

DARLINGTON—A REFUGE?

“There’s Ashtons in Them Thar Hills”

Do you remember rainy days in May? There were some, once. It was on one of those that a daggy green ute with a daggy green canopy was whining, shuddering and groaning its way up Greenmount. Raindrops kept dripping from the ragged edge of the canopy, and sitting on the edge of a splintery pine crate I could see precious little to admire in a grey sky, closing in on the looming slopes on the other side of Chipper’s Leap; but still I was happy enough, because there was my new home to look forward to, and my boarding school to kiss a thankful farewell to.....

It was 1951; a couple of years had passed since my mother (deputising for my parents) had seen the property of her dreams, and decided to buy it. Perhaps £3,000 was rather a lot to pay for eleven-odd acres of largely rock, and there was a general feeling that we had in some measure been ‘had’; but what the hell, there was a creek running through it, I had been told; and speaking of hell, I had qualifications and experience in that region, in boarding schools in Ceylon and Perth. I had been, quite frankly, looking forward to this.

When the green ute pulled into the gateless entrance of the yard by the cottage, we had already been travelling down gravel roads from the Post Office/Store (then run by Mr and Mrs Benn, relatives of my earliest mate at Wesley), along a road which despite two changes of direction and as many junctions retained the name of Glen—as it still does—and only became Victor as it reached the bottom of the valley and branched seaward, through the width of the old Victor spread.



Looking across Nyaania Creek from the back of our house, in fact, we were rewarded by the spectacle of the original Victor homestead, boiling with a bewildering array of juveniles of all available sexes, under the inadequate control of a few next-to-invisible adults. Our house, which had been the gardener's cottage, was snuggled up under the shoulder of Victor Road; one of my ex-'mates' from Wesley College C-Dorm, after accepting an invitation to visit, was gracious enough to characterise it as a 'shack': not too far from the truth, and delivered with the Pilbara brutality which has, I hope, remained his most endearing feature.



The old Victor homestead, then, concealed the remaining house on the west side of Glen Road: Harry and Laurel Pearce lived in a green weatherboard building hardly bigger than ours. The hundred Victor acres had first been split by Victor Road, then the southern fifty had been divided in half. The western half was occupied by Glen Doone, with a series of erections kindly called 'chalets' dotted along the skyline of the last ridge on Victor Road. Under the previous owner, a Mr Lester, these cottages were designated as holiday accommodation, but were empty (and gradually grew derelict) from the time we arrived. Taking his cue from this, Mr Lester had also departed, and Glen Doone was owned by a Geoff Wilde, with his wife and children—son Vaughan and daughter Dixie—whom we later got to know reasonably well, as amongst my mother's music students.

Of the eastern half of the southern portion, our block—a little over eleven acres—had two road frontages, Victor and (surprisingly) Mills, which had long been gazetted but never actually brought into service. Harry and Laurel's completed the layout with three frontages (Victor, Glen, Mills) and some twelve and a half acres, I think.

Laurel Pearce was sister to Kelvin Prater, who had at one time owned the Victor spread (with the possible exception of Glen Doone), so the Pearce property was part-of-the-family – as ours had been before my mother purchased our part of the property. The main 'dwelling' on the property was the

gardener's cottage, inhabited by a widow and her four children. Mrs Laming had bought it from Kelvin – who had used the property to fatten cattle bound for the slaughter yard in Midland,

Our arrival on the scene, and our occupation added to the fact that we were less welcome than we might have been in the immediate neighbourhood. Indeed, my Zane-Grey-fed imagination started to cook-up parallels with cattle-barons and nesters, in which each apparent attempt to dislodge us was made with an amusing lack of subtlety: inhabitants of the Old Prater Homestead emitted loudly disparaging remarks and falsetto laughter as they passed (going *where*? Victor Road led nowhere, then). We were offered an exchange block in Mahogany Creek—no house, no services, well populated with something called 'poison weed', Dame Rumour said later—and finally veiled threats which only ceased on the arrival of my father.

Unconnected with the feuds of the early years was a late-night telephone-oriented 'adventure' which, I think, marked the demise of Glen Doone Holiday Chalets. Its herald was an hysterical banging on the front door. These were the days before it was necessary to have every door double-locked, with burglar alarm and Doberman at hand, so it was with some concern that I opened the door and revealed a man with a faceful of blood – some of which also decorated his upper garments. He asked to use the phone to ring for an ambulance. Why not the one at Glen Doone? I ask now, all these years later, and one or two answers do spring to mind. It seemed that he and a 'friend', occupying one of the chalets, had had a disagreement which eventually featured a hatchet, I think. Mira phoned triple-O as we did not want blood all over the floor, or the phone. We settled down to listen for the blues-and-twos.

Nothing happened, and then went on happening. Fairly soon our ex-combatant was back looking (now that he had rid himself of most of the blood) more concerned than ever. Where, he asked, was the ambulance? His friend was continuing to lose blood, and there was only so much..... We, of course, immediately rang the three zeros, and back came the plaintive tale of the Lost Ambulance, looking fruitlessly for a Victor Road in ***Bindoon***: an easy mistake to make as 'Bindoon' sounds so much like 'Glen Doone'.

Since all this, the Praters have moved (to a Margaret River property, if memory serves); so have the Pearces, to the Geraldton area (same caveat) where Harry has since died. Kelvin and Ann's daughter married Clarrie Jones, a pleasant young man whom we had for an over-the-road neighbour until the Prater fifty acres was split into three farmlets of roughly three-and-a-half acres. The remaining 28-odd acres (opposite the chalet sites) is occupied by the family of other relatives. On the south side of Victor Road there have occurred similar carvings-up: the Pearce property was subdivided before Harry and Laurel left. Their old green weatherboard house on the top block was on one block, and their newer brick/tile house nearer the creek was bought by the Bogles who erected a stable/barn – close to the old Victor Homestead site which had sunk into oblivion through the activity of innumerable termites.

Virtually upon arrival, my mother had been invited to take part in the local choir—the Kajamaba Singers—then under the wing of Mrs Curlewis, of Beenong Road. My mother's long experience, working with Radio Ceylon since 1930, and Radio South Africa during 1942-4 while she and I were evacuated there, added to her academic qualifications from the Royal Academy of Music, made her a valuable resource to the community. She was only too happy to comply with the request. Demand also came from the University Choral Society for its annual performance of Handel's *Messiah*, in which she featured as contralto soloist. At past-fifty, time was starting to leave its mark. I vividly remember her astounded fury during one of those years, when the music critic of *The West Australian* described her as 'lacking power'. In the meantime, however, she continued to go from strength to strength, and the Darlington Singers (as they were now) went with her.

On the home front, most of the packing-cases containing the Worldly Goods of the Ashtons had been delivered, and sat neatly ranged around the verandahs (see photo), full of lovely surprises for us, and for me in particular.

Not so for my mother: she was always quoting the horror stories of other travellers who had suffered the effects of the version of *Drop-It-and-See-How-Many-Times-it-Bounces* practised by stevedores in various ports. She had had experience of this laissez faire attitude in India:



somewhere to the northward of us, an Indian family was at that moment enjoying the contents of our cabin trunk, left aboard the SS *Shirala* after the Bombay Harbour disaster of April 14, 1944. We had been told that *Shirala* had been sunk in the catastrophe— and there was plenty of evidence to support this, in a general way – even though it turned out to be incorrect. One (more) for the pilferers!

When opened, the crates showed that the Fremantle stevedores, determined to uphold the noble aims of the calling, had combined with my father's excessive caution to produce a new high in destructiveness. The teak expanding dining-table which I remembered from the Colombo house was missing several sections from its edge-trim; and, of the six matching cane-bottom chairs, only four were recoverable. The Chinese display cabinet was full of the shards of its own glass. It was my father's extreme meticulousness which had played a part in this destruction: he had screwed these (and other items of furniture) to the base and/or sides of crates, and when the crates were dropped onto the quay and concertinaed, the furniture followed suit. We looked at one another, then started work.

For the remainder of 1951, I continued at Wesley. This meant early rising (5 am, if I remember correctly) in order to do my half-hour's piano practice, a hasty breakfast, then trudging the best part of a mile to catch the bus. The Beam Bus Service's (Dennis or Guy make) single-decker waited in the

turning-pan north of the railway station, at the bottom of steep Montrose Avenue. Between Montrose and equally-steep Allestree Road stood the Uniting Church, snuggled up with Owen's Liquor Store under the eaves of its hall; and as the bus shuddered off up Darlington Road it passed between St Cuthbert's Anglican Church—warm and lumpy ironstone and red-brick walls—and, across the railway lines, the Recreation Ground.

The same year showed that a lack of close supervision, combined with my carefree attitude toward academia, had put me on a collision course with failure in the Junior Certificate Examination, due to heave over the horizon the following year. So, a virtue was made of necessity: with the excuse that it was closer to home, I was removed from Wesley at the end of '51. My mother enrolled me at Guildford Grammar School in, what is now, Year Ten. Discipline at GGS was reinforced by a liberal use of the cane, so I passed the Junior Certificate in nine subjects.

But a number of things changed. Such friends as I had had at Wesley tended to drift away. There were not too many to lose, as there was a culture – seemingly based on an aversion intellectually – similar to the “don't-dob-on-ye-mates” mantra which one sees invoked in schoolyard bullying and theft today. However, in a search for companionship for me, my mother had induced one of the choir to offer-up her son Eddie, some three years my junior, and we formed the nucleus of a Gang. The problem (whisper it soft) was not so much my falling into bad company: I was Bad Company waiting for an excuse to happen.

Into this vortex was sucked another hapless, but far from reluctant, participant: Dickie. He lived near the southern end of Lionel Road in an eccentric pile with his father, his mother, his elder sister and younger brother. The family would today be described as 'dysfunctional', although three of its members struck me as being pretty normal.

There was not a lot normal about Dickie, however, and he would not have had it otherwise. A Hale School student, he and I had met during the Beam-Bus years, and when I dropped the dear old brown/cream rattler for the smooth suavity of the 8 a.m. WAGR all-stations-to-East-Guildford flier, I hung onto Dickie. We three (Dickie, Eddie and I) formed the nucleus of a most promising Social Problem, of a non-violent type, and we all brought gifts to the table.

It was Dickie, for example, who claimed to be the inventor of a simple but incredibly effective Wind-Up Fart machine which produced a variety of reactions during our last shared days on the Beam Buses – although I have my reservations, because his father was no shrinking violet, and he described to me a number of similar engines for creating embarrassment among the unsuspecting. Another of Dickie's gifts was literally explosive. He would manufacture gumnut bombs, which he delighted in inserting into sundry letter-boxes of the neighbourhood. What His Majesty's Mails thought of this ingenious device remained uninvestigated. A sequel to these harmless *fourberies* occurred a couple of Guy Fawkes' nights later, when someone tossed a lighted cracker into Dickie's firework tin, and he spent the next two months in hospital.

Eddie was handsome and well-built, and as I had been learning judo during the final year at Wesley (having scores to settle), he was a keen student of what I had to pass on, and apt withal. Both Dickie and Eddie had bicycles. Dickie, though not tall, still dwarfed his blue 20-inch fixed-wheel machine, and could make it do everything except stand up and beg. Eddie was more normally equipped, so I was the odd one out in the sense of transport.

Problem soon solved. By the time this deficiency became an inconvenience, I had been induced to join the Darlington Youth Club, and through its activities (in what is now the Lesser Hall) had met some of the most admirable people I will ever be likely to meet.

Roy and Thelma Davidson lived in Mofflin Avenue, with their sons Elyn and Darryl; their dedication to the good of the community—which extended as far as some of the industrial suburbs of Perth—was reflected in the response from young people both local and distant.

The Darlington Youth Club—whose name tended to vacillate from time to time to reflect its perceived aims, but which finally settled-down to be the Darlington Younger Set—was designed above all to help the inarticulate teenagers of its membership develop self-confidence without having it rubbed-into them that they were lacking in same. To that end there were many activities, around the clock, and in many places, designed to involve them and draw-out their aptitudes.

The aim was to detect their desires and channel them into positive directions: “Revues” of great intricacy and exactness— I shall never forget the Macbeth parody *Spot the Lady* in which Macduff says,

“That sword’s no good, Macbeth, you’d better drop it” and First Murderer mutters

“Looks like it’s my cue to ‘op it”.

And Lady Macbeth’s deathless line,

“Out, out, damn’d Spot! Out, out, I say! Will nothing wash this blood away? Now Duncan’s dead, the need is urgent; I’ve even tried petroleum detergent!”



There were also faux-Stanley-Holloway recitations (“Marksman Sam”, “The Return of Albert”), the matchless pianism of Elyn Davidson, set-piege songs by whoever had not had to suffer for a while; and finally all-singing-all-dancing floor shows to a theme like “The Little Red School House” (refer photo).

And lest the Gentle Reader think that all this activity was surplus to requirements, no, we were not the only Gang in the district. The one which shot to (limited) fame was a little more sinister in nature, and promised red-blooded excitement including the shedding of the Good Red Krovvy (mine); but they came to grief after they made a sally on the shack in the Helena Valley and strutted

around the Village brandishing their haul—a 9mm WWI Luger Parabellum—after which they were not much in evidence around Darlington for a while.

So, what has all this meticulous detail to do with our Gang, and my bikelessness? Regard, Reader, the picture above, particularly the rear rank. There's Elyn under the newspaper forage cap; and next to him the inimitable Frank Cooke, with the roguish smile which made him so popular among us. Frank was, I should say, completely tone-deaf; and it would make our day to hear him sing "How You Gonna Keep 'em/Down on the Farm (etc)". Frank, incidentally, was not taller than Elyn; I think that he must have been standing on someone else here. We lost him some years later when, driving his taxi, he went under the tray of a truck. He was, and continues to be, much missed.

Frank had, at the time we first knew him, a bicycle that he wanted to dispose of, and he wanted five pounds. We had £5, and did a swap with him. I had ridden a bicycle once before in my life: my final year at Wesley. This one was unvarnished, painted red with rusty handlebars, a freewheeler which we all thought was sound until one day in the middle of Midland (Midland Junction, as it still was in those days) I sensed that it was being transmuted into a racing machine. I sank lower and lower, the handlebars came up to meet me and I finally went aground in front of the Malvern Star shop (A Sign! A Sign!). I was devastated, but after due consultation my mother ordered me to heave it into the back of her Hillman Minx Station Wagon and it vanished, to reappear a couple of weeks later as a shiny—nay, resplendent!—object called *Atlantic*, in blue and green, its glitter backed-up by the top-of-the-range Sturmey Archer four-speed gear hub which made Greenmount possible without a heart attack.



A Hail of Animals, various:

While on the subject, and studying the pre-transformation photograph of the bicycle, I draw your attention to the Flat Cat, clearly enjoying her ease on an otherwise trying summer afternoon

outside the kitchen/dining-room (door, right), and trying to dissipate some of the heat of the day from her thick fur through the roughly-poured concrete of the cottage verandah.

This was Rattle, our first cat *in situ*; so named (by her previous owners) because of the loud purr with which she would greet all and sundry, unless they were disturbing her afternoon siesta; in which case she would favour the interloper with the deep-freeze stare which you see above. It may have been, on this occasion, the memory of her first ratting expedition which produced this implacable glare; and it would have been small wonder.

It was my parents' intention at the time of purchase, to develop *Engalia* as a poultry farm. With *The Egg and I* hitting Perth screens in 1948, comic stories of agricultural endeavour had become all-the-rage, and even *Punch*, I remember, ran a cartoon in which a lady dripping with pearls and diamonds was being interviewed by a reporter in her palatial living room: "Well, we wanted to write a comical book about our failures in chicken-farming..... but something went wrong".

Some of the crates (p.4) which had contained our desecrated furniture from Ceylon were quickly converted by Your Humble and Untalented Servant into residences for a brace of Khaki Cambells and as many Indian Runners. Chooks and goats were also among those present; they were soon joined by a small platoon of Muscovy ducks and drakes; and we were away.



Nothing, however, succeeds like success and it was not a great while before we were joined by a bustling community—no, two bustling communities—of rodents. Greatly varying in size, from the dear-little-mousikins to the eighteen-inch Plague rat, *Rattus Rattus Rattus Helluva*, they posed a problem which I thought could easily be solved using arm's-reach resources. Gathering up the unsuspecting Rattle, then, I took her into the lean-to behind the kitchen where the feed was stored. My grandfather, having been employed for years at Peters' Ice Cream works, provided us not only

with the muscovies, but also with much of the ducks' fodder (ice cream cone scrap). I lifted the lid of a 44-gallon drum half-full of cone scrap and unfurled Rattle into it.

My word, but that cat could move! She was up the sheer side of the drum, under my armpit and out of the door of the lean-to, past the Little House and into the tangle of rocks by the lower pool before I could recite the Kings of England from Edward I to Richard III. There was a slight stir amongst the intended victims, but the net outcome was that we had their company for the next decade or so, as we have of their descendants today.

As we had friends in Hardy Road, Glen Forrest who were horsepersons, it was decided that a grounding in horsemanship was the Right Way and a Good Thing for me; and after a brief introduction to the personnel of Eastern Hills Horsemen's Association, I suddenly found myself staring at close range into the eyes of an old gelding, who looked back at me with infinite understanding and some degree of sympathy. His name was Ginger; and as this would not do, he was immediately re-christened "Prince". I have to say that he did his best to bear up under the strain.



Les Ashton on "Prince"

It was through the medium of "Prince" that I met the wonderful Fischer family, then of Lionel Road: Peter of the great heart and crooked smile, and Win of the unlimited patience and insight into the psychology of both horses and humans. They and their two children made their home continually available to young people. Their home-paddock was an exercise-ground of cavaletti, lunging-ring and jumps of all types and sizes; and when Karl Jurenak, Viennese riding-master and virtuoso instructor, offered his services, I do not recall it costing us a penny. It was then that I learned to shoe a horse.

At some 15 years of age “Prince” really could not be expected to excel over the triple-bar, nor when we gathered on the Pine-Terrace Recreation Ground for a game of polocrosse did he reveal a flashing turn of speed or the determination to bully his way past the opposing Number One. However, give him his due, he was pretty nifty at the ‘extras’ of the Gymkhana, like bending races or flag races, and he was great to learn on. His ‘kind eye’, with no new-moon of white behind the iris, spoke of a willing and docile nature. It was easy to follow the advice of Peter and Win – and of our Glen Forrest friends Carroll Summers and Joe Andro – gaining expertise around horses until it was the general opinion that “Prince” had taken me as far as I could go. It was time to move on.

The time scale has slurred over an important period in the life of our family: my father. He was a mechanical/civil/electrical engineer, working up-country in Ceylon for the firm of Walker & Greig since 1928 – largely in, on and around tea factories. He was one of those unsung heroes who give everything for a totally inadequate reward. Finally, he had been forced to request an extension to his 1945 Leave in UK, to have his ‘waterworks’ problem further examined. Well, doctors in the Sussex hospital had been overwhelmed by the avalanche of wounded still returning from French field-hospitals after D-Day, and the result of this was that when he retired to *Engalia* in 1953, at the age of fifty-three, his problem had considerably worsened. I had his company for a little more than a year, and then after a brief final Leave to farewell his family in Sussex, he returned with a determination to resolve the issue: it was Do or Die.

Well, it turned out not to be Do. After a series of messy invasions at St John of God Hospital, Belmont, the surgeons Read the Omens, sewed him up one more time and sent him home to die. During the ensuing six months, I was given a privileged (if undesired) knowledge of the course of Prostate Cancer in the year of 1955, complete with the smells of corruption—poor Dad was exquisitely embarrassed at this, although we assured him continually and truthfully that it could not matter less. And indeed, his embarrassment soon faded into disjointed discussion on the immortal soul, then into gradual ramblings based on hallucinations and the application of Differential Calculus to various of his organs. Then one day the ambulance came and he was no longer there.

You may well imagine, Gentle Reader, that I had during all this become a tower of strength to my parents; let me disabuse you of this generous opinion. 1954 saw me attempt the Leaving Certificate Examination (all there was, in those years) and pass in English, French, Physics, Chemistry and Tech. Drawing. Ashtons, said Family Tradition, had always been engineers: My grandfather had been Ashton Bey, Egyptian Government Engineer, in the dying years of the Ottoman Empire, and my Uncle Ken was building dams in and around Enugu, in Nigeria. My mother turned a deaf ear to the prayers of Frank Gamblen, Dean of the Faculty of Engineering at UWA (the only one there was at the time), not to enrol me in Engineering. However, as mentioned above, the Ashtons had been engineers for generations. And so there I was: the First Year practice examination resulted in the following triumphs: Maths I—5%; Applied Maths I—21%; Physics I—28% (I had just missed out on a Distinction by two marks in the Leaving); Tech Drawing—Glory Be!—52%.

Glittering Prizes aside, I clearly needed more suitable transport from horse and bicycle for a daily odyssey to Crawley. So early in 1955 I was given a motor-cycle: a single-cylinder 500cc BSA B33. It may well be that the ambition to be a capable motor-cyclist had something to do with the above academic triumphs – or it may have been that *The Wild One* had. I will say little of the doe eyes of certain of the female inhabitants of Western suburbs.....

“Prince” had been sold before my father arrived from Ceylon, and had been succeeded by the ill-fated “Harbour Song”, one of the most beautiful creatures I have ever seen, standing sixteen hands with her satiny chestnut coat, cream mane and tail, and two white socks. An electrical storm accompanied by buckets of lashing rain, the long lead-rope from her halter (to stop her escaping a second time) and the proximity of the rocky bed of Nyaania Creek, all did their share in her being strangled to death.

“Patsy” (Harbour Song’s pet-name) was succeeded by “Gypsy” (née “Foaley”), a barrel-shaped ex-stockhorse whose hobby was putting overconfident riders over her head. After we had come to an understanding, she turned into a superb polocrosse performer who was the terror of any opposing Number One whom I was intent on ‘riding-off’. The only time I ever left her saddle was when I tried to turn her into a Hunter: she quit in the middle of a triple-bar up at Peter and Win’s, and as I lay on my back looking upward, she returned my indignant stare with a complete lack of expression.



Nevertheless, University was the thing, so horses had to go; and “Gypsy”, I am happy to say, was taken off my hands by a young woman starting a riding school in Glen Forrest.

Elyn Davidson had ‘qualified’ at the same time I did; and we both started Engineering at the same time. First Year for him lasted about a month and a half longer than it did for me; because on the afternoon of September 7, riding home along Mounts Bay Road, I happened to meet a Yarloop farmer who wanted to turn up Spring Street; I had been emptied onto the pavement across Spring Street between a tree and a lamp-pole with a broken fib. and tib. For the first time in my life I booked-in at St John of God Belmont. General opinion held that one had been pretty lucky.

The same could not really be said for the family: my Dad was still painfully lucid at the time, and when I came home gave me the benefit of his opinion of my intelligence and sense of responsibility at some length. The silly fellow apologised for it the following day, until I shut him up with a display of contrition added to a nifty bit of crutchwork as I served him his midday meal.

My mother, I think, was in a state of cumulative shock after these hammer-blows; added to which was the awareness (ever since my father’s retirement) that financially speaking, everything had happened too early. Ways and means were strongly on her mind: already she was preparing to teach piano, and was building a large clientèle in homes around the Village, and at Helena School (Ryecroft Road—Helena College had yet to appear), Guildford Grammar and Swanlea Residential Hostel in Middle Swan.

I have to digress here (what else do I do, I hear you ask) to pay tribute to the superb friends I had in Darlington already, and some I had hardly heard of: Fred and Eric Hort, from what is now the Oxley Road area up near the Highway. They would call by in their Morris truck and hale me off to the Darlington Swimming Pool (now lost under the Pipehead Dam in the Helena River, prohibited entry, etc, cha cha cha). After my father died, and mother took his ashes to be scattered on the South Downs of Sussex, I was given many a tasty feast by Walter and Pat Coxon, who would also scandalise me with tales of Pig-Iron Bob and other evils of the conservative parties.

In an effort to rescue something from the wreckage of my University débâcle, we fell back on the advice with which knowledgeable people had been bombarding us. Mr N.R. Collins, Deputy-Head of Wesley College, once ‘punished’ me for laughing at the story of Little Hans of Holland (who saved the nation by sticking his finger into the hole in the Ijsselmeer dyke) by making me sit in his office with R.L. Stevenson’s *Travels with a Donkey*. Go for journalism, he said.

Go for journalism, said Ted Blom, best languages teacher in the world. Go for journalism, said my new friends (and enemies) at Guildford Grammar. Go for journalism, said Elyn at university. Go for journalism, Go for journalism, Go for journalism.....

I went for journalism; and just as I had fluked entry to UWA with my unsuitable five subjects, I immediately applied for a cadetship at the West Australian, and was accepted. The BSA was repaired, but my mother, long-headed Cornish Celt reinforced by canny Hibernian (her father), made me an offer I could not refuse, and lent me the £450 to buy a pretty little blue Sunbeam-Talbot sedan (just like the one in *A Many-Splendoured Thing*). Having misused the BSA for bruising mud-runs up the Helena River, the first outing I gave the Sunbeam was an interesting-looking side-track in John Forrest National Park: cost, £5 to tow her out of bog with a burnt-out clutch, thank you very much Mr Smith.



With the wreckage of all her plans hanging around her head and shoulders (and she was not the only one who mourned the fate of my father; his sister in Sussex wept for months afterward) my mother kept her grief for the dark hours, and distracted herself with the plans for the New House.

Gone were the grandiose Tara-like concepts of *Engalia* sitting well up the slope, with a panoramic view of Victor Road and the south-facing slopes of Darlington; The New House



became established just behind the old cottage, which was eventually torn down and used for building materials as my mother expanded her interests into seaside flat-letting. The new house (let's abandon the caps, it is not really all that grand) reflected my mother's interests, in that the main room was dominated by her pride and joy, a Bechstein upright piano. Bedrooms were adequate in size, and bathroom and kitchen poky and ill-designed and –furnished. But there is an enviable view over Nyaania Creek where Kelvin Prater's father had built a dam of concrete and rubble; and up the slopes to the ridge which divides us from the Helena Valley. It was not until 1972 that I built a 'road' bridge across Nyaania Creek, so that I could get our tractor into the southern part of the property to plough the firebreaks suddenly (and correctly) deemed necessary by the Proper Authorities. There was, however, the 1998 fire which came roaring up the creek and made a liar out of me ("If a fire comes up the creek, we've had our house").

The Acute Reader—that's you, sit up and pay attention—will observe that Darlington features less and less in detail, and in interest from the historical point of view; and in fact I was in the process of Flying The Coop. Yes, Darlington *had been* a refuge; I had learnt so little of the hard lessons of life that two years later I was fired from *The West Australian*, and wound-up as a farm-hand in Brookton, where I learned many wonderful agricultural crafts. The experience of erecting farm fencing inspired me to go back to university. There is nothing more motivational than repetitive hard work. After university I taught at various schools and met my future wife while teaching in Northam.



Mira (short for Mirosława Anna, née Wolyniec) and I came back to the Darlington house in the fourth year of our marriage, stayed a while, then set off to Europe for what turned out to be six years. We returned at the end of 1979 and, giving-in to a shared tendency to dig in and become troglodytes, have become completely unreliable as sources of ongoing history. We like to help our neighbours, and occasionally drink wine with friends on the deck overlooking Nyaania Creek. Some of us drink a little less nowadays, when I find that I have a little unwanted legacy from my Dad.....

Les Ashton - 2018.

This document is without prejudice