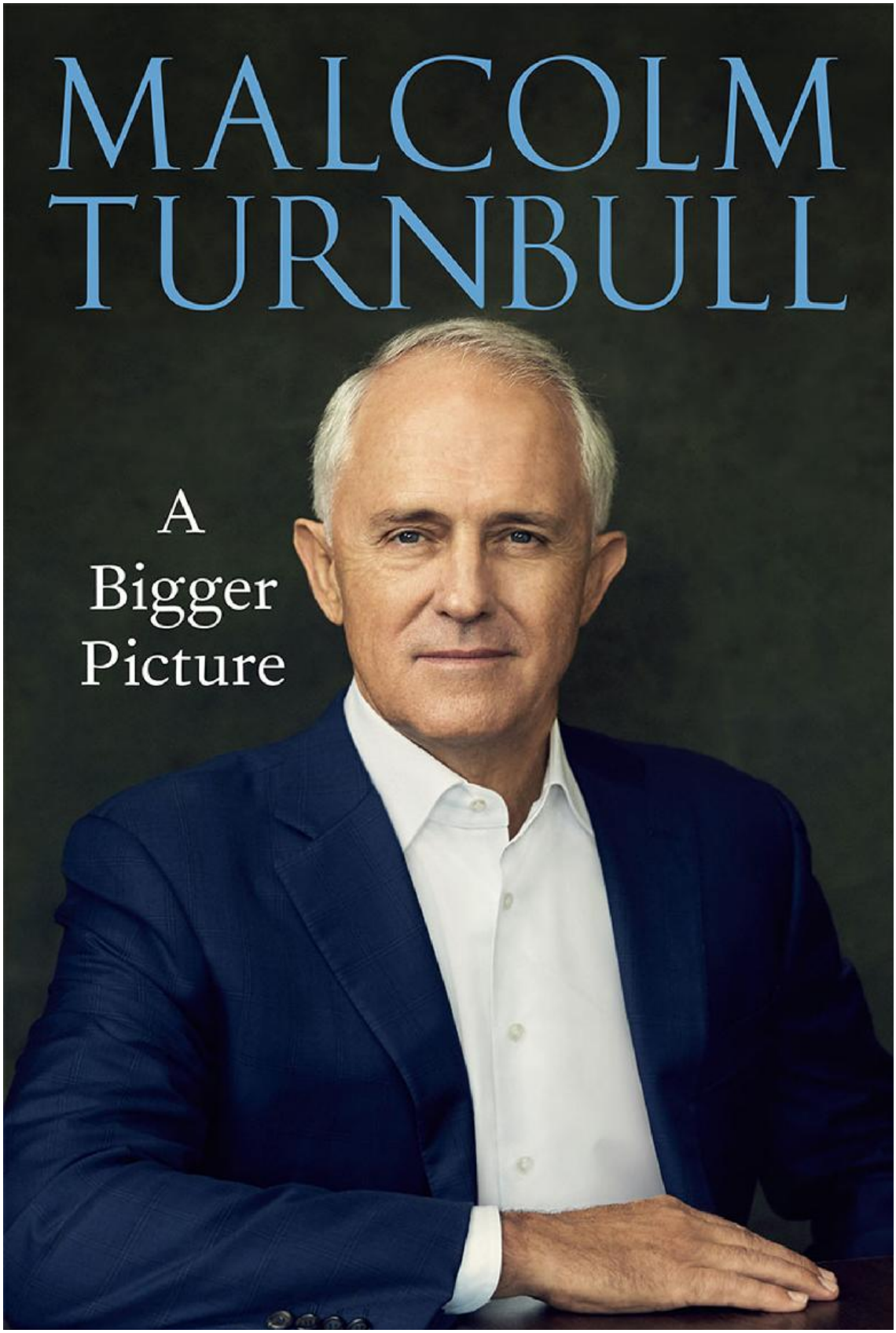
MALCOLM
TURNBULL
A
Bigger
Picture

To Lucy

MALCOLM TURNBULL

A Bigger Picture

Hardie Grant
BOOKS

Contents

I

Beginnings

(1954–82)

CHAPTER 1

Coral and Bruce

What are my first memories of my parents? The earliest are almost all of Mum. Tall, dramatic and eloquent, Coral Magnolia Lansbury was a writer –

of radio serials, of plays, of poetry and, in her later years, of novels. When I was small, her writing was confined to radio serials – each episode 15

minutes long and all involving lengthy and complex romances. The longest running one was *Portia Faces Life*, and then there was *The Reverend Matthew*, among others. I didn't listen to them on the radio but often heard them as they were being written. Mum usually banged them out on an old Remington typewriter, sitting at her desk in the living room of our flat at 119 New South Head Road, Vaucluse. But when she was selling more

serials than usual, an old lady (who was probably in her 40s!) would be enlisted to type at Mum's dictation. Some weeks she'd write half-a-dozen 15-minute episodes.

I'd sit under the desk watching my mother, one long leg flung over the armchair, head swung back as she became transported in the drama of her imagination. She'd act out every part:

George [*deep voice, on the verge of tears*]: Forgive me, Maria, forgive me. [*He sobs*]

Maria [*cool and deadly*]: This is the end, George. [*Sound of revolver being cocked*]

George [*sensing his doom*]: No, Maria, remember our love, remember … [*gunshot*]

Maria [*screaming*]: What have I done?

All this was dutifully transcribed by the typist without any sign of

emotional recognition. Not sobs, screams or the loud BANG of the gunshot caused her to turn a hair.

Portia ran for nearly 20 years and over 3500 15-minute episodes, of which Coral wrote many. *Reverend Matthew* went for years too, and over a

thousand episodes.

Mum's parents started their family late. May Lansbury was eight years older than her husband, Oscar, and gave birth to Mum's only sibling, also named Oscar, when she was 39. Coral was born seven years later.

My uncle Oscar was a keen sailor and, according to Mum, ran away to

sea to join the merchant navy. He finished his working days as the

harbourmaster in Port Adelaide.

Coral was a brilliant student, both at North Sydney Girls High School and at Sydney University. She won prizes in history as well as the Henry Lawson Prize for Poetry in 1948 for a verse play about an Aboriginal

maiden called 'Krubi of the Illawarra'. She was both delighted and appalled when I won the same prize in 1974 for a hundred lines of rhyming doggerel I'd put together as a speech for a Union Night Debate, with the

characteristically frivolous topic of 'A woman's just a woman, but a good cigar is a smoke'.

My maternal grandparents were both actors. They'd come out to

Australia from England in the early 1920s as part of the cast of *The Vagabond King*. Oscar, a baritone, had a wonderfully rich and beautiful voice. He spoke in perfect unaccented English. He didn't sound posh or grand, nor did he ever acquire an Australian twang.

Oscar's father, Arthur Lansbury, was a dentist who immigrated to

Australia in 1884. After stints in Sydney, Newcastle and Brisbane – where Oscar was born in 1892 – Arthur established his practice in Roma. In his advertisements in *The Western Star and Roma Advertiser*, he claimed to be

‘the only qualified dentist west of Brisbane’. He returned to England with his family in 1901.

Arthur’s brother, George Lansbury, had also immigrated to Australia in 1884 but stayed only a year and returned to England to immerse himself in radical politics. He helped found – and later led – the British Labour Party.

George Lansbury was best known for championing women’s right to vote, hence his nickname ‘Petticoat George’. He was also a Christian socialist, a pacifist and a passionate believer in unilateral disarmament, an idealistic position that became increasingly unrealistic as the dictators rearmed in the 1930s.

George’s son Edgar, also a Labour politician, married an Irish actress, Moyna Macgill. Their daughter, the actress Angela Lansbury, came out to Sydney in 1958 for the filming of *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, based

on Ray Lawler’s 1957 play about the lives and loves of Queensland cane cutters. A sign of the times: none of the four leads were Australians – but Angela certainly did a better Australian accent than Ernest Borgnine!

Meeting Aunty Angela and playing with her (somewhat older) children is among my first memories. More than 50 years later we met again when she was in Australia appearing in the stage version of *Driving Miss Daisy.*

Angela and Mum shared a distinctively Lansbury look.

Oscar was a star of radio, first as a singer and then as a master of sound effects. He’d performed in music hall as well as opera, and he taught me several music-hall numbers, including ‘The Man Who Broke the Bank at

Monte Carlo’. Every number had its own ‘patter’, a line of chat that went before, during and at the end of the song as part of the entertainment.

As a child, I loved visiting Pop Lansbury’s studio at 2GB, an Aladdin’s cave of delights. The radio serials were produced live in the studio and so, at the appropriate moment, Oscar might have to fire a gun, bang a drum,

drop something in a barrel of water, close a door, break a window, simulate the wind through the trees or not too quietly creep up a gravel path.

It was probably because of this connection with radio drama that Mum

began writing radio plays at 16. An early one was a Gothic romance called *Ringarra*, which involved a fierce, giant pig ravaging the Australian countryside (*Hound of the Baskervilles Goes Down Under*, you could say).

She later turned that into a novel. There were many others, all dramatic, all romantic, with handsome heroes and swooning but plucky heroines. While studying English and history at Sydney University, Coral supported herself by writing.

Two of her university friends I remember coming to dinner when I was

very young were Neville Wran and Lionel Murphy. The former would go

on to be premier of New South Wales and the latter a senator for New South Wales, attorney-general in the Whitlam government and finally a High

Court judge. Neville and Lionel were firm friends at university. Where Neville was as handsome as any movie actor, Lionel was quite the reverse.

His red and bulbous nose later became a cartoonist's delight. Murphy's career was colourful and controversial, but even his harshest critics (and he had many of them) would concede that he was remarkably charming. He

could make the dullest dinner companion feel that he or she was the most fascinating person he'd ever met. I brought that up with him once, and he

replied, 'While men are seduced through their eyes, women are seduced through their ears.'

At university, Mum and Lionel had dated briefly. But I know very little about her romantic life prior to my birth. On 20 February 1953, Coral made a most improbable marriage to George Edwards, a 67-year-old radio actor and producer. He was known as 'the man of a thousand voices' for the way he used to write, produce and then act all the parts in his own radio plays.

But not long after the wedding (Edwards's fourth) the groom fell ill, and he died on 28 August that year. Decades later, Mum claimed that her fearsome mother had bullied her into this match. It can't have been for financial benefit as very little of Edwards's modest fortune found its way to his young widow, despite the best efforts of her lawyer, Neville Wran.

However, the young widow wasn't entirely bereft of companionship. Her marital home was a comfortable apartment at 14 Longworth Avenue, Point Piper, overlooking Lady Martins Beach. In the back basement of the rather more modest block of flats next door at number 12, then called Kenilworth, there lived an impecunious but devilishly handsome young salesman called Bruce Turnbull.

According to Mum, Bruce won her over by swimming up and down the

beach pretending to be a porpoise. This may seem an improbable mode of seduction and at odds with Murphy's theory. But, in any event, I am proof that the seduction was successful. I was born on 24 October 1954, though my parents didn't marry until the following year. I hope this fact makes the thousands of people who've called me a bastard feel vindicated.

When he and Coral met, Bruce didn't have a bean and Coral was not yet established as a scriptwriter. It wasn't long before the widow was chucked out of the Edwards beachside apartment and the pair found themselves

living in a series of small flats in the eastern suburbs. The first one I remember was the flat at 119 New South Head Road.

Coral and Bruce were an unlikely couple. She was a university graduate, a writer and prodigious reader of novels, poetry, history; never happier than in a library. Her friends were mostly writers and actors like herself, although she was a keenly competitive squash player. Bruce's parents were both schoolteachers. He was born in Tumut, but spent most of his childhood in the coalfields of the Hunter Valley, playing rugby for Maitland. At 16 he left Cessnock High and worked as an apprentice electrician in the

coalmines. After the war he went into sales. By the mid-50s, he'd become a

hotel broker. Bruce wasn't an intellectual; he wasn't a reader. He regretted not having finished high school or having gone to university. The fact that both of his parents were better educated than he was seemed to prey on him.

His father, Fred Turnbull, had been born on the family farm at Euroka, in the Mid North Coast of New South Wales. He started work cutting timber on the Comboyne Plateau and then took up school teaching before

volunteering to fight with the Australian Imperial Force in 1915. Despite being gassed in the First World War, he re-enlisted to service in the Second as a captain. I still have his sword.

Like many bushmen of his era, Fred was extremely well read. He knew

off by heart the works of Henry Lawson, William Ogilvie and Banjo

Paterson, and most of Shakespeare as well. Fred and my grandmother,

Mary, or 'Top', retired to a fibro cottage at Wangi Wangi on Lake

Macquarie and I often stayed with them: days filled with fishing on the lake for flathead, building steps down to the beach where Fred kept his boat or pottering about in his workshop. I'm not sure that reciting bush ballads helped our fishing expeditions, but I loved listening to him.

Fred's erudition at full flight did have its embarrassing moments.

Occasionally, we'd go into Newcastle on some retail expedition or other and generally found our way to the large co-op known as The Store. One day, when I was about seven or eight, Fred was having no luck getting served. The sales assistant gave my grandfather a pretty rude brush-off, and so the old man drew himself up to his full height and delivered Coriolanus's contemptuous denunciation of Rome:

You common cry of curs! whose breath I hate

As reek o' the rotten fens, whose loves I prize

As the dead carcasses of unburied men

That do corrupt mine air.

And concluding, as he strode out (me following, mystified, in his wake): Despising, for you, the city, thus I turn my back:

There is a world elsewhere. **1**

The Turnbull side of the family had settled in Australia in 1802 in the shape of John Turnbull and his wife, Ann Warr, and four children. They were Presbyterian Scots, and they'd made an epic sea voyage of 121 days on the *Coromandel*. As free settlers they were given land on the Hawkesbury

River, where they helped build, in 1809, the Ebenezer Chapel, the oldest church building in Australia.

John Turnbull was 51 when he arrived at Sydney Cove. Family legend

has it that Governor King, who went down to welcome the colony's

newcomers, greeted my forebear with the words, 'What are you doing here, old man, at the end of the earth, with one foot in the grave and the other out of it?' John outlived the governor, was one of the first customers of the Bank of New South Wales when it was founded in 1817, and died in 1834, aged 83. He was a remarkable man – when he was 70 he was attacked by a bushranger on the Parramatta Road near where Sydney University is today.

He held off his assailant until help arrived.

The Turnbulls and the other Hawkesbury River settlers were dismayed by the corrupt military clique of the New South Wales Corps that monopolised the supply of rum to the infant colony as well as engaging in other corrupt activity. They were delighted when from 1806 Governor Bligh sought to bring the Rum Corps' leader, John Macarthur, to book, and appalled when Bligh was overthrown in a military coup in 1808. They were in no position to directly oppose the military but sent a number of petitions to London complaining about the mutiny and extolling Bligh's virtues. New South Wales offered them the chance to own and farm some land, build a chapel and worship as they saw fit.

So admiring of Bligh were the Hawkesbury River settlers that many of the older families called their children after the governor, including John and Ann Turnbull, who named their youngest son William Bligh Turnbull.

Happily, my forebears kept up the tradition and so I am Malcolm Bligh Turnbull. This news will disappoint those who assume that I am either directly descended from the notoriously cruel William Bligh of the *Bounty*, or that my parents, anticipating my brutal character, named me accordingly.

Now, it is rather ironic that John Turnbull came to a penal colony in search of freedom, but that's precisely what he and the other Scottish settlers on the *Coromandel* were seeking. In England at that time, there was considerable discrimination against any faith other than that of the Church of England – non-conformist Protestants like the Turnbulls were second-class citizens, as were Catholics and Jews. New South Wales offered them the chance to own some land, farm it as they saw fit, build a chapel, and worship as they saw fit. And they took great risks embarking on their tiny ship to have that freedom.

I am also descended from another of John's sons, Ralph, who married Grace Cavanough in 1813 on the Hawkesbury. Grace was one of the first people to be born on the hitherto uninhabited Norfolk Island – in 1794. She was the daughter of Owen Cavanough and his convict wife, Margaret Darnell. Owen had been a sailor on the *Sirius* and, so the legend goes, was the first sailor to land at Sydney Cove in 1788: he'd held the longboat steady as the officers stepped ashore.

It may have been that Bruce's lack of literary accomplishment was a reaction against his father's reading and reciting, but in any event he was highly intelligent, and above all he was incredibly charming. Dad had a disarming smile and style that could win over anyone – ideal for a salesman. In fact, one of his anxieties about me was that I was too serious and 'heavy'. 'Lighten up, Malcolm,' he'd say, despairing when I'd get

myself into long and, to his mind, turgid discussions about politics and history with people we met in the pub.

Bruce was also very athletic. He was good at rugby, swimming, surfing and running. He ran marathons, was a pretty good campdrafter and a

reasonable boxer. In some ways he was an idealised Aussie male of his era

– street smart, handsome, sporty and funny.

So, my first memories of family were of an amazingly beautiful and

brilliant mother who doted on me, and an overshadowed father who was in the background except for when we escaped to the beach, when we entered into an all-male world that was entirely Dad's. Having observed their miserable relationship first-hand, I can only assume that I was conceived in a moment of raw passion, and my arrival caused them to stick together and marry. Other than me, I cannot think of anything they had in common.

Mum made a number of fatal errors in 'husband management'. She

patronised Bruce and regularly reminded him of his lack of education. She also reminded him of how broke he was and how our slender family

fortunes depended on her income as a scriptwriter (which was probably true). A good lesson learned at a young age: don't belittle people (least of all your spouse).

As a baby I'd been sick with pneumonia, leading to what appeared to be chronic asthma. I was also pigeon toed. The doctors prescribed surgical boots to correct my feet and lots of rest and coddling to deal with my asthma. Any parent with a child choking for breath knows how terrifying asthma can be – imagine what it was like before Ventolin.

Dad was sceptical of the medical professionals, however. He knew a bloke who'd been knock kneed and pigeon toed and, apparently, generally sickly of demeanour. Somehow or other this invalid had secured a job as a beach inspector and Dad observed that after some months of walking up and down

Bondi Beach, the man was restored to good health. Walking in the soft sand fixed his posture, and the exercise and salt air cured the rest.

The upshot was that Bruce took me down to Bondi Beach every morning.

We'd walk and then, when I got older, run up and down the beach in the soft sand. I became a strong swimmer and, before too long, I was no longer tripping over my feet, and my asthma was at least manageable.

Bondi was most definitely not a fashionable place in those days. The

saying, 'You can take the boy out of Bondi, but you can't take the Bondi out of the boy', wasn't a compliment. There were hardly any cafes, no

restaurants, and the blocks of flats on the Ben Buckler headland, whose apartments now sell for millions of dollars apiece, were known as

'cockroach castles'.

Bruce was a member of the North Bondi Surf Club, where we always

went to change and shower. Consequently, I grew up in a world where the whole colourful diversity of the eastern suburbs would stand around in the change rooms gossiping and joking. There'd be a Supreme Court judge

having a shower next to a garbo, a police superintendent next to one of gambling tsar Joe Taylor's enforcers, a hilarious Jewish crowd in the rag trade … take your pick, they were all there.

It was an ideal place to learn important lessons. No matter how rich or educated you might be, everyone looks the same with their gear off.

Respect everybody but defer to nobody. And, above all, just relax, be yourself, and you can get along with anyone.

While I was doing blokey things with Dad at the surf club, Mum was

busy ensuring that I loved books and learning. She read to me for hours and hours and I became her 'little bookworm'. The first proper book I can

remember her reading me was Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and then the entire

'Lord of the Rings' series. For years after she left us, I'd read 'Lord of the Rings', all three volumes, several times a year. Looking back, I can see that I was trying to recapture those happy days when she read me those stories about dwarves and dragons, hobbits and elves. I don't think I could have been any closer to Coral, nor do I think she could have been a better or more attentive mother.

It's probably not correct to describe Coral as religious, but she was certainly spiritually interested. This may have been hereditary. Her parents had been theosophists, followers of the teachings of the famous Madame Blavatsky and indeed Arthur Conan Doyle. My maternal grandmother was

keen on séances. Coral never tried to get me interested in theosophy but I do remember her having a Seventh Day Adventist period (there used to be a reading room in Rose Bay) and, more troublingly, a Christian Scientist period. She said later that her dalliance with Christian Science was because she thought it would be a comfort to me, as a sick child, to know that prayer can heal you. However, I had a little friend at school whose parents were Christian Scientists. According to local gossip, when his mother became ill, she refused any medical assistance, preferring to rely on Mary Baker

Eddy's teachings to cure her. Not surprisingly, they didn't. I cannot recall how old I was, but from an early age this convinced me that God helps those who help themselves.

I can only dimly recall my parents sleeping in the same bed. For most of the time we lived together, Bruce slept in a single bed in a tiny room at the back of the kitchen. They seemed to lead separate lives. When Coral had dinner parties, Bruce rarely attended. But like many unhappily married couples, they stayed together for my sake and I wasn't old enough to be troubled by their lack of affection.

At this stage we lived in Flat 2, 119 New South Head Road, Vaucluse. It was a small, rather dark flat of two bedrooms, or three if you included the back room where Dad usually slept. We rented it from a frightening old

man called Clarrie Ball, who lived next door in Flat 1 with a snappy dog that didn't like me or the series of Persian cats Mum owned.

Why Mum liked cats so much I can't say. Her own mother had bred

Yorkshire terriers, and when I was born she owned a boxer dog called

Sheba. But by the time I could remember these things, our animal world was that of majestic, disdainful cats. First, a pure white Persian I called Ribbons, and then the most characterful of all cats, Figaro, a large smoke-grey Persian, who made friends with all the old ladies in the flats up and down New South Head Road. This enabled him to eat five or six times

every day.

Most of my friends at Vaucluse Public School lived in houses with big backyards and dogs. I didn't envy their real estate but would have liked to

own a dog. They seemed much more useful than cats – they would catch things, follow you down to the shops and come when you called.

The good thing about living at 119 New South Head Road was that there was a park across the street where we local kids built cubbyhouses and forts in the bushes. And a bus ride took me down to Watsons Bay and Camp

Cove, where a university friend of my mother, Rhonda Williams, lived in a cottage on the beach with her children, Lisa and Mark. The two university friends had given birth to baby boys within a few days of each other and a family myth (I hope it was a myth) was that the two little brown babies were so alike that one day Coral took the wrong one home. Summer after summer, we were inseparable.

Back then, Camp Cove and Watsons Bay weren't the impossibly

expensive suburbs they are today, and many of the old fishermen's cottages were still occupied by fishermen. There were even some sheep living at Nielsen Park in Vaucluse. The beaches, the rocky headlands, even the old fortifications around South Head were my playground with Mark and our

other friends. In short, all the best things in my childhood were free. The children of millionaires and struggling salesmen alike were catching the same waves at Bondi, digging the same holes in the sand at Camp Cove. It sounds perfectly unbelievable, even absurd, to many people, but the eastern suburbs of Sydney and the area's beach and sporting culture were

thoroughly egalitarian.

Life changed markedly when I went to boarding school at age eight, to the Sydney Grammar Preparatory School at St Ives. I'm not sure why my

parents chose Sydney Grammar. Perhaps it was because Uncle Oscar had

gone there (before he ran away to sea). I'm sure Dad would have preferred to have me at home, but between his wife's increasing absences and his own – he was often away for days at a time, going around the countryside selling pubs – it wasn't practicable.

Boarding school was the prelude to the end of the marriage. By 1964,

Coral was spending most of her time with John Salmon, a professor of

history at the University of New South Wales (UNSW), and when he

accepted a post in New Zealand she left with him.

None of this was explained to me at the time. Dad started to play a bigger role in my life. He was often the only parent there on weekends when I was

home from boarding school. At first, I was told that Mum was in New Zealand studying for another degree (she did in fact obtain a PhD from Victoria University in Wellington). Bruce was determined that I not know, or have reason to suspect, my mother had left us. So, her absence crept up on me, like a slow chill around the heart.

I hated boarding school more than I could ever describe. The Sydney

Grammar boarding house at St Ives was a brutal, badly managed place.

Bullying was rife and I was particularly unpopular. This was no doubt initially because I wet my bed. The other boys taunted and mocked me, all of which made me more miserable, more anxious and more likely to wet the sheets.

The matron at St Ives made me get up early and take my sheets to the

laundry. Alone I'd wash them and then hang them up on the line, where everyone could see Turnbull's sheets drying – a flapping white reminder of my incontinence. Later, a kinder matron appeared, who dispensed with this daily humiliation. No doubt she recognised that adding to my anxiety was hardly going to be a cure.

Both my parents kept the letters I wrote to them from boarding school.

They alternated between bogus pluckiness – 'We had a great game of

cricket today, Dad' – to heart-rending pleas to take me home.

I went over to visit Mum in New Zealand when I was 10. The visit was

the subject of extensive negotiation between my parents. After their deaths, I read the correspondence in which Bruce reluctantly agreed to my going but on the condition that John Salmon wasn't to be living in the house while I was there. He insisted that the pretence that my mother was simply

temporarily absent and living alone must be maintained. Coral agreed to all of this.

When I arrived at the airport in Auckland I was greeted by my mother

and her friend Professor Salmon, as I always called him. She welcomed me with the words, 'Darling, Professor Salmon and I are getting married.' At that stage I didn't even know my parents were planning to divorce. Worse still, John Salmon had children of his own, who now seemed to feature in Mum's life.

It's striking that I didn't bitterly resent Mum for leaving me. The only explanation I can give is that Dad was relentless in praising her and

reassuring me constantly that my mother loved me more than anything else on earth. He literally never spoke an ill word about her.

Reading the reproachful letters he wrote Coral at the time, I still find it hard to believe that he could put down his pen, seal up the aerogramme and then turn to his son and tell him the object of his recrimination was the most brilliant, beautiful and adoring mother in the whole world. As we all know, many, if not most, divorces result in the parents freely expressing their reservations about each other to the children, which no doubt results in the kids thinking less of both parents on the basis that some, at least, of the criticism must be true. So, Bruce's self-discipline was remarkable,

especially since Coral's departure resulted in us losing almost all our furniture (she had it shipped over to New Zealand) and then our flat. A few years before they split up, Coral and Bruce had banded together with the other tenants to buy the building from our landlord, Mr Ball, but Coral had put up almost all the cash, and so when the flat was sold she took the proceeds as well as all the furniture, except for my bed.

Financially, we'd never been carefree. Coral had earned good money

when she was writing several radio serials at the same time, but by the early 1960s, radio was being overtaken by television, and Coral didn't adapt to the new medium. Instead she returned to academia, writing a slim but

important volume on the evocation of Australia as an Arcadian paradise in 19th-century English literature. I should note that her other enduring academic interest was the history of the Australian Workers' Union (AWU).

Together with Bede Nairn, she co-authored the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* entry on William Guthrie Spence, the AWU founder, and she wrote several papers on the shearers' strike and the early years of trade unionism in Australia.

Coral loved to say how I startled some of her friends one day. They asked what I wanted to be when I grew up. 'The general secretary of the

Australian Workers' Union,' I replied. I have no idea whether this is true –

Coral was a fabulous fabulist.

By the time she left Australia, Coral was no longer earning the big

money she had as a scriptwriter. Her income as a university tutor was modest, although she supplemented that from time to time with television appearances with Eric Baume on *Beauty and the Beast*. As the occasional grumpy letter from the school bursar indicates, Bruce often struggled to pay my boarding-school fees.

Dad and I moved to a smaller rented flat in 13 Gladswood Gardens,

Double Bay, where we lived like two bachelors. We had no furniture in our

lounge room until I returned from school one weekend and encountered two enormous white fibreglass armchairs, each on a swivel and looking like something out of *The Jetsons*. A dentist friend of Bruce had decided to refurbish his waiting room (good move, I thought) and had given him the chairs. A childhood dominated by a bookish mother was replaced by one with a father whose interests were largely athletic.

Our relationship was more like that of a big brother and a little brother than father and son. Bruce taught me how to cook (simply), wash and iron shirts. If he had work to do in the country when I was home, he'd take me with him. A stocktake was always required when a hotel was sold and so I'd pitch in counting beer glasses and drip trays and checking them off the inventory. We spent more time at the beach and at the football. I led two lives, a bookish, academic one at school, and then a thoroughly blokey life with Bruce.

By the mid-60s, I was regularly running with Bruce, first up and down Bondi Beach and soon, in what was regarded then as a big effort, from North Bondi to Bronte and back – about 8 kilometres!

Dad and I did much of our jogging together in Centennial Park and the crowd was the same eclectic mix I used to see at the surf club (most of them were members). Our regular running crew included 'Paddington' Jack

Florentino, a garbo; Billy Bridges, a real estate agent; Henric Nicholas, an up-and-coming barrister; and Ernie Boyd and Ted Helliar, who, like Dad, were in the pub business.

The leader of all the Centennial Park joggers was the terrifying George Daldry, who ran the gym at City Tattersalls Club and at different times trained our international rugby teams, rowing crews – you name it. George was Mr Fitness. He was also as tough as they come. As a boy soldier in the Second World War, he was captured by the Japanese and exhibited in a

cage, half starved, as an example of the scrawny youths the Australians were sending into war.

George survived the war, so he said, because he obtained the stainless-steel dixie of a dead British soldier; they were easier to keep clean than the cast-iron Australian ones. He became fanatical about cleanliness and after the war almost always dressed immaculately in white.

Running round the park, many of the men competed with tales of their

romantic adventures. Dad, like the lawyers, made no admissions. He placed

a high value on discretion, and most of the other joggers' stories were as mundane as they were implausible.

But there was one raconteur who was in a league of his own. Bruce

Gyngell was one of the world's most successful television executives and was always a great friend and mentor to me. At different times he ran Nine, Seven and SBS. In the UK he ran ATV for Sir Lew Grade and later (as a result of my suggestion) TV AM. He was tall, slim and always elegant – my father used to say Gyngo was like a tailor's dummy: anything you threw on him looked smart. After all the local larrikins had told their tales of bonking in Bondi Junction and other not so romantic locations, it was Gyngell's turn.

'I was flying on the Concorde from New York to London when I noticed

that the exquisitely beautiful stewardess was staring at me. I went back to reading my papers and then when I looked up she was staring at me again.

“Mr Gyngell,” she said, “you are so handsome, I cannot take my eyes off you.”’

‘Jeez,’ said one of the other joggers. ‘What did you do then, mate?’

‘I squeezed her hand gently and discreetly, I did not want to make a

scene, and quietly said to her, “Ask the captain to radio the Dorchester and reserve the Terrace Suite.”’

‘And then what happened when you got to London?’ they asked Gyngell.

‘Three days and nights of indescribable passion. She wrote me a sonnet of appreciation.’

Well, I thought, jogging along in the early morning. This was at least a better class of bullshit.

CHAPTER 2

Books, bananas and Jack Lang: school

and university

Alastair Mackerras, the master of the Lower School, welcomed me to

Sydney Grammar School in 1967. His office was at the southern end of the old sandstone school building on College Street. Next door was the

classroom where he taught 1A – the brightest of the new boys, including me. Alastair looked like a rumpled bear. A classicist and mathematician, he was a natural bachelor who preferred the company of children to adults. He used to invite groups of boys to stay with him in his house at Kiama on the South Coast over the holidays. Nowadays it’d be unheard of, but there was never any hint of impropriety.

His understudy was another bachelor classicist, John Sheldon. Alastair and John were two of the most charismatic teachers I ever had. Between them they could make Latin and Greek interesting for 12- and 13-year-old boys. Both were eccentric, and thoroughly Australian in an Anglophile way that was common with academics of that era. As I recalled in a speech in 2012, long before you saw Sheldon you knew he was there. Hanging like a smoky whisper in the cool air of the morning, the unmistakably sweet smell of his tobacco left a trail through the panelled corridors. No one else smoked Balkan Sobranie, a blend of tobacco from Virginia, Macedonia and Syria.

John Sheldon, like his tobacco, was a blend of the conventional and the exotic. He was entranced by the ancient world. In aid of Latin, Greek or indeed Sanskrit, he made no claims of utility or relevance – although many could be made. But you couldn't help feeling that without a more than fleeting acquaintance with the classics, John Sheldon wouldn't regard you

as, well, adequately educated. He radiated a love of learning that was, for me at least, quite irresistible.

Sydney Grammar School students felt a strong sense of cultural

continuity. As we trudged through *Kennedy's Revised Latin Primer* or Hillard & Botting, we knew we were treading a well-worn path. Some of our textbooks had been printed in the 1890s. One of the Latin masters, Mr Swan, invariably addressed boys by their father's name if he'd taught them

– it was unclear whether this was because he actually thought we were still in the late 1940s or because when you're considering Caesar's suppression of the Gauls, a generation here or there is easy to overlook.

John taught us Greek in Second Year, in 1968, and I did fairly well. We had another teacher the next year; I was underwhelmed by the experience and in my exam I scored 6 per cent – presumably for writing my name, and that in English. I resolved to give up the subject, but John persuaded me to continue and I did so only because he was taking Greek the following year.

In that year, with John Sheldon as my teacher, I finished third in our class and fourth in the state. While Sheldon did teach me a little Greek and Latin,

he taught me something much more valuable and that is the profound – the central – importance of the charismatic teacher.

I continued boarding, now at the boarding house at 43 St Marks Road,

Randwick; there were only about 70 of us (out of a school of over 1100) and we'd get the 339 bus in and out of the city. Like the boarding house at St Ives, the one at Randwick was badly run. Bullying was unchecked, and inappropriate, creepy conduct by masters wasn't uncommon. One master

was especially sleazy. When I was 14, my friend Ted Marr and I went to see Alastair Mackerras to complain about him. Alastair was an unworldly man, an innocent in many ways, and he couldn't understand what our concern was. I told him that if he didn't move the master out of the boarding school, I'd walk across the park to see the chairman of trustees, whom I knew to be the very grand Sir Norman Cowper, senior partner of Allen Allen & Hemsley. When Ted audibly gasped, I realised that I might have been

testing Mackerras's patience. He didn't complain, simply assured us that wouldn't be necessary, and by the next term the master in question was no longer at the boarding house.

I continued to hate boarding. The only redeeming aspect was that

because Grammar was a non-denominational school, the boys went to the church of their own affiliation on Sundays. Being under the

misapprehension that I'd been baptised and as a Presbyterian, I went to the Randwick Presbyterian Church and joined the fellowship, which included quite a few of the Sydney Girls High students I used to chat with on the 339

bus.

The housemaster lived in an old villa, a relic of Randwick's late 19th-century magnificence. The boarding house closed in 1976, the dormitory blocks were demolished and sold to developers, but the mansion, Rothesay, remained. It was rather eerie to visit it a few years back when its new

owner, Professor Michael Feneley, was the Liberal candidate for Kingsford Smith in the 2016 election.

Bruce was an ideal father but wasn't suited for matrimony. He always

had a complicated love life, with several girlfriends on the go at any time; he relished the intrigue and occasional drama. As his weekend and school holidays flatmate, I not only witnessed this but received a running

commentary of advice – useful had I wanted to have three or four

girlfriends at the same time without any of them finding out about the others!

Yet to my immense surprise, in 1968 Bruce told me he'd married Judy

Womersley. I knew Judy reasonably well – she used to come around on

Sundays when I was home from boarding school and cook dinner for us –

but I hadn't expected Bruce to marry her or anyone else. I was 14 by then, so didn't have the resentment a younger child might have, and I wished them well. Soon after that, Bruce kicked a few goals in his business and we were able to move out of the small rented flat in Double Bay into what seemed an enormous apartment – in Longworth Avenue, Point Piper.

Happily, when I was 16, my years of boarding school ended; I moved home and into a more conventional domestic existence.

Judy used to describe herself as the 'WSM', or wicked stepmother; she was anything but. She'd have liked children of her own; I was a bit old to mother, but she was good to me. Sadly, the marriage ended in divorce 12

years later. Bruce's fault entirely – monogamy wasn't his thing. Still, we all stayed friends.

As Dad's business continued to thrive, it became easier for him to pay the fees. But I never forgot how hard he worked to send me to Grammar and resolved to prove his investment was worthwhile. From an academic point

of view I was a strong performer, especially in the humanities, and very engaged politically, joining Ted Marr in the Moratorium demonstrations

against the Vietnam War. I loved history, often embarking on my own independent research on topics as diverse as ‘Who Are the Imperialists?’ in which I compared British, US and Soviet imperialism, through to ‘The Life and Times of Cosimo de’ Medici’. I was thrilled years later when my

daughter, Daisy, majored in Renaissance history at Sydney University.

Grammar had an extensive library, but I discovered a back room full of books deemed out of date by the librarians. I loved rummaging through the old bookshelves, and developed a keen interest not just in history, but how history was perceived at different times – I probably didn’t know the word for it then, but it was the start of a lifelong interest in historiography and, of course, the first real historian in the Western tradition, Thucydides.

I was a mediocre mathematician. In that respect my son, Alex, is a good example of what I should have done. Alex was, like me, a pretty ordinary mathematician at school but he worked and worked at his maths after he went to Harvard and emerged highly numerate. An example of evolution, perhaps?

Even though Grammar’s reputation was largely academic, and we were

all acutely aware that it had produced two prime ministers, many leading lights in law and medicine and a swag of Rhodes Scholars, private boys’

schools of the day were overwhelmingly sporty. Thespians, debaters and intellectuals were suspect; the heroes were all footballers or cricketers. But especially after Mackerras became the headmaster in 1969, the tone of Grammar became more sympathetic to the arts. Music (for which I had no talent) thrived, but I was able to throw myself into debating and acting.

John Sheldon ensured we were well drilled in debating in the Lower

School. My debating partners included David Gonski, who was in the year ahead of me. In my final year, with Kim Swan and Steve Scholem, our team

won the GPS Debating Competition and I won the Lawrence Campbell

Oratory Competition – both rare achievements for Grammar in those days when the debating prizes were dominated by the Jesuits' Riverview. John O'Sullivan led the St Joseph's College team and, as with David, we have remained lifelong friends, our paths crossing frequently in business and then in politics.

However, while I enjoyed debating, it was the Globe Players, Grammar's drama society, that really engaged me. Of course, I relished the

showmanship of being on stage, the centre of attention, and, I should add,

the co-productions with girls' schools – Abbotsleigh in the first few years and then SCEGGS Darlinghurst.

But it was the poetry of Shakespeare that entranced me the most, and I loved the big long parts: Edgar in *King Lear*, Iago in *Othello*, Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and then, in my last year, Prospero in *The Tempest*. Our drama teacher, Tony Gallagher, was also often our English master. He adored Shakespeare so much he couldn't bear to cut the plays, so we did *King Lear* uncut – nearly four hours of it, and in the Great Hall of Sydney University, not known for its comfortable seats!

The Great Hall wasn't designed for theatrical performances and there

were no wings, so the cast had to enter from a side door which let out onto Science Road. I was waiting to go on as Edgar in his guise as Mad Tom on the opening night – I'd been made up in body paint that, together with a white loincloth, made me look more like a large, deeply tanned baby than a wild woodland maniac. So, I decided to roll around in the bushes and cover myself with sticks and dirt. As I was doing that, a young man was slowly cruising past in a smart MG, roof down, left arm around his beautiful companion. I couldn't resist bursting out of the bushes to surprise them.

I've never seen a car accelerate as fast and if that was the end of the affair

… well, forgive me.

I didn’t neglect rugby, however, and was a mediocre but enthusiastic

front-row forward, encouraged by Dad, who felt that sport and exercise would offset my thespian interests.

Once, displeased that I’d missed some of my patrols at North Bondi Surf Club (guilty as charged), he was up-front with his concerns: ‘Son, your problem is you spend too much time hanging around with sheilas and not enough time at the surf club. Keep going on that way and people will think you’re a poofter!’

‘Really, Dad?’ I said. ‘So, the way to ensure people don’t think I’m a poofter is to spend more time at the surf club having showers with lots of blokes!’

To which he burst out laughing, gave me a hug and said, ‘You’re right, Bozo, but just don’t miss the patrols!’

One of the more idiosyncratic but useful things I learned at Grammar was how to splice rope. It was compulsory for boys in Years 9 and 10 to be in the cadet corps, and enthusiasts could continue on for Years 11 and 12 if they chose. I did a year in the army cadets and then escaped to the naval

cadets, presided over by a wonderful history teacher, rugby coach and navy veteran named Clyde Slatyer. We had excursions to naval bases and ships, but by far the best fun was camping on tiny Snapper Island, located near the Iron Cove Bridge in Sydney Harbour. This was more rocky reef than island.

An eccentric old sailor called Len Forsythe had leased it from the navy in 1930 for use as a sea cadet training depot and he was still on the scene, although very much the ancient mariner, when I was visiting nearly 50

years ago.

The training depot had been built with bits and pieces scrounged from naval stores and decommissioned ships, and it was a paradise for me. Len had a fleet of 27-foot Montagu whalers, immensely heavy clinker-built boats used in the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) until the 1950s – mostly for training.

We used to row them around the harbour and sail them when there was a brisk breeze. We never tipped one over, which was just as well

because it would have gone straight to the bottom – I don't recall any buoyancy compartments!

I finished my time at Grammar as the senior prefect, and shared with Tim Murray the role of captain of the school, which, in Grammar's eccentric way, was for the top boy in humanities. The duxes of the school were Jim Colebatch and John Watson, both of whom went on to become neurologists, following their fathers into the medical profession (even more hereditary than law, in my experience). I left Grammar filled with confidence,

ambition but above all curiosity. Our Welsh history teacher, Alf Pickard, had encouraged wide reading and research and hadn't minded too much

when we occasionally invented imaginary references to see if he was

paying attention. And between the English and Classics departments I'd developed a love of words and etymology.

One of the first things my friend John Watson and I did after leaving school was to enrol in a typing course at the Bondi Evening College.

Clattering away on old Remingtons in a classroom full of teenage girls, we were the only males, but it was probably the most practical course of instruction either of us ever undertook – touch typing has stood me in good stead ever since.

I was always anxious to be financially independent and so as soon as I was old enough, I had part-time jobs – a bit of labouring and gardening mostly, while I was at school, and then in the long summer before I started

university, I found a job at the Sydney Fruit and Vegetable Markets, which in those days were in the centre of Chinatown, in Haymarket.

'Les Walters, Banana Merchants' was my first employer, and my job was to load boxes of bananas into and out of ripening rooms (where they were

gassed with carbon dioxide) and onto trucks. It was an early start, around 4

am, and I was finished by midday. I had an offsider but after a few weeks I noticed he wasn't working with us any more and I was doing a lot more lifting and carrying. So, I asked my boss for a raise; what one could tactfully describe as an industrial dispute followed. Out of the banana trade, I was relegated to working on the watermelons, which was the hardest

physical work I'd ever done – passing watermelons on and off trucks all day.

However, I reckoned my old boss owed me some money. My polite

request was met with a pretty abrupt refusal, so I decided to see if the massed ranks of Australia's labour movement would spring to my defence.

There wasn't any union coverage at the markets, as far as I could see, and so after knocking off my eight-hour shift at midday, I walked up Sussex Street to the NSW Labor Council. John Ducker, who was the president,

looked me up and down and said, 'I know who you should see – come and meet Bob Carr.' Ducker led me into a small side office, where a young, thin man in a white shirt, tie and with big black glasses was pounding away at a typewriter.

I was in football shorts, a T-shirt, boots and covered in sweat. I'd been working in a hot shed since four in the morning. After I told Bob my story, he thought for a minute and said, 'I've just finished a fantastic book about the politics of Eastern Europe. Do you want to borrow it?' I was taken aback – this seemed a long way from my struggles for wage justice in the city markets – and I told Bob, 'No, I just want you to help me get my money back.' It quickly became pretty obvious that Bob wasn't going to be much help there, and once I accepted that, we became good friends and in due course, Labor premier of New South Wales and Liberal prime minister of Australia respectively.

After that summer, in March 1973, I started at Sydney University doing a combined arts and law degree. I especially enjoyed medieval history; it

added the next chapter to my studies of ancient history at school and left me

with a lifelong interest in the history of medieval Spain in the time of el Cid.

I hadn't studied French at school beyond fourth form so shouldn't have been able to study French at university. But over the summer, while

working in the markets, I'd become friends with a girl visiting Sydney from Marseilles. She spoke no English and so by the time I got to university I thought I was pretty good. As he agreed to admit me, Professor Ross

Chambers said, 'You are quite fluent, but your grammar is appalling, you have a gangster's accent and quite a bit of your vocabulary is, in fact, Italian.'

Between reading *El Cantar del Mio Cid* and Camus's *La Peste*, I started writing for the university newspaper, *Honi Soit*, and then, after failing to be elected editor in a contest with two members of the Communist Party, I started writing as a freelancer for the *Nation Review*, a leftish weekly newspaper owned by Gordon Barton. Its editor was George Munster, a

Jewish refugee who escaped Europe with his parents before the Holocaust, and an intense chain smoker who seemed as old as time to me then (he was only 50).

The *Nation Review*'s Sydney office was a dingy set of rooms on George Street, near Railway Square, happily above the Malaya Restaurant, where I developed a taste for spicy foods, especially laksa, which I found to be the perfect cure for a heavy cold.

The *Nation Review*'s publisher was Richard Walsh, whom I rarely saw, and it was run on the smell of an oily rag. Well, that's how they justified paying me the distinctly unprincely sum of $30 per thousand words for my deathless prose.

Mostly I wrote about politics, and especially NSW state politics. At

university I read a lot about labour history, the foundation of the AWU, the efforts to create ‘one big union’, the clashes with the communists that finally led to the split in the 1950s. It was the 1920s and ’30s that most fascinated me, and particularly Jack Lang, the giant figure of Labor politics in that era.

Twice premier of New South Wales – in 1925–27 and 1930–32 – Lang

was a radical, the subject of a personality cult that has no counterpart in Australian politics, thank heavens. ‘Lang is greater than Lenin’ was the slogan on the posters and ‘Lang is Right’ buttons were everywhere as he battled with the banks and conservative opposition–controlled Legislative

Council. A populist, closer to Mussolini than to Lenin, he spoke to enormous rallies in The Domain, furiously denouncing the banks, the

communists and the big end of town – all with an unhealthy dose of

xenophobia as he railed against Jewish bankers and defended the White Australia Policy.

He’d parted ways with the federal Australian Labor Party (ALP)

government in 1931 – at the height of the Great Depression – over the payment of interest on English loans to the state government. Lang wanted to postpone payment and spend the money on public works in Australia; the federal government insisted on paying the interest as a priority. In the financial crisis that followed, Lang was dismissed as premier in 1932 by the English governor of New South Wales, Air Vice-Marshal Sir Philip Game.

It prefigured the sacking of Whitlam in 1975, which occurred just six weeks after Lang’s death.

Lang was 98 when he died. He was a giant man with a huge head and

intimidating even in the unsteady frailty of advanced old age. For the last few years of his life I often visited him in his old office in Nithsdale Street, south of Hyde Park. He was still editing his newspaper, the *Century*, by

then only 16 pages, and wrote most of the articles himself. I wanted to talk about the politics of the 1920s and ’30s, and Lang obliged me, denouncing his enemies, all long dead, as though their treacheries were only hours old.

Writing his obituary for the *Nation Review* in 1975, I observed: ‘Lang knew how to hate. He destroyed or attempted to destroy anyone who came in his way. He was convinced of his own rectitude and regarded anyone who

disagreed with him as a saboteur.’**1** But then he would turn to the here and now and hold forth about Whitlam and Fraser and all the political issues of the day.

His successor as NSW Labor leader, later premier and governor-general, was Bill McKell and he too was still alive and happy to be interviewed by me. So, I had a wonderful insight into the history of those times, especially since each of them, Lang in his late 90s and McKell in his 80s, despised the other.

With my tape recorder and notebook I’d shuttle between those old men.

As though in a time machine, they’d relive the struggles of a half-century before. It was quite a privilege; they were the only ones left of that era and they loved to talk. My lecturers were most impressed as one essay after

another was filled not with references on the reading list but quotes from the great men themselves.

Lang had split off the NSW Labor Party from the federal ALP in the

1930s. After being replaced by McKell in 1939, he was finally expelled in 1942 and started his own party. He’d ended his parliamentary career as an independent ‘Lang Labor’ MP in the federal parliament for one term, a thorn in the side of the Chifley Labor government. In large part due to a young Paul Keating’s efforts, all was forgiven in 1971 and he was

readmitted to the ALP.

Lang was bemused by my Liberal Party membership but didn’t seek to

persuade me to switch to Labor, although he did tell me a story that I never forgot.

'The Liberals have no loyalty or generosity – and no gratitude. The Labor Party is at least sentimental. Take Bertram Stevens, Sir Bertram Stevens …'

He almost licked his lips over the 'sir'. 'Well, Stevens was the man who led

the United Australia Party**2** into government after I was sacked. He helped

remove "Lang the Monster"! He defeated me in three elections! And yet, do you know, he died a pauper in the Lewisham Old Men's Hospital – they had no gratitude for their hero and he died without a penny or a friend.'

Which begs the question why I joined the Liberal and not the Labor

Party. Mum wasn't just a Labor historian but a supporter as well. I don't recall Dad being particularly partisan, so there was no strong Liberal impetus from home. But as I reflected on the two parties, while I admired the romance and history of the Labor movement, I always felt I was a

natural liberal, drawn to the entrepreneurial and enterprising. Of course, small-l liberals exist in both the major parties, but their natural home should be the Liberal Party and in those days I think it still was.

Around this time I came to know Bob Ellis, who'd go on to become a

Labor speechwriter and political commentator. For a while we worked

together on a script for a musical about Jack Lang. I lost it long ago and wish I hadn't. Bob and his composer partner, Patrick Flynn, had done well with a political musical about the life of an even earlier Labor politician, King O'Malley, and Jack Lang was, if anything, a more interesting and colourful character.

Ellis was inspired by the writing style of US novelist Norman Mailer, where the journalist is right there in the centre of the story. I found that attractive as well and did my own series of 'road trip' stories for *Nation*

Review when I travelled overseas for the first time in 1974. Armed with nothing more than infinite confidence and a dodgy business card, I talked my way into Richard Nixon's hideaway in San Clemente and interviewed

his ghostwriter, and also talked my way into the Alabama State Capitol, where I interviewed the governor and former presidential candidate George C. Wallace himself. Wallace was professing he was no longer a racist

segregationist, as he had most assuredly been in the 1960s. But I wasn't convinced. I couldn't help but notice that the Confederate star and bars flew everywhere in Montgomery; I only saw the stars and stripes on one building while I was there and that was the US Post Office. I kept these thoughts to myself after he produced a magnificent certificate and appointed me an honorary aide-de-camp and lieutenant colonel in the Alabama State Militia!

I was a long way from home after all.

I came home through the UK and Europe, rushing through the great

sights at the breakneck pace of millions of other young Australians. But I managed to squeeze in a train trip up to Walsall, the old industrial town near Birmingham whose Labour MP, John Stonehouse, had recently got into

financial troubles, faked his own death then escaped to Australia – where he'd been arrested. I wrote that his constituents weren't surprised he'd fled Down Under, one of them observing under their leaden sky, 'I mean, it's very sunny there now … in't?'**3**

Back in Australia, to augment my meagre earnings from the *Nation*

Review I used my sketchy journalistic credentials to get access to the NSW

parliamentary press gallery. After noticing that neither Channel Nine nor Radio 2SM had a full-time state parliamentary roundsman, I cold-called their management and persuaded them I could provide a cheap and cheerful voice from Macquarie Street. It was piecework – $12 per radio story that went to air for 2SM and $40 per story that went to air for Channel Nine.

Soon I'd completed my arts degree and had two years to go to finish law.

It was an exciting time in state politics to be a law student reporting in print, radio and TV. I was covering the 1976 election when Neville Wran brought 11 years of Liberal government to an end. In those days, most of the

parliament buildings were temporary timber structures, almost all of which were fire traps, and I was able to find my own cubbyhole in the press gallery and a quiet desk in the parliamentary library (rarely frequented by the honourable members) to pursue my law studies.

Paul Mullins was a legendary reporter for the Ten Network who, like most of his colleagues, was highly sceptical of the young stringer for Nine, and when I impertinently suggested he'd gone soft on the premier, Eric Willis, he king-hit me. A scuffle ensued, which concluded with me sitting on top of Paul in front of the enthralled parliamentary press gallery – most of whom were no doubt taking bets on who would prevail.

'Okay, Paul,' I said, 'I'm really sorry. I shouldn't have said that. Now if I get off you, can we just put all the furniture back before the police arrive?'

'Sure, mate,' said Paul. 'Apology accepted.'

Relieved, I stood up. So did Paul. And hit me again.

Well, we finally got sick of wrestling and someone said there were police on the way, so we quickly tidied things up and could pronounce, when the law did arrive, those immortal words, 'Nothing to see here.'

Working at the state parliament reacquainted me with my mother's old

friend, Neville Wran. However, Neville's press secretary, Brian Dale, was a master of media management and rightly suspected I was unlikely to be a reliable conveyor of the government line. Consequently, I was treated with caution and was never an intimate or an insider as some of the other

journalists became.

I did, however, make friends with some of the younger MPs, including

Paul Landa and Laurie Brereton. Brereton was 30 when Wran was elected and was disappointed not to be in the ministry. I took him to lunch at the Hyde Park Hotel.

'Mate, do you know most of these blokes Neville has put in cabinet are half dead – in their fifties,' and he leant forward to make the point, 'even in their sixties?'

Being 21 years of age, I could see his point. But then Laurie bucked up and raised his glass for a toast. 'Well, comrade, I console myself with this: where there's death there's hope!' Laurie and his wife, Trish, like Bob and Helena Carr, became good friends.

As if my workload wasn't enough, I found another job – as a copywriter for John Singleton's advertising agency, operating then from an old building in Darlinghurst across the road from the Tradesman's Arms Hotel.

Singleton specialised in direct hard-sell retail advertisements, and I wrote ads for Best & Less – 'Where do you get it? Can of baked beans 87 cents' –

as well as more refined copy for *The Bulletin* and other clients.

It was while working for Singleton that I first met Kerry Packer.

Singleton had asked us both out for dinner, along with a rather elegant Irish-born radio announcer called Claire Dunn. When one of Singleton's mates arrived, bringing with him his girlfriend and two 'friends' of hers, fairly obviously escorts, Claire turned up her nose at dining with them and

departed. The evening ended almost as soon as it began as Kerry obviously thought better of it too. 'Do you like Chinese, son?' he asked me. Leaving Singleton with the professionals, I climbed into the back of a Mercedes bearing Kerry's dad's FP plates, drove to a Chinese restaurant in Double Bay, picked up takeaway and repaired to his pile at 76 Victoria Road, Bellevue Hill.

'That was a narrow escape,' Kerry chuckled as he tucked into sweet and sour pork. By the time we'd polished off the food I think each of us was

somewhat warily intrigued by the other and remained that way for many years.

Singleton and I had our ups and downs – it was a pattern in just about all his friendships – but he treated me well. It always amused him to overhear me in my copywriting den filing stories for 2SM and signing off, 'Malcolm Turnbull, Parliament House'.

None of these jobs would have been possible had it not been for the

Marist Brothers, for it was they who'd ensured my old debating rival John O'Sullivan had perfectly legible handwriting. I attended hardly any lectures at law school but for $30 a week, Jos, my fellow student, would take a carbon copy of his own notes for me. Not only were they better notes than I'd have taken, they were legible; my handwriting was scrappy. This

practice wasn't unheard of: legend has it that Jim Spigelman, university medallist in law and later chief justice of New South Wales, attended next to no lectures. It was a more relaxed environment than that which law students face today.

Whether it was Singleton or the politicians or the guys in the press

gallery, I found myself then, as I did for many years, working with people older than me. Occasionally, a little voice in the back of my brain would ask, 'Why are these grown-ups listening to *me*?' I'd rented a flat in Elizabeth Bay – with so many jobs, I was making reasonable money, even saving a bit – and remarkably, my grades were holding up thanks to Jos's notes. I'd dropped out of the Liberal Party – better for a journalist to be a member of no party – but I was starting to develop firmer political

ambitions. Sitting in the press gallery, watching the politicians clash in the parliament below, I thought, I could do better than that.

CHAPTER 3

Journalism, Oxford, marriage and the Bar

Helped by Jos's notes I managed a few Distinctions in my legal studies and my multi-platform news career was humming along pretty well. Over the 1976–77 break, I returned to the UK. I wrote a few pieces for the *Nation Review*, including an interview with the Conservative MP Enoch Powell, a ferocious old man who in some respects reminded me of Jack Lang. I also interviewed Quintin Hogg, later Lord Hailsham. I remember him, perhaps suspecting I was dozing off with jet lag, emphasising a point by slamming his walking stick on his desk.

Fellow Sydney University debater Tony Renshaw and I went together to

the Cambridge Union. The debates there, and at Oxford, are in a

parliamentary style. The president, then Karan Thapar (matched by Benazir Bhutto at Oxford), sits in the speaker's chair and speakers line up on either side of the chamber to debate the topic of the day. There are several featured, or 'paper', speakers on each side – a couple of prominent public figures matched with senior student debaters. After they've spoken the floor is open to speakers from what one might call the backbench, although the back bar is probably a more apt description.

On this night, Harold Evans was speaking. Now for me, as a young

journalist, Harold Evans was a god. He edited *The Sunday Times* and had pioneered the investigative journalism that had exposed the thalidomide scandal and many others. The paper was enormously profitable and most reporters, of any age, would do anything to work there.

Later in the debate I got the call from the president and, no doubt assisted by a few pints in the bar, made a stirring contribution about the importance of a free press. Not long after, I was passed a note from Harold Evans himself, on *Sunday Times* notepaper. 'Good speech! Come and see me in

the Gray's Inn Road.' So, thrilled by the summons and clutching the note, I turned up at the offices of *The Sunday Times* the next day.

I'd never met anyone like Harry before. He was built like a jockey but filled the room with his energy and infectious enthusiasm. He loved

journalism and newspapers. He'd written a series of books about every aspect of the craft; he gave me the full set and signed them for me. He spoke about journalism with a romantic passion that was almost impossible to resist. And before too long, he'd offered me a job on *The Sunday Times*.

But there was at least one practical brain cell operating, and I said I had to go back to Australia to finish my law degree.

'Law!' said Harry. 'That's the worst possible idea. Don't study law.

Because if you do, you'll become a lawyer! The most boring job in the world, and where does it lead? Become a judge? Even more boring! Or – '

and at this point his voice dropped to underscore the gravity of what he had to say, 'you could become a politician.' He shook his head – a fate worse than death.

Not entirely sure I hadn't made the biggest mistake of my young life, I stuck to my guns but arranged to stay in touch. I explained that I could keep my options open by continuing my journalism while I finished my law

studies. After all, only a few days before a telegram had arrived from Trevor Kennedy offering me a full-time job back in Sydney.

Trevor was the editor of *The Bulletin*, a venerable Australian news magazine nearly a hundred years old that he was reviving for its owner, Kerry Packer. While I could continue covering state parliament for Channel Nine, which Packer also owned, my days at the *Nation Review* and 2SM

were over.

I flew back to Australia via New York, where Rupert Murdoch was

making waves. He'd moved there in 1974 and in late 1976 purchased the *New York Post* from its 73-year-old publisher, Dorothy Schiff. In January 1977, after a contentious takeover battle, he acquired *New York Magazine* and *The Village Voice*. The 17 January 1977 cover of *Time* summed up the media establishment's horror when it portrayed Rupert as King Kong

bestriding the twin towers of the World Trade Center with the headline

‘Aussie Press Lord Terrifies Gotham’.

I couldn’t help but admire Murdoch in those days. He was Australian, he was politically progressive, he was shaking up the old order, taking on the world.

So, once in New York, I persuaded the team at Channel Nine that I’d do a story on Murdoch’s New York triumphs. The only problem was that with

litigation going on over the *New York Magazine* takeover, he wasn’t giving any interviews – not to anybody, not even to the big US networks.

With the help of Ray Martin, the ABC’s New York correspondent, I

found a freelance cameraman and sound recordist and started to put the story together. At one point, I was doing a piece to camera in Greenwich Village in front of a newsstand and out of the corner of my eye spotted the well-known Australian art critic and writer Robert Hughes. I only knew him by reputation and I had no premonition that in a few years I would fall in love with his niece Lucy, but I raced up and promptly interviewed him about Murdoch. He was terrific talent and complained, with a wry smile, that Murdoch had sacked him as a cartoonist on Sydney’s *Daily Mirror* years before.

The story was falling into place, but one element was missing: Rupert.

My contacts, such as they were, couldn’t help. Nothing worked. One

evening I started ringing every extension at the *New York Post*. Dozens and dozens of dead ends. But then, after I dialled yet another random number, I heard a familiarly Australian voice. It was Rupert, working late in the green-wallpapered boudoir of an office that had been Dolly Schiff ’s.

‘Rupert, I mean Mr Murdoch, it’s Malcolm Turnbull here. I’m trying to put a story together for Channel Nine, *A Current Affair*, and it’s all about you and the *New York Post* and *New York Magazine*. But unless I get an

interview with you, I haven't got a story. So, could you please do me a favour and give me a few minutes?'

Silence … but no click. He hadn't hung up.

'Okay, why not. Come down to the *Post* now and we'll do it. Call me when you're here and I'll come out and we can do it across the road. I don't want anyone seeing you – the networks will go wild if they know I'm

giving an interview to anyone else.'

Our motley crew leapt into a cab and flew down to the East River. Rupert came out on a freezing night wearing a pullover and we did the interview. It was a minor miracle that neither of us came down with pneumonia. But just before we wrapped up, I asked him about Robert Hughes. Why had he

sacked him? A pause, then a smile as wry as Bob's.

'I recall a dispute over the ownership of a case of champagne.'

Back in Australia, I threw myself into my new role at *The Bulletin*. Its acerbic deputy editor, Patricia Rolfe, used to call it the 'New Hellas School of Journalism' after the nearby Greek restaurant we used to frequent.

Compared to my frenetic existence as a freelancer, life at *The Bulletin* was comparatively tranquil. I was so anxious not to be fired for under-production that I wrote more articles than Trevor could fit into the paper –

filing once a week seemed shamefully idle.

In the age of the 60-second news cycle, with news reported online

literally as it happens, the stately schedule of *The Bulletin* bears some reflection. We hit the newsstands on Wednesday morning, but the magazine had to be all but complete by the previous Friday evening. We could, with immense difficulty, just manage to get a big story into the magazine by 11

am on the Monday. All this meant that if we wanted to break a story, we needed to keep it under wraps for days. After filing a story on Friday, I used

to anxiously wait for each morning's newspapers to see if my exclusive had become old news before our magazine had even been published.

In my ongoing attempts to ensure I didn't get fired (I don't know why I was so concerned but I was), I persuaded Trevor to let me write a weekly column about the law. In that more deferential era, it was disrespectful to the eminent men of the law – they were all men, too. At one point, I wrote a piece about the failings of the Family Court, and the chief judge accused me of contempt! I was so excited, but the attorney-general, Bob Ellicott, wasn't. I caught him striding through the corridors of the High Court and asked him if he was going to prosecute me. He stopped, glared at me with a chilly disdain, and said, 'If you think I'm going to make a martyr of you, Malcolm Turnbull, think again.' And, gown billowing, swept off.

Even though he'd been no help with my industrial problems at the city markets, Bob Carr and I had kept in touch. I knew that he'd left the ABC to work at the Labor Council on the promise of a Senate seat only to be

dudded by the party machine. Bob introduced me to his friend Paul Keating and assures me that I asked him, 'If Lang is greater than Lenin, does that mean Keating is greater than Kerensky?'

I persuaded Trevor we should have a correspondent to write about unions and Labor with the insight of an insider, and that Bob was the one to do it.

Naturally, we had to seal the deal at lunch – we were journalists – and so Bob, Trevor and I repaired to another nearby Greek restaurant, the Ithaca.

I'd worded Bob up: 'Ask for twenty-five thousand dollars, Trevor will offer twenty-two, settle for twenty-four.'

Plates taken away, Trevor leaned across to Bob. 'So, Bob, what do you reckon you're worth?'

Bob almost stuttered. 'I don't know, what do you think?' Good grief, I thought, no wonder he wasn't much help in the markets.

‘I reckon twenty thousand is good money for you, Bob, getting started with us.’

Before I could tip the table over or start a fire, Bob replied, ‘Thank you, that’s fine.’ Trevor beamed and on the way back to the office congratulated himself on how much money he’d saved.

Bob did well at *The Bulletin* and went on to become the longest-serving premier of NSW, but his passion had always been foreign policy, and so I was pleased for his sake that long after leaving state politics he became a senator and Foreign minister for Julia Gillard. As is the way with politics, partisanship often got in the way when our paths crossed over the years, but he did perform one invaluable service for me in those *Bulletin* days.

Although lawyers rarely spoke to the media in those more taciturn days, I’d persuaded Tom Hughes QC (with a little help from his client Kerry Packer) to do an interview for *The Bulletin*. This was a coup. The Honourable Thomas Eyre Forrest Hughes was the nation’s most sought-after barrister. A former attorney-general in the Gorton government, he commanded the incredible fee of $1000 a day. The cover picture was

strong; the story was okay – Tom was brief and to the point. His nickname, after all, was ‘Frosty’.

But if the father left me a little chilled, that wasn’t the case with 19-year-old Lucy Hughes, who was in his office earning some money noting up law reports as I waited to see her father. I would have gladly waited forever. By the time I sat down with the great man, I was madly in love with his

daughter.

But would she come out with me if I asked her? Bob and Helena Carr

were about the only married couple I knew well and they were kind to

provide the cover for our first date – at the Sorrento fish cafe at Circular Quay, as I recall.

To my surprise, a few months before meeting Lucy, I had won a Rhodes Scholarship. Previously I'd applied without success and so I hadn't been optimistic about my chances. My hotel-broker father was out at the North St Mary's Hotel in Western Sydney and I called him as soon as I knew. Dad put down the phone and, bursting with pride, told the publican the good news, who replied, 'That's great, Bruce. I've got a cousin who's high up in the Department of Main Roads – we should get them together.'

The Rhodes Scholarships were Cecil Rhodes's imperial fantasy. With his vast fortune made from diamonds, the founder of Rhodesia wanted to

recruit young achievers who'd reinforce the best of British stock in the halls of Oxford and go on to rule the world together. Naturally, they'd all be white, and men, and so were drawn from the old settler dominions such as South Africa, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the United States and, of course, Germany.

In the late 1970s there were about 60 Rhodes Scholars 'coming up' to

Oxford each year, about half of whom were from the United States. They were no longer all white or even all men, with women admitted for the first time in 1977. The Rhodes Scholars from Australia typically did

postgraduate degrees, as I did, whereas the Americans would do an Oxford three-year undergraduate degree in two years. The Americans stuck

together and when I spent time with them, I concluded they all planned to be president one day. But so far Bill Clinton is the only Rhodes Scholar to be president. Australia has had three scholars become PM so far: Bob

Hawke, Tony Abbott and myself.

The news of my selection brought me back to the attention of Kerry

Packer. Everyone at Packer's Consolidated Press was thrilled. Even Ita Buttrose, editor-in-chief of *The Australian Women's Weekly*, spoke to me.

Kerry asked me to work as an assistant to his deputy chairman, Harry

Chester, who'd been the right-hand man and chief financial officer for Kerry's father, Frank. Harry was a wise and steadying influence on 39-year-old Kerry. So, I spent the nine months or so before I went up to Oxford not just learning about the publishing business but actually doing deals, including spending a few weeks in Chicago negotiating an Australian

licence for *Playboy* magazine and signing up the West Indies cricket team in Barbados for World Series Cricket.

Finally, in September 1978, I arrived at Oxford. I'd been accepted into Brasenose College, which sits on the southern side of Radcliffe Square, one

of the most beautiful in Europe – especially on a chill night when the mist swirls around the confident neo-classicism of the Radcliffe Camera in the centre, framed by the austerely anxious gothic spires of the university church.

I started doing a business degree. After concluding the course was too much management speak and not enough finance, I returned to the law and enrolled in the Bachelor of Civil Law. The BCL is a tough black-letter law Master's degree by coursework, with the entire assessment based on six exams at the end of two years. This encouraged me to neglect my studies for the first year, a near-fatal mistake.

University life at Oxford was dominated by the undergraduates, who

were generally three or four years my junior: I was an ancient 24.

Nevertheless, I threw myself into plenty of university activities, even sport.

I'd been a mediocre third-grade rugby player in Sydney, and I had no

pretensions to an Oxford Blue, but I enjoyed playing for my college. It was almost a pleasure being tackled, as the English pitches were so soft

compared to the hard, dry football fields of Australia.

Debating at the Oxford Union was a delight, although not always

decorous. Among the guest speakers was Lucy's father, Tom, who came up while in the UK on a Privy Council appeal. Another was Richard Nixon. On one memorable night, future British PM Theresa Brasier and I argued over professionalism in sport with soccer legend Bobby Charlton in a debate presided over by Theresa's soon-to-be fiancé, Phil May.

I'd never been a full-time student and I didn't start at Oxford. Instead, I continued with my journalism, writing for Australian newspapers and

magazines, and even contributing a few pieces to the *Chicago Tribune*. It wasn't all news reporting – I rewrote the text for a Time-Life book about Sydney for a flat fee of a thousand quid.

During the years since we'd met at Cambridge, I'd stayed in touch with Harry Evans and he again offered me a job on *The Sunday Times*, which I reckoned I could handle while supposedly studying at Oxford. However, all was not well at Times Newspapers Ltd. Just as I was hired, a long-running industrial battle with the printing unions resulted in the management locking the printers out. Stop the presses indeed!

The journalists union did a deal with management and the reporters

remained on the payroll. The papers remained shut for a year. If everybody had known that was going to be the case, they could have gone on long

holidays or written books (and a few did) but, as it happened, every few weeks there was news that a settlement was imminent, and we all set out researching and writing stories to fill the paper. Every month, I wrote thousands of words of copy, including a few investigations, that never saw the light of day.

The industrial dispute was over agreements with the printing unions that were completely absurd. And even the printers thought it was ridiculous, laughing in the bar of the Blue Lion pub, on the other side of the Gray's Inn Road, about all the fake names on the printers' payroll, the people who were paid but didn't show up. One archaic rule in particular always tickled me – that on the press floor there was a man with a rake and another with a broom. Why was that, I asked the shop steward.