

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 this backdrop, he stepped aboard SS Oriana, at the tender age of sixteen, aiming - with some degree of determination - for Australia and what he hoped was a bag-full of new opportunities.

Soon after the ocean liner had tracked across Port Phillip Bay to dock in Port Melbourne, the lanky teenager, who had by now developed a 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 back in Cornwall had given him, just before leaving England. The 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.

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 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 first born 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 the land of *The Beatles* might be like. Officially George was coming to stay, billed as their mother's younger brother: rather incredibly, 25 years younger in fact. They had been told he would join their family household in Ballarat - a smaller, provincial city, about 75 miles inland from Melbourne - and attend a local secondary school. He was 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 step-son, but if pushed he would have admitted to a little apprehension about the newcomer and how his presence would affect his well-formed nuclear family. The man's uneasiness tracked back to those well-remembered circumstances, 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. 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, plus the Suez Canal and all the other delights on the way, and now he was even more captivated by the thought of getting to grips with *the lucky country*: Australia. It was seeing the place, rather than meeting the people, that was the real fascination for this young man - coming in like a sponsored immigrant from the old country (though in actual fact his passage had in fact been paid for him by his step-father to be) - not that he didn't appreciate their invitation, of course.

He might have held a different attitude vis-à-vis this quite major move to Australia, if he had known then what he came to know later, about his birthright. But at that time, he simply thought he had come to stay with his older sister and her family for a while, and he was going to make the most of that ... as a jumping-off point to the country.

George recalls the events at that time:

“Here I was, sweet sixteen and - I have to admit, 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 I wasn’t 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.

Since then I’ve often wondered - much later in life, when I became aware of the whole charade regarding my early life - just how the whole business of what turned out to be my emigration to Australia, was planned and managed; and indeed, what the people involved thought would be the result. It was on the face of things a clever continuation of the concealment of my true birth details by older family members. I did not see my birth certificate and my passport was organized by my grandfather, or my aunties. Had this all been planned for a long time, perhaps even mooted when my mother, Doris, left me behind as a toddler – something like: “George can come out to live with me when he’s old enough to travel on his own.” - or did it come about on the spur, as a result of my errant behaviour, at school and home, to save me from my self-undoing?

In retrospect, it wasn’t so much that I had been seriously misled at the time - that I guess was part and parcel of the whole thing - what has consumed me more, since becoming aware of where I actually came from, was the exact intention of those who were involved in planning my family transfer. Was it envisioned that I would live with Dorothy and family as her younger brother and 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 was the case, but it failed to materialise, because - and this is a bit of a guess - John, her Australian husband, would have had a significant influence over the whole matter and perhaps might have contrived to veto the whole idea of disclosure at the last minute, just as he had conspired in the plot years before, to separate me from my mother..

John became a good stepfather to me (though only in actions, never in name) and I became very fond of this man, who was so loving and generous to all. Many years later he wrote to me, throwing some light on the circumstances which prevailed in those days when I was a toddler; 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 Doris in Edinburgh, during the music and drama festival in Scotland.

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 Doris 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, on separate occasions, confronted both my mother and him about my birth: my mother over the kitchen table and John at the saloon bar of the 'Old Coloners' a rather musty wood-panelled affair, catering specifically for the elite 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.

When I read 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 misguided. What did I do about it? Well, nothing 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 – and as well, too scared - to confront either of them on a topic as thorny as this. In retrospect I have to admit I came 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.

We never talked about anything much to do with my place – fact or fiction - in the family after that; 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 when he came to the family meeting 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."

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