TO SPECIALISE IS TO BRUSH ONE TOOTH

Notes from the life of a generalist

Bill Bottomley

Ideally, these notes should be read in conjunction with my website, which can be found at *http://www.billbottomley.com.au/*. The site has also been archived in perpetuity at the Australian National Library's Pandora electronic archive at *pandora.nla.gov.au/*

FOREWORD

As I begin this I'll turn 77 in a few weeks. My fingers are afflicted with osteoarthritis, and I can't play music any more – neither piano nor flute. I miss playing music quite a bit. And most of my fine motor skills have decamped to the hills as well, so most of the manual stuff I used to do is no longer possible either. Apart from the drastic reduction in ways that I might try to be creative, it means that I spend a fair bit of time feeling at a loss to know what to do, and I read voraciously to deal with the fact that these days I get bored easily. Talking about this with friends, it is often suggested to me that I could write up some sort of account of my life – a suggestion that I've not been all that enthusiastic about.

Back in the '90s I interviewed about twenty retired people about their working lives. (These interviews can be found in Drawer One of my website). As I wrote in the Introduction to these interviews: "In order for a country's history to truly reflect its past, the need to chronicle the lives of its 'ordinary' citizens, and not just the notable ones, has long been acknowledged. Eric Hobsbawm wrote that the most widely recognized achievement of radical history "has been to win a place for the history of ordinary people, common men and women." One of the most frequent responses I encountered when approaching people to talk about their working lives was that they thought their lives were too "ordinary" to be of interest to others. There is also the deeply-rooted feeling, particularly among working class people, that talking about yourself is a bit too close to "blowing your own trumpet" (to quote my Dad), and is to be avoided for fear of appearing to have tickets on yourself. When I explained that it was precisely the "ordinary people" and their everyday lives that I wanted to document they usually came around to agreeing to be interviewed, though often still with some show of reluctance. I was well into the process of recording and transcribing before I realised that the same sorts of considerations were stopping me from writing an account of my own life. So, with the oral history dictum that "Every person is a living history book" bolstering my own reluctance in this matter, I made a couple of attempts to make a start on some sort of autobiographical musings. These faltering starts were largely unsatisfactory though, and never came to much.

PART ONE

This is how I approached the matter in 1995:

"Not that long ago I finished publishing the transcripts of Mum's tape recordings. Putting it all together raised lots of thoughts -- about my family; about how selective one's memory is; about how selective, therefore, is what comes to be known as history; about identity; and about the cultural forces which helped to shape me. And it made me think about the assumptions, cultural and otherwise, that underlie our sense of reality, our sense of normlity, and what we think it is reasonable to expect from life. I found it interesting how much in Mum's reminiscences was communicated between the lines, as it were. The unvarnished accounts that came from Mum's memory, the choice of words, the revealing asides, were as rich to me as the actual stories recounted.

I'm only 58 as I start to write this (I wonder what proportion of my allotted span of years that will turn out to be?) and that's a bit young to be starting on one's own reminiscences. But I was prompted to make a start on the memories of my early days at least, because writing up Mum's memories made me realise how the passage of time seems to erode the jaggedness of detail and variety from the mountain range of our memories, and leaves a time-worn (literally) string of prominences to represent our mind's-eye view of our biography as we look back. Mum's got plenty of her marbles left at 83, and I find her mental acuity and open-mindedness impressive compared to other people I've met of her age, but time does take its toll, and on a number of occasions she rang me to suggest that we include events that she'd forgotten that she'd already talked about. On (surprisingly few) other occasions she taped the same memory twice. What I found arresting about this whenever it happened was how very similar these accounts were to each other. Sometimes whole phrases, sentences even, were repeated verbatim. It seemed like there was a sort of memory landscape which, when surveyed, always presented itself to her view with certain topographical features dominant. Talk to Mum at any length and it soon becomes obvious that there are many, many other features in the memory landscape to be focussed on, but repeatedly the same few landmarks seem to push themselves forward for attention more than others. Sometimes their prominence is obvious because of their sheer magnitude, (like the scarifying memories of losing the two baby boys) but as large as those memories loom for Mum she seems to remember just as vividly things like having to clean the porridge pot when they were kids at Narrabeen while her brothers played in the lake, or Cocoa Kenzie singing to her that she was as dainty as a fairy. Or Nana Turner's apparent antipathy to her, ("she gave me a tin dish for a wedding present and didn't come to the wedding"). I wonder what filtering mechanism determines what stands out in our memories and what doesn't?

Often while I was putting Mum's transcripts together I thought how interesting I would find it to read a similar biography of any of my forebears. [I'd love to have a similar one for Dad - though he would have thought that to write anything about yourself for posterity would be the height of big-headedness -- one of his Deadly Sins that he took almost fanatical pains to avoid, to the point of unnecessary self-deprecation). In addition, my daughter Fiona's enthusiasm on reading Mum's memories, (and a slack period between other projects on my part) prompted me to make a start now on documenting what comes to mind when I think of the early years of my life. I'm assuming that beginning early might preserve some of the jaggedness of detail in the landscape of my memories that will probably, like it has with Mum, become time-worn if I leave it till later. (Of course, this process is doubtless well under way even at 58). Moreover, if I wait another decade or two before I make a start on this, I may well not be around to do it at all.

I don't think I'll be able to write about my past simply as a narrative of a series of events. I'm sure I won't be able to resist the temptation to comment - to expatiate on the significance I see to be associated with certain things that I experienced. In a way, I suppose I see the main value in bothering to do something like this lying in the social and personal

significance of life's events, rather than the events themselves.

When I was interviewing the pioneer families in the valleys around here, (see *Back Then* and *In Those Days* in Drawer 1 of my website) most of the people I spoke to also felt that their lives were 'too ordinary' to be of interest to anyone. I found it hard to convince them that to them their lives may be ordinary, but to others who have had different lives, their lives were of considerable interest. I think there is a bit of a class thing going here. People on the bottom of the social heap in terms of status do not easily see themselves as inherently interesting, whereas people who have known only relative privilege seem to have less trouble convincing themselves of their own self-importance. I've had to remind myself of this each time I deferred beginning -- deciding that it would be only an indulgence to write about my own life. Of course my life has only been an 'ordinary' one. Lots of people have had more colourful or adventurous lives than I have. But my life has been very different to the lives my parents had. It has been lived out in a very different social and ideological matrix to the one that bounded their lives. In the same way that I felt that Mum's memories were a valuable microsocial document of what it was like to grow up working class in Balmain in the early years of this century and then to live a typical suburban married existence in the rapidly-changing postwar years, so too (I hope) will my autobiographical meanderings provide some insight into what life was like being her offspring. Born just before the Second World War, I was the beneficiary of a widened access to education, post-war economic expansion, and greatly-heightened social mobility, not to mention a degree of social questioning that was significant in its absence from the times of my parents. Yet as a twig I was bent by the assumptions of their times, as well as of mine. What follows is my attempt to describe the landscape of my life from my own personal vantage point. What it's worth will depend on what you're looking for.

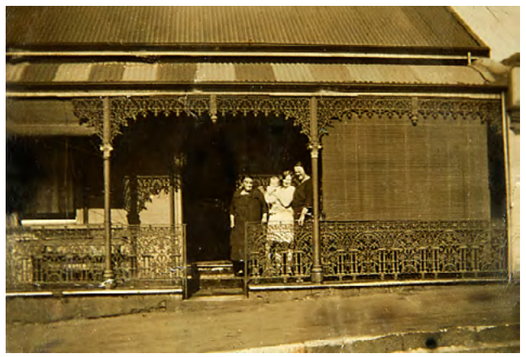
Childhood

I feel that I can remember bits about the flat in Louisa Road where I was born and where we lived until I was going on four years old, but how much of this comes from actual memories and how much I picked up from numerous visits to Balmain after we moved to Drummoyne I can't say. When Mum mentioned in her reminiscences about Nanna coming to Drummoyne to get me to take me back to the gap in the corrugated iron fence around Morts Dock to watch a ship being launched I felt a flood of recognition. I would have been four and a bit by then. I can remember the lank, long grass on the paddock next to 27 Cameron Street, but when I took Mum on a drive past her old Balmain haunts recently I was surprised to see how big it was. I'd remembered it as much smaller, though it usually works the other way around when you revisit places of your childhood. Of course Morts Dock is long gone, and has become a pleasant park girt by pastel-coloured modern units for many years. If you drive around there you can discern where the dock must have been - but only just. My memories of it are of something akin to Cockatoo Island - rusting corrugated iron sheds of huge proportions, a dry dock, cranes, the lightning flash of welders, and steel and rust everywhere.

(This'll be a bit stream-of-consciousness in its construction. I'm bound to go off at tangents as topics are suggested by what I'm talking about. Here's a digression coming on now): Thinking of Morts Dock makes me think of a conversation I had with Dad late in his life. We were having a pre-lunch beer at their sunny kitchen table at Nambucca Heads. Mum was somewhere else, and the idiom of the conversation was very much Bloketalk -- which was the conversational currency when Dad and I were being blokes together. He was talking about working at the Dock and what it was like then, and to illustrate the authoritarian work environment, he was telling me about how inflexible the conditions were. When my young brother Bobby died Dad had no sick leave owing him, and he had to take the time off (unpaid, of course) to go to the funeral. When he got to work late he was carpeted and ticked off by the foreman (who Dad thought was a deadshit). What got me about this story was Dad's choice of words when he told the despised foreman why he hadn't turned up for work,(and the fact that he chose to use them again when he related the incident to me). "I had to go and burn my kid." he'd said. I was in my forties when we were having this conversation, and I was considerably taken aback at the matter-of-fact way

Lots of food came from the Narrabeen lake. This is Papa with an eel he caught. Nana knew how to cook it so that it was delicious.

Building the house on the property adjoining the lake. When Uncle Jack died in his nineties it was worth over a million bucks.



The Herwigs lived in Balmain when it was a slum. This is typical of the houses there in those days.

Nana & Papa about to leave Bribie Island (where Papa spent much of his youth) after holidaying there around 1937.

he related this. It said so much to me about the callousness of working class male culture -- as though putting it that way would show that he was above sentiment or something. To betray emotion, even under such tragic circumstances, was to be avoided at all costs lest public perception of your masculinity be compromised -- especially by a boss you had no time for. This way of being is still around, of course, in various subtle and not-so-subtle guises. When he said it, I wasn't judgemental of him for saying it -- just terribly sad. It was a perception of his role as a man that straitjacketed him emotionally all his life. And millions of other good men, too.

My earliest reliable memories are of course of Drummoyne. Number four South Street. A semi-detached cottage with the Skeppers through the wall. Mr Skepper was a postman. They were innocuous enough neighbours, but we were never close to them. ("Neighbours shouldn't live in one another's pockets.") You couldn't hear all that much through the common wall, but the semi-detached design of the living quarters was carried through to the design of the crapping quarters, so the outside dunnies had a common wall too. But it was only single brick and you could hear every little tinkle, blurt and plop if you happened to be in there when someone from next door was using it too. This vicarious intimacy was studiously ignored by all parties in their day-to-day polite neighbourly interactions. When you think about it, it could hardly have been otherwise.

Our dunny had a number of features. High up on a shelf beside the cistern Dad kept all the poisonous nasties like weedkiller and such. He even had some cyanide -- or was it arsenic, or both? -- up there that he used when he case-hardened home-made tools in the fire under the copper. It also had an ancient, hand-drawn railway map of NSW -- a relic from Papa's time (my maternal grandfather) when he worked as a storeman and packer at Cooper's, the people who made sheep shearing equipment among other things. I got to orient myself a bit as far as NSW was concerned because of this map, and when drunk enough I can still bore the assembled company by reciting the railway stations in order between Wellington and Orange. I used to know whole strings of them. When High School came I used to pin up on the wall lists of irregular French verbs and other things I had to learn. There was also a clipping of Rudyard Kipling's "If" in its entirety (I think Mum pinned it up because she thought its ideals of manhood were salutary), and I can still recite most of that. (I suppose I still think we could do worse than encourage many of the values espoused in it, even though Kipling was a spokesman for a pretty imperialist view of the world in other ways). Beside the map, the many-times kalsomined wall had multi-coloured shapes where the layers of paint were flaking off, and one day Mum pencilled-in one of the shapes and made it into a little drawing. This served as an encouragement to me, and I began to see all sorts of things suggested in these flaking shapes, which I carefully elaborated into little pencil drawings. I think it was from this time that I began to think of myself as "being able to draw", because my efforts were favourably commented upon -- though not from Dad, of course, who felt that any positive feedback was to be avoided at all costs because it might lead to a "swelled head". Positive encouragement during the learning process was something Dad was a stranger to.

Dad's father died when Dad was in his teens, and his mother died when I was about three, and there is little known about his side of the family. Nana and Papa Herwig lived on the lakeshore at Narrabeen, and I used to spend most of my school holidays there. By the time I was 12 or so I used to ride my pushbike from Drummoyne to Narrabeen each holidays, but of course the traffic was much less back then.

Another digression: One of the things etched into my memory (like Mum's memories of washing the porridge pot) was sitting at the kitchen table when I was about eight with pencil and paper, drawing, while Mum sewed and Dad read the paper, with *Mrs 'Obbs* on the radio in the background. Dad had a look at what I was doing and said: "Why do you have to start off in the middle of the sheet of paper? When you muck it up you've wasted a whole sheet. Why don't you start up here in the corner so that when you make a mistake you've still got plenty of space left on the page to start again?" What encouragement! The main message I got from that was that I was bound to muck up whatever I was doing, and at that age I had no way of explaining to him that each time I started out to draw something I had the hope

that it would be a picture in its own right, with nice white space around it to set it off. As far as Dad was concerned that smacked of over-confidence, of 'having tickets on yourself', which for him was 'the last card in the pack'. Aesthetics was not a word in his vocabulary, and I suspect that for him, worrying too much about how things looked was vaguely unmanly. Women looked after that end of things, while men were more concerned with the practical. It was all pretty black-and-white with Dad. Not a lot of greys in his perception of the world. But then, I'd realize how badly he had been scarred by The Depression. For him, saving pennies was what it was all about.

But back to South Street. Mum's sewing machine was under the window in the kitchen, and the bakelite Stromberg Carlson radio on the mantelpiece was nearly always on. Mum used to religiously listen to a lunchtime story read on 2CH by Uncle Cy (? spelling - never saw it spelt, only ever heard it). I can also remember Alan Toohey doing the Hit Parade on 2UW (the top seven, mind!) and on 2GB there was Eric Baume, the right wing precursor of Alan Jones and John Laws (only worse, if that's possible) sounding off about anything that incurred his bigoted dislike. Bing Crosby was Mum's favourite singer ("When the Blue of the Night meets the Gold of the Day") and *Mrs 'Obbs* and *Yes, What?* radio's equivalent to today's TV sitcoms, were on most weeknights just before tea. (It was always breakfast, dinner and tea, not breakfast, lunch and dinner. Who says there's no class structure in Oz?). Breakfast was at seven, dinner at twelve, and tea at half past five, except on Fridays when Dad went to the pub on the way home and it was an hour later. After tea we'd go into the loungeroom in our jarmies and dressing gowns and listen to the radio -- programmes like Jack Davey's and Bob Dyer's Quiz shows, and *The Amateur Hour* and *The Quiz Kids*. For some reason I didn't listen to *The Argonauts* on the ABC, though I often used to hear it when I was playing indoors down the road at the Bows' place after school. I think Mum and Dad thought the ABC was a bit highbrow for them, and anyway, it didn't play much pop music, which was what they liked. Mrs Bow, on the other hand, was a minister's daughter, and the Bows had more in the way of upward social pretensions than our family seemed to. I used to feel that Mrs Bow thought that I was a bit "common", to use one of Mum's words, and I probably was.

Saturday mornings Dad used to help Mum with the washing. He'd light the fire under the copper and do the heavy work like lifting the steaming heavy wet clothes into the tubs with the potstick. As far as Mum was concerned this put him on a pedestal high above the other husbands she knew. ("He was good like that, your father. Not many men would do that.") Which was true. And for one so careful about cleaving closely to accepted stereotypes of maleness in other ways, Dad seemed to have no qualms on the washing score. I always got the impression that he did it because he thought it was fair. Not that he ever talked about why he did it. He just got on with it. Not a bad example to set, I suppose.

As I grew bigger I was given some regular chores to do, but they weren't many. It was my job to bring in the garbage bin (the "dirt tin"), to keep the coal scuttle and the kero heater filled in winter, and later still I was given the dubious privilege of mowing the lawns, trimming the edges, and hosing the yard and path down afterwards (Boy, were we profligate with water! It was looked on as an unlimited resource then, like clean air was). In winter I'd wheel the wooden barrow that Dad had made for me to carry the papers on big paper-run days (Wednesdays and weekends) a couple of miles down to the Education Department workshops on Hen and Chicken Bay and bring it home full of wood offcuts they used to periodocally throw out onto a heap. If there was more on my list of responsibilities I don't remember them. By and large I was given a pretty free hand. Mum made it clear that she considered me to be sensible and reliable, and by and large I think I probably tried to live up to this image (helped along by Kipling in the dunny). We'd go "down the park" to play -- mainly the Bow boys, Mick and Ian -- and by the time we were about ten we were ranging over an area of the Iron Cove waterfront from what was then Dunlop/Perdriau's tyre factory (now Birkenhead Point) to a bit past the wooden-slatted tidal baths that used to be around the Henley Marine Drive towards Five Dock. We knew all the tunnels in the lantana and which were the good caves along the waterfront, and we'd spend hours at a time there and nobody thought twice about our safety. Our parents weren't at all worried about us or what we got up to, though we weren't allowed to make the traditional corrugated iron canoe to venture onto the water with. It was local belief that Iron Cove was shark infested (which I doubt, now) but that bit of conventional wisdom was also an effective disincentive to go aquatic.

You wouldn't say that I grew up in a house full of books. Dad had a fat edition of *Machinerys Handbook* that he used when he was a milling machinist during the war, but apart from that the only other books I can remember were two secondhand copies of *Reader's Digest Condensed Books*, and later, when Dad was working as a Civil Engineer at Ryde Council, the collection was swelled with a couple of hardbacks on drain construction. I was an avid reader as a kid -- mainly books like Biggles and the William series -- but Dad used to occasionally chip me for reading too much, mainly at the meal table, especially breakfast. ("You'll ruin your bloody eyes.") Apart from the daily paper, the *Daily Telegraph*, of course, the only other reading matter was *The Women's Weekly*. Mum had bought every copy since it was first published (didn't miss one till she was well into her sixties) and looking back I think that it was a potent shaper of Mum's expectations about life and how you should behave.

Mum claims that the loss of little Bobby when he was two and I was about five, had an affect on me. I've always dismissed this idea, but recently I've come to wonder if there mightn't be something in it. It might have helped foster that feeling I have always been prey to: that life is very chancy, that disaster could strike tomorrow, that it's unwise to take anything for granted. (From my perspective now, I wonder if maybe I arrived at the right answer for the wrong reasons). From the age of five, when I started school, to about... I don't know, maybe eight or nine, I'd be overcome with acute anxiety if Mum wasn't home when I got home from school. If she was there, then I knew she was alright, but if she wasn't, then there was always the chance that something bad had happened to her, and I couldn't do or think of anything else till she came home. When this happened, especially when I was younger, I'd go into Bows to try to take my mind off it, but I'd be sick with worry, and on several occasions I broke down and cried in front of my mates. On top of my anxiety feelings, doing this was a terrible embarrassment to me because it "showed what a cissy I was." Not being tough was a terrible thing for a boy, and I used to feel abjectly ashamed of my inability to be cool about whether Mum was home or not. Of course this problem faded with the years, but I have to say that I am still no stranger to that sinking feeling in the pit of your stomach, the feeling of total futility that comes out of nowhere with a sort of Nameless Dread. (Is this what Sartre meant by "existential nausea"?)

Discipline at home wasn't particularly harsh. Mum handled most of it, and a slap on the bottom or the back of the thighs was about as rough as it got when I was little. Dad was the ultimate authority figure though, and there was a lot of "Just you wait till your father gets home" that went on. Mum used to use this like blackmail a bit, in that if I did what she wanted, then she wouldn't tell him.

I only got a "hiding" once -- when I was about eight, I think. Papa had given me a real pocket knife as a present, and he sharpened it for me and told me how to use it safely. I was dazzled. I whittled every bit of wood in sight, (you can still see some of the scars on my left hand) and the world only existed for me to try out my pocket knife on. In the veggie garden down the side of the house Dad had a dozen sugerloaf cabbages whose progress he was most pleased with. They had huge, tightly packed heads and were just about ready to pick. Well! You know the sensuous feeling of crisp sharpness that comes when you cut a cabbage with a sharp knife? My first tentative slit in a cabbage head introduced me to that feeling, and I didn't stop till I'd cut a neat, deep cross in all twelve! Mum discovered my vandalism, and this was definitely a Biggie that had to wait till Dad got home. When he did, and found out what I'd done he was devastated. Speechless. He couldn't work out an appropriate punishment. But then he also discovered that not only had I cut all his cabbages, but that as well I'd tried to blame most of it on Johnny Irwin, a kid from further down the street who happened to be with me while I was demonstrating proudly the virtues of my pocketknife (I'd let him cut two of them). Blaming someone else for something bad that you had done yourself was a crime that put irresponsible cabbage-cutting in the shade. Dad stormed white-faced into the bathroom and emerged with his leather razor strop doubled over. He held me across his thigh with us both sort of standing up and let me have half a

dozen solid wallops on the bum then sent me to my room. I was crying, of course, but I think it was more out of genuine shame at having tried to frame Johnny than any physical pain. I thought that I deserved all I got. I found out from Mum years later that Dad had gone out into the kitchen to fume about what I'd done, worked himself up another head of steam and was on the way to my bedroom to give me another salvo with the strop till she held him back by the cardigan and threatened to leave him there and then if he touched me again. "It's not that you didn't deserve the punishment," she said to me years later, "but you'd already been punished and he was quite out of control with rage when he went to go back in to you the second time."

Dad used to rule the house by the 'roar and order' system, and he had us all intimidated -- especially Mum. His authority and wisdom were beyond question. We had our share of blues and slanging matches ("now don't you give me any cheek, young man" sort of thing from Mum, and "if your brains were dynamite they wouldn't blow your bloody hat off" from Dad), but I don't remember feeling hard done by as a kid. I thought they were pretty fair, and just, about most things. As far as Dad was concerned, he saw it as important to bring me up tough in anticipation of the "hard knocks" that I'd get later from "the cold cruel world". He was very light on sympathy when I hurt myself, and very light on praise. I knew he approved of something I'd done if I got something as gruff as: "If you keep that up you might start to get somewhere." He was always chiding Mum when she showed sympathy or compassion ("You'll make a bloody pansy of the kid if you're not careful".) Mum, on the other hand, was soft to Dad's hard. She was a well of unconditional love, and she made it abundantly clear. It never occurred to me that they both didn't love me, even though Dad was totally unable to express it, and I grew up in the security of knowing that, whatever silly or childish things I might do wrong, that they both thought that basically I was OK. Which is more than a lot of people can say, and whatever critical remarks I might make about either of them, I think that overall they were Good Parents. They did their sincere best according to the tenor of the times.

Mum used to treat minor childhood ills herself -- saving the doctor for real emergencies. If we got a sore throat, my sister Chris and I would be given a level teaspoonful of sugar moistened with a few drops of household kerosene to swallow. I got to quite like the taste. And for a few years there we were given a teaspoonful of Cornwell's Extract of Malt every day because they'd read claims somewhere for its therapeutic properties. Dad's belief in the efficacy of Friar's Balsam became legendary. He'd use it as an inhalation if he had a cold, and put it neat on every cut, graze or laceration. He cut the meaty part of his hand at the base of the thumb on one occasion, and I watched him grit his teeth as he poured the Friar's Balsam straight into the open cut. The more it hurt, the better I think Dad thought it must be. And Christ! Did it hurt! It stung like hell. Mum showed me how to blow like mad on it when it went on, and this made it feel very cold (it had a methylated spirits base) and seemed to take your mind off the excruciating stinging.

When I was about ten I got a big splinter in my foot. It was in too deep to get out easily, so they put some Iodex on it, which was a black ointment which was supposed to draw it out. It didn't, and the foot festered. Late on a Saturday night I was wakened with the throbbing pain of it, and when Mum looked at it, she saw that it was very highly inflamed and obviously still seriously infected. Dad ended up handling this by having Mum sit on my legs while I buried my face in a pillow while he lanced the infected area with his cut-throat razor... then swabbed it with, yep! Friar's bloody Balsam! But the relief that came after the lancing overwhelmed the pain of having it done.

Across the road and down a couple of doors from us in South Street was Chalker's Dairy. They were the local milkmen -- had been for years -- and they had half a dozen stables for the horses that used to draw the noisy steel-tyred milk carts. Households left their billy out (in a tray of water to keep the ants away) and the milkman would fill it with bulk milk. (Bottles didn't come till quite some time later.) They used to let me go into the empty stables

with a sugar bag and collect the manure, which I then used to flog around the immediate neighbourhood. A shilling a bag. I never had any trouble getting rid of it, and this was the way I earned my first pocket money.

When I was in Primary School I took on a paper run for the local newsagent. Six bob a week. Seven mornings a week, rain, hail or shine. I had to get up to the alarm at five a.m., summer and winter, in order to have enough time to do the paper run and have breakfast before going to school. I used to look forward to the summertime, when I did the whole round in daylight. Doing it in the dark on a wet, windy, winter's morning wasn't much of a buzz. Dad was a tower of strength throughout my paper run days (which lasted for several years). He made me a sturdy barrow for Wednesdays and weekends when the papers were big, and came around with me for the first few times. If I wanted to spend a few days of school holidays down at Narrabeen where my grandparents lived by the lake, or if I needed the odd morning off for some reason, then Dad would do the run for me. Dad mightn't have said much about things, but I suspect this is because he thought that actions spoke more loudly than words. You could count on him when you needed him. Unless you needed money.

By the time I went to High School I had quit the paper run and taken a job with a local chemist delivering medicines on my pushbike all round the suburb at six o'clock at night. This meant riding a lot in the dark in winter, and in all weathers, and I had the odd spectacular spill every so often, but of course the speed and density of the traffic wasn't anything like it is today. I kept the job with the chemist till I left High School. Whatever, Mum and Dad didn't ever have to give me weekly pocket money.

The general diet in those days (the late forties and fifties) was pretty much meat and three veg. "Beetle's wings" (corn flakes) for breakfast and sandwiches for lunch. Mum couldn't afford to buy the more expensive cuts of meat, and stuck to undercut and middlecut blade, chuck steak and chops. Chicken was a luxury reserved for Christmas dinner. Dad used to grow some spuds and some greens, and Mum was big on desserts. Queen Pudding was one of her specialties, and she was always making cakes and biscuits. I didn't eat spaghetti that wasn't out of a can till my late teens, nor had I tasted a dressed salad till about the same time. A bit of brown vinegar on the tomatoes was all Mum ever added to a salad.

Dad was no gourmet ("I eat to live, I don't live to eat.") He wouldn't eat out at a restaurant because he distrusted their cleanliness and couldn't see the sense in paying fancy prices for fancy food when you could eat cheaper at home. As a result, I was working at my first job before I ever ate in a restaurant (as opposed to a country cafe, say) and when I did I was most apprehensive because I didn't know anything about dining protocol and I was terribly worried that I'd do something wrong with the cutlery or something and draw attention to myself.

Looking back, Mum and Dad didn't seem to have much of a social life. I can remember a few nights where they had friends over to play cards (usually Caliente Rummy) and sink a few home brews, but by and large they didn't seem to entertain much. Or go out that much, for that matter. They were pretty much homebodies who stuck close to the social shoreline that they were comfortable and familiar with.

Mum made most of our clothes for us, especially when we were younger, and Dad built furniture, re-soled shoes and was a general handyman around the place. But he wouldn't do much to the house because they were renting it and they thought the landlord was a skinflint and Dad didn't want to put work into anything that might add to the value of the property. This was why he never built a shed outside, and condemned Mum to twenty years of having his workbench in the second bedroom.

When I was about six I wanted a scooter for Christmas, and Mum and Dad couldn't afford

With Chris as a baby.

With Lassie, Papa's dog, at Narrabeen beach

Mum with Bobbie.

Ready for Air League

Mum & Dad at Nambucca

to buy me one, so Dad bought the wheels and built the rest himself as a foreign order while he was working at the Australian Optical Company on the nightshift. It was very well made and sturdy, and worked fine, but because it was clearly home-made I can remember being a bit embarrassed by it. I wanted it to look the same as the ones all the other kids had. Something similar happened when I joined the Air League a few years later. Mum couldn't afford the uniform so she bought some material and made me one. It was beautifully made, (she was a proudly proficient seamstress) but it didn't look quite the same as the regular ones that the other kids had, and again I felt a bit embarrassed that we couldn't afford to get the "proper" one. Apart from this, the only other times I can remember being aware of having parents who were always a bit short on money was when I was buying piano lessons while I was in High School with the pocket money I earned from my job with the chemist, and I didn't have enough to spare to buy goodies from the school tuck shop. I used to envy the kids from families who were better off, who always bought tuck shop food and didn't have to eat boring sandwiches from home. But I have to say that not being very well off wasn't all that much of a hassle for me as a kid -- it's just that we didn't get many luxuries like lollies and ice creams. But I was certainly aware of some people being much better off than others -- and that we weren't among the former.

I read this over, wasn't satisfied with how it was going, and shelved it.