
PART FOUR

Going bush

What a good decision it was to leave UNSW! I can't tell you how free I felt, how much I felt in control and responsible for my own life. The lack of ready cash, compared to my contemporaries, didn't matter – it was just another creative challenge. In the latter part of my time at UNSW my reading had been coalescing around the notion of ecological sustainability and how this approach seeped into every aspect of your life if you were going to try to be environmentally responsible. There are a few articles in *The Dunnybook* on my website which give a good idea of why I was feeling so exultant. On p21 there is an extract from *Smallcreep's Day* by Peter Currell Brown that outlines the different way that I was now viewing the world; on p16 there is a short piece, *A Waste of Time in a Time of Waste*, which sums up my attitude towards consumer society; on p19 there is *Dropping Out*, which was written fifteen years after I made the Big Decision; and on p32 there is *Kicking the Habits*, which outlines my thoughts on sustainable building. I put *The Dunnybook* together quite some time after I moved to Wirrimbirra, and just about everything in it is relevant to how I saw things after I left the consumerist rat race of Sydney, and, indeed, how I still see things for that matter. On my wall I had pinned up a quote from Shelter:

*What would life be like with less energy consumption?
We'd grow most of our own food, and it would taste better.
We would again make things with our hands.
We would build and maintain our own houses. Life would be less hectic.
Less machine labour, more muscle use,
Better health, and the rediscovery of dormant capabilities.
We'd make our own music.*

Looking back now, I did all that, (except that I gave up on growing much of my own food – though I did persevere with growing my own euphorient).

Wirrimbirra – The House

Building my house has to be the most creative thing that I've ever done in my life. There must be something quite atavistic in building a shelter for yourself and then living in it. I loved doing it. I don't think I was ever as happy as I was when watching my efforts slowly culminate in an actual structure. Apart from when visiting friends helped me manhandle a couple of large tree trunk beams into place, I did it all myself. Most of the people I knew were supportive of the project. Dave Gibb gave me a whole lot of recycled windows, Alan Key made me a solar hot water system out of polypipe and a recycled 44gallon drum. Ron Witton offered me funds if I should get into economic difficulties, (an offer I was pleased not to have to accept). I incorporated all sorts of recycled stuff into the house that people gave me. It was an exercise in creativity, really. I only ever bought something new as a last resort. And it all made so much sense. Every now and then I have a look at an episode of *Grand Designs* on the telly, and I am absolutely appalled by the building assumptions that underlie the "grand" houses that they come up with. Talk about being part of the problem!

For the past 30 years or so, my solar panels have meant that many tons of carbon dioxide have not been released into the atmosphere to prop up my existence. More people are fitting solar panels these days, of course, but I guess I'm pretty proud of the fact that I was an early adopter of this technology (like, more than 25 years ago). Similarly, my house walls are made of earth scooped up from within twenty metres of the house itself, and everything to do with the house is recycled, wherever possible. And, most significantly, my "standard of living" has not suffered. In fact, for someone of my turn of mind, it has been quite the opposite.

Ellen Quinn was a fundamentalist feminist. She once bawled out her butcher for calling her “luv”. She was given to wearing a T-shirt that had “So many men...” on the front, and “... so little time” on the back. There weren’t too many greys in Ellen’s view of the world – she either couldn’t stand someone, or she “loved them to bits”. But she was good fun, and I think we both enjoyed the four years we spent together. Ellen had a daughter, Kylie, who was about Fiona’s age, and they got on well together. At time of writing this, Fi is teaching secondary school science in the Port Macquarie area, and Kylie is teaching primary school in the same region. They are still in touch.

While Ellen was living in her caravan on my land and I was getting stuck into pouring foundations and making mudbricks, our relationship was getting increasingly abrasive, and finally Ellen and I called it quits and she took her van over to her land and lived there while some friends (including me at times) helped her to build a cabin to live in while she was organizing to have a proper house built. Both Ellen and I knew that our relationship was not going to be a permanent one, and this was a reasonably amicable split. What happened next is accurately conveyed in a poem written by Isabelle Fogarty, who was to become my next lover (but more of that later).

The Burning Passion of Gavin and Alice

(The names have been changed to protect the embarrassed)

*Our story begins when young Gavin and Alice
Thought that life in the bush might be nice,
And they built a log cabin they thought was a palace
And took up peace, love and brown rice.*

*But, alas, their affair which had started so well
Began to get rocky and rough.
And what once had been heaven turned into a hell,
Till they both felt that they’d had enough.*

*In a civilized fashion they severed their ties
And decided to call it a day,
And Alice, in what seemed a good compromise
Bought a lovely block over the way.*

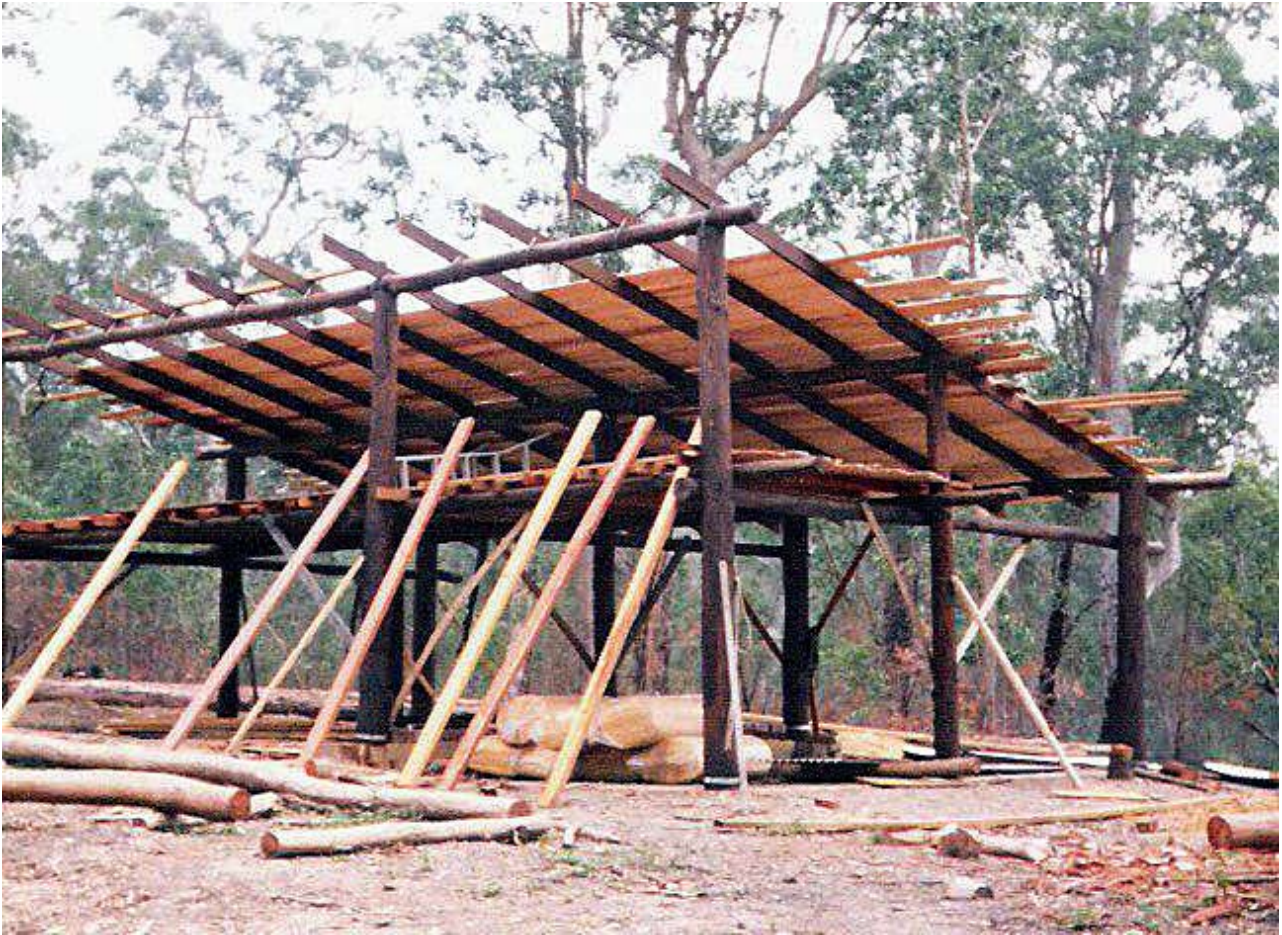
*Now Alice and Gavin’s intentions were clear –
To be friends, though they now lived apart,
And Alice conceived a terrific idea
That would help them to make this fresh start.*

*“I’ll light up his fridge so his beer will be cold.
I remember warm beer makes him shitty,
And he’ll say ‘What a neighbour – what a pure heart of gold!’
When he comes up tonight from the city”.*

*Now Alice’s deed was sincere and well meant,
To prove that she still was his friend.
But Gavin was courting a trendy named Wendy
And didn’t come up that weekend.*

*Well, something went wrong with the lighting routine
And a great conflagration ensued,
And out of the ash of that pitiful scene
Rose the smell of Gav’s beer – barbecued.*

*Hysterical Alice, distraught and embarrassed,
Then telephoned Gavin in town.
“I meant you no malice” sobbed poor little Alice,
“But I just burned your log cabin down”.
He took the news bravely – and when he could speak*



In the beginning...was the bushpole framework



Then there was the bathroom



Inside the bathroom



The naked builder

*He consoled his remorseful ex-lover
"No worries, my dear, I'm retiring next week;
I'll look forward to building another".*

*This ending was happy – the friendship survived,
But the lesson it teaches is hard:
If you want to prove friendship when passion has died
You'd be better to just send a card.*

Luckily the mud house that I was building had by this time been roofed, and although it had no walls to speak of I moved in. I had little choice, really, and I learnt to share the upstairs sleeping loft at night with tiny bats and the odd possum.

Some time later Ellen managed to burn down her own cabin as well! When she did, in a fine demonstration of neighbourly action a local builder and quite a few people from round about used to turn up on weekends and give a hand.

When I was still living in my house at Crows Nest that I had bought when Gill and I split up I bumped into an old friend from Lintas days, John Edye. John had left Lintas and become a potter, and was running the Sturt Pottery attached to Frensham Girls' School down at Mittagong. We rekindled our friendship, and some time later John ended up buying 50 of my 100 acres at Wirrimbirra, on which he built a painstakingly finished two-storied mudbrick house across the gully from my place. Since the minimum block size zoning in that part of the world was 100 acres, we had to go to all sorts of lengths to get half each, resorting to setting up Brush Creek Pty Ltd as a company of which we were both directors. This didn't actually meet with the approval of Council, such that even now John's place is not strictly legal, and our ambiguous status with the Council hangs over us like a pall.

I had pretty well finished building my house when another old friend came on the scene. Isabelle Fogarty was a member of the Presbyterian Fellowship when we were both teenagers. Since then she had married John Fogarty, who also hung about on the outskirts of the Fellowship group, and had three girls to him. By the time we re-met, her marriage to Foge had split up and the three girls were by then grown up. The eldest, Sarah, was a fine musician, had married, and had a young son called Dylan. Besides Isabelle, Sarah played a big role in bringing music and musicians to Wirrimbirra, and many a swinging time was had by all – but more of that later, too.

My relationship with Isabelle was pretty much idyllic for the first four years or so. Here's something I wrote during that period, which was around the middle of 1990:

*Three squares a day,
A roof and some walls,
A good woman,
A loving daughter,
And good things to do.
Cheap champagne,
Homemade beer,
Free dope
And no fetters
On your imagination.
More?
Why?*

But as so often seems to be the case, things don't stay on a high like that for long, and the relationship began to fray after about four years. Things went downhill from frayed to tattered and Is moved out on the eighth anniversary of when we had reconnected. This

pretty well devastated me and I thought the bottom had dropped out of my world. Mind you, I don't think Is was unscathed, either. Shit happens, I guess, but it was a couple of years before I was able to be philosophical about the rift.

Wirrimbirra is so full of good memories, though. In the summer it was usual for me to spend the day naked. (It was, after all, the seventies). I'd be making mud bricks, or laying mudbricks into a wall, or cleaning old mortar off recycled bricks, and by lunchtime I'd be filthy. In those days the big dam below the northern side of the house held water and was swimmable, so I'd just go down and dunk myself. Living like this I made very little washing, and was pretty cheap to run. A typical building day would go something like this: I'd wake up at sparrow fart (Eastern yellow robins, in fact), and after a simple breakfast I'd spend an hour or two on some relatively heavy task like cleaning bricks while it was still cool. Then I'd do an hour's flute practice, and about half an hour's piano practice, then go back to work till lunchtime. Lunch was washed down with home brewed beer which I was regularly making at the time, then back to whatever I was doing for the arvo. At the end of the day I'd have the other half of the bottle I'd begun at lunch, and a joint (I was growing my own in different parts of the bush round the house, and fighting the Swamp Wallabies for it). One of the many books I'd read about alternative lifestyles was *Living the Good Life*, by Helen and Scott Nearing, in which they advocated putting aside half of every day for creative activities that nourish the soul, like writing, playing music, reading and the like. I found this very congenial. It made me feel that I was really in control of my own life at last. No more working for money to pay people to do stuff for you. If you did everything for yourself you didn't need nearly as much money, and I got by on the rent from the Crows Nest house. I was prepared to have a crack at doing it all, though I must admit that a fair bit of what I did was a bit rough. I'd do stuff like plumbing and (12v) electrical wiring, but the results were rarely tradesmanlike. In Drawer Three of my website you can get a good idea of how the house turned out by going to *Wirrimbirra circa 2005*.

One autumn day I was chainsawing up some wood for winter fires. It was still quite hot, and all I had on was my Wellies. You can't hear much over the roar of a chainsaw, and when I switched it off I was taken aback to see a Council ute and three Council officers amusedly watching my progress. I just said something like "Give me a sec to get decent and then I can talk to you without being at a disadvantage". No problem. I can't remember why they had visited. Some time later I heard that there was a rumour that someone that they called The Wild Man of the Watagans lived in the bush in the Watagan Mountains clad only in Wellington boots!

I mentioned only buying something new as a last resort. That was one of the guiding principles behind everything I did to the house – see it as a challenge to find a way to use what you've got before you go out and buy a new one. As a result of this way of approaching things, my glassware was made from cut-off bottles, and my lights were housed in jam jars. Some people found my house at night a bit on the dim side, but as far as I was concerned, it may have been dimmish, but it was all I needed to see what I was doing, and a quantum leap on hurricane lamps.. I had a couple of portable lamps with bright bulbs in them for when I needed to read or do fine work at night. Over the years the lights and the glasses have been superseded by well-meaning folk who brought me "proper" light shades and wineglasses. Not everyone understands how far you can take recycling, and how satisfying it can be.

One of the people who understood my approach was Ron Le Seuer who lived down in the valley. He had a penchant for dropping up every so often with half a bottle of whisky and some Coke around the end of the day for a 'sundowner'. After I had the place pretty well finished we were having a noggin or two one evening and he was giving the place the once-over. "Mmmm" he said, "It's all you need really, isn't it." I took that as a fair sort of compliment.



Speaking of Ron, when Isabelle called things off she bought a small cabin that had been built on a block the other side of Ellen's. From that moment on Ron always referred to the track that ran off Brush Creek Rd along the ridge which led to all the properties (now Wirrimbirra Lane) as Bill's Old Poke Rd.

Fiona

I want to talk a bit about Fiona now.

As I write this Fi is 44. It's funny how, when your kids grow up, you miss the way they were in childhood. I certainly do, and photos of her as a child swamp me in waves of nostalgia. Childhood photos of Fi's son Christopher, now 15, do the same thing for me.

From as early as 8 or so Fi has been besotted with horses. Not an unknown phenomenon among young girls, I suspect that we all thought this would abate sometime in her teen years, when she would discover that boys had a bit more to offer. But no. Horses have been a big part of her life all the way through. Because of her involvement with horses and horse riding she has suffered a broken arm, a broken rib, and a lucky escape when a horse reared and fell back on top of her, from which she emerged sore and sorry, but with nothing broken. She was sobered somewhat by each of these accidents, but each time she has "got back on", and in her early middle age she is still committed to riding.

In the early days at Wirrimbirra, when Fi (and Kylie, Ellen's daughter) were about 9, I made them a couple of abstract horses from some tree trunks. They had tree bark for manes and tails, bits of leather for ears and they turned out to be a great fantasy vehicle for both girls. They were so keen on horses in any form, that they collected horseshit from down in the Valley, and brought it back to pile under the tails of their wooden ones. Fi finally got a horse of her own when she was about 13, from an adult friend she had made down in Yarramalong, Rosalie Skinner. As things turned out, when Fi was 19/20ish she went to live with Rosalie and her family for a couple of years, largely to be near her horse, while she finished a science degree by correspondence. It's been an enduring friendship.

She met and ultimately married Alex Irving, a Kempsey boy, and they had a son, Christopher. Fi and Alex wanted more kids, but despite forays into IVF this was not to be. In Alex, now a solicitor, I think she chose well. I'm impressed with him as a son-in-law, and I greatly enjoy his laid-back, dry sense of humour. They lived for quite some years out of Denman in the upper Hunter, and now they live out of Wauchope on a farm at Bellangry. A visit to their place these days I always find rejuvenating. The place is full of animals – cows, calves, goats, and four dogs that pretty well run the house, and it is a happy, loud and slightly anarchic place. I made a card for Fi in her early adolescence, which said something along the lines of: "To Fi. May she, like her father, be lucky enough to be able to follow her interests". And I am gratified to see that so far she has.

Fi teaches secondary school science at various high schools in the area, Alex runs his business as a solicitor (and sometimes can be seen wearing a T-shirt which has a drawing of a shark on it and the words "Trust me, I'm a lawyer"), and together, with some help from Chris, they run the farm. It's a physically demanding existence but they all seem to thrive on it.

When Fi was about 15 or so, I used to be a bit dismayed that she seemed like a typical teenaged girl – a bit flighty, a bit scared by physical challenges, and a bit (dare I say it?) conventionally flighty feminine and dependent on her peer group, which is how most adolescents are. It's been a great satisfaction to me to watch her turn into an autonomous, responsible and adventurous adult. These days she can brave winter mornings to help deliver a calf, put her arm up to the shoulder inside a cow, mark bull calves, and take on just about any job that the farm might require. She is resourceful, creative in her approach to life, persevering in the face of obstacles, and overall has managed quite admirably to define a life for herself which is anything but the "feminine" stereotype that worried me a bit when she was younger. And Alex is a spot-on complement to her. They are a good team.



With Buck at Yarramalong



When she was living with the Skinners



On her wedding day



With Kylie (slide)

With me on a trip to Wales aged 5



The make-believe horses

Before Fi met Alex she brought various beaux up to Wirrimbirra. At that stage I was fearful that she might pick up with a bloke who owned a motor bike, or some religious fundamentalist. (Well, you never know...) She told me recently that she and one of her boyfriends had planned to drive up to Wirrimbirra separately, she in her car and he on a borrowed motorcycle clad in priest's raiment. They were going meet at the top of the hill down to the house, where Fi would mount the pillion and they'd ride down to the house, and watch my face. For some reason this jape never came to be, but it would have been a ripper if it had!

Christopher has turned out to be a thoughtful boy who seems to be quite able to resist the testosterone-based silliness of most of adolescent male culture. You wouldn't exactly call him a sports jock, but he enjoys playing soccer and futsal, and like all of his peers, needs a surgeon to separate him from his computer. He is articulate and witty, and takes the serious things in life seriously, yet he still seems to get a kick out of living and enjoys a wide range of friends. In this he is very much like both of his parents. I enjoy his company (and theirs, of course) tremendously.

A lot of my friends go back a long way. I met Telford Conlon in London when we were both in our twenties. Telf went on to complete a PhD in Physics and has had all sorts of jobs, none of which directly entailed using his higher degree. He makes the train trip up to Cooranbong every few months and we indulge in what Telf calls "cigar work", where we sit on Lo's back verandah and, over a bottle or three of red, we smoke cigars and solve the problems of the world. Telf often brings other people with him who he thinks would fit well into this cosy scenario, and a good time is usually had by all. I greatly enjoy these regular forays into matters intellectual. They help me feel less isolated in a sea of pensioners and Seventh Day Adventists.

Another long term mate is Peter Slezak. We became firm friends in my early days at UNSW when I supervised his Honours thesis and the friendship has continued ever since. He is an indefatigable campaigner against all forms of hypocrisy and political chicanery in various public forums, and is now an Associate Professor of Philosophy at UNSW. I admire his perseverance in the face of much bitter opposition, particularly from the Jewish community who resent his cogent criticisms of Israel and Zionism.

Wirrimbirra and music

Apart from my own regular practice periods, much is the music that has been made at Wirrimbirra. I think it would have reached its zenith during the Isabelle years. Not long after Is and I got together we made a cassette tape called *Sound Tracks – made by visitors to Wirrimbirra*. It featured a choir of local kids, a piano solo by the local GP, poem recitals by Ron Le Sueur, an original collaboration between John Edye and Chris Kirby, a piano piece by Telford Conlon, songs from Sarah Fogarty, Isabelle, and the Fogarty girls, to name a few. I did something as well. Then we sold copies to all our friends for ten bucks a go, and were able to send a donation of several hundred dollars to the local fire brigade. It was a fun thing to do.

One weekend later on we had a sale of a lot of my paintings, drawings, collages, turnings and sculptures. A helluva lot of people came, and literally everything was sold. Afterwards, so many of our friends were musicians that it developed into a full-on jam. The joint was jumpin', as the song says. From the profits I kept a quarter to cover expenses, and sent a donation of \$2,500 to the Total Environment Centre. Not a bad donation from someone who was existing on \$100 a week rent from my Crows Nest house, I thought.

A few clicks away on Murrays Run lived Claude and Bronnie Aliotti. Claude was another generalist and he'd turn his hand to anything whether he knew anything about it or not ("all you've gotta do..."). He set up a music studio in his handbuilt house and bought all sorts of



Wally Carslaw with Isabelle and her daughters



*Wally and Sarah Fogarty being inconvenienced by the flute player.
(They had to let me play because I owned the house)*



"Miss Jones", the group I played with at the Ourimbah University campus for years giving a concert at Wirrimbirra. Mike Goddard, WB, (and Andrew Kepert out of frame)



With Sue Blundell at the Stone House in Yarramalong

recording gear and video editing stuff off EBay. Through Claude I met more musicians from round about, like Larry Hughes and Alan Glover. We recorded a lot of stuff in the Tin Shed Studio as it got to be called, and samples of our output can be found in the Music Drawer of my website. (See *The Murrays Run Improvised Ensemble* and *The Lost Angelas*).

Well before we all got a computers I bought myself a second hand Fostex 4-track recorder and used to get quite a kick out of overdubbing my own tracks with the power being supplied by the house's solar panels. In the same Music drawer are examples of music that I used to multi-record at Wirrimbirra, such as *Off the Cuff* and *Sky Blues*.

Other craft work

I had bought myself a lathe and a bandsaw, and spent a fair bit of time turning wooden bowls and other round stuff once the house was pretty well finished. I also did candlesticks and non-turned wooden sculptures and junk sculptures of all kinds. Long before it became popular to make sculptures from recycled materials. I was enthusiastically into it. Like building the house, I saw it as a challenge to my creativity to use stuff that our society throws away to make something that had some sort of aesthetic value. At one stage I sent a form letter to several big Sydney printers asking if I could scrounge their offcuts of paper. Only one replied, John Sands, and they were intrigued with my approach. I drove to their factory and filled the back of my Suzuki with lots and lots of paper and boards, including the last ream of double-demi size Bemboka paper, which has a particularly beautiful surface texture. It was when the output of these various efforts had built up that I had the sale mentioned earlier. Photos of a lot of this stuff are in Drawer Three of the website.

All the time these activities were going on I was doing graphic design jobs for various people who got to hear about me. For about 12 years I designed the posters, programmes and publicity material for Valley Artists, who were a highly-talented group of amateur theatre people focused on the nearby towns of Wollombi and Laguna. Later, when I moved to Cooranbong I also did graphic design jobs for the Southlakes Community Group and the local Meal on Wheels. I used to do all these jobs *pro bono*, because I felt that the people I was doing them for deserved support. It also made me feel a bit useful, which I liked.

In 2001 I embarked upon what is probably my most ambitious attempt at writing a comprehensive oral history. I interviewed fifty residents of the Mangrove Mountain area, transcribed them, and put them into a book I called *The Way It Was*. The first half of the book was a history of the area from pre-colonial times and the interviews made up the second half. I put this book together with Ken West, who supplied many of the photos from his own extensive collection. The late Wendy Lowenstein, doyenne of Australian oral history (*Weevils in the Flour*, *Under the Hook*) wrote an enthusiastic Introduction to it which helped me feel that I hadn't been wasting my time. The readership for such a work is not big, so we only printed 750 copies which had sold out within a few years and it is now out of print. The Gosford Library had contributed a grant of \$2000 towards production costs, and is currently scanning the book to upload it to the Gosford Local History website, where from now on it will be available for free.

Meeting Lorraine

Through Paul Budde of Bucketty I got involved with doing some interview work with people involved with the Great North Road, which was an early convict-built piece of priceless heritage that was being allowed to deteriorate badly. Paul and several others initiated moves



The original cabin that burned down



The aftermath



Just after I'd finished the new cabin



When water was plentiful



The new cabin. It had a sod roof.



With the Le Sueurs at one of Ron's poetry recitals at the Yarramalong Manor



Lorraine



At Fi's graduation



With Chris at Mum's 93rd birthday

to get what was left of the Road looked after adequately, and The Convict Trail Project was born. There was a historian who lived at Sunnyvale on the Macdonald River, not far from Wisemans Ferry whose name was Lorraine Banks. She was one of the volunteers working on the CTP and became its first Executive Director when the project got up and running. It was through Lorraine that I got to interview a whole heap of people who were involved with saving the Road, and out of this came the local history book *By Force of Maul and Wedge*, which contained the interviews I'd done and which I self-published. This also is now out of print, but again, Geoff Potter of the Local Studies section of Gosford Library has undertaken to scan it and upload it to their website.

One thing led to another (as they do) and Lorraine and I soon became close friends, and I worked together with her to do most of the graphic design work that was needed for the furtherance of the Convict Trail Project. This work went on for some years until Lo became too ill to continue in the job, and because she was having increasing difficulty negotiating the stairs in her Sunnyvale home she moved to a house in Cooranbong on the banks of upper Dora Creek.

Not long after Lo and I became an item we bought a camper trailer (the Canvas Hilton) so we could travel Australia. We went all over the place, camping wild wherever possible. We went to Corner Country, the centre, a round trip of the Kimberley, and did numerous other trips till we'd seen just about all of Australia. We particularly liked the outback trips. It certainly is A Big Country.

After being together for several years we embarked on a project to build a sort of raft affair, which we took down to Yarrawonga and went for several hundred clicks down the Murray River as far as Echuca. A good mate of ours, Kent Shaw, who was also an owner-mudbrick builder and a marine engineer, helped us considerably with this project. The building of the raft (the Floating Hilton) was hugely satisfying, but the trip down the Murray was a litany of mishaps and adventures. Nonetheless it was a great experience. The full story is told in Drawer One of the website, entitled *Over the Hill and Down the River*.

About the time I met Lorraine I'd bought a secondhand computer, and she helped me get up to speed on a lot of what computers had to offer. I ended up with an up-to-date computer on which I could run programmes like Photoshop and InDesign, and this pretty much revolutionised my approach to things graphic. Eventually I put together my website (which is looking a tad dated these days) and got a local graphic designer to upload it to the Web and host it for me. I was mightily complimented when the National Library asked me if they could add it to their *Pandora Electronic Archive*, which is archived in perpetuity and updated every twelve months or so.

As time went by and Lorraine and I began to pay the inevitable price of too many birthdays we had to reluctantly give up our camper-trailer travels, and we began to travel overseas like so many oldies do. We chose to visit places in the Pacific, since neither of us had ventured further than New Zealand. We went to New Zealand (again), and after that to Niue, a tiny island in mid-Pacific that enjoyed only one flight a week in and out. Next we went to New Caledonia, had a few days on the Isle of Pines, then hired a car and drove around the main island for about a week. I think the highlight of our Pacific peregrinations though was when we went to Tahiti and boarded the *Aranui* for a trip of ten days around the Marquesas Islands. The *Aranui* was a working boat that provisioned the islands and only took 100 passengers. It was a well-organised trip, and largely devoid of the carry-on you seem to get with most cruise liners. We thought it was terrific.

The last trip overseas we did was to Cambodia and Vietnam. After visiting Angkor Wat out of Siem Riep we boarded a boat and went down the Mekong River to Ho Chi Min City (which the locals still call Saigon), and flew up to Hanoi and the obligatory sampan-on-Halong Bay overnight cruise. Having been considerably involved in the protest movement

against the Vietnam war (which they call the American War) I was pleasantly surprised to see how the country had bounced back and reinvented itself. I found myself to be fiercely jubilant all the time I was there that the Vietnamese had actually won the war against the obscene and ugly might of the US. The story was similar in Cambodia, (and also, I believe, in Laos) which were also subjected to months of carpet-bombing ordered by those sub-human pricks Nixon and Kissinger. The US pulled out all the stops and did its horrendous and despicable best to “bomb them back to the Stone Age” as Kissinger so indelicately put it, but the S.E. Asians survived and eventually prevailed. I admire the Vietnamese so much for what they did.

These days, when being long in the tooth (actually, they're quite worn down) necessitates so many visits to medicos for things like Warfarin monitoring and the ailments of age, I spend most of my time at Lorraine's place at Cooranbong, because Wirrimbirra isn't all that convenient to medical care, has no mobile phone reception, and the landline service is unreliable because of its proximity to iron deposits along the Kulnura plateau. Indeed, since my capabilities have been severely curtailed by the passing years Wirrimbirra has increasingly seemed to belong to earlier chapters in my biographical narrative.

Given that the philosophical foundation on which my house was built was that you should do as much as possible yourself (as one of my interviewees once said, *"If you pay people to do stuff for you then you don't learn anything"*) I do find it ironic that these geriatric days I have to pay someone to clean out my gutters. I can't do stuff anymore, and this dilutes considerably the enjoyment of living in a shelter of your own making. You can no longer ignore the fact that entropy is winning – the place slowly disintegrates around you if you don't keep up on the maintenance, and the upsetting truth of the matter is that I can no longer do that. Of course, when I was younger and brasher, this never occurred to me.

Before finishing this part I'd like to emphasise what a positive role Lorraine has played in my life since we became lovers, and we've been together for some eighteen years now -- the longest relationship I've ever had. I have never known another relationship that was so mutual, so hassle-free, and so fulfilling. We both think that this might have come about because we met late in life, at a time when we both had worked out coherent self-images for ourself, and had a pretty good idea what was negotiable and what wasn't in the name of forging a relationship. We talk about our feelings a fair bit, and have a good idea what each thinks of the other. I think that one of the contributing factors to the success of the friendship is that we both respect one another. It's a relationship built on reality, rather than romanticism. For me, having experienced several initially hopeful relationships founder, it is greatly reassuring to find that someone can get on with me, and for as long as Lo and I have. There is the saying that “no man is a hero to his valet”, and it contains much truth, but in our case, having seen all that a valet can, and more, about each other, it is vastly gratifying to know that even at our late stage of life true companionship -- mateship, even -- is possible. I would have included more photos of her if it weren't for her being so camera-shy.

So here endeth the biographical overview of *La vie Bumley*. It is selective, of course, but if it weren't you'd have tuned out by page five (if you haven't already anyway.). However, I am aware that there are many things in my life that happened to me that I haven't mentioned. These are usually embarrassing, or not fit for general consumption, and I can't see any way around this. I've always wished I might have known about the lives of my forbears in more detail, especially Dad, and I can only hope that this egocentric account will go some way to providing some detail of my life to those few who might be interested to read about it.
