THE ACTIVIST LIFE OF DR JANET IRWIN AND MY ACTIVIST RESPONSE IN RESEARCHING AND WRITING HER STORY

Comprising:

Creative work: A Prescription for Action:
the life of Dr Janet Irwin
and

Exegesis: ‘Biography, motivation and writing the life of Dr Janet Irwin’

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Research Question

The research question for my doctoral project is:
What were the significant factors in Dr Janet Irwin becoming a successful activist, and what were her achievements? (biography/creative work)

and

What were the significant factors involved in my researching and writing her biography and what are their implications? (exegesis).

Contribution to knowledge

The biography/creative work component of this project is a contribution to knowledge in demonstrating how Dr Irwin’s activism had a positive impact not only within her professional arena (including medical training and practice, university health services, women’s health and occupational health and safety) but also within the public arena in the area of law reform.

The exegesis is a contribution to knowledge in outlining how my research on the evolution of biographical writing and its relation to literature assisted me in writing Dr Irwin’s biography, and led me to the conclusion that motivation is a significant factor in biographical writing and one which warrants further examination.
Abstract


My research question led me to investigate how a woman born in 1923, who grew up in a remote area of New Zealand, came to be a leader in the provision of university health services in Australasia, and a successful activist on social justice issues, particularly those involving women. It also led me to explore the link between my subject’s activism and my own activism in researching and writing about her life, and, from this, the importance of motivation for biographers.

The biography describes the influence of Janet’s father, who set up a healthcare service which even today is viewed as innovative, and the impact of the early death of her brother. It recounts how she completed her medical degree in her forties when her children were teenagers, and how she discovered she had siblings in Scotland. In Edinburgh, Janet worked with children with psychological problems, and was influenced by the new school of thinking on psychosocial development. Offered a position at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, New Zealand, she carried out original research which challenged conventional thinking on a range of issues relevant to student health, came to view the doctor-patient relationship as the focus of medical practice, took part in her first political rally, and declared herself a feminist.

1974 saw her relocate to Australia and take up the role of Director of Student Health Services at the University of Queensland where she focused on the importance of teamwork, again carried out relevant research, played a role in changing the nature of medical education and practice, and was appointed to the National Better Health Commission. She mentored female students and general practitioners, ensured that the university developed a broad view of occupational health and safety, and played a major role in improving the status of women staff and students. She was an activist on health and women’s issues at the community level and the national level as well as at the university. Her retirement from the university saw her take up an active role on the Criminal Justice Commission, charged with the reform of a corrupt system. She continued to speak out on issues of social justice and campaigned for A Woman’s Place to honour the achievements of women.

The exegesis validates the disciplinary context of my work as practice-led research within the field of creative non-fiction in the creative arts. It outlines the evolution of biography; how both literature and history have, at various times, both claimed biography and rejected it from their domains; and the impact of this research on my biography. It explores the context of Virginia Woolf’s stance that biography is not an art, and suggests that her problems with the form related to her problems with motivation in writing one. It claims that motivation is a significant factor for biographers, and that novelists hold biographers in low esteem for reasons related to motivation. It details my own motivation in wanting to understand what made Janet such an unusual woman for her time and how she achieved what she did; wanting to honour her life as a fellow feminist; and seeing her as a role model for others wanting to make a difference to society. It also describes the process of writing the biography, including my experimentation with biographical form before returning to a fundamentally narrative, chronological approach.
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Statement of original authorship

The work contained in this thesis has not been previously submitted for a degree or diploma at any other educational institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

Signed:  
Susan Currie

Dated:

3 June 2016
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Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Donna Lee Brien. It is, of course, accepted practice, and understandable to thank your supervisor first. I am, however, not thanking Donna first just because it is accepted practice. I am thanking Donna because I could not imagine a better supervisor. I say that in the context of my considerable experience as an academic as well as a student. Donna is always supportive, encouraging, wise, practical, and helpful. It was no surprise to me when she was awarded two 2014 Vice-Chancellor’s Awards, one for Excellence in Research Higher Degree Supervision and the other for Good Practice in Teaching and Learning. A heartfelt thank you, Donna. I applied to do my PhD at Central Queensland University because I wanted you as my supervisor and I have referred other potential students to you, safe in the knowledge that they will be nurtured the same way I have been.

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'A reader of a successful woman’s life identifies with her, emulates her; she may possibly become, in turn, an eminent woman, perhaps a writer of tributes to famous women; and eventually find her own story circulating in the lists of recognition, part of a cohort that reforms the character of a nation.'

- A Booth, *How to make it as a woman: collective biography from Victoria to the Present*, 2004
A Prescription for Action: the life of Dr Janet Irwin

by Susan Currie
Janet on one of her son, Bill’s, many motorbikes, located (of course) in the lounge room of his home in Nelson in 2003
This book is dedicated to the memory of Dr Janet Irwin and to all those who knew and loved her.

It is also dedicated to my mother, Joyce Veronica Currie, who ensured that education was at the forefront of my world, and to my father, John Desmond Currie, who taught me to stand up for social justice.
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‘Our interconnection is not only a natural and necessary part of our lives but also a force for good. Just as brains can do things that no single neuron can do, so can social networks do things that no single person can do.’

Researching and writing this biography has been a long journey during which I have gratefully received assistance from many people. There may be some whom I neglect to mention here through forgetfulness. My sincere apologies if that applies to you, as I am most grateful for all the contributions everyone has made.

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‘What counts in life is not the mere fact that we have lived. It is what difference we have made to the lives of others that will determine the significance of the life we lead.’

- Nelson Mandela during the ninetieth birthday celebration of Walter Sisulu, Walter Sisulu Hall, Randburg, Johannesburg, South Africa, 18 May 2002
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Introduction

*If you haven’t been driven by the passion and the action of the times, you haven’t lived.*

This was the motto of Dr Janet Irwin (1923-2009), a remarkable woman whose story was begging to be told, and which I am honoured to share with you.

I first met Janet when she was in her late sixties, the same age as my mother. It was at a luncheon in the Brisbane home of mutual friends in the early 1990s. She was such a tall, elegant, patrician-looking woman, that I wouldn’t have been surprised if she was Lady Someone. I dreaded the thought of making polite chitchat. As it transpired, she was not Lady Anybody and would have dreaded the thought of making polite chitchat as much as I did. Indeed, the reason we had been invited to lunch together was that our hosts were aware that we had both been appointed to the Social Security Appeals Tribunal, she as a medical member, me as a legal member. By the time the luncheon ended, I no longer felt intimidated – I had been made to feel like a kindred spirit. One of Janet’s most endearing qualities was her capacity for friendship. She seemed never to forge people to whom she was introduced, and those who had the good fortune to cross her path usually ended up lifelong friends.

When I worked with Janet on the Social Security Appeals Tribunal, I was impressed by her compassion. We found that our approaches to the law were similar: the spirit of the law, not a narrow interpretation of the language of the law, was what should prevail. I was also a willing audience to many a fascinating tale about Janet’s ancestors in Scotland. We would run into each other at bookshops and the cinema and feminist gatherings. I met her daughter, Sally, who had recently moved to Brisbane and joined a book group Sally had started.

I clearly remember Janet arriving for a tribunal hearing one morning, furious about press reports that someone with a terminal illness had been charged with possession of marijuana. Drug-taking was a health issue, not a legal one, as far as she was concerned. And in this case, the drug was being used for pain relief. She went on to say ‘As far as I’m concerned, all age pensioners should be able to grow marijuana for their own use.’ I tried to think of any woman I knew of comparable age coming up with this suggestion. Unsuccessfully. She went further. ‘In fact, they ought to be able to grow more marijuana than they need and sell it to the government to supplement
their pension.’ And further. ‘The government could then take control of the drug trade and that would get rid of the criminal underworld.’

I was fascinated. This was Queensland, the ‘deep north’ of Australia. We had only just been released from the grip of the Bjelke-Petersen government which, for nearly 20 years, had enforced its extremely conservative views on the population and its control on dissidents. The fear in the air had not completely evaporated. And yet here was this older woman making suggestions that left us open-mouthed. Most women her age did not work outside the home, let alone advocate such radical politics. Most women my age did not work outside the home. My politics were considered somewhat radical. But the ante had just been upped. Considerably. I was greedy to know more about Janet.

We became friends. I found out that she had not come to Brisbane until 1974, when, at the age of 51, she had been recruited as Director of Student Health Services at the University of Queensland. She had lived the early part of her life in New Zealand. Clearly, I do not have an ear for accents as I had failed to pick that up. When I discovered that Janet had grown up on the margins of New Zealand society, in the town of Rawene in the Hokianga, a place unknown even to most New Zealanders, I was even more intrigued. I had just assumed that she had come from some cosmopolitan city. I had to know more.

One day in the early 2000s, I rang Janet out of the blue and asked her if I could write her biography. This was a very strange thing to do as I had never written a biography and had never felt any interest in being a biographer. So I think I surprised myself more than Janet when I popped the question. Janet, being a very gracious person, did not point out my lack of qualifications for the job. Had I known then that she was friendly with New Zealand writers like Fiona Kidman, Michael King and Rosie Scott, I would never have considered such a folly.

Writing this biography has involved both a literal and figurative journey. Janet told me a great deal about her father and her mother and her life prior to Brisbane. I knew little of New Zealand where Janet had spent most of her life. To remedy this situation, to immerse me in relevant places and introduce me to relevant characters in Janet’s story, we travelled around that country together in 2004. It was a fascinating time but overwhelming as well. We travelled from the tip of the North Island to Dunedin in the south of the South Island and we met people of all ages from all walks of life. One of the reasons why Janet was a remarkable woman was her ability to
relate to, and befriend, people of all ages. In fact, it was not unusual for her to be friendly with three generations in the same family, all in an equivalent kind of way, and to remember the names of their children and animals.

By the time we returned from New Zealand, I had an understanding of the formative influences in her life. The first of those was her birthplace itself. Janet’s birthplace had, in fact, been the birthplace of New Zealand, discovered by Polynesian settlers. It is a remote geographical area on the north-western coast of the North Island, a community in which Maori and Pakeha had to draw on their resilience and work together for survival. It was a community which, at the same time, fostered strong leaders, including Dame Whina Cooper who became known as ‘Mother of the Nation’. Dr George McCall Smith, Janet’s father, had arrived there from Scotland with his wife, Lucy, to take up an appointment as surgeon. As an adult, Janet was to learn that their decision to leave Scotland was not exactly voluntary and this was to lead her to a family secret.

GM was a forceful and charismatic leader within the community generally, not only in the area of medicine. Both parents were intellectuals who kept up to date with current thinking across a wide range of areas notwithstanding their distance from the mainstream. It was GM who determined that Janet should be a doctor, at a time when that was an unlikely occupation for a woman. I was to discover that this was not just because he was an innovative thinker, but was also the result of a family tragedy. Janet, however, had been encouraged to think for herself, and was determined to make her own way in life. She married, had three children, even set up a shoe shop business with a friend.

It was not until Janet’s marriage broke down that she was convinced by an older woman to complete her medical studies. She was fortunate to find another mentor in medical school who encouraged her to pursue a developing interest in psychological medicine, particularly relating to adolescents. On graduation, Janet travelled to the UK where groundbreaking work in this field was being done. This mentor was also responsible for her subsequent recruitment by the University of Canterbury, back in New Zealand to specialize in psychological medicine in the student health service being developed there. My research at that university revealed how proactive and publicly outspoken Janet had been on health issues, such as contraception and abortion, affecting not only students but the general community. I also became aware of the importance of her membership of a group of doctors whose
focus was primarily on the patient and their relationship with the patient, rather than the conventional more limited focus on the disease.

Now that I had a much clearer picture of Janet’s life prior to coming to Brisbane, my curiosity had to some extent been sated, and I let life get in the way of completing my research and writing. When I returned to the biography, I realized that I had been so focused on Janet’s life in New Zealand, I actually knew very little about her work and achievements in Australia. Janet was quite modest in this regard. It was not until after she died, that my research uncovered an extraordinary range of achievements.

Archives at the University of Queensland revealed that Janet had played a very influential role there, a role that has yet to be formally acknowledged. In this biography, we will witness the importance of her development of the health service as a non-hierarchical body with a team approach. The team was a broad one, encompassing not only other health professionals on a practical level, but seeking input across the university. Janet’s interest in student health services was not confined to the one she headed. She became Medical Vice-President of the Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association and secured funding for a national evaluative study of student services.

Janet ensured that the health service maintained contact with the medical profession at large, and indeed she established groups for general practitioners, particularly those entering the profession, to discuss issues with their work. She likewise lectured in the medical course where, concerned about the stress students were experiencing, she organized a national seminar challenging the conventional teaching of medicine. The Hawke government appointed her to the Better Health Commission it established in 1985.

The health service concerned itself not only with the health and safety of individual students but also of the university as a workplace. We will see how Janet campaigned successfully for the appointment of a Director of Occupational Health and Safety, and also for the recognition of sexual harassment as an occupational health and safety issue. She also successfully pursued these matters at the national level at student services conferences.

1975 had been declared the beginning of an International Decade of Women by the United Nations. Janet was appointed by the federal government to its National Women’s Advisory Council and she and other members also represented Australia
internationally. This prepared her for her work as a member of the University of Queensland Senate where she instigated comprehensive reforms on the status of women, and equal opportunity generally.

Having played a major role in a successful community campaign against repressive abortion legislation proposed by the Bjelke-Petersen government, Janet continued to play an active role in the community on retirement from the university. When the Fitzgerald Report on Police and Political Corruption in Queensland during the Bjelke-Petersen years, recommended the establishment of a Criminal Justice Commission to oversee reform, Janet was appointed a part-time Commissioner. Here, she had significant input into the Commission’s reports recommending reform of the laws on prostitution and cannabis. No doubt, it was during this time that she formulated the views on cannabis that I mentioned earlier.

In retirement, Janet also campaigned with other women, both at the state and the national level, for the establishment of *A Woman’s Place, A Woman’s Space* where women could come together and which would acknowledge their achievements and those of the women who went before them.

Curiosity set in again about the extraordinary range of her life’s work. I wanted to know how Janet had been able to achieve so much and what had kept her energized in the face of setbacks. I discovered that Janet’s success was predicated on a number of factors which are explored in this biography. I wanted to tell the story of her life because, to me, it is important that our society cultivate the potential Dr Janet Irwins in our midst. It is so easy to be overwhelmed by the problems of the world, to feel powerless in the face of widespread social injustice. But Janet’s life reminds and reassures us that the individual can make a difference, that we do have an obligation to stand up for what we know to be right, and that we can enjoy a full and interesting life in the process.
Chapter 1

Home

It is September 14 1923. The place is the small town of Rawene in the Hokianga, New Zealand, Nga Puhi territory. The daughter of Dr George McCall Smith and his wife Lucy (née Scott) is born at home. Janet Rickord McCall Smith, they call her. Dr Janet Irwin, she is to become.

Janet was to become convinced that geography plays a role in defining us as people, and that, in her own case, her birthplace was of fundamental importance. She was to live, for a time, in other parts of New Zealand. Dunedin was her home when she was studying medicine at the University of Otago and her professional life began in Christchurch, but there was no real sense of belonging in either place. Brisbane, Australia was to become her home from her early fifties and was where her professional career really developed. She was happy in Brisbane and lived there until the end of her life. But the Hokianga was always home, no matter where she lived. And her accommodation would reflect that.

Not that she was, by any means, stuck in the past. Nor did she ignore her current environment. She was keen to establish a sense of belonging in the places she inhabited. Her various homes were resonant with local cultural artifacts and influences. They also reflected a sense of continuity with other places she had lived and visited. But above all, they demonstrated a commitment to her birthplace.

At her unit overlooking the Brisbane River in Toowong, which she moved to in her seventies, you might initially be drawn to the stunning, dramatic Picasso-like painting of three women above the sofa. But it would be the quiet watercolour of the old ute, off-centre in a benign landscape of harbour and sand-dunes which you would pause before. It seems an unlikely choice for the urbane, professional woman making you coffee in the kitchen. But then, you look around the room and realize that there are other landscapes of this more traditional nature on the walls. They are not allowed to be exclusive, mind you. Or boring. More modern and challenging paintings jostle
with them for your attention. But somehow they provide a sense of reassurance: Enjoy the new. Take up its challenge. We are here to soothe your way. Janet was always delighted when visitors appreciated this artwork. ‘That is Eric Lee-Johnson’ she would say of the ute. ‘The Hokianga got to him as well. In fact he ended up living in our Pakanae bach (beach-house) for a couple of years. Have you seen this wood carving? Allan Gale’s a local. I just love the extraordinary detail in this bird’s feathers.’

For Janet, her birthplace was a frequent topic of conversation. She knew nearly as much about what was happening in the area as those who still lived there. She kept in touch with childhood and family friends and regularly visited. She loved the place and was fiercely protective of it. In 1992, an article appeared in the New Zealand magazine *North & South* headed ‘Hopeless Hokianga.’ It was a tale of an economically depressed area without a future. Janet was furious and wrote an article in response. ‘Hokianga people are rich in the things that matter most,’ she claimed. ‘Hokianga, to me, and I believe to its people, is the most beautiful place on earth.’

Janet’s birthplace is a largely unknown part of New Zealand on the far north-west coast of the North Island centred around a large, picturesque harbour. The place names, intriguing and unpronounceable to those unfamiliar with Maori linguistics, give only a hint of European influence. To the south are the settlements of Waimamaku, Omapere, Opononi, Pakanae, Koutu, Whirinaki, Rawene, Waima and Taheke; to the north, Broadwood, Pawarenga, Panguru, Mitimiti and Rangi Point; and, at the top of the harbour, upstream from the narrows, Horeke, Kohukohu and Mangamuka. Today, after a three hour drive north of Auckland, you enter the area via the awesome Waipoua Kauri Forest. Before the nineteenth century, so much of this area was covered by magnificent kauri trees. Tane Mahuta, Lord of the Forest, around two thousand years old, 51 metres high and 31.8 metres in circumference, bears witness to what has been lost. Coming out of the forest, and down the mountain, it is difficult to keep your eyes on the road and not be distracted by views of the harbour, of the sand dunes and of unspoiled beaches. It is one of those places which you hope the tourists never discover but, ironically, it may need the tourist industry to ensure its ongoing viability.

The ‘Winterless North,’ the tourism people call the area, and there is no doubt it is a far cry from the ski-fields of the South Island. Indeed, with its sub-tropical climate, it is more Queensland than Queenstown. Driving through the quaint towns of
Omapere and Opononi, it’s hard not to be tempted by the idea of buying a bach, as New Zealanders call their beach shacks. If you’d lived here in the mid-fifties, there would have been the added attraction of Opo, the dolphin waiting for you to get in the water and toss a ball back and forth. Opo is memorialized in a beautiful stone monument near the beach. In fact, it’s easy to believe that you still are in the mid-fifties here. In early morning, watching a ferry slide along through the harbour mist, it is like slipping into a black and white photo of the past.

Hokianga is now a more narrowly defined geographical area, and the larger area is known as Northland. It is a highly significant location in the history of New Zealand, both in terms of early Maori and early European (Pakeha) settlement. And it was here that the Treaty of Waitangi was signed the second time. Surprisingly, as the Hokianga Visitors’ Guide acknowledges:

the history, the forests, the beaches, the harbour remain largely unknown to most New Zealanders. Yet Hokianga offers what so many people seek: the wide open spaces, tranquility, a dramatic and beautiful landscape relatively untouched by man.²

The claim that it is ‘relatively untouched by man’ is probably true of the last one hundred years, but it ignores the massive loss of the kauri forests to timber felling in the nineteenth century.

Hokianga is named after the legendary Polynesian explorer, Kupe, who is credited with discovering New Zealand. It is a shortening of ‘te hokianga nui a kupe’, the place of Kupe’s great return. Some visitors, enchanted with the place, misinterpret this to mean a return to the Hokianga. They say that they hope to return like Kupe.³ In fact, the explorer is referring to his return to his homeland of Hawaiiki. The local tourist guide elaborates that he had been ‘forced to flee Hawaiiki when his affair with a chieftain’s wife became known, a fugitive from justice like many a later immigrant.’⁴ Many local places commemorate Kupe and his exploration. His anchor stone is visible near Opononi, and, at Pakanae, he raised a kumara crop for his home journey. It is rather confronting to discover that, before he left, he sacrificed his son in a spring high on the sand dunes ‘to be a fountainhead for the people remaining behind.’⁵ Hokianga has been called the ‘birthplace’, ‘the womb’, ‘the cradle’ or ‘the nest’ of New Zealand.⁶

Many generations later, Kupe’s descendants, Nukatawhiti and Ruanui, followed the route he had taken. Legend has it that two great taniwhas (spirits who
assume the form of sea creatures such as whales) Arai-te-uru and Nuia, escorted them on their journey and that they remain as guardians of the South Head and North Head of Hokianga Harbour providing assistance for safe passage over the dangerous bar.  

Although there is no doubt that it was the Polynesians who discovered and first settled New Zealand, and many Maori tribes have tales of Kupe, the legends lack a sound basis in Maori history according to prominent historian, Michael King. Certainly the claim by ethnologist, Percy Smith, that Kupe navigated New Zealand’s shores around 950 AD have been discredited. And the claim that he called the place Aotearoa, the land of the long, white cloud has been traced to the New Zealand Department of Education’s *School Journal* in 1916. But the claim certainly challenged the prevailing mythology that Tasman and Cook discovered the country. The Maori people themselves came to believe that this claim was part of their history. And, as Michael King states, ‘because shared mythology is ultimately more pervasive and more powerful than history, it became so.’

The issue resurfaced in 2010 with the re-examination of bones and other artifacts found on Maupiti Island in Tahiti in the 1960s. The oral traditions of the local Maupiti people suggest that the bones belong to Kupe and that they date from the thirteenth century which is now considered a more likely time when New Zealand was discovered and settled. Indeed an offer was made to return the bones to New Zealand which was being considered by the Nga Puhi, the Te Rarawa and other northern Maori tribes (iwi).

It is Rahiri, born in the seventeenth century on Whiria, the impressive pa (fortified hilltop Maori settlement) established at Pakanae near the Hokianga’s South Head, from whom all the Nga Puhi Maori (the largest iwi in New Zealand) can establish that they are descended. The Nga Puhi can claim a number of influential leaders including Hongi Hika and Eruera Patuone, both of whom encouraged missionaries and Pakeha settlers and traders into the area. Nga Puhi politician, Hone Heke, advocated not only legislative reform to improve conditions for Maori people, but the fostering of good relations between Maori and Pakeha.

The Hokianga was also home to Te Rarawa woman and ‘Mother of the Nation’, Dame Whina Cooper, an activist from a young age who played a leading role in church and community affairs, was elected Foundation President of the Maori Women’s Welfare League and led the 1975 Maori Land March at the age of eighty. When she wanted to bury a nephew who had committed suicide in consecrated
ground at the local cemetery, the parish priest refused. Undeterred, Whina buried the nephew outside the cemetery, in a plot with pre-Christian Maori remains. Then she lifted the fence to bring both urupa (plots) inside the boundary.13

Captain Cook noted the Hokianga Heads in 1770 but did not realize that there was a large harbour beyond. It was not until the missionary, Thomas Kendall, crossed overland from the Bay of Islands to the West Coast in 1819 that it came to the attention of people of European descent. By 1825, Hokianga had its first white settler, ‘Cannibal Jack’ Marmon, thought to be a runaway convict. The ship in which he was sailing was wrecked off the Hokianga Heads. There were three survivors, two of whom were allegedly eaten either by Maoris or by Jack himself. Jack was supposed to have been saved because a bandage on his head was mistaken for a sign of chiefdom. He lived as a Maori and went on to marry a Maori princess. It was rumoured that when he died, the earth refused to take him until he was buried headfirst.14

Fred Maning mysteriously left Tasmania in 1833 at the age of twenty-two to come to this isolated spot. Just before his departure, seven Irish patriots had been smuggled out of a Hobart prison to safety in America. Maning was known to have saved another man from the gallows and to have been protected by Tasmanian bushrangers. He married a Maori woman and became very popular in the Maori community. He advised its chiefs not to sign the Treaty of Waitangi and went on to become a Judge of the Native Land Courts.15 Interestingly, two of the Ngā Puhi chiefs Hone Heke and Tamati Waka Nene were instrumental in persuading Maori chiefs to sign the Treaty of Waitangi, although later Hone Heke was to regret that decision particularly with the loss of Maori land which followed.

In the 1830s, Baron Charles Hippolyte de Thierry, whose father had been at the French Court before the Revolution, arrived in the area. Not content with his inherited title, he claimed also to be the King of Nukuhiva in the Pacific Islands and Sovereign Chief of New Zealand. Unfortunately, the Baron’s cheap purchase from abroad of 40,000 acres of Hokianga land was not recognised on his arrival with his wife, four sons and a daughter, and he ended up a music teacher in Auckland.16

In his book, An unholy trinity: three Hokianga characters, Jack Lee tells the tales of ‘Cannibal Jack’, Thomas McDonnell (1788-1864) and John Lundon (1829-1899) and sums up early settlement figures thus:
In New Zealand the past has been enlivened by enterprising and interesting people who, had they conducted some of their dubious or ambitious business affairs within the more exacting constraints of our present society might have earned for themselves substantial periods in jail. But these carefree opportunists were not necessarily entirely villainous, and some who achieved a delicate balance between villainy, public service and philanthropy tended to be successful in all those areas.17

In the nineteenth century, not only was felling timber a thriving industry, Dalmatian migrants also found work digging the kauri gum which was used commercially for varnish and was also made into crafts such as jewellery. The area was accessible by sea and river but well into the twentieth century, it was known as the ‘Roadless North.’ Sketches and photographs of cars and other vehicles entrapped in mud were a staple for newspapers and magazines. In 1913, there was a meeting of local and public bodies to determine strategies for promoting a different Hokianga, one where sheep and beef cattle farming, dairying, the cultivation of fruit and vegetables, fishing, mining and gum digging thrived.18

The fact that the area was isolated did not mean that the residents were devoid of cultural experiences. The following story however gives some idea of the problems:

I was a member of the Waimamaku Orchestra which was engaged to play at a Welcome Home Ball at Rawene shortly after the first world war. This was organized by the citizens and held in the skating rink, decorated for the occasion. A special platform high above floor level, had been erected to accommodate the musicians, and as the evening progressed, the atmosphere became unbearably oppressive. Unable to bear the heat any longer, the orchestra complained to the MC.

In the midst of the next quadrille, there was a terrific screeching noise overhead, which almost made us drop our instruments. A man was cutting a large hole in the iron roof, for our benefit, and everyone breathed freely again…

The journey to Rawene entailed a ten mile waggonnette drive with four horses, leaving Waimamaku about 2pm and arriving at Opononi in time for dinner. Then we faced a twenty mile launch trip, arriving at Rawene in time to play the Grand March, which in those days was essential for any Ball.19

The name Rawene means sunset. The focal point of the town even today is the wharf area where the car ferry leaves on the hour for Kohukohu on the other side of the harbour. Some local buildings such as the Boatshed, a café-cum-art gallery, perch out over the water supported by piles. Nearby is a recently completed mangrove walk. Historic buildings line the road down to the wharf. Some, like Clendon House, home of James Clendon, variously a shipowner, merchant, consul and magistrate20, are maintained in their original state and open to the public. Others have been put to
different uses. The old Court House (1875) is now the town library although the
prison behind it can be viewed unchanged. The old Post Office, now called The
Outpost, sells a variety of merchandise such as books, music, art, as modern post
offices do. The difference is that it no longer provides postal services. The
Postmaster’s house is now a boutique hotel. The Baptist Church has been the site of a
major art installation by students at Northland Polytechnic. The streets are named
after early Pakeha settlers: traders, boat builders and sailors who prayed in the
churches and drank in the pubs. And above the town in a commanding position with
stunning views of Hokianga Harbour is the Hospital and a memorial to Janet’s
parents, Dr Smith and his wife.

A model T Ford was the first car in Rawene and its owners charged one
shilling to drive people from the wharf up to the hospital. By 1922, a road had been
built from Rawene to Kaikohe, 30 miles further south, but it took four and a half
hours to negotiate the trip. Jean Irvine, in her history of the town reports how:

> they carried chains for the muddy stretches, an axe to cut down manuka scrub to help
> the wheels grip, a spade to dig the car out when she got stuck, and there were times
> when they had to be pulled out by a team of horses or bullocks.\(^{21}\)

The road had improved sufficiently by 1925 for the journey to take only two and a
half hours. Public utilities city folk take for granted were a long time coming.
Electricity, for instance, did not reach the area till the 1950s.

Dairy farming replaced the timber industry as the mainstay of the community
in the twentieth century but, by the 1970s, dairying had become uneconomic. Rawene
had been the civic centre of the area but gradually public services moved away from
the Hokianga in favour of the Bay of Islands, on the east coast, creating even more
unemployment. On the positive side, with cheap land, houses and farms available,
what were then called ‘hippies’ and now called ‘seachangers’ moved in, ‘many of
them well educated, creative and idealistic’. And many of them have stayed. After a
period of adjustment, they have been accepted into the community.

At the time of the 2006 Census, the population of Hokianga was 4,572 people
and declining. Rawene had only 438 people and was likewise declining. The 2013
census saw a decline in population to 4257 in the Hokianga, but the population of
Rawene had increased to 471.\(^{22}\) Interestingly, the most common occupational group in
Rawene was ‘professionals’.\(^{23}\) It is a community in which Maori and Pakeha mix
freely, in which many people have both Maori and Pakeha heritage. One resident, Dick Holdaway, when asked in a television interview about the ratio of Pakeha to Maori in the community responded, ‘It’s not a big feature. Practically everyone is both or feels that way’. He saw the defining feature of the community as cooperation arising out of shared hardship. Hokianga people have had to fight just to survive, and that has brought them together. One priest at a local marae (sacred gathering place) similarly declared ‘We’re just one big family. It’s an integrated community’. Young people who leave the community to find employment are often drawn back for this reason. One young man spoke of coming back to the local ‘polytech’ to do a building course so that he could construct his own house. There are other factors in its favour. The climate is subtropical. It is easy to grow things, and residents can aim at self-sufficiency. Indeed, to a visitor, it seems like a genuine community where you get on with your neighbours, not because you don’t want any trouble, but because you have taken the time and effort to get to know them. There might not be a local bank or post office or ATM machine. Your mobile phone, heaven forbid, mightn’t always work. But for those who live here, these lacks seem small prices to pay for the treasures they have.

5. Harrison, E, Hokianga, p. 3.
7. Harrison, E, Hokianga, p. 3.


15. Manson, CC, Tides of Hokianga, pp. 31–35.


Chapter 2

An Indomitable Father

Dr Janet Irwin was not only clear about the influence of her birthplace on her future trajectory, she was in no doubt that her father had loomed large over every aspect of her life. He was a good father to her and she loved him. She also admired him tremendously as a doctor. She was impressed by his capacity to come up with original solutions to difficult problems. Not that she always approved of his methods for getting things done. He could be overwhelming. Like a force of nature.

Dr Smith, or GM as he came to be known, did not come to the Hokianga by design. Like Kupe the Navigator, he had been forced to flee from another place. Jack Lee’s description of early settlers in the area as being successful in villainy, public service and philanthropy might also be applied to GM. Villainy is probably too strong a word but there is no doubt that he was not above breaking the law in pursuit of what he saw as a greater good. He was to join the Hokianga legends.

Rex Fairburn the poet, who was a close friend, described him as ‘a cross between an Arab chieftain and an Archbishop’. Janet clearly inherited his height and rather regal appearance. She was, however, as elegant as her father was sartorially-challenged. The Northern News declared that ‘Dr Smith’s clothes would make a tailor weep, his appearance as he goes swinging down the street would make a whole medical congress sit up and gasp’. His style of dress was always the same: old grey felt hat with a sagging brim, a loose grey flannel jacket over an open-necked white cotton shirt, a pair of unironed flannel trousers, an old oilskin raincoat and sandals. ‘From under his hat-brim peered piercing or twinkling bright blue eyes around whose corners the years gathered quizzical creases, and beneath his big hooked nose he held in his down-curved mouth a down-curling pipe.’

Describing himself, GM declared:

Well! If you care to go to Scotland, and if you go to the best place – which, of course, is North of the Forth – you will see, somewhere up on the Highland line, a long fair Hieland Shepherd. He will be cursing and swearing at his dogs because he can’t get the sheep to go the way he wants, which, of course, is the right way. That’s me! Or rather it would have been me, if I hadn’t been a good shepherd gone wrong.
It was not until Janet was an adult that she found out what GM was referring to, and why he had to flee Scotland. All she knew as a child was that he was born in Laggan, Speyside, Scotland on 13 November 1882, the son of a sheep farmer; that he had studied medicine at the University of Edinburgh and trained as a surgeon.

GM and Lucy arrived at Rawene in 1914 from Scotland. While they were still on board ship, what was to become known as the First World War was declared. On arrival, the place they would call home for the next thirty-five years seemed to belong to a different world. The first thing which struck them was its isolation, isolation not only from the rest of the world but from the rest of New Zealand. And not only was it isolated externally, the various communities that made up the Hokianga were isolated from each other. In the absence of roads, the only possibility was access by the harbour. But this was no longer the relatively prosperous community of past timber-felling days. With the destruction of the kauri forests, dairying was becoming the main industry of the area. Few locals owned their own boats. Often your only option to get around was to thumb a lift on the launch that collected the cream from local dairies. If you lived at a distance from the harbour, contact with others often required great ingenuity.

From a medical point of view, this isolation made GM’s task daunting. He had been appointed as Superintendant of Rawene Hospital. There was a hospital, but many patients could not access it because of isolation. He was trained as a surgeon, but he was the only medical specialist in the community. Indeed he was the only doctor. GM also inherited a general practice in which the previous incumbent had lasted only eighteen months. In fact, there was no dentist or veterinary surgeon either so he would have to fulfill those roles as well. But to admit defeat was not in GM’s nature.

Given that his practice covered the whole of Hokianga and part of the Bay of Islands, it was clear he needed his own launch, so he ordered one to be built. He could not work without an anaesthetist, so he recruited Lucy against her will to not only work by his side at the hospital but to travel with him by launch and on horseback to provide domiciliary care. Back in Scotland, Lucy, the daughter of a well-to-do country family, had spent her time riding, playing golf and tennis, reading and going to parties. She must have been a very resilient and adaptable woman to take on everything demanded of her in New Zealand. Someone on the Rawene Hospital Board raised the issue of Lucy being unqualified as an anaesthetist. The dilemma was
resolved by paying GM the money for the anaesthetist, and leaving it up to him as to how it was dispersed. Lucy remained in the role.

GM started a diary in January 1915 in which he recorded the medical matters which required his attention. These were very diverse: ectopic pregnancy, paralysis, circumcision, abscess, rheumatic fever, removal of appendix, removal of tonsils and adenoids, forceps delivery, thyroid removal, hernia repair, heart failure, broken ankle, septic hip, baby with malnutrition, badly burnt child, bronchiectasis. It soon became clear that the job involved a great deal of travel and long hours. On 14 January 1915, he and Lucy left home at 4.30 am returning at 3.45 pm in time for the hospital rounds. Just a few days later, on 18 January, they started at 1 am and finished at 2 am the following morning. 5

The Rawene Hospital was poorly equipped and lacked the fundamentals. There was no electricity. The water supply had to be transported in tanks by barge and then dragged on sledges by horses. Both the kitchen and laundry were inadequate and there was no proper drainage. When GM took over, he found no surgical instruments or sterilizer, no proper operating theatre, no x-ray equipment. Nor was there a microscope or any bacteriological apparatus. Most immediately, the hospital needed an isolation ward due to the prevalence of the infectious diseases typhoid and diphtheria. The Hospital Board said there was no money. The ever resourceful GM called public meetings in Rawene and KohuKohu and raised the money by selling tickets. However, once the isolation ward was built, an increase in patients saw it become a general purpose ward. The hospital urgently needed a piped water supply. Some townsfolk suggested calling on the services of a water diviner. GM thought this a preposterous idea. Water was instead piped in from the Waima Hills with the pipes resting on wooden trestles over swamps and shifting clay soils. The water supply would often not reach Rawene because of resultant cracks in the pipes. There were many harsh words uttered by Dr Smith to Roddy Cochrane whose job it was to keep the pipe line going. When the unfortunate Roddy’s wife was expecting a baby, he rang GM one night to say that he didn’t think his wife would last till morning. ‘What will I do?’ he asked. The response reflected previous conversations: ‘Well, just bung her up with concrete and she ought to last ‘til morning’. 6

GM would prepare reports to the Hospital Board about desperately needed resources but, in the meantime, he was forced to work with what was available. Until the 1970s, the only way to qualify as a nurse was through employment with a
hospital. GM was prone to peremptorily co-opting young women as nurses just as he had co-opted Lucy as his anaesthetist. Some time in 1917, he called at Shapland’s Farm to borrow a horse. One of the girls was training as a nurse in Rawene. A younger sister who had never had anything to do with the hospital, nor thought of doing so, appeared in the farmhouse doorway. GM saw her and said, ‘That’s another one I’ll have – send her down’. He needed an extra assistant in theatre. She had no knowledge of ‘sterile technique’ but soon learned under such direct instruction as ‘Shapland! Stop rubbing yourself like an itchy cow on my sterile towel!’

When the 1918 influenza epidemic reached New Zealand, GM organised for armed men to patrol the roads of the Hokianga to turn back travellers. He also ‘decreed’ that all shops must close, and they did. The school was turned into a community kitchen, and cattle were shot to provide meat for beef tea. With GM’s assurance that the best medicine for flu was whiskey, members of the community were happy to take action to protect themselves. GM himself caught the flu but this did not stop him from travelling to remote communities to kill beasts and feed the people. On one occasion he became so feverish on his return that he would have drowned had he not been saved by Mr Rickord, the manager of the Koutu Mill (after whom Janet takes her middle name). Rickord had been educated at the prestigious Harrow School in England and been an officer in the Royal Navy. Janet didn’t know what turn of fate saw him end up in Hokianga but she was to be linked to him forever by the burden of a second name requiring explanation and usually misspelt.

Fifteen years later, GM was to take control of the community in similar circumstances. In 1933, a mysterious illness which made people very sleepy and was to be responsible for the deaths of four children, spread throughout the Hokianga and the Bay of Islands. Janet was sent to the Smith beach-house at Pakanae so that she did not catch it. GM decided that the disease was encephalitis lethargica and contacted the Medical Officer of Health to have schools closed, gatherings banned and travel stopped. In the meantime, he had taken the law into his own hands ordering the shops in Rawene to close, which again they did. When he heard that Ratana, a Maori Spiritual Leader and Healer within the Christian tradition, was coming to Kaikohe and that public gatherings were planned, he invited Ratana to a meeting with important local dignitaries to discourage the planned trip. Ratana refused to abandon the tour so GM arranged to block the public highway and three motor lorries were driven on to the access bridge. GM was there to insist that the trip
not continue. Once again, he won the day. In later life, he liked to refer to it as ‘the day we held the bridge’.  

In the 1920s, GM had purchased a thousand acres of hilly limestone farm country where he started many different enterprises including farming angora rabbits and large white pigs. He believed in the importance of pedigreed animals, and two pigs he specially imported were kept in the back paddock of his Rawene house, notwithstanding complaints to, and by, the Medical Officer of Health in Whangerei. Only when the complaints stopped were the pigs moved. Having read a great deal about farming in association with these ventures, GM set up a local branch of the Farmers Union with himself as President. He would regularly lecture local, more experienced farmers about farming practice, notwithstanding that he was yet to make his own farm pay financially. His enthusiasm, energy and ready supply of ideas ensured that the branch at least was a success.

Whatever was happening in the community, GM was there. He was elected to the Town Board where he was involved in securing public works like roads and water supply. There was no refrigeration. GM wanted the Taheke Falls used for hydro-electricity, however this did not prove feasible after much human energy was expended pursuing the idea. While he was keenly involved in such community matters, GM’s main focus was medical. Indeed, his involvement in community matters came from having an holistic view of health and a particular interest in preventive medicine. Maori children in the community had a high death rate from pneumonia and gastro-enteritis. GM encouraged the eating of protein rather than carbohydrates. Diphtheria, typhoid, tuberculosis, tetanus and gas-gangrene (a deadly bacterial infection) all existed within the community and as immunising injections became available, he enthusiastically adopted them.

He convinced the Hokianga Board that a new hospital was needed and in 1925, the plans he had had drawn up were approved by the Health Department. It was not possible, however, to get Maori households to pay rates because of the multiple ownership of land. GM was of the view that the Board could take a loan for that amount and he undertook to raise the money for equipment and furnishings. Public meetings were called and when insufficient money was raised, GM ‘imposed’ what he called a ‘hut tax’ on the district. Every household was to contribute a certain sum for the hospital. He would recall:
It was this way, d’ye see. Some of them played the game and paid up because they could see it was a benefit to have a new hospital, and it just needed a bit of a stimulus to get them going; then some of them paid after I’d been talking to them; and others paid later still when I told them that if I couldn’t persuade them to support the new hospital maybe they couldn’t persuade me to go to them when they were sick – and I was the only doctor running the only hospital in a district cut off by bad roads and wild seas.9

While GM was clearly forceful and tenacious, he could get away with this because he was also warm, empathetic and charming. It was clear that he cared deeply about the people in the community and that neither he nor Lucy was interested in making money. His motto was ‘Illness is nasty enough itself without the added nastiness of having to pay for it’.10 He was no businessman. He would send out accounts about once a year to anyone he thought might pay, for any sum which occurred to him. In the sitting room at Nimmo Street, there was a large mantelpiece. On top of it sat a tin, and in the tin, cheques sent by patients sat expiring. He rarely cashed them. A friend of Janet’s, Shiela Wilson, remembers hearing about the tin as a child. On one visit, she wrote ‘Shiela was here’ in the dust on the mantelpiece, and on each visit would confirm that it was still there. Card evenings and dances did not raise sufficient money for a hospital, so GM came up with the idea of establishing a casino like the one in Monte Carlo. The casino equipment was imported from Paris. There was a café, concert room, beer garden and dance hall, open to all. People came from near and far, necessitating the temporary suspension of all restrictions on the manufacture and sale of alcoholic beverages, gambling and dancing. GM also arranged the raffle of a motor vehicle which he imported from England for the purpose. Someone (annoyed, he surmised, at not winning) reported him to the police for not having a permit for the raffle. Both the police prosecutor and the magistrate had bought tickets but justice had to be done according to law and so, he was found guilty, and fined ‘a fiver’ (five pounds).11

GM believed that the end justified the means so long as the means were not vicious. When he heard that a man who had, contrary to his religious beliefs, bought a raffle ticket and then said that he would give fifty pounds to the fund if he won (to assuage his conscience), he decided that the raffle needed a bit of a help along. The man was so spooked when he won, he handed over the fifty pounds and sold the car immediately.12 (This attitude was not restricted to financial matters. On at least one occasion it is believed he declared a death to be accidental when it was clearly
suicidal. He was unworried by his perjury because it enabled the widow to collect insurance on her husband’s life.)

Finally, once the money had been raised, GM supervised the building of the hospital which opened in 1928. The *Northern News* reported on the facility in the most glowing terms:

> Rawene’s crowning glory (in both sense of the word) is the County Hospital pronounced by the Health Authorities as comparatively the best equipped and most up-to-date hospital in the Dominion… the hospital is not only the darling of Dr Smith’s heart, the apple of his eye so to say, but the embodiment of his personality… Sun-bathed and breeze-swept, from its windows the views are fair and far. It is what few hospitals are, a cheerful place. The interior is painted in bright, even gay colours. There is surgical cleanliness but little of the oppressive deadly hospital whiteness. The floors are covered with indiarubber with a bright marble pattern. The whole building is flooded with light and air. These are powerful remedies to be had everywhere for the taking, and too little used by most of us.¹³

Having been successful at establishing a model hospital in the most unlikely setting, GM was ready for a new cause. As economic conditions deteriorated in the Hokianga at the beginning of the thirties, as a result of the Depression, he had another brainwave. His plans for a large-scale tobacco-growing project was, however, misconceived not only in health terms but in terms of the climate. Mildew brought it to an end. As the economy got worse and unemployment increased, he would take food and clothes for the needy with him when he was out and about in the community. He could not understand why things were so bad financially when the land was as productive as ever and there were adequate workers and machines to do the necessary work.

When he discovered the writings of Major Douglas, a British engineer who adopted an interdisciplinary approach to economic issues, GM became a convert to the Social Credit Movement and, never one for half measures, its first New Zealand president. Douglas blamed the banks for tying up credit which could otherwise be circulated through the general population. He argued that the economic system was organized to maximize profits for those with economic power by creating unnecessary scarcity.¹⁴ Soon, anyone going into Rawene Hospital would be harangued by GM about the virtues of the Social Credit Movement. He established a study circle in Rawene of some thirty members and in 1932 they decided to hold a study camp to
educate the general public on the philosophy and its relevance as a response to the Depression.

The camp was held at Pakanae, on beachfront land leased to GM by the Maori community. There was plenty of land at Pakanae for camping and GM had a long Nikau (palm) shelter built for the occasion. (This was not the first building GM had constructed on this site. Some time earlier, he had built a holiday home for the use of family and friends. His wooden house with an iron roof had been built economically because the design was simple. In the interests of health, all the bedrooms and the living area led onto a verandah with louvres providing cross-ventilation. It was a house which could be easily extended as required. Being GM, he planned it as a model structure, one which local people could emulate, which the government might adopt for public housing in the area and, indeed, he unsuccessfully approached the government in this regard.) The Social Credit Camp was a great success with about 100 in attendance, mostly local farmers, and so another camp was planned.

As the Depression continued and unemployment worsened, GM was convinced that the answer lay in making New Zealand self-sufficient economically. He addressed a large meeting at the Whangerei Town Hall which unanimously adopted a motion that ‘the Government recognize the fact that the credit of New Zealand belongs to the people and not to the private bankers and that the Government conduct a free and open enquiry into the financial position of New Zealand without the help of the bankers.’

A National Medical Service (based on hospitals paid for by a special tax under which those most able to pay, paid most) was Labor Party Policy. But at this point in time, GM was still riding the Social Credit horse. In 1933, he told the Medical Officer of Health that Social Credit was sweeping New Zealand and that in six months, he’d be running New Zealand.

What was needed, however, to give this the final impetus, he decided, was a major international public figure coming to New Zealand to endorse it. He wrote to Winston Churchill, but when that tactic was unsuccessful, in 1934, he invited Major Douglas out on an all expenses paid basis to a Social Credit Camp at the Ashurst racecourse.

Unfortunately, GM had neglected to obtain any authorisation from members of the movement for this invitation, and when he informed the delegates that they would be required to fund Major Douglas’ expenses, they were not impressed. There was a call for the movement to be properly constituted as an organisation with an executive to make decisions to avoid such high-handed activity. To add insult to
injury, when Major Douglas did arrive, he only made himself available to deliver a single speech, a speech which, moreover, had nothing new to say and was delivered in an uninspired and uninspiring fashion. GM’s leadership of the movement was no longer tenable and from this time onward, he ceased any form of direct political involvement. He did, however, maintain an interest in social justice and wrote in his journal about the importance of educating students about economic matters. He would have been gratified to learn how his daughter was to engage with the political arena, not as a member of a political party, but lobbying for reform on issues of social justice generally and women’s health in particular.

He now redirected his energy from broader-scale political reform to the reform of his medical practice. It was in obstetrics that he first changed tack. Initially, he had adopted the philosophy (partially influenced by Maori midwifery) of letting nature take its own course. Janet was thus born not in the hospital but in the family home. However, many local women were unhappy with the lack of assistance he afforded them in childbirth. Fortunately for them, GM’s voracious reading led him to discover that the drug Nembutal could be used to afford painless childbirth. He was not too proud to change his practice, and women were to come from all over New Zealand to Rawene for a painless birthing experience. His obstetric practices still, however, had a non-interventionist flavour in that he did not believe in repeated physical examinations to see how the labour was progressing, relying instead on recording the contractions by putting peas in a pot.17

Notwithstanding his unorthodox practices, GM was held in high regard by his nursing staff once they got over their first impressions of him. In regarding nurses as professionals in their own right, and expecting them to be independent in thought and action, he was not only ahead of his times in the 1930s and 1940s, but also ahead of the times today.18 He would be baffled by the ongoing resistance within the medical profession to the idea of nurse-practitioners, specially trained nurses who carry out the functions of general practitioners in appropriate circumstances, such as where doctors are not available. One of the nurses who worked with GM, Barbara Ancott-Johnson, was to write a book about the experience. She recalled:

I had learnt to respect him, admire his quick wit and humour, his tenacity and deep-rooted humanity, his kindness to animals, his hatred of ostentation and humbug. The impish pleasure he derived when he scored off the establishment always amused me.
All in all, he taught me a tremendous amount and was the most painstaking and tolerant of teachers.  

He was likewise held in high regard by the patients in his hospital for his genuine concern for their welfare coupled with his philosophy that their lives should be interfered with as little as possible. Things were not done just because they were usually done in hospitals. Patients were not, for example, woken at dawn to be washed and have their beds changed to suit the convenience of hospital staff. GM also turned his back on current medical thinking when he believed it wrong. He administered morphia to give relief to patients with pneumonia at a time when it was generally believed that it would be lethal to do so. His nursing staff were gowned, masked and gloved at all times and cross-infection was almost unknown in Rawene hospital, some years before these issues assumed paramount importance elsewhere.

He kept up to date with what was happening in his field by reading medical journals and books. Indeed, he and Lucy would spend large amounts of money on books, and they subscribed to a huge number of papers and magazines from overseas. Not that he would be easily convinced by an argument.

Most of the stuff in the journals, medical journals, any journals, is rubbish! Ye must have a philosophy, a frame of reference built on the foundation of those things which, as Whitehead says, are self-evident and need no proof. Then when ye read of something new, if it fits into that framework it’s probably true – if not it’s probably not, no matter how big the pot that says it. 

Alfred North Whitehead, English mathematician and philosopher was one authority to whom he remained constant. Whitehead was known for his philosophy of ‘organism,’ of the inter-relatedness of concepts. Like Whitehead, GM believed that, while specialization was necessary, the good specialist was well-informed across the spectrum of knowledge, and not only within his own discipline. For a scientist, that meant an appreciation of the arts. Whitehead’s writings were peppered with quotations from his favourite poets, Wordsworth and Shelley.

Perhaps inspired partly by Whitehead, and no doubt by the desire to prove the medical establishment deficient, GM decided to write a book on medical practice. *Notes from a backblock hospital* was published in 1938 and was to be followed by four more titles in kind. They are curious books. Some chapters assume a reader who is a fellow medical practitioner. Others are clearly meant to offer practical advice.
to nurses who find themselves in situations for which their training has not equipped them. Some are intended for a lay audience wanting to be informed about medical matters, while others read like submissions to the government. The rest are more oblique and philosophical. Whitehead is called upon in support of some arguments, GM assuming that his readers know who Whitehead is, and there are frequent allusions to literature.

GM even tries to formulate his own philosophy of life:

God is man-made – who is going to decide which is the best model – you can’t completely standardise a God – man is not a God – how can he know – he is not a peer of God. We can only recognise his necessity in our Cosmology – without him there is no sense in our conception of the universe.\(^{23}\)

He continued:

And what of the Church, who claim they know how to get man out of his present predicament – well! They may know the way for some, but not the way for enough, and I am amongst the enough.\(^{24}\)

Notwithstanding this irregular approach, perhaps even because of it, the books were widely read. The blurb on the cover of the final book gives some indication as to why: ‘All through his pages we hear him shouting and cajoling; persuading and jeering; thumping on the table; sweetly reasonable, comic and downright rude by turns, He has above all, something to say.’

By the late 1930s, GM was becoming well known throughout New Zealand and there were regular visitors to the Hokianga who had heard of him or read his books. He became friendly with a group of men from Auckland, the writer ARD Fairburn, architect Vernon Brown, and fellow surgeon Douglas Robb who was to gain a knighthood and the Chancellorship of Auckland University. GM claimed he had no desire nor need to live in the city and preferred the idea of living and thinking on the margins. Often referred to as eccentric, he claimed it should be spelled ex-centric and expressed the view that ‘the only way to see what is happening at the centre is to be ex-centric.’\(^{25}\)

In the 1935 election campaign, the Labor Party put forth proposals for a National Health Scheme. GM supported this approach. In 1937 he spoke of the imminence of a National Health Service at an opening function of a Plunket Society
branch. The Plunket Society had been set up by Dr Truby King who believed that to reduce the infant mortality rate it was necessary to have ‘scientifically formulated doctrines’ on nutrition and infant care.\(^{26}\) Whilst GM endorsed the society’s emphasis on hygiene, he was critical of their rigid ideas about feeding times and weights, and the authoritarian tone adopted by many of their nurses. He made it clear that, in his view, independent organisations like the Plunket Society should and would be brought under the umbrella of the National Health Service. It was always a risk inviting GM to address a meeting. On the one hand he was a charismatic and entertaining speaker who could pull in the crowds. On the other, you could never predict what he would say.

The Labor Party’s plans for a National Health Scheme involved provision for Special Medical Areas where doctors would be employed on salaries, as distinct from a fee for service arrangement. This proposal was opposed by the Medical Association (which GM refused to join). Because the Hokianga was both poor and remote, GM became convinced that it needed to operate as a Special Medical Area and convinced the Hokianga Board to apply to have it gazetted as one. When the Labor government proved slow in establishing Hokianga as a special area, GM tried the alternative approach of arguing the prohibitive cost of not doing so. His estimates having been challenged, he set about collecting census-style data himself with the assistance of district nurses and school teachers. ‘He called the school teachers and told them to set each class an emergency project on ‘Who lives in our valley and where they live.’\(^{27}\) The information was collated and forwarded to the Health Dept within six days, together with an assessment that they would have to pay Dr Smith considerably more per annum if he were not on a salary. Hokianga became a Special Medical Area from 1941. Janet was later to employ this strategy of carrying out surveys to good effect when campaigning on reforms to the abortion laws.

GM devised a fully-integrated Health Service in which education, prevention and treatment (both domiciliary and hospital and including pharmaceuticals) were provided free of charge to the population. Specially-trained community nurses were to continue to have primary responsibility for diagnosing and treating patients in remote districts.\(^{28}\) The Hokianga Health Service came to be recognized as an extraordinary success, not only in New Zealand but internationally. To this day, doctors from places such as Iceland and Columbia apply to spend time working for the Service. Whenever there have been challenges to this system or attempts to bring it into line with
mainstream health priorities, the Hokianga community has rallied together and successfully argued that it remains more cost-effective to maintain their system. Indeed in 1993, ownership and governance of health services in the area were assumed by the community in the form of the Hokianga Health Enterprise Trust and that arrangement continues successfully today.29

If you visit the Rawene Hospital today, you will see two memorials outside. The first memorial reads ‘Tribute to the memory of the late Dr George McCall Smith. The doctor in this district and Medical Superintendent from 1914 to 1948 was also farmer, town councilor and friend, who by the strength of his personality became part of our way of life. No call was too far. No track too rough. He designed the Rawene Hospital and set up the Hokianga co-operative medical service of doctors, nurses and the people – his true memorial. He served us well’. The other memorial reads: ‘In memory of Mrs Lucy M Smith, the calm foundation of her husband’s turbulent world and his anaesthetist. She followed him’.

In many respects, Janet was her father’s daughter. Under her father’s influence, she acquired a sense of social obligation to those less fortunate than herself. She was likewise to become an innovative medical practitioner and a committed campaigner on health issues. She too was forceful and tenacious on the one hand but warm, empathetic and charming on the other. But Janet had also acquired a more considered and accommodating personality from her mother. She was not as abrasive or as impulsive as her father and she had difficulties with his philosophy that the end justifies the means. It was when he tried to run her life for her, however, that their relationship was to falter.

2. Welch, GK 1965, Doctor Smith, Blackwood and Janet Paul, Auckland, p. 75.
3. Welch, GK, Doctor Smith, p. 25.
5. Welch, GK, Doctor Smith, p. 20–24.


Chapter 3
A Resilient Mother

Janet felt that she never really knew her mother. Lucy Margaret Smith was a private person. She and GM came from similar backgrounds, having been born in the same year, to farming families in the Scottish highlands. The farm in her case was Newton, near Cromarty in the Black Isle. She was the only daughter of John Scott and his second wife, Jane Fraser, and had to contend with two older brothers, Tom and Jack, and two younger ones, Fraser and Andrew. John Scott’s first wife had died of consumption and Lucy also had siblings, two girls and a boy, from that marriage.

The Scotts were relatively prosperous farmers who had gone north with their sheep at the time of the Highland clearances. John’s father was Adam Scott and his father was John Scott and there is an unbroken line of Adams and Johns going back to the twelfth century. Jane was the daughter of Thomas Fraser and his wife Lucy. Her father, the Sheriff Substitute of Skye, is mentioned in John Prebble’s history of The Highland Clearances. After the potato famine of the 1830s, many Skye residents sought to migrate to America and Canada. Finding they were being exploited by the shipping companies, Thomas Fraser set up The Skye Emigration Society to protect them. It was later taken over by the British Government, the first time in history it had taken responsibility for victims of a natural disaster. This was the sort of ancestor Janet was proud to be associated with. Lucy Smith, who had brought few family mementoes with her to New Zealand, was to give Janet a locket containing a lock of her great-grandfather’s hair and his picture, and also a miniature of him painted on ivory.

Janet also came into possession of letters and a diary kept by Thomas Fraser. The diary is immensely readable and gives a good insight into the times as well as the character and personality of Thomas himself. Thomas starts it in February 1831 when he is twenty-one and an articled clerk with a law firm in Inverness who aspires to formal study of the law in Scotland. He is a rather serious and conscientious young man who is keen to spend his day productively. To that end, he makes a daunting resolution:

1. I intend to get up every morning so that my prayers and dress may be over by 7 o’clock.
2. to devote the hour from 7 to 8 to arithmetic.
3. to devote the hour from 8 to 9 to Latin
4. to devote the hour from 9 to 10 to breakfast & exercise.
5. to devote what unemployed time I may have in the office to the improvement of my handwriting & to miscellaneous reading.
6. From ½ past 3 o’clock when I leave the office until I return again at 6 to exercise, to dinner, miscellaneous reading or other amusement.
7. From 9 o’clock when I generally leave the office for the day, to employ myself for another hour at Latin.
8. Then to make the necessary entries in my Account Book & Record & then to go to bed after reading a chapter of the Bible to my mother.¹

Not satisfied with these constraints on himself, three months later, Bridget Jones style, he makes a list of personality defects that need correction:

1. To give up swearing & cursing.
2. To check myself whenever I am prompted to utter any indecent witticism; and when I am spoken to in such a manner, to refrain from replying in the same strain.
3. Whenever any lewd, indecent or unchaste thought occurs to me to do my utmost to banish it from my mind.
4. To avoid taking Snuff on any occasion &
5. To note down every night whether I have adhered to these resolutions.²

Thomas was active in public affairs. Early on, he reports attending meetings advocating the passing of the Reform Bill to make the parliament more democratic, and clearly and succinctly articulates the issues involved. He is a great reader, particularly of poetry, his favourite being the nature poet Wordsworth. His own writing style reflects that interest. On climbing up Craig Phadrig, he describes Inverness below him as ‘an infant smiling in the lap of its delighted mother’.³ He would have been pleased that his grand-daughter, Lucy, was also a great reader.

Lucy would share occasional snippets from her childhood with Janet: how she would drive a dogcart down from the farm into town; how the best thing about school at St Leonard’s in St Andrews was playing lacrosse; about the finishing school in Lausanne, Switzerland, where the German girls arranged for sausages to be sent from home in their parcels of clean washing. She would whisper ‘dormez bien’ in Janet’s ear after tucking her in bed at night. Sometimes, Lucy would mention tennis parties and summers spent on Skye after leaving school. When her father died, the family moved near Perth in Scotland and she continued to enjoy sporting activity, this time in the form of golf. Janet wondered what happened to the athletic gene, as she did not inherit any interest in, or inclination for, sports.
It is doubtful that it was ever contemplated by the Scott family that Lucy could, or would, earn her living. Lucy herself was totally unprepared for, and unimpressed by, GM’s proposal that she be his anaesthetist. But, ‘her objections that she knew nothing about it and didn’t want to do it were brushed aside as trivial’.⁴ And she, particularly, was overborne by the sheer force of his personality. Not long before she died, she told Janet, ‘I could never refuse him anything.’ Fortunately, life on a farm had prepared her for riding on a horse with GM to provide health services to the Hokianga community, and it was preferable to accompany him than to wait at home, not knowing when he would return. Janet remembers her mother riding sidesaddle with high, laced-up riding boots and long riding skirts, and coming home smelling of ether.

Given the unpredictable nature of medical work, the Smiths always had live-in household help. Maybe this would have been the case in any event. Lucy’s upbringing had no more prepared her for working within the home than outside it. She had never cooked a meal before coming to New Zealand. In Rawene, she taught herself to cook with the assistance of two recipe books: *Tante Marie’s French Cooking* and the Scottish cookbook *Tried favourites with household hints and other useful information* by Mrs EW Kirk. Tante Marie was a legendary French cook who set new standards in French cuisine in the early twentieth century. Lucy was inspired by her to wear a long white apron and use a thermometer when baking, and she became a wonderful cook. Janet recalled beautiful pastries and sweets, even chocolates with peppermint or raspberry cream inside. With the milk from the family cow, Lucy was able to make sour cream for cooking, and a Scottish skim milk cheese called ‘crowdie’ to eat with her home made baked oat cakes. Lucy did pass on her cooking expertise to Janet who, in turn, was to pass it on to her daughters.

GM only once criticized Lucy’s cooking, declaring a pudding a ‘hellish concoction’. He did not make the same mistake twice. Lucy could be quite formidable at times and she had a quick tongue. The artist Eric Lee-Johnson, who became a family friend and indeed lived at their beach house at Pakanae during 1948 and 1949, described her thus:

Lucy was adept at demolishing her husband’s more flamboyant assertions [with] neatly timed asides or down-to-earth observations of her own. It was a disloyalty that GM never seemed to hear, for he continued confidently to look to his wife for support of his viewpoint on all occasions.⁵
Janet does not recall ever being punished by her mother. There are, however, two occasions which were etched in her memory. When she was five, she tripped over Peter the dog and exclaimed, ‘Peter, you bugger’. ‘Don’t you ever say that word again’ responded a formidable Lucy, and Janet claimed she was an adult before she ever reoffended. A couple of years later, Janet made the mistake of announcing to a friend visiting the house, ‘Anyway, I’ve got a new book and you haven’t’, which met with a similar response.

The Smith household always included animals. When GM started his diary in 1915, it included a dog and two horses. When Lee-Johnson first arrived at the Smith home in Nimmo Street, Rawene, in 1946, he was accosted at the gate by four fierce-sounding dogs who allegedly protected GM from marauding hypochondriacs. There was no doubt, however, that GM, Lucy and Janet were all animal lovers, and once inside the house he was set upon by their feline collection and a large parrot. The writer Frank Sargeson, in describing his first visit to the Smith household, claimed that there were fourteen cats and six dogs and ‘these creatures are all over the house at all hours’.

At Nimmo Street, Lucy had little time for gardening, and in any event, the soil was heavy clay, not suitable for gardening without a great deal of work. Janet remembers the house and yard being overgrown with rambler roses, honeysuckle and bamboo. But, after the Pakanae bach was built, Lucy managed to entice a landscape architect out from Scotland to develop a garden near the beach. The Smiths would usually spend weekends at Pakanae and come back to Nimmo Street with large bunches of beautiful flowers which Lucy would arrange with the skill of a florist.

It was not the first garden to be established at Pakanae. When the artist/explorer Augustus Earle arrived at the Hokianga Heads in 1827, he, unlike Cook, decided to investigate further and ventured down the harbour to Pakanae, where peaches and potatoes were being grown for export to Australia. The land leased by the Smiths was at the foot of the Whiria Pa and was itself tapu (sacred) to the Nga Puhi. It says a great deal about the regard in which the Smiths were held by the local Maori people that they were able to develop the land as they saw fit. Lucy’s garden was designed not only for its decorative appeal, but also to provide sustenance. When the Lee-Johnsons moved in, the garden had become run-down but there were still figs, grapes, peaches and pears for the eating. No doubt, GM would have had a
say in this as he was convinced of the value to your health of growing your own food. Both he and Lucy would have been pleased to know that their grand-daughters were to become keen gardeners even if their daughter was not.

The real passion of Lucy Smith’s life, however, was not cooking or animals or gardening. It was reading. And it seems likely that it was this passion which had brought GM and Lucy together. They subscribed to more than thirty overseas periodicals and newspapers through MacNiven & Wallace in Edinburgh, although it would take four weeks for them to arrive by sea. Janet recalls her parents reading *Time & Tide, The Spectator, The New English Weekly, The Times Literary Supplement, Blackwood’s Magazine, Cornhill Magazine, The Dublin Magazine, Punch, The London Observer, The Manchester Guardian Weekly, The News Chronicle* and keeping up with births, deaths and marriages in *The Weekly Scotsman.* They might have been in the antipodes, but her parents were enormously knowledgeable about what was happening in the world at large.

Her childhood home was filled with books. Lucy had an account with Foyle’s bookstore in London as well as with New Zealand booksellers and publishers such as Whitcombe & Tombs. In this way, Lucy kept up to date with the finest in literature. Born in the same year as Virginia Woolf, she would acquire Woolf’s books immediately they were published. She was also a great fan of Katherine Mansfield and her shelves displayed not only Mansfield’s short stories but also her published and collected letters and journals. From the time her daughter was about eight, Lucy would pass over to her stories such as ‘The voyage’, ‘The garden party’, ‘Prelude’, and ‘At the bay’ with pencil marks in the margins denoting the passages she thought she might particularly like. As an adult, Janet was to return to these stories from time to time for comfort. Lucy signed Janet up for the UK Children’s Book of the Month Club so that she too had the delight of receiving regular parcels of books in the mail.

Not only was Lucy a fan of Woolf and Mansfield and novelists Elizabeth Bowen and Muriel Spark, she was a devotee of other women writers of her era whose books were to be republished by Virago Press in their Modern Classics Series and continue in print today: Stevie Smith, Winifred Holtby, Rosamund Lehmann, Willa Cather, Molly Keane (aka MJ Farrell), Rose Macaulay, and Elizabeth von Arnim. Many of these women were friendly with each other and with members of the Bloomsbury set. All were novelists although some also wrote biographies, travel stories, essays and satire. They wrote about the lives of women, and their women
characters were strong-willed and courageous. They called into question conventional wisdom about the role of women in society which, as Holtby put it, ‘not only checks the development of the woman’s personality but prevents her from making that contribution to the common good which is the privilege and obligation of every human being’. Elizabeth and her German garden by Australian-born writer Elizabeth von Arnim, was a particular favourite of Lucy’s. There were some resonances with her own life in this semi-autobiographical novel about gardening in a rural setting with a domineering husband Elizabeth called ‘Man of Wrath,’ and Lucy particularly appreciated its witty and sarcastic tone.

Some of the women writers which Lucy favoured are no longer in print: Storm Jameson, president of the English centre of PEN, the international literary and human rights organization from 1938 to 1945; Stella Benson, activist for women’s suffrage, who wrote about her travels in the United States and China; and the Irish cousins who wrote as Somerville and Ross. Janet recalls her mother reading The real Charlotte and Some experiences of an Irish R.M. by Somerville and Ross, the former, a serious novel about the decline of the aristocracy, and the latter, a humorous take on the efforts of a Magistrate to enforce the law in an Irish province.

Lucy’s reading was not restricted to women writers. She was, for instance, a fan of DH Lawrence. She embraced the ‘social realism’ novels of American writers John Steinbeck and John dos Passos but could equally enjoy the crazy, tragicomic worlds created by William Gerhardie in novels such as The Polyglots:

the story of a spectacularly egocentric young officer, George Hamlet Alexander Diabologh, who, on a military mission in the Far East is dragged into the orbit of a highly eccentric Belgian family, the Vanderflints, a collection of nymphomaniacs, obsessives, paranoic satyrs and crossdressers.

In the twenties, Gerhardie had equal or higher status as a writer than Evelyn Waugh, Aldous Huxley, Graham Greene or Anthony Powell. Lucy was not a timid reader. She relished unconventional and satirical works. She read Kingsley Amis, Henry James, Christopher Isherwood, LP Hartley, Joyce Cary, EM Forster and also kept up with what was happening in the New Zealand literary scene. She read Frank Sargeson, Rex Fairburn (who was to become a family friend), Maurice Duggan, Jane Mander, Maurice Gee, CK Stead. For some light relief, she and GM would read the detective novels of Marjorie Allingham and Dorothy Sayers.
Nor was Lucy’s reading restricted to fiction. She enjoyed the works of contemporary biographers Hesketh Pearson and Hugh Kingsmill, especially when they dealt with writers like Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw and DH Lawrence. She sent Kingsmill food parcels when he was interned in France during the war. Boswell’s *Life of Johnson* was a favourite, and because her family were originally from Skye, she had been particularly drawn to Boswell’s *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson*. When Pearson and Kingsmill published *Skye High*, their account of touring the Hebrides in the footsteps of Boswell and Johnson, it became one of her favourite books.

Janet described her mother’s taste in literature as ‘impeccable’. Frank Sargeson, with whom Lucy came to correspond, commented of her that ‘she reads a tremendous lot and knows her stuff’.15 She and GM would discuss the books which they had read. Lucy was to say to the teenage Janet, ‘Some people are interested in people; others in things; some in ideas. Your father is interested in ideas. It may surprise you to know that I am interested in people.’ She expected this might surprise Janet as it was usually GM who invited people to visit, and Lucy who tended to listen rather than initiate conversation.

The Smiths were not the only couple in the district to have experienced a more cosmopolitan lifestyle and to look forward to the arrival of books and journals from overseas. Allen Giles had not been born locally but in Christchurch in 1892. His father had been a grazier in the Queensland outback before moving to New Zealand. Although Allen and his sisters grew up in rural areas, their father was determined they should have the education he had missed. Allen was sent to boarding school in Switzerland where he learnt French and then on to Cambridge University. ‘He was intelligent, erudite, an outstanding raconteur and debater.’16 He and GM soon became firm friends. Allen was married to Fairy Blackwood, a woman with a European sensibility like Lucy. He had met Fairy in Paris when she was only seventeen, petite, beautiful and spirited. She was the daughter of the Irish ambassador to France. Passionate about the arts, she was to become a ballet and ballroom dancing teacher. Allen and Fairy became engaged but did not marry for seven years. She had time to think about the wisdom of travelling to the other end of the earth, away from her beloved Paris. But she was undeterred, not even by the fact that Allen’s Hokianga property bore the insalubrious title of Dead Horse Farm. Fairy arranged for her parents to regularly forward copies of *Paris Match*, which along with books, a
gramophone and large selection of classical records helped her survive in a ‘rural environment, where men and women struggled for existence, and the sure qualities of a top class bull were infinitely more important than the latest performance by the world’s finest tenor’. 17

While the Giles and the Smiths had much in common, it does not appear that Lucy and Fairy became close in the way they might do if this were a novel. Lucy and GM had family friends, but Lucy did not have intimate friends of her own. She was loathe to talk about herself and rarely revealed her feelings. Janet was to realize later in life that there were events which had occurred which no doubt had contributed to her mother’s reticence. She was never, however, able to make an assessment of how her mother felt about her life in Rawene with GM, and especially whether her mother was happy or not.

1. Fraser, T (1831–1851), ‘Record and confessional of Thomas Fraser commenced at Inverness in February 1831’, Inverness, Scotland, 88, pp. 10–11.

2. Fraser, T, ‘Record and confessional’, p. 21.

3. Fraser, T, ‘Record and confessional’, p. 27.


6. Welch, GK, Doctor Smith, p. 22.


8. Lee-Johson, E, No road to follow, p.115.


Chapter 4
A Defining Death

It may appear from previous chapters that Janet was an only child. But she was not the first child born to GM and Lucy Smith. John Samuel McCall Smith, named after his grandfathers, was born at home at Nimmo Street on 9 January 1922, nearly two years before Janet. He was to be known as Jock.

The children were not christened when they were born. Neither GM nor Lucy was religious although they had both been brought up in the Church of Scotland, and the Scotts used to say prayers every day when Lucy was a child. The only time Janet could recall any talk of religion was when her father mentioned the visit of a missionary to the local church when he was a child. He laughed as he recalled the missionary’s oxymoronic account of naked savages with concealed weapons.

When Janet was four, she followed Matty Wesley, the Maori girl who milked the family cow, when she collected bran from the shed behind the house. Here, Janet was bitten on the right calf by a rat. Her leg became swollen and had to be opened after a couple of weeks and she developed high fevers. She was seriously ill with a blood infection caused by a spirillum, a bug rather like the spirochaete which causes syphilis. The conventional treatment with arsenicals had to be ceased as Janet proved allergic to them. She was to spend eighteen months in bed.

Dogs and cats kept her company when she was ill at home, along with a pet donkey called Bill and a galah named Johnnie Walker. GM’s friend surgeon Douglas Robb taught the parrot to say ‘Ten and six please’ which was the going rate for a consultation. The parrot would also cough like GM, allegedly because the only way to get his attention was to have an ailment, and also constantly exclaim ‘Where’s Janet?’, just like him. Janet grew up with a great love of animals and was particularly entranced when some ponies joined the menagerie. Ponies were to become a significant feature of her own children's lives. Not only were there animals wherever you turned, the front door at Nimmo Street was always open to the neighbourhood children, and the six Cave children, whose father owned the local garage, were regular visitors. Given that Lucy was regularly out assisting GM in his practice, there was a nanny to help take care of things, known to the children just as Morton. Janet loved her dearly.
Janet and Jock were the first generation to be brought up on AA Milne books. *Now We are Six* was published when Jock was six. GM would sit in his big leather chair and read to the children: *Treasure Island*, *Tarka the Otter* and *Doctor Dolittle*. Janet learned to read while she was at home in bed. For a time she was taught by a red-haired Gaelic-speaking governess from Ullapool in far north Scotland, Rhoda MacLean, sister-in-law of Angus Ross, the headmaster of Rawene school.

Janet was five and a half years old before she was well enough to attend school. In typical older brother fashion, Jock scared her by announcing that she would get the strap when she started school for not going before then. On her first day, she yelled so much in protest about leaving home that the neighbours thought that her parents were beating her. In truth, she was only ever smacked once, by her father, with a large bare hand on her bottom. She couldn’t recall what she had done wrong. Her mother never smacked her. Generally, she was tolerant of the children’s behaviour. Indeed, in spite of her illness, Janet had a happy childhood. Although neither of her parents displayed their emotions openly and her mother wasn’t into physical contact at all, she had a secure sense of being loved.

Despite her tardiness in beginning her formal education, Janet was more advanced than the other students when she started school in the junior section of the Rawene District High School, so rather than being kept back, she was put up a couple of classes. She started in Prima 3 in 1929 but skipped Prima 4 and Standard 1. And she stayed ahead of other students her age, notwithstanding that relapses of the ‘rat bite fever’ made her attendance unreliable. Janet was not overly fond of school and she was not the only one. She remembered how the boys used to heat the barometer, knowing that when the temperature reached a certain level, they would be given the afternoon off and could race off down the Long Wharf and leap into the harbour.

Rawene District High School was rather a grand name for what was then a building of three rooms, with three teachers catering for around sixty students. While the primary school section conformed pretty well to the curriculum standards of the day, the school had difficulty both in attracting and retaining teachers, given the demands of the task and the isolation of the area. The school motto was *Ehara moku, mo te katoa*: Not for oneself but for all, a motto which reflected the spirit of the community. The school logo, however, was more a reminder of what had been lost, the kauri tree. In Standard 3, Janet was to experience her first science experiment. Students were confronted with two piles of soil, one covered with leafy twigs and one
bare. When they sprayed water on them, the twig covered pile survived while the bare one washed away. An environmental lesson too late in coming.

Children who lived in Rawene walked or rode their horses to school, and there was a paddock at the school set aside for the horses to graze in. For many students, just getting to school was a major achievement. Those who lived in outlying areas of the Hokianga were dependant on securing rides on launches or rowing themselves. Some children boarded in Rawene during the week. From time to time, the Smiths would take in students who would otherwise have difficulty getting to school. One of these was Lomond Leaf, a young boy whose Maori father, Harding Leaf, had been awarded the Military Cross in World War One and whose mother was a Scotswoman. Lomond and Jock and the local Boyd boys were all great mates and would ‘hang out’ together. Following the gender apartheid practices of childhood, Janet would spend her time with her best friends, Sheila Wilson and Daphne Cavanagh.

When Janet was seven, an event happened which she did not fully appreciate at the time but which devastated her parents and played a defining role in her future. It was not long after the Social Credit camp at Pakanae. Jock had been sent home from school with pains in the stomach. GM and Lucy were away all day seeing a patient and did not get home until late. GM immediately assessed that Jock’s condition required surgery and rang a consultant surgeon in Auckland. It took the surgeon many hours to get there, and on arrival, he decided it would be unwise to operate, and returned to Auckland. When Jock’s condition worsened, he was recalled and the theatre prepared. Lucy had to administer the anaesthetic to her son. When Jock’s abdomen was opened, ‘a coil of dull black tubing shot out’. Jock’s bowel was gangrenous, and there was too much to be cut out. He died on the operating table.

There was no public funeral. GM would not have a funeral service, and Jock was buried in an unmarked grave in the Rawene cemetery on Mt Herbert. GM repelled any offers of support and he alone attended the burial. It was not unusual for GM to be confronted by death—domestic violence leading to death, death while bushfelling, working with machinery, falling from horses or drowning in the harbour—but he never came to terms with it. When the Isabella du Fresne, a trading schooner, had sunk in 1928, and all eight men aboard drowned, GM did not attend. He avoided tragedies where he could not assist. The loss of his son mirrored an event in his own childhood where one of his brothers died while GM was looking after him.
The death was not due to anything GM had or hadn’t done but he blamed himself, as he no doubt blamed himself for Jock’s death.

Lucy was devastated. She sat in the house doing nothing. Then one day a neighbour came to see if he could help, and his visit touched some catch in her. She flew up the passage and clung to his coat lapels sobbing hysterically. When she had calmed down, she was released from immobility but she could not bear to stay in Nimmo Street and went down to Pakanae where she lived alone for some time.³

Eventually, Lucy returned to Nimmo Street, but it was as if Jock had never existed. Not only had GM buried him in an unmarked grave, he had removed all trace of him from the house. It is unlikely that GM and Lucy ever spoke to each other again about their son. They certainly never spoke to Janet or anyone else about him. Janet was given the clear message that the subject was taboo. No one acknowledged her loss.

Janet was not to come to terms with her brother’s death until some fifty years later when one of her daughters was diagnosed with a serious, potentially debilitating illness. For the first time, she confronted her loss and was able to weep at long last for her brother. She decided that she wanted a memorial erected where Jock was buried but she did not know where that was. She contacted Jock’s old friends who were still living in the area.

It was Lomond Leaf who was to ascertain the site of the unmarked grave and help Janet organize a memorial stone. Lomond had still been living with the Smiths when Jock died, and had been sent home, never to return, without explanation. He must have had his own issues in coming to terms with Jock’s death. In 1995, Janet, Lomond and others gathered to formally mourn Jock. Janet later wrote a poem about the occasion:

My brother died when he was ten
My father could not cope with death
He buried him – no funeral
My parents wept and did not speak of him again
I could not grieve.
Fifty years later, my child is ill
Alone in Leicester I wept for him
Ten years later I found his grave
We marked it
Twenty people came
They did not forget.
Not only had Jock’s friends never forgotten him, there had, in fact, been a memorial to Jock before 1995, a memorial of a very touching nature. When Lomond left the Smiths, he changed his name, informally, to ‘Jock’. From that time on, he was known within the community as Jock Leaf in honour of his friend.4

For Janet, her brother’s death was to have long term consequences beyond loss and the lack of acknowledgement of it. She was now an only child. For better or for worse, all her father’s hopes and dreams for the future now centred on her.

1. White, CK 2009, Not for oneself but for all Ehara Moku, No Te Katoa: the past 150 years of schooling in Rawene, Rawene Primary School, Rawene.
2. Welch, GK 1965, Doctor Smith, Blackwood and Janet Paul, Auckland, p. 98.
3. Welch, GK, Doctor Smith, p. 98.
Chapter 5

Free Range Children

Janet’s primary school friends Shiela Wilson and Daphne Cavanagh would spend weekends with the Smiths at Pakanae even before Jock’s death. Daphne remembered a fancy dress party where Janet was dressed as a butterfly, Jock as a petrol pump, and she had the misfortune to be attired as a Christmas tree which meant that she couldn’t sit down all night. After Jock’s death, Shiela and Daphne were regular weekend visitors at the bach.

Notwithstanding the fact that GM had designed the house as a model for public housing, it was on the primitive side. Lee-Johnson writes of his time there:

The interior was entirely unlined, and through cracks in the cladding and ill-fitting battens we enjoyed more of the health-giving ozone than we felt was our share. On stormy nights, when the winds whined madly around the house, enough would flow in to blow out our kerosene lamps. Candle flames burnt horizontally, dripping their grease down one side of the stick, and the only practical place to be reading was in bed.

Hot water for the bath was provided by a gas cylinder which was a potential fire hazard in these conditions. And if that were not enough, Janet described her mother as a bit of an incendiary who was always leaving lit cigarettes around the place. Amazingly, the house survived the Smith occupancy, and only burnt down after they left.

Clearly the children were much safer outside than indoors. At first they slept in an army tent which was pitched in the yard. Later, when the Smiths acquired a beautiful Indian marquee for entertaining, the children were able to give their imaginations full rein. At night, they would trace the arc of shooting stars, growl with the roar of the sea as the waves crashed on the bar, and stir each other up into a frenzy of excitement and fear as storms approached. They were, however, not perturbed by the sound of the Maori women keening and wailing in the cemetery nearby. They knew they were on sacred ground and in some ways the rituals were reassuring. Once, however, in the middle of the night, they decided to be really daring and sleep at the pa which was called Whiria. They climbed up the sacred hill behind the house, but they knew that what they were doing was wrong, and were too spooked by the thought to get much sleep there.
They were free range children at Pakanae. There were no house rules except ‘Be home on time for meals’ and ‘Don’t go out in boats’. The children knew that Lucy trusted them and they rarely misbehaved. They looked forward to the meals which Lucy would prepare for them, especially Tante Marie’s crepes. Sometimes, however, the food was a bit on the exotic side for them. GM was, for instance, particularly fond of gorgonzola cheese, a taste the children had yet to acquire.

They loved to ride the horses which the Smiths kept on the property and would skinny dip in the harbour afterwards. Shiela liked to up the ante by insisting they walk to nearby Opononi beach to dive off the pontoon. That was until she met her match in the form of a large stingray. Her intrepid spirit was not shared by Janet. Nor was Janet keen to play beach cricket, especially after Shiela bowled the ball directly into her nose and declared her out, nose before wicket. Their friendship was never compromised by such difference, although Janet got her own back by handing Shiela a hot red pepper she had plucked from the garden, saying ‘Take a bite of this.’

Shiela was later to remember their delight at being quarantined together at Pakanae for nearly three weeks during the encephalitis epidemic. Fortunately none of them were to experience the headaches, high fever and lethargy which might lead to prolonged unconsciousness. Their ‘holiday’ was somewhat overshadowed by the death of one of their classmates, but they had the capacity to be in the moment and put that to one side. They were supposed to be continuing with their school lessons but Shiela’s recollections were more of stealing Lucy’s Du Maurier cigarettes, trying to roll their own, and playing the gramophone until the spring broke. She remembers Lucy sitting in a chair, reading, and occasionally commenting ‘What are you children doing? Trying to make the hairs on the back of my neck stand up?’

Allen Giles was a frequent visitor at Pakanae. In the early 1930s, he and GM were particularly involved in the Social Credit movement. Fellow Social Credit devotees, Auckland surgeon Douglas Robb, and writer Rex Fairburn, would often join them. The men were to become lifelong friends. They would have passionate discussions, not only about Social Credit but about medicine and literature and any idea for making the world a better place. In response, Daphne, Shiela and Janet decided they would form their own special group. They called themselves the Orange Cushion Society, no doubt a more tangible concept to them than social credit, and even put out their own handwritten newsletters.
The members of the Orange Cushion Society were never patronized by the men on whom they modeled themselves. The children were not excluded from the discussions or debates. Indeed, as they grew older, they were encouraged to participate. In later life, Janet would describe Giles, Robb and Fairburn as her mentors. She was to emulate the way they were active citizens. ‘If you haven’t been driven by the passion and action of the time, you haven’t lived’ became her motto. She was active in lobby groups. Friendship for her meant not only mutual interests and support, she enthused her friends into forming networks for social change.

Not only did these men model for Janet a way of life which appealed to her, at least two of them seem to have consciously assumed the role of mentor. ‘Allen Giles saw his task as counteracting the more extreme influences of my father.’ Douglas Robb was to play a determining role at important junctures of her life as we shall see later. None of them, however, ever lectured or gave her unsolicited advice. She was treated as an adult and her views respected.

When junior school finished, the Orange Cushion Society was disbanded. Shiel left Rawene to go to Technical College and later became a dental nurse. Daphne, who was four years older than the other two, was sent to Auckland to earn her own living at fifteen. There she gained employment in a department store but was later to take up jewellery-making and painting. Like their mentors, the three girls kept their friendship intact regardless of change in circumstance and remained in regular contact throughout Janet’s life. Daphne, who had endured the cruelty of a sadistic stepfather at home, would later describe those weekends at Pakanae as the happiest time of her life.

As the offerings at Rawene District High School were limited, Janet, still only ten, was sent to board at Epsom Girls Grammar in Auckland. She found the environment there bleak and cold, and cried for three weeks. Her parents relented and enrolled her at Whangerei Girls High School. She still had to board as this school was eighty-four miles from Rawene but it was much closer than Auckland. She resigned herself to the prospect, somewhat mollified by the fact that her father, in characteristic fashion, laid down to the school, the rules which his daughter would follow. She did not have to go to church, nor do two to three hours homework per night, nor would he give consent to her letters being read. (It was the norm that all incoming and outgoing correspondence except that with parents was read.) There was a house mistress whom Janet particularly disliked. Douglas Robb wrote a letter to Janet, enquiring ‘How is
that narrow-gutted, shrivel-bosomed, snaggle-toothed old hag, Miss H?’ This insult could not, of course, be challenged, without acknowledgement that the agreement had been breached.

Lucy wrote to Janet every day and sent her iced biscuits in her father’s Cavendish Tobacco tins, green with a picture of a pretty girl on them (no doubt a marketing strategy to render the product benign). So, in a tangible way, Janet remained connected to home. But she never reconciled to the boarding school environment nor indeed to school, and she hated the emphasis on sport. The fact that she did well academically made no difference. She did make some friends and they did visit each other during the school holidays but she remained a free range child at heart and never settled in.

Boarding students had leave on two Sundays and one weekend each term. Her parents would sometimes book into the Settlers’ Hotel in Whangerei to spend time with her. On one occasion, when she was twelve, they went out to dinner with Martin Finlay, Minister in the new Labor Cabinet. Far from being shy in this exalted presence, Janet forcefully expressed her views on the proposed National Health Service.

In typical adolescent fashion, Janet would admire her parents one day, be embarrassed by them the next. They looked different from other parents. GM never wore a tie or shoes. His standard attire was open-necked shirt and pants and sandals. He wore sandals because he had one foot bigger than the other as a result of frostbite he had suffered as a child in the chilly climate of Speyside. Lucy, in turn, had a propensity for carrying a Maori kete (basket made from flax) instead of a handbag. Janet used to envy her friends Briar and Pam Marshall their elegant and fashionably dressed mother. Then there was the question of never knowing just how her father might behave. One year in the middle of an annual prize giving event which was especially pompous and boring, her father tapped a young man he knew on the shoulder and said ‘I’ll give you five bob if you’ll fart loudly.’ It took her a long time to find any humour in this situation.

GM and Lucy decided that Janet was to have the company of other children as often as possible when she was home during the school holidays. Kemble Welch recounts one such occasion:

Mrs Rogers of Broadwood answered her telephone.
‘Are ye there?’
‘Yes, Dr Smith.’ (no need to ask who it was)
‘Good…Now…Janet’s home. Send Lorna.’
‘But, Dr Smith, I need Lorna to help me!’
‘Send Lorna. We’ll take her to Pakanae. Ye’ve other children that can help ye.’
And he hung up.
Lorna went.

When the Cave family moved away from Rawene, Lucy and GM arranged for Jack and Verner Cave to live with them for a year so that their schooling was not interrupted. Bob Cave was to stay with them for two years after that. When Bob Cave got a bit drunk at the local Opononi pub when he was in his late teens, he asked Janet not to tell her mother. He could not bear the thought that she might think badly of him.

Not only did Janet have substitute brothers, she also had a couple of substitute aunts. Ella Leslie had become friendly with the Smiths while a District Nurse in Rawene. Like Lucy, she loved to garden and to read, particularly the works of DH Lawrence. Now that she was living in Whangerei, she would look after Janet when her parents could not visit. She taught her to knit and crochet and always cooked her favourite food. In similar vein, when Janet returned to Rawene in the school holidays, the first thing she would do would be to visit Morton, her former nanny. Morton would have afternoon tea ready with a spotless white linen table cloth and fine china cups on the table, and Janet’s favourite peanut brownies, known as Nutty Joys, freshly baked.

Janet matriculated in 1937 and finished school when she was only fifteen in 1938. She refused to return for the second year of sixth form. It did not matter that she would not qualify for university. She was not going back. She had been encouraged to have views, to express them, and to be faithful to them, she said. And that was that.


Chapter 6

University: to be or not to be?

Janet might be determined that she was not returning to school, but GM was adamant about her future. She was going to be a doctor. Even though there had been no discussion about the matter between them, he had made that perfectly clear for some time and there was no discussion. It was not negotiable.

Perhaps if Jock had not died, things might have been different. Medicine was an unusual career for a woman in the 1930s and was to remain so for some decades to come. There were, however, women pioneers in medicine in New Zealand dating back to the nineteenth century. Emily Siedeberg was the first woman to graduate from Otago Medical School in 1896 followed by Margaret Cruickshank the following year. They were followed by the occasional woman student and a small group of female students in the early twentieth century. Many years, however, saw no women enrolled and, given the attitude to female students within the university and within the profession, that is not surprising.

In the 1891 issue of the University newspaper, *Review*, a Dunedin doctor had written ‘Why should a woman unsex herself by giving way to a morbid craving which…can only be likened to an epidemic of insanity?’ That morbid craving was the study of medicine. His views, unfortunately, were not idiosyncratic but common, not just in the late nineteenth century but well into the twentieth. Male lecturers were not comfortable with women in the class when teaching anatomy or discussing certain public health issues and would order them from the lecture room while the male students cheered and jeered. But it was in the dissection room that the harassment of women students reached its pinnacle. A former laboratory assistant reported that male students would throw flesh at Emily Siedeberg ‘every chance they got’.

Meanwhile, influential members of the Medical School staff, including Truby King (who was to become known for the establishment of the Plunket Society with its strict views on child-rearing), campaigned not only against women studying medicine, but against their undertaking higher education in any form. They argued that it placed too great a strain on them at the ‘most momentous period of their lives’ and was thus detrimental to the ‘vitality of the race’. Appointed Director of Child Welfare in the Department of Health in 1921, Truby King was of the view that the
perfect woman was ‘pious, pure, submissive, supportant, nurturant and a most excellent wife and mother.’ He believed that girls should not be encouraged to work hard at school as they would become ‘flat-chested and unfitted for maternity’.4

GM was yet again an iconoclast in insisting that his daughter study medicine or indeed have a career at all. His mistake was not to engage her in the decision-making process but to assume that she would appreciate the wisdom of his plans for her. He was undeterred by Janet’s refusal to go back to Whangerei High School. With the assistance of his friend, Douglas Robb, he simply arranged for her to be accepted into Auckland University College in 1939 to study the subjects Zoology, Chemistry and Physics which she would need to pass to be accepted into Medical School. Being a ‘renaissance man’, he also arranged for her to attend English lectures. His finishing touch was to organise for her to live with a family in the inner city. Strategically, this was a wise move. After her negative response to boarding school, enrolling her in any form of student residential college might have jeopardized the entire project.

Lucy started to make plans for Janet and herself to travel to Scotland at the end of 1939. Perhaps the purpose of the trip was simply so that Janet could meet her relatives. Perhaps it was a sweetener to make the move to Auckland more palatable. Or, in later years, Janet pondered, perhaps Lucy’s motivation was quite different. Maybe she was providing both Janet and herself with the possibility of alternative futures. Futures away from GM, away from New Zealand. Janet would never know. In September, war was declared and the trip was abandoned.

Janet had yet to personally make a commitment to medicine and she was not rigorous in studying the subjects she needed to enter medical school. After the declaration of war, she found it even harder to keep focused on study. Many male students in her classes joined the military and not all of them were to return. When Janet returned to Rawene during university holidays, she continued the ritual of making her old nanny, Morton, the first port of call. She was not the only regular visitor. Morton read fortunes from tea leaves and during the war, girls would go to her in the hope of good news about their boyfriends who were on overseas service.

When Janet’s schoolfriend, Jack Cave joined the Royal New Zealand Air Force (RNZAF) early in the war, Janet saw him off at Auckland. He was killed a few months later in a cross-Channel air raid. Then, his brother, Verner Cave was lost in action over Yugoslavia. Another schoolfriend, Nibby Boyd, whose mother owned the bakery and teashop in Rawene was also killed. Not only were their families lost in
grief, it was a confronting and distressing time for Janet. Yet again, the precariousness of life was brought home to her. And it was not something she could talk discuss with her family. The subject of death was still taboo. Not only was Janet at a loss. The Caves and Boyds could not understand why Dr Smith made no reference to the death of their sons.

In December 1940, when Janet had just turned seventeen, a university friend, whose brother was in the Air Force, invited her to a party in Auckland. Janet suspected that the invitation was prompted by her possession of some of the strictly rationed petrol coupons (compliments of her father), but she was keen to have some fun regardless. At the party, one of the corporals from the nearby RNZAF Base, tall, fair and handsome Peter Irwin, seemed to take a fancy to her and offered to drive her home in his car called Daphne. In notes made later about their meeting, Janet does not describe Peter’s physical appearance. She does however describe Daphne as ‘a magnificent Crossley with pigskin upholstery’. And with all the carefreeness of a teenager, she found it very amusing when he drove Daphne along the main road with the driver’s door open, standing on the running board. Indeed, it was probably his dashing behaviour that led her to invite him home to Rawene for Christmas.

Her university studies, meanwhile, were receiving scant attention. It was a great shock nonetheless when she failed Chemistry in her medical intermediate exam. Winning the Chemistry prize at school had led her to underestimate the amount of study she needed to do. She was able to resit the subject over the university break and passed, but it meant that she had missed out on a quota place at medical school in Dunedin.

It did not mean, however that her father relinquished his ambitions for her. She could return to Rawene to spend 1941 working at the hospital with him, he determined and she could enroll in medical school the following year. She conceded defeat. It was not as if she had an alternative plan. Society’s prescription for women was that they be wives and mothers, not that they consider the possibility of assuming control over their own lives. In retrospect, Janet came to see this ‘gap year’ in a positive light. She was still very young. She had learnt that her father’s friends would not always be able to smooth her path. It was good practical experience and she enjoyed it. She enjoyed working with the nurses, helping the seamstress and looking after the operating theatre. And she came to develop a great respect for her father’s
work as a surgeon. Later, she was to say that he was the quickest, most adept and gentle surgeon, and that she only ever met one other surgeon who was as competent.

Wartime life had a heightened emotional atmosphere. Not only had some of her schoolfriends from Rawene already been killed in action, other male friends were enlisting or being conscripted. There was an atmosphere of *carpe diem*. In early January, Peter was posted to Suva. They had little time to get to know each other before he left. But he became her ‘boyfriend overseas’ and they corresponded for two years. She was later to tell a friend that it was ‘the lure of the uniform’. Other hospital staff members had ‘boyfriends overseas’ too. They socialized together, often at functions held to raise money for the Patriotic Fund. Janet experienced her first hangover after someone laced her drinks with gin. She lay on a bed at a friend’s house while the apples in the School Dental Services poster on the wall spun around her head.

In 1942, Janet was finally accepted into medical school in Dunedin. Up until 1968 when a medical school would open at the University of Auckland, the only place where it was possible to study medicine in New Zealand was at the University of Otago. Having completed her medical preliminary studies, she was able to go straight into second year. Student residential colleges in Dunedin were not an option given her previous experience but, fortunately, the university provided a list of people offering board to students in their home. Janet wrote to a Mrs Margot Wood she selected from the list and was accepted as a boarder.

The trip from Rawene to Dunedin was an epic one. The closest train left from Kaikohe, twenty-five miles away, and the train journey south to Auckland took all day. The train trip from Auckland to Wellington consumed all night. Janet had the day to kill in Wellington before boarding the inter-island ferry to Christchurch which again took all night. Then it was another full day on the train to Dunedin where she arrived in a state of total exhaustion. Her host had said she would be at the station along with her two year old daughter, Jocelyn ... as indeed she was, resplendent in a glamorous, dark green coat. The meeting started with the desperate declaration, ‘Hello, how are you, Mrs Wood? I’m Janet and I think I’m going to be sick.’ She bent over the edge of the platform but luckily did not embarrass herself.

Margot was married to, and deeply in love with, Windsor (Win) Wood, a teacher who was on active service as a Major in the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force in North Africa. Both she and Janet waited impatiently for letters from abroad.
Notwithstanding the twelve year difference in their ages, they developed a close friendship and Janet felt comfortable inviting her university friends around. Indeed, she was to live there for two years and enjoyed baby-sitting little Jocelyn.

If Janet was a woman ahead of her time in studying medicine, Margot was a wonderful role model. Her ancestors had settled Auckland in 1842. Her grandfather had been Mayor of Auckland and a member of the National Parliament. Margot had commenced University in Auckland where she studied Journalism, Economics (she was the only girl in the class), English and History. When the family moved to Dunedin, she completed an MA in History with a thesis on the early Anglican history of the area. She became Secretary to the Federation of University Women and campaigned for the rights of women to serve in the police force and on juries. Margot was a woman of many talents. During the 1930s, she acted with both the University Drama Club and the Repertory Society and took part in British Drama League competitions. She also performed in radio plays with the Faculty Players. She danced, ice-skated, played club tennis and badminton and was a pioneer member of the Otago Ski Club. Janet could not have hoped for a more interesting or inspiring host.

While the percentage of female university students rose dramatically in this period, this was not true of the Medical School. One reason was that male medical students could opt out of being conscripted by joining the Otago University Medical Corps. The main reason was that women were still not made welcome as medical students, and this was to take a very long time to change. Even when the Otago University Student Union publication, Critic, appointed medical student Diana Shaw as editor, that did not stop a fellow student writing to the journal suggesting that the shortage of space in the Medical School be resolved by excluding women. ‘There are 21 women in second year of whom about 2 will qualify’ he asserted, recommending they study Home Science instead. In response, the Editor pointed out that of the forty-one women who had recently completed the course, forty were in employment. She might have added that this achievement occurred in a context where not only was there little encouragement for women to succeed, but they were subject to this sort of unfounded discrimination. There were just six women out of about 110 students in Janet’s class. Fortunately they had each other for support in this otherwise alienating environment. Janet became closest to Sheila Wilding, who came from an influential family in Christchurch, and was to become the first woman ever employed as a resident in the Christchurch Hospital.
While Janet did not repeat her mistake of giving insufficient attention to her studies this time, her heart was elsewhere. Even though she hardly knew Peter, he preoccupied her thoughts. She felt committed to him. Indeed, when he came home on leave in 1943, they became engaged, buying a diamond cluster engagement ring in Wellington. She was nineteen.


Chapter 7

Married Life

In 1943, Peter Irwin was stationed in the Royal New Zealand Air Force at Riccarton in Christchurch as a Signals Officer. When he had leave, he would come to Dunedin by train and Margot would lend them her Austin 7 to drive to sunny spots on the peninsula. Janet describes it as a loving time. She was welcomed into the rather small Irwin family very warmly by Peter’s older sister, Marjorie, who was known as Marge. Peter’s mother had died when he was only six, and he had been cared for by his maternal grandmother, a housekeeper and Marge. His father, a dentist, had apparently been loving and indulgent but erratic as a father.

Marge’s husband, Mowbray, was also in the Middle East with the 2nd New Zealand Expeditionary Force (NZEF) and she proudly related to Janet how he had swum all seven miles of the Sea of Galilee in an Army swimming race in which he came third. While he was away, she was living in a flat in Christchurch with their four year old son, Myles. She supplemented her meager Army allotment with sewing, specializing in trousseaus for war brides. Silks, satins and laces covered the flat and, to speed up the pace, Marge had revved up her mother’s old Singer sewing machine with an electric motor. Ironically, because of the war, it was a time of glamour and excitement for young brides. With fiancés overseas, or soon to be so, and the future so uncertain, marriage took on a particularly romantic hue. A talented seamstress in her own right, Janet sewed her own trousseau while she finished her pre-clinical exams at Medical School.

On 24 January 1944, Janet and Peter were married at the home of Helen and Douglas Robb in Remuera, Auckland. Janet was only twenty, Peter nine years older. Janet felt it would be hypocritical to get married in a church as she was not religious. Peter had been bought up in the Protestant faith and he had attended Christ College in Christchurch run by the Anglican Church. In a compromise, the wedding was presided over by the Presbyterian Minister Reverend Pryor, who was happy to conduct the service in a private home given that the private home belonged to someone as respectable as Douglas Robb. For her part, Janet was happy to say the words of the traditional wedding service so long as the promise to obey was deleted.
Sadly for Janet, her father refused to come to the wedding. It wasn’t that he particularly disliked or disapproved of Peter. It was the marriage itself he didn’t approve of, as he was afraid that Janet would drop out of medical school. Lucy, however, caught the train down to Auckland a couple of days before the wedding and she and Janet stayed at a nearby hotel. It was a small wedding. Being wartime, you needed a permit to travel but that did not stop Janet’s old Rawene schoolfriends, Shiela and Pringle Wilson, from attending. Nor Mrs Ross, wife of the Headmaster of Rawene School, nor Morton, her old nanny. Ray Wilson, a fellow medical student always known as Willy, was there. Rex Fairburn the writer came and, indeed, Janet would have been sorely disappointed had he not been there. A couple of Peter’s ‘aunts’ also attended, one who was related and the other a friend of the family.

Douglas Robb ‘gave Janet away’ and the presence of Reverend Pryor did not deter him from making irreverent jokes. The Robb children, Jenny and John, were sent outside, both for the service and for the party afterwards, much to their disgust. Janet wore a stylish and fashionable two piece outfit in turquoise blue silk crepe, a leghorn hat and navy blue court shoes. Her bouquet of ‘shot silk’ roses had been made by Helen Robb’s sister who was a florist. Douglas’ friend, Leo Whyte, an aviation photographer, took photos. For their wedding night, Janet and Peter travelled by train to Hamilton where they were embarrassed to find their wedding photo in the Herald the next day.

From Hamilton, they travelled south to the picturesque waterfront town of Picton in the Marlborough Sounds where they stayed for a week at the popular guesthouse The Portage, which is now a Resort Hotel. Peter, who was not used to country life, was startled by an aggressive cow who did not want them to come close to her calf. Janet took delight in later regaling their friends with the story of how her new husband abandoned his bride to the fury of the beast. The final night of their honeymoon was spent in Nelson where their champagne cork broke the light globe in the Hotel Nelson dining room as they celebrated with Alan Hall, an old friend of Peter’s, and his wife, Amy. As the night wore on and the champagne took effect, Alan and Peter relived their various exploits as young men growing up in Christchurch before the war.

After the honeymoon, Peter had to return to Riccarton and, her father’s fears notwithstanding, Janet resumed her Medical School studies. She moved from Margot’s into share accommodation with fellow students Sheila Wilding, Diana Shaw
and Ann Mawson at Maori Hill. This was because Margot’s sister Nancy had moved in with Margo after her husband, Ned, joined the 2nd NZEF.

In April, Margot received dreadful news. Her husband had died of acute leukaemia, not long after his brother Oliver was killed at Alamein. In a long walk with Janet, Margot confided that she found the grief unbearable. Janet became fearful for her own situation. She and Peter met when they could, never knowing when they parted if they would see each other again.

In the middle of 1944, Janet developed painful red lumps on her legs, started losing a lot of weight and developed a wet cough. She tested positive for tuberculosis and went home to Rawene to recover. Despite this setback, she still managed to pass her fourth year exams, and gradually recovered her health. In 1945, she boarded in Dunedin with a fellow student, Evelyn Rawson, and her family. Evelyn had a sense of urgency about her and did not like to waste a moment. It was as if she had a premonition that she was to die (in a riding accident) the following year. Janet was to name her first daughter Jane Evelyn in honour of her friend.

In the meantime, Peter had been stationed on Norfolk Island before being transferred to Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands. When he returned on leave, they dispensed with contraception and were both delighted when Janet became pregnant. Mrs Rawson sewed and knitted tiny garments for the forthcoming arrival and, when Janet developed mumps during her pregnancy, fussed over her like a mother. Janet managed to finish the academic year on a high note, obtaining the highest marks in Medical Jurisprudence. When the Dean of the Medical School, however, suggested she take a year off from her studies in light of her recent health problems, Janet was willing to take his advice. She and Peter settled into a house on the Hobsonville base, Auckland, where Peter had been transferred and Janet made friends with other Air Force wives. It was a happy time.

A couple of weeks before the birth, Janet went home to Rawene to live. In this, she joined those expectant mothers who came from all over New Zealand in pursuit of painless childbirth. William Peter Myles Irwin was born on 9 April 1946. In common with the other women, Janet was allowed out of bed after two days. Studying Obstetrics at Medical School in Dunedin, she had been taught that women should not be allowed out of bed for two weeks, yet the Rawene practice, heretical at the time, was to become the norm. Bill was a baby who entranced the family and
completely won over Janet’s father. Peter was not able to travel to Rawene to see his son until a couple of days after the birth, but he was a delighted father.

Ella Leslie, who had been like an aunt to Janet when she was in high school at Whangerei, brought the first golden delicious apple from her tree up to the hospital and Janet declared it true to its name. The only sad note was that Morton had died a few weeks earlier and Janet could not share the joy of Bill’s birth with her. Indeed, her hospital window overlooked the cemetery where the grave had been freshly dug, and Janet wept for the woman with the white, curly hair who had always been there for her.

On their return to Hobsonville, Janet took full responsibility for looking after Bill as well as household chores as, like most men of his time, Peter was not a hands-on dad. Baby Bill flourished. When he was a couple of months old, GM came to visit and Janet ‘nearly burst with pride.’ She was pregnant again, and another bonny baby, Jane Evelyn, was born on 18 March 1947, eleven months after Bill. As a baby, Jane contracted a skin infection which caused her to cry a great deal. Although Janet was a reasonably confident mother, she was fully occupied with caring for two babies. When Jane was only fifteen months old, Janet found she was pregnant once more. Although she was pleased to be pregnant, she was anxious about how she would cope. When Peter was asked to go to Korea with a RNZAF detachment, Janet persuaded him not to go. She felt that she couldn’t manage on her own and that he had been away long enough. As he had been offered only a four-year term after the war instead of a permanent position, Peter decided to resign and took a job as Radio Inspector in the Department of Civil Aviation in Wellington.

Janet went home to Rawene with Bill and Jane while Peter searched for a house for the family. On a sunny day when the tide was out, he found one right on the beach with an impressive-looking sea wall in Tainui St, Raumati, on the Kapiti Coast, north of Wellington. It was affordable and they had a ‘rehab loan’ which cost them very little by way of interest. They were delighted with their first real home. It reminded Janet of her parents’ holiday home in Pakanae.

But a few months later, before they had even properly settled in, gale force winds hit the area and the barrier wall could not cope with the resultant high seas. It collapsed. They couldn’t believe it had happened. The wall had looked so secure. The waves did not reach their house but there was a risk that next time it might. Their lovely beach position was now a source of anxiety. They liked the area and it was not
too far for Peter to travel to his job in Wellington. But they questioned whether they would be able to find a property which they could afford beyond the incursions of the tides. They had, after all, only just paid the costs of the move south.

GM came to their assistance by buying them a two and a half acre block in Rimu Road, on the fringes of Raumati. No doubt, Peter would have had an ambivalent attitude to this largesse. While Janet was in Rawene giving birth to red-headed Sally (Elizabeth Sara) on the last day of the year, 31 December 1948, Peter engaged a contractor and helped him move their house from the beachfront to Rimu Road, an endeavour which Janet described as ‘a much more difficult labour than mine.’ She was now the mother of three children under three years old. Medical School seemed to belong to a different world.

Rimu Road was in a rural area but the forest had been cleared, leaving what was effectively a peat swamp. Peter planted the property with trees and constructed a vegetable garden. Their property had all the advantages of bush living and yet the beach was only a mile away. They were also not far from the school and about a mile from a strip of shops with a general store, milk bar, barber and garage. Their neighbours in Rimu Road, on a similar acreage block, were Alan and Kay Collins who ran the general store. The Collins children were older than the Irwin children but they were still in and out of each other’s houses, climbing through the hole in the hedge which separated them. Jim Collins talked to Peter about the possibility of becoming a pilot after finishing school. Little did they know that not only would he become a pilot, but that his name would become well known to New Zealanders through the tragic circumstances of the Erebus plane crash in Antarctica. Meantime, Peter had left the Civil Aviation Department to work as a private contractor servicing radio equipment for the Calibration Flight and National Airways, a job which involved travel around New Zealand and the Pacific Islands.

Ann Warden (née Collins) remembers living next door to Janet as a young woman thirteen years younger. She said that the Irwins had the local community in awe. They seemed so much more sophisticated. While young Sally Irwin called Mrs Collins Auntie Kay, Ann had great difficulty in calling Janet anything other than Mrs Irwin, even when she was an adult herself. She was particularly impressed by the fact that Janet could cook French food, and that she held ‘dinner parties,’ which were unheard of in the area.
Many of their friends at this time were Air Force friends of Peter’s. One of them, Jimmy Young, a flight engineer with a great sense of humour, was particularly popular with the Irwin children. He would play tricks on them and have them in fits of laughter with colourful and evocative expressions like ‘smells like a gorilla’s armpit’. The Irwins, the Youngs and others in their social circle would have laidback dinners at each other’s houses at night. There was always a bottle of gin or brandy in the cupboard and dancing was popular. Vinyl Long Play records were the vogue and the favourite was Tony Martin at the Copacabana, particularly singing Begin the Beguine. One party famously started at 11am with drinks before lunch and finished at 4am the next morning.

It was after Sally’s birth that GM and Lucy made a momentous decision. They would leave Rawene after thirty-five years to be closer to Janet and their grandchildren. They bought a house in Waikanae, north of Raumati Beach, and all travelled together down to the Kapiti Coast three months after Sally was born. With them came Matron Beddgood from Rawene Hospital who had worked with GM for many years and proved indispensable. He organized accommodation for her nearby and set up private practice from his home with her assistance. This new venture was a great success, and enabled him to pay for extensions to the Irwin home. He became well known this time for his unorthodox approach to asthma. He believed that it was over-diagnosed and over-medicating. And again he attracted creative people to his house. One of his patients was Peter McIntyre, the official war artist who was to write the popular book The Painted Years. Rex Fairburn continued to be the family’s favourite visitor, and overseas visitors prominent in the arts might well find themselves at Waikenae. Jane recalls a visit from Dame Sybil Thorndike and Sir Lewis Casson when they were on tour, performing at theatres across New Zealand.

The children loved having Granny and Grandpa nearby and particularly liked going to Waikanae individually where, Janet laughingly exclaimed, they were ‘spoiled outrageously.’ Indeed GM was very generous to the young family, helping them to buy a new car, some more land and ponies for the children. Jane also recalls him buying a Dishlex combination (clothes) washing machine and dishwasher with a circular basket arrangement for the dishes which replaced the agitator, and Janet responding, ‘God bless the washer and all who sail in her.’ It was hard for Peter to accept this help and although he did so, there was an underlying resentment which he
never got over. He and GM never quarreled but there was no real affection between them.

The ponies were a great success and pony camps and gymkhanas became the order of the day, with Granny and Grandpa enlisted as groupies. Jane was the star, riding her much-loved chestnut, Jubilee, whom she had fed, groomed and trained from a thin and miserable animal to a multiple award-winning ‘Best Pony’ at local shows. Bill had a chestnut called Sunshine and young Sally a small, round pony called Bubbles. GM claimed naming rights for them all. He was spot on with Bubbles who liked to evaporate into thin air and was replaced by the quiet and gentle dappled grey, Dusky. Even Dusky could, however, wrench the reins from small hands when he thrust his head down to eat. ‘You will have to let him know who’s boss’, Janet told her youngest, who promptly announced to her suitably unimpressed pony ‘Dusky, I’m the boss’.³

With ‘tall’ genes on both sides of the family, the children looked striking on their mounts and ponies soon became horses. Jane’s first horse was Pandora, a beautiful part Arab mare who turned out to be pregnant and gave birth to a foal, Pepper, under the pepper tree in their front garden one night while she and her mother looked on in awe. GM continued to buy horses and at one stage there were ten of them and he had to buy more land to accommodate them. It was possible to ride a distance of around a hundred miles from their home. Sometimes they would ride along the beach, searching for dolphins. Bill recalls riding with friends up into the hills, through the pine plantation, raiding orchards as they went and sometimes camping out.⁴ Like their mother had been, they too were ‘free range’ children.

Another greatly beloved family member, ‘the best dog in the world,’ was Daniel, a black and tan Australian terrier. Peter had not been keen on the idea of a dog, and in the car on the way home from the breeder was declaring to the children that Daniel was their responsibility and not his, when Daniel put his chin on his knee and looked pleadingly up at him. From that time, he was Peter’s faithful companion whether it be on trips to the airport to service aircraft or into the bush to hunt rabbits. Peter also loved to fish and once, when he was travelling out to Kapiti Island in a boat, Daniel set out to swim after him. Fortunately, he turned back in time.

When the children were in kindergarten, Janet was active on the kindergarten committee; when they started at Paraparaumu School, she was on the school committee. She also became involved in her first women’s group, the Raumati
Community Club, a group of women who supported each other and went on to form enduring friendships. She had some help at home from a cockney woman called Daisy O’Connor who was quite a character. Her favourite saying was ‘Two ‘eads are better than one, even if it is only fish ‘eads’. Daisy also cleaned GM’s surgery and he paid her wages at both places, another sore point with Peter.

When Sally started school in 1954, Heather Young, Jimmy’s wife, suggested to Janet that she go into business with her. Janet had never considered the possibility of setting up a business or indeed taking up any form of paid employment. She had been preoccupied with her role as wife and mother. Occasionally, her thoughts turned to medical school, but she dismissed them. Dunedin was a long way away. The children were still young. She still wouldn’t be welcomed there as a woman. It hadn’t been her idea in the first instance.

Heather, who had previously worked in a shoe shop, was keen to establish one at Paraparaumu Beach. She was impressed by Janet’s sense of style and thought she would be particularly good at buying. Both husbands were supportive of this idea and prepared to put their accumulated superannuation (which in those days could be drawn on) into the business. Janet, reluctant at first, was convinced to give it a go. GM was a likely hurdle to overcome, but he finally ceded control over Janet’s life to her. Indeed, he offered his accountant to deal with the financial side, freeing Heather and Janet to focus on buying and selling. Fairway Footwear was to have such fashionable and stylish shoes that people would come up from Wellington to buy them. According to Ann, the local community was amazed at the activities of these two women pioneering the way in small business. Meanwhile, Peter set up a shop next door called Aerosound where he sold records, serviced and sold radios and ran a Fisher & Paykel agency for household and electrical goods. Both businesses were successful.

Notwithstanding her shoe shop commitments, Janet continued to cook and sew for the family and to teach her daughters to do likewise. The girls would groan when she insisted they put down whatever they were doing to observe what she was doing. ‘You will thank me for it one day’ was her response. Jane remembers the first time she prepared the traditional Sunday roast dinner when her mother was delayed at the shop. She had watched her mother lightly flouring the bottom of the baking dish, adding the dripping and placing the potatoes and pumpkin around the roast. She knew it had to be cooked at 350 degrees Farenheit and that the cooking time depended on
the size of the cut of the meat. She knew to add the peas to the saucepan when the carrots were half-cooked, along with sugar, salt and a sprig of mint, and how to make gravy. Indeed, pre-dating *Masterchef* by some sixty years, she knew the importance of ‘plating up’. Her debut was a triumph.

Both Jane and Sally recall how Janet would sew dresses for them into the night, hanging them on the girls’ bedroom door to delight them when they woke. Fortunately, Janet was not only a stylish dresser herself, she made the girls dresses that did not have a homemade look. When Jane was to have her portrait painted by Peter McIntyre, her mother made a light blue denim dress with white rickrack braid for the occasion. Jane, however, insisted on choosing her own outfit, ‘a hideous little candy striped jump suit. I recall Mum saying *you will regret it*. She was quite right. I do’.  

Janet also enjoyed applying her skills with a needle to embroidery and tapestry. Sometimes she thought of medical school and how she might have ended up using these skills in surgery. But those thoughts didn’t seem real. That Janet seemed like a different person.

Chapter 8

Back to the Future

GM continued to practice medicine with the commitment of a young man even as his eye sight failed. He even added consulting rooms to the Irwin house at Raumati. Bill remembers that his grandfather, ever conscious of the importance of diet, would have the same food every day. Breakfast consisted of a grapefruit and porridge followed by bacon and eggs. Lunch was vegetable soup followed by roast mutton or beef. Dinner was a glass of milk and a maltmeal wafer. He only ever drank alcohol at Christmas when he would enjoy a glass of claret. While he clearly loved his grandchildren, they were never mollycoddled. Jane recalls being home from school, feeling sick, when GM marched into her room, promptly announced ‘You’re just a humbug’ and walked out again.

It was a great shock to everyone when he died of a heart attack on the afternoon of Boxing Day 1958 after seeing patients in the morning. He was seventy-six. Only a week or two before he died, with characteristic resourcefulness, he had taken to driving a bulldozer to access the hills behind Waikanae to tend to an injured bushman. In hindsight, Janet felt they should have realised he was becoming unwell when he gave up his beloved cherrywood pipe. Prior to this, he does not appear to have given any consideration to the potential detrimental effects on his health of smoking a pipe. Perhaps, Janet thought, he didn’t want to know. Of course, the health problems caused by smoking were yet to be established.

GM had seemed almost invincible. It took his family and friends some time to adjust to the fact that he was really gone. Life suddenly seemed more routine, more pedestrian. Lucy went to live with Janet and her family. The house was large enough for that to be comfortable, and Peter was tolerant and kind to Lucy. There was, however, the question of blending the respective animal families. Lucy had a champagne coloured standard poodle called Peggy (after Boswell’s wife) who had a reputation as a hooligan. One day she had brought home a leg of lamb, freshly cooked from some unfortunate person’s kitchen, and had to be given away. Lucy did, however, bring her other dogs, Langton and Boclark, with her but they never gained the popularity Daniel had attracted. The menagerie now consisted of three dogs, two

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cats (Sandy and Magpie), Johnny the parrot and some ten horses. Bill made it clear that Lucy’s dogs were to know their place. ‘If Langton chases Sandy, he’ll get a slug [from Bill’s air rifle] up his chuff.’ Unaware of what a ‘chuff’ was, Sally happily recounted this episode to her piano teacher, wife of the headmaster, much to her later embarrassment.²

Over the next couple of years, Janet and Peter’s marriage started to disintegrate. Looking back on her marriage, Janet couldn’t help but wonder whether, unconsciously, she had married Peter to escape her father’s dominance and the burden of his expectations, and she no longer needed him in that role. A more obvious and ongoing problem was that, to Janet, Peter didn’t show sufficient interest in the children and their activities. With three children born so closely together, she had been necessarily and quite happily preoccupied by them. Had she focused on them to the detriment of her relationship with Peter, she questioned herself. But he was not easy to get through to—she found him quite self-absorbed. When he arrived home from work, and she asked about his day, he would never think to enquire about her or the children in response. Bill describes his father as ‘quite sentimental’ but this did not translate into real emotional engagement with his family.

Janet puzzled why Peter didn’t have the sort of attachment to the children which she, or indeed his sister Marjorie, did. She suspected it had to do with the early loss of his mother and the unreliability of his own father. Peter told Janet he had no memory of his mother. The only thing he recalled was the traumatic experience of seeing her dead body in its coffin. He talked a lot about his father, Bill, a keen sportsman, and his various exploits, including illegally tapping into the neighbour’s artesian well in the middle of the night to obtain water for his garden. Perhaps, Janet thought, Peter was uncomfortable being a father because his own role model had more the unreal quality of a hero/villain.

The marriage had the further problem that the couple did not have similar interests outside the family. Unlike Janet, Peter was apolitical. He had no interest in discussing world affairs or social issues. Although he was popular and had lots of friends, his world was the world of things, and he was quite creative and innovative in that regard. In fact, he built a television set in 1957 before there was a television transmitting station in New Zealand.

Although young Bill inherited his personality from Janet, he shared an interest in machines with his father.³ Like many boys his age, he was fascinated by aeroplanes
and cars and recalls the excitement of his first flight in a *de Havilland Dominie*, a wooden (of all things) airliner. Riding horses could no longer compare to riding motor bikes. He saved all his earnings in the hope of one day buying one. When he turned 14, and had achieved very good results at school, his parents rewarded him with the present of his dreams. It was the beginning of a lifelong obsession with collecting and riding motor bikes. Bill also started working for his father in his business and, after university, was to establish his own successful computer business. Despite these shared interests and activities, Peter was ‘very hard’ on his teenage son and would refer to him as ‘that stupid boy’.

In retrospect, Bill thinks that his father was self-centred and saw his son as a rival. Fortunately, Bill never lost a sense of being loved by his father and in later years they were to get on well together.

Janet felt that Peter was jealous of all the children and a strict, unfair and often unpredictable father. The relationship between them continued to deteriorate, although not publicly. It was not a time when people got divorced, no matter what distance had developed between them. When Janet found out that Peter was having an affair with one of the women in their social circle, however, she knew that she could no longer commit to him as her husband. Bill had a sense at the time that his father was involved with another woman, but there was not a great deal of arguing between his parents as Janet hated conflict and Peter would ‘blow his stack’ when challenged.

Janet went on to, herself, have an affair with another man. Was this to bolster her resolve about ending the marriage? I asked. Janet said that she felt that it was only fair that she mentioned her own infidelity but she did not want to discuss it further as she was both distressed by her actions and concerned to ensure the privacy of the other party. Neither relationship lasted, but the marriage was finished. Peter moved to Auckland at the end of 1960. Bill was fourteen, Jane thirteen and Sally eleven.

Janet claimed that Peter left ‘with hardly a backward glance for the children’. Unlike Bill, Sally and Jane were never to establish relationships with their father as adults. To them, he had been a distant and inadequate father and they saw no point in trying to maintain contact. Bill feels that his mother’s attitudes unfairly influenced them in this regard. It was the only criticism he had to make of her as a mother. As he saw it, Janet failed to sufficiently consider her daughters’ needs at this time, leaving them with a jaundiced view of men in general and their father in particular. Both Jane and Sally reject this assessment. Marge was understanding about the split up,
continuing to treat Janet as a sister and to love and support Bill, Jane and Sally. Janet was pleased that neither she nor Peter lost any mutual friends when they separated. Peter was not to return to Raumati, but he did visit them in Dunedin for Christmas 1962. There, they all got on quite well with the assistance of Daniel the dog, who was delighted to see Peter. In the years to come, Peter was to meet another woman and remarry, and Janet and the children were to establish a close relationship with Pat, his second wife.

In the meantime, Lucy’s health had started to deteriorate, leaving her unable to care for herself. Janet felt guilty about arranging for her to go into a nursing home but she was unable to provide the level of support her mother needed. Lucy died of a massive stroke in May 1961. She was aged seventy-eight. Looking back on her life, Janet proclaimed that the night of her mother’s death was the loneliest time she had ever experienced.

The end of an era was marked by the public unveiling of the memorials to both GM and Lucy at the front of Rawene Hospital. Douglas Robb, by now Chancellor of Auckland University, did the honours and many old friends and hospital staff were in attendance. Ella Leslie was ill in hospital at this time and Janet took the children to visit her. She was delighted to see them all but died soon after. It was hard for Janet and her children not to be overwhelmed by loss at this point. Janet knew she would have to make important decisions about their future, but for the moment, she was focused on getting through the day.

It was Margot Ross from Dunedin who was instrumental in determining Janet’s future direction. They had remained in touch over the years. Margot had become one of the first women to teach in the History Department of the University of Otago, tutoring returned servicemen. She was also a regular radio broadcaster, commenting on the arts, history and politics, reviewing books and introducing her listeners to a wide range of accomplished New Zealand women, including the artist Frances Hodgkins and the children’s writer Edith Howes. She also wrote for the Otago Daily Times. Over time, she had come to terms with the loss of Win and remarried. Her new husband, Angus Ross, had been a fellow student in her History Honours class, and was now Professor of History at Otago University. Margot and Angus were planning sabbatical leave at Cambridge University in 1962 and their house in Dunedin would be vacant. Why, she wrote, didn’t Janet stay in their house for a year and finish her medical studies?
Janet checked with the university and confirmed that they would take her back if she did a ‘catch-up’ year before enrolling in final year. So the house at Raumati Beach was sold, and Janet’s share in *Fairway Footwear* was bought by her business partner. When those funds were added to the money from her parents’ estate and a long forgotten legacy from her grandmother, there was enough to enable Janet to return to medical school.

At the age of sixteen, Bill was up for a taste of city life. He was not sorry to leave Raumati, figuring that Dunedin would be a much more interesting place to live. He had already tried life outside of the Kapiti Coast. By choice, he had spent time boarding at Hadlow School in Masterton in 1956 and then at Scots College in Wellington in 1958. Jane, on the other hand, loved the rural physicality of her life in Raumati and her beloved horses. And, while she hated school, feeling that she was not academically clever and self-conscious about being the tallest girl there, she did not want to leave her friends. Perhaps worst of all for Jane, she felt that Janet did not seem to understand how distraught she was when her horse Jubilee was sold. She wanted her mother to be more supportive of her needs. With hindsight, Jane wondered whether her mother had difficulty acknowledging pain and grief as a result of the silence which had accompanied Jock’s death. Sally had just completed her final year at Raumati School. It would be a double transition for her, and it was eased by sending her to stay with her beloved Auntie Marge in Christchurch while the move took place.

Janet would be spending long and sometimes unpredictable hours studying at the university and doing clinical training at the hospital. Bill was enrolled as a day student for his final year of high school at Kaikorai Valley High School, a co-educational day school near the Ross house in Roslyn. Needless to say, this was an option he very much favoured. When Janet was confined to the hospital for two weeks as house surgeon in her fifth year, Bill acquired considerable hospitality expertise without leaving the house. Jane and Sally, on the other hand, were enrolled as boarders at the Anglican college, S.Hilda’s which had been started by nuns in 1896. Jane describes the school as high church Anglican and the headmistress as very religious and proselytizing. Neither girl enjoyed boarding. They couldn’t wait to get home as quickly as possible on Sunday, leave day. The only way this could be achieved was by attending Holy Communion first, but this would involve being confirmed, and being confirmed would involve being christened. The Padre at the Air
Force had wanted to christen the children when they were born but Janet had refused, saying that they could make up their own minds about religion. She had not anticipated such a prompt decision on the issue. Demonstrating their grandfather’s pragmatism, the girls insisted on being christened and confirmed. Janet confided in the Anglican Dean who was a sociable man and a bit of a character. ‘Oh,’ he said, ‘we don’t mind. We take anybody.’ So, attired in their demure all white finery, the girls presented at the Cathedral and Margot’s mother, known to them all as Granny Garrett, came along as witness. Bill, unimpressed, refused to have anything to do with the occasion.

The Medical School had changed in the seventeen years since Janet had last attended, as, of course, had she. The Dean, Professor Edward Sayers, had remodeled the course to place a greater focus on clinical training in the wards in fourth and fifth years. Professor Wallace Ironside had been appointed to head up a new Department of Psychological Medicine. Ironside was a dynamic figure who was to pioneer the teaching of psychiatry not only in New Zealand but also later in Australia. Born in China, where his father was a business executive, he had done his training in Scotland where he had acquired an interest in the developmental and dimensional issues of psychopathology. Ironside stressed to his students how important it was for doctors to understand their patients as integrated human beings with biological, psychological and social needs. This was familiar territory for Janet. Her father had been similarly inclined in his views. Ironside ‘initiated a teaching program which had medical students considering psychosocial issues from their first day and following the psychosocial health of families over time.’ His own research was focused on emotionally deprived children. The field of psychological medicine was an attractive one for Janet and she was very grateful to have Ironside as her mentor. They were to become friends and, later, when Ironside moved to Monash University, Janet’s daughter Jane was to spend time living with him and his family.

Some of her fellow medical students were ‘stuffed shirts’; others were good-natured and good-humoured. Janet got on particularly well with Wilson Wylie who had been a Sergeant in the Army before deciding to study medicine and was at least eight years older than Janet. They were the seniors in the class and became great friends. Some students would complete their clinical training in their final year away from Dunedin in Christchurch or Wellington and then return south for their finals and the inevitable parties to celebrate their graduation. Wilson stayed with Janet for a time.
and she can remember him singing in the shower, ‘Violate me in the violet season in the vilest way that you can.’ He ended up in Broken Hill in Australia which Janet considered totally appropriate as the outback town ‘was full of characters like him’.

When the Rosses returned from Cambridge, Janet bought a smallish house nearby in Roslyn which she loved because of its view of the harbour. In 1965, she undertook a year’s residency as a surgeon at Dunedin Public Hospital. Her skills as a seamstress proved invaluable when she had to sew up a chef’s face after he had been hit by a broken bottle in a brawl. (Whether that brawl took place in a Gordon Ramsay hothouse-style kitchen or on the floor of a restaurant or bar is unclear.) The chef was to contact Janet once his face had healed, delighted at the lack of scarring. Janet similarly impressed the nursing staff. Annie Warden tells of meeting some nurses from Dunedin Public Hospital who proclaimed her the best doctor they had ever worked with.

Although clearly skilled as a surgeon like her father, Janet was more inclined towards working in the area of psychological medicine. With encouragement from Margot, she considered applying for the Winifred Gimblett Scholarship which had been established, according to its terms, ‘to enable a graduate to pursue investigation in the field of Abnormal Psychology, with reference to the behaviour of adults or that of children and adolescents, the latter including the effects of mental hindrances or disabilities upon their scholastic progress.’ But, if successful, there was the question of where to carry out this research. The one clear contender was Scotland. Wallace Ironside had developed his holistic approach to medicine during his training in that country as, of course, had her own father. But there were the children to be considered.

In 1963, following the family tradition, Bill had enrolled in the Medical Intermediate course at Otago University. However his commitment to becoming a doctor wavered when his then girlfriend enrolled at Canterbury University in Christchurch where medicine was not offered. He moved there and enrolled in Engineering in 1965 but later switched to Arts, majoring in Philosophy and Psychology. Those childhood years sitting on his grandfather’s knee having the philosopher Whitehead quoted to him had clearly left their imprint. He too was fascinated by Whitehead, and the empiricists Locke and Hume, and was content to continue happily leading his own life in Christchurch.
Jane had left S.Hilda’s in 1963. ‘I had been told from a very young age that I would be a nurse,’ she said and she pursued that path. She enjoyed looking after patients but found the regime punishing and some of the sisters ‘downright bullies.’ When she was given responsibility for the cancer ward and had to lay out dead people at the age of seventeen, she understandably became quite depressed and could not wait to leave nursing. As for Sally, in 1965 she was completing her final year of high school at S.Hilda’s as a day girl. She had no interest in resuming life as a boarder. But she was happy to stay with her mother’s friends Roy and Liz Muir in Dunedin should her mother go to Scotland.

Janet put in an application for the scholarship signaling her intention to carry out research at the University of Edinburgh Royal Hospital for Sick Children for a period of two years. She hoped her daughters might join her there at some point. When she was successful, she was delighted. Firstly, there was the acknowledgement of her capabilities and the opportunity to undertake a program of meaningful research. Secondly, she would be able to visit the places where her parents had lived and spend time with her Scottish relatives. Thirdly, she would be able to pursue a further line of enquiry about her family, about a family secret which she had only become privy to as an adult.

3. WP Irwin 2010, pers. comm., Brisbane and Nelson.
Chapter 9

A Family Secret

Growing up, Janet knew very little about her family background and, like most children, had scant interest in it. Only when she was eighteen, and had just completed her second year university exams, did she become aware of a family secret which had multiple ramifications. GM had driven down from Rawene to collect her. In the street in Auckland, he ran into an old patient from Perth, Scotland. When Janet got into the car, without any preliminaries, he announced that there was something which he needed to tell her. Clearly, meeting up with someone who knew the story had left him concerned that Janet would find out this information through other sources.

He had been married before, he said. Back in Scotland. To a woman called Barbara Grieve. He had four other children. Not only a family secret but a secret family. Janet was astounded. So much for being an only child. ‘What are their names?’ she asked. ‘Marshall, William, Anna and Sandy’ he replied. When he had left Scotland, they had stayed with their mother. He had agreed, he told Janet, never to get in touch with them but he had thought of them every day since he had left. There was silence in the car when he had finished. Neither of them knew what to say next and they quickly moved on to discuss Janet’s results and life at the hospital.

By this time, Janet had met Peter and was engrossed in her own life. She was not greatly interested in the past in general, or that of her family in particular, and did not give the matter much thought. The issue of the secret family did not arise again until sometime after GM and Lucy had moved to Waikanae. One day, after seeing patients at the Irwin house, GM strode into the kitchen and declared ‘I have momentous news. Barbara is dead’. Janet looked at him blankly. He reminded her of their conversation in the car sixteen years before. He was elated. After all these years, he was now free to contact his other children.

The full story started to emerge. GM was not divorced nor even separated from Barbara when he and Lucy met and established a relationship. It was an affair which not only brought his marriage to an end but led to him undertaking to set up a trust fund for his children and not to have further contact with them. It was also a relationship which caused a rift between GM and his family of origin. To the McCall Smith family, Lucy was a red-headed Jezebel, which was ironic as it was a
relationship between intellectual equals and to Janet, ‘anyone less like a Jezebel would be hard to find.’

The relationship also caused a rift between Lucy and her family. ‘My mother’s family saw him as a vile seducer.’ When they were leaving London, Lucy’s brother, Tom, ran up and down the quay trying to persuade her not to leave. Her brother, Fraser, had a more measured response. On 26 July 1914, he wrote to his mother, Jane Scott, in the following terms from Sierra Leone where he was stationed in the army:

My dear mother
Your letter was a shock to me. I had always thought that you were taking too obvious a view of what I thought was probably a close friendship, and I was afraid that, with Lucy in a nervous condition, opposition and distrust might have the effect of turning a simple friendship into a clandestine love affair. But evidently you were right in fearing the worst and it must be of some relief to you to feel that you did all you could to stop it. I feel awfully sad about it. I always hoped that Lucy would fall in love with a decent fellow and marry him. I knew that if she did, her affection would be no half hearted thing; and now she has given herself to this man. I would feel easier about it in spite of its being wrong if I had any reliance in his character, but this bad affair shows him to be lacking in most of the qualities that go to make a man.

But even though he has shown his lack of character in this, he must also have been deeply in love with Lucy to be ready to go off with her and start life afresh in a new country, and that is the one hope in the whole sorry business. It would be too awfully useless if they two, who have made so many others unhappy by their conduct, should not get any happiness out of it themselves. It is done now and right or wrong I hope it will bring happiness to Lucy. She has never been really happy for years, through faults of her own temperament perhaps, but that does not alter the fact. It is done now and it is precious little use reviling Smith and blaming Lucy with wickedness and selfishness. There will be plenty of people outside her own family to do that if they hear of it as I suppose they must.

I shall write to her and tell her I love her as much as ever and try to keep up a correspondence with her. She will have many a black day I fear and may be helped by the thought that her own family have not thrown her over. I can’t say my dear Mother how much I feel for you. It must have been awful for you seeing her go off and being powerless to prevent her.

I hope your health will recover from the shock. What a good thing it was that Tom managed to persuade Lucy to leave her money under trust. He must have had an awfully trying time of it.

[There follows some discussion of other matters.]

I keep thinking of poor Lucy. What an awful time she must have had before she gave in to going to N.Z.

With love and all my sympathy
From your affectionate son
Fraser Scott

When Janet was to read this letter, she found it incredibly touching. She was impressed with the way Fraser was able to, on the one hand, acknowledge and sympathise with his mother’s position while, on the other, stress the importance of
continuing to love and support her own daughter. Jane Fraser was, however, unable to see beyond her own grief and was not to have any further contact with Lucy. Interestingly, she kept Fraser’s letter.

Not only did the relationship between Lucy and GM have these ramifications within the personal sphere, it had potential ramifications within the public sphere as well. Lucy had been GM’s patient and their relationship was in breach of the ethics of the medical profession. If it were made public, GM was likely to be struck off the roll of medical practitioners in the UK. No doubt to avoid this, he relinquished his share of a general practice in Perth, Scotland, and sought work outside the UK. Janet was later to wonder why her parents chose New Zealand: whether it was because it resembled Scotland in the natural beauty of its landscape, or its considerable Scottish heritage, or, merely, its distance from the UK. There had been two jobs advertised in New Zealand, the other in Central Otago with its vast plains, the so-called desert of New Zealand. She was pleased they had chosen Rawene.

Moving to New Zealand did not bring to an end the challenges to her parents’ relationship, Janet discovered. In the early 1920s, an Auckland newspaper published a lengthy report of the divorce action initiated in Britain by Barbara. By this stage, the Hokianga Hospital Board had tired of being ‘constantly instructed, nagged at and bullied by Dr Smith’ and seized the opportunity this information afforded them and gave him three months notice. Board members expressed concern at the fact that when GM and Lucy arrived in the Hokianga they were not married. GM and Lucy had, in fact, married as soon as they were free to do so. GM did not respond to the dismissal notice.

When the position of Medical Superintendent was advertised, Donald Davie, a farmer and cousin of Allen Giles, organized well-attended protest meetings at all the small settlements on both sides of the harbour. ‘This is none of our business. We’ve got the best doctor we’re ever likely to have. Forget it.’ At one meeting, he called the crowd to order by taking off his boot and banging it on the table, shouting ‘Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.’ Davie’s attitude reflected that of most of the community. The Director-General of Health called for an explanation of what GM had done to warrant his dismissal. The Board responded that when he was wanted at the hospital he was on his farm twelve miles away, that his marital affairs were irregular and that his attitude to the Board was overbearing. The Northern News of 28 May 1921 reported that fifty ratepayers presented a petition signed by 700 residents
seeking reasons from the Board. When the petition was refused, another protest meeting was held which demanded the resignation of the Board.

The end result was a stalemate. Applicants for the position were advised that the position was filled and life continued as before. GM’s stature in the community actually increased as a result of the incident and he became more insistent about public involvement in community issues: ‘Ye must do it! It may well mean ye’ll get the sack for it, but d’ye know I’ve been sacked many a time. Ye can’t take any notice of that!’ Interestingly, though, he had not challenged his own dismissal. Nor had he challenged Barbara’s ultimatum that he not have contact with his children.

Isobel Marshall, his eldest child, got in touch with him when her mother died. The children, like their father, had not challenged their mother’s wishes while she was alive, even though Barbara had remarried in about 1920 to Bertie Nevin-Spence. GM’s daughter Marshall, as she was known, had not seen or had contact with her father for forty-two years. Marshall had married late in life but sadly Gordon, her husband, had died of throat cancer. She was now living in the Shetland Islands with Bertie, her stepfather, to whom she was devoted. She quickly organized to visit them all in New Zealand. GM was overjoyed to see his long-lost daughter. He tried to make up for the past by indulging her. On discovering that fly fishing was a favoured hobby, he bought her a huge caravan so that she could head off to fish at Lake Taupo. Janet became very fond of Marshall too, but had her nose slightly out of joint to be displaced as the centre of GM’s world. Sadly, it was not long after Marshall returned home that her father died, and he was never to meet up with any of his other children.

Marshall and Janet kept in regular contact after that. Indeed, Marshall kept in touch with Bill, Jane and Sally as well. Not having children of her own, she made a great fuss of all her nieces and nephews and was greatly loved by them all. When Janet arrived in the UK to take up her scholarship in 1965, she immediately made contact with Marshall who, with great delight, made arrangements for her to meet her other siblings and their families. Marshall was the honorary ‘head of the family’. One nephew of Janet’s claimed, laughingly, ‘She conducts the whole bloody orchestra’. When Jane and Sally arrived in the UK to join their mother the following year, Marshall was only too happy to repeat the performance. They all enjoyed travelling around England and Scotland meeting new aunts, uncles and cousins, although it was a bit overwhelming at the same time. They had to constantly remind each other who was who and how they were related.
Bill was not there to share the occasion but, when he did get to travel to the UK with his wife, Lorraine (known as Cornish), in 1973, Marshall was once more proud to do the introductions all around. Janet and her daughters had spent time with Marshall’s sister, Anna, now Anna Anderson in her 400 year old cottage called *Weavers* in Suffolk and met her twin sons, Mikey, who was in the navy, and Ken, a vicar. By the time Bill and Cornish got to meet the family, Marshall and Anna had moved to Somerset, near Sherborne School (the location for the film *Goodbye, Mr Chips*) where Ken was the chaplain. Bill was to visit Marshall again in 1994 when she was nearly ninety and still known to all as Aunty. She spent much of her time on the phone, intensely interested in what every single family member was doing. She had also sustained a passion for politics just as her half-sister from New Zealand was to do. But their politics were poles apart. Marshall was a Conservative who loved Maggie Thatcher and read the *Daily Telegraph*. Fortunately, like Janet, she was respectful of different viewpoints. While Bill was there, she bought him a copy of *The Guardian* ‘because your Ma liked it’.4

While Anna and her family, like Marshall before them, were warm and welcoming to their New Zealand relatives, it was William and Sandy and their families with whom the Irwins had most in common. They too were ‘colonials’. Both of Janet’s half-brothers had served with the Rhodesian Police and brought their children up in what is now Zimbabwe. In 1966, Janet and her daughters met William and his wife, Phyllis, at Anna’s place and got on really well with them. Sadly William died before they were to meet again. Later they were to meet their daughters, Janie, Judy and Alison. These days Sally keeps in contact with Alison (Ally) Neville, his daughter who is an artist and has a number of Ally’s watercolour etchings of interesting buildings on the walls of her home.

It was not until a later trip to the UK in 1975 that Janet and Sally met Sandy and his wife, Daphne, and visited the famous Sissinghurst gardens in Kent with them. Sandy and Daphne had four children, Morag, Iona, Barbara and Sandy Jnr who were to become regular correspondents with the Irwins. Whenever there has been the opportunity, they have continued to visit each other. In one particular instance that has been made easier by the fact that their relative is constantly travelling the world. Sandy Jnr, Janet’s half-nephew, or Alexander McCall Smith to give him his full name, was to become Professor of Medical Law at the University of Edinburgh before achieving international fame as writer of the *No 1 Ladies Detective Agency* Series.
The Irwins, in common with much of the English-speaking world, are huge fans of Mma Ramotswe. And Bertie at 44 Scotland Street. The only difficulty they find is keeping up with their Edinburgh relative’s prolific output.

The Irwin family felt enriched by establishing contact with this part of the family previously unknown to them. No doubt GM and Lucy would have been both relieved and delighted had they known.


4. WP Irwin 2010, pers. comm.
Chapter 10

A Journey into the Past

As foreshadowed in his letter to his mother, Fraser Scott kept in contact with his sister Lucy after she moved to New Zealand. When Jock and Janet were born, he wrote to them and sent them presents. To Janet, he was her ‘fairy godfather’. Once Janet could write, she would send him letters. He wrote to her regularly. He was a kind man and no doubt wanted to make sure that she had someone to turn to, especially after Jock’s death. They were to continue their correspondence when Janet became an adult.

Fraser was also a generous man. When Janet started boarding school, he sent her three pounds so that she could buy a portable gramophone. This meant she could play all her favourite records: The Comedy Harmonists, No No Nanette, The Donkey Serenade, Alan Jones, John MacCormack, Paul Robeson. The gift was a great comfort to her when she was away from home. Shortly before she died, Lucy told Janet of his generosity on another occasion. At one point, when GM’s disastrous farming venture had swallowed up all Lucy’s money, Fraser and his wife, Frances, offered to take Jock and Janet to be educated with their own two sons, Fraser Junior and Donald. Fortunately it did not prove necessary to take up their offer. Fraser became a Major in the Royal Artillery in Africa and then Singapore. From the latter, he sent Lucy a present of a beautiful silk embroidered mandarin’s coat with real gold buttons which appeared regularly at fancy dress balls in the Hokianga. When he retired from the Army in 1926, he became Managing Director of a steel tube engineering company. He was well ahead of his time in terms of the management practices he introduced. In fact, he would be considered innovative even today. He established worker management committees to run the business, and the company never had a strike. He introduced continuing education and training programs for staff as well as occupational health care, including a staff psychiatrist. He was responsible for the first advertising of industrial components in Punch using cartoons as an enticement. And he even wrote a book, The writing of business letters, which was used by the British Ministry of Information.

In 1957, when he was seventy-two, Fraser decided it was important to complete the family history he had started twenty years earlier. What he has to say about his sister, Lucy, is illuminating.
I think she was probably the ablest of us and certainly the most dynamic. But at the beginning of the century, a girl had to be quite exceptional to attempt a career. Her job was to stay at home making herself useful until she got married or grew slowly into being that most useful person, a maiden aunt, available to be summoned to help any of the family confronted by some domestic difficulty. In Lucy’s case it was particularly hard to break away from home. My mother had been in poor health for years and was gradually becoming bed-ridden. How far her ill-health was real, physically, it is impossible to know. She lived until she was over eighty. It may have its roots in a sub-conscious desire to retain power, and there is no way better for ensuring this end if you are dealing with people with the strong filial sense current fifty or more years ago. Be all that as it may, Lucy, who was not naturally a domestic type, felt bound but resented it particularly as she had no common bond with her mother, to put it at its mildest. She tried to fill her life with what interests were available. She became a good golfer and an expert gardener. She rode a motor bicycle at a time when it was considered quite adventurous for a man. But the irksomeness of her home life resulted in she too having poor health. The doctor who attended her was an exceptionally able man with many intellectual interests in common with Lucy. He was engaged in writing a book, and Lucy undertook the typing of it for him. The sequel was that they went off to New Zealand together, he leaving his wife and four children deserted. My brother, Tom was, with difficulty, dissuaded from trying to get Smith struck off by the Medical Council. As no doubt he would have been, if the facts had been reported. I set my face against punitive action which would injure Lucy without helping the deserted wife. She incidentally was a nice woman and in no way to blame for the fact that she was not an intellectual woman.a

Janet finally got to meet her uncle in 1959 when he and Frances travelled to New Zealand by boat. Given the past hostility of Lucy’s family to their relationship, GM was apprehensive about the pending visit notwithstanding Fraser’s ongoing contact. He was, however, to die before they arrived. It was a successful visit and they all got on extremely well. Bill remembers Fraser showing him a clever card trick to impress his friends.² When it was time to leave, Fraser gave each of the Irwin children ten pounds with strict instructions not to put it in their savings accounts.

When his wife Frances died in 1964, Fraser was bereft. He decided to come to New Zealand again and to take Janet back to the UK with him on the Arcadia as soon as she had finished her intern year at Dunedin Hospital. Janet, in turn, was keen to see his home at the Old Rectory, Alvechurch, in Worcestershire where they had established a beautiful garden. However, the trip did not eventuate. Sadly, Fraser went into hospital for prostate surgery instead and died of a heart attack post-operatively.

When Janet did, however, travel to the UK to do postgraduate research, she met up with his sons, Fraser Jnr and Donald and was warmly welcomed by both cousins. Fraser Jnr, a retired Brigadier, had inherited his father’s horticultural talents and was ‘the doyen of the garden club’ in his village in Surrey. He had also inherited
his mother’s needlepoint skills, designing and organizing the production of beautiful kneelers for the ancient village church, ‘like a military operation,’ Janet suspected. To her astonishment, Donald had in his possession a piece of kauri gum with a small lizard embedded in it which she had sent to his father as a child. Janet told Donald that she was troubled by the feeling that her mother had always been homesick. She wondered if she had really wanted to leave Scotland or just had no choice. Donald reassured her that, in his view, Lucy had made a lucky escape. Had she remained in Scotland, as the only daughter, she would have been expected to take on the care of her mother, and Jane, according to Donald was ‘a grumpy old thing, very discontented.’ He reminded Janet that his father had recorded in his family history that she was ‘intelligent but inhibited and devoid of charm and after my father’s death, took refuge in ill health to ensure a claim on her family’s attention which proved an effective manoeuvre for the rest of her long life.’

On the same trip, Janet was to meet her Uncle Jack for the first time. Jack Scott was the second child in the family, born just before Lucy. He was by then in his eighties and had been a widower for some years. His wife, Belle, had been somewhat older than him. The marriage had been opposed by his mother as Belle had previously looked after her in the role of ‘companion.’ This was the role Lucy had been expected to fill and Jack reported that Jane was quite put out to have her interests trumped again. Belle and Jack had been very happy together and Jack now lived with their daughter, Isobel, who was single, at Mailingsland, a mixed farm of cattle, sheep and crops near Peebles on the Edinburgh Road. John, her brother, had tragically drowned in a yachting accident on the Firth of Forth when he was a resident doctor at Victoria Infirmary in Edinburgh.

Janet found Jack very much like her mother, matter of fact and rather self-deprecating. She was intrigued by his habitual practices. Jack drank half a pint of Guinness at lunch every day. He put sugar on tomatoes, pepper on strawberries and whisky on his pancakes. He would not have a Christmas tree in the house because of their German origin and, at Hogmanay, would open the front door to let the old year out and the new year in. Even though he was quite lame, he walked out with the dogs every day and kept an eye on the stock and the working of the farm. There were several farm cottages occupied by workers who had been with the family for many years: Geordie who did some gardening and maintained the ‘dry stane dykes’; Donald the cattleman; Bob the shepherd; and Jock the tractorman. Jack had a reputation as a
fair employer and he was also very generous. A variety of people would come to his farm for long breaks who could not otherwise afford holidays. He told Janet that he was pleased to hear that Lucy did not forget him and that, indeed, he had named his favourite dog after her.

When Jane and Sally joined Janet in Scotland in early 1966, they would often spend weekends at Mailingsland. In the dining room, when the gong was rung by Marjorie, the cook/ housekeeper, they sat in chairs with rams’ heads carved on their backs watched over by the ancestors on the wall. Jack loved to be surrounded by young people. Jack and Janet would argue about environmental issues. She insisted on reading him Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* when she found out that they were using Dieldron on the farm, but was unable to convince him that a substance which prevented sheep from being fly-blown could be anything but good. Despite not agreeing, he would not get upset at being challenged and she never heard him say a cross word.

They had a memorable trip to Newton in Inverness-shire where the Scott children had been born. The family home was virtually unchanged. One night, at the Royal Hotel in Cromarty where they were staying, Jack appeared with an elderly woman on his arm as a surprise. It was Effie Middleton who had been a family friend when they were all young. Lucy had told Janet about tennis parties at the Middletons. Not long before he died, Jack sent all his nieces and nephews some money and with this bequest, Sally was able to buy her first car, a Fiat Bambino.

Janet was never to meet any of her aunts. Jessie, Lucy’s favourite sister, never contacted her after she left Scotland to Janet’s knowledge. She acquired a photo album belonging to Jessie, which she cherished as it gave her some sense of their mother’s life on Skye, and was pleased when Jessie’s son, Jack Crisp, later visited her in New Zealand. In turn, she was to visit him in Northumberland in 1974 before coming to Australia. Lucy’s other half-sister Christobel visited Auckland briefly on a cruise ship in the early 1930s and Lucy went to see her. Disappointingly for Janet, she did not take her along. Christobel was married but childless. Apparently she was a rather terrifying character. Janet met a local man who remembered her driving around Tain in Ross Shire in a dog cart apparently at some risk to the pedestrians. Uncle Jack related how she would insist on singing loudly even though she was tone deaf. Christobel wrote a number of novels, one called *Ebb and Flow* in which the heroine was based on herself and her life as a step-child.
Janet and her daughters not only met up with her mother’s relatives, there was the father’s side of the family to catch up with as well. Janet’s paternal grandfather, Samuel McCall Smith, had married a Miss Andrews. There was a beautiful Victorian photograph of her in profile on their mantelpiece in Rawene. She was tall and had big feet like her granddaughter. GM told Janet that she would not admit to taking any more than a size six but the bootseller would shake his head and say ‘Seven’s your size, Mrs Smith’. Janet was able to visit the farmhouse where her father was born in Laggan, Speyside. The family later moved to a farm called Shempston near Lossiem in Morayshire which today forms part of the grounds of Gordonstoun School. On this visit, she experienced the beauty of this highland area. It could, however, also be cold and bleak, and she remembered how her father had sustained permanent damage to his foot from frostbite as a child.

GM had five siblings, four boys and one girl. Hamish followed in his father’s footsteps and became a farmer. Willy qualified as an architect but died of a sarcoma in GM’s house in Perth when he was in his twenties. Another younger brother Colin died when very young of an epileptic seizure. GM, then in his early teens, was with him at the time and unable to do anything to save him. Janet wondered whether that was what motivated him to study medicine. His younger brother Bryce also studied medicine. To add to the family grief, their beautiful, adored and rather spoiled sister, Jenny, was to die of tuberculosis in Biarritz in the early 1920s. This put Janet in mind of her father’s anxiety about seriously ill patients and his inability to cope with death.

Uncle Hamish was the first relative she had actually met. In 1938, he had arrived by ship for a six month stay in New Zealand. He was tall and distinguished looking, as expected, but his beautifully tailored clothes and handmade shoes were a surprise. He told the story of how when he and GM were young men ordering evening jackets to go with their MacPherson tartan kilts, GM told the tailor not to be too bothered about Hamish’s jacket but to take special pains with his because, as he said, ‘I’m a professional man’. This version of her father as a dandy was hard for Janet to reconcile with the grey flannel suits, open-necked shirts and sandals which were his ‘uniform’.

Earlier that year, the Smiths had travelled to the South Island with their friend Allen Giles who had grown up at Parnassus in north Canterbury. They had been overwhelmed by the beauty of the lakes and mountains, and amazed at how different it was from the North Island. They decided to repeat the performance that Christmas
while Hamish was there. Allen regaled them all with tales of his childhood, never letting the facts get in the way of a good story. After fishing at Mossburn, they spent Christmas in Queenstown. On their way home, they stopped in Auckland to see Fay Compton, the notable English actress and singer who was performing at Her Majesty’s Theatre in *Victoria Regina*, a provocative play about Queen Victoria which had attracted the attention of the British Censor. Hamish wore his evening clothes, and Janet, who was just fifteen, had her first evening dress, white satin with a halter of black velvet ribbon and a long bow falling from the décolletage. When the play was over, Hamish and Janet led the party out of the theatre where there was a Rolls Royce awaiting the Governor-General and Lady Galway whom they had upstaged. Allen Giles embellished and retold this story for years afterwards. Hamish thoroughly enjoyed himself while he was in New Zealand. Before he returned to Scotland, he had helped Janet settle into her ‘digs’ for her first year at Auckland University. Back home, unfortunately, severe physical illness saw him chronically depressed and he died in Craig House, a mental health institution in Edinburgh. Janet was later to become close to his son, Neil, and to Neil’s daughter Alice.

Once she was in Scotland, Janet was keen to meet the remaining member of the family, her Uncle Bryce who was another doctor. While GM and Bryce had corresponded after he left Scotland, they were never to see each other again. Janet made contact with Bryce’s daughter Anne and her husband Gordon who lived in Lanarkshire where Gordon was Sheriff, and Anne, an Advocate. They drove her out to Bryce’s home in East Lothian. When Bryce opened the door, Janet felt like she had seen a ghost. He was the image of her father with white hair, piercing blue eyes and an almost ethereal quality. Anne described him as ‘made of different material’.

Bryce was another complex and larger than life character. He had served in the Royal Army Medical Corps in Serbia and Mesopotamia in the First World War where he established a lifelong friendship with fellow medical officer Osborne Mavor who, under the pseudonym James Bridie, was to become one of the leading British playwrights of his generation. Janet was intrigued by the way this mirrored her father’s close relationship with the writer ADR Fairburn. Bryce married Margaret, an army nurse, and their son Sam was born in Persia. Due to political upheaval, they were forced to escape Persia with Margaret riding on a donkey with Sam at her breast and all their belongings left behind. On his return to Scotland, Bryce set up a general practice north of Glasgow in a village called Lochgilphead. Around this time, he
developed poliomyelitis. His legs were largely paralysed, but he coped by wearing splints and using crutches. He told Janet that the worst time of his life was when he had to travel to the south of France to his dying sister, Jenny. After some years in general practice, he was appointed Medical Superintendant of Victoria Infirmary in Glasgow where his friend Mavor was a physician. He was later to be awarded an OBE for his services to medicine and to civil defence.

On the occasion of Janet’s first visit, Bryce delighted in playing the new hi-fi system which had been set up for him by his son, Sam, now a radiologist. He was generous with both his laughter and malt whiskey. Aunt Margaret, to whom he was clearly devoted, was rather frail with a failing memory. They had various helpers in the house, including two elderly gentlemen known as ‘the beavers’ who worked away at the garden. Bryce insisted, however, on sawing the wood for exercise.

He took Janet to Morayshire where the family were born and grew up, and showed her the exact place on Laggan Bridge where her father had dropped a prized glass marble. GM could see it in the river every day on the way to and from school but never managed to recover it. Possessions were few and far between and to be treasured. Janet remembered GM telling her of his disappointment on first tasting a tomato. He had expected it to be much more delicious. When the subject of GM’s first marriage came up, Bryce told Janet that ‘Barbara and her family set about to capture the handsome young doctor’. If this were indeed the case, Janet had no illusions that her father was anything other than a willing victim as Barbara was beautiful and played the cello.

Bryce had an unforgiving nature. He hated organized religion, and had refused to attend his daughter’s marriage in the Episcopalian Church just as GM had refused to attend Janet’s. When his wife subsequently died, Bryce refused to eat and died not long after, leaving all his estate to Sam and none to Anne. Janet was saddened by this side of him and tried to focus on the positive side she had witnessed.

Janet’s visit to the UK in 1965 was the beginning of a family healing process. The Scotts and the McCall Smiths were no longer Capulets and Montagues. With the benefit of time and a society which, in this regard at least, was more tolerant, they were now just in-laws.

1. Fraser, T 1831–1851, ‘Record and confessional of Thomas Fraser commenced at Inverness in February 1831,’ Inverness, Scotland, p. 88.
2. WP Irwin 2010, pers. comm.

Chapter 11

A Career Focus

As a medical student at the University of Otago, Janet had become interested in the work being done by Professor Wallace Ironside in the Department of Psychological Medicine. Aware that students often had problems which interfered with their academic progress and their personal development, he surveyed fifth year medical students and found that a quarter of them suffered some form of emotional disturbance. They believed, moreover, that they had to resolve their own problems and, indeed, little help or support was available to them. There were two suicides in Janet’s class. She came to believe that students’ problems mostly had their origin in unresolved conflicts from childhood. With Professor Ironside’s encouragement (along with that of Margot Ross), Janet had won the Winifred Gimblett Scholarship for a postgraduate student to conduct research into abnormal psychology at the University of Edinburgh. Dr GM Carstairs was Professor of Psychiatry there. As he got to know Janet, he suggested to her that, while she was skilled at research, her primary interest and strength seemed to be in clinical work, and he wondered if she might not be better pursuing that. In consultation with him, Janet decided to relinquish her scholarship and focus on the clinical side.

Following in her father’s footsteps, she took up a full-time position as Registrar in the Department of Psychological Medicine at the Royal Hospital for Sick Children in Edinburgh in 1965. GM had been a Resident Doctor there early in the century. But it was not a doctor who was the greatest influence on Janet during her time there but a clinical psychologist, a Glaswegian by the name of Janet Hassan. Hassan had begun her career as a teacher working with children from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. While working as Head Teacher at a school for so-called ‘maladjusted children’ in the 1950s, she studied psychotherapy and was to conduct regular therapeutic sessions with all the children at her school. She became a founding staff member of the first Department of Child Psychiatry at the Sick Children’s Hospital in Glasgow. She had been similarly involved in the establishment of the Department where Janet was now Registrar. Hassan was insistent that the frame of reference and the values underpinning their work should be expressed in everyday language so that they were open to public examination. ‘She had an unusual gift of
forcibly challenging ideas without creating offence.' It was a gift Janet Irwin was herself to demonstrate in her own work.

The approach at the hospital was a multidisciplinary one with doctors, clinical psychologists and social workers working as a team. Every Friday, they would hold a meeting at which they discussed the children they were treating. Janet recalled one small boy of seven or eight years of age who was being treated for school phobia. He had been born to older parents, and his father had died suddenly. In play therapy, he was a very controlled child who never did anything wrong. One day, however, he became very aggressive and violent. Suddenly, he blurted out, ‘It wasn’t my fault that Daddy died’. After that, he started to get better.

Janet was also a visiting doctor at the School for Maladjusted Children in Edinburgh run by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd. Most of the children had been abandoned, or emotionally, sexually or physically abused. One child, Elizabeth, was an elective deaf mute. She was the fifth child in the family and her father was a coal miner, permanently disabled by lung disease. Her relationship with her mother was so hostile that Elizabeth stopped speaking and hearing what her mother said. She was of normal intelligence but unable to learn. When Elizabeth’s mother became pregnant again, ‘the sensible Scottish doctors had no trouble in recommending an abortion and sterilisation for the mother. It seemed to me like sound practice of preventative medicine.’

Janet heard Sir Dugald Baird lecture on abortion at Edinburgh University and was impressed by his kindness and concern for women. Regius Professor of Midwifery at Aberdeen University, Baird advocated universal access to contraception and was a leading advocate of reform of the abortion laws in the 1960s. He spoke of the right of women to be free from the tyranny of excessive fertility, a right Janet was to refer to frequently in the lectures she was to give in support of abortion law reform both in New Zealand and later in Queensland.

It was an intellectually stimulating time for Janet. She was grateful to have the opportunity to meet Anna Freud who attended a Child Psychiatry Conference in Edinburgh to outline the work being done in child psychoanalysis at the Hampstead Child Therapy Course and Clinic. Anna Freud argued that not only was it normal for adolescence to be a time of trouble and conflict, it was abnormal not to have conflict in adolescence. Another significant figure Janet was to meet in Edinburgh was the American Dr Knight Aldrich, Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Chicago,
who was researching aspects of general practice and its relationship with psychiatry. Janet had learnt from her father that medical practice was not simply a matter of clearly-defined diseases with specific treatment, but something more complex.

He used to say in the depression days in Hokianga that the best cure for a peptic ulcer was telling the bank manager to go to Hell. This was a bit hard on the bank manager, but looked at in psychodynamic terms, I suppose one could say he meant that expressing anger directly rather than allowing it to gnaw at one’s insides, was a more positive way of dealing with the problem.³

Professor Wallace Ironside had reinforced this idea of a patient-centred rather than a disease-centred approach to medicine while she was a medical student. More common, however, among her lecturers had been the so-called ‘scientific’ approach to medicine, which viewed the patient as clinical material, an example of a particular disease requiring treatment.

Professor Knight Aldrich was particularly interested in what he saw as central, the importance of the doctor-patient relationship. Not only was it important in obtaining the most useful diagnostic information, but also in establishing and sustaining the relationship between the patient and the doctor and in obtaining the patient’s collaboration in treatment. Developing his ideas, Aldrich was later to write a book for medical students, The medical interview: gateway to the doctor-patient Relationship.⁴

Like Janet Hassan, he was insistent on communicating in everyday language. As Edmund Pellegrino indicates in the Foreword to the book, it is relevant for experienced medical practitioners as well as students and also for other allied health professionals. Aldrich distinguishes between illness and disease as a difference in point of view between the patient and the doctor and stresses the importance of understanding the patient’s perspective. He stresses the opening part of the interview when patients should be encouraged to be spontaneous in describing their illness. Aldrich reinforced for Janet the importance of the doctor-patient relationship and, in particular, the medical interview. From him, she also learnt the importance of determining the 3 Ps of illness: the predisposing factors, the precipitating factors and the perpetuating factors. She was to keep in contact with Aldrich and they were to visit each other at their respective universities throughout their lives to discuss the work they were doing.
Janet had been working in Edinburgh for two years when she was offered a job back in Christchurch, New Zealand. Dr Ken Ussher had recently become the first full-time Director of the Health Service at the University of Canterbury and wanted someone to assume responsibility for mental health services. Professor Ironside recommended Janet for the job, and she was up for the challenge.


3. Irwin, J 197?, ‘Lecture 1: Doctors and Patients’.

Chapter 12

An Untrod Career Path

In taking up the appointment as a physician at the University of Canterbury in early 1967, Janet was a trailblazer. Student Health Services were in their infancy. At Canterbury University, the Student Health Service had been established in 1957 with a part-time Director but had not become a full-time unit until 1965.¹ Not only was she the first person to specialise in mental health issues at that university, it was the first such appointment at a New Zealand university, and one of the first at an Australasian tertiary institution.

In Scotland, Janet had held two sessions per week for students with psychiatric problems at the Student Health Service at Edinburgh University. Students also had access to a weekly group therapy session as well as individual appointments. While there, Janet had taken the opportunity to attend the 1966 Conference of the British Student Health Association and to visit the Student Health Service at Queen’s University in Belfast. On the way back to New Zealand, she visited other student health services at McGill University in Montreal and the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada. So it was that she arrived in New Zealand having had the opportunity to compare how these different institutions approached the task of dealing with the emotional health of their students.

Edinburgh, Edmonton and McGill were universities of comparable size. At Edinburgh, the Senior Consultant was Dr John Evans, a child psychiatrist and psychoanalyst with a particular interest in adolescents who had supervised Janet’s work with students. But he and his colleagues had other professional commitments and limited time for student health issues. At Edmonton University, Janet noted, ‘psychiatric help for students seems to be low on the priority scale, the service being almost totally geared to physical illness.’² McGill University on the other hand, had a psychiatrist as the Director of the Student Health Service and five part-time psychiatrists on staff. One of those psychiatrists was responsible for the organisation of student therapy groups. There was also a full-time clinical psychologist. ‘The department is a lively one, and there is research going on and regular weekly seminars for the staff.’³
Research provided some guidance as to how universities might determine student need in this area. For example, Dr Cecil Kidd carried out a longitudinal study of the emotional health of first year students at Edinburgh University which provided empirical data to be considered in designing appropriate health services:

The findings of the significant attributes of students who are prone to develop psychiatric disorders show that they can be identified on entry to the university and that there are definite main areas (medical, educational, and personal) in which significant factors may be found.  

His research concluded that the best and simplest way to determine if students had problems was to ask them. Janet was able to utilise this knowledge at Canterbury. Every first year student was interviewed by the Health Service and assessed in terms of his or her academic ability, personality adjustment and physical health. Janet noted that ‘the fundamental preventive measure is the early detection of the vulnerable students. We let them know that we are interested in their welfare and that help is available if they feel the need for it.’

One of the factors which Janet came to identify as significant in ensuring that a university was to adopt ‘best practice’ in the area of student health was liaison between their health service and other on-campus ‘helping services’. At Edinburgh, she observed that there did not seem to be very much communication between the health service and welfare and housing officers, chaplains, and other services or, indeed, with the academic staff. At Belfast, however, she found that the Accommodation Officer knew her students well and was able to make appropriate referrals. Janet was keen for the various ‘helping agencies’ at Canterbury to be located under the one roof so that they could work more closely together. In the meantime, fortnightly meetings were organized for the staff of the various services, including the physical education officers, to get together and discuss issues. Representatives from the Student Representative Council and the University’s Executive were invited to alternate meetings. A particular topic might be chosen for discussion such as ‘Drug Taking Among Students.’ Members of the health service also met regularly with the academic staff on an informal basis. ‘It is important that we should be trusted by all concerned – by the students who can rely on confidentiality, and by the administration who rely on us for honest medical certificates.’ Not only was Janet keen to liaise within the university, she was aware of
the importance of contact with relevant bodies outside it, such as schools, and would sometimes address final year high school students and their parents on issues such as separation anxiety.

She was also keen for Canterbury to carry out its own research on the effectiveness of its practices, aware however that ‘research in this field is fraught with the usual difficulties experienced in psychiatric research—objective measurements, finding suitable control groups, patient co-operation and so on.’ She was reassured by a follow-up study of students treated at the University of Kansas Mental Health Clinic which demonstrated the efficiency of its services for increasing the comfort of these students, thereby enabling them to focus on their education. Janet saw her role as helping move students towards independence, maturity, and making the best use of their capabilities, thereby assisting the university in its educational mission.

At Canterbury, a small number of students suffered psychiatric illnesses as defined in the DSM, *(Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders)*, the psychiatrist’s bible, such as schizophrenia and manic depressive disorder (as well as homosexuality which was classified as a mental illness at that time). But the largest group of students needing assistance consisted of those who could not concentrate on their studies. Homesickness was a problem for many students, especially those who had left home for the first time in order to attend university. Their situation might be made worse by finding themselves in an unsuitable boarding situation, or having to adapt to the stresses and demands of communal living in a student hostel. Homesickness was a particularly acute problem for overseas students who were also having to come to terms with a different and dominant culture. Under the Colombo Plan, students selected by governments in South-East Asia studied at New Zealand universities with the support of the New Zealand government. Some students from Malaysia were privately sponsored as well. ‘The popular faculties were engineering and science, where in some classes, a third and even a half of the students were from South-East Asia.’

Some students, whether homesick or not, felt lonely and isolated. They found it difficult to make friends and to focus on their studies. Students with authoritarian parents might be ill equipped for taking responsibility for their own studies as well as the other decisions they needed to make. They might also rebel against authoritarian university staff or processes. (Fortunately, universities were starting to involve students in decision-making which mitigated somewhat against student unrest in this
Some students had no real sense of who they were, why they were at university or where they were going in the future. They might be anxious about their ability to complete their courses. They might be abusing alcohol or drugs. Some were suicidal. Going to university might not have been their own decision. Their parents might have missed out on the opportunity to attend university either because of the Depression or the War. Students might be studying courses dictated by their parents rather than courses of their own choosing. And, for overseas students, completion of the course might be a matter of family or even national honour. Finding out about the student’s family background and their coping skills in the past was clearly important.

Indeed, Janet’s experience in child psychiatry proved very relevant to her work with students. She would tell the story of attending a Musica Viva concert in Christchurch where the final item of modern music by Hindemith left her uncomfortable. On leaving, she met up with the music critic with the Christchurch Press, Claude Davies, and asked why her nerves were so jangled by it. ‘It’s the unresolved discord’ was his response. Janet’s experiences with the emotional difficulties experienced by students seeking the assistance of the Health Service were confirming her view that unresolved discord from childhood was an issue.

In 1969, Wallace Ironside, who was now a full Professor and Foundation Chair of Psychological Medicine at Monash University in Australia, invited Janet to give a paper on ‘Aspects of aggression in the university’ at the Annual conference of the Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists in Melbourne. In it, she discussed the issues facing individual students as well as aggressive behavior by groups such as initiation rituals. She also made reference to the aggression of university staff, whether the result of overly authoritarian attitudes, or the pressures of academic life pushing students’ personal and emotional needs down low on the list. ‘Aggression is expressed in a variety of subtle ways by staff and students in a university’, Janet said. ‘It is an acceptable and necessary driving force in academic success, but when expressed as a neurotic interaction between individuals and groups, it can be a destructive force both to the individual and the institution.’

Drug-taking was not a significant issue among students presenting at the Health Service at this time. When Janet was asked to address the Medical Women’s Association on drugs, she opened her talk by challenging the idea that because she worked with young people, she would have more experience and knowledge of drug abuse. Janet suggested that, on the contrary, drug abuse was manifested in the over-
prescription of drugs by doctors and in the over-consumption of tranquillizers by middle-aged housewives. She also questioned the current focus on the use of one particular drug, marijuana, which she viewed as similar to the approach to alcohol in Prohibition days. Like Professor Knight Aldrich, she was opposed to the American approach to drugs which placed marijuana in the same category as morphine and heroin, a stance which, she believed, led young people to discount public information on drugs generally. She also questioned the value of Christchurch police officers lecturing school students about drugs. ‘Does this really help or does it stimulate interest and convey an expectation?’

Girls who were pregnant were a significant group seeking the assistance of the Health Service, and for them, the support was multi-faceted, arranging for maternity care, sick leave, social security, contact with child welfare and private board if necessary. Janet spoke of how:

we try to be as positive as possible in our approach and to help the girl to grow and mature. If the baby is adopted we try to help with her inevitable grief. Each year a number of girls who show severe disturbance are referred for therapeutic termination of the pregnancy. Each case is very carefully assessed and followed up regularly afterwards. I think this follow up is absolutely essential.

This was to become an area of particular concern for Janet and one she was to increasingly focus on in the future. In this area, as in others, she was to adopt an increasingly more radical stance over time.

Only the University of Otago and the Auckland University had medical faculties. Janet was invited to address the medical students at the latter on ‘Getting Pregnant,’ a topic which, she told them, ‘was unmentionable, except in strictly obstetric terms, when I was a student in the 1940s. Regrettably the situation hadn’t changed much when I went back to medical school 17 years later in the 1960s, my medical education having been interrupted by getting pregnant.’ She went on to describe how, ‘as recently as 1962, the course in Otago on contraception consisted of one lecture in which, among other things, the professor demonstrated how far a French letter could be stretched, and the whole performance was very amusing for the unusually good attendance of medical students, and those from other faculties who could be smuggled in.’ She was also later invited by Dr Bill Platts, a member of the World Health Organisation Advisory Panel on Venereal Disease, to address the 1974 Venereology Conference in Christchurch on ‘Sex and the Student’.
For Janet, it was vitally important that health service professionals were aware of their own needs and problems to ensure they could play an appropriate role in students’ lives. It was this interest which had drawn her to Professor Knight Aldrich’s work, and it was now, at this time, to lead her to the work of Dr Michael Balint. Her old friend from Medical School Sheila Hurrell (the first woman to be employed as a Resident at Christchurch Hospital in 1935) was a member of a Balint group in Christchurch and suggested Janet join them. Michael Balint, a British psychiatrist and psychoanalyst (originally from Hungary), had written a book titled ‘The Doctor, his Patient and the Illness’. It became, and remained into the twenty-first century, the standard text on the doctor-patient relationship (especially for GPs). Balint had practised at the Tavistock Clinic which was recognised internationally for its pioneering work, both research and clinical, in the area of mental health. There, he and his wife, Enid, a psychoanalyst with a social work background, became particularly interested in the psychology of the doctor-patient relationship.

Balint wrote this book at a time when doctors in the community were finding that often patients did not present with the diseases they had been taught about in medical school or in the hospital setting. Instead they described vague symptoms such as tiredness and pain. He invited general practitioners to a series of seminars on the psychological aspects of general practice. At these seminars they were invited to present the case histories of patients which were of concern to them. Balint taught them, by example, to be good listeners, and to demonstrate an interest in their patient’s personal lives. Their fellow doctors were encouraged to make suggestions about what the significant issues might be for their patient and how they might best be handled. These seminars were the foundation of what became the International Balint Society, and Balint groups of GPs are still in existence today.

A Christchurch GP Dr Selwyn Carson had attended Balint’s seminars in London and, returning to New Zealand, had not only established a Balint group but also invited Michael and Enid Balint to visit Christchurch in September 1965. This was the group Sheila recommended Janet join. She did, and not only was she pleased she did, she was later to say of her time in Christchurch, ‘I had seven good years there, the most important aspect of which was my involvement in the Balint Society’. Dr Lanktree Davies, a GP who was to become a good friend of Janet’s, wrote his own recollections of the group including his reasons for joining.
I did not enjoy medical school. Most of the teaching seemed to be irrelevant to patient care. The syllabus seemed to be directed at diseases rather than patients. But I had little idea at the time how ill prepared I was for the practice of family medicine in the community as my training had been entirely in hospital practice and delivered by specialist physicians and surgeons.\textsuperscript{16}

Davies found the group an amenable learning and support environment, and the Balints’ visit increased both his understanding and his enthusiasm.

Our basic format was to present the tenth patient seen that day. That is assuming that no member had urgent business that always took priority. Various studies were undertaken which included \textit{the unmarried mother, the dying patient}, and the not to be forgotten \textit{O.J. syndrome}. The latter was where difficult patients caused the doctor to exclaim \textit{Oh Jesus!} when s/he saw their name on the appointment list. From these beginnings we went on to patients who were more demanding of skills in psychological medicine.\textsuperscript{17}

The groups helped general practitioners to identify how their own unconscious emotional reactions to patients and their issues affected the doctor-patient relationship. Balint was of the view that the most important drug, not listed in the pharmacopoeia, was the doctor. Another of his aphorisms was ‘If you ask questions, all you get is answers.’ What the doctor assumes is important may not be the real issue for the patient. He was not talking about routine matters such as a sprained ankle but about patients with what he described as an ‘unorganized illness’: they are tired, they feel dizzy, they get headaches or stomach aches, sometimes they can’t sleep. What they want is for the doctor to listen to them. As Janet expressed it:

In Balint work you have to be flexible; you have to be able to wait for the patient to give you bits of information which help to put the jigsaw puzzle together. You have to wait for trust to develop, for both of you to understand what can and cannot be said and when.\textsuperscript{18}

Balint and his colleagues were concerned about doctors prescribing benzodiazepines for patients with unorganized illnesses and they carried out a survey of repeat prescribing in medical practice.\textsuperscript{19} The World Health Organisation recognized the importance of this work.

It is clear from the work of Balint and others that drugs, especially those affecting the central nervous system have multiple meanings extending far beyond their simple biochemical mode of action…Patient’s responses to a medication are related more to
the attitude and expectation of the prescribing physician than to the patient’s own expectations.20

Doctors like Janet who placed central importance on the doctor-patient relationship were less likely to experience a disjunction between their attitude to, and expectations about, medication and that of their patients.

Balint groups provided doctors with a safe environment in which to express their own anxieties about medical practice, an important consideration given that doctors themselves are a high risk group in terms of mental health issues.21 Davies reported that ‘it has certainly helped me to come to terms with not knowing and uncertainty, something which is very difficult for many doctors’. Further, the doctor might have conflicting feelings: relieved, for instance, to have identified a serious medical problem but uncomfortable about relaying that information to the patient.

Janet was delighted to have the opportunity to meet the Balints on their second visit to Christchurch in 1968. She was to instigate the visit of Aldrich as Erskine Fellow to the Department of Psychology at the University of Canterbury the following year, where he was to spend much of his time with the Balint group. Even after Janet left New Zealand for Australia in 1974, she remained in contact with the Balint groups across the Tasman. Michael Balint died in 1970 but Janet kept in contact with Enid Balint. Indeed, she was to establish a new Balint group in Brisbane and was involved in the organisation of the first Trans-Tasman Balint workshop in 1978.22

20 The Balint Society of Australia and New Zealand was founded in 2005. Today it is working in conjunction with University Medical Schools in Australian Universities to establish Balint work in the medical school curriculum. Pilot projects are running at Wollongong and Sydney Universities. Since 2010, the Auckland University Medical School has successfully run Balint groups for final year medical students in the context of their general practice training internship programme.22 Attendance at workshops and membership of Balint groups is also accredited for the purposes of continuing professional development for doctors in both countries.

The continuing need for a focus on the doctor-patient relationship is emphasized in a recent article in The Guardian by an oncologist subtitled The medical establishment dismisses homeopathy, but many people are willing to defend it – often because they finally feel heard by alternative medical practitioners. The writer argues that

Users of alternative health take any number of unknowable and even dangerous products, but they all tend to describe one common element -- they feel heard. They sense sympathy for their condition, they feel respected, and they are drawn to the appeal of a simple explanation even if it’s wrong. The research findings make me reflect that doctors can either spend their time wondering why people can’t see what is good for them, or we can seek to improve our communication with patients to at least partly address the reasons people turn to alternative health practitioners. And here, medical training is widely thought to do an inadequate job.23
A focus on the doctor-patient relationship was to underline Janet’s approach to her work in the area of student health services at the University of Queensland, a university fortuitously with its own medical faculty. There, she was to give lectures to medical students and to run Balint groups with them as will be discussed in Chapter 14. She was also to be influential as a member of the Australian Better Health Commission in the establishment of a committee to study medical education, including the doctor-patient relationship.


5. Irwin, J, ‘Lecture: Full-time psychiatric work with students’.


11. Irwin, J 1969, Medical Women’s Association: Discussion on Drugs.

12. Irwin, J 197?, ‘Emotional problems of university students’.


23. Srivastava, R 2014, ‘Of course homeopathy doesn’t work-but patients don’t want to hear it’, *The Guardian*, 11 April, 
Chapter 13

A Feminist is Born

It was not without some degree of trepidation that Janet had faced the prospect of living in Christchurch. Christchurch, settled in 1850, ‘would remain visibly English in character and appearance, and in the manners of its citizenry, for its first 100 years.’ Christchurch citizens prided themselves on establishing their connections to the First Four Ships and they relished their status as part of the ‘Establishment’. Not only was Janet of Scottish heritage, she was from a distinct anti-establishment background. Fortunately, it was the late 1960s and the times in Christchurch were a-changing as much as they were elsewhere. Janet herself was playing a conscious role in helping that change to occur.

New Zealand after the Second World War and throughout the 1950s had seen very little social change, and the universities were no exception. In 1947, in response to a claim that Canterbury University was a ‘hotbed of communism’, the Student President had described it instead as a ‘hotbed of apathy’. Agreeing, the university student magazine, *Canta*, had claimed in the fifties that ‘Most New Zealand students are conservative in their outlook and little interested in politics’. By the 1960s, however, the pendulum had swung forward. Students in the United States were protesting against the war in Vietnam and campaigning for civil rights. The feminist movement was making its presence felt. This activism spread across the West (although there was a time lag) and New Zealand students were becoming engaged in social and political issues.

One of the issues which reflected the change in thinking was birth control. It was not surprising that the Student Health Service at Canterbury University was dealing with unwanted pregnancies. The traditional attitude to birth control was that denying young people knowledge about contraception would stop them having sex. Any endorsement of birth control measures was construed as encouraging students to have sex. So it was that when the executive of the Canterbury Student Union proposed the installation of contraceptive vending machines on their premises in 1968, they could not get the initiative passed by a special general meeting. Indeed, the proposal itself prompted a public outrage. Many statements, unsupported by evidence, were made about students’ sexual behavior. Questions were asked in Parliament and
the Prime Minister, Sir Keith Holyoake, declared himself ‘disgusted’. Janet was
moved to action. Later, she described how

those of us who worked with students there saw it quite differently. A group of us,
doctors, counselors, chaplains, went to the Vice Chancellor with a prepared statement
praising the students for their responsible attitudes and stressing the need to avoid
unwanted pregnancies. The Vice Chancellor reluctantly agreed to let us print a leaflet
and to give the statement to the press. This we did... The students had, meantime,
installed in the Union a Condomat which extruded lengths of garden hose which
users could cut to the required length.

Janet and others who had approached the Vice Chancellor on the subject felt that it
would be useful to have some reliable information on the sexual knowledge, attitudes
and behavior of their students. With the approval of the University Council, all first
year students were given a questionnaire in the medical interview, completion of
which was voluntary. The exercise was also intended to have an educational function
in that:

it gave students an opportunity to discuss any problems they may have had, to ask for
information, and established the Student Health Service as an appropriate place to
seek advice should problems, or the need for contraception arise.

The questionnaire was completed by 2175 students (98.2% of first year students). The
majority of those who refused were overseas students, and overseas Asian students
were excluded.

In answer to the question, ‘Have you ever had or attempted to have sexual
intercourse’, 27% of males and 22.5% of females said ‘Yes’. Only 14% said that they
had been sexually active in the last three months and of these, 76.7 % said that this
was with a steady partner. (66.6% of males and 90% of females) In relation to
contraception, 12% stated that they used no contraceptives; 25.8% relied on the so-
called safe period, 29% relied on coitus interruptus, 46.6% used condoms, 17.2% used
the pill and 1.3% the diaphragm. Some used more than one method. Of those who did
not use contraception 39% said that it was because of non-availability. Females were
most likely to get information about sex from their mothers; males from friends or
books; only 23% of the total obtained their information from formal sex education
classes at school. Yet, 93% approved of sex education in schools and 48% felt it
should start at primary school level.
The questionnaire was given to students enrolling in 1969 and 1970. Up to the end of 1971, twenty-four girls from this sample reported to the Student Health Service that they were pregnant. (This may well not represent the total number of pregnancies as some may have gone to other doctors.)

Janet had hoped to reduce the number of illegitimate births by making contraceptive advice freely available. However, when Janet started working at the Health Service, the Director of the Health Service did not prescribe the pill, referring students instead to a GP who did. Janet believed that the Service needed to set an example in this regard. The non-availability of contraceptives was, however, a major issue. No doubt the published results of this survey were influential in determining the outcome of a second proposal by the Student Union for the installation of contraceptive vending machines in 1971, ‘which was easily ratified by a meeting said to be unusually well attended and the decision was accepted by Council’.

The University of Canterbury Students’ Association magazine, *Canta*, decided to feature a series of written sex education lectures from social and medical counselors. In hers, Janet declared the ineffectiveness of the so-called rhythm (safe period) method and stressed that the Health Service doctors were always willing to discuss methods of contraception. In the following issue, a Dr Pat Dunn took issue with this approach. Later, *Canta* was to publish an article by an Australian, Dr Brereton, on the need for abortion law reform which again was contested by Dr Dunn in the following issue. Janet then wrote a letter to *Canta* setting out in detail her views as to why reform of the law was necessary. Unsurprisingly, Dr Dunn again responded complaining of the involvement of student unions in the abortion issue.

New Zealand abortion laws were based on British legislation. Under the 1961 Crimes Act (N.Z.), abortion was a crime punishable by up to fourteen years imprisonment, however ‘No one is guilty of any crime who before or during the birth of a child causes its death through means employed in good faith for the preservation of the life of the mother.’ When Janet was in Edinburgh, the UK Parliament had passed more liberal legislation. Their Abortion Act of 1967 allowed for abortion if two registered medical practitioners were of the opinion, formed in good faith, that to continue the pregnancy would endanger the physical or mental health of the pregnant woman or any existing children of her family; or that there was a substantial risk that, if the child were born, it would suffer from such physical and mental abnormalities as to be seriously handicapped. Janet had been impressed by the way doctors like Sir
Dugald Baird responded to the issue and by the fact that Scotland had treated abortion as a health issue rather than a criminal one for some time. She was aware, however, that not all doctors would share her opinion.

Two New Zealand specialists in obstetrics and gynaecology decided to take action to make sure that New Zealand did not follow suit in liberalising the law. Professor Sir William Liley had been responsible for a medical breakthrough in which blood transfusions were carried out on unborn children at risk because of blood group incompatibility with their mothers. Dr Pat Dunn was a devout Catholic and the man who contested Janet’s views in Canta. They called a meeting at Auckland Town Hall in early 1970 to rally the public to set up an organization to uphold and protect the rights of the unborn child. ‘Half way through his presentation on the humanity of the unborn child, Sir William called for silence while he played a tape of the amplified heart beat of a 10 week-old foetus. The rapid, swishing, thumping sound echoing around the vast Town Hall had a galvanizing affect on the audience.’19 Both doctors travelled around New Zealand promoting the cause, and by 1972, the Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child (SPUC) had twenty-four branches and 200,000 members. Ruth Kirk, the wife of the Prime Minister, became a member and the organization claimed that more than thirty members of parliament were members.10

In response, members of the community who felt that abortion should be a decision between a woman and her doctor formed the Abortion Law Reform Association of New Zealand (ALRANZ). It was not a feminist organization although some of its members were undoubtedly feminists. Its aims were to change the laws along the lines of the UK 1967 Act and to promote education on contraception and make it freely available. Not only did it obtain support from leading figures in the medical community, ALRANZ was keen to rally as many sectors of the community as possible to its cause. Sir Edmund Hillary and the politician and author John A Lee were among its supporters. The more radical Women’s National Abortion Action Campaign (WONAAC), established in 1973, argued that the laws making abortion illegal should be completely repealed and that abortion should be a decision for the woman alone. They believed that ‘until women had control of their reproductive capacities, they would not be able to partake fully in paid employment, education and other areas of life if they so desired.’11

Janet was invited by the University’s Staff Wives Club to participate in a panel discussion on abortion. About fifty women attended and there was a lively discussion.
Later, she said about this event, ‘I realized that these educated intelligent women were very concerned about the issues and that they felt that the legal situation in New Zealand was unclear and that they did not know where to turn in the event of an unwanted pregnancy.’\textsuperscript{12} Janet was also invited to speak at a symposium on abortion organized by the Obstetrics and Gynaecology Society at Christchurch Women’s Hospital. She started her presentation by stating:

I am glad to be here as a woman, surprisingly the only woman speaking here today. I think that it is often forgotten that abortion is women’s business. Policies are laid down, legislation is passed and women’s voices have hardly been heard.\textsuperscript{13}

She also spoke on the issue to the Association of Anglican Women, in a debate with Professor James Gwynne, Pathologist at the University of Otago Medical School, in 1972, and at the New Zealand Medico-Legal Society Conference in 1974.

When the President of the New Zealand Medical Association (then a branch of the British Medical Association) made comment in the press that doctors in New Zealand did not see the need for any change in the abortion laws, Janet doubted that this was likely to be the case. She convinced the Christchurch branch of the New Zealand Medical Women’s Association of the need to carry out a survey of medical practitioners on the issue. Robin Gregson, Professor of Psychology at Canterbury University, was enlisted to assist with the drafting of the document and financial support was secured from a local medical bookseller and publisher. The survey canvassed all registered medical practitioners in New Zealand regarding their knowledge of the law and their attitude to reform.

Just over half, 1726 of the country’s 3400 registered doctors responded.\textsuperscript{6}

\textsuperscript{6} The survey provided for four possible answers to each option for termination: an unqualified yes (Y), a qualified yes (QY), an unqualified no (N) and a qualified no (QN). The results were clear:

- 88.6\% were unqualifiedly in favour of abortion when the mother’s life was in danger; 3.5\% were unqualifiedly against.
- 64\% Y when her physical health might be impaired; 11.4\% N.
- 60.4\% Y when there is a significant risk that the mental or emotional health of the mother might be jeopardized; 12.5\% N.
- 59.7\% Y when there is a significant risk that the child would be born mentally or physically defective; 17.3\%N.
- 73.6\% Y when the pregnancy results from rape or incest of a girl under 16 years of age; 9.9\% N.
- 60.4\% Y when the pregnancy results from rape or incest of a girl over 16 years of age; 13.7\% N.
- 12.3\% Y when requested by a single woman; 54.1\% N.
The results published in the New Zealand Medical Journal in 1969 were as Janet had predicted. More than two thirds thought that the law should be liberalized. However, a significant number were unclear regarding the specific provisions of the current laws and their implications.\(^{14}\)

Janet had become interested in the issue of abortion when she was a first year medical student in 1941. Her father had a Maori patient, a mother of nine, who was again pregnant. She had experienced dangerous bleeding after the last couple of births, and he was afraid she would die if she had another baby. He wanted to perform an abortion. But the patient consulted the local priest who told her she had to go through with the pregnancy. She did and died giving birth, leaving ten motherless children. Within a year, the eldest daughter was pregnant to her father.\(^ {15}\)

Then a classmate of Janet’s at Medical School whose fiancé was overseas in the air force found out she was pregnant. She underwent an illegal abortion from a bootmaker who carried out backyard abortions in the same street as the Medical School. She was one of the fortunate ones who survived. Janet learned about abortion as a medical student, not in the classes on Obstetrics and Gynaecology, but from Medical Jurisprudence and the Bourne case in the UK. In 1938, Sir Alec Bourne, a British gynaecologist, gave himself up to police after aborting a young woman who had been gang raped by a group of soldiers. He was tried but acquitted, the case setting a precedent for performing an abortion to preserve a woman’s mental health.

In 1944, a New Zealand general practitioner was struck off the Medical Register and jailed for performing illegal abortions. His three children were at Medical School with Janet. ‘They held their heads high and I’m proud to say that their classmates did not reject them. But it was a tragedy for the family and a harsh judgment on a man who had been trying to help women who found themselves in desperate circumstances.’\(^ {16}\) All of these experiences were to influence Janet’s own response as a doctor to the issue of abortion.

- 11.8% Y when requested by a married woman; 51.4% N.
- 23.7% Y when the economic circumstances of the mother’s home life make a limit on her family size desirable; 45.8% N.
- 43.2% Y when the mother is intellectually handicapped; 21.7% N.
- 38.7% only with the consent of the husband in the case of a married woman; 30.9% N.
The question of referral for abortion arose in respect of some of her patients at the Student Health Service. Relying on the decision in the Bourne case, she would provide a detailed psychiatric report in making her referrals. However, ultimately, the power resided with the gynaecologists who had, after all, to do the operations. Some were helpful, but unpredictable. They would agree if the woman concerned was from the right side of the tracks. They could identify with her problems. I learned always to mention it if the patient had been to a private school! Others were harsh in their judgments and unkind to women seeking abortions. One even said, when discussing the possible liberalisation of the laws, ‘We don’t want to give up the power.’17

One of Janet’s colleagues had a patient, a single parent with the care of elderly parents as well as two children, who had become pregnant after drinking too much at a party. He made a strong recommendation for a therapeutic abortion but the gynaecologist refused, whereupon the patient put her head in the gas oven and suicided.

ALRANZ set up a Medical Aid Centre which performed abortions in Auckland. Women from all over New Zealand travelled there with referrals from psychiatrists; however, members of SPUC and their sympathisers would picket the clinic. When a woman arrived to have an abortion they would be praying and singing hymns. ‘You are killing your baby. You mustn’t murder your child,’ they would proclaim. Sometimes they would even follow her home to inform her family that she had had an abortion.18 The alternative to the Auckland clinic was to travel to Sydney where it was not necessary to make out psychiatric grounds for the procedure. SPUC put great pressure on the New Zealand government to close down the Auckland clinic, and in 1974, it did so. The local branch of ALRANZ organized a protest march in Christchurch. One of the staff wives who was a clinical psychologist, Gail Adams, asked Janet if she was going on the march and Janet responded that protest marches were ‘not my thing’. Gail’s response was ‘Well, I’m going, because for me it’s all about whether women can make their major life decisions or whether they can’t’. That was enough to spur Janet into action. Indeed, she ended up leading the march with Gail and carrying the banner. Later she was to describe this as a turning point in her life, the day she became a feminist.19

The government, however, was determined to push through legislation to satisfy SPUC supporters and, in 1977, introduced very restrictive legislation.
had left New Zealand for Australia in 1974 but she kept in touch with what was happening there. ‘Women had to front up to a committee – a diabolical system in my opinion, and there was a complex system of consultants who sat in judgment.’ Over time, however, public hospitals set up outpatient facilities for abortion and the law was interpreted much more liberally. ‘I’ve heard that one of the gynaecologists who is making the most money out of it all is the one who opposed us so much back in the ‘60s. He’s using his power in a different way now.’

The issue of abortion did not move into the past when Janet moved to Queensland. Another New Zealander had moved there ahead of her and assumed the role of Premier of the State. Just as in New Zealand, she would be faced with a government intent on making the laws on abortion even more restrictive. This time, Janet would be playing a very active role in challenging that initiative. But first, she had to settle into life in Brisbane and focus on her work as Director of the University of Queensland Student Health Service.


15. Irwin, J, ‘My life and abortion’.


17. Irwin, J, ‘My life and abortion’.


Chapter 14

A Team Approach

In any talk she was to give about her life in medicine, and she was to give many, Janet always stressed the role that mentors had played, and acknowledged their contribution to her career. In most cases those mentors were male. It was very rare for a woman to hold a position of power in the medical profession in those days, as is still somewhat the case. To do so, they needed the encouragement and acknowledgement of the men in positions of power. Indeed, in many areas of medicine, such as surgery and orthopaedics, women found it impossible to get in the door, let alone rise to the top. One of the doors that was open to them was psychological medicine, perhaps because the subjective nature of this field was more seemingly aligned to the feminine. In any event, that doctors in this area are less conservative in their thinking has been verified by research. It was Dr Wallace Ironside who had suggested to Janet that she apply for the position at Canterbury University. It was now Dr Murray Williams, the Director of the University of Queensland Health Service, who suggested that she apply for the position he was vacating after hearing her deliver a paper on student health issues at a conference in Auckland.

Janet would be the first woman in Australasia to be appointed to such a position. This raises the question of what qualities Janet possessed which led these men to disregard the issue of gender or indeed perhaps even consider it an asset. One factor was obviously their own open-mindedness. As for Janet, her demeanour left you in no doubt that she was to be taken seriously, and when she opened her mouth, it was clear that she kept herself well informed on issues and was open-minded to differing ideas and responses. Like her father, she was both a natural leader and an innovative thinker, and she related well to other people. As we will see, she had a knack for involving people in issues she felt passionately about, and she was strategic in her approach to getting things done. She knew that it sometimes took time to get people onside; that you could not assume that other people saw the world as you did. Further, she was older when she started practicing medicine and had more life experience which gave her an appreciation of the complexity of human behaviour.

The Student Health Service at the University of Queensland had an interesting history. Douglas Gordon, Foundation Professor of Preventive and Social Medicine at
the university since 1957, had become aware that there were significant health issues facing university students, that the medical advice they were receiving was of limited value and that academic staff needed assistance in interpreting and assessing medical certificates. There was, however, no funding available for the novel idea of a student health service run by a university. The student union at Adelaide University had established a health service in 1946 but it was not until the 1960s that universities started to fund such services. Fortunately, Professor Gordon was an innovator. He had previously worked at the Queensland State Health Department under the Director-Generalship of Sir Raphael Cilento, a name to become famous for the pioneering medical work of its family members. Gordon had been in charge of a field very much in its infancy, what was then known as Industrial Hygiene, and which we now call Workplace Health and Safety. At that time his focus was on hazards associated with mining, rural industries, soap and battery manufacture and asbestos dust, but he had also become aware of the health risk posed by workplace stress. He recognized the importance of ensuring that university study was not a health hazard and he was going to do something about it. Gordon was undeterred by lack of funding, and by the fact that he had already taken a hands-on role running an outpatients’ clinic at the Brisbane General Hospital, in addition to his role at the university.

He co-opted the University of Queensland Students’ Union to set up a clinic under his direction, run, with the assistance of medical students, from his academic office. He also enticed Dr Murray Williams, then studying adolescent health at Harvard University, to join him in his endeavours, even though it was nearly two years before the University offered Williams paid work. The first official Student Health Centre run by the university opened in 1961 but, even when Williams became a full-time health officer, the enterprise was chronically short of money for his needs. Like Gordon, Williams was determined that the Service would be a success. As the *UQ Alumni News* was to acknowledge, ‘he worked heroically but eventually fell victim to the very work-related stress he strove to prevent in students and had to resign’. When Janet arrived to take his place, she found the Health Service exactly what she had hoped for: a multi-disciplinary service with doctors and nurses working as colleagues, an approach which her father certainly would have favoured. There was a Deputy Director and two part-time medical officers; two visiting psychiatrists; and
three nurses, two full-time and one part-time. The service also had a working relationship with the Counselling Service. The secretary of the Health Service at the time, June Marshall, ‘knew everyone and everything about how the University worked and gave me enormous support’. Indeed, Janet was delighted by the sense of community she was to experience at the University of Queensland when she arrived.

In any one day, I might have face-to-face contact with anyone from the man who picked up the garbage or cut the grass, to the Registrar or the Vice-Chancellor. Sir Zelman Cowen used to visit many departments on a drop-in basis, including the Health Service. He knew us all, including the departmental secretaries.

The accommodation for the Health Service left a lot to be desired. The nurses, particularly, worked in appallingly cramped conditions with little privacy. Janet was determined to ensure that this situation was remedied. The university administration was kept regularly informed of the problems caused by the lack of appropriate space and facilities. Janet was always strategic in her approach, not making excessive demands and always acknowledging the financial constraints on the university. But she was persistent, and clear about the implications for both staff and students from a health and safety point of view if her concerns were not addressed. It took time and it happened in a piecemeal fashion, but the accommodation situation did improve. Janet was also concerned about health and safety issues on campus generally and, soon after her arrival, arranged for the service to keep detailed records of the nature and place of accidents dealt with by the staff.

Like her predecessor, Janet was not one for hierarchical structures and she treated all the staff in the Health Service as colleagues. She instituted weekly meetings at which they planned their work as a team. The nursing staff were not restricted in the roles they might play according to the traditional doctor-nurse relationship. Over time, with her support, they were to operate as nurse practitioners with a more expanded and responsible role than many nurses have even today. Likewise, Janet encouraged her office staff to pursue projects of interest to them. Elizabeth Cottee, who was to become Janet’s extremely hard-working secretary, was undertaking a Bachelor of Arts degree, majoring in Sociology. When the Health Service noticed a very high incidence of gastro-intestinal upsets in students of some faculties at exam time, Janet encouraged Elizabeth to carry out a research project on the issue for her course. Elizabeth found that the highest incidence was amongst
students of EC134, an economics subject. Janet used to delight in reporting this research and exclaiming, ‘Clearly, Economics gave the students the shits (excuse my language)’. A consistent advocate for her staff, she was to become involved in the establishment of a University of Queensland Secretaries Association in 1976 and assume the role of its Patron from 1984 until 1990. She was also appointed to the General Staff Promotions Committee. The staff responded very positively to this team approach and there was very little attrition amongst her team notwithstanding a difficult physical work environment and heavy workloads. Nola Chambers, who worked as a medical receptionist at the time, recalls that Janet impressed me from the start by saying that family always came first and if my children were sick I was not to come to work but stay home with them (not many bosses say that!) I soon learned that Janet was a staunch advocate for women’s rights and women’s liberation - something I had not been exposed to. Janet always treated her staff like family and wanted us to reach our full potential. I was just a medical receptionist but Janet called me into her office one day and wanted to know what I wanted for ‘me’. Having a husband and two daughters, I was always on the go looking after them and working in between. I told her I had always been interested in learning about ‘how and why’ people tick. This may sound silly but Janet knew exactly what I meant and organized a Uni Course for me to go to that lasted 12 weeks (at night) run by two Psychologists, and the Health Service paid. I absolutely loved every minute of this Course and it made me think outside the square for the first time and recognize that I was a person too and not just someone’s wife and mother (even though I loved both roles).

Having a productive relationship, and not just a token one, with other related services was also important to Janet as she had demonstrated at the University of Canterbury. She organised weekly meetings with the Counselling Service. She also became a member of the Chaplaincy Committee and regularly attended their meetings. To familiarize herself with related health service providers, Janet started visiting medical laboratories, x-ray services, the Occupational Therapy and Physiotherapy Departments, and the Queensland Institute of Technology (as QUT was then known) Optometry Clinic. She was always quick to invite other health professionals to visit the University Health Service, and likewise encourage her staff to visit them. The newly appointed Deputy Vice-Chancellor, fellow New Zealander Professor George Davies from the Department of Dentistry, accepted her request to visit the Health Service and was to be a great support in the future. In the meantime, Janet was...
invited onto a Vice-Chancellor’s Committee to investigate matters relating to physically handicapped students.  

Next on the list was a visit to the various academic departments to make sure they were aware of the work being done by the Health Service and to discuss ways in which co-operation would be beneficial. One issue which was repeatedly mentioned was the difficulty they were finding in assessing medical certificates, especially those from outside the university. Janet devised criteria for the issue of certificates which maintained privacy for students in relation to their health issues, while at the same time ensuring that the need for special consideration was clearly established. She was, keen to develop a special relationship with the Medical Faculty and, because of her particular interest in mental health issues, was invited to lecture to fifth year students in the Department of Psychiatry.

The university colleges were not neglected. Janet introduced herself to all the colleges on campus, giving talks to their students and arranging for the Heads of Colleges to visit the Health Service. It was agreed that the nursing staff of the service would visit sick students in the colleges where appropriate. Janet was to establish a particular connection to Women’s College and was to be a member of their governing Council from 1977 to 1984. Dr Beverley Angus, who was Head of the College at the time, remembers Janet addressing the ‘freshers’ in Orientation Week on the various issues which would affect them as young, independent adults, in terms ‘which did not flinch from addressing delicate topics most pragmatically’.

Janet’s ability to relate to people is clear from the fact that she was able to exert such an influence not only on campus but also in relation to medical matters in the broader community. She was soon leading groups organized by the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners Family Medicine Programme to introduce fledgling GPs to medical life outside the walls of hospitals, and to retrain GPs returning to practice. Continuing the work she had done in Christchurch, she set up a Balint group for established GPs in Brisbane. It is easy to forget that she had only recently arrived in Brisbane and was, in effect, an outsider in a city which many characterized as a large country town and where everyone knew everyone else. Nothing seemed to daunt her and others readily accepted her authority.

Indeed, she was invited to deliver an Inaugural Lecture to the University, the first time the head of a non-academic department was to be honoured in this way. Her title was ‘People, problems and pills.’ She started by dismissing the traditional
illness-oriented approach to medicine and the unhealthy relationship it fostered between the medical profession and the large international drug companies. She related how a company who wanted her to prescribe their diuretics gave her a rather blatant gift of a recording of Handel’s ‘Water Music’.

In defining the aims of the University Health Service, she stressed the importance of an awareness of mental health issues in carrying out their clinical role. Another important focus was preventive medicine practised both in practical ways such as immunization but also in educational terms both at the university and the community level. Janet emphasized the need for liaison between student services, and for co-operation with academics and administrators. As far as the students were concerned, the Centre’s aim was always ‘to work towards independence and autonomy’. And she had no doubt that in the future it would be necessary to develop the occupational health side of the Health Service’s work. This was to prove particularly so in relation to the epidemic of Repetitive Strain Injury (RSI) in the 1980s when a joint enterprise with the Physiotherapy and Occupational Therapy departments was to prove very successful.

It was clear from her speech that Janet was a ‘big picture’ person. She had a plan not only for the Health Service but for the university as a whole and the community at large. The way she perceived her own role as Director was markedly different from that of the traditional doctor working in an institutional setting with a private practice on the side. For a start, there was no private practice on the side bringing in an extra income. Like her father, she was never driven by the desire to make money even if, unlike him, she did have rather expensive tastes in shoes. And notwithstanding her responsibilities as Director (which she clearly perceived in an open-ended way), she undertook a full clinical load, seeing the same number of patients as other doctors in the service. The scope and demands of the workload which she was to undertake on top of that were extraordinary as we shall see.


15. Irwin, J 1975, ‘People, problems and pills: inaugural lecture delivered at the University of Queensland’. University of Queensland Press, Brisbane.
Chapter 15
A Broader View

Keen to keep up with latest developments in the many disciplines involved in student services, and also to establish productive networks, Janet not only became an active member of the Australia and New Zealand Student Services Association but was soon elected Medical Vice-President.\(^1\) She helped organize a weekend meeting of Queensland members of the association at the Darling Downs Institute of Advanced Education (now the University of Southern Queensland) in Toowoomba in 1978. Her Monday meetings with the Counselling Service now focused on a discussion of clinical problems and were also attended by the visiting psychiatrists and the nursing staff of the Health Service. She was always open to suggestions about ways in which the Health Service might be improved and how it might better interact with other services. She became aware, however, that there were wide variations in the provision of student services nationally but this was not documented, nor were there any guidelines.

When, in 1978, the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission solicited suggestions for research funds and one of the possible topics was an evaluative study of student services, Janet immediately saw the potential of such a project. Independent research of this nature could provide a national picture. It could promote a climate in which student service providers evaluated their services with the input of the broader tertiary community. And it just might encourage on-going discussion about the role of student services in tertiary institutions. Janet got together with Dr Thiele, the Head of Counselling Services, to put forward a submission and this was approved by the Commission.\(^2\) The project as it developed under the direction of the Tertiary Education Institute at the University of Queensland was a major enterprise.

It involved, firstly, gathering information about student services of all types in the then three sectors of tertiary education: universities, institutes of technology, and
the technical and further education bodies known as TAFEs. Secondly, an evaluation of student services in all those sectors was to be carried out. d

There was, of course, no guarantee that the project’s researchers or its subjects would view the situation the same visionary way Janet did. Student services were short of staff and tertiary institutions were short of funds. Then there was the daunting scope of the project. A Report on Student Services in Tertiary Education in Australia was released in 1982. It was not able to come up with recommended guidelines.

A study of this kind, enquiring into a complex nation-wide operation, inevitably raises questions rather than providing answers. The hopeful justification is that the formulation of the questions is a significant step towards illumination and deeper understanding of the issues. 4

However the researchers did come to some conclusions, including the need for tertiary institutions to develop a ‘well-considered student services policy for educational reasons and for reasons to do with the health of the institution, but not for reasons of finding an area where cuts in resources might not be too unpopular’. 5 The Report discussed the need for more communication and co-operation both within student services and between student services and the broader tertiary community. And it came to the conclusion that ‘student services staff, particularly health and counseling staff, have a legitimate watchdog role concerning the general health and safety of the institution, drawing attention to matters which need attention.’ 6 This, of course, was the expanded role that Janet had envisaged and advocated in her inaugural lecture in 1975.

Janet was now giving lectures on community medicine to fourth year medical students as well as lectures to final year students in psychiatry, and tutoring in social medicine to first year students. The Health Service was also assisting medical students with various research projects. She became concerned about the number of medical students presenting with stress related problems. e

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4 Sources of data included academic and administrative staff, students and student services staff and published and unpublished material regarding student services. Methods of data collection included interviews, discussions, case studies, invited and uninvited letters, submissions and telephone calls, and several different questionnaires. ‘A significant feature of the methodology was the invitation to interested individuals in student services to study and comment upon draft sections of the report and on the draft of the complete final report.’

5 [Many years later, Janet was to receive the following letter:}
Medical students had problems in common with other university students, of course but, as Professor Wallace Ironside had established at the University of Otago, they were less likely to seek help, and often left it until it was too late. There were also specific issues relating to expectations of, and by, students enrolled in medicine because they were the top students in their classes at secondary school. Medical students had to absorb huge amounts of information in their early years and then faced the prospect of the new and frightening world of the hospital in their final years. Female students had few role models and the medical course made no allowance for part-time postgraduate training in what potentially were their child-bearing years.7

After referring four medical students in their fourth or fifth year for psychiatric assessment in the first month of the first semester in 1981, Janet spoke with Dr Bevan Wiltshire of the Counselling Service and found they were observing the same phenomena. They raised the issue with the Dean of Medicine, Professor Ralph Doherty, and came up with a proposal to conjointly run a seminar on the issue.8 The rationale for the seminar was to encourage students to discuss aspects of their course which caused them to feel anxious and stressed, and then, together with their educators, look at ways of addressing the problems.

The seminar, Stress in the Medical Course, held in 1982, was attended by students from all years of the course at the University of Queensland as well as from most medical courses in Australia, as well as medical educators. At that time, medical education in Australia was based on the English model and followed a discipline-oriented curriculum with an emphasis on factual content and elementary clinical skills, with the final two years of the course consisting of clinical teaching of hospital–based specialties. The 1973 Report of the Committee on Medical Schools to the Australian Universities Commission (Karmel Report) had recommended more innovative admission and educational policies but there was resistance within the profession to change. Change was to come initially, not from the sandstone sector but

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In 1976, I was a 5th year medical student with anxiety and panic attacks (largely precipitated by the study of psychiatry!), and although I never asked or knew what to expect, I was a little surprised that you never suggested any tablets. Instead, I learnt (slowly and painfully – but I learnt!) to understand and manage the symptoms in other ways. Since then, I have, while seeing people with similar problems (and even in the midst of the occasional panic attacks I still have) many times breathed a silent thanks to you – thanks for doing the best and hardest thing for me back then and for not letting me learn any quick, easy solutions.]
from the new medical schools at the University of Newcastle and Flinders University. One of the speakers at the seminar, Professor Beverley Raphael of the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Newcastle Medical School, was able to report on important innovations occurring there, such as problem-based learning, rather than a focus on disease, and the expansion of community-based learning, rather than only hospital-based. The seminar was considered an outstanding success. ‘Much of the work of the seminar was done in small groups and it was interesting to find, for example, a 12th grade student hoping to enroll in medicine, and Emeritus Professor Douglas Gordon in the same group.’

When Janet attended the Australia and New Zealand Association for Medical Education (ANZAME) conference at the University of Newcastle the following year, discussion with staff and students from other medical schools confirmed that the seminar on Stress in the Medical Course had initiated continuing discussion of the problems. Professor Doherty was to go on to head an enquiry into Australian medical education and the Australian workforce in 1988 which recommended that undergraduate medical education embrace self-directed learning, community involvement, maximal use of new technology, and innovative student selection methods not restricted to student grades in secondary school. Both Janet and Elizabeth Cottee made submissions to the inquiry and they were both subsequently interviewed.

In her work both at the University of Canterbury and at the University of Queensland, Janet had continued her interest, and developed her expertise, in adolescent medicine. In 1978, while on leave, she had attended a meeting of the Society for Adolescent Medicine in Chicago which focused on the right of young people to confidential medical care. On her return, she gave a paper titled Adolescence at the Royal Children’s Hospital Centenary Academic Week. The Roe Report on Student Services had endorsed the need for such services, not only in universities but also in other tertiary institutions. Janet’s predecessor at the University

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f ANZAME has since been replaced by a new peak organization, ANZAHPE, a multi-disciplinary body for practitioners involved in the education and training of health professionals. A broader view of medical education has prevailed. The issue of stress in medical training has, however, not gone away. In 2015, the sudden deaths of four medical trainees, three trainee psychiatrists and a hospital intern in Victoria focused national attention on the issue of doctors’ workloads and wellbeing, and raised the question whether mandatory reporting laws in regards to the medical impairment of doctors may be a factor in doctors at risk not seeking help.
of Queensland Health Service, Dr Murray Williams, had recently founded an Australian Association for Adolescent Health (AAAH), concerned that there were adolescents, especially those from poorer socio-economic environments, who were missing out on confidential medical care. Janet attended the AAAH Conference in Melbourne and formed the view that much more was happening in other states than in Queensland. Aware that a multi-disciplinary approach was required, she proposed a seminar on adolescent health to be organized by the University Health Service along with the AAAH and the Department of Child Health. She also gained the interest of The Royal Children’s Hospital and the Mater Children’s Hospital which were also to come on board as did the Postgraduate Medical Education Foundation.

The Adolescent Health Seminar was held in 1984 with speakers from Canada and New Zealand as well as Australia and dealt with a wide range of topics. It was hoped that the seminar would promote the inclusion of a component on adolescent health needs in postgraduate and continuing education courses for health professionals. The seminar also encouraged organisations involved with adolescent health to hold seminars and workshops to promote community awareness of the health needs of adolescents. Attendance was not as large as hoped for but the published Conference Proceedings were in demand after the event, and, in recognition of her expertise, Janet was asked to convene the steering committee for the biennial conference of AAAH in 1988.

In 1985, the Hawke Federal Government made a decision to set up a Better Health Commission charged with the task of identifying Australia’s preventable health problems and of devising strategies for dealing with them. Derek Llewellyn-Jones, then Associate Professor of Obstetrics & Gynaecology at the University of Sydney was appointed Chairman and twelve part-time Commissioners were appointed. Organisations and individuals with an interest in health were invited either

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8 A number of speakers reported on recent research projects they had carried out. The Brisbane Human Nutrition Research Group had studied the body build, smoking and drinking habits and physical fitness of 769 young people aged eleven to twenty-five years. It found that most young people were physically unfit, interestingly the thinner being slightly worse that the heavier. There was a longitudinal report on factors affecting the health of Aboriginal adolescents in Queensland. Children by Choice reported on a sexuality survey and the Family Planning Association on attitudes to and problems with contraception. Anne McMillan, a solicitor with, and founder of, the Youth Advocacy Centre, discussed the requirements to be satisfied for a person under eighteen years to be legally able to consent to medical treatment. Other topics included behavioural problems in disadvantaged adolescents, and adolescents with chronic illness and physical disabilities.
by letter or public advertisement to have their say as to what health matters should be prioritized. h

The terms of reference included the provision that the Commission should have regard to particular ‘at risk’ groups among which were included adolescents. Janet and another member of the Queensland Adolescent Health Association made a written submission to the Commission in that regard. When one of the part-time members resigned later that year, Janet was appointed in her place. The only reference to women’s health in the terms of reference was the inclusion of women in their reproductive years in the at risk group. It was recorded that

women on the Commission including Dr Janet Irwin argued for a comprehensive social view of women’s health…[The Commission] decided that women’s health needed attention because it did not get proper consideration from a male dominated health care system. 16

Janet was invited to be keynote speaker at a seminar in the outback Queensland town of Mt Isa organized by the Women’s Information Service (whose Co-ordinator at the time was Quentin Bryce, later to become Governor of Queensland and Governor-General) and the Union of Western Women. Recommendations from this meeting in relation to the health needs of isolated rural and regional women were included in the final report of the Commission.

As part of her work on the Better Health Commission, Janet also convened two workshops on the health of young people at Bardon in Brisbane, one attended by young people, and the other by youth workers, from all over Australia. The

h There were 530 written submissions received. Oral hearings were also conducted in all capital cities and in Alice Springs and Townsville, at which 304 organisations and individuals were heard. The Commission undertook two surveys of community attitudes: one on the meaning of health and the second on the role of doctors in illness prevention. A series of taskforces were established to address three key areas, namely cardiovascular disease, nutrition and injury.

1 The Commission took into account evidence that women in remote areas were at special risk of depression and the abuse of alcohol and prescription drugs; their diet was often limited; and they lacked family planning and other preventive services. If they were on small family properties, or the families of itinerant workers, they might not be catered for by the Royal Flying Doctor Service (an aeromedical health service for those who live, work, or travel in regional and outback Australia). The Commission accepted recommendations that this problem could be addressed by carefully selected and trained nurses travelling in four-wheel-drive vehicles to provide health education, assessment, preventive and referral services. It concluded that a pilot program of a ‘remote area family support service’ should be developed.
proceedings from these workshops again formed a major part of that section of the report relating to young people.  

Another of the national strategies for better health outlined in the final report, which has Janet’s imprint on it related to educating health professionals:

In order to ensure greater relevance and appreciation of the health of communities, the Commission recommends that the curriculum of each health professional school be reoriented towards health promotion. In addition, these curricula should be reviewed periodically by a committee comprising faculty members, graduates, students and community representatives.

Throughout undergraduate courses of instruction, illness prevention should be integrated into relevant topics and presented in a clinical context. There should be a mechanism for ensuring that students acquire an agreed level of competence.

After graduation, health professionals should be offered courses of training so that they may develop skills in assessing their patients’ health needs, and in patient education and communication.  

The report noted that occupational health was one area that was extremely important but had not received detailed attention in the report. It stated that this was because in late 1985, a National Occupational Health and Safety Commission had been established. The need for the University of Queensland Health Service to establish a focus on this area had been pre-empted by Janet in her 1975 inaugural address and indeed there had been developments in that area as outlined in the next chapter.


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1 Unemployment was seen as the greatest threat to the health of young people. They also lacked reliable information and guidance on sexuality and contraception, diet and nutrition, substance abuse, and where to find existing sources of help. The fact that parents and health professionals in contact with young people also lacked this information compounded the problem.

Many young people, especially those less educated, felt they lacked control over their lives. Uncertainty about medical confidentiality stopped them from seeking contraceptive advice or treatment for sexually transmissible diseases. The Commission recommended that the Commonwealth invite the States to jointly sponsor a national debate on the health of young people with the purpose of ensuring greater participation by young people themselves in determining the content and relevance of future programs. It also recommended that the Commonwealth Office of Youth Affairs establish an effective communications network to enable organisations working in the field of adolescent health to share information and experiences and to avoid wasteful duplication of effort.


5. Roe, E et al., *A report on student services*, p. 137.


7. Irwin, J 198?, ‘Stress in the medical course’, address given at seminar, University of Queensland.


15. Adolescent Health Seminar 1984, *Abbreviated proceedings of the Adolescent Health Seminar, 30th March to 1st April, 1984*, Brisbane, Qld.

Chapter 16

The Value of Research

Having established the fruitfulness of research in her time at Christchurch, Janet was always keen for the University of Queensland Health Service to carry out its own research, but it lacked funding and staffing for that purpose. She did, however, ensure that it assisted university departments with their research projects. Dr Colin Furnival from the Department of Surgery approached the service about being involved in his studies of mastalgia (breast pain), and also in researching the need for biopsies of breast lumps in young women. In the latter regard, the research, which suggested a conservative approach was appropriate, was written up in the *Medical Journal of Australia* with Janet as co-author.\(^1\) Similarly, the Health Service co-operated with the Department of Microbiology in a study of vaginal infections; assisted Professor Mervyn Eadie from the Department of Medicine in observation of the absorption of drugs in the treatment of migraine; and studied sprained ankles with the Department of Physiotherapy. It also worked with the Queensland Institute of Medical Research in a number of research projects involving glandular fever which was a particular problem among the student population.

In 1983, the Health Service became involved in a research project into adolescent sexuality carried out by Beryl Holmes, Education Officer with Children by Choice. In advising about options regarding unplanned pregnancies since 1972, Children by Choice had become concerned about the lack of knowledge, or misinformation, about sexuality among young people. The organization became a public advocate for honest and detailed sex education and relationship courses to be conducted in school time in all schools. To this date, however, the Queensland government had failed to even consider the issue. It was hoped that having statistics about young people from a variety of different backgrounds would back up their arguments.

The survey questionnaire was distributed to both female and male students at health services at the University of Queensland and at Kelvin Grove College of Advanced Education, to Children by Choice clients in Brisbane and Townsville, and to young people involved in Community Youth Support Schemes. Of the 531 surveys completed, 25% of the respondents were male and 75% female. The topics under
discussion were menstruation, wet dreams, homosexuality, venereal disease, contraception, pregnancy, birth, parenting and abortion. Less than a third of the total sample claimed to know a great deal about any of the listed topics, leading Holmes to comment that ‘Parents failed dismally as primary sex educators’. The university respondents were no more satisfied with the extent of their knowledge than the other groups. Fortunately, doctors from the Health Service were invited to the university colleges to talk about sexuality, sexually transmitted diseases and other related issues. The Health Service also took every opportunity, especially during Orientation week, to address the general student population about these issues. A lack of contraceptive availability and unplanned pregnancies were a significant issue for the Health Service and will be discussed in the next chapter.

At the Australian and New Zealand Student Services conference in 1985, Janet learned of a study from the University of Waikato in New Zealand regarding the prevalence in women of infection with *Chlamydia trachomatis*, often undiagnosed, inadequately treated and potentially causative of infertility. It was decided that the Health Service would embark on a similar study. Dr Tony Arklay, who had joined the service as Deputy Director in 1983, conducted the research in conjunction with the Inala Community Health Centre. In both instances, around 4.5% of positive cases were found in women who were asymptomatic, suggesting, among other recommendations, the need for screening in sexually active populations.

Meantime, the Health Service continued to concern itself with issues involving occupational health and safety and Dr Arklay was developing particular expertise in that area. In May, 1984, a fatal accident occurred in the Geology department as the result of a gas cylinder exploding. At considerable personal risk, Dr Arklay attended the premises to examine and care for the victim. At the next meeting of the Senate, the governing body of the University of Queensland, it was agreed that a University Safety Council needed to be established. Janet, who had been elected to the Senate as a representative of full-time graduate staff, the previous year, affirmed the need for such a body to be established in the light of her experience at the Health Service in dealing with accidents and matters related to industrial safety. She drew attention to the fact that the Health Service was a de facto industrial health service but that it lacked the staff it needed for that role. As industrial health matters also needed to be

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k Dr Arklay became Director on Janet’s retirement in 1988, and continues in that role in 2014.
addressed, she asked that the word ‘Health’ be included in the title.⁴ She was also responsible for ensuring that two medical officers were appointed to the Committee including one, Dr Arklay, from the Health Service.⁵

Repetitive Strain Injury was a major problem at the time, stemming from “the rapid introduction of new technology with high output expected from fewer clerical staff.”⁶ The Service worked with the departments of Human Movement and Physiotherapy in a three-pronged approach: prevention, education and management. The outcome was positive. Janet attended the 21st International Occupational Health Congress in Dublin that year and visited occupational health units at the British Broadcasting Corporation and British Telecom. There was cause for celebration the following year when the University of Queensland appointed a Director of Occupational Health and Safety, Mr Barry Pratt, and the Health Service moved into larger premises in the basement of a new building with a dedicated room for occupational health activities.

In the meantime, Janet had become increasingly involved in an occupational health and safety issue of a non-industrial nature. In 1981, she read an article in the student magazine, *Semper Floreat*, about an issue that was interfering with the studies of a number of women students and was “a real threat to women’s academic careers”.⁷

That issue was sexual harassment by male academics. The reporter was Anna Bligh, then Women’s Rights Vice-President of the Australian Union of Students (AUS), who was to go on to become a Member of State Parliament and Premier of Queensland. Women from the University of Queensland, Griffith University, Kelvin Grove College of Advanced Education (CAE), Mount Gravatt CAE and the Seven Hills College of Art had organized a combined campus campaign to address the problem. At a phone-in they conducted, thirty students had called and discussed the impact of this behaviour which proved particularly problematic if students openly displayed their objection, in some cases leading to them failing the subject under discussion.

New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia had equal opportunity or anti-discrimination legislation which included sexual harassment within its domain and had established processes for dealing with such complaints. Queensland, however, had no such legislation. Furthermore, no Queensland campus had any formal mechanism for handling such complaints and no Vice Chancellor or head of any tertiary institution had committed to the issue. The problem was compounded by the
fact that it was becoming the trend for academics accused of harassment to immediately respond by suing the complainant for defamation, such that the AUS had found it necessary to establish a Sexual Harassment Defence Fund to provide financial and legal advice to complainants in this situation.

A patient of Janet’s at the Health Service had recently committed suicide after being sexually harassed by her employer at a part-time job. ‘She had watched the shy, sensitive young woman’s life spiral to depths that led her to a prescription-drug overdose.’ Janet, who was yet to be appointed to the University Senate, approached Professor Davies, then Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic) about the matter, and suggested that he bring to the University’s attention its potential legal responsibility for the actions of its employees. As a result of her initiative, the Vice-Chancellor established an Advisory Committee to handle complaints of sexual harassment at the university in 1981.

The Committee had an educational and preventive role, and, in order to convey the message that sexual harassment was a matter which the university took seriously, the Committee was to be chaired by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor and the other members were to be senior members of staff: the Dean of Social Work, the Deputy President of the Academic Board, Janet in her capacity as Director of Health Services, and the Director of Counselling Services. As it was also the responsibility of the Committee members to hear complaints of harassment, the University of Queensland Union became concerned that students might not be comfortable making a complaint to people of this status. As a result, two women student representatives were added as members.

Concern expressed to Janet by students at one of the female residential colleges, coinciding with several female college students seeking medical treatment as a result of severe sexual harassment, led her to believe that the problem was not confined to behavior by academic staff. She became convinced of the need for research to determine the nature and extent of the problem. The student magazine, *Semper Floreat*, ran an article on sexual harassment in its July, 1982 issue. This article claimed that harassment in the colleges was a serious problem, especially during Orientation week, and one of the university’s best kept secrets. It reported that the Sexual Harassment Committee had raised the idea of conducting a survey of the colleges, and that most of the college heads had agreed, but that the Vice-Chancellor had ‘torpedoed’ it on the basis that it could bring the university into disrepute,
discourage parents from sending their children to colleges and that it was an issue for the colleges themselves and not for the university. (These allegations were later denied by the Vice Chancellor.) The article went on to say that ‘Unconvinced by these arguments, however, the Director of Health Services, Janet Irwin, has decided to go ahead with the survey through individual colleges.’

And, indeed, Janet did proceed with a survey in conjunction with Janet Jones, who lectured in the Department of Sociology. It was envisioned not only as a fact-finding investigation, but also as having an educative function in heightening awareness and facilitating discussion of the problem of sexual harassment. The introduction to the survey report indicates that there had been resistance from the heads of some of the co-educational and male colleges and that a decision had been taken to survey only female students and only some colleges. From the 756 questionnaires mailed out, 422 replies were received. There were also 151 questionnaires completed by non-college female students waiting to be seen at the Health Service. It was emphasized that the survey was not implying that college females were different from other female students nor that males were immune from sexual harassment.

Of those surveyed, 52% reported having been sexually harassed. Those living in co-ed colleges and rented accommodation were more likely to have suffered considerable harassment. One student said that ‘It was quite a terrifying experience to be made feel that sex is a must at Uni, and that, if you are a virgin, it is worse than having the bubonic plague.’ Another spoke of strange males banging on their door, groups of drunken males piling into their rooms without invitation. Eight percent said that the harassment had affected their academic work. One spoke of an incident in the library where ‘the guy was masturbating on the floor near my desk and deliberately shot semen over my legs.’ Twenty students were thinking of leaving their colleges because of the problem, fourteen of whom came from co-ed colleges. The most common offenders were casual male acquaintances. Harassment by male academics occurred in 6% of cases. One student said that the lecturer who was harassing her was on the institute which decided who was accepted into the profession, so that there was too much at stake for her to risk making a complaint. Fifty-nine percent said that pressure was put on females to put up with potentially harassing behaviours in order to be socially accepted. Most respondents were unaware that the university had a complaints system.
Janet was later to report to Professor Davies that a number of female students who came to the Health Service told her that the survey had empowered them to talk about the issue, and that a friend on the council of one of the co-ed colleges reported that they were looking seriously at aspects of college behavior since the survey.\textsuperscript{11}

Guidelines were drawn up for the Sexual Harassment Committee. The primary role of the committee was confirmed as educational and preventive, but it was also given authority to hear individual complaints, to mediate complaints in appropriate cases and to recommend appropriate disciplinary action where warranted. Sexual harassment was defined in detail so that it was not only clear to the Committee in its operations, but they could make it clear to the university community.\textsuperscript{1}

The effects of sexual harassment were also detailed, along with the results of surveys on prevalence of the issue, including the survey carried out by Janet and Janet Jones. It was noted that the magnitude of the problem was difficult to fully estimate given the reluctance of victims to complain for fear of reprisal or even just perceived lack of action. The Guidelines set out specific grievance procedures and made provision for the protection of the privacy of both parties unless formal disciplinary action was taken.\textsuperscript{12}

In 1985, Professor Davies, Chair of the Committee, gave an address to the Australian Institute of Tertiary Education Administrators on Sexual Harassment: a review of problems relating to the establishment of operational guidelines and an evaluation of progress to date. In it, he pointed out that sexual harassment of students could cause physical or psychological problems, depression, loss of interest in

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In general terms sexual harassment may be defined as a serious social issue characterized by any form of sexual advance that is unsolicited, unwelcome and persistent. Such behavior is of particular concern in an academic community where students and staff work in an environment of dependence and trust.

In more specific terms sexual harassment may be described as any attempt to coerce an unwilling person into a sexual relationship, or to subject a person to persistent and unwanted sexual attention or to punish a refusal to comply.

It may involve a wide range of behaviours from verbal innuendo and subtle suggestions to overt demands and physical abuse. In an academic environment harassment may be tolerated in the belief that a member of staff will assign favourable grades to a student who grants sexual favours or unfavourable grades to a student who does not. Conversely members of staff may be harassed by students. Harassment may occur between students. It may occur between persons of the same sex.

In some cases of harassment the person responsible genuinely fails to perceive the effect produced on the recipient. Likewise a sensitive and vulnerable person may misinterpret and thus resent and find offensive verbal or physical advances which a less sensitive person may regard as amusing or even complimentary.\textsuperscript{7}
\end{quote}
education, forced changes in educational plans and feelings of helplessness, and in some cases, severe emotional disturbance. He produced a table of complaints and outcomes from which it could be determined that half the twenty-four complaints received to date were from female students against male members of staff, and the next largest groups were complaints by female students against male students and complaints by female members of general staff against male members of general staff. Just under half the cases were resolved by mediation and conciliation; four cases led to resignation or retirement for the staff members involved; three cases were referred for psychiatric treatment (including a complaint against an extra-terrestrial person); and, only in one case, no action was taken. Other outcomes were reprimand and transfer of examiners or transfer of enrolment.13

Professor Davies indicated that two posters, a brochure and a videotape had been produced in co-operation with Griffith University. He went on to state that:

It is too early to assess the overall effectiveness of our current procedures but we are encouraged by the fact that we have been able to deal satisfactorily with all the problems that have been drawn to our attention. We cannot define the extent to which our attempts to create an awareness of the problem has had upon its incidence in the University community except to say that more people seem to be willing to tell us about incipient problems so that we can intercept them before they become serious.

In 1986, it was determined that the extent of sexual harassment on campus would be monitored by conducting a survey on an adequate sample of male and female staff and students every three years, analyzing the results and disseminating the information. The University Colleges posed a problem because the colleges themselves were privately owned and did not come under the jurisdiction of the university for disciplinary purposes. Educational programs were instituted during Orientation Week where Janet and other Committee members addressed incoming students on the issue and also visited the Colleges to foster awareness. The Committee also became aware of the need to educate specific groups of students such as those about to undertake hospital, school or community placements, and overseas students who may have different cultural expectations. By the beginning of 1989, approximately fifty cases of alleged sexual harassment had been dealt with by the Committee. However, attempts to instigate general university-wide programs in sexual harassment education had not been successful.14
Meanwhile, Janet had been active on this issue at the national level. In 1982, at the Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association conference in Melbourne, she put forward a proposal that

Because of increasing public awareness of and concern about the problem of sexual harassment, we as student service personnel from various disciplines, wish ANZSSA to make representations to all tertiary educational institutions to set up formal systems of communication for the handling of complaints. There is no doubt that this problem exists in the educational system and involves students and staff, male and female. So that allegations may be dealt with confidentially for the protection of the complainant, the person complained against, and the institution, it is essential that such systems be introduced.¹³

It was passed. The following year, ANZSSA conducted its own survey of members. Thirty three institutions replied and in only ten of these had any formal complaint procedures been established.¹⁶ By the following year, however, sexual harassment was being studied and actions taken at the majority of tertiary institutions in Australia. Janet had once again demonstrated the value of research and the power of one persistent person to bring about systemic change.

In 1980, at the United Nations General Assembly in Copenhagen, the Australian Fraser government signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. (Janet had been an Australian representative at the Non-Governmental Organisations Forum which took place in conjunction with that General Assembly.) In 1981, Labor Senator, Susan Ryan introduced a Sex Discrimination Bill as a Private Member’s Bill in the Federal Senate. The affirmative action provisions, however, proved too contentious for it to proceed to a vote. It was not until June 1983, that the Federal government, now under the Prime Ministership of Bob Hawke, introduced legislation in accordance with national obligations under the Convention. The terms had been watered down from Ryan’s original proposal. There were no affirmative action provisions. Exemptions applied to educational institutions established by religious bodies. Sexual harassment was proscribed, but only in employment. The legislation was not proactive but complaints-based, and, of particular concern, the Human Rights Commission (HRC) did not have the power to make binding orders. Not only would a successful complainant need to seek a further order from the Federal Court, but the Federal Court could not endorse an HRC decision, but would have to hear the matter afresh. It would take a very determined complainant to pursue such a convoluted course of action.
Although the proposed legislation was really a toothless tiger, it was seen as a valuable move symbolically. However, this was nearly its undoing. Even though it had bipartisan support initially, it met fierce opposition from a vociferous minority who saw it as undermining the fundamental values of our society. Margot Anthony, wife of the National Party leader, Doug Anthony, said that it would encourage the breakdown of the family unit. Liberal Senator, Austin Lewis foresaw young children maternally deprived and forced into child care, ‘their thumbs stuck in their mouth, all trying to rock themselves to sleep.’ National Party Senator, Ron Boswell, who only retired from politics and from saving society from such threats in 2014, realized immediately that it was a pretext for the spread of Communism. Independent Senator, Brian Harradine who spent thirty years in the Senate himself, immediately identified the real rationale for the bill as abortion on demand. Notwithstanding the obvious non sequitur, he pursued the matter so relentlessly that the Bill was amended to specifically state that it did not apply to ‘the provision of services the nature of which is such that they can only be provided to members of one sex’.

Eighty thousand petitions opposing the Bill were presented to Parliament, mainly from right-wing Christian lobby groups and conservative organisations such as Women Who Want to Be Women. As recorded in a history of the passage of the legislation:

The New Right lobby sought to abolish government consultative groups such as the National Women’s Advisory Council, it attacked the validity of women’s studies courses in universities and arranged for prominent US Moral Majority campaigners to come to Australia to lend their voices to the anti-progressive campaigns.

At this time, there were only six women in the 125 members of the House of Representative and thirteen in the sixty-four in the Senate. The Coalition Opposition decided to allow a conscience vote but after endless negotiation and amendment, the Bill finally passed the parliament, and came into effect on 1 August 1984.

When Janet retired from the University of Queensland in 1988, she certainly did not expect that she would find herself re-employed there but she retained a

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It was not until 1992 that the Act was amended to extend the prohibition on sexual harassment beyond employment to include educational institutions, the provision of goods and services and accommodation. That same year, Quentin Bryce was appointed the second Sex Discrimination Commissioner. In 2011, amendments to the Act redefined sexual harassment to cover conduct which a reasonable person would anticipate could cause offence, humiliation or intimidation; strengthened protections in workplaces and school to protect students regardless of their age; and prohibited sexual
commitment to addressing the issue of sexual harassment. In 1995, a revised three-tier process for dealing with sexual harassment was approved by the UQ Senate. The increased size of the university community necessitated the appointment of twenty Referral Officers as the initial point of contact for complaints. They would provide counsel and support and suggest options. At the next level, a Sexual Harassment Conciliator was to be appointed, someone who was independent of the mainstream university structures and would, therefore, be seen to be impartial as well we acting in an impartial fashion. Unresolved cases from the Referral Officers would go to the Conciliator who would seek informal resolution or, where necessary, consult the Deputy Vice Chancellor who was responsible for formal complaints.

By this time, Janet had acquired considerable experience in the fair handling of complaints. On her appointment to the University Senate, one of the many committee which Janet was to serve on was the Appeals Committee which dealt with appeals by students against adverse decisions, and appeals by staff on disciplinary matters. After retiring from the University Health Service, she was to be involved in a number of positions involving the review of administrative decisions. In her role as a part-time Commissioner on the Criminal Justice Commission, she was responsible for establishing procedures to handle complaints by police officers regarding promotions, transfers and disciplinary matters and also for hearing those complaints and making recommendations to the Police Commissioner. As a Tribunal Member on the Immigration Review Tribunal and later, the Social Security Appeals Tribunal, she was involved in objectively weighing up written and oral evidence by the appellant against the evidence of the Government department involved, and making a recommendation or determination as to the appropriate outcome.

harassment through new technologies. The amendments did not go so far, however, as to place a positive obligation on employers to take all reasonable steps to avoid sexual harassment in their workplace.

The Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC) has conducted its own research into the issue by way of National Telephone Surveys on Sexual Harassment in 2003, 2008 and 2012. The most recent survey found that it is still a persistent and pervasive problem in Australian workplaces, and that limited progress has been made in addressing the problem. Further, the AHRC reported in 2012:

there has been a significant increase in the number of people who have experienced negative consequences (eg victimization) as a result of making a formal report or complaint of sexual harassment. Furthermore, understanding and reporting of sexual harassment remain low.19

Further research is clearly vital to establishing the need for action to be taken, but the willingness of politicians and others in positions of authority to respond appropriately is another matter altogether.
This experience led to her appointment to the Conciliator role in 1996, a role she maintained until the end of 1999. In interviews at the time of her appointment, she said that the University of Queensland had put considerable resources into changing the culture in which sexual harassment was acceptable. ‘But it’s a shifting population – thousands of students come in every year and a lot of them can be very vulnerable or insecure. Prime examples of youth culture encouraging sexual harassment were orientation week initiation ceremonies.’ In another interview, she spoke, presciently, of the internet and email as possible new avenues for sexual harassment. Above all, she wanted to be clear about exactly what her role involved:

> Every case has to be dealt with on its merits. The outcomes depend on what transpires in the conciliation process. I hope complainants will be confident that I will be understanding, and I hope that respondents will believe that I’ll be fair. I’ll certainly do my best to ensure fair outcomes and resolve some cases without recourse to a higher authority.


12. Guidelines for the Sexual Harassment Committee 1983, University of Queensland Sexual Harassment Committee of the Vice-Chancellor.


Chapter 17

Once More into the Political Fray

The 1980 Annual Report for the University Health Service noted that a number of female students had presented with unplanned pregnancies, despite the service’s efforts at education in this area, and the, by then, ready availability of contraceptive services. It stated:

A number have been referred for therapeutic termination of pregnancy and I would like to express my appreciation of the excellent service given by Children by Choice in counseling these patients and giving them necessary information. Also to the doctors at the Greenslopes Fertility Control Clinic and the two clinics at Tweed Heads. The matter of unwanted pregnancies is one of great concern and we do everything possible to assist, support and follow up the unfortunate women who find themselves in this predicament. Those who continue with the pregnancy are also given maximum support and referred for supportive obstetric care.¹

This all sounds very matter of fact, even unremarkable and benign. But, behind that paragraph, a battle had taken place: a battle which is recorded in nine boxes and forty-two folders of the Fryer Library at the University of Queensland²; a battle whose story is told by its three leading protagonists, Susan Davies, Beryl Holmes and Janet herself in the unpublished work, Struggle for Choice. They were unlikely warriors on the face of it: a journalist, an education officer, and a doctor.³

In order to understand this battle, it is important to consider the broader social context and remember what a time of social and cultural transformation the 1970s were. There was a deep sense that life was changing for the better, that society was becoming more equal and that women’s voices were finally being heard. The election of the Federal Whitlam government in 1972 was a pivotal moment, given its reformist zeal and the fact that Whitlam himself was listening to women’s voices, including that of his openly feminist wife, Margaret. One of the issues which was to the forefront for many women was the right to control their own bodies, including the right to abortion.

Whitlam was in favour of reform of the abortion laws but abortion had been criminalized, and the states had control over their own criminal laws. Decriminalization of abortion, albeit with strict conditions, had been achieved in
South Australia in 1969, but the other states had not followed suit. The only power which the federal parliament had was in relation to the territories. So it was that two Labor backbenchers, Tony Lamb and David McKenzie, introduced a Medical Practice Clarification Bill which would have allowed abortion in the Australian Capital Territory. An all male parliament determined the issue, however, and members were allowed a conscience vote. The Bill was defeated by a significant majority.

Meanwhile, in the United States, the Supreme Court reached the historic decision in *Roe v Wade* (1973) that no state could disallow abortion during the first trimester of pregnancy. And it was proving to be the courts, rather than the parliaments in two individual Australian states, Victoria and New South Wales, which were responsible for a more liberal interpretation of the abortion laws in those states. It became apparent that change was not to be quickly achieved by legislation. So, the Whitlam government decided to play its part in effecting change in a different way, by establishing a Royal Commission on Human Relationships to instigate a public discussion on the issue and make recommendations back to the government. Initially this was to be a commission on abortion, but, when this motion was unsuccessful, its terms of reference were broadened. Abortion became only one issue the commission would concern itself with, but it remained an important one.

There were three Commissioners appointed, two of whom were women. They were Justice Elizabeth Evatt, Chief Justice of the Family Court, Ann Deveson, journalist and broadcaster, and Dr Felix Arnott, the Anglican Archbishop of Brisbane. They carried out extensive consultations with all sectors of the community and their extensive Final Report in 1977 was presented in five volumes. By that time, however, the Whitlam government had been controversially sacked by the Governor-General, and the Commission’s enduring legacy was not the implementation of the reforms they recommended but the fact that the public was now discussing matters which had not previously been out in the open.

Amongst detailed recommendations on abortion, the Commission’s Report stated:

> In our view, the persons best placed to assess the need for abortion are the woman herself and her doctor. The Doctor’s role is to weigh up the circumstances, to advise

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It has been suggested that the passage of such legislation was easier in that state because there are significantly fewer Catholics there than in other states.
of the risks and to ensure proper medical practice. The woman should have counselling to enable her to consider the options free of pressure.

It went on to propose an upper limit of twenty-two weeks pregnancy unless termination at a later time was necessary to preserve the mother’s life or avoid a grave risk to her health, or unless a serious mental or physical abnormality of the foetus was diagnosed.

At this time, abortion laws in Australia varied significantly from state to state. In New South Wales, where an abortion was not illegal if the doctor honestly believed that the woman’s mental or physical health was at risk, the courts had ruled that the effects of social and economic stress could be taken into account. In Queensland, abortion was illegal, and both doctor and patient could be prosecuted, unless it was performed for the preservation of the mother’s life, and the performance of the operation was reasonable, having regard to the patient’s state at the time and to all the circumstances of the case. At this time, there had been no judicial ruling on the meaning of the terms of this provision, which was open to being interpreted very narrowly. While in Christchurch, Janet had become aware that many women found it necessary to travel to New South Wales for an abortion, as we have seen. The situation was similar for Queensland women.

Even though Queensland is generally considered to be more conservative than other Australian states, the movement for women’s liberation had made its presence felt there in the late 1960s and early 1970s, especially through the University of Queensland. In 1965, Merle Thornton and Rosalie Bogner, both wives of UQ academics, started the ball rolling by requesting to be served at the Regatta Hotel bar in nearby Toowong. It was illegal for women to be served in public bars and so they were refused, whereupon they chained themselves to the bar. The men in the bar started to buy drinks for them. When the police were called to cut the chains, they must have read the mood. They asked the women to leave, and when they refused, did not pursue the matter further. The incident received great publicity and, ironically, one of the rooms at the hotel is now named after the women.5

The next incident to receive attention not only in the media but also in Parliament was in 1971 when women started distributing pamphlets on ‘Female Sexuality and Education’ outside selected schools. One of them, Claire McKeough, was charged under the Vagrants, Gaming and Other Offences Act. The leaflet was
tabled in parliament and the women concerned were accused by the then Premier, Joh Bjelke Petersen, of being linked with the Communist Party. ‘What type of sex education is being taught in schools?’ asked an irate parliamentarian, oblivious, apparently, to the fact that the answer was none. Indeed, anti-smut campaigners, Angel Rendle-Short and Rona Joyner, were busily visiting schools and lobbying to have books where there was any mention of sex, including such classics as To Kill a Mockingbird, removed from school libraries and curricula. The case against Claire McKeogh was, however, dismissed by the presiding Magistrate who ruled that ‘the first part of the leaflet was in the nature of a medical treatise’ and that ‘it’s not so much advice to be sexually promiscuous as to insist that what is right for the male is right for the female’. 6

An Abortion Law Reform Association (ALRA) was formed in Queensland in 1971 and began speaking out in public about the need for family planning facilities, sex education and the right to abortion. That same year, a Right to Life Association, which opposed abortion in any circumstances, mobilised in the state. ALRA decided that, tactically, a change of name to Children By Choice would be to their advantage. A formal structure was established for a family planning and abortion information service to be conducted from independent premises. It would charge a small fee for its services in order to be self-funding, and thereby independent, both from the government and from any abortion clinics. Beryl Holmes, a former teacher and alderman, assumed the role of President.

The Right to Life movement was incensed by the decision in Roe v Wade, and intensified their campaign to ensure that Australia did not follow the American precedent. Children by Choice decided they needed to counter the distorted facts being disseminated by the group. With the assistance of the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at the University of Queensland, they compiled a questionnaire to be completed (with their consent) by clients of the service and counsellors working there. ‘This academic research through the Queensland University added to the organisation’s credibility.’ 7 The data collected was also utilised by the Royal Commission on Human Relationships. Children by Choice continued to publish and widely circulate quarterly reports. Bricks were thrown through the windows of their premises, but this afforded them publicity in the media for their cause, and they established a good relationship with the police, who would check on their safety at night.
Children by Choice was a very active and strategic organization. From 1973, every two years it would write to all registered doctors in Queensland informing them of their service. It kept demographic records of its users along with the names of their referring doctors. Notwithstanding the large numbers of doctors who referred patients there, none of them had come out publicly to support their work, or indeed to advocate for abortion to be a matter between a woman and her doctor. Those doctors who did speak publicly on the abortion issue were supporters of the Right to Life movement.

In April 1977, Dr Don Watson, the Queensland President of the Australian Medical Association said that the majority of doctors in this state did not want a change in the abortion laws. It was history repeating itself for Janet. Up until now, she had been too involved in other matters to be publicly involved in the abortion campaign, but this could not be left unaddressed. She began talking to the media and spoke on the subject on the Coming Out show, a relatively new ABC radio program for women, by women. She was invited to speak at the National Convention on Civil Liberties in Brisbane that year. She continued to speak out on abortion, on women’s right to choose, and on the right of doctors to refer or operate according to their clinical judgment. The more she spoke out, the more she was asked to speak on the issue because she was the sole medical voice in Queensland to do so. She later reflected that:

Most doctors, including the Medical Women’s Association, were afraid to go public. I was considered to be courageous, if not foolhardy. I never felt that I was, mainly because I worked for a salary in a tenured position at the university, and I believed that freedom of thought and expression was part of the deal. I also felt that from that secure base, I had a duty to do what I could to try to get a better deal for Queensland women.⁸

Janet would claim that her opinion was shared by many other doctors. The only problem was that her statistics on doctors’ opinions were from New Zealand, not Queensland, and the University of Queensland Health Service did not have the funding or the staff to carry out a similar survey. Undaunted, Janet was to prevail on Department of Social and Preventive Medicine at the university to do so and was successful. There were 2066 Queensland doctors (67%) who responded to the survey, and the results were similar to those in the New Zealand survey. Seventy-nine percent believed that the law should be more liberal.⁹ Indeed, Children by Choice records
from this time indicated that approximately 1000 doctors were referring patients through them.

In 1977, Children by Choice organized McNair Anderson to conduct a public opinion survey on Queenslanders’ attitudes to abortion. Sixty-one percent of respondents supported a law in Queensland to allow abortion during the first three months of pregnancy. ‘The survey showed that views on abortion were by then independent of religious or political affiliation, age, social, educational or financial background.’\textsuperscript{10} The results were forwarded to all members of state parliament. Janet was invited by Beryl Holmes to speak at a public meeting on abortion in 1977. She stated that the only way to have fewer abortions was to liberalise or repeal the law (quoting the experience of countries like the UK and the US), and to provide sex education and contraceptive education and services for all who needed them.

That same year, Dr Peter Bayliss moved to Brisbane from Melbourne and set up the Greenslopes Fertility Control Clinic. Abortion clinics had also been established over the border with New South Wales at Tweed Heads. Queensland women no longer needed to travel to Sydney. In 1979, this all came to public attention when the ABC Program \textit{Nationwide} aired allegations that Children by Choice were still sending most of their clients to Sydney and not to Greenslopes because the staff were getting free air tickets for their own use from Ansett Airlines for doing so. These untrue allegations were particularly galling to the women at Children by Choice given that their work there was unpaid. They also had the effect of placing the Greenslopes clinic in the spotlight. The Right to Life movement approached the government to have the clinic closed and circulated a petition. But it was not the government which responded but the leader of the Opposition Labor Party, Ed Casey. In direct contravention of Labor Party policy, he presented parliament with a petition calling for the clinic’s closure with 910 signatures of electors from his electorate of Mackay. He described the clinic’s work as ‘massacre of the innocents’.\textsuperscript{11}

The government was not happy with the initiative being seized by the opposition. There were rumours that the government had organized for New Zealand lawyer, and President of Society for the Protection of the Unborn Child (SPUC), Des Dalgety, to come to Brisbane to advise on the very restrictive legislation introduced in that country in 1977. In response, pro-choice groups formed a coalition, the Women’s Campaign for Abortion (WCA), and organized rallies, meetings, petitions and pickets, and even marches to Parliament House. This was risky business in a state
where the Premier had declared a state of emergency in response to protest marches against apartheid during the Springbok rugby tour in 1971. Janet organized a network of seven doctors to join her in writing a letter to the 1000 doctors who had referred women to Children by Choice, and to the Australian Medical Association (AMA), urging them to contact politicians, and to sign a petition to Parliament. Two professors from the University of Queensland, one from the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology and the other from the Department of Psychiatry, joined the campaign against the proposed legislation.

All of this was happening in the United Nations International Decade for Women. Australia had instituted a National Women’s Advisory Council (NWAC) to come up with a plan of action to be presented at the UN General Assembly at Copenhagen in 1980 and Janet had been elected a Queensland delegate to the NWAC. In March 1980 the NWAC passed a pro-choice motion by a large majority. Janet was interviewed in national, state and local newspapers on the issue. The Women’s Electoral Lobby called for a general boycott of Queensland. The Australian Women’s Weekly released results of a survey which ‘showed wide majority support for abortion rights’.12

1980 was an election year. Right to Life kept up the pressure on politicians. When the government failed to act, one of their rank, Don Lane “foreshadowed a private member’s motion to strengthen the resolve of cabinet and force their hand”.13

On 16 April 1980, Liberal Party Member of Parliament, Rosemary Kyburz, who was pro-choice, spoke on the morning ABC radio program, AM, and bravely leaked the news of the proposed Unborn Child Protection Act, which would not have allowed abortion in any circumstances. The restrictiveness of the proposed legislation ensured that many people who had not previously been involved in any campaign now decided something had to be done.

On 22 April, Right to Life took out a full-page advertisement in The Courier-Mail in favour of the Bill with the names of many doctors included. Children by Choice was able to point out that twenty-five of these doctors had in fact referred women to them. The following day, Janet spoke at a rally against the Bill in King George Square which attracted some 1,500 people. But Right to Life kept up its lobbying, and on the evening of 29 April, the government decided to introduce its

12 (later to be convicted and sentenced to twelve months gaol for misusing public funds),
own Bill, the Pregnancy Termination Control Bill, in a Parliament House where eighty of the eighty-two members were men. Abortions were only to be permitted in public hospitals, and only if the woman was near death. Women and their doctors faced fourteen years in jail for defying the law.

Members of the Women’s Campaign for Abortion and others were protesting outside the building when an official declaration from the Speaker was read out, denying them the right to be within the precincts of the House. One woman who remained seated on the steps was arrested by the police. There was talk of storming the parliament. Beryl Holmes, concerned that this would be counter-productive, pleaded with the crowd not to do anything which would provoke violence. A vote was taken and the protestors trickled out the gates. Solicitor Terry O’Gorman, who was there acting as observer for the Queensland Council for Civil Liberties, was asked to leave by the police and agreed to do so, but was arrested for resisting arrest nonetheless (a charge later dismissed by a magistrate). Meantime, inside the building, the Bill passed its first reading.

Another professor from the University of Queensland John Western, from the Department of Sociology, contacted Janet and suggested they organize their own full-page advertisement against the Bill in the Courier Mail. It appeared on 15 May with 976 signatures, 266 of whom were doctors. The May Day parade had provided an opportunity for those opposed to the Bill to come together and a group of women who had not previously been involved in the campaign decided to hold a public meeting at City Hall. The date they chose, 15 May, was, coincidentally, the very day the advertisement appeared. The organisers had taken a punt. They had no idea how many people would turn up and how they would pay for the hire if it was a no-show. But they had chosen their speakers well, eminent figures from the community including doctors, lawyers and even an Anglican Minister. As it turned out, well over 2,000 people came and filled the hall. Janet later wrote, ‘I turned to Beryl and we clasped hands – our eyes filled with tears - I think we knew then that we were going to win’. And win, they did. By the time of the second reading of the Bill five days later, it was once again a private member’s Bill and even Cabinet Ministers were being given a free vote. Four of them crossed the floor. The Bill was defeated 40:35.

So that battle had been won. The warriors were under no illusion, however, that the war was over. In 1985, the Queensland police raided the Greenslopes Fertility Control Clinic and arrested Dr Bayliss and Dr Dawn Cullen. The media had been
tipped off and they recorded women who had just had, or were about to have, an abortion, being hustled out of the clinic. They also recorded the police seizing all the medical records of the clinic. No one knew what use was to be made of this information. Janet said that ‘I confess to being anxious myself, although I knew that all my referrals had been perfectly proper and that they would be hard to challenge in a court of law.’15 She contacted the Vice-Chancellor, Brian Wilson, and was reassured that the legal resources of the university would be at her disposal, if necessary.

When the charges against the Greenslopes doctors came to court, Judge McGuire, in a landmark decision, interpreted the Queensland law in a similar way to its interpretation by the courts in New South Wales and Victoria. The charges against the doctors were dismissed. Janet wrote a letter to the Editor of the Courier Mail:

The test case is over, and the jury acquitted the two doctors. The time has come for the harassment of women and doctors to cease. The jury represents the people, and their finding confirms the results of several opinion polls in recent years. Our pluralist society believes that individuals, in this case women, have the right to make major life decisions. There is no need for legal sanctions in relation to induced abortion other than informed consent and due professional care as applies to all other medical and surgical procedures.16

In 1987, Janet was to write another letter to the Editor of the Courier Mail:

I was interested in the recent article about the events in the political life of Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen. It chronicled a number of defeats suffered by the former Premier but it did not mention the defeat of the Pregnancy Termination Control Bill in May 1980…It was the women of Queensland who were responsible for the defeat of the Premier on the floor of the House. I believe this was the only time he was defeated in Parliament; once again, women have been written out of history.22

p Abortion, however, remained an offence in the Queensland Criminal Code. When the Beattie Labor government came to power in 1999, it instigated a Taskforce (Commission of Inquiry) on Women and the Criminal Code, but excluded abortion from the terms of reference. The Taskforce, nonetheless, proceeded to recommend the removal of abortion from the Code but this recommendation was not followed by the government.17

The issue does not go away. In 2009, a young couple were charged under the Queensland Criminal Code with procuring a medical abortion. After a three day trial they were found not guilty. But The Australian reported that Queensland women were again travelling out of the state for abortions and doctors were reluctant to provide services for fear of being charged.18 This was notwithstanding an Auspoll survey in May that year which found that 79% of Queenslanders favoured decriminalization.19 In 2014, Victoria, ACT and Tasmania have removed abortion from their criminal laws. But recently, a Queensland politician claimed that abortion causes breast cancer20, an allegation supported by a federal politician. And New Matilda reports ‘anti-choice shots fired in NSW, Victoria, the Northern Territory, South Australia and Tasmania in recent months. Federally, Senator Madigan has threatened to hold the current government hostage over abortion.’ The article is headed ‘Are the abortion wars about to begin?’21 A more appropriate question might be ‘Will the abortion wars ever end?’
The next chapter will show how, in the meantime, Janet had become involved in politics at the university level.


3. Holmes, B, Irwin, J & Davies, S 1982, Struggle for choice. Photocopy of typescript held in the University of Queensland Library.


8. Irwin, J 198?, ‘My life and abortion in Australia’.


15. Irwin, J, ‘My life and abortion in Australia’.
16. Irwin, J 1986, ‘Women have the right to decide’, Letter to Editor, Courier Mail.


Chapter 18

University Politics

Janet’s election to the University of Queensland Senate in 1983 as a representative of full-time graduate staff was ‘seen as a compliment to the Health Service and value placed on it by the University community’.¹ Her role on the Senate was not limited to Senate meetings. She now became involved in a plethora of Senate committees, some of them in her capacity as Director of the University of Queensland Health Service, but most of these extra-curricular duties by choice. She had already served on a number of non-Senate University committees² Now she was on the Senate Appeals Committee, the Senate Building and Grounds Committee, and the Senate Chaplaincy Committee. She was also a representative of the Senate on the Academic Board, and on the Medical, Dentistry and Social Work Faculty Boards. That this involved a considerable commitment is indicated by the fact that she finally relinquished her full-time clinical load. As indicated earlier, she had a broader view of health services and was committed to occupational health and safety issues at the university level.

Not only did Janet play an active role on these committees, she now instigated the establishment of further Senate committees on which she was to play an even more active role. Ironically, she was later to give a talk at a *Women at Risk* seminar on the dangers of trying to do it all. She said that women had to give themselves permission to be good enough, and not strive for perfection. ‘Families and society must give us that permission too.’² Her nephew, Alexander McCall Smith, in a recent radio interview, denied being an overly prolific writer, pointing out that he only produced about seven books annually.³ There is clearly something in the gene pool in this family, or in the value of denial, to be harvested for the greater productivity of society.

As we have seen, the first new committee Janet convinced the Senate to embrace was a University Occupational Health and Safety Council, on which the Director of the Health Service (or nominee) would be an ex officio member.

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¹, including the Physically Handicapped Persons Committee, an ad hoc Committee on the legal and ethical implications of human experimentation and related matters, and the General Staff Promotions Committee.
Fortunately, and, no doubt, strategically, she had encouraged her Deputy Director, Dr Tony Arklay, to acquire specialist qualifications and expertise in this area, so that she could pass on responsibility to him. She hoped that he would ultimately replace her as Director of the Health Service when she retired, as they shared a commitment to a preventive and educational role for the Service.

Janet was also the force behind the establishment of a Working Party on the Status of Women. Janet had long not only been concerned about, but also spoken out about, the status of women at the university. ‘Women are still concentrated in the lower academic areas. They have to do the triple shift -- run a home, raise children and do the post-graduate research which academic advancement depends on.’ But it was not just female academics and professional staff in her field of vision. Janet was never blinkered by the senior position she held to the situation of women secretaries, women in administration, women cleaners, women students. The issue of promotion for general staff was one which she consistently pursued and her particular concern for the (lack of) status for the university’s secretarial staff had led her to instigate a formal organization to act on their behalf, and assume the role of its Patron, as we have seen. She knew only too well the workload carried by women like her own secretary, Elizabeth Cottee. It just would not have been possible for Janet to do the work she did without Elizabeth assuming a huge and demanding workload.

They’re the glue that holds the place together and yet, when the official history of Queensland University was published, they didn’t even rate a mention. Not a word. They were literally written out of history.

Janet had long acted to improve the status of women at the individual level. One of the female student representatives who had been appointed to the University’s Sexual Harassment Committee was Fleur Kingston, a law student who was to become President of the Student Union in 1983. Fleur, first met Janet when she consulted her at the Health Service as a student of seventeen and felt totally comfortable talking to her about any issues. She described Janet as her most important mentor:

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4 (He was, indeed, to replace her, but the University then restructured so that members of the Health Service were no longer employees of the University, and no longer possessed the ‘academic freedom’ to speak out on issues which concerned them, as Janet had done.)

5 Fleur Kingston is now a Judge of the Supreme Court of Queensland
Janet is an extraordinarily generous woman who acted as confidante, helping me through an uncertain time and giving me confidence to be myself. I was impressed by her relentless, tireless devotion to the causes that were important to her.⁶

Fleur recalls that Janet mentored all the young women leaders at the university at the time. One of those young women was Anna Bligh, who stood, unsuccessfully, against Fleur in the election for President of the Union⁴.

Not only did Janet support women at all levels at the university and mentor female students, she was also involved in a campaign headed by the Women Lawyers Association of Queensland and its President, Leneen Forde, for the institution of anti-discrimination and equal opportunity legislation by the Queensland government. The Lobby for Equal Opportunity group (LEO) was supported by Professor Eileen Byrne from the Department of Education at UQ; journalists including Maxine McKew, Jane Singleton and Susan Davies; and the Zonta Club of Brisbane, a women’s service club. Draft legislation was prepared and then lawyer, Margaret McMurdo⁵ and others met with the Attorney-General to pursue the matter. The Premier, Joh Bjelke-Petersen, however, would have none of it, and it was not until the Goss Labor government came into power in 1989, that anti-discrimination and equal opportunity in public employment legislation was enacted.⁷

When they were both on the University’s Sexual Harassment Committee, Janet and Fleur Kingham talked about how to improve the status of women at the university in a significant way. When Janet was elected, and Fleur was appointed ex officio to the University Senate in 1983, they seized their opportunity to call for systemic change. Janet taught Fleur the importance of laying the groundwork for a project. ‘She always consulted with relevant people in advance of putting a proposal forward.⁸ They worked together on drafting an equal opportunity policy for the university and lobbied fellow members of the Senate, especially the Vice-Chancellor, Brian Wilson, and his Deputy, Professor George Davies. There was reference to the research which had been carried out, and the measures which had been introduced in other Australian universities to address the problem. Janet stressed the importance of drawing upon this material as well as gathering relevant data at the University of

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¹ Anna Bligh was to go on, as stated earlier, to become Premier of Queensland.

⁵ Maine McKew was to become a Federal politician.

⁷ Margaret McMurdo was to become President of the Court of Appeal.)
Queensland. On 28 April 1983, the Senate approved the establishment of a Working Party on the Status of Women. Importantly, it was to be chaired by the Vice-Chancellor himself. Professor Eileen Byrne from the Department of Education headed the Academic Staff arm and Janet the General Staff arm. Its task was:

to review the position of women with respect to any form of discrimination and/disadvantage in career paths and promotional opportunity; and to make recommendations on appropriate measures that might be taken to remove such discrimination and/disadvantage as may be found by the Working Party.

The Working Party needed information not only about structural barriers and direct or indirect discriminatory practices affecting the participation of women in the university but also about the climate of opinion on the issue, given the potential impact of the latter on attempts at change. A comprehensive survey of all staff—male and female, academic, research, general, and maintenance and service—was carried out, with a response rate of 75%. Individual submissions were also invited. In December 1984, a Preliminary Report was submitted to the Senate, which decided it was important to declare the University’s general position in advance of the Final Report. The Senate announced that the University was committed to actively promoting and encouraging the equal progress of women and men in academic work, in staffing, and in its decision-making structures. Further, the University undertook to proactively eliminate discrimination against women in all aspects of its work. It declared that the documentation of the University was to be written (and rewritten, where necessary) in non-sexist language. External bodies with representation on University boards and committees were to be told of this University policy and asked to consider nominating women with relevant experience as well as men to these positions.

By the time the Working Party produced its Final Report in August 1985, the Federal Hawke Labor Government had passed the Sex Discrimination Act which included universities within its reach. So, it was very timely. The Hawke government had also issued a policy paper on affirmative action. That paper talked of the widespread but ill-informed fear in universities that affirmative action would lead to a decline in standards. It also pointed out that the current criterion of merit being applied was value-loaded and not objective. This was, in fact, confirmed by the Working Party Final Report which found that ‘The deepest barrier facing women
remains one more of ingrained attitudes than of any conscious intent by others to cause disadvantage. The Working Party stressed that its role had been ‘diagnostic,’ and that continuing research, enquiry and review were essential. After discussing the Report, the Senate referred twenty-eight specific recommendations to the relevant bodies for discussion and feedback. It went on to accept the recommendations that it establish, not only a Standing Committee on the Status of Women, but a position of Equal Opportunity Coordinator, and, further, that it initiate a quantitative evaluation of unmet child care needs.

The Student Union had a Women’s Rights Committee which had been actively advocating for the rights of women students, and seeking to promote women’s rights in the wider community since 1974. Janet saw the need for an organization of female staff at all levels to demonstrate grassroots support for change. The catalyst proved to be a Seminar on Equal Opportunity in May 1985, in which it became apparent that more was being done at the Queensland Institute of Technology (including the establishment of a body called Women in QIT) and at Griffith University than was happening at the University of Queensland in this area of policy and practice. Female staff at UQ were invited to a meeting on 20 August 1985 to set up such a group and seventeen women from all over the university, including Janet, volunteered to be on the steering committee of the Queensland University Women’s Association. Minutes of that meeting note that twenty-four of the recommendations of the Status of Women Working Party Report had yet to be made public, and also that there was no longer any appropriate body to address the recommendations about general staff. The meeting called for the Report to be widely circulated and for the University Administration to prepare an implementation program as a matter of urgency.

Because the electoral process for the Committee recommended in the Report would take some time to implement, the Senate decided to establish an Interim Standing Committee on the Status of Women. Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic), Professor George Davies, chaired the interim committee and was to go on to chair the Standing Committee when it was finally constituted in 1987. Janet was, likewise, a member of the Interim Committee and, later, of the Standing Committee. The Interim Committee set about the task of ensuring that the recommendations of the Working Party were being widely circulated and being implemented. An Equal Opportunity Coordinator was appointed in 1986 and she and Janet worked together to draft a set of
Grievance Procedures which would provide for procedural fairness and mediation in relation to complaints and would apply not only to female staff but to all staff.

The Standing Committee had clout because of its representation of senior members of the University administration. It was democratic in that it had representatives from all relevant sectors. Members were appointed for three years. Their role was to regularly review the relative position of women in the University, in conjunction with the Equal Opportunity Coordinator, and to make recommendations to ensure the implementation of equal opportunity for them. The Standing Committee was also to take a leadership role in the elimination of sexism and sex-role stereotyping in the work of the University, both as an employer and as an educational provider, and to liaise with other committees and Boards of the University which dealt with matters of particular concern to women staff.¹²

The Queensland University Women’s Association undertook to consult with its membership and provide input to the Standing Committee on matters requiring attention. In conjunction with the Women’s Rights Committee of the Student Union, it also organized a series of lectures and workshops on campus by academic and professional women on women’s issues.¹³ The minutes of the meetings of the Standing Committee reveal how persistent the Committee was in the face of stubborn refusal by many individuals and bodies to accept that there were problems which needed addressing. When the Head of Building and Grounds, for instance, was asked to attend the meeting to explain why all the full-time jobs were held by men, and all the casual ones by women, he is recorded as telling the meeting that it had been a waste of his valuable time attending, when he had important things to do. The minutes record members of the Academic Board responding to requests for information with comments like ‘The arguments were unsatisfactory in the intellectual sense’ and ‘The conspiratorial tone was unfortunate.’ But until matters raised by the Committee were fully addressed, they remained on the agenda, and constant reminders were sent to relevant people. Recalcitrants were referred to the Vice-Chancellor, with a reminder, where necessary, about vicarious responsibility.

The fact that the Vice-Chancellor had headed the Working Party on the Status of Women was important in terms of guiding the response of many members of the University staff. This became particularly significant when Women in the University: A Policy Report, edited by Brian Wilson and Eileen Byrne, was published in book form by the University of Queensland Press in 1987.¹⁴ At Janet’s farewell lunch when
she stood down as Director of the Health Service in 1988, Vice-Chancellor George Davies, who had chaired the Status of Women Committee, gave the address. He spoke warmly and humorously of their shared New Zealand virtues, including ‘pragmatic and careful planning.’ He continued:

When it was decided to write a definitive statement on the current status of women, a Committee was set up to do the job. It had several sub-committees, one of which was chaired by Eileen Byrne and another by Janet, but they needed someone to be the person who would fight the good fight and present their views to the Senate, the Academic Board and the University at large – someone whose mana and authority was such that no-one would question whatever they wanted that person to say. And, so, with great ingenuity, persistence and guile they manipulated the Vice Chancellor in such a way that he actually volunteered for the job. This left me, the President and the PVCs to run the University while he and Eileen Byrne wrote, re-wrote, circulated a green paper, followed by a white paper, edited and re-edited and finally published …the Eileen and Brian gospel according to Janet.15

“...It is likely that, with Joh Bjelke Petersen still Premier of Queensland, Janet would have been prepared for more battles in terms of women’s health and social justice. It is unlikely, however, that she would have anticipated the imminent battle in which the University Senate would become embroiled. It is particularly unlikely that she would have seen the possibility of the Senate honouring this particular Premier for his stewardship of the state.

The background to this stoush was seemingly innocuous. In 1935, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the University of Queensland, the then Governor of the State, Sir Leslie Wilson, and the then Premier, Mr Forgan Smith, were awarded Honorary Doctorates of Laws. In 1960, the Governor, Sir Henry Abel

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15 In today’s world, such an outcome seems like a fantasy. University funding has been savagely cut by successive governments, and, as is so often the case, either directly or indirectly, women are the major victims. The University of Queensland website indicates that its Equity Office was ‘disestablished on 16 June 2014’.16 And, notwithstanding that UQ pioneered the study of gender in Australian universities and was at the forefront of research and leadership in Women’s and Gender Studies in Australia for over forty years, it is no longer possible to do a major in Gender Studies at that institution. Protests by students on the issue and a petition of 836 signatures delivered to the University Senate on 18 April 2013 proved ineffective.17

It would be wonderful if this was happening because there was no longer a need for such services/studies. The 2013 Annual Report for the University of Queensland indicates in its Key Statistics that 55.4% of its students are female.18 There is, however, no breakdown by gender in relation to staff. The Equity Unit at QUT has been collecting gender equity data on all Australian universities in accordance with Universities Australia Strategy for Women 2011-2014. The most recent statistics to be published are for 2012. They indicate that from 2008 to 2014, the number of women in Senior Academic Staff (Associate Professor and Above) at UQ not only did not increase during this period, but decreased by nearly 15%, the worst figures in Australia. Where 36.3% of Senior Academic Staff at UQ were women in 2008, by 2012 that had dropped to 22.8%.19
Smith, and the Premier, Mr Francis Nicklin, were similarly awarded. And continuing the tradition, the Honorary Degrees Committee of the Senate recommended in 1985 that the Governor, Sir James Ramsay, and the Premier be similarly honoured. The Senate accepted their recommendation.

Fleur Kingham was, at that time, an elected Student Representative on the Senate. She received the agenda for that particular meeting while she was on circuit in Toowoomba as a Judge’s Associate. There was no notification of the intended awards. As there were no other matters on the agenda that she felt she needed to drive to and from Brisbane for, she did not attend the meeting. As she was overseas at the time, Janet did not attend the meeting either.

Honorary degrees have a long history, and a not always salubrious one. The earliest honorary degree at the University of Oxford in 1478-9, a Doctor of Canon Law, awarded to the brother-in-law of Edward IV, Lionel Woodville, was, according to the University itself, ‘clearly an attempt to honour and obtain the favour of a man with great influence. Woodville was shortly afterwards elected Chancellor of the University’. Recipients of honorary degrees do not earn the degree through academic achievements. They may not have any special connection with the university honouring them. The doctorate which is unlikely to be questioned is given in recognition of some outstanding contribution to a particular field of knowledge or to the benefit of society at large.

Around the same time as the UQ Senate made its decision to honour Sir Joh Bjelke Petersen, Oxford University refused to similarly honour the UK Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher. Academics had led a campaign against such an honour in protest against the government’s cuts in funding for education. Over 1,000 academics and administrators attended the meeting; 5,000 students handed in a petition; and the vote against the award was 738 to 319. This happened in the context of the year-long miners’ strike. Similarly, the UQ decision took place in the context of the electricity workers’ strike which was to see 1,100 workers sacked and yet another State of Emergency declared by the Premier within days.

However, there seems to be an increasing tendency for celebrities to be awarded honorary degrees. It is suggested that this is about universities aiming for self-promotion in a society/media obsessed with the cult of celebrity. An article in The Guardian asked ‘What do Shane Warne, Kylie Minogue, Muammar Gaddafi, Mike Tyson and Kermit the Frog have in common?’ They have all received honorary doctorates. A recent article questions whether it is time to abandon honorary doctorates altogether. Given that universities are not commercial entities, it questions the free rein seemingly exercised by their marketing departments.
Professor John Holmes (husband of Beryl Holmes from Children by Choice) was Head of the Department of Geography at the University of Queensland and a member of the Academic Board, a body separate from the Senate but answerable to it. Janet was also a member of the Academic Board. On 5 February 1985, John sent a memorandum to the President of the Academic Board headed Notice of Motion:

We, the undersigned, give notice of the following motion, for consideration at the next meeting of the Academic Board. The motion reads:

That this board dissociates itself from the decision to confer the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws on the Queensland Premier.

Moved J.H. Holmes
Seconded J. Irwin

Holmes recalls that there was some pressure exerted to have this motion withdrawn, but it was not. Over 100 members attended the next meeting, the largest attendance the Board had seen, ‘and the best debate we ever had under the very competent chair of Ralph Parsons. Parsons was to subsequently give a very good account of the objections of the Academic Board to the Senate’.

Although there was blatantly a problem with giving an Honorary Doctorate of Laws to a Premier who had demonstrated such scant regard for the rule of law, the main impetus behind the motion was to change the nature of the relationship between the university and the government. Holmes stated that ‘unlike other universities in Australia, UQ had become almost part of the Public service’.

Indeed the University of Queensland Act 1965, then in force, required the consent of the Governor in Council to decisions made by the University in relation to its operation. The meeting was told that it was time to abandon this inappropriate relationship and establish full independence for the university. (This was prescient given that after corruption allegations against the government had led to the Fitzgerald Inquiry, Bjelke-Petersen demonstrated that he had no idea what was meant by the doctrine of the separation of powers under the Westminster system.)

Tying the motion to this issue, and thereby depoliticizing it, was strategically a wise move. The motion was passed by about ten votes.

The Vice-Chancellor, Professor Brian Wilson, was concerned, however, that not awarding an honorary doctorate to the Premier according to tradition would be taken as a political statement. The Senate proceeded with its original plan. As graduation day approached, advertisements appeared in the daily papers in response.
The Queensland Education Resource Centre called on students and graduates to peacefully protest the conferral of the degree, urging that ‘in view of the Premier’s public ridicule of higher education and the principles to which it aspires, no tertiary institution should honour him in this way.’

The UQ Academic Staff Association stated that it considered the award of the degree wholly inappropriate given that the Premier had:

among other things consistently subjected the University and its members to intertemperate attack; insisted that members of the academic staff should account in a personal way to Cabinet in respect of research activities conducted beyond national borders; chosen to associate with sects and to distort the curriculum of the schools to ensure that it conforms to their beliefs; shown not the least regard for civil liberties. In particular, Sir Johannes intervened to prevent an inquiry into an allegation that a female student of the University of Queensland had been assaulted by a police officer, notwithstanding that the then Commissioner of Police considered an inquiry appropriate.

It too called for peaceful protest.

There was, further, an advertisement in The Courier Mail by 348 staff members of the university, paid for by themselves, which stated that they:

wish personally to dissociate ourselves from the Senate’s decision. We support certain basic principles which Sir Johannes Bjelke-Petersen, by his words and actions, violates persistently. His attempts to restrict free speech and assembly, his contempt for rational debate and argument, his dismissal of independent informed opinion, and his denigration of opposing viewpoints all clearly attest to this fact. Given his confrontational, polarizing approach, the award of an honorary degree must inevitably be seen as an endorsement of these violations.

Unsurprisingly, among the signatories are Holmes, J and Irwin, J.

The famous and widely-respected poet, Judith Wright, returned her own honorary doctorate in protest. On the night when the honorary doctorate was to be awarded, along with the usual awarding of degrees, protestors gathered outside Mayne Hall where the graduation ceremony was to take place. There were staff, some of them carrying the Academic Staff Association Banner, others the banner of Academics for Human Rights. There were students with placards and student union officials with microphones. There were protestors waving Nazi flags. The police were there and the media.

Notwithstanding the call for peaceful protest, the University authorities had become concerned that the protest might turn violent when the Premier arrived. He
was advised not to attend the graduation ceremony, and instead there was a private ceremony held with University officials at Parliament House. In the meantime, medical staff at the Health Service had undertaken to provide emergency care with Dr Arklay in charge. Because she had seconded the motion of the Academic Board, Janet felt a moral obligation to be part of the protest. The meeting was peaceful during addresses by Professor Eileen Byrne and David Barbagallo from the Student Union. However, the number of protestors continued to increase and some of them started banging on the windows of Mayne Hall.

In a submission to the subsequent UQ Senate Commission of Inquiry into the events of that night, Janet reported that she ‘felt decidedly alarmed and aware of the danger and distress which must have been experienced by those inside the Hall.’ Fortunately the protestors dispersed, presumably when they realized that the Premier was not going to attend. No one was seriously injured.

I believe that most of the people involved in banging on the windows were not part of the academic community and I deplore the press coverage which indicated that students and academics were primarily responsible for what happened. In Queensland it is difficult for people to protest, and the parliamentary processes are such that legislation is passed without meaningful debate. I can understand that some groups affected by such legislation become angered and frustrated. I make no apology for having been part of the Academic Staff Association’s protest and I well understand why Professor Byrne felt she must protest. If those of us whom I regard to be sensible and reasonable abdicate the middle ground, only the two extremes remain.

The UQ Senate also set up a committee to investigate the question of honorary degrees and in November 1985, that committee made a number of recommendations, including one of greatest relevance, that degrees should not be awarded to serving politicians. Another recommendation, emanating from the Academic Staff Association, was that honorary degrees not be awarded without reference to the academic community at the university.

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9 In today’s world, university funding has been savagely cut by successive governments, and either directly or indirectly, women are the major victims. The University of Queensland website indicates that its Equity Office was ‘disestablished on 16 June 2014’9. And, notwithstanding that UQ pioneered the study of gender in Australian universities and was at the forefront of research and leadership in Women’s and Gender Studies in Australia for over forty years, it is no longer possible to do a major in Gender Studies at that institution. Protests by students on the issue and a petition of 836 signatures delivered to the University Senate on 18 April 2013 proved ineffective.9

It is not as if this is happening because there is no longer a need for such services/studies. The 2013 Annual Report for the University of Queensland indicates in its Key Statistics that 55.4% of its students are female.9 There is, however, no breakdown by gender in relation to staff. The Equity Unit at QUT has been collecting gender equity data on all Australian universities in accordance with
The Bjelke-Petersen government refused to let go of its grip on the university. Perhaps the protests about the ‘honorary degree’ had added fuel to the fire. In 1987, twenty-one years after Christchurch, Janet found herself again confronted with the issue of contraceptive vending machines. The Queensland government passed legislation making it illegal to sell condoms from vending machines. It was not illegal to sell these items from pharmacies, or give them away for nothing, but vending machines, for some reason, were unacceptable. In 1974, the Students’ Union at UQ had installed a contraceptive vending machine, but had been made to remove it. When in 1981 the National Health and Medical Research Council recommended that condoms be made available from vending machines in public lavatories and other appropriate places to reduce the incidence of sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancies and induced abortions, Janet wrote to the State Minister for Health, drawing attention to this recommendation and asking that vending machines be installed in appropriate places. This was vetoed by the Premier.

‘Queensland is a clean living state,’ claimed Joh Bjelke-Petersen, in the face of statistics that showed very high rates of sexually transmitted diseases and induced abortion, and the highest rates of teenage pregnancy in Australia. Janet was informed by the Family Planning Association Educator that it was not permissible to mention the words ‘sex’ or ‘condom’ in schools in school hours. The government also refused to allow the AIDS Council’s ‘Safe Sex’ video to be shown in Queensland. In a speech at the 13th National Conference of the Australian Institute of Health Surveyors, Janet shook her head as she asked rhetorically:

Do they believe that the sight of condoms on public sale will lead to an uncontrollable outbreak of sexual activity. Is it that condoms, especially the various coloured and textured ones available are so powerfully erotic as to be dangerous?37

She was invited to give a talk on ‘The Humble Condom’ on Ockham’s Razor on Radio National’s Science Show with respected medical reporter and doctor, Norman Swan. It was an entertaining as well as informative talk, and The Age newspaper asked permission to print it. Janet told of growing up in a small town

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*Universities Australia Strategy for Women 2011-2014.* The most recent statistics to be published are for 2012. They indicate that from 2008 to 2014, the number of women in Senior Academic Staff (Associate Professor and Above) at UQ not only did not increase during this period, but decreased by nearly 15%, the worst figures in Australia. Where 36.3% of Senior Academic Staff at UQ were women in 2008, by 2012 that had dropped to 22.8%.19
without a pharmacy, where, if you flipped a half-crown in his presence, a local bank officer would provide you with a little metal canister of three condoms.\(^z\)

In 1987, the UQ Student Union decided again to install contraceptive vending machines. An article in *Semper Floreat* reported that ‘the media got very excited last week when our condom vending machines arrived,’ and warned students that if they used the machines they could be confronted by the Special Branch Contraceptive Squad.\(^{39}\) In a keynote address to the Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association Annual Conference, Janet described what happened next:

> In 1987, in the face of AIDS, epidemics of chlamydia, and wart virus infections…police came to the University of Queensland Union at 5am and used crowbars to break louvres and doors and rip out the machines. Can you believe it?\(^{40}\)

She wrote a letter to the Editor of *The Sunday Mail* in her capacity as Director of the UQ Health Service:

> It really freaks me when I am confronted with unwanted pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases and infertile young women. These problems are difficult for both doctor and patient. They do not seem to bother the Queensland Cabinet who are freaked only by condoms, especially if they are in vending machines.\(^{41}\)

She would have appreciated the juxtaposition in an article in the *Brisbane Times* in 2011 entitled ‘Dinosaur skulls and condom machines – it’s in our DNA’ which reported that the Museum of Brisbane was raising funds by selling some of their collection of artefacts, including a rare skull from mega marsupial Diprotodon, and the contraceptive vending machine ripped from the refectory at the University of Queensland in 1987.\(^{42}\)


\(^z\) She was invited back to give two further talks on *Ockham’s Razor*, one in 1987 on ‘Medical Education and the contribution of Dr Michael Balint’, and the other in 1988 on ‘My Life and Abortion’.


13. ‘Women’s Lecture Series and Workshops’ 1988, *Semper Floreat*, University of Queensland Union, St Lucia, Brisbane, April, p. 20.

14. Wilson, BG & Byrne, EM, *Women in the University*.

15. GN Davies 1988, pers. comm., address at farewell for Janet Irwin.


32. Some members of staff UQ 1985, ‘Statement’, Courier Mail, 10 May.


34. Irwin, J 1985, Information for Senate Committee into the Events Surrounding the May 10 Graduation Ceremony, Senate Committee into the Events Surrounding the May 10 Graduation Ceremony.


36. ‘Tony Fitzgerald slams appointment as Tim Carmody sworn in as chief justice’ 2014, Australian, 8 July.

38. Irwin, J, ‘The case for the humble condom’.

39. Fletcher, K & Gilbert, C 1987, ‘Don’t buy the chewing gum, it tastes like rubber’, *Semper Floreat*, 18 August.

40. Irwin, J 1988, ‘21 years in the business, the condom goes full circle’, *ANZSSA News*, no. 29 (September), pp. 5–8.


42. Feeney, K 2011, ‘Dinosaur skulls and condom machines - it’s in our DNA’, *Brisbane Times*, 1 June, 
Chapter 19

A Champion of Civil Liberties

Premier Joh Bjelke Petersen’s approach to government was socially conservative and religiously based. ‘This combination was popular with an electorate in which only 12% of the population had completed nine years or more of schooling.’ At the very time at which Janet was speaking out on a range of issues requiring the attention of the Queensland government, there was another woman doing the same. Another educated woman, in fact, another medical doctor, Angel Rendle-Short. But it is hard to imagine two more different women.

Spare a thought for the young Francesca-Rendle Short growing up in Brisbane in the seventies. In her remarkable memoir/novel, Bite your tongue, written after her mother’s death, she addresses their problematic relationship:

My mother was a book burner. Sometimes, she was so agitated about the books the teachers and librarians insisted I read at school, she was on fire; I could see smoke and flame coming out of her orifices, her ears, her mouth…Angel Rendle-Short was a morals campaigner, an ‘anti-smut campaigner. An activist. She was on a mission from God to save the children of Queensland. Women like Francesca’s mother and her fellow campaigner, Rona Joyner, putting pressure on the government to remove what they saw as the considerable quantity of ‘smut ‘in school libraries, led the Chief Librarian at the University of Queensland, Derek Fielding, to take up the role of President of the Queensland Council of Civil Liberties (QCCL) from 1975 to 1979. The QCCL had been formed by a group of staff from the University in 1966 concerned about the erosion of civil liberties during anti-Vietnam demonstrations that year. By the late 1970s, they had been joined by a number of prominent lawyers including Wayne Goss, Leneen Forde, Quentin Bryce and Terry O’Gorman. The emergence and flourishing of the Queensland Council of Civil Liberties in the mid 1960s had just that epic quality of a shift in power towards a grassroots enlightenment; a momentum that had about it the inevitability and rightness of the great social justice movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: Quentin Bryce

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aa Wayne Goss was to become Premier of Queensland; Leneen Forde became Governor of Queensland and Chancellor of Griffith University; and Quentin Bryce became Governor-General of Australia
In 1976, more than 1,000 students from the University of Queensland marched against proposed cuts to the Federal education budget. Bjelke-Petersen had instructed Police Commissioner Whitrod not to issue a permit for the march. One police officer was filmed hitting a female student over the head with a baton. Commissioner Whitrod ordered an enquiry into the incident and also into police action during the whole of the march. This decision was overturned by the Premier, a move which prompted Janet, along with a number of other concerned citizens, to join the QCCL. The Police Commissioner later resigned, having failed in his mission to reform a corrupt police service (then aptly called a police force). In his memoir, Whitrod talks of ‘locking my bedroom door at night and keeping a firearm with me’. He claims to have had strong support from Zelman Cowen, who was Vice-Chancellor of the University of Queensland at the time, and says that, when he resigned, he received a card from the President of the Student Union at the University, which stated ‘We are very sorry that you are leaving. You gave us hope’.

It was difficult for Queenslanders who believed in the importance of a government acting ethically, and recognizing civil liberties, to maintain hope in the 1970s and 1980s. ‘Corruption in Queensland extended beyond police and politicians, to taint the electoral system, parliament and the public service.’ But the Queensland Council for Civil Liberties, notwithstanding its very limited resources, stood firm in its opposition to this corruption. Terry O’Gorman, in particular, President of the Council from 1979 to 1985, and again from 1990 to 1994, became a well-known media figure, prepared to espouse and defend the civil liberties of all people, even, perhaps especially, the most unpopular and unlikeable.

Janet was to become involved directly in issues involving police powers in the early 1990s as we shall see later in this chapter. At the time of her joining the QCCL, however, her main focus was on the campaign against the proposed abortion legislation. The QCCL and, in particular, barrister Lew Wyvill had been very helpful to Children by Choice in advising them how to ensure the organisation operated within the law. Janet presented a policy on abortion to the General Meeting of QCCL in 1978, but the Council were divided on the issue. Although Janet had strongly-held views on abortion, she was respectful of the views of other executive

\[\text{bb} \text{ later to become Queen’s Counsel}\]
members, some of whom held strong anti-abortion views. So she developed an amended policy which was something of a compromise, akin to the Roe v Wade position of the American Supreme Court. It did not reflect Janet’s own view, and took account of the rights of a viable foetus close to full term. By contrast, the rights of the woman early in her pregnancy took priority over the rights of a tiny, non-viable foetus. During the early stage of the pregnancy, there was, in effect, abortion on demand, because the rights of the woman were much greater than any competing interest. It was unanimously accepted by the QCCL.

Together she and lawyer Peter Applegarth prepared a submission which was circulated to members of parliament urging them to oppose the Pregnancy Termination Control Bill in the successful campaign which was outlined in Chapter 17. The QCCL also played a major role in opposing the raids on abortion clinics and the seizure of personal medical files. Wayne Goss appeared on television to protest the violation of privacy which, he said, could have a devastating effect on the women involved. Matt Foley, later to become Attorney-General himself in the Beattie government, sent a formal complaint to the then Attorney-General, Neville Harper.

When the Goss Labor Government swept to power in 1989, and instituted a Committee for the Review of Criminal Law, Janet and Peter Applegarth seized what seemed like a significant and timely opportunity to have the law on abortion repealed and made a detailed submission to the Committee on the issue. However, the Goss government would not touch the issue and nor would the Beattie Labor Government which came to power in 1998.

Matt Foley assumed the Presidency of the Queensland Council for Civil Liberties from 1985 to 1987. During his term of office, there was much discussion and debate among the members concerning amendments which the government was planning to make to the Evidence Act. Some saw the proposed amendments as undermining the traditional rights of accused persons; others saw them as giving voice to the victims of rape and assault, voices which were discounted in the current system. Barrister and later Senior Counsel, Stephen Keim, who was to assume the Presidency of the Council in 1987, recalled those debates:

(Now Supreme Court Judge)

dd Even Anna Bligh, who had been a member of the Women’s Right Collective at the University of Queensland which campaigned for legalized abortion in the 1970s, did not attempt to reform the abortion laws when she became the Labor Premier of Queensland in 2009. Notwithstanding opinion polls consistently showing the majority of the population favour decriminalisation of abortion, it remains, an ‘untouchable’ issue.
Some of the women who were involved were just fabulous people to know, and I learnt a lot from them. Janet Irwin, who was part of the medical service at UQ, was a fabulous thinker. Those debates between women’s issues and the integrity of the criminal trial were such good debates, and such enjoyable debates to be part of, because the people respected one another so much, but they were prepared to express their opinions quite forcefully without rancor or viciousness or anything like that.

Matt Foley saw them as having a profound effect on his thinking:

Years later when I was Attorney-General, I was much more empathetic to the voice of women and children and their criticisms of the criminal justice system, and I tried to change the law a bit to assist them. I also tried to change a number of things concerning the make-up of the judiciary, and appointed numbers of women there, and indigenous people too, for that matter. But that was a learning experience for me.  

In 1987, journalist Phil Dickie exposed widespread corruption in the police force in the only state-wide newspaper, The Courier-Mail. This was a pivotal moment as newspaper coverage was usually limited to the material which Bjelke-Petersen used to ‘feed the chooks,’ his own description of his relationship with the press. ABC television quickly followed this with a Four Corners programme, ‘The Moonlight State’ in which journalist Chris Masters and his team investigated the issue of government corruption in the state. The Queensland Council for Civil Liberties called for a Royal Commission into the issues raised, headed by a Queens Counsel. Fortunately, Bjelke-Petersen was temporarily overseas at the time, and Acting Premier William Gunn agreed to this proposal, appointing former Federal Court judge, Tony Fitzgerald QC, to head it. Bjelke-Petersen tried to have the Commission of Enquiry closed down on his return but it was too late. Corruption had been exposed in his Cabinet, and he was now a political liability. He was forced to resign later that year.

Fitzgerald QC sought and gained extended terms of reference and extended powers for the Commission and, extraordinarily, a commitment, in advance, from the leaders of the National, Liberal and Labor parties to fully implement its recommendations. The Fitzgerald Report, as it became known, released in 1989, led to the prosecution of numerous police officers, five Ministers from Bjelke-Petersen’s Cabinet, the Police Commissioner, Terry Lewis, and Bjelke-Petersen himself. ‘The prosecution of the Premier failed because of a hung jury later found to have been tampered with by his defence team.’ The most important aspect of the Report,
however, was the blueprint for reform. Two new bodies were to be established to instigate and oversee reform: the Electoral and Administrative Review Commission (EARC) and the Criminal Justice Commission (CJC). The latter was not only to oversee the reform of the police service but also to be generally responsible for criminal justice reform and policy. The Queensland Council for Civil Liberties was ‘delighted with the endorsement the report had given to many of the Council’s policies’. 11

The National Party government appointed Max Bingham QC to head the CJC. Bingham had been a long-serving Liberal Party MP in Tasmania before being appointed by the Federal Labor party to the executive of the new National Crime Authority from 1984 to 1987. It also appointed a new Police Commissioner in the person of Noel Newnham, the former Victorian Deputy Police Commissioner. Bingham arrived in Queensland to preside over the transitional arrangements. The Premier, Russell Cooper, wanted to install him immediately as CJC Chair, but Bingham insisted that his appointment be postponed until after the upcoming state election and told Wayne Goss, the then leader of the Labor Party, that he was prepared to stand aside if Labor won the election and wished him to do so.

The Labor government romped into office in the elections, and on election night, Goss stated that Newnham had the support of the government as Police Commissioner, and that ‘I expect that we will be able to resolve the position of Sir Max Bingham fairly promptly after consultation, real consultation, with the two other leaders’. 12 He did, in fact, later endorse the appointment, but the relationship between them had not got off to a good start. Bingham was later to comment that the relationship with the government and the CJC was always going to be difficult, regardless of which political party was in office, because of the nature of its brief and the power it had been granted. The Fitzgerald Inquiry had investigated the policing of organized prostitution, unlawful gambling, the sale of illegal drugs and associated misconduct by members of the police force. Not only was the CJC to be permanently charged with monitoring, reviewing, co-ordinating and initiating reform of the administration of criminal justice, it was also to fulfill those criminal justice functions not appropriately carried out by the police or other agencies. This meant that it had a huge task ahead of it. ee

ee Its seven main aims and objectives were:
The Goss government set about the task of reform, and appointed newly-elected lawyer and State Secretary of the Labor Party, Peter Beattie, to chair the Parliamentary Committee overseeing the CJC. It advertised for four part-time Commissioners to assist Bingham. One was to be a practicing lawyer with a demonstrated interest in civil liberties; the other three were to have proven ability in community affairs. Janet, who had recently retired from the University of Queensland Health Service, decided to apply for one of the latter positions. When the government forwarded a list of five nominees, of whom she was one, to the National and Liberal Party leaders for their endorsement, both leaders objected to her appointment, and ensured their objections were duly reported in The Courier Mail. This was probably a counter-productive move as Janet had considerable support within the community which was conveyed to the government, and Goss proceeded to appoint her a part-time Commissioner. After the appointments were announced, Angus Innes, the leader of the Liberal Party, questioned Janet’s credentials for the position. ‘Dr Irwin is a noted pro-abortion campaigner and I don’t know if she can see both sides of the issue.’ He discounted Janet’s previous work hearing administrative appeals at the University of Queensland, on the Federal Immigration Review Tribunal and the Social Security Appeals Tribunal. And the same allegation was not made against fellow appointee, Professor Western, who had also been actively involved in the campaign against the proposed Bjelke-Petersen abortion legislation.

It was no doubt this administrative appeals experience which led to Janet being appointed not only a Commissioner of the Criminal Justice Commission but

a) to enhance public, parliamentary and forensic awareness of the problems which beset the administration of criminal justice in Queensland;
b) to expose corruption and official misconduct through hearings and reports to Parliament;
c) to provide evidence leading to the prosecution of persons engaged in corruption or official misconduct either before the courts, the Misconduct Tribunals, or by disciplinary proceedings;
d) to provide evidence leading to the prosecution of persons engaged in major or organized crime which cannot be effectively investigated by the Police Service of other agencies of the State;
e) to reduce the incidence of misconduct, official misconduct and corruption in the Police Service and other units of public administration;
f) to upgrade the ability of the Police Service to tackle major and organized crime; and
g) to provide comprehensive and accurate intelligence briefings to law enforcement agencies, Parliament and the community on the state of major and organized crime in Queensland.

The other appointments were barrister Jim Barbeler; John Kelly, a retired public servant with considerable administrative experience who had assisted in the compilation of the Fitzgerald report; and Professor John Western, Professor of Sociology at University of Queensland.
also the Commissioner of Police Service Reviews. This role, which was independent both of the Police Service and of the Criminal Justice Commission, turned out to be one which required a considerable commitment of time. The former Appeal Board had been described in the Fitzgerald Report as ‘overly formal, legislative and cumbersome’ 15. The Fitzgerald Inquiry had found that demotions and punitive transfers were not uncommon where whistleblowers were concerned, or when police tried to enforce the law against police offenders. A previous Police Commissioner, for instance, had asked the policeman who stopped his car for speeding if he wanted to go to Cunnamulla or some other distant posting. Another relevant issue had been raised at a meeting of the Past and Present Police Women’s Association which Janet attended. ‘I became aware that there is significant institutionalized discrimination detrimental to the careers of women police officers.’16

Not only were reviews to her as Commissioner possible in relation to promotions and transfers, they were also available in relation to disciplinary matters which did not involve official misconduct. 68 As this was a new process, she worked closely with the Registrar of the Misconduct Tribunals and liaised with the Public Sector Management Commission to develop appropriate procedures and find an independent space for hearings to be conducted.17 Her power, however, was limited to recommending outcomes, and not to instituting them:

As a Review Commissioner my decision can be set aside by the Police Commissioner. He is a very powerful man. The General Counsel of the Criminal Justice Commission assures me that it would be a brave Police Commissioner who would make a habit of overturning my decisions.18

The Police Commissioner was required to provide a brief summary of reasons why any recommendation was not accepted. The 1991 Annual Report of the CJC reported that the Police Commissioner had accepted all recommendations to date. The following year, however, the Commissioner did not accept four of the recommendations and had yet to advise his decision on eighteen recommendations at the time the Annual Report was written.19

When the volume of work increased dramatically in the first year, a second Review Commissioner was appointed. These hearings mirrored the hearings of

68 Janet noted that Terry O’Gorman, in an even-handed way as President of the Queensland Council for Civil Liberties, made representations to the CJC to ensure that a fair deal was afforded police officers facing disciplinary sanctions.
appeals in the public sector against administrative decisions. It was now further enshrined in legislation that promotion was no longer to be based on seniority, but on merit, so, the overwhelming majority of reviews related to promotion; in the first year, 433 out of 500 applications for review.

Meanwhile, Janet’s part-time work as a non-specialised Commissioner was also proving a significant commitment. The Fitzgerald Report had recommended that the CJC, as an essential part of its immediate functions, undertake a:

- general review of the criminal law, including laws relating to voluntary sexual or sex-related behavior, SP bookmaking, illegal gambling, and illicit drugs to determine:
  - (a) the extent and nature of the involvement of organized crime in these activities
  - (b) the type, availability and costs of law enforcement resources which would be necessary effectively to police criminal laws against such activities
  - (c) the extent (if at all) to which any presently criminal activities should be legalized or decriminalized.

Labor Party policy favoured the introduction of poker machines and, indeed, the Goss government had committed to introducing poker machines in its first year in office.

In January 1990, the Chairman of the CJC was requested by a Cabinet sub-committee to provide advice on areas of likely difficulty in the introduction of gaming machines in licensed establishments in Queensland. At that time neither the Research & Coordination Division nor the Parliamentary Committee was established. The report was prepared under extraordinary circumstances in that certain stages in the introduction of gaming machines proceeded in the intervening period, in particular the preparation of legislation and the calling of expressions of interests for the supply of gaming machines.

In June 1990, the CJC released a Report on Gaming Machine Concerns and Regulations. It emphasised that it was written on the basis that the introduction of poker machines into Queensland was a fait accompli, and made detailed

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hh Written submissions were exchanged by the parties prior to the hearing in order to clarify the issues in dispute. The hearing, which would normally take about an hour, was informal and non-adversarial, and legal representation was not permitted. Written reasons for the decision were provided within seven to ten days. Previously there had been only very limited rights to have promotions reviewed, but, with this process, review rights were available to all police officers, other than the Commissioner and Executive Officers who were appointed by the government.

ii That trend continued in 1992. The Annual Report for that year stated that, ‘Despite the fact that the present system of review has been in operation since June 1990, some police officers seem unaware of the nature and requirements of the review process.’ It also noted that the Review Commissioners were currently members of a Queensland Police Service committee reviewing the selection, promotion and review processes.
recommendations regarding licensing and enforcement. It went on to express concern that there were ‘long established and well documented links between the legal and illegal gaming machine industry and organized criminal interests.’ It also stated that an industry dealing in high cash turnovers in numerous locations could be expected to lead to an increase in criminal activity, particularly theft and fraud. It provided evidence in that regard from previous enquiries into the industry and recommended that two of the country’s biggest gaming machine manufacturers be banned from the state and raised issues of an alleged donation made by one of them to the Labor Party. This was later challenged in the High Court which found that the company had been denied natural justice by the CJC.

Journalist Phil Dickie, who had joined the CJC as a research officer and was involved in a major way with producing the report, said that it was necessarily rushed, and the Report itself acknowledged that the normal consultation process was not followed because of time constraints. But Goss was furious. ‘This is just self-serving pap about independence to try and hide the fact that they got it seriously wrong.”23 The relationship between the Premier and the Head of the CJC was never to recover.

The following month, Janet was invited to address the Centre for Australian Public Sector Management National Conference on her role at the CJC. Janet told the conference, ‘We hope that there will not be too many more ‘shoot the messenger’ reactions to any future recommendations from us. We shall have to be fearless’.24 In early 1991, The Courier Mail reported on its front page, a ‘confidential’ police report of Yakuza gangs becoming involved in property and tourist transactions, particularly on the Gold Coast and in Cairns. It also reported Janet as saying at a UQ seminar on the Fitzgerald Reform Process, that the CJC was ‘very concerned about organized crime getting into the gambling industry, and into the poker-machine industry particularly’.25 Nonetheless, the government introduced the proposed legislation in February 1992.26

In accordance with the Fitzgerald recommendations noted above, the Commission prepared a paper on homosexual law reforms enacted in other jurisdictions, and the public was invited to make submissions to the Parliamentary Criminal Justice Committee.27 In November 1990, the government decriminalized

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23 Wayne Goss was later to admit, ‘I wish I’d never brought in poker machines. I think they’re a scourge…the people who play them are the people who can least afford to do so’.26
consensual homosexual sex, but the age of consent was set at eighteen, as compared with sixteen for consensual heterosexual sex.

The CJC set about dealing with the wide range of matters which required its attention. In November 1990, the Commission released an Issues Paper on *SP Bookmaking and Other Aspects of Criminal Activity in the Racing Industry.*\(^2\) It established an Advisory Committee on Illicit Drugs under the chairmanship of Professor Western to report back to it. Janet was appointed one of the members of this Committee given that she had been quite outspoken on the issue in the past, and played an active role in the production of its Discussion Paper on *Cannabis and the Law in Queensland.*\(^2\) Peter Applegarth attended the Parliamentary Criminal Justice Committee hearing of the Report on behalf of the Queensland Council for Civil Liberties, but it was noted in their Annual Report that it seemed to have disappeared into a black hole since.\(^2\)

In its first year, the Criminal Justice Commission also embarked on a major research project on prostitution. The Commissioners attended a conference on ‘Prostitution – Crime or Industry’ organized by SQWISI (Self-Health for Queensland Workers in the Sex Industry). Professor Marcia Neave, who had produced a major report on prostitution for the Victorian Government, addressed the conference on the powerlessness of many women and the limited choices they have in their attempts to improve their economic status and that of their families. It was the first time these issues had been addressed in a public forum in Brisbane but few sex-workers attended, and Janet noted that ‘those who did were alarmed by the presence of police in the car park’.\(^2\) There were state-wide consultations with sex-workers and the public, not only about decriminalization, but also about occupational health and safety issues. In February 1991, the CJC produced an issues paper for discussion but the outcome was pre-empted by Goss announcing that decriminalization of prostitution was not on the government’s agenda.

Speaking at the seminar on the Fitzgerald Reform Process mentioned above, Janet said that the issues paper had indicated that child prostitutes, including a boy aged nine, were operating on the streets of the Gold Coast. She said that sex workers would...

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\(^1\) The issue remains unaddressed in Queensland, but the decriminalization of cannabis, especially in relation to health needs, appears likely in some jurisdictions in 2014. Janet would certainly approve of the current Premier of New South Wales Mike Baird’s proposal that the state grow its own marijuana and carry out medical trials with it.\(^1\)
be reluctant to have input into a research project which would place them at risk of being arrested. The CJC carried out a public opinion survey which found that 88% of the 1800 respondents agreed with licensed prostitution. In a very extensive report, it recommended to the government in September 1991 that it replace criminal sanctions with government regulation of the industry. This position was supported by Peter Beattie in his role as Chair of the Parliamentary Criminal Justice Committee, and even by The Courier Mail. It was rejected, however, by Goss whose Prostitution Law Amendment Act 1992 continued to criminalize brothels but allowed prostitution in the form of sole operators working from their own homes. It was a seeming compromise that ‘was condemned as unworkable by police, lawyers and prostitutes themselves. Terry O’Gorman even claimed it was ‘worse than the Joh era’. It was not until 1999, during the Beattie Labor Government that licensing of brothels was introduced.

In January 1992, Janet, a regular theatregoer and aficionado, was invited to open the Real World Theatre Company’s season of Shakespeare’s Measure for measure. ‘In view of Queensland’s recent history, this play about prostitution, hypocrisy, crime and punishment is an appropriate choice,’ she announced, and went on to quote from the play:

Lucio, speaking of Angelo, the Duke’s deputy, in Act 3, Scene 3, says to the Duke (who is disguised as a friar) - A little more lenity to lechery would do no harm in him
The Duke responds - It is too general a vice and severity must cure it.
Lucio replies - Yes, in good sooth. The vice is of a great kindred. It is well allied but it is impossible to extirpit it quite, Friar, till eating and drinking be put down.

For a Premier who had committed to achieving social justice for women in a state which was lagging behind other states and the Commonwealth in that regard, Goss’s response to the issue of prostitution was as puzzling to Janet as his turnaround on the issue of abortion. There is no doubt that he did proceed to introduce a range of changes to the law and policy that benefited women. The Queensland Anti-Discrimination Act 1992 prohibited discrimination on a wide range of grounds, including sex, and an Anti-Discrimination Tribunal was established with the power to investigate complaints. The legislation applied to work, the provision of goods and services and the administration of State laws and programs. Sexual harassment was clearly identified as sex discrimination. Goss also tightened the laws on domestic violence, and he introduced legislation similar to that enacted by the Commonwealth and most other states on Equal Opportunity in Public Employment. He established a
Women’s Policy Unit within Cabinet, a Queensland Women’s Consultative Council, and a Register of Women for appointment to public bodies. He appointed the first female judge, Justice Margaret McMurdo, and the first female Governor, lawyer Leneen Forde.

Wayne Goss has been rightfully recognized for his achievements in this regard, and Janet was delighted to see all this happening. But there were certain women whose interests were not being considered by the government, and those women were part of her responsibility in her role as Commissioner, and the only female Commissioner. As University of Queensland academic Barbara Sullivan saw it at the time:

There are two areas of law and public policy in which the Labor government has overtly compromised any commitment to social justice for Queensland women. In the first place, the Goss government has consistently avoided any address to the issue of abortion despite the considerable hardship that this has involved for many Queensland women. Second, in relation to prostitution, the Goss government has abandoned any serious attempt to address the inequities faced by sex workers, most of whom are women. These particular legal and policy failures have significant ramifications for all Queensland women.35

Meanwhile, another issue had arisen to cause further friction and ultimately a chasm between the Criminal Justice Commission and the government. Had the relationship between the Premier and the Chairman been more amenable, it seems unlikely that the farce-like game which was to play out would have occurred. Peter Beattie, in his role as Chairman of the Parliamentary Criminal Justice Committee, while ensuring the accountability of the CJC, attempted to relate to the organisation in an even-handed way and not to assume a political agenda on their part. However, in an address to the Fitzgerald Reform Process seminar mentioned earlier, he stated that critics of the CJC, including members of his own Parliamentary Criminal Justice Committee, had sought cheap headlines through public attacks on the CJC. He expressed concern that if the CJC and PCJC were at loggerheads, that would be the focus rather than the important issues which were being addressed. And this was, in fact, what eventuated with the government and the CJC.

A number of articles appeared in The Courier Mail concerning alleged misuse of the parliamentary travel scheme to the tune of nearly $500,000 during 1987 to 1988, prior to the Goss government coming to power. ‘Goss played down the story, saying that the travel guidelines for MPs had been revised and tightened under his
government. Bingham, however, determined that the Commission was required to investigate the matter.

Bingham himself had been stopped for speeding earlier in the year and found to be still driving on a Tasmanian licence, rather than having obtained a Queensland one. Police Commissioner Newnham declined to take further action on the licence breach on the basis of Crown Law advice that it was arguable that Bingham was still a Tasmanian resident. More than a year later, having been contacted by a senior official with the Queensland Police Union, Channel Seven News claimed that Bingham had received preferential treatment. The police file on the matter had meanwhile gone missing. Bingham claimed that he had provided the Premier with the relevant documentation but that Goss did not disclose this to the press.

Meanwhile, the CJC had obtained the records from the earlier parliament and summoned a number of Members of Parliament from that period to private hearings. On the eve of the release of their report on the matter, the Sydney Morning Herald claimed that two Ministers in the Goss government and a senior National Party frontbencher had made a claim for private expenses as parliamentary expenses in the relevant period. ‘This reinforced Goss’s belief that the CJC had a political agenda. Who else could have leaked such a politically damaging story?’

The Report itself stated that the parliamentary travel scheme had been widely abused during the twelve years from 1987 to 1998, and that many of the rorters were sitting in the current parliament. However, independent legal advice obtained by the Commission stipulated that, in no case did the evidence meet the criminal standard of proof necessary to support a prosecution, and that therefore it was inappropriate to name names. The Report provided thirteen examples of the worst abuses, and sufficient information was provided to enable journalists to identify some of the politicians involved. Russell Cooper was identified as the worst case and resigned as Opposition Leader. The Sunday Mail named the Police Minister, Terry Mackenroth, and the Health Minister, Ken McElligott, which placed Goss in a situation where he had to call for their resignations as well.

As if that was not enough, Mackenroth then wrote to Police Commissioner Newman accusing him not only of gross incompetence, but also of misusing his own travel entitlements. Newnham and Mackenroth had fallen out in early 1990 when Newnham provided the Premier with Federal Police transcripts of taped phone conversations between Mackenroth and former Supreme Court judge, Angelo Vasta,
and his brother-in-law, Santo Coco, who at the time faced bribery charges. Although Goss indicated that Newnham had his support, Newnham felt obliged to refer the matter to the CJC. A trial in the District Court cleared him of criminal behavior, but said there was evidence of possible official misconduct. A Misconduct Tribunal of the CJC found the charge of misconduct proven and ordered Newnham’s dismissal. Newnham appealed to the Supreme Court where the verdict was overturned.

The Police Union, however, sponsored a ‘no confidence’ motion against Newnham, just as they had done with Whitrod when he had tried to reform their organisation. A public rally was held to support Newnham, and Janet attended as an observer to assess the public response. A minority report of the Parliamentary Criminal Justice Commission criticized this attendance. The Council for Civil Liberties, however, supported her attendance in accordance with her role on the Commission representing the community. It also criticized the minority report for failing to afford her the opportunity to respond to their criticism.

Newnham announced that he would not seek reappointment when his term of office expired, and nor did Bingham when his term expired the next month. The writing was on the wall for Janet. When her original term of office expired, she was recommended for reappointment, both by Bingham and by the incoming Chairman of the Commission, Rob O’Regan QC. But the government decided to appoint, in her place, a person whose references had not been checked and who was to be ‘unappointed’ a day later. The QCCL Annual Report commented that:

The circumstances of the failure to reappoint Janet Irwin as a Commissioner raises the very important aspect of the manner in which Commissioners of the CJC are appointed by Government. Janet Irwin’s failure to be appointed was seen by many as a reaction by the Government to Janet’s somewhat strong and public criticism of the Government when it was reasonably seen to be necessary.

The next head on the chopping block was that of Peter Beattie, who was replaced as Chairman of the Parliamentary Criminal Justice Commission when the government was returned to office in late 1992. An article in The Bulletin magazine entitled ‘CJC under threat’, reported that his ‘vigorous independent stance and defence of the Commission caused him to clash regularly with Goss. It quoted a government source as stating that, ‘Goss regarded the CJC as a loose cannon on the decks. He expected the committee to pull it into line and was very resentful when it didn’t.’ Janet was interviewed for the same article. ‘I was seen as too independent and
not likely to succumb to political pressures.’ She said that Bingham was ‘kicked in the teeth repeatedly’ by the government and that Newnham was ‘seen as a threat to the established order of things in the police culture.’ She also commented that Goss compromised the work of the CJC by repeatedly pre-empting its investigations and that ‘people who disagree with Mr Goss will be in similar peril to those who disagreed with Sir Joh’.  

The fact that she was no longer in a position of authority did not stop Janet from continuing to speak out on issues related to the CJC, as indeed she spoke out on other issues which concerned her. In 1994, the CJC made a recommendation that it investigate Members of Parliament for criminal behavior only, and not for misconduct, even though public servants and local government officials could be investigated for breaching standards of conduct. In an article in The Courier-Mail, Janet claimed that this was compromising their role as watchdog for the people of Queensland, and sent the message that it was possible to bend the rules a little and nothing would happen.

The following year, The Weekend Independent, a newspaper produced by the students and staff of the Department of Journalism at the University of Queensland, offered report cards on the Goss government’s response to the Fitzgerald Inquiry. The first was from Janet who spoke of the excitement which so many people felt about the prospect for change with the election of the Goss government. She went on, however, to detail matters which, in her view, saw the promise of a new deal not delivered. As well as the issues discussed above, she pointed to problems with community consultation with the QCCL, for instance, being given copies of proposed legislation with insufficient time to prepare submissions, and its advice ignored. The Freedom of Information legislation she described as now a joke, with any papers prepared for Cabinet exempt even if they did not make it into cabinet discussions.

Another report card was from Scott Prasser, Senior Lecturer in Government at the University of Southern Queensland who had organized two major seminars on the post-Fitzgerald challenges and outcomes. His assessment was that the Goss government was never a left-of-centre, social reformist government. It had indeed initiated many changes proposed by Fitzgerald, but Prasser doubted whether the spirit of real, open, democratic government had come to Queensland, citing a continued lack of genuine parliamentary reform, lack of resources to the Opposition, a hypersensitivity to criticism, and the subtle politicization of the public service.
Chris Griffith, journalist and former Secretary of the Queensland Watchdog Committee, was likewise critical of the Goss government saying:

It can say it champions accountability, parliamentary reform, public sector ethics, and the virtue of whistleblowing. But equally there’s evidence that much reform is superficial particularly as the government’s attitude to the spirit of these reforms is questionable. For examples, whistleblowers say that far from supporting its critics, the government goes out of its way to attack and undermine anyone who opposes and exposes it.  

When The Courier Mail reported Janet’s comments that open government was a joke, Goss suggested that they were being driven by her desire for a lifetime appointment to the CJC and disappointment at not being reappointed. Janet publicly sought an apology. Goss responded in private saying that:

I have always had a high regard for you, and indeed still do, but I must say in all honesty that I thought in some respects you failed to discharge your duty to the public in your role as a Commissioner at the Criminal Justice Commission insofar as you had a particular responsibility in relation to civil liberties and natural justice. This is not to suggest any improper motivation or that you did not make a positive contribution in other areas.

Janet saw some irony in that response.

When the Labor government lost the 1996 election, Goss made a stinging attack in The Courier Mail on the Queensland Council for Civil Liberties in general, and Terry O’Gorman in particular, accusing them of putting criminals before citizens. Janet and Beryl Holmes, who were both on the executive of the Council at the time, responded that the Council, in fact, ‘put human rights and civil liberties before simplistic populist views’. At a public function at the time, Janet said that ‘The community owes a great debt to people such as Terry O’Gorman. Terry has contributed such enormous passion, time and energy to ensure civil liberties are not eroded by abuse of political or police powers.’


As for civil liberties in Queensland in 2014, it seemed that, under the Newman Coalition government, we were back in the dark ages. Tony Fitzgerald QC detailed its approach to governing:

Standard populist refrains build on envy and resentment to encourage ignorance and bigotry: educated people are ‘elites’ who live in ivory towers and lack knowledge of the ‘real world’; evidence-based knowledge is inferior to intuitive ‘common sense’ gained in a ‘school of hard
knocks’; experts know less than a ‘table of wisdom’ at the local pub; and judges, despite their oaths of office and obligations of impartiality and independence, should just do ‘what the people want.’

Behind that populist façade, the government sacked, stacked and otherwise reduced the effectiveness of Parliamentary committees, subverted and weakened the State’s anti-corruption Commission, made unprecedented attacks on the courts and the judiciary, appointed a totally unsuitable Chief Justice and reverted to selecting male judges almost exclusively, appointing 18 new male judges and magistrates and only one woman; and more to emerge, for example, concerning the inappropriate influence of politically supportive police.

Retired judges and lawyers who were shocked into criticizing the government were disparaged for their effrontery. The opinions of people who have spent their professional lives implementing an impartial legal system in accordance with the rule of law and grappling with the complex problems associated with criminal justice were patronizingly dismissed by the Premier and the Attorney-General, neither of whom has the slightest knowledge or understanding of those matters. The Courier Mail acted throughout as the government’s belligerent spear carrier.48

However, just when it seemed like hope of good governance was lost to Queensland, an early election was called in 2015 and the Newman government was defeated, to be replaced by a minority government with a female Premier, female Deputy Premier, the first female indigenous Cabinet Minister, and women as a majority in the State Cabinet.49 No doubt it was an election where, for the majority of voters, the focus was on getting rid of the previous government, and it remains to be seen how the electorate responds to this extraordinary turnaround, and how the new government responds to the task ahead of them. But Queensland now has the most progressive government by far in Australia in terms of the status of women. If only Janet had been here to witness this extraordinary outcome. The Queensland Council for Civil Liberties, meanwhile, continues its essential role in keeping governments accountable, and Beryl Holmes was recently made a Life Member of that organisation in honour of her longstanding and outstanding contribution to their work.


4. Clarke, E, Guardian of your rights, p. 36.


8. Clarke, E, Guardian of your rights, p. 44.


42. ‘CJC has become politically compromised, says former chief’ 1994, *Courier Mail*, 26 August.


Chapter 20

Women Coming Together

The successful campaign against the oppressive abortion laws proposed by the Bjelke-Petersen government had demonstrated what women could achieve when they joined forces. Janet witnessed this happening again, in 1980, as an Australian delegate to the Non-Governmental Organisations Forum in Copenhagen as part of the UN Decade for Women. She later recounted how:

1 a leading Egyptian doctor and women’s rights activist who had attended was arrested without charge and thrown into jail on her return to Cairo. New Zealand MP, Marilyn Waring wrote to us urging us to write to our ambassadors and Prime Ministers. Within three weeks, women were networking all over the world and the Australian government even sent a formal protest to Egypt. We got her out of prison and all for the price of a postage stamp. That made me aware of networking’s power.

Inspired by this outcome, after she returned from Copenhagen, Janet decided to set up an informal group of like-minded women, all involved in some way in improving women’s lives, to meet for dinner once a month to share their experiences and support each other. They would meet in a local café and have lively discussions. Helen Draper, who then worked for Family Planning Queensland, was a regular and avid attendee. She recalls that the usual practice was to go round the table and for the women to take it in turns to share with the group whatever took their fancy: humorous anecdotes, infuriating experiences, problems which they hadn’t solved, matters which needed addressing, and always laughter. It was a fluid group.2 Beryl Holmes was always there, of course. Win Metcalf, an advocate on disability issues, was another regular. Win was to go on to complete a Masters degree on Aging and the Politics of Humour in her late seventies. Now in her nineties, she has amazing and fond recall of those gatherings. She also credits Janet with assisting a family member through a very difficult experience with anorexia as a student.3

The dinners would continue for sixteen years. Janet would introduce newcomers to Brisbane to the group, and whenever there was an advocate for women’s issues visiting Brisbane, it was inevitable that she would join the group for dinner. When Quentin Bryce headed up the Women’s Information Service in Brisbane, she invited Hazel Hawke, then wife of the Prime Minister. When Wendy
McCarthy was in Brisbane in 1989 for the Breaking the Silence campaign on Domestic Violence, she joined them.\(^{nn}\)

Over time, this network of Brisbane women began to talk about having their own space. As Virginia Woolf had stressed the importance of a room of one's own, they brainstormed what sort of space would be appropriate, not only for themselves, but for the women of Brisbane generally. They wanted a space which was not just somewhere for women to congregate, but which recognized the contribution of women to the state of Queensland. If the Stockmen’s Hall of Fame had attracted substantial funding, surely this was in similar vein. The group was particularly energized by an awareness of the contribution women had made to World Expo 88, held in Brisbane. ‘It would be lovely if they just gave us the $15 million that women are estimated to have contributed towards Expo – 75 percent of the work for Expo was donated by women housing, feeding and looking after Expo visitors’.\(^5\) Journalist Susan Hocking reported in *The Sunday Mail* receiving a phone call from Janet, suggesting, what Susan thought was a brilliant idea, that once the Expo site was redeveloped, part of that site include a ‘Woman’s Place, as a permanent thank you’\(^6\).

There were precedents in the United States. A National Museum of Women in the Arts had been constructed in 1981 in Washington DC. But a precedent which was especially relevant had been set in the previous century. One of the most popular exhibits at the 1893 Chicago World Expo was The Women’s Building, a neoclassical building designed by a female architect, decorated by female sculptors, muralists and interior designers and exhibiting women’s fine arts, crafts and industrial products, both national and international. Panels lining the grand rotunda listed the names of women of achievement. The *New York Times* recorded how:

> The building also contained a lunch room, a model nursery, a library of women’s writing and records, and examples of women’s philanthropies, explorations and discoveries; its managers sponsored a World’s Congress of Representative Women, at which thousands listened to distinguished women speak their minds.\(^7\)

A ‘Women’s Place, Women’s Space’ steering committee, with Janet as Foundation President, was formed in 1989 to secure a building and funding, and a successful launch party with eighty attendees was held at the School of Arts. Ann

\(^{nn}\) In 2014 Quentin Bryce was appointed to head up a Special Taskforce on Domestic and Family Violence in Queensland, an issue which keeps getting worse.\(^4\) It seems that, along with humour, great persistence and perseverance are required if you want to improve the lot of women in society.
Garms held a fundraising lunch at her elegant Tivoli theatre restaurant entitled ‘Heroines at the Tivoli.’ The Australian Federation of Business and Professional Women’s Brisbane Riverside Club raised a considerable sum of money at a Queensland Day breakfast raffle. The Women in Architecture organization became involved in drawing up plans for a suitable building. Indeed, the proposal received the public support of the 173 women’s organisations representing 200,000 women throughout Queensland. The then Lord Mayor of Brisbane, Sallyanne Atkinson, supported the proposal as did the Local Government minister, Tom Burns. As well as a Hall of Fame, it was intended that the space would include a gallery area, an auditorium, meeting rooms, a board room and a library. It would pay for itself by leasing other areas to suitable tenants, such as health professionals, child minding facilities and counselling services.  

In 1991, Janet was invited in her capacity as Foundation President to address a seminar in Canberra organized by a committee of the Federal Parliament on ‘Recognition for Women in Australia.’ She talked about the symbolic value of a concrete Women’s Place:

In Canberra, there is a War Museum funded by the Government. Is Women’s contribution in peace and war less important? Such a place would demonstrate, display and hold records of women’s achievements; not just the high fliers, but all women from indigenous, convict and early settler women, migrant women, women in professions, the trade unions and women in the home and in politics.

She acknowledged the significant $11,000 research grant the organization had received from the Office of Status of Women. ‘We are using this to establish a methodology and a database to record and preserve information about women and their place in history.’ Indeed, two members of the Women’s Place Committee, Denise Conroy and Colleen Forrester, had already sent out around 700 requests for information to a variety of different organisations including historical societies, local authorities and museums and had been inundated with information about women’s contribution to Queensland society. Justice Margaret McMurdo, the first woman appointed to the Bench in Queensland, agreed to commit her wig and gown to the collection of memorabilia. Regrettably, however, the considerable work of all involved, which is stored at the John Oxley Library, Brisbane, was to no avail. It is a project whose time is yet to come.
Over the years, Janet became convinced that the only way discrimination against women would be eliminated would be by women being represented in parliament in equal numbers to men. It was an idea which she and Jenny Huey, the Women’s Officer from the Queensland Teachers’ Union, started to discuss. Jenny, a fellow New Zealander by birth, recalls that when she came to Brisbane, she was most excited to meet up with the doctor who had prescribed the contraceptive pill for her as a student at the University of Canterbury. They became firm friends and fellow campaigners. When Jenny and her colleague, Mary Kelly, now Head of Equity at Queensland University of Technology, came up with the idea of establishing the Australian Women’s Party, a political party with equal representation and rights for women as its main purpose, Janet was immediately interested. Jenny remembered that:

Janet was very keen to join the AWP. She came to my house on numerous occasions, and sat around my kitchen table in Paddington with a number of other women, where we had great conversations while we put information into mail outs for potential new members and sent out our newsletters.¹¹

Janet was one of the women who spoke at the launch of the Australian Women’s Party on 26 November 1995 at Colossus Hall, West End, Brisbane. It was registered as a political party and branches set up in all states.

Paul Keating was Prime Minister at the time and it looked like Australia was moving towards becoming a republic, an opportune time for constitutional change. Constitutional change was what the AWP was aiming for, constitutional change so that men and women were guaranteed equal representation in federal parliament. It was not, however, a single issue party. Its platform stated that:

We believe that all issues are women’s issues and that women’s perspectives are missing from government…The Australian Women’s Party wants a partnership with men to share the power, the work, the wealth and the responsibilities in an Australia based on equality and community.

It had a commitment to a fair Australia on all fronts.

In 1996, however, the Howard Coalition government assumed power. John Howard was not in favour of a republic, but, strategically, called a Constitutional Convention on the issue in early 1998. A number of women’s groups, including the Australian Women’s Party, decided to call a Women’s Constitutional Convention
beforehand to inform the main convention on significant issues for women. Howard, however, limited the discussion to three issues: whether Australia should be a republic; how any President should be appointed; and the time frame. There was no attention to such questions as a Bill of Rights, let alone women’s equal representation in parliament. The Convention gave ‘in principle’ support for a republic, and called for a referendum the following year. Predictably, given this context, the referendum was unsuccessful.

Janet refused to allow herself to be swayed from activism. The worse things got for women, the more important it was, she believed, for women to bind together. And, as she would point out, that was always such a rewarding exercise in its own right. The act of coming together was just as rewarding as the outcomes achieved, and it was also important to remember the gains which had been made, not to overlook what women had achieved. Janet’s resilience in difficult situations was one of her leadership qualities. Her example inspired other women to soldier on.

One of the many committees which Janet had managed to fit into the busy schedule which once constituted ‘work’ and now constituted ‘retirement’, was the Course Advisory Committee for the Applied Ethics Unit at Queensland University of Technology. Dr Gail Tulloch, who was then on the lecturing staff there, had a background as an academic in Women’s Studies and as an Equal Opportunity Officer in Victoria. Janet invited her along to the monthly dinners as well as other social functions. When it was Janet’s seventieth birthday in 1993, Gail came up with the idea of not only having a special dinner to honour the occasion, but also of establishing an annual dinner, in Janet’s name, for women to come together to celebrate what they had achieved. When Gail had worked in Melbourne, she attended the annual Mary Owen dinner. Mary Owen was a significant figure in the women’s movement in Melbourne, having been founding Coordinator of The Working Women’s Centre from 1975 to 1986. When she retired, a dinner was held in her honour and continued for the next twenty years. ‘There was always a female keynote

Mary Kelly and Jenny Huey stood on a joint Senate ticket for the Australian Women’s Party in 1998 but they too were unsuccessful and the Australian Women’s Party was deregistered in 2003. In 2014, the media raised the question ‘Could a feminist political party succeed in Australia?’ This was in the context of French feminist candidates standing for election, and the first member of a Swedish feminist party gaining a seat in the European Parliament. It was in the Australian context of Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s misogyny speech and the online group Destroy the Joint gathering 40,000 supporters in response to radio shock jock Alan Jones’s comment that women were ‘destroying the joint’. It seems unlikely given that feminists are still labelled ‘men-hating’ while Alan Jones is never ascribed the label ‘woman-hater’ notwithstanding the depths to which his diatribes against women descend.
speaker and the audience, normally in the order of 600 women, wearing the feminist colours of purple, green and white, was a sight to behold.  

With the assistance of QUT colleague, Denise Conroy, and Colleen Forrester, then Electorate Officer to Mary Crawford, Labor Member of Federal Parliament from 1987 to 1996, Gail organized the first dinner. The speaker at Janet’s birthday dinner was feminist author Dr Dale Spender, and actor Annie Lee delighted the audience with a special performance for the occasion. It was decided that the speakers at future dinners had to be Queensland born or based; eminent in their field; have some connection with Janet either personally and/or committed to improving the status of women; and from different disciplines or fields of endeavour. Colleen co-opted her boss as one of the principal organisers of future functions.

The early Janet Irwin Women’s Dinners were held at the UQ Staff Club, and later ones at the Parliamentary Annex with the sponsorship of a female Member of Parliament. The dinners were relaxed but polished affairs with fine china and glassware and gourmet food and wine, very much in the style of the dinners which Janet herself would hold at home. Audrey Gibbs designed a special motif for the menus symbolizing Janet’s role at the centre of a network of women. There were special flower arrangements for the tables, and balloons to provide a celebratory air. Women were encouraged to change tables and meet other women they didn’t know. The organisers invited women from all walks of life to attend, and while the audience shared similar views about acknowledging and encouraging women, they ranged across the spectrum politically. The dinners continued for fifteen years. Some women attended all or most dinners, while others attended to hear particular speakers which interested them.

Senator Cheryl Kernot, then Leader of the Australian Democrats, was the second speaker, followed by Professor Nancy Viviani, who came to Griffith University from Harvard University in 1978 to set up a Centre for the Study of Australian-Asian relations and had contributed to numerous community and government commissions. Actress Diane Cilento, from the prominent Cilento medical family, provided a wonderful audio-visual presentation of Karnak, the theatre and rainforest sanctuary she had set up in northern Queensland. Mary Kelly and Jenny Huey talked about setting up the Australian Women’s Party. Dinner number six saw Quentin Bryce, who was to go on to be Governor of Queensland and Governor-
General of Australia, talk of her groundbreaking work directing bodies dealing with sex discrimination, human rights and equal opportunity.

At the seventh dinner, Justice Margaret McMurdo, President of the Court of Appeal, gave a speech on Women in the Law—the past, the present and the future. She told how Queensland’s first woman solicitor, Agnes McWhinney from Townsville, admitted in 1915, did not receive any payment for her work but rather her salary was paid to her brother who was in the armed forces. Female law students constituted at least 50% of law students in 1999, ‘consistently beat the males in achieving the glittering prizes’ but were ‘still so under-represented in positions of power and influence in the legal profession’. She was optimistic about the future.

Mary Magee, the first dinner speaker for the new millennium, had been the first woman to own a pharmacy in the Brisbane CBD and was currently International President of Zonta, an organization of women from business and the professions dedicated to advancing the cause of women through service, advocacy, fellowships and educational programs. In 2001, Dr Cherrell Hirst, Director of the Wesley Hospital Breast Clinic and Chancellor of QUT, highlighted the importance of being prepared to go down the road less travelled. Janet would always invite the audience to meet their own challenges with similar enthusiasm and determination to the speakers: ‘If you haven’t been driven by the passion and action of the times, you haven’t lived’.

Journalist and television presenter Maxine McKew, yet to take on the challenge of a parliamentary career, reviewed the achievements women had secured in 2002 and discussed the battles yet to be won, including equal pay. At that time, the average weekly earnings of women were well below that of their male counterparts.

The following year saw a speaker from a road less travelled, or rather, a flight path less travelled: Air Commodore, Julie Hammer. She was the first woman to attain that rank, the first to be appointed Commandant of the Australian Defence Force Academy and was to go on to be the first woman appointed Air Vice Marshall. When

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99 Her optimism had diminished by 2013 when, in a speech to women law graduates, she expressed the view that the current government’s appointment record suggested an unconscious bias against women. Hardly fighting words, but they elicited a quite remarkable and unethical response from the then Attorney-General, suggesting she had recommended her husband and another man for the position of Chief Justice. The conversation was confidential, making it unethical for her to provide details of what had been said to rebut the allegations. It was a stark reminder of the difficulties women face in attempting to advance the cause of other women.

999 and the situation has continued to worsen with a gender gap of 18.8% in 2015, a record high.
she joined the Air Force in 1977 with a BSc (Hons) in Physics from the University of Queensland, there were limited positions which were available to women but she made the most of those which were, and obtained a Masters degree in Aerosystems Engineering. When doors opened, she walked in and soon took charge.

The year 2004 saw another double act, this time, mother and daughter in the form of Merle Thornton, the activist who had chained herself to the bar of the Regatta Hotel, and her daughter, Sigrid, probably best known at the time for her role as the Magistrate, Laura Gibson, in the popular ABC television series, *Seachange*, which had twice won her Most Outstanding Actress Award. Mothers were encouraged to bring along their daughters to this dinner which saw the greatest attendance figures. The dinner which caused the greatest emotional response was that in 2005 when the speaker was Di Fingleton. The first woman to be appointed Chief Magistrate in Queensland in 1999, she controversially held reconciliation ceremonies in six magistrates Courts in Queensland and issued a formal apology to indigenous peoples. In 2002, she was convicted of the offence of intimidating a witness under the Queensland Crimes Act in relation to an email she had sent to a fellow magistrate. That decision was overturned by the High Court but, in the meantime, she had lost her position, her reputation and spent six months in gaol. She had not long been reappointed as a Magistrate and her talk to the dinner was entitled ‘Resilience: Keep your Eye on the Stars.’ Whatever opinions the audience may have held regarding what had occurred, they would have had cold hearts not to be affected by her speech.

In 2006, the speaker was Elizabeth Nosworthy, a commercial lawyer and partner in a national law firm for twenty years and the first woman President of the Queensland Law Society from 1986 to 1987. She then assumed multiple significant roles as company director and, in 2001, won the Australian Institute of Company Directors (Qld Division) Award for Outstanding Director. She was to go on to be the first woman Chancellor of Bond University. At the final dinner in 2007, Queensland’s ‘First Lady of Jazz’, Dr Clare Hansson, delighted the audience with her music. After graduating with a PhD from QUT in 2006, Clare had established a Young Jazz Recording Prize in conjunction with the Brisbane Jazz Club to springboard the jazz career of emerging musicians. Janet made a special request for Hoagy Carmichael’s ‘Stardust’ but, sadly, she was not well enough to attend. Janet’s daughter Sally, who had always attended the dinners with her, spoke on her behalf. Justice Helen O’Sullivan gave an impromptu speech in which she talked of the mentoring role Janet
had undertaken for the benefit of so many women; how she encouraged women to express themselves and to develop their interests and passions unapologetically, which was quite radical at the time; and how she had brought women together in a beneficial way, mirrored by the dinners.¹⁹

Janet’s achievements were recognized formally, firstly when she was made a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) in the Queen’s Birthday Honours List in 1991, for service to women’s affairs and to the community; and, secondly, when she was made a Centenary Medallist in 2003 for distinguished service to the community, to medicine and to women. While she would have been pleased that a woman had been afforded this recognition, there is little doubt that what would have meant the most to her was not awards, but the ongoing personal rewards of the shared journey which she and other women were undertaking.

9. Davies, S 1991, ‘Women’s Place: an idea whose time has come’, Newsletter, Women’s Place, no. 4, August.


Chapter 21

A Wealth of Friends

In 1991, journalist Susan Hocking, in an article in *The Courier-Mail*, noted that:

> History books abound with glowing tributes to the ideal of Aussie mateship – that almost sanctified form of friendship forged between Australian men. The same mystical aura has never surrounded friendships which Australian women share.¹

"After questioning why female friendships were not similarly esteemed, Hocking went on to interview three sets of female friends about the importance of their bonds with other women. One set was Beryl Holmes and Janet. They spoke of meeting in the ABC corridors after taking part in a radio discussion on abortion reform. Janet recalled:

> We realized from that first meeting that we shared the passionate belief that women should be able to make their own life decisions. It was a belief which brought us close and keeps us close. Our greatest bond is that we both care deeply about women. We can be completely open with each other because our relationship is based on total trust and it is a non-exploitative friendship except (laughing) that I occasionally exploit her to help in my garden and she occasionally exploits me to cook her baked dinners.

Beryl responded:

> We give each other unconditional support, can call on each other any time, we share our contacts, our other friends and our families. There are minor things that we disagree on but they are what help make our friendship interesting. We can challenge each other’s ideas.²

²²Interestingly, in a recent work, *Mateship: a very Australian history*, Nick Dyrenfurth explores the evolution and validity of a term which, as Hocking suggests, is treated in Australia with the sort of religious fervour which religion no longer attracts.² In fact, in a 2013 survey conducted by Westpac, for whatever reason, of 1,000 respondents on what makes a typical Australian, the top answer was ‘mateship’, suggesting that women are seen as unAustralian.²³Dyrenfurth details how the term was used to foster a sense of nationalism in support of a ‘yes’ vote for the conscription referendum during the First World War, and how in the 1990s, Prime Minister Howard tried to have it officially recognised as a national characteristic in the preamble to the Australian Constitution. While ‘mateship’ has been a clarion call for both sides of politics, its association with the Australian bush as claimed by poets such as Henry Lawson, is challenged. Lawson and the boozy bohemians of Sydney were very much projecting their blokey camaraderie onto the good burghers of the bush.⁴
Friendship was not only important to Janet at the individual level. In the last chapter, we saw how it could work both at the public and private levels at the same time. And it was not only women whom she befriended. When Janet resigned from her position as Director of Health Services at the University of Queensland in 1988, her colleagues expressed their anxiety at the prospect of picking up where she left off. In addition, to so many of them, she was much more than a colleague, she was a well loved and admired friend. They told her this in a collection of sixty-three letters gathered for her official farewell. From the United States, Professor Knight Aldrich wrote of their mutual respect and deepening friendship as they maintained a working relationship across the globe. In acknowledging Janet’s outstanding contribution to women’s issues, he added:

I’d like to remind you that you haven’t neglected the opposite sex, particularly the male doctors who have had the good fortune to participate in the Balint groups that you have led so long and so effectively.6

There were also letters from New Zealand from former colleagues. Dr (later Dame) Margaret Sparrow, the leading figure in the abortion law reform movement in New Zealand, and a fellow student of Janet’s at Otago University, recalled our first meeting in 5th year classes in 1962. I had just returned from a two year break in my studies and was coping with an 18 month old daughter and a 3 year old son. I found it difficult enough having been away from medicine for two years. Even in that time drug therapy had changed. Child care was not readily available or even considered acceptable and women still sacrificed their careers for their family. You were an inspiration! Here you were back at Medical School after a much longer break, having raised a teenage family. If you could do that and cope with the responsibilities of life single-handed, I could surely manage. I admired the courage with which you picked up the threads of what must have seemed at times, a lost career. It is not surprising that we both became involved in women’s health issues and especially reproductive health.7

There were tributes from a wide range of Australian and Queensland government and community organisations concerned with health issues or women’s rights or both, and from a diverse range of university organisations. But above all, there were letters from individuals.

Dr Tony Arklay, who was to take over Janet’s role as Director of the Health Service after five years as Deputy Director, wrote:
You bring to medical practice your refreshingly broad, ethical and humane perspective. I have observed you fighting tirelessly for the issues close to your heart especially adolescent, occupational and women’s health. I, and many others, feel you have made an enormous contribution to the Health Service, the University of Queensland and to Australian society. Personally, I have benefitted greatly from your mentorship and friendship. I wish all medical graduates could have the good fortune to be exposed to such an exemplary individual. I look forward to our continuing friendship.8

Janet’s secretary, Elizabeth Cottee, asked:

How to say ‘thank you’ for all you’ve done for me? I have learnt – how to put the problem where it belongs; how to say ‘no’ without being aggressive; how to lobby politicians, bureaucracies and others; how to belong to and be part of an administrative team: how – oh, so many things… You have retired but not been lost, for I know you will always be available as a friend, a confidant, an advisor, and a whole range of other things. Thank you, Janet. Love from Elizabeth.9

Professor Eileen Byrne, who had been involved with Janet on the UQ Working Party on the Status of Women looked back:

with affection and gratitude to our first meeting in 1981 when I arrived from England, a stranger alone in a far off land, a new academic, a woman entering a male club, a feminist in a country ‘all right for horses, but no good for women and dogs’, and a passionate social reformer in a country of political apathy. Many women like me have felt a little alone and unsupported – until we met Janet Irwin. The Vice Chancellor had already told me on my arrival ‘You must meet Janet Irwin…’, a statement that became a veritable litany echoed by more and more people who saw you as an essential guide and friend to a new woman cast in the same mould. And they were right.

The letter goes on to list ‘a litany of thanksgiving’ finishing with a drawing of a cat, and expresses thanks for ‘sending me the Lady Emmeline (Pankhurst) Byrne to lighten my domestic hours and to heal all stress, with the Purrfect Panacea in a Brown Velvet Purrsonality.’10

A similar sentiment is expressed by Ian Cottee, Elizabeth’s husband, who salutes Janet’s treatment proposal when he was going through difficult times, physically and emotionally:

Naturally I am speaking of your suggestion that I have first choice of Kiri’s litter of the most beautiful Burmese kittens. Samantha, who was my immediate choice, has continued to supply my daily dose of love and affection. The only thing is that I am HOOKED on the treatment, which I feel you knew I would be, and I don’t mind that either.11
Perhaps the letter which would have touched Janet the most, given her efforts to improve the lot of secretaries at the University was from Deidre Walker in the Typing Section of Administration:

Dear Janet

On the occasion of your retirement from the University’s Health Service I write to express my appreciation for your encouragement, assistance and friendship during your time at the University.

As I reflect on the position of women in the University during these years I see clearly the great contribution you have made to improving our situation by your encouragement of women at all levels to accept responsibility and to participate in many areas of university life where previously women had been invisible and/or unacknowledged.

I recall conversations when certain males on the staff would refer to you as ‘Your friend – Dr Irwin.’ As I look back, I realize that I haven’t heard that comment for a while now – these same people are more than happy to claim you as their own friend!!

I am delighted that you will continue your close association with the staff through QUWA and through your very valuable membership on the University Senate.

Thank you, Janet, for your tremendous contribution towards raising the status of women in this University and for your initiatives and support for improved occupational health and safety conditions and for the welfare of staff in general. I will miss you as a colleague but will continue to benefit from your efforts.12

In a press interview shortly after leaving the Health Service, Janet said that the best thing about being Director was the contact she had with people of all levels from students to the Vice Chancellor.

My best memories will be of the friendships I have enjoyed, the sense of working together as group and the marvelous support I had from Health Service staff in everything I tried to do. I’d like to tell people they can have the best years of their life after they are 50 – I’ve had a ball!!13

That Janet’s male colleagues were as happy to be befriended as female ones, is clearly conveyed by Dr Ben Steinberg:

I met Dr Janet Irwin in 1974 when she became Director of the Student Health Service, University of Queensland, where I worked as a Consultant Psychiatrist. Janet quickly fell into the role and ran the service with intelligence, great care, understanding and humanity which she showed to all her patients and all staff who worked there. She had a heart of gold and always had time for her staff who loved and respected her. They were loyal to her and she to them. Janet had a strong but fair character and was very caring, honest, loyal and totally reliable.
Janet and I shared similar work interests – she was Balint trained and worked with the whole person not just their physical problems, and my main background was in psychoanalytically informed psychotherapy. We worked together with many patients at the Health Service who went from having major emotional problems to leading very successful and productive lives. Janet helped countless people whose lives changed and were enriched by the help she gave them. She had great admiration for her patients and others, who with her help, grew, thrived and achieved in the face of extreme adversity. She was a strong advocate for students, and for women’s rights and she showed great courage in fighting for them – I can remember signing many petitions she instigated for people’s rights. If she had a cause she followed it to the end.

Janet became a very dear friend to me and my family and showed great interest in all our ‘doings’. She was a great conversationalist and loved books, music, art and travel, especially to New Zealand and the United Kingdom. She was honest and loyal and you always knew where you stood with her. Janet had a deep love and pride in her family – her 2 daughters Jane and Sally and her son Bill and his family. She had her ‘finger on the pulse’ with everything they were doing, and pride in their achievements - Bill in New Zealand, Jane in Brisbane and then in Tasmania and Sally in Brisbane, and she was with them ‘every inch of the way’ with their ups and downs through life. She also talked fondly of her extended family in London and the United Kingdom. She talked of the very happy time she spent with her children in Edinburgh where she studied Child Psychiatry and attended Balint Groups. Janet was very proud of her Scottish and New Zealand heritage – she often talked fondly of her beloved parents and her extremely happy childhood in New Zealand. She had a wonderful portrait of her mother with a treasured sandy Australian Terrier in pride of place.

Janet was an extremely warm and generous person and a very gracious hostess. She had a great sense of style and her homes were always furnished with great care and fashionable comfort. She took great delight in her Burmese cats. My wife and I have very fond memories of going to her apartment on Coronation Drive and having wonderful morning teas. She was a great cook and made a fantastic orange cake serviced on exquisite china with sterling silver cutlery. Janet was a wonderful colleague, a loyal and treasured friend and respected by all who knew her, she is greatly missed.

It was not just colleagues at the University of Queensland who were befriended. Another of Janet’s close friends was Carmel Camens. They met when they were both in their late fifties and Carmel was an undergraduate Fine Arts student at the University of Queensland. Like so many other women, Carmel was at last to fulfil her lifelong dream to go to university following the Whitlam Labor Government’s introduction of free tertiary education. Carmel’s husband had died almost a decade before she and Janet met, and Carmel had returned to the workforce for half a dozen years while seeing her two daughters through university. Jane Camens, her daughter, now Executive Director of the Asia Pacific Writers and Translators Association, remembers that:

Janet used to laugh that Carmel referred to herself as a ‘pro-lapsed’ Catholic, which may have been the condition that brought the two together. Sally Irwin and I both had
serious health issues (which we eventually overcame) which may have helped bond them… Through Janet, Mum met academics and authors and other thinking, generally left-leaning people, and these became her new friends. She didn’t drop her old social friends, but some of them suddenly realised that my father’s sweet-natured ‘decorative’ wife was ‘the smart one’. Mum used to laugh and say, ‘Your father wouldn’t know me now.’

Like Janet, Mum had grace and style, a sense of fun, and a great capacity for friendship. She was also a great cook. In their 80s, Janet and Carmel would go to the cinema together at the Graceville Cinema (known as ‘The Disgraceful’ due to a season under earlier management when it ran risqué girlie flix), then return to Carmel’s home nearby for a meal. When Janet moved into a small unit on the Brisbane River and was no longer able to drive, Mum, who drove until she died (about 18 months before Janet), would visit Janet with various things she’d cooked for her. It was a wonderful, mutually supportive friendship, and these days, Sally and I continue our friendship.\(^\text{13}\)

The story of Janet’s life at the University of Queensland was clearly one of her supporting (and, where appropriate, mentoring) colleagues and students who then became close friends and often joined forces with her in campaigns to make the University, or the world, a better place. This was a recurring theme in her life: bringing friends together to effect change. Her friends were only too happy to be coopted in this way because they really enjoyed the process. It was fun. They enjoyed coming together in this way. It enabled them to cope with the fact that the outcome was not always the one they were seeking, as we saw in the last chapter.

Gregorio and Valli Kohon, who arrived in Brisbane just as Janet was retiring from the Health Service, recount how Janet converted newcomers into both colleagues and friends:

We moved to Brisbane in the winter of 1988, and soon after, we founded The Brisbane Centre for Psychoanalytic Studies. The Centre offered seminars of both practical and theoretical nature to teachers, social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, general practitioners and others in the helping professions. In leaving England, Mrs Enid Balint, a friend of Janet’s, suggested that we get in touch with her. Enid knew us both and wrote a very warm letter of recommendation. Gregorio had personally trained with Enid as a leader of Balint Groups of General Practitioners, an area of interest to Janet, who was most welcoming.

She immediately supported our project of opening a Centre, recommended us to many of her colleagues and friends, and introduced us to her family. After our first meeting, she proceeded to invite us to a Teddy Bear’s Picnic, an annual event that she organised together with a number of her friends, which always took place in one of the parks in Brisbane. This was an important event for us: it was at that very first social occasion that we met some of the people who would become very close friends in the years to come. We remained immensely grateful to Janet for introducing us to people who later became very important to us.

Professionally, Janet was very supportive of our work. In 1991, we had the opportunity of organising through the Centre, a Balint Day – An introduction to
Balint Groups for General Practitioners, where Janet and Gregorio led the main meeting of the people attending. Through her active support, Valli and Gregorio were able to form two private small groups of general practitioners, which functioned for a number of years. We consider it one of our most important contributions to the professional communities in Brisbane. She was open-minded and her interest in psychoanalytic work was greatly encouraging.

On a personal level, we became close friends with Janet, enjoying many outings as well as many intimate dinners at her house or ours. After dinner at her house, always a stimulating affair, my request for a herbal tea instead of her delicious coffee gave rise to the term ‘wimp tea’ and so it has remained! We actively helped to celebrate her seventieth birthday by holding a party at our house, and together with her children, organised a collection among her friends. Thanks to their generosity, we were able to buy airline tickets for overseas travel. At one point, we asked Janet to sit on the sofa, in the middle of the room. Then, Gregorio came in, seemingly carrying a box of wine, covered by wrapping paper. When close to Janet, he threw the apparently heavy box onto her lap. And she was quick enough to catch it! Of course, it was just an empty box containing a voucher for her airline travels. To watch the happy, moved and moving expression on her face has been one of the most cherished moments we keep in our minds. Her hospitality and generosity were very special to us, our seven years in Brisbane were enhanced by her warmth, humour, and kindness to us and our family.

Justice Peter Applegarth, who had been involved with Janet on the Queensland Council for Civil Liberties had likewise become a family friend. He recalls first meeting Janet:

in about 1977, when I joined the QCCL Executive as an 18 year old law student. Janet and others organised a very successful National Civil Liberties Conference in Brisbane that year. There were many speakers, including Michael Kirby and Gareth Evans, and the papers were put together in a booklet called ‘Subject or Citizen?’ My mother typed most of it for the printers to use. Quentin Bryce, then a tutor at UQ Law School, gave an address on The Rights of the Child, which was a new topic to most people in that era. Over the decades, Janet provided wise counsel and support to the various Presidents of the QCCL, starting with Derek Fielding. She was a dedicated attendee at Executive Meetings, well into her retirement, and would come into the city to the law offices of Presidents like Ian Dearden and Michael Cope. Her thoughtful contributions to deliberations were highly valued. Janet was dedicated to the QCCL as well as other organisations. She and Beryl Holmes were a great pair. They were role models for younger members.

Janet was a sophisticated, cultured and educated person. Despite her social and professional standing, she never sought to exert that status to influence or dominate others. She treated others in the civil liberties movement, who came from different backgrounds and who lacked her education and erudition, with respect and dignity. She was caring and well-humoured, even in the darkest days. On a personal note, when I went to Oxford in 1983, Janet made sure that I met one of her cousins in Oxford (Alice McCall-Smith). I was invited to spend a wonderful Christmas/New Year on the McCall Smith farm near Crieff in Perthshire. I later met, via Alice, Sandy McCall Smith, then a legal academic and self-publisher and now, of course, a famous author, who sells books in the millions. They both spoke with great affection of Janet. So my first very happy Christmas and New Year in the UK owed everything to Janet’s generosity.
On the QCCL front, I think that the Presidents of the QCCL, like Terry O’Gorman, who bore the burden of media appearances and being the face of the organisation, will agree that they could not have achieved what they did without the support and stability which Janet Irwin gave to that organisation. She was calm in very difficult political circumstances, kind in her manner and generous in spirit and deed.17

Even though retirement, in Janet’s case, was definitely a misnomer, it did free her up to spend more time with family and friends just enjoying each other’s company. It also meant more opportunities to go to movies, concerts, galleries, theatres and literary festivals, plus more time to read. Janet was a great reader and an avid book club member. Dr Helen Kerr, who was to take over Janet’s clinical load when she left the Health Service, recalls being invited into a book club which consisted of interesting women from diverse worlds who keenly discussed and debated fiction and non-fiction chosen by them in turn. Members included Joy de Gruchy, interior designer and gallery owner; psychologist Nancy Day; social worker Jill Kennard; and artist Phillippa Webb. The book club continues to this day, with Helen Kerr as its youngest member. ‘We call ourselves “The Waiting Room”.’ Clearly, Gabrielle Carey had been on their reading list.18

Janet was not only a keen reader, she also became involved in writing a book later in her retirement. Writer Susanna de Vries had arrived in Brisbane from Edinburgh not long after Janet. They were to meet through Susanna’s first husband, Larry Evans, who had taken up a position as Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Queensland Medical School. De Vries developed a particular interest in Australian art and history and wrote fifteen books, including several on Australian artists, eight biographies of Australian women, and illustrated histories of Sydney and Brisbane. Janet attended all the launches of these books and was particularly moved by Blue ribbons, bitter bread: the life of Joice Nankivell Loch, Australia’s most decorated woman. De Vries recalls that Janet ‘had a great gift for friendship and was a true and loyal friend in good times and bad’.19 When Steve Biddulf published a book, Raising boys, in 1997, she commissioned Janet and a number of other people with specialist qualifications to balance the picture with a book dealing with issues of particular concern to parents of girls. Between them, they had raised two dozen children so their expertise was not just theoretical.

The book was not afraid to address difficult issues in a straightforward and practical way, just like Janet’s talks to students at university colleges. It dealt with
issues from babyhood onward, including tantrums, schooling, divorce, puberty, sex, sexuality, body piercing and tattoos, drugs, eating disorders and moving out of home. Dr Cherrill Hirst, then Chancellor at QUT and Director of the Wesley Breast Clinic, gave it her endorsement on the cover, ‘The advice throughout this handbook is immensely practical. Keep it on the kitchen shelf and consult it as your daughter grows up’, and it received a very positive review in The Courier Mail for its real life stories and its practical tips. Regrettably, the book was published with the title of Raising girls and had a similar cover to the Biddulph book. It had to be withdrawn in that format. The title was subsequently changed to Parenting girls. Unfortunately, however, it got more publicity for problems with the way it was published than for its contents.

I remember discussing with Janet how important books were to both of us. She asked me what book had had the most influence on my life. When I nominated American feminist Marilyn French’s novel The woman’s room, she responded ‘Me too.’ Initially, I was surprised that the same book had so fundamentally influenced two women of successive generations but, perhaps, because her professional life began after she turned fifty, Janet seemed more attuned to the world of the babyboomers, than her own generation. Many of her friends were the same age as her own children. And her own children, once they became adults, she treated as friends.

By the late 1990s, Bill, Janet’s son, was now running a very successful computer business in conjunction with his wife in Nelson, New Zealand. Bill had experienced both parents running their own businesses when he was young. When interviewed for the local paper, he said:

People think that the computer business is a technology business but it isn’t. It’s a people business. The success or failure of computer systems has very little to do with the equipment but a lot to do with the people who run it…We have a terrific staff and that is really what has made the company such a success.

Bill is probably the only person to have emerged from the University of Otago with a Bachelor of Arts degree in philosophy, chemistry, mathematics and psychology. Fortunately, he found his niche, training as a computer programmer in Christchurch. He met and married Lorraine Cornish (known to all as Cornish), and after spending four years working in London and Australia, they returned to New Zealand and had two children, Roger and Ella. Janet was to keep in regular contact with them. She was
always a diligent letter-writer, and sender of aerogrammes and audiotapes when the
latter were the best means of keeping in contact with family and friends. And of
course, there were trips home to New Zealand as often as possible. Bill and Cornish
are great travellers, and Bill is a passionate motorbike rider with a house-size
structure built next to their home to store his vast collection. These days, there are
grandchildren living nearby and grandchildren living overseas. Bill says that:

She was a great mother to us all and we always knew that come what may she would
never waiver in her support for us. She loved to network and like her parents was
always drawn to artists and writers. She was kind and generous and gentle but a
fearless defender of others less able to defend themselves.25

After spending further time in the UK after Janet and Sally’s departure, Janet’s
middle child, Jane, had moved to Australia in 1969, first to Sydney where she worked
in travel and later to Melbourne. She married architect Douglas Lambert in 1974, and
in 1984 they moved to Brisbane. Janet was keen for Jane to be part of her circle of
friends but Jane was not comfortable with this arrangement and did not want to be
drawn into political campaigns. She particularly did not like going to election night
parties at her mother’s place. Like many mother-daughter relationships, theirs was not
always an easy one. When, however, Jane and Douglas separated in 1994, Jane
moved in with her mother for nearly a year, and they got on well. Jane was keen,
nonetheless, to forge her own path and moved to Hobart in 2003 to set up a cooking
school. She was later to move to Nelson and now lives near her brother. Like Janet,
Jane has always surrounded herself with interesting friends, and is renowned for her
entertaining. Reflecting on her relationship to her mother, she said:

Mum was a gutsy person and her going back to medical school gave us huge
opportunities to do other things and to extend ourselves. Going to the UK in the 60s
was really special. Going overseas at 17 and 19 years of age gave us an experience
we would not have otherwise had, had Mum not completed her medical training. It
broadened our horizons, and we learned a lot about ‘how the other half lives.’
The things I value Mum most for are her teaching us to cook and sew, good sound
values and an appreciation of good things, be it antiques, art, food and of course the
ability to entertain.26

Janet’s youngest child, Sally, had been working alternately in the UK and in
Melbourne. Her favourite job in the seventies was as a production secretary and then
production assistant at the BBC. In Melbourne, she enjoyed a similar position at the

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ABC. In 1980, she was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis, and underwent clinical trials of experimental drugs. She moved to Brisbane in 1985, much to Janet’s relief and delight. Sally bought a house in Paddington with her mother’s assistance, and Janet moved from St Lucia into an old Queenslander cottage not far away. Fortunately, Sally’s symptoms eventually subsided. She had started a university degree on leaving school but not completed it, to her regret, so now enrolled in a Bachelor of Commerce degree and completed it in 1997, the year before she turned fifty. She then obtained work she really enjoyed as a Project Officer with the Queensland Public Service. Sally, too, is a good cook and enjoys entertaining. She is also an enthusiastic gardener, an activity owing a great deal to Beryl Holmes’ encouragement. Her friendship circle and Janet’s entwined in a way which was rewarding for both of them. ‘I was very proud of her and always glad to be known as Janet Irwin’s daughter.’

Sally now lives in Red Hill, Brisbane, with her partner, retired academic Dr Peter Isaacs, their cat, Ruby-Violet, and the much adored spoodle, Puccini.

Newcomers to Brisbane were always made welcome by Janet, and writers particularly so. New Zealander, now Australian writer and activist, Rosie Scott recalls how Michael King, the eminent New Zealand historian, suggested she contact Janet when she and her family moved to Brisbane in 1987:

I was quite homesick for a while and didn’t know many people and so she was like balm to me - she really made my life there. She was a great networker so, through her, I met lots of interesting women who became friends, like Dale Spender and Quentin Bryce. We immediately connected – she was very close to her New Zealand roots, we were both political animals, and feminist, and she was so interested and knowledgeable about writing. And she had a wonderful wry sense of humour. She was extremely supportive and appreciative of my writing. I loved her.

We became very good friends...she launched *Feral City* in 1992... I dedicated it to her, along with my daughters. She was immensely kind. I have this memory of her physical presence- she was such a statuesque woman, tall, dignified and powerful and she held herself so erectly. I remember her coming over to my house all flushed and out of breath -she’d just read *Feral City* and was so excited, and had come immediately to tell me so.

She had a charming old Queenslander house full of interesting artefacts and paintings. She and I were both involved in campaigns – I was immersed in Citizens for Democracy, an organisation which was opposing the gerrymander, and her knowledge of Queensland politics and the people was always invaluable in my work. I was always interested in her campaigns, and work, and we discussed them at great length.

The thing about Janet is that she was like the best kind of judge; her advice was always pithy, judicial and wise and stuck in your mind. I found her to be such a wise and supportive friend. I still remember her advice about diet was have a little bit
of what you fancy – and her advice about teenage daughters was always keep communication open even if it kills you (or something like that.) Her soaring intellect, wisdom, sense of justice, her unfailing compassion and great heart made her a very special person in my eyes.

My family loved her too. She was a great cook and my husband Danny said he had the best meal in his life at her house. He told her so and she presented him with a handwritten copy of the recipes. My daughter Bella emailed me a story - 'You and I were invited by Janet to a book launch, just down the road from her house in a rickety old bookstore. I was a tweenager. After the event, Janet introduced me to her friend who owned the bookstore, I can’t remember her name. Her friend asked me what authors I liked. I was mad about Tolkien at the time and said so. After the event, out of the blue, the friend gave me a beautiful shiny big book as gift; a book called *Unfinished Tales* by Tolkien (which I still have). Janet’s friend was so lovely and unexpected and generous just like Janet. I remember being quite affected by that. Nothing like that had ever happened to me before and through all the years I’ve kept that book as a memento. It was a very Janet thing to do her; her friend and her were cut of the same cloth.'

Janet would invite friends, and friends of friends, to stay at her place. One such visitor whom she was yet to meet, was the leading New Zealand writer (Dame) Fiona Kidman who stayed at Alma St while Janet was away, and was to write a poem about the experience.

**Queenslander cottage**

(for Janet Irwin)

1.
The wardrobes open to receive
My clothes. Tonight I’ll lie down
in your bed while the pink light glows
in the room beyond. I’ve been here for years. I know you.

Well, this is not exactly true. I’m a stranger
In a borrowed house
And alone at evening
In another country.
I absorb the assembled evidence:
   Pewter, rugs, books, globes
   of glass brimming threads like spun sugar, *New Yorkers*, music
   Jane’s pictures
   On every wall, hints of the Hokianga –
A transplanted past, a relentless presence
In which I see myself reflected.

2.
It is morning:
From the stilt-legged verandah
I watch four crows advance
Their voices gurgling
Their steps mincing their eyes
Staring hardly at mine. I look back, disturbed
But not scared; the web of the house
Draws me back. The first jacaranda blooms
Heavy as a quilt, light as blue air
in the valley. I may never meet you
Or, yes, it will happen. The history’s as unshakeable
As this happiness of knowing, and not knowing,
Everything.

The two were indeed to meet and to become good friends. Fiona had, herself, grown up in the far north of New Zealand. In her engrossing autobiography, Beside the dark pool, she talks about that friendship:

Every time I go to Rawene, I visit the cemetery, which is close to the hospital, on a hillside overlooking the harbor. Before I enter I wash my hands under a tap to cleanse myself, as is the custom there. I take a short walk to the grave of John Smith, who died as a child. His sister, Dr Janet Irwin, befriended me in the late 1980s, because she had read and liked A Breed of Women... She arranged for me to visit Brisbane and speak to a group of women connected with the university and the wider women’s movement in the city. A strong advocate for women’s rights…her passion for what is just and fair has been an inspiration to me…

In the years since I met her, Janet has supported and advised me, as well as welcoming me to her home. I would often stay in her Queenslander cottage, sometimes on my own when she was overseas, other times when she was there, enjoying her superb cooking and the company of her friends. Standing on stilts in a valley filled with jacaranda, magnificent in spring, the house brimmed with pictures and books, Persian rugs and Ming china and other, more recent, artfully arranged china. She had a great talent for getting the best out of flea markets. I would fly home with overweight bags crammed with finds…

In time, [New Zealand writer] Lauris [Edmond], became included in this important friendship, both on my account, and because of Janet’s early association with A.R.D. Fairburn. Lauris was editing Fairburn’s letters. And James McNeish and Michael King were regular visitors to Brisbane, although we all stumbled over these mutual associations by accident. One morning, when Janet was overseas and I was in her house, I was woken by a phone call. As soon as I heard Michael’s voice, I greeted him by name. He said in bewildermnt, ‘That sounds like Fiona. What are you
And it wasn’t just writers. Just like her parents, Janet had a keen interest in art, and had befriended artists from her homeland as well as locally, again even introducing New Zealanders to each other. Kidman goes on to say that:

Through Janet Irwin, I had met the Nelson artist Jane Evans. [the Jane of Fiona’s poem]. Janet travelled frequently to Nelson to visit family. I would go over to meet up with her and together we would head for the vivid impressionism of Jane’s Mediterranean-style house and vine-clad verandah and garden.30

Janet always maintained contact with Jocelyn Harris from Otago, whose mother, Margo Wood, she had boarded with when she was studying medicine during the Second World War. Jocelyn, who was to go on to be Professor of English Literature at the University of Otago, specialising in the Eighteenth Century and Women’s Literature, especially that of Jane Austen, says that:

I’ve always thought of her as my second mother, and have happy memories of her reading Winnie the Pooh, Now we are Six, Just So Stories, and Peter Rabbit to me in the liveliest fashion. (When my own children were born, she sent Peter Rabbit to them, to carry on the tradition.) My father Win Wood was serving in North Africa, money was short, and times were hard. Janet brought energy and laughter into the house, and organised delightful picnics with her medical student friends in the sandhills at St. Kilda…Janet’s companionship helped Margot cope with the stresses of war, especially when Win died, and they remained lifelong friends. Every time that Margot and her second husband Angus Ross took their annual winter holidays in Brisbane, they visited Janet.

After the war, Janet saw that Margot and I were very run down, so she invited us to her parents’ home in Rawene. What a journey it was in our little Ford-Anglia-with-a-Prefect engine, bumping along dusty, corrugated, deserted roads up through the South Island, the North Island, and past the huge columns of the kauri trees. I still have strong images of Daddy and Mummy Smith, Dr Smith striding about in his shorts, Roman sandals, cloth sun-hat, and flyaway raincoat, a pipe clamped firmly between his teeth, and his brows beetling. Mummy Smith was elegant and calm, always surrounded by books, periodicals, and pictures. I vividly remember Fairy Giles and the cream boat that went round the Hokianga harbour, and their airy house with its outside veranda linking all the rooms. Because I was so skinny (no longer!), Dr Smith poured cream into me, an unusual luxury, and I began to thrive. She fought to retain her father’s community medical system, which was well ahead of its time, and arranged a beautiful marker for the brother who died and was buried in an unmarked grave. When I met Alexander McCall Smith recently, it was strange to think that I had met his grandfather, whereas he never had.

In 1962, Margot encouraged Janet to finish her medical degree…She and Dr D’Ath from Otago University, a man who was violently opposed to abortion law reform, had a ding dong debate in the Student Union, where Janet’s reasonableness, compassion, and sense of humour won the day. And her glamour. Tall, elegantly
dressed, her fingers laden with silver rings, who could resist her? And what a reader she was, like her mother, just as she was an iconoclastic doctor like her father.

When I rang her in Brisbane, she would always ask what I was reading and recommend more books to me. Staying in her apartment was wonderful, as you were surrounded by books, paintings, and beloved family photographs. Even when she was fading, she would enquire with the greatest interest about what I was doing. The last time I saw her, Bill had driven her all the way down to Dunedin to collect a motorbike, and she relished the road-trip with him. 31

Australian historian, Barbara Caine, in her introduction to *Friendship: a history*, talks of the changing nature of friendship. The concept of friendship which emerged in classical times was restricted to men of ‘moral virtue’ and grounded in their usefulness, the precursor of the old boy network. In the nineteenth century, women’s friendships started to manifest not only in the private sphere, as depicted in the novels of Charlotte Bronte and Lousia May Alcott, but publically with the emergence of organized philanthropic and feminist activity. It was not until the twentieth century that friendship acquired priority over family and religion, becoming ‘the social glue of modernity’. 32 While privileged men retreated to the fraternity and the lodge, friendship was now accepted between parties who in the past would have been viewed as unequal.

Interestingly, Caine recounts that it was not until the second half of the twentieth century that what we now would view as the template friendship, the intimate and reciprocal friendship, characterized by emotional and private, rather than practical and public, obligations, came to the fore. It was then, too, that friendships of conviction, where people came together to achieve social change, also became prominent. The civil rights movement, the feminist movement, the peace and green movements were all heavily reliant on friendship networks. Friendship, as she points out, can be ‘a model of connection, of listening to others and seeing the world through their eyes and, having listened and seen, being committed to helping them become what they want to be’. While the idea of friendship has changed, what has not changed is the ‘long-standing importance accorded to friendship as a relationship fundamental both to social and individual wellbeing’. 33 Neither Janet, nor her friends, would have any quibble with that.


10. EM Byrne 1988, pers. comm. to J Irwin, 31 August.


17. P Applegarth 2014, pers. comm., 4 December.


27. S Irwin 2014, pers. comm., 20 December.


Chapter 22

Death

Thirty-three years after moving to Brisbane, Janet could not have made more of a mark on a place, and was surrounded by loving friends. But her health was declining, and, as she continued to experience falls, and as her memory increasingly failed her, she came, reluctantly, to acknowledge her dependence. Her mobility had already been compromised by her managing to drive into the back of a police vehicle. Fortunately, she could still laugh when relating this one sure way of ensuring her licence would not be renewed. As Sally was still working, Bill suggested that Janet move back to New Zealand to live with him and Cornish in Nelson. Janet was uncomfortable about this option, aware that Cornish had already spent a long period of her life looking after her ageing father. It would also mean she would no longer have easy contact with her Brisbane friends. But, in the end, it was the only viable course of action.

Fortunately, Janet had kept in contact with her friends in New Zealand who were now able to visit her more frequently. She had never relinquished her New Zealand citizenship. And, of course, New Zealand had always been present in her Australian home. Her favourite place in the world remained the tiny town where she was born, Rawene in the Hokianga. Bill ensured that she was to visit Rawene ‘for the last time’. Indeed they were to visit Rawene for the last time, three times. Bill related that:

both Cornish and I were glad of the last 2 years she spent with us. It wasn’t always easy watching her battle with dementia, but she never lost her sense of humour and was always genuinely grateful for what anyone did for her.1

I visited Janet in Nelson in March 2008. I assumed that, as commonly said about those with dementia, while her short term memory was problematic, her early memories would still be intact. I brought along the records of my interviews about her early life. I wanted to check some facts, I told her, but that was not the main reason for bringing them. I was not sure how to relate to Janet in this new reality. Maybe I could avoid the issue by sticking to the past. I had anticipated that it would be an enjoyable escape for her to go over old, cherished memories. But what it did,
instead, was reveal to her a further unpalatable fact. She had only limited recall of the past as well. ‘It’s too late, Susan’ she exclaimed and I wanted to weep for my misjudgment. It was the last time I was to see her.

Fiona Kidman recalls ‘the very last sad time I saw her at Bill and Cornish’s, and Bill so tenderly dressing his mother when she could no longer do it for herself and managing to include her in conversations at lunch’.

In March, 2009, her state of health necessitated admission to a nursing home. Fortunately for both Janet and for her family, it was not to be an extended stay, although they were able to say their goodbyes. She died on 20 March 2009.

Shortly after, Sally sent an email to her mother’s friends:

We gave Mum a good send off yesterday. It was a beautiful sunny autumn day. We had a very simple service at a little old chapel at the crematorium at Atawhai - on the road to Picton. It was just family (Bill, Cornish, Jane, Roger, Margaret-Jayne and the twins, and our cousin Kaya and her husband John). Nothing religious about it - sort of ‘home spun’ and just what Ma would have wanted. We played the music she always said she wanted at her funeral - *Abide with Me*, *Joe Hill* sung by Paul Robeson and finished with *Stardust* sung by Nat King Cole. We tried to sing along with some of it - rather badly as we were all in tears. She would have told us we needed lessons! John read the last verse of a poem *To a Friend in the Wilderness* written by Rex Fairburn who was a very dear family friend - that was also Ma’s request. Neither Bill, Jane nor I could have read it without crying.

Old friend, dear friend, some day
when I have had my say, and the world its way,
when all that is left is the gathering in of ends,
the forgathering of friends,
on some autumn evening when the mullet leap
in a sea of silver-grey,
then, O then I will come again
and stay for as long as I may
stay till the time for sleep;
gaze at the rock that died before me,
the sea that lives for ever;
of air and sunlight, frost and wave and cloud,
and all the remembered agony and joy
fashion my shroud.

We had her very simple pine coffin (not open!) here over the weekend. I was spooked at first but it did feel right. We didn’t want her on her own at the funeral parlour. Friends and some of her carers called in to say goodbye and we talked to her. Bill poured a glass of her favourite malt whiskey at the usual time and put it on her coffin. Jane and I put a simple bunch of purple and white Lysianthus and a white lily on her coffin - good feminist colours. We’ll make a pilgrimage to the Hokianga next summer to scatter her ashes and put a plaque on her brother’s grave in the Rawene cemetery.
On Labor Day, Monday 4 May 2009, the Irwins organized a picnic at the University of Queensland to celebrate their mother’s life in the company of her friends. We gathered under shady trees overlooking the lakes. There is a calm essence to the place. The balance of protective trees and extended water vistas provides the mature beauty of well-established botanical gardens, while ducks, geese, water-fowl and eels cavort and remind you of the importance of playfulness.

Our picnic spot was adjacent to the Una Prentice Memorial Gardens. Like Janet, Una was a pioneering woman. She was not only the first woman to graduate in law from the University of Queensland but indeed the first law graduate. Because of her gender, however, she was unable to obtain employment as a solicitor until the outbreak of the Second World War when the Commonwealth Deputy Crown Solicitor’s Office wrote to her asking if she would work for them, given that they were unable to obtain any male legal officers. Not only was she put on the lowest scale of typists’ pay, she was expected to do the office bookkeeping as well as her legal work, and then to retire when the men returned from the war. In 1985, the University saw fit to award Una an honorary Doctorate of Laws. Unfortunately, this was the year it also saw fit to bestow the same award on the Premier, Joh Bjelke-Petersen.

The gathering to celebrate Janet’s life was the sort of low-key, genuine event which she would have appreciated and Bill confided thinking ‘I must send photos of this to Mum’. Sally reassured those present that Janet’s memory for events and places might have failed her in the end but she never forgot people. There were no formal speeches but people who wanted to say something were encouraged to do so. Judge Helen O’Sullivan spoke of the importance not only to women, but to society in general, of inspirational figures like Janet. Susan Davies affirmed Janet’s motto: ‘If you have haven’t been driven by the passion and action of the times, you haven’t lived’. Journalist Susan Hocking told how, travelling though China with Janet for an international womens’ conference, she became aware of her sense of fun. Janet had insisted on having her photo taken appearing to post a letter in the backside of a large, stone elephant. It was a family joke. When Janet’s children were little, she had asked them whether they knew the difference between an elephant’s backside and a letter box. When they looked puzzled, she replied ‘Well, I wouldn’t send you to post a letter!’ When Sally went to India in 1973, she sent Janet a photo of her ‘posting’ a letter in an elephant. Annie Warden, Janet’s neighbour in Paraparapamu, talked of
how much fun their families had shared. Another journalist Marion Demozay (Smith), who had met Janet when working as a media officer for the Criminal Justice Commission and become a firm friend, spoke of how her family, likewise, interconnected with the Irwins.

Former colleagues from the Queensland Council for Civil Liberties were there including the judges Peter Applegarth and Ian Dearden. Beryl Holmes spoke from the heart about their friendship and collaboration and Terry O’Gorman shared his personal experience of Janet’s contribution to the Council for Civil Liberties. Alex Head wrote about the gathering in an article in the Queensland Council for Civil Liberties newsletter:

I spent much of my childhood in the home of my grandparents. My grandmother, Isabell Clarke, was a friend of Beryl and Janet who lived in houses across the road. I was fortunate to meet Janet at various functions throughout my teenage years and she constantly encouraged me to do well with my studies. It was very interesting to see the ways in which she impacted on the lives of those who not only worked closely with her but also grew up around her.4

After lunch, a Stenocarpus Sinuatus (wheel of fire) native tree was planted in Janet’s honour. Janet was no gardener; Beryl would give her plants to grow and she would manage to kill them. Fortunately, Beryl was on hand to ensure a successful planting. Janet would have approved of the choice of a native tree, and a wheel of fire was symbolic of her contribution to society: getting women, and men, to join together to take action on matters they were passionate about. For those of us present, her family and friends, there was a shared sense of how fortunate we were to have known her. As Beryl said, ‘Knowing Janet has enriched us all. We are lucky that our paths crossed. We will all remember Janet, and this tree will stand straight and bold as she did’.

Afterword

Writing the biography of Janet Irwin opened up a number of unfamiliar worlds to me. The first of these was New Zealand. Like many fellow Australians, I grew up surprisingly ignorant of our neighbor and fellow member of the British Commonwealth, a Commonwealth which circumscribed our world at the time. I was very fortunate to have the opportunity to learn about New Zealand culture and history, and that was fortuitous given that my elder son was to marry into a Christchurch family (not from the first Four Ships). I was fascinated to find how, historically, New Zealand had been more advanced in its responses to issues involving gender and race. I was also grateful for the opportunity to acquire some understanding of the issues involved in medical practice and training, and to compare them with my own background in the law.

On the face of it, Janet’s life and my own were very different. She was twenty-three years older than me, had spent most of her life in another country, and came from a non-religious background whereas I was brought up Catholic. One of the surprising discoveries I made was that there were many similarities between Janet’s life and my own. Our fathers were very similar in temperament, and like GM, my father was not interested in making money. Dad was an activist trade union lawyer, forever seeking ways to improve the lot of workers, who conducted a successful, landmark case arguing that the concept of injury included psychological damage. He was, however, later in life, struck off the roll of solicitors for investing his client’s funds, without their permission, in the purchase of a hotel to set up as a home for alcoholics [sic]. He was found not guilty on grounds of mental illness and spent many years confined in a mental health facility. He suffered from hypomania, and I must admit I wondered if GM might have too. Just as, after Jock’s death, Janet was expected by her father to become a doctor, so too, because I did not have a brother, did my father expect me to become a lawyer. Like Janet, I resisted initially but ultimately succumbed, returning to finish my law degree, and assuming a role as a legal academic in the area of justice studies in my mid-forties.

When I approached Janet about writing her biography, I was unaware of her campaigning on the abortion issue and how significant the issue of a woman’s right to choose was to her professional life. The issue of a woman’s right to choose was as central to my personal life as it was to Janet’s professional life. I had no access to
contraception and became pregnant as a university student (at the University of Queensland) well before Janet was to take charge of the Health Service. I travelled to Sydney to obtain an abortion. When I became pregnant for a second time, I knew I could not go through with that again. For a start, I had borrowed the money for the first trip from a friend and I had yet to afford to pay it back as I was an articled law clerk earning a pittance. I had not long turned twenty-one and was therefore an adult but, in those days, this did not necessarily mean much.

While writing Janet’s biography, when I noticed these similarities, I considered the possibility of a combined biography/memoir. Ultimately, I decided not to pursue this idea as my priority was ensuring that Janet’s biography got written, and it had already taken far longer than I would have hoped. Not long before Janet died, however, I wrote the following slice of memoir, which I have decided to include here because of its relevance to the campaigns Janet fought.

Ladies in Waiting

There was at least one home for unmarried mothers in Brisbane in 1968. But I guess sending me there would have defeated the purpose. I was to go away, have the baby, give it up for adoption, come home, nobody would be any the wiser, and life would return to normal. When my boyfriend (B) and I announced to Mum and Dad that I was pregnant, there was more hanging on that announcement than the pregnancy itself. B was in the invidious situation that he was an articled law clerk in my father’s firm. Fortunately my father was not given to histrionics. There was no suggestion of him being thrown out of their house or sacked immediately.

Once our news had had time to sink in, Dad was the one who responded. He and Mum would not like us to repeat the mistake they had made, ‘would we, Joyce’. We should not feel that we should have to race into marriage just because I was pregnant. Mum nodded. There was no discussion about how B or I felt about the pregnancy. Indeed, B and I had not discussed how we felt about the pregnancy. Our sole focus on finding out that I was pregnant was with my parents’ reaction. We hadn’t talked about getting married. We hadn’t talked. We had just panicked. Dad took charge of the situation. He would make enquiries. B was politely shown the door. Mum looked at me as if I had betrayed her. She had never approved of my going out with B. I could do much better. But her sense of betrayal went much deeper than that. I was revisiting past shame on her when she had committed her life to redeeming it.

St Margaret’s Hospital, Darlinghurst, sounds quite benign, and when my father arrived with me in tow to be dropped off, the Nun in charge appeared likewise benign. The conventional wisdom about appearances proved, however, to be correct. It was the last I was to see and hear of the outside world for a long time. In respect of its contingent of young unmarried mothers, St Margaret’s operated like a prison. Once inside its walls, we were not allowed outside except for an initial visit to the local church to make a confession of our wicked ways. We were not allowed to send or
receive mail, and were allowed approved visitors only. In my case, that was my father’s brother and his wife. No one else. When my closest friend flew down from Brisbane to see me, she was refused admission.

‘Ladies in waiting,’ the nuns called us in a snide way. By having sex before marriage, we had relinquished any claim on the title ‘lady.’ And our wait was a long one, having been banished from home ‘before we started to show.’ I don’t remember how many of us there were. Thirty? We came from all over Australia. At twenty-one, I was the oldest, and the only one with a university education. Our accommodation was in rooms which had been previously occupied by medical students. Presumably the laundry did their washing for them, as we had no laundry facilities. We had to wash our clothes in the hand basin in the toilet area and then hang them to dry over the toilet door. This was notwithstanding that most of us were working in the hospital laundry as a means of earning our keep. I was put to work in the art union office. This was special treatment, no doubt earned because my father was a solicitor. It was doubly unfair to the other young women in that it involved typing and most of them could type. Placed in the science stream at school (because of my grades, rather than any inclination to science) I had never been near a typewriter.

The others worked on the mangles in the laundry. Mangles were old-fashioned clothes dryers which served double duty as irons. They consisted of two huge, heavy, horizontal, heated rollers through which items such as sheets would be fed. It was necessary to lean across the rollers to ensure that the sheets were firmly in place. From an occupational health and safety point of view, it was hardly suitable work for pregnant women. Some acknowledgement of this was made in that, in the final month of pregnancy, ladies in waiting were taken off the rollers and given light duties. It would not do to lose the babies required for adopting parents. These light duties involved waiting upon women who had just given birth and had the privilege of keeping their babies. There was the double punishment of being forced to witness the joy of these new mothers while being paraded as unworthy to join them. Perhaps the only person who could inflict such cruelty was someone who had taken a vow (whether willingly or unwillingly or when too young to make an informed choice) of celibacy.

I was very fortunate that I was not sent to Coventry by the other young women for being afforded special treatment. They must have resented this discrimination but they never showed it. As it turned out, I did end up joining them on the mangles. This was not because of my lack of typing skills, but for speaking out. Little speaking out was done, but then we young unmarried mothers had limited choices. The fact that we were in this institution in the first place was witness to the stigma against unmarried mothers. There was no financial support available from the government. Unless the father was prepared to marry you and could afford to do so, or your mother or sister agreed to bring up the child as theirs, adoption was the only possibility. Two young women voiced their protest by climbing over the stone walls of the Hospital at night and escaping. We never heard any news of what happened to them and their babies.

My speaking out related to another unmarried mother whom I will call Susan, as well, as so many of us were in those days. Gradually but progressively, Susan’s behaviour started to change. She became quieter. She paid scant attention to her appearance. She started to dribble out of the side of her mouth at meal times. We all started to worry about her, suspecting that something was physically wrong. I knew very little about the human body except that, as the nuns at school had foretold, it was an occasion of sin. But Susan’s condition could not be ignored, and I decided to raise
the issue with the nuns. The change in Susan’s appearance, I was informed peremptorily, had been noted. She was lazy and slovenly, and had been spoken to. The discussion was at an end. Shortly afterwards, Susan stopped joining us at meals. Nothing was said by the nuns but somehow we found out that she had died from a brain tumour. My aunt and uncle came to see me each weekend. They were very kind to me but I did not feel I could discuss the death with them. From the start, I had felt it incumbent upon me to present an untroubled picture of life at St Margaret’s. I did not want to worry them or my parents. Each visit, they would bring me in a beautifully home-cooked roast chicken with vegetables, enough so that I could share it with some of my friends there. Each time, I took it back to my room and binge-ate it by myself, literally stuffing down my feelings.

I knew nothing about the physical process of having a baby and there were no pre-natal classes for us to attend. I tried not to think about it. I knew it started with contractions because that had been the starting point for other girls to be taken to the hospital proper to give birth. When I started to experience contractions, I was taken to a small bare room with two chairs, a small table, and a crucifix on the wall. There was a buzzer near the door but it was made clear to me that I was not to use it until I was sure the baby was coming. What was not made clear to me was how I was to tell. The hardest part of being in that room was not being able to distract myself from fear of the unknown. There was no one to talk to, to reassure me. There were no newspapers, no magazines, no books, no television. There was no food. Contractions arrived unpredictably dealing me excruciating pain. I paced the room. I was there from the darkness of early morning until evening. No one looked in on me. When it started to get dark again, I felt as if I had died and gone to hell. I would not allow myself to cry but I finally pressed the buzzer. A nun arrived. I started to sob. ‘I can’t stand the pain any more.’ ‘You should have thought of that before you got yourself pregnant,’ she responded, examining my body before heading out the door again.

When I was finally taken down to the birthing room, I remember the piercing screams coming from women giving or about to give birth in nearby rooms. I was terrified. What were they doing to them? I remember nothing of actually giving birth. Immediately my baby was born, it was whisked away. I did not know if it was a boy or a girl. It was better that way, I was told. The less I knew, the easier it would be for me. I remember very little of the ward I was sent to. I do recall however being pinned to the bed with sheets in a way which had the effect of straight-jacketing. I was told that it was standard practice to ensure that women’s bodies returned to normal as soon as possible after the birth. Certainly childbirth then involved women being kept in hospital for a much longer period than it does today (or it did in GM’s hospital).

We had been no better prepared for this later stage of our journey in St Margaret’s. No one asked us whether we still wanted to adopt out our babies. No one had told us that private adoption agencies would come around after the birth with consent forms for us to sign. There was a process like an assembly line and we were part of it. That was all. I don’t know when I decided that I was going to keep my baby but I strongly suspect that it was when I was first given a consent form to sign. It was not an informed choice. I had not carefully thought through the consequences of keeping the child compared with adopting it out. It was not even the impulsive decision of a mother who has just given birth. I am sure it was delayed and well overdue resistance. Resistance to other people controlling my life, making decisions on my behalf without ever once asking me what I wanted or how I felt. So, on that first morning, on that first visit from the adoption agency, I said ‘No.’ That afternoon, I said ‘No’ again, and the next morning and the next afternoon, and for ten days, I
simply said ‘No.’ Increasing pressure was applied each time I said it, but each time I said it, it felt better, and I felt stronger. I was able to resist pleas to consider the child, and how much better off it would be with a proper family. (Similarly, as I write this, resisting a strong sense of discomfort about sharing these matters in public, I feel better and stronger.)

I did not think about what my decision involved. I did not even think about how it was going to be put into effect. I knew that might weaken my resistance. I still did not know whether my baby was a boy or girl and my requests to see it were refused. I was due for discharge on day fourteen but I was living from day to day, not thinking about the next when a miracle happened. On day eleven, there was a new nurse on duty. She walked into the ward, took one look at me and said in astonishment, ‘What are you doing here?’ It was Judy Talley. We had been in the same class at school in Brisbane. When I had last seen her, I had been School Captain and Dux of the School. I told her my story. I told her of my decision. In response, she did something extraordinarily brave, something which must have placed her employment in jeopardy. She brought my baby to me.

I had imagined my baby to be a boy and I was right. But the baby she brought to me was not right. He had black hair. My imagined baby had fair hair. I asked her if she was sure it was the right baby. She reassured me it was. I cuddled him to me. He was real. My son was real. My parents were delighted. My father, I was told, was flying down to collect us. I was placed in a room by myself with my baby. Once again, I was given no information and no assistance with looking after him. He was being bottle-fed so I continued with that, and tried to fathom how to pin on a nappy. I clearly remember looking at him with a mixture of joy and fear as I realized that he was mine, he would always be my son. I was a mother.

When I returned to Brisbane, my parents arranged a wedding at the local church and reception at their place with baby R as the guest of honour. Many years on, his father was to have the marriage annulled by the Catholic Church. But for the moment, I was a wife. Quite apart from my world doing a 360 degree spin, I was in pain with my lactating breasts and I was suffering from agoraphobia. I dreaded leaving our rented accommodation to do the shopping. Although the shops were not far away, the noise of the traffic and the closeness of the other shoppers overwhelmed me. Once I caught the ferry into the city, only to flee in a panic. But it was not only open spaces which were a problem. One of the reasons I had been such a good student was that my mother had always prioritized study. I could squirm out of doing our household chores by claiming I had an assignment to finish. As a result, I was poorly house-trained. I had no idea how to cook or how to use the washing machine, for instance. But if I was in a constant state of anxiety about how to run the house, mothering was my Waterloo. Poor baby R sensed my fear that I would do something wrong and he would die. He would cry during the day and wake at two hourly intervals during the night. I got no sleep. I cried. My mother was in hospital, having a hip replacement. We moved in with B’s parents. I remember sitting in front of the television that July with my son on my knee watching Neil Armstrong land on the moon and announce his step forward for mankind. I might as well have been on the moon for all the territory I was inhabiting was familiar. But, as I reminded myself, if I was feeling disoriented, that was nothing compared to how the other ladies in waiting must now be feeling. I had my son. He was beautiful, and now that I had some help, I could relax and enjoy him. They had lost their babies. There was no consolation for them. They had been waiting for Godot.
There was a subsequent inquiry by the New South Wales government into forced adoptions in this period and, fortunately, St Margaret’s, and places like it, were closed down.

I decided to finish Janet’s biography on this note because I think it indicates that my reason for wanting to tell Janet’s story turned out to be far more complex than I had first envisaged. It could be an extraordinary coincidence that, in my life, the issue of a woman’s right to control of her body turned out to be so pertinent. But I don’t think mine was an unusual situation in those times, especially for young women brought up in a religious family and educated in a religious school. No doubt, there are still young women today in that situation. In any event, Janet’s concerns went beyond women’s control of their bodies to control of their lives, and, as we have seen, women still have a long way to go in our society to achieve that objective. I also decided to finish with this personal story because, like Janet’s story, it’s a story of speaking out, the courage it takes, and the importance of doing it. Like Janet, I have often spoken out on issues affecting others. I just wish, in retrospect, that I had been as strategic as she was in doing so, as my ‘campaigns’ would have been a lot more effective as a result. For the same reason, I also wish that I had engaged others in advance to join forces with me in speaking out.

But, of course, it is never too late. I am now the same age as Janet was when I first met her. Janet’s life is a prescription for living that applies to the whole of life. Watch out, world… here we come!
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Biography, motivation, and writing
the life of Dr Janet Irwin

By Susan Currie
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Introduction

This introduction details the rationale for my project; provides a summary of the biographical component of the project for those reading this exegesis separately from the creative work; and outlines the material to be covered in Chapters 1 to 6.

This exegesis forms one component of a PhD project titled 'The activist life of Dr Janet Irwin, and my activist response in researching and writing her story.' The other component is a biography, 'A prescription for action: the life of Dr Janet Irwin'.

The research question for my doctoral project is:
What were the significant factors in Dr Janet Irwin becoming a successful activist, and what were her achievements? (biography) and What were the significant factors involved in my researching and writing her biography and what are their implications? (exegesis).

The biographical component of this project is a contribution to knowledge in demonstrating how Dr Irwin's activism had a positive impact not only within her professional arena (including medical training and practice, university health services, women's health and occupational health and safety) but also within the public arena in the area of law reform. This exegesis is a contribution to knowledge in outlining how my research on the evolution of biographical writing and its relation to literature assisted me in writing Dr Irwin's biography, and led me to the conclusion that motivation is a significant factor in biographical writing and one which warrants further examination.

*   *   *   *   *   *

Dr Janet Irwin was of the view that 'If you haven't been driven by the passion and action of the times, you haven’t lived.' The biography I have written explores the factors leading Janet Irwin to this view at a time when women were largely confined to the private domain. It tells how Dr Janet Irwin, née McCall Smith, grew up in Rawene in the Hokianga, a remote and largely unknown area in the
north island of New Zealand. It describes the profound influence of her Scottish
doctor father who, in a largely Maori community, set up a healthcare service that
even today is viewed as innovative, and attracts doctors from around the globe.
A family tragedy led to her father’s expectation that Janet would follow in his
footsteps, but she did not complete her medical degree until her marriage broke
down, and she had three teenagers to support. It recounts how a developing
interest in psychological medicine led her to Scotland where she came to
befriend a previously unknown extended family.

In Edinburgh, Janet worked with children with psychological problems,
and was influenced by the new school of thinking on psychosocial development.
Student Health Services at universities were in their infancy when she was
offered a position as a physician at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch,
New Zealand. This was the beginning of a career which saw her carrying out
original research to challenge conventional views on student sexual practices
and use of contraception, and also to successfully challenge political claims that
doctors were opposed to liberalizing the law on abortion. Her views on medical
practice were influenced by psychoanalyst, Michael Balint, author of The Doctor,
His Patient and The Illness (1957) and his focus on the doctor-patient
relationship, rather than the conventional, more limited focus on the illness. Her
time in Christchurch saw her taking part in her first political rally and declaring
herself a feminist.

1974 saw her take up the role of Director of Student Health Services at
the University of Queensland and focusing on the importance of teamwork with
nurses, counsellors and other services. Again, she carried out relevant research,
and brought to attention the need to change medical education both to reduce
the level of stress caused to students, and also to focus on the doctor-patient
relationship. Janet mentored students and novice general practitioners and
ensured that the university developed a broad view of occupational health and
safety, including freedom from sexual harassment. She played a major role on
the University Senate in improving the status of women staff and students and
also played an active role on the National Better Health Commission. As a
member of the Queensland Council for Civil Liberties, she became an outspoken
activist in a successful community campaign against repressive abortion laws. At
the university, she initiated a campaign against the awarding of an honorary doctorate to Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen whose government was shown to be corrupt by the Fitzgerald Inquiry.

Retirement from the Health Service saw her taking up a role as part-time Commissioner of the newly-established Criminal Justice Commission and continuing to speak out on issues of women’s health and social justice. Her friendships, particularly with other women, which were always of great importance to her life, resulted in a campaign for *A Woman’s Place* to honour the achievements of women at large. An annual Janet Irwin dinner was established in her honour and she was twice honoured by the Federal Government. She died in New Zealand in 2009.

Dr Janet Irwin was a woman who made a difference to the lives of many people in Australia and New Zealand. The biography places her life in its relevant social, political, and cultural context, and comments on the current situation in relation to reforms she achieved. In the spirit of her life, the biography has a public life focus. It does not, however, neglect her love of books and art and the fundamental importance to her life of family and friendships.

* * * * *

**Chapter 1** explores the issue of biography as a research form, how biography is under-theorised; how today, nonetheless, biography has come to be accepted research practice in a variety of disciplines; and how, as a creative writing student, I am writing this biography within the framework of practice-led research.

**Chapter 2** explores the evolution of biographical writing; how both history and literature have, at different times, claimed and also rejected biography as an accepted practice in their respective fields; how historians, dating as far back as the fifth century BC, have claimed that historical writing, including biography, by its very nature, is literary; and the implications for me as a biographer.

**Chapter 3** explores the context of Virginia Woolf’s struggle with biography; her conclusions about the limitations of biography; and how I came to conclude that motivation was a relevant issue.
Chapter 4 argues that the challenge to biography as literature is related to the issue of biographical motivation. It explores not only what biographers have to say of their own motivation, but how the motivation of biographers is portrayed in fictional literature.

Chapter 5 deals with my own motivation for writing the biography of Dr Janet Irwin; how my initial motivation was curiosity; how I wanted to commemorate my subject’s life and what I learned from feminist scholarly works about that process; how I came to view writing this biography as a form of activism; and an unconscious motivation.

Chapter 6 details the process of writing the biography as a doctoral project and the issues that arose during that process: my interviews with my subject, our joint trip to New Zealand, and problems with both; how my motivation to know about Janet Irwin’s upbringing expanded to include an understanding of place; how I became fascinated by the possibilities of biography; how I explored the idea of combining the biography with a memoir; how I lost motivation; how my motivation was resuscitated by finding out the full extent of Janet’s achievements and wanting to know how and why she had been so successful.

The Conclusion draws these threads together in the light of the research question and proposes other related areas worthy of research.
Chapter 1.

Biography as research

The issue of biography as a research form; how biography is under-theorised; how today, nonetheless, biography has come to be accepted research practice in a variety of disciplines; and how, as a creative writing student, I am writing this biography within the framework of practice-led research.

In the prologue to his work, Biography: a brief history, Nigel Hamilton questions why so little has been written about the nature and history of biography. He defines biography widely: ‘our creative and non-fictional output devoted to recording and interpreting real lives’. In a recent article, Hamilton describes the further issue of biographical composition as ‘a foreign land. One that is still not mapped, is largely undiscovered.’ I read a wide range of books and articles on various aspects of biographical writing as part of the process of writing my biography of Dr Janet Irwin, and, like Hamilton, I found that the nature of biography tended to be assumed, and that very little had been written about the history of biographical writing. In the next chapter, I outline what I learnt about the evolution of biography and its usefulness for my project.

Harold Nicolson’s The development of English biography, first published in 1928, begins with the Oxford Dictionary’s definition of biography as ‘the history of the lives of individual men as a branch of literature.’ Nicolson notes that Dr Samuel Johnson was the first to proclaim that biography was a distinct branch of literature. These days, however, almost 90 year later, biography is defined by that same dictionary as ‘an account of someone’s life written by someone else’. The dictionary entry also makes reference to the term being used as a literary genre, but the requirement that it be so, seems to have disappeared. My research has revealed how the domain of biography has been a contested one, being both claimed and rejected as a bastard child at various times, not only by literature, but also by history. Some recent texts, however, particularly from historians adopt a more inter-disciplinary approach as we shall see in Chapter 2.

Indeed, in recent times, as Joanna Bornat outlines, biography has been making a successful claim as a research form across a range of disciplines:
In critical pedagogy, cultural studies, critical race theory, gerontology, decolonizing research, social policy, health studies, feminisms, identity theory, studies of sexuality, employment, family and management theory, the range of areas in which biographical methods have been taken up is vast. Joanny Moulin, in her introduction to *Towards Biography Theory* talks of the need this raises ‘for a new definition of biography in the larger sense of the term.’

Despite this widespread use in research, biography, however defined, does not fit neatly within traditional quantitative or qualitative research paradigms. It is beyond the scope of this exegesis to explore the research frameworks that are being utilized in other areas where biographical research is being carried out. However, there are a number of scholarly works emerging on biographical research in the social and health sciences.

I am writing this biography as a creative writing researcher. My biography of Dr Irwin is intended as a creative work. In the creative arts today, biographies are classified as a subgenre of life writing within ‘creative non-fiction. Forche and Gerard say of this genre, ‘Creative nonfiction has emerged in the last few years as the province of factual prose that is also literary’. Or, as Cheney puts it, ‘Creative nonfiction tells a story using facts, but uses many of the techniques of fiction for its compelling qualities and emotional vibrancy’. I discovered, in my research, that this was not a new concept, but in fact, dates back to ancient times, as will be explored in Chapter 2.

In recent times, an alternative research paradigm, that of practice-led research has been successfully utilized by researchers in the creative arts. This involves both the production of a creative work and a reflection upon its evolution in intellectual terms. Carter talks of the creative arts practitioner utilizing this framework retrieving the ‘intellectual work that usually goes missing in translation’ during the creative process. Brien describes the application of this process for the creative non-fiction writer:

Researchers will be engaged in a series of research enquiry cycles. Their findings will be reported in a variety of ways that include the piece of non-fiction writing itself (the creative work) as well as a range of scholarly writings that support, explicate and arise from that artwork.
I have chosen to utilize this framework in researching and writing this project, or rather I should say, that the framework chose me in the sense that I came at this project with an open mind and tried many different iterations of its composition before deciding on an ultimate approach. That process is detailed in Chapter 5.

In that chapter, I also describe how writing the biography involved reading material on the social, political and cultural factors informing Janet’s life in both New Zealand and Australia and on familiarizing myself with the medical and social issues which she addressed professionally and publicly. To fully inform myself on relevant issues for a biographer and to assist me with decision-making in this regard, I read books and articles on the history of biography, ethics in writing biography, psychobiography, the sociology of biography, feminist biography, writing about living subjects, experimental form in biography, non-human biographies, fictional biographers, literary biography, the role of the biographer in the text, the publishing history of biography, on biography as research and particularly on biographical form. I also read a wide range of biographies, both traditional and experimental. Throughout this exegesis, I will review selected texts that I studied and their usefulness for my project. In Chapter 2, I will focus on what my research revealed about the evolution of biographical writing, and its claim as literature.
Chapter 2.

The evolution of biography and its relation to literature

The evolution of biography; how both history and literature have, at different times, claimed and also rejected biography as an accepted practice in their respective fields; how historians, dating as far back as the fifth century BC, have claimed that historical writing, including biography, by its very nature, is literary; and the implications for me as a biographer.

As we saw in Chapter 1, Nigel Hamilton defines biography very widely. Under its umbrella, he would place not only ‘written’ lives, but all creative forms from ancient rock carvings to the deluge of new media which engage with biographical practice today. This is a very comprehensive and inclusive definition indeed, and is in line with the expanded concept of biography as research. Hamilton points out that biography has not always been viewed as a branch of literature, and that questions of whether biography belongs to literature or history have been ‘eternal’, dating back to The Epic of Gilgamesh in the second millennium BC. Hamilton insists that biography plays an ‘integral role in the shaping of human identity’. In his discussion of what he calls evolutionary biography, Hamilton develops this claim, arguing that the ‘commemorative instinct’ is a ‘psychological, possibly evolutionary drive’ with a secondary function as a guide for individuals to understand themselves. Similarly, Dr Samuel Johnson who is credited, as we saw in Chapter 1, with claiming biography as a form of literature, had a passionate interest in the psychology of individuals and was as interested in the inner life and the domestic one as public acts, claiming ‘I esteem biography...as giving us what comes near to ourselves, what we can turn to use’.

Nicolson, in The Development of English Biography likewise talks of biography developing to satisfy the commemorative instinct. He goes on to discuss how it then became didactic. He is scathing of the idea that the role of biography is to locate the great men of history, ‘clean the dirt from them, and
place them on their proper pedestal.'xvii He details how it was not until the time of Samuel Johnson that what he calls ‘pure biographies,’ as distinct from biographies commissioned by institutions for their own purposes, started to appear. Nicolson also argues that the taste for biography was further stimulated in the early eighteenth century by the extension of its focus from the eminent to the notorious, from the well-known to the obscure. Both Nicolson and Hamilton view the biographies of the Victorian period as a retrogressive step. Indeed, Hamilton declares 19th century novelists the true biographers as it was they who ‘received the pass and ran with Johnson’s ball’.xviii Indeed, he points out, George Eliot saw fiction, not non-fiction, as the proper vehicle for intimate life depiction.

It was not until the twentieth century that English biography was again to flourish, and here the significant figure, Nicolson argues, was Lytton Strachey. Referring to Strachey’s biography of Queen Victoria, Nicolson claims that:

It is this psychological motive, this psychological point of view, which gives the book its unity...more than two-thirds being devoted to the long processes by which the character of Victoria was formed, and the remaining third dealing with her life after her character had crystallized.xix

Nicolson argues for a biography to be a record of personality.xx As Hamilton outlines, Nicolson was not the only one with that view. In a private letter to his Swiss protégé, CG Jung, Freud confided that ‘the domain of biography, too, must become ours’.21 While decrying Freud’s imperialist claims, Hamilton acknowledges his influence on biography in the twentieth century.

*Literary biography: an introduction* suggests that in the twenty-first century, the claim of biography to be a form of literature is still contestable, at least within the literary community itself. Michael Benton is concerned, not with biography as a literary form, but with biographies of literary figures. His first purpose, in writing the book is, he says, is ‘to discuss the principal generic issues in a literary form of ambiguous nature and uncertain status’.xvi His second purpose is to challenge the belief of many writers and academics that literary biography is, at best, redundant. (It is beyond the scope of this exegesis to explore whether this discounting of biographies extends to biographies of non-literary figures.) In the next chapter, given Virginia Woolf’s status as a writer, I will explore the specific challenges that she makes in her writings to the concept
of biography as literature, and how that opened up for me the significance of the issue of motivation.

My research revealed that while the literary community were challenging the concept of biography as literature, some historians were not only conceptualizing biographies as literature, but asserting that this was far from a new concept. In the introduction to Biography and history, historian Barbara Caine firstly discusses the place which biography has assumed in the study of history. She argues that biography has moved from the margins towards the centre, as it is now seen to ‘offer ways of throwing new light on a range of different historical periods and problems and of bringing individuals and groups who had previously been ignored into the framework of historical analysis’.

Caine recounts how the classical world distinguished between biography and history, but this dichotomy was challenged by Francis Bacon in the early seventeenth century. She records how, in the following century, readers found that biographies could provide a more lively version of history. In the nineteenth century, however, Ralph Waldo Emerson and other historians saw history as essentially being the lives of significant men, and in that same century, the ‘professionalization’ of history saw emphasis switch to a scientific approach to history and an emphasis on public documents. This would seem to reflect the situation with literary biographies, and highlights the impact of social, political and cultural contexts on the evolution of biography generally.

Caine explores the changing treatment of private life over the history of biography. She reveals how the public/private divide is not a simple dichotomy. For Samuel Johnson, private life was the social life of his subjects usually outside the home. In the nineteenth century, a person’s family of origin could be explored, but not their family life. Reputation was all important. In the twentieth century, private life came to have a psychological flavour, with the emphasis shifting from character to personality.

Caine addresses changing biographical practices in the 20th and 21st centuries, acknowledging as she does so that the dominant subject in biographical writing continues to be important men, and that the basic concern continues to be to tell their story in a way that demonstrates their exceptional abilities and historical significance. She believes that historians and literary
writers have a lot to learn from each other in writing biographies; that biography is not a domain which should be occupied by one group to the exclusion of the other, or indeed, to the exclusion of practitioners of other disciplines.

One of the conventional arguments for biography belonging to the domain of history is that biographies are factual, as is history. They are not fictional like literature. In *Is history fiction?* two Australian public intellectuals, Anne Curthoys and John Docker, invite us to re-examine our attitude to historical facts in a particular way. They suggest that history has a double nature, that the desire for historical truth cannot be extricated from the world of literary forms. Language, narrative, metaphor, rhetoric and allegory are the devices of the historian as much as the literary writer. And they further suggest that this idea can, in fact, be traced back to Herodotus and Thucydides, the founding fathers of western history, in the fifth century BC.

Although Thucydides had a narrow notion of history as political and military, while for Herodotus, history included the social and the cultural, (even the role of women) they both viewed it as ‘literary, engaged in narrative, history as drama, engaged in the creation of scenes, characters, and speeches’. Thucydides’ great work, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, is structured as a tragedy. *The Histories* make explicit the process of writing history and Herodotus inserts himself as historian into the text.

Curthoys and Docker claim that it was not until the nineteenth century that history and literature came to be conceived as opposed to each other. But the real challenges to historiography in the late twentieth century came from post-structuralism, postmodernism and feminism. Faced with compelling evidence of the limitations of the historical method, many historians responded by experimenting with subject matter and particularly with form, some adopting what was seen as a literary form. Historian, Penny Russell, relates how writing a biography led her to undertaking a creative writing course, ‘believing that I was not enough of a writer to tell this story well, to evoke sentiment without falling into sentimentality, to offer analysis without dealing a deathblow to narrative, to allow multiple interpretations without sacrificing coherence, to suggest coherence without becoming an intrusive authorial voice.’
I have not attempted here to provide a detailed account of the evolution of biography as recounted in these works. What is clear from them is that its evolution has been no more consistently progressive than has the evolution of western society. The value of these texts to me was that they challenged me to question what I wanted to achieve in writing a biography. There was no doubt that I wanted to commemorate my subject’s life. That, to me was particularly important. Firstly, I felt that her achievements had not been recognized, and I did not want to see her becoming one of the forgotten women of history. Secondly, like Strachey in his biography of Queen Victoria, I wanted to understand and record what my research had revealed to be the significant factors in her becoming the person she was. I also wanted to explore how my subject became a successful activist so that I could share that information with readers in the hope that it might encourage their own activism. Not only were these texts of value in identifying these issues, they were a useful reminder of the need to ensure that my subject did not come across as some saintly figure, a characterisation which she herself would have found laughable.

In the next chapter I recount the difficulties Virginia Woolf encountered in writing the biography of Roger Fry, and how she came to challenge the validity of biography as literature. In accordance with my research question, I outline how I came to wonder if the problem lay with issues related to motivation for the task, rather than the biographical form.
Chapter 3.

Virginia Woolf ‘s views on biography and the unspoken question of motivation

The context of Virginia Woolf’s struggles with biography; her conclusions about the limitations of biography; and how I came to conclude that motivation was a relevant issue.

‘My God, how does one write a biography?’

---Virginia Woolf to Vita Sackville-West

It was somewhat reassuring to know that a writer of the stature of Virginia Woolf felt a sense of trepidation about writing a biography, so I was keen to understand the context. With the death of Roger Fry, renowned art critic and fellow member of the Bloomsbury set, came a request from his widow, and an expectation from other members of the group, that she would write a biography to commemorate his life. Woolf regarded Fry very highly. Indeed, she told him she would have dedicated To the lighthouse to him if she had thought it was good enough. And in her diary, she would go on to describe her relationship to him as biographer, as ‘an odd posthumous friendship – in some ways more intimate than any I had in life’. Nonetheless, she struggled with the task assigned her. She described working on the biography as a ‘grind’ and ‘drudgery’ and doubted her abilities as a biographer.

Roger Fry: a biography disappointed the reading public as much as it disappointed Woolf herself. The biography lets Fry’s texts speak for themselves, and Woolf does not create a sense of intimacy with her subject such as she had celebrated in Boswell’s biography of Samuel Johnson. Woolf’s father, Sir Leslie Stephen, editor of the Dictionary of national biography, considered the duty of the biographer to be that of presenting the greatest possible amount of information about his subject in a thoroughly business-like form. His successor, Sir Sydney Lee, wrote that ‘character which does not translate itself into exploit is for the biographer a mere phantom’. While Woolf did not agree with their views, she found it difficult to establish an alternative and consistent position on
the issue. In her diaries, she makes frequent reference to the subject, and she also wrote a number of essays in which she explores the nature of biography.

Woolf felt a sense of obligation about the task which was not comfortable. This had not always been the case. Ten years earlier, she had published a book with the title *Orlando: a biography.* Based on the life of Vita Sackville-West, it traces her story back to an incarnation as an English nobleman of the Renaissance. Woolf had felt free to give full rein to her imagination. Five years later, she followed this with *Flush: a biography* featuring Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s dog. It is ironic that the writer who produced such wonderful experimental biographies, and indeed called them biographies, did not really consider them biographies.

Woolf came to the conclusion that it was the very nature of biography which was the problem. Both in her diaries and in essays, she tries to define what it is about the nature of biography which is problematic. In an essay entitled ‘The art of biography’ written two years after the publication of the Fry biography, Woolf raises the question of whether biography really is an art. The biographer, she claims, is restricted in a way the novelist is not. She acknowledges that biographers had, by that time, won a degree of freedom to reveal their subjects as fallible human beings. Lytton Strachey had demonstrated his ability to ‘caricature’ *Eminent Victorians* as a group. But Woolf argues that his full biographies of Queens Victoria and Elizabeth demonstrate that biography only works when it is practiced as a craft. There seem to be two issues at play here: firstly, the freedom of the biographer to present a ‘warts and all’ picture of the subject; and secondly, the difference between ‘art’ and ‘craft’, the latter a PhD topic (or six), in its own right.

Woolf, felt herself confronted by dichotomies. In a later essay entitled ‘The new biography’ she describes what she sees as a fundamental problem confronting the biographer:

On the one hand there is truth; on the other is personality. And if we think of truth as something of granite-like solidity and of personality as something of rainbow-like intangibility and reflect that the aim of biography is to weld these two into one seamless whole, we shall admit that the problem is a stiff one and that we need not wonder if biographers have for the most part failed to solve it.
She goes on to discuss how, under the influence of Boswell, biography expanded from being the story of the subject’s active, public life to also incorporating the ‘inner life of emotion and thought’. However, the obsession of the Victorian biographer with the idea of ‘goodness’ meant that only a limited type of ‘truth’ was being told. The twentieth century biographer was now refusing to be constrained in this way and insisting on the right to independent judgment both about the subject and about the way the subject be presented. Woolf here refers to Harold Nicolson’s work, Some people, which she admires, but argues that ‘it is not fiction because it has the substance, the reality of truth. It is not biography because it has the freedom, the artistry of fiction’. In her view, combining the two—truth and fiction—is a dangerous enterprise because they are fundamentally antagonistic. This is a very odd view to come from the writer of Orlando and Flush.

Woolf provides almost a stream of consciousness account of the difficulties of writing biography. Again, we really have a number of intertwined problems: the inclusion of the inner life as well as the outer one; the ‘warts and all’ issue of unpalatable truths; fact versus fiction, and their supposed irreconcilability; and the incursion of the biographer into the work as a subject. Initially, the dichotomy presented by Woolf is one between truth and personality, but as the essay progresses, it shifts to being between truth and fiction. The original dichotomy seems a strange one to the twenty-first century reader. But, were we to maintain it in these post-modern times, we might view the issue the other way round: personality as possessing granite-like solidity and truth as having rainbow-like intangibility. The alleged dichotomy between fact and fiction is one which has already been explored in chapter 2 as a problematic argument.

While I do not agree with the central proposition of ‘The new biography’, Woolf did raise a number of issues which were relevant for me in writing Janet’s biography. These included whether I should use my imagination where evidence was lacking, and to what extent it was appropriate for me to be obviously present in the text. I address these issues in chapter 6.
Prior to focusing on Woolf, I had found it necessary and fascinating to explore the history and the evolution of biography in Western society as discussed in chapter 2. I started to read Woolf’s essays at the time I had started to formulate some ideas of my own about the ‘nature’ of biography. What was most helpful to me was to explore the underpinnings of Woolf’s writing about the nature of biography and to assess her conclusions. My own conclusion was that it may not have been the nature of biography which caused Woolf such grief, but the fact that she had been ‘commissioned’ to write the biography. She had not come up with the idea herself and, therefore, her motivation for the task was lacking. This problem was exacerbated by the fact that ‘her desire to do Fry justice in a biography, her sense of responsibility to his family, and her fascination with the man himself compelled her to persevere’, xxxiv In this, she lost any enthusiasm for the project, and the project suffered as a result. In chapter 6, I describe a similar experience in relation to my own project.

From this inquiry, I have come to the conclusion that an author’s ‘motivation’ in researching and writing a biography will impact on the outcome. In this exegesis, I will, therefore, unpack and discuss my own motivation for writing the accompanying biography as well as the issue of motivation in biographical writing generally. This is an under-researched area in relation to biographical writing. Nor is motivation, itself, a simple issue. Some motivation may be unconscious. Competing motivations may suggest different approaches. Motivation may also fluctuate.

In her diary, Woolf raises the problem which arises when a biographer is telling the story of someone they have known as a living person. She did not feel she could write openly about Fry’s homosexual relationships, nor about his affairs with women because of opposition, either from family members of those involved, or his own family.xi Yet, these relationships had been central to the stance he was taking on how a life should be lived. Her response to the issue is again surprising given the reputation of the Bloomsbury set as being uninhibited by convention. It seems that, because writing the biography was not Woolf’s own idea, she does not feel a sense of comfort in the process, but rather that her writing has been constrained.
I too am a biographer telling the story of someone I have known as a living person. I have become friendly with members of my subject’s family. There are issues which are sensitive in this regard, but they are relatively minor ones, and, fortunately, they are not fundamental problems for me. It was my own idea to write this biography, and I have not felt constrained in any significant way. I have, however, struggled with the biography at times when motivation was temporarily lacking. I also struggled with the nature and form of the biography. I discuss these issues further in chapter 6.

In yet another essay on biography, ‘A sketch of the past’, Woolf was to make the further claim that:

*Biography pretends that a life can be told, when experience teaches us that it cannot. We suppress the knowledge, because we have a need for stories, a need to make sense of lives.*

In her National Biography Award Lecture 2007, ‘Biography - the impossible art?’ historian and memoirist Inga Clendinnen agreed with this need for story-telling in relation to biography. She suggests that we need it for our own purposes, for the good of society. ‘The pursuit of the Other, baffled and awkward as it may be, is what makes us human. It might still save us.’ I presume she means, that it might save us from ourselves, and unite us as a community. Nigel Hamilton is of a similar view regarding the value of biography to society as a whole, as we saw in chapter 2. It is a view which I share. Indeed, as I outline in chapter 5, it was one of the motivating factors for me in writing Janet’s biography.

In the next chapter, I detail my research into the significance of motivation for biographers, and how biographical motivation is perceived by creative/literary writers.
Chapter 4.
The significance of motivation in biographical writing

*How I came to believe that the challenge to biography as literature is related to the issue of biographical motivation; what biographers say of their own motivation; and how the motivation of biographers is portrayed in fictional literature.*

Exploring Virginia Woolf’s experience in attempting to write the life of Roger Fry led me to wonder how significant an issue motivation was for other writers. How did it impact on the way they went about their research and writing? Yet, this, I found, is a topic not explored in any detailed way in biography scholarship, not that biography scholarship itself is extensive, as we have seen.

‘The unexamined life is not worth living’, Socrates suggested, no doubt intending that we examine our own lives rather than those of other people. But it may be that there is a connection between the two, and that examining the lives of other people helps us examine our own lives. Samuel Johnson certainly thought so, as does Nigel Hamilton as we saw in Chapter 2. I wondered if this could be what motivated some biographers.

Michael Holroyd, the English biographer, tells readers that this is not what motivated him to go into biography. In fact, quite the contrary. ‘My career as a biographer probably arose from my need to escape from family involvements and immerse myself in other people’s lives.’ He finds, however, that writing about other people does, in fact, shape his own identity. When his parents died, he felt a need to ‘go back and explore. My parents, my family scattered over time and place, have become my biographical subjects as I search for something of me in them, and them in me’.

Australian biographer, Brenda Niall, views writing a biography as ‘an act of imaginative and creative sympathy’, as a border crossing, rather than an escape, but she acknowledges that ‘the author’s self is always involved’. Hermione Lee, biographer of Virginia Woolf, Edith Wharton, and Philip Roth, among others, is, however, ‘sceptical about empathy as the driving force of biography’. She writes that she does not think that it is necessary to like her subject and that she is motivated to write literary biography by her enthusiasm for a writer’s work. That it is more complex than
that she reveals in another interview about her biography of Wharton. She adored Wharton's work, but turning to the existing biographies, was left with questions. 'There were just lots of things about her which baffled me. I wanted to know why this person chose to live her life in another country, for example.'

Niall agrees that at the most primitive level, biography engages the biographer like a detective:

But it isn't really about facts, it's about the understanding that comes with thinking about a completed life, perhaps a famous person, perhaps someone whose life that seems to embody some experience that goes beyond the individual.

Hilary Spurling, prize-winning biographer of Matisse, is another who sees her role like that of private detective hunting down not only the subject but the age in which he or she lived. She would never contemplate writing a biography of someone she knew, she proclaimed in an interview in 2006. ‘Surgeons never operate on people they know.' Her choice of words is interesting. Certainly she has chosen as biographical subjects people who, on the face of it, have led uneventful lives and shown that appearances can be deceptive. Contrary to her earlier proclamation, she is now in the process of writing the biography of someone whom she did know, the novelist Anthony Powell. It remains to be seen whether her approach, or the result, will differ.

Deidre Bair has written biographies of two people who were living when she started to write them, Samuel Beckett and Simone de Beauvoir, as well as of two who were not, Carl Jung and Anais Nin. She agrees with Leon Edel, the biographer of Henry James, that biographers are usually impelled by deeply personal reasons to write about their subjects. She was attracted to de Beauvoir because she was interested in exploring whether or not it was indeed possible for a woman to have it all, to combine a significant professional career with a satisfying personal life. That was also the motivation of another biographer who is discussed in this section, Deborah Shepard.
Meryle Secrest, biographer of Frank Lloyd Wright and Salvador Dali among others, claimed in an interview in *The New Yorker* in 2007, that she views the whole process as a commercial one:

Deciding on a subject is mostly a cold-blooded business of weighing the subject against potential markets, timeliness, the availability of material and the likelihood of getting the story, the kinds of factors publishers have to worry about.iii

(That this might only be a partial truth is suggested in an interview in 2011 in which she declares that if she had had an education, she would have been a psychiatrist, suggesting that understanding the way people’s minds work is important to her.)

A number of biographers have stated that they are held in poor regard by novelists, and that their motivation is seen as questionable and unethical. As the biographer Michael Holroyd points out in *Works on paper*, not only are they not viewed as fellow writers, they are generally depicted as ‘a naive and calculating band of outcasts and impossibilists, careerists, murderers and grave-robbers’.lii Biographer Carl Rollyson argues that biographers are seen as ‘bottom-feeders - the lowest of the low.’ James Joyce called them ‘biografiends’, and Rudyard Kipling deemed the genre a ‘higher form of cannibalism.’ The suggestion that biography adds a new terror to the thought of death is attributed by Rollyson to several writers.liii

The motivations of biographers as depicted in fiction illustrate this argument. In A S Byatt’s *The biographer’s tale*,liv the central character, the biographer Phineas G Nanson, is grappling with postmodern literary theory. In the midst of a yet another discussion about the dismemberment of the imagined body, he experiences an understandable desire to escape into a world of facts. But he is infected by uncertainty even about this choice. In a savage critique echoing the old axiom that those who can, do, and those who can’t, teach, Byatt has him relate:

I had always considered biography a bastard form, a dilettante pursuit. Tales told by those incapable of true invention, simple stories for those incapable of true critical insight. Distractions constructed by amateurs for lady readers who would never grapple with *The Waves* or *The Years* but liked to feel they had an
intimate acquaintance with the Woolfs and with Bloomsbury, from daring talk of semen on skirts to sordid sexual interference with nervous girls.\textsuperscript{lv}

With the encouragement of one of his Heads of Department, however, Nanson puts aside these reservations and makes the leap. Nanson decides to commit the ultimate sin for a student of literature, to write the biography of a biographer. As if to emphasize the lowliness of this endeavour, Byatt has chosen to make him a dwarf. Nanson finds, however, that the facts of biography provide no true escape. They too are uncertain, being both fragmentary and questionable. This is dismemberment of the imagined body in action. At the end of the novel, he finds redemption in sex and poetry. The biographer’s tale is, of course, a satire. But even in Possession, which is meant to be read on one level as a serious novel, and indeed won the 1990 Booker prize, Byatt’s main characters are scholars, competitors in a race with other scholars to write the most salacious biography about the relationship between two famous poets. Seemingly, she cannot resist the temptation to malign biographers.\textsuperscript{lvi}

In a 2005 talk to the UK Biographers Club on Biographers in Fiction, Hazel Bell confirms, after examining twenty-six novels about biographers, that they are viewed in a very poor light.\textsuperscript{lvii} She comments firstly on the fact that many are depicted as having sexual experiences with relatives of their subjects, and infers that novelists view biographers as having unclear boundaries between themselves and their subjects, or simply as opportunists. They depict biographers resorting to theft and even murder in the cause of research, and hostile to other biographers who hone in on what they see as their territory. Even children’s writers can’t resist: there are two evil biographers in the Harry Potter series. Like Bell, I am intrigued whether this is a case of professional jealousy or rather, that many novels are based in a reality which their authors do not want revealed. Here is another PhD topic for exploration.

I am now going to explore in detail two biographical works where the motivation is clear. While it is not the purpose of this exegesis to make a judgment call about the appropriateness or effectiveness of differing motivations, I would argue that, in each case, the impact of motivation on the quality of the work is clear.
Peter Martin acknowledges that he wrote *Samuel Johnson: a biography*, yet another biography of the great literary figure of the eighteenth century, in anticipation of the tercentenary of his birth in 2009. He had previously written biographies of James Boswell and of Edmond Malone, without whose help Martin claims, Boswell would probably never have published his work, *Life of Johnson*. So, I take it as evident that Martin has a very comprehensive knowledge of Johnson and his world. Is that, however, sufficient justification for another biography of Johnson? It is certainly true that Johnson was fifty-three when Boswell met him and that the focus of his biography is his own experience of Johnson. But, when someone else has already written a biography about your subject which not only proved enormously popular when it was first published in 1791, but is considered a literary classic and still taught in universities today, and when there has been considerable biographical scholarship about him in the past thirty years, it would seem evident that you would need to have something original and substantial to say. There is also the problem of determining the audience for your work. Are you writing for a general public who know nothing about the man or for a literary audience who do? Perhaps you are writing in response to other biographers to correct what you perceive as inaccuracies in earlier works. If these questions are not addressed, you will run the risk of not pleasing anyone.

Martin wants firstly to show us, not the extrovert Johnson, but the private man, a man who, though strong and tall, suffered from a number of physical disabilities. Initially, this engages the sympathy of the reader. After a difficult birth, in accord with common practice, Johnson was placed in the care of a wet nurse, where he acquired the scrofulous sores of a tubercular infection which scarred him for life. He also became almost completely blind in the left eye and had only partial vision in the right, a deficiency treated throughout his life by blood-letting and open incisions of his body. On the advice of a physician, his mother took him to London to be touched by Queen Anne in the fruitless hope of a cure. Throughout his life, he was also troubled by involuntary movements and tics which may have been Tourette’s Syndrome.

Johnson suffered even more from the melancholy he inherited from his father, and Martin goes to considerable lengths to show the full extent to which
this negatively impacted on him. This is a risky enterprise. It becomes tedious and frustrating for the reader to bear witness to his constant depression and its various manifestations, particularly inactivity, which led to his difficulty in finishing the *Dictionary* and indeed most works which he undertook. So much so that when the biography shifts to the short and relatively pleasurable time he spends travelling around the Hebrides with Boswell, there is a sense of relief that something is finally happening. Due to this concentration on his melancholy, readers get no feel for the extrovert side of Johnson's personality and what it was which caused others to be so engaged by him. People all over the Western world, and indeed even in Japan, set up Johnsonian Clubs in his honour.

Johnson, himself, was the writer of numerous biographies and claimed that ‘no species of writing seems more worthy of cultivation than biography’. It is doubtful, however, that Johnson would have much time for such a biography as this very lengthy, very thoroughly researched and detailed one. His own biographies were very different. He had little interest in doing any research in preparation to write them and brought the same approach to the task of reporting parliamentary debates, Martin tells us, ‘putting speeches in the mouths of people who did not make them, or introducing arguments that were never uttered at all in the debates’. It seems that Johnson would have more in common with the writers of fictionalized biography today than with an academic one such as this. As he pronounced in that same Rambler Essay:

> All joy or sorrow for the happiness or calamities of others is produced by an act of the imagination, that realizes the event however fictitious, or approximates it however remote, by placing us, for a time, in the condition of him whose fortunes we contemplate; so that we feel, while the deception lasts, whatever emotions would be excited by the same good or evil happening to ourselves.

Johnson was also of the view that the kind of biography which is most valuable is that in which the writer includes his own story. Boswell’s biography of him would suggest the truth of this proposition. But of Peter Martin, his passions, and his attitude towards Johnson, we get little feel in this biography. Martin is disappointed that Johnson is remembered through Boswell and that his own writings are rarely read these days. He claims, not without irony, that the best way to get the measure of Johnson is to read him. It is hard to understand,
therefore, why he did not consider an annotated compilation of Johnson's works rather than a biography. This work raises again the question of whether there needs to be some personal motivation involved for a biography to be successful.

The next work I have chosen to canvass in detail is a collective biography where the motivation is clear. It is a work which I was drawn to for a number of reasons: firstly, because of my continuing interest in New Zealand; secondly, as a feminist; and thirdly, as part of my investigation into biographical practice. In Her life’s work: conversations with five New Zealand women by Deborah Shepard, biographer and life writing mentor with the New Zealand Society of Authors, sets out to explore the question whether it is possible for women to have it all. Can they do productive and rewarding work at the same time as attending to the demands of family without the risk of exhaustion? She has chosen to investigate this question by interviewing and telling the life stories of five older women aged from sixty-two to eighty-nine who have been significantly successful in their chosen field: internationally lauded author of books for children and young adults, Margaret Mahy; film-maker Gaylene Preston, awarded for her documentaries and oral history interviews (particularly with women); Merimeri Penfold who was a leader in Maori Women’s Welfare League campaigns and is a university lecturer, writer, translator and Human Rights Commissioner; artist and writer Jacqueline Fahey whose work wryly comments on women’s role in society; and anthropologist, historian and writer, Anne Salmond, who is internationally acknowledged for her cross-cultural scholarship. Shepard acknowledges that she chose these particular women because they had all inspired her personally in her own work as a life writer. What she wants to know is how did these women cope with constraints imposed by their gender; who supported them; what conditions assisted them; and what price did they pay. She also has specific questions for each of her interviewees: how did Jacqueline Fahey balance her work with the demands of her role as a medical wife and mother; how was it that Anne Salmond’s involvement with a Maori couple guided her early work; how did Merimeri Penfold manage to negotiate the dual worlds of Maori and Pakeha; how did Margaret Mahy, with her international profile, keep in touch with the imaginations of children; and how had Gaylene
Preston survived the male-dominated world of the film industry, especially given her outspokenness.

The collective biography consists of in-depth interviews, in question and answer format, accompanied by comments on the interviewees’ non-verbal responses as well. The questions chart similar territory with each of the subjects and it is therefore possible to compare and contrast the subjects’ responses. However, the reader is not aware of the template in a distracting way. The questions are challenging and penetrating, appropriate to the individual circumstances of the subject and Shepard is comfortable detouring down a more productive path if necessary.

Each of the women had exhibited an independent spirit from early in her life and had been supported in pursuing her passion by her parents. Once they left home, however, job opportunities were limited for women and for all of them, there were deviations before they were able to do the work they wanted. Earlier women provided inspiration for them from anthropologist Margaret Mead to writer Katherine Mansfield, or in Mahy’s case, female pirates and a film poster of female outlaw Belle Star riding a bucking horse. All subjects with the exception of Mahy had to contend with raising a family while working. Salmond recounts how her anthropology seminar at the university was always scheduled for five o’clock in the afternoon, the worst time for a parent. And then, to make matters worse, she would have to endure questioning about who was looking after her children. It is clear from the interviews, however, that regardless of the difficulties they confronted, each of the women felt that undertaking work which they were passionate about was worth it.

One of the most fascinating parallels in the book is that between Penfold and Salmond. Penfold, of Maori descent, had an influential Pakeha teacher who convinced her parents to allow her to go to a boarding school for Maori girls in Auckland (along with a similarly talented friend), organising scholarships for them and accommodation with Pakeha families at weekends. When it became clear that the boarding school was nurturing them to be typists or housewives, their host families took them in full-time and organised for them to be educated at Auckland Girls’ Grammar in preparation for university studies. Penfold’s mother died when she was seventeen and her host family went on to adopt her...
two younger sisters as well, aware that the father was not supportive of education for girls. Meanwhile, Salmond, a Pakeha, in her first year at university was to develop a friendship with a Maori couple, the age of her grandparents, who were to inspire and guide her academic study and work. Her PhD was a study of Maori ceremonial gatherings and she has continued to write about the interaction between Maori (and other Polynesian) and Pakeha worlds. Penfold and Salmon are friends and university colleagues, and worked together on a successful campaign to build a marae (Maori community gathering place) on the campus of Auckland University. It is a story which only non-fiction could tell. Fiction would reject it as well intentioned but implausible.

Demonstrably, the author was highly motivated to write it and, in turn, it motivates its readers. It demonstrates how women blossom when they are encouraged to pursue work of their choosing, especially when that work involves other women. It is clear-sighted about the challenges and the compromises, suggesting the need for pragmatism, a sense of humour, stubborn bloody-mindedness, and the sustenance of family, friends or work colleagues (or in Penfold’s case, spiritually through her ancestors). It also provides a clear argument that nurturing work is of benefit, not only to the individual involved, but also to society at large. In the next chapter, I discuss how my research about Janet’s life revealed similar issues at play.

Clearly, it is not possible to make a qualitative argument about motivation in biographers on the basis of two very different biographical works, and, in fact, some scholars might dispute the classification of the second work as a biography. But, in each case, the motivation of the biographer appears to have had a significant impact on the biography (whether that be positive or negative). The issue of motivation in biography is worthy of further exploration. It is certainly true that my motivation for writing Janet’s biography impacted on my work. In chapter 5, I detail my varying motivations, and in chapter 6, I explore how those motivations impacted on the process of writing the biography.
Chapter 5.

My motivations for writing this biography

*How my initial motivation was curiosity; how I wanted to commemorate my subject’s life and what I learned from feminist scholarly works about that process; how I came to view writing this biography as a form of activism; and an unconscious motivation.*

Hazel Rowley, the internationally acclaimed biographer, who sadly died while I was writing this biography, gave the 2007 Australian Book Review/ La Trobe University Annual Lecture on ‘The ups, the downs: my life as biographer’. In it, she put forward what she saw as the prerequisites for a biographer:

> It seems to me you need to be curious about the world, to like people and be interested in their lives, and to enjoy drawing out their stories. You need to be tenacious. Your research has to be scrupulously correct, or the scholars will wring your neck… To write serious biography, you need a strong interest in history, politics and psychology, but this knowledge is simply part of your palette, and must be woven into your narrative with skill and subtlety… But, ultimately, the most important thing is your writing, your storytelling ability.

Michael Holroyd views the purpose of biography in this way:

> ‘Biography began as a reinforcement of the existing order. By reexamining the past and pointing it in a new direction, it may now be used to question our understanding of the present, and affect our vision of the future.’

When I made the original decision to write the biography of Dr Janet Irwin, my prime motivation was curiosity. As outlined in the introduction to ‘A Prescription for Action’, I met Dr Janet Irwin when we were both invited to lunch at the home of mutual friends in the early 1980s. My first thought was to wonder what we could possibly have in common. Here was this woman my mother’s age, tall, striking, patrician-looking—a seeming pillar of the establishment. I was told she had been in charge of the University of Queensland Student Health Service from the mid-1970s and I tried to remember if I had ever consulted her as a student.
there. I felt rather in awe of her. I wasn’t sure how she would respond to my rather left-wing and forthright views on life. But by the time the luncheon ended, I no longer felt intimidated—I had been made to feel a kindred spirit. One of Janet’s most endearing qualities was her capacity for friendship. She never forgot people to whom she was introduced, and those who had the good fortune to cross her path usually ended up lifelong friends.

In the early 1990s, I worked with Janet on the Social Security Appeals Tribunal. I clearly remember her arriving for a hearing one morning, furious about press reports that someone with a terminal illness had been charged with possession of marijuana. Drug-taking was a health issue, not a legal one, as far as she was concerned. And in this case, it was being used for pain relief. She went on, ‘As far as I’m concerned, all age pensioners should be able to grow marijuana for their own use.’ She went further. ‘In fact, they ought to be able to grow more marijuana than they need and sell it to the government to supplement their pension.’ And further. ‘The government could then take control of the drug trade and that would get rid of the criminal underworld.’ Her comments were so unexpected, particularly from someone of her age, that I was, for once, speechless.

I was then working full-time as a legal academic, but I had always wanted to be a writer. A new century was a good time for change. In fact, I was rather impulsively about to relinquish my tenured position for part-time work to afford me time to write. Initially, this was a rather hazy enterprise. If indeed I did have ‘a book inside me’ like so many people claim, it had yet to manifest its form and content. One night, however, I found myself rather pertinently ringing Janet to ask if I could write her biography. I had never written a biography before. I had never had any thought of writing a biography. But I had decided that I wanted to write Janet’s story. Or perhaps more importantly, I wanted to know Janet’s story.

It was unusual for my own generation of women to go to university and proceed into a profession, let alone women of Janet’s age. Continuing into her eighties, she was to play an active and public role in the community, agitating for social justice and, particularly, for women’s rights. I wanted to know what had led Janet to be this fearless advocate, this dauntless networker, this woman passionately involved in the issues of her time, unlike most women of her
generation who had been confined, or had confined themselves, to the domestic sphere. It was curiosity which drove my impulse to write about Janet. I wanted to know about her upbringing and other influences on her development. Ironically, I was to find that one of Janet’s driving interests in her professional work was psychosocial development.

When I discovered that Janet had grown up and, indeed, spent the first fifty years of her life in New Zealand. I wondered whether ‘place’ had been a significant factor in making Janet the exceptional person that she was. I knew virtually nothing about New Zealand, and relished the opportunity to remedy that situation. (That turned out to be fortuitous, in that one of my sons was later to marry a delightful young woman from Christchurch, by which stage I had acquired some basic information and did not disgrace myself by my ignorance.) Indeed, as I detail in the next chapter, the more worlds writing this biography potentially opened up for me, the more it appealed.

Of particular significance for me as a motivating factor, and no doubt underpinning my curiosity about Janet, was that she was a feminist and so was I. I set about exploring the history of feminist biography. Many feminists have argued that history as it is written is literally *his story* and that women have been left out. Alison Booth, however, examined biographies written between 1830 and 1940 and found that biographies of women were not as thin on the ground, historically, as might be thought. Her bibliography includes more than 900 volumes. While some women who were commemorated in these volumes displayed a healthy agency of their own, or were noted for their learning, the majority, however, were championed for their beauty, for being good wives and mothers, or for their ‘virtue’.

The late twentieth century saw feminists seeking to redress this situation by identifying and acknowledging the contribution of women to society at large. Carol Sanger identifies a five-phase evolution of writing about women’s achievements: 1) the recognition that what appears a ‘womanless’ phase has ignored the contributions of the rare women who did engage with society at large; 2) a search to find or resurrect pioneer women; 3) a recognition of the problematic nature of women’s position in straddling the public/private divide;
4) a celebration of women; and 5) a rewriting of history to properly acknowledge women's achievements.

I had only a limited idea of the extent of Janet's achievements before I started researching her life. Once I became aware of just how much she had accomplished, especially for the benefit of women, I wanted her life and her work to be acknowledged and honoured. Jacquelyn Hall says that: Feminist biographers are often engaged in acts of rescue, trying to restore to their rightful place foremothers who have been ignored, misunderstood or forgotten.

Initially, feminist scholarship focused on significant figures in the women's movement but in recent years attention has been paid to those women who, while active in feminist movements, philanthropy or imperial ventures, never attained the status of national leadership. Their lives are now seen as important not only in themselves but also because of the insights they offer into how important these various causes and issues were to the many women to whose lives they gave shape and meaning.

Not only did I want Janet's life story to be written, published, and read, I wanted it to inspire its readers to action. Janet was a mentor to many people, especially women, in her lifetime. This would merely be a continuation of that practice. Booth writes of the self-help power of female biographies which, she argues, is generated by the friction among the three parties to the narrative exchange, who readily change places. A reader of a successful woman's life identifies with her, emulates her; she may possibly become, in turn, an eminent woman, perhaps a writer of tributes to famous women; and eventually find her own story circulating in the lists of recognition, part of a cohort that reforms the character of a nation.

It is rather depressing to consider that women are still being called upon to take responsibility for the moral state of the nation, but hopefully there is some truth in Booth's claim about the potential power of biography.

Amia Lieblach views the writing of biography as a relational project. She questions the traditional (masculinist) viewpoint on biography which values neutrality in the attitude of the writer to the subject. Lieblach suggests that ‘the biographer cannot avoid being there with her feelings, hopes and satisfactions, and her own echoes of the tales of the protagonist's life.’ Sara Alpern claims that
For most of us, because we were women writing about women, our heightened consciousness of the role of gender meant an especially close relationship with our subjects...To recognize the subjectivity of biography means that biographers can reveal their attachments and detachments even while maintaining a critical, scholarly distance.  lxxi

I never entertained the idea that as a biographer, I was merely one of science’s disinterested observers, nor did I attempt to adopt a ‘neutral’ position to my subject, whatever that might involve, or however possible or impossible that may be.

I was interested in how feminist biographers viewed their motivation as affecting the way they interpreted and constructed lives. Carolyn Heilbrun, I found, viewed her own work as impressionistic and experiential, and argued that the principles of feminist biography could be deduced only by looking at the actual practice of biographers.  lxxii In reference to structure, Elisabeth Perry says of her subject. ‘Because she engaged in so many different kinds of activities...I had to blend a thematic and chronological approach.’ lxxii This was the case with my subject as well, and I was to adopt the same approach.

Paula Backscheider argues that there are four basic questions which biographers need to address: the voice of the biographer; the nature of the relationship between the biographer and subject; the ways in which evidence is understood and dealt with; and how the personality of the subject is understood, represented and used to give the life its shape. The question of voice involves the further question of the extent, if any, to which the biographer should appear in the book. She claims that the issue of gender is relevant here and that women biographers are likely to provide more personal detail about themselves.  lxxiv This was an issue that I grappled with, as I describe in Chapter 6.

Janet’s story is not just the story of what one woman achieved, but how she went about it. And Janet’s achievements usually involved her convincing others of the worth of her cause, and inspiring them to join forces with her. Her biography includes the voices of the many people who joined forces with her speaking of the positive effects that this coming together had on their own lives, even when they were not successful.
When I suggested to Janet that I give her intended biography the sub-title of A Woman’s Woman, she was not comfortable. Most of her mentors had been men, she pointed out. She felt that it was only fair that the men who had assisted her in her life’s work be acknowledged. She did not want to be seen as someone who had lived in a world only of women. I accepted that, and I made sure, when I was writing the biography, that I acknowledged the men who were a part of her life.

Hagiography deserves its poor reputation, but I would argue that there are people in our society who are admirable in their behaviour, and that it behoves us well to recognize them as role models, even if it is only at the individual level. On the other hand, I didn’t want to write a ‘worthy tome’ that people would feel that they should read, and for that reason alone, choose not to read it. I wanted to write a book which was lively and engaging and would make friends with its readers in the same way in which Janet had done in person.

Janet impressed me as a person who had led a life worth living in terms of a passionate involvement with the issues of the time, activism on human rights issues, a wide circle of friends and a love of books, art, and food. I now believe that a further motivation for writing this biography was the hope of better understanding how to make my own life as productive. Sara Alpern talks of being drawn to her subject ‘as a prospective role model. I wanted answers to all the questions I faced as a woman, historian and mother’. Joyce Antler reveals that ‘Perhaps I learned as much about myself during the process of doing her biography as I did about [her subject], since every aspect of her story ... had resonance in my own.’ I found this to be true in my own case and I explore the issue further in the next chapter.

Belle Gale Chevigny explores the motivation of feminists writing about women from an earlier period who attempted to act out their lives unconstrained by gender. She suggests that they ‘will symbolically reflect their internalized relations with their mothers and in some measure re-create them’. Whilst I have difficulty with such psychoanalytic claims, and especially any suggestion of universality, I now see that my relationship with my own mother was relevant to my choice of biographical subject. Further, I can certainly relate to Chevigny’s comment that ‘I see that my evolving engagement with [her
subject] Fuller... can be interpreted as a series of deepening endeavours to seek out and understand the sources of my position in the world, my current sense of myself'.\textsuperscript{lxxvii} But it is the following comment to which I can most closely relate: 'My efforts to understand her were rooted not only in my desire for vicarious self-knowledge, but also in a desire to know a precursor in ways I could not know my own mother'.\textsuperscript{lxxix}

I knew my mother's life had not been a happy one but I never acquired any real sense of her as a person. I wanted to know whether the difference between my mother and my subject could be found in their respective family backgrounds. Biographer Alice Wexler says of her attraction to her subject, 'Most of all was her contrast with my mother...I am certain I was seeking an alternative mother.'\textsuperscript{lxxx} Ironically, I was to discover that one of the great sadnesses of Janet's life was that she had not known and understood her own mother better. It was one of the many unexpected aspects of our lives which dovetailed.

In the next chapter, I discuss how these motivations played out in relation to the process of researching and writing Janet's biography.
Chapter 6.
The process of researching and writing the biography as a doctoral project, and the significance of motivation to it.

My interviews with my subject, our joint trip to New Zealand, and problems with both; how my motivation to know about Janet Irwin’s upbringing expanded to include an understanding of place; how I became fascinated by the possibilities of biography; how I explored the idea of combining the biography with a memoir; how I lost motivation; how my motivation was resuscitated by finding out the full extent of Janet’s achievements and wanting to know how and why she had been so successful.

In 2003, when Janet agreed to my writing her biography, I decided, given that I had never written a biography before, that it would be helpful to do so as a creative writing student. I had already commenced a postgraduate qualification in creative writing at Queensland University of Technology, pursuant to which I had been introduced to the academic field of creative non-fiction, and I now enrolled in a Masters Degree in Research (Creative Writing).

I obtained Ethical Clearance for the biography and set about interviewing Janet about her life. I took along a tape recorder to her home in Brisbane. I had thought about whether I should prepare a set of questions in advance, but decided that I had insufficient knowledge of her life to do so, and that, in any event, this might make the interviews too stilted. So, I decided to just go with the flow of information that she gave me, and remedy any deficiencies caused by this approach at a later time. We would start with her childhood in the first interview and gradually progress from there in later interviews.

I soon found with this approach that Janet had a tendency to jump from one topic to another. To compound the situation, so did I. The interviews never progressed in a linear fashion. They were much more like discussions, than a question and answer format. I was, however, reluctant to make the process more formal, as we were both enjoying it, and the conversation was certainly flowing.
Sometimes, she would speak a bit too softly for the tape recorder, but I did not like to interrupt her train of thought too often to address this.

By this stage, Janet was eighty years of age, and her memory was not as robust as it had been. Because so much of the information which she was sharing with me was novel and fascinating, I did not concern myself with any omissions. When she raised her limited recall of some events, I told her not to worry, that I could do my own research. When, many interviews later, Janet said that she felt she had told me everything, I had no reason to doubt this. In any event, I would have transcripts made of the interviews, and we could address any problem then.

I have talked about being motivated by the desire to understand what led Janet to be the women she was. This would involve looking at her psychosocial development. I was clearly going to have to do some reading of psychological texts. Given Janet’s own involvement with this area, she could be my guide. I could explore the texts which had most influenced her, as well as keeping an eye out for any current significant texts on the subject. I would also explore the field of psychobiography.

Given that her motto was ‘If you haven’t been driven by the passion and action of the times, you haven’t lived’, it was clearly also going to involve looking at how the world around her impacted on Janet, as well as how she impacted on that world. And her world was very different from mine. She had grown up in New Zealand in a non-religious family after the First World War and ended up a doctor. I had grown up in Australia in a religious family after the Second World War, and ended up a lawyer. Yet our views of the world were similar.

I have always been curious about the world. Writing Janet’s biography would give me the opportunity to learn more about New Zealand. It would also give me a sense of what it was like to grow up in a non-religious household. At a different point in time. Of how different or similar the worlds of medicine and law were. And to explore how we ended up with similar views on the world. This was all very appealing to me. The project had such vast scope. I ignored the question of whether this might cause problems. I was excited by the challenge.

I knew that the next step was for me to go to New Zealand with Janet, in order to visit the places which had been significant in her life and meet members
of her family and friends. That would involve driving from Auckland up to the north of the North Island to the region formerly known as Hokianga, across to the Bay of Islands, back to Auckland, down to Paraparaumu, north of Wellington, to Wellington, and then flying to Nelson in the north of the south island, from where Janet’s son, Bill, drove us down to Dunedin and back up through Christchurch. That trip took place in early 2004. I kept a handwritten diary for the first week:

Friday night 2 April.

Take taxi to St Helier’s [Auckland] where Maria Collins lives. Maria is the widow of the pilot of the Erebus disaster. I sleep in the general area under house with a sign above the bed ‘Like a photo, character develops in the dark’.

We make contact with Janet’s friend, Jenny Buxton, daughter of Sir Douglas Robb, and her husband, John. Their apartment has lots of lovely artwork, including a bust of Jenny as a child which Janet tells her she took her to sit for. Jenny mentions that the writer Marina Warner is giving the Douglas Robb lectures at the University of Auckland that year. Janet says that Marina once addressed the Balint group. Jenny suggests that the biography of her father does not capture the man at all – he was quite different from the austere man presented. He liked the trappings of office but he also poked fun at authority. There is talk of the men’s relationships, particularly Janet’s father, Jenny’s father and Rex Fairbairn, the writer.

We leave Jenny and head to Daphne Cavanagh nearby. Daphne is 84 and talks of carefree childhood days at Pakanae. She was forced to leave school at 15 to go find work in Auckland but she and Janet have kept in touch. We then head back to Maria’s for dinner with her daughters, Pip and Didi. It was Jim, her husband who was originally friendly with Janet having lived next door to her (where?) and Maria has ‘inherited the friendship’.

Next morning we head for North Shore to the apartment of Janice Fairbairn, daughter of the writer, Rex. Her sister, Di, pops in to say hello to Janet. We head off to see Christine Cole Catley, the publisher. Everyone is distressed that Michael King, the NZ writer, has died. He was driving in his car with his wife when he drove into a tree and both were incinerated. NZ is in mourning—it is reassuring to know that writers can be people of great public importance. Christine loved Michael like her own son. On finding out that I am writing Janet’s biography, she suggests that I send her a couple of chapters and a synopsis—she has connections with Harper Collins. She also offers any help she can give. She is 81 like Janet and still working. There is a discussion about the onerous task of executorship. Janet Frame died recently leaving Michael King and a difficult relative as executors. Janice is executor of someone’s estate who appointed her without her consent. She is not paid for the work she carries out. We discuss the problem of women’s unpaid work.

We then pick up Pringle Hutchison who is 89 and who is to accompany us to her sister’s place in Omapere up north. Pringle manages to lose her No Flies on Me hat before she gets in the car. She turns out to be as sharp as a tack, telling many a tale of wickedness on the way up. Shiela, her sister, has organised dinner at the Opononi pub for us and some friends of Janet’s, 13 in all. The pub has a wonderful view out to sea including to Pakanae where Janet’s family had a beach house.
Present are Lomond Leaf who was a friend of Jock's and used to stay at Rawene with the Smiths before Jock died and he was sent away to native school. Janet's mother later said to her friend Morag, recently widowed, 'Keep talking about him or you'll lose him'. In 1995, Lomond located Jock's burial place and organised a proper burial site for him. Also there are Heather Ayrton whom we are to spend the day with tomorrow. She is the Coroner and was taking phone calls about a young epileptic boy who had just died in a car crash. I sat at a table with Pringle and Trisha, a former nurse from the Rawene Hospital and her husband, Tam, who went to high school in Whangerei at the same time as Janet. They have a farm overlooking the water. Tam rolled 104 bales of hay that day notwithstanding his previous heart attack. Also there was Gwen Cox whose father, Ray Cox, was Chair of the Hospital Board, and her husband Carl Freese whose father ran a trucking business; Lindsay who had been a nurse; and Ian Voycich (?) who went to primary school with Janet. Pringle told a story about V's daughter wanting to change her name. Her father said: you will when you marry. She married a Wigglesworth! I went straight to bed when we came home. Janet and the others stayed up. I said 'I can't keep up with you old things'.

This morning we drove through Scotland-like country to Rawene, stopping at the cemetery where we saw Jock's new gravestone and then to the hospital where the new Superintendent, John Wigglesworth, showed us through the new wing, the birthing room where Janet gave birth to her children and the photos of the special ceremony honouring Janet's father last year. (There is another one to be held this year by the Medical Society.) The hospital has magnificent views from every point.

We then drove into Rawene proper with toi toi (pampas grass) beside the road in shades of wheat, gold, white, cream and musk. We had lunch at the Boathouse which had an exhibition by the woodworker, Alan Gale. Janet has a couple of his wood sculptures at home. There is no bank in town anymore so I had to go to the Council chambers to get some money. We then booked into the Masonic Hotel across the road—the only people in the hotel. Barry Andrewes, the publican, came and chatted to Janet about old days by the fireplace and under a photo of timber being felled.

Next day we head to Doubtless Bay on the Bay of Islands to see Lindo & Letitia Ferguson. Janet went to medical school with Lindo. They have restored a whaler's cottage and established a museum and have expansive gardens including a 700 year old Pohutukawa tree. Unfortunately, I ran out of film. We had afternoon tea with a film crew from the BBC there making an animal film based on the stories of a local writer. We then returned to Heather Ayrton's place back on the west coast at Kaikohe for dinner with a couple of her friends.

We headed off south the next morning. We drove through KawaKawa where there is a Hundertwasser toilet and on through Auckland to Cambridge where we stayed overnight at a lovely old Victorian place called Souter House with its own restaurant. In the morning we headed off to Lake Taupo and on to Waikenae to the home of Jenny and Michael Bryce. We had dinner with Jan McIntosh at their house. Jan is very frail, but like Pringle, quite wicked. She was friendly with Janet and Peter when they lived in Raumati. We headed off in the morning to find where Janet, Peter and the kids lived but couldn't find it. Janet didn't know the address—said she'd never written a letter to send there. Janet's parents had moved to Waikenae to be close to them and we also tried unsuccessfully to find their home. Both died there, the father first. Janet said that when her mother died she felt absolutely bereft as her husband had meantime left with another woman.

We dropped the hire car in Hutt Rd, Wellington and writer Fiona Kidman and her husband, Ian, picked us up. We had an interesting lunch of cheese and
beer soup at their place with its magnificent views of Wellington and its cable-car before going in to Te Papa. We saw an art exhibition which was unimpressive, and then started on the Maori exhibition. The place was filled with families. We went on some of the writers’ walk and saw a couple of monuments including that of James K Baxter (The Maori Jesus) underwater. We went back to Fiona’s where she gave me a copy of her latest collection of short stories before driving us to the airport to fly Air NZ on a small plane to Nelson. Janet’s grandson, Roger, his partner Margaret and their friend Tam (?) were at the airport to greet us.

We had dinner for Bill’s 58th birthday prepared by his wife, Cornish – a lovely Bouillabaisse. Also present were Ross and Helen Wilson from Wellington, she involved in public health, he a lawyer involved with the trade unions, and Bill and Cornish’s daughter Ella and her boyfriend Elinas from Lithuania. On Saturday we went to the markets and on to the Wearable Art Museum. On Sunday, we were picked up by Jane Evans the artist and taken to her lovely home for morning tea. In the afternoon we went to see Graham Kemble Welch and his wife Ann and their daughter Rona and son-in-law, Neville. Graham is the author of the biography of Janet’s father and was delighted when I told him how much I enjoyed it. Then, at night, we watched ‘What the Doctor Ordered’ about the Rawene Health Service. The previous night we had watched a video called ‘Backblocks Hospital’.

By the second week, diary entries had trickled out. I was overwhelmed by the number of people we were meeting and places we were visiting. I also found my role as biographer problematic. Janet had not seen many of these people in person for some time and they had some catching up to do as friends. I felt that my role should take second place to Janet’s relationship with these people, and was not comfortable asking too many questions.

Another issue that concerned me was that my friendship with Janet was as important to me as my work as a writer and I was concerned that this might potentially compromise the writing of the biography. As it transpired, however, there were no significant challenges from her, nor indeed from any source, impacting on the ethics or integrity of the biography. (Janet will no longer be able to comment on the final form of the biography, but she told me, before she died, that she trusted my decision-making in that regard.)

I went back to New Zealand the following year (2005) to conduct more research. I started in Christchurch where Janet had worked at the University of Canterbury in Student Health Services on her return from Scotland in 1967. I interviewed Pippa and Lanktree Davies, and Jocelyn Hay about their relationship with Janet and particularly about their time together in the Balint group. Then I
spent a number of days at the University. On the first day there, I wrote in my diary that:

Yesterday was very productive from the biography aspect. I visited the Health Services at Canterbury University; I bought a book on the history of the University and spoke on the phone to one of its authors, Eric Beardsley, and he was very helpful; I met with the archivist at Macmillan Brown Library, Jeff Palmer, who lent me his copy of a book on the New Zealand Student Associations, and advised me that the University Chronicle which details daily life and issues is in bound copies. He is going to check on an index. He is also going to check the whereabouts of the newspaper clipping files. There are also five and a half shelves of student union materials, unsorted, which might be of use.

After I had finished carrying out research at Canterbury University, I travelled down to Dunedin and visited Jocelyn Harris to obtain more detailed information on the time Janet spent living with them when she started her medical degree. I also met up with Dorothy Page, an historian who was writing the history of the Otago Medical School, and who was very helpful. She was able to inform me how to locate archival resources, and about primary sources such as a student magazine called *The Medical Digest*, the *Cuttings Book* of relevant information from the press, *The History of Otago Medical School under three Deans* by Charles Hercus and Gordon Bell, and the general student magazine called *The Critic*. Page was very knowledgeable about issues relating to women. She had written an article about early women graduates which she later sent to me. She said her research revealed that the Medical School in Janet’s time was a very ‘macho’ place and, in the *Staff Journal*, there are lots of ribald asides. I was later to find Dorothy’s completed history of the Medical School invaluable in writing about Janet’s time as a medical student.

I was starting to worry that the scope of the project I was undertaking was a much larger one than I had anticipated. And, in the meantime, I had been approached by the Supreme Court Library to write some profiles of significant women in the law in Queensland for a forthcoming book. In early 2005, I decided to change my Masters project from the biography of Janet to seven profiles of women lawyers which were subsequently published in *A woman’s place: 100 years of Queensland women lawyers*. It was my intention to return to Janet’s biography when this project was completed, and possibly undertake it
as a PhD. In the meantime I would gain some experience of life writing, even if in the more limited form of profiles. The significance of this change of focus was that outstanding matters relating to the interviews did not get pursued until much later. Some of the transcripts of the interviews were of poor quality but I would remedy that, I thought, once the Masters degree was completed.

In late 2005, there was an extraordinary and serendipitous meeting with fellow Australasian Association of Writing Programs member Janine McVeagh who lives in Rawene where Janet was born. Janine is also a biographer, and was to be very helpful to me when I returned to writing about Janet’s life. I wrote about that meeting in a published article which is attached as Appendix A.

After completing the Masters degree, I enrolled as a PhD student at Central Queensland University in September 2007 (where my original Masters supervisor, Professor Donna Lee Brien, was now working). The same year, Janet’s health and her memory deteriorated considerably and she returned to New Zealand to live with her son and his wife. When I told Janet about Janine, she was delighted and when she moved back to New Zealand, she arranged for her son, Bill, to take her up to Rawene to meet her.

In 2008, I returned to New Zealand to visit Janet and do further research. I had been told by her family that Janet’s memory of her later life was now limited, so I decided to start by going over some of the interviews about her early life. I assumed that she would still remember those days, as people often do, even when their memory of recent times is lacking. I thought it would reassure her to recall her early life. In fact, it did the opposite. It made her aware that she had no memory of her early life either, which was very distressing for both of us. ‘It’s too late, Susan’, she said. The implications of this will be pursued further later in this chapter.

After my distressing meeting with Janet in Nelson in 2008, I travelled up to Rawene to do some more research.

Tuesday 4 March 2008

I am staying with Janine McVeagh and her partner Mike Albrecht in the house Mike has built down the harbour end of De Thierry St. in Rawene. This afternoon, after finally figuring out how to access the internet on my new Apple laptop, I walk to the top of the street which is a very steep climb. At the pinnacle is the Rawene Hospital. In front of the hospital is a monument to Dr GM Smith
and to his wife. I read the memorials to GM and Lucy at the front of the hospital once again and then cross the road to the cemetery where I find the now-marked grave for Jock. I return home soaked from the rain which has made a sudden appearance and ask Janine to remind me about Lomond Leaf who helped Janet find the spot where Jock was buried and erect a proper memorial...

Janine is a warm, intelligent woman with an interest in many things: writing, the local community, sustainability, permaculture, Maori culture and history. And she puts her commitment to these issues into action. She teaches creative writing online to Polytech students who live in regional areas and is a diligent support to them. She and Mike have a garden which reflects their beliefs. Her daughter, Jessie, is here when I arrive. She is committed to making the world a better place and has just returned from working in Guatemala.

Wednesday 5 March 2008

I drive into Whangerei with Janine to the Northland Room in their Public Library to do some research, and find some materials worth copying. I am looking for anecdotal material, material which gives a sense of the time and place as much as factual material...While I am researching, a notice comes over the loudspeaker that there is a one-legged Kiwi called Sparky who has been saved by rangers in the old library. I go over to see him.

Tonight a friend of Janine and Mike, Judy, who Janine says was responsible for saving the free hospital, comes over. Judy did the number-crunching which showed that it would be cheaper to leave the service as it is. She is from NY originally and has a PhD in Theology/Linguistics. She can speak Aramaic and has written a novel based on Old Testament characters which Janine is supervising. She was warm and friendly.

Thursday 6 March 2008

I drive Janine and Mike's car down to the Rawene Public Library which is only open on Thursday and Saturday mornings. The archives have been forwarded on to the Historical Society in Opononi but I find some books and other materials which are useful and convince the librarian to let me borrow those which are not reference. I take a couple which are reference across the road to the Council to photocopy certain parts.

Friday 7 March 2008

I get up early to drive with Mike into the Historical Society rooms in Opononi. We have contacted Alexa the archivist and she has come in even earlier to hunt out materials for me. More reading and photocopying. I then wait for Mike to finish bottling home brew with a sculptor mate, Rob Anderson, while reading a history of Rawene. I read essays by Rosie Scott and a short story by Fiona Kidman.

Saturday 8 March 2008

Mike drives Janine to the airport for conferences in Auckland and Wellington. Then we drive to Opononi to catch a boat for a Harbour Cruise...it is a magnificent sunny day. First of all we get off and walk on the sand dunes near the entrance to the harbour. Then we cruise past Pakanae and the Kupe Pa where Janet spent her holidays. The commentary is by a Maori guy called Zac and his sidekick, Gerry. They are interesting and very funny. There are stories of Maori and Pakeha history of the area. We stop again at the Wesley mission and then have lunch at a café on the water in Kohukohu where the boat pulls up on the deck of the café.
Sunday 9 March 2008

We drive to the south head of the harbour opening and walk out to the head. We then drive to Waimamaku where we have lunch at Morrell’s Café and then drive up into the forest to Louis’s place. Turns out he grew up in Inala in Brisbane and came here in the 1970s. We then take the back dirt road to Pakanae and see a perfectly triangular mountain on the way there.

I take photos of the sunset from the deck while Mick picks up Janine from the Kerikeri airport. I have also been reading about Gretchen Albrecht, Mike’s sister, who is a foremost contemporary artist in NZ. I am now going to read more Fiona Kidman short stories.

Monday 10 March 2008

I spend the morning reading the materials I have acquired so that I know what I still need to know. I sort through materials as well. After lunch, Mike drives me into Clendon House, an historic place where the curator, Lindsay, is a writer too. I buy a collection of his short stories. Later on, we drive up to Lindsay’s property where he and his new wife, Anya, an attractive young woman from Eastern Europe have built a whare overlooking the harbour. Lindsay spent 15 years as a ranger in Queensland. We drink wine and beer as the sun sets. Lindsay and Arna run their cattle on a section of Janine and Mike’s property. I learn what a nikau tree is. I read some of Lindsay’s stories.

Tuesday 11 March 2008

Janine gets a phone call to say that the husband of one of her fellow staff members at the Polytech has died in the night. The tungi will begin in the Marae this morning and go for 3 days. Janine and her fellow staff members will go this morning to pay their respects. There will be an open coffin. I do some research from home. I read the books from the Rawene library and enter them in Endnote. I write 700 odd words, at first in this pompous voice like the materials I have been reading and then when I become aware of this, in my own. Mike cooks a great ratatouille for dinner. We eat figs and feijoas from the garden for dessert.

Wednesday 12 March 2008

I drive with Janine to Moerewa where there is high unemployment as the result of the closing down of the freezing works. I meet other members of the Trust Board who, with Janine, are trying to address this issue in practical ways like keeping services from moving to other areas like Kerikeri (predominantly well-off whites) and organising a ‘poets on the train’ event, and a woman from Mexico is going to show her documentaries about the indigenous peoples there. Rawene itself has a Readers Festival and a Film Festival, a Country Music and a Blues Festival. I overhear that there will be a band playing in the hall on Saturday night. Even though the population is declining and services are disappearing, the place is still hopping. There is tremendous sense of community spirit. I went for a walk to try to find the marae but was unsuccessful. We then drove to Kerikeri where we had lunch at the German bakehouse, and then back to Kaikohe where they have an ATM (in fact, 3...gluttons) and I could finally get some money out. I am reading a collection of Fiona Kidman stories which I think are fantastic.

Thursday 13 March 2008

Final day in Rawene. I drove into town to return the library books. I went into Outpost and purchased 4 more books: 2 poetry collections by Glen Colquhoun, a doctor from the area who is also a poet whom Janet corresponded
with; one by Hone Tuwhare who has just died and other book with an introduction by Glen Colquhoun. I have arranged to meet with Joan Leaf en route to Auckland tomorrow, and the Auckland University Library has 29 letters of Janet to Douglas Robb which they will have for me tomorrow afternoon. Another former Australian called Suzy is here for dinner so I’d better finish.

Friday 14 March 2008

Took a photo of Jock’s grave before we left. Called in to Joan Leaf’s place on the way. She told me that Lomond had only lived with the Smiths for a year before Jock died; that Harding and GM were friends; that Jock, Janet and Lomond had a private tutor and that even when the gravesite where Jock was buried was unmarked, Lomond always knew where it was. Most importantly of all she told me that Lomond changed his name to Jock after Jock died and that was what he was called by everyone.

We then drove on to the University of Auckland Library where I examined the letters written by Janet to Douglas Robb. I also found a letter from GM’s brother, Bryce, to GM which he must have passed on to Robb. The Library are organising to put the correspondence on a disk and post it to me.

As can be seen from the above diary entries, meeting up with Janine had been an enormous benefit to me. I would not have known where to start without the assistance she and Mike afforded me. Staying with them, I was also getting a real sense of the place where Janet had grown up and its people, and was able to access a variety of archives and other sources.

As well as visiting New Zealand, I was to read literature on the social, political and cultural events informing Janet’s life in New Zealand. I read books about the history of New Zealand. The Hokianga area where Janet grew up has probably the largest Maori population in New Zealand. I read about the history of the area and of Maori-Pakeha relations. Given that Janet’s father, Dr Smith, set up an innovative health service there which continues to be recognized internationally, I read the books which he had written on medicine and on philosophy and the biographies that had been written about him. Because Janet went on to follow in his footsteps, I read about the history of medicine and of nursing, both internationally and in New Zealand. Given that Janet had as mentors significant figures in the arts and in government in New Zealand, I read biographies of these people. Because her mother was widely read, friendly with writers in New Zealand and overseas, and encouraged her daughter to read widely, I familiarized myself with the works to which she was particularly attached. I read histories of the school Janet attended and of the University of Otago Medical School where she was a student and of the University of
Canterbury where she worked. I pursued the family trees of both sides of her family in Scotland. I read up on the history of psychological medicine and its practitioners which was to influence Janet so greatly, particularly when she undertook postgraduate study and practice in Scotland.

My supervisor encouraged me to start writing this exegesis while I was doing my research and writing the early chapters. Like a scene from a Woody Allen movie, writing the very first sentence of my draft exegesis prompted great angst. The sentence read ‘Biography is enjoying unprecedented popularity at the current time’. How many times had I seen an argument of this nature that we were obsessed with the lives of others, that you only had to look at the popularity of reality TV programs. Perhaps it was my inner lawyer who caused me to pause after writing that sentence. Where is the proof, she asked? And went on to cross-examine me about what I knew about the current statistics on book sales; what I knew about the popularity of biographies in the past; was I just talking about Australia, or the US or Britain?; were publishing figures similar in all these countries? I found that I could not bring myself to write a second sentence without verifying the validity of my first sentence. I knew that herein lay madness and at this rate, I would never finish a paragraph let alone a PhD. But I did my research on the issue, engaging my supervisor’s interest and involvement in the process and we produced a scholarly article which established that biography was not as popular at the current time as had been thought and that it had in fact been more popular at other times in history. These findings are attached as Appendix B.

Meanwhile, as outlined in Chapter 1 and explored in Chapter 2, I read a wide range of books and articles on biographical issues including the history of biography, ethics in writing biography, psychobiography, the sociology of biography, feminist biography, writing about living subjects, experimental form in biography, non-human biographies, fictional biographers, literary biography, the role of the biographer in the text, the publishing history of biography, and on biography as research. I also read a wide range of biographies, both traditional and experimental, as detailed in the bibliography.

I became obsessed with biographical form. My supervisor suggested that I start writing the biography in conventional narrative form to start with and I
could play around with this later. So I did this. My reading about psychobiography, and of some psychobiographies, convinced me that I had neither the expertise, nor the inclination, to pursue this course of action. I had, however, started reading some literature on experimental biography. While I was writing Chapter 4 of the biography about the death of Janet’s brother and the refusal of her father to acknowledge it, I felt a real empathy with Janet’s mother (possibly because of the way my mother’s silence on important issues had affected me). I could not resist adding a fictional diary written by her during the time she spent alone in Pakanae. Then, after I spent time with the Maori women in Pakanae, which is described later in this chapter, I included one of their ancestors, Pesa, in the diary. My reading on ethics in biography had lead me to the view that, while it was not ethically appropriate to change historical facts, there was no problem with including imagined material that was consistent with the known facts...so long as the reader was aware that it was imagined. I dealt with this issue by saying in the text: No record remains of the time Lucy spent at Pakanae. But perhaps she kept a diary. I later removed this fictional diary as it was the only part of the biography which was imagined, and seemed incongruous in those circumstances.

Indeed, writing about the dramatic death of Janet's brother and its aftermath of silence had a powerful effect on me. I emailed my long-suffering supervisor to inform her that I was no longer writing a biography and providing details of the play that I intended to write instead, focusing on Jock's death. Act One would involve the death of GM's brother. Lomond Leaf would be a pivotal character. His finding Jock's grave would lead to the denouement where it was revealed that he had assumed Jock's name and already provided a memorial to him. My supervisor kindly suggested that this was a great idea for a future project, but that, given the research I had already done, the limitations of the play format, and my own lack of experience in the genre, I might be wise to stick to the biography.

However, my interest in experimental biography would not subside as my diary entries reveal. Indeed, the very next entry not only takes up the issue again but starts with the idea that I might write a novel, and finishes with the decision
to write a series of essays. I was running the risk of driving myself crazy. And I was now thinking of incorporating my own life into the biography as well.

14 January 2009

I finished reading Marianne Wiggins’ *The Shadow Catcher* on Monday. Janene Carey had recommended it to me after I had talked at the postgrad workshop about writing an experimental biography. In it, Wiggins explores the life of Edward Curtis, the famous American photographer of native Americans. It is in the form of a novel and the relationship between Curtis and his wife, Clara, is imagined. I think it is actually the best part of the book. But the reason Janene recommended it was because Wiggins tells her own family story or part thereof in the book and it happens that the two coincide in unexpected ways. There is no reason, of course, that I cannot write a novel. Maybe that will provide me with the way out of some tricky issues around revealing family stuff in public.

I have a real issue about Helen Garner’s attitude that all is grist for the mill, and the report of her pushing to the front of a gravesite as the coffin is being lowered to take notes, I find totally repugnant, as I do Annie Liebowitz’ photographing Susan Sontag as and after she dies. Now these are extreme cases, I know. Still, most writers, I think, have a more liberal approach to what is morally permissible than I do. And I question why that is so. Is it that I am still holding back regarding family matters the way I have always held back? Am I really afraid of upsetting my family for reasons which are valid or not? I guess that all I can do is write how I feel, and I can later make a decision as to whether it needs modifying and how that is done.

I have decided to write the Janet biography as a series of essays. One of the essays will be about Rawene and meeting Janine McVeagh. I think I will make a start on that now.

15 January 2009

I could also write an essay about trips to NZ. This could start with my trip as a law student in 1966. Perhaps a title could be *Would you mind if I borrowed your life?*

My diary entries for the next five days involve a detailed retelling of my attendance at a Law Students’ Association Conference at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, where, in 1966, as the only female, I am subject to the same sort of harassment I describe in my chapter on Janet’s experiences as a medical student. Then, as I have a meeting with my supervisor the next week, and have told her I want to change to the essay form, I brainstorm the issue in my diary:

The first essay needs to be about meeting Janet, what attracted me to her and the coincidences with Alexander McCall Smith and Janine McVeagh. Then I need to discuss getting to know Janet; issues in writing a biography; getting to know and falling in love with New Zealand, firstly as a student, then on the trip with Janet, and
again on later trips; the importance of books and writing; women’s control over their own bodies; professional women; universities; speaking out; friendship; making sense of it all. I think that what I need to do is make a timeline of Janet’s life and of my own and then sit them side by side.

There is no diary entry recording my meeting with Donna. Given that February is given over to detailed diary entries about my own life, she must not have been able to discourage me from making this a combined biography/autobiography. I include some brief extracts from these entries here where it can be seen that Janet’s story was still foremost in my mind. The complete entries constitute over 30,000 words.

Monday 9 February 2009
Interestingly, Janet and I both worked for our fathers after university and soon after entered into marriages which did not last. I did not enjoy working at Dad’s. My father was convinced that I could do anything, so when I commenced work as an articled clerk in 1968, he gave me all the work that others had dispatched to the too-hard basket. I had no idea how to handle them but he was confident that I would pick it up easily. All I picked up was a high degree of anxiety. What I didn’t realize at the time, nor did anyone else, was that my father was suffering from hypomania. (Perhaps Janet’s father was too?)

Thursday 12 February 2009
My parents had to get married because my mother was pregnant. The overwhelming message I received from my grandparents on both sides of the family was the importance of what the neighbours, or perhaps more particularly the Church, might think of you. The very worst thing you could do would be to bring shame to your family in this regard. In Janet’s family, the shame issue played out in a different way.

Friday 13 February 2009
When I told Dad that I wanted to be a journalist or a social worker when I left school, his response was ‘Social workers just change bedpans. [Clearly he had no idea what social workers did.] Journalism is no job for a woman. What you need to do is law. You’ve got a mind like a man.’ That last comment was meant as a great compliment. If I had had a brother, no doubt he would have been compulsorily requisitioned to work as a lawyer in Dad’s office, and I might well have been left free to change bedpans. Just as Jock would likely have been requisitioned into medical practice by GM.

Saturday 14 February 2009
When Bob and I announced to Mum and Dad that I was pregnant, Dad was the one who responded. He and Mum would not like us to repeat the mistake they had made, ‘would we, Joyce’. We should not feel that we should have to race into marriage just because I was pregnant. Mum nodded. There was no discussion about how Bob or I felt about the pregnancy. Indeed, Bob and I had not discussed how we felt about the pregnancy. Our sole focus on finding out that I was pregnant was with my parents’ reaction. We hadn’t talked about getting married. We hadn’t talked. We had just panicked. Dad took charge of the
situation. He would make enquiries. Bob was politely shown the door. Mum looked at me as if I had betrayed her. She had never approved of my going out with Bob. I could do much better. But her sense of betrayal went much deeper than that. I was revisiting past shame on her when she had committed her life to redeeming it.

In March, the diary entries move on to the issue of pruning biographies to read from the lengthy lists I had made, but soon return to my own life, and the connections with Janet’s life.

2 March 2009

I have just been sorting out the biographies I really want to read as soon as possible. This is a process of narrowing down as I have plenty of biographies which I have yet to read. I want my focus now to be on writing not reading but I have pulled out half a dozen biographies/memoirs I think will be of assistance in my writing: Richard Freadman’s *Shadow of doubt: my father and myself*; Eileen Haley & Lillian Rosser’s *Memories of an Australian girlhood*; Manning Clark’s *The puzzles of childhood*; Brian Matthews’s *Louisa*; and Craig Sherborne’s *Hoi polloi and Muck*. Sherborne I am including because of his NZ background as well. Some time soon, I also need to make a similar decision about narrowing down my reading about New Zealand.

I put Jamaica Kincaid’s *The autobiography of my mother* back on the shelf after reading the first sentence which begins ‘My mother died at the moment I was born.’ My immediate response had been that her experience was not close enough to mine to make the ‘shortlist’. But then, I went back to the shelf and reclaimed it. My mother did not die when I was born, and in fact is alive as I write this. But in another sense, my mother did die. I have always had a sense of being responsible for the death of my mother as a real person. Not only did my birth bring to an end her carefree spirit, it brought her a chronic disease, rheumatoid arthritis, which crippled her beautiful body, and has caused her daily pain and suffering ever since.

3 March 2009

My mother and Janet Irwin were born one year apart yet their worlds could not have been more different. Neither of Janet’s parents were religious and she grew up in a household unconstrained by the preaching and practices of any church. Like my mother though, Janet was to enter into a marriage which did not have her father’s blessing and he refused to attend the ceremony.

I ask myself whether the reason I was intrigued by Janet Irwin was because her life provided an alternative narrative for me to respond to. My mother’s life caused me nothing but anguish. Perhaps I still needed a role model even as my own children were looking to me to provide one for them, maybe particularly, because I needed to be one myself. It wasn’t a rejection of my mother or a failure to appreciate her mothering skills. Maybe it was about being able to look for guidance without feeling guilt. Whatever it was, it was occurring at an unconscious level.
I am half way through reading the book Janet wrote with Susanna de Vries and Susan Stratigos Wilson on *Parenting girls*. This was not written when her own girls, Jane and Sally, were teenagers but in 1999, when she knew they had survived the transition from children to adults. No doubt, the authors were still bearing the metaphorical wounds and bruises that come with parenting, but they are balanced by the wisdom of hindsight. I cringe when I think of my own parenting veering between being too restrictive and being neglectful. I had not grown up myself when I gave birth to my first child. Recently there was much publicity given to a thirteen year old boy who had fathered a child. When asked how he was going to cope financially, he asked ‘What does financially mean?’ Whilst this is an extreme case, there are many of us who might have known what financially meant but were no better equipped by that knowledge to parent.

I am sure that Mum was relieved that I was writing about someone she did not know. However she would, no doubt, be aware of Janet’s views on abortion as Janet would write letters to the editor of *The Courier Mail* on the issue. And those views would be abhorrent to my mother.

My mother was not aware that I had undergone an abortion. That would not have in any way changed her view, based as it was on the thinking of the Catholic Church.

The physical loss of my subject

Sally rang from Nelson in New Zealand on Saturday to say that Janet had died. I feel a bit numb about Janet’s death. In a way, Janet died progressively as her memory failed her. She could no longer rely on retaining information so that one of her great pleasures in life, reading, was now denied her. It was as if each sentence was self-contained and vanished with the full-stop. Janet had always been a great letter-writer, and her friends still wrote to her, but once she had finished reading their letters, Janet would forget that they had existed. It was the same with phone calls. Once her phone conversation was over, Janet would not be able to recall it. As a result, she would be puzzled as to why her family and friends did not phone.

I felt sad that I had not been able to talk to her before she died about her dying in a truly honest way. I was also sad that, when I was interviewing her, I felt constrained in talking to her about issues like sex and intimate relationships. She probably would have been more comfortable than me in discussing these matters. May her death provide the impetus I need to complete writing her story...and mine.

I did not meet Janet until she had retired from full-time employment and was what our society would term elderly. But I never thought of her in that way. She was working part-time in various capacities, and actively campaigning on many issues as well as going to films, theatre, art exhibitions and book launches. She would regularly invite guests for a meal at her place, a serious discussion of social issues, and a serious laugh. Even at her eightieth birthday party, there was no sense that any of this would change. Notwithstanding that both of her parents
had died in their mid-seventies, Janet seemed to be destined to live to a literally ripe old age. So, when Janet started to experience falls caused by minor strokes, and her memory started to leach, it caught her family and friends by surprise.

Ironically, while death is a commonplace in our global society, the fact that ageing leads to dying is still largely a taboo topic. Diana Athill’s memoir, *Somewhere towards the end*, written at the age of eighty-nine, was prompted by the fact that, while we are living longer, little is being recorded of our later years. She continues to gain considerable pleasure from life and reflects on why this is so and what specifically brings her joy. Athill was employed as an editor till the age of seventy-five. This is work she clearly loved, both because of her passion for books and for the contact with writers. When it ceased, she started reviewing books and then writing her own. Active in mind and body and optimistic in spirit, she still indulged in other passions such as gardening and drawing. She did not develop a real awareness of her own ageing until she was over seventy. And it took the purchase of a young tree plant and the ageing of her dog to bring about a realization of her mortality. But that realization did not change her mindset. Athill views those who treat the prospect of death with fear and despair, or with defiance, as foolish. It is not that she lives in a state of denial. She is frank and specific about the downside of ageing. She also concedes that external circumstances such as lack of money, ill health, an abusive or neglectful childhood, or ‘a mind never sharpened by an interesting education or absorbing work’, make life a lot more difficult, and that some might find what she has to say meaningless or even offensive. Nor does she underplay genetic inheritance. She is grateful for what she sees as inbuilt resilience. Most of the women on both sides of her family have lived into their nineties in full possession of their faculties. They have managed without live-in carers and not had to enter into nursing homes. And this is what I had anticipated would be the case with Janet.

There was a family funeral for Janet in New Zealand, and, as I have described in the biography, there was a celebration of her life and planting of a tree in her honour at the University of Queensland. With the assistance of her daughter, Sally, I wrote an obituary for the *Courier Mail*. This process involved distilling the New Zealand research which I had carried out, seeking out the most
significant aspects of Janet’s life in Australia, and acquiring a bird’s eye view of her life as a whole:

Obituary
Dr Janet Irwin MB.Ch.B, AM
1923 - 2009

Well known Brisbane feminist and pioneering activist for women's health and social justice, Dr Janet Irwin has died in New Zealand. Had she lived a day longer, she would have been delighted to witness the first woman elected as Premier of an Australian state, and women constituting the majority of Labor MPs elected in Queensland. No doubt she would have started lobbying again for the establishment of a 'Women's Place, Women's Space' multi-purpose centre for, and honoring, women.

Dr Irwin grew up in the small town of Rawene in the Hokianga region of the North Island, New Zealand, where her father, Dr George McCall Smith, established a free and co-operative health service to a poor, widely dispersed, and multi-cultural community. Never one to be fazed by a challenge or stand on ceremony, he co-opted his wife, Lucy, as his anaesthetist, and if the patient could not come to them, they went to the patient, on horseback or by boat if necessary. Originally from Scotland, the Smiths were intellectually inclined and their house was regularly visited by politicians, writers and artists. Sadly, Janet's older brother, Jock, died when he was ten, and she became the sole beneficiary of her father’s ambitions and hopes. Janet recalled having an argument with a government Minister about policy over the kitchen table at the ripe age of about twelve.

Janet commenced medical studies at the University of Otago after school but, to the dismay of her father, left university to marry Air Force Officer, Peter Irwin. They set up home in Parapauramu, north of Wellington, where they had three children, Bill, Jane and Sally. When the marriage ended in 1962, Janet returned to her medical studies and graduated as a doctor the following year. On winning an international scholarship for the study of emotional problems in young people, she worked at the Royal Hospital for Sick Children in Edinburgh, Scotland. Here began a lifelong campaign for abortion law reform. 'I became aware of the problems of children who are rejected. Every child should be a wanted child.'

Back in New Zealand, Janet obtained a position as physician with the University of Canterbury in Christchurch where she became a public advocate on health issues for students, particularly young women. When the New Zealand Medical Association announced in 1969 that doctors were in opposition to abortion law reform, Janet arranged for a survey to be conducted. It revealed that more than two-thirds of medical practitioners thought the law should be liberalized.

In 1974, she was recruited by the Student Health Services at the University of Queensland where she was Director from 1974-1988. She founded the Queensland University Women’s Association, was on the Council of Women’s College and mentored many young women. She became an active member of the University Senate and was later appointed the university’s first Sexual Harassment Conciliator. But her proudest achievement was co-sponsoring a successful resolution that the Academic Board dissociate itself from the Senate’s decision to award an Honorary Doctorate of Laws to the former Premier, Joh Bjelke-Petersen.
Reflecting the diversity of her concerns, Janet was appointed to various government bodies including the Immigration Review Panel, Social Security Appeals Tribunal, Commonwealth Better Health Commission and the National Women’s Advisory Council. Later she was to become a part-time Commissioner of the Criminal Justice Commission. She also represented Australia at numerous international women’s conferences. She became particularly active in Children By Choice campaigns and the Queensland Council for Civil Liberties and set up the Brisbane Women’s Network. She was the co-author of a book *Raising Girls: the pleasures, the perils, the pitfalls*.

Janet always walked the walk (sometimes, literally) as well as talked the talk on social justice matters. She would speak out publicly, sign petitions, write letters to the editor, give lectures at conferences, carry out surveys, write articles for medical journals, join advocacy groups, form her own lobby groups. ‘If you haven’t been driven by the passion and action of the times, you haven’t lived,’ was her motto. An annual dinner was established by the Equity section at QUT from 1993 to 2007 to honour both Janet and the achievements of Brisbane women from diverse backgrounds. For her services to women, medicine and the community, Janet was made a Member of the Order of Australia and awarded a Centenary Medal.

Like her parents, Janet loved literature and art and enjoyed the company of writers and artists. She was welcoming and inclusive. People were the centre of Janet’s world: both her extended family (and it was extensive, including her nephew, writer Alexander McCall Smith of *The No 1 Ladies Detective Agency* fame) and her wide network of friends. Janet had a remarkable capacity for remembering details such as the names of your children and even your pets. She became friends not only with you but with your children, and in turn, you became friends with her children. There will be many people in Brisbane, men and women, who will feel a sense of personal loss at her death.

Janet left the world a better place for having lived in it. Her spirit lives on in her children, Bill and his wife, Cornish (Nelson, NZ), Jane (Hobart) and Sally (Brisbane); her grandchildren, Roger and partner, Margaret-Jayne, and Ella and husband Alenas; and her great-grand-children, Nikas, James and Charlotte.

No longer the biography of a living person

So, while this biography started as the biography of a living person, it did not benefit from Janet’s direct input to the extent which I had intended. I realized when I revisited the transcripts that there was very little in them about Janet’s life and work since arriving in Brisbane in 1974, which was the prime time of her career. I had the advantage of having lived in Brisbane during this period, and of having access to archival material here, although I was later to find that my own memory of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s was hazy, and I had to do considerable reading about the social and political world of the time.

Fortunately, Janet had given me family documents, photos, newspaper cuttings, letters to and from family, friends and colleagues, copies of the many speeches she had made and other similar materials. She and I had some mutual
friends and colleagues. I had also become, or was to become, friends with her family. Through them, and particularly through her daughter Sally, who was living in Brisbane during this period, I was able to connect with other friends and colleagues who have been invaluable in the process of writing this biography.

I still had research to carry out in Rawene and I also needed to visit the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington where Janet's father's papers were deposited. In late 2009, I returned to New Zealand. I stayed with Janine and Mike again as I wanted to visit the school Janet had attended and meet with Claire White who had written a history of the school. I also wanted to go out to Pakanae where the Smiths had their beach house.

Sunday 23 November 2009

Last night, Janine, Mike and I went to a fundraising dinner at the house where Janet was born and lived in at Nimmo St, Rawene. It is still a doctor's residence. The current doctor, Val, is from Puerto Rico and married to a Maori artist. Doctors from all over the world have worked at Rawene Hospital because it is a Special Area Community Hospital. Recently there was a doctor from Iceland. (I was later to find out that Elizabeth, Alexander McCall Smith's wife, had worked there as a doctor before she was married. Another extraordinary coincidence.) The dinner was to raise funds for a twenty-piece band to come up from Dargaville to play for their Ballroom Dancing Society Christmas function. Val is also a ballroom dancing teacher. There are so many things happening in the area even though Janine says the population is down to about 200. There is even a local arts newspaper, Stingray.

On Friday night, we had watched short films from the Rawene Short Film Festival, including one by Janine and one by her daughter, Jessie. Two Maori women were there, sisters Joey and Bunty Howarth, both former writing students of Janine. It turned out that they live at Pakanae, just near where the Smiths had their beach house. So today, Janine and I went there and Joey showed us the place where the house was, and said that her great grandmother would have leased the place to the Smiths. I took photos of the sacred mountain behind, the marae in the background, the cemetery to the left and the sea to the front. There were a few trees and plants growing there that probably had been planted by Lucy or her gardener. But, largely, this area, which was once covered in gardens, is unfortunately no longer. Janine thinks that the flu epidemic may have taken many of the farmers. The Maori farmers would have grown tropical fruit trees, potatoes, kumera, corn, etc.

That same trip, I delivered a paper at the Australasian Association of Writing Programs conference in Hamilton, and then proceeded to Wellington to carry out research at the Alexander Turnbull Library.

I still had the idea that I would write a combination of biography and memoir. Indeed I prepared an abstract which was accepted for a 2010
conference in San Diego on Contemporary Women’s Writing: New Texts, Approaches and Technologies. It stated that:

For my PhD in Creative Writing at CQUniversity, I am writing a work of creative non-fiction entitled Would You Mind if I Borrowed Your Life? The person this question is addressed to is a woman friend of mine, recently deceased, who was a feminist activist on health and social justice issues. I am exploring her life (with her permission) both to pay her due honour, but also in order to make sense of my own. The work therefore is a combination of biography and memoir. It is, however, wider in its scope than this, attempting to engage also with issues such as the importance of place (my friend grew up in New Zealand; I grew up in Australia) and attitudes to religion (Janet’s family had no religious affiliation; mine were deeply religious). Reflecting this, the work is written as a series of essays and engages with other creative writing and relevant scholarship on the themes it explores.

I would argue that Would You Mind if I Borrowed Your Life? is innovative both in form and content. It eschews the narrative form of life writing in favour of the thematic approach of the essay. And unlike the conventional biography/memoir, it does not have as its subject my family members. The powerpoint presentation I propose for this conference would explore the advantages/difficulties which I have encountered in writing this work.

The problem was that I had yet to do any research on Janet’s life in Australia. I determined that I would not make any final decisions about form until I had completed a full draft of the biography. I would stick with the original proposal and write a narrative biography in chronological order. I gave myself an ‘out’ in that if I were to find that some of the later chapters lent themselves more naturally to the essay form, I would adopt that form, within a fundamentally narrative framework. In 2010, I returned to New Zealand once again, not to carry out further research, but to attend a Residential Workshop at the Michael King Writers’ Centre which had been established to honour the historian and author. The workshop was called ‘Truth Lies Somewhere: Biography, Autobiography, Memoir’ and Fiona Kidman was among the presenters. She spoke, not only of the importance of place in her writing, but also of shaping one of the volumes of her autobiography as a novel. Fortunately, I resisted the temptation to convert Janet’s biography to a novel.

By this time, I felt that I had a strong understanding of why Janet was different from most other women of her generation. As a result, my motivation for doing further research was dwindling, and yet, I had a long way to go. I was
also overwhelmed by the amount of information I had amassed relevant to Janet’s life in New Zealand, and relevant to the nature and form of biography. By August 2010, I had ten chapters of the biography completed and a substantial part of the exegesis. Aware that I needed to do research on the social and political environment of Queensland during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, I had completed a very interesting and useful six week course, Discovering Queensland, run by historian and author, Professor Ray Evans, at the State Library of Queensland. However, health and family problems (including the death of both my parents) saw me applying for leave until October 2011, and changing my status from full-time to part-time. My candidature was confirmed in June 2012, and I completed another three chapters on Janet’s work at the University of Canterbury, but I needed to apply for sick leave for six months in 2013. Finally, however, I was well enough to apply myself fully to the project in 2014.

My writing group came up with an idea to motivate us all on projects that had temporarily stalled as mine had. We would write a speech to give at the launch of the book we were writing. My speech was as follows:

Ladies & Gentleman

You have no idea how pleased I am to be here for the launch of my biography of Dr Janet Irwin. There was a time when I thought this biography would never be completed, that I would keep doing more research, reading more biographies, going off on more tangents until I would be paralyzed with information. But I am pleased to say that I rallied, took charge, plunged into the undergrowth, sawed off branches, eliminated thorny vines, pulled out copious weeds, until I could finally see the garden that the trees constituted. Once I had this overview, I could plan a major path leading to an endpoint with vistas in all directions. But I knew that, from a gardening point of view, it was important not to expose all those vistas to the expectant traveler. The journey had to be as important as the endpoint, with new and unexpected distractions on the way. The traveller, however, needed to have faith in the path, and not find it a maze from which they longed to escape.

I’m not too sure how Janet would feel about my use of a gardening metaphor. She was not a keen gardener. To know more about her specific talents, you will need to read my book. Suffice it to say that Janet Irwin was an extraordinary woman whom I had the great good fortune to come to know. It was unusual for my own generation of women to go to university and proceed into a profession, but Janet was my mother’s age and she had done those very things many years before. And she continued to play an active and public role in the community agitating for social
justice and particularly for women’s rights until her body would no longer support her.

I wrote this biography of Dr Janet Irwin because she was an admirable woman and an exceptional woman. I wanted her accomplishments acknowledged. But the main motivator for me, as always, was curiosity. I wanted to know what led Janet to be this fearless advocate, this dauntless networker, this woman passionately involved in the issues of her time, when most women her age were confined or confining themselves to the domestic sphere. And I wanted to know what continued to drive her and kept her energized in the face of setbacks.

I wanted to know the answers to these questions because to me it is important that our society cultivate the potential Dr Janet Irwins in our midst. It is so easy to be overwhelmed by the problems of the world, to feel powerless in the fact of widespread social injustice and never-ending wars. But Janet Irwin’s life reminds and reassures us that the individual can make a difference, that we do have an obligation to stand up for what we know to be right, and that we can enjoy a full and interesting life in the process. It is a message we need to hear, and which we need to pass on to our children.

Writing this speech helped. I returned to writing in my diary.

20 August 2014

I have made a list of things that distract me and committed to not doing them. I have tried to work out why I have allowed myself to be distracted in this way and I think that the main problem is that of feeling overwhelmed. I have accumulated so much stuff relating to the PhD and I still have some interviews to do and further information to seek out. However I have decided to leave the interviews and further information until I have written draft chapters. I need to prune and sort the material I have but that is a massive task. For the moment I will focus on the material on my desk and on putting that into folders when I have finished with it.

I did become totally involved in researching Janet’s life in Australia. Once I had sorted out the materials in my study, I decided, contrary to my diary entry above, to contact anybody who might have something useful to contribute to the biography, at the same time as writing new chapters. Time was running out and I didn’t want to leave it until I was ready to write a particular chapter, and find they were not available. But given the time that had elapsed since their involvement with Janet, one of the issues was going to be how to locate them. Janet’s daughter Sally was of great assistance here. She had been part of her mother’s network and had maintained contact with many of the people in it and/or their families. And many of those people had kept contact with other
people...and on it went. And the overwhelming response from the people I contacted was how pleased they were that someone was writing Janet’s biography, and how happy they were to be involved.

I started at the UQ Student Health Service where, fortunately for my research, Tony Arklay, who had been the Deputy Director under Janet and then taken over as Director when she left, was still in charge and happy to be of assistance. Some of the other staff members had also worked with Janet and I was able to interview them as well, and also access the Annual Reports for the service during Janet’s time. I found that she had achieved so much more in her position as Director of the Health Service than I had been aware of, not only in relation to student health issues, but in relation to medical education, the status of women students and staff, and occupational health and safety. She had also been involved in significant research and sat on boards and committees at the state and national level on many issues.

Not only were the Annual Reports and the interviews with former colleagues invaluable, once I finally obtained access to the university archives, they were of great assistance, particularly in relation to Janet’s work on the University Senate. I found the histories which had been written of the university of limited use, except for the one Vice-Chancellor Brian Wilson had written on Women in the Universityl, and had to rely on primary sources, including materials held at the Fryer Library and the State Library.

On a visit to Canberra, I was able to access materials on some national bodies Janet had been involved with at the National Library.

Of course, her work at the university was only part of the story. There was the successful campaign against the repressive abortion laws proposed by Bjelke-Petersen; her work as a part-time Commissioner on the Criminal Justice Commission; and her campaigns on a wide variety of social justice issues. There was a huge amount of research to be done, particularly on the CJC. My background as a legal academic specializing in criminal law helped enormously in this regard.

I became fascinated with the question of exactly how she was able to achieve the things she did. It was becoming clear to me just how important teamwork and friendships were to Janet, and how fundamental to what she had
been able to achieve. As I researched, I kept finding more and more people who were relevant to her life and whom I needed to talk to, sometimes to verify my assessment of a situation rather than recall specific information.

I include some extracts from diary entries below to give a sense of the research which I carried out and the issues I encountered.

18 October 2014
Today I read relevant chapters of Ben Robertson’s history of the University of Queensland entitled The people’s university which is unfortunately more a coffee table book than anything useful to a scholar. Where possible, I am suggesting people get back to me by return email rather than my having to interview them. I have enjoyed the interviews I have done recently but they have not been very productive in terms of cognate information because people find it difficult to remember exactly what happened, and often lack records.

I need to go through the records of the Balint group which Helen Kerr gave me and work out where they fit in. I also need to go through Malcolm Thomis’ history of UQ and to read Eddie Clarke’s history of the Queensland Council for Civil Liberties.

23 October 2014
I got on to Bruce Ibsen in Archives at UQ about accessing material about the Status of Women committee of the Senate. He is to get back to me after talking to the FOI person?!

24 October 2014
Yesterday I interviewed Beryl and John Holmes. Beryl, who is 84, did not have a good memory of matters but she has kept extensive records. She told me how Janet would walk up the street from where she lived, 3 houses down, every morning of the campaign, and they would plan the day. They would each take a sleeping pill every second day but work through the night the other.

I got a list of UQ Senate members from Bruce Ibsen, but he had not heard back from the Right to Information officer about other Senate materials.

28 October 2014
Today I responded to the FOI person at UQ’s rejection of my claim for further information on Janet in a legal tone. I should have said I was a lawyer from the start.

31 October 2014
The legal tone worked. Bruce Ibsen from Archives says that he is going through the materials and that I may need to go in there. I have responded that that is fine by me.

9 November 2014
Where does time go? It’s not that I haven’t been sitting at the desk but the perfectionist in me keeps searching out more and more information online.

One of the things which I was thinking about this morning was that Janet was able to get the people in charge on side because she had already befriended them, and not for any particular advantage. I recall Susan Davies talking about the picnic on the river which Janet invited her to, and her talking to a guest and
finding out that it was the new Vice-Chancellor. That would have been done out of genuine consideration for the newcomer from Canada. I'm sure it all relates back to living in the small community of Rawene where you were all one big family. If Brian Wilson or George Davies suspected for one minute that Janet was manipulating them, they would never have responded to her. And she certainly wasn't the sort to use 'womanly wiles' to get what she wanted. They would have read her exactly as she was, a warm, friendly, welcoming person to the university family. I recall her story of sitting at the table at 12 discussing politics with political leaders, so it was a natural thing for her to do.

I have spent the past 3 days going through relevant archival material at UQ, particularly in relation to the Status of Women Committee, and admiring the persistence of the women involved in the face of stubborn refusal to accept that there were problems which needed addressing. Minutes of other committees were largely sheer tokenism. But this committee politely recorded matters like the Head of Building and Grounds who had been asked to attend the meeting to explain why all the full-time jobs were held by men and all the casual ones by women, telling the meeting that it had been a waste of his valuable time attending when he had important things to do. And the Academic Board responding to recommendations for change with comments like 'the arguments were unsatisfactory in the intellectual sense' and that 'the conspiratorial tone was unfortunate.'

Until matters raised by the committee were fully addressed, they remained on the agenda and constant reminders were sent to relevant people. Fortunately Janet had managed to get the VC and DVC onside (often with reminders about vicarious responsibility) and they were called upon to call recalcitrants to account. A very interesting piece of social history. Unfortunately this very year, UQ did away with the Equity Department; sexual harassment counsellors are now volunteers and have no power and it is no longer possible to do a major in Women's Studies. Plus ça change.

I felt that readers of the biography would be interested in knowing what the situation was currently in relation to issues which Janet had been involved with, and so I researched the current situation in relation to issues like abortion, drugs, women's status at universities and civil liberties and incorporated that material in the relevant chapters.

13 November 2014

I have read the relevant chapters of Margaret Reynolds' autobiography, Living politics, which I will use when I write the section on the Status of Women Committee. However, I really need the book written by Brian Wilson on Women in the University to get clear in my head exactly how this all evolved.

I sorted out the materials on women into different files so that the non-Uni groups are separated from the Uni groups and the Uni Senate groups separated from the non-Senate groups. I again read through the Letters to Janet when she left the Uni and some of them made more sense this time.
16 November 2014
I have read a huge range of material on the QCCL and the Criminal Justice Commission. I can't believe how much I had forgotten about Queensland in the late Joh era and more particularly under Goss, Borbidge and Beattie.

4 December 2014
I read a book by Christakis and Fowler called Connected: the amazing power of social networks and how they shape our lives for use in Ch 20. In the acknowledgements at the end, the authors talk about how social networks assisted the writing of the book. Janet’s social networks have been invaluable to me in the writing of her biography.

By Christmas, 2014, I had completed a draft of the biography which consisted of twenty-two chapters and by New Year I had completed an Introduction.

Initially, as I have recounted, I was motivated to write Janet Irwin’s biography by a desire to know what had made her the person she was, and particularly to know about her upbringing. When I came to realize that ‘place’ had been important to her development, as well as her family and friends, my motivation extended to finding out as much as I could about Rawene in particular, and New Zealand in general. Then, on reading widely about biography, I became motivated by the idea of writing an experimental biography. When I found similarities/connections between my life and Janet’s, I wanted to include my life in her story. My motivation started to dwindle when I had written up Janet’s early life and the influence of family, friends and place on the person she was to become. In retrospect, I wonder whether my health problems in the middle of this project were contributed to by a loss of motivation for the project. Like Virginia Woolf, I felt a sense of responsibility for telling her story because I had told Janet I would. Her family and friends were also expecting me to do so. I have no doubt that the death of my own parents and my ambivalence about including my own story negatively impacted on my health at this time.

I was very relieved to find, once I started to research Janet’s life and work in Australia, that my motivation had returned. I was fascinated by what she had managed to achieve and keen to find out how she had managed it. I felt that it was particularly important to understand how Janet had succeeded in making a difference for women and on social justice issues. And I became fascinated by the central role teamwork and friendship played.
Conclusion

My research question for this exegesis was ‘What were the significant factors in my researching and writing the biography of Dr Janet Irwin and what are their implications?’

Writing the biography of Janet Irwin proved a very interesting journey for me and I learned a great deal. The original interviews I carried out with Janet, the documentation she provided, and our trip to New Zealand were invaluable in understanding my subject and the influence of family, place and friends on her life. Also valuable was sitting in libraries and archives, seeking out primary sources both in New Zealand and Australia and interviewing or corresponding with significant people in Janet’s life.

I found my research on the impact of social, political and cultural factors on the evolution of biography useful. The claims of some historians that historical writing, including biography, is, by its very nature, literary, provided further validation of the category of ‘creative non-fiction’ within which I was working. Virginia Woolf’s views on the problems of writing biography helped me formulate my own views on the significance of motivation. My research on how biographers viewed their own motivation was useful, and the hostile response of the literary community to biographers led me to conclude that this would be a productive area for further research. I found arguments about the nature and form of biography challenging, and the clutches of experimental biography very difficult to resist. I enjoyed reading many biographies, both traditional and experimental, but found some from each camp tedious.

My research about different approaches to medicine, and medical education, and student health services was informative. I had experienced universities, and the student activism of the 1970s and 1980s, feminism and the political response myself. But I needed to revisit it to make sure I remembered it correctly. It was depressing to revisit Queensland under Joh Bjelke-Petersen, but I learnt a great deal more about the Fitzgerald Inquiry and subsequent political history. Above all else, I learnt about the importance of friendship and teamwork, not only in making a difference to those involved, but to society at large.
I certainly never imagined back in 2003 that my biography of Janet would not be completed till 2015. But I am very pleased to have told the story of a woman which I, and those who knew her, believe needed to be told, and I feel fortunate to have had the experiences which researching Janet’s story afforded me.

A major focus of this exegesis has been on motivation. One issue in relation to motivation, however, which has not been specifically addressed here, is Janet’s own motivation. Her motto was ‘If you haven’t been driven by the passion and action of the times, you haven’t lived’. For Janet, family, friends and home were vitally important as they are for most people. But, unusually for a woman of her generation, she wanted to engage with the world at large, to play a part in making the world a better, fairer place. She wanted to join with others for their own betterment and the betterment of others, and just for the sheer enjoyment of doing so. After researching Janet’s life, I realized that I not only wanted to understand her, I wanted to be like her. And I hope readers of her biography will feel the same way. This certainly contributed to my own motivation in researching and writing this text.

I reassert the contribution to knowledge that this exegesis provides in outlining how my research on the evolution of biographical writing and its relation to literature assisted me in writing Dr Irwin’s biography and led me to the conclusion that motivation is a significant factor in biographical writing and one which warrants further examination.

It is my intention to approach the relevant authorities in Australia and New Zealand to have Janet’s biography included in their respective National Dictionaries of Biography. That might lead other scholars to pursue areas of interest in related fields. The domain of biography remains to be theorized. The issue of motivation in biography needs further exploration. The antipathy of literary writers to biographers is, I suspect, related to their assumptions about biographers’ motives. This warrants exploration as does the question of whether the antipathy extends to biographers of non-literary figures.

The University of Queensland Student Health Service deserves to have a full history written. The University of Queensland itself is worthy of a history that is not a hagiography, but tells how, from the 1960s to the 1990s, the
University Senate, staff and students engaged with the political and social issues of the time.

Margot Ross, who was the precipitating factor in Janet completing her medical studies would appear to be worthy of a biography in her own right, as would many women honoured at the Janet Irwin dinners.

The groups with which Janet was involved: the Rawene community, the Balint groups, and especially the activist groups, like Children by Choice, are worthy of biographies in their own right. An activist campaign should make for a lively group biography. Now that we have a female Premier and Deputy Premier in Queensland, a majority of women in Cabinet and the first female Aboriginal Cabinet Minister, a biographical investigation of their successful campaign for the leadership is warranted. And time would seem particularly ripe for the story of the campaign for A Woman's Space/A Woman's Place to be told, and hopefully reignited.
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Witness Thomas Gibbon’s 1777 tome *Memoirs of Eminently Pious Women, Who Were Ornaments of their Sex, Blessings to their Countries and Edifying Examples to the Church and World*. (Arthur Vincent’s atypical 1897 collection, *Lives of Twelve Bad Women* no doubt would have more appeal to modern sensibilities.)


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Appendix A

The Margins And Mainstreams Papers: The Refereed Proceedings Of The 14th Conference Of The Australian Association Of Writing Programs


Donna Lee Brien & Marcelle Freiman, Editorial introduction.

www.aawp.org.au/the_margins_and-mainstream_papers

CQ University
Susan Currie

Where did you say you come from? : a case study of geographical margins in life writing

Abstract:
The dictionary definition of ‘mainstream’ that appears on the conference flyer is ‘the prevailing current of thought, influence or activity.’ Those in the mainstream are up to date in their thinking, what they do and their influence on others. A ‘margin’ is defined as an edge, a blank space, a limit, a degree of difference. It is easy to conclude that those on the margins are not as civilized, not as cultured, not as well-informed and do not contribute as much to society. For writers, the term ‘mainstream’ might well elicit a different response, a perjorative one. Mainstream writers are not real writers like we are. Real writers are marginalized by society: undervalued, un(der)paid. The writerly margins are where the prevailing wisdom is challenged; the writing edge is the ‘cutting edge’ We are proud to be on the margins. But what if we are also on the geographical margins?

In this paper, I describe the cultural cringe I have experienced living all my life in Brisbane in the “deep north” of Australia and explore how easy it is for those on the geographical margins to not only internalize a sense of being second-rate but also to marginalize others in turn. I describe how surprised I was to find that an older woman, Dr Janet Irwin who impressed me with her iconoclasm, courage and political nous (such that I was motivated to write her biography) grew up on the geographical margins in Rawene, a small town in the Hokianga, in far north New Zealand. And that she considered Rawene not a liability but a formative influence.
**Biographical note:**
Susan Currie BA/LLB (UQ), MA (Research) (QUT), MLaws (QUT) is a PhD student at CQ University where she is writing a biography of feminist activist, Dr Janet Irwin. She was formerly a Senior Lecturer and Director of Undergraduate Programs in Justice Studies in the Faculty of Law at QUT. Susan has also worked as a tribunal member, barrister, solicitor, high school teacher, and librarian. She has written biographical profiles of significant women in the law in Queensland for *A Woman’s Place* published by the Queensland Supreme Court Library, is the co-author of a legal studies textbook, and has published numerous legal articles, poems and short stories.

**Keywords:**
Life Writing  Margins  Geographical Location

[Camus] threw into question what was central, what the margins, and saw how the two circle around one another like fascinated strangers, each haunted by the Other. (Iyer:2005,7)

Janet Irwin was such a tall, elegant, patrician-looking woman, that when I first met her at a Brisbane luncheon in the early nineties, I wouldn’t have been surprised if she was Lady Someone. I dreaded the thought of making polite chit chat. As it transpired, she was not Lady Anybody and would have dreaded the thought of making polite chit chat as much as I did. Indeed, serendipitously, we had both been appointed to the Social Security Appeals Tribunal, she as a medical member, me as a legal member. When she propounded her view that aged pensioners should be able to grow marijhuana for sale to the government to supplement their pensions, I was fascinated. She was twenty-four years older than me. Most women her age did not work outside the home let alone advocate such radical politics. Most women my age did not work outside the home. My politics were considered radical. But the ante had just been upped. Considerably. Who was she, I wondered. Was she the black sheep from some establishment family? She couldn’t possibly be from Brisbane.

David Malouf captures the cultural cringe of those who grew up in Brisbane in the 1950s in his 1975 novel, *Johnno.* (Malouf:1983,51-52)

As for Brisbane, the city I have been born in – well, what can anyone say about that? I have been reading Dante. His love for his city is immense, it fills his whole life, its streets, its gardens, its people; it is a force that has shaped his whole being. Have I been shaped in any way – fearful prospect! – by Brisbane? [...] Brisbane is so sleepy, so slatternly, so sprawlingly unlovely! I have taken to wandering about after school looking for one simple object in it that might be romantic or appalling even, but there is nothing. [...] Queensland, of course, is a joke.
I was right about Janet. She had not come to Brisbane till 1974, when she had been recruited as Director of Student Health Services at the University of Queensland. But at this stage I did not ask her where she had come from. I assumed it was Sydney or Melbourne. Later I was to find out more about her from other sources. At the University of Queensland, she had founded a University Women’s Association, been an active member of the Senate and was later appointed their first Sexual Harassment Conciliator. Her proudest achievement however was inciting the UQ Academic Board to condemn the University Senate’s decision to award an Honorary Doctorate of Laws to former Premier, Joh Bjelke-Petersen.

Reflecting the diversity of her concerns, Janet had been appointed to various government bodies including the Immigration Review Panel, Commonwealth Better Health Commission, the National Women’s Advisory Council and the Queensland Criminal Justice Commission. She represented Australia at numerous international women’s conferences; became particularly active in Children By Choice and the Queensland Council for Civil Liberties and set up the Brisbane Women’s Network. In her free time, she co-wrote a book on parenting girls. (Irwin et al:1998) ‘If you haven’t been driven by the passion and action of the times, you haven’t lived,’ was her motto.

We became friends. When I found out that Janet had grown up on the margins of New Zealand society, in the town of Rawene in the Hokianga, a place unknown even to most New Zealanders I was intrigued. Where had her courage and her confidence come from? This question motivated me to write her biography. It also prompted me to examine my own assumptions about place, about geographical margins and mainstreams. I came to believe that, while Janet’s genetic inheritance and her upbringing were clearly significant factors in her becoming the person she was, so too was living on the geographical margins and not in a negative way but a positive one.

The dictionary definition of ‘mainstream’ that appears on the conference flyer is ‘the prevailing current of thought, influence or activity.’ Those in the mainstream are up to date in their thinking, what they do and their influence on others. A ‘margin’ is defined as an edge, a blank space, a limit, a degree of difference. It is easy to conclude that those on the margins are not as civilized, not as cultured, not as well-informed and do not contribute as much to society.

For writers, the term ‘mainstream’ might well elicit a different response, a perjorative one. Mainstream writers are not real writers like we are. Real writers are marginalized by society: undervalued, underpaid. The writerly margins are where the prevailing wisdom is challenged; the writing edge is the ‘cutting edge’ We are proud to be on the margins. But what if we are also on the geographic margins?

We Antipodeans, of course, know all about geographical marginality. Until we become states of the union, we will remain invisible to many Americans. For any number of UK residents, we are still the colonies. And the rest of the world knows as little about us as we know about them. Who is in the centre and who is on the margins is however a moveable feast. The positioning of China
within the modern world is a good example of this. Invisibility is not the only penalty to be paid for being on the margins. Not only is living on the periphery different to living in the centre, there seems to be an assumption that those on the geographical margins are different to those in the mainstream. And that imputation is not one favourable to those on the outskirts. In response, those marginalized in this way are likely to position themselves at the centre of a smaller world and marginalize others.

In Australia, anyone living outside Sydney or Melbourne is likely to be the object of derision or pity and Queenslanders are particularly scorned. I wrote about this marginalization some years ago in an unpublished essay entitled From Brisbane which begins:

‘Where do you live, Susan?’ I feel immediately uncomfortable.
‘Brisbane.’
Silence. Puzzlement.
‘Brisbane, Queensland?’ As if there were Brisbanes dotted all over Australia.
‘Mm.’ I give a small, dry-mouthed nod.
‘So how do you know Mary then?’
‘We went to school together.’
‘Oh...Where was that?’
‘In Brisbane.’ This must be what it is like to be interrogated by the police. If I have to say Brisbane one more time, I am going to be sick.
‘Mary grew up in Brisbane?’ My interrogator looks closely at me as if to make sure I am not lying. More than Mary’s character is now on the line. Could she really have come from Brisbane and them not pick it up? They have, after all, known her for some years now. She seemed just like a normal Sydneysider.

That we Queenslanders are still considered “the deep north” notwithstanding that the current Prime Minister comes from Queensland and that in 2009, more people are moving to Brisbane than to any other capital city, is confirmed by this recent comment in a column in The Australian newspaper:

Although Queensland is often talked about by outsiders and locals alike as if it is a separate country, it’s possible the mindset is taking root at a more official level going by a press release from Steven Smith yesterday headlined “Foreign Minister visits Brisbane.”(Jeffrey:2009,11)

Particularly inclined to scoff are those who grew up in Queensland themselves and had the nous to escape. For those of us who stayed, it is hard to escape internalizing a sense of being second-rate.

It was no use telling Sydneysiders that you didn’t vote for Bjelke-Petersen, that none of your friends did either, that you had risked
imprisonment or being king-hit by police marching in demonstrations against his government. To them, if you remained in Brisbane, you deserved what was meted out to you.

I knew that staying forever in Brisbane was inconceivable. I wanted to live where learning was valued. Where difference was not immoral or illegal. A place where you could not declare a state of emergency over a football match; where traditional African dancers did not have to put on bras to perform; where an actor would not be arrested on stage for saying the word ‘fucking’; where the musical Hair would not be banned. The problem was that in those places, I would be an outsider. I had lingered too long in Brisbane.

You would think that feeling like this, I would never marginalize other people. But it is not true. I marginalize within Queensland. I look down my nose at the Gold Coast as our own bastard child of Las Vegas and Florida. I have a friend with a pucker British accent whom I can’t wait to tell people grew up in Rockhampton in central Queensland. I am not on very safe ground here as I am studying at Central Queensland University. I take pains to tell anyone who asks me where I am studying, that I followed my supervisor there because she is such a good supervisor and she is not from central Queensland either. Implication: I would not be seen dead in Rockhampton otherwise.

Of course, New Zealanders have had to endure centuries of sheep jokes from Australians to say nothing of our tendency to abrogate stars like John Clarke, Sam Neill and Russell Crowe as our own. I’m not sure about the respective status of Wellington, Auckland, Christchurch and Dunedin within New Zealand. I do know that, notwithstanding her patrician appearance, Janet Irwin, as a North Islander, never felt at home in Christchurch. My own daughter-in-law was born in Christchurch but she could not wait to escape to the Gold Coast. I thought this an aberration on her part until I heard New Zealand writer Lloyd Jones interviewed on the Book Show on ABC Radio National (15 September 2009) about his new collection of short stories called The Man in the Shed. Interviewer and show host Ramona Koval was clearly bemused by the fact that in three of the short stories ‘blokes go off to Queensland’. Indeed, in the story Swimming to Australia a whole family washes up on the Gold Coast. Jones’ justification was that in suburban places like Lower Hutt where he lives, Queensland is seen as a working man’s paradise, a land of opportunity, everything New Zealand is not. Jones himself has no wish to escape (which I can only suggest is very fortunate for New Zealanders as his book Mr Pip is probably the finest book I have ever read). But he can understand that quest for the far horizons given that New Zealanders never live far from the coastline.

Surprisingly, then, Janet Irwin never had a sense of growing up on the margins even though Rawene was so far off the radar for mainstream new Zealanders. I suspect this is partly because the Hokianga has a strong sense of its own history and of attracting or producing legendary characters. The name Hokianga is itself attributed to the great Polynesian explorer, Kupe. According to
legend, he was the first explorer to discover New Zealand, navigating its shores around AD950. ‘This is the spring of the world of light’ he declared and indeed Hokianga became the cradle of Maori settlement in New Zealand.

In another of the foundation legends, the pakeha Fred Maning mysteriously left Tasmania in 1833 at the age of 22 to come to this isolated spot. Just before his departure, seven Irish patriots had been smuggled out of a Hobart prison for safety in America. Maning was known to have saved another man from the gallows and to have been protected by Tasmanian bushrangers. He married a Maori woman, became very popular in the Maori community, and even advised its chiefs not to sign the Treaty of Waitangi. He was to become a Judge of the Native Land Courts. (Manson:1956, 31-35) Judge Maning's house was beautifully crafted by another legend, ‘Cannibal’ Jack Marmon, thought to be a runaway convict. The ship in which he was sailing was wrecked off the Hokianga Heads. There were three survivors, two of whom were allegedly eaten by Maoris. Jack was supposed to have been saved because a bandage on his head was mistaken for a sign of chiefdom. He went on to marry a Maori princess and it was rumoured that when he died the earth refused to take him until he was buried headfirst. (Kemble Welch:1965, 68-73)

The Hokianga was also home to the extraordinary Maori leader Dame Whina Cooper who lived until the age of 98. In his biography, historian and writer Michael King depicts her as another larger than life character: charismatic, dynamic, a born leader, capable at a wide range of skills, knowledgeable, forceful, resourceful. (King:1983) She was a very similar personality to her contemporary, George McCall Smith, known as GM, Janet Irwin’s father. Janet clearly inherited her rather daunting appearance from her father. Indeed, Rex Fairburn, the poet who was a close friend described him as ‘a cross between an Arab chieftain and an Archbishop.’ (Trussell:1984,134) Another friend and fellow doctor, Douglas Robb, draws this portrait:

Picture the young G.M. as a native Scot, a medical student in Edinburgh. Of striking physical size and appearance, enormous vitality, and great natural intelligence and charm, he soon emerged with distinction among his fellows. He had been used to the good things of life, to authority, and to the respect of those around him. It would seem that no prize or position was beyond his grasp... His mind was strong and original, often iconoclastic, not content to absorb uncritically what his teachers put before him. (Kemble Welch:1965:15-16)

Such a man was likely to end up a Professor at the same university. Yet it was not to be. (It was in fact his well-known grandson, Alexander McCall Smith of No 1. Ladies Detective Agency fame who achieved that distinction). GM left behind a family of four children to come to work in what he called “the backblocks” of New Zealand in 1914. He brought with him Lucy Scott, formerly his patient, who was to be his second wife and Janet’s mother. Lucy came from a wealthy landowning family but any notions she may have had of refined country life were
no doubt soon dispelled. The Hokianga was a poor, widely dispersed, and multi-cultural community and it was yet to be made accessible by road. Never one to be fazed by a challenge or stand on ceremony, GM co-opted Lucy as his anaesthetist, and if the patient could not come to them, they went to the patient, on horseback or by boat. Indeed, under GM’s leadership, the Hokianga acquired a free and co-operative health service which even today serves as an international model for similar communities. This was achieved by fair means or foul with GM thinking nothing of setting up an illegal casino or rigging a fundraising lottery.

Both GM and Whina Cooper considered the Hokianga their fiefdom. They were both committed to addressing Māori health issues in the Pangaru area, and no doubt there were clashes about how that should be achieved. Janet grew up aware of Whina’s achievements and oblivious to the argument that a woman’s role should be restricted to the home. Her father referred to Whina as ‘that old devil Josephine’ and told her about the time she wanted to bury a nephew who had committed suicide in consecrated ground at the Panguru cemetery. The parish priest refused so Whina buried the nephew outside the cemetery, in a plot with pre-Christian Māori remains. Then she lifted the fence to bring both urupa inside the boundary. This story was confirmed by Michael King in his obituary to Whina. (King:2001,135)

The Smiths were intellectually inclined. They subscribed to over thirty overseas newspapers and literary and political journals. Lucy Scott avidly read the works of Virginia Woolf and other iconoclastic writers. GM was a strong believer that it was bad enough to be sick without having to pay for treatment and he spoke out publicly on social justice issues. Notwithstanding the difficulties of reaching it, their house was regularly visited by politicians, writers and artists. This was a case of the mainstream coming to the margins. Indeed, GM had an interesting take on the issue of margins and mainstreams. Often referred to as eccentric, he claimed it should be spelled ex-centric and expressed the view that ‘the only way to see what is happening at the centre is to be ex-centric.’ (Trussell:1984,134) Camus would no doubt have agreed with him. Janet recalled having an argument with a government Minister about policy at the ripe age of about twelve. Sadly, Janet’s older brother, Jock, died when he was ten, and she became the sole beneficiary of her father’s ambitions and hopes.

Whilst this was no doubt a powerful formative influence, Janet believed that Rawene and the Hokianga were a strong influence in their own right. She loved the place. It was always home to her no matter where she lived. She kept in touch with her childhood friends throughout her life and would return frequently. When I visited the Hokianga with her in 2004, it felt like a pilgrimage. Janet always knew what was going on there and was fiercely protective. When an article appeared in the New Zealand paper North/South in 1992 headed Hopeless Hokianga, she was furious and wrote an article in response from Brisbane. ‘Hokianga people are rich in the things that matter most,’ she claimed. ‘Hokianga, to me, and I believe to its people, is the most beautiful place on earth.’ (Irwin:1992, 34-36) Sadly, Janet died this year. In accordance with her wishes, her family will gather in Rawene early next year to scatter her ashes.
Meanwhile, the Rawene spirit lives on. In late November, 2005, I attended the AAWP conference in Perth. There were two women from New Zealand present. To my utter amazement, I read in the program that one of them, Janine McVeagh, was from Rawene. That could not be possible. How big would Rawene be today? 200 people? I found Janine, and told her of the biography I was writing. Janine did not know Janet but she did know about her father. In fact, Janine lives in the street opposite the hospital that GM established. It was spooky. When Janine told me that she too was writing a biography, of the social reformer Priscilla Wakefield, it felt as though our paths had been meant to cross. I stayed near her side for the rest of the conference. I think I was concerned that if I let her go, she might evaporate into a figment of my imagination.

Janine, like Janet is actively involved in community affairs, an outspoken advocate on social justice and environmental issues. And she is one of many in her community. Rawene continues to foster strong, independent characters. Is it just its history? Could it have something to do with the landscape? Is it the strength of its Maori heritage? Could it be that what I have observed happening in Rawene happens in marginal communities everywhere? I doubt it but you never know.

As for Brisbane, well, it’s changing. And I’m changing my attitude to it. I’ve even taken to getting a little fierce when people criticize us.

OK, Central Queensland. I know. My game is up. No more Rockhampton jokes. I fear the joke is on me.

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Appendix B


Mythbusting Publishing: Questioning the ‘Runaway Popularity’ of Published Biography and Other Life Writing

Introduction: Our current obsession with the lives of others

“Biography—that is to say, our creative and non-fictional output devoted to recording and interpreting real lives—has enjoyed an extraordinary renaissance in recent years,” writes Nigel Hamilton in Biography: A Brief History (1). Ian Donaldson agrees that biography is back in fashion: “Once neglected within the academy and relegated to the dustier recesses of public bookstores, biography has made a notable return over recent years, emerging, somewhat surprisingly, as a new cultural phenomenon, and a new academic adventure” (23). For over a decade now, commentators have been making similar observations about our obsession with the intimacies of individual people’s lives. In a lecture in 1994, Justin Kaplan asserted the West was “a culture of biography” (qtd. in Salwak 1) and more recent research findings by John Feather and Hazel Woodbridge affirm that “the undiminished human curiosity about other peoples lives is clearly reflected in the popularity of autobiographies and biographies” (218).

At least in relation to television, this assertion seems valid. In Australia, as in the USA and the UK, reality and other biographically based television shows have taken over from drama in both the numbers of shows produced and the viewers these shows attract, and these forms are also popular in Canada (see, for instance, Morreale on The Osbournes). In 2007, the program Biography celebrated its twentieth anniversary season to become one of the longest running documentary series on American television; so successful that in 1999 it was spun off into its own eponymous channel (Rak; Dempsey). Premiered in May 1996, Australian Story—which aims to utilise a “personal approach” to biographical storytelling—has won a significant viewership, critical acclaim and professional recognition (ABC). It can also be posited that the real home movies viewers submit to such programs as Australia’s Favourite Home Videos, and “chat” or “confessional” television are further reflections of a general mania for biographical detail (see Douglas), no matter how fragmented, sensationalized, or even inane and cruel. A recent example of the latter, the USA-produced The Moment of Truth, has contestants answering personal questions
under polygraph examination and then again in front of an audience including close relatives and friends—the more "truthful" their answers (and often, the more humiliated and/or distressed contestants are willing to be), the more money they can win.

Away from television, but offering further evidence of this interest are the growing readerships for personally oriented weblogs and networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook (Grossman), individual profiles and interviews in periodical publications, and the recently widely revived newspaper obituary column (Starck). Adult and community education organisations run short courses on researching and writing auto/biographical forms and, across Western countries, the family history/genealogy sections of many local, state, and national libraries have been upgraded to meet the increasing demand for these services. Academically, journals and e-mail discussion lists have been established on the topics of biography and autobiography, and North American, British, and Australian universities offer undergraduate and postgraduate courses in life writing.

The commonly aired wisdom is that published life writing in its many text-based forms (biography, autobiography, memoir, diaries, and collections of personal letters) is enjoying unprecedented popularity. It is our purpose to examine this proposition.

**Methodological problems**

There are a number of problems involved in investigating genre popularity, growth, and decline in publishing. Firstly, it is not easy to gain access to detailed statistics, which are usually only available within the industry. Secondly, it is difficult to ascertain how publishing statistics are gathered and what they report (Eliot). There is the question of whether bestselling booklists reflect actual book sales or are manipulated marketing tools (Miller), although the move from surveys of booksellers to electronic reporting at point of sale in new publishing lists such as BookScan will hopefully obviate this problem. Thirdly, some publishing lists categorise by subject and form, some by subject only, and some do not categorise at all. This means that in any analysis of these statistics, a decision has to be made whether to use the publishing list's system or impose a different mode. If the publishing list is taken at face value, the question arises of whether to use categorisation by form or by subject.

Fourthly, there is the bedeviling issue of terminology. Traditionally, there reigned a simple dualism in the terminology applied to forms of telling the true story of an actual life: biography and autobiography. Publishing lists that categorise their books, such as BookScan, have retained it. But with postmodern recognition of the presence of the biographer in a biography and of the presence of other subjects in an autobiography, the dichotomy proves false. There is the further problem of how to categorise memoirs, diaries, and letters. In the
academic arena, the term “life writing” has emerged to describe the field as a whole. Within the genre of life writing, there are, however, still recognised sub-genres. Academic definitions vary, but generally a biography is understood to be a scholarly study of a subject who is not the writer; an autobiography is the story of a entire life written by its subject; while a memoir is a segment or particular focus of that life told, again, by its own subject. These terms are, however, often used interchangeably even by significant institutions such the USA Library of Congress, which utilises the term “biography” for all.

Different commentators also use differing definitions. Hamilton uses the term “biography” to include all forms of life writing. Donaldson discusses how the term has been co-opted to include biographies of place such as Peter Ackroyd’s *London: The Biography* (2000) and of things such as Lizzie Collingham’s *Curry: A Biography* (2005). This reflects, of course, a writing/publishing world in which non-fiction stories of places, creatures, and even foodstuffs are called biographies, presumably in the belief that this will make them more saleable. The situation is further complicated by the emergence of hybrid publishing forms such as, for instance, the “memoir-with-recipes” or “food memoir” (Brien, Rutherford and Williamson). Are such books to be classified as autobiography or put in the “cookery/food & drink” category? We mention in passing the further confusion caused by novels with a subtitle of *The Biography* such as Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*.

The fifth methodological problem that needs to be mentioned is the increasing globalisation of the publishing industry, which raises questions about the validity of the majority of studies available (including those cited herein) which are nationally based. Whether book sales reflect what is actually read (and by whom), raises of course another set of questions altogether.

**Methodology**

In our exploration, we were fundamentally concerned with two questions. Is life writing as popular as claimed? And, if it is, is this a new phenomenon? To answer these questions, we examined a range of available sources.

We began with the non-fiction bestseller lists in *Publishers Weekly* (a respected American trade magazine aimed at publishers, librarians, booksellers, and literary agents that claims to be international in scope) from their inception in 1912 to the present time. We hoped that this data could provide a longitudinal perspective. The term bestseller was coined by *Publishers Weekly* when it began publishing its lists in 1912; although the first list of popular American books actually appeared in *The Bookman* (New York) in 1895, based itself on lists appearing in London’s *The Bookman* since 1891 (Bassett and Walter 206). The *Publishers Weekly* lists are the best source of longitudinal information as the currently widely cited *New York Times* listings did not appear till 1942, with the *Wall Street Journal* a late entry into the field in 1994.
We then examined a number of sources of more recent statistics. We looked at the bestseller lists from the USA-based Amazon.com online bookseller; recent research on bestsellers in Britain; and lists from Nielsen BookScan Australia, which claims to tally some 85% or more of books sold in Australia, wherever they are published. In addition to the reservations expressed above, caveats must be aired in relation to these sources. While Publishers Weekly claims to be an international publication, it largely reflects the North American publishing scene and especially that of the USA. Although available internationally, Amazon.com also has its own national sites—such as Amazon.co.uk—not considered here. It also caters to a “specific computer-literate, credit-able clientele” (Gutjahr: 219) and has an unashamedly commercial focus, within which all the information generated must be considered.

In our analysis of the material studied, we will use “life writing” as a genre term. When it comes to analysis of the lists, we have broken down the genre of life writing into biography and autobiography, incorporating memoir, letters, and diaries under autobiography. This is consistent with the use of the terminology in BookScan. Although we have broken down the genre in this way, it is the overall picture with regard to life writing that is our concern. It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer a detailed analysis of whether, within life writing, further distinctions should be drawn.

Publishers Weekly: 1912 to 2006

1912 saw the first list of the 10 bestselling non-fiction titles in Publishers Weekly. It featured two life writing texts, being headed by an autobiography, The Promised Land by Russian Jewish immigrant Mary Antin, and concluding with Albert Bigelow Paine’s six-volume biography, Mark Twain. The Publishers Weekly lists do not categorise non-fiction titles by either form or subject, so the classifications below are our own with memoir classified as autobiography. In a decade-by-decade tally of these listings, there were 3 biographies and 20 autobiographies in the lists between 1912 and 1919; 24 biographies and 21 autobiographies in the 1920s; 13 biographies and 40 autobiographies in the 1930s; 8 biographies and 46 autobiographies in the 1940s; 4 biographies and 14 autobiographies in the 1950s; 11 biographies and 13 autobiographies in the 1960s; 6 biographies and 11 autobiographies in the 1970s; 3 biographies and 19 autobiographies in the 1980s; 5 biographies and 17 autobiographies in the 1990s; and 2 biographies and 7 autobiographies from 2000 up until the end of 2006. See Appendix 1 for the relevant titles and authors.
Breaking down the most recent figures for 1990–2006, we find a not radically different range of figures and trends across years in the contemporary environment.
The validity of looking only at the top ten books sold in any year is, of course, questionable, as are all the issues regarding sources discussed above. But one thing is certain in terms of our inquiry. There is no upwards curve obvious here. If anything, the decade break-down suggests that sales are trending downwards.

This is in keeping with the findings of Michael Korda, in his history of twentieth-century bestsellers. He suggests a consistent longitudinal picture across all genres:

In every decade, from 1900 to the end of the twentieth century, people have been reliably attracted to the same kind of books [...] Certain kinds of popular fiction always do well, as do diet books [...] self-help books, celebrity memoirs, sensationalist scientific or religious speculation, stories about pets, medical advice (particularly on the subjects of sex, longevity, and child rearing), folksy wisdom and/or humour, and the American Civil War (xvii).

Amazon.com since 2000

The USA-based Amazon.com online bookselling site provides listings of its own top 50 bestsellers since 2000, although only the top 14 bestsellers are recorded for 2001. As fiction and non-fiction are not separated out on these lists and no genre categories are specified, we have again made our own decisions about what books fall into the category of life writing. Generally, we erred on the side of inclusion. (See Appendix 2.) However, when it came to books dealing with political events, we excluded books dealing with specific aspects of political practice/policy. This meant excluding books on, for instance, George Bush’s so-called ‘war on terror,’ of which there were a number of bestsellers listed.

In summary, these listings reveal that of the top 364 books sold by Amazon from 2000 to 2007, 46 (or some 12.6%) were, according to our judgment, either biographical or autobiographical texts. This is not far from the 10% of the
1912 Publishers Weekly listing, although, as above, the proportion of bestsellers that can be classified as life writing varied dramatically from year to year, with no discernible pattern of peaks and troughs. This proportion tallied to 4% auto/biographies in 2000, 14% in 2001, 10% in 2002, 18% in 2003 and 2004, 4% in 2005, 14% in 2006 and 20% in 2007. This could suggest a rising trend, although it does not offer any consistent trend data to suggest sales figures may either continue to grow, or fall again, in 2008 or afterwards.

Looking at the particular texts in these lists (see Appendix 2) also suggests that there is no general trend in the popularity of life writing in relation to other genres. For instance, in these listings in Amazon.com, life writing texts only rarely figure in the top 10 books sold in any year. So rarely indeed, that from 2001 there were only five in this category. In 2001, John Adams by David McCullough was the best selling book of the year; in 2003, Hillary Clinton’s autobiographical Living History was 7th; in 2004, My Life by Bill Clinton reached number 1; in 2006, Nora Ephron’s I Feel Bad About My Neck: and Other Thoughts on Being a Woman was 9th; and in 2007, Ishmael Beah’s discredited A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier came in at 8th. Apart from McCulloch’s biography of Adams, all the above are autobiographical texts, while the focus on leading political figures is notable.

Britain: Feather and Woodbridge

With regard to the British situation, we did not have actual lists and relied on recent analysis. John Feather and Hazel Woodbridge find considerably higher levels for life writing in Britain than above with, from 1998 to 2005, 28% of British published non-fiction comprising autobiography, while 8% of hardback
and 5% of paperback non-fiction was biography (2007). Furthermore, although Feather and Woodbridge agree with commentators that life writing is currently popular, they do not agree that this is a growth state, finding the popularity of life writing “essentially unchanged” since their previous study, which covered 1979 to the early 1990s (Feather and Reid).

**Australia: Nielsen BookScan 2006 and 2007**

In the Australian publishing industry, where producing books remains an ‘expensive, risky endeavour which is increasingly market driven’ (Galligan 36) and ‘an inherently complex activity’ (Carter and Galligan 4), the most recent Australian Bureau of Statistics figures reveal that the total numbers of books sold in Australia has remained relatively static over the past decade (130.6 million in the financial year 1995–96 and 128.8 million in 2003–04) (ABS). During this time, however, sales volumes of non-fiction publications have grown markedly, with a trend towards “non-fiction, mass market and predictable” books (Corporall 41) resulting in general non-fiction sales in 2003–2004 outselling general fiction by factors as high as ten depending on the format—hard- or paperback, and trade or mass market paperback (ABS 2005). However, while non-fiction has increased in popularity in Australia, the same does not seem to hold true for life writing. Here, in utilising data for the top 5,000 selling non-fiction books in both 2006 and 2007, we are relying on Nielsen BookScan’s categorisation of texts as either biography or autobiography.

In 2006, no works of life writing made the top 10 books sold in Australia. In looking at the top 100 books sold for 2006, in some cases the subjects of these works vary markedly from those extracted from the Amazon.com listings. In Australia in 2006, life writing makes its first appearance at number 14 with convicted drug smuggler Schapelle Corby’s My Story. This is followed by another My Story at 25, this time by retired Australian army chief, Peter Cosgrove. Jonestown: The Power and Myth of Alan Jones comes in at 34 for the Australian broadcaster’s biographer Chris Masters; the biography, The Innocent Man by John Grisham at 38 and Li Cunxin’s autobiographical Mao’s Last Dancer at 45. Australian Susan Duncan’s memoir of coping with personal loss, Salvation Creek: An Unexpected Life makes 50; bestselling USA travel writer Bill Bryson’s autobiographical memoir of his childhood The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid 69; Mandela: The Authorised Portrait by Rosalind Coward, 79; and Joanne Lees’s memoir of dealing with her kidnapping, the murder of her partner and the justice system in Australia’s Northern Territory, No Turning Back, 89. These books reveal a market preference for autobiographical writing, and an almost even split between Australian and overseas subjects in 2006.

2007 similarly saw no life writing in the top 10. The books in the top 100 sales reveal a downward trend, with fewer titles making this band overall. In 2007, Terri Irwin’s memoir of life with her famous husband, wildlife warrior Steve Irwin, My Steve, came in at number 26; musician Andrew Johns’s memoir of
mental illness, *The Two of Me*, at 37; Ayaan Hirst Ali’s autobiography *Infidel* at 39; John Grogan’s biography/memoir, *Marley and Me: Life and Love with the World’s Worst Dog*, at 42; Sally Collings’s biography of the inspirational young survivor Sophie Delezio, *Sophie’s Journey*, at 51; and Elizabeth Gilbert’s hybrid food, self-help and travel memoir, *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman’s Search for Everything* at 82. *Mao’s Last Dancer*, published the year before, remained in the top 100 in 2007 at 87.

When moving to a consideration of the top 5,000 books sold in Australia in 2006, *BookScan* reveals only 62 books categorised as life writing in the top 1,000, and only 222 in the top 5,000 (with 34 titles between 1,000 and 1,999, 45 between 2,000 and 2,999, 48 between 3,000 and 3,999, and 33 between 4,000 and 5,000). 2007 shows a similar total of 235 life writing texts in the top 5,000 bestselling books (75 titles in the first 1,000, 27 between 1,000 and 1,999, 51 between 2,000 and 2,999, 39 between 3,000 and 3,999, and 43 between 4,000 and 5,000). In both years, 2006 and 2007, life writing thus not only constituted only some 4% of the bestselling 5,000 titles in Australia, it also showed only minimal change between these years and, therefore, no significant growth.

**Conclusions**

Our investigation using various instruments that claim to reflect levels of book sales reveals that Western readers’ willingness to purchase published life writing has not changed significantly over the past century. We find no evidence of either a short, or longer, term growth or boom in sales in such books. Instead, it appears that what has been widely heralded as a new golden age of life writing may well be more the result of an expanded understanding of what is included in the genre than an increased interest in it by either book readers or publishers. What recent years do appear to have seen, however, is a significantly increased interest by public commentators, critics, and academics in this genre of writing.

We have also discovered that the issue of our current obsession with the lives of others tends to be discussed in academic as well as popular fora as if what applies to one sub-genre or production form applies to another: if biography is popular, then autobiography will also be, and vice versa. If reality television programming is attracting viewers, then readers will be flocking to life writing as well. Our investigation reveals that such propositions are questionable, and that there is significant research to be completed in mapping such audiences against each other. This work has also highlighted the difficulty of separating out the categories of written texts in publishing studies, firstly in terms of determining what falls within the category of life writing as distinct from other forms of non-fiction (the hybrid problem) and, secondly, in terms of separating out the categories within life writing. Although we have continued to use the terms biography and autobiography as sub-genres, we are aware that they are less useful as descriptors than they are often assumed to be. In order to obtain a more complete and accurate picture, publishing categories may need to be
agreed upon, redefined and utilised across the publishing industry and within academia. This is of particular importance in the light of the suggestions (from total sales volumes) that the audiences for books are limited, and therefore the rise of one sub-genre may be directly responsible for the fall of another. Bair argues, for example, that in the 1980s and 1990s, the popularity of what she categorises as memoir had direct repercussions on the numbers of birth-to-death biographies that were commissioned, contracted, and published as “sales and marketing staffs conclude[d] that readers don’t want a full-scale life any more” (17).

Finally, although we have highlighted the difficulty of using publishing statistics when there is no common understanding as to what such data is reporting, we hope this study shows that the utilisation of such material does add a depth to such enquiries, especially in interrogating the anecdotal evidence that is often quoted as data in publishing and other studies.

Appendix 1

*Publishers Weekly* listings 1990–1999


There is no biography or autobiography included in either the 1999 or 2000 top 10 lists in *Publishers Weekly*, nor in that for 2005. In 2001, David McCullough’s biography *John Adams* and Jack Welch’s business memoir *Jack: Straight from the
Gut featured. In 2002, Let's Roll! Lisa Beamer's tribute to her husband, one of the heroes of 9/11, written with Ken Abraham, joined Rudolph Giuliani's autobiography, Leadership. 2003 saw Hillary Clinton's autobiography Living History and Paul Burrell's memoir of his time as Princess Diana's butler, A Royal Duty, on the list. In 2004, it was Bill Clinton's turn with My Life. In 2006, we find John Grisham's true crime (arguably a biography), The Innocent Man, at the top, Grogan's Marley and Me at number three, and the autobiographical The Audacity of Hope by Barack Obama in fourth place.

Appendix 2

Amazon.com listings since 2000

In 2000, there were only two auto/biographies in the top Amazon 50 bestsellers with Lance Armstrong's It's Not about the Bike: My Journey Back to Life about his battle with cancer at 20, and Dave Eggers's self-consciously fictionalised memoir, A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius at 32. In 2001, only the top 14 bestsellers were recorded. At number 1 is John Adams by David McCullough and, at 11, Jack: Straight from the Gut by USA golfer Jack Welch. In 2002, Leadership by Rudolph Giuliani was at 12; Master of the Senate: The Years of Lyndon Johnson by Robert Caro at 29; Portrait of a Killer: Jack the Ripper by Patricia Cornwell at 42; Blinded by the Right: The Conscience of an Ex-Conservative by David Brock at 48; and Louis Gerstner's autobiographical Who Says Elephants Can't Dance: Inside IBM's Historic Turnaround at 50. In 2003, Living History by Hillary Clinton was 7th; Benjamin Franklin: An American Life by Walter Isaacson 14th; Dereliction of Duty: The Eyewitness Account of How President Bill Clinton Endangered America's Long-Term National Security by Robert Patterson 20th; Under the Banner of Heaven: A Story of Violent Faith by Jon Krakauer 32nd; Leap of Faith: Memoirs of an Unexpected Life by Queen Noor of Jordan 33rd; Kate Remembered, Scott Berg's biography of Katharine Hepburn, 37th; Who's your Caddy?: Looping for the Great, Near Great and Reprobates of Golf by Rick Reilly 39th; The Teammates: A Portrait of a Friendship about a winning baseball team by David Halberstam 42nd; and Every Second Counts by Lance Armstrong 49th. In 2004, My Life by Bill Clinton was the best selling book of the year; American Soldier by General Tommy Franks was 16th; Kevin Phillips's American Dynasty: Aristocracy, Fortune and the Politics of Deceit in the House of Bush 18th; Timothy Russert's Big Russ and Me: Father and Son. Lessons of Life 20th; Tony Hendra's Father Joe: The Man who Saved my Soul 23rd; Ron Chernow's Alexander Hamilton 27th; Cokie Roberts's Founding Mothers: The Women Who Raised our Nation 31st; Kitty Kelley's The Family: The Real Story of the Bush Dynasty 42nd; and Chronicles, Volume 1 by Bob Dylan was 43rd.

In 2005, auto/biographical texts were well down the list with only The Year of Magical Thinking by Joan Didion at 45 and The Glass Castle: A Memoir by Jeanette Walls at 49. In 2006, there was a resurgence of life writing with Nora Ephron's I Feel Bad About My Neck: and Other Thoughts on Being a Woman at 9;
Grisham’s *The Innocent Man* at 12; Bill Buford’s food memoir *Heat: an Amateur’s Adventures as Kitchen Slave, Line Cook, Pasta-Maker, and Apprentice to a Dante-Quoting Butcher in Tuscany* at 23; more food writing with Julia Child’s *My Life in France* at 29; Immaculée Ilibagiza’s *Left to Tell: Discovering God amidst the Rwandan Holocaust* at 30; CNN anchor Anderson Cooper’s *Dispatches from the Edge: A Memoir of War, Disasters and Survival* at 43; and Isabella Hatkoff’s *Owen & Mzee: The True Story of a Remarkable Friendship* (between a baby hippo and a giant tortoise) at 44. In 2007, Ishmael Beah’s discredited *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* came in at 8; Walter Isaacson’s *Einstein: His Life and Universe* 13; Ayaan Hirst Ali’s autobiography of her life in Muslim society, *Infidel*, 18; *The Reagan Diaries* 25; *Jesus of Nazareth* by Pope Benedict XVI 29; *Mother Teresa: Come be my Light* 36; *Clapton: The Autobiography* 40; Tina Brown’s *The Diana Chronicles* 45; Tony Dungy’s *Quiet Strength: The Principles, Practices & Priorities of a Winning Life* 47; and Daniel Tammet’s *Born on a Blue Day: Inside the Extraordinary Mind of an Autistic Savant* at 49.

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