



Home again to England

It was like a fast-action video game acted out in real-time: *The French Connection* with a faster car. I watched in horror as we zig-zagged back and forth across three lanes, powering on past a sprinkling of vehicles out for a Sunday morning drive. Glancing across at the speedo caused even more alarm: 140 miles per hour! Twice the limit and faster than I had ever been on four wheels!

A motorway signboard flashed by indicating a service stop ahead. Trying to sound as nonchalant as possible, whilst shouting to be heard above the scream of the engine, I called out to the driver:

“Hey Mike, could we stop for a bite? I’m famished after the flight; the food on board was crap.” It was not true, but I would say anything to escape this high velocity merry-go-motorway, even if it was only for brief respite.

“Sure George, sure,” he quipped back to me, swinging over to the left lane and releasing his foot from the gas, the exhaust burbling excitedly, as we powered down towards the legal speed ... and the exit lane.

I was returning to live in England, the country of my birth, after more than thirty years on the opposite side of the planet, in Australia. During the previous year, there had been a visit by myself and family to check out the scene. Now I was the frontrunner, returning to the fold for what was assumed to be for good: a scout tracking ahead, to arrange safe landing for the main posse following behind.

During the previous year I had met with Michael – not *Ferrari's Schumacher*, though perhaps that's who he thought he was - after applying for a job with his English learning academy. Mike was in fact my boss. The academy was a one-man show (my inclusion made it two) and the interview turned into a longer-than-planned beer drinking session, which we both drove away from, distinctly under the influence and certainly over the breath-test limit. Mike treated such mundane matters with elite disdain. My job like the academy was a bit of a scam, and involved teaching English on a one-to-one basis, to a young boy from an extremely well-healed South Korean family. Teaching took place at a most prestigious (and therefore exceedingly expensive) private school for boys in Cheltenham Spa, home to a handful of education institutions for the upper-class and well-endowed, whether that be British aristocracy or South Korean nouveau riche.

As well as being a formidable consumer of beer, I found that Mike was also relentlessly addicted to nicotine. Like his employee (me) he also taught foreign students on a one-to-one basis at the same hallowed halls, and when our timetables permitted we would meet for a cigarette-smoking challenge, washed down with bottomless cups of thick black coffee, whilst looking towards the main gate of the austere college which paid our way, from a vantage point in a rather exclusive coffee shop, across the street. This was a little over twenty years ago, and looking back to it now, it seems incredible that we were able to sit there and produce a smoke haze, in this select place for the well-heeled.

These were fun times, until I found out that my boss was screwing the rather cute (and extremely wealthy) mother of my young student. The subterfuge that Mike had to employ to maintain his pursuit of this Korean lady meant that I was often left alone for the coffee breaks ... or if and when he turned up, the coffee breaks would turn into a

rant from him, about his dealings with her. All this of course had to be kept from the son – my innocent young pupil - though at times I got the feeling that the young lad knew more than he let on. It was without doubt, an intriguing return to my homeland.

The last I heard of Mike, was of him attempting to resist arrest whilst being hauled off a *747 Jumbo* in Hong Kong, charged with smoking in the toilet. I can just hear him now as he was being handcuffed:

“My God young man, how do you expect me to exist for 14 hours without a smoke. You need to provide a smoking room. ... Would you like a cigarette by the way?”

Underneath it all he was such a charming individual: a fascinating guy who lived life to the extreme and looked destined to die young because of it ... either behind the wheel of a Lamborghini, or from compound failure of liver and lung, or in more combative circumstances, at the hands of an irate father of some young child he was tutoring!

Mike earned a bomb from the Eton-esque school; but paid me peanuts. That was not the case with a summer-school position I managed to secure, teaching English to visiting students, who arrived each year from a girl’s high school in Tokyo. The job was a dream: one hundred fifteen-year-old girls divided into ten classes; thus ten girls per class, five days a week, four lessons a day, sports in the afternoons and three separate day-long excursions to the *Dreaming Spires of Oxford*, *Shakespeare’s Stratford* and the *Roman baths in Bath*. At the end of the three-week heist, we gathered for a staff party where pay-packets were handed out in brown paper envelopes ... no questions asked!

This job, which I stumbled upon by chance, had its amusing moments. For instance, I was given the role of squash coach in the afternoon sports sessions, and while I think I had previously seen a squash court, actually playing on one was a novel experience. Fortunately, a few of the girls were at my level, most were way below. On the day trips out, the teachers had their favourite hideaways in each of the historical towns; these tended to be the most bland of pubs in some anonymous back alley. Thus, after the girls had scurried off for their obligatory afternoon High Street shopping, us classroom

mentors would gather for lunch and untold rounds of drinks, before returning to the meeting point at the allotted hour, hardly able to negotiate the steps up into the bus.

There was a general feeling that the educative value of these jaunts to historical places was slightly overrated: that these girls were invigorated by dolls from *The Alice Shop*, rather than the history of *Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll)* the author and somewhat eccentric academic, across the road in Christchurch College. And of course this was true: acquiring name-brand souvenirs from high street shops was quite high on the agenda, but there could be glorious exceptions to the rule, as noted in the following poem, which I wrote during my final year of those summer school delights.

Excursions in History

*The excursions were the sweetest part
Of this sixteen-day sojourn:
Shakespeare's Stratford,
Dreaming spires of Oxford,
Sunning in the gardens on the Avon's banks at Bath.
Prepositions of place
Useful now in practice,
Translated from the classroom and so put out to work.*

*But could these tours of England's heart
Be enough to please
Young Japanese ladies,
Keen to find the delicacies
In those High Street castles, such as 'Next' and 'Gap'.
For whom the 'Alice Shop'
And 'Peter Rabbit's Place'
Meant so much more than two thousand years
Of history, on view from Roman times in Bath.
... Mostly not.*

*But there were a few – a glorious few,
Who could see beyond the tourist hordes,
To glimpse a past of majesty and meaning
That reflected back
To make the tours worthwhile.*

For those few balmy summer months after returning to England, my scouting operation appeared to be going well. Then the summer schools finished, and Mike disappeared, reported in dispatches to be living with a wealthy lady in Seoul. My long-lost family flew in from the antipodes and found me high and dry, with no income. My partner had pre-arranged a job-swap before arrival, but England was by no means the cheapest of places to live, so it became imperative for me to help bolster the household coffers.

After a month or two of getting used to life in Cheltenham Spa - settling into the rented house I had arranged and getting two daughters into school - I stumbled on a local group whose work was aligned to education about development, and resembled in some ways what I had been doing some years before in Australia, the main difference being that while my previous links had been with India, the new group was connected to Kenya. More specifically, they linked to the Far West of that country and had facilitated a township link between Cheltenham and the third biggest urban area: a town on the shores of Lake Victoria called Kisumu.

This Gloucestershire-based organization, named *Rendezvous* - run by a self-centred man whom I came with time to detest – had a fascinating range of enterprises, with a mini-Oxfam style shop at street level, a cosy café down below and rooms above for offices and meeting space. With my Australian experience in a similar world, I soon became involved in their work, and before long went about developing a subdivision for schools, as part of the overall effort. Suddenly, I was back in the world of *Global Education*. It seemed my destiny to be there.

For the first time I launched into the idea of three-way links, and soon after beginning work at *Rendezvous* I managed to create a Kenya – UK – India triangle for schools, grounded and building on the original outreach work from Australia. This meant reconnecting to previous partners, now old friends, based in Mumbai. As it transpired, the triangular country formation became a feature of all the work I was to be associated with for the next ten years, and during that time we moved from schools to include universities and after that community youth. Thus our main target groups (loosely

termed *youth*) could be anywhere in the age range from five to twenty-five years, coming from each of three countries, and representing any of three continents.

The man who headed up the Cheltenham group was an interesting study in ideology and obtuse survival tactics, rolled together to consume everything and everyone he touched. This was way before Jeremy Corbyn hit the headlines as leader of the *British Labour Party*, but the two could have been soul mates, even twins, because they looked and sounded almost identical, each in their late sixties within juxtaposed generations, and both coming from the North of England. It was an eerie experience for me, as I watched Jezza destroy Labour, through sheer pigheadedness, much as Denis from Cheltenham had made a total mess of running *his charitable* organization. Like Corbyn he was a man with a smattering of devotees, but one whom the majority had little time for. I too fell into the latter bracket for both.

And it was *his* organization, for Denis was the founder, president, secretary, and treasurer, all rolled into one, with a puppet committee that hardly ever met, and even when it did would always bend to his wishes. There was one memorable night - after our initial friendship had started to sour, and things in general were also beginning to fall apart between Denis and his devoted entourage - at an Annual General Meeting of perhaps 30 or 40 people, in the upstairs rooms of the organisation's base - when the once-exalted leader became so irate he ended up chasing a couple of committee members down the stairs, out the front door and along the street outside: a sight under the streetlights, to behold!

It wasn't long after that, when I realised things were going way off-track, and began to separate my affairs from those of Rendezvous. Denis of course, was dead against that, pursuing both me and a new associate of mine with never-ending zeal, threatening theft and false accounting, all of which was untrue. It took a full two years, which incorporated a raft of accusations – totally unfounded – before we were able to completely sever the ties. I came to recognize this as a much-too-common trait amongst smaller Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) and charities the world over - to be controlled and

operated, often on the borders of legality, by one person – and a few years later I had to contend with something very similar, but in a Kenyan setting.

John, the new associate whom I had brought on board, helped enormously to enable a break-away from the clutches of *Rendezvous*. He was a formidable character whom at first, even Denis was a bit hesitant to confront (though after a while he overcame those inhibitions and went about life, like a toothy terrier around our ankles, trying to make matters as equally uncomfortable for both of us, as he possibly could). My first encounter with John – this man who would come to be my colleague and whom I also would come to see as valued mentor - occurred after I spotted him at a local community meeting, reporting back on alleged improper dealings by one of *Rendezvous'* offshoot organisations. My main interest in his report was to see how the spin-off group would fair. They had been subjected to the same treatment by *Rendezvous* (which in fact meant by Denis) as I was now suffering, which from my viewpoint was not a nice process to withstand. It too was a trumped-up case and John treated it with the disdain it deserved, rising to the occasion within that community gathering.

John delivered the report in an assured manner which I was to become familiar with; sincerity and grace were hallmarks of his style, as well as being a brilliant orator. After a glittering career which included two honorary doctorates for work relating to urban regeneration, with a special focus on community youth, John took early retirement following the tragic death of his wife (well known for her development work with Oxfam). Still under sixty, he went from being the busy head of *Groundwork* - a multi-million pound, cross-UK outfit - to mowing the lawn in front of his Cheltenham house, and I could tell he was ready to find a new challenge. So I pressed him to help me ... and after giving it some thought, he accepted.

From there we worked together very closely for more than a decade until his untimely death in 2011. He put his considerable efforts and influence into the venture (a constant hallmark of his character) and in the middle of all that, he became my mentor. And though I introduced him to the field of *Global Education* in the United Kingdom – of

which in characteristic style, he rose to be the person in charge - he taught me so much in return, that I will be forever in his debt.

In truth, I never fully understood how or why this happened. Beside John, I was a bit of a rough diamond, where he – despite a lowly background - was now the fine-cut product. He spoke the Queen's English, while my voice was tinged with nasal Australian vowels: a shade more mellow than Crocodile Dundee, but indeed still quite noticeable. At first sight he was a daunting guy, big and imposing in stature who scared many people - me included initially - but when I got to know him, I found the best, most dependable friend in the world.

John was well known for two traits: he did not do detail (as they say) and he did not suffer fools. Thus, in my work alongside him, I was the one to make sure all the fine points were in place and I had to know what I was talking about. Once I got those two items straight, we were good to go, on any undertaking. We turned out to be a well-honed team that was able to tackle a common challenge from opposing angles, resulting in a valid, composite solution.

He joined me in both Kenya and India, to help deliver major conferences, while along the way introduced me to The Farmer's Club in the backstreets of Whitehall, and Lord Paul Tyler over coffee at Portcullis House (an offshoot of the parliament building). He was honoured with an O.B.E. in 2002, and I think had he lived longer, would have received the Queen's sword. Sadly, that was not to be: John died at the age of 72, still a comparatively young man, with a lot to give.

Once we had broken away from Rendezvous, John and I started up a unique tri-country programme at university level. It was part of a UK-wide initiative, with our fledgling Cheltenham-based organization being chosen to deliver the England component. This was a step up to a new level: contacts in high places and enough funding to support a well-rounded programme. The University of Gloucestershire became our local partner, which too brought with it previously unknown credibility and pulling power, while our

newfound wealth enabled accommodation just near the centre of Cheltenham, along with well-qualified support staff.

For my partner and I, and our two beautiful daughters, Cheltenham became home for more than a decade. We had jobs that paid modest salaries, but they involved work that we both enjoyed (arguably the more important aspect). The girls went to one of the best state-run schools in the country, and from there onto London universities. In many ways my return from the southern hemisphere had been a roaring success.

Cheltenham itself was a town of two halves - upper and lower - an interesting place to be domiciled because it encapsulated a good cross selection of British society. *Waddon*, a down-at-heel suburb which housed the Cheltenham Town Football Club, and the place where we lived for a while after arrival, rubbed shoulders with *Battledown*, where I would often go jogging along gated-community streets, to look in awe at mansions which resembled castles. The High Street, like the whole town, was a street of two halves, named literally *Upper* and *Lower*. Our offices were situated appropriately, just off the somewhat seedy *Lower* section, while the other end housed fashionable boutique brands from Knightsbridge and Mayfair in London.

The county of Gloucestershire was for me an absorbing work location, also in part because of its diversity. Most people think of Gloucestershire as a privileged region, but some of the schools and their communities, which I worked with in the City of Gloucester itself, were far from prestigious; visit them and you leave with a very different impression of the county. Cheltenham is usually identified as upper-crust, but taken as one whole, that is also not true, while Stroud, the town which completes the county's urban triangle, is one of the most alternative, beer drinking, weed smoking municipalities in the country. I adored the down-to-earth community feel and friendliness of Stroud, much more than the other two.

The various programmes that we managed over the decade or so I lived there, reflected the diversity of the region. A project which focused on school gardens for example, included tiny Cotswold village schools with fifty pupils, alongside massive town

secondaries and then at least three schools which catered for mentally and physically handicapped youth. We ran another incredibly interesting little project that took Muslim women into schools, to speak with students – usually white, Anglo-Saxon - and demonstrate aspects to do with their lives and their culture: dress, food, customs, etc. That was a project which very clearly reflected one of the main aims, which was all about helping people to understand different perspectives, even though it dealt with issues at home on the doorstep ... and inside Gloucestershire.

Away from the work routine, Cheltenham brought some glorious new friends: men who fitted my usual template of strangely accented, boundary pushing characters, with untold charisma. One such was Pierre, who liked to claim he didn't have an accent, but in character and voice remained almost as French as the day he was born. With Mick Jagger-like craggy features and vocals, long greying hair and beard - leftovers from a hippie background in the 70s - he still looked and sounded the part, but had sunk down the anarchic scale a tad, to become house-husband fighting like cat and dog over petty issues, with his very English wife, whom he had known since those flower-power days.

I loved his devil-may-care attitude to life, with lurid gestures and loud raspberries in the direction of disagreement. He smoked brown-papered *rollies* and it was his habit to roll one, whenever he got behind the wheel of his early model *VW Golf*: red in colour, though like the owner, wearied by age into a pinkish mix. We would sit well into the night, on concrete steps, overlooking his back garden - even during the bitter cold months of winter – for discussion on worldly affairs, fortified by inordinate quantities of red wine. He went not so much on taste, but alcohol content: 14% was good, 15% outstanding! Pierre was born to buck the system – verbally at least - and one day having just finished his PhD, announced on the back steps, that he would not complete the requirements requested by the *viva* panel. “*Up their asses,*” he said with his usual vitriolic fervour. “*If they want me to make any more changes, they can go and fuck themselves!*” ... all delivered in gloriously French-accented English, accompanied by numerous unseemly gestures and several very audible raspberries. And he stuck by his

word resolutely, if perhaps a little foolhardily, by binning the thesis which had taken several years to research and write. A great friend and remarkable character.

Return to Britain also provided me with the opportunity to re-unite with close family in Cornwall: those whom I had run away from more than thirty years before. This was moderately successful, with trips down to the South West less often than should have been, and hardly any family doing the reverse trip to visit me and my entourage in Gloucestershire. Although there had been short-term Cornish vacations, since leaving for Australia more than thirty years before, by the time I came back to live there it was all a bit too late; kids had grown into parents and a new brood was on the way. I was too far removed and too out of touch to re-assimilate in a complete sense. What I did find though, was that I was distant enough to be no threat, yet close enough to be trusted, meaning that family members would use me as a sounding board, to help sort out their personal challenges. For that reason alone, it was well worth returning to the enclave of my upbringing and rekindling a bit of my past.

During this Cheltenham Spa period, I wrote a number of poems which related to family relationships. The verses below reflect abuse within the wider family, which was divulged in confidence to me. The alleged abuser has since died.

Strange Revelations

*Everyone faces an unexpected word,
But a stranger revelation I have not heard,
Concerning family matters of a very trusted soul
Who had erred rather gravely, just a few years ago.*

*Now my time (at 49) has brought a jolt or two,
But this disclosure came, like a bolt from the blue,
Casting further doubt on the sanctity at stake,
Of a tarnished family background over solid silver plate.*

*Concealments are made to test secrets that are held,
Their unveiling thus ensuring their concealers can be felled.
Bad trees in the forest, cleared away to make safe
The purity of life, in what seems a perfect place.*

*The falsity of this is so clearly there to see,
For innocent young saplings all make semi-rotten trees.
Some conceal, some expose, their less than wholesome parts,
But most (if not all), grow into old and wrinkled farts.*

*The choice thus remains for the new ones coming on,
To conceal or condemn the secrets they have won:
To keep momentum going or to cut and start again,
To support chronic anguish, or deal acute dose of pain.*

Cornwall, UK, 1998