



A second start: a new life!

George had escaped England after rifts with family and torturous schooldays. From fourteen onwards he was drinking, playing truant from school, and becoming quite accomplished as a pool player. With all this in the rear-view mirror, he stepped aboard SS Oriana, at the tender age of sixteen, not knowing quite what he was going towards, but hoping at least that it might herald some improvement on what had gone before.

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Soon after the ocean liner had tracked across Port Phillip Bay to dock in Port Melbourne, the lanky teenager, who had by now changed from Elvis 'flop-top' to Beatles 'mop-top', was leaning on the wooden top-rail, casually watching as the four people he was expecting to see, made their way up the sloping gangway from shore to ship. He gave a gentle wave, then snapped a picture with the new camera his family in Cornwall had given him, just before leaving.

That shot became etched in his memory, showing the dark-haired woman in the lead - still as fine-looking as he remembered, but older now - glancing in his direction and waving back; followed by a fair-haired trio of son, daughter, and noticeably tall father bringing up the rear. Unlike the lady in front, none of the others seemed to have picked him out from the crowd lining the deck. This alone, perhaps indicated some inbuilt, unstated connection, between the two.

That sunny winter's day in Melbourne held a certain excitement for George and the lady he had not seen for ten years. The young man, now a shade under six feet tall, remembered her as a very gentle person, when she was with him for a few months those many years ago, caring for him and taking him to school on his first day (from where he promptly ran away on the second!). Since then she had continued to send airmail letters, on a regular basis, telling him all about life in Australia. At times he had replied too, but perhaps not as often as he should have. For the lady, the day was significant because it held the potential to begin to quell the torment she had gone through since leaving George - her firstborn son - after marriage to the tall blonde Australian, with whom she had fallen in love at the Edinburgh Festival.

Her two children, both tall and slim - after their father - were intrigued as to what this new interloping *uncle* from '*Beatle-land*' might be like. Officially George (even his name mimicked one of the fab four) was coming to stay, billed as their mother's younger brother: in fact, almost unbelievably, 25 years younger! They had been told he would join their family household in Ballarat - a smaller provincial city, about 75 miles inland from Melbourne - and from there would attend a local secondary school. He was a few years older, so would he be like a mate? Or would he want to boss them around? They had discussed all this in private and out of their parent's earshot, thus on the day the visitor arrived, they had formed a joint, albeit somewhat secret understanding, that all their questions were on the verge of being answered.

Their father, it could be said, was outwardly pleased to welcome the lad, whom he realised could in time become his stepson, but if pushed he would have admitted to a little apprehension about the newcomer's arrival, and how his presence might affect his well-formed nuclear family. The man's uneasiness tracked back to those circumstances he remembered only too well, when he had last seen George as a toddler in Yorkshire, and had then swept his mother off her feet, away from the boy ...and out of the country. George took it all in his stride. For him it was like an adventure in the geography classroom: the only subject at secondary school he had had much time for. He wasn't

quite sure what to expect from, or how to react to, his newfound family, but he did know that he had been enthralled to see the ruins of Pompei, along with the Suez Canal and streets of Colombo, plus all the other delights on the way. Now, he was even more captivated by the thought of getting to grips with this vast land called Australia. It was seeing the place, rather than meeting the people, which underpinned the real fascination for the young man, though of course he very much appreciated their invitation. At that time, the British Government was subsidising emigration to Australia – the journey cost just 10 pounds - but though George appeared like a sponsored immigrant, his passage had in fact been paid in full, by his stepfather to be.

If George had known then, the detail he came to know later about his birthright, he may have held a different attitude vis-à-vis this quite major move to a new land and home, ten thousand miles distant from his country of birth. At the time, he simply thought he had come to stay with his older sister and family for a while – an extended holiday of sorts - and he was going to make the most of their invitation, come what may. If he ended up staying for good, then so be it: at sixteen the world was his oyster!

George recalls the events at that time:

“Here I was, sweet sixteen and - apart from a bit of cavorting around in the school bus on the way home from the Christmas party - never been kissed in earnest. Yet somehow, I’d managed to travel half-way round the planet on my own, and didn’t seem particularly concerned about leaving the family I had known throughout my childhood, in favour of adopting a relatively unknown quantity in another country.

Looking back, it seemed an extraordinary thing to do, but then again, us teenagers are resilient and resourceful creatures; often quite single-minded. I loved geography and maps and the thought of travel to anywhere and everywhere: faraway countries and mysterious capitals were like a magnet to my mind at that time. As well as all that, back in Cornwall I was under severe threat of being thrown out of school, and though I might have been quite willful at times, I was not stupid: I knew it could seriously affect my

prospects of any future studies and work and suchlike, so I grabbed the lifeline when it came hurtling towards me - from 'the land down under' - and hung on resolutely.

Ever since I became aware of the grand charade regarding my early life, I have often wondered just how my emigration to Australia was organized (without the person who was actually travelling – me - knowing anything about it). Now with the benefit of hindsight, I can sense a clever continuance of that cover up, which began before I was born. I was not privy to any of the necessary details, such as birth certificate; passport and tickets, etc.: everything was arranged by grandfather, or aunties perhaps. At sixteen of course, I could have been fully involved, but that option was never taken: the detail was all done for me somewhere in the background.

But perhaps even more importantly, I would also have loved to have known just what the people who steered that course, thought would be the ensuing result. Had it all been planned for a long time, perhaps even mooted when my mother left me behind in Yorkshire as a toddler. Something like:

“And don't forget mam, I want George to come out to live with me as soon as he is old enough to travel on his own.”

Or perhaps it all came about on the spur of the moment - a result of my errant behaviour at school and home – in order to save me from self-destruction ... Akin to:

“You'd better send him out to me dad. I'll see what to do once he gets here. He'll be better off in Australia.”

In retrospect, it wasn't so much that I had been seriously misled at the time – that I suppose was part and parcel of the whole thing – but what consumed me more, was the exact intention of those who were involved in planning my transfer from family in England to something similar in Australia. Was it envisioned that I would live with Dorothy as her younger brother and become an uncle to her kids, or was the plan for her to disclose the truth and nothing but the truth, and thus take me into the fold as the eldest of her three children? I suspect the latter; but that it failed to materialise because

- and this is a bit of a guess - John, her Australian husband, who would have had significant influence over the whole matter, had second thoughts, and contrived to veto the idea of full disclosure. This may have been at the very last minute (even perhaps after I had arrived on their doorstep) and something of a repeat from years earlier, when he had conspired to separate me from my mother as a three-year-old.

Having said this, John did become a very good stepfather to me (though only in actions, never in name) and I became fond of this large man, who was so loving and generous to everyone: a gentle giant in all respects. Many years later he wrote to me, throwing some light on the circumstances which prevailed in those days, when I was a toddler in Yorkshire; a situation which may still have influenced his thinking a decade or so later, when I arrived to join his family. His type-written letter went as follows:

My role, all those years ago, leaves much to be desired. I was about 23 at the time and had spent from 18 to 22 in the army. My father died while I was in Japan, and my mother had died only a few weeks before I met Dorothy in Scotland, during the music and drama festival in Edinburgh.

I went to her home in Yorkshire and lived with your family. I don't know what your memory of this time would be - there was quite a table full. As you know your mother was the eldest of six siblings (you were in fact deemed the seventh). Dorothy's mam and dad were wonderful people and you were very much part of their large family. Our romance blossomed and she had the task of telling me she had a child by an airman, already married.

When we decided to get married, Dorothy asked me to take you to Australia. I was faced with the decision, which has haunted me ever since. I had very little money and was 12,000 miles from home. I wanted to get back to Australia as soon as possible and arriving in Ballarat with a ready-made family troubled me. Things can be tough enough now for unmarried mothers, but in those days, prejudices prevailed that were straight out of Charles Dickens.

But the deciding factor was the love for you of Dorothy's mam and dad. Mam told me to take Dorothy to Australia, give her a good home and look after her. So, I am the black sheep; Dorothy didn't have a choice. She left you and her heart behind in England. I must confess to my youthful combination of bliss and ignorance. I did not understand the depth of her emotion. I suppose even then it was in her mind that somehow, she would get back to you.

I find this letter very difficult to write - it seems quite inadequate that I thought I did the right thing at the time.

Love, John.

He had written the letter a few years after I had confronted both my mother and him (on separate occasions) about the true details of my birth: my mother over the kitchen table and John over a beer at the saloon bar of the 'Old Coloners' club, a rather musty wood-panelled affair, catering specifically for the elite white men of Ballarat town. I suspect that in part, he wrote to me because the health of his wife – the love of his life - was deteriorating, and the guilt that had been there for more than thirty years, was welling up. It was I think, for him a cathartic exercise.

As I was reading the letter, it became plain to see that John was indeed the main reason for my life without a mother, and in retrospect the bitterness I had felt towards my mother was to some degree misplaced. What did I do about it? Well, nothing very much really. If I had been angry, I would have confronted him, but he was too nice a guy for that, or if I had been more considerate, I would have approached them together, in an act of reconciliation. But it pains me to say now, that I was too uncaring – or perhaps too timid - to confront either of them on a topic as thorny as this. In retrospect I have to admit I come across to myself as a bit of a wimp on the whole matter; when I should have taken the bull by the horns to at least try to make right some of the wrongs that had been done, both to me and to my mother. But I stepped back into the shadows to hide. If I had had the courage to confront the issue head on, it could have been a good thing for all concerned, which might have cleared the air and put things right, long before, first John my stepfather, and later Dorothy my mother, passed away.

After that, we never talked about anything much to do with my place – fact or fiction - in the family; though years later, when my mother's health was failing I did mention that I had come to know the son of my real father - a young boy who had attended the family meeting, along with his parents, just before I was born – and also repeated, what I had told her some years before, that I was aware of the real circumstances that underscored my own existence. Her response to that news was much less than enthusiastic. By then, the myth that had been concocted so many years before, and continued on when I arrived in Australia, had in her mind, become a warped sense of reality. Since those early days she had buried her head in religion, which increasingly, seemed to form an escape blanket, under which she could hide. For better or for worse, I left it at that.

And so, from time to time, I would visit and - at surface level - they would treat me in very much the same way as they always had done. I had arrived from England as the uncle of their children: five and seven years my junior. Later I would travel from Adelaide with my wife and young family, to stay for a few days in the Ballarat homestead, or vacation houses in the mountains or at the beach. Time passed by and nothing much changed: I was always her brother, always their uncle.”

It seemed like there was an unwritten law; and yet, once I had plucked up the courage to confront each of them at separate times – mother, father, son and daughter – they all knew the truth. But still the charade continued, year after year, after year ... until both father and mother died. How incredibly stupid. If I had been more of a courageous extrovert, I perhaps might one day, have stood on the dinner table to proclaim the truth, which in retrospect, I am sure would have been a huge relief to all concerned, lifting the veil and disguise - the punishment of untruth - after so many years.

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