowed their hard-worn faces and shadows played on the whitewashed walls behind them.

The full moon had risen when we left the island and everything was bathed in a silvery light. We climbed into a heavy, wooden *kaiki*, pulled in among reeds at the shore, and, for one moment, we and the gaunt, old boatman were still, as if we were frozen by the magical beauty of the night, before he dipped the oar and pushed us out.

Nick said he would take me to see some caves next day and, as I was walking along the street, waiting to meet him, an old, old lady dressed in black came up to me and gave me two perfect figs, on a fig leaf. The spontaneous generosity won my heart and I fell in love with the Greek people on the spot. I felt utterly safe while I was there and, poor as they were, that they would care for me.

The caves were some distance out of town so we went by bus with some other people who were interested to see them. They are quite well-known I learnt later on and very interesting.

Later we went to a market where farmers and people from remote villages had brought produce and beautiful craft work for sale. There were cheeses, pottery bowls, vases and wonderful woven blankets I yearned to buy. Camels were much in evidence and people in traditional dress gave it all a romantic aura.

There were several sideshows and we visited one where a rather solidly built lady was raised up off a table and suspended in mid-air with no visible means of support. She was then packed into a box and supposedly cut in half. There were many gasps of wonderment at these marvels and much applause.

Nick told me a lot about his family and the effects of the war and the rise of communism. His father had been shot during the war and he had joined the partisans and lived with them, fighting in the mountains during his teenage years. Now he was responsible for his mother and sister.

When the latter was married, he had to sell a lot of their land, vineyards, to get the money for her dowry. It was a revelation to me and gave me food for thought.

It was with great sadness that I left on the bus next day but I had to return to catch the boat back to Brindisi. Nick and I promised to keep in touch and I said goodbye to the people in the CARE office, feeling I had made friends for life.

While I waited on the little jetty at Igoumeritsa for the ferry to Corfu, I was very amused to see a row boat pull in, with a donkey standing up in it, with all the aplomb of a hardened seafarer.

It was the turning point in my journey and sad as I was to leave Greece, I felt I had been blessed to have been to Ioannina and met her people.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

CORFU TO EDINBURGH

The ferry for Brindisi left in the late afternoon and I joined a throng of black-clad women, men and children laden with bundles and baskets as I went on board.

The only other tourist was a young Australian man and we settled down on piles of ropes on deck to share our experiences of Greece. He had been to Athens but had caught some bug and had an unpleasant time. Conveniently, there were two lifeboats nearby, so when weariness overtook us, we crawled into them for the night.

Looking up at the stars before I fell asleep, memories of the last few days crowded into my mind, the barren mountains, stony roads, the market, the people from the mountains with their beautiful handwoven rugs, the donkeys, the mules, the minaret and sailing across the lake in the moonlight. I felt it would always be a special memory, set apart from the rest of my trip, like a picture in a frame in time.

In my absence, Gino had cleaned and oiled my bike and adamantly refused to let me pay him. After stocking up on my supplies, I set off for Taranto, on the Gulf of Taranto, in the Ionian Sea (the instep of Italy).

Low scrub grew as far as the eye could see, the country was flat and there was very little traffic on the road, two or three cyclists and a man, driving a mob of sheep. I saw several dwellings but they looked small and none were near the road.

Taranto was a pleasant small town on the coast but I pushed on, looking for somewhere to camp. Shade was at a premium as there were no trees and I finally had to make do, by crawling under a scrubby bush and moving with the sun.

Somewhere on my travels, a prickle had stuck into my leg and, although I had removed it, the site was quite sore, inflamed and festered. In spite of the less than attractive camp site, I thought I should rest it for a day. Luckily, the road ran along the coast and I hoped the saltwater might clear it up. The beach curved round in a sickle of white sand and, to my delight, when I walked the short distance to swim, I found a clump of pink Madonna lilies growing right on the tide mark. It seemed like a miracle and reminded me of home when the Easter lilies, as we called them, suddenly appeared from the dry, barren-looking soil in the late summer, exquisitely shaped, pale pink and beautiful.

I had nothing to read so it was a long day of introspection, thinking about Dick and the family's concern for his health, as well as of my travels. I swam several times and, by next morning, my leg felt considerably better.

It was just as well because the road to Potenza, the next town, was on the Appian Way and lead ever upwards. The air became cooler, the higher I climbed. I saw one or two villages, well off the road, sparkling white in the sunlight and perched on mountain peaks. Late in the day, as I was pushing my bike up yet another steep incline, and wondering where I could find water, a man and a woman, also pushing a bike with a sack perched on the handlebars, came out of a side road and joined me.

When I asked them where I could get water, they indicated I was to follow them. Although they spoke a dialect, I gathered they had come from another village nearby, to leave their three children with their grandparents for the school holidays. The man did most of the talking, the wife, smiling shyly and nodding her agreement to his remarks.

The man worked on the roads but they had been able to do the journey because it was Sunday and his day off. We came to a little village and I looked around for a village pump. The couple indicated the cobbled street running between primitive whitewashed dwellings, so I followed them. Lamps were lit and shed a soft, golden glow inside the houses we passed, here a crucifix, there a string of blood-red chillies hanging from a nail in the white wall, sidestepping a donkey tethered outside an entrance, until they stopped at a low door near the top of the street, opened it and ushered me in. Finally, I realized I was to spend the night with them; since the children were not home, I was to sleep in their bed in the attic.

Remonstrations were swept away and the husband picked up a bottle and disappeared, to return shortly with it filled with wine. I sat at a small table, watching as his wife cut up fat red tomatoes, laced them with oil and garlic and cut thick slices from a large, crusty loaf of bread. Perhaps, it was not only that the tomatoes were some of the sweetest I had ever tasted,

or my hunger, but, more likely, the warmth of their hospitality made it so special.

There was only one room, sparsely furnished except for the magnificent matrimonial bed on a raised dais. It was covered by a snowy-white spread, edged with crocheted lace. When it was time to retire, the wife took me up a rough timber ladder to the attic and showed me the double bed, normally where the *bambini* slept. Her husband left for work at dawn and, after a cup of coffee and a piece of bread and jam, I hugged my hostess goodbye and tried to express my gratitude for their hospitality. The village, I saw as I left, was called Grotole.

A truck came along, later in the morning, and when it stopped and I was offered a lift, I accepted readily. It was one of the few motorized vehicles I had seen since leaving Brindisi. There were two men on board and, after the bike was stowed on the back, I climbed into the cab. As on many occasions on my travels, I perched on top of the gear box. It was not the most comfortable place to sit but it was much better than struggling up and down the mountains. I was even more grateful when, in spite of language difficulty, I realized they were going all the way to Salerno on the Mediterranean Coast, saving me at least two, hard days on the mountainous road. Small settlements of white building on the tops of the mountains were the only houses we saw and there was very little traffic, apart from people leading donkeys. Potenza was a small town but we did not stop and we reached our destination in time for me to go south from Salerno, out along a spur of land, through Amalfi to Positano where I booked into the youth hostel.

I had heard that Amalfi and Positano were beautiful and, as soon as I arrived, I felt a difference in the air. It was soft and warm and I awoke next morning to sunshine and the mellow fruitfulness of the surrounding country. The hostel was perched on a small cliff, above a curving beach of white sand. Across the blue sea lay the Isle of Capri. Sadly due to my reduced financial state, I could not afford to go there.

It was so beautiful I decided to stay two nights and had a relaxing day, swimming and sunbathing. There were no shops nearby and my food supplies ran out before I left. An Australian girl, who was hitch-hiking, and I shared our breakfast, finishing off the tail end of my loaf of bread dipped in the last of her bottle of wine. We sat on a rock outside the hostel, looking across to the Isle of Capri and felt our cup of happiness run over!

I rode to Pompei next morning but it was well before the opening hour and I was so pestered by half a dozen youths wanting to be guides, look

after the bike and advise me, I decided to push on, rather than spend two hours in their company.

Naples was all I had dreamed of and more. I spent three days wandering around the streets visiting galleries and museums. As my shoes had completely given up the ghost, I managed to buy a pair of wooden-soled sandals, with a strip of leather over the toes. They were very uncomfortable to walk in and tended to slip off the pedals of the bike.

The road along the coast to Rome was so beautiful, I was happy to linger on the way and I made slow progress. I got a lift in an old truck into Rome. The driver pulled off the road on a hill overlooking the city and with great pride, he pointed out the famous landmarks and the seven hills surrounding the city.

I spent five days exploring the city, on my bike and walking. It was not only the wonders of the buildings, the Sistine Chapel, St Peters', the Colosseum, but the little back streets, with cameos of wonderful workmanship in the buildings, the shadows on cream walls, the secret places and the many cats, seething around fish stalls.

To my relief, I had been able to buy a pair of navy and white sandshoes for 4/6 which were not only much more comfortable but also improved my appearance. There had been times when I had taken the clogs off and gone barefoot.

Unhappily, the time had come to face reality on the financial front. My only asset was the bike and, by a wonderful chance, I had a top bunk at the youth hostel above a young American girl who wanted to buy one to ride to Denmark. We clinched the deal forthwith and with £10 in my pocket, much relieved, I reorganized my belongings for hitching.

I hated losing my independence and all but my most basic possessions. With winter approaching, I was not optimistic about the American girl's chances of reaching Denmark ahead of it but did nothing to dampen her enthusiasm.

I caught a bus to the outskirts of the city on the road to Florence. My first ride was in a Volkswagen, driven by a young man, who told me his name was Romulus and that he had a twin brother called Remus! Rides were easy and I reached Florence in the mid-afternoon. The hostel lay in the outskirts and I missed the bike badly as I plodded out to it.

I fell in love with Florence. I remembered Aunt Ina telling me how she longed to see it and I thought how lucky I was to have the chance. Being comparatively compact and small, exploring it was easy. In the middle ages, it had become famous for fine woollens and as a major financial centre. Affluent merchants spent their money on art, paintings, sculptures and

buildings. They became rulers of the city, persecuting anyone who had the temerity to rebel. Finally, the workers united and struck back. Class warfare continued until the 1400s when the Medicis came to power and peace and prosperity returned. This was the golden age of the Renaissance.

Not only was Florence a beautiful city but it had vibrancy and a commercial atmosphere. Leather workers and silversmiths worked busily at their trades. The shop windows were full of mouth-watering, elegant clothes, shoes, leather bags and exquisite scarves. It felt as if I had entered a stage set for a transported *Merchant of Venice*. I had my first cappuccino before setting off on a round of sightseeing, the statue of David, the Uffizi Gallery, where I spent hours and came out in a daze from the marvellous treasures I had seen – and aching legs. Looking back, I realize how fortunate I was to have been able to visit so many wonderful places when there were no crowds of tourists. There was always enough space for the few visitors in Italy, at that time, to enjoy works of art and move around without having to peer over peoples' shoulders.

Back at the coast, I caught only a fleeting look at the leaning tower of Pisa, from a truck window as we drove past.

Finding a place to camp was not easy as every piece of fertile land was divided into small farmlets. Getting a ride one evening (something I never did normally) and travelling until late, I asked the driver to stop when I thought I saw a suitable opening. However, when I investigated, dogs began barking and I beat a speedy retreat. The only option was the beach so, hoping I was above the tide mark, I crawled into my sleeping bag and went out like a light, in spite of lying on a bed of pebbles.

I woke suddenly to bright sunshine and with a fisherman, crouched on his haunches, his face about eighteen inches away from mine, gazing at me in astonishment. I gathered from the small amount of what he said that the tide was coming in fast and unless I moved I would be soaked or swept out to sea. Delicately trying to get out of the sleeping bag with some circumspection, I did my best to explain the circumstances in my broken Italian but he departed finally, still with a bemused expression on his face. I was able to wash in the sea, tidy myself as best I could, have a drink of water and some bread and cheese and get on the road to Genoa.

There was no difficulty reaching the city and the hostel, which was busy with a cosmopolitan group of travellers. In talking to some Indian students, one said he came from Patiala and in further conversation, it transpired he knew one of the boys I had met on the *Maloja* in 1954. It was an incredible coincidence and good to have news of someone I had known, if only briefly.

The previous few days had been not without their stresses and I needed a day to do some washing, pull myself together and sightsee. While there were wonderful galleries, buildings and museums to explore, it was the noisy, busy, dirty part that fascinated me the most. I sat by the monument to Christopher Columbus and tried to cast my mind back to 1492 and imagine the tiny, sailing ships bucketing their way out of the port, across the Mediterranean and to their adventures in an unknown world. I later discovered that Christopher Columbus, who was born in Genoa, did not, in fact, set sail from Genoa but, I think, somewhere in Spain.

Originally, I had planned to head north to Milan, where I hoped to get mail, and from there through Austria and on back to England as fast as I could. I did not have a visa to enter France and was reluctant to pay the fee. Unfortunately, heavy snow falls had cut off all the northern routes, including the Brenner Pass, so I had no option, other than France.

As I left the hostel, I was joined by a rather odd German man, Kurt I think, who announced he would travel with me. He told me his fiancée, Margarita, had turned him down and as his heart was broken, he was on his way to Marseilles to join the Foreign Legion. It sounded so romantic, I raised no objection. I thought he was very odd but in view of his plans, knew we would not be together long. I had no illusions about why he needed a female companion, since we were in a tourist area where people were reluctant to pick up hitch-hikers, especially a man on his own.

He had some connection with the *Croix-Rouge* (Red Cross) and before we left Genoa, had to go to their office, but I never found out why. I was subjected to a dissertation about Margarita, whom, by now I decided, was a wise girl. He had a thing about Arabs which I felt did not auger well for them if he ever did get into the Foreign Legion.

We were not doing well, getting rides. Every time a vehicle came along, he hid in bushes on the side of the road and planned to come out if it stopped! I was highly amused when the first thing to stop was a motor-bike and I was offered a lift on the back. Relieved, I climbed on board.

'I will meet you on the Corniche', he cried as we headed off – and faintly in the breeze, 'Margaret, do not talk to Arabs.' I was not sorry to see what I thought was the last of him.

When I reached the French border, I was able to get a three-day visa quite cheaply, although it would mean a rush through to get into Belgium.

Daylight had gone by the time I reached Nice and all the shops were closed. I was out of food but assumed I could get something at the hostel. It proved to be on a steep cliff above the town and, tired from my travels,

I was despondent when I found not only did they have no food but no vacancy either!

A young Canadian brother and sister overheard my conversation with the manager and came up to me as I turned away and said I must share their supper. They had bought an array of patés, cheeses and other delicacies which they pressed on me. Tired and hungry, I did justice to the meal and will be forever in their debt for such kindness.

Much cheered, I retraced my steps until I found a snug, secluded spot and settled down for the night. I lay looking down on the fairyland of lights in Nice, thinking how romantic it was and how fortunate I was to be in such a place.

Next morning, I was sitting on a bench, overlooking the ocean and eating a croissant, when a young man came and sat beside me. He spoke excellent English and told me he was Arabian, had come to France from Algiers. We had a most interesting conversation.

Fortunately, he had moved on before who should turn up but my erstwhile companion, looking rather exhausted, I could hardly believe my eyes. Unable to think of an excuse to get rid of him and knowing we would soon go separate ways, we again set off together.

We were given a lift by a racing driver in a red sports car and headed inland along a narrow, winding road through mountains. My companion sat in front and conversed knowledgeably about cars with all the aplomb of a millionaire with a fleet of Ferraris. I cowered in the back trying not to look at the precipitous drop into the valleys below, as we sped along.

We separated at Arles, much to my relief, he taking his fractured heart to Marseilles and I to Avignon. I waved him off as he trudged down a poplar-lined road, thinking what a great plot for a film it would be, had there been any romantic interest! As it was I felt only great relief.

I explored Avignon and the famous bridge, sadly only half standing, and recalled singing *Sur le pont d'Avignon* in French lessons at High school. The country was very beautiful but I could not afford to linger. With good rides and great relief, I reached the Luxembourg border, four hours before my visa ran out.

Arriving in Brussels on a mild, sunny day in the mid-afternoon, I bought a long bun, filled with delicacies, and found my way to a deserted park to sit and enjoy it. I was tired after my speedy trip through France, felt grubby and my clothes were showing the signs of my two months, rather unorthodox, travel. When a smartly-dressed woman came into the park and sat down on a bench, I was relieved to see some distance away, my self-esteem went lower still.

Suddenly, to my embarrassment she got up, came over to me and, in English, asked if I had a match. I said I was sorry, that I did not smoke. Then she asked if she could share the bench. I replied that of course she could and tried to tuck my, by now, frayed sneakers out of sight. She went on to say she had thought I looked so interesting, she wanted to find out all about me. 'And that roll', she went on, 'just made my mouth water!' She wore a tailored, blue suit, white hat, with matching bag and shoes, a white carnation in her button hole. As I had just finished the roll, I could not offer her any, but feeling more at ease, I told her about my travels.

'I envy you so much', she said, when my tale ended, 'I wanted to travel and be free but I grew up in a conservative family and never had the chance.' She had sisters, married at 22 and had two children in boarding school. She had come to Brussels with her husband, who was attending a conference, and was bored to death. We sat and talked for over an hour. As we parted, she leant over and tucked a five pound note in my pack, saying 'I can't take you to dinner, but I want you to buy something to remember me by!' In spite of my protestations, she insisted, kissed me goodbye and left. I sat for a few moments in a reverie deeply touched by the brief encounter.

My evening at the hostel in Brussels was spent sorting out my belongings and making the most of the ample, hot water supply in the plastic bowls provided to wash in. There were no showers.

Much cleaner and spruced up, I set off for a quick look at the Market Square, covered in flowers and surrounded by the noble buildings of the city, before hitching to Bruges.

When I was having a last look in a shop window, a middle-aged man came up to me and, in a heavily accented voice, asked me if I would like to go to Munich, I think, maybe it was Berlin, to a housekeeping job! I did not like the look of him much, so declined gracefully, thinking it was more likely to be a fate worse than death, he had in mind.

By now it was late autumn and calm, sunny weather when I reached Bruges. White swans floated on the dark waters of the moat surrounding the castle, there were beautiful buildings, a richness and feeling of solidarity. As I walked the streets, I felt I could be in the Middle Ages. If I loved Brussels, I loved Bruges even more, I decided.

While I was pondering over some lace-edged handkerchiefs, which I planned to take back as presents for my friends in Scotland, and which, thanks to my generous English friend in Brussels, I could now afford, a tall, heavily-built young woman came up to me and in English, asked if she could help me. When I had made my purchases, she said she would like to

take me to afternoon tea. We went to a nearby café and she immediately started to tell me her life story.

She told me she was twenty, that both her parents were dead, leaving her the sole beneficiary of their fortune. As she was an heiress, to protect her from unscrupulous suitors, she had been left in the care of the Abbess of a convent, where she lived. She seemed quite happy, not at all rebellious against what sounded like a strict religious life, saying she felt they had been very wise to protect her in this way. She kept reiterating how necessary it was to be on guard against such eager swains. I wondered if many young men had pressed their suit.

Next day, I pushed on to Ostend and England, sad to end my trip but much richer and with wonderful memories, which have lasted a life-time. The trip back to Edinburgh was swift and the welcome from my kind landlady warm.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

SCOTLAND AGAIN

I caught up with my friends from the Infirmary and paid a visit to the Davidsons at Braid Hills.

'And what are your plans now?' Gracie asked me. I told her I had vaguely thought I would get a housekeeping job for some old boy in the Highlands for the winter and write a book about my travels. 'Oh!' she cried, leaping off her chair. 'You are just what the Herds need', and hurried to the phone.

'That's marvellous!' she said when she came back into the room. 'It's all arranged! I have spoken with Peter's mother and she is delighted!' She added, 'They aren't quite ready to come out of hospital yet, but it is only for six weeks, until they are on their feet!' Then she explained that Peter, his wife Maidie and four children had been in a bad car accident, when a truck driver waved them on at a crossroad and a speeding vehicle crashed into them. They were sent to different hospitals and could not go home until they had a competent person to run the house and look after them. My protestations, that I might not be qualified, were brushed aside and, as it was for such a short time, I weakly agreed to do it.

Gracie and Peter's mother had been at school together. Peter was her only child. He had been in the Black Watch and an *aide-de-camp* to Lord Louis Mountbatten in the Middle East during the war. Maidie was about to spend a year in Switzerland studying languages before going into the Foreign Service when the World War 2 broke out and she joined the WRNS. She was sent to what was then Ceylon where she met and married Peter.

Peter had a law practice, inherited from his father, in Kirkcaldy and the family lived in a little village on the outskirts of the town. Kirkcaldy, I was to learn, was noted for the production of linoleum.

I arrived home to be greeted by an excited Mrs McGregor. A strange man had called and asked to see me. He told Mrs McGregor that he, his wife and two children, had just returned from visiting his wife's family who lived in Ioannina. He had spent a day fishing with Nick who had told him about meeting and given him my address. His wife was very lonely and finding it hard to settle in Edinburgh and he wondered if I would come and live with them for a year as her companion!

To say I was stunned is an understatement, even more so when I discovered that they lived a few houses down, on the opposite side of our street! I went to visit them and found them very friendly and anxious for me to come. The husband, tall and dark, told me they had met during the war when he was either stationed at Ioannina or escaping the enemy, fallen in love and married. His wife was finding being in the house all day, with two small children and few outside contacts, very lonely and wondered if I would help.

His wife, also tall and dark, was very friendly and spoke English fluently but looked depressed. The house was quite dark and sombre and, thinking back to the sunshine, blue sky and open-hearted people in Ioannina during my brief visit, I understood how constricting her life must be now. I explained that I had promised to Kirkcaldy. Would I come to them after that? Much as I loved cold, austere Edinburgh, I had spent six months there and felt I should move on but my heart went out to the girl and I felt unhappy about refusing their request. Whether I could have helped her or not, I was never to know.

I was barely through the door, after my visit, when I had an urgent phone call from one of the social workers at the Infirmary, whom I shall refer to as Ellen, asking if I could help her out for a few days by staying in their house with her elderly, blind mother while she herself was at work. Normally, they employed German au pairs but the girl who had been with them for several months had a nervous breakdown overnight and had to be flown home! Could I stay until a replacement could be found?

I knew Ellen had to work for financial reasons so I did not hesitate to pack some clothes and go over. Her mother was delightful, cultured, Irish and very independent, in spite of her lack of sight. She was competent in German and for this reason they chose German au pairs with whom she could converse and teach English. There was very little to do beyond cooking, under her direction, reading to her or talking. I could understand a young person finding the days very long and lonely, with little opportunity to make friends or go out. By the time another au pair had been installed,

the Herds were ready for discharge from hospital so I set off the Kirkcaldy, a short train-ride from Edinburgh.

Peter's mother met me at the station and I settled in the night before the parents were due home. There were four children, Michael and Katie had already been sent back to boarding school. David and Malcolm were to come in a day or two, being cared for by friends in the meantime.

Maidie, understandably, was rather tentative when we met but we settled down together, very amicably, after a few days. She was not only extremely pretty with a clear, flawless complexion and red-gold hair but friendly and vivacious. Peter also was easy to get on with and very kind.

Maidie had a fractured pelvis from the accident and, as she was six months pregnant, there had been grave fears for the baby. Fortunately, no damage had been done but she had been advised to be very careful. Well before my six-week engagement was up, she asked me if I would stay until the baby arrived. I was enjoying being with the family, I said I would. It was the beginning of a lifelong friendship.

Peter had a badly fractured leg and was on crutches for several weeks. He managed to go to the office, for a few hours initially, later extending them, travelling to and fro' by taxi.

The house was not called *Orchard Croft* for nothing. It was a pretty, long, two-storey building set in an acre of orchard and built on a rise above the little village, where we did the household shopping.

First thing every day, I made an enormous pot of porridge for the family, reserving a big helping for the lady who came each morning to do the housework, including heaving scuttles full of coal up from the cellar. She looked as if a puff of wind would blow her away but she worked much harder than I did.

Malcolm and David had an early supper each night. Every morning, when I was walking down the drive with David to put him on the school bus, which passed the gate, I asked him what he would like me to make for his supper. Without fail, he said, 'Minth (mince), pleath, Mith Porter!'

Planning meals and shopping for a family was rather a challenge, initially. I felt Maidie was taken advantage of by two elderly sisters who ran the fish shop and the butcher. I tended to go for less expensive fish and meat but, after a while, I suspected they were sabotaging me and, when they saw me walking down the street, rang Maidie to say, 'We have a lovely wee bittee…' such and such fish naming something exorbitantly expensive and talk her into having it 'sent up!' The same thing happened with the butcher.

Christmas was approaching and, as Peter had thought they would be managing on their own, he had obtained a Fortnum and Mason's catalogue

and put in an enormous order. When it arrived, it was an Aladdin's cave of delicacies I had only read about. Many of his clients were wealthy farmers and they and other friends turned up with presents of Christmas cheer. The larder shelves were groaning.

Michael and Katie came home for the holidays and there was great excitement getting ready for the big event.

I remember nothing of the day itself but, on Christmas Eve, Maidie and I went to midnight mass. The snow lay thick on everything, the street lamps cast a golden glow and the high Anglican service gave me a wonderful feeling of spirituality I still remember.

New Year's Day was very quiet, as everyone recovered from Hogmanay. David and I took tin trays to the road outside the gate, sat on them and sledged wildly to the bottom of the hill. Our shrieks of laughter were enough to waken the dead.

Sometime previously, the family had employed two Spanish sisters as au pairs-cum-home helps. They fought a lot and threw pots around in the kitchen in the mornings. They used a lot of garlic in their cooking which Maidie and Peter enjoyed, but they had to draw the line at them giving David garlic soup every morning, because the smell was so overpowering when he came to kiss them goodbye before school.

I was dying to try out some of the recipes I had collected on my travels. When Maidie discovered that, not only did I like cooking but I could cook, she decided to return all the hospitality they owed friends while I was with them. So we embarked on a series of buffet dinner parties, for five or six couples each. It was fun planning menus, doing flowers, etc. The cleaning lady came back to wash up but the kitchen was very small and space limited, so I had to be careful where to tread when I came in with plates to be washed, as we had to stack them on the floor.

In a twist of fate, years later, the son of one of these couples met up with Scott Robertson (a relative from Queensland) and came to WA with him. They stayed for a time with Aunt Marjorie, my mother's youngest sister, and Uncle Bill at Windyridge, near the small town of Bruce Rock, and the boy's parents came out and stayed there, too! His mother said to Aunt Marjorie, 'I have only met one person from WA and that was Meg Porter!'

When the children came home for holidays, Maidie decided to have a party for their young friends. Among their group, these were usually a small dance in their own homes, an orchestra hired for the music. I suggested we have a barbecue and everyone was most enthusiastic. It was a very basic affair, a fire lit in the middle of the immaculate gravel path, a trestle table, sausages and tomato sauce in a bun and the wherewithal for them to make

johnnycakes: flour, water and golden syrup. After demonstrating how to cook their sausages and make and cook the johnnycakes, I let them do it themselves. We boiled the billy for tea to wash it down. It was hailed as a great success, some of the boys saying it was the best party they had ever been to.

When the holidays were over, we adults enjoyed a much more sophisticated outing, a day at point-to-point races. Sitting on a tartan rug, drinking champagne and nibbling cold chicken, it was exhilarating to watch the horses take the jumps in such a perfect setting on a warm spring day.

I had seen Fred a few times since my return. He had moved to the Dundee Infirmary where he was a registrar in the Orthopaedic clinic.

Tom Davidson invited us to go gliding, one Saturday, and we spent a long, cold day in a bleak field on the outskirts of Edinburgh, where the club met, for our turns to go up. There were only two gliders and only one person at a time could go up with the pilot, so it was a slow process. Each changeover and getting the craft up was time-consuming and the members had precedence over us. The glider was attached by a rope to a vehicle, which drove at speed along a strip, until it became airborne and the rope dropped. Floating silently over the countryside on an air current was a wonderful feeling and made our long wait worthwhile.

I felt grateful for being accepted as part of the family while I was with them and included in all their activities. We went to a review of the Black Watch one evening, at which Peter was the guest of honour, to Edinburgh and a variety of other outings.

There was a bout of wild weather as the time arrived for the baby's birth. Peter was due to go to a meeting and dinner in Edinburgh and planned to stay overnight, as the bridge over the Forth was being repaired and he had to detour about 70 miles to get there. He did not want to go but Maidie assured him she would be all right. The doctor had recommended that she go to the Edinburgh Maternity Hospital, in case there were complications, rather than the local cottage hospital. Peter left.

Maidie woke me at midnight and said the baby was coming. She was quite calm and had ordered a taxi to take her to the local hospital. She made me promise I would not ring Peter and tell him what was happening, as she knew he would came straight home, he would have been drinking and, with the icy roads, could have an accident.

When Peter did arrive home next morning, it was to hear he had a new baby daughter. There was rejoicing all round and the children decreed she was to be called Susan. All seemed well, although Maidie had voiced

concern that she looked rather blue. The staff reassured her but, two days later, Susan died from an undetected heart defect.

The wild weather continued and wind and rain battered us, as Peter and I followed the undertaker and the minister up a grassy slope to lay the small, white coffin in her grave. It was an awful day on every count.

Things went on much as usual, in spite of our heavy hearts. The weather cleared and the countryside burgeoned.

Maidie was not anxious for me to leave but I was no longer needed. While I pondered on my next move, I heard from Rosemary Locke (later Skoss) saying she was finally coming to UK and could we do the trip we had talked about, to the continent?

Ro had been doing her nursing training at Fremantle Hospital, when I left, and she had come to see me off. She says she made up her mind as the *Maloja* put to sea; she was going to travel too, as soon as she finished her course. True to her word, on qualifying she got work in hospitals in Canada and the USA. Now, she was coming to the UK and would meet me in Edinburgh where she would be staying with the Davidsons, at Braid Hills.

While I was packing up to go to Edinburgh to join her, a cryptic telegram arrived from the Bests at Acton – 'Don't waste your talents in Scotland, come to Ireland.'

No second invitation was needed and I arranged to go there as soon as Ro and I returned.

1958–1959

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

SCANDINAVIA

Rosemary and I met at our cousins, the Davidsons, in their cold, stone house in the Braid Hills on the outskirts of Edinburgh. In spite of it being early summer, we were stricken with cold, backing up against the Aga cooker in the kitchen at every opportunity, to get some warmth into our bones. The dog still soaked up any heat from the drawing room fire, stretched out in front of it on the rug.

Pod looked after us in her inimitable way, bringing us breakfast in bed, exclaiming, 'Well, how are my wee moosies today?' The wee moosies were huddled under the blankets up to their chins, dreading the moment when they would have to emerge and face the day.

Our travel plans were to go to Linton, to see the famous church and the manse where grandfather Leishman grew up. From there, we would head south, cross to France and go to Paris, which neither of us had been to, before heading north through Belgium, Holland, etc, to Trondheim in Norway to visit Barbara and Curt Dahl. I was supposed to have gone to the UK with Barb three years before but had gone to the Kimberley instead and was anxious to see her again. We were going to hitch-hike and travelled light.

We had no trouble getting to Linton and exploring the church, supposedly built a thousand years ago. The first names we saw in the visitors' book were those of our aunts, Helen and Peg, when they were there before the war.

We had some difficulty getting rides when we set off south. Ro had arranged to visit a pen-friend she had corresponded with when she was at school. The girl lived in Newcastle and was expecting us.

Nightfall found us on a lonely moor, miles from a youth hostel and, to make matters worse, a drizzling rain set in. The only building in sight was a small shed, well off the road, and we made for it. It was a timber mill, clearly still in use. Workmen's jackets hung on pegs, and in a rough little kitchen, there was a kettle and mugs, sugar and spoons spread around. Hoping we could get away before anyone turned up for work next morning and we were caught red handed, we had a scratch meal of sorts, then borrowed the jackets and settled down in the drier places we could find for the night. It rained steadily and the roof leaked. I had been boasting to Rosemary that I could sleep anywhere but I had to eat my words that night. Apart from my ration of jackets, I had covered myself with my raincoat. It was black, voluminous and made of some synthetic, slippery material. Whenever I moved, even slightly, it would either slither off me or sashay up over my face, nearly smothering me. In the middle of the night, the roof above me sprang a leak and it was impossible to move without falling over something. There was no trouble about making an early start. It was a relief when dawn broke and we made our getaway.

Still there was no traffic and the chance of reaching Newcastle to see Ro's friend by the time Ro had advised her of our likely arrival, was clearly a lost cause. We plodded on through the lonely heath.

Deep in sombre thought, we did not hear the horn of the limousine until it pulled up beside us. It was driven by a chauffeur who hopped out and the plump, elderly, cheerful gentleman sitting inside invited us to get in when the doors were opened for us. We needed no second invitation and arrived at our destination in comfort and style.

When we eventually reached the terraced house where Ro's friend and her mother lived, they had almost given us up. We felt dreadful as they told us how all the family had come to meet us the day before (Sunday) and a special meal had been prepared. There was nothing we could do and it must have been guilt that made Ro refuse their pressing offer to stay with them. Instead, after a cup of tea we left, leaving two very disappointed people behind, waving us goodbye.

It was much easier to get rides as we went south. We stopped at Rutland, where Uncle Bill's family came from originally. In answer to Ro's inquiry, an elderly lady directed us to an old forge which she said was erected on what originally had been Locke land. Neither of us remember finding any other traces of the family but later Uncle Bill said we should have gone to see the vicar, as his Uncle Charlie had donated a lectern for the church which had been inscribed with the family name.

It was a mellow, golden afternoon when we walked along a grassy ridge which was part of the Pilgrim's Way and looked down through a gauzy haze on Canterbury. In my mind, I could see the string of ponies and hear the jingle of the harness as the pilgrims made their way to the city. I thought of the Miller's Wife, mounted on a little white pony, chatting away in that indecipherable language we had to read in *The Canterbury Tales* when we studied them at High School. I could see her riding side-saddle, wearing a full skirt of 'fustian', and the veil from her wimple fluttering behind her. I have never known what fustian was, but it always sounds practical material.

The youth hostel at Canterbury was a black and white Tudor building on the outskirts of the city and tucked away behind a honeysuckle hedge. We were given gardening for our tasks, which was much pleasanter than cleaning.

Next day we explored Canterbury, trying to take in some of its history and the glory of the cathedral, before catching the car ferry from Dover to Calais. We spent our first night in France at Montreuil-sur-Mer at 'La Hulotte', Citadelle, an ancient building within grey, crumbling walls. A man wearing blue dungarees and jacket, with a beret on his head, was mowing the tall, green grass growing within the ramparts, in the long, summer twilight. I was so happy to be back in France.

It rained steadily next day and at lunch-time, we sought shelter in a café to eat our bread and cheese and drink our wine.

The country was flat and the fields planted with corn and sugar beet. We got a ride through to Paris and we set out to find a student hostel in Pigalle, which someone had recommended to us. In spite of being given wrong directions by several people, even being put on the wrong train in the Metro, we found our objective, eventually. Our bed and three meals cost us in sterling 8/- (eight shillings) a day. Much later, Ro and I both admitted we thought the meat we were given was horse but hunger had overcome our finer feelings and we had done it full justice.

We wasted no time seeing the sights. The people in the street fascinated us, long-haired men, chic French women, people of all races and colours. We walked along the River Seine, drinking in the feeling of age, history and the beautiful architecture of the bridges over the river, Notre-Dame and all the other romantic places. We visited churches and galleries until our feet ached and I will never forget the look on the face of the guard in the Gallery of Modern Art as he saw Ro walking along barefoot, carrying her shoes. Although there were crowds on the streets, there were not a lot of tourists in Paris and we were able to enjoy our viewing of treasures like the *Mona Lisa*, almost by ourselves.

We soon mastered the Metro system and could get around the city with ease. Two Spanish boys took us to the Latin Quarter one night but we saw more when we went back on our own, next day.

A very small girl from Iceland shared our dormitory. She had made the mistake of sightseeing in high-heeled shoes and her poor, little, size three feet were swollen and blistered. Rosemary anesthetized her with a tumbler full of red wine and then bathed and taped up the offending members.

We took the Metro to Fontainebleau but, in my haste to get on the train, I knocked off the top of the bottle of wine I was carrying on the train railings and cut my finger, as I wrenched the bottle out of my pack. There was consternation, among the sedate French housewives in the carriage, at the profuse bleeding and in no time I, too, was taped up.

The Château de Fontainebleau was a favourite palace of the medieval kings of France surrounded as it was by forests abundant with game. The palace, with its fine Renaissance decoration, frescoes and statuary, was an extravagance to behold. Napoleon's throne room, once the king's bedroom, with the throne itself where the king's bed once stood under a carved wooden canopy, was a magnificent sight. There were very few visitors that day and Ro, seizing the moment, sprang over the red velvet ropes and sat in it. Unfortunately, she left a large, dirty footmark on the venerable gentleman's velvet footstool but we made our getaway without detection.

Unfortunately, when we went to the Château de Versailles, King Louis XVI's grand palace, the Hall of Mirrors was closed but we went through the Palace enjoying the seventeenth and eighteenth century art and the magnificent gardens stretching out as far as the eye could see. This was a place of contrasts, the Sun King in all his glory who turned a hunting lodge into a magnificent Château which, at the time of the Revolution, became the last palace of his dynasty.

We went back, through Paris, when we turned north again, getting a ride with some soldiers in an army vehicle. They showed little respect for speed limits, or other traffic, as we sped through the city.

By now it was high summer and the days warm and long. One midday, when we had finished our lunch and somnolence had overtaken us, we stretched out in a field of lush grass, poppies and cornflowers, for a siesta. We were rudely awakened when several cows came over to look at us and ran their rough tongues over the backs of our legs – no doubt after the salt in our perspiration. Our road led us past a youth hostel, described as a stone cottage set among corn fields, and it sounded too romantic to miss. We got a lift in a wine tanker and when we saw the YHA sign and then the cottage off the road, we asked the driver to drop us off which he obligingly did.

With right hand traffic, alighting passengers had to get out in the middle of the road, so although it was quite quiet, we wasted no time jumping out and waving our kind driver off. He was well down the road before I realized I had left our black, plastic handbag, the same one we had taken round Spain, on the floor of the truck. It contained all our money, passports and visas. The truck was about to disappear over the last rise when Ro, with great presence of mind, jumped onto the nearby stone wall and waved her arms frantically. We thought there was no chance the driver would see her and realize something was wrong, and we had a frenzied discussion, 'Should we hitch on, or should one go and one stay?' We knew he was heading for Rheims and we might find the truck at a winery, which was his destination.

Suddenly, over the horizon, a long, black, open tourer came in sight. The driver was waving a black object in his hand, most precariously. It was our kitty bag. The truck driver had caught a glimpse of Ro's signal as he drove over the hill and had seen the bag and given it to the first passing vehicle. The plump, jovial driver and his numerous family members, packed in around him, seemed to think it was a huge joke, waved away our thanks and went on their way, laughing their heads off.

We were euphoric with relief, as we walked down the path, through corn and flowers. The cottage looked so romantic but our enthusiasm was tempered somewhat, when we found we had quite a long walk to the nearby village to collect the key. The facilities were Spartan and, apart from two boys, also hitch-hikers, who came in later, very quiet.

Going into Belgium, I told Ro we would have no trouble getting around Brussels, because I knew the city like the back of my hand. We found the youth hostel easily enough but were barely installed when our dormitory was overrun by a bus-load of young, German schoolgirls on a tour. They had come to Brussels to visit the World Exhibition which had just opened. They all talked loudly and ceaselessly, and spent their time ratting through their large suitcases, which blocked the aisle between the bunks.

The water was hot but I had forgotten there were no showers and we had to do with a wash in one of the big, red basins in the bathroom. The room was not large and it was bedlam each night, trying to get a good wash before retiring. Even when you could get hold of a basin and fill it, finding a space to put it on the floor was a challenge. Rosie said if you turned round to pick up your soap and turned back, you would find someone else's foot in your basin. Her troubles did not end there as every time she opened the window by her top bunk, the person below slammed it shut. Clearly our bedfellows did not appreciate fresh air.

We had an exciting and exhausting day at the exhibition. There were displays set up from countries around the world. The beautiful glass objects, set against light, in the Swedish display enchanted me and started my love of coloured glass. It was very warm; we could find nothing to drink. There were no seats and the small squares of lawn were roped off with instructions not to step on them. Ro went off to watch a film and I, by good luck, found a chair. I sat on it, amid a busy throng, clutching the kitty bag to my bosom and, in spite of people falling over my feet and hitting me on my head with their handbags, fell deeply asleep until Ro came back and woke me.

At one stage in our travels, we were given a lift by a high-ranking, very elegant, suave army officer, attached to NATO, or some international organization. He wanted to take us out to dinner that night but we did not feel we could rise to the occasion either physically and certainly not sartorially.

My boast about knowing Brussels so well, proved to be rather rash when we set off to explore the city at night. After walking for what seemed to be hours, trying to get back to the hostel, we finally caught a tram and ended up at the terminus, on the outskirts of the city in the opposite direction. We managed to fall through the hostel door just before it was locked up at 10 pm.

There was no difficulty getting rides over the border and into Holland. It was all as neat and tidy as I remembered. Everyone was interested when they heard we were from Australia, many having family members who had emigrated. We got a lift with a man who told us he had spent some of his childhood in Australia. Incredibly, not only had he lived in Leederville, but the family had attended the same church as Granny and Aunt Jean. He even remembered that Aunt Jean had taught Sunday school!

Ro mentioned that she had pen-friend who came from somewhere near our route but did not have her address or knew if she was married. Our new friend said we should be able to trace her through the Records Office and he set off to do so, like a bloodhound on the trail. After several forays, he did in fact find out her married name and whereabouts and drove us to the house. He said he would see if she was home and was in fact Ro's old pen-friend. He came back beaming and told us we were at the right house and she wanted us all to come in for a cup of tea. As we got out of the car he said to Ro, 'I suppose you know she is black!' Ro did as they had exchanged photographs. The girl was ecstatic to meet Ro and full of questions. She was a small, dainty person, sat us down and made us an elegant morning tea. She begged us to break our journey and stay and when Ro said we had to go on, pleaded that we stay at least to meet her husband when he came home

for lunch. Ro said no and her disappointment was palpable when we said goodbye. When we got back in the car our friend rebuked us – 'Why did you refuse to stay – she really wanted you to?' Neither of us had an answer. We both agreed later, that we had been mad to refuse the kind offer.

We had a couple of days in Amsterdam visiting galleries and museums. We went to Haarlem to see the Frans Hals Museum and to Alkmaar, a tourist village where everyone wore traditional dress and there were colourful displays of cheeses. Barges were being poled along the canal loaded with wax-packaged Edams, like red cannon balls, and flat round Gouda cheeses, going for export.

We visited an immaculate dairy farm where black and white cows were feeding in small, lush, green fields. The milking shed looked as it had never been used, but in winter cattle were kept under cover all the time. Now they were out feeding, the stalls had sand sprinkled thickly over them. Not only was the sand flattened smooth with the back of a rake but the dairy's insignia was stamped neatly in each stall. Cheeses were on sale and arrangements could be made to send them back home as presents. We were not affluent enough to take up the offer.

We hired bikes one day and rode to the coast, passing flat fields of sugar beet and the occasional windmill with sails spinning. Whether it was my bike or the wind, which seemed against us whichever direction we took, I made heavy weather of it. Finally, Rosemary, waiting for me, said in exasperation 'Meggie! I don't know how you ever rode round Spain!' I was beginning to wonder that myself.

We planned to spend our last night in Holland at a youth hostel, which was an old sailing ship on the coast, near the German border. It sounded very romantic and we were pleased to get a lift with a nice, fair-haired, young man who was going to a nearby town. He did not speak English so our communication was difficult. When he reached his destination, he insisted we must come home to meet his wife. The day was advanced but we felt it was only polite to accept. In fact, we had little choice.

His young wife was very welcoming but not only was she shy, she likewise spoke no English. However, they had plenty to say to each other and there was much nodding of heads before he disappeared out the back. The house was very small with one main room, a kitchen at the end and a ladder leading to an attic. Beyond that was a bedroom. The husband returned and they indicated we were to follow him. He led us outside, through what appeared to be a neighbour's yard, into the next house. We gathered it was his parents' house and were led into a room crowded with people (like prize

exhibits). No one spoke any English but we tried to explain who we were and where we were going. We hoped, to the youth hostel sailing ship.

We were given tumblers of lemonade with segments of tinned mandarins floating in it, which we felt was a great luxury. We felt like monkeys in the zoo, being watched by people while we were trying to eat and drink. We were led back by our host to find a meal ready for us. In spite of our protestations about leaving, after we helped wash up, we realized we were there for the night and our hope of getting to the coast faded.

When we had finished, the husband tactfully disappeared and we were offered a wash at the kitchen sink before being led into the bedroom and shown the double bed with pristine, lace-edged, white sheets where we were to sleep. Our host and hostess were going to sleep in the attic. All arguments were brushed aside. We had been travelling all day and the thought of our dirty feet appalled us. We wondered about sleeping on the floor but without sleeping bags, decided there was nothing for it – we climbed into our pyjamas and slid gingerly between the sheets.

We consoled ourselves about missing out on the sailing ship by thinking at least we would go and have a look at it next day, but even there we were thwarted. It was pouring with rain and our kind host insisted on driving us to the border. All we saw was the faint outline through the rain as we drove past. As the rain was still bucketing down, our host drove us well into Germany before leaving us with a fond farewell. It had been an exhausting experience but the kindness of the young couple was heart-warming.

We had quite a long wait in the rain, on one occasion, sitting on our packs, under a tree. Ro and I argued quite a lot on our travels but we agreed, we were more in tune with each other when the going got tough. In spite of the weather, we were very amiable towards each other as we sat there, soaked and with water trickling down our necks.

We were relieved by a pleasant, young, German man who gave us a lift, in spite of our condition. He told us he had been a Luftwaffe pilot during the war but did not appear to harbour any ill-feeling towards us!

We went through Hamburg, which looked dirty and depressed, to Flensberg on the Danish border, where we stayed at the youth hostel. Also at the hostel were two South African girls, whom we were to meet again further on in our travels. It was my first encounter with the South African accent and hard 'ar' sounds. Also they had an obnoxious smelling cheese in one of their packs so, on at least one occasion, we smelt them before we saw them. They said 'yar' a lot for the affirmative which took a little time to adjust to.

The weather was perfect when we took the ferry across to Denmark – blue sky and white fluffy clouds. Placid black and white cows grazed in lush, green pastures and all the houses and buildings were so sparkling, they looked as if they had just been painted.

A friendly BP representative, who spoke some English, drove us to Copenhagen and he insisted on taking us to his home to meet his wife and have morning coffee. They lived in a small unit, in a vast high rise complex, where we were made most welcome and given delicious coffee and pastries. Our hostess did not speak English so after her husband left to go to his office, conversation flagged. We admired the plants with which the unit was inundated. Creepers crawled up the walls, hung down from containers near the ceiling and occupied tables and windowsills. As a result our hostess insisted on giving us cuttings. We tried to explain our circumstances to no avail and, after thanking the kind lady and bidding her goodbye, went off clutching a variety of greenery, well-wrapped in damp paper. Unhappily, they did not survive the rigors of our travel.

Copenhagen was an easy city for sightseeing and we wasted no time enjoying its offerings. We stayed in a beautiful, old home, on the coast, which had been converted into a student hostel. It was very comfortable and surrounded by a lovely garden.

Needless to say, we saw the Little Mermaid, sitting on a rock and gazing wistfully out to sea, the museums, galleries and the fish market at the harbour, where the fishwives were busy scaling and gutting fish. We window-shopped, especially outside cafés displaying pastries looking light enough to float on air and delectable open sandwiches, spread with slices of succulent, pink ham, cheeses of every variety, eggs, pickles and other mouth-watering titbits. Our smorgasbord lunches were a highlight in our days, needing serious consideration.

Denmark, less affected by war than most other European countries, was more prosperous, food more lavish and businesses appeared to be thriving.

Every evening we went to the Tivoli gardens where, during summer, various entertainments were held. The gardens were near the centre of the city, wooded with little artificial lakes and water features here and there. Dotted throughout, small music groups played softly, trapeze artists and magicians worked their magic; all was lit by subtle lighting among the trees so it looked like fairyland. Festivities came to an end when the twilight faded to brief darkness; fireworks were set off from little boats in the largest lake in the area. We enjoyed wandering through the crowd eating the best hot dogs I have ever had.

We visited the Tuborg Brewery in the company of four American girl students. After the tour, we were offered generous tastings, enjoying ourselves so much, Tuborgs must have wondered if we would ever leave. We were all very gay as we finally stepped out into the street but sobered up when one of the American girls was almost hit by a car, crossing the road.

Ro and I were advised to visit the Cherry Heering Cellars where the Cherry Heering liqueur was produced. The headquarters of the world-wide company was built on an island, Christenshavn, near the centre of the city and was still owned by the Heering family. The central building was a merchant palace, with ochre-washed walls and decorative gables and roof. Additions had been made over the years, blending in with the original elegant style.

The company was started in 1818 by Peter Heering, a young grocer's assistant, who began experimenting and then making the liqueur which became so popular. We were privileged to be shown through the cellars by the current owner, Peter Heering, the fourth, a modest, friendly little man He was very interested to hear we were Australians and, later, when we sat round sampling the goods, but with a little more restraint than on our tour of Tuborg's, told us that, as a young man, he had spent a year in Australia as a jackaroo on a station in the Northern Territory. When we were leaving, he gave us each a black scarf, decorated with a bunch of cherries – which we both have still – and a book on the history of the firm.

We sent him a card of thanks and good wishes for Christmas when we came back to WA. He wrote back and said, although many tourists visited the cellars, it was rare for anyone to show their appreciation and thanking us.

Our time in Denmark had been so pleasant we were reluctant to leave. We caught a ferry to Sweden and had no difficulty getting lifts to the Norway border. We had quite a long ride with two jovial gentlemen who spoke very little English. They had a rather careless attitude to speed limits and road rules and, although it was quite early in the day, we wondered if they had been sampling the schnapps somewhat unwisely. The little part of Sweden we passed through was flatter and more open than Denmark but again there were a lot of black and white cows grazing in vividly, green fields.

It was raining when we crossed into Norway and reached Oslo and the youth hostel. It rained the whole time we were in the city and our visit was notable mainly for mail from home, which we collected next morning. I do recall our evening meal at the hostel, some tasteless white fish, floating in milk.

In contrast, the weather, when we got on the road to Trondheim, was perfect, a few powder-puff clouds in blue sky. Norway had the hottest

summer in thirteen years when we visited. Melted snow from the mountains had flooded the rivers. The scenery was superb, little rivulets poured down from the fir-clad heights, where their snowy tops, the clouds and sky, were reflected on the mirror surfaces of the many lakes we passed.

In some places, roads were blocked by flood-waters and, from time to time, we saw timber logs being rafted down the rivers to timber mills below. We had plenty of time to admire the scenery as traffic was practically non–existent. Finally, we caught a bus to Trondheim, arriving two-and-a-half days after we left Oslo.

We had a tumultuous welcome when we arrived unannounced on the Dahl's doorstep. It was particularly heart-warming when we realized, with exquisite embarrassment, that Barbara's aunt and uncle were still there, the very time Barb had asked us to avoid.

Fortunately, they were staying at a hotel and Barb soon had us settled in. I had met them when I was in Adelaide and they were very friendly and understanding. We were made welcome again when Curt, very tall and easy to get on with, came home from the battery factory he managed. Margaret, their three-and-a-half-year-old daughter, a small, bright replica of Barbara, greeted us cautiously in English and Norwegian and we admired the six-month-old, placid baby, Eric.

Barbara and Curt lived in the lower regions of a comfortable timber house while Curt's parents, Mumsen and Pupsen, who had retired from his mechanical engineering chair at the Trondheim University, lived upstairs. We were duly taken up to meet them. They were a delightful pair but did not speak much English, so again communication was difficult.

In view of our bad timing, we decided to make ourselves scarce while Barb's relatives were there and we went off for a short trip on a small boat, travelling to the Outer Isles of the Norwegian Sea. It carried mail, passengers, supplies, animals and anything else needed in these isolated places.

We had considered going 400 miles further north to Tromso, to see the midnight sun but the weather forecast was so bad, we decided against it. As it was, there was light almost for 24 hours where we were.

The skipper of the *Froya* knew Curt and could not do enough for us. He was very apologetic that all the cabins were booked until the early morning and invited us onto the bridge. As he did not speak English, the conversation was stilted to say the least but we saw the maps with the channels and other features of the passage. I was allowed to play with the radar and, for a brief few minutes, steer the ship.

It was clear daylight but, after several hours, Ro and I began to feel hungry so we intimated our intention of going below to get a meal from the

cafeteria. He was most insistent that we wait until he came off shift. Rather reluctantly, we agreed but when at last he was relieved, he took us below to the galley and we realized it was past midnight and the cafeteria had been closed for some hours.

He put a large kettle on the stove to boil, indicated bread, butter, a large pink ham and other delicacies, and that we were to help ourselves and no, we were not to pay, and he retired to bed. We were starving and made great inroads on the spread before us. At about 4 am, we were told a cabin was available as some passengers had got off at one of the many islands we were passing. We needed no second invitation and fell into our bunks and slept until late.

Our progress was slow as the boat stopped at each of the small islands we passed, to drop off passengers, mail, milk cans and boxes of stores and other goods. Watching next day, we saw a cow being lifted off the ship in a sling and a small rowing boat came alongside with two sheep standing docilely in it. It was quite cold and our wardrobes were sadly deficient for the overcast, breezy weather.

When Ro was on her way to the USA and stopped at New Zealand to see Aunt Peg and her family, she had given Ro a pair of knee-length woollen knickers which we wore turn about. I had a long-sleeved, black jumper and by pinning up the neck and putting our legs through the sleeves, and pinning the waist, we made a passable garment for non-knicker days. I had acquired a red corduroy, circular skirt which we took turns wearing, too. It looked very fetching but had a tendency to blow up in the wind.

I have the happiest memory of one day when Ro was wearing both the black jumper in reverse and the red skirt. She was halfway up a ladder to the deck, beating the skirt down and saying she felt like a 'bloody, black Orpington!'

When we reached Halten, the last in the chain of islands, we anchored for the night. It was very small and rocky; a few little cottages were tucked away in sheltered places. The sky was grey, the sea was grey, even the rocks were grey and we wondered how people could live in such a place. One of the crew told us that people raised on Halten, always come back[25]. We walked round the island. There were no trees, only small scrubby bushes, moss on the rocks and a few tiny pink and yellow flowering plants, low down in sheltered crevices. We wondered how people could survive winter in such a place; the wild seas would be terrifying. We saw none of the inhabitants

25 The last permanent residents left Halten in 1988. It is now just a summer holiday 'resort'.

as we walked round but the twitch of a lace curtain at the windows let us know our every move was seen by hidden eyes.

Before we left next morning, a fisherman brought some bright, orange fish for sale. We bought some, as what we thought would be a treat for Barbie and Curt, but when we handed our gift over, their reaction was less than enthusiastic. The fish were a very deep sea variety and so salty as to be almost inedible. Barbie did cook them, after a long soak to get rid of the salt, but they were not very nice.

On our return trip, we took on mail, full milk cans and passengers, and made a triumphant entry into the Trondheim harbour. We were on the bridge and Rosie recklessly announced our arrival by continually pulling the hooter rope. All the family were on the wharf to meet us early next day.

Barbara's parents had recently returned to Australia, after spending a year living with her and Curt. Her father had worked at the battery factory, with Curt. Her favourite Aunty Joy, a nurse, had been in Norway for longer, working at a nearby sanatorium and spending a lot of off-duty time with the young family, but she was due to return Australia soon, as well.

Fortunately, Barb spoke fluent Norwegian by this time and had come to grips with her very different life. She wasted no time in introducing us to their way of living. Curt had met Barbara when she and a friend were hitch-hiking through Trondheim and decided to try and get work there. Curt was in the Employment Office when they called in and it was a case of love at first sight.

Although the weather was grey, cold – by our standards – and overcast, the house was very comfortable, heated centrally by oil. A large thermometer, hanging outside the kitchen window, showed the temperature, so those going out into the elements could dress appropriately.

Barbara took us shopping to the fish market most days, fish being the staple protein food, as meat, apart from whale, was astronomically priced. We had whale one day, a dark, dense meat, not unlike beef. Next day she made *lapskaus* with the leftover meat, chopped up and fried with onions, potatoes and cabbage, which was delicious. Cabbage appeared to be the only green vegetable available but everyone looked very healthy. Barbara said that, in most families, the women and children went into the mountains to pick berries, rich in Vitamin C, during the long summer holidays to preserve for winter. Three boilings were made, the juice preserved in gradings of goodness, jams and other preserves hoarded for the severe winters.

Another specialty was rice cooked very slowly, more and more creamy milk added for richness. She and Curt made us a *blutkakke*, a festive cake, layered with jam and cream, after being liberally soaked in port wine, whisky

or brandy. Alcohol seemed to play an important role in Norwegian life but Barb and Curt were fairly abstemious. We were taught the art of *skolling* of considerable importance in social life – that is downing your drink in one go without losing eye-contact with your partner. Barb had gained immediate approval from Curt's friends because of her proficiency in this art.

We were also taught the art of wrapping ourselves in *doonas* – a novelty to us at that time – we had never seen them before.

Curt and Barbara had a small car and at the weekend we all piled in and were driven round to some of the beauty spots. We had a special treat, spending a day with very good friends of the family at their farm, Melhus, tucked away in a valley among the mountains. They ran a dairy farm and grew some crops. The cows were feeding out in the fields but in winter they were kept in barns, as for some winter months they were cut off by snow. During the war, Curt stayed at Melhus, keeping out of the way of the German soldiers, so the relationship was very close.

They were warm-hearted, generous hosts, plying us with food, nearly all produced on the farm – a wonderful smorgasbord of homemade bread spread with a variety of cold meats, cheese, eggs and pickles, washed down by hot tea. We were told everyone worked long hours during the summer; the smorgasbord was always spread and workers came in and helped themselves when they were hungry.

Margaret Plunkett, my cycling companion with whom I went to Spain, rode her bike to Trondheim and worked at Melhus during one summer, earning a reputation for being indefatigable and one of the best they had ever employed. Knowing Marg, I believed them. Everyone, even Margaret, were competent skiers.

Trondheim is noted for its beautiful cathedral, built a thousand years ago and still a solid, elegant structure, dominating the city. It is also a busy port and when the time came for us to leave and we were having difficulty getting news of any traffic going south, Barbara said to us: 'I don't know what's wrong with you two. There's a harbour full of ships down there. Go and get yourselves on a boat!' So for the next several days, we wandered around the wharves and whenever we saw a sailor hanging over the rails would enquire, 'Excuse me. Do you speak English?' which few of them did, followed by, 'Are you going south?' which none of them were! However, we realized that, had we the time, we could have gone to all sorts of places, on fishing boats, even on a whaler to Iceland.

Rosemary had booked to return to Australia on a bus travelling through Asia, on a date which was fast approaching. I felt she was not looking pleading enough but (and I quote) she said, 'That in reply to her request, the

sailors looked back at her with their bright blue Viking eyes and her knees turned to water.'

We soon knew every craft in the harbour, where they came from and where they were going – but none south to Bergen, from whence we were to return to England. A few days later, we were all at the harbour when a little 800-ton, grey-nosed, cargo boat berthed. We went up and asked the crew member hanging over the rail, the engineer we discovered later. He disappeared and the skipper appeared, wearing dungarees and half-shaven. He was waving a razor. As it happened he knew, Curt. Yes, they were leaving for Bergen that afternoon and we would be welcome to come with them. We thanked him profusely and told him we would be happy to work our passage! (Apart from helping the cook peel potatoes, we did virtually nothing – instead were very spoilt)

It was hard for me to say goodbye to Barbara and as the family waved us off, I wondered if and when we would meet again.

Peter, the skipper, and the engineer, whom we were told was called, unbelievably, Odd Lod, insisted we have a glass of cherry brandy to warm us up, before we were fairly out into the fjord. They told us they had just returned from Spain and Portugal and were well stocked up with alcohol, including champagne which they seemed to drink in some quantity. The skipper called the engineer 'the last of the Vikings' or 'the old blind Viking', the latter, no doubt reflecting on his rather mellow state due, we were afraid, to his unwise sampling of their cellar. We had our meals with them both and the skipper moved out of his cabin for us. He slept in a spare bed in the chart room.

On the first morning, just as we got out of the bunk, where we had slept head and tail, the ship turned into rough water and we fell back on the bunk feeling very odd, until the ship turned into calmer water.

We had the run of the ship and although we visited the cook, who had a withered arm and had fallen in love with Ro, to help him, apart from washing up and peeling potatoes, we spent most of the time being given coffee and biscuits and his best apples and oranges. Rather than mess girls, we were treated like honoured guests. His extravagance with food bothered Ro. He flung what to us were perfectly good comestibles over the side with gay abandon. I remember her grabbing a leg of corned mutton at the moment of launching saying: 'You can't throw that out!' and taking it back to the galley.

Odd Lod entertained us in his cabin one morning after he had given us a guided tour of the engine room. I remember sitting on the top bunk feeling very relaxed and having strawberries and champagne.

We spent a lot of time on the bridge, checking the radar, the depth finder and poring over charts. Looking at the scenery was absorbing. On each side of the fjord, the mountains were still capped with snow. Small farms were tucked away in the valleys and all were reflected in the still, serene waters of the fjords. Cut hay hung on racks to dry.

We were wakened at 2.30 next morning to look at the highest mountain we would pass, Hornelen, rising about 7,000 feet, a rugged, craggy top, covered in snow. It was bright daylight.

Our ship was called the *Friborg* and our first port of call was Molde, a beautiful, little fishing village. We had a short time to look around.

The skipper had told us that harbour fees were very expensive, especially if the vessel over-stayed its allotted time. Neither of us had a watch, so when we arrived at Ålesund and were told we could have two hours ashore, we were determined to be back in good time. Ålesund was spread out with many inlets along its shore. There was not a lot to see and no one spoke English but we enjoyed strolling around. When the time came to return to the *Friborg*, we couldn't find it. We quickened our pace and, although we saw lots of little harbours and wharves, there was no sign of our ship. We asked one or two people for directions but they looked blank and shook their heads. Our pace became frenzied as time passed. By good fortune, we suddenly saw a taxi. The driver at least understood *Friborg* and, after a winding journey of many twists and turns, we fell into the arms of the mate, just as the last case of herrings was being loaded. He scolded us but the skipper laughed and said he would never have left us but sent a taxi to find us.

After such a great trip, we were reluctant to leave the *Friborg* and her crew. When we began our farewell speeches, after docking in Bergen, the skipper announced that, as the ship was in port for three hours, he and the engineer were taking us to lunch. They both appeared smartly dressed and ushered us onto the funicular railway which whisked us to the top of the mountain overlooking the city. The view was spectacular and the food only slightly less so. As we dropped downhill afterwards, the driver handed the steering wheel to Ro who took us safely down the perilous decline.

Our hosts loaded us up with fresh, sweet-smelling strawberries and hooted their farewell out of the harbour. We kept up a correspondence with them for a little while and received the odd postcard from foreign places but, like so many brief contacts, faded in time.

Nothing now remained but to catch a ferry to England and move on.

Tess and Virginia Hayward, who were back in London after a hitch-hiking trip to Southern Italy, had offered us beds. They were great hosts

giving us a beer and a bath on arrival. Tess was a friend from my Adelaide uni days.

They had been to Italy to visit the ex-prisoner of war who had worked on their family vineyard in South Australia during the war and who had become a great friend. He was now Mayor of his town and Tess and Virginia had stayed longer than they meant to, running out of money in the process. They had a rather hair-raising trip back to London, at one stage chauffeuring a wealthy, elderly Englishman to Paris, and being left there in the lurch. They were very intrepid travellers, well-organized, but on this occasion Tess said all they had was a toothbrush, they shared, and a Grecian urn.

I was very disappointed to discover that, while I was away, Nick had come to London to do a Welfare Course. Expecting to see me, he had been to WA House, which was my mail address. The wonderful Mr Cave who was so helpful to us all, had no idea where I was, remembered Ro and I were cousins and that she was related to Rosemary Davidson, who was in London. He gave Nick her phone number and I wish I could have listened to the ensuing conversation between them. Unhappily, Nick had left before I arrived back.

While we were on our journey, Rosemary had been telling me it was time I came back home. I had no special plans but I felt very torn about leaving Europe. Sometimes I missed Australia but never felt homesick and there were so many possibilities overseas – new horizons. But a seed had been planted and was growing in the background of my thoughts.

We said goodbye to each other and I set off for Ireland.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

ACTON

Although coming back to Acton felt like coming home, sadly, there had been big changes. Aunt Tiny had died from cancer, and Don and Margaret and their now five children had moved from the Lodge up to the big house. Uncle Jack and Betty, who had come home when her mother was ill, were living in a new bungalow built in a nearby field.

I was to stay with them and go over to Acton each day to help Margaret, whose hands were fully occupied. Besides running such a large house and looking after the children, John aged six, Barbara five, the twins, Craig and Sheena, about two-and-a-half, and Gareth, the baby of six months, there were always extras for meals. Apart from breakfast, Uncle Jack often turned up at meal-times, frequently with one or two of his mates in tow.

A tall, capable lady came in three days a week to clean and iron, helped by a young girl called Mary, who came when it suited her. She bustled around looking busy and probably was – and whose stockings concertinaed down her legs.

Fortunately, Margaret was not only an easy-going, warm-hearted person but highly organized. She and Don had both been at university, she doing physiotherapy and he agricultural science. Her mother, 'Aunty Mum', was a frequent visitor. She lived at nearby Scarva House which had a beautiful semi-enclosed garden at the entrance. I felt it would make a wonderful setting for a Shakespearian play. Indeed, every year a re-enactment of the battle of the Boyne by the villagers of Scarva takes place on 13 July. The costumes for the 'Sham Fight' were kept in the attic. A strong tradition exists that

William of Orange camped under a Spanish chestnut tree at Scarva on his way to the battle[26] in 1690.

Uncle Jack drove me over to the big house at 8 o'clock each morning and someone ran me home at night. Sometimes, I walked back and I wrote home saying how much I loved it.

> 14.8.1958.
>
> I walk barefoot on the soft, wet, green Irish grass through mobs of cattle, up to the top of the rise and in front of me the whole county stretches out in green pocket-handkerchiefs and on the horizon to the SE the mountains of Mourne lie against the sky.
>
> Sometimes they have clouds on top or wisps of mist and tonight they were almost navy blue. The cloud effects are superb and sunlight never covers all the land, but just strips and patches. It has a soft beauty that is breath-taking.
>
> The cattle are luscious. They (Don and Uncle Jack) buy up Eire steers and graze them for three months when they are eligible for a government bounty, before they are sold off.
>
> The fields are thick with them, around both houses, and there seem to be dozens of pigs. They smell dreadful and of course you can hear them all day, squealing in the pig house.

Uncle Jack often brought Sheena's children over to stay. They were lovely boys but so eager to hear stories about Australia, they quite wore me out. I kept telling them because I remember the joy I felt when Mother, Dad and Aunt Helen used to tell such wonderful stories.

The twins kept us busy. Craig, in particular, was very active. We had had a lot of rain and there were mud and puddles everywhere. Tractors, sludge heaps and stairs were further hazards. When she returned from holidays, a young girl from the village, Miss Jones, came at midday every day and took them for walks in the afternoon and bathed, fed and put them to bed, which helped.

Margaret was very organized. When I arrived each morning, the family had been fed. Don had left for an auction somewhere in Northern Ireland, John and Barbara were ready to be picked up by the bus taking them to the little village school and a wash was ready to go on the line.

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26 The Battle of the Boyne between the deposed King James II of England and the Dutch Prince William of Orange.

With three children in nappies, the supply was formidable. First, they went on the outside line, come hail, rain or sun, then taken up to the attic, on the third floor, and aired for a day before being finished off at night, in front of the combustion heater on the biggest clothes-horse I had ever seen.

The twins and Gareth were all given bottles of milk, changed and put down at the same regular times every day. They were bedded down every morning in big old prams, well wrapped-up and wheeled outside under the shelter of a huge tree opposite the entrance, where, to my memory, they slept like lambs, unchecked for several hours.

Keeping everyone fed was a full-time job, quite apart from everything else. Every day Margaret baked wholemeal griddle bread, soda bread and made a wide variety of jellies with fruit and whipped, jellied beetroot and a host of other delicacies. The midday meal usually consisted of meat and potatoes for an uncertain number of people, depending on who Uncle Jack brought in and anyone working around the place. I remember the window cleaners coming in for a bite and very frequently a man from the village who was a bit slow. He came in and sat at the kitchen table watching every move I made. Fortunately, Margaret came in and whispered 'he's waiting for his dinner'. As his visits became more frequent she teased me, saying he fancied me!

The first time she asked me to put on some potatoes for our midday meal, she saw the modest amount I had in the pot, and said, 'Och! darlin' that wouldn't feed the twins' and dragged out a huge, black cauldron and filled it to the brim. Nearly all our vegetables were grown in the garden at Acton, in the rich, black soil. Boiled in their jackets and eaten with pepper, salt and butter, the potatoes were a feast on their own.

We had all our meals in the beautiful dining room and, as well as the midday meal, the table was loaded for high tea at five. Uncle Jack nearly always came in for it, often bringing extras. Mrs Grattan, the help, Mary, Miss Jones and all the children, sat down to cold ham and other meat, cheese, jam, soda bread, griddle bread, tarts, salads, whipped jellies and cream, tea or coffee. Don was often late home and, as well as all the other good things, finished up the last of the potatoes, fried!

Although Uncle Jack had officially retired and handed the business over to Don, he still had his hand on the rudder. Most evenings he had a long telephone conversation with his namesake, Jack Best in Newcastle. He would sit with his stockinged-feet propped up on the side of the mantelpiece in the bungalow and discuss cattle prices and the day's market, or plans for Don to ship cattle over on a certain date.

Uncle Jack had a firm hand on family matters, too, which later extended to me. He regularly sat on the Bench, and was greatly respected locally. People came to ask his advice on everything from farm business and finance to family relationships. Betty and I went to church with him several times. He drove like a maniac on the narrow roads. The tall hedges blocked the view but he sailed through cross roads with a gay abandon which made us blench.

We visited the little Clare churchyard and saw the graves of my grandparents, Mary and James Porter, but, unfortunately, the church was locked.

Some American relatives were staying with the Ferris's at Cloghinny and we went over to meet them. Harry Ferris ran the farm as Uncle Joe had retired, although he and Aunt Izzie still lived there. There was some confusion about whose relations they were. There was an old man, his son and his wife and several small children. The father, who was eighty had been in Congress and told us 'Yes sah! Ahm from Virginny!' several times.

The family had spoken fondly of another relative, Russell, who had visited them on leave from the Canadian Army, during the war. There was a photo of him on the piano, a tall, blonde, good-looking boy. They had thoroughly enjoyed meeting him, although he had caused them some embarrassment. The local Army CO had invited him to a party but he had a bit too much to drink, became rather boisterous and accidently knocked a British Army Captain down the stairs. Another time, when some of the boys had taken him to the pub, he over-indulged again and they had trouble. He insisted on standing outside the army barracks in the village singing Republican songs.

I had barely settled in at Acton when Uncle Joe Ferris from Cloghinny was killed by the bull.

Don was on the phone to Harry Ferris getting the sombre news as I walked into the Acton kitchen. Uncle Joe, despite family instructions not to go into the bull's yard had done so with fatal consequences. There was great sadness. Uncle Joe, besides being well-respected, was a gentle, well-loved man.

There was also a degree of chaos as somehow messages became mixed up and half the family thought it was Uncle Jack who had died.

Margaret remained focussed throughout it all. 'Darlin,' she said to me, 'you do the jellies and I'll do the sponges.' I looked at her blankly. 'For the wake,' she said. We cooked relentlessly all morning and I travelled over with the results of our efforts in the afternoon.

I joined the other ladies who were in the parlour where Aunt Izzie, resplendent in tight, black satin, was flanked by ladies, all wearing hats and sitting stiffly on the hard, upright chairs. I felt very embarrassed but

managed to get a chair next to Margaret's mother, 'Aunty Mum' Buller, which helped.

Everyone spoke in whispers and as Aunt Izzie spoke half her sentences on indrawn breath, it was very conspiratorial. One rather talkative lady, however, mentioned the unfairness of the judging at the Newry Show and things improved from there.

Strong tea and food kept coming in at regular intervals. There was a wonderful, old lady, Sarah McGee, who just kept making pots of tea all day. No one ate anything so all the food went out again.

There were men everywhere outside, probably imbibing more than tea to keep their spirits up! Periodically, Harry, Jack or Uncle Jack would tiptoe in, leading some stiffly-clad man up to Aunt Izzie, saying 'This is McConnell's boy Pat!', or similar. Looking as if they were wishing the floor would open up, they would mutter 'Evenin' Mrs Ferris' and shake her hand, getting out as quickly as possible.

After a while, Aunt Izzie got onto the bull and how Uncle Joe would have wanted to go 'out at work, among his own fields'. Uncle Joe had bad cataracts and could not see very well. Also he had been told by all the family, he was not to go into the bull's yard. However, then Aunt Izzie said, it was not the bull's fault, that he was not cross and never attacked anyone. 'He just tossed poor old Joe aside as though he was a sheaf, and walked on!' Actually the bull's horn pierced Uncle Jo's heart and lung so his death would have been almost immediate.

Casually, a little later, she said that the bull had tossed one of the workmen over a hedge the day before but he landed in the 'plantin'' so he wasn't hurt. She added, 'Harry, who saw it, had a terrible headache all day.'

I managed not to burst out in hysterical laughter, again, when later on, Sally told me how one of the sows had knocked Uncle Joe over two weeks before. I felt he had been a man living on the edge for some time.

We left at midnight and, as Aunt Izzie said, as we left, it had been a good day. 'There were people in the kitchen, people in the dining room, the storeroom and even in the hayshed,' she announced with satisfaction. Because of his work in cattle-breeding and getting TB testing of herds in the north established, Uncle Joe was greatly respected by many.

We launched into another marathon of cooking for the actual funeral. On the day, Aunt Izzie and Uncle Jack had decided I was to go to Cloghinny at the crack of dawn but I said I was not going to leave Margaret in the lurch. I knew there would be plenty of people to help without me. I had a cold war with Uncle Jack who dressed me down for 'liking my own way!' He came round in the end. Margaret was quite impressed. 'I've never

known anyone stand up to him like that!' she told me. Fortunately, he did not hold it against me.

I went over with Sheena and Don and Uncle James Henderson, who was Aunt Tiny's brother. He was a darling old man, still living in the lovely old, rather derelict, family home called *Mount Ida*. He shared it with a housekeeper called Minnie, a lot of cross-eyed cats and had two horses on the property. I had been there with Aunt Tiny before she died.

Several of us stayed with Aunt Izzie as the mourners walked down to the church for the funeral service. We stood at the kitchen window and cried, as we watched the procession follow the coffin down the road. Then we made a pot of tea and sat round the kitchen table, the dogs lying among our feet underneath.

The sky darkened and a storm broke as the mourners returned, so we were busy trying to dry off their coats while they settled down at the long trestle tables to a sustaining meal.

I met several people who remembered the Porter's at Moyrourkan and they remarked how like Uncle Jim I was, more like him than his own daughters. Uncle Jim had four daughters and although I duly met one, she was tall and dark. They were all very good musicians and played in the local orchestra.

Molly Moore, Uncle Jack's sister and Peggy Donaldson's mother, was there and was a great character. I was told she was always talking recipes and making wine no one could drink. I did visit them once. Her husband was an author but rather reclusive.

Almost before I had settled in and just after the funeral, I found that everyone had planned for Betty and me to have a little trip, before Betty left to go to London. Sheena and Dudley Good had rented a house at Portnoo in Donegal and we were invited there before they gave it up at the end of the month. One problem was that there was no tryptique for the Austin which meant we couldn't take it into Eire but Uncle Jack and Don raced round and got the required documentation. Betty was lukewarm about the whole idea until I suggested we camp. Although horrified at the idea, everyone rallied round. Don found us a bit of tarpaulin off the stack and Margaret loaded us up with saucepans, tinned food and stuff. We packed about three dozen eggs and shoved rugs, etc, in the boot.

We headed for Portnoo in the morning, going through Armagh and Omagh then crossing the border at Strabane/Lifford making for Donegal town. The country was mostly little green hills hedged off into pocket handkerchiefs with honeysuckle and roses on every side. It rained and shone all day until we came to Donegal when it cleared up. We took a back

road to Portnoo which we thought then must be one of the roughest in the country. It was through a winding lonely glen of peat bog. There seemed only black-faced sheep moving and the heather was just coming out.

The Goods gave us a great welcome. The bungalow was gorgeous, right on the sea and very comfortable. It was great to see the three boys again – Peter (9), my special buddy, Brian (6) and Christopher (4). Last time I was in Ireland, Peter slept with me all the time so I could tell him about Forrest River till late at night and early in the morning. They all demanded stories about the 'excitingest' countries I had been in and sat spellbound while I drivelled on.

In the evening, which was as clear as a bell and sunny until 9.30, Betty and I drove around exploring. The whole country was soft and beautiful, the mountains long stretched out and purple and the hills, far and green, covered with stooks of hay. There were low stone walls and honeysuckle trailing and stretches of purple lakes between the hills. The tide was out and the sands were smooth, gold, dotted with rocks, and here and there, a boat lay harboured. The cottages are whitewashed stone with rounded, thatched roofs and we passed little donkeys being driven along, a herd of cows wandering along the beach and old men yarning at a stile – it was very beautiful.

Next morning was clear and sunny, too, and the boys, Bet and I all went down for a swim in the harbour before breakfast. It was lovely and very, very bracing. We had to buy bacon on the way back, which took half an hour at least. Time is nothing in Donegal and I haven't made a purchase yet that it hasn't taken ages. Everyone is friendly and their speech is full of vim. We all went onto the beach for the morning and, after lunch, Bet and I set off on our next lap. I may say we added to our store of food, plus two lilos (blow-up mattresses).

We didn't go far, stopping near a surf beach, left the car and crossed the sand-hills to the sea. We wandered around then went for a bathe, which was very cold but terrific. We returned to the car ravenous and got a fire going. It started to rain but we got hot soup and fried eggs into us, plus hot coffee and fried johnnycake. The latter was terribly indigestible and nearly killed us later but we gulped it down. It was bucketing rain so we decided to camp in our little car. About 3 am, we moved outside but had to get in again when it began to rain a few hours later.

Betty's face had got horribly sunburnt the previous day which subsequently gave her hell so we agreed to go to Ardara to make some purchases. It was the 'fairing' and the street was full of men hustling cattle and pigs

around. There were rows of black-faced sheep tied to the stone walls by a rope run along behind their heads. It was fascinating.

We decided to drive on and find some caves near Maghera. We pretty soon came onto bad roads but, although we thought we had found this little place, we didn't see any caves. We stopped for water at a cottage, full of fowls and barefooted children. Two nice girls had taken our bucket and run up the hillside to a fall. Returning to the road, we found ourselves climbing up a mountain through a glen. This road was just rocks and we could only go very slowly.

As we had not eaten, we decided to stop and cook a meal at the top of the glen. Here there was water on every side, trickling down rocks, soggy underfoot and, a few yards below the road, ran a stream of peat brown, gurgling, creamy water. We could see no one, just sheep and heather and a stretch of moss-green moorland with a line of blue hills in the distance.

Soon, a sheep dog shot out and started mustering sheep and a man came wandering down the road. The latter came up and lit our fire for us out of dead heather and peat. He had lived in New Zealand for 19 years. We chatted while he waited for a taxi to take him to Ardara. Eventually it came. A whole car load of people appeared from nowhere, and he went off leaving the vast loneliness to us.

It was pretty good sitting, looking at the shadows moving across the country, as we had our peaty tea and fried eggs eaten out of the pan.

We pushed on for what we thought was Glencolumbkille, following directions we had. We passed a lot of little farms and at one of the last we were set upon by sheep dogs. They came shooting out of every lane. They were lovely but we were sure we'd kill them as they seemed to have no idea about cars.

Two miles further on, we got a rude awakening to find ourselves at the sea. The road, a rough grass track by now, had stopped dead and Bet was hard put to turn the car round without going over the cliff edge. The back wheels kept spinning on the wet grass. This was the world's end. The most westerly part of Donegal, it was a wonderful smugglers' hideout. It even had some caves and a little harbour between high, grass-clad hills. Sharp rocks stood out in the water and there were a couple of little fishing boats tied up, the only evidence of habitation. There were sheep grazing and gulls wheeling and when the sun came out, it was a miracle. It is a place I shall never forget, like a cove where I spent a sunny day on Skye.

We had to face the dogs again and I went into a house to ask the way. There was a big bare kitchen and the woman had just put her bread on to bake in a big black pot hanging by wire over the flames. A little, shy,

barefoot boy sat on one side of the fire and an old man on the other. Her directions were so involved, I was really foxed. Somehow I got it sorted and we arrived at Glencolumbkille. It was cold and windy and there were great breakers crashing against the rock face so we decided to go on to Killybegs to see the fishing fleet. This was not to be as the boats had not come in so we motored on along the cliff-side road until we found a quarry we could safely pull into.

When I came out of a doze in the morning, everything was rocking. I thought we must be having an earth tremor, until I looked out at the rump of a cow against the window. She was having a scratch on the car! From there, we drove on to Mountcharles and found a grassy place by the sea. Bet has been lathering her face with cold tea which is doing it good. We have had dozens of children and people walk past us – right through our camp. One lovely little boy kept coming up and asking us about the fire and saying when he is big he is going to be an Indian and to Bet – 'has the sun scraped the fece off yer?'

I wrote to my mother from this camp, telling her of our Donegal adventures, concluding:

> We are just about to settle for the night. The tide is at our feet, full in (we hope). Across the bay, the low hills are purple and there is a reflection of a creamy cloud in the sea before me.

Our camping had not been very successful as drizzling rain had fallen at some time each night and we ended up crouched in the car. We had not had a proper wash since we left Portnoo and we, and our belongings, reeked of peat smoke and an indescribable smell from the wet, carpet-underlay/tarpaulin, so we agreed there was no way we could go to a hotel.

The car sprang an oil leak, no doubt from some of the rough roads we had been on. Donegal town was the nearest place of any size on our route, so we pressed on. It was Saturday and the town looked dead. The weather turned grey, and everything in the place looked dismal, so we were rather depressed, as well as dirty and tired.

By good luck, however, we found a garage where the owner was working late and agreed to mend the leak. We also found a café and, in spite of our appearance, were able to get a pot of tea while we waited. It was a large room with more than a dozen big tables, covered with white linen tablecloths and completely empty, except for us.

By mutual consent, once the car was fixed, we headed for home.

We were greeted with surprise and some astonishment when I gave Uncle Jack his change from the £80 he had given me – £77 – our main expenditure to the garage for the car!

It could not be said life settled down after we returned to Acton and Bet left.

Some mornings, Uncle Jack would tell me to get my coat and take me to a nearby town, where a market was being held. He sometimes took a couple of his friends along as well. We usually fortified ourselves with a whisky and strong black coffee, in some smoky bar as a heart-starter, first. We went to Armagh one day when Don was auctioneering. When he came home he said he wondered why the bidding suddenly stopped, until he saw we had walked in! I cannot remember ever seeing a woman at any market, so I guess it was the novelty factor that caused the stoppage.

The crop at Acton, barley I think, ripened and all the workmen from surrounding farms came for the day to the haymaking. There was some excitement, because Don had hired a small tractor to pull the binder. I presumed horses had been used before. The binder was like the one we had used at home, with flails.

The fields were very small but the crop heavy. Men were raking and tying the sheaves, to build into stooks. The hilly and rough places, where the tractor could not go, had to be scythed. I had a go on the side of a little hillock. I had used a scythe before, as dad used one to cut the tall grass in spring at home. I was no expert but I knew enough not to slice my legs off. Looking down on the fields below, where a dozen or more men were busy gathering and stooking, I felt I could be in medieval times. It might have been a scene in a Thomas Hardy novel. There was little time to stand and stare because I was needed back at the house where another marathon cook-up was in progress.

Cauldrons of stew, boiled potatoes, soda bread, griddle bread, cakes, tarts and huge enamel pots of tea were relayed to the haymakers by Don and Uncle Jack.

All the work was to be done in one day. At dusk, more food was taken out to the workers, more stew, breads, potatoes, and piles and piles of French toast. Margaret stood at the stove, frying slice after slice of white bread, dipped in milk and egg to a crisp and delicious golden-brown. More tea and, no doubt further lubrication, when the job was done. The weather had been perfect and the job done to everyone's satisfaction.

★ ★ ★

One day, not long after this, Uncle Jack announced that Bill Buller, from Scarva, Margaret's brother was lending me his horse so I could join the Newry Harriers for the hunt the following Saturday.

In 1970, when we were at Towera, I wrote the following article which I sent to Ita Buttrose, then editor of the *Australian Women's Weekly*. It was accepted and I received a cheque for $70. Unhappily, the letter of acceptance came after John died. The article was published on 19 August 1970 under the title 'The Irish Hunt'.

> HUNTING in Ireland! Could anything be more exciting and romantic, I thought? And I was right.
>
> I have never savoured life more deeply than I did when I was out with a harrier pack on the border of Northern Ireland several years ago.
>
> I must admit this was partly due to my doubt that I would come home alive! The air seemed sweeter and softer, fires were warmer, and hot water a benison because of this very doubt. I relished living.
>
> Not that I approve of hunting. It is a cruel business, but at that time I was too excited at the prospect to consider the pros and cons.
>
> The fact that I had never jumped – apart from putting my old school pony at small logs 20 years before – did not dampen my enthusiasm when my Irish uncle, with whom I was staying, announced that he had borrowed Bill Buller's horse as my mount for the hunt on the forth-coming Saturday.
>
> Bill Buller, a neighbour and a gay young blade, was agreeable to this as he played rugger on Saturdays, my uncle said. I doubt if Bill was given much choice. My uncle was a resourceful man and, before the great day, had gathered my riding kit from friends and relatives.
>
> There was a hat, a rather sloppy coat, my cousin Harry's britches – a bit tight for my generous proportions, but my uncle reassured me – 'Ach, sure, once ye're up no matter if there is a wee split' – a stock and gloves. Boots were a problem and finally I settled for a pair of wellingtons, size nine, belonging to Mich, the farmhand.
>
> They were the smallest and smartest we could find. Redolent of the sty, but hosed down they looked quite stylish. I had to wear three pairs of woollen socks to keep in touch with them.
>
> 'Darlin, darlin', ye look jest grand!' the family exclaimed when I had a dress rehearsal in the big, warm farm kitchen. Mich stood wordlessly by.

The meet was at noon, seven miles away. I jogged along through seemingly endless lanes while rain fell in gentle mist. My mount was a beauty; although he was inclined to pig-root, and this tendency increased as we approached the meet.

It was a glorious sight. Horses surging, the black- and white-clad riders, the Master in a Lincoln-green jacket, and the eager mass of tan-and-white hounds showed up vividly against the green grass and the sombre, bare trees.

I did not have much time for soliloquy because my mount was close to unmanageable. A middle-aged lady, riding a solid brown cob, took me under her wing – uncle's instructions again, no doubt.

Indeed, I should have been in a quandary without her, as the riders took off over hedges and stone walls with a surprising suddenness.

I followed her more sedately through a farmyard full of mud, startled geese, and pigs, into a ploughed field. The pack was already milling around on a hill opposite. As we cantered soggily down the field I cast about for a way around the wide drain which ran along the bottom of it. It had a low wire fence on the near side and looked all of 12 feet across.

To my surprise my companion put heels to her horse and flew over it. I was startled, but the next thing I knew I was sailing over it, too. Easy! Even if I did lose both stirrups and the reins and had my arms and legs wrapped round the horse's neck!

I struggled back in the saddle just in time to get some feeling of co-ordination with my mount as he took a hedge. My blood started to pound. This was glorious! We went over that drain four times in all and I even stayed in the saddle the last time.

My horse bucked all day, but I had confidence in him now and I knew he would take anything I put him at. All I had to do was stay in the saddle – well – on his back. I remembered a remark my brother, an ex-Light Horseman, once made; you are never off your horse until you are on the ground!

I had little time to think about the chase. I was never even in the same field as the hounds. They did not seem to be in favour, judging by the curses and advice meted out to them by the Master and sundry hoary onlookers.

It was dusk when I got home. I had been in the saddle six hours and I fell in a heap when I dismounted. Water gushed out of Mich's boots.

Later, Bill confessed he had taught his horse to buck when he put his hand on his back, behind the saddle, where my low-slung coat-tads had been tickling him all day.

Unfortunately Bill had fractured his jaw in the rugger game that day, which meant he could not play for a while. Hunting was not vetoed, so he needed his horse.

Unperturbed, my uncle simply told cousin Harry, the owner of the britches, that I was to ride his grey. The grey was young and had hunted only once. That made two of us as we set out to the meet the following week.

Harry rode what he imaginatively called the Horse. The Horse stood 17 hands in his bare feet. My mount was called – quite simply – the Big Horse. I looked down on everyone in the field.

The Big Horse and I never really established rapport. He was quiet and well-mannered but did not quite know what it was all about. I fell off early in the first day. Only my dignity was hurt, although I landed on bitumen. Both my boots shot off and with them my top layer of socks, which rolled across the road like scurrying hedgehogs.

To add to my mortification, I could not get back in the saddle. That short stirrup was well beyond reach of my foot even if Harry's britches had not been so tight.

Finally, an obliging ploughman, seeing my predicament, stopped his tractor and came and gave me a leg-up.

I found the body of the hunt near a creek choked with blackberry bushes. Looked at objectively it was a mixed bag. There was a priest on a small bay. The aged vet, sporting a canary-coloured waistcoat and with his trousers tucked into the top of his socks, was on a nondescript black. A farm boy in a tweed suit was riding a camel-like grey, bare-back. I drew up beside a pretty little blonde on a dapple pony.

She looked scared and she told me this was her first hunt after a fall in the field the previous season, when she had broken her leg.

Curses were emanating from a nearby wood where huntsmen were trying to restore order among the hounds. I realised that a commanding-looking redhead who had been riding side-saddle was being dragged feet first out of the brambles.

Later I jogged up beside her and said in my matey, colonial way – 'Oh! ho! I see you fell off, too!' She could not look down on me but she withered me – 'I did not fall. My horse came down!' I was pleased to see, as she flounced off haughtily, that she still had a length of bramble caught up in her bun.

Although I was never up with the hunt I was learning fast, not only about the geography of Co. Armagh, but also about the 'shockin' behaviour of the hounds' – they seemed to be a law unto themselves – royal flies, and double sloughs. I am still not quite sure what constitutes a royal fly. All I remember is a six-strand wire fence mixed up with briar rose coming at me and knowing I was going to come off my horse before we left the ground.

My head felt full of hot prickles when I got up and I thought I had gone blind until I realised I had landed on my head and my bowler was squashed over my face.

Double sloughs are wide, parallel drains, divided by a 12-inch bank. In principle, the horse jumps across the first drain, changes feet on the bank, and jumps the second. Double sloughs did not worry me. In fact I enjoyed them until they showed me one where 'puir auld Paddy had his wee bit of bad luck.' Two years before, the luckless Paddy's horse mis-stepped and he and Paddy fell in the drain in a horrible tangle.

Paddy was dragged out eventually and, despite his cries for mercy, was walked 200 yards across fallow to the waiting ambulance.

'Ach, hould yer whist, man, sure it's just a wee scratch,' they encouraged him relentlessly. He had a fractured pelvis and spent the next six months in hospital. Oh! He was back in the field right enough, but I never felt sure of a double slough again.

I never came off while my blood was up, but when my mind took over it was the end.

Galloping down a lane one day we were suddenly confronted by a five-barred gate. 'Up wid ye,' shouted my companion. Up! I jumped as well as the horse. I swear there was three feet of daylight between me and the saddle and that I could see the sea laid out all round Ireland. But that time I landed back in position.

The grey was a trier. He balked only once – at a hedge with a wide drain in a lower-level field. There is a point of no return on a horse's

> neck, and, although I knew I had passed it, I hung on hopefully for a moment or two before I let go and fell like a stone into the black slime below.
>
> An obliging huntsman coming up in the rear gave the grey such a whack on the rump that he shot high up and over with surprise.
>
> ''Catch him,' shouted the huntsman. 'Catch him.' I took one look at that ton of horseflesh coming down on me and turned and ran as fast as my waterlogged boots would let me. As this gallant huntsman flung me back in the saddle, he assured me that under the circumstances I had made a classic fall. I looked sideways at him, but, no, he was not laughing!
>
> But moments like that were forgotten after we had returned home. Sitting by a roaring fire, eating bacon and eggs, drinking lashings of hot strong tea, we relived the glory of the day.
>
> I still see the subtle colours of the autumn countryside, cloud patterns on the Mournes, the gleam on well-bred horses. I still tingle with the romance.

I will not elaborate further on my days when I rode to the hunt but they were some of the best of my life.

Jack Ferris's wife, Graemie, was one of my favourite people because she was full of fun. She was passionate about hunting but since she married Jack and had two beautiful boys – with mops of red-gold curls – they could not afford it, so to compensate and like many of the locals, she followed the hunt.

When it was available, she drove off in their utility, otherwise any visitor to the Glebe who was careless, leaving their keys in their car, faced the prospect of being stranded until the hunt finished. It never bothered Graemie or the vicar who might own the vehicle. If left unattended on a hunt day, she took off, leaving the owner, be it an agent, neighbour, the vicar, to wait or ring around for a lift. No one ever seemed to mind the inconvenience.

She came from a family of thirteen and was very laid back about life generally. Jack was a lovely, kind person who seemed very accepting of these peccadillos.

One afternoon, she asked me to go with her to pick up a calf that Jack had bought from a farmer at an outlying farm. When we reached the place, only the wife was home. She told us where the calf was penned but said all the men were away, so we would have to get it ourselves.

The calf was only a few weeks old but very lively. It was in a pen, deep in mud and we had a hilarious time trying to catch it and put it in a bag. We slipped and slid around, paralytic with laughter, trying to lay hands on the little brute without falling in the mud. Finally, Graemie threw herself on it and we managed to get it into the bag and on the back of the utility.

One day, a swarm of bees settled over the front door at Acton. Margaret asked Don and Uncle Jack to try and get rid of them. They slid out and disappeared for the day. Margaret was angry, because we could not get the prams out for the twins and Gareth to have their morning sleep under the tree or on the porch. She went to the hayshed, brought up a bale of hay and set fire to it, in the porch. I winced to see the flames and smoke, not to mention the scorch marks on the paving, but it was effective. The swarm took off but only moved round the house to settle on the windowsill outside the babies' bedroom. Usually the window was open but, luckily, not on this occasion. Finally, she managed to locate a bee-keeper who came and collected the swarm. We were left to clear away the mess on the porch.

Fat, black, succulent blackberries appeared on the hedges and we had gathering excursions in the mellow autumn days. Margaret made mouth-watering blackberry pies in which I regularly over-indulged. I remember her saying, 'Have another wee slice, darlin'! Sure and they'll never taste so good again!'

Uncle Jack had about a hundred hens in cages at the bungalow and sold eggs locally. I thought it was barbaric, although they were well looked after. Some pecked at each other through the wire or pulled out feathers. Every now and again, one would die and he would bring it over to Acton and, dumping it on the kitchen table, say to Margaret: 'I just brought you this wee hen – sure and there's nothing wrong with her – she's just died.' Neither she nor I could raise enthusiasm at the prospect of having it for dinner but she felt duty-bound to cook it. If Don was home when it was produced, Uncle Jack would ask in the middle of the meal – 'what do you think was wrong with this wee hen, Don – why did it die?' I can still hear Don's reply. 'I'm sure I don't know, Daddy.'

'Sure it's no matter, there's nothing wrong with her!' Uncle Jack would say. By the looks on our faces as we pushed slices of the wee hen round our plates, it would have been clear to an onlooker that Margaret and I did not share his opinion. Uncle Jack was the most generous of men but he did not believe in waste.

Wonderful as living at Acton was, I knew it could not go on forever, and that I would have to return home eventually. Ro's urging had started me giving it serious thought and I knew it made sense. I didn't want to leave

Ireland and Uncle Jack did not make my decision any easier by trying to persuade me to stay, even to the point of trying to marry me off locally, a ruse which did not succeed.

There was so much of Europe and the UK I hadn't seen and in those 1958 days before regular air travel, Australia seemed so far away, it might have been on another planet.

Leaving was dreadful. The night I left, Margaret had the whole family to dinner to say goodbye. Don drove me to the ferry and I sobbed all the way: 'Ach, sure you'll be back, darlin',' he tried to console me, handing over his handkerchief to mop over my tears.

'I won't, I won't', I sobbed, 'I'll never get back and they'll all be dead!' Poor Don. How prophetic my words.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

COMING HOME

It was November when I arrived back in London. Cold, dark, foggy, it matched my gloomy mood, as I made my way to the long-suffering Crabbes in Croydon.

Since Cecil had been knighted for his work as Registrar of Friendly Societies in Great Britain, their lifestyle had changed considerably. Both he and Margaret were now much busier but they were still as kind and hospitable to me as ever.

I had to borrow money from my mother to pay for my fare home. When that came through, I booked on one of the P&O boats due to arrive in Fremantle just before Christmas.

Saying goodbye to my favourite places in London was depressing. I walked along the Embankment, looked for the last time at the bridges, the Houses of Parliament, the Museum, the National Gallery, now shrouded in fog. Finally, and saddest of all, I walked the length of the beautiful, elegant Regent Street, already a sparkling, magic fairyland of tinsel, stars and Christmas decorations.

I did some last minute shopping and spent hours in the Crabbe's attic, sorting and discarding many of the belongings I had deposited there over the previous four years. They must have been so glad to see the last of me.

Rosemary had already left on her homeward journey by bus across Asia. I would have given my eye teeth to do the trip but it was too expensive for me. Before leaving she asked me to bring back a fake fur coat she had bought in the USA. It was not a suitable article to take on a bus trip across Asia. It was warm and I felt very opulent wearing it.

At last the day of departure dawned and I caught the boat train to Tilbury docks. When an Immigration Officer came through asking for

passports, there was a great shuffling in bags from passengers around me. I smiled and smugly thought, 'Fancy not having your passport handy', until I opened my own bag and realized with a dull thud that mine was still at the Commonwealth Bank in the Strand where, the day before, I had closed my meagre account.

To say I panicked was an understatement. The awful thought struck me that I may not be able to board the ship or land in WA. It was at the time of the Suez crisis and I thought that even if I was allowed on board, I may be barred from going ashore at any of the ports. The Immigration Officer could not help me.

We were decanted from the train into a high-fenced enclosure. There was no phone to ring the bank and I ran up and down the fence like a caged lion. Finally, I caught the attention of a young man who was standing nearby, observing the milling throng. I explained my predicament and asked him to ring the bank and ask them to post the passport to me at home. I don't know if he did or not but I had no problems and the passport arrived back in Narrogin, a few days after I did.

I shared a cabin with two middle-aged ladies who, with their husbands, were emigrating to the Eastern States. Most of the passengers were migrants and the atmosphere on board was very different to my outward journey when we were almost all young Australians and New Zealanders off to spread their wings in Europe.

I was adopted by a group of New Zealanders and we played Canasta a lot. I became friendly with a South Australian girl, returning home, and the Entertainment Officer asked us to help the Purser pick the winner of the Children's Fancy Dress. 'Just go along with the Purser', he told us. The Purser was a very large man who was immediately enamoured by a little, blonde fairy whose elaborate, pink, frilly dress was bought – obviously. After trying to divert him to more innovative efforts, we got the same response: 'My word, I like that little pink fairy!' We agreed, weakly, in the end and the pink fairy triumphed!

We had a few hours in port when we reached Gibraltar, a major Royal Navy base. There was time for a quick tour round the Rock, to see the Barbary apes, and afternoon tea in a little tea-rooms which could have been transported from an English village, lace curtains and pretty china and all.

The weather became tempestuous when we sailed for Naples and I spent three days on my bunk, surviving on dry crackers and water.

Naples felt familiar, remembering my previous more arduous trip. I made a B-line for UPIM's store and bought eight little coffee cups in primary colours, like the ones Tess and Virginia had in their London flat. They have

been a source of pleasure to many children over the years but are now on their last legs. I wandered around back streets and bought my first pizza from a street stall.

Mount Etna was blowing sparks as we sailed past Sicily. We picked up some Greek migrants at Palermo Bay but did not get a chance to go ashore.

The trip through the Suez Canal went smoothly and we arrived at the ports in daytime which was reassuring. It was less nerve-wracking than finding shops, barely lit at 3 am and with warnings of danger and abduction ringing in our ears. I bought, among other things, a pair of thongs which must have been among the first to arrive in Australia.

As before, we were held up at locks, watching the biblical panorama on both sides as men and women in long, white robes led camels and donkeys through little settlements of tents, children and other paraphernalia. Whenever we stopped, small boats came out with baskets, rugs and other goods for sale. It was still mystifying when *Gully Gully* men came on board to entertain us, producing scarves, eggs and new-born, fluffy, yellow chicks out of unexpected places.

It was disappointing not to call at an Indian port but we had a whole day in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). Colombo and Singapore had been holiday venues for well-heeled Western Australian's for years before the war and I had hankered to visit them. I went on a tour to the centre of the island to see not only the scenery on the trip but the famous white marble palace and rotunda in the lake of the Temple of the Tooth – of a Sacred Elephant, I think. It was a day of complete magic, the beautiful trees in the forest and the bounty of the land. We saw cinnamon, nutmeg, tea plantations, monkeys in the trees and many fascinating glimpses of this beautiful place. I imagined the Swiss Family Robinson would have lived there in great comfort. A last call at a tea-packing factory, where we had to take our shoes off and wash our feet before we were allowed in to see the various processes, and back to the ship for dinner.

We set sail and all that lay between us and Australian shores was the wide, blue Indian Ocean.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

HOME

On the 22 December 1958, I walked down the gang-plank in Fremantle and was met by a friendly Customs Officer whose broad, Australian accent startled me. 'Welcome home!' How long had I been away? etc. With such a welcome and feeling the warmth of the sun, I wondered why I had been away so long.

Mother and Tom met me and, after a stop-over at Dick's and Anne's, we headed home. I was startled by the noisy children, their accent and the banging fly-wire doors as they ran in and out of the house in Broome Street. The Acton children, with their soft brogues, were so much quieter and, in fact, I can never remember them running around and being so boisterous.

Driving back to Narrogin, there was a hot easterly blowing through the open window and I felt as if the skin was being whipped off my face.

Mother was living in a house in Herald Street by now and so I could stay with her for a few weeks. I took the only job in town, as a nursing assistant at the Narrogin Hospital. The hospital was run by Matron Henry, small in stature but a superb nurse. She, with Dr and Mrs Jacobs (a nurse) had worked tirelessly to provide a medical service in the district during the war years.

Dr Jacobs had been a stretcher bearer in World War 1 and was a pacifist. He was considered to be quite eccentric but he and my father were good friends and I felt that was why he was so good to me. He gave me a subscription to the *National Geographic* magazine all the time I was overseas and, when I was at Royal Perth, invited me to join him and Amy, his daughter, who was doing her nursing training there, to picnics in the hills. As he organized picnic hampers from the Palace Hotel, where he stayed, the

lunches were very special. When I came home, he gave me the book *`Till I End My Song*.

He had strong views about his patients having peace and quiet, and vetoed radios. There was always a mad rush to turn them off when he pulled into the car-park at the hospital. When an old man who was very disturbed about being separated from his dog was admitted, Dr Jacobs ordered that he be pushed out onto the verandah so the dog could camp under the bed.

There were only two wards, one for women and one for men, with one or two private rooms. This was in the old hospital, later converted to Permanent Care.

Dr Mainland, the only other doctor, had retired from serving in the army in the Islands where he had gained recognition for his work in malaria treatment. He did the obstetric work and he, also, had very strong views. After his patients gave birth, he insisted they were to remain on full bed rest for ten to fourteen days. He attended me when I had Ned and, when I was eventually allowed to get up, my legs buckled!

Apart from Matron Henry, there were only two trained sisters. One of them gave me a couple of lectures on how to take temperatures, make beds, how to give bed baths and do mouth washes.

For the first three days, all I did was to make egg-flips for the patients and arrange flowers, all of which were removed religiously every night to the flower room. I was in heaven. The honeymoon was soon over. I found I was to do dressings, dole out medication, all of which I could deal with, but also give injections. I was given a practice run with an orange and let loose. Although I had injected plenty of sheep, small children were a different matter and I could not do it.

There were about fourteen other assistants working at the hospital and although I got on alright, I was surprised by their cattiness. In all my communal living, I had not encountered it before and found it unpleasant.

The domestic staff were nearly all displaced persons, DPs as they were known. As there was a labour shortage in Australia after World War 2, and, I like to think for humanitarian reasons, some of the thousands of Europeans displaced during hostilities were brought to Australia on contract, to work for two years where required, and then allowed to settle here. Mainly they came from Poland, the Ukraine, the small northern countries, Latvia, Lithuania, with some Yugoslavs and Croatians.

As Narrogin was a major railway centre, on the Great Southern line between Perth and Albany with branches going east and to Collie in the south west, workers were needed to keep the lines in order. Others were employed doing roadwork. The women who did not have small children

were free to work as domestics at the hospital. It is as well they did because local girls either left town or preferred to work in offices or shops. Very few married women worked then.

Since there was no available housing for so many people, they lived in tents in an encampment, on the east side of the Wagin Road, diagonally opposite the butter factory. As well as tents each newcomer was given a swag and messing gear, the bare essentials for cooking, on open fires, and, perhaps, some furniture. It must have been bitter in winter and purgatory in summer heat.

Looking back, it is hard to believe such events took place. The sudden invasion of so many foreigners, few of whom spoke English, must have been an over-whelming event for them, but also the local population.

The locals, I understand, were not all as welcoming as they might have been and comments about misunderstandings were subjects of jokes, or remarks such as 'Why can't they speak English?' and 'Why aren't they more like us?' Some of the criticism was directed to their food, their use of oil and garlic especially.

The Council and organizations like the CWA became involved in trying to help and gradually animosity gave way to acceptance. By hard work, they eventually moved to houses, some built by themselves. Many of their descendants are now well-established and well-respected citizens of the town.

I enjoyed my time at the hospital and learned a lot about caring for sick people. It was not a wasted experience and making people comfortable gave me great satisfaction. For all that, I have always been glad that my path led me to social work.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

PERTH – IMMIGRATION

Ro was home from her bus trip, about to start a paediatric course at Princess Margaret Hospital and suggested we share a flat. Accommodation was very hard to find at that time. Apart from a multi-storied block of units built by the Housing Commission in West Perth, I cannot remember any other purpose-built, rental properties.

Eventually I found three rooms in what had been a maternity hospital at 23 Coolgardie Street, Subiaco. The rent was £4.00 a week. To reach it, we had to climb a rickety outside staircase. The shared bathroom and refrigerator were downstairs and the toilet in the backyard. There were a few bits of furniture and to our distaste we had to share a double bed. Ro said sleeping with me was like backing up against a Wellstead combustion stove. As soon as we could afford it, we bought a second-hand divan. I remember a young man bringing it round one Saturday, with it balanced precariously on the roof of his VW.

We decided to smarten the place up and the owners happily agreed when we asked if we could repaint it. (When we finished it, they asked if we would like to move into one of their other units!)

Lady Luck played into our hands at this stage, in the shape of Tom Sayers. Tom was an Englishman who had come to WA when he was in the Royal Navy during the war and with a mate spent a leave at Windyridge. He had come back to set up a branch of British Paints. He said he would supply the necessary paint from samples and help us do the painting.

We planned to do it after work but he insisted we must eat first and would take us to the Palace Hotel for a four-course meal, with wine – I think a sweet white called *Barossa Pearl*, very popular at the time.

As Ro went on duty at 6 am every morning and was on her feet most of the day, she would collapse on the bed and fall asleep as soon as we arrived home. Tom and I would make a tentative start but before long decide it was all too much and gave up. Finally, Tom sent his boy round to do the job and it was soon completed.

We had only the barest of household goods. Our precious little bits of blue and white china from Copenhagen, Ro's set of Venetian wine glasses and a two-inch clay pot from Isfahan, nursed tenderly on her travels across Asia. She knocked it onto the floor when she came home late one night, waking me up with her anguished cry. 'Never mind, Rosie', I murmured consolingly from the depths of the double bed – 'I'll glue it for you tomorrow!

'Glue it, she snarled, 'it's a heap of dust!'

She also brought back a hubble-bubble pipe, which was to become the main attraction at our future candle-lit suppers! We bought tobacco and with some difficulty got it going, dragging the smoke through the water with some effort to get a satisfying bubbling sound. It was our *pièce de résistance*!

Ro made trendy, café curtains and we painted French, Spanish and Italian proverbs on the kitchen walls. A red and white check tablecloth, candles standing in empty Chianti bottles and we were ready to entertain. We specialized in leafy green salads dressed lavishly with oil, vinegar and garlic, spaghetti Bolognese, red wine and we were more European than Europeans!

I cannot remember either of us having a radio, getting the daily paper, nor being interested in world news. TV had arrived in 1956 but we certainly did not have a set. Thanks to our families' donations, before long we had been fairly well set up with our other household needs.

In later life, Robin and Richard Porter, as well as Libby Fornachon, a South Australian cousin, who stayed with us for a few days while her family was in WA, have told us how strong an influence our mildly bohemian lifestyle had in opening their eyes to a big, wide world beyond Australia.

In the meantime, I was settling in to my job at the Immigration Department. No sooner had I started than I had a call from Princess Margaret Hospital offering me a job, but I was already committed.

I felt very unsettled, glad to be home but missing family in Ireland and friends and the exciting and beautiful places I had seen. Working with people who were going through the pain of loss and separation, in far more traumatic and tragic circumstances, put things in perspective and it also helped me relate very closely to them.

The Department was in a two-storey building in Murray Street, west of William Street. There were two main divisions, one for British migrants and one for Foreign Immigration. There must have been 50 or more staff.

My office was a partitioned enclosure near the entrance and the long, high front counter. It was unadorned and not sound proof. At times, if a client became noisy or emotional, as one or two did as some had severe mental problems, one of the men would come in and remove them. I was not happy about this but did not think it was appropriate to have an argument in public.

Four men from the government came into my office one day and questioned me about a man I had seen several times and who had talked wildly about a secret society. He was obviously very ill mentally. I was asked a lot of questions but as I had little information I could give them very little help. Afterwards, I was informed that my interrogators were from (I think) ASIS – very hush hush and senior to ASIO. Unbelievably, there were no interpreters on staff. If necessary, another migrant from the same language group would be called in to help – usually after work. It seemed very unprofessional to me, with no surety the interpreter was impartial.

In those days, phone calls to the Eastern states were not undertaken lightly but once or twice a week a link-up would be made to Head Office in Canberra. We would be paired up to take a call from our opposite number so the call was transferred when our turn came.

My senior was mainly interested in how I had spent the previous weekend, the weather in Perth and what shows were on, rather than work.

The Good Neighbour Council had been established to help newcomers settle in. It was run by an English lady who had migrated with her mother. They planned to go to Sydney but she had been so violently seasick and ill on the trip, she could not face another voyage and they stayed here. She was a very nice, sensible person and as many of the cases overlapped, we saw a lot of each other.

The Commonwealth Bank set up a Welfare Section, too.

Needless to say some new arrivals, who came with high hopes, found reality did not match their expectations and were very unsettled. All were committed to staying and working for two years in return for their passage out but I remember one couple, who were very disillusioned, pleaded to be sent back to the UK. They were so persistent that Canberra finally capitulated and they were returned. Three days in the UK was time enough for them to realize they had made a mistake and were pleading to come back. Canberra's response was a categorical 'No'!

A young couple with three small children were equally demanding a return without success. On that occasion, the enterprising young mother stowed the family away on one of the P&O liners while it was berthed in Fremantle *en route* for England. They were not discovered for several days. They were off-loaded somewhere along the Suez Canal and shipped back to WA. They eventually settled down.

Sometimes, I was involved in helping people who may have had some illness or injury on the voyage and needed to be hospitalized. One of the office staff and I would meet the boat and make all necessary arrangements for the patient and their family. I have a wonderful memory of a very dapper officer escorting the Swiss parents of a little boy, who needed to be admitted to hospital, along the wharf. He was very nattily-clad in a suit, in spite of the temperature being over 100° and clutched a furry brown bear, almost as tall as he was.

It was always action stations when a ship came in from Europe. Passengers arriving here had to be assessed, taken to their accommodations, etc. They were always greeted with warmth and understanding, rather different from our current system (2014).

Sometimes I was asked to investigate the suitability of families wanting to bring a relative to Australia. Usually they wanted to bring out parents who needed care. The families had to be in a sufficiently affluent position to take full responsibility for the newcomer. This meant accommodate them, cover all financial needs, including health, as they would not be eligible for pensions, health cover or any other expense for their lifetime. I met some wonderful people, very genuine in their wish to care for their mostly elderly relatives. I loved visiting their homes and seeing some of the family treasures brought with them from their homeland. It was a huge commitment to bring an elderly person from village life, in Southern Europe for instance, to a suburb in Perth. Often to a modern house with all the labour-saving devices, where all the family spent their time at work or school. Grandchildren often did not know the 'old' language and with three generations living together, tensions sometime arose.

I started Italian lessons again, this time with Franco Lutero who had come to WA as a migrant some years before. He was married and had two small daughters. As well as language, he taught us a lot about Italian culture and organized Sunday afternoon social gatherings with mainly young Italian men. They were great fun. We danced, conversed and had spaghetti and red wine suppers! Franco asked me to recommend that his application to bring out his young sister be approved. Knowing the family so well, I had no hesitation in doing so,

His sister duly arrived and began her nursing training at the WA School. She did a placement at Narrogin and, by one of those quirks of fate which seem to happen often in my life, she was on duty in maternity the night Ned was born and was present at his birth. John bought her a cameo pendant to mark the occasion. She was a lovely girl.

I met a lot of older women, asking for help to get jobs more suited to their qualifications than cleaning in hospitals and government departments. It was difficult, as vacancies were rare. The stories of their lives, in many cases, were tragic. Several had lost daughters in the war and, in small ways, saw me as a substitute. I became very close to one or two of them.

Some families invited me to parties, which I really enjoyed because they were such fun, dancing, music, delicious food and interesting conversation. Efforts made to marry me off to some of their fellow countrymen, failed.

A custom Australian women initially found surprising was that of men kissing their hand when arriving at a social function. I always felt very gauche when my hand was kissed. All I could think of was: 'have I been cutting up onions, today?' European women accepted the greeting so graciously, it made me feel even clumsier.

Sometimes, Uncle Bill [Locke] came to Perth and would ring me and say, 'Meet me outside at 12 o'clock and we'll go to lunch at that 'Ding' place across the road.' He knew I would disapprove of him referring to the Venezia Café as a 'Ding' Place. In fact, whatever it was called, I have never tasted better chicken and spaghetti, which they served, since. On his way to the city, Uncle Bill would stop in the Swan Valley to top up his wine supply – and ours – and go to the Watsonia Factory, buy cheese, butter, bacon and sausages, bacon and fill our fridge. We were very spoilt. Uncle Bill had always been very good to me and I enjoyed his witty turn of speech.

I tried to go back to Narrogin to see mother every six weeks or so, down on Friday night and back on Sunday, by bus. She was living in Herald Street, too far out for her to walk to town, but friends were very helpful and picked her up for shopping, etc.

As the weather became hotter, we decided to move nearer the beach and found a unit, mostly enclosed verandah, in what had been a lovely old home in Rosenda Street in Cottesloe. The house had been partitioned, to make ramshackle living quarters. We had only just signed the lease for six months when Dick bought 38 Broome Street, across the road from where they lived and asked us if we wanted to rent it. As we couldn't break our lease, he let it to an English family, who proved to be less than ideal tenants, for six months.

Ro had bought a scooter and every morning we would grab our bathers and zoom down the hill to disport ourselves in the ocean. Sometimes a pod of dolphins joined us. We made net bags for the shells we collected as we swam and dived. Then back up the hill for a quick shower and breakfast, glowing with health, and so to work.

I was asked again to go to Princess Margaret Hospital. Although I liked Immigration, involvement with people from so many different cultures, I was missing the medical sphere and the feeling of being part of a team.

When I told the CEO I had decided to leave, he tried hard to dissuade me. He asked if there was any job I wanted in Immigration – a move to Canberra, a trip on a migrant ship as a Welfare Officer, he would arrange it, but my mind was made up. He was quite cross when I remained firm.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

PERTH – PRINCESS MARGARET HOSPITAL

My reception by the nursing staff at PMH, apart from one ward sister, could hardly be called warm. I was quite surprised, although Ro had found most of them less than friendly, too. The person in charge of the private wing virtually refused me entry – saying there was nothing for me to do as there were no 'poor people' in her ward!

All day visiting was brought in soon after I started and caused huge consternation. The children would be upset and routine disorganized, etc! Soon it was all changed – children, no longer kept in their cots or beds crying, or worse withdrawn and silent, were running round playing together, often sitting on the knee of a resident doctor and playing with his stethoscope while he wrote up his notes.

Our secretary Joan Howard was wonderful and became a lifelong friend. Years later she typed up my notes on family history.

The transport driver was a mature lady, mother of a large family, full of common sense and humour. She drove the hospital van and when I had a number of home visits to do, we often spent the best part of a day going round the city and environs following them up. A lot of the referrals were follow-up visits, when a child had not been brought in to the second appointment after an initial examination.

Italian parents, especially, were terrified their child might need 'the knife'. Usually our visits were to make sure the child was all right and parents reassured and encouraged to bring the child back. A lot of these families lived on market gardens north of Perth. Once they realized the follow-up visit to the hospital was just a routine check, they could not do enough for me.

While Mrs C waited in the van, reading, I was regaled with coffee and, when I made a few tentative efforts to practice my Italian, accepted as one of the family. I was given little heart-starters of home brew, livened up with some smuggled alcoholic essence that some relative had managed to bring into the country undetected. If we were visiting a market garden, we would be inundated with fruit and vegetables, piled into the van, regardless of our protestations. In due time, the little patient would come for a follow-up and the matter cleared up.

There were some heart-breakingly, sad cases, many of whom I still remember vividly and I recall the courage of their parents, their love and sacrifice.

It was about this time that I felt able to honour a promise I had made to myself when I returned from Europe. I had been deeply moved by the kindness and generosity I had been shown by so many people I had met on my travels, especially in Greece in the little town of Ioannina. I felt very strongly that I wanted to repay them in some way. I made up my mind that, when I returned to Australia and was solvent, I would sponsor a child through the Save the Children Fund.

I applied for a Greek child but there were none on their books at that time. I was asked to sponsor a child through The Lebanese Union for Child Welfare. Nimeh was a five-year-old from south Lebanon whose mother had died giving birth and who, with his two older brothers, was living in poverty, separated from their father who could not afford to take them with him to Beirut where he could find work as a mason.

Not long afterwards, I was asked if I would help Andreas Caracostas as well, a very bright little Greek boy who, likewise, lived in great poverty. His father was a seasonal labourer and his mother was suffering from kidney failure. Needless to say I was very pleased to accept them both. The payments were modest and it was satisfying to know I was helping in a practical way towards a better future for these small boys.

John felt as I did and we continued to support them after we were married.

Nimeh left school and went to work in Saudi Arabia. We did not hear from him again.

Andreas finished primary school and we were asked if we would make a bigger payment so he could move to the nearest town, Amfilohia, 20 kilometres away to attend high school. Although it meant a larger commitment than we could manage comfortably, we said we would and John had just paid the first instalment when he died.

In all the following trauma of the aftermath of his death, I had a burning conviction that I would find the money somehow. When the Greek people heard of John's death the whole village mourned.

In fact the Save the Children Fund arranged for an elderly couple in Mount Lawley who had been left a small legacy to take the sponsorship over and they paid for the remaining five years of Andreas' education at High School.

Under the title 'Boy gets another chance to learn', this newspaper article covered the story:

> **Anonymous Samaritans in Western Australia have given a Greek boy a future.**
>
> The boy – a 12 year old – is the son of poor Greek parents who can't afford to send him to a Greek high school.
>
> His headmaster has recommended that he be sent, but until last week his chances of continuing his education looked minimal.
>
> The boy had been sponsored through his early education by a West Australian couple. He had been sponsored initially by the woman, who had been warmed by Greek sympathy to her plight when she was stranded[27] without much money in their country.
>
> When she arrived home, she approached the Save the Children Fund, and subsequently 'adopted' the Greek boy. When she married, her husband took on the sponsorship.
>
> But he died before he had time to take out the insurance policy he had planned to cover the next five years. His widow, though she had two of their own children, wanted to sell shares to cover the sponsorship.
>
> Another West Australian couple have offered to take the sponsorship. They too, want to stay unnamed.

Later, when we were in Perth, we visited the kind people who had taken over the sponsorship. From then on, we heard no more. But this was years later.

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John rang me at the hospital one day, but I was out, and as he did not call back or leave a number, I couldn't follow it up. I never thought he might be interested in me, because when I went to Mardie, Phyll Sharpe told me he

27 Newspaper hyperbole – I was never 'stranded' though I had little money when I had been in Greece.

hated women. He said he had been brought up by two old aunts who ran a market garden. Everyone at Mardie thought he was rather odd because he was studying Mathematics by correspondence, through the London School of Economics. He used to go for long runs at night in an effort to get fit so he could join the army.

Owing to Phyll's strict segregation of workmen from the upper echelon of staff at Mardie, I only ever met him when I went to the vegetable garden, usually with the children, to pick greens for the kitchen. Sometimes we exchanged a few words. He never seemed anything but very nice and polite. Jamie, who was about three-and-a-half, loved him and spent quite a lot of time with him when he was in the garden.

Phyll had seemed so sure when she told me this and gave the impression that his aunts had been very strict, I did not question it. He had been disqualified from joining the army because he had been a bad asthmatic as a child.

Fortunately, the doctors and other staff at PMH were very friendly and I learnt a lot while I was there. Advances were being made in medicine and I was privileged to have been involved with new developments in heart surgery – notably with 'blue' babies.

There was no interpreter here either and several times I was asked to help. Although I could communicate on one to one in my work, I was less than successful in the clinics. As far as I could gather, I was the only staff member who knew any other language, which is hard to believe today!

There were only a handful of social workers in Perth in 1959/1960 but some earnest souls were trying to raise enthusiasm to get a school of social work established at the university.

We seemed always to be having meetings after work. This was more onerous for me because I was secretary and always writing letters and minutes, by hand, as well.

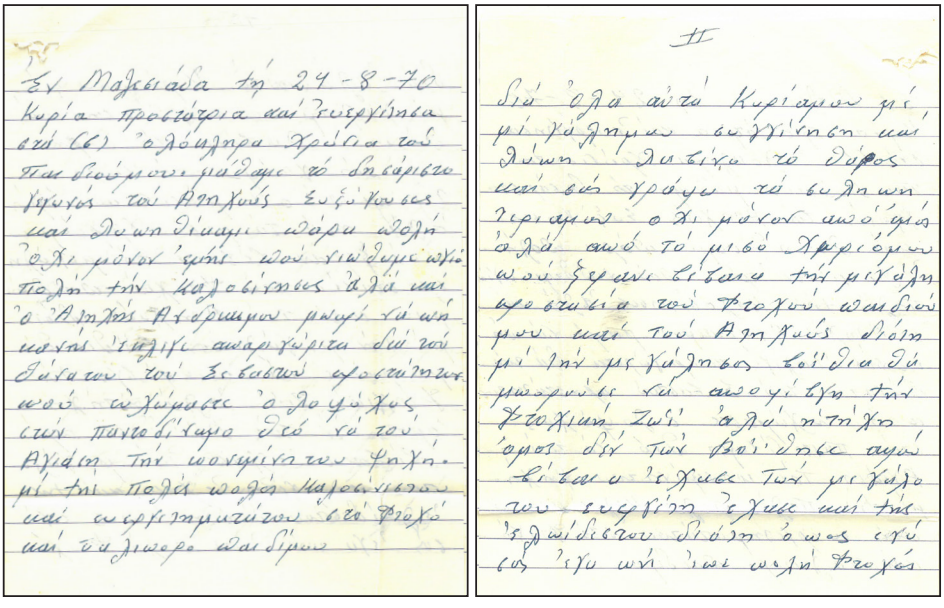
Ro by this time was working at the Child Welfare Department.

Betty Best came out from Ireland, rented a flat near the Royal Perth Hospital where she soon got a job as medical secretary to Dr Hockey who was doing research in genetics. Athol Hockey was married to Dr McComb, a prominent plastic surgeon. They had four boys who went to Christ Church with the Porter boys. The McComb boys later formed *The Triffids* band. Athol was completely absorbed in her work and Bet became much more than a secretary to her.

Gill Potter, who had trained in Canada and been working in Singapore, had travelled from the UK across Asia and like Ro who had had similar experience, became a lifelong friend.

Late in 1961, I was again asked to go to Fremantle and, as it was the job I had always wanted, I accepted it. The hospital management was not happy I was leaving but by now, two other social workers had been appointed so I did not feel I was deserting the ship. One was a young married man. It was not until many years later, I was told that, because he was a male, he was paid at a higher rate than I was. He was also less qualified. I had never been very concerned about pay rates and entitlement. I was doing work I loved and felt very fortunate to have the qualifications necessary to be employed in the field.

When I was doing my farewell round, the sister who had been so unpleasant to me said: 'Oh! Now Miss Porter is leaving who can we be rude to?' Miss Porter told her rather acidly she was sure she would find someone!



Save the Children Fund Letter.

Meg was a passionate supporter of charitable causes, particularly Save the Children Fund. Inspired by the kindness she had experienced in Greece after the war, she and John sponsored several children despite having little money themselves. Among them was Andreas, a bright Greek boy whose family faced great hardship. After John's sudden death in 1970, this moving letter was received from one of the sponsored children. The entire village mourned John's passing, and thanks to the generosity of others, Andreas was able to continue his schooling – a cause Meg and John had dearly hoped to support.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

FREMANTLE

It was Christmas time, 1961, when I started at Fremantle. I was invited to the Christmas party, where the sister who had been in charge of the office was being farewelled.

She had a nurse assistant who would be staying on to help me. She had worked with Dick, my brother when he had a practice in Meekatharra. Norah was staying on to help me.

After Mrs Fletcher had been suitably lauded and presented with the obligatory gold watch, I was called into the middle of the ring of spectators. The President of the Board of Management raised my right arm, like a prize fighter, and addressed the crowd: 'We weren't too sure what she would be like but she looks alright to me!' It was some time later that Norah told me the Board had been reluctant to appoint me because they thought that, as a professional social worker, I would not be kind to the patients!

As well as Norah, there was a girl on switch who also handled the lending of crutches, etc, and a young office girl. The voluntary transport service, too, was handled by our office.

Norah was a mine of information, not only because she knew all the ward sisters but because she had been at the hospital for many years and knew a lot of the patients, their families and circumstances.

When I started, everyone who came in the door was called 'dear', one of my pet hates, in those days, as I felt it sounded very patronizing. I am more tolerant from necessity now, because terms of endearment to all and sundry are so common, it is easier to go with the flow! I said nothing about it but, after a few days of referring to people by their given names, the message was heard.

There was a chronic shortage of crutches and, checking the appliance book, I found over a hundred pairs of crutches and some walking sticks had been lent but never recovered. I remember thinking, if I do nothing else while I am here, I am going to get the crutches back! By letter writing and home visiting we collected, I think, about 120!

Although we were only twelve miles from Perth, with good connecting train services, Fremantle residents were very parochial, and only went to the capital when their needs could not be met locally.

The Fremantle doctors were akin to gods in the eyes of their patients and hospital staff enjoyed their reflected glory.

At times, I had to go down to the port and on board ships when, after a rough trip, for instance, passengers were injured and needed hospitalization.

On one epic occasion, I needed to go on board the guano boat which, at that time, did a ten-day round trip to Christmas Island to pick up guano, the white powdery bird poo which was used as an agricultural fertilizer. I needed to request the Captain to grant one trips' leave for a young man so he could get married. The poor man was dealing with about three other matters but when I explained the circumstances, he gave his blessing. Getting on and off the boat was quite a challenge, as I had to climb a rope ladder while the vessel swayed on the incoming tide. The fact that I was wearing high-heeled shoes and a tight skirt, added to the difficulty.

The boy in question had only recently arrived in WA. He and his fifteen-year-old girlfriend, to escape from her parents' forbidding the union, had eloped from Sydney and driven to WA in an old vehicle. By the time they reached Fremantle, the poor girl had collapsed from heat and stress and been admitted to hospital. The fact that she was under sixteen made the situation difficult but, fortunately, her birthday was due. As soon as the boy was assured she was better and in safe hands, he took the job on the guano boat. He was a very sensible, nice lad.

When the patient had recovered, we found somewhere for her to stay, a caravan in a backyard, but where the owners took her to their hearts and mothered her. Norah was wonderful to her. As soon as she turned sixteen, plans were made for the betrothal. Her family in Sydney had been contacted and, in the face of the inevitable, given their blessing to the union. Everyone involved went to the ceremony at St Patrick's Cathedral to wish them well. Later, they returned to NSW. They were an impressive young couple.

I bought a car, a little black and white Austin 40. For some reason, although I had the money, I decided to ask for a loan. A very polite gentleman in the Commonwealth interviewed me, completed the application form, and assured me there would be no problem in getting the money.

He said the only thing I needed to do was get the form countersigned by a male relative, husband or brother!

I'd never heard of feminism or chauvinism but, although I did not actually snort as I stalked out of his office, he was left in doubt what I thought about his precious bank. I have been prejudiced against the Commonwealth ever since but it would have been standard practice for any bank at that time!

Having the car made travelling to Narrogin to see mother a lot easier.

I was nominated by the Social Work Association to go to the Annual Social Work Conference in Sydney. I decided to make the most of the opportunity. Trips to the eastern states were a major event in those days and not to be treated lightly. I arranged to visit a couple of hospitals, at Newcastle in NSW and Fairfield in Melbourne, which were establishing Day Care and Home Help, etc, to see what they were doing. As Fremantle were planning a Day Care extension, I was granted to leave to visit them. Also, I was given a few days leave to visit the Snowy River Scheme which had been such an enormous project and fascinated me.

My friends came to see me off on the bus to the airport for the trip. Going by air was quite a social event then – no track suits and carry-on luggage. Passengers generally dressed up, the hostesses settled people in their seats and handed round barley sugar to be sucked when the plane took off, to help prevent pain in the traveller's ear from air pressure.

When I had duly attended to the social work business and been to Newcastle, I flew to Canberra to start my tour of the Snowy country.

I had booked the tour through the Sydney Tourist Bureau. It had been described to me as new, very individual and was highly recommended. It proved to be individual and new as far as operations, but the small bus had seen better days. It was the first day of operating. I was the only passenger and the driver had also just started. He was a raffish lad from Bourke, who had never seen the sea, and as I was to find out, apart from having a job, had a secret agenda for choosing this one – or so it seemed to me!

Officially, we were part of an entourage of other tourist buses, private vehicles and officials from the project who guided us. Sometimes we were with them, sometimes we were not.

Finally I discovered one of the reasons my driver had taken this job was to try and locate a 'mate' who owed him money. At least, that is what I thought it was and it explained why, when the rest of the tours were going in one direction, we were heading in another. I vividly recall eating ice cream at Jerrildery later flooded for a dam, a long way from the other vehicles with whom we were meant to be travelling. When we dropped down through thick forest into a deep valley which was cold and dark, passed

'No Entry' signs with gay abandon, I did feel a frisson of anxiety. Even more so, when my intrepid driver stopped the bus and muttering, he would not be long, disappeared into the gloomy forest. The cold was seeping into my bones when he returned, after what felt like hours, but was probably only ten minutes. He was smiling happily, having finally met up with his man and got the money. It was all plain sailing after that. We found the tour and we were taken in to see the huge turbines and other engineering marvels of the scheme.

The scenery in the Snowy country was very beautiful; I wish I had seen more of it. Purple ranges reaching back to the far horizon is a memory I will never forget.

The boy from Burke took me to the night club in Cooma where the tour ended, after we had had dinner. There were about fifty men there, all workers on the scheme, European and well-dressed. I was the only girl. It was acutely embarrassing, even more so, when my swain insisted we danced. He wore a shirt with the sleeves rolled up and danced very energetically, with his right hand pumping up and down in the approved bush style!

It was a relief to get on a regular bus service to go to Canberra and take a plane to Melbourne.

After visiting Fairfield hospital, to see what they were doing in the area of home support, and catching up for a couple of days with Eileen and the Ryan family, I headed west. Suddenly having a sister, even if she was just half, felt wonderful. We were so compatible it felt very comforting. It was sad our time together was so brief. She never came to WA.

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The first thing I saw when I walked back into the flat was Betty sitting, with her leg in a full plaster, propped up on a chair. When everyone went their way after seeing me off to Sydney, Bet was crossing the Terrace to return to her flat when a young man hit her with his VW. She was taken to RPH, where she denied having any contacts in WA. Being very independent, she did not want to cause any bother, especially for Dick, who of course worked at RPH. Apart from the remorseful young man who had hit her, and inundated her with flowers and books until she gave him short shrift, she managed to keep her secret. Dick finally discovered her and she was brought back to our unit so Ro could look after her, bathe her, etc.

I had no compunction about taking an extended lunch-time when any of my Eastern States students, or other friends, had a few hours in Fremantle, when their ship berthed in port for the day. For the young to work for a

year, to get some money and then head to Europe, was a rite of passage. For older travellers, it was the realization of a long held dream. A number of my friends were travelling to Europe. It was nice to see them again. Norah, a stickler for regular hours, was shocked to the core by my casual attitude but, I always made up lost time, often visiting patients at night or during weekends.

When Ro and Jesse married and went to Esperance, and the leases ran out for our unit, and 38 Broome Street, Bet and I moved down the street to the latter. In recent years, the house had been roughly partitioned to make several units but Dick had a marvellous elderly handyman who had opened it up and restored it, if not to its previous glory at least to a more liveable state. He was one of those living treasures who could, and would, turn his hand to anything and was always there when needed, either at 38 or 36, across the street where Dick, Anne and family lived.

38 Broome Street was similar to many old Perth houses, in the more affluent suburbs. They had verandahs, big rooms with high ceilings and large windows. The long, central, passage was embellished with cameo painted scenes from the Italian lakes. There was a dark, evil-looking scullery off the kitchen, leading to an enclosed verandah, part of which served as a laundry. A copper-lined boiler, to boil clothes as well as provide hot water, and cement troughs were tucked away in one corner. There were seven bedrooms of varying standards from palatial to rabbit hole. We never locked the doors and the Porter children came and went from across the road regularly, as the fancy took them.

I remember urging Richard to go beach-combing, and look for money washed up on the tide. I was awoken at 6 am next morning to find that he and Johnny had taken me at my word. It was pouring with rain and these two little boys stood by the bed, water running off their oilskins and holding up a plastic bag, half-filled with water, where some seaweed, a dead blowie and someone's upper plate of false teeth floated!!

Bet and I organized a Halloween Party for the children and a number of their friends. We set up sticky buns on strings, hanging on the clothes line, which they had to eat without touching with their hands, a tub of water where they bobbed for apples and other traditional games. Some of the erstwhile guests remember it as a highlight still.

People came and went from 38 constantly. They came for a meal, a swim at Cottesloe Beach on Sunday morning followed by a long lunch, or to stay a week or six months. Audrey Boyle, the social worker at the Royal Infirmary in Edinburgh, who took over my previous job at PMH came for several months. Gill Potter, Cecile Dorward, an eccentric English

occupational therapist, plus casual visits from family members, all came, making life interesting.

Preparations for Christmas in 1962 were well in hand at home and at the hospital, when I had a phone call from one of the sisters at St John of God Hospital in Subiaco who said: 'A Mr John Coten had asked her to ring me and asked if I would please visit him.' She said he had been flown to Perth by the Royal Flying Doctor Service following a serious accident in the north. I was surprised, to say the least, but said I would come after work.

When I saw him, I was shocked at how frail he looked, but not surprised when I heard how severe the accident had been. He said that after working for seven years on Warrawagine Station, erecting wind mills, he resigned as the windmill man, but stayed on, restoring some antique furniture for the manager's wife. He had always been interested in prospecting and it was while he was out on a trip the accident happened. He saw a dingo drinking at a waterhole below where he was standing. When he reached for his gun, his foot slipped on gravel and he fell several metres onto the rocks below. He stayed at the waterhole for two days but, realizing he was seriously injured, managed to pack up and drive seventy miles back, through rough bush, to the Warrawagine homestead.

The RFDS flew him to Port Hedland Hospital and from there to Perth. His kidneys and spleen had been badly ruptured and he had been having very painful investigations carried out. He had initially refused anaesthetic but finally accepted he had to have it. His phobia, he told me later, was because as a child he was a bad asthmatic and his relatives who were caring for him arranged for his tonsils to be removed but did not tell him. He was probably about nine years old. He was taken to the hospital and forcibly held down while he was given the anaesthetic. He said he had been traumatized to the point it had affected him mentally.

His asthma was the reason he had been rejected for the army, he told me. He was very conscious of his fitness and one of the reasons he had left England was in the hope that in NZ, where he had gone first, or then in Australia, he might be accepted into the army. As he told me more about his family and himself, I began to see him in a very different light to the person I had believed him to be at Mardie.

When, at my third visit, he suddenly asked me to marry him, I said 'Yes' without hesitation. It was to be the best decision of my life.

The sea breeze was in, when I left the hospital, and the leaves on the trees fluttering green and gold in the late afternoon sunshine. I could have been on another planet the way I felt but I knew that my whole life was to be changed and I knew it was right.

CHAPTER FIFTY

JOHN – ENGAGEMENT

Mother had come to spend Christmas with us and there was a lot going on so I had not mentioned to anyone that I had been seeing John.

When he told me he was a Roman Catholic, and knowing how the family had reacted when Aunt Helen 'turned', I did not expect my news to be greeted as tidings of great joy! John said one of the reasons he was sure I would not marry him was his religion but I assured him it made no difference to me. Rather than cause an upheaval before Christmas, I decided to wait until the celebrations were over before dropping my bombshell.

Gill Potter and I were sharing the house at this time and when she, mother and I were having breakfast on Boxing Day, mother said: 'Oh! Well, that's all the excitement over for another year!'

'Well, actually it is not!' I said, 'I am getting married!'

At least when I told the family that John was a Roman Catholic, they did not immediately cut me off the family tree. They made it quite clear they thought I was making a huge mistake, however Mother said hopefully, that perhaps he was not a 'good one', which, in view of her blind acceptance of the preaching of Christ, would have made me laugh, if I had not felt so shocked. I was pleased to tell her, in fact, that he was a good one!

Although they did not say it, I am sure they thought I was grasping at any straw to get married, 'at my age'. They could not have been more wrong.

John came and stayed at Broome Street, before returning north.

To be fair to the family, they probably were worried because, although John had a job as a dogger for the Vermin Board and the prospect of renting a house in Port Hedland, a house in Port Hedland was far removed from their idea of security.

We planned to get married in March (1963). In retrospect, it would have been easier if we had eloped! Before he went north, John had an amethyst ring designed and made for me. Amethysts have always been my favourite gem. He bought a second-hand truck to travel back to Warrawagine and set off.

Phyll Sharpe had suggested we get married on Mardie but John did not want to and it would have been complicated anyway. It was kind of her because no one in the family showed any interest. Dick, when he first heard the news muttered 'having to do something about a wedding' but that was it.

Mother was upset because I was moving so far away. Although I lived in Perth, I went home a lot for weekends and she relied heavily on me. Being so disabled by her rheumatism and arthritis, I could understand why she felt I was abandoning her.

The person who surprised me most was Aunt Jean, who never raised the issue of religion and was very loving, setting about, making me some lovely underwear by hand. I thought she may have regretted the way she treated Aunt Helen. She was certainly won over, when she met John. Aunt Helen, of course, was thrilled I was marrying into the Roman Catholic Church. Aunt Peg in New Zealand was delighted I was marrying an Englishman! So I did have some support.

Considering that, even if we had been married in Narrogin, it would be held in the Catholic Church, which would have upset everyone even more, I opted for Port Hedland.

Even if my family were not enthusiastic, all my friends in the east and overseas, as well as in Perth, thought it was very exciting and romantic. Norah organized a dressmaker to make up the material I had bought for a dress. She had a wedding-cake baked, as well as giving us some beautiful, embroidered, linen sheets.

Bay Leishman in Scotland sent a tray she had had made up with the piece of my great-great-great-? -grandmother's wedding dress, thought to be woven in France, and which Kylie and Jim have now. Mrs McGregor, my erstwhile landlady in Edinburgh, sent a delicate set of silver coffee spoons from Jenner's. Mary Porter also made and decorated a wedding-cake.

Rene, 'our secretary at Keighley Hospital in Yorkshire', wrote of her delight at our engagement and gave news of the staff at Keighley:

Thornhill,
Highfield Lane,
Keighley.

15.1.62

My dear Meg,

I just couldn't wish for any better news for the New Year and am so very happy to hear of your engagement. You say you are luckier than you deserve, but I don't think so --- I'd just like to tell your John what a very lucky fellow he is! By the way, would you mind giving his surname in BLOCK letters next time, please, or else I shan't be able to write to you after you are Mrs ???? as am sorry I can't make it out in your dashing hand-writing. Am also a little puzzled as to the 'steady job' as it appears to be 'grave digger'… sorry, I do believe the first word is 'gov't' and perhaps the next is 'Dogger' so am guessing at some type of prospecting. Of course, 'grave digging' may be 'steady'! in some places.

Truly, Meg, I think you're just the girl to go along with him. You know I always did think you were cut out for a wife – no reflections on your almoning which was A1 – I remember you saying I would not rest until I'd got you with that 'yaller band' on your finger. When I read your letter I just beamed as I felt so very happy for you, and I never knew how you managed to stay single so long. However, if you've got the right man now then it's worth it, but what a pity he didn't actually propose a year ago when he meant to.

You sound to be going to have a very different life, but I know how you love the country and how adaptable you are. Fancy not knowing you could cook! I am sure if he had known how well you did it you'd have been married years ago. I'll give you a testimonial for baking scones, cutting hair, dressmaking etc etc. Sorry I can't tell Mr Ling just yet as he is on his way to Japan, but I will certainly see he gets to know when he returns. Did he meet your John? Also was Mardie the station near the Montebella Islands? You see I still remember the things you used to talk about, and will think of you under 'the ever-lasting glory of the stars'. You do surprise me about mules living until 60… but then I've never really known a mule.

I can understand your family being disappointed that you are to marry so far away…. But then it might so easily have been England, or Ireland, or Scotland, eh? They will have more chance of seeing you

more often over there. If you ever have a spare snapshot of the two of you (even with the mules) just post it here and we can then pass our verdict on your choice.

I rang Eleanor to tell her and she was thrilled and agreed with me that you should have married years ago. Audrey was away in Essex but E said she could hardly wait to pass on the news. She and A had had 'words' as E did not think it would be a good idea for A to borrow her car to take mother back to Essex in this weather. However, nothing daunted A has set off in her own pick-up. Eleanor thinks Audrey is unhappy now in prison service and would be glad to get back to hospital life. There seemed a chance of a good job at Wakefield but I have heard nothing since, so perhaps it has fizzled out.

Mr Ling has sung your praises everywhere and said what a marvellous time he had at Fremantle. Sister Scanlon (she knew you here) was at a cocktail party here at Christmas and he was telling all and sundry about you. So you have done Commonwealth Relations good at this end! By the way, will you be seeing the Queen? I'll bet she's glad to come to your nice, warm, hospitable country. Eleanor had heard you had left hospital as 'Coll', who stayed here with them, had seen your job advertised.

I cannot remember when I wrote you last, but things have been all hay-wire this last few months with me. Early October my sister had a biopsy of breast done at Leeds, and just when we thought all was well they decided to do a mastectomy. Thank goodness it was not a radical but a simple mastectomy, and she seems to have made a good recovery and we are hoping radiotherapy may not be necessary. My own mother died exactly a year after her own (but radical) op, which she had at the same age as Dorothy is now. The hospital sent D home at the 5th day with the district nurse calling daily, so I took some unpaid leave to look after her until she got on her feet. I got a great feeling of satisfaction by being really useful to someone again, and managed the housekeeping and cooking OK – in fact my brother-in-law said I was feeding them much too well! I went again at Christmas to cook the turkey, but she is not at all a helpless type and was busy doing the jobs she could manage.

In the evenings I get a good fire going and am studying my travel books – also doing a bit of Italian in case I get near to Italy this year. However, it may only be to the South of France, but I would like to

> get abroad somewhere as I have only a year or two before I retire and then there will be no money.
>
> Just at present all is frozen here and we have a heavy covering of snow…. It all looks very pretty and sparkling when the sun is on, but we don't feel as cheerful getting out of bed in the morning to dig ourselves out. The experts say it is the worst since 1947… however so far I have had no frozen pipes. We have had great difficulty getting old people back to their homes – in some cases they had been left with all the water undrained and fireback boiler, cylinder and cistern have been frozen solid. The trouble is that there are so many people wanting beds. My boss has taken her own electric panel heater and her own oil heater up to one house and they have just made no impression. However, today I believe we have hopes of slightly warmer weather.
>
> Well, Meg, please tell your John that I think he's the luckiest of men. And may you have a very long and happy life together! I know it will be a very full one.
>
> It was sweet of you to write and let me know that one of my wishes has come true, and who knows, perhaps my other hopes will, too.
>
> With every good wish for the future,
>
> Love,
>
> Rene 'H' (Mrs!!!)
>
> Sorry there was a time lag between starting and finishing the letter. Thaw here!

When I went back to Narrogin, before leaving to go to Port Hedland, the Highbury ladies gave me a kitchen tea, as was the custom when any girl in the district became engaged. At 38, I did not feel very girlish but it was very nice of them.

John, in the meantime, had seen Father Middleton, the Catholic priest in Port Hedland and arranged for him to publish the banns for our wedding. He also arranged with the Sisters at the Convent, for me to change for the wedding there, rather than at the hotel.

From there, it all went downhill. As soon as the Vermin Board knew John was getting married, they refused to employ him because, they said, there was no accommodation available for a married couple. John was held up at Warrawagine for a fortnight, when a cyclone came through flooding the De Grey River and making roads impassable. Having lived in the north, and

on Mardie, where on one occasion we had been flood-bound for six weeks, I was philosophical but mother, and Dick in particular, seemed to think it was further proof that John's intentions were not sincere. The family's lack of enthusiasm, and their obvious doubt in my ability to make good decisions, was depressing but nothing new.

Having been self-supporting since I joined the WAAAF and had wider life experiences in several areas than any of them, I felt I was quite able to look after myself.

John got the offer of a job as a mill man on a sheep station near Menzies.

The first announcement of banns had lapsed, so John arranged for a second reading. In the meantime, I had visited the priest in Mosman Park and had instruction on Roman Catholicism. It was not very onerous and mostly we discussed the weather and world affairs.

We had all moved out of 38 Broome Street and I returned to Narrogin to pack again! A letter came from John to say Father Middleton, driving between Port Hedland and Wittenoom, had suddenly realized he had forgotten to announce the second of the banns. The whole process had to be started for the third time!

We had been given some nice presents but nearly all were quite unsuited for the sort of life, I anticipated we would be leading. I packed them up and left them in Narrogin. The mining boom had not started and the north was a closed book to most people living down south. There was a romantic idea about the glamorous life on sheep and cattle stations, having plenty of staff to do the work and a luxury lifestyle. Even on Mardie, which was efficiently run, I knew it was not all play. Knowing too, that John, because he would be an ordinary working man, would be placed well down the social ladder, I had no delusions of grandeur.

Waiting and riding the setbacks was very trying and I was immensely relieved when I finally got on a plane and flew north. John met me and I spent what was left of the night in a rather sub-standard room at the hotel. Port Hedland had not changed much since Pat and I had stayed there, on our epic trip to the Kimberley to go droving with Pat's brothers.

It was a depressing-looking collection of buildings, straggling along a red dirt road. Most were built of galvanized iron – a defence against the white ants. Some had been bravely whitewashed and the rising dust from the road laid a pink patina on their lower regions. There were two hotels, a café, a large Streeter and Male store, the conduit for station supplies which came up from Perth on the coastal steamer, more or less on a fortnightly basis. The boat arrivals were a cause for great excitement.

The Roman Catholic Church, St Cecilia's, was a large Nissan hut. As it also served as the school, we had to wait until 5 pm to be married, so it could be set up as a church. Father Middleton had arranged for the headmaster's wife to be a witness and John had asked a young clerk from the Commonwealth Bank with whom he was friendly to be the other.

With all the stress, the trip to the north, lack of sleep and the humidity, I was almost in a daze. I am ashamed to say, I cannot remember the names of the witnesses. I did not thank the Sisters properly, for their loving care when I went to change at the convent, nor did I think to invite them to come to the ceremony. I feel even more ashamed when I recall all the work entailed in setting up the church and that the Sisters had decorated the whole room with wattle and Sturt pea flowers.

It was, however, very real and joyous when John and I walked up the aisle, hand in hand, and were finally pledged in marriage.

Father Middleton invited us to the Presbytery for a toast. He was very surprised when John refused a beer. John had told me he had seen so much damage caused to families by alcohol, he had decided never to drink it. He said his family had never had wine with meals, only water on the table. For practical reasons alone, I was quite happy to follow suit.

He rarely smoked but did enjoy a good cigar occasionally. There was a specialist tobacconist's shop on the corner of Hay and Barrack Street in Perth, diagonally opposite the Town Hall, where, as with all the firms he dealt with, he kept a credit account. The boys and I always included a box of these cigars with his birthday and Christmas presents.

We camped at a waterhole, just out of town.

Before I drifted off to sleep, I remembered how envious I had been when Pat and Lance Barrett-Leonard left after their wedding in an old ute, to camp under the stars. Later Pat told me they had an awful night. They drove up north of Perth, probably somewhere like Trigg's, got hopelessly bogged in sand and spent the night digging themselves out!

For me it was perfect.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

MARRIAGE – KANANDAH

We set off early next morning. When we reached Nullagine, John took me to the registrar's office to get a mining licence! I thought it was very romantic and exciting to sign my married name on such a document. Unfortunately, although we panned in a number of creek beds, we never found more than a few specks of gold.

It was such a relief to finally be married after all the delays and hassles we had been through. I think we were slightly hysterical. For the first three days, we never stopped talking and laughing.

We travelled down the 'Madmans Track' at the back of beyond. It was a narrow dirt road, rarely used by the look of it. The only person I remember meeting was a young engineer heading north. We boiled the billy and gave him a slab of our wedding cake. He, like most people, must have thought we were mad!

Our troubles, unhappily, were not over. Heavy rain to the south had made the roads impassable. We were held up for several days until they dried out. There were pools of clear water, so I caught up on our washing, set up a 'cubby kitchen' and felt it was an ideal way to spend a honeymoon.

The spring weather was warm and sunny and the wattles were in bloom. We spent the days walking in the bush, panning for gold in the creek beds, reading and talking. The bush track ran along beside a railway line, I think Meekatharra to Kalgoorlie, but only one train passed while we were there. We waved to the driver and fireman who reciprocated with a whistle. I felt reassured that someone would know where we were, as I suspected rightly, that my mother would be imagining we were drowned or lost; the worst anyway.

When we reached our destination, the station-owner told John he would not put him on the pay roll until the station roads dried out. As this would take another two weeks, we packed up and went on to Kalgoorlie.

From what we heard later about the gentleman in question, John made the right choice. He had been accused of sheep stealing from the next door station. When the police from Kalgoorlie visited, they found clear evidence – a fleece hanging on a rail with the earmark of the next door neighbour's clearly cut. The accused was put in the back of the paddy wagon with the fleece. Unfortunately for the police, when they arrived back in Kalgoorlie, they discovered he had chewed up the ear destroying the evidence.

John had no trouble getting another job when we reached Kalgoorlie. It was erecting windmills and laying pipes on a newly opened-up station – Kanandah, roughly 250 miles east of Kalgoorlie, just north of the railway settlement, Naretha, on the Trans line. I am pretty sure Grandfather Leishman was stationed there, when he worked as Paymaster while the line was being laid from west to east. It is where he found the piece of rock embedded with shells, which I think is with Jim.



John and Meg after their wedding in Narrogin.
Meg and John shared a deep love of the land and an adventurous spirit, which saw them living and working on some of Australia's most remote stations in the years ahead.

The station had recently been bought by the South Australian Pastoral Company and was managed by a Queenslander, Mr Swann. The homestead was being established in, from what I recall was the only clump of trees in sight. The manager, his wife and three children, the Swanns, were living in their house as it was being built around them.

The builder, his wife and several children, had a caravan and tent and, like most of the staff, were from SA. He had the theodolite used by Colonel Light when he planned the City of Adelaide. John and he became good friends. The family was used to being on the move, the mother teaching their children through School of the Air.

The station hands were housed temporarily in a large shed and had their own cook, etc. Conditions were fairly primitive. From the sounds of disagreement and the occasional rifle shot that drifted through the trees from time to time, they seemed to have a fairly robust lifestyle.

John and I had a large tent, with a smaller one for storage, on the opposite end of the little settlement.

Between us and the homestead, the overseer, and his wife and two small children, lived in a small caravan. The overseer was a Queenslander, his wife, Margaret Taylor, from Sydney, and I became very good friends. She was a doctor's daughter and a champion tennis player. She had met her husband when she was a governess on a station in Queensland.

Although it was primitive, there was a shower and laundry available, so we could keep clean. Our worldly goods were meagre, a couple of camp beds which we rarely used, preferring to sleep in the swag under the stars, in the lee of the tent. Because wood was scarce, we had bought a small gas stove which proved invaluable for making a cup of tea or a snack. We had also bought a camp table and chairs.

There were rabbits everywhere, a new generation from those stricken by myxomatosis in the early forties. I dug a hole in a convenient burrow and set up a fireplace. Winds, coming up from Antarctica and over the Bight, were not only cold but fierce, so every care had to be taken to prevent a wildfire. A southerly buster blew up most nights, causing the tent wall to billow in and wreak havoc with my carton storage system.

The tent was pitched on sand, of course. We were enchanted to see the tracks of nocturnal visitors when we got up each morning. Minute, little desert mice or tiny marsupials of some sort left miniscule footprints in the sand of our tent floor. They looked like mice and had large flower petal ears which looked translucent and pink with the light behind them.

Apart from our small oasis of trees, there was nothing to break the 360° of horizon.

The land looked completely flat but, I learnt later, that, in fact, it was pitted in places with depressions of varying depth and width, called dongas. I loved the feeling of space and the great dome of the sky at night, peppered with stars, was a never-ending enchantment.

Kanandah was a very large station and when we arrived, at the end of a very good winter, there was a thick growth of grass, knee high. Unfortunately, wild geranium was also growing prolifically. The station was stocked with sheep and the corkscrew seeds of the geranium caught in the wool and worked their way through it to the flesh of the animals. The pain became so unbearable, they became transfixed, unable to walk to water or feed and died. I believe it is now a cattle station.

The high grass close to the railway line was also a fire risk. Steam engines were used and sparks frequently started grass fires which, urged on by the wind, could spread very fast.

All stores and mail came from Kalgoorlie, mostly on the 'tea and sugar' train that plied back and forth between Port Pirie and Parkeston, just out of Kalgoorlie. Not only did it bring stores and mail but also water for the settlers and their families. Water also had to be brought to fill the tanks along the line for the refilling of the train's engine tanks.

Sometimes, Margaret and I went to the Naretha siding to pick up the stores and meet the passenger trains. Having done the trip so often, I remembered what I had thought when I looked out and saw people by the track. 'Poor things! Fancy living in this desolate spot!' By the look on passenger's faces, their thoughts ran along the same lines. The trains now had a luxurious, glass observation car at the rear. A lavish arrangement of gladioli stood at the end and it amused me to think of it going back and forth across the desert. A more inappropriate decoration could hardly be found. How Dame Edna would love it!

For the first few weeks I was there, and after I had tidied our establishment, which was hardly an onerous task, I would sit outside the tent reading, writing and conversing with a group of crows which carried out an advance retreat manoeuvre. Every time I chased them, with harsh words and threatening gestures, they lifted gracefully, as one, on a draught of air and descended, as one, a few yards further away. They looked like random sheets of torn black paper as they rose! The whole exercise would be repeated time and again. It was quite a relief when the Swanns asked me if I would take on governessing their three children who were studying with School of the Air.

When Christmas drew near, a children's party was arranged at Rawlinna, 30 miles further east. I went with the Taylors and with some of the other

women who lived in the district. It was great fun and an eye-opener for me. I had no idea of the number of people who lived in the area. There were several families who travelled together with their fathers, who were rabbit trappers, doggers and station workers.

Rawlinna was a larger settlement and, at the Christmas tree, presents given out by a beneficent Father Christmas made the affair a great success.

I met the wife of the owner of the freezer truck. They travelled all over the Nullarbor, collecting rabbit carcasses and getting them to market. She was an elegant blonde who told me she had escaped from the war aftermath and come from Austria. She looked the most unlikely sort of person to be living in the outback. She told me the best present her husband had given her was a roll of linoleum to put on the tent floor.

The Swanns had a Christmas party at their, almost completed, house. It was a very pleasant evening. The house was built around a central courtyard which I thought was a great idea because it gave protection from the seering winds. It reminded me of Spanish buildings I had seen and had thought of as very attractive and sensible. We had a real Christmas spread. There was dancing but I could not entice John onto the floor. He had told me with glee that he had had dancing lessons at school. The boys danced with each other, aiming to stamp on each other's feet. He was tone deaf musically!

Christmas was particularly joyous that year – not only because we were so much in love, but because I knew I was pregnant!

Soon after, however, I began to have problems and after talking to the builder's wife – a very nice, kind person, realized I needed to see a doctor.

I got onto the hospital in Kalgoorlie on the radio and after explaining my problem, not only to the doctor but everyone from Meekatharra to the Bight, Kalgoorlie to the SA border, was advised the RFD plane would collect me within hours.

So on New Year's Day 1964, I was taken to the Kalgoorlie Hospital and admitted. We had landed at Cundeelee Mission to pick up a very little aboriginal baby on the way. It was hot and I was distressed at the thought of losing our precious child and being separated from John.

I was startled when, having been put to bed in the ward, the lady in the next bed leant over to me and said: 'I saw you coming in with that little baby. Is it yours – I know it is very black but no one worries about that these days, do they?'

I was asked if I would like to see a minister and as I had not been to church for some time, and also that divine intervention could only be beneficial, I said yes. Much to my surprise, next morning Bishop Muschamp

came to give me communion. Having done so, he had just reached under his cassock and brought out an Agatha Christie paperback, when John, looking pale and wan, walked through the door.

He had been sent for as, unbeknownst to me, the doctors thought I might have an ectopic pregnancy and they might have to operate. I was blissfully ignorant of the drama and, in fact, things righted themselves and surgery was not needed. John often teased me, saying he had had a sleepless night and then found me cracking jokes with the Bishop. His wife, Mrs Muschamp, came to see me, too. She was a lovely person.

John had driven the truck in and, in some convoluted way, met up with 'Bill', now married to Maisie who was our cook at 447 radar. John had gone to fill up with fuel at the garage owned by Bill and Maisie. When we were at Geraldton, Bill, I think had been listed as missing in the Islands and it was good to know their story had a happy ending. Maisie came to see me and we had a great time recalling our service days.

Less happy was the edict, I would need to be near medical care for the time of my pregnancy and there was no way I could return to the Nullarbor. It was arranged that I should go to stay with mother in Narrogin, while John returned to finish his job at Kanandah. What was best for our precious cargo was paramount but it was a bitter pill.

John took me on the train to Northam where mother and Tom met us and took me back to Narrogin. It was July before I saw John again when he had finished at Kanandah.

Dr Mainland looked after me in Narrogin. He was very conservative and there was no way he would let me take any risks. In fact, I had two stints in hospital so the pundits were right.

The only way of communicating with John was by the RFDS R/T, sending a telegram or mail. His letters were always full of news but due to his long hours working and lifestyle, they were few and far between. To say I missed him is an understatement.

Mother was delighted to have me with her, however.

When Tom married and she had to move off the farm, she moved onto an orchard block on the east edge of town. It was quiet unsuitable for her. It was nearly two kilometres from the town centre. She had no transport and because of her arthritis and gout, could not walk there. She enjoyed social outings and had to rely on friends to pick her up. The appeal, apparently, was the orchard, which she loved, and the house. There was only one taxi and that was often out of town. One of the stores, fortunately, did deliver.

I had my own troubles because, for the first three months, I had severe 'morning' sickness – usually in the evening.

1964–1971

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

JOHN

It was several years since those few weeks when I had worked as a nursing assistant in the hospital at Narrogin and, having been away for so long, I had no friends in the town. So I suffered mother's tea parties and did the shopping, chores and gardening.

John was very anxious for me to have the baby as naturally as possible, so I did the appropriate exercises, religiously, every day. At three months, my morning sickness, which struck me down every evening, ceased so there was no longer the need to cling to a verandah post and heave my heart out!

In spite of my age, I had had little experience of babies – human ones anyway. I knew a lot about lambs, calves, foals and chickens but never had any experience with babies. I had never pined to have them. I bought a copy of Dr Spock's book on child care and, despite all the criticism later, I thought he made a lot of sense.

The exercises began to make sense too. Dr Mainland, plus all other interested people, were sure I would need to have a Caesarean section – 'because of my age'. No one mentioned it to me and it never crossed my mind. I became quite enthusiastic with huffing and puffing.

I missed John badly and thought about him constantly. I marvelled at my good fortune in marrying him. Every day I loved him more, to depths I did not know I had within me.

We had known so little about each other when we married, it seemed a miracle that we were so compatible. He reminded me of my father, with his sense of justice, his generosity and wide interests. He was a compulsive reader, like my father. He had a slow, dry sense of humour.

His family were all very tall, he told me. John was 6 feet but said he was the runt of the family. He always accused me of being a shortie, in spite of

my 5 feet 7½ inches. He had, very bright, deep-set, blue eyes, a large, high-bridged nose, fair complexion and slightly curly, brown hair.

He always cut his own hair. He sat on the ground, with a sheet of newspaper between his legs spread out, and would run his fingers through his hair and snip off the bits protruding! It was always a lengthy process, as he read the newspaper from top to bottom while he did it. The result was surprisingly good.

John had been a very bad asthmatic as a child and the medication he had been given affected his teeth. He had been traumatized when, without telling him why, he was to have surgery. He was taken into the theatre and held down while he was given an anaesthetic and had his tonsils removed. He said it affected him so badly, he could not face an anaesthetic which would be needed to extract his teeth as they were very strong.

He wore a moustache and liked to twirl the ends.

In the time we had been together, he told me bits and pieces about his family.

As far as I knew, he never went back to India or spoke about the family coming to England. When war broke out, they had to stay there in India, and he in England.

His main connection seemed to be with his mother's mother who came over from Killarney in Ireland and set up house near his paternal grandfather and family.

I may have mentioned some of this information but, to be sure, I will write it up anyway.

His father, Edward, was in the British army. I think John told me he was a Captain in the Welsh Guards. There was a strong military history in the family. I remember John telling me his great-grandfather had been with Younghusband on manoeuvres into Tibet and had told John how beautiful the wildflowers were there. I gathered that military service or the law were the family traditional professions. His father was an excellent horseman. He rode a black horse and could pick up a handkerchief from the ground at a gallop. Probably, they did the tricks like the 10th Light Horse used to compete in at the Narrogin Show – 'tent pegging' – picking up pegs off the ground with their bayonets while at full gallop, or removing rings hooked on a stand likewise.

John's mother, Imelda Coady, came from Killarney in Ireland and went to India as a governess, one of the many eligible young women who were nicknamed 'the fishing fleet' – that is, were looking for husbands! John thought it was very amusing!

NOTE: Apparently, there are a lot of Coady's still in Killarney.

John's father and his family were High Anglicans, his mother Roman Catholic. I have often wondered how his parents fared in gaining approval for the union. In those days, I would have thought opposition to a mixed marriage would have been strong.

John was born on 9.3.1924 in Quetta in Northern India. It is now in Pakistan and, from reports, it has been badly damaged during war. He was the eldest of four children, a baby who miscarried, a brother Edward and a sister Helen. Edward was in the army and was killed during an uprising in Jerusalem, aged 19.

John always spoke very fondly of his family and sometimes spoke about his early childhood. He had a great affection for the *amah* who looked after him and defended him fiercely when he got into trouble. He covered himself in red paint once and she told his mother that the paint had put itself on him!

He was only seven when he was sent to prep school in England. I think that an aunt may have come, as well as his grandmother. They had a large garden but whether they grew produce for sale or not, I do not know. Having ridden my bike through the area on my way to the continent, I can vouch for the area being so lush and productive, with vegetable and flower gardens as far as the eye could see.

His grandfather had an extensive library where John spent many hours, when he was not well enough to go to school. I never ceased to be amazed at his knowledge, in a wide area of subjects – mathematics of course, but also science, history, politics and literature, and their relationships to current affairs. The family appears to have lived in comfortable circumstances.

I remember when we were living in fairly bushy conditions, John told me one of his uncles had not come down to dinner one evening and his grandfather asked the butler to ask 'Mr Henry' to hurry down. But Mr Henry, unhappily, aged 26, had had a stroke and died. The incongruity made a sharp impression in my mind.

John was very proud of his heritage, which he said dated back to the Vikings. The people on the low-lying part of the East Coast were the only ones not conquered by the Normans when William the Conqueror invaded England in 1066. There were quick-sands among the swamps and the Saxons led the opposing Normans into the danger areas where they were forced to retreat or sink! (I remember learning about this in Primary School!)

On the maternal side, both his great-grandmother and grandmother had gone to India as governesses and married soldiers. They both sounded feisty ladies. His great grandmother had married an officer who was sent to Sydney to serve in the Rum Corps. When he died, she stayed on in Sydney.

She met a young man whom she had known in Ireland. John loved to tell the story of her 'rigging' a jury. This young man was selling encyclopaedias and was accused of stealing, but she managed to persuade the other jurors of his innocence, got him off the charge and subsequently married him.

His grandmother also went to India as a governess and, I think, married but he never mentioned any family.

When he completed prep school, he was sent to Winchester which he hated. He was not interested in sport and Greek (and the Greek teacher) was the only subject he enjoyed or related to.

The war had broken out and he was burning to join up. He felt school was such a waste of time. Also, I always felt he wanted to follow the family tradition.

When he was sixteen, instead of going back to school after the summer holidays, he went to a recruiting office, put his age up and because he was quite tall, was accepted into the army.

England needed everyone they could get and, he said, although he was sure the doctor knew he was underage, he just said, 'Get along, you young devil.' John never spoke about his army service except that he was on a plane flying over France when it was fired on and he got shrapnel wounds. Also he had to spend some months in a convalescent home. None of the family knew where he was for six months after he joined up. They only found out when one of their friends saw him in uniform in London.

After the war, having been refused permanent engagement in the Army for health reasons, he went back to his grandmother's home.

He decided to emigrate to Canada and get heavy work in the timber industry up the Mackenzie River to get stronger, hoping to be enlisted by the Army, but when a visitor to his grandmother's told him there was a vessel in Hull about to sail to New Zealand and it had a berth, he packed up and bought the ticket with his deferred pay.

His first job was as a gardener at Government House in Wellington. He was surprised by the number of visitors who asked him what the protocol was for 'Signing the Book'. (I don't know if this still happens but newcomers to a city could sign a visitors' book at Government House and, if they were 'suitable', they could get invitations to Royal Garden Parties and other desirable functions. When I went to England, Phyll Sharpe gave me a letter to the WA representative, recommending me as a 'desirable person', for me to hand over when I 'signed the book', but I never used it.)

John also worked on an isolated sheep station on the South Island. He lived at an out-camp, with other shepherds. It sounded quite spartan and the owner's wife was not over-generous with supplies, even rationing the candles which were all they had for lighting.

He took a job at a woollen mill in the South Island, as he wanted to learn more about the trade and, for a while, worked on the fishing trawlers.

I think he stayed in NZ for about two years, before coming to Australia. He landed in Sydney and worked his way north on farms, through Queensland to the Gulf country.

He worked for the council, doing road work. By taking on heavy work, he hoped to gain strength and, in a remote area, have more chance than otherwise of being accepted into the military services. It was not to be, although he never had any health issues.

He moved down through the Centre and for six months lived on a station belonging to S Kidman & Co, checking mills. It was very remote and his only contact with the outside world was a store-run once a fortnight. When he went to collect his wages from the office in Adelaide, he was told that the boss had given orders he was to be paid double wages.

Isolation did not trouble John because he was so interested in so many things – astronomy, space travel, the possibility of life on other planets, quite apart from world events, politics and the environment. On the other hand, he was very friendly and enjoyed talking to people he met.

He finished the mill erection work on Kanandah in time to pack up and come to Narrogin for Ned's arrival.

In spite of everyone's expectation that I would need to have a Caesarean, with hard work and a lot of huffing and puffing, our beautiful son arrived. He was born at 11.40 pm on the 5 August 1964.

My main memory is leaning over a trolley in the birth suite in the afternoon when Matron Henry, of whom I had been in awe, came in and said, 'Poor darling, is it very bad?'

'No', I panted, 'I'm busy. Go away!' She did.

Neither the doctor nor John was present when Ned popped out – 8 lbs 12 oz of beautiful baby. He was roaring his head off. I heard Dr Mainland say to the nurse: 'If he doesn't stop, give him half a Dispirin.'

My hackles rose. 'Over my dead body', I thought, 'No one gives my child Dispirin!' As it turned out, Ned settled down, for the moment.

Unfortunately, the regime in those days, apart from Dr Mainland's strict edict that mothers had to spend two weeks after the birth in total bed rest, was that babies were only to be fed four-hourly. I was so drilled to this system, I dared not rebel. At 4 pm every day the babies were fed sips of boiled-water with a teaspoon. Later a few drops of orange juice were added.

John had a mill job lined up, out from Port Hedland. He was to head off for that and I was to follow with Ned, when he was settled. There was a house available and it sounded very satisfactory.

We wanted Ned baptized before he left and the priest said he would be happy to do it at the hospital. There were only two other 'patients' in the ward, so the staff had spare time to set up a six-bed ward like a little chapel, decorate it with flowers and make it a memorable occasion. Dick and Anne came down and, I think, Gill (Rose), a godmother, came. We went overboard with godparents. Richard, Gill, Pat Masters, who had nursed John when he was flown down to Perth after his accident, Bill Bell, his old mate from Mardie, were among them. (I feel there was someone else!)

Franco Lutero also came. She was the sister of my Italian teacher, whom I recommended to be accepted for migration when I worked at the department, and was doing her nursing training at Narrogin and on duty when Ned arrived. John bought her a cameo brooch as a gift to mark the occasion. After the ceremony, the guests went up to mother's house for afternoon tea and I went back to bed and admired the reason for the celebration.

John left to go to his new position out of Port Hedland and, after my enforced bed rest, with new baby went to mother's as weak as a kitten. Also, Ned being a lusty child and hungry, the staff had fed me up so I was a stone heavier than when I went in.

In the kitchen in the Herald Street house, there was an almond tree growing outside a deep window. Ned lay in his bassinet beside it, fascinated by the leaves dancing in the breeze. That he was a good doer was proved by our visits to the clinic sister, Bobby Taylor whom I had known all my life. Ned put on a pound a week for his first sixteen weeks!

John's new job as a windmill expert had sounded ideal. The owners had just come from Queensland. There was a good house in a beautiful setting. However, it was isolated and all stores and mail had to come from the home store and station. It was not long before it was apparent the exorbitant prices charged by the owner for goods made it unviable. They even charged for meat, killed on the property – normally always free!

The Vermin Board, however, had changed their minds about employing married men and offered John a job as a dogger, based at Wittenoom. Accommodation was available at Cowra, an out-camp on Lang Hancock's station, Mulga Downs.

Finally, after our long separation, Ned and I flew to Wittenoom and we were together again with John. It had been hard being apart for so long but when we looked at our beautiful son, we knew it had been worth it.

In the early 1960s, the north was very much pioneer country, still. The mining bonanza was yet to come but already geologists and mining personnel were beginning to infiltrate the outback, in search of minerals.

There was a push to employ some of the old prospectors who, seizing the day, professed to know of a 'good thing' and were well paid for their efforts.

It was an exciting time.



Ned with Meg and John when he was a young boy.
Family life remained a joy for Meg, who loved storytelling and sharing her rich life experiences with her sons, Ned and Jim. The boys heard many tales of the bush, the goldfields, and Meg's remarkable travels.

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

COWRA

John thought that when I saw the so-called house at Cowra, I would turn round and want to go south again. Little did he realize, I never wanted to be separated from him, ever.

The structure consisted of two Nissan huts with a breezeway in between. The huts were divided into two rooms each. There was an open kitchen attached to the south east corner. It could have been reasonable, if all the nuts, bolts, rusted tools, broken windmill parts, worn out tyres and other junk had been removed, the roof mended and the floors had been cemented. The breezeway, too, could have been very useful but it was completely filled with stacks of timber.

A green and white Metters stove sat out in the yard. It proved to be quite serviceable when John cemented it into the fireplace. To begin with, I cooked on our little gas camping stove.

There was a rainwater tank but the water was not fit for drinking. John carried water from a mill, three miles away, which was soft and safe. He used 44 gallon drums and usually several frogs hitched a ride, providing a musical serenade in the evenings.

John fenced the mill and planted a vegetable garden but, as soon as the green shoots appeared, the kangaroos demolished it – fence and garden.

There was a cold shower under the tank stand, a hundred metres from the house, but as it was open to the world, hardly suitable.

Incongruously, there was a flush toilet with a septic tank but that, too, was outside the house yard and I had to climb over the fence to use it.

The shearing shed was well away from the house and there was a small radio hut, with a bunk in it for lone travellers.

An aboriginal couple lived at the shed and Blanche sometimes came over for a yarn. I remember her telling me about another aboriginal man, whom she respected very much because he had a 'private horse'! A very nice fencing contractor, part aboriginal, sometimes came in and camped with his large family at the shed, as well. He had two wives, making the protocol of asking them to afternoon tea, tricky. They were a lovely family.

All mail and stores had to be collected from Wittenoom, which was fifty miles away. It does not sound much but the road had deep ruts filled with bull dust which rose up in a cloud; there were six gates and Ned and I were usually sick at the third.

In view of the above, I never pined to do the trip.

When the fridge finally arrived, life became easier and, in spite of the rough conditions, I quite enjoyed the challenge of making the place habitable. I was to have many such challenges over the years. I have always been grateful for my time at Forrest River Mission when the people taught me how to make the best of what is available.

John was often away in the bush but I never felt worried or unsafe, being so isolated. There were always red letter days when John was nearby. Ned was flourishing.

John told me never to lend his tools because they were necessary in his usual trade of a mill expert and were expensive. I assured him I would not, blissfully unaware of how soon I was to be tested.

The mining boom was about to break and there were rumours that the Mount Newman Company were planning to build a railway from the mine to Port Hedland.

Barely six weeks after Ned and I arrived two Land Rovers appeared, driving through on the road, not far from the house. There had been heavy rain and while one vehicle drove through, the second got hopelessly bogged. One of the party came up to the house – if it could be called that – and said the group were surveying the land for a company (American) which had the contract to build the line. I was in a quandary when he asked if we had a jack they could borrow! He admitted rather sheepishly that they had lost theirs in the mud! It did not sound very reassuring but I handed it over, implying it was on pain of my death if it was not returned.

Quite recently (2015), David Price, who was working with the party as an assistant, contacted me. He was then a nineteen-year-old university student and had been recalling those days and got in touch with Richard Porter, with whom he had been at Christ Church, to see if I was still on deck. He remembered my connection to Richard because, on one of the crew's later visits, I asked him to take a parcel back to Perth for the family,

which he obligingly did. He referred to the Cowra establishment as 'the hovel' which was a good description. As he now, and possibly previously, lives in Peppermint Grove, I can understand his opinion.

Even with a second jack, they could not get his Land Rover out – it was returned, covered in mud, looking as if it had only just been rescued from the underworld. Fortunately, the first Land Rover had come back and pulled its partner out. David reminded me that, at this point, the leader of the party developed severe stomach pains. They had a radio but no one knew how to use it. So one of the party drove the poor man to Wittenoom where he had an emergency appendectomy. They were around quite a lot and I cooked meals for them several times.

David insisted that while they were there, a dozen baby snakes slithered out from under the timber in the breezeway. I cannot remember it but he was insisted I was there. I do remember other encounters with reptiles, however. When we had visitors for meals, we usually sat in the small spinifex room in the yard. It had a tin roof, over four walls of double netting with spinifex stuffed between. A perforated water pipe ran round the top of the walls. In its heyday, long since gone, water dripped through the spinifex and any errant breeze blowing through it, cooled the interior. After Jim was born, I usually put him out there, in his bassinet, to sleep, which he did most of his early life, being a very contented and amiable baby. I remember my alarm when I went to check on him and saw a large mulga snake, coiled up in the spinifex barely eighteen inches from our precious child.

We only had hurricane lanterns for light. One evening, I got a bucket of water, for washing up, from the tank in the late dusk. When I went back to the kitchen, I thought 'that tap looked funny!' It did not seem so funny when I went back with the lantern and saw a large snake wrapped around the outlet pipe, cooling off. John never killed snakes. If they were near habitation, he picked them up and put them in the leg of a spare pair of overalls, tying both ends and taking them well away, letting them go near water.

John had been given a clean bill of health by the specialists in Perth who treated him after his accident but when he had a routine check-up from Dr Oxer in Wittenoom, he was told his blood pressure was very high and he needed to go to Perth for investigation.

Due to his phobia about 'white coats', he was not very worried but concerned about leaving me with Ned at Cowra. I said there was no way I would move into Wittenoom, even if we could find accommodation. Much to our delight, I was about three months pregnant with Jim. John caught the bus south and I prepared myself for a quiet time.

However, a couple of days after John left, a helicopter flew in and landed on the strip, just beyond the shearing shed. Curious, I put Ned in the Land Rover and drove over to see who it was. There were three men, the pilot and two American engineers, who said they were from the company laying the railway. As they had no water on board – surprise, surprise – I went back to our 'house' and made them a jug of lemon squash. They were most grateful and insisted I have a flight in the helicopter as a gesture of appreciation. I was not very enthusiastic but they assured me they would look after Ned, so I rather reluctantly climbed aboard.

Having a tendency to suffer from vertigo, I found being in a clear dome down to my feet, so I could see the landscape right down to my toes, unnerving, to say the least. It was a great relief to be back on terra firma. The babysitters were deep in discussion, some thirty feet away from the Land Rover, where Ned had been amusing himself going through the glove box. When I arrived, he was holding a bottle in his hand, puzzling how to get the top off. It contained the strychnine John used for baiting dingoes.

John arrived back, full of beans after having been given a completely clean bill of health by the specialists he had seen in Perth. He was not a little surprised when he heard about our adventures in his absence.

Unfortunately, John was out bush when the two American engineers came through again and camped at the shed. I invited them to tea. Both had been in the USA Army. The senior was General Erhart and his companion, whose name escaped, I think a Lieutenant or Major.

It was a warm moonless night but the stars were so large and prolific, we could see to eat by their luminous light. For me, it was a memorable night. Both men talked about their early lives and families – the General, I think, was the son of German migrants. He was one of the most intelligent and cultured people I had ever met. They spoke of their broken first marriages and their children. The dark and unusual surroundings was an ideal setting for such confidences. The General had mentioned he also had an October birthday so later I sent him a card. A sporadic correspondence started between us and lasted until his death. He lent me his copy of Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*, which he carried with him always, he said. I had never read it. We had talked a lot about Social Justice. His daughter wrote to tell me he had died and was buried in Arlington Cemetery.

The weather began to warm up. Ned was thriving and had advanced from waddling to running very quickly. John did not realize this as he had been away for over a week and when he went out to put the trailer on the Land Rover, left the gate open. I watched him go out and a minute later,

Ned ran over to him. I thought how wonderful it was to have such a careful, caring husband, when suddenly Ned was screaming!

John had not seen him and moved the Rover a few inches so he could get the trailer on, unaware that Ned had climbed in between them. It was only a slight bump but enough to break his femur. We reached Wittenoom Hospital at midday, worried, hot and covered in red dust. Ned was the calmest of us all. He slept most of the way, stretched out on the seat while I sat on upturned oil tin. A nurse and an orderly came out and laid Ned on a stretcher under the blazing sun. The nurse then said, 'Well, I'm going to lunch!' It was not the most appropriate remark but John begged me to restrain myself. He said when he was in the hospital as a child, family interference with his treatment had repercussed badly on him.

Later, after Ned had voiced his objection to being put in traction, the nurse took pleasure in telling me I had made a rod for my own shoulders. Fortunately, for all concerned, she flew out, back to Melbourne, at dawn the next day. After his initial objection to his treatment, Ned settled down and accepted the situation very stoically.

John met a miner, whom he knew, who as soon as he heard what had happened said I must come and stay with his family, his wife and two children, a boy of ten and an eight-year-old girl. The only alternative would have been to stay at the hotel. To my shame, I cannot remember the name of my hosts. They were English migrants and the most kind family. The wife worked as a domestic for the managers who lived in separate, more salubrious, accommodation, just out of town.

The town was laid out in Avenues, 1-8, and the houses were all the same – a row of three rooms, verandas north and south, a kitchen, bathroom and sleep-out attached. They were made of plasterboard and the yard covered in crushed asbestos. The roads, too, were covered in asbestos – no doubt adding to the hazards when dust storms struck the town and laid a patina of red dust over everything.

We insisted on contributing to household expenses and I took over the housework and evening meal preparations. More importantly, I could see the children off to school and be there when they came home, as both parents started work early and arrived home late. Previously they had to manage on their own. They certainly appreciated it.

I was still feeling emotional when I visited Ned next morning. Then 'Auntie' Irene walked in the door, wearing a pretty, pink nursing assistant's uniform and bringing a sense of serenity with her. I felt all my anxiety fade away and her presence alone calmed me down. We settled into a routine. After seeing the children off to school and tidying up, I sat with Ned,

playing with him or reading stories until he had an afternoon sleep. I went back in the afternoon and stayed to settle him for the night.

The town or company doctor (Gordon Oxer) was a small, rather eccentric person – or at least he had a reputation of being so. He treated Ned very well and later looked after me and Jim, when he was born. He had a reputation for being a very good photographer and spent his weekends exploring and photographing remote areas of the Pilbara.

The Matron was another matter. She, her friend and a very pretty young girl who had been selected as the 'Miss Nor' West' in the state beauty competition, were registered nurses. Besides Irene, there were, I think, two other nursing assistants. The Matron was rather confrontational and disapproved of me spending so much time with Ned. I stuck to my guns, knowing that the effects long periods of hospitalization can make children withdrawn. It was not very reassuring when she came in one day and tossed Dr J Bowlby's article on the effects hospitalization can have on children, on the bed, saying,

'Head Office sent this up. I haven't got time to read it, you can!' John Bowlby was a leading authority on paediatric care and head – I think – of the Tavistock Clinic in London.

She said I should not spend so much time at the hospital – that being four months pregnant, I should rest more and was to go home without settling Ned for the night. Irene muttered, 'They will be going over to the quarters soon. Go out and sit on that log where she can't see you in the dark and I'll give you the nod when it's all clear.'

In spite of this, I think she regarded us as friends and John took her and her friend for trips out bush several times.

John came in whenever possible but, as his area of baiting was so wide, he was not near Wittenoom as often as Ned and I would have liked. It is hard now to remember how isolated the Pilbara and Kimberley were from the south and how sparse the population. It was on the cusp of the mining and tourism boom.

John was back at Cowra, however, when General Erhart and his assistant called in, as a courtesy, to meet him. Once they realized how much John knew about the country – the river levels, topography, etc, instead of a quick call, they stayed for the weekend. He cooked them kangaroo stew in the camp oven.

While Ned slept, I read. The hospital had a small library donated by the RFDS and I worked my way through it voraciously.

It was here that I discovered the precious *The Gobi Desert*, which is still my most favourite book in a plethora of favourite books. It was written by two mature English missionary ladies who travelled through Tibet by

wagon, distributing Christian literature. Their names were French and Cable and they travelled through the country, I gather, in the years before and probably during World War 1.

Reading it for the umpteenth time, recently, I was interested to read their account of travelling among the Uigher (Weega) people in the northwest corner of the country (Tibet). Recently, the Uighers have been one of the minority groups persecuted by China. Some have come to WA. The book describes their advanced culture and organization. I was halfway through it when Ned was discharged and never more tempted to steal a book, but honesty prevailed. In fact, I finished it when I went in to have Jim and, years later, Alan Tapper found a second-hand copy for me which I treasure.

Ned was strung up on traction for six weeks and had become very quiet and accepting, so it was joyful news when we were told we could take him home on Christmas Day (1965).

Our hospitable friends insisted we share their Christmas dinner, which had all the traditional trimmings, cooked on a wood stove in 110°F heat! We decided to take Ned out later in the day, when the weather cooled off.

I expected him to take a while to acclimatize to the outside world but as soon as we put him in the Land Rover, he began to sing and, in spite of driving through a tropical storm which broke when we were halfway home, he sang or hummed a tune throughout the trip. Even the drips of red mud that came through the holes in the roof of the Land Rover did not stop him. (The government did not believe in supplying their outback staff with fancy vehicles.) The next day he was running around as if nothing had happened.

The family assumed I would go south to have Jim but I never wanted to go south again, certainly not be separated from John. Through his connections in Wittenoom, he had arranged with the company for us to rent a house for several months.

There had been rumours that the mine might close, as the concern about the danger asbestos caused to the miners' health could no longer be ignored. The knell sounded on Christmas Eve and we heard the news when we went to the store to do our shopping before going back to Cowra. It meant our plan to rent a house in the town was scuttled, as the closure was immediate.

The first person I met when I went into the store and told, miserably, was Irene. 'Oh, you can come and stay with us,' she said without hesitation. By now, John had met Irene's husband, 'Uncle' Brian who shared his love of the bush. Irene and Brian had only recently been married and proved to be very special friends to us. The town was evacuated rapidly. Our other

friends left soon after the news of the closure came through. Brian was an engine driver and was kept on and Irene was still employed at the hospital.

We had a lot of visitors while we were at Cowra: Jenny Oliver and her mother, Kath Wiese, Dick, Anne and the family, Jehovah's Witnesses, the manager of Mulga Downs and more mining people.

John bought me a short wave radio which was a great joy. Unfortunately, it ate batteries which were very expensive. Mainly I listened to the news. The share market report came on at the end of the afternoon news and when I remarked to John that Bells' shares – which were initially about 22 pence – were rising, he suggested I buy some with my own money – a modest account which he refused to use.

As Bells' seemed to be doing well, he suggested I get some TNT and Brambles, as he said transport would be needed as the north opened up. It was good advice. Generally, I did moderately well with them, more so than with my plunge in Bamboo Creek gold mine. The promoters absconded with the funds, including all of my £30.

Weather played a significant part in our lives. I remember one evening, when the Uniting Church minister from Port Hedland and an aboriginal stockman camped at the shearing shed and came over for tea. A storm burst and water poured through the roof. There were only two dry areas – in the so-called bedroom – one, where Ned lay asleep in his cot, and over our double bed. The four of us sat on it talking until the blow was over.

The cot was also a playpen for Ned, especially when we went out with John. I remember us arriving, late at night, at a waterhole and setting up camp among nearby river gums. Birdsong woke us at sunrise. Ned was standing up in the cot, looking up into the canopies in wide-eyed wonderment, listening.

There was an exodus of families from Wittenoom as the mine closed. Logistically, they could not take much with them, so the rubbish dump became a gold mine of discarded treasures. Whenever John passed through the town, he picked up household articles which we found very useful. Notably, he brought home a little Hoover washing machine and a two-stroke engine from a lawn mower, put them together and it served us well. Later, he taught Ned how to clean the spark plug.

Ned and I moved into Wittenoom several weeks before Jim was due to arrive. Irene and Brian were very welcoming and, as they both worked shifts, I hoped we were not too obtrusive. It was quite a change being among people again. I met some other wives – mainly those whose husbands were in government jobs – and we had picnics at a pool in another small gorge – also riddled with asbestos.

The country was very beautiful, red earth, the pale-green-grey of spinifex among rocks and ranges. The air was clear on still days and the sky, a pale blue canopy.

I went to services at the Anglican Church, met the minister and his wife and did a few stints of cleaning the church. Bishop Witt had just been made Bishop of North West Australia and I was asked to entertain him to morning tea. Happily, John was in town and could enjoy the visit. The Bishop was a born actor and one of the wittiest people I have ever met. We racked with laughter. Later, when he took the service in the church, the congregation was almost rolling in the aisles with mirth.

The Matron and her friend were due to be transferred south and, in lieu of our rather edgy relationship, I was hoping they would leave before I had Jim. That hope was squashed when Irene told me that she was announcing to all and sundry that she was 'not leaving town until Mrs Coten had her baby!'

On the afternoon of the 25 March 1966, after the heat had eased slightly, Ned and I set off for the store to buy groceries for the weekend. John was coming in to start his leave later. We had not gone far before I realized I was not going to make it, so returned. Fortunately, Irene was home. It was then that her enquiries revealed that the one and only taxi had gone to Port Hedland and would not be returning until next morning. The hospital was about one-and-a-half kilometres away and I clearly could not walk to it. Irene and Brian had a van but had put it up on bricks for the duration of their stay, because the roads were so bad.

The couple next door were 'New Australians', who could barely speak English and whom Irene hardly knew. They had a very, beautiful car which they never drove but cared for lovingly. It had embroidered cushions on the back seat, and was washed and polished regularly. Irene went in very bravely and explained our dilemma to the wife. She was very generously given the keys and the indomitable Irene drove Ned and me up to the hospital. I have always thought the poor lady who lent the car to us must have died a thousand deaths in case the baby came on the way to the hospital. Her relief when Irene returned it in pristine condition must have been enormous.

Ned sat between us. Irene insisted he realized what was happening. After I had been admitted, she took him home and she and Brian looked after him until John came.

Except when he was hungry, when he bellowed until he was fed, he was a very observant, thoughtful child. I remember one evening at Cowra, when several mining people were having tea with us, talking mines and exploration. Ned was sitting in his low chair when one of the men said,

'Look at that child, he looks as if he understands everything we are saying.' Ned sat with his ankles crossed, his hands on the tray, like a company director, quite still. He was about twelve months old.

Jim arrived at 8.30 pm on Friday, 25 March 1966 – all 10 lbs 11 oz of him, and 24 inches long. He seemed to be all arms and legs. He had a thick mop of black hair which the girls had to trim out of his eyes. They said he was 'well cooked' and as if he was three months old and had been here before. He was a very contented baby and slept a lot. It was in contrast to his lively birth, when Matron argued with poor Dr Oxer the whole time.

Later, I had to have a blood transfusion – a complicated business, with the blood having to come up from Perth which took time (with my blood sample going down for a match, etc, first). When it did come, it did not run freely so Dr Oxer ordered the staff to put a hot water bottle. When Matron came she asked, 'Who ordered that water bottle?'

'Dr Oxer,' I replied timidly.

'Take it away!' she ordered one of the girls.

When he came back he would ask, 'Who took the water bag?'

'Matron!'

He, 'Stop her!'

Me 'I can't!'

This happened a couple of times until, exasperated, he said, rather plaintively, 'Well! If there is one thing I do know something about, its blood because I was in charge of the Blood Bank in Kalgoorlie for four years.'

To add to the little drama, I must have had some incompatibility with the blood, because I woke up in the middle of the night, after I had it, with great raised weals all over me. Fortunately they subsided in a couple of days.

Dr Oxer was regarded as rather aloof but I had great respect for him after he cared for Ned and me so capably.

Prior to our move to Wittenoom, John had made a special cutter which would cut meat for dingo baits much quicker than with a knife and he had been asked to take it to Port Hedland when a Regional Vermin Control Meeting was to be held with the Head Office staff to give a demonstration.

The meeting was to take place while Jim and I were still in the hospital so, with only a few days to admire his new son, he packed up and drove off to Port Hedland with Ned sitting up beside him.

Although it was small, a lot went on at the hospital. Irene filled me in on the action. Not that I was particularly interested, Jim and I were wrapped up in our own little cocoon, of contentment on Jim's part, overweening pride on mine.

The glow did not last long because John and Ned had barely set out on their journey when a weather report came in to say a cyclone was bearing down on the North West coast and the eye of the storm was due to hit Port Hedland. Communications, primitive at the best of times, were knocked out so I could only hope and pray the travellers would be safe. As it turned out, I need not have worried. They sought and were given shelter by the Anglican minister and his family. The Reverend Redman, an engineer working with a mining company as well as doing pastoral care, and his family, had also sought shelter at the Rectory and were living in a caravan in the backyard. The cyclone passed in a few days but, as there was flooding and the coastal road closed, John and Ned had to come back to Wittenoom on the longer, inland route. Jim and I were out of the hospital by the time they returned.

I expected to find a tired and grubby little child when I went out to meet the travellers but John came up the drive carrying a smiling, happy little boy dressed only in a snow-white nappy. They had shared a camp-site with a retired couple whose daughter had given them a dozen nappies she no longer needed. She had said to pass them on to someone who could use them. They thought John could!

I had some concern about how Ned would accept our new family member. He was not antagonistic but very watchful of our every move.

We moved back to Cowra and picked up the threads again. Sometimes, John took Ned out with him on short trips. On one occasion they got into a deep bog and had to build the muddy track up with branches and spinifex. It must have been in August because we had bought Ned his red, pull-along trolley for his birthday. Fortunately, the mail truck had been able to get through, on its fortnightly run, on time with the package.

When it was opened, Ned never said a word but got some water and made bog hole and pulled the trolley into it. Taking John's hand, he led him to the nearby mulga tree and indicated he wanted some small, leafy branches. Adding leaves and grass, he replayed the whole adventure. John glowed with pride.

I will always remember taking Jim to Cowra. As it was still hot, John decided it would be better to travel by night, so we set off after tea. He also decided to go on a back track he had discovered. It entailed cutting a six-strand fence but felt that was justified to shorten the trip. It grew dark, dust rose as we went. Quite suddenly we came on a wide patch of wild flax covered in bright blue flowers. Rising up from this sea of blue, clearly visible in the head lights, rose clouds of white moths. It was so beautiful I felt it was a special welcome for our beautiful new son asleep in my arms.

Although the journey was far from luxurious – a battered Land Rover covered in red dust, swags, rifles, tools and other jumble – I felt so happy and thought no baby could have a more beautiful homecoming. John cut the fence, drove through, mended it and eventually Jim came home!

Jim was baptized in Wittenoom, when he was six months old. Brian was godfather and, in the absence of his godmother, Janne Bent, whose mother had been one of my WAAAF friends, Barbara Mitchell, the headmaster's wife, acted as her proxy. Father Fitzgerald, who officiated, had made the arrangements.

By a quirk of fate, about two or three years ago, we met Mr (Jim) and Mrs Mitchell at a morning tea for those of us from Wittenoom who were foundation members of the Survey for Research, at Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital, into Asbestosis. I was talking to Mr Mitchell, reminiscing about our Wittenoom days, when out of the blue he said, 'Did I ever meet John Coten?'

'Meet him? I married him,' I said. Then suddenly the penny dropped and we had a long talk and Jim met his erstwhile proxy godmother.

John met a lot of people on his round – mining and station people, tourists and government workers. He always had time to talk to them and explain the country. I have met many people who remembered how they enjoyed knowing him.

Janne Bent's mother, Doreen (O'Neill), was a very good and generous friend, always sending gifts of toys and clothes she had made for the boys. Mary Porter used to send us welcome gifts of overalls and other garments. As we had no electricity, even if I had a machine, I could not have used it.

There was a poliomyelitis scare and everyone in the state was offered immunization against it. I cannot remember if it was compulsory or not. It was given by three doses, over a period of several weeks, of a teaspoonful of a thick pink liquid. I seem to remember it was given with sugar.

Robin Miller (later Dick, when she married the head of the RFD's) was a trained nurse and pilot who flew her own plane and travelled through the outback, treating people. The aboriginals called her the Sugar Bird Lady. We travelled to Nullagine for the first two treatments and Robin gave me the last dose to administer and save us the long trip. Sadly, she died from cancer not long afterwards.

When Jim was ten months old, John said I should take the boys back to Narrogin to meet the family. I did not want to go but in the end I gave in. Ned clearly did not want to go either and cried all the way from Wittenoom to Perth which, as we had to make a detour to Meekatharra, took seven hours.

The senior hostess, who spent most of the trip chatting, etc, to the other passengers – all mining men – clearly found us exasperating. She, too, told

me I had made a rod for my own back. Mid-air was not the place for a fight so I contained my feelings.

★ ★ ★

I was very happy to come back to Cowra and John. The boys, too, seemed happy to be home.

Sometime later, we had a visit from a tall, rangy-looking man asking for directions to some place in the district. John was out and I could not help him. He told me he was Bruce Lang, that he owned Hillside Station, further north on the Shaw River. He said he was just looking around the country but was lost. I thought it was rather strange that he had come out with no clear directions but I gave him a cold lemon drink and he went on his way.

His motive for the visit became clearer when John received a letter from him with the offer of the manager's position on Balfour Downs Station, 30miles east of Ethel Creek Station, on the edge of the Little Sandy Desert. He had wanted to check me out!

Rough as it was, I felt affection for our hovel in the bush and had a few pangs of regret to leave. Although the country around us was flat and uninteresting, there was a line of blue ranges to the south, which broke the horizon. Whenever I looked at them, there seemed to be rain falling somewhere along their length – gossamer veils of waterfalls that lasted only a few minutes then vanished. They were like good friends.

We had very kindly, been invited to stay at Hillside for a few days to get to know the family and staff. We were made very welcome by Pam, Bruce's wife. They had two boys at school in Perth and a young daughter still at home. The homestead was an attractive rammed-earth building with big rooms and wide verandahs. There were half a dozen stockmen and a truck driver, who picked up and carted our goods to Balfour.

Pam was very capable and did all the cooking which was quite a task with so many mouths to feed. The only real excitement during our stay was Jim going missing one morning. Bruce went into panic mode and, in five minutes, there was turmoil. He sent a search party down to the Shaw River – which, in fact, was dry – while others were off to the various buildings. After several minutes, Jim was discovered, sound asleep under a double bed in the breezeway! Unused to so many people and the activity, he had sought a retreat.

After our brief visit, we said farewell to our hosts and set off for our new home.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

BALFOUR DOWNS

I rather enjoyed moving around and cannot remember even being unhappy about our changing circumstances. As long as I was with John, I felt the boys and I were secure and happy. From an early age, both boys were good travellers and never complained.

Setting up a new home in rough conditions, reminded me of playing cubbies when I was young. Having been brought up on the farm, I was accustomed to the lack of modern amenities and my time at Forrest River Mission had taught me a lot about making do with what was available.

Our new home was over a hundred miles from Hillside and the road to it lay through dry, stony, desolate country. The only habitation we passed was the Bamboo Creek homestead. The house built of the local stone, stood uninhabited and bleak. I wondered how anyone could have lived there, but many years later I did meet someone who had gone there as a young bride and survived!

I fell in love with the Balfour homestead as soon as I saw it, although it was set on a flat, red dirt plain with few trees around it.

The house had thick, red rammed earth batt walls; there was a kitchen and pantry one end, a bathroom at the other and wide cement verandahs on the east and western sides. A machinery shed was attached to the southern end but apart from that, there were no old buildings. There were three large rooms in the middle of the house, one of them fly-wired which was a boon.

Water was pumped up from a bore, very mineralized and hard, but potable, a good wood stove in the kitchen and, best of all, a 'donkey' to supply hot water to the bathroom. A 'donkey' consisted of a 44-gallon oil-drum, laid on its side on a brick stone, with pipes to fill it with water and take it to the bathroom when heated from the fire under the drum. As all

our many guests who visited us arrived covered in red dust or mud, the bathroom got a lot of use.

Balfour was on the edge of the Little Sandy Desert and the nearest habitation to the east was Alice Springs, a thousand kilometres on.

A plaque on an oil drum on the eastern boundary stated that it was the beginning of the road Len Beadell had bulldozed across to Alice Springs. It had been a marathon of an effort and took him some months to achieve. He wrote a couple of books, later, about the road and other work he had done in the outback.

Balfour was a cattle station but the cattle were being mustered and trucked to Perth for sale. There was no breeding program, or development, carried out. After having been on Mardie and John on Warrawagine Station as well, it was a very different scenario for us.

John was classified as the manager but most of his time was spent on mill work. The stockmen from Hillside were brought over to do the mustering and as there were no quarters, they had to live rough. Most of the work was done out on the run so I saw very little of it.

John was away a lot and I hankered to go with him but it was not practical with the boys so young. Also, we were on the RFDS from Meekatharra call schedule so someone needed to be available to listen for that.

The mail truck called once a fortnight – a great excitement. Sometimes the road was impassable, if there had been heavy rain, and we were isolated for some time – six weeks once. It brought not only mail but our stores, tools, etc, ordered from Perth, or our food supplies from Meekatharra – at a price. I made sure we always had a good reserve of staples. We usually had a couple of bags of flour in store, as I made a lot of bread. It was so popular with our many visitors, I felt it was less than polite not to offer them the latest batch.

John ordered *Playhour*, a weekly comic for the boys, and Dougal the dog in 'The Magic Roundabout' and 'Little Drag a Chair' were two of the many characters we all enjoyed.

John always had credit accounts with a number of Perth stores – Boans, Bairds and the tobacconist. He never owed money and always liked to be well ahead. Bairds was a great stock and supplier to stations. They sold everything from rope, saddles, tools, haberdashery, furniture, to machinery. I was always amused when he asked me to order myself a 'pretty hat from Bairds!' Reliable and good as they were, they were hardly high up on the fashion stakes. We all wore Akubras and I had made fly nets for the boys, as the flies, of course, were always with us. They looked rather strange, especially Jim who was so small, but it saved them a pair of 'bung eyes'. We ordered



John with Jim in his arms and Ned on the ground.
Captured during one of the many station adventures that shaped the family's life. The Cotens spent years on stations such as Balfour Downs and Towera, living close to the land and embracing the remote serenity.

a red trolley for Jim, for either Christmas or his birthday, but he was more interested in other presents. Not, Ned, however, 'Oh look Baby Bimbles,' he cried, 'Now you have your *own* Red Trolley!' Jim's disinterest did not last long and both boys spent many happy hours playing with their transport.

They played with their toys on the cooler front verandah in the mornings but on one occasion, when I went out to see if they were all right, I found them cheerfully talking to each other sitting an arm's length from a six-foot black and white banded snake lying in the garden by the edge of the verandah. In panic, I picked up a child under each arm and sprang onto the nearest bed. 'Mr Bandy Bandy' as we called him, stayed with us for three or four days before returning, we assumed, to the desert from whence he came.

There was a lighting engine which, although noisy, was an improvement on hurricane lanterns and candles.

When the musterers were over, we used to get fresh beef. Otherwise we had our family favourite of fish (tinned herring) mixed through cooked rice and dressed with oil and vinegar, or kangaroo – which our guests invariably thought was beef. John salted the beef to preserve it. He cut it into pieces and rubbed coarse salt all over. He spread it out on a netted bed to dry, repeating the process for three days. Then it was put in a sack and hung up until needed. The pieces looked very unappetizing as they turned purple and yellow in patches. Soaked to remove the salt for several hours, given a long slow simmer in a pot of water with root vegetables, and a handful of rice added for the last hour, made a meal fit for a king. We only used kangaroo John had shot, to make sure it was clear of disease, and I always cooked it very well.

Rolled oats was a favourite staple. We rarely had butter but I had learned at Forrest River that beef dripping was a useful substitute and that, or oil, filled the gap for cake-making. Treacle, too, was a good standby. Whatever we had, it kept us in good health and our many guests were always very appreciative of our hospitality. Partly, I am sure that, although they had ample supplies, often luxurious by our standards, some even having refrigeration, no one in the crews ever seemed to know how to cook!

Not long after we moved, John had a letter from three boys from Perth who asked for permission to come to Balfour to explore the caves on the station. John wrote back saying he did not think there were any caves but they were welcome to look.

They arrived in due course – Robin MacArthur, Peter Groom, and another Peter? Their gear was packed, if that is the word, into a very large, decrepit trailer which had taken a bashing in the river crossing. Their first day was spent mending the trailer, with help from John. When the time

came to look for the caves, they discovered the Army Ordnance map they were using was three hundred miles out. They were from England and had done furniture design at the London School of Furniture Design, I think. I am not sure about the others but Mac, as we called him, had trained with the son of an English firm 'Catts' which had set up business in Perth. Mac also had been sent to Winchester College by a 'doting' mother, he told me recently (2016), and like John, hated it.

Not long after he and the other boys went back to Perth, he returned to work with John – later going over to Hillside. He married Helen Stowe, Randolph's sister, and they had two daughters – Genevieve and Sally. Mac was a talented furniture maker, doing all sorts of jobs around the house – both effective and elegant. Years later, they built a beautiful house on a block at Bedford – as Ned will bear witness – and Helen became a much respected wood carver and stained glass expert.

One day the Vermin Control Inspector and his wife drove in and, after talking to John, set up their camp in a nearby paddock. Uncle Amos and Auntie Dot, as they became, were soon part of the family. As Uncle Amos was away all day, he wanted to be sure his wife would have company.

They were a remarkable couple. Uncle Amos was the Government dogger covering a vast stretch of the south coast for many years. They had four children whom Aunty Dot taught by correspondence as they travelled. They were all married now, with their own families and established in good jobs. (Moore was their surname.) They travelled in a converted bus.

Auntie Dot came over to the house every afternoon and she and Uncle Amos came for tea every Sunday. He was a preacher and, although he never held a service, Aunty Dot brought her zither and we used to belt out hymns with great vigour, after tea on Sunday nights. Normally, she only came after lunch each day but one morning when a 22-member exploration party rolled in by Land Rovers and a helicopter, she arrived early. 'I couldn't sit there wondering what was happening and miss the excitement,' she said.

The party had been out in the desert for three months so, while the bathroom went into overdrive, the South African helicopter pilot and I managed to produce a meal to assuage the starving host. Never has a leg of lamb, which was among the last of their supplies, been stretched so far. Potatoes, baked beans and anything else edible among our stores, came out and seemed to satisfy everyone.

As a thank you gesture, I was invited to have a flight in the helicopter. My protestations were pushed aside and I reluctantly climbed aboard. Once again, vertigo overtook me and I felt I was about to fall out into the tree tops below my feet. To make matters worse, the pilot rounded up some



Photograph of John Coten by Robin McArthur.
Robin McArthur first met Meg and John while travelling on a survey expedition in the North West. Lifelong friendships, often forged in remote places, were a hallmark of Meg and John's lives in the bush.

cattle and, as we dipped and swerved, my stomach and equilibrium went with it. I was never happier than when we landed.

Not long after we arrived the Reverend May from the Uniting Church paid us a visit and put on a picture show for the musterers, over from Hillside. The camp was several miles away and we sat on a log to view the two cowboy films. We expected the boys to fall asleep but they sat up, laughing their heads off and clapping until the show finished at almost midnight.

There was a growing interest in exploration for minerals in the hinterland and small exploration parties came through regularly. The old prospectors camped around Nullagine and Marble Bar had a heyday. Telling newly arrived geologists, they knew of areas with good prospects, they were put on the staff as temporary guides.

One day an English geologist arrived with his prospector guide, just as a storm was brewing. John urged them to wait at the homestead until the weather cleared but they assured us all would be well and headed off. The storm came through with torrential rain and we wondered how the travellers were faring. The following afternoon, I happened to see the geologist – John – walking towards the house. He told me they had become hopelessly bogged and finally he decided he would have to walk back to get help. He was rather coy sidestepping around me until he finally explained he had split his trousers getting through a fence. I was hard pressed not to burst out laughing but I fed him, gave him a pair of John's overalls and sent him backwards into the bathroom. Being taller than John, the overall legs came only halfway down and looked hilarious. He, not unnaturally, was worried about his stranded and aged off-sider so as soon as John came in, they set off on a rescue mission. Their only supplies had been a bottle of whisky! Later, after the rescue party made a triumphant return, John told me they had been so hopelessly bogged in a deep, narrow cutting with high banks each side, the doors could not be opened. The geologist had to get out of a window.

They were with us for several days until the roads dried out. We had enjoyed their company, as John Smith had a lovely disparaging sense of humour. (He was a brother-in-law of Ainsley Gotto – a secretary to Gorton, Prime Minister, and later a very discerning TV presenter.) They went off, trousers mended and washed, and with supplies. I don't think there were any significant discoveries!

Dr Beard, the head of Kings Park, and his off-sider came in one day, having been out for several weeks on a seed-collecting visit in the desert. They made good use of the bathroom too and spent a few days with us. It was very interesting hearing about the work being done at the Park.

Several times we went with John beyond the Balfour boundary on the eastern side to an abandoned station – Tallawana. I believe someone had tried to make a go on it but it had no surface water, or fencing, and wild dogs would have decimated any stock. There were the remains of a corrugated iron shack and I after, thought about the two men, I believe, who had taken up the lease. It seemed a magical place to me like the edge of the world. Further east there were two lines of ranges with a valley lying between. There was sparse vegetation and there must have been iron ore in the ground, because it looked reddish violet. It looked harsh but very beautiful.

The landscape around the Balfour homestead was very flat, except for a rocky outcrop about a mile distant to the north and a much more impressive line of ranges to the south. They too had a violet tinge and somewhere along their length, there were veils of misty rain falling every day. Only a width of a few miles, like water tipped out of a bucket, a diaphanous film fell from the sky. Sudden showers fell around the homestead, too. I never tired of looking at the wide, flat plain, the vast, open sky and revelling in the feeling of freedom and space. When storms blew up, majestic thunder heads of restless clouds appeared over the ranges. Sometimes sheets of rain fell – on one occasion from each point of the compass in an hour.

At night, the stars blazed in the sky and John, who was fascinated by everything connected to astronomy, taught the boys to find the Dog Star, the Southern Cross and other formations.

One day, the stockmen brought in a baby donkey for me to care for. Millie, as she was named, became a much-loved pet. Her mother had died and, had she been left, she would never have survived. We already had a tabby cat and a kitten, who considered themselves family members to the extent that they slept with us.

Although we loved Balfour, there were reasons we decided to seek our fortune elsewhere. We had been treated fairly but we had issues about the management generally, which John did not want to be involved in.

I knew I would miss the excitement of living on the edge of no-man's land, the wide open space, the mobs of little finches that flew onto the shady verandah to escape the burning heat and drink water from the shallow containers I filled and left out for them. I had a feeling of being a pioneer on the edge of exciting new developments as well, so there was sadness in packing up and leaving.

John was offered a job as manager of Towera Station, part of Winning Pool in the Gasgoyne, about 280 miles north east of Carnarvon.

It was Christmas time and, as his new job began in the New Year, we decided to take our time on the trip. We looked like a travelling circus when the packing was completed. We were limited in what we could take on the truck but John made cages for the cat and kitten, as well as Millie, and all settled down like seasoned travellers.

We let the livestock out when we camped and they stayed close until they were bedded down for the next stage of the journey. Millie, who had a few tummy troubles, relished getting onto bush tucker and it was obviously the food she needed.

It was well into December when we left and hot. We made pre-dawn starts, camping at midday and driving on in the late afternoon. The boys never complained and played under the tarpaulin shade house, John erected when we stopped or slept. The country had few trees of any size being mostly rocky and covered in spinifex.



John Coten, date and location unknown.
John was known for his calm manner, love of bush life, and deep respect for Indigenous culture and the land – values he and Meg shared throughout their marriage.

When we reached Newman, John parked a little way out of town (rather than take our circus in) and walked in for stores. He returned with two miners who had given him a lift in their ute. They were clearly intrigued by our outfit and returned shortly after with a cask of red wine! John explained very politely that we did not drink alcohol but we were touched by the kind thought. Warm red wine in a temperature of 100+°F would have laid us out; appreciated much more was the ice cream John had brought, which we devoured forthwith, before it melted completely.

There was very little traffic. We had halted for our midday camp one day when a Land Rover on the road, stopped abruptly and the driver got out. John went to see if something was wrong and found the vehicle had a broken windscreen. He brought the traveller back to our camp and that is how we met the 'banana man', as he became.

He was John Hutchinson[28], I think an environment officer based at Gascoyne Research Station. I do not know what he did but it entailed travelling and he visited us regularly later, when we were at Towera. He always brought bananas, usually a hand, which made a welcome addition to our diet. He was the brother-in-law of Joan Hutchinson, our very special secretary when I worked at PMH and who typed up the family history I wrote. When the boys and I were in Carnarvon, going south at the end of 1970, he invited us to lunch at the Research Station. To the huge delight of the boys, when he turned on the heat on the oven, a large python crawled out!

Our only other encounter of note, was finding an empty car, abandoned on a little-used road on which we were travelling south. Naturally, we felt concerned, but carried on for about three miles, until we came to a mill and saw the stranded travellers, two adults and two young children. They told us they were on their way back to their home in Newman and had decided to take this back road, not realizing how little it was used. They were migrants and certainly not bush wise. Their only supplies were some half-ripe tomatoes, a friend had given them.

They, fortunately, remembered passing the mill some miles back, when the husband realized he could not fix the car, so they walked back to it. The children were quite young and had to be carried. There was no shade round the mill and, although there was water in the tank, it was not fit to drink. They had been hosing water over the children to cool them off.

No doubt they were hungry when I opened a tin of peaches, as they gulped the fruit and juice down. John meantime boiled the billy and we had a quick meal before he took the husband back to the stranded car. Not

28 His book, *North West Australian wildflowers*, was published in 1971.

long afterwards both vehicles returned. We gave them some basic supplies and water, for which they tried to pay us, before we parted.

John carried a 44-gallon drum of water and basic supplies without fail. In view of the adventurous life he led, it was just as well. When we were married, he gave me a pocket knife, a small compass, a box of matches and a piece of string and said I must never leave the house without them. He always checked his vehicle before going out too – tyre pressure, oil and water in the radiator.

We celebrated Christmas on the road. We camped for the day and tried to make it special for the boys. There were no shady trees, just low scrub and spinifex. We decorated the biggest bush for our tree and when the boys fell asleep put out the presents we had brought. Mother had sent little Christmas stockings which John hid in nearby burrows for a treasure hunt. Food had been left out for Father Christmas and his reindeer, and John always left a lantern burning low, on Christmas Eve, a welcome for travellers to the inn.

Although it was a humble inn and a simple celebration it was a lovely Christmas. The boys were thrilled with the stocking hunt and all the little toys and puzzles kept them busy all day.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

TOWERA

We reached Winning Pool station on New Year's Day and met our new employers, Michael and Tess Stroud.

John, when he first appeared in WA and was travelling north, working his way, had been employed to do the gardening for a few weeks at Winning. The eldest of their three daughters had just been born. I cannot remember her name. The others were Michelle and Katie. They had one son, I think Michael. We were invited to stay for lunch and wait until the day cooled off before pressing on the 50 miles to Towera.

It was dusk when we reached the Towera front gate. A light was showing and I remember thinking how welcoming it looked. When John got out to open the gate, 'What will happen to us here?' I wondered. Little was I to know how dramatically our lives were to be changed.

I was delighted to find there was a cottage, even if, as I discovered in daylight, all was not ship-shape and Bristol fashion. Sometime later, when my mother visited us, the ceiling, in the room where she was sleeping, collapsed, but fortunately she was not in it at the time. Daylight also revealed a number of solid buildings making up a well laid out homestead.

The kitchen, dining and radio rooms were in a separate, raised building, forty metres from the cottage. They were roomy, had trestles and benches as well as basic equipment. The No 2 Metters stove was a good 'cooker', as well as a source of warmth in winter.

There were good, self-contained men's quarters, a machinery shed with a lighting engine and, best of all, a large store, built of jarrah. The store was a treasure house of tools, old records and even jars of cloves, nutmegs and other forgotten relics. It had a wonderful aura and felt rich in secrets. John had a desk there and recorded the day's events every evening – methodically.

There were solid cattle yards, a mill pumping water for our use, and a chook yard. Tess Stroud sent half a dozen hens over, when we were settled, and the eggs were a welcome addition to our diet.

A tennis court, overgrown with weeds, gave testimony of a gracious past but times had changed. The previous owner, had I believe, gone broke. Now, instead of leisurely days of tennis parties and visitations, a lot of owners, including the Strouds, had their own planes and employed pilots full-time. The Strouds regularly flew to Perth for business or social events.

We had been at Towera three days when Ned asked, 'When are we moving on to our next camping place?' He seemed quite satisfied when I told him we were staying on at Towera.

The Yanrey River ran through the property, less than a mile from the homestead. It was easy walking for the boys and we often went there for picnics. When it flooded, it was a swift-flowing, wide sheet of water carrying all before it. Bushes and branches swept past, tumbling and twisting, on their way to its mouth. The water birds, pelicans and ducks, sailed past majestically, making the best of the bonanza. Most of the time, it was a chain of shallow pools, with sandy beaches. Big gum trees gave shade on hot days and habitat to a multitude of bird life.

The Towera homestead was at the junction of the road from the Great Northern Highway (Barridale Road House) to Marroonah Station to the east. It was managed by Harry Broad, a rather gruff old boy. His wife was a nurse who had trained at RPH with Anne Porter.

Lyndon Station was to the south, managed by Tim D'Arcy and his wife. His brother John and his wife were on Nyang Station which was over the river on the northern side. (Nyang used to be quoted as one of WA's hot spots but it must have been decommissioned and the name changed to Emu Springs.)

Although John had been employed as the manager of Towera, we were never invited into the inner circle of NW society. The exclusion caused us no grief as John did not drink and I chose not to. We would have hardly fitted in to social occasions.

We had many visitors. David Porter came up for one school holiday. Unhappily, he got so badly sunburned when he went out for the day with the Stroud children, we felt he was not well enough to travel home by bus and Tom and Mary came up to take him home. Mary found it rather surprising to find Millie, who had settled in like a homing pigeon, gazing into her face, when she woke up in the morning.

The banana man, John Hutchinson, came several times. More for the steamed puddings I made for him, than the call of duty, I always felt. We certainly appreciated the bananas he brought.

Bruce Wright, the teacher who had recorded aboriginal paintings and carvings in the Fortescue River area, came several times. (John had been seconded from the Vermin Board to act as guide for him, because he knew where the best sites could be found. Jim has the book Bruce produced.) He and his nephew came on one occasion and he showed us an odometer he had brought. I thought it was so interesting and beautifully made, I raved about it. After they drove off, I went inside and, to my embarrassment tinged, I must say, with delight, found it on the kitchen table with a note saying he was glad I liked it. Another time he brought some modelling clay and we turned the kitchen into a studio. There was clay from one end of the room to the other. I remember how impressed I was by how professional he was, and how quickly order was restored.

Towera was a sheep station but had been neglected. With the aerial mustering, a number of sheep were collected from nooks and crannies previously missed. For the first time in my life I saw a sheep with four years' wool on it.

A small number of cattle lurked in the back-blocks, also. Later on a mob was brought in for branding and the market. I stood at the rails, with Jim beside me, watching as John oversaw Ned pick up the red hot branding iron from the fire and run with it to the stockmen, holding the beast down. My heart was in my mouth but Ned did exactly what he was told and showed no fear, only great pride at being part of the team. The fact that he was barefoot did not make it look any safer. Both boys went barefoot until Ned was about four and we bought them thongs on a rare visit to Carnarvon. The shop keeper was rather startled when he asked what size they took and we said we did not know because they had never worn shoes!

John was so good at showing the boys how to tackle difficult situations, where I would try to protect them. He was very patient and showed them how to climb steep rocky places, across water courses etc. Sometimes he took them with him when he was working near the homestead. Because they were with me so much, I sometimes wished, 'If only I could have an hour to myself!' but when they were away, I missed them so much I couldn't wait to see the Land Rover coming down the track. They were always full of news on their return.

One day, they passed a few sheets of iron in the bush. 'Oh look,' Jim said, 'a plane!' John said, 'He is so clever. Ned and I just saw tin but he saw so much more.'

Ned piped up. 'Daddy and I just saw tin but Baby Bimbles saw it was like a plane!'

They came home late from one trip, very proud of themselves because they had to cart rocks to build up a creek crossing to get through. John was so proud of them.

I had not fully comprehended how alone John had been until one day he wrapped his arms around the three of us and said, 'Now, I will never be lonely again.' It brought home to me what a dislocated life he had.

The welcoming light we had seen on our arrival came from the cottage where the aboriginal couple who comprised the staff lived. (H)amish Cameron and his partner Nita were a friendly, middle-aged couple, well endowed with a great capacity to eat meat. (H)amish was responsible for getting the killers in and doing the butchering among other things, but John had to put a limit on the frequency of kills. Between us, we ate about a sheep a week, of which we had the lesser half. Often John shot a kangaroo or emu to tide them over. He liked emu too, so Nita often brought up a leg she had cooked for him – unappealing and ungainly but he liked it. Otherwise they mended fences or helped John when he needed assistance.

There was a Federal election not long after we went to Towera and I dutifully sent off a postal vote. John had never applied to get on the roll but because of my vote the authorities discovered him. A 'please explain' letter arrived asking why he and (H)amish were not on the roll. He replied that he would vote when he thought there was anyone standing worth voting for and Mr Cameron was more interested in the population of kangaroos round Towera than who was in Parliament in Canberra. Nothing more was heard about the matter. Nita was clearly a non-person!

I cannot remember how many mills were on Towera but the run took John at least a day to complete, more if any repairs were required. He never left a mill needing repair because water was so important for the stock, and wildlife. Towera had a sizeable population of kangaroos, birdlife, etc. The river was not accessible to all areas. So when John went off, I never knew when I would see him again. I often thought about families in the city, when the breadwinner arrived home at the same time each night, and how they would cope, not knowing if they would come today, tomorrow or the next week.

John had, among a myriad of other subjects, been interested in everything to do with the universe, astronomy and the likelihood of life on other planets. When we experienced the visitation of UFOs he told me that if he had the chance to go onto a craft, he would go. The sightings of

unexplained lights happened on numerous occasions and John, or I, began to record them. (They are listed in the next chapter.)

John always had his rifle, binoculars and a book on space travel in the Land Rover and said, to show friendliness, he would approach any craft, like the one which followed him, lay these articles on the ground and withdraw to wait for a reaction.

I knew that he was in earnest and in view of what we had experienced never doubted the possibility that he might disappear.

Therefore, he was greeted with great joy when he did arrive home safely. He always had interesting stories about his trip – the wildlife he had seen, state of the mills and so on.

We on our side had stories about picnics by the river, people passing through, what naughtiness Millie had been up to, coming into the kitchen considering herself a member of the family.

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My mother was very good, sending toys and books for the boys. The *Little Golden Books* were great favourites. I must have read about Scuppers in *The Sailor Dog*, Ned's favourite, a thousand times. I think Jim's favourite was about a lamb and he was greatly attached to a little, blue, velvet lamb that someone had given him.

Mary Porter and (Aunty) Doreen Bent, one of my WAAAF friends, both made shirts and overalls for the boys and often sent up exciting parcels of other goodies.

All our mail and stores came to Winning Pool by the mail truck from Carnarvon. The stores were very costly and as wages for station hands were low, we lived very modestly. The goods were brought over by road, or sometimes by plane, from Winning. Apart from the RFDS radio, our only other communication was a landline to Winning Pool.

I read to the boys a lot and we played ball games, which I felt would help their development. We painted, modelled with play-dough and played water games on hot afternoons. They fought each other regularly and had special fighting places. I remember Ned calling, 'Come over here, Baby Bimbles!' to Jim. 'Come over to this fighting place.' Inevitably, Baby Bimbles obliged and being shorter and in a good strategic position, too, would deliver a telling blow to Ned's solar plexus. There would be a roar and wail from Ned. He would run to me crying 'Baby Bimbles hit me!' Baby Bimbles would wear an evil look of triumph.

Jim became Bim early in his life because Ned could not say the jay sound. Bim then became Baby Bimbles, much to his embarrassment when he got older. He, himself, had problems saying his Rs and Th sounds resulting in a lisp which I found most engaging.

I recall our Christmas at Towera when, after the first excitement of present-opening had subsided, Jim went outside to where food had been left for the reindeers. He walked up and down the path, examining the ground, and came back to solemnly announce, 'I *fink* I can see weindeer twacks!' There were tracks, we all agreed, but whether or not reindeer made them was a moot point.

John loved the ritual of Christmas. We left a light burning all night as a token welcome to the Holy Family, we said prayers together every night and grace before meals. He always went to mass when he was near a church which, it must be said, was not often. I had been a regular attendant at the Anglican Church when I was in Wittenoom. At no time, was our religious difference a matter of any contention. I was committed to the boys being brought up as Catholics and never saw any reason to convert myself. One of the many things I appreciated about John, was his belief that people had a right to self-determination.

Many women in those days had been brought up to believe – and accept – that men knew best. It was certainly true in my mother's family – men were super beings – the fountains of knowledge. I did not subscribe to this belief and it was with constant gratitude I gave thanks for my good fortune to marry John.

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A roo shooter had moved onto the property about 30 or 40 miles from the homestead. John had met him and his wife and three young daughters who travelled with him. Another shooter was part of the entourage. They were well set up beside the river with a caravan, tents, etc. They had a generator and freezer van so the kill could be kept chilled until it was collected. They were Queenslanders and the wife was a school teacher so had no problems teaching her daughters.

She and I only met four or five times but we felt very close because of our similar circumstances. I remember her laughing, telling me about her previous life when she thought nothing of spending eighty pounds to buy a hat! She and the girls came over two or three times, one visit at short notice. She said she felt cheated then because she liked to have three or four days'

notice to think about the visit and savour it, rehearsing what we would talk about.

The boys and I went to their camp once. It was a rare chance for all the children to meet and play together. Shortly after our visit, they were nearly washed away. Rain had fallen further inland, sending a flood down the river. They were having morning tea in the caravan when one of them saw a two foot wall of water surge past. They just had time to move their camp before the area was flooded.

Ned started school at the beginning of 1970, through School of the Air in Carnarvon. After the regular station calls, there was an on-air session for schoolchildren with the teacher based in Carnarvon.

On the first morning, after the above formalities were complete, the teacher asked, 'Would anyone like to sing a song?' The microphone was snatched out of my hand and Ned piped up, 'I will, Miss!' So much for my concern that he would find radio intimidating! I think he sang *Baa Baa Black Sheep*. After an hour or so, the session finished and children went on to do their ordinary correspondence lessons.

Jim considered himself part of it all when the Inspector spoke to the pupils, while on a visit to the centre, and they called back to his greeting of 'Good morning, children'. Jim came in on the end of their replies. The Inspector said, 'Thank you children. I especially like that little voice that came in late.'

The weather was very hot and humid and the tail end of a cyclone coming through, dumped sand throughout the house. Coupled with a dust storm, everything felt gritty and dirty. We celebrated John's birthday on March 9th and Jim's on the 25th. Rain had fallen in between, cutting us off from Winning but the pilot had flown over, with overdue mail and stores and joined in the latter celebration.

I had made a Hansel and Gretel cottage cake for Jim. I did not tell anyone I had to sift the weevils out of the flour. Covered thickly with chocolate icing and decorated with smarties and other sweets, only the slightly nutty flavour of the cake itself gave evidence of a deception.

Shortly after our celebrations, when John had gone off to fix a mill on a far part of the run, a heavy storm came through. Next day, I heard a vehicle go past towards the Highway and return some two hours later. Not long after that, it came back, stopped and a burly man stumped into the kitchen. 'Get me a sugar bag,' he ordered without ado. I realized he was Harry Broad, manager of Marroonah Station. Humbly, I gave him the bag. 'Need it to put over the engine to cross the river,' he muttered as he strode out. As sounds of the Land Rover engine faded, I sent up a little prayer, 'Thank you

God for sending him on.' My gratitude was short lived. Half an hour later, he was back.

Harry stomped onto the verandah carrying his swag and announced, 'Rivers up! Can't get through – have to camp here.' Harry strode onto the living/radio room, followed by his boy, who had travelled with him as his gate opener, and settled in. Shearing was in progress so the quarters were full but they could use the showers, etc. Harry kept the boy busy sending him out to get loads of firewood. For the next four days, there was another person listening to School of the Air. Harry virtually took over the radio, hunched up by the set from the first calls.

No one knew where John was, until the weather cleared enough for the plane to fly and he was located, camped over the river. When he was finally rescued his food supplies were running out and he was smoking pieces of meat from a sheep he had killed. A Boys' Own Adventure he would have loved.

Harry and I got on very well in the long run. I heard on the grape vine, sometime after the event, a lot of people in the district felt sorry for me but I found him very genuine and down to earth. Also he said that my barley broth was the best he had tasted since his mother had made it.

We rejoiced when John arrived back, none the worse for his enforced holiday. The weather improved but there was a lot of repair needed to fences, washed down by the flooding river. At weekends, we went out with John and the boys loved splashing around in the water.

The flies, of course, were always with us, black clouds gathered on our backs and trying to get into our eyes.

There were little fish in the river pools – very strong little fish but easily caught. The boys were happy for hours fishing. There were shouts of excitement when a fish Jim caught leapt out of the bucket and back into the pool.

It was impossible to cook before sundown because of the flies, so we sometimes stayed late.

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We went with John one day in June. The weather was perfect; the sky was a soft blue. I went for a walk along a narrow sheep pad beside the river. I could hear John's deep voice and the boys' lighter ones as they chattered away together. A diaphanous column of smoke rose straight up into the sky from our camp fire. I thought how perfect everything was and how happy I felt. The sheep pad lead through tall, scrubby bushes dotted with small white flowers. Little birds flittered from bough to bough twittering.

Suddenly, I had an overwhelming feeling that I wanted everything to stop just there. I felt there was a wall in front of me and I did not want to go through it. I had never had that sort of experience before. I pushed on through the scrub and put it out of my mind.

We stayed and had a meal, after sunset, when the flies had left the arena. It was a particularly lovely night with a full moon. At dusk, a pelican had made a long, gliding landing on the river and then was swept majestically away and out of sight. I drank in the beauty of nature around me.

I remember thinking that John seemed very tired but as he had been working all day, mostly in water, it was to be expected.

The roo shooter and family came over unexpectedly during the week, for John to show him an area which was overpopulated with kangaroos. While the men were away, his wife and I talked and the children played.

John brought us ladies back bunches of white everlastings. The roo shooter was very amused because John had crawled round on hands and knees to pick them. He always crawled on hands and knees, whether working or following the tracks of wildlife including furry caterpillars.

I noted again that he seemed very tired on the days which followed, but I just put it down to his hard work.

There seemed nothing unusual the night he had the stroke. We had only just gone to bed when he suddenly cried out, 'My head! My head!' He got up and took Dispirin. His last words as he went back to bed were, 'Don't bury me in Carnarvon. Bury me on Towera.'

Shortly after, he had a massive seizure and lost consciousness. It was about 10 pm on Friday, 26th June.

I felt that I must keep calm and think through this awful thing. I dressed quickly and called out to (H)amish who came over to the house. I asked him to stay with John while I tried to get through to Winning on the landline. Reluctantly, he came into the garden, clearly terrified.

Although it was so late, by great fortune, Tess was awake and heard the phone ringing. Winning managed to raise the RFDS in Carnarvon and plug me through, so I could speak directly to the doctor.

I cannot remember much of what he said, but only that it might be an infection and I should give him an injection. He quoted all the numbers for the equipment and antibiotics in the RFDS medical chest which was supplied to every station and told me how to do the injection. I remember saying in a quavering voice that I did not think I could do it. He said the FD plane would be out at first light to pick John up and take him to the Carnarvon Hospital.

I told (H)amish who could not get away fast enough to his house.

Fortunately, the boys slept through it all.

I sat beside John through the night. I watched the moon cross the sky and wondered what would happen. I felt sure John had not developed an infection and did not even go to the medicine chest.

Michael Stroud drove in at 4.30 am, bringing the pilot and aboriginal overseer. Tess had sent a thermos of hot, strong coffee which was very kind of her.

While the men cleared space for the plane to land nearby, I woke the boys, dressed them and told them what was happening as simply as I could.

When John had been lifted into the plane, the doctor (Hicks) asked, was I coming too? I said I could not because of the boys. Ned and Jim had run and hidden behind the house when the plane landed but now emerged and we stood in a mournful huddle watching the plane take off and head for Carnarvon.

We were in limbo. I tried to keep things as normal as possible although my mind was in turmoil.

About eleven o'clock, a miracle happened. A car drove in and Aunty Irene and Uncle Brian stepped out. We had not seen them or had news of them for several months! After leaving Wittenoom, Brian had got a job at Exmouth, where they had been for some time. He had just been transferred to Carnarvon and they decided to pay us a surprise visit. I could never repay their generosity and help they gave me.

Brian cleared John's tools out of the Land Rover and packed them in the storeroom. I remember picking up a heavy spanner and thinking, 'John will never use this again!' I did not think he would die but would be semi-invalid for a long time, maybe always. I felt it would be dreadful for him, for all of us. Irene and Brian insisted we go back to Carnarvon with them. I packed some clothes, etc, and we drove off.

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John was unconscious when I got to the hospital. Just once, before he died, he squeezed my hand and I felt he knew me.

I talked with the doctor who said John had a massive stroke, that if he sent him to Perth, he would die on the trip. He asked for permission to withdraw life support treatment, which I gave. I knew life as a complete invalid would be torture for such a free spirit. I have never doubted my decision.

He had a series of small strokes and then a massive one. He died about 9.30 pm on Monday night, 29th June 1970.

I was with him when he died for which I was very grateful.

John Storey, who was the Welfare Department Officer in Carnarvon, and a Roman Catholic, had been very helpful contacting the priest, who had given John last rites – something I had never thought about.

We had been quite friendly with the Storey's – John, his wife and three small children. They had come out to Towera for a weekend and the boys and I had been to see them in Carnarvon.

I had not taken the boys to the hospital because I thought seeing him connected to so much strange equipment, unconscious and breathing stertorously, could be very frightening for them.

Irene was wonderful looking after them.

I felt detached when I left the hospital. It was a dark, balmy night and I walked around the empty streets for half an hour or so, before going back to the house.

Irene got up and made me a cup of tea.

I lay awake all night wondering how to tell the boys.

We all cried when I did, and then they seemed to change before my eyes. Ned became more mature and Jim to shrink into himself and lost his beguiling twinkle. Over the next few months, he caught colds and developed ear-ache.

I had rung the family to tell them what had happened. They asked if I wanted anyone to come to the funeral. At first, I said no, but changed my mind and Tom agreed to come. Dick was not well so it was not an option for him.

The undertaker in Carnarvon was also a deep sea fisherman. Unfortunately, on this occasion, he had gone inland, on a shooting trip, so the funeral had to wait, until he came back and had made the coffin.

Michael Stroud was agreeable to John being buried on Towera but it was discovered that a burial like this had to be more than, I think, 90 miles from a registered cemetery – in this case it was more than 200 odd miles so approval was granted. John Storey arranged everything about the funeral and logistics of getting John's body and the priest to Towera. I think they brought them in a utility.

He also arranged an early morning (6 am) mass for John the day after he died. Irene, the boys and I went and several nuns from the convent came. One of them told me she had been at the Port Hedland convent when we were married.

Irene took us back to Towera.

Tom arrived, with friends who had driven him up. With extra to find beds for and feed, there was little time to think, let alone grieve.

My mother sent a bunch of jonquils which were put on John's coffin.

There were a lot of people around. I was asked where I wanted John buried and finally a place was chosen, about 200-300 metres from the house in a west south west direction, I think.

I think Ned and Jim were there when the grave was dug.

Tess Stroud wanted me to send the boys to Winning, for the girls to look after during the funeral, but I was adamant that I wanted them to know they had been there, when he was laid to rest. Only Irene backed me up.

Their behaviour was exemplary and I felt so proud of them.

Tess had brought a lot of purple and white bougainvillea, threaded through chicken wire, to put on the grave. The service was held in the radio room, decorated with more bougainvillea.

The people from surrounding stations came but I cannot remember anyone coming to introduce themselves. They had brought food for tea after the funeral, which was as well as I had not given it a thought. I felt overwhelmed with extra cooking, etc, for the household.

The roo shooter's wife came and asked me if I would like to go and lie down. It was the last thing I wanted to do but I felt I was an embarrassment to everyone so, after being assured the boys would be looked after, I meekly took myself off.

When everyone had gone, Tom said he and his friends were leaving, as Dick wanted to look at some country further north. The house mill had broken down and I had asked them to look at it, but they could not fix it and drove off.

Again, Irene said she would stay for a couple of days until she had to get back to work at the hospital. She was always so understanding and had such common sense. I will always owe her a debt I can never repay. She was still with me when we saw one of the lights again, the first of only four sightings seen after John's death.

The diagram of the homestead at Towera on the next page shows where some of the UFO sightings occurred and the place where we buried John.

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John Storey had filled in forms for me to claim a widow's pension and for the Public Trustee to handle our finances, meagre as they were. I found them very helpful and reasonable.

Fortunately, John's funeral costs were very low but, even so, there was very little left.

When the funeral was over, the Stroud's offered me a job as governess for Kate, their youngest daughter, and as bookkeeper. They said we could move to Winning and live in the overseer's cottage. I could teach Kate as well as Ned. I accepted gratefully.

I was in deep shock, and it was not until mother pointed it out that I realized John was buried on July 2nd, our seventh wedding anniversary.

Michael said (H)amish would like to buy the truck. I said I would gladly give it to him. John had not used it since we came to Towera and I could not drive it. I knew John would have liked him to have it.

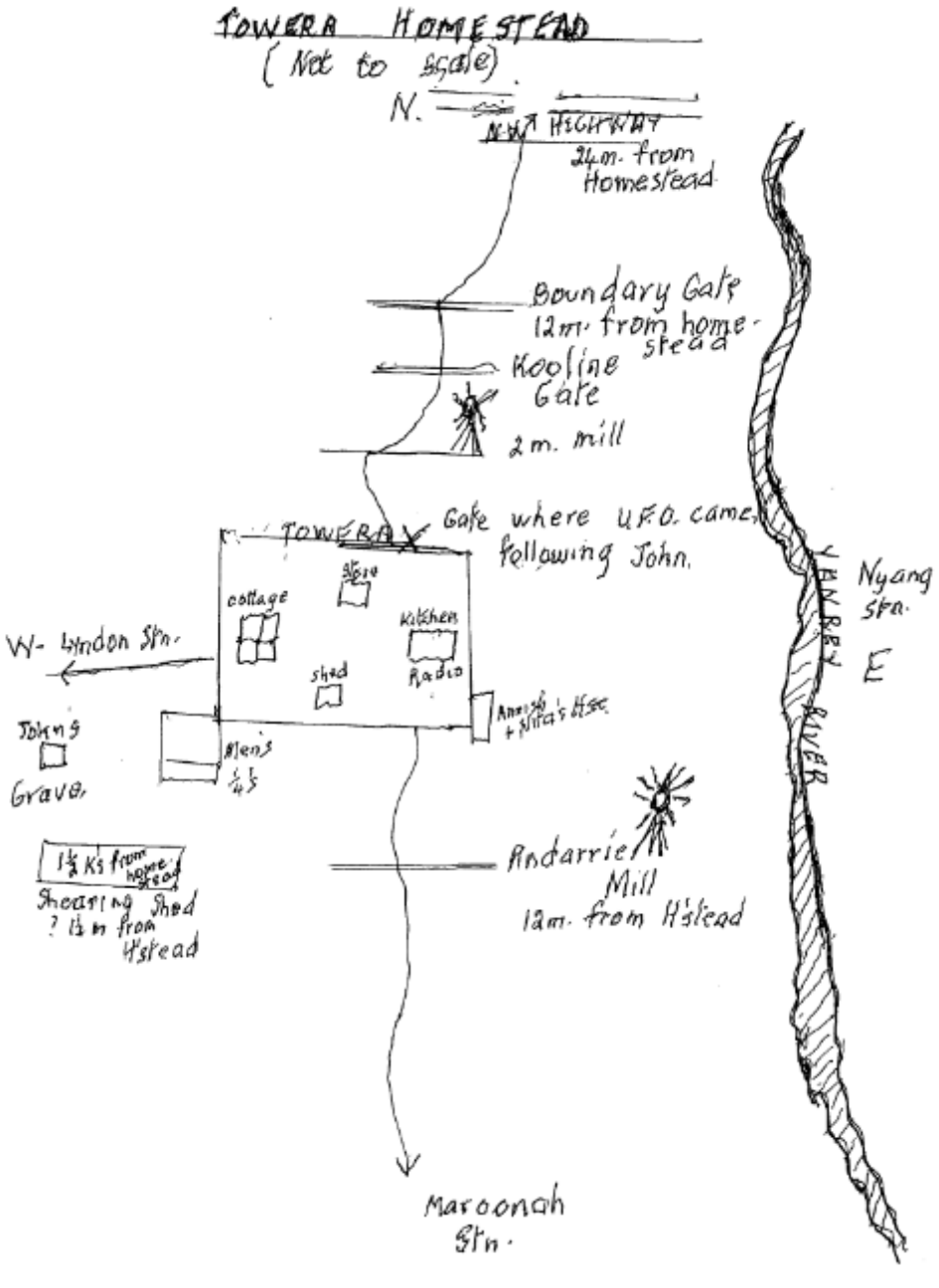
Bill Bell, the carpenter who lived and worked at Mardie when John was there and was a good friend of his, came several days after the funeral to see if he could help. He was Ned's godfather and had retired with his wife to Onslow. They lived in the caravan John had bought for them. He offered to pay me for it but I said John had given it to them and we did not expect a return. I knew they only had the pension to live on and he was very relieved. John had just bought new overalls, an Akubra etc, which I was happy to give because he had been the same size as John. He sorted out John's tools and was a great help and comfort.

We stayed at Towera until the September holidays when Tess and the pilot shifted us over to Winning.

In the meantime, we carried on as much as possible with our usual routine. All the time I felt the gap, between John and us, widen. We had experiences, he no longer shared. I tried to block off my thoughts about him.

Two burly policemen came out from Carnarvon and very tactfully told me I had to hand in John's high-powered rifle and shot gun. As I had a gun licence, I was allowed to keep the four .22 calibre rifles. I hated handing them over. I gave the shotgun to Michael but doubted he would even use it. It was quite new and John had loved it.

When we were packed up, I blocked my mind and concentrated my thoughts on the countryside we passed. Fortunately, both Millie and Lambie had become more independent and spent more time away from the homestead. They were nowhere to be seen when we drove away to another life.



Meg's 'Mud Map' of Towera Station.
Meg created this 'mud map' diagram of Towera showing where UFO's were seen and also the final resting place of John.



Towera Station in 2020.
Jim, like his mother, has a deep affection for the North West. On this trip with his daughter Claire, they visited Towera, where Meg and John had spent formative years of their lives and where John's wish to be buried in the outback was honoured.



Remains of the Towera Homestead.
Towera holds special significance in the Coten family's history–a place of both challenge and profound connection to the vast Australian landscape.



John's grave at Towera.
Fulfilling his wish, John lies in the red dust of the outback,
a fitting resting place for a man who loved the bush life deeply.



Ned, Meg and Jim at home in 1973, Andrews Street, Narrogin. After John's death in 1970, Meg and the boys moved back to Narrogin, where this photo was later taken. Meg's remarkable life story continued to unfold – always with a twinkle in her eye and a story ready to tell.



Ned, Jim and Meg in the backyard, 1975.
Meg created a warm and loving home for her family, where her adventurous spirit and rich life experience inspired those around her.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

UFO SIGHTINGS AT TOWERA

Sightings of unidentified flying objects happened on numerous occasions and John, or I, began to record them, beginning:

> Lights, like a car approaching within a quarter of a mile along the road from the north, have been seen at Towera on about five occasions in the last six months. No car arrives and a daylight search shows no sign of tracks of a vehicle for 12 miles along the road.

8.7.69

At about 9 pm on the 8/7/69, lights were seen approaching. I immediately went on a motorcycle to investigate.

About 5 miles north, I saw the lights again. I got closer and they held their distance, tho' varying a little. They were between me and the Yanrey River.

They were not against the sky, height above ground maybe 15 ft or thereabouts, distance hard to judge but about a quarter of a mile.

Most of the time, it appeared as a row of about six lighted windows.

It appeared to turn at times and become a slightly wedge-shaped bar of light with a pulsating light, somewhat like a blow torch flame, across the bar of light.

I followed it for about 9 miles, when it appeared to draw ahead rapidly and was lost to view in the distance.

My speed when watching was 20-30 mph. I could only see lights, nothing else. It was not a weather balloon, aeroplane or stars.

I do not know what it was. The approaching lights were seen by three people at the homestead.

J Coten

The above report was passed to the RFDS at Carnarvon. The operator remarked that a lot of light sightings were reported by pilots and truck drivers.

1.8.69

A light was seen about 5-8 miles to the north of the homestead about 8.30 pm.

John went down and waited along the road but lights came no closer.

They appeared to be moving about haphazardly, rising rapidly on several occasions and travelling along the Yanrey River and back at high speed.

I saw the light from the homestead.

M Coten

9.8.69

John was writing in the store when the rooster squawked. He went out to investigate and saw lights near the Two Mile mill and apparently over the river.

He rode down near the Two Mile; he saw the light quite close towards the river. It appeared different to previous sightings, narrower and consisting of only three windows. There was no pulsating light.

The light went ahead of John on the east side of the road, going north. After a mile or so, it crossed the road to the west, ahead of him, flying low; his vision was blocked by scrub, etc. It reappeared on the east side of the river, now a full bank of windows, six or so.

Could be two separate craft about. It disappeared from view a mile or so north of the Kooline gate. Rode to boundary, waited but saw nothing further.

Returning home, looking behind me, saw it apparently following close, roughly where it had disappeared from view.

John turned and rode towards it. The craft maintained distance from him – about a mile, and disappeared again.

Returned to boundary gate and again waited. Saw nothing.

Returning home again, saw it following at about the same place, maybe slightly nearer to the boundary – all this on the east side of the road.

Turned motor cycle round, facing lights which were close and in full view. Switched headlight on and off repeatedly, also worked dip switch – no visible response. After five minutes approximately, craft again moved to the north.

Followed and lost sight of it near the boundary gate. Again, waited at the gate, night very cold.

Returned home, frequently looking over shoulder. Saw nothing till I stopped at the homestead gate, then again saw lighted windows close behind me, just to the side of the road.

Drew Meg's attention to lights, got binoculars and watched lights which were manoeuvring. Only single light visible to naked eye or binoculars. Lights then disappeared. Very cold. Went to bed.

(Dictated by John to me) MC

9.8.69 about 8.30 pm

I saw lights about the same time John did and watched intermittently until his return. Mother also watched for a short while, when they were in the distance.

Mostly, they appeared as a small distant light but, on one occasion, two lights blazed up at apparent distance of less than three miles from the homestead and about a mile apart. One light seemed to be over the river and later discussion showed John was not within that distance at that time. At times the light seemed to rise up.

After some time seeing nothing, I saw John's light, followed closely by what I thought was another vehicle.

When he came on to the homestead gate, it seemed to remain stationary. It then manoeuvred and disappeared.

I could see the 'lighted bus windows' from the house.

M Coten

10.8.69

Saw light again at greater distance. Rode north between Two Mile and Kooline gate, car coming from the north.

This could not have been the light I saw. Rode to the Kooline gate – saw nothing and returned home.

At one place on the way to the Two Mile, I experienced a very definite feeling of warmth and friendliness. This lasted for a short distance. Looked around but could see nothing. Could have been the craft in the area on the ground.

Returned home, very tired, went to bed. Saw what appeared to be a car light coming but went to sleep before it would have passed.

Cars were returning from Polocrosse weekend at Marilla.

John Coten

10.8.69

I saw initial lights but nothing else except car passing sometime later.

These lights seem different to vehicle headlights in that, they do not appear to throw a beam and are like the diffused light from a window. At times they blaze up as if a beam has been turned on.

Both John and I had a premonition the lights would come.

As far as we can remember, the lights only appear on moonless nights. On 8th August, the lights disappeared about half an hour before moonrise.

M Coten

13.8.69

I noticed a blur in the sky about 8.30 pm, high up 5. Appeared to be moving rather quickly. John and I looked through binoculars and saw faint but definite rocket head with a vapour trail. It travelled high up across the sky to the north.

? expedition to Mars? Mariner 7.



18.9.69

I was shutting up fowl house about 7 pm, when I noticed a bright light about 3-6 miles north. Appeared above tree-line. Disappeared, and not seen again.

It was faint (young) moonlight and there was a sunset glow in the west. John away.

NOTE:

Nita and (H)amish have seen lights on a number of occasions.

While they were fencing, Nita reported it one night John was away. Apparently it was fairly close, along the fence.

Jim Fennell (aboriginal overseer from Winning Pool) is said to have seen a similar phenomenon at Towera twenty years ago.

On one occasion, he was carting wool from Towera to Winning Pool, he saw what he thought were approaching headlights and pulled up to wait for the vehicle to pass. Nothing came and when he went on there were no tracks, apart from his own coming in.

M Coten

22.8.69

Light seen quite close, just as John going off on Winning Road. It disappeared as he approached.

Sometime later, vehicle travelling towards Towera passed. Light not seen again.

M Coten

29.8.69

(H)amish reported seeing the light this evening about 7 pm.

He thought it was John coming home.

Sighted it by the curve of the river.

18.9.69

Light has been seen on two occasions since the last entry, once by (H) amish about 7.30 pm, then at 10.30 pm, I saw it – one mile north, waxing and waning, moving back and forth for a few minutes, before it disappeared. Bright moonlight.

2.10.69

Saw reddish faint light manoeuvring about 1½-2 miles north.

Glowed up like a headlight once, then disappeared. Time about 7.30 pm. John not home.

29.10.69

Lights seen about 9-9.30 pm. Men in garage saw moving glow.

I saw glow from the house, and a definite light, briefly. John went down but saw nothing.

31.10.69 (Hallowe'en)

Putting the boys to bed at 8 pm, I saw lights, or a glow in the sky, approaching on Lyndon Road west, which I presumed were shearers who were due.

Saw two more, what I presumed were the lights of vehicles, approaching.

Told John and Dave, the grader driver, the shearers had come, which surprised them.

Saw two separate 'glows' in the sky near the shed area, and I presumed the shearers had started the lighting engine and were checking their gear and the quarters. I was surprised at the strength of the glow, which seemed much higher than any I had seen previously.

Later, going to bed about 9.30 pm, I saw at least two more vehicles going to the shed. (The shed was about 1½ kilometres from the house.)

M Coten

1.11.69

This morning, John went to take a telegram which had come for one of the shearers and found no one there. There were tracks of one vehicle.

M Coten

4.12.69

Glow of light seen to north, about two miles or less from the homestead. John just coming to bed.

He switched on his torch, which was very powerful. Immediately, the light disappeared, as if switched off.

Shire Council men who had camped at the Two Mile did not see anything but had gone to bed early.

MC

16.12.69

John saw very faint glow on the horizon, when coming to tea. Thought it looked closer, but more subdued, than usual. Could 'almost see the light itself'.

I woke during the night and saw similar 'glows' very briefly, pin-head of light which then disappeared. Seemed to be within two miles.

29.12.69

Saw glow in the northern horizon. Showed briefly, quite late, then disappeared.

J & M Coten

30.12.69

I saw glow in horizon over river to the north, about 10.15 pm, just after John left in Toyota. Appeared briefly like a torch light swinging. Moved, very rapidly, west a short distance, then disappeared.

M Coten

5.1.70

Faint glow in the north, got brighter and very bright, apparently near Two Mile, no light, only bright glow.

Went to get Toyota, light faded. At Two Mile gate, saw glow to the north, faintly.

At Kooline gate, saw glow to the north, slightly brighter.

At boundary gate, saw it again in the north, about same brightness. Apparently same bearing throughout.

Estimate light to be 4-5 miles ahead of me at all times. Came home.

J Coten

6.1.70 7:45 pm

Saw glow, apparently quite close. Expected John home. Lessened, as if swinging east – remained several minutes, then faded. Nothing came. Comet has been sighted in SW about 8 pm for last 3 nights.

M Coten

9.1.70

Woke and saw strong glow in north. Watched for a few minutes and thought I saw light within glow several times. Was sleepy, so not sure.

Remembered John's dinner still in the oven, so got up. Light still there but disappeared immediately torch switched on. Appeared to be within three miles at most.

M Coten

10.1.70

Glow in north noticed about 8.15 pm. Observed for a few minutes before apparently switching off.

John and M Coten

20.1.70

Glow in sky came up quickly and close. Thought it must be a vehicle. Glow swung east and beam of light could be seen. Seemed only about half a mile away. Then disappeared. No moon.

M Coten

7/8.2.70

Lighting similar to above. Came quite close then light went out.

27.2.70

Saw light 'floating' on tree tops about 7.30 pm last night when boys and I were collecting Millie, baby donkey.

Saw it twice over a period of five minutes. Quite clear and bright, and not far away by the look of it. Light appeared to sink down and then went out.

Boys also saw it and next day (H)amish remarked he had seen it and asked me what it was? – Not Venus.

M Coten

2.3.70

(H)amish told John he had seen the light last night.

MC

28.3.70

Nita saw light.

MC

29.3.70

Saw light quite close – glow.

JC

3.4.70

Saw glow about 8 pm. Very dark for short time. Reappeared 8.20 pm and remained close for some time. Appeared close. John went down. Saw light near Two Mile but disappeared.

Later a vehicle came through from the north but definitely not responsible for glow.

M Coten

4.4.70

Glow in horizon. North, visible about 1½ minutes at 9.30 pm.

9.4.70

Glow seen in NNE direction over the river about 9 pm – fluctuated and faded. At same time, glow appeared due north – almost a light, briefly then disappeared.

John and I both saw this. I woke during the night and saw repetition of glow in north.

John went out and, at Pindarrie, he saw glow behind him – ie, north which he was sure was passed south – ie, of the homestead.

M Coten

10.4.70

John saw glow in north from homestead, again quite close.

24.5.70

John and I saw light in north and he went down but saw nothing.

M and J Coten

25.5.70

Light seen again, John not home.

M Coten

There were four further sightings after John's death:

6.7.70

Aunty Irene and I saw light approach rapidly from north. Vehicle came on Lyndon–Barradale Road – from west, and lights went out. Nothing came.

Meg Coten

15.7.70

Light seen 'floating' near Two Mile. Watched it for a few minutes, about 7 pm. Disappeared into the trees.

M Coten

7.8.70

Lights seen twice but nothing came.

We left Towera not long after that and nothing more heard of phenomena.

M Coten

OCTOBER 2020

EPILOGUE

Sadly, on 26th September 2020, Meg passed away peacefully at the age of 96. As much as she loved life, she said this year, "No one should live to be 96". She was still mentally alert and able to say her good-byes. Meg wasn't afraid of dying.

Meg Coten had achieved so much and was a woman before her time. In her nineties she finally completed *Meg: A Memoir* and was happy to have a typed, bound copy showing the many hours she had spent telling her story.

Unfortunately, Meg didn't get to document some interesting family connections that evolved in November 2017. During their lives, Meg's sons Ned & Jim had wondered about, and searched for, the family of their father John, Meg's husband. They were unsure that they would ever find the family, or learn more about his life.

Through genealogy research, they finally discovered they had family in Wellington, New Zealand. On investigating, they found John's sister, Helen, her children and grandchildren. It was a massive shock for Meg and Helen to learn of each other. Meg, Ned & Jim learned that John Francis Coten was actually born Maurice Joseph Graham. He had never disclosed his New Zealand nationality and shared few details about his family. In short, the man Meg loved and married had a history she did not know.

We have outlined significant detail about the discovery and the events leading up to it in Appendice G of this book, titled 'Finding John Coten'.

Confronting the situation took great courage, understanding and reflection. It is a puzzle with missing pieces that can never be completed. Meg and Helen had many phone calls, emails and exchanging of photos. They finally got to meet in May 2018 when Helen and her son Roderick travelled to Perth from New Zealand for a weekend to meet all the Coten's.

Needless to say it was an emotional, wonderful and exhausting weekend for all concerned. Meg and Helen discussed together the parts of their lives that involved John/Maurice respectively. For both ladies, the meeting provided a connection that healed feelings of emptiness, bewilderment and betrayal.

Meg and Helen soon realised they could never answer questions about John's reasons for leaving behind his biological family and never disclosing their existence to Meg. However, Meg and Helen being similar in personality and intelligence, accepted each other whole heartedly and moved forward to embrace the new family members they had found as did the next two generations of Cotens.

The situation was extremely painful and exhausting to Meg. You may wonder why she did not share her new story with many. She said, "I can't answer the questions, and it would be too exhausting trying to".

Ultimately, Meg remembered John as the kind, intelligent, hardworking, good husband and father that she got to spend seven special years with. John had told Meg on their engagement that she had kept him hanging on for ten years. What they had was real in spite of the omissions on John's part. Meg never remarried which was a testament to their love. We hope as Meg now joins her beloved John that the answers she didn't have in life can be found. John would have been proud of the men Meg mothered to the end. Helen gets to continue to be an Aunty to her nephews, and new family who she never knew she had.

Helen's email to Ned and Jim after being told of Meg's passing:

> "Dear Ned and Jim
>
> I am finding this very hard to take.
>
> Meg had become so important to me.
>
> I regret the loss of the years we might have known each other and shared our experiences.
>
> I liked writing to her and am pleased my letters gave her some pleasure, but now I cannot do anything for her and it hurts.
>
> Thank you for the photos – I see her as she was the day we first met.
> With sympathy, Helen."

Rest in Peace Meg.

Written with great love for Meg – Kylie Coten and Therese Groen



Last family Christmas, 2019.
Meg often joked that 2020 would be a good year to "drop off the perch." The family was fortunate to gather one last time in Perth for Christmas in 2019 – a treasured and poignant memory.

Meg's all set to pound City to Surf pavement



NO STRETCH OF THE IMAGINATION – Proving you're never too old to compete, 82-year-old Meg Coten has started training for the 2006 City to Surf.

by SASHA JONES

IT'S not the London Marathon, and it'sre than 25,000 West Australians, City to Surf is an annual event not to be missed.

Entering its 31st year as a major calendar highlight, Activ Foundation's City to Surf is the largest community sporting event in WA and the second largest of its kind in Australia.

Five hundred people participated in the first event on February 23, 1975.

Last year, a massive 25,101 people registered to compete in the 12km and 4km categories (by running or walking), as well as the 11km wheelchair division.

The course is essentially the same as that used in 1975 – starting on St George's Terrace in the city and finishing at City Beach.

These days the finish line is situated on the firm grass of City Beach Oval rather than the soft sand of the shoreline – a small change that is, nevertheless, greatly appreciated by the calves of the 12km runners.

Other changes over the years include the introduction of a 4km course from Perry Lakes Reserve, a wheelchair category and walking categories for those who prefer a less strenuous start to their Sunday morning.

For 82-year-old Meg Coten, it was taken out of her hands when her son decided the whole family should be in the event.

"He said he wanted to see all of the Cotens' names in the paper, so he registered all six of us in 2005," Meg said.

"My goal for the 4km event was to finish in under the hour and I walked it in 56 minutes."

Meg won the over-80s category, and her son has been asking for a couple of months if she has begun her training for 2006.

Yes, Meg has been registered and intends to be at the start line on August 27.

"I have always been active – playing tennis and hockey, and riding when I was growing up on a farm," she said.

Registrations for the City to Surf can be done online or in person at the New City to Surf Store at the Perth Fitness, Health and Lifestyle Show from August 24-26 at the Perth Convention Exhibition Centre.

A registration fee applies and no registrations will be accepted on the day.

More information on 6462-7300 or www.citytosurf.activ.asn.au

All fundraising efforts go towards the Activ Foundation which helps provide support services to people with intellectual disability and their families across WA.

Meg completing the City to Surf at age 82.

Typical of Meg's indomitable spirit, she took on the City to Surf at 82. Her love of walking and determination shone through – a reflection of her lifelong resilience and energy.



Meg's 90th birthday, 2013.
Celebrated in Perth at the home of Jim and Kylie Coten.
Back row, L-R: Kylie (Jim's wife), Jim (younger son), Ned (older son).
Front row, L-R: Claire (Jim & Kylie's daughter), Max (Jim & Kylie's son),
Meg, Andre (Ned & Hilary's son), William (Ned & Hilary's son),
Sam (Jim & Kylie's son). Absent: Hilary Coten. The gathering echoed
the joyful family celebrations Meg always cherished.



Meg with her beloved grandchildren.
From left: Claire, Max (hugging Meg), Andre, William, and Sam.
Meg adored her grandchildren, delighting in sharing stories from her adventurous life with them, just as she had once begged her own mother to tell stories of the goldfields and the bush.



Meg about to blow out her 90th birthday candles.
Meg's 90th was a fitting celebration of a life filled with love, adventure, humour, and resilience. She remained the heart of the family, beloved and admired.

INTRODUCTION TO THE APPENDICES

While this book is a collection of memoirs written directly by Meg Coten, it also serves as a history for her sons, Ned and Jim, and for others – family and friends – who knew her.

During her life, Meg gave many speeches and wrote a number of articles, some published and some not. In addition, others wrote stories about Meg or about places and events connected to her life.

We have included these items in the appendices to provide a fuller record of Meg's life and to add interest and insight into some of her experiences. Together, they help capture the rich texture of her story – beyond what is covered in the main chapters of this book.

Most of the appendices are self-explanatory, and we hope you find them both interesting and illuminating.

- **Appendix A. Albany High School Article**
  Written by Meg at the request of Albany High School in the 1970s as part of their school history project. The article offers a window into her time there and reflects the excitement and challenges faced by students of that era.
- **Appendix B. *New Idea* Article, 1964**
  While living on the Nullarbor, Meg wrote an article about life in a tent, which was published in the magazine *New Idea* in 1964.
- **Appendix C. Story about Balfour Downs Station**
  An article written by an unknown author about a visit to Balfour Downs Station, where Meg, John, and their sons were living at the time. It offers a vivid glimpse of life in the outback.

- **Appendix D. *The Australian Women's Weekly* Article, 1970**
  Titled 'The Irish Hunt', this article recounts Meg's experience of taking part in a hunt in Ireland during her time in Europe.
- **Appendix E. Highbury Story**
  A story written by Meg, accompanied by a covering letter to Bob and Chris Weise, long-time friends of the family. It offers personal reflections on the Weiss family and their interactions with Meg's family in Highbury.
- **Appendix F. Meg Coten Obituary**
  Meg's obituary, published in *The West Australian* newspaper on Monday, October 19, 2020.
- **Appendix G. Finding John Coten**
  In a remarkable turn of events late in Meg's life, the family discovered that John's personal history was not what it had seemed. This appendix tells the story of how Meg, Jim, and Ned uncovered John's true family background. There is some overlap here with content in the main text, but we wanted to provide the full account for readers who may not have followed the entire journey.

We hope you enjoy these appendices, and that they deepen your understanding of Meg's remarkable life.

APPENDIX A

REFLECTIONS ON ALBANY HIGH SCHOOL

This piece was written by Meg for an Albany High School Anniversay, reflecting on her time as a student there and providing an insight to life in that era.

Born in 1923, I am roughly speaking, of the same vintage as ASHS, of the two, the school being better preserved.

I was brought up on a farm south of Highbury, a small settlement and siding on the Great Southern Railway line. It is about 14km south of Narrogin, halfway between Perth and Albany.

My early schooling at the one teacher school at Highbury was sketchy, as I was teased and bullied relentlessly and I spent most of my time plotting to avoid attending. I was aided and abetted by my old speckled grey pony I rode, named Myrtle. She had been taking children to school for years and found being tied up in the bush stable all day as unpleasant as I found school. She threw me off at least once a week, generally more often. I always hoped for obvious injury – skin off or blood flowing. It gave me a legitimate excuse to take sick leave.

My mother and brothers said I did not know how to ride and they would show me. I took pleasure in the fact that while Myrtle always waited for me to re-mount, when she threw them she galloped home leaving them to walk back.

I was hunted back to school finally after the teacher visited us and said if my attendance did not improve she would have to report me to the truancy officer. My parents had done their best to get me to attend school regularly

but redoubled their efforts after her visit. Terror at the imagined threat of imprisonment did the trick for me.

Having missed so much school I was always behind especially with maths. No one ever pointed out or realized that I had never learnt the times tables! Mental arithmetic continued to be torture. It was during the Depression and although on the farm we had plenty of food there was very little money – certainly for boarding school. When I finished primary school I continued attending the Highbury school and studying the first year high school curriculum by correspondence. I began with a flourish but faded as the year progressed, completing only 13 of the 20 sets required.

My mother inherited a small legacy from an aunt in Scotland and generously used some of it to send me to ASHS or AHS as it was then called. Going to high school was the exception rather than the norm for country children in those days. Boys mostly stayed to work on the farms, girls also stayed to help their mothers, go into service, do office work or serve in shops locally. In fact there were very few high schools in the State – at Albany, Bunbury, Kalgoorlie, Northam, Geraldton and Perth Modern School.

From memory I think the attendance of ASHS when my mother took me down to enrol me in 1938 was in the region of 320 students. Coming from Highbury it seemed a lot! She also settled me into a small, private boarding house for students.

Very few people had cars in those days so students from the Great Southern travelled by train. A few came in to catch it at Narrogin on a branch line from Corrigin – further south from the Dumbleyung area connecting at Wagin. As the trains passed Highbury both ways in the middle of the night, the journey involved either catching or being met in darkness on the little platform at the siding. Although I was never homesick when I was at school, leaving home to get there was a misery. When the alarm rang and I heard my father getting up, lighting the hurricane lantern, the gate bang shut as he went as he went down to the stable to harness up Mac, the sulky horse, I would feel sick with nerves.

The only noise as we drove down the white ribbon of track to Highbury were steady hoof beats and the whispering rustle of the iron wheels on sand. Standing in the gloom, the lantern lit, ready to wave when the train came round the bend to let the driver know to stop, is still a vivid memory. Holding my breath I would listen for the first faint hum of the engine. At first a whisper of sound, getting louder and suddenly the train came around the bend like a fiery dragon – lights, steam, screeching and crashing it came to a stop. I would be pushed into a compartment and we were on our way.

Boys and girls travelled separately but I do not remember any rules about this. Sometimes in an act of bravado during the journey, a boy would slide out of the door and walking crabwise on the running board and holding onto the iron rail on the carriage side make his way to visit the girls in their dog box and return.

Eventually having exchanged holiday news and collected the Wagin crowd, we would try to sleep, hunched up, contorted on the narrow seats. There was very little sleep for anyone.

Further south there were cream cans to be loaded for the butter factory in Albany adding to the rattling, screeching and jolting as the train brakes were applied and carriages came to a shuddering halt. We reached Albany in time for school. The local carrier collected our luggage and took it to distribute to our boarding houses.

I took to high school like a duck to water and in spite of my rather casual attitude to learning previously, very soon caught up with the curriculum requirements in all but French and understandably maths. During 1938 Mr Laing (Whizzy because he rushed everywhere) was acting Headmaster deputising for Mr Reidy who was on leave overseas. Mr Laing was a tall, slightly hunched, rugged faced Scot. Like all staff he wore a gown when teaching but was rather ragged and as he charged along always reminded me of an eagle. He was passionate about English Literature and for me, an avid reader, his lessons were sheer bliss. I still have and read poems from my copy of the "Bond of Poetry".

All the teachers were treated with respect – none more so than Miss Stevens, the Headmistress. She was calm, very just and looking back, I think the best teacher I ever had. She taught Botany among other subjects and after one of her classes I never needed to revise. She had the ability to make information stick. Out of school behaviour and dress came under her portfolio too. Woe betide the girl seen in town not wearing stockings, hat and gloves or acting in a hoydenish manner! Make up of any sort was banned as was smoking.

Mr Collins, gentle, very good looking taught languages and geography. I was never in his class but know his female students adored him. He was the Deputy Head in 1938, I think.

Miss Birkhead, tall, fit was our Sports Mistress, brutal in hockey training. Our team played on Saturdays against Association teams on the town oval. We trained after school during the week and she made us run around the oval three times before training began, which for me, overweight and no runner was defined torture. Even getting to the oval was quite a marathon - entailing a run through several bushy paddocks and clambering over

a 6 foot gate. It became more of a challenge when I became goalie and had to lug pads along as well as my stick, school bag etc. I was exhausted before training began!

ASHS sent teams to Country Week every second year only, because of the distance and expense. I went with the hockey team in 1938. Bunbury beat us and won the competition. Country Week was cancelled when war broke out.

Miss Birkhead taught French and laid great emphasis on accents, teaching us to roll our "R's" on our molars, in the Parisian way! She must have had some success because years later when I visited France I was complimented on my accent.

Mr Calcutta taught maths and was always the star of our end of year concerts as he had a rich baritone voice and his rendition of "The Road to Mandalay" brought the house down. "Sing it again Sir ", – and he always did! The applause was thunderous. We had a social at the end of each term – preceded by several periods of dancing lessons! Once a year, a fancy dress School Ball was held in the Albany Town Hall.

Miss Bernasochi was our third year (Year 10) girls Form Mistress. Short, plump and rather dramatic she wore pretty, flowing dresses and flowery garden party type hats in class. We were never reprimanded if we failed to do our homework but suffered feelings of guilt as she wiped away her tears of disappointment. She always took her class to the beach for a picnic on the Saturday before the start of Junior Exams (Year 10). She said she did not want us to be swotting all weekend or we would be like "limp lettuces" for the exam.

Miss Lamb (a misnomer if ever there was one) taught us domestic science. Her cold stare could transfix at ten paces. We learnt how to make scones, Cornish pasties, white sauce and launder men's detachable shirt collars, gopher frilly pillowcases and embroided lace edge mats. We used four stoves built around a central chimney for cooking, jockeying for the best position for our dishes. The flat irons that we used were heated on top of the stove and rubbed in bees wax to give a smooth finish. The whole room was warm and redolent of bees wax. It was hard to avoid smuts or scorching in spite of our best efforts.

I cannot in later life ever remember having a need to launder gentleman's stiff detachable collars nor gopher the frills on a pillow slip. (Gophering frills is achieved with hot hair tongs giving a corrugated effect).

The day before we broke up after second term was Boronia Day, a holiday, when we went bush to pick boronia to take home. We picked armfuls and the whole train reeked of the perfume on our homeward journey.

We were not greatly effected by the war but mourned for two ex-students who joined the RAAF as pilots and were shot down, I think in Europe, soon after. They were Prefects when I started and young Gods in my eyes.

We were a small group in Upper School when I reached the dizzy heights. Austin Holmes was Head Boy and I was Head Girl. I have a vivid memory of us laying the school wreath for Mr Reidy who had died from a heart attack. Austin was a brilliant student and went to work for Nugget Coombs in Canberra. The late Dr Ernie Manea (Mayor of Bunbury) was also in my year. We met up again some years later at the Adelaide University, where he studied Medicine and I studied Social Work.

Now I meet many people of my generation who mourn the fact that they had to leave school at 14 to help their families when they wanted to go on. I realize how privileged I have been to go to ASHS. No one can take my learning and its gifts from me.

Thank you ASHS and good fortune to all.

APPENDIX B

NEW IDEA ARTICLE, 1964

AND HERE'S A STORY FROM ANOTHER READER —ABOUT MORE UNUSUAL HOUSEKEEPING CHORES.

TENT ON THE NULLARBOR

WHEN I tell people I live on the edge of the Nullarbor Plain in a tent they look at me with the interest usually reserved for rarer animals in a zoo.

Not that I blame them. I was surprised myself when my husband accepted a job on one of the several properties, newly opened up along the transcontinental railway line.

Building is going on, but it will be some time before there are enough houses and, in the meantime, a number of the staff are living in caravans or under canvas.

The Nullarbor is not as desolate as many people think. There is some good pasture for sheep and cattle, and artesian water, although costly to obtain, is available in fairly good supply.

Clumps of mulga and desert oak, with saltbush undergrowth, break the monotonous flat grasslands. The most distinctive feature is a number of strange depressions called dongas, several feet deep and varying in size from a few yards to half a mile across.

We get stores, bread and mail twice a week, and as we are close to a siding we can always go in and meet the "tea and sugar" — now the only train left on the run with the leisure to stop at the small sidings. That and the monthly visit of the Flying Doctor make up our social occasions.

The Royal Flying Doctor Radio Service is our lifeline to the outside world. Medical calls, telegrams, fire messages, school of the air and even Country Women's Association meetings come to us through this magnificent service. It gives a sense of security hard to put into words.

Our tent is big, and although our furniture consisted only of stretchers and a table, boxes purloined from the builder and artfully draped with old curtains, a tablecloth and a sarong made adequate store cupboards, seats and a work bench.

By watering the tent floor, stamping on it and sweeping it with a mulga branch we soon had a firm surface and less dust.

I lost my temper one night when a southerly buster hit us without warning, upsetting the dinner I had just served AND my store cupboards.

Everything not tied down set off in a northerly direction. Several empty cartons were soon flying sky high like kites.

The winds come at night from Antarctica; fierce and icy cold. Dressing for dinner means climbing into warm slacks and sweaters, woollen socks and stock-boots.

We arrived in winter and I cooked in camp ovens in a fireplace dug out of a rabbit warren.

It was the only soft place to dig, but hazardous as a kitchen, as the rabbits and two or three goannas continued to live there and excavate.

Community shower, washing and refrigerator facilities make my housekeeping chores easy.

For lighting we use carbide lamps. Insects do not worry us much, although I treat a family of red-back spiders, living in one corner of the tent, with respect.

There are plenty of birds to watch; the area is rich in fossils, conversation takes on deeper meanings, there are worlds to conquer in books and thoughts.

And now I have plenty of that commodity so rare in the modern world — leisure.—M.C. #



APPENDIX C

STORY ABOUT BALFOUR DOWNS STATION

Meg found this document, that was written by visitor to Balfour Downs when Meg, John and the boys lived there. Meg could not recall the name of the author, and the first pages of the story are missing. We included this to provide an outsider's perspective in Balfour Downs and station life at the time. The story commences where the author and his mate appear to be making their way to the station.

It's work, but it's good honest work. Essential work. And, when you escape the bog, satisfying work.

We did a good job. Chud backed out of the bog, over our path of trees and stones, onto the centre of the road.

Resuming our journey to Balfour Downs, Chud drove more slowly and kept strictly to the centre of the road. We reached, and safely crossed, Jiggalong Creek at midday.

The creek flowed clear over a sandy bed. We bathed, washed out our muddy clothes and put on clean ones before eating our lunch. Without breaking into the good clobber, we wanted to appear respectable, or at the very least, presentable, on our arrival at Balfour Downs homestead.

Ten miles beyond Jiggalong Creek we bogged again.

"Aw, come on Chud. Once is funny," I said.

As it was not the first time, we reacted more calmly. I found plenty of stones within carrying distance, so this bog did not delay us more than half an hour. It did, however, transform our appearance into something less than presentable.

We could not expect to reach Balfour without bogging again. We decided not to risk another set of clean clothes.

John, of Balfour Downs, greeted us warmly. He shook our muddy hands and did not comment on our mud-splattered appearance. Indeed, he would have been surprised had we arrived otherwise.

John was six-foot tall, clean shaven but with a bristling Henry Lawson-like moustache. He spoke, slowly, of bogs, bad roads and past and future rains. We did not stay long. The fuel dump was uppermost in our minds. We could not fully relax while the drum of petrol was in the vehicle. It was like a lodestone around our necks.

John told us that some geologists, in two Land-Rovers, had passed through the day before. They were heading for a point beyond the Canning stock-route. On the strength of this information, Chud and I assumed the road to be in a reasonable condition.

We assumed wrong.

Only seven miles west of Balfour the front wheels of our Land-Rover went down in a sticky mess created by the vehicles before us. We worked hard for half an hour and succeeded in getting the back wheels into the same bog. Once again another innocent stand of mulga was sacrificed to provide a base that enabled our vehicle to escape to firm ground.

Beyond the Balfour Downs home paddocks, the watercourses were fewer. We camped at twilight and, with only one other bog during the

afternoon, our spirits were high. It would have been a perfect desert camp but for the black clouds streaming across from the west, blocking out the stars and threatening rain.

I felt happy with the days work. In the face of difficulty we had made good progress into the desert. I have received a day's wages on several occasions for doing no more than bogging a vehicle early in the morning and spending the rest of the day extricating it. On those days I always considered I have earned my pay. Regrettably, my supervising surveyors have not shared my opinion.

Chud was also basking in the comfort that comes with the knowledge that one has worked well and made progress. He wanted to talk about it. His statement displayed fully his tendency to remark on the obvious.

"A bloke'd be buggered out here without a shovel and an axe."

Early next morning we crossed the headwaters of the Oakover River and passed through the rabbit-proof fence at mile post 672.

This fence was a significant point. At last we were getting somewhere. The rabbit-proof fence survey was a Canning survey. Canning, the man whose stock-route we aimed to drive. At the fence we crossed Canning's trail.

Alfred Wernham Canning's father worked a farm in Victoria. Alfred was born in 1860 and he qualified to practise as a surveyor in New South Wales. He worked for the Lands Department in Bega, Cooma and Bathurst before going to the West in 1893. He soon proved himself a capable surveyor working in the country between Albany and Eucla.

Western Australia was expecting other, more numerous, visitors from the east in the 1890's – rabbits.

In 1859 an unthinking Victorian imported rabbits into Australia. The rabbits, being rabbits, went forth and multiplied – and spread. The Perth government of the day decided to make an effort to keep the rabbits out of their farmlands. Canning began the survey of a line for a rabbit-proof fence. At Starvation Harbour, between Albany and Esperance on the Great Australian Eight, he headed north into the interior of the state.

The survey reached a point near Southern Cross. Such was the government's respect for the mobility of the rabbit population, Canning was asked to extend the survey line further north, into the Wiluna district, then on to include the Filbara region, carrying on to the Indian Ocean at Cape Karaudren, north of the mouth of the De Grey River.

During 1902 Canning, Trotman and a camel man, Hasan, explored the northern section in order to find a practicable route for the fence to follow. There were many factors to be considered. The fence had to be

positioned east of the settled areas of Western Australia and west of the oncoming rabbits.

Naturally, the availability of water – surface and underground – was of paramount importance. The search for water occupied most of Canning's time. On some sections all the men were forced to wash in the same pint of water. The route needed to pass close to any forest areas capable of providing the timber required in the construction of the fence. As well as these restrictions Canning had to avoid rugged country that would make the building of the fence difficult and expensive.

One of the Canning party's supply points was Balfour Downs. Here the men enjoyed the spartan comforts offered by the pioneer homestead. Then, as now, Balfour Downs was the last station before the desert.

Travelling a line between the desert and the Oakover River, Canning pushed north. When he reached the vicinity of the Oakover-De Grey River junction many months had elapsed since he had last reported his progress to his superiors in Perth. He also needed to order extra supplies. Canning sent Trotman and Hasan to the river junction to wait, while he set off on camel for Wallal, the nearest telegraph office.

Canning had covered only 40 of the hundred-odd miles to Wallal when his camel died. He walked on. His unerring sense of direction brought him to the telegraph line less than a quarter of a mile from his target.

Unassumingly, Canning entered the office and lodged his report for sending to Perth, along with his request for supplies. The telegraph operator informed Canning that the government had expressed concern for the safety of his party. Canning could not understand why. They were only overdue.

With his business at Wallal completed, Canning calmly turned again to the desert for the walk back to the river junction. The telegraph operator apparently showed some amazement at Canning's intention to return to his men cross-country. He suggested that Canning follow the coast road south to the De Grey River and then follow that river inland to its junction with the Oakover and his waiting men. A longer, but safer route. Canning declined. He would return the way he had come.

While the Wallal man expressed surprise at this decision, he is reported to have said Canning's aura of confidence convinced him that Canning was quite capable of completing any journey he chose to undertake.

With the fence route reconnoitred, Canning returned to Wiluna district to begin a survey to locate it. Encumbered with a surveying assignment and the extra personnel required to carry out this task, Canning now had a new source of problems while battling the same hostile environment. When the survey finished at Cape Karaudren, the length of surveyed fence line,

from its starting point on the Great Australian Bight, totalled 1175 miles. Canning also carried out 1200 miles of traversing to connect his fence line to existing surveys in the developed areas of Western Australia.

The construction of the fence was completed in 1906. Arguments still persist on how effectively it checked the spread of the rabbits west.

For many years the government employed men to patrol and maintain the fence. Theirs was a lonely job. They kept the fence clear of spinifex growth, ensured that the gates remained closed and repaired all breaks. They fought a losing battle.

The fence became the butt of many jokes. It prevented the rabbits from returning east. The rabbits queued at the gates waiting for the patrolman to come and let them through. If he was late the rabbits built their own styles over the fence.

The rabbits won. Kangaroos and emus, floods and fires continually damaged the fence – sometimes beyond repair. The patrols ceased. Nature had triumphed over man.

Maybe the fence significantly delayed the rabbits' advance in some areas. Maybe it didn't. But the fence, or its remains, survive. Many pastoralists maintain sections of it for their own use. In the north, the fence was a landmark and in the early part of the 20th century landmarks of this kind, in the north, were rare. I've no doubt many prospectors, drovers and explorers used the fence, and the track beside it, as a lifeline in the lonely country. Even Chud and myself, more than sixty years after its construction, positively identified our position on the map, when we passed through the rabbit-proof fence at the 672 mile post.

I ordered Chud to pose for a photo.

Pleasantly buoyant at the contact with Canning, the real purpose of our trip, Chud and I discussed the prospect of delivering the drum of fuel at Well 22 that evening. Then we saw two Land-Rovers heading down the track towards us. Chud pulled over onto a dry spot. We got out of our vehicle and stood beside it. The geologists stopped their vehicles in the centre of the track, one behind the other, and ambled up to us – one man from the front vehicle and two from the other.

"You won't get far," the leader told us. "It's still too wet. We've been getting stuck all the time. You get out of one bog then you get into the next. It's unreal out there."

"How far did you get?" I asked.

"I'm not sure. Forty or fifty miles maybe. We were in one bog for seven hours. You'd be mad to go on in that over-loaded old thing."

He contemptuously nodded his head in the direction of our Land-Rover. Overloaded? Sure, and now very dirty as well but, none-the-less, our Land-Rover. I didn't like this bloke. I gained the impression that his two workmates didn't like him either. They remained about ten feet behind and did not attempt to support or contradict their leader at any stage. Strange.

"Why don't you come back with us?" the talkative one suggested. "We'll help you over the bad spots."

"Er ... not yet," I said.

"No," said Chud. "We'll push on for a few miles and see what it's like."

"Okay, whatever you reckon." Then, realising we were going on, he suddenly softened his line. "Of course, you may do better. It's probably dried out a lot since we were there."

The two silent men smiled. The leader stood awkwardly in front of us, not wanting the conversation to end but unable to prolong it.

"Well ... we'll be seein' yuh," I said and moved towards our Land-Rover.

The leader responded, suddenly in a hurry. "Yes, right. See yuh." He walked quickly to his vehicle and drove off. The other two followed.

"There's something funny going on there," I said to Chud. "I think those guys were playing no-talkies with each other." Chud agreed.

Whatever their troubles, the geologists served us well. We now had fresh tracks to guide us. Chud and I used their experience to our advantage. Where they had bogged in the track we detoured around. Where they had bogged on detours, we stayed on the track or added detours to their detours. In this manner we successfully negotiated several of the so-called horror stretches. Shortly after lunch we arrived at their seven-hour bog.

Seven hours was no exaggeration. Over one hundred feet of track, along with a few attempted detours, had been transformed into a soggy, filthy mess. Chud and I made an inspection.

The other party had stopped here overnight. We looked around their camp. Chud found a bunch of spinach and an apple. I found a jacking block and, strangest of all, two shovel blades in the camp fire ashes. Only the blades. It appeared that the handles had been burnt out of them.

"What's going on here?" I stared at the ash-covered blades.

"They've been used to boil the billy," declared Chud.

"Yes. I wonder what the hell was going on with those guys. Maybe the boss wanted to go on and the other jacked up on him and burned the shovels."

"Surely not," said Chud.

"Why else would they burn the shovels?"

Chud's only answer was to shake his head.

We had two good reasons to get beyond this bog. To achieve our purpose of heading east and to succeed in our "overloaded old thing" where the others had failed.

We conducted an extensive reconnaissance of the area surrounding the seven-hour bog and worked out a detour. We walked the length of our detour several times. I dug my heels into the earth as hard as I could. It is possible to locate soft ground by this method but sometimes the heel of the boot merely indents the crust of earth over a treacherous bog. The weight of a vehicle has no trouble breaking through the crust.

Our Land-Rover sank slightly a couple of times as Chud drove it around the seven-hour bog. On each occasion he carefully backed out and detoured further. The detour extended and became more of a by-pass. We eventually regained the track with the seven-hour terror now behind us.

We pressed on. But not for long.

No longer did we have the wheel tracks of the geologists' vehicles to guide us.

To the eye the road presented a clear, unbroken surface. But, at any moment, we knew the surface could crumble beneath us. Unlike the road between Ethel Creek and Balfour, there had been no consolidation of the surface by generations of traffic. It was beyond the station country. Beyond the reach of most tourists.

It led to a place with the unflattering name of Windy Corner. At Windy Corner the track intersected a similar one which, in turn, joined others of the same description. These tracks are all part of the network established by Len Beadell in the late 50's and early 60's.

According to Beadell, the first track, the Gunbarrel Highway, was constructed to allow a geodetic survey to connect the Overland Telegraph Line to the surveyed areas in Western Australia. This road, and the others that followed, enabled Native Welfare personnel to make contact with groups of aborigines living in the Great Sandy Desert. Many people believe the roads were constructed to provide access to any rockets which may have faltered and crashed in the area after their launching from Woomera.

Beadell's roads provided the first basic network through this extensive area of desert. They are still used today. However, the infrequent but often heavy desert rains have converted many to watercourses and today most travellers find it easier to drive beside the track than actually on it.

But most travellers do not venture into these areas in wet weather. Chud and I had no choice. Our fuel supply at Well 22 was essential. We had to continue east – even though the road was deteriorating.

We established a routine. I walked in front of the Land-Rover where the ground looked fragile. Progress was slow. We had a couple of narrow escapes. It was nerve-racking work.

We made camp early and discussed our position.

If we proceeded east our chances of becoming irretrievably bogged were good. What then? A wait until the ground dried out or a walk back to Balfour Downs for help. Help? We could not expect John to waste his time and risk his vehicle for the sake of a couple of tourists.

We decided to stay where we were for a few days and wait for the ground to dry out. We still had plenty of time. We could spare two or three, maybe ever four, days. In that time the country would dry out and make travelling less hazardous and less nerve-recking than it was at present.

Once the decision was made I relaxed. The prospect of a few days, isolated here in the desert, appealed to me. A long weekend in the middle of nowhere. The sky was cloudless. Yet again, I thought the rain was over. A few days of sunshine and making the fuel dump at Well 22 would be easy.

Knowing I could sleep in the next morning, I read late into the night. A little book called "A Hero of Our Own Time" by a Russian named Lermontov.

Although I enjoy reading books of travel and history when at home, once I am on the move myself, I like to read the classics. I never leave home without a supply of books. I get the titles from high school and university reading lists.

The appeal of travel and history books is primarily one of locality. The classic writers concentrate more on human reaction to locality and other humans. A more universal topic. In the classics I often find a precept set down long ago, on the other side of the world, by a person alien to myself, which strikes a chord with me, here and now – in Australia today. It's uncanny. I guess that is the hall mark of a classic.

What had I, in the Australian desert in 1968, in common with a Russian soldier in the Caucasus more than one hundred years ago?

Lermontov wrote, "... when we get right away from the conventions of society and close to nature we involuntarily become children once more. The soul sheds all that it has artificially acquired, to be what it was in its prime and probably will be again some day."

And I knew exactly what he meant.

I finished reading and turned off the light. With Chud snoring softly in his swag I felt quite alone. The cool, invigorating desert air, the majestic grandeur of the desert sky, the moonlight transforming the spinifex to spikes of silver. The wonder of it all caught my breath. My throat. My heart.

My spirit. Not only the beauty of nature and the power of the universe, but the wonder of the written word and how it can bring all men together.

Now I was too excited to sleep. I turned the light back on and tried to write a letter to Stan. My thoughts were ecstatic with the emotion of life. Too ecstatic, too sublime, too intoxicating to translate into words on paper. I dropped the pen and returned to Lermontov. He understood.

"Anyone who, like myself, has wandered among the wild mountains, has feasted his eyes on their fantastic shapes, has eagerly inhaled the vivifying atmosphere of lofty passes – will readily understand why I long to reproduce these magical impressions."

Ah, how I long to reproduce these magical impressions.

Despite the late night, I woke early. I could hear a strange noise. A kind of gutteral, gurgling sound. Chud was also awake and listening.

"What d'you reckon it is?" I asked.

"Buggered if I know. Camel maybe?"

Camel! I was excited. Although many wild camels roam free in the desert, I had never actually seen one. Both this year and last I had seen many tracks, some only a few hours old, but the elusive beasts had always managed to keep out of sight. Here was my chance to see one.

I signalled to Chud to be quiet and stay in his swag and I stealthily slipped out of my own. I took the binoculars from my port and peered around the back of the Land-Rover. There was no sign of a camel. Yet I could still hear the noise. I climbed onto the roof of the vehicle and looked further. Nothing. Not a movement anywhere. The spinifex and scrub was nowhere more than waist high. How could I miss a camel?

I raised the binoculars and began a systematic search of the area. I focussed on a distance about two hundred yards out and carefully moved the field of view through horizontal arcs of 90 degrees. As each sweep was closer than the last I slightly adjusted the focus, after each sweep. If a camel was there, I would see it. Yes. There it was.

I distinguished the curve of a graceful neck, off-white in colour, moving between the clumps of spinifex.

"Yes Chud. It's a camel. A white one. Must be an albino. Yes, it's a beaut Chud, a beaut."

"You sure? An albino?" queried Chud.

"Yes, it's a beaut ... hold it ... I've lost it."

I looked above the binoculars. No more than a stone's throw away, my movements and exclamations had attracted the attention of a turkey (plain turkey or bustard). The bird immediately ran a few steps and then struggled ungainly into smooth flight. Chud, now leaning on his elbow in his swag,

watched the bird disappear behind some trees. It was large but not at all camel-like. Chud began to laugh.

"It's a beaut. It's a beaut," he mimicked.

So to our day of rest in the desert. Chud rotated the wheels on the Land-Rover. I made him a cup of tea and continued reading my book. After lunch we walked forward along the track to see how it was drying out. After one dangerous section the track entered an area of sandridges and looked much safer.

We retraced our steps to the dangerous section and marked out some detours. Would you believe it, in the west, clouds were building up. Chud and I glared at them. By four o'clock they covered half the sky.

We dawdled back to the seven-hour bog to check if the geologist had left anything else we could use. There was no food there but, back at the Land-Rover, the turkey had returned. This time I saw it first. Chud got his rifle from the cabin of the Land-Rover, fired one good shot and we had fresh meat for tea.

Chud roasted the turkey in the camp oven. The bird was big and old. No doubt it had survived some poor seasons in the desert. Nevertheless, it tasted good. Not palatable by city standards perhaps, but even a Methuselah among turkeys tastes better than tinned meat.

As we each chewed a drumstick, Chud said, "You know, these things are protected. We could be fined for eating this bird. Keep your eyes open in case a cop comes along."

I was not afraid to speak with my mouth full.

"No. It's not the eating that's against the law. It's the shooting. I'm in the clear. You're the lawbreaker."

We enjoyed the meal but not the night. The cloud cover increased to completely cover the sky. I cursed the heavens and bedded down. I slept poorly. Each time I stirred, I looked for stars. I found very few. Worse still, I felt rain on my face. Light rain, but rain. How could the country dry out?

In the morning the sky was overcast. There was no rain on the horizon and the air was cool. We soon decided to give away the waiting game and continue our journey east. The carefully judged decision to wait arrived at after sober thought only one day ago, was quickly abandoned in the face of a few raindrops.

Chud said, "Let's go on. It's just as likely to get wetter as drier."

The detours we planned the previous day were good solid ones. We entered the sandridge country and made good progress. We came to the western edge of the McKay Range. The range is south of the track but numerous streams flow out of it and across the track. The crossings were

risky. We bogged then pushed our way through two and rushed over another three. How long would our luck last?

I estimated our position 30 miles short of Well 22.

"Close enough," I suggested to Chud. "Let's leave the drum here. It's close enough to the stock-route. What d'you reckon?"

Chud rested his forehead on the steering wheel. He loves driving but the pressure of this trip was getting to him. He offered no argument. We rolled the obnoxious drum of petrol out of the Land-Rover and hid it among some saplings – Fuel Dump No. 1 was established.

We repacked the gear, with the tucker-box back inside. The vehicle's load was a good deal lighter. We felt unburdened, carefree.

As we had made it this far out in an overloaded vehicle, we assumed the return trip – with a lighter load and our outward tracks to guide us – would be easy. Unlike most of our assumptions, this one proved to be correct. We drove around the seven-hour bog at dusk. The sky was clear. A cool breeze blew from central Australia – the true winter pattern of desert weather. However, I no longer dared hope the rain was over.

While Balfour Downs was the eastern-most occupied homestead in this area, there was another, Talawana, on this track. Talawana is abandoned. Abandoned to a far greater degree than Talga. With time to spare, we drove down a side road to check it out.

The country was in good condition. Parakeelya pastures flourished. Sadly, no stock were present to take advantage of the good feed. We came to the old homestead. An abandoned homestead on the edge of the desert is a melancholy place. I looked around for souvenirs and found only pathetic evidence of human occupation.

I picked up a wheel from an old Singer sewing machine – the pedal model. I found assorted pieces of metal, a decaying tea-chest containing the disintegrated remains of a golliwog. A rusty tank had collapsed into a rotting tankstand. An old meat-safe lay beside it. The frayed canvas of a deck chair flapped feebly by the front door. Rank weeds were consuming it all.

The traces of human activity forced me to think of the people who had lived here. Who worked here. Who probably struggled here. Who may have been happy here. Who held hopes of improving the place. Of making a home. Of making a fortune, maybe. All come to scraps of trivia disappearing into the lush growth of a good season.

What happened? What caused the people to leave? Were the seasons bad? Did a creditor foreclose? Did the desert break a marriage? Was the call of the city or town too strong? Here was a story but no person to tell it. Too poignant to contemplate.

The toilet, a short distance from the house, had no walls. The seat cover was also missing. The throne, exposed but defiant, remained. Chud likes funny photographs.

"Here," I said. "I'll sit on it and go red in the face. Take a picture of me. You can call it 'Relief at Talawana'."

"Yes. Good idea," said Chud.

Balfour Downs homestead offered superior plumbing facilities. A bath. Most pioneer homesteads settle for a shower, but John and Meg allowed themselves the luxury of a bath. On our way through, they had invited us to overnight on our way back and take advantage of their ablution block.

In true swagman tradition, Chud and I drove up to Balfour late in the afternoon – in time for the evening meal. We were not the only callers. A dogger and his wife were drinking tea with John and Meg when we arrived.

"Oo, I'm cranky," said Meg. "Months go by and we never see anyone and now, for this night, we have four visitors."

The six of us crowded around the wooden table in the small kitchen. John's shy sons, Neddles and Bimbles, of pre-school age, clung to their parents in the presence of strangers.

"What did you two guys say to those geologists?" John asked.

"Nothing much," said Chud. "They were on their way back when we saw them. We just asked them about the track. Why?"

"Well, they asked me if you were government men checking up on them. Making sure they were not prospecting outside their lease. You had them really worried."

I looked at Chud in disbelief.

"We asked them how far out they'd gone. But only to get an idea of how far we could get," I said.

I told John about the burnt out shovels and my suspicion that all was not well in their camp.

"I don't think they were speaking to each other when they passed through here," said John.

"Anyhow," said Chud, "we enjoyed the spinach and an apple they left behind. I didn't expect to find fresh fruit and vegetables out there."

"Yes, and we had fresh meat too. My mate here shot a turkey," I added.

The Dogger, Amos, then spoke.

"You mean an emu, not a turkey."

He looked serious.

"No," I insisted, "a turkey. Plain turkey or bustard. That's their proper name."

"I know their proper name. But what your friend shot was an emu," said Amos.

I looked to the dogger's wife for an explanation. She smiled at me, blandly. Then looked at her husband.

"Right, so it was an emu that you shot," Amos repeated.

"No ..." I was about to start again, when John raised his hand.

"My friend," he said to me. "Amos is not only a dogger. He is also a game warden in this region. One of a game warden's duties is to take action against persons who destroy protected wildlife."

"Oh," I said. "Er ... oh."

Chud came to my rescue. "Wait on, it wasn't an emu or a turkey. It was an albino camel."

Amos laughed. "An albino camel! That's a good one. I haven't heard it called that before. An albino camel, eh?"

I, happily, allowed the matter to drop.

Amos and his wife were camped a few miles down the road; They refused Meg's offer to stay for tea. Meg insisted but they were adamant. I felt awkward. It was obvious that the dogger and his wife did not want to stay because Chud and I were there. Two extras were enough. No doubt Meg would have preferred some female conversation to that which Chud and I had to offer.

Actually John did most of the talking. He showed us over his workshop. His tools, his prized possessions, were individually wrapped in oil rags. He outlined the history of the mining industry in Western Australia: from Paddy Hannan to Tom Price. He knew every person that Chud and I had met in the north-west, along with an anecdote and observation on each.

After tea Chud and I washed the dishes. Meg retired to write letters – we would post them for her the next day. John continued to speak with an account of his involvement in the pastoral industry. I asked how long Talawana had been abandoned. An hour later I knew the entire history of the Talawana lease.

However, the story I liked most was the one John told concerning his courtship of Meg. Of all the many things he had done and seen in his life, I could see that this was the part he treasured most. The events of the story were interesting, but it was the sensitive manner in which he told the story and the unashamedly tender way he spoke of his wife that appealed to me. I have long forgotten the events of the story and yet the manner of telling I still remember quite clearly.

My bathwater was cold when I finally reached it. I slept well and woke with the young children looking at me, lying in the swag.

"Hullo Neddles. Hullo Bimbles," I said.

They raised their fingers to their mouths and ran off.

We thanked John and Meg for the hospitality and entertainment we had enjoyed and left Balfour Downs.

APPENDIX D

THE IRISH HUNT

Meg wrote this article about her time in Ireland. She sent it in to The Australian Women's Weekly*, where it was published on 19 August 1970, on page 36.*

THE IRISH HUNT
By MARGARET COTEN

HUNTING in Ireland! Could anything be more exciting and romantic, I thought? And I was right.

I have never savoured life more deeply than I did when I was out with a harrier pack on the border of Northern Ireland several years ago.

I must admit this was partly due to my doubt that I would come home alive! The air seemed sweeter and softer, fires were warmer, and hot water a benison because of this very doubt. I relished living.

Not that I approve of hunting. It is a cruel business, but at that time I was too excited at the prospect to consider the pros and cons.

The fact that I had never jumped – apart from putting my old school pony at small logs 20 years before – did not dampen my enthusiasm when my Irish uncle, with whom I was staying, announced that he had borrowed Bill Buller's horse as my mount for the hunt on the forth-coming Saturday.

Bill Buller, a neighbour and a gay young blade, was agreeable to this as he played rugger on Saturdays, my uncle said. I doubt if Bill was given much choice. My uncle was a resourceful man and before the great day had gathered my riding kit from friends and relatives.

There was a hat, a rather sloppy coat, my cousin Harry's britches – a bit tight for my generous proportions, but my uncle reassured me – 'Ach, sure, once ye're up no matter if there is a wee split' – a stock and gloves.

Boots were a problem and finally I settled for a pair of wellingtons size nine, belonging to Mich, the farmhand.

They were the smallest and smartest we could find. Redolent of the sty, but hosed down they looked quite stylish. I had to wear three pairs of woollen socks to keep in touch with them.

'Darlin, darlin', ye look jest grand!' the family exclaimed when I had a dress rehearsal in the big, warm farm kitchen. Mich stood wordlessly by.

The meet was at noon, seven miles away. I jogged along through seemingly endless lanes while rain fell in gentle mist. My mount was a beauty; although he was inclined to pig-root, and this tendency increased as we approached the meet.

It was a glorious sight. Horses surging, the black- and white-clad riders, the Master in a Lincoln-green jacket, and the eager mass of tan-and-white hounds showed up vividly against the green grass and the sombre, bare trees.

I did not have much time for soliloquy because my mount was close to unmanageable. A middle-aged lady, riding a solid brown cob, took me under her wing – uncle's instructions again, no doubt.

Indeed, I should have been in a quandary without her, as the riders took off over hedges and stone walls with a surprising suddenness.

I followed her more sedately through a farmyard full of mud, startled geese, and pigs, into a ploughed field. The pack was already milling around on a hill opposite. As we cantered soggily down the field I cast about for a way around the wide drain which ran along the bottom of it. It had a low wire fence on the near side and looked all of 12 feet across.

To my surprise my companion put heels to her horse and flew over it. I was startled, but the next thing I knew I was sailing over it, too. Easy! Even if I did lose both stirrups and the reins and had my arms and legs wrapped round the horse's neck!

I struggled back in the saddle just in time to get some feeling of co-ordination with my mount as he took a hedge. My blood started to pound. This was glorious! We went over that drain four times in all and I even stayed in the saddle the last time.

My horse bucked all day, but I had confidence in him now and I knew he would take anything I put him at. All I had to do was stay in the saddle – well – on his back. I remembered a remark my brother, an ex-Light Horseman, once made; you are never off your horse until you are on the ground!

I had little time to think about the chase. I was never even in the same field as the hounds. They did not seem to be in favour, judging by the curses and advice meted out to them by the Master and sundry hoary onlookers.

It was dusk when I got home. I had been in the saddle six hours and I fell in a heap when I dismounted. Water gushed out of Mich's boots.

Later, Bill confessed he had taught his horse to buck when he put his hand on his back, behind the saddle, where my low-slung coat-tads had been tickling him all day.

Unfortunately Bill had fractured his jaw in the rugger game that day, which meant he could not play for a while. Hunting was not vetoed, so he needed his horse.

Unperturbed, my uncle simply told cousin Harry, the owner of the britches, that I was to ride his grey. The grey was young and had hunted only once. That made two of us as we set out to the meet the following week.

Harry rode what he imaginatively called the Horse. The Horse stood 17 hands in his bare feet. My mount was called – quite simply – the Big Horse. I looked down on everyone in the field.

The Big Horse and I never really established rapport. He was quiet and well-mannered but did not quite know what it was all about. I fell off early in the first day. Only my dignity was hurt, although I landed on bitumen. Both my boots shot off and with them my top layer of socks, which rolled across the road like scurrying hedgehogs.

To add to my mortification, I could not get back in the saddle. That short stirrup was well beyond reach of my foot even if Harry's britches had not been so tight.

Finally, an obliging ploughman, seeing my predicament, stopped his tractor and came and gave me a leg-up.

I found the body of the hunt near a creek choked with blackberry bushes. Looked at objectively it was a mixed bag. There was a priest on a small bay. The aged vet, sporting a canary-coloured waistcoat and with his trousers tucked into the top of his socks, was on a nondescript black. A farm boy in a tweed suit was riding a camel-like grey, bareback. I drew up beside a pretty little blonde on a dapple pony.

She looked scared and she told me this was her first hunt after a fall in the field the previous season, when she had broken her leg.

Curses were emanating from a nearby wood where huntsmen were trying to restore order among the hounds. I realised that a commanding-looking redhead who had been riding side-saddle was being dragged feet first out of the brambles.

Later I jogged up beside her and said in my matey, colonial way – 'Oh! ho! I see you fell off, too!' She could not look down on me but she withered me – 'I did not fall. My horse came down!' I was pleased to see, as she flounced off haughtily, that she still had a length of bramble caught up in her bun.

Although I was never up with the hunt I was learning fast, not only about the geography of Co. Armagh, but also about the 'shockin' behaviour of the

hounds' – they seemed to be a law unto themselves – royal flies, and double sloughs. I am still not quite sure what constitutes a royal fly. All I remember is a six-strand wire fence mixed up with briar rose coming at me and knowing I was going to come off my horse before we left the ground.

My head felt full of hot prickles when I got up and I thought I had gone blind until I realised I had landed on my head and my bowler was squashed over my face.

Double sloughs are wide, parallel drains, divided by a 12-inch bank. In principle, the horse jumps across the first drain, changes feet on the bank, and jumps the second. Double sloughs did not worry me. In fact I enjoyed them until they showed me one where 'puir auld Paddy had his wee bit of bad luck.' Two years before, the luckless Paddy's horse mis-stepped and he and Paddy fell in the drain in a horrible tangle.

Paddy was dragged out eventually and, despite his cries for mercy, was walked 200 yards across fallow to the waiting ambulance.

'Ach, hould yer whist, man, sure it's just a wee scratch,' they encouraged him relentlessly. He had a fractured pelvis and spent the next six months in hospital. Oh! He was back in the field right enough, but I never felt sure of a double slough again.

I never came off while my blood was up, but when my mind took over it was the end.

Galloping down a lane one day we were suddenly confronted by a five-barred gate. 'Up wid ye,' shouted my companion. Up! I jumped as well as the horse. I swear there was three feet of daylight between me and the saddle and that I could see the sea laid out all round Ireland. But that time I landed back in position.

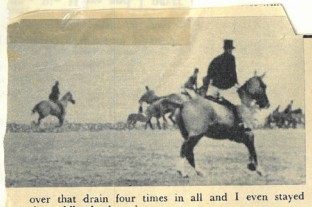
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An obliging huntsman coming up in the rear gave the grey such a whack on the rump that he shot high up and over with surprise.

''Catch him,' shouted the huntsman. 'Catch him.' I took one look at that ton of horseflesh coming down on me and turned and ran as fast as my waterlogged boots would let me. As this gallant huntsman flung me back in the saddle, he assured me that under the circumstances I had made a classic fall. I looked sideways at him, but, no, he was not laughing!

But moments like that were forgotten after we had returned home. Sitting by a roaring fire, eating bacon and eggs, drinking lashings of hot strong tea, we relived the glory of the day.

I still see the subtle colours of the autumn countryside, cloud patterns on the Mournes, the gleam on well-bred horses. I still tingle with the romance.



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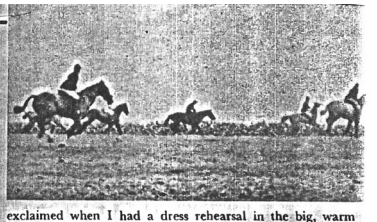
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APPENDIX E

HIGHBURY STORY

1/59 Fifth Street
Bicton 6157
8.3.07

Dear Bob and Chris,

This has taken me much longer than I had planned it to, but at last I have finished it. I can't guarantee that this is accurate, but it's how I remember it all. Probably Tom would know more because he was older, but he won't write his memories down. Caught at the right moment he is very interesting, but the problem is getting him going.

You will have to put up with my erratic writing, because along with reverse street parking I don't compute! Added to which I have inherited the family tremor, and sometimes my hand refuses to work.

Chris, I was so sorry when I heard of your loss of Waverley, I only met her once at Pat's, and I thought she was pretty special.

Pat seemed very happy with her new abode and is leading a very social life.

With best wishes. Love, Meg.

The Wiese family and my mother's family, the Leishmans, and later my father, when he took over Linton in 1922, were neighbours and close friends from their first settlement.

My grandfather, Matthew Leishman took on the farm in 1905, having left a legacy from his father, a Church of Scotland minister of Linton Parish in Scotland, hence the name of the farm.

A Mr English, who had another man had taken up the farm six months before, had planted an orchard and started to build a house.

My grandfather had no experience of farming and having borrowed money of a high rate of interest from Sir Joshua Simmonds in South Australia. A financier, often the initial flutter had trouble making ends meet. In spite of this, all of his eight children seemed to have loved their place and regarded their childhood as very happy.

I do not know when Mr. and Mrs. Wiese took up their land, but I was told it was just after they married and that they arrived with 300 sheep, tools and a swag.

Later when the Weiss children started going to the Highbury school, Ernie drove them up in a spring cart. The young Leishmans had to march and my Aunts told me when the cart came along, Ernie would whip up the horse and tell them they could have a ride if they could jump on. They were always late.

He was a great tease, but always so kind. I cannot imagine he ever left them behind. Aunt Helen fell under the wheel one morning when she was trying to climb in and the wheel went over her, breaking her collarbone. She did not tell her mother for three weeks because she did not want Ernie to get into trouble.

Aunt Helen shared a birthdate with the twins. Frank and Kellie and lilne Kellie joined a sisterhood, Anglican. After training as a nurse, she worked as a medical missionary in the Solomon Islands, and she knew Hedrides for 30 years.

After a lot of adventures avoiding the Japanese in World War II, a typhoon wiped out the mission and the four sisters disbanded. Then they joined the Roman Catholic Church, and she began a Cadmelite. Needless to say, for my Protestant family, this was the equivalent, in reverse of Henry VIII dissolving the monasteries and some members unhappily were never deconciled. Fortunately, she felt she made the right choice.

None of them seem to have learned much at the school. Aunt Marjorie said the only thing she learned was how to spell "car." An old Mr Wilson teaching her have to break string when she helped him call the mail in the

post office, after school came out and after the train came in. On the other hand, proved useful all her life.

My mother told me that when Bill was born, Mrs Weise could not feed him and my grandmother lent or gave her a milking cow, which his mother said saved his life.

A story you probably know, and which Evelyn White tells me is quite true was about Dinah, the Aboriginal being, stealing Laurie when he was a baby. When he was recovered from the rabbit warren where Dinah had hidden him, Dinah said he wanted to introduce red hair into the tribe.

I remember Dinah very clearly, as we often saw him walking along the road, and when he called into the farm for tea, sugar, flour and tobacco. He always carried a handful of spears and a boomerang. He had a sugar bag with a liender twine strap for his supplies and often a possum or roo tail for his dinner.

He was a regular visitor and always knew everything about the family, asking for news of absent members.

My mother said that once he told my grandmother she was on his land and should not be there.

She was most indignant and after he left, she said, "Fancy him saying that to me, what a cheek!!"

I have met some of his descendants in Pingelly and I think the Reillys are connected too. Mr. Weiss was a very good blacksmith and my father, who was a horseman and definitely non-mechanical, always took broken machinery parts to him to fix.

The forge was in a shed, like most at that time, had walls of samhosts side by side and a hay hatch. As time went by, the walls took a leak to horr and the hay went grey with a musty smell.

Mr. Weiss was a tall, lanky man with a big moustache and he really always had the butt of a cigarette twerched in the corner of his mouth under it. Later on, when he had a car, I think a long, green Essex with a clip on celluloid windows, he took my mother and me to Narrogin for some function. I sat beside him in the front seat and was fascinated because he had a butt in both corners of his mouth. In retrospect, I never remember ever seeing him light a cigarette or for that matter, hearing him speak.

I loved both him and Mrs Wiese and never missed the chance to visit them. They were so welcoming and warm and time never seemed to bother them or any of the family. They all spoiled me. Rosie and Alice would take me to the orchard to pick mulberries or almonds and make large batches of almond toffee, pouring it out of she more onto big serving dishes which would be collector's items now. They would take me down to the sheds

to look at the new calves, her camels and the newest batches of puppies and kittens.

I loved the house which I think was stone and mud batt. The actual kitchen was quite small, so everyone had meals at a long table with benches each side in the big nestbule at the back of the house. The walls were netting, thickly covered with doliches creeper which made it cool and airy in summer.

The sitting room was on a lower level, I think, and was rather dark. There was a dark leather sofa with a carved wooden back and two large photographs of Mrs Wiese's parents, (I believe) in gold oval frames hanging above the fireplace. They were highly tinted with rather grim looks. A white coloured paper string curtain that rustled in the breeze to keep flies out in the doorway. I thought it was the height of elegance and longed to have one.

The other highlight for me was the lavatory down the yard. The wide plank seat had two holes, a big one for grown-ups and beside it, a small one for children. This and the string curtain had priority in the home I dreamed about having when I grew up.

Many years after, when Mrs Wiese had had a stroke and lost the use of his arm, he set to making mud batts and build onto the house. He was a wonderful, indomitable man.

Mrs. Wiese was still very pretty, small with blue eyes and pink cheeks. She seemed always to be working, which with such a large family was understandable but she always had time to make people feel loved and wanted.

For a long time, Rosie and Albie drove up to Linton on Wednesday afternoons for piano lessons with my mother. There certainly was some music, but it was interspersed by gales of laughter. Alice had a laconic wit and a wonderful deep guffaw. I doubt if they learnt much. Rosie was very pretty and gentle. Both of them did painting on fabric with heated wax, which was a craze at the time. For years I cherished a noile pillow sham Rosie made for me. It was very dainty with lace, round she edge and pink roses painted with this stuff in the corners.

When Rosie married Mort, the whole district came to their reception in the Highbury Hall. At midnight we all trooped down to the siding to see the happy couple onto the train to Albany for their honeymoon. I was about nine and cried my eyes out as the train chugged off because I feel I had lost her.

It was bitterly cold the night Kathy and Ernie took me to see Micah's Circus. It was before they were married. As the circus started, I forgot the sharp sting of frosty air on my bare legs. I was in another world.

The girl's acrobats in pink tutus and ballet shoes were the highlight for me. They spun round on an apparatus pulled up to the top of the tent, supported only by headbands and stood up on their backs of four beautiful white ponies cantering around the ring in unison. Meanwhile, the girls juggled, did handstands and formed pyramids. The lighting was dim and as the event were performed, fine dust rose in a haze, but it was sheer unadulterated magic for me.

Ernie always seemed much older than the rest of the family. He had a dry wit, loved tricks and before he spoke in a slow drawl, worked his mouth as if he was rehearsing his words before he spoke them.

On the morning of the children's sports day, he always drove up to the Narrogin ice works to collect a cherie of ice cream for us. He brought it back, packed with salt and milk over bags over it to keep it cool.

We children watched down the road for him and escorted the horse and sully onto the sports ground as if he were royalty.

It was in our eyes because ice cream was such a treat. We were given little cups of it. They were called terry licks and the creamy yellow, slightly salty mixture melted almost before we could eat it.

Ernie found Pat Gerton, Warburton, when he died in his tent on his block which was near Ernie's place. He went over when he heard the dogs barking and found Pat. I think he died following an attack of flu.

Pat was a very gentle, fair-haired young man. When he came in to get mail and stores and we were there too, he always bought a bag of lollies. I feel very sad when I heard that he had died because I really liked him, not because of the lollies alone. He is buried near other family members at a little Saint Merberg's church east of Mount Barther.

When I was in Melbourne last year, I spent a day reminiscing with Sibyl Latham, and we agreed one of the best nights of our lives was Bill Weise's 21st birthday party.

It was meant to be a surprise to Bill, but as everyone in the district was given a party when they turned 21, he probably had his suspicions.

Possibly to encourage him to change out of his morning clothes, Mrs Weiss had invited us to tea, invited us to tea at the boys house on Pedler's. It was dark by the time he and Laurie came in. I remember Mrs Weise going out into the yard when they were having a wash in a tin dish, and a bit of muttering going on, but whether he did change or not, I do not remember. All of the boys wore grey flannel singlets for work.

Their house was quite substantial with four rooms, I seem to remember. There was a big fire in the front room where we had tea, roast mutton, preserved pears, and custard.

It had been a very wet year, oh happy days, and not only was the road in from the gate very muddy, but the little creek between the gate and the house, although it was not wide, had steep sides and was running a hasher. We had crossed into the slushy without incident, but clearly buggies and cars could not cross.

Laurie was prepared, and by the time the first guest arrived he had a horse harnessed into the spring cart ready to ferry them over.

There were shrieks of dismay when the ladies tried to climb in without getting wet and muddy, and even wilder shrieks as the cart tilted down into the water, and the horse slid and scrambled up the other side. The one thing that showed up clearly was a snowy white bandage round Laurie's head, covering the gash where he had kicked by a horse. It was all great fun for us children.

The ladies sorted themselves out and gathering up their baskets of cones and settled in the kitchen to gossip and get supper ready. All these functions someone was detailed off to collect the merengue tea, tins, cups and saucers from the hall.

The older men settled themselves by the fire for card playing. My father who was a bridge and something fanatic was always well to the fore. These men were separated like tribal elders and always given the best things for supper.

The boys organised us young ones into the games out of the flat. Two big fires were going to give us light and boil the billies. We played drop the something, twos and threes, prisoners base and chasey.

It was a frosty night and when the moon come up everything turned silver. Heaven knows when everyone got home but I was sure no one minded the late hour.

Accidents with horses happen regularly, people being tossed off or kicked, but generally the damage was minor. My father was reaching in a very pretty light chestnut mare, a bit feisty, and because he did not have enough work to quieten her down, he lent her to Laurie and Bill to work in the spring cart.

Her mother had a very placid temperament, but unfortunately, Gerette, as she called, had inherited. She came home after a few days. Always by shining a spring cart was beneath her she kicked it to bits.

Laurie and Bill came to visit us regularly for tea and cards. They usually unharnessed the horse and tied it to a fence post outside the front gate. These evenings tended to be late, after midnight, and often the horse got fed up, undid the rope with its teeth and went home. Once when they left it harnessed up to the cart it took off, carriage and all getting stuck in the

bushes down the road. On one glorious occasion, it took the hall and a length of netting until it was caught up in nearly half a mile away. I loved it when they had to stay overnight and we tracked the house next morning.

Lori dropped in a lot, usually with a fresh kill of roo or a couple of ducks. I remember the look of embarrassed disbelief on his face when my father told him they were leprechauns and fairies on the river flats of Pedlars. He told me the same and I never knew it really believed there were or not but I was grown up or before I stopped keeping a sharp lookout. There was rumor that treasure was buried on Pedlars. Ill-gotten gains from a jewellery theft. I dreamt of finding a rusty tin box full of diamonds, rubies, pearls and other precious gems. That coupled with the possibility of little people coveting on the river flats gave me the feeling it was haunted and mysterious.

During the summer on Sunday afternoons people for people foregathered at Wolwolling pool for a picnic and a swim it was not quite the "grey greasy linghops" but did have certain drawbacks. Bark from the trees gave it a golden brown colour, there were snags and mud around the edges and leeches were an ever-present hazard. In the heat no one minded.

None of the women or children could swim across the pool to the sandy edge of the other side, so we had to troop down to a shallow ford on the south end of the pool. We changed in the bushes and splashed around in the shallow water.

One Sunday the young men with Frank and Laurie to the forefront sneaked around and gathering up all of the clothes took then back to the other side and hung them in the trees. They were horrified shrieks from the swimmers and I remember someone moaning, "I wore my old holy singlet and the horrors have hung it up."

Eventually, the older non-swimming ladies made them take them down and return them. They left them in the heap and when everyone scrambled out of the water and began grabbing garments and tut tutting, it was like hens around a pile of mash.

One year, a wire was strung across the pool so the non-swimmers could cross. It made a huge success until unfortunately the line broke afternoon. My mother was in the middle of the pool and she said she would have drowned if Laurie had not taken her to shore.

Bill was the mainstay of the Highbury Cricket team but and he and Laurie were always late. This created a problem for the team, especially if they had an away game because they could not do without them.

We had one of the few telephones in the district. We were Highbury 1 for a long time there was only three others. Almost every Saturday afternoon

during the season the phone would ring and questions came, "Have the boys gone passed yet?"

In winter, if the river was too deep to go to get the car through and there was a donny on at the hall, the boys, Rosie and Alice, had to come in the spring cart. The girls would moan about the difficulty of keeping the mud off their long dresses getting in and out of the cart. During the spring, Sunday hikes were all the rage. Those who could walked two or three miles to a chosen site and someone with a truck took every one back to the store. We smaller children hung around the boys, fighting to hold their hands as we walked along. We must have been a dreadful nuisance but none of them ever seemed to mind. Lawrie nearly always had a bag of sweets for us, giving him the edge in the popularity stakes. The hikes metered out as the weather had been hotter and harvest started.

When Bonnie came to teach at the Piesseville School, she joined the young people in Highbury and made quite an impact. She was well regarded as a teacher and for years I kept a hand-painted programme from one of her school concerts, which she had decorated with gum nut babies she had painted on each one.

When her sister Audrey visited, they always drove up for a musical afternoon with my mother. Mother was an accomplished pianists and had a very good voice, so music played a big part of her enjoyment of life. There was a lot of singing and a lot of laughing on those days.

Weekend camps were popular for a while. One Sunday a lot of the people joined young ones when they had a weekend camp at, I think, Minijan Pool.

Bonnie had rigged up a bush by threading two saplings through a couple of wheat bags. She had hauled it up about eight feet into a sheath and balanced it onto branches.

She climbed up for a rest and a read after picnic lunch, but come down shouting when Frank began to chop the tree down.

Laurie was very pleased with himself as he had caught such by a summering underwater and grabbing its legs. He coated it with clay and loomed it in the cold coals. He offered it to the older ladies, but they were less than enthusiastic and my mother said it was disgusting. When war broke out, everything changed. Some of the young men joined up, Mark Halusler and Laurie among the first to go. Mark to his death, Laurie was captured. My brother Tom was ahead in the 10th Light horse and was sent to patrol the coast between Geraldton and Bunbury and horseback. He was allowed home to help with seeding, shearing and harvest but when the light horse

was disbanded and things became grim in the north, he went east, trained at the something jungle complex and then the islands.

It was a hard time for families left behind. My parents had each lost a brother in World War I and it was an anxious time. Very little information about the serious something Australia faced came out.

The Lone Guard was formed and women in Perth spent canteens for service personnel, i.e. the colour patch, which served cheap meals for those on leave. Knitting groups and fundraisers for troop comforts took over from social events. In the Highbury, any function was a fundraiser to help the war effort.

Frode parcels were sent to relative overseas. I remember my mother sending four eggs packed in a treacle tin to which added dripping to stop them breaking. Unhappily, the slow trip through the tropics proved too much for both eggs and dripping and the Scottish cousins who received them were less than appreciative.



Meg at the Highbury Memorial, 2007.
A poignant place for Meg– Highbury was where her life began, on Linton farm. The memorial evokes memories of the close-knit farming community, her beloved pony Myrtle, and her joyful but often mischievous childhood.

Sugar, butter, tea, tobacco and petrol were rationed and people bargained for coupons from each other. Tea for my mother and tobacco for my father were very important. People made a sort of ertzats coffee by roasting and grinding wheat but it was pretty awful.

My father riced up a gas hooduelr on a old car and the drum of living coals on the back, spitting out sparks as we drove along. It was a constant fire hazard.

I had just finished school and was at home waiting for an interview for nursing training (which I refused and joined the WAARF to train as a radar operator to my mother's horror.) Your mother had to go to hospital and asked if I would ask if I would go over and help your father with your children.

Although I had some domestic skills, I knew nothing about small children and something rather overwhelmed. It was better when your mother came home and although she had to stay in bed, she could tell me what to do. It was so inept. I must have driven your parents mad.

Much later, after the war was over, when Frank had married Kylie and they were living on the farm next door along the East Road, they had a New Year's Day duck shoot for the whole Weise Clan. Tom and I were invited to join them. Richie, the first wife and four children were there too.

Kylie put on a great feast for lunch and then while we cleaned up, the men went off for a shoot. She was a marvellous cook and I remember that no sooner were the decks cleaned from the meal when she began taking sponge cake after sponge cake out of the freezer compartment of the refrigerator and whipped up cream to lather over them.

The men came back with bags of ducks, over a hundred. We were all standing around in the kitchen listening to the exploits when Darryl, who was about four, came in brandishing a carving knife and advanced on one of his young girl cousins.

Kylie screamed and went to leap forward to get the knife but Frank held her back and said in his slow drawl, "Let's just see what he is going to do with it. Fortunately someone else took it away before Darryl could do anything with it.

I remember another story about Daryl too, when he was about four and a bushfire broke out near the farm. Frank had a lot of drums of water standing on a ramp ready for such an outbreak and when the helpers arrived they began loading them on the back of a truck to take out to the blaze. Daryl was watching them and when they had picked up he said, "That one's got petrol in it." but they took no notice of him. He said it again but he was told to get out of the way.

Daryl was right and it was sheer good luck that no one had injured in the congregation.

The war made big changes and nothing ever seemed the same afterwards.

I went off to do the other things but I often reflect on my good fortune in having spent my formative years among the wonderful people with strong principles and a sense of fun and who loved me.

APPENDIX F

MARGARET COTEN OBITUARY

This was Meg's Obituary, written by well known journalist Patrick Cornish and published in The West Australian newspaper following her death.

World War II battered many of society's building blocks: families, workplaces, hopes for children's futures.

A relatively new concept, "social worker", was seen as part of the massive repair task.

Meg Porter, a farmer's daughter in the WA Wheatbelt, felt she had something to offer, having backed the war effort through three years as a radar operator in the WAAAF (Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force). An aunt had regaled the family with dramas and delights from her years as a medical missionary on Pacific islands.

Something else turned Meg's mind and heart towards work with people who could use help.

The Depression had hit hard during her school years. She had seen men so desperate for a meal and money to feed their families, that they came into the family farm to chop wood even before asking for any paid arrangement.

Meg had seen the face of desolation and never forgot it.

In March 1945, with the war almost over, she joined five other women who had won a Red Cross scholarship to the University of Adelaide. WA then had no school of social work. The train ride across the Nullarbor launched a life of adventure and professional achievement.

Meg's accomplished memoir offers colourful recall and lively sense of humour. She is buoyed by successes, notably with Aboriginal people on the crucial issue of their housing.

THE WEST AUSTRALIAN **CLASSIFIEDS**

OBITUARIES

The West Australian
Monday, October 19, 2020

Intrepid and selfless

MARGARET (MEG) COTEN
Social worker
Born: Narrogin, 1923
Died: Perth, aged 96



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In September 1975, she was appointed Narrogin's first woman Justice of the Peace, and later as a member of the Children's Court. She was the first social worker appointed to the town's hospital.

Playing constructive social roles in this region had an extra dimension because it was there she had grown up, picked wild cranberries and ridden her horse, Myrtle, to school.

Margaret Leishman Porter was born in Narrogin on October 11, 1923, the youngest of three children of Agnes (nee Leishman) and Irish-born Robert Porter.

The family farm, Linton, was at Highbury, between Narrogin and Wagin.

Margaret, always known as Meg, and her brothers, Tom and Dick, lived there until she went to boarding school in Albany. (The children had a half-sister, Eileen, from Robert Porter's first marriage. His wife died young, of illness, as did his second wife.)

Meg's thirst for fresh horizons was born in her Highbury school's library, especially stories about Canada.

"I burned with desire to wear snow shoes," she was to write, "avoid . . . the badlands, take furs on my dog sled to trade at the Hudson Bay Company Store. I read my father's Wild West stories and yearned for wilder frontiers. I read under the desk at school, riding home and whenever I had a free hand to hold a book."

In late 1941, she left Albany High, where she had been head girl, and considered nursing as a career.

The entry of the United States into the war, after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, underlined the urgency of training carers and healers. Five minutes listening to a stern matron, however, deterred Meg from going any further. The WAAAF, which she joined in September 1942, proved a better option.

In Adelaide, she chose to concentrate on the medical side of social work, so was pleased, after graduating in 1949, to get work at Royal Perth Hospital and Hollywood Repatriation.

Among later posts were Fremantle and Princess Margaret hospitals, and within the Commonwealth Immigration Department, guiding migrants.

Four years travelling in Europe with friends broadened her life education.

More of the "wilder frontiers" she had once longed for opened up while a governess in northern WA — at Mardie Station, near Karratha, and Forrest River Mission (now Oombulgurri, near Wyndham).

Mardie was where she first met John Coten, who made windmills for rural properties, but she got to know him better after he, seriously injured in an accident, was flown to Perth by the Royal Flying Doctor for hospital treatment.

The memoir describes acceptance of his marriage proposal as the "best decision of my life".

In 1963, they wed in Port Hedland, in a Nissen hut doubling as school and Roman Catholic church.

Meg would have many opportunities to prove her capacity to adapt. The couple lived in a tent on the Nullarbor while John worked setting baits for wild dogs. Insects didn't worry her, she wrote in a magazine article, but redback spiders were "treated with respect".

John's death in 1970, after a stroke, devastated Meg, whose sons were five and four. The three settled back in Narrogin, where Meg retired in 1988 and lived until 1997, when she went to live in the Perth suburb of Bicton.

Meg died on September 26, survived by sons, Ned and Jim, and five grandchildren.

The Porter farm, now run by Meg's nephew, Philip Porter, remained a haven of memories for her. She hated the school blazer of brown, yellow and green stripes, but for 90 years lived up to the school motto, "Keep Troth".

Loyalty was her long suit.

Patrick Cornish

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APPENDIX G

FINDING JOHN COTEN

An Introduction

As outlined in sections of Meg's memoir, many parts of John Coten's life remained a mystery. It was known that he had lost contact with his family, and in the years that followed, much of his early story remained unknown – even to Meg.

Over the decades, Meg and John built a remarkable life together. But after John's death in 1970, the lingering question of where his family might be stayed with Meg, and with her sons Ned and Jim as they grew older.

Throughout their childhood, Ned and Jim heard various stories about their father's background. Yet these tales left many gaps. There was always a quiet hope that one day, more might be known. For much of their lives, they wondered about the family that must surely exist somewhere.

Indeed, part of the motivation for publishing Meg's memoirs has been to tell this part of the story – to bring full circle the circumstances of Meg's life and the life of the family she and John created. The story you are about to read is remarkable in its own right, and it adds depth, interest, and a sense of mystery to the rich tapestry of Meg's life.

The sections in this appendix have been written from various perspectives, each adding its own insight to the unfolding story:

- **Section 1. John Coten's History as Told to Ned and Jim**
  A summary written by Meg as a record for the boys, outlining the version of their father's life that Ned and Jim grew up with.
- **Section 2. Finding John Coten: Ned and Jim's Perspective**
  A retelling of how the discovery unfolded from Ned and Jim's own

point of view – deeply personal, as they were discovering the truth about their own father.

- **Section 3. The Search to Find John Coten's Family**
  An overview written by Hilary and Richard Tulloch, providing the background to the remarkable circumstances under which John's family was found.
- **Section 4. Finding John Coten: Hilary and Richard Tulloch's Journey**
  Again written by Hilary and Richard, this is a more personal account of their search, offering insight into their own experiences along the way.
- **Section 5. Overview of Findings about Maurice Graham**
  A structured summary of the findings about Maurice Joseph Graham (John Coten's original identity), compiled by Hilary Tulloch. This section provides a genealogical record to ensure clarity and accuracy.
- **Section 6. Remembering Meg by Helen Mulgan**
  A moving reflection by John's sister, Helen Mulgan. It captures the emotional impact of being reunited – after so many decades – with the family of her long-lost brother.

We hope you find this appendix as fascinating and moving as we have. It has been an extraordinary journey for Ned and Jim – and, of course, for Meg during her lifetime – to discover this part of their history and to finally meet their husband and father's family.

Most importantly, those new family connections have blossomed. At the time of writing, Helen is still alive at 95 and living in Lower Hutt, New Zealand. Ned and Jim have visited her and maintain a close relationship with her family – including Roderick, his wife Sarah, their daughters Emily and Julia, and Helen's adopted daughter Kitty and her son Christopher.

It is a joy to see this story come full circle – one more remarkable chapter in the life of Meg Coten and her family.

1. The backstory that Ned and Jim grew up with

This is a short document written by Meg for Ned & Jim, to summarise the backstory as she understood it, about John's life before they met.

Dad's father was in the British Army, and was stationed in India when he was born. Dad then lived in India until he was seven and sent to England for schooling at Winchester College, one of England's best schools. Had severe asthma when young, ran away from Winchester when he was 16 and joined the British army. He served in France but was wounded with shrapnel and sent to convalesce back in England.

He then stowed away on a boat and went to New Zealand then Australia. In 1962, while on Warrawagine Station, 300 miles east of Port Headland, Dad had a bad accident. Standing on a cliff above a waterhole, taking aim with his gun at a dingo drinking, he slipped on loose gravel and fell some metres onto the rocks, rupturing his mid leg and spleen.

He stayed there for 2 days, but realised he was bleeding internally and managed to drive the 70 miles through bush back to the homestead. The Royal Flying Doctor Service took him to Port Headland Hospital and onto St John of God Hospital in Perth. He recovered from this.

Dr Le Soeuf at the hospital told him investigations had shown, apart from the injuries, he had something in his kidneys that was a hereditary condition and not serious. He had regular health checks that were all OK until late 1965. Dr. Oxer in Wittenoom, Western Australia, said his blood pressure was very high and sent him to Perth. He saw Dr. Fortune, he did a number of tests and said it was a false alarm. Dad had had a bad time when he had his tonsils out as a child and was always apprehensive seeing doctors, dentists and being in medical environments. So he thought that explained his high blood pressure when Dr. Oxer examined him. His health was quite OK apart from occasional headaches. His Stoke was quite unexpected, but he had been very tired all day. He had been putting the fence up across the Yarney River, where floods had washed it away. This was heavy work in running water, so his tiredness was to be expected. He passed away a few days later.

2. Finding John Coten's family – Ned & Jim's perspective

Written by Ned & Jim Coten, outlining how the story unfolded from their perspective and what it meant to them.

When our father, John Coten, passed away in 1970, our mother Meg had no one to tell from his side of the family. He had lost contact with them long before, and despite Mum's efforts over the years, she was never able to trace them. Whenever she had asked him about them, he had changed the subject and, in her wisdom, let it be.

For us, growing up without any connection to Dad's past was always a quiet gap in our life – one that lingered in the background even as we built our own lives and families.

The story we were raised with was one of intrigue. Dad had told Mum that his father was in the British Army and that he was born in Quetta, a city in what is now Pakistan. He had supposedly been sent to England for schooling at Winchester College, had served in the army, and eventually made his way to New Zealand and then Australia. Along the way, he lost his identity documents – at least that's what he told Mum. When they married, he needed to be baptised just so he could get paperwork that would allow the marriage to go ahead.

We always knew there had to be a family somewhere. But whenever we tried to dig deeper – writing letters to distant Coten's we found in phone books or searching online databases (when the internet evolved in the 2000's), nothing ever came of it. From around the age of 20, we would revisit the search every few years, always hopeful but always hitting a dead end. We checked military records, school archives, and migration databases, but it was like trying to find a ghost. There was no apparent trace of who John Coten really was or where his family were.

Despite this, we knew a few things: that Dad had a sister named Helen, and that Mum believed his mother's name was Catherine Amelda Cody. Ned was named Edward John after Dad's father. But beyond that, the story was non-existent.

Everything changed in 2017. Ned was travelling to London on business and arranged to meet our cousin Richard Porter, the son of Mum's brother Dick, at his house in the best part of London, right near Oxford Circus. He and wife Tina arranged a beautiful morning tea, where Richard's daughter Natasha and her in-laws Hilary and Dick Tulloch, both enthusiastic family historians, all gathered. Hilary and Dick were immediately interested, and Ned told them the story of our Dad and the mystery of his past. What followed was an extraordinary journey of discovery.

Hilary and Dick took the story as a challenge, and with a mere handful of clues – names, places, and vague memories – they began searching. Within a matter of weeks, they had uncovered a completely different version of events. Our dad had been born Maurice Joseph Graham in New Zealand, not Pakistan. He had changed his name and left his family behind in 1948, sailing to Australia at the age of 20, never to be heard from again - until now.

Each new fact that came to light was both a revelation and a shock. For the first time in our lives, we were discovering our father's origins. And most remarkably, we discovered that his sister, Helen, was still alive.

We felt we had to reach out. On a call to New Zealand, Jim rang the only "A.H. Mulgan" listed in the phone book. When a woman answered, he introduced himself with: "You don't know me, but I believe your brother is my father." It was her.

That phone call remains one of the most extraordinary moments of our lives. After over 40 years of wondering and nearly as many of researching, we had found our family. And in that moment, Helen found the brother she had lost six decades earlier.

Soon after, we arranged for Helen and her son Roderick to fly to Perth to meet our family. We gathered together – Meg, both of us and our families - and spent time together making up for lost years. It was the only time that Mum and Helen met, but it was unforgettable. Watching them together, seeing the bond form, was a moment of profound peace and connection.

Some people have asked how we feel about the fact that Dad – Maurice - had created a new identity and told a story that wasn't true. Our answer is simple: people make the choices they need to make in life. Perhaps he felt he couldn't go back. Perhaps he needed to leave something behind. But if he hadn't made those choices, we wouldn't be here. He wouldn't have met Mum, and the life we were given would never have happened.

We're deeply grateful to Hilary and Dick Tulloch, to Helen and her family, and to everyone who has supported us on this journey. We feel incredibly lucky to have found a wider family – people who have welcomed us so warmly and with such love.

It's an extraordinary story. One that, like the best parts of life, is filled with mystery, emotion, and ultimately, connection. We're proud to include it in this book, not only as part of Mum's legacy but as part of Dad's too.

We now refer to our father as Maurice, not just because that was his given name, but because it's the name that connects him to the family we've come to know and love. It's the name that links him to his past – and to our future.

With love and gratitude,
Ned and Jim Coten
October 2025

3. Finding the family of John Coten – the search for answers

A summary of how the journey to find John Coten's family unfolded. Written by Hilary & Dick Tulloch.

Meg had written her memoir in the early years of her retirement. When she had been in Europe as a young woman, she had stayed with several of her paternal relatives, the Porters and the Bests, in Ireland and her maternal relatives in Scotland, the Leishman and Robertson families. These provided the family stories that Meg's boys grew up with.

But what of their father's family? John's death when his sons were so young meant that this connection was broken. Meg had tried hard to discover his family to let them know of his death but wherever she looked, she drew a blank. As Ned and Jim grew up and had families of their own, they too tried to fill this gap in their history, researching Coten families around the world. Meg understood their need to establish their paternal ancestry and supported them in their search for answers.

It was in September 2017 that fate stepped in. Ned, on a business trip to London, visited his cousin, Dick Porter. Here he met Dick's daughter and her husband. Staying with them and invited along were Natasha's in-laws, introduced as being keen family historians. At once Ned found himself telling the story of the long search for their elusive Coten ancestors. As anyone with an interest in family research will know, a few tantalising facts create an irresistible challenge. Ned was warned that there is always a chance that research among family mysteries may turn up unwanted history.

Assured that Ned and his family were aware of the risks, the Tullochs returned to Dublin with Meg's notes of possible leads into John's past. Knowing that the search for Cotens had not led anywhere, clues were sought elsewhere in the family.

Meg's notes told of Cambridgeshire connections, in particular Ely, military connections, a sister called Helen, a possible New Zealand experience, a Catholic mother, Katherine Imelda Coady from Killarney, Ireland, and a father called Edward John. Meg also noted that John was born in 1928. Although Meg had made these notes many years after John's death, it was these clues that provided a base from which to begin research.

'Katherine Imelda Coady' was the first clue because it was an unusual combination of names.

After online searches around the world, Catherine Amelda Coady born in 1884 at Stafford, New Zealand, seemed the most likely match. She was the daughter of Maurice Coady, originally of Glenmore, county

Kilkenny, Ireland, who died in Wellington, New Zealand, on 1 September 1914, and his wife Catherine Mary O'Brien who died in Wellington on 1 October 1933.

Maurice and Catherine, both Roman Catholic, had seven children, two boys and five girls; one of the girls died in infancy. Research into the lives of these Coady children led to the discovery of some interesting military connections with possible similarities to Meg's recollections of John's family stories.

Catherine Amelda Coady married in 1927 after working as a postmistress at Kawhia, North Island, New Zealand. Her husband was a farmer, Edward John Graham, born in England in 1877 at Salisbury, Wiltshire. After living in various parts of New Zealand, he settled, in 1939, at Rangiuri, Otaki, on the west coast of North Island, about 100 kms north of Wellington.

Edward, or Ted as he was known, had first arrived in New Zealand in February 1886 with his father and sister. He was travelling under the name Edward John Hanson. Edward's mother's name was Helen Wise, whose family came from March, near Ely, Cambridgeshire. Helen had died in Cardiff, Wales, before John Hanson travelled to New Zealand with two of his children, Edward and Helen.

Edward John Graham died on 20 March 1950 having made his will, dated 28 March 1949. A copy of the will was lodged with his probate papers at the Probate Court in Wellington in May 1950. The will, after a few bequests, names his wife, Catherine Amelda, as sole beneficiary. In the event of her dying before him, Edward's will named their two children, Maurice Joseph Graham and Helen Wise Graham as beneficiaries in trust.

Looking further into the Coady/Graham/Hanson family, their names and origins, suggested that this might be a possible family for John Coten. However, it still left many questions unanswered so further research was needed before contacting Ned and Jim.

Catherine Amelda Graham made her will a few days after her husband's death. It was dated 23 March 1950. When she died, on 13 March 1959 in Lower Hutt, a northern suburb of Wellington, her will was lodged with the Wellington Probate Court in May 1959. In that will, she appointed her daughter, Helen Wise Graham, and her son, Maurice Joseph Graham, as joint executors and trustees, with the estate to be shared equally between them.

Maurice Joseph Graham had gone to Australia. He was recorded on the ship's manifest for SS *Eastern* which departed on 18 August 1948 from Bluff, at the southern tip of New Zealand bound for Sydney. He had declared himself aged 20, born in New Zealand and a general labourer.

By the time of her mother's death and subsequent probate, Helen had married. In her affidavit, attached to the probate papers, she confirms that she is the daughter of Catherine Amelda Coady and stated that the deceased had only two children, herself and Maurice Joseph Graham.

In this affidavit, dated 30 April 1959, Helen Wise Mulgan went on to say:

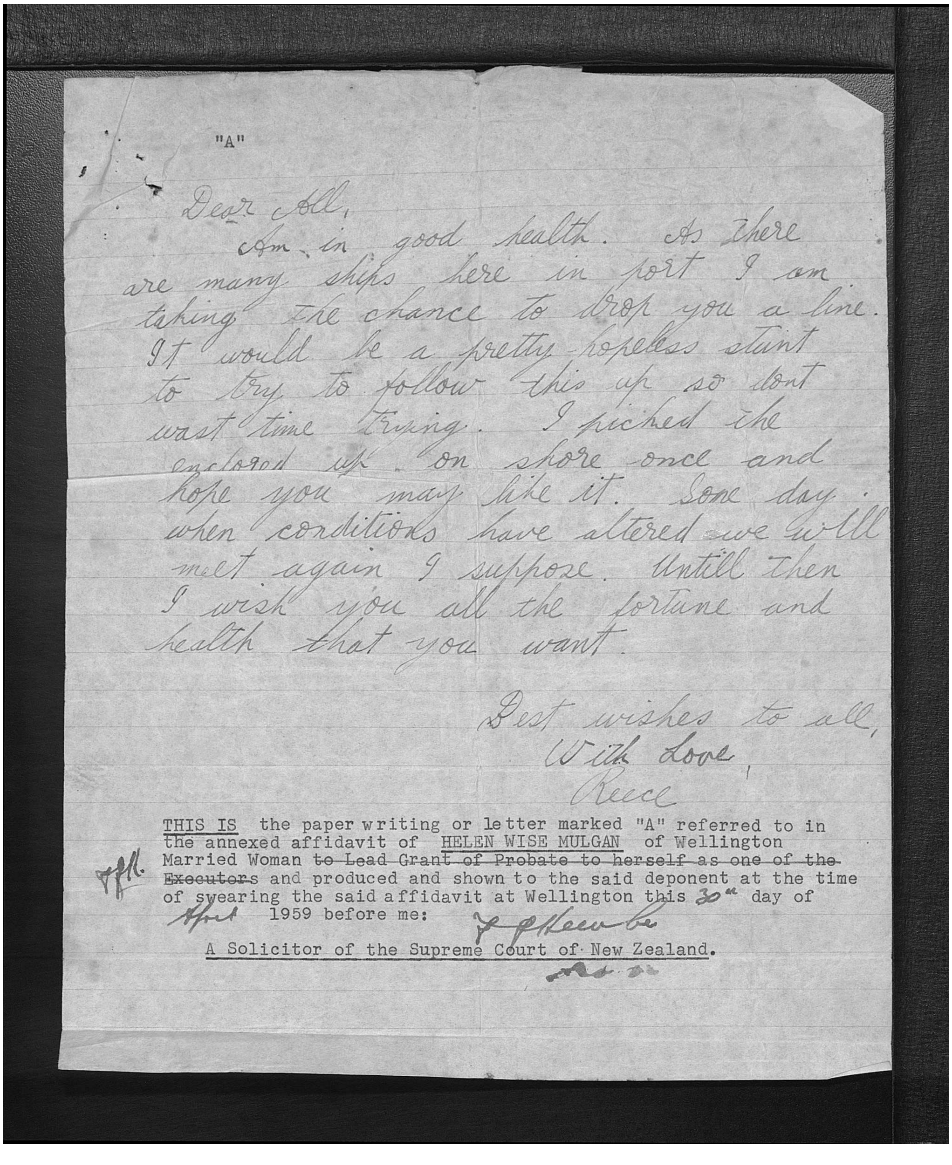
> 'The whereabouts of my said brother are not known. He was born in 1928. He suffered Asthma from childhood and after secondary school education he was not able to take up regular employment on this account. He wished to take up open-air life on account of his ailment and went to Australia in the beginning of 1948. He wrote regularly to us at the family home until about the end of that year and then his letters ceased. It has always been his intention to travel about the world and I verily believe that if still alive he has been travelling in various parts of the world ever since.
>
> 'That the only communication that either myself or my mother has received from my said brother since about the end of 1948 (*the lawyer has noted, yet the will is dated 1950*) is a letter which he sent her enclosing a small gift namely an ivory paper knife engraved in Oriental characters and in which letter he suggests that we could not locate his address. I say that I would know of any further communication which had been sent to my mother from my said brother since the year 1948 and that this is the only communication. I have found the said letter (which is undated) among my mother's papers after her death and the same is annexed hereto and marked "A".'

Part of this letter, without the signature, helped prove that Maurice Joseph Graham and John Francis Coten were the same person. Meg was able to identify the writing as John's hand.

Having looked for so long, Ned and Jim were keen to see all that had been discovered in the search for their father's identity. The detailed accounts that they received unveiled extensive families in England, Ireland and New Zealand. It was the revelation of close family, Helen's family, in New Zealand that was most exciting.

Jim contacted Helen Mulgan in New Zealand by telephone. What a shock to speak to an unknown nephew! It was difficult to take it all in but Helen bravely overcame her reservations and identified a photo of John as being her long-lost brother, Maurice, who had left New Zealand in 1948.

The results of DNA tests, already taken in both families, confirmed the genetic link. Now, at last, Meg's 'boys' were able to trace all their family lines but, most valuable of all, the connection has been made to their aunt and there are cousins to share the future with.



"A"

Dear All,

Am in good health. As there are many ships here in port I am taking the chance to drop you a line. It would be a pretty hopeless stunt to try to follow this up so dont waste time trying. I picked the enclosed up on shore once and hope you may like it. Some day when conditions have altered we will meet again I suppose. Untill then I wish you all the fortune and health that you want.

Best wishes to all,
With Love,
Reece

THIS IS the paper writing or letter marked "A" referred to in the annexed affidavit of HELEN WISE MULGAN of Wellington Married Woman ~~to Lead Grant of Probate to herself as one of the Executors~~ and produced and shown to the said deponent at the time of swearing the said affidavit at Wellington this 30th day of April 1959 before me:

A Solicitor of the Supreme Court of New Zealand.

Letter from Maurice 'Reece' Graham

4. Finding the family of John Coten – how we found the elusive answers

Also written by Hilary & Dick Tulloch about meeting Ned Coten and the subsequent work to uncover decades of mystery.

In September 2017 we first met Ned Coten at the London home of Meg's nephew, Dick Porter. Dick is our youngest son, Coryn's, father-in-law. Our great interest in family history was well known by Dick as we had enjoyed educating our daughter-in-law Natasha on her's and our son's shared Irish ancestry. It was at that enjoyable lunch meeting that Ned explained the challenges that he and Jim had experience in trying to discover more about their father John Coten's family. They had spent several years looking for their elusive Coten history but without success and by the end of that lunch his tales had stimulated our interest in the hunt. We were very careful to caution Ned that if we did discover something, it might not be what they wanted to hear. Ned accepted this possibility and with that gave us a few brief notes that told of what Meg had recalled of the little bits that John told of his family history.

We looked at Meg's notes in the knowledge that Ned and Jim had already spent many years looking for Coten connections without success. So we looked at the notes to see if we could find another way into the story of John Coten. Meg's notes told of Cambridgeshire connections in particular Ely, military connections, a sister called Helen, a possible New Zealand experience, a catholic mother Katherine Imelda Coady from Killarney, Ireland, and a father called Edward John Coten. We also knew from Meg's notes that John was born in about 1928. Meg had made these notes many years after John' death but we were sure that they contained some good clues for our research.

We started our research with the fact that his mother's name was Katherine Imelda Coady, a unique name and hopefully there would not many others with that name.

After a lot of negative searches, we finally discovered a CATHERINE AMELDA COADY who was born in Stafford, New Zealand, in 1884. She was the daughter of MAURICE COADY, originally of Glenmore, county Kilkenny, Ireland, who died in Wellington, New Zealand, on 1 September 1914, and his wife CATHERINE MARY O'BRIEN who died in Wellington on 1 October 1933.

Maurice and Catherine, both Roman Catholic, had seven children, two boys and five girls, one of the girls died in infancy. We researched the lives of these COADY children and discovered some interesting military connections which could have had possible similarities with Megs's recollections of John's family stories.

CATHERINE AMELDA COADY married in 1927 after working as a postmistress at KAWHIA, North Island, New Zealand. Her husband was a farmer EDWARD JOHN GRAHAM, born 1877 in Salisbury, Wiltshire, England, and, after living in various parts of New Zealand, he settled in 1939 at RANGIURI, OTAKI, on the west coast of North Island, about 100 kms north of Wellington.

We discovered that Edward John had first arrived in New Zealand in February 1886 with his father and sister, but was travelling under the name EDWARD JOHN HANSON. Edward John's mothers name was HELEN WISE, whose family came from March, near Ely, Cambridgeshire. Helen had died in Bristol before Edward John's father brought him and his sister to New Zealand.

EDWARD JOHN GRAHAM died on 20 March 1950 having made his will, dated 28 March 1949, which is contained in his probate papers lodged at the Wellington Court in May 1950. The will, after a few bequests, names his wife, CATHERINE AMELDA, as sole beneficiary. EDWARD's will went on to name their two children, MAURICE JOSEPH GRAHAM and HELEN WISE GRAHAM as beneficiaries in trust should CATHERINE AMELDA predecease him.

The names and origins of several of the characters in this Coady/Graham/Hanson family all suggested that we might be on to a possible family for John Coten. However, although we thought that this all very positive, it still left to many open questions for us to tell Ned and Jim of these discoveries. We needed to find more so carried on searching.

When CATHERINE AMELDA GRAHAM died on 13 MARCH 1959 in Lower Hutt, a northern suburb of Wellington, her will, dated 23 March 1950, was lodged with the Wellington Probate Court in May 1959. In that will she appointed her daughter, HELEN WISE GRAHAM, and her son, MAURICE JOSEPH GRAHAM, as joint executors and trustees, with the estate to be shared equally between them.

By the time of the Probate HELEN WISE GRAHAM had married and was named as HELEN WISE MULGAN. In Helen's affidavit, attached to the probate papers, she confirms that she was the daughter of CATHERINE AMELDA COADY and stated that the deceased had only two children, herself and MAURICE JOSEPH GRAHAM.

In this affidavit, dated 30 April 1959, HELEN WISE MULGAN went on to say:

> 'That the whereabouts of my said brother are not known. He was born in 1928. He suffered Asthma from childhood and after secondary school education he was not able to take up regular employment

> on this account. He wished to take up open-air life on account of his ailment and went to Australia in the beginning of 1948. He wrote regularly to us at the family home until about the end of that year and then his letters ceased. It has always been his intention to travel about the world and I verily believe that if still alive he has been travelling in various parts of the world ever since.
>
> 'That the only communication that either myself or my mother has received from my said brother since about the end of 1948 (the lawyer has noted, yet the will is dated 1950) is a letter which he sent her enclosing a small gift namely an ivory paper knife engraved in Oriental characters and in which letter he suggests that we could not locate his address. I say that I would know of any further communication which had been sent to my mother from my said brother since the year 1948 and that this is the only communication. I have found the said letter (which is undated) among my mother's papers after her death and the same is annexed hereto and marked "A".'

We discovered that on 18 August 1948 MAURICE JOSEPH GRAHAM departed Bluff, on the southern tip of New Zealand, for Sydney on board SS *Eastern* and the ship's manifest records:

GRAHAM, MAURICE JOSEPH, age 20, General Labourer, born New Zealand, destination port Sydney.

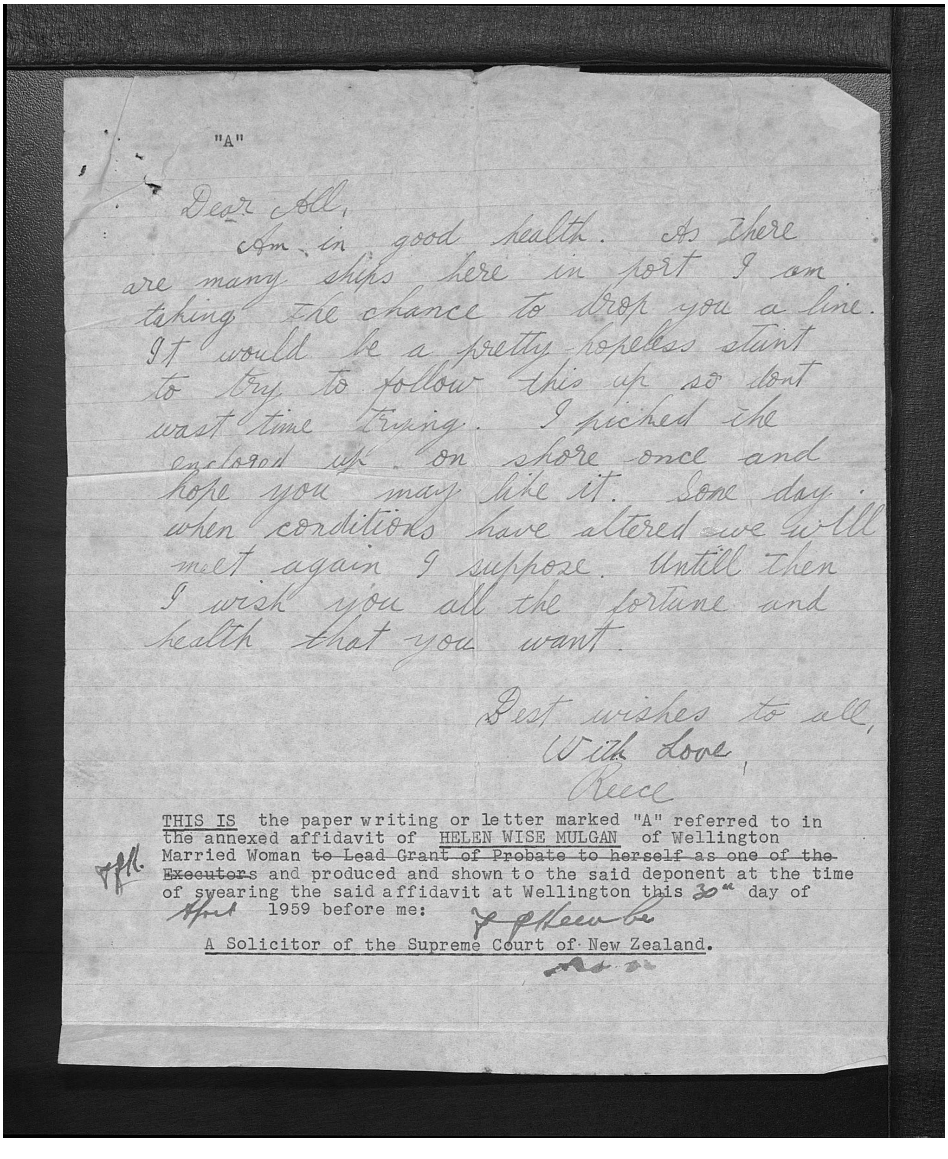
We finally thought that we had enough of a story to think about telling Ned and Jim of our discoveries. But first we wanted to see if the handwriting in letter that Maurice Joseph Graham wrote in the 1950's might be recognised by Ned, Jim or Megs as that of their John Coten.

This was the letter that Reece sent to his mother in the 1950s, from which we sent a small extract.

We sent the young Rece's letter to Ned on 31 Oct at 9pm AEDT and only a few hours later we had an excited message back to confirm the similarity of the writing and asking us what else we had discovered. The link seemed to have been found after all those years and so we told Ned and Jim of all our discoveries.

About five days later Jim contacted Helen Mulgan in New Zealand, who bravely overcoming the shock of being contacted by to her an unknown family, confirmed that a picture of John looked like her long-lost brother who had left New Zealand in 1948. Over the next month DNA tests within the family which all fully confirmed the genetic links and so thankfully the research did indeed lead to the happy result of a family reunited.

Nephews now have an aunt, sisters-in-law were connected, and there are cousins to share the future with.



"A"

Dear all,

Am in good health. As there are many ships here in port I am taking the chance to drop you a line. It would be a pretty hopeless stunt to try to follow this up so dont waste time trying. I picked the enclosed up on shore once and hope you may like it. Some day when conditions have altered we will meet again I suppose. Untill then I wish you all the fortune and health that you want.

Best wishes to all,

With Love,

Reece

THIS IS the paper writing or letter marked "A" referred to in the annexed affidavit of HELEN WISE MULGAN of Wellington Married Woman ~~to Lead Grant of Probate to herself as one of the Executors~~ and produced and shown to the said deponent at the time of swearing the said affidavit at Wellington this 30th day of April 1959 before me:

A Solicitor of the Supreme Court of New Zealand.

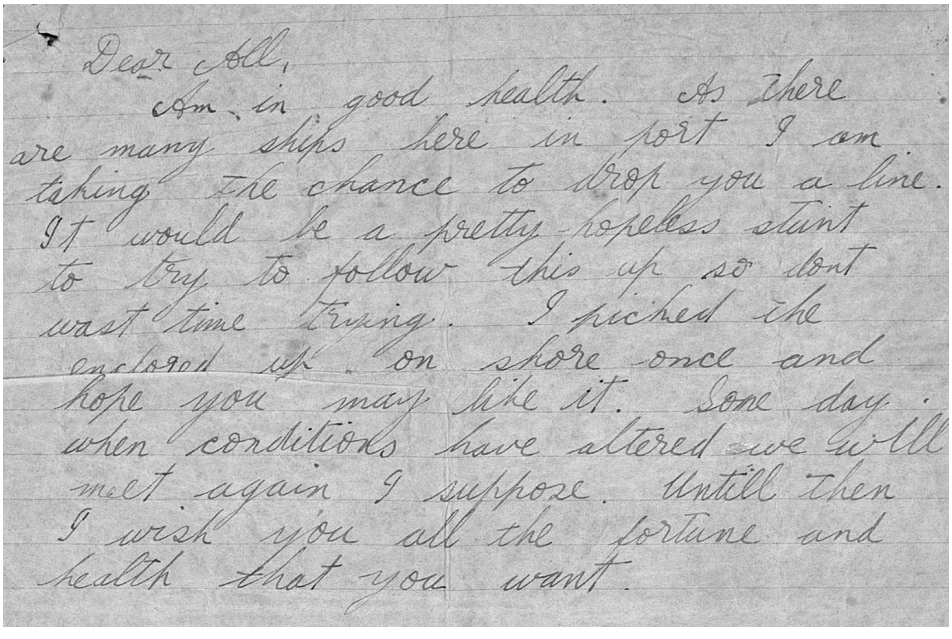
5. Finding the family of John Coten – data and information

This section, writhen in November 2017, outlines the results of the significant research undertaken by Hilary & Dick Tulloch about John Coten/Maurice Graham. It is intended to provide a more comprehensive view of his history and that of his wider family. The document was written to provide an overview to Ned and Jim, so there are some questions and personal references which we have chosen to leave intact.

Catherine Amelda Coady married an Edward John Graham in NZ in 1927. Catherine's father Maurice emigrated to NZ from Ireland c1870 and married Catherine Mary O'Brian in NZ where they had several children. At least one served in WW1. Maurice Coady may have come from Kilkenny. We have been trying to follow the leads to your father's past from your mother's memoir and have some ideas which we will put into a logical order for you to look at.

In the meantime, the file attached shows a short letter from a young man who appears to have spent at least a short time at sea. How long we don't yet know. Could this have been written by your father? Do you have any letter, for example, that you could compare it with? There won't be an exact match as writing develops over time and this was written when the man was about 20.

Do you know if your father ever applied for Australian citizenship? I assume the answer is no.



Dear Old,

Am in good health. As there are many ships here in port I am taking the chance to drop you a line. It would be a pretty hopeless stunt to try to follow this up so dont waste time trying. I picked the enclosed up on shore once and hope you may like it. Some day when conditions have altered we will meet again I suppose. Untill then I wish you all the fortune and health that you want.

I have based my research on your mother's memory that the name of your father's mother was KATHERINE IMELDA COADY.

After a lot of negative searches, I discovered a CATHERINE AMELDA COADY who was born in Stafford, New Zealand, in 1884. She was the daughter of MAURICE COADY, originally of Glenmore, county Kilkenny, Ireland, who died in Wellington, New Zealand, on 1 September 1914, and his wife CATHERINE MARY O'BRIEN who died in Wellington on 1 October 1933.

The couple, both Roman Catholic, had seven children, two boys and five girls, one of the girls died in infancy. I have also researched the lives of these COADY children and I will provide you with that information later. Suffice to say that some of these histories do have possible connections with your mother's recollections of your father's family.

CATHERINE AMELDA COADY married in 1927 after working as a postmistress at KAWHIA, North Island, New Zealand. Her husband was a farmer EDWARD JOHN GRAHAM, born 1877 in Salisbury, Wiltshire, England, and, after living in various parts of New Zealand, he settled in 1939 at RANGIURI, OTAKI, on the west coast of North Island, about 100 kms north of Wellington.

EDWARD JOHN GRAHAM died on 20 March 1950 having made his will, dated 28 March 1949, which is contained in his probate papers lodged at the Wellington Court in May 1950. The will, after a few bequests, names his wife, CATHERINE AMELDA, as sole beneficiary. EDWARD's will goes on to name their two children, MAURICE JOSEPH GRAHAM and HELEN WISE GRAHAM as beneficiaries in trust should CATHERINE AMELDA predecease him.

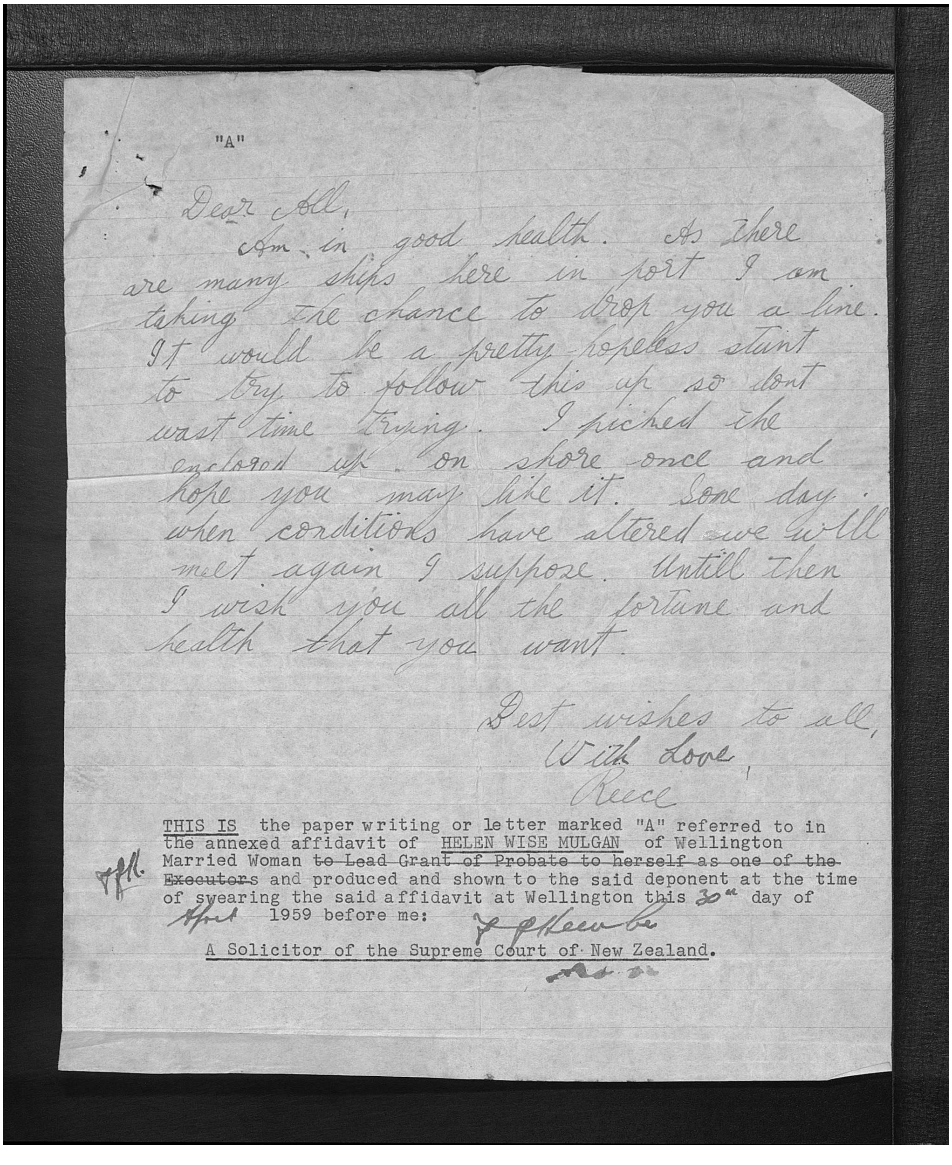
CATHERINE AMELDA GRAHAM died on 13 MARCH 1959 in Lower Hutt, a northern suburb of Wellington. CATHERINE's will, dated 23 March 1950, was lodged with the Wellington Probate Court in May 1959. She appoints her daughter, HELEN WISE GRAHAM, and her son, MAURICE JOSEPH GRAHAM, as joint executors and trustees, with the estate to be shared equally between them.

By the time of the Probate HELEN WISE GRAHAM has married and is now named as HELEN WISE MULGAN. In HELEN's affidavit, attached to the probate papers, she confirms that she is the daughter of CATHERINE AMELDA COADY and states that the deceased had only two children, herself and MAURICE JOSEPH GRAHAM.

In this affidavit, dated 30 April 1959, HELEN WISE MULGAN goes on to say:

> 'That the whereabouts of my said brother are not known. He was born in 1928. He suffered Asthma from childhood and after secondary school education he was not able to take up regular employment on this account. He wished to take up open-air life on account of his ailment and went to Australia in the beginning of 1948. He wrote regularly to us at the family home until about the end of that year and then his letters ceased. It has always been his intention to travel about the world and I verily believe that if still alive he has been travelling in various parts of the world ever since.
>
> 'That the only communication that either myself or my mother has received from my said brother since about the end of 1948 (*the lawyer has noted, yet the will is dated 1950*) is a letter which he sent her enclosing a small gift namely an ivory paper knife engraved in Oriental characters and in which letter he suggests that we could not locate his address. I say that I would know of any further communication which had been sent to my mother from my said brother since the year 1948 and that this is the only communication. I have found the said letter (which is undated) among my mother's papers after her death and the same is annexed hereto and marked "A".'

The letter is attached as a separate file.



"A"

Dear all,

Am in good health. As there are many ships here in port I am taking the chance to drop you a line. It would be a pretty hopeless stunt to try to follow this up so dont wast time trying. I picked the enclosed up on shore once and hope you may like it. Some day when conditions have altered we will meet again I suppose. Untill then I wish you all the fortune and health that you want.

Best wishes to all,
With Love,
Reece

THIS IS the paper writing or letter marked "A" referred to in the annexed affidavit of HELEN WISE MULGAN of Wellington Married Woman ~~to Lead Grant of Probate to herself as one of the Executors~~ and produced and shown to the said deponent at the time of swearing the said affidavit at Wellington this 30th day of April 1959 before me:

A Solicitor of the Supreme Court of New Zealand.

The whole probate bundle can be seen at:

https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-CS7S-JPQB?i=834&cc=1865481

MAURICE JOSEPH GRAHAM (born 1928)

On 18 August 1948 MAURICE JOSEPH GRAHAM departed Bluff, on the southern tip of New Zealand, for Sydney on board SS *Eastern* and the ship's manifest records:

GRAHAM, MAURICE JOSEPH, age 20, General Labourer, born New Zealand, destination port Sydney.

There is a record of a MAURICE GRAHAM travelling from Wellington to Sydney on SS *Wanganella* on 3 June 1954 which list the passenger as:

GRAHAM, MAURICE, age 26, occupation Naval Rating, born in New Zealand.

It is not possible to confirm if MAURICE JOSEPH GRAHAM and MAURICE GRAHAM are the same person.

I have currently found no other traces of a MAURICE JOSEPH GRAHAM, born c.1928 in New Zealand, in available genealogical sites or newspaper archives.

Catherine Amelda Coady and her siblings

Since meeting you in London, we have been trying to find clues to your father, John Francis Coten, and his possible ancestors.

Looking for Coten's, like you we too had very little success, only finding reference to your father's marriage and death registrations. Similarly, we had no success in finding Edward John Coten, whom we understood to be John Francis's father, despite searching records worldwide.

Your mother's memoir gave your father's mother the name Katherine Imelda COADY so we started to look for evidence of her life. This research led Dick to CATHERINE AMELDA COADY in New Zealand.

When he discovered that this woman, the daughter of MAURICE COADY, married an EDWARD JOHN, Dick became more interested. Your mother had said that your father's father was called Edward John and, with this coincidence, we thought that Dick should spend time researching this COADY family.

The logic was to see if any of this family had married a COTEN (or COTTON) or if an adoption of a COTEN had occurred. We considered adoption/fostering as a possibility because CATHERINE AMELDA

COADY did not marry EDWARD JOHN GRAHAM (NZ BMD Ref. No. 1927/2858) until 1927 when she was 40 years old.

Dick continues:

> *Sources:*
>
> In tracing the COADY family, I will give you the New Zealand Birth, Marriage and Death Reference Numbers (NZ BMD Ref. No. YEAR/XXXXXX) where I have them. This online source (https://www.bdmhistoricalrecords.dia.govt.nz/search) has been invaluable but availability is limited to Births prior to 1916, Marriages prior to 1936 and Deaths prior to 1966. Other confirmation that I have used are the New Zealand Electoral Rolls for many of the years between 1853 and 1981, which are available on the Ancestry subscription website (www.ancestry.com).
>
> My searches followed the usual routes to find CATHERINE AMELDA COADY's parents and her siblings. I have discovered many additional pieces of information about the members of this COADY family but in this note I will concentrate on the vital records of the family.

Catherine Amelda's Parents

MAURICE COADY married CATHERINE MARY O'BRIEN in 1872 (NZ BMD Reg. No. 1872/3607).

MAURICE COADY was a miner in the gold mining town of Stafford on the main West Coast road, eight miles from Hokitika on the South Island of New Zealand. I have not yet discovered when he first came to New Zealand. I also want to research further to try and discover where CATHERINE MARY O'BRIEN may have originated from.

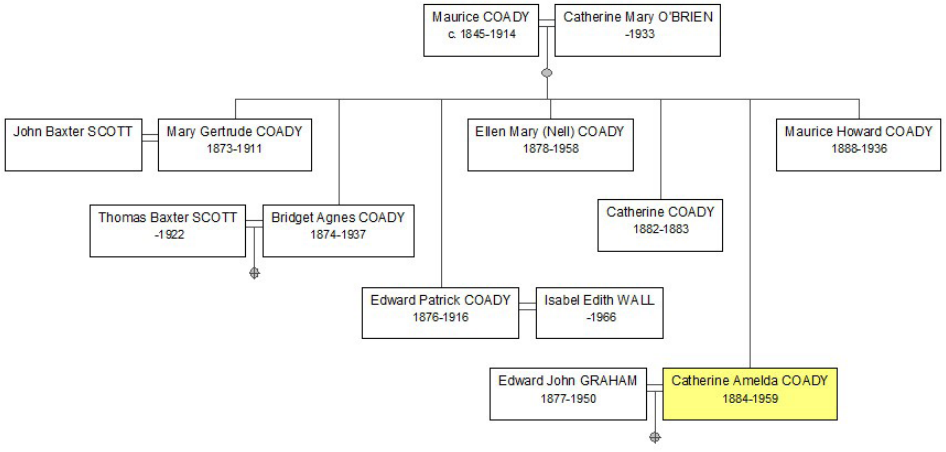
MAURICE COADY died in 1914 (NZ BMD Reg. No. 1914/5448) shortly after the couple had retired, in about 1911, to live in Kaiwarra, Wellington. He was buried in the Karori Cemetery and a transcription of the memorial on the headstone reads:

> MAURICE COADY native of Glenmore, County Kilkenny, Ireland, died at Wellington 30 August 1914. Also CATHERINE MARY his wife died 1 October 1933.
>
> ELLEN MARY (NELL) COADY daughter of the above died 15 April 1958.

As you see from this memorial, CATHERINE MARY died in 1933 (NZ BMD Reg. No. 1933/20448).

Catherine Amelda's Siblings

MAURICE and CATHERINE MARY had seven children, all born in the Stafford area, five daughters and two sons. As you will see from the girls' employment, two teachers, one nurse and a postmistress, the family valued education.



1. MARY GERTRUDE COADY's birth was registered in 1873 (NZ BMD Reg. No. 1873/16580). In 1900 she was a nurse at the Mount View Asylum in Wellington.

   In 1901 she married JOHN BAXTER SCOTT (NZ BMD Ref. No. 1901/5837), a farmer at Kawhia, North Island.

   The couple have no children and she died in 1911 (NZ BMD Ref. No. 1911/5690).

   There is a memorial to her in the Kawhia Cemetery (attached).

2. BRIDGET AGNES COADY's birth was registered in 1874 (NZ BMD Reg. No. 1874/36379). In 1893 she passed her Civil Service Junior Exams, qualifying as a teacher. She was living in the area of Greytown, north of Wellington at the time.

   In that same year, 1893, she married THOMAS BAXTER SCOTT (NZ BMD Reg. No 1893/2432). By 1900 the couple are living in Kawhia, where THOMAS BAXTER SCOTT is a farmer.

I have yet to discover if JOHN BAXTER SCOTT and THOMAS BAXTER SCOTT are brothers but I suspect that is the case.

It was probably BRIDGET AGNES COADY's marriage that drew her sister MARY GERTRUDE COADY to the Kawhia area and we will see later that her move and marriage also attracted her other sisters.

BRIDGET AGNES COADY and THOMAS BAXTER SCOTT went on to have ten children over the years 1894 to 1916, all born in the Kawhia area. I will return to these children in my next note when I tell you about the descendants of the MAURICE and CATHERINE MARY COADY living in the 1960's, and who might be alive today.

THOMAS BAXTER SCOTT died in 1922 (NZ BMD Ref. No. 1922/8435) and BRIDGET AGNES SCOTT (née COADY) died in 1937 (NZ BMD Ref. No. 1937/15161). The couple are buried in the Kawhia Cemetery where there is a memorial to them both (attached).

3. EDWARD PATRICK COADY's birth was registered in 1876 (NZ BMD Reg. No. 1876/1299).

   In 1896 he was living on Cuba Street, Wellington, and employed as a torpedoman.

   In 1914, EDWARD PATRICK COADY joined the New Zealand Expeditionary Force as a Lieutenant (Quartermaster) in the Canterbury Mounted Rifles. In December 1914 he travelled with them to Egypt but, by March 1915, he has returned to New Zealand, with promotion to Captain (Quartermaster). However, he chooses not to remain in New Zealand, away from the fighting. He resigns his commission in April 1915, sails to Sydney, and enlists with the Australian Imperial Force as a private soldier under the name EDWARD COADY.

   In June 1915, EDWARD PATRICK COADY married ISABEL EDITH WALL (Registered in Sydney NSW Ref No. 1915/14132).

   By November 1915, EDWARD COADY, is a Sergeant in the 30th Battalion, AIF, and after six months training in Suez, from December 1915 to June 1916, he is posted to France.

   He joined the 30th Battalion, part of the 5th Australian Division, in early July when they are preparing for the ill-fated attack at Fromelles on 19 July 1916. EDWARD COADY was one of the 400 unidentified

Australians killed in the attack. His name is recorded on the screen at V.C. Corner Australian Cemetery, Fromelles.

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission records state:

> In Memory of Sergeant EDWARD COADY, 137, 30th BN., Australian Infantry, A.I.F., killed in action on Thursday 20 July 1916 aged 38. Sergeant COADY, son of MAURICE and CATHERINE COADY; Husband of ISABEL E. COADY, of 171, Jones St., Ultimo, New South Wales. Native of New Zealand.
>
> EDWARD PATRICK COADY and his wife ISABEL EDITH (née WALL) had no children. ISABEL EDITH COADY died in 1966 in Randwick City, NSW.

4. ELLEN MARY COADY's birth was registered in 1878 (NZ BMD Reg. No. 1878/1716). By 1905 she, recorded in the Electoral Rolls as Eileen, is a schoolteacher in Kawhia. She had also passed her Civil Service Junior Exams in Greymouth but in 1896, three years after her sister Bridget.

   ELLEN MARY COADY would remain a spinster and returned to look after her parents when they retired to Wellington in 1911. She died in 1958 in Wellington (NZ BMD Ref. No. 1958/34128) and, as we have seen earlier, was buried alongside her parents in the Karori Cemetery in Wellington.

   ELLEN MARY COADY died intestate and her probate records of 1960 are the basis of much of my discovery of the surviving descendants of MAURICE and CATHERINE MARY COADY who might be alive today.

5. CATHERINE COADY's birth was registered in 1882 (NZ BMD Reg. No. 1882/11441). Sadly this child only survives a short while and her death is registered in 1883 ((NZ BMD Reg. No. 1883/6269). She was buried in the Old Stafford Cemetery but there would appear to be no memorial.
6. CATHERINE AMELDA COADY's birth was registered in 1884 (NZ BMD Ref. No. 1884/20036) and by 1905 she was the postmistress in Kawhia. By 1911 she is back with her sister, Ellen, and her parents at Kalwarra, Wellington.

As I told you in my last note, CATHERINE AMELDA married EDWARD JOHN GRAHAM in 1927 (NZ BMD Ref. No. 1927/2858).

Since the New Zealand Birth records online do not cover the years after 1927, it was from my later discovery of EDWARD JOHN GRAHAM's and CATHERINE AMELDA GRAHAM's probate records, from 1950 and 1959 respectively, that I discovered that the couple had any children.

It was only from CATHERINE AMELDA's probate papers that I discovered, first the letter from their son MAURICE JOSEPH GRAHAM and second that he had been out of contact with the familysince about 1948.

EDWARD JOHN GRAHAM and CATHERINE AMELDA GRAHAM (née COADY) are buried next to each other in the Catholic Cemetery attached to St Mary's Church, Otaki. This is not far from the area of Rangiuru where Edward had been farming for at least the last ten years of his life. The memorials on their graves state (copies attached):

> In Loving Memory of Edward John Graham, Born at Salisbury, England. Died at Otaki 20th March 1959. The King of Love my Shepard is. RIP
>
> In Loving Memory of Catherine Amelda Graham Born at Stafford Westland Died at Lower Hutt 13 March 1959 RIP.

I have not had any success in tracing EDWARD JOHN GRAHAM's parents. In his attestation papers in 1916-18 they are listed as JOHN HANSON GRAHAM, born Tamworth, Herefordshire (Tamworth is actually in Staffordshire), and HELEN MARY (maiden name not given), born Ely, Cambridgeshire. I am continuing to search for clues about these two.

Now we come to MAURICE and CATHERINE MARY COADY's seventh and last child.

7. MAURICE HOWARD COADY's birth was registered in 1888 (NZ BMD Reg. No. 1888/18501). Prior to 1916, according to his NZ Expeditionary Force attestation papers, he had been working in New Zealand as a machinist engineer with the Metropolitan

Dredging Company of New York. Like his brother EDWARD PATRICK COADY he gave his next of kin as Mrs C M COADY of Kiawarra, Wellington.

After his basic training he was drafted to the New Zealand 21st Specialist Machine Gun Corps and spent part of 1917 in France. Sickness saw him posted back to England in February 1918 and he remained at the Corps Depot in Grantham, Lincolnshire, for the rest of WWI.

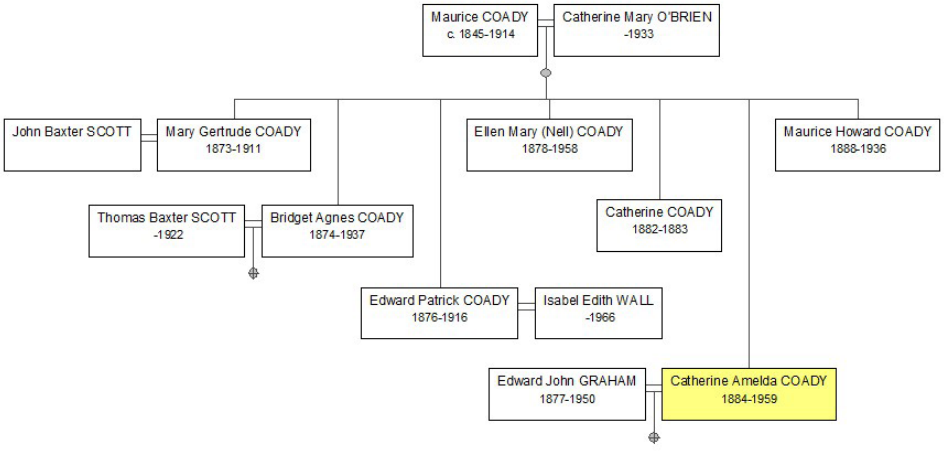
On his discharge in May 1919 he returned to New Zealand but by December that year he had left the country, joining the Merchant Navy serving as an engineering deck officer, sailing mainly out of American ports.

In 1920 he is granted American Citizenship. He continues to sail the seas up to the time of his death in Baltimore in 1936, from 'Heart failure Cardiac Asthma'. MAURICE HOWARD COADY is buried in Mount Olive Cemetery, Baltimore. He did not marry and there is no record of any children.

This outlines the basics of the COADY family in New Zealand. Also attached to this note is a diagram of the family tree, which I hope is helpful in understanding this new family, and photos of some of the COADY graves.

As I said earlier, ELLEN MARY COADY died intestate in 1958 and the subsequent probate papers list her surviving nieces and nephews in 1960. These will be the source of determining who of this COADY family might still be alive today.

In all our research to date, we have not found any reference to the name COTEN (or variant) in connection with the COADY family. However, we will keep looking.



I agree. This is Helen Wise Mulgan nee Graham. Her husband was David Kennaway Mulgan, a journalist who died in 1999.

Helen has lived at 6 Taungata Road Lower Hutt since 1969. I believe that of their 4 children 2 are still living.

We do not know why Maurice never wanted to make contact.

There are other descendants through the Scott marriage though we haven't yet got their addresses. However, Helen is most likely to be able to answer your questions. I hope she still has a good memory: she is 87.

Good luck and best wishes from us both,

Dick and Hilary

Descendants of MAURICE COADY (c 1845- 1914) and CATHERINE MARY O'BRIEN (c 1850- 1933) alive in 1960

Your COADY cousins

The following research is based on the probate records of ELLEN MARY COADY (1878-1958), who died intestate. During the probate process, her siblings, nieces, and nephews surviving in 1960 were listed, see https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-CS7V-QTF7?i=689&cc=1865481 .

These are the people included in these probate papers, some of whom may still be living or have surviving descendants. They all come from one of two families.

Children of EDWARD JOHN GRAHAM and CATHERINE AMELDA COADY

Your Father

1. Her nephew, MAURICE JOSEPH GRAHAM, born c 1928.

Your Aunt

2. Her niece, HELEN WISE MULGAN (née GRAHAM), born c 1930, the widow of DAVID KENNAWAY MULGAN (1915-1999).

   Children of THOMAS BAXTER SCOTT and BRIDGET AGNES COADY, *your 1st cousins once-removed*. This couple had ten children, however four had died before the probate in 1960. These were:

   John Baxter Scott (1898-1930), James Leo Scott (1903-1936), Thomas William Scott (1906-?) and Hilda (Mary) Grace Ward née Scott (1910-1942) who had issue, see later.

   The children alive in 1960 were:

3. Her niece, MARY AGNES GILBERT (née SCOTT), born 1894. She was the wife of ERNEST MONTAGUE GILBERT.
4. Her nephew, EDWARD MAURICE SCOTT, born 1896.
5. Her niece, EILY CATHERINE RANDALL (née SCOTT), born 1901. She was the wife of ARTHUR HENRY JAMES RANDALL.
6. Her niece, KATHLEEN GERTRUDE WARD (née SCOTT), born 1908. She was the wife of WALTER LEWIN WARD.
7. Her niece, PATRICIA MARY SCOTT, born 1913.

8. Her nephew, ARTHUR WALLACE SCOTT, born 1916.

   Hilda (Mary) Grace Ward née Scott (1910-1942), who had died before 1960 left one child who was mentioned in the probate, *your 2nd cousin*. After her death, her widower, WALTER LEWIN WARD, married her older sister KATHLEEN GERTRUDE.

9. Her great-niece PATRICIA MARY CUMMINS (née WARD), born c 1938. She was the wife of MICHAEL JOHN CUMMINS.

Surviving descendants

The question I looked at next was, which of these nieces and nephews of your great-aunt, ELLEN MARY COADY, apart from HELEN WISE MULGAN (née GRAHAM) your aunt's family (she will provide that information), are still surviving and do any of them appear to have living offspring.

1. MARY AGNES SCOTT and ERNEST MONTAGUE ROY GILBERT appear to have had at least three children (source rootsweb). I have not found any probate records for this couple.
   a. MAURICE GILBERT born 1922 in Kawhia, North Island. He would appear to have died in 1931. ***(No descendants.)***
   a. WILLIAM MONTAGUE GILBERT born 1927 in Kawhia. He appears to have died in 1991. ***(Living descendants possible.)***
   a. PATRICIA GILBERT born 1930 in Kawhia. She appears to have died in 1934. ***(No descendants.)***

2. EDWARD MAURICE SCOTT married MONA MARTHA SCHULTZ sometime after 1937 and they appear to have had at least one child, EDWARD MAURICE SCOTT jnr. EDWARD MAURICE SCOTT snr died in 1966 in Kawhia and his headstone lists other possible descendants including Edward MAURICE jnr. They are PETER, PATSY, GRANT, TONI, BRUCE and GINA. I have not been able to determine what the relationships of these names are. I have not found any probate records for this couple. ***(Living descendants likely.)***

3. EILY CATHERINE SCOTT married ARTHUR JAMES HENRY RANDALL sometime after 1937. The couple died in 1986 and 1976 respectively but their headstone in Kawhia Cemetery makes no

mention of any descendants and the electoral rolls give no indication of any adult children. I have not found any probate records for this couple. *(Maybe no descendants.)*

4. KATHLEEN GERTRUDE SCOTT married WALTER LEWIN WARD, the widower of her sister HILDA MARY GRACE SCOTT, sometime after 1942 but before 1946. The couple died in 1990 and 1999 respectively but their headstone in Kawhia Cemetery makes no mention of any descendants and the electoral rolls give no indication of any adult children. I have not found any probate records for this couple. ***(Maybe no descendants.)***

5. We can reasonably remove PATRICA MARY SCOTT from this search because, at the time of the probate in 1960, she was a Sister in Holy Orders. Born in 1913, she is unlikely to be alive in 2017. ***(No descendants.)***

6. ARTHUR WALLACE SCOTT married JOY POWELL circa 1946 on returning to New Zealand after a distinguished war service. He was captured at El Alamein in July 1942 and made a prisoner-of-war in Italy. For his actions as an escaped prisoner-of-war in Italy in 1943-5, he was awarded the Military Medal. According to his obituary in the *NZ Herald* on 12 May 2006 he was survived by four children: Rose, Marilyn Trish and Don. ***(Living descendants.)***

7. PATRICIA MARY CUMMINS, the only child of HILDA MARY GRACE (née SCOTT) and WALTER LEWIN WARD, born c. 1938, would appear to have married MICHAEL JOHN CUMMINS in about 1969. The 1981 Electoral Roll for Tarawera, Bay of Plenty, imples that they have at least three children: MICHAEL JOHN jnr; ANNE-FRANCES MARY; and ANTHONY VINCENT. ***(Living descendants.)***

Further research

Here are a few links which I have used and they might save you some time in your searches.

Probates

GRAHAM, EDWARD JOHN (1877-1950) – you will need to scroll to record P.870/50, they are not indexed:

https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-CSS6-639BY?i=477&wc=7H16-GXQ%3A1045248401%2C1588876956&cc=1865481

COADY, ELLEN MARY (1878-1958) P.648/60:

https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-CS7V-QTF7?i=689&cc=1865481

The New Zealand Probate files on *FamilySearch* are not all indexed and so you might well have luck searching for other COADY files by going into:

https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-CS7V-QTF7?owc=waypoints&cc=1865481

and searching through the relevant years. Time consuming but it was how I first found Edward and Catherine Graham's probates.

NZ Army Attestation forms

GRAHAM, EDWARD JOHN

http://ndhadeliver.natlib.govt.nz/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE9868174

COADY, EDWARD PATRICK

http://ndhadeliver.natlib.govt.nz/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE14013629

COADY, MAURICE HOWARD

http://ndhadeliver.natlib.govt.nz/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE14026237

Other sites

The Archway (New Zealand Archives) simple search page may also get you to other records of interest which I have not looked at:

https://www.archway.archives.govt.nz/SimpleSearchResults.do

Additionally I found some interesting photos of the post office and school at Kawhia on this site:

https://natlib.govt.nz/photos

6. Finding my brother

Written by Helen Mulgan, her long lost brother. Helen speaks about the shock of discovering about his life after leaving New Zealand and meeting his family, about whom she had no knowledge prior to 2017.

I clearly remember that morning in the late Spring of 2017 when the telephone rang in my Eastbourne, New Zealand home and an Australian stranger told me he was my nephew, son of my brother, who, he said had died long before. He said he had been seeking me out for 27 years.

I warily answered his questions and listened to his story. Then, in shock, I just sat down and did nothing for half an hour. In the space of three minutes I had found and lost my childhood mate for whom I had grieved most of my adult life. Later I rang my children, Kitty and Roderick.

My brother, my only brother, Maurice, had poor health as a child. He suffered from severe asthma. At 20 he sailed to Australia hoping that an outdoor life in a dry climate would effect a cure. We were sad to see him go, but his health was the first priority. For about six months we were comforted by his frequent letters telling of new experiences and freedom from asthma attacks.

Then, nothing. Nothing for over 60 years.

Why would a cherished son and brother, who had led a blameless life, decide to cut all ties and assume a new identity? We could only speculate.

Perhaps this was not my Maurice? Incredulity gave way to confirmation, with DNA and other evidence – birth date, photographs, handwriting and more. Interestingly, when he had chosen new names for himself, he had used one of his father's first names and a surname associated with his father's UK home and that of a special uncle for his first son.

A few months later my son and I flew to Perth to meet our new family. On our arrival Jim and Ned drove us straight to see Meg in her retirement home. At once I felt an affinity with Meg. I saw what had drawn my brother to her and why they had spontaneously made a commitment to each other.

I feel grateful that they shared happy years and were blessed with two fine sons. In photographs of the little family, I can feel the loving bond between them in the very way they look at each other.

I feel grateful that Maurice had someone to weep over his grave.

I never met Meg again, but we exchanged thoughts and memories in letters, e-mails and in one (novel to me) zoom call. I miss her. I regret the wasted years when we might have known and supported each other – unaware, we each had a son just a few months apart. But, belatedly, I did get

to know her. And I am so glad Meg and John/Maurice have left something of their unique selves in their children and grandchildren.

Now, in my declining years, I have time to ponder on the wonder of it all.

Helen Mulgan, 2021

Footnote 1: Now that Ned and Jim, along with their families, have heard the full story, met their extended family, and had time to reflect on the fact that their father's background was very different from what they had believed, they have chosen to refer to their father as Maurice, rather than John.

This choice is both objective and emotional. On a practical level, since Maurice was his original name, it now feels natural to call him this –especially as they knew him for so little of their own lives. Emotionally, it is also important that his legacy in New Zealand is not lost, and that his sister Helen, in particular, can remember her brother by his birth name, not the name he chose later in life when he left the family and never saw them again.

Today, Ned and Jim lovingly refer to their father as Maurice, and feel incredibly fortunate to have connected with such a wonderful extended family.

Footnote 2: The following is taken from an email sent by Helen Mulgan to Hilary Tulloch, during correspondence once the family had been found. This note is from Helen to Hilary:

Thank you for all the photos. My eyes fill with tears as I look at them. I believe he could have been held down in an operation. He was in hospital for tonsil removal and afterwards was traumatised. My mother was distraught but helpless to put things right. We did not have many photos taken when we were children. My parents lost everything they owned in the Great Depression and never recovered. We were too poor to own a camera. I have one when Maurice was about 3 when they could afford a studio portrait. Also a poor snap taken by a visitor of Maurice about 10/11. I think you can see a resemblance.

I wonder if I could get it enhanced. I am not computer savvy and do not know how to send it to you. I may get help. Incidentally my computer password has always been "Maurice" plus a number and I say a little prayer for him as I sign in. In the photos he looks loving. I never saw Maurice after he was 18.

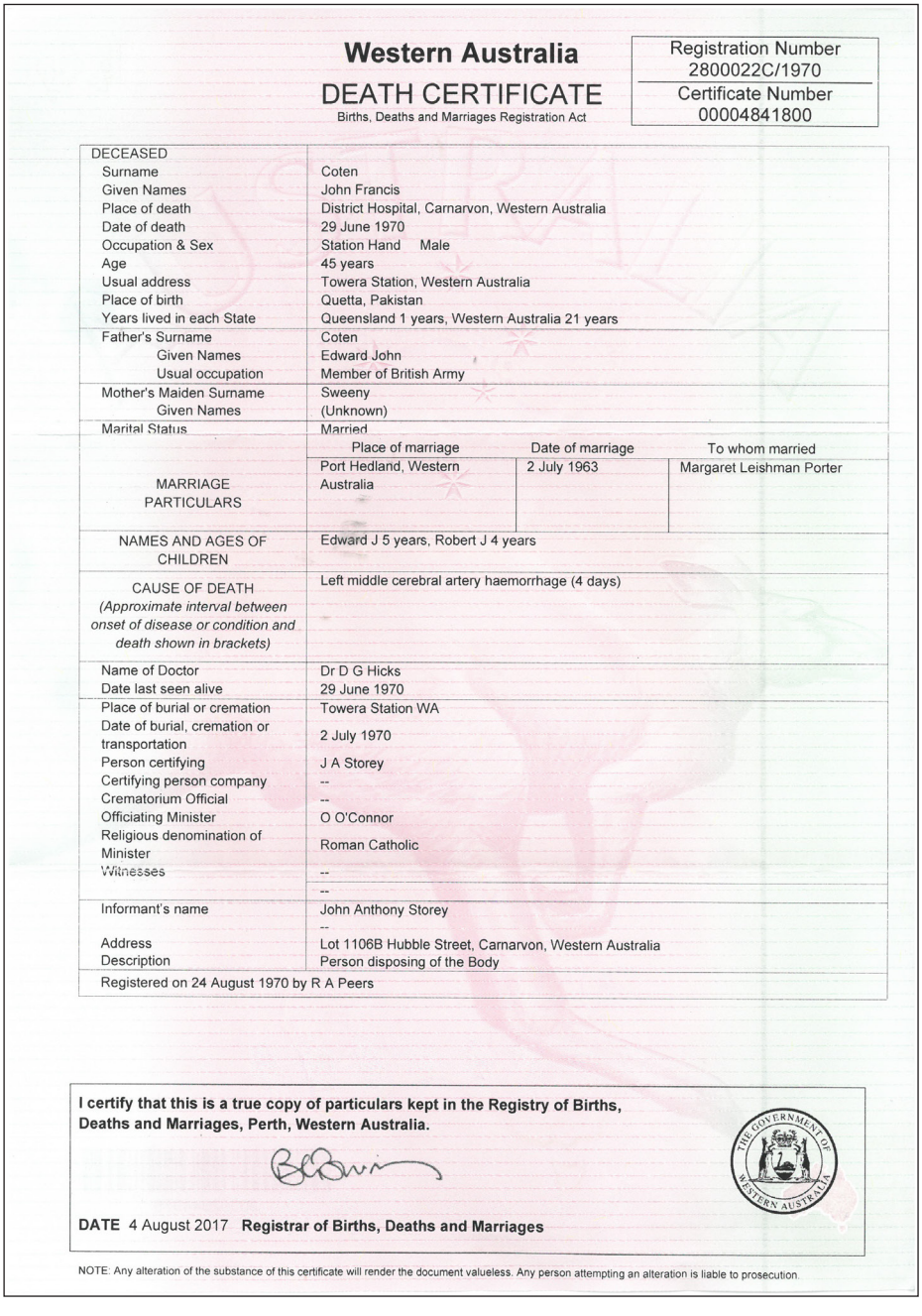
I never knew of any rare blood group in any members of family. When younger, I used to donate blood – but it was never specially sought after; nor of anyone else's resistance to anaesthetic. Maurice abhorred unions and we suspected he got into trouble for refusing to join a union. My mother and I formed a theory that unionists were out to get him and that he might have been waylaid if he were hitching a ride to Wyndham. Ever since he vanished I have carried in my head a picture of his body being slung in a ditch in the outback. If he feared reprisals, could this be why he arranged to disappear? My father never strove to amass money and was so successful in this regard that we were poverty-stricken throughout my childhood. Yet he was a hard worker, but seemed to be dogged by bad luck.

Our poultry farm collapsed when our flock got the disease – coccidiosis (I forget the spelling). My father was always ready to give to anyone in need. I too give to Save the Children. Roderick is going to scan the few relevant photos I have. I suppose you have a busy life. I do not know if this e-mailing is taking up too much of your time. I can keep things till/if we meet. Oh yes he truly did walk to the beat of his own drum. I can sort of understand his claiming to have fought in the war. He followed war news keenly and had set up a map of Europe on the wall and had pins to place strategic positions. He complained that whenever his mother wanted a pin the Allies had to retreat. He was frustrated that he was not old enough to join up. Maurice's birthday was 9 March, but 1928.

Photographs of the Life of John Coten (Maurice Joseph Graham)

The following photographs and images are included to provide additional insight into the life and story of Maurice Graham, who later adopted the name John Coten. Together, these visual records complement the written narrative and offer a deeper perspective on the family's remarkable journey to uncover his origins.

For decades, much of John's early life remained unknown to his wife Meg and their sons Ned and Jim. Through painstaking research, a series of personal discoveries, and the help of extended family and researchers, the full story finally came to light. These images illustrate key moments, documents, and relationships that now form part of the family's shared understanding.



Western Australia

DEATH CERTIFICATE

Births, Deaths and Marriages Registration Act

Registration Number
2800022C/1970

Certificate Number
00004841800

DECEASED			
Surname	Coten		
Given Names	John Francis		
Place of death	District Hospital, Carnarvon, Western Australia		
Date of death	29 June 1970		
Occupation & Sex	Station Hand Male		
Age	45 years		
Usual address	Towera Station, Western Australia		
Place of birth	Quetta, Pakistan		
Years lived in each State	Queensland 1 years, Western Australia 21 years		
Father's Surname	Coten		
Given Names	Edward John		
Usual occupation	Member of British Army		
Mother's Maiden Surname	Sweeny		
Given Names	(Unknown)		
Marital Status	Married		
	Place of marriage	Date of marriage	To whom married
MARRIAGE PARTICULARS	Port Hedland, Western Australia	2 July 1963	Margaret Leishman Porter
NAMES AND AGES OF CHILDREN	Edward J 5 years, Robert J 4 years		
CAUSE OF DEATH *(Approximate interval between onset of disease or condition and death shown in brackets)*	Left middle cerebral artery haemorrhage (4 days)		
Name of Doctor	Dr D G Hicks		
Date last seen alive	29 June 1970		
Place of burial or cremation	Towera Station WA		
Date of burial, cremation or transportation	2 July 1970		
Person certifying	J A Storey		
Certifying person company	--		
Crematorium Official	--		
Officiating Minister	O O'Connor		
Religious denomination of Minister	Roman Catholic		
Witnesses	--		
	--		
Informant's name	John Anthony Storey		
	--		
Address	Lot 1106B Hubble Street, Carnarvon, Western Australia		
Description	Person disposing of the Body		
Registered on 24 August 1970 by R A Peers			

I certify that this is a true copy of particulars kept in the Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Perth, Western Australia.

THE GOVERNMENT OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

DATE 4 August 2017 **Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages**

NOTE: Any alteration of the substance of this certificate will render the document valueless. Any person attempting an alteration is liable to prosecution.

This official certificate, submitted at the time of John's death in 1970, states that he was born in Quetta, Pakistan, and had resided in Queensland for one year and Western Australia for twenty-one years. Notably, the details recorded here differ from John's true origins, as later uncovered by the family's research.



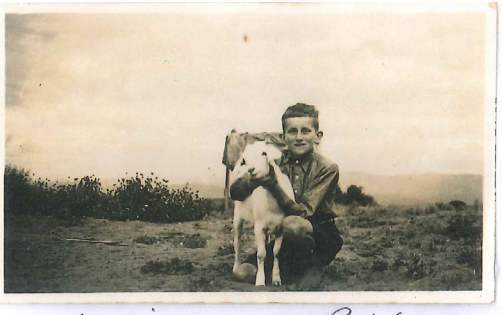




This series of three photographs depicts Maurice Graham (John Coten) and his sister Helen in their youth during their childhood in Otaki, New Zealand – a bond that would be heartbreakingly severed when Maurice left for Australia in 1948.

1. Maurice walking with his father.
2. Helen walking with her father.
3. Helen and Maurice together with farm animals on their family property in Otaki, New Zealand.

Helen and Maurice were exceptionally close, and Helen carried the pain of his disappearance throughout her life.



Maurice and Robby
Otaki farm



Helen & Maurice
Otaki farm



Helen & Maurice at
Otaki farm. Our father
is decapitated

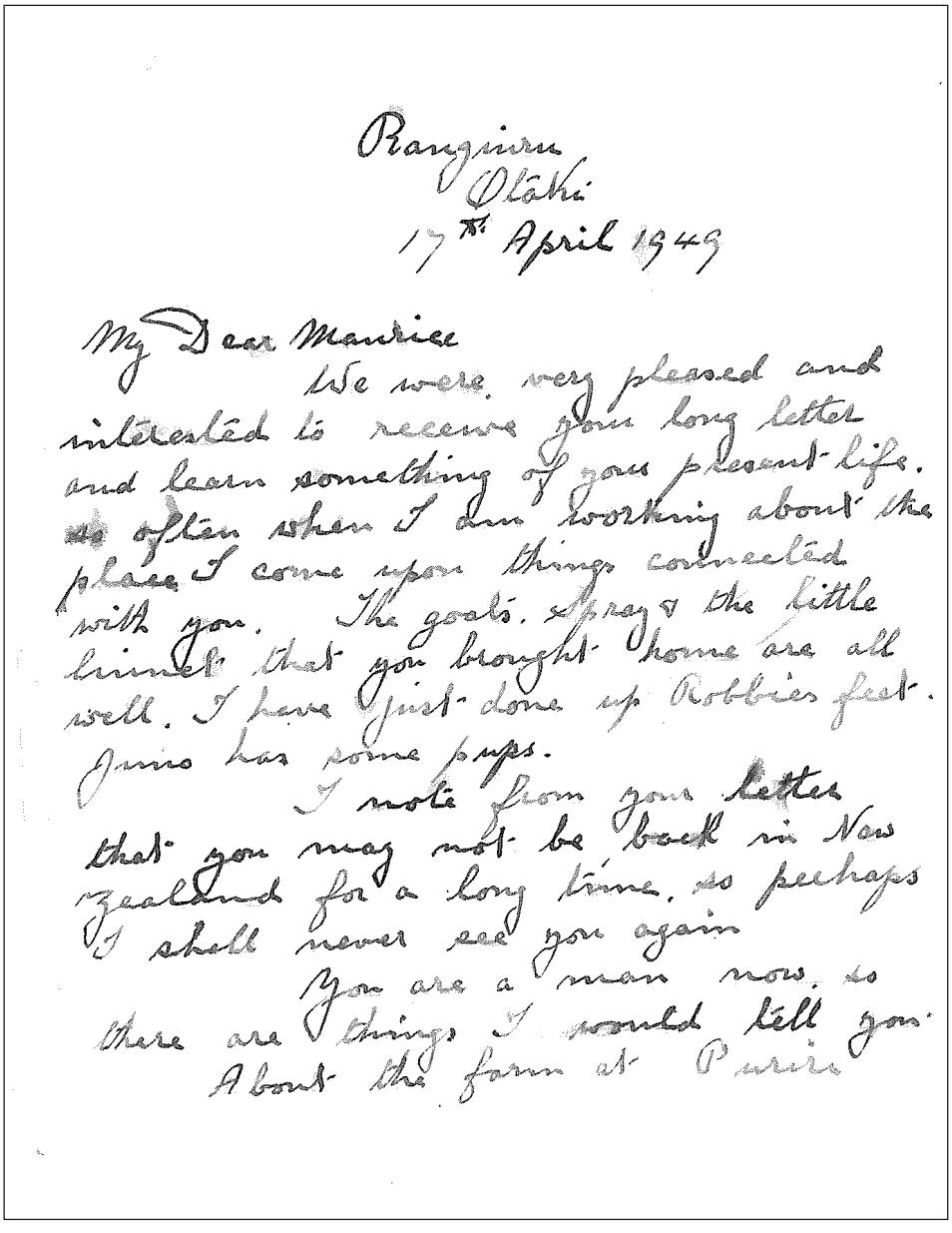


Maurice at "the
Fort" where we lived
with our aunt for
five years



← Uncle Ned. I am
not sure if this is at
the Captain Coady
stage. I think so (?)
Poor photo – enlargement
of little face in
large group photo.

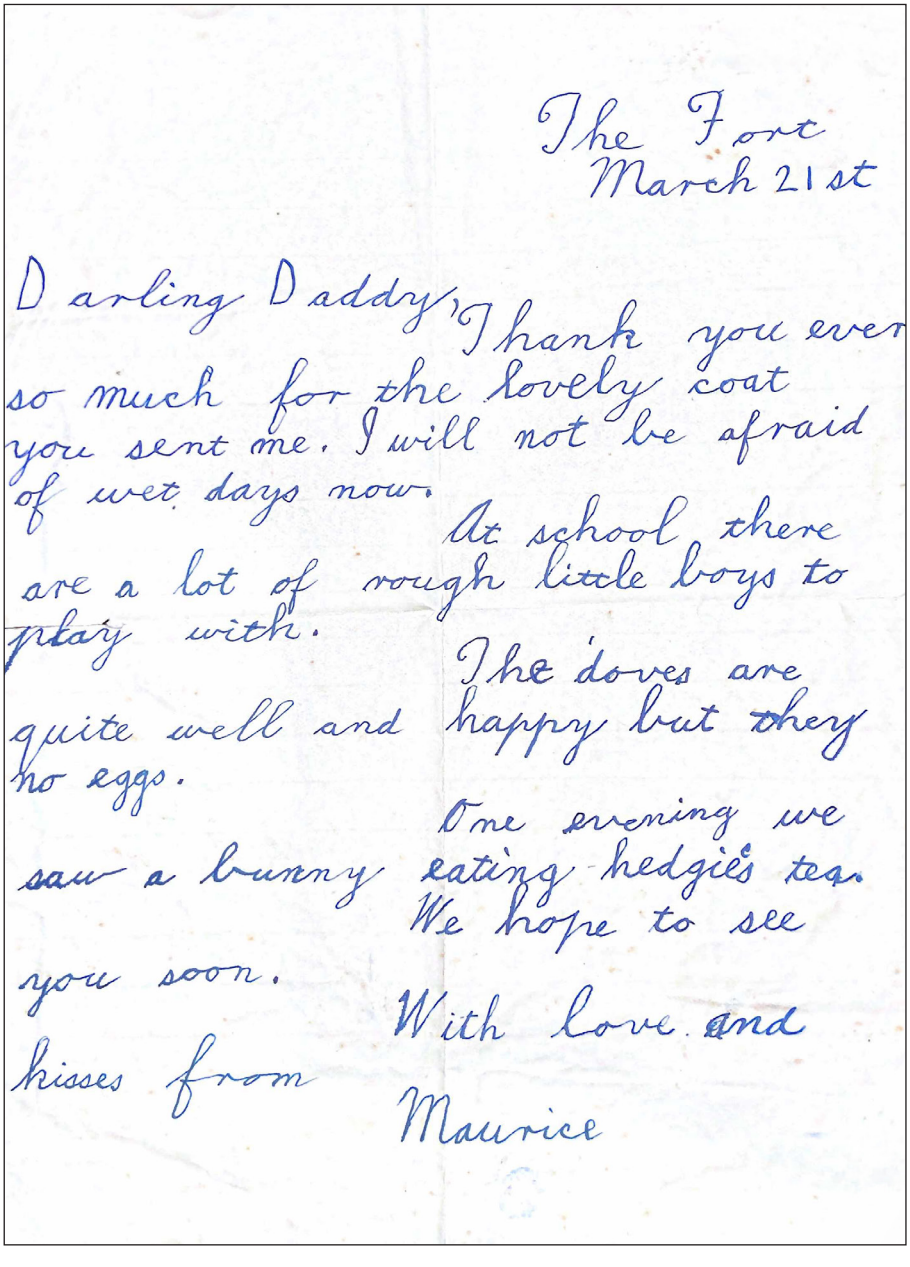
These images, taken from a family album, were given to Ned & Jim by Helen Mulgan during their visit to see her in New Zealand.



Rangiuru
Otaki
17th April 1949

My Dear Maurice
We were very pleased and interested to receive your long letter and learn something of your present life. We often when I am working about the place I come upon things connected with you. The goats. Spray & the little kinnet that you brought home are all well. I have just done up Robbies feet. Jimo has some pups.
I note from your letter that you may not be back in New Zealand for a long time. so perhaps I shall never see you again
You are a man now. so there are things I would tell you. About the farm at Purir

This letter, one of many exchanged between Maurice and his father Edward John Graham, reflects their method of maintaining contact while Edward was frequently away. The letters demonstrate a warm relationship despite the physical distance.



The Fort
March 21st

Darling Daddy, Thank you ever so much for the lovely coat you sent me. I will not be afraid of wet days now.

At school there are a lot of rough little boys to play with.

The doves are quite well and happy but they ho eggs.

One evening we saw a bunny eating hedgie's tea.

We hope to see you soon.

With love and kisses from

Maurice

In contrast to his father's detailed letters, Maurice's own correspondence was typically brief and to the point. This example includes a letter written by Maurice, with handwriting later verified by Meg as matching that of John Coten – a key piece of evidence in confirming his identity.



This special Zoom call marked the joyful moment when the extended family – long separated by history – came together virtually.

Participants included:

- Top left: Helen Mulgan (Maurice's sister) and her adopted daughter Kitty.
- Top right: Ned and Hilary Coten.
- Middle left: Dick and Hilary Tulloch, researchers instrumental in uncovering the story.
- Middle right: Roderick Mulgan (Helen's son).
- Bottom left: Dick Porter (Ned and Jim's cousin), who played a key role in bringing the families together.
- Bottom right: Meg with her son Jim, at Meg's aged care facility in Perth.



Ned Coten (Maurice's son), William Coten (Ned's son), Sam Coten (front, Jim's son), Andre Coten (white shirt, Ned's son), Roderick Mulgan (back, Helen's son), Helen Mulgan (Maurice Graham's sister), Meg Coten (Maurice Grahams widow, Ned and Jim's mother), Hilary Coten (blue jacket with white trim, Ned's wife), Max Coten (rear, partly obscured, Jim's son), Jim Coten (Maurice's son), Claire Coten (Jim's daughter), Kylie Coten (Jim's wife).

Helen and Roderick Mulgan travelled to Perth to meet the Australian family of their brother and Uncle. Ned, Hilary, and their sons William and Andre joined from Melbourne, gathering at Jim and Kylie's home with their children Sam, Claire and Max, and of course Meg. This was the only occasion when all branches of the family were physically together.