THE FACING ISLAND

A Personal History

JAN BASSETT

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PO Box 278, Carlton South, Victoria 3053, Australia
mup-info@unimelb.edu.au
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FOREWORD

'Last night I dreamt I went to "The Pines" again.' Thus Jan Bassett begins her memoir, an unusual meditation on childhood, family, war and mortality. She is typically and ironically aware of the literary antecedent: another striking retreat to the country. In *The Facing Island*, we travel with Jan to Phillip Island, where she spent her holidays as a child and young woman. Her mother's family had long owned a dairy farm at Ventnor. We meet her grandparents and extended family. Subtly, affectionately, Jan evokes a world for which it is hard not to feel degrees of nostalgia: one with sleepouts and music boxes and long brown Dodges.

There is a chiffonier, too. (There is nearly always a chiffonier furnishing the past.) And here we recall another literary source: the brass jardinière in David Malouf's masterly memoir about childhood, *12 Edmondstone Street*. For Malouf, the contents of the jardinière—all those mysterious domestic oddments—continue to move him in middle age. 'I dedicate myself', he says. 'I imagine going through life with the jardinière invisibly in my arms, a heavy burden,' For the 13-year-old Jan Bassett (or Janice Lyons, as she was then) the chiffonier at 'The Pines' would yield a similar historical burden, akin to Malouf's unpaired talismans. Following the death of her adored grandmother, Jan investigates the box that always stood on the chiffonier and discovers a secret compartment—manna for a future historian. She finds a bundle of letters from a young New Zealand soldier named Wilson Tong. The first was written 'Some Where in France' on 24 August 1916. Young Signaller W. Tong had placed a letter in a bottle and thrown it overboard as he sailed towards the Great War. Jan's young grandmother, possibly wandering along the beach at Ventnor, retrieved it and wrote him a letter. The correspondence lasted until 1919. Jan's grandmother preserved Tong's letters—charming, witty, expressive—but her own responses never found their way into the secret compartment.

This unknown cache of letters, never acknowledged during her grandmother's lifetime, might have been intended for the historically inclined granddaughter. Perhaps 'Nana' trusted the clever teenager to master the secret compartment (something I failed to do when Jan showed it to me). She returned to these letters three decades later, not long after she embarked on her own journey into darkness—illness, uncertainty and premature death. I remember how delighted she was when Brenda Niall and John Thompson included the first of Tong's letters in *The Oxford Book of Australian Letters*.

What we have, in *The Facing Island*, is a series of responses from Jan herself, addressed to her grandmother, with a personal commentary and Tong's original letters. Jan comments on the young New Zealander's stoicism and afflictions, and ponders, as he must have done in the trenches, the reasons for her grandmother's reluctance to send him a photograph of herself, despite Tong's humorous pleas. Jan reminisces about childhood and begins the unwonted process of describing her personal and intellectual progress. One of the book's strengths is the vividness of Jan's recall. The clarity and dexterity of her memory are enviable. Jan tells us that she never kept a journal. Little wonder: with a memory like that, she hardly needed to. And how frustrating it was for Jan when illness and surgery clouded that impeccable memory for a time, just as it threatened her sight.

For those of us who knew Jan (my friendship with her began in 1990 when I started working with her on *The Oxford Illustrated Dictionary of Australian History*, one of five books I would publish with her at OUP), the grandmother's enigmatic quality (she once sent Tong a photograph with her face cut out, as if preferring invisibility) reminds us of qualities we discerned in Jan. She was above all a reader, a historian, a reticent and independent woman. Not for her the gratuitous revelations that spice this garrulous world. There was nothing capricious or attentionseeking about this reserve. Here was a private person, and one learned not to delve too deeply.

By the late 1990s, however, the protective and exclusive walls ('the various compartments of my life') that Jan had for whatever reason erected began to fall. Always self-deprecating, she wrote about her 'ice maiden' reserve and how it had crumbled in the aftermath of her diagnosis. This was movingly summed up for me in the Acknowledgments section of Jan's last book with OUP, *As We Wave You Goodbye: Australian Women and War*. Commissioned just before her cancer diagnosis in 1996, this pioneering anthology would have been promptly abandoned by most authors, but Jan persevered, writing in her meticulous pencilled hand. The book was published on Remembrance Day in 1998. Normally, Jan's acknowledgments were succinct, formal and scrupulously alphabetical. But this time there was a new note—a kind of relaxation—and a deliberate tribute to her second husband. It ends: 'The late Lloyd Robson taught me much about the infinite suffering caused by war. Andrew Demetriou has taught me much about life'.

Terrible though any terminal illness is, it does seem to have this capacity—if the victim is reflective and brave—to transform that person's life and to deepen her understanding of the true priorities in life—intellectual and artistic, but also moral and personal. To an onlooker, this appeared to be Jan's experience of illness and impending death. The humour at times was so mordant you wanted to weep; there was never a time when Jan entertained illusions about the true course of her cancer. She writes candidly about pain, incomprehension and existential terror. Nevertheless, there was tremendous dignity and assurance. Jan had always been a passionate traveller, both within and outside Australia. As soon as she could, she resumed her travels—to Cyprus, Europe and Bali, and elsewhere in Asia. She kept her friendships in good repair, as she had always done. She learned to live for the moment, paradoxical though that was for such a diligent scholar. 'Historians', she mused, 'are definitely not trained to think that way'. Above all, there were more books to be written. 'I have measured out my life in books', she remarked. In another remarkable passage, she talks about her impatience to commence all the books she had been planning to write: 'I remember having a very striking image of myself as something like ICPOTA, the little newsprint figure that advertises the classified pages of the Melbourne *Age*. I felt as though my body was stuffed with words, but that I did not have time to get them out in proper order, and that they would just burst out all over the place'.

Somehow Jan did 'find the time', and the words emerged—not randomly, but with her customary precision.

In the end, Jan was left with a strong sense of completion and fulfilment. The writing of her memoir, her relationship with Andrew, her many and eclectic friendships all seemed to contribute to a new kind of acceptance. She never stopped dreading and resenting the cancer (how could you?), but anger and recriminations were not her way. She writes beautifully in the memoir about the things that mattered to her. They are not material, or only modestly so: 'all I need, aside from people, are a piano, a fireplace, a bath, a cat, and lots of books. For most of my life I have had all those'.

Now, of course, Jan's memory and legacy assume other forms—less tangible perhaps, in some cases, but undiminished. Most importantly, there are the books, and the influence they continue to exert. Jan was a great lover of literature and an astute and conscientious scholar, with limitless faith in history's importance in a civilised society. She was a respected member of the community of Australian historians. How fitting it was that Jan should live to see the opening of the Australian Service Nurses' Memorial in Canberra. Jan's book *Guns and Brooches: Australian Army Nursing from the Boer War to the Gulf War*, launched by the then Governor-General Bill Hayden in 1992, was a major contribution to a sparse literature on the subject. Passages from the book are inscribed on the new memorial. *Guns and Brooches* revealed the full extent of army nurses' contribution and the spartan, often hostile, environment in which they served. As with her anthology of Australian women's writings on war—another neglected area of our history—Jan, in that moral and determined way of hers, saw a historical anomaly, and set about correcting it.

War, above all, absorbed and moved Jan, just as it haunted her mentor, Lloyd Robson. The folly of it, the historical complexities, continued to interest her until the end of her life. What Wilson Tong saw in those trenches on the Western Front, and her grandmother's distant empathy, helped Jan to summarise her lifelong work. That secret compartment had provided her with a kind of coda.

The Facing Island meant much to Jan Bassett and her admirers. She continued to work on the manuscript as long as she could. As Jan lay dying in October 1999, I and Louise Sweetland, a great friend and long-time publisher of hers, took it in turns to read from the manuscript. Although Jan was very groggy, her lips moved occasionally as she recognised a passage, an image, and now and then she smiled. Was she travelling back to 'The Pines', past The Gurdies, across that old suspension bridge, back to what she had always known and profoundly treasured? We hoped so.

Now other readers can accompany Jan on that journey.

Peter Rose

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The facing island, a mortal blue,
beckons, intensifies, vanishes.

from Peter Rose,
‘Balnarring Beach’ (1999)

BECKONING

'Last night I dreamt I went to "The Pines" again.' A tempting way to begin this book, with apologies to Daphne du Maurier,[1] but untrue. I don't recall ever having dreamt of 'The Pines', the farm at Ventnor, on Phillip Island, where we used to spend our family holidays. As a girl growing up in Melbourne, when I awoke from bad dreams, my father did calm me by telling me to think of Phillip Island. As an adult, during bouts of insomnia, I have often walked around the rooms of 'The Pines' (in reality long since demolished), ticking off objects, instead of counting sheep. Now that nightmares have begun to invade my days, and drugs send me to sleep at night, it's not surprising that I find myself turning again to 'The Pines' for solace.

Some of my most vivid memories of the farm date from the early 1960s, when I was aged seven or eight. Instead of travelling by train and ferry, by this time we made the trip from our house in Glen Iris, which Mum's father had built in 1919, to the island by car. Dad, an engineer turned teacher, drove, although Mum had a licence, having learnt to drive while growing up at 'The Pines'. (As a young woman she had driven herself alone into Cowes, passed her licence test, and returned home to Ventnor.) You could easily have substituted Mum, Dad, my younger sister Susan and me for the mother, father, John, Betty and baby in the *Holidays* reader that I had read in Miss Dunphy's grade two class at South Camberwell State School in 1960.[2] It was a school that I found much more congenial than Barry Humphries had a couple of decades earlier, according to the brief account in his autobiography *More Please*.[3]

Perhaps his sensibilities were more refined than mine. But back to the eighty-odd mile journey, which we usually broke with a stop for fish and chips at Tooradin.

We passed through The Gurdies, said to have been named after a travelling entertainer's 'hurdy-gurdy' (probably really a merry-go-round) which had broken down there in the dim past. After Grantville, Bass and Anderson, eventually we'd come to San Remo and cross over the suspension bridge to Phillip Island. Past Forrest Caves we'd go, then along the Back Beach Road, alongside the race track, tooting the car horn as we passed the adjoining farm, where Mum's cousin, Neil Grayden, and his family lived, including Judy, eighteen months or so older than me, with her pretty blonde curls. Further on, we navigated Hell Corner and Heaven Corner, which had acquired their names during the car and motor bike races held on local roads during the 1920s and 1930s. Turning left, we'd cross Salt Water Creek, pass 'The Anchorage' shop, and go up the hill, with the Justices' farm on the left and Uncle Bert Grayden's on the right, straining for a first glimpse of the rusty corrugated iron of the big hayshed at 'The Pines'.

Ignoring the road to the right, marked by several letter boxes made from kero tins, leading down to the house where Aunty Myrt (one of Nana's sisters) and Uncle Bert lived, we turned right through the gates of the farm and bumped our way over the rocky track, flanked by the big old trees that gave the place its name. We parked near the gate to 'The Square', which was an orchard and vegetable garden, but walked across the stubbly grass in the other direction, towards the house, the dusty smell of saltbushes hanging in the air. As we approached, the new building which Grandpa had built when Mum was fifteen or sixteen was to the left, the washhouse straight ahead in the background, and the Victorian timber farmhouse on the right. Nana and Grandpa Coels, Mum's parents, who usually greeted us at the gate to the house yard, could also have stepped from the pages of a children's book. Nana, whose name was Edie, was in her sixties then and normally wore longish dark print dresses and her grey hair pulled back in a bun. Grandpa, who was five or six years older, wore long trousers, a long-sleeved shirt, and a satin-backed waistcoat on even the hottest of days.

In my memory, the days at 'The Pines' are almost always hot and summery, the nights cold and wintry. Whatever the weather, the fire in the combustion stove in the kitchen, which was the hub of the household and located in the 'new' building, was always kept burning. Each morning, pine cones rekindled the night's embers. As well as being used for cooking, the stove heated the hot water. Sometimes Nana kept sickly little chickens in a shoebox beside it to warm them back to health. Until electricity was connected to Ventnor in late 1963, as night was falling, Uncle Gren Harris, Nana's bachelor brother, lit the Tilley lamp that hung above the big kitchen table. For a girl like me, who loved reading, it was intensely frustrating having to endure the gloomy limbo before the lamp could be pumped up to its full brightness.

Uncle Gren was a mild-mannered man several years younger than Nana. He ran 'The Pines' as a dairy farm, and also had a reputation as a horsebreaker. A framed photograph of one of his prize-winning local racehorses, 'Una' (from the Latin meaning 'one'), after whom Nana reputedly named Mum, hung on a wall in the front room of the old part of the house. Uncle Gren, whose favourite expression was 'Cripes', walked with a limp and his eyes were bleary from sandy blight. His main social activities were going into Cowes for euchre parties on Monday nights (escorting a gaggle of widows in later years) and cheering on the Phillip Island team at local football matches. His bedroom, which opened off the kitchen, was badly lacking in privacy. When I had mumps and measles during a couple of consecutive school holidays, I was put into his narrow bed in the daytime so that I could be close to the action in the kitchen. Nana's treadle sewing-machine lived just inside his bedroom door. A big blue pincushion on it was stuffed with the long dark hair of Grandpa's sister who had died when I was a toddler.

Uncle Gren seemed more at ease in the paddocks or in the various outbuildings than inside the house. I especially liked his machine shed (which had two open sides), where he kept saddles and assorted other interesting objects, including the butter churn with which Mum had made butter during the Second World War. There was a chook's nest in the far corner of that shed, which we had to check when collecting eggs for Nana, an activity that was no less of a treasure hunt than the Easter egg hunts that we sometimes had at home in Glen Iris. Uncle Gren had only one horse at that time, ‘Gym’ (brother of ‘Khana’), a placid creature on whom we occasionally had rides. According to Uncle Gren, I looked like a ‘sack of spuds’ on horseback. Further up the hill was the cowshed where he did the milking, at times teasing Susan and me by squirting milk (which I’ve always loathed) straight into our mouths. We didn’t mind collecting dried cowpats to burn in the fire in the adjoining dairy, which created the steam to sterilise the milking equipment. Beyond the cowshed, past the tumbledown binder shed, which, like many island buildings, was made from timbers salvaged from the sea, was the hayshed. I still can feel the scratchy hay on my hands as we helped to handfeed the cows. Walking around the paddocks of the farm in general, overlooking Western Port, you had to be careful not to step in plovers’ nests in the grass, and keep an eye out for snakes.

Most summers lack of water was a problem. When Nana told me that the frogs in the dams said ‘not a drop, not a drop, not a drop’, she was probably really saying more about that situation than she was about any amphibious language. Uncle Gren often tapped the water tank with his knuckles, sounding out how much water was left in it. On the wall of the washhouse was a wooden handle, used to pump water up onto the roof each night for the hot water. Being asked to help with the pumping was a mixed blessing, a grown-up but tedious task. Baths in the bathroom, which was in the new building, were shallow, shared (the water not the bathing), and, after visits to the beach, sandy. During thunderstorms, Uncle Gren’s dog ‘Rowdy’, a nice border collie, used to head straight for the bathroom, which opened onto the yard, and cower up one end. Nana objected to his name, which she didn’t think that he deserved, although perhaps that’s precisely why he acquired it, so she alone always used to call him ‘Roly’. Odd, really, given that she didn’t fuss much about names for animals, usually calling all of the cats that lolled around outside the bathroom ‘Stripey’, regardless of their colour or markings, presumably after some long-dead cat fitting that description.

Eccentric even by Phillip Island standards, Uncle Ken McKindlay, who also lived at ‘The Pines’, was a different kettle of fish altogether from Uncle Gren. A cousin of Nana's and Uncle Gren's, Uncle Ken came to the farm to live in 1913 when he was aged about seven, following the deaths of his parents. Whether Nana's widowed mother, Sarah Harris, needed another mouth to feed, on top of those of her own five children, is probably debatable. Uncle Ken's brother and sister were sent to live with other relatives. A formal photograph of the McKindlay family, while it was still intact, hung on the wall in Mum's girlhood winter bedroom (where she and Dad now slept during the holidays), one of the four main rooms of the old house. Heaven knows why it was kept there, given that those rooms were really Nana's and Grandpa's domain, and until Nana's death I don't remember seeing Uncle Gren or Uncle Ken ever go into them.

Uncle Ken's room was attached to these rooms, but opened directly onto the yard. Dark and cluttered, it was out of bounds to the rest of us, except for Nana, who was allowed in each day to make the bed. When electricity finally came to Ventnor, marked by a ceremony at which Nana, as the area's longest-standing resident, cut a ribbon at the local hall, it probably came as no surprise to anyone that Uncle Ken refused to have it connected to his room. He didn't go to Cowes (about four miles away) for years, presumably embarrassed after falling from his bike one night on his way home from some post-cricket match celebrations, or to Melbourne for decades, not bothering even to go to Mum's wedding. He spent most days down at his old two-roomed wooden hut, which seemed pretty ordinary then, but more interesting now that I know it is one of the island's oldest buildings, on a piece of land adjoining Uncle Gren's and Uncle Bert's. He had a chicory kiln and a couta boat there, both of which he'd built himself, but in my time he scarcely used them. Not one to over-exert himself, he did grow a few vegetables. Although he was gruff and prickly, he was not unkind to Susan and me, and sometimes brought us strawberries or baby carrots when he returned at the end of the day. In the kitchen he sparred endlessly with Nana, particularly insisting on his own battered cutlery and crockery. He rarely ventured into the bathroom, preferring instead to wash his face and forearms (and not much else) in a sort of goldpanning dish which he filled at a gully trap in the yard.

Grandpa was responsible for the upkeep of the yard, sweeping its asphalt surface every day. In the corner between the bathroom and the washhouse, he caught blue-tongue lizards, attracting them with saucers of milk. Somewhere he'd read that they were troubled by ticks in their ears, so he held them down on the lid of the copper (in which Nana did the washing on Mondays) and gently removed the ticks with a steel pin which he kept for that purpose. From the yard he also whistled up thrushes, leaving pieces of fat for them on the roof of the breezeway linking the old and new parts of the house. Grandpa's main hidey-hole, however, was his workshop about a hundred yards from the house. Filled with tools, timber, and the contents of job lots that he'd bought at auctions, it smelt of pine wood shavings, with a lingering note of creosote. Grandpa loved creosote, a murky-looking oil made from coal tar, which was used to protect wood from borers. Other people might have painted it only on fences and outbuildings, but Grandpa was inclined to slap it onto any wooden objects. As Mum says, 'If he'd been a drinking man, he'd have drunk creosote cocktails'. At the back of the workshop was an old bed, with a mattress covered in striped ticking, on which Grandpa snoozed and read his beloved *National Geographic* magazines.

He kept his big old brown Dodge car, with its wide running boards, in a garage near the workshop. Having learnt to drive in his late fifties, Grandpa was a terrible driver, whose continued survival on the roads owed much to the fact that other islanders usually gave him a wide berth when they saw him coming. One local not quick enough to get out of his way was 'Bluey', a Queensland blue heeler, bought by Uncle Gren to be a cattle dog but 'stolen' by Uncle Ken. 'Bluey's' demise, the nature of which fortunately must have been kept from me as a child, occurred when Grandpa accidentally backed over him. Grandpa undoubtedly would have been very distressed about that death, given that he hated having to kill anything. He found having to chop the heads off chooks destined for the table particular torture, even though Nana had first rocked the unfortunate victims to sleep.

Grandpa probably cleaned up poor 'Bluey' when setting off one day for Cowes, where he had another workshop. He would lurch along Ventnor Road, then along Thompson Avenue, sounding the horn as he shot past the house belonging to Uncle Rupe (Nana's youngest brother) and Aunty Bess, and then swing right into Church Street, where he had a couple of blocks of land. His workshop there held similar paraphernalia to that in the one at 'The Pines'. Sometimes he strolled around to see his friend Mr Bain (whom he always called by that name, although Mr Bain always called him Rudy), who had a second-hand junk shop in Thompson Avenue. Instead of being a carpenter, Grandpa probably would have realised his dream of making his fortune by becoming a scrap dealer, had it not been for Nana's opposition to the idea. His other dreams included building an octagonal house, that could be rotated to catch the sun. Sadly, he was never to build it.

He did build many other things, including a lovely little weatherboard cubby house (probably without peer on the island) for Mum when she was a girl, subsequently turned into a storage shed. And he also constructed some kind of ferris wheel or carousel (I never got it clear in my mind and it was long gone when I was a child) on which Mum used to play. It always struck me as a rather sad image, this only child of elderly (by the standards of the time) parents, running around like a mouse in a wheel. In fact, Mum says that she was perfectly happy swinging to and fro on it. At that time I found it hard to imagine that Mum (or any other mother) could ever have been a child, even though there were plenty of signs at 'The Pines' that she had once been young. For a start, Uncle Gren still called her by her childhood nickname, 'Tops' (short for 'Topsy'). Books from her schooldays at Ventnor State School down the road, were still around. The part of the Ventnor beach where we swam, at the end of Rainbow Road, was called 'The School Beach' because students from the school, including Mum, walked down there to swim. Nana had kept some of Mum's toys, among them 'Timmy', Mum's toy dog with the bandaged leg, and 'Julie', her black mammy doll, both of whom lived in a big chest of drawers in Nana's and Grandpa's bedroom.

Various other treasures, such as a trunk of children's fancy dress costumes made from crepe paper, were kept in Mum's childhood summer bedroom, a sleepout with half walls and canvas blinds, which was part of the front verandah of the old house, overlooking Nana's cottage garden, in which a tangle of blue plumbago and pink-flowered passionfruit vine had taken over. (The house's front door was in the middle of that verandah, but no visitors ever entered that way.) When Mum slept out there, a possum lived in one of the rolled-up blinds and huntsman spiders sometimes dropped in. Nana was quite fond of spiders, which she saw as useful because they caught flies, and was very reluctant to kill them. Mum's sleepout was later converted into a bedroom for Susan and me. I liked sleeping in there, especially waking up in the mornings in my top bunk and being able to look through the wooden fretwork of the verandah and watch the sun rising over the sea. Not being a shepherd, I liked red skies at night and in the morning equally.

Over the years, the old part of the house had somehow turned back to front. Coming into it from the direction of the kitchen, you entered the dining-room, which was dominated by the captain's table from the *Speke*, a ship wrecked on the island in 1906. In the past the family had eaten most of their meals in there until the new building replaced the old wattle and daub kitchen. But I never saw anyone other than Nana eat in the dining-room. She used to have her lunch in there at about 3 p.m., having earlier fed everyone else in the kitchen. A nice sideboard that Grandpa had made stood against one wall. Other furniture in that room included two very odd chairs that he'd also made. Like everything else that he ever constructed, they were extremely solid. One was a round swivel desk chair, the other a curved armless lounge chair. Neither was remotely comfortable, except if you sat rigidly upright in the first of them, or slumped down in a hunched position in the second. A number of pictures hung on the wooden lining-board walls, including a print of a ship on what I remember as a storm-tossed sea (but which looked relatively calm on recent inspection), another known as 'Two Strings to Her Bow', depicting a young woman being escorted down a garden path by two would-be lovers, and a pretty little watercolour painting of Venice. When it was cold, Mum and I sometimes sat by the fire in the dining-room and read, our feet resting on the heavy wire screen (which, judging from its weight, Grandpa had probably also made).

Like the dining-room, the front room and Nana's and Grandpa's bedroom were furnished in Victorian manner, with considerable amounts of furniture. The front room, a kind of music room, was, in my eyes, the most interesting room at 'The Pines'. Moving in a clockwise direction from the door to the dining-room, propped open by a captain's chair, the seat of which was stuffed with seaweed, you encountered a cupboard containing Nana's large collection of sheet music. On top of it were a set of Chinese bells and the xylophone (really a glockenspiel) on which Grandpa sometimes played 'Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer'. Next came Nana's upright piano, with its padded stool for duets. In the corner was an old gramophone with a large trumpet-shaped speaker, resting on a cabinet filled with records which we were allowed to play on rainy days. Grandpa's beautiful Swiss music box, more than three feet wide, sat in front of the dark, disused fireplace. It was unquestionably one of Grandpa's better buys, having been bought for £5 at an auction in the early years of the century. Whether Susan and I slept on makeshift beds in that room, or in our adjacent room on the verandah, the music box often lulled us to sleep. Once it was wound up, one of its metal rolls would begin to turn and make music, with miniature bells, wooden clackers, drums, and an organ chiming in. Of the many melodies that it played, the one which I remember most clearly is 'I Dreamt That I Dwelt in Marble Halls' although I couldn't have told you its name then.[4] Beyond the music box was a music stand. Finally beside the front door was a chiffonier on which sat a small Edwardian wooden box, designed to look like a row of books.

There were also real books in that room, on the mantelpiece above the fireplace. One was the second volume of Mr Lloyd's *General History of England*, published in 1764, which was fragile and had to be handled with great care. Being old and English it was something of a ring-in, most of the others being Australian and much more recently published. They included Mum's childhood copy of *Chunuma*, the story of an Aboriginal boy, written by Mary Durack and illustrated by her sister Elizabeth. Several of C. J. Dennis's books of poetry, in their wartime green covers, were there, among them *Digger Smith*, dedicated by Dennis to the Australian Imperial Force. Among the other books was a copy of the *Centenary Gift Book*, compiled by a committee of women to celebrate the centenary in 1934 of European settlement in Victoria, which Nana had been given that year for her forty-third birthday.[5] She would not thank me for mentioning her age. When I once asked her how old she was, she rebuked me sharply, saying that you should never ask a lady that question.

When that conversation took place, I was tucked up under the blankets on the couch (more properly chaise longue) in Nana's and Grandpa's bedroom, where I slept for a while as a girl. It's likely that I had my feet on my earthenware bottle, filled with sand, which was heated in the stove by day and served as a bedwarmer. (It was wrapped in wool so that I didn't get burnt toes.) The wind was probably howling through the pine trees outside, as it frequently did. Nana was standing in front of her dressing table, unpinning her hair before going to bed. I loved the stories that she used to tell me at that time of night, although looking back not many of them had very happy endings. (One of her oft-repeated sayings was 'No good will come of this', which she applied to a multitude of circumstances.) The story of poor William Grossard was typical. A retired sea captain, he was staying with the McHaffies, the island's first permanent settlers, in 1868, the year that Nana's grandfather, Joseph Richardson, selected land on Phillip Island. Captain Grossard was apparently sitting on the verandah of the McHaffies' homestead, which was situated between the future site of 'The Pines' and Green Lake, on the way towards The Nobbies, when a gun was accidentally discharged, mortally wounding him. He was buried on the cliff overlooking McHaffie's Reef and the Hen and Chickens Rocks. I liked going to 'The Lonely Grave', as his resting place had become known, and looking at his grey granite tombstone under the shade of a cypress tree.

Nana became ill in 1966, and briefly came to stay with us in Melbourne, so that Mum could look after her. I remember sitting beside her bed in our sunroom, listening to her raspy breathing. I wasn't frightened, although I must surely have known that she was dying. Nor do I think that she would have been afraid, had she been conscious. She was not the kind of person to 'rage against the dying of the light'.[6] Soon afterwards she was taken to a nearby private hospital, where she died the next day. After a funeral at St Philip's in Cowes, she was buried, alongside many other family members, in the island cemetery at Rhyll, on another hill looking out over Western Port. She left no will.

A couple of weeks later, I turned thirteen. Holidays at 'The Pines' continued. The next summer (and for the following five summers), I had a holiday job at the old tearooms at The Nobbies, making sandwiches, serving meals, selling souvenirs, staffing the telescopes used by tourists to view the seals on Seal Rocks, and washing and drying mountains of dishes. That same summer (1966–67) I had my first date, at the pictures at the Shire Hall in Cowes, holding hot and clammy hands with a nice local boy whom I'd met at work. We corresponded for some time after I returned to Melbourne, but I no longer have his letters.

Around that time, because I was interested in historical things, Mum must have given me Nana's small Edwardian wooden box that sat on the chiffonier. I slid open the box's secret compartment and took out the pretty little key that it contained. Using the key to open the concealed lock, I lifted up the lid, and found in it a collection of letters that a man called Wilson Tong had written to Nana. He was a New Zealand soldier who served on the Western Front in the Great War. I wrote my responses to his letters in Melbourne in the late 1990s, more than thirty years after Nana's death and at a time when I too was facing my own mortality.