

Generations apart: A tribute

Since I left Australia, one journey has remained a small dream unfulfilled. It involves going north in New South Wales, to an old frontier town called Ballina, which is an Irish corruption of an Aboriginal word meaning “abundance”. My mother Elsie arrived in Ballina in 1920, alone, aged 19. It was the middle of the night. She had travelled the 500 miles from Sydney, having sold her books to pay the fare, which the department of education said was “the responsibility of those privileged to teach”. This was her first teaching job; in those days, you taught where you were sent.

The railway line had ended in the bush, and the handful of passengers who had come this far were loaded on to a truck with chains on its wheels; a track lay ahead. Two days after she had left Sydney, she was awakened and told she was in Ballina. “Sorry, Miss,” said the driver. “Your bag’s been dropped off somewhere else.”

In the same clothes and flat broke, she walked along the long dirt road that was Ballina’s main street, wide enough for a team of bullocks to turn, past W J Pickering Outfitters and the courthouse and the lock-up, to the only other 19th-century sandstone building, the school. “When I presented myself,” she wrote, “the principal was busily inaugurating a pub nearby.” So she sat on the steps and waited until he hove to, drunk and gasping for breath; like many of that Anzac generation, he had been mustard-gassed on the Western Front.

“What do you teach?” he asked her, to which she replied, “French and Latin and, if you like, history and English.”

“You might as well go back,” he said. “I want a maths teacher, and I want someone who won’t be terrified by the brats” – meaning a male.

She didn’t go back. She faced classes of up to 70 bush kids, many of them barely literate and there under sufferance of parents who really wanted their labour back on the farm. Her wage was £169 10s a year. She was of a remarkable

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generation of pioneering women, who asked for no material gain, whose currency was determination and courage.

She had grown up on the Hunter Valley coalfields, north-west of Sydney, before and during the First World War. Her great-grandfather was Francis McCarty, an Irishman who had arrived on the barque John Barry on 7 November 1821, wearing, along with all the other political prisoners, four-pound leg-irons. Convicted of “uttering unlawful oaths”, he had been sentenced to 14 years in Britain’s Antipodean penal colony. Her great-grandmother was Mary Palmer, a Whitechapel prostitute sentenced to life in a “female factory” near Sydney for the crime of relieving a client of his spare change; she would have been hanged had she not been pregnant. She arrived on the Lord Sidmouth, packed with rats, in 1822. She was 17.

Born soon after the turn of the century, Elsie was the only one of nine children from a mining family who completed her education. Up before dawn, she would catch the coal-company train to the new high school at East Maitland, where she had won a place with the first bursary ever awarded to her tiny primary school in the town of Kurri Kurri. At night, she would read and study by the light of a hurricane lamp or a candle under her bed or beneath the water tank that stood on stilts beside the house. Her books were the first of their kind her family had seen. “My other education,” she wrote, “took place in the many hours I spent in the cemetery counting the number of miners accidentally killed and questioning the justice of their deaths and of the deity to whom we all prayed under my mother’s surveillance every night.”

The “Great War” with Germany was fed with Australian volunteers from small frontier towns; only the French, proportionally, suffered greater casualties. Elsie sold sprigs of bush wattle for pennies, which were sent to the Anzacs; she also questioned out loud why such a blood sacrifice had anything to do with Australia. She wrote, “I grew to hate their war; it’s always their war.” The warmongering prime minister of Australia at the time was the effete William Morris Hughes, whose speeches about “morality” were like those of Tony Blair. In two referendums, he tried to bring in conscription and failed, thanks largely to a campaign by women all over Australia, especially the young like Elsie.

At the age of 16, she arrived at Sydney University, where she became Australia’s youngest graduate – a distinction that may still stand. Her family in the meantime had prospered and moved to a place called Merewether, to a house on a hill, which had the first refrigerator I ever saw, and running hot water. Elsie never lived there. In Sydney, she had met Claude, the son of a German sailor, who had

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also grown up in the Hunter Valley and had left school at 14 to go down the pit. As an apprentice, he was entitled to membership of the Mechanics Institute, whose “social, political and cultural lectures” were his education.

Elsie would smuggle him into the university library, where they read together. They became socialists, and he a member of the international Industrial Workers of the World, the “Wobblies”.

In the late summer of 1920, Elsie took Claude home to meet her family. On the way, she met her eldest brother. “They’re waiting for you,” he said ominously. Going on alone, she found a family court in session. “The source of the disapproval was clear,” she wrote: “the only educated daughter had deigned to want to marry a Bolshie!”

Now excommunicated by her family, she set out for Ballina. Her clothes arrived two months later, without a note and wrapped in newspaper. “The hypocrisy!” she wrote, “what with our Irish convict background! But of course we never talked about that.” When she returned a year later, Claude had borrowed £10 so they could be married. They chose the register office near the walls of the old convict prison factory where Mary Palmer had been incarcerated and had met Francis McCarty. On her wedding day, Elsie sent two one-word telegrams to her sulking family. The first, before they were married, said GOING; the second, after the ceremony, said GONE. She laughed a great deal, often darkly, though when she and Claude fell apart, that stopped.

The other day, I followed her footsteps along Ballina’s main street, past the same 19th-century courthouse and lock-up. In the library, I discovered a letter from the local MP, requesting “a competent teacher of languages... who will allow our children in the country district an opportunity they would not otherwise have”. It was dated 1919 and it was the cue for Elsie. Her power as a teacher became something of a legend; year after year, for more than half a century, her former students would meet in Sydney for dinner to celebrate her, even though she always declined their invitations to attend. “I was never that good,” she would say to me, “... just determined.”

Ballina is leafy and brisk and very modern these days, and the original school took some finding. When I found it, I peered in and saw her there. **JP**