



LET'S GO LOCAL

Free speech is Abbott's first victim

BY MARK LATHAM



Former ALP leader Mark Latham pulls no punches as he scrutinises the Australian political landscape and the Labor Party's fortunes

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That didn't last long. The Abbott government's commitment to a new era of free speech turned out to be as bogus as its taxpayer-funded expenses for partying on at wedding receptions.



If Tony Abbott doesn't trust his own frontbench to communicate freely with the Australian people, who does he trust? Photo: Glenn Hun

Under the new administration, [not even ministers have the freedom of speech to do media interviews without first getting permission from the Prime Minister's office](#) – a rule imposed by control freaks.

If Tony Abbott doesn't trust his own frontbench to communicate freely with the Australian people, who does he trust?

This is a repeat of the errors of the first Rudd government, when the prime minister's staff acted as a filter on the basic functions of the executive – a degrading process for MPs who have been waiting years to turn their shadow-ministerial pronouncements into action.

With the authoritarian streak in Abbott's office, ministers have lost the freedom to act and speak for themselves.

VEIL OF SECRECY

Micro-management has also infected the new government's approach to border protection. In its determination to control the flow of information about boat arrivals, week-long delays have been imposed on the public's awareness of people smuggling. As the former minister Chris Bowen has pointed out, there is no operational reason why illegal boat arrivals cannot be announced the day they occur. The reason is entirely political, denying the electorate a chance to monitor closely the Coalition's effectiveness in Stopping the Boats.

It's not only the new immigration minister, Scott Morrison, acting behind a veil of secrecy. In one of her first meetings as foreign minister, Julie Bishop told her Indonesian counterpart, Marty Natalegawa, she wanted to deal with the asylum seeker issue "behind the scenes", to do things "quietly". Natalegawa was so determined to maintain his freedom of speech he released a detailed account of their conversation to the media.

Add to this list a fourth act of censorship: the plan by agriculture parliamentary secretary Richard Colbeck to outlaw secondary boycotts by consumers and environmentalists – denying people the right to protest against unethical corporate behaviour.

In its first month in office, the Coalition has moved to close down dissent and deny access to important information. Buoyed by the exaltation of power, the Liberal Party has been anything but liberal.

THE HARD-RIGHT HUNTING PACK

This is not surprising for anyone who has been watching the emergence of Northern European cultural norms in Australian right-wing politics. A significant number of ministers and conservative commentators come from this autocratic political background.

Here I'm thinking of the Coalition's hard-right hunting pack, a group of activists who share climate change denialism, a strong interest in race issues (especially concerning Muslims) and a determination to police what they see as the integrity of Western values.

While they claim to be libertarians, in practice they want an active role for government in enforcing their prejudices, in moulding society in the image of their ideology.

Often, they argue for dissenting points of view to be silenced. If they were true libertarians they wouldn't be so deeply involved in collective organisations such as parties, governments and large corporations.

Andrew Bolt is a case study in this contradiction. He has a habit of supporting free speech for himself but censorship for his opponents. Last week he called for journalists who write about climate change "scaremongers" to be sacked.

On his *Herald Sun* blog, Bolt censors his reader's comments, falsely blaming the Australian Press Council for this practice. He has even called for this body to be

abolished – a loss of freedom for anyone who wants to complain about newspapers.

In the electronic media, Bolt is no less authoritarian. He has banned critics from his TV program. Last year, after condemning Alan Jones's "died of shame" slur, the commentator David Penberthy was axed from the Steve Price/Andrew Bolt program on Sydney radio 2GB – censorship that Bolt readily endorsed.

The Abbott government is following the hunting pack's lead – imposing an unwelcome, restrictive foreign influence on Australian politics.

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http://www.afr.com/p/opinion/free_speech_is_abbott_first_victim_T1dnTWxeTDno7y3cLJwVfM

Our Tribute

Recorded at a recent public book launching function

To the traditional custodians of our culture, the citizens of this land who have not been bludgeoned or defamed into silence by insane and degenerate bureaucracies implementing repellent agendas that are inimical to our life and culture.

This is our Natural Knowledge, of the Natural Aristocracy of the people, derived from the Natural Order, **as against** the twisted alien dogmas of virtual reality, [that is 'political correctness'], that now spew forth from once proud universities. Similarly, natural food is infected by the poisons and drugs inflicted upon us by the incubi and succubi of culturally and genetically corrupt **s**pielers and fraudsters.

We must beware both the reactionary and revolutionary forces that would corrupt our minds, turn back the clock, and inflict on the land a fantasy, a mirage, that has only one outcome, and that is death, to both our culture and all our people.

We honour those settlers and explorers who opened a desert of scattered ill-fed inhabitants to a new future and a new people who made the land bloom for the millions that are here today.

This is the 550th title recording the lives and actions of all the inhabitants of Australia. We intend that there will be many more.

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- has been observing and writing about people for a long, long time, and here is a small selection of his work output. And don't worry about the quotation marks used by Denis. He's still from the old school where the direct quote uses two "...", rather than one '...' as is now the custom. Enjoy!

Dexter and the Dandy

Once upon a time, long long ago in the Aussie bush, when bank managers were respected, and wine wasn't, there lived two bachelors, Dexter and 'The Dandy'.

They both enjoyed dancing, but not only was Dexter a very ordinary dancer he was too young and hard up to afford a decent vehicle.

The Dandy was a good deal older than Dexter, and although he wasn't rich he dressed fastidiously, danced like Fred Astaire, and drove an enormous, elegant car.

Seeing young Dexter was such a nice considerate young bloke he took pity on him and used to take him to some of the country balls that were so popular then.

One day, by a great stroke of luck (so he thought) Dexter managed to induce the daughter of their local bank manager to accompany him to a ball.

The Dandy was only too happy to encourage others to share his love of ballroom dancing so another passenger was no problem.

Well it was no problem on their way to the ball, but soon after they arrived the girl decided Dexter was a drag; so she ditched him and disappeared outside with one of the local hoons.

Worried sick Dexter told The Dandy, and then they split up and spent what seemed like most of the night frantically searching for her.

By the time they found her abandoned in the scrub she was comatose after drinking nearly a bottle of what was known as 'leg opener'.

Whether or not it had that effect on her is lost in the mists of good taste. It had certainly opened her stomach though! She had been sick all down the front of her expensive ball gown and was no longer the kind of passenger anyone would want in their nice car, but Dexter and the Dandy were true gentlemen. For the sake of her reputation they covered up for her, fussed over her, cleaned her up, got her on her feet, loaded her into the limo, took her home to her parents, and carried her gently inside.

Hoping to spare her parents the embarrassment of thanking them and perhaps apologising on her behalf Dexter and The Dandy discreetly withdrew.

Both had appointments at the bank a day or so later which they were reluctant to keep, lest they further embarrass the bank manager.

Instead of apologising for his daughter's lack of manners however, in dumping her escorts in favour of someone else, and thanking them for all the trouble they had gone to finding her and bringing her home, he abused each one for "leading his daughter astray" before suspending their overdrafts.

The Dandy was so upset at having his good name dragged in the mud so he took it out on Dexter the next time he saw him.

"Don't ever expect to bring your drunken girlfriends with me again!" he shouted.

Still; things could have been worse for Dexter. If he'd married the girl, not only would he have been lumbered with a wife who wasn't loyal and couldn't hold her grog! Worse -he could have wound up with a bank manager for a father in law!

True story, but I can't reveal the source!

Apsley, Vic. 21/1/02

PS: This is one of my favourite stories as recorded for the ABC, but now my old friend Allan Schiller has passed on I guess I can say it was his story and it took place at Pinnaroo, SA.

An Officer and a Gentleman

In the SA mallee soon after the war, when the lady of the house took ill, a farming family employed a Dutch lady, who had recently emigrated. When she got to know them she told them that when the German army took over Holland, she was required to billet one of the officers.

He was a courteous, considerate man, who had his own rations, so one evening when he realised how short of food she was, he invited her to share his meal.

She politely declined the offer, saying she had nothing against him personally, but since Germany had occupied her country and she had been given no choice in the matter of billeting him, she felt she would be compromising her ideals if she accepted his invitation.

He said he understood how she felt, and made no further attempts to coerce her into sharing his meals.

When the Allies entered Holland and the German Army began falling back, she was surprised to find that instead of getting

out while he had the chance, her uninvited guest kept returning each night, looking more and more drawn and worried.

"Most other German officers have left," she said finally. "I'm surprised you're still here."

"I will be leaving tomorrow," he told her. "I could not go until all my men had been accounted for." Then he smiled, saying that seeing he could no longer be regarded as an invader, perhaps she could now do him the honour of sharing his last meal?

She replied that she would be honoured to accept his invitation, as he had shown himself to be a brave and considerate man.

That evening the Dutch lady and the German officer sat down as friends, to their sparse meal.

Apsley, 31/1/02, from a true story told to me by Allan Schiller, Pinnaroo.

The Bosch

Soon after my father got back from the war he bought a broken down tractor that had stood out in the weather for years. After he had stripped the engine down and found it to be repairable his interest turned to its Bosch magneto. Magnetos were as scarce as hen's teeth at the time and the Bosch seemed as dead as a maggot, so if only it would still work after it had been tenderly dried in Mum's oven he would be home and hosed.

Next morning as he sat it on the bench and turned it by hand, closely watching the gap in the spark plug he had connected to it the Bosch threw a tremendous spark, not through the plug but right through Dad's body!

Later in life I trained myself to accept being zapped by ignition sparks – it was one of those macho things we did, but besides suffering a bit of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder Dad didn't need to prove himself in such a juvenile way so his mind was not programmed to accept sparks that were deliberate or accidental. He simply gave a great shout, which began as one of alarm but quickly switched to one of triumph and gratitude. "Best engineers in the world, the Germans," he added – his voice still echoing and re-echoing in the scrubby hillsides.

I don't recall there being much anti-German propaganda during the war – the Japanese were a much more immediate threat, and there were so many decent people in SA then with German surnames I don't we were nearly as terrified of being taken over by Germany, but Mum had bought me a subscription to 'The Champion' comic. That was printed in the UK and naturally was full of anti-German propaganda, so I suppose Dad saw my look of horror, because he gave me my first man to man talk then.

"Our enemies are not the men in other uniforms," he said. "They are just like us. They are simply doing what they have been told to do." Then he added darkly, "Our enemies are all around us!"

I waited on tenterhooks to hear who our real enemies were, but as so often happened Dad had run out of words!

He never got onto that subject again and I never asked because Dad only got heavy when it suited him. Questions only troubled him, possibly because Mum never tired of telling him how much more education she'd had.

What Dad *did* tell me years later was that during the war, soon after he had been supplied with a motor boat requisitioned from its civilian owners the senior of a group of naval officers strolling around the docks asked him how liked his new craft. Engines were the love of Dad's life and he was so impressed by the German built engine in the Kingfisher (probably a Junkers marine diesel judging from what he said) he forgot the Germans were our enemies and sang its praises. Afterwards his own officer admonished him for telling the truth instead of saying what was expected of him.

"When your own side tells lies and expects you to lie as well how can you believe anything they say," he asked.

Now, 70 years later, I guess I would have to say that particularly when the stakes are high you can't believe anything anyone tells you, you have to regard their every statement as a proposition, and remember the bit in the Bible that says, "By their deeds ye shall know them."

Apsley, 1/12/13

Advantage from Adversity

Maybe I'm a bit paranoid but whenever I see films portraying country people in the southern states of the US as barbarians I think it's no wonder some city people think all country people are gun crazed hillbillies.

Take the film 'Undertow' for example, in which Charles Dance is a psychotic hillbilly with a moonshine still in the cellar and more guns and mantraps hanging on the walls than you could shake a stick at. He gained his glamorous young wife when she was 13 as payment for what her father owed him, presumably for moonshine, and naturally he ill-treats her and the Asian or maybe Indian looking young fellow she rescues from a car crash. Just as naturally; as you would expect in a Hollywood masterpiece, the young drifter, played by Lou Phillips, has to kill the hillbilly and seduce his wife as part of the rescue package.

A great many of these films set in the south seem to have a brutal and crooked Sheriff as the arch villain who treats women and Negroes even worse than the hillbilly element.

Perhaps Robert Elliott Burns started the 'hillbillies versus civilized society' ball rolling with his book 'I am a Fugitive from a Georgia Chain Gang'? Perhaps it's just a continuation of the U.S. Civil War?

I guess the only reason there aren't quite so many films portraying Australian country blokes in the same unfavourable light is because our movie industry isn't as wealthy and powerful as Hollywood.

The funny thing about all these outrageous films portraying bushies as violent Rambos is that sometimes there is an element of truth in them; possibly because country people in general are more practical than most of their city cousins; and less spied upon by their neighbours and the police!

Take Ross, one of my father's old friends, for example.

After spending his entire working life dry-land farming Ross finally became wealthy enough to retire to a coastal town leaving his sons to work the family farm and others they had bought.

Now at last Ross was free to pursue his two favourite hobbies, gardening and fishing, almost fulltime.

He got stuck into the garden and soon had a mass of finely tilled beds filled with sprouting flower and vegie seeds.

He'd noticed the odd wandering cat cutting across their yard but hadn't thought much about them, other than dreamily thinking they might grab the odd mouse and thus stop them breeding up and becoming a nuisance.

Ross soon found his optimism was totally unfounded. The local cats seemed more interested in fighting and fornicating than catching mice and what was worse, Ross's immaculate garden beds seemed to attract them.

All night long, every night from then on, so it seemed, there were hundreds of cats in his precious garden yowling, growling, spitting, digging holes, tearing fur out of one

another, and in general giving Ross and his wife sleepless nights and traumatic days, as they tried to relax or repair some of the damage they had done. Great holes dug in the carrot bed; garden gnomes tipped over, and utter chaos in the potting shed. Time and time again Ross would find shattered earthenware pots and expensive plants lying mangled on the floor of his potting shed.

After all the droughts, fires, floods, plagues, diseases, and lousy prices Ross had had to contend with on the farm he was still pretty resilient, but age was beginning to take its toll. He was no longer able to start again from scratch with as much optimism as he'd once had. Now he just felt angry and depressed as he surveyed the damage each morning.

"You can't shoot in a town," his wife told him one morning as he looked out once more on his mangled garden, uttering wild threats, feeling tired and tense after being deprived of so much sleep by all the nightly circuses.

"Maybe not," he said darkly. "There's more ways to kill a cat than by choking it with butter."

Next time one of the 'boys' called on them Ross drew him aside and asked him to bring a few rabbit traps next time he came down.

When the traps arrived Ross set them in the garden and went to bed that night with the worn out barrel of his old three oh twenty five leaning by the back door.

At the first snap of a trap and the first really whole-hearted yowl of the night Ross was out of bed in a flash and out the back door, torch in one hand, rifle barrel in the other.

Whack! Then an eerie silence descended as he furtively re-set the trap and disposed of the body in a most innovative way.

"Pity in a way that we ran out cats" he told Dad as they prepared to go fishing some months later when my parents visited them.

As Ross slid one of the concrete slabs in the potting shed aside Dad saw it served as a virtually air-tight lid on an old earthenware toilet cistern buried beneath the floor with a rotting, maggot infested rabbit carcase in the bottom.

Ross showed Dad how he shook the stinking carcase in a builders' sand sieve to separate the maggots, which he then tipped into a screw top jar half filled with flour.

"Once they've gutsed on flour awhile, and OK to handle, I put 'em in the fridge till I need 'em for bait," he explained.

"They're great fish bait for some species, but now we've run out of cats I have to get dogs' meat from the butcher or get the boys to bring me a rabbit or something."

"You can't beat that for turning adversity into advantage," Dad remarked admiringly to me after he'd told me the story. "No wonder Ross was such a successful farmer!"

I'm not sure whether the RSPCA or cat fanciers would see it quite that way though.

1/2/14 rewrite.

Stumped

Back in the early '60s, a young bloke we called Perce was a familiar sight in the mallee. Perce carted hay and super when he could, but competition was fierce and his truck was only a five tonner. To make ends meet he took loads of mallee roots to Adelaide.

Hard work never worried Perce; he was as tough and lean as his axe handle. When it was necessary he could pick his own stumps, but it was more profitable when he could get someone else to do that side of it. The going rate was a pound

a ton for stumps trimmed and thrown into heaps a truck could get to without getting bogged too often.

Stump picking is a hard way to make a quid, so Perce was always on the look-out for blokes silly enough to do it for him, or failing that for paddocks where stumps lay thickly enough for profitable picking.

"Try out west of Coonalpyn," a whiskery shearer in the Tailern pub advised him.

"There's some nice little mallee flats between there and the Coorong. You can get five ton to the acre sometimes; beaut little chunky stumps that hardly need trimming."

Perce drove for miles through Rundle Street cocky country, seeing only lush pastures. After awhile he began saying unkind things about half sizzled shearers to his newly acquired off-sider seated next to him in the truck.

Just as they were about to turn back they saw new country ahead. Soon they were driving through freshly cleared ground, and as they topped a rise they saw a wondrous sight. There before their eyes lay row upon row of heaped mallee stumps.

To Perce it was like finding Lasseter's reef!

It was too good to be true he decided; someone must have their sights set on these perfect stumps. The ground was firm, with about a ton of wood in each heap. Not even the fussiest wood merchant could fault these stumps. Not much hope of buying them though he decided, but no harm in asking.

Seeing an expensive new car oozing down the newly gravelled drive towards the road Perce stopped the truck and waited by the cattle grid. The car drew up beside him, and a supercilious looking townie in a Persil white shirt wound down the window.

"G'day," Perce drawled in his unhurried way.

"What can I do for you?" the city bloke asked impatiently.

Perce was a shy, modest sort of fellow and ill-at-ease with fast talking city-slickers, but somehow in between fumbling nervously with his cigarettes and kicking the ground he managed to convey his interest in the heaped up stumps.

The city businessman's eyes sharpened and he began a rapid-fire spiel about his mallee roots. For every word Perce uttered

the Rundle Street cocky got half a dozen sentences out, practically talking him into the ground. At last Perce managed to say something about money.

"Money?" the city bloke shouted, catching the magic word, if not Perce's meaning. He'd paid a gang of old winos to heap the stumps, now he was not too sure what to do next. No need to let this lanky bushy know that though. If he knew the contractors were due to seed the paddock next month he'd try to drive a hard bargain.

The city bloke stepped up his verbal assault, using phrases like 'contractual obligations' and 'productivity incentives'.

Perce's jaw dropped. This bloke must have swallowed a dictionary! It was all Greek to Perce.

"No," the city bloke said firmly, winding up his argument. "I definitely will not pay you any incentive to take them, and I'll expect you to shift them all within 30 days, take it or leave it! You're not the only fellow carting stumps you know!" he started his car, a wily move he thought, indicating that the interview was over.

"Okay then," Perce told him, managing to look disappointed. "I'll have 'em out of it in a month."

They shook hands on it. (The city bloke knew *that* much about bushies) then he was gone in a great cloud of dust.

"Bloody old tightwad," Perce's offsider commiserated! He was as new to stump carting as the Rundle Street cocky.

"Tightwad," Perce hooted. "If he'd let me get a word in sideways I was going to offer him a quid a ton for them and let him push me up to thirty bob. He's just talked himself out of three hundred quid!"

The Oracle

The rich and famous might unwind at places like Rio, Bali, or Acapulco, but for generations our family relaxed at Port Arthur. No, no, not *that* Pt. Arthur, and certainly not the one the other side of Japan! I mean the one near the head of St. Vincent's Gulf; on the opposite shore to Pt. Wakefield.

Most people think going to the beach simply entails throwing bathers, block-out, towels, fishing rods, and an Esky of beer and cool drink into the car, then heading blithely off.

You didn't do anything half so impulsive though if the beach you happened to choose was Pt. Arthur!

First you had to consult the Oracle to see if there would be any water because most of the time Pt. Arthur is simply an expanse of mud flats and mangroves!

The Oracle in our case was Grandma. Dad would ask her what the tides were doing and although she didn't quite throw hallucinogenic incense into the fire and go into a trance, the effect was similar.

"Full moon on the 13th," she might mutter, grave faced and staring into space, holding up one finger then another, counting the days since full moon. Then, after almost chanting the list of things that would affect the time and height of the tide she would come up with an answer.

Sometimes her face would take on an even graver appearance as she pronounced the verdict if it was a dodge tide. God forbid it should be a dodge tide!

Imagine how it would be for little kiddies at a school break-up as teachers and VIPs drop less and less subtle hints that Santa might be soon be there. The mums and dads steadily stoke

the excitement, and then at the last minute when it's at fever pitch they tell them Santa can't come!

That's about how it is at beaches like Pt. Arthur if you don't know there's a dodge tide in the offing. The let-down is monumental!

For hours the kids eagerly scan the horizon; then at last! They see the shimmer of water. They stare at it unwinking, until at last they can make out waves. Yippee! There is feverish activity changing into bathers, then scampering out along the age-old track to avoid the squidgier mud and meet the approaching waves on the sand bar.

Into the water they charge; knee deep. No time to waste squealing about how cold it is. A few more minutes and the water will be waist deep - for a kid that is. Deep enough to swim - but wait! Has that last wave gone in quite as far as the others?

It bloody well hasn't you know! Everyone; kids in their bathers and adults with their crabbing gear look ashen faced as the awful truth begins to dawn. The tide is departing before they can swim or crab successfully!

There are probably still some people around who have never quite recovered from the trauma, just because their parents took them to beaches like Pt. Arthur without first consulting the oracle.

ART AMONG THE EMUS

Now lest you be pondering the artistic capability of that intellectually challenged creature, the emu, perhaps I should set you straight? This story relates more to the exploits of a

wiry little old gnome of a bloke named 'Art' and the art work on his truck door, than to whatever artistic motivation an emu may have.

Like many early settlers in the South Aussie Mallee, Arthur Kernich was of German descent, and early in the 20 th. century came as a boy from the Barossa Valley, on the family's horse drawn wagon. Art did not take up the gentle and lucrative trade of farming. Instead he bought his own wagon and team and concentrated on picking mallee roots and railing them to wood merchants in Adelaide. With the right attitude, stump picking could be a relatively interesting job, far from the smells and stresses of city life, without becoming too involved in the stresses of farm life, but when it comes to being intellectually disabled; who would want to unload them, and distribute them throughout Adelaide? Not even an emu would be that silly!

As my late father in law once mused, while taking a break, squatting on his heels, rolling a smoke, in between heaping and trimming mallee roots on my cousin's scrub block, "What kind of woolly nosed old wino would spend his entire life chucking stumps this way and that?"

You might not need a uni degree to gather mallee roots on scrub blocks and cart them to the nearest rail head, but there were many challenges to be met, like not getting bogged too often.

By the time I got to know Art Kernich in the 50s., he owned a neat corrugated timber and iron cottage, right in the centre of Jabuk, and besides carting stumps, he was also the local carrier. By then of course, he had changed over to trucks, and besides stumps, was also carting grain and wool from the local farms into the railway siding. He was already well past the age when most of us gave up stump picking but Art was one of those wiry old coots who never seemed to get tired or sick. Perhaps being a bachelor had something to do with it?

In those grand days, before bureaucracy had crippled all initiative, Art was a kind of one man employment bureau and doss house proprietor, where a constant stream of unemployed youth found work and lodging, for days, weeks or months, depending on the state of their wallet, the condition of their stomach and their commitment to work. A cast iron stomach was best, to cope with Art's cooking!

Stump picking was a hard way to make a quid, even when you were self employed and able to deliver them onto railway trucks. There was no "level playing ground" then at Jabuk, physically or financially, especially when you worked for people like Art. You brought your production of trimmed, heaped up stumps, to a level which paid your wages and keep, plus a small profit margin for the boss, to compensate him for the use of his plant. The only "super" in those days, was what you applied to your paddocks. There was no holiday pay, no "compo", no redundancy pay-outs, all of which meant there was not much scope for wine, women or song, for stump pickers, after work. The boys certainly wouldn't have felt like spraying graffiti around the place, after spending upwards of ten hours trudging through loose sand, trimming, throwing and loading stumps for Art Kernich.

Art was the only man I knew who could canter around all day pushing a wheel-barrow, putting stumps into nice big heaps, ready to load onto his truck. He believed in the Biblical

concept, that man should earn his bread by the sweat of his brow, and seeing neither bankers, politicians or tax officials raised a sweat, he didn't see fit to include them on his pay roll. His "safe" consisted of tins, jars, and other receptacles full of cash, and cheques which he signed and used in lieu of cash. I doubt if he ever had a bank account, or paid tax but the local garage did well out of him, and he tidied up thousands of acres of land, ready to bequeath to the multi-nationals.

My main object in picking stumps, was to clear up our paddocks, not to get rich, so I wasn't interested in sending them to Adelaide, I just sold what I'd heaped and trimmed, to Art. By the late 50s the number of youths seeking work stump picking, had almost dried up, so he was often glad to get a few quick loads from me.

Sometimes he'd pay in cash, but seeing he was usually paid by cheque, if he owed you, say fifty quid, he'd riffle through his cache of cheques, with which the wood merchants and local cockies had paid him; until he had somewhere around fifty pounds worth. It was never less. More often a few quid over - which you could owe him, until you cut it out in more mallee roots, trimmed and stacked in reasonable sized heaps, he could reach in his truck.

Those were the days when banks bent over backwards to help country people. Someone from one of the Lameroo banks would set up a temporary office at the back of the hall in Jabuk, once a week. The banker would draw a chair up to a trestle top, facing the back door, then sit down, placing his brief case beside him on the floor. Then, having placed his blotter before him, he would lay a very large, loaded Webley revolver beside it, pointing towards the door, as insurance against anyone attempting to make unauthorised withdrawals. The Bank of Adelaide was now open for business!

It was there I would cash the cheques Art had counter signed. One cheque he gave me was 7 years old. I looked at it askance. The banker looked at it askance. "Well I can try it I suppose," he said with a sigh.

It was OK. People didn't very often go broke then. They did sometimes curse the old bloke though. Just when you thought your bills were all paid, and were considering something in the luxury line, one of the cheques you'd written out for him a few years earlier would suddenly materialise and reduce your credit.

Art's "safe" was never locked. His cottage was never locked, and he always kept beer in his fridge for visitors. Everyone was Art's mate, and everyone was expected to help themselves to a beer out of his fridge, should he be absent.

The most forlorn I ever saw him, was one day in the mid 60s, when he told us some of his jars of money had disappeared, so he would have to begin locking his house. Things were changing; not only in Jabuk, but throughout country Australia, people began finding it paid to regard strangers with suspicion.

It wasn't so much the money that bothered Art, as the fact that now things like that could happen, even in peaceful little Jabuk, and now his mates wouldn't be able to come in and have a beer while he was away.

A Case of Mistaken Identity

A military strategy that can work well against an inexperienced unit is to set an ambush near something nearby that seems a better option than the ambush site. It can be many things; a building, a patch of woods, a vehicle or boat even, just as long as it's sufficiently booby-trapped to destroy anyone who survives the initial onslaught.

I think the people who are still steadily taking over Australia knew that opposition was increasing so they set a political ambush; a politician like Pauline Hanson who would say what we wanted to hear, and maybe even mean it. Then when everyone had flocked aboard her ark they could open the sea

cocks and drown us all – just in case we hadn't already started to fight among ourselves!

I don't think I had any illusions about what would happen, but I thought it would be fun to upset the politicians and ratbags who had been upsetting us for so long. An unexpected benefit of joining the One Nation Party was that I met people I hadn't seen for decades as well as getting to know more people who shared my views – or some of them.

I'll call two of these interesting people Fred and Anna. Fred was the brother of a bloke I'd known and liked in the mallee. Anna had been what they called a 'New Australian' who as a girl had escaped from Europe. Fred had got to know her when she was working on a sheep station up north where he was 'roo shooting as a kind of money making holiday from farming. Besides all the interests we shared I liked Fred's attitude to the firearms laws. Any he couldn't sell or keep one way or another he carefully cut up with his angle grinder, burnt, then took into the police station. He said he'd done such a good job they would be flat out working out what they had been, never mind finding numbers on them!

Whether Fred struck a sympathetic copper or whether the force was too busy with all the other gun 'buy back' problems I don't know, but I suppose besides saving the government having to pay Fred anything for them, it eased his warrior conscience knowing he had not surrendered any working weapons to the enemy.

"They wanted them destroyed," he told the police girl, "so that's what I've done!"

"I can see that," she said, peering in at the mangled incinerated pieces and laughing, and that was that.

One Nation became a kind of hobby with Fred and Anna. They enjoyed travelling around, raising money, and meeting people and so on, so one day they decided to go to an O.N. meeting in Adelaide.

They said to one of the organisers that they were up from the country and were warmly welcomed, given a cup of tea and bikkies and shown to comfortable seats.

They noticed there were no Pauline pictures or party symbolism, but unlike our branch the one they belonged to was getting a bit spooked by all the threats and violence so they were cutting down on anything that might draw undue attention to them. Well this was Adelaide, a city teeming with Commos and ratbag socialists so they could understand the lack of symbolism. The names of the speakers who were to address the meeting didn't ring any bells either for Fred and Anna; still this was way out of their territory so that was also understandable; but after awhile some of the things the first speaker said didn't sound quite like something a true blue Aussie would say.

"Fred," Anna whispered after awhile, "I think we've come to the wrong meeting!"

Fred agreed and as they oozed unobtrusively out he noticed a small sign pinned on the door that they hadn't noticed on the way in. "Australian Democrats" it said!

"No wonder it didn't feel quite right," said Fred afterwards.

When blue gum fever was at its height Fred and Anna were made an offer they couldn't refuse, after which they moved even further away, and after awhile we lost touch with them.

Fred was a fair bit older than me so I guess by now he is being cared for by the sexy shield maidens of Valhalla. If ever we should meet again I think we'll probably agree that farming and 'roo shooting suited us both better than politics ever would.

Apsley, Circa 2000

Clothes Maketh the Man

'Clothes maketh the man,' we are told.

We sure don't look much without them, and naked my father looked rather like a pouter pigeon with his enormous chest and scrawny thin legs. In the grease stained, multi-patched dowdy farm clothes he generally wore when I him in his 40s and 50s he looked like a peasant. At 60 he was a pallid, sick man, dead at the age of 61.

At the age of 35 though in his best naval uniform he looked really fantastic, and Mum confessed that her first sight of him in uniform his 20s was all it took! The Light Horse uniform he donned to attend parades and training camps as a member of the Civilian Forces later on was equally stirring she said, if just a trifle incongruous when he rode off on his motor bike with his emu plumes aflutter.

Unfortunately there are no photos of him with the beard he grew after re-enlisting soon after the outbreak of war. That must really have added the finishing touch!

After the Japanese bid to capture Pt. Moresby had failed, and Dad was stationed in Brisbane for awhile Mum and I went up to be near him.

At that time Brisbane was teeming with American servicemen; most of them probably involved in transport and supply if they weren't part of General MacArthur's staff. Essential to the war effort, and suave looking in their elegant uniforms, but nowhere near as soldierly looking as the odd Digger I saw, who as likely as not was on his way to the front or to a jungle warfare training camp, and fully kitted out with rifle, bayonet and tin hat, plus all his battle webbing and luggage. Their

uniforms looked more in keeping with the battlefield, but the masses of Yanks I saw would have looked more at home in a ballroom; but then I was only a biased little kid. What would I have known?

To me, the US Army Negro truck drivers looked and sounded far more soldierly than their white counterparts, and to a little boy, driving a Diamond T tank transporter seemed far more important than shuffling papers in an office!

There was some kind of headquarters unit of Aussie soldiers who pounded typewriters in the top storey of one of our school buildings. They too were friendly but they carried no weapons or equipment. Didn't even wear slouch hats so I don't think we were as awed by them as by their warrior cousins weighed down with weapons and equipment.

Sometimes Dad could spend time at our flat but usually Mum and I would meet him in a park somewhere in the city.

One had a small zoo with many lively monkeys, a massive turtle, and other wildlife that didn't interest me as much.

Most of the men strolling around the park seemed to be Yank soldiers and I got as much fun from watching them as the monkeys.

Once a pipe smoking Yank soldier got too close to the bars and like lightning a monkey whipped the pipe out of his mouth and shot up onto the rails at the top of his cage where he went through the motions of smoking it.

At first the Yank was outraged at the loss but his companions laughed so much he soon joined in.

I was already too accustomed to poverty to understand why anyone could be amused by the loss of someone's personal property, particularly their own, so I hung around expecting to see the Yanks summon a keeper to retrieve the stolen pipe and perhaps chastise the wayward monkey. All that happened though was the destruction of the pipe as the monkeys all fought for possession of it.

Eventually I drifted back to where Mum was sitting on a park bench near the gates, awaiting Dad's arrival, and being pestered by a baby faced Yank soldier.

She said afterwards he was only a boy and obviously extremely lonely rather than being romantically inclined.

Obviously he didn't believe she was waiting for her husband as she kept telling him, because he knew most Australian men were either at work or at war; not mooching about parks in search of entertainment.

Had he been a *real* soldier I'd have been interested in him but I found him a total bore and so I kept a sharp lookout for Dad.

Suddenly I saw him enter the park seeming to nearly fill the broad gateway. I suppose that besides being broad and relatively tall, his loose, bell-bottom trousers, swirling around his legs, and his rolling, swaggering seaman's walk made him seem enormous. Then there were the ribbons and other complexities of the naval dress uniform, plus all his badges, especially the bomb stitched to his lower sleeve that denoted that his principal job was bomb and mine disposal.

"Here's Dad!" I cried gleefully, expecting in my innocence that the juvenile Yank soldier would be delighted to meet such a mighty and accomplished warrior as my dad.

When I looked around though, to my utter amazement there was no one but Mum and me on that broad expanse of lawn. There was no American soldier within half a mile! No wonder MacArthur and his staff had got out of the Philippines unscathed. If that young Yank had been typical of the rest no one could possibly have caught them!

Apsley - Rewrite 8/12/13

The Spooky Old Inn

My mind was not really opened to the possibility of ghosts until my belief in the rational side of life had been jolted by an incident that occurred at the Bushman's Inn in 1976.

The simple fact that a solid, well situated old building had lain derelict for 16 years should have told us something; and now when I see apparently sound homes demolished for no apparent reason I wonder if they too have been affected by some unsettling force for which there was no rational explanation?

Our inn certainly looked a fitting home for ghosts, especially when viewed from the north with a full moon illuminating the stone wall of the 2 storey section.

Before we bought it I just *knew* there were no such things as ghosts, and I had even compiled quite an impressive mental list of practical reasons to convince myself because I didn't *want* to believe in anything spooky. If you at least believe them possible it opens up a whole can of worms. No one likes to think that they too might become a troubled spirit after they die.

A "ghostly" tapping I thought for instance, might simply be a leaky water pipe dripping inside a hollow wall.

All my common sense explanations fell in a heap one night however when I heard "footsteps" on the staircase next-door to my office.

I had declared the two storey section of the inn off limits at night because not only did the staircase require repairs, there was no power in there for lights.

I raced out to the kitchen in a parental fury to see which kid had defied me, but they were all innocently watching TV and the deadlocks I'd fitted on the 2 storey doors were still locked. Obviously I had to come up with a better theory than a leaky pipe to explain that one!

I have since found that what sound like 'footsteps' to be one of the most common unexplained phenomena.

Not only did I fail to find a practical theory for them, they continued at regular intervals, and our eldest daughter who was sleeping in a caravan in the courtyard, had been reporting strange noises upstairs nearly every night. People must be getting in at night she reckoned, and to prove it she tied fine cotton across doorways and onto latches.

The noises continued but the cotton all remained intact, but that problem was easily solved. I simply moved teen-age daughter and caravan as far as possible from the building!

Then, one memorable day I found my better half on her knees, ashen faced and immobile in the midst of weeding the courtyard. "I heard the footsteps too," she admitted, so stunned she actually apologised for having doubted my word (or my sanity?).

This is the one redeeming feature of living in a place where weird things happen; seeing the instant conversion of unbelievers!

The funny thing that day was that I had just come past the stairs and not heard or sensed anything!

When our son visited us between jobs he too expressed his disbelief in spooks in the nicest possible way. We had been working too hard, worrying about business matters etc. etc. He then volunteered to repair one of the upstairs bedrooms, partly for his own use when he was home, partly to demonstrate how it was only the psychological effect of the run down, dreary surroundings affecting our minds.

Every night as he sat down to eat with us in the single storey front section he'd gently remark that no restless spirits had visited him that day as he worked upstairs using a lead through the window from the workshop to power his tools!

It was an auspicious night when he lit his candle prior to ascending the stairs for a session of discordant music before sleeping in his new bedroom for the first time.

When he came down for his supper a few hours later he was rather pale.

"Well," he said finally and reluctantly. "I think I must've made contact with it too!"

He said as he ascended the stairs it was as if something crashed into the backs of his legs, nearly bringing him down. The candle went out and he was left in pitch darkness wondering what had happened. The fact that he stayed there, re-lit his candle, then continued on his way upstairs, probably explains why I tolerate his views even when they diametrically oppose mine. At least he's not a wimp!

Scarcely had he reached his room, closed the door and sat down on his bed, than he heard 'footsteps' approaching along the passage. As they stopped outside his door, he waited with some interest to see if the handle turned!

Nothing further happened however, so after awhile he switched on his stereo, and anyone who has heard his music will understand why the presence never troubled him again.

This single visit of a spirit (if that's what it is) to a newcomer or a change to the building seems very common.

You expect long time marijuana users to have strange experiences. You expect chronic alcoholics to see pink elephants, but not so long ago a very 'with it' young lady in a most responsible job, told me her family had once lived in a house where a newly installed door with a deadlock was repeatedly found unlocked every morning when they woke!

A force that can undo a deadlock is something that has to be reckoned with is it not?

My son said that perhaps the strangest thing with his experience was that the 'footsteps' were like leather soled shoes on bare floorboards, whereas we had some thick old carpets laid in the upstairs passage at that time.

A good while later our youngest daughter claimed to have seen "a woman with long fair hair, wearing old fashioned clothes, holding a candle as she walked to the head of the stairs." The fact that we didn't believe her will be readily understood by any parent of a brooding and manipulative teenager not above experimenting with drugs; besides, no-one else had reported anything of that nature.

Many years later however when she seemed more responsible she repeated the story word for word, which made it more believable.

Eventually we set the 2 storey up as a museum and the reactions of people going upstairs knowing nothing of its history were sometimes quite surprising. Many described exactly the same feelings we had experienced in exactly the same places. A feeling of coldness followed by acute depression engulfed them. This was followed by an overwhelming desire to leave!

One little girl went bounding upstairs laughing and enjoying herself immensely until halfway up she stopped dead and began screaming hysterically. Her parents were dumbfounded as she had never acted that way before. The only way they could comfort her was by taking her out of the building, promising never to take her back there.

You can see why we weren't very sociable towards something that deprived us of custom!

One evening after lugging a heavy cast iron grate up the stairs, a friend and I left it on the landing, saying with humour grim that we hoped the spook wouldn't fall over it in the night. Next morning the heavy, broad based grate was on its back. Explain that if you can? It would have taken a considerable force to tip it over, and as always, the building was securely locked at night.

Things went from bad to worse. Frequently we'd find things upstairs had been moved overnight, and finally the eerie atmosphere moved from upstairs and invaded our living quarters in the front section of the building.

By enlarging a window that had been blanked off by the stairs when the 2 storey was added I made a temporary door that enabled us to squeeze from the 2 storey to the front section and vice versa. After we made our bedroom in the single storey section close to the door I used to say jokingly never to leave it open lest the spook take it as an invitation!

Soon after that I woke one night rigid with fear, convinced the 'thing' was standing right beside me as I lay in bed. My sleeping wife's hand was only an inch away, and I badly wanted to touch it in order for our souls to kind of gang up on the interloper, but I couldn't even manage that.

I fancied the thing was trying to communicate, sending me a psychic message that it wanted me to help it find where it belonged.

I sent a frantic thought message back telling it to clear off as I couldn't help it, and it seemed to flee with a despairing psychic wail that reminded me of a hurt dog.

What was even more curious, instead of lying awake a long time trying to get it out of my mind I sank into the most peaceful sleep imaginable. Explain that if you can!

Next morning I saw that the temporary door had either been left open – or somehow opened during the night!

Before you ring for the men in white coats to take me away let me explain that others; some I know quite well, have experienced that same horrible feeling. Some books claiming to understand something of the psychic world describe it as a ghost sitting on your chest. Other publications striving to rationalize human experiences say it's a medical phenomenon known as 'sleep paralysis' in which the body remains asleep while the mind experiences horrible hallucinations.

That's what I'd like to believe but it only happened the once. If it's a medical condition why hasn't it happened to me since?

I make no claim to understand any of it. I didn't like it at all; especially in our house!

I don't know how I'd have handled the situation the next night, but happily we were going on holiday in the morning.

When we returned three weeks later I screwed up my courage and groped my way through the dark to the foot of the stairs in order to switch on our temporary power arrangement for the two storey section. To my great relief the hostile vibes I had come to expect and dread were absent.

Soon afterwards when our youngest daughter returned after a long absence and went upstairs she called out excitedly. "It's gone! It feels OK up here now."

After a few more weeks' peace, our eldest daughter heard about a newcomer to the town, a lady with alleged psychic powers she wanted to bring around one night to read our fortunes.

I was at first hostile. I didn't want her stirring up whatever it was!

When the old lady got me to dim the lights until we could barely see one another it was hard not to laugh, it was all so corny, but when she gave me a "reading" as she called it, I no longer felt like laughing. It was as if she could read our minds.

There are many charlatans in the psychic game. They know what names were popular in the past, and can easily suck the gullible in by saying stuff like "Does anyone have a John who has passed over?" "Does anyone have a relative who was very ill in their last days?"

Well doesn't everyone?

Ruth didn't charge for her services, and as we got to know her better we felt that if she was a fake then she was fooling herself as well as us.

The grand finale came that first night when her eyes went to the door, then appeared to follow the progress of some invisible person who sat across the table from her, after which she did a good deal of mumbling and nodding which was incomprehensible to us – or possibly acting out her part. By now I had reverted to scepticism, and even when she told us afterwards the spirit form of an ostler named "Albert", who had inhabited the inn in days of yore had spoken to her, I didn't believe a word of it.

Then she added apologetically that she'd heard we were being troubled by a

restless spirit and had stopped outside the inn one night, called it down, and persuaded it to move on.

According to Ruth Albert had just popped back temporarily that night to say he was happy in the wide blue yonder and wouldn't trouble us again, though he made no promises about never paying us an occasional social call. She also warned us that Albert might not be the only spirit who called our old inn home.

The time Ruth mentioned sending Albert on his way coincided with the time the bad vibes had ceased. She could possibly have wormed this information out of a friend of our youngest daughter, whom she also knew, had time permitted, but I doubt if it had, and there seems to be a definite pattern to this kind of thing.

Many of the things Ruth predicted have come to pass. When our daughters asked her if they'd have children, she predicted two boys for the eldest, and then hesitated, as if seeing something unpleasant for the younger one. After further consideration she said 'no', but that she would be like a shady tree under which many people would shelter during her life.

That has certainly come true. That daughter lost her first child and is unlikely to have more, but many of society's lame ducks seek shelter under her branches.

Our other daughter duly produced a son, and then shortly before the birth of son No.2 I dreamt of a little girl coming skipping along our path to visit us. That time I was right and Ruth was wrong. No.2 was a bubbly little girl, so my psychic powers must also be pretty good!

Early in our brief relationship Ruth asked me if I saw many bright colours when I closed my eyes prior to sleep.

When I said I did she claimed it was an indication of strong psychic powers, but that I was pushing them away.

I sure was! If I was psychic I didn't want to be, and at about that time at least I stopped seeing the colours.

I still have what seem like psychic experiences, but very few now.

It's as though only the strongest messages get through, like the time a family member unexpectedly passed away. That message was pretty garbled but it told me that something had happened which would seem terrible, but in reality was not.

That experience was not scary in the least. In fact it was as if an angel or some other heavenly messenger was with me.

A good many years after we'd sold the inn, and the lower part of the 2 storey had become part of a licensed restaurant, a group of us went there for a meal. After awhile I looked towards one of the ladies, and to my surprise, I saw her necklace was undone, yet it seemed to hang suspended with each end sitting on top of her shoulders as if held by invisible fingers for a second or so, before falling into her cleavage.

She said it had never undone before, nor has it since, and though she isn't normally the most relaxed of women, she said it gave her a warm tingle as it undid, as if an old friend had played a joke on her.

Was the "second or so" it seemed to hang there, simply a split second, frozen in time so to speak, or was Albert there with us that night, enjoying himself with his adopted family?

Apsley, 10/1/03 – tidied up 8/12/2013

The Ash Wednesday Fire

Early on the 16th day of February 1983, a hot north wind began rising.. At the time I was unable to work because of a back injury, so the dry heat suited me admirably, enabling me to move more easily than I had in weeks.

As soon as the shops opened, I rode my motorbike around to the doctor's surgery to make an appointment. By now I felt a great sense of exhilaration. My back-ache had gone, leaving me feeling young and supple once more, but it was more than that.

In his description of Black Thursday Thomas McCombie said the winds for the previous two months had felt highly charged with electricity. Perhaps that's what it was that affected me so much that Wednesday in '83? I had experienced plenty of nasty hot, dusty north winds in the mallee and the mid north, so this hot wind was nothing new. Perhaps it was the novelty of a hot north wind at Penola? After all, the bottom storey of the Bushman's Inn was cool on the hottest day, and I didn't have to work outside, so I was free to enjoy what looked like being a day out of the ordinary.

It felt so good riding my motor bike about in the hot, gusty, north wind, I took a slow joy ride out the Casterton road for half a mile or so.

On the way home I stopped at our old cottage in Portland Street to set a hose trickling on the garden, not too surprised to find our dog Taffy there. Not liking The Bushman's Inn much, he often went back to the friendlier, familiar surrounds of our old cottage. What *did* surprise me was his demeanour! Normally his greatest joy was riding on the parcel carrier of the motor bike, but when I started it and called to him, not only did he disobey me, he hung his head and grovelled. He was so reluctant, showing such fear, I couldn't help laughing. "Come on Taffy," I urged. "What's wrong? Do you know something I don't?"

I had not been home long before there came a radio report of a fire somewhere north of Furner. "Due to the high wind, it is

not expected to develop a wide front," the reader said reassuringly. "No," I said, going cold, "but it'll run through to the sea if they can't stop it - then the cool change will bring it back to us on a hundred mile front!"

The next radio report said the Kangaroo Inn Area School had been evacuated. Typical Education Dept. hysteria, I thought.

There was a tiny core of dedicated members in our local CFS group I felt guilty about letting down but after my time in a Woods & Forests Dept. fire crew they seemed dangerously unsupported by Council, the CFS hierarchy, the public, and some of their own members who appeared to be in it purely for thrills. It seemed I had a minor accident or near miss every fire I went to with them; all of them unnecessary, and I had developed a morbid fear of dying in my next big fire.

It was therefore some time since I had been to a fire with the CFS, but I thought if it got too bad, a state of emergency would be declared, and volunteers would be called for over the radio. Then I would have no excuse to stay home. Throughout the day however, the radio remained totally divorced from the reality of the situation, giving many of us the impression that nothing much was amiss.

As the wind grew stronger and hotter I grew ever more restless, making repeated trips upstairs to try and see something. Visibility was down to a few hundred yards as brown dust obscured everything. Then the sky in the south-east cleared briefly, and I saw a shaft of sunlight reflecting off an immense smoke cloud, rising far above the dust clouds.

To say that was a dramatic sight would be putting it mildly. It was stunning; not because it was any bigger than other smoke plumes I had seen, but because of all the dust around it, and the uncanny appearance of the sky behind it. It was like something out of the Book of Revelations; the end of the world perhaps?

Soon afterwards the wind shifted to the west. Before long the whistling of power lines had risen to a shriek, which reminded me of recordings I'd heard of falling bombs.

Having once been in a fire tower where I recorded wind gusts of 60 knots. I judged the Ash Wednesday gale to be about the same, and does the Beaufort Scale not say 'phone lines shriek at 60 knots?

The sun became an eerie red disc as smoke partially obscured it. Suddenly it grew quite dark.

The power went off and shortly afterwards, Grant, our daughter's fiancée, got back from work.

We still could not envisage any threat to Penola, nevertheless after a short conference he brought his mother and grandmother (Nanna Schwab), around to our place, more to ensure their peace of mind than their physical safety. Anne meanwhile had invited the two ladies from nextdoor, from their slab cottage, to the greater security of our old inn.

Nanna must have realised her home in the Adelaide Hills would be in danger, yet unlike many people much younger than her, with much less cause for worry, she never showed a hint of anxiety.

I felt our old inn, with the massive stone walls of its two storey section protecting the front from any radiant heat, to be one of the most secure buildings in town. There was only one window on the west, and that was in the top storey. When the fire front passed, people who had sheltered in the front part of the building, could easily move out into the street if it caught fire.

Grant and I put the bit of firefighting gear we had in his car, as we knew Alex Douglas had gone out to Ellis's farm on the west side of town. He was looking after their stock while they were away, and we knew his wife Margaret, would be worried about him, as being Scottish migrants, they had little knowledge of bushfires.

If Alex was worried he showed no sign of it, but I felt uneasy, not knowing what was going on out in the smoke. There were not many ashes falling out there, but we urged him to go home. We told him there would be little he could do if the fire front came his way. The small timber and iron cottage wouldn't have provided much cover, and there was little in the way of sprinklers to damp the place down, but Alex kept saying he'd promised to look after the farm, and he would not go back on his word.

"Silly old bugger!" Grant and I agreed, falling back on the good old Aussie habit of rubbishing those who have gained our respect.

The few falling ashes were cold, suggesting to me there was no immediate threat, but it was unnerving not knowing where the front was, or where it was headed. We switched on the car radio, thinking surely by now the Mt. Gambier stations would be broadcasting proper fire reports.

I stared in disbelief, as sensuous music backed a sexy feminine voice advertising ladies undies. Any other time we'd have made some macho joke, but that was bizarre. Didn't city folk realize what was happening out in the country?

(Years later – in 2013 I got talking to an old chap at the Lucindale museum who had been in the thick of the Ash Wednesday fires. When I told him about our experience with the car radio – adding that the radio stations seem a lot more helpful now when there's a fire, he replied, "Ah yes and I think I can fill you in on that."

He told me that one of the fire officers he knew had rung the local radio stations so they could warn people how bad it was, but besides not being as helpful as they could have been, one announcer had even said sniffily that he couldn't interrupt his programme to give news of a bushfire!

Afterwards pressure had been applied to radio stations to ensure that such a thing never happened again.)

Alex had asked us to check on his wife, back in Penola. This we did, finding Brian Eason had taken his kids in there to stay. Margaret Douglas was not too happy, as the town water had been shut off.

I suggested she fill her wash trough and some other containers from their rainwater tank, and to put some bags and mops in them to deal with any spot fires. She seemed happier with something to do.

I found out later the police had given Brian 10 minutes to evacuate his farm, a few miles further out than Ellis's place. Soon after he had taken his kids to Margaret, the police had told him the fire front was no longer heading for his place, so he and his son Lyndon, were able to go back and do what they could to make the place safer.

Grant and I checked on our family at the inn again, finding people were being evacuated to the football oval.

My wife Anne was concerned, wondering what she should do if they were told to go.

I was reluctant to give her any hard and fast advice, because you can never predict what a fire will do.

I said she would have to use her own judgment, but if it was me, I thought I would give the police the impression I intended to act on their advice – then I would stay right where I was!

Besides our inn being built like a battleship, we had thousands of gallons of water in concrete tanks. It was probably the safest spot in the entire South-East! She thought so too!

It disturbs me to see ovals and open paddocks designated as assembly points in case of fire. So many people are like sheep when it comes to a fire, and nowadays we are becoming more and more conditioned to look to someone in uniform for guidance, rather than using our own commonsense and initiative. At least now the authorities are realising people are probably better off in their homes than making last minute dashes through the dense smoke and risking collisions, or going the wrong way – perhaps into the flames?

The Penola oval had huge pine trees along its western edge then, so it was hardly a safe haven, nevertheless a good few people went there, including some young men.

I use the word 'men' loosely!

Some were heard to remark that they wished 'the silly old buggers out at the fire' would get it out so they could go home, or back to the pub.

Anne, to her great amusement, observed one of our neighbours heading for the oval with his car boot open so he could carry his nearest and dearest to safety. Not his business records; not his wife; not his dog; but his TV!

As Grant and I set out again I noticed another neighbour standing on the footpath in front of his house holding a shovel; his right foot resting on the step of the blade. He looked the very essence of resolution, standing there in shorts and navy blue singlet, his jaw set, both the hair on his head and legs fluttering in the wind. His determination, if not his dress sense, did him credit. He reminded me of the propaganda posters I had seen during the war – the stoic Briton facing up to the Hun!

We called at Brian's place, finding him trying to get the sprinklers going around the house while Lyndon headed across to their western boundary on their tractor.

To plough a break perhaps – I don't remember.

Grant and I stopped at the corner of Easons' farm, not knowing where the fire was, or what we should do.

I felt foolish. A fire-fighter without a fire!

I have a vague memory of somebody, somewhere along the way that day, asking how we had got out there. When Grant and I exchanged puzzled looks, the person told us all the roads were blocked by the police, who were only allowing fire-trucks and so forth through.

We realised then that by making a bee-line for our destinations, and using mostly back roads we had inadvertently dodged all the road-blocks! In any case, I was accustomed to playing the major role at fires, with the police **helping** us, not hindering us!

I had never sewed the new CFS badges onto my old EFS overalls and couldn't find them anyway, and I'd never cared for the heavy old helmets we had then.

Outdated as my overalls were they still gave people the impression that I knew what I was doing and made them more anxious to co-operate, but it hadn't occurred to me that the police might not be very impressed by firefighters without even outmoded overalls, much less an appropriate vehicle!

There was a pall of smoke to the west, but no indication of a fire within many miles. The wind was swinging to the south now. The day was cooling off, so when Grant remarked that his fuel tank was low I felt suddenly insecure. I hadn't thought to ask about **that** before we'd left home! There seemed no further point staying out there anyway.

We went home and transferred our equipment to my station wagon (which had plenty of fuel!). I noticed our almond tree had dropped a big branch on one of our caravans during the wind, but there was no urgency about shifting that.

Before we sallied forth again I rushed around the shed looking unsuccessfully for my EFS overalls and helmet. The name change had been a sore point with me, but I was still technically a member, and I always found my overalls handy for getting co-operation from people, should it prove necessary.

This time as we went out past Brian's we saw the glow of the fire reflected on its smoke cloud, and ultimately caught up with part of it on a back road near Furner.

That section of fire front had been halted, and as far as we knew, the entire fire had been stopped by then. Fire crews were standing by while a farmer ploughed a break along it. We spoke to some of the crews who told us they weren't putting out anything unless it was absolutely necessary. They were holding their water in reserve in case the fire jumped the break.

"We'll be out here all night watching it," someone told us. "Not much you blokes can do now. May as well go home and get some sleep so you can relieve us tomorrow."

Back home we heard a friend, Ken Caulfield, had been caught in the fire with a load of cattle. His new truck had been burnt, yet both he and the cattle had escaped death by a miracle.

He had been so busy loading cattle he hadn't known there **was** a fire until it leapt a paddock of green potato plants and hit his truck side on. Then, as far as the 'book' was concerned, he did everything wrong he possibly could. He left his truck and ran down the road to the nearest house where a woman was facing the fire on her own. The house survived, as did the cattle but afterwards Ken's fibre-glass truck cabin was found to have melted, so it was lucky he hadn't obeyed the usual advice and stayed in it.

Reports of deaths were coming in by now, and obviously, although Grant and I had been unable to locate the main fire, it was still a very serious one, and was in fact two fires that had joined up further south.

Our daughter Rebecca had not returned from work in Mt. Gambier, and as the 'phone lines were down, there was no

way of knowing if she was OK. We assured Grant she would be staying down there over night, but deep down, knowing just how much initiative and determination was packed into our teenage daughter, we all wondered if she might have slipped through the police lines to try and get home.

It was only about then, Grant and I realised just how efficiently, if unwittingly, we had been dodging police road blocks all day. Knowing all the back roads, it hadn't occurred to us to use any of the main routes where the police were stationed, although once during our wanderings, on our way out from the direction of the fire, we had passed near one road block.

I **had** subconsciously noticed how the light summer uniforms of the two officers were clinging to their bodies in the gale, without paying much attention to what they were doing there. By then I had become accustomed to seeing police officers at fires, and co-operating with them, but on the whole their function was different to ours. We put out the fires, while they kept people out of the way. On this occasion I never imagined they might be trying to keep **us** out of the way!

Next morning, the 17th of February 1983 we lent Norma Graham next door, our portable gas fridge. At the precise moment we connected it, the power came back on; still, we left the fridge with her, as we didn't know how long the power would remain on.

Grant went to work, and was sent firefighting with other Mildara workers. I got Anne to run me down to the fire station, but there were no fire units requiring crew members, so I was given permission to go out in my station wagon, taking my friends Brian and Wayne Field.

Anne stayed when she realised she was needed at the fire shed to help feed the fire crews as they came in. Many other private vehicles besides mine were taking men out, either to fight the remaining fires, or to shoot the burnt live-stock.

I heard that upon seeing so many firearms, one over-enthusiastic young policeman asked his superior if they should do a spot check, to make sure they were all registered. His exasperated superior ordered him back to the office, but that incident was a sign of things to come.

Who in '83 would have guessed our little Browning semi-auto .22s that proved so ideal for disposing of burnt livestock, would become illegal within 13 years?

I still can't work that one out. With so many people around, it was considered too dangerous to use high-powered rifles, yet the puny little .22 bullet would kill a bull if placed in exactly the right spot, at point blank range. The Brownings had 8 bullets in the magazine, requiring only a squeeze of the trigger to fire each one, and they could be used with one hand, which was to prove invaluable, as many stock were hard to get to.

My memories of that day don't quite compute with my diary entries, or anything else. I don't recall exactly where we went that day, but I clearly remember seeing our daughter's little Toyota in my rear vision as we neared Eason's place. Not many other happy memories can compare to that one!

She had been to the Penola Fire Station and seen Anne, who had suggested she chase after me to let me know she was OK. Knowing my friends and family were all OK took a great weight off my shoulders.

Becky had Leola Eason with her. She said she **had** been on the point of dodging the police and coming home to Penola the previous night, just as we had thought she might, but her employers had persuaded her to stay the night in Mt. Gambier with them.

She then went back to Penola, where to Anne's amazement, she did exactly as she was asked. Instead of demanding to

play a man's part as we had half expected of her, she used her common sense and settled for the Florence Nightingale role, taking fire-fighters to the hospital to get their injuries seen to. Meanwhile Brian, Wayne and I found the rotten hay on the ground around Robin Ey's haystack was still smouldering, after the stack had been miraculously saved from the initial fire, so we dug trenches to save it a second time.

As we headed down a side road we saw the first immense pile of dead sheep. Then we met a police car patrolling the area, and asked the two officers where they thought we should go.

With a burst of the good old dry Aussie sense of humour I was to hear so much of in the next few days, they told us there were more than enough fires to go around, so we could take our pick. There were burnt stock, and people needing help everywhere, so we'd have plenty to keep us occupied. They said there was a big paddock of grass nearby being menaced by fire, so seeing feed would be in short supply, maybe we could tackle that?

For the next couple of hours we battled one of 3 fires that were slowly consuming the grass, but it was hopeless. No sooner would we knock down the flames, than the fire would appear once more from what had looked like dead ashes. I suppose in places the peat had caught alight, but often we would flood ordinary ground as soon as the grass caught fire. There would not be as much as a spark left; or so it seemed, yet away it would go again. This is what I meant about the mystic nature of fire. It was like one of those horror movies where the vampire keeps returning to life after being killed.

We could see the couple of big fire units in the next paddock had the same problem. In the end they abandoned that paddock to the steadily creeping fire. It was very disheartening to see them give up, and we were getting tired, which made it worse.

I saw a couple of 'roos which appeared to be unharmed, but as I got nearer I could see their eyes had been scorched. They looked like pickled onions, and the unfortunate animals were responding to noises rather than sights.

My rifle was back in the wagon, but I doubt if I could have got close enough to shoot them. In any case I would have been reluctant to do so, because apart from their eyes they looked OK. I must have been a trifle irrational by then, because I had the feeling that perhaps their eyes might get better?

As our water began cutting out, we were greatly encouraged to see a small farm unit coming along the flank of one of our three fires, extinguishing the edge.

I soon realised they were new to firefighting. Neither the driver nor the hose man was looking behind. In retrospect it looked funny, seeing them industriously putting out the flames they could see, while behind them a tidal wave of flame was about to engulf them!

I crossed some crab-hole country where there was barely enough grass to carry a fire, and when I was close enough, I yelled and pointed to the flames behind them.

After a lifetime of working with experienced firefighters, I assumed that seeing a man on foot in unburnt grass, they would head my way, and take me with them to safety, or at least dart across and spray the flames in front of me before they went.

Instead they stared at the flames dumbfounded then took off; not in my direction, or towards burnt ground, but across high, unburnt grass. If they'd got a vapour lock they might have lost their little truck, possibly even their lives.

Had they come my way they'd have been much safer, and they could have saved me from the flames that were advancing on me.

The flames were only inches high so they were scarcely life threatening, but there was a lot of heat behind them and a lot of half green reeds. Not much flame, but an awful lot of dense smoke.

I thought once again I'll be able to test the claim that there's always a layer of fresh air at ground level. I'd never found much of it in scrub fires, forest fires, grass fires, house fires, or any other fire I'd ever seen. There wasn't much fresh air on that crab hole country either, but my lungful just got me through.

Obviously the fires were intent on getting all the strips they had missed the previous day. Everywhere we looked was burnt, burning, or obscured with smoke. I knew there was a fire out along the Tower Road on the north of Penola Forest. For all I knew the fires from Kalangadoo could be sweeping across Eason's place by now. I didn't fancy going along the Penola/ Millicent Road, past all the roadside trees at Easons and Yallum Park once they caught alight, so as we were nearly out of water I suggested we make a strategic withdrawal.

The manager of the property had told us they had saved most of their sheep, but feeding them would be a problem so I felt a bit of a traitor leaving that sorely needed grass to burn, but we had no option.

Back at the fire shed Anne pushed some food at me before I went home for a shower and a rest – so I thought, but remembering all the people who were still out there battling the flames, shooting stock and so on, I couldn't stay.

Apart from what anyone else was going through, Anne had a ghastly great black thrombosis on one leg, which made me feel sick just looking at it, but she wouldn't leave the fire shed. They were too short of workers, she said.

It was dusk when I returned to the fire shed, where I was told to go to the first drain past Wattle Flat, with Rex Colbert and two timber cutters from Apsley, on the No. 4 water tanker.

In the semi-darkness there appeared to be fire units as far as I could see along the roadside, but we weren't required to do anything. The only excitement was hearing a vehicle coming towards us along the dry drain bed. It was the Wattle Range fire-truck, an ex-army Commer. As it engaged a lower gear to clamber up the bank of the drain a cheer went up. It was a dramatic sight, and some years later I saw it again on John deFredrick's property near Langkoop, still living up to its fire-truck role.

You can't keep a good fire-truck down!

There were other things of minor interest to keep us occupied, besides watching the Wattle Range fire-truck lumber out of the drain. Soon after we arrived, a team of National Park workers emerged from the scrub nearby carrying McLeod tools.

McLeod tools are hoe-like implements with a scraper blade one side and 6 prongs on the other. They played a big role in the Woods and Forests Dept., not so much for fire-fighting, as training. For some strange reason we were given lots of practice scraping small breaks with them during training sessions. Crews were arranged in military formations, 4 to 6 men in line, the first dragging aside branches with the prongs, No. 2 actually scraping the break, the rest putting the finishing touches to it, the one in the rear having a pretty easy time.

Every so often the man in charge would shout "Up one!" Then to a muted chorus of 'Up **you!**' the man in the lead would drop back to the easiest job at the rear, while No.2 took his place as No.1. It was an efficient way of sharing the work load, and for a docile fire, the McLeod tools **did** make an effective break through the deep leaf litter, but such practices always created a lot of good humoured complaints from the users.

The National Parks boss told the CFS boss what they had done, before they went.

At about that time, Pat Wilson, a council worker, brought a meal out for us. Throughout the entire emergency I ate and drank very well indeed, and I didn't miss much sleep, but I know many others were less fortunate.

Some of the exchanges over the radios, as we sat there on standby, gave us a chuckle.

At one time an imperious voice asked the Penola CFS Base how long it had been using that particular wave band. "Oh about 20 years," came the reply in a well educated drawl.

"Good for Penola!" someone called, and there was laughter along the line of waiting trucks. No-one seemed very conversational, and I felt tired, so I stretched out under a bush and took a nap.

I awoke blearily to find we were being pulled out as the fires hadn't flared up in our sector. I was pleased to find myself going back with David Davis, with whom I had worked in South East Afforestation.

In many ways the fire acted as a reunion. I was spending a good deal of time away from Penola by then, so I met many men I hadn't seen for quite awhile. Like they say, the darkest cloud has a silver lining.

Thank God the fires were pretty well under control I thought, as I collapsed into bed late that night, but not for long!

Next thing I knew, my long held premonition that a truck would hit a pole outside our inn and bring down the power lines, had come true!

I had often mentally rehearsed what I would do when it happened. I even had my torch handy by my bed.

I had just dozed off when the crash came. The night was lit with flashes of fire when the high voltage power cables touched, just as I had foreseen.

A truck had hit the pole near our 'phone box, right in front of where Koch's were living at the time.

I began waving my torch about importantly, to warn people of fallen cables. As I had foreseen, there was also a small grass fire, but CFS personnel had the situation well in hand, so neither my presence nor my premonition was of earth shaking importance after all!

A man driving a CFS unit home had radioed to Penola base that a truck ahead of him towing another truck, was weaving to and fro dangerously. "Looks like the driver is sleepy," he reported. "He'll hit something in a minute." As if to emphasise his remarks, it hit the power pole right on cue.

Due to it being Ash Wednesday - or at least Ash Thursday night, there was a fire-truck on hand - really on hand, and the base was still manned, so there was nothing at all for me to do.

As we stood around like galahs, Bronwyn Koch said something to Anne about her unborn baby 'nearly jumping out' of her when the truck hit, and the power lines put on their fireworks display.

I hadn't known about the baby until then, but we'd known Bronwyn since she was a child, and from my office upstairs I had often seen her emerge furtively from her kitchen, apparently to bury cooking disasters in the back yard, so I already had a warm and fuzzy feeling about her. In the circumstances, with so much death and devastation all around, it was really nice to hear of new life coming into the town.

Next day, the 18th with her leg still looking ghastly, Anne worked at the fire shed again all day, while I went with Rex Colbert again, this time in his truck, to help clear up dead stock. I didn't take my rifle that day. In spite of having killed

hundreds of animals over the years, thousands I suppose counting rabbits, I didn't want to have to kill any more. Not after what I had seen the previous day.

What I had seen on the Thursday was nothing to what I saw on the Friday!

There were two reasons why for 20 years I never talked much about the Ash Wednesday fires and their aftermath. One was that people who either haven't seen a fire, or have only seen ordinary ones, don't seem able to comprehend the magnitude of Ash Wednesday. The other is that it seems indelicate for those of us who didn't lose anything to be twittering about our minor traumas, in the light of others' losses and major traumas.

One story that affected me at the time was about a man who left his ute in what he felt sure was a safe area, with his dogs tied in the back, so they wouldn't come to any harm.

He was devastated later, to find the fire had swept back and destroyed his ute and his dogs. He didn't care about the ute, but the fact that he'd unwittingly condemned his dogs to such a terrible death, had preyed on his mind.

Now as I write about Ash Wednesday and its aftermath 20 years later, after listening to people on radio describing their experiences, I wonder how politicians can so blithely commit their countries to wars, which to the rest of us seem unjust and unnecessary.

I have a hazy memory of seeing two big planes flying low, heading towards the Mt. Gambier airport. I still don't know who or what they carried, but it seems probable they were carrying our erstwhile PM, Malcolm Fraser, his wife, and hangers-on.

Perhaps it was that night, as I sat watching the TV news, while grabbing a bite to eat, I saw Tammy Fraser interviewed. Her husband had been all for 'going out there,' she said incredulously, and positively wide-eyed; or so it seemed to my jaundiced eyes. It seemed he would have actually **'gone out there'** with the rest of us, had he not been prevented from doing so!

Thank God, I thought, that the white Prime-ministerial moleskins had been saved from getting charcoal on them. There was, after all, no longer any danger by then; and how many hundreds of red-eyed, grimy, **ordinary** men, women and kids had been 'out there' all through the worst of the emergency?

Friday morning as Rex and I topped a small rise out west of Penola, he stopped the truck, and stared at the blackened wasteland ahead. "I've lived here all my life," he said stunned. "I don't know where I am though. It's all totally different."

We waited at the assembly point with other men with trucks, front end loaders and so on. Don Beirworth had his bulldozers out, but the 'powers that be' weren't as organised as we were. They never seem able to improvise, the way the rest of us can. That was the pattern all through the crisis, as I saw it.

At last a couple of young Agricultural Dept. men arrived. They said they had called at one farm, where the owner had apologised for not being as attentive as he could have been, because they had lost a family member in the fire. "We felt real bastards," one of the Agric. boys said.

I felt sorry for the Agric. boys. They must have been aware of everyone's irritation and impatience, but their job was to relay instructions to us on how to dispose of the dead stock, regardless of what their private convictions may have been. When they told us we must spike the bellies of the dead stock and cut their ham strings, we knew that technically there was merit in the suggestions - but I didn't see anyone do it! And I didn't have a knife did I?

As far as I can remember, we were to bury the bottom beast no lower than 6 feet above the water level, and the top one no shallower than six feet from the surface. No-one argued, but after they had gone, someone asked a local farmer where the water level was around there. "About 6 inches above ground level in a wet year," he said.

Of course he meant on the flats. We buried the stock on sand hills which were a little higher, though probably not nearly high enough to satisfy requirements.

Weeks afterwards I heard learned voices on radio saying some of the stock might have to be re-buried to comply with regulations; but I never heard of anyone ever doing so; certainly not the officials who had suggested it!

Some of us went to an area where – I was about to write 'where dead cows were still standing'. Now as I pause for inspiration, that seems a pretty fair description of them. The living dead!

Of all my memories, none sticks in my mind more than that first group of jet black cattle, standing stock still, all facing the same way, all apparently staring straight ahead with their pickled onion eyes. I realised after awhile they weren't necessarily black cattle. They had been burnt, literally barbecued alive. Were they in silent agony? Were they semi-conscious? I don't know, but there was not the slightest flicker of movement from any of them. That was what seemed so eerie. Normally cattle will blink, swish their tails. No matter how sleepy they are no animal is ever totally still, but these appeared to be as silent and still as statues.

I suppose I was in shock. There must have been sounds of some kind, with so many men and machines around, yet I have no clear recollection of any sound whatsoever. Now when I think about it, I think I could hear the constant sound of distant shots. There would have been no birds, no insects, no leaves to stir. It was a landscape of the dead, some of them the living dead.

Someone broke the spell, saying men would be required to shoot the stock that were still alive, others would be needed to help put the stock onto front-end loaders prior to being loaded onto tip trucks.

A Council truck driver said loudly he was a truck driver, and that was all he intended doing! It sounded very arrogant and union oriented, but in reality I guess, like the rest of us he was in shock. It came out differently in different people. Most of us were probably quieter than usual.

I don't think anyone wanted to shoot the poor devils of cattle, yet we urgently wanted them put out of their misery. I suppose those of us who were, or had been farmers, felt a certain amount of guilt, because a farmer is supposed to care for livestock, and these had been so terribly let down by us we didn't want to prolong their agony by not killing them instantly with the first shot.

Rex noticed that the dead cattle we were to load were entangled in wire, the remains of the fence which had stopped their headlong flight I suppose.

He handed me a very small pair of pliers, with instructions to cut the wire shackling the beasts together. As I got out he urged me to shut the door as quickly as I could, to keep the smell out of the cabin. His concern about the smell struck me as funny. It reminded me of some of the comedies I had seen, in which everyone is urging the other fellow to play the hero. In this case though, there wasn't much chance of anyone dodging the smell for long.

I had a certain amount of immunity to the smell after years of plucking dead sheep and getting very dead animals out of troughs, fences etc where they had died. I have developed the

ability to shut out a good deal of smell and emotion when I have to, and it stood me in good stead that day.

I don't recall that small mob of cattle being shot. I suppose I shut that out too, but also I was taking great care to avoid getting any of the putrid material on me. I have no clear recollection of any bloated animals bursting as they were picked up, or of limbs coming off when they were caught in the wire. I think I shut that memory out too, but as I write, I am imagining I can still smell it on my hands. This is probably another reason I have waited 20 years to talk about it. I was waiting for the smell to fade from my memory!

I will quote here from my diary (18th. Feb. 1983) 'at Jimmy Little's there were thousands of sheep, mostly in piles of up to about 800/1,000 jammed in the corners of paddocks four or five deep in places. Photos cannot describe it, the peculiar stench of half cooked, half rotten sheep, the simmering heat of the still hot paddock and above all the terrible sense of desolation as we looked all round and saw no tinge of green or living thing besides us. Distant vehicles, fire-units and stock disposal units were weirdly altered in shape by all the mirages and heat haze. John (somebody) joined us in his Suzuki, a young fellow, obviously still in shock from the fire that had narrowly missed destroying his house and had killed his best friend. His friend had gone to the assistance of a family of four who were also incinerated. John was collecting scattered sheep on his ute, shooting the few who still lived.'

Some of the trucks carrying the dead sheep away had stock hurdles so the carcasses could be piled higher. Every so often someone would call out, "There's one up there still alive!"

Disposing of the dead and dying stock was something everyone wanted to get out of the way as quickly as possible, so I'd have expected to see men acting callously towards the ones that weren't quite dead. It was therefore a particularly moving sight, to see a group of grimy, hardbitten men, stopping to point out a sheep that was still twitching, and remaining there until someone had climbed the side of the stock crate with his little Browning and ended its suffering. Only then would they return to their work, satisfied that a death by slow suffocation wouldn't be added to what it had already been through.

Someone told me it was both horrible and difficult to cut the throats of burnt sheep, because the burnt wool was like leather to cut through.

A man of maybe 60, paused near a wedge shaped mound of about a thousand sheep. "God," he said in an awed voice, speaking for all of us. "What must it have been like when all this was happening?"

Mobs of panic stricken animals must have been stampeding blindly through the smoke, often running the wrong way. Perhaps running from one fire, only to run into another one, or be overtaken by the first. When they ran into a fire the first hundred must have fallen dead, while the others continued running over their bodies, falling dead on top of them and so on. Wave after wave of sheep rushing on over the dead, to their own deaths.

I think it was Merv Lambert who said he saw balls of fire rolling along the ground on the Wednesday. Many people spoke of amazing or terrifying sights they witnessed during the actual fire, but I found it hard enough absorbing what I had seen after the fire without taking in everything others told me.

Since seeing those mounds of dead sheep I have read accounts of ancient battles where men were fighting on top of mounds of dead. There are also descriptions of mounds of

dead warriors piled so high, no-one could explain for certain how it could have happened.

There have been many claims of people seeing or hearing ghostly battles near ancient battle-grounds. I wonder if anyone has heard the ghostly thunder of hooves in places like Furner, where similar tragedies might be acted out again and again by the spirits of the dead animals?

I remember helping someone load dead sheep on a small traytop, presumably the Suzuki I mentioned, driven by John?

It had a set of steel panels from portable sheep yards on it, and after we'd thrown the first few sheep up, on top of that, I suggested that we off-load the panels.

John looked at me, rather vacantly at first, and then I saw his eyes brighten. Then he laughed. He said something like 'what an idiot he was, not to have noticed the load of steel panels on the back. Hard enough loading dead sheep on a hot day without lifting them another 18 inches higher than you had to.' We immediately went back to the gate and off-loaded the offending panels.

I thought that incident showed the remarkable humour and resilience some people displayed, in spite of how severely the fire had affected them.

I clearly remember standing on the back of a small front-end loader driven by Ian Mingey, yet I can't remember the name of the other young man with us.

Two of us would toss dead sheep into the front-end loader scoop, and when it was full we'd dump them in heaps, or into tip trucks, to be tipped into pits for burning or burial.

Soon after we started, I found a lamb that was still technically alive. We had no rifle. We had no room to carry one anyway. All we could find in the tractor tool box to kill it with, was a short jack handle.

In spite of all the ration sheep, rabbits and other ferals I had disposed of in my life, I found it so revolting having to kill that pathetic little animal with such a small tool, I was momentarily unable to go on. After I had dispatched it, I just froze up, still crouching on the ground.

One of my companions put a hand on my shoulder, both reiterated what I already knew; that it had to be done. What words Shakespeare could have put into our mouths that day! All we could manage however must have sounded inane, but both of my new friends were so supportive they swiftly restored my resolve.

Experiences like that made me realise how people have been able to survive much worse experiences through the centuries. It was often hard to work out where paddocks had been, when posts had burnt to ash and the wire had had dragged by panic stricken mobs of animals, but presumably in the same paddock where the thousand or so had perished in a pile, we found a runty hogget which had stayed under a Mt. Gambier stone tank stand, and survived unscathed. Obviously it had been too weak to run with the others, and had survived the fire that killed all of its healthier mates, so it seemed grossly unfair when someone shot it.

"Did you find a woolly lamb with its throat cut?" one grinning, red faced old farmer asked me, as we brought yet another scoop load of charred dead sheep to leave in a pile pending the return of a tip truck.

I had as a matter of fact. I had wondered how he had apparently escaped the fire, only to have his throat cut, while all the others had been killed in the fire, or with a bullet.

"He was a runt I had at home on the lawn," the old farmer informed me. "I wasn't going to be left with a runt after losing all our good sheep, so I'll claim him off me insurance too!" The

old bloke chortled as if he was some corporate high flier cheating an insurance firm out of millions!

One of the most horrendous sights I saw was in a drain, where the fire had apparently continued burning so fiercely, the leg bones of the dead sheep had calcined. They had literally turned to lime, yet the bodies were as putrid as any we saw. This made handling them all the more difficult. Having to take hold of the rotting bodies themselves was much harder to stomach than simply handling charred hocks and legs, and there was no breeze whatsoever down in the drain to carry away the stench.

There were about 40 sheep in that condition. They were so heavy and so fragile, it took two men to lift each one. Even then they tended to disintegrate. After one or two men had found it too much and had headed for relatively fresh air a delicate looking youth joined me. He looked no more than 15.

It wasn't the kind of situation which lent itself to introductions and small talk. We just wanted to get the job done and get to hell out of there, so I never learnt his name, but that young fellow's self control made a lasting impression on me.

He had milk white skin. He was immaculately clean, hair neatly combed. He was very well dressed, but in rather outmoded clothes; which, combined with his sober demeanour, gave me the impression he'd have looked more in place at a church rally. I don't recall him saying a word, yet he didn't hesitate. He stayed with me until we'd retrieved every revolting carcass.

I fought my first bushfire when I was 9, but that didn't involve handling dead, putrid, stock. At 46, with years of gruesome experiences with dead stock behind me, it took all my inner strength to keep going. It amazed me that a boy of 15 or so could cope so well.

My next experience was equally uplifting.

A little 4 wheel drive pulled in beside me, and when the driver said he'd come to take me to rejoin Rex Colbert I recognised him as (Ernie Gibbs) the old drunk who had greatly irritated us and our other clients at our deli a few years earlier.

He had never meant to be offensive. Far from it. One night he'd simply wanted to buy an expensive Easter Egg for a child who had fancied it. The parents couldn't allow a stranger to buy such expensive gifts for their child. They were embarrassed, but the old bloke had been so drunk and so anxious to make the child happy, he wouldn't take no for an answer. In spite of him always being a happy, well meaning drunk, we could cheerfully have strangled him on numerous occasions.

As I got in the ute with him I realised he was cold sober. It was the first time I had seen him in such a state, though old residents had told me he had once been nicknamed 'The Dandy'. He had been renowned for being well dressed and well mannered.

And that's how he was again as he drove me across to Rex's truck. He was clean and tidy and incredibly anxious to help. He helped me wash my hands. Then he insisted that I eat and drink as we travelled. "There's no meat in any of those sandwiches," he assured me. "Try those salad ones," he urged. "They're really nice." They were too, and as we drove, he told me he was now working for a local farmer (Gil Skeer).

I heard later he hadn't had a drink for months, and was proving very useful on the farm. It certainly gave my spirits a boost to see someone I'd come to regard as a hopeless alcoholic performing such a useful service.

We could see Rex's truck but we couldn't find a gate into the paddock. Finally we saw a gap in the roadside scrub and of course the fence was down, but there was an enormous old

hollow gum tree, well alight, and leaning across the gap, as if it was about to fall.

We looked up at it, then "She'll be right!" we both agreed. We drove safely into the paddock, and then my kindly taxi driver departed.

"How did **you** get in here?" another truck driver demanded of Rex later on, as he joined us, and Rex described the long circuitous route he had taken. The other bloke nodded, then said, "Someone told me people have been coming in straight in off the road, but there's a bloody great gum tree across there now!"

I didn't think much about it at the time, but later, having done a few calculations, I decided it must have come down about 10 minutes after the old chap and I had gone under it. About 2 minutes after he'd gone under it on his way out!

I hadn't noticed the crash as it fell, possibly because of what was going on around me. About a year later I woke with a start, dreaming it had fallen on us as we were driving under it! How would Freud have explained that dream?

Soon after I had rejoined Rex someone delivered some sandwiches to him, which he attacked with gusto, only to hurl open the door and spit the first mouthful out onto the ground. When he had finished spitting, spluttering, and making outraged sounds, he practically shouted "Bloody mutton!"

I felt quite proud being able to enjoy mutton sandwiches in such an environment, but I must confess salad sandwiches tasted much nicer!

As our stock disposal operations came to conclusion late in the day, I had time to watch a boy driving a front-end loader. He looked no more than 12, yet he could scoop up a load of dead sheep and deposit them into a tipper so quickly and expertly, my sense of wonder blotted out the unpleasant aspects. As Ernest Hemingway said, a boy becomes a man when he has to.

As we watched the dozer putting the finishing touches to the last pit, the rest of us stood around, leaning on trucks, too tired to do much talking, but greatly relieved to have all the horrible work behind us. The dead stock did not only smell abominably, and pose a health threat, they were an all too painful reminder of what had happened. Being out of sight didn't mean they will ever be quite out of mind, but at the time it made the blackened landscape a little easier to live with.

What little murmur of conversation there was, cut off abruptly as a ute arrived containing two council workers of the white shirt and clip-board variety.

One, who I know meant well, made the mistake of briskly suggesting a sort of debriefing, along the lines of 'what have we learnt from all this chaps'. It was a classic case of poor timing. In a conference room filled with well dressed men who have just enjoyed a good meal, washed down with few beers he might have got away with it.

A young bloke not known for an excess of diplomacy, said with great gusto, something along the lines that, "Well for a start we've learnt that you two weren't much bloody use to anyone!"

As the white-shirted ones went into damage control mode, other voices added their criticism, not only of those two unfortunates, but also of the entire organisational structure.

The two didn't stay long, but their embarrassment and hasty departure was good for morale. Men, who had been too tired to talk, were now laughing and grinning, making delighted comments, feeling at last they'd had a win.

There are memories I can't tie to any specific spot, time, or day.

I have an image of a burnt out ute in my mind, which I felt sure I'd seen on the roadside on the second or third day. Next time I was headed out that way I said to the person with me that we should check it out, but he was adamant there hadn't been a vehicle of any kind there.

During the clean-up, whenever I'd go home for a break, I'd generally watch the news on TV. Perhaps that's where the image came from? What I was seeing out from Penola was so similar to the images I was seeing on TV perhaps that particular image got transposed in my mind?

I remember finding one adult sheep, which didn't look too bad, but when we turned it over we found the side of its face burnt right away. Even its skull was charred, but we had nothing to finish it off with. All we could do was stand around until someone came along with a rifle.

At last an agitated looking man came out in his ute with what looked like a .577 Martini Henry or some other equally large and ancient army rifle and shot that particular sheep. When he found another one alive it jumped up and ran away. As it did so I saw charred bones protruding from its body. Either the man with the rifle missed it or failed to kill it for awhile, because it kept on running and he kept on firing. The combination of the terrified, horribly mutilated sheep and the very loud reports of his rifle every time the man missed his target seemed especially grotesque.

"Shoot it you bastard!" I heard someone shout angrily as though to cover his revulsion.

During the clean-up of dead stock, one of my partners and I met another couple of blokes in another truck. When we had traded the necessary information, they said we would meet an elderly couple at the next cross-roads with food and drink. "Stop and eat or drink something, even if you've just eaten!" they told us.

We soon saw what they meant. I was heavily into 'the Goons' then. I had many of their tapes, which I knew by heart, and without meaning any disrespect to the old couple they were Min and Henry to a 'T'! Their skin was like parchment. They were like walking, quavery mummies, so old you'd never imagine meeting them anywhere except in an old folks home, sipping cups of tea and deploring the state of the world.

They were not being cared for though. They were parked in the midst of the vast, burnt out lunar landscape, and they were eager to care for us.

"We thought we were of no further use to anyone. Then this came along," the old lady told us, as she plied us with sandwiches and cool drink. Her eyes were glowing. Her face, in spite of its lines and age, was that of an enthusiastic young girl. The old gentleman was too intent on remembering all the alternatives he could offer us, to converse much, but he too was all smiles. They were in their element, once more being of use to the community. Perhaps that was my most uplifting experience after the fire, but there were so many.

I remember how nice it was seeing women, regardless of their age or looks, in crisp, clean, summer frocks, bringing out food and drink. One lady said she had intended wearing jeans, but someone had advised her to wear a dress, and perhaps to take out dogs or children, to help lift the morale of the men.

I didn't lose any friends, family or property in the fires. I didn't lose much sleep, or work particularly hard. I didn't even see the worst part of the fire, but I certainly appreciated seeing women in dresses, with the occasional dog or child.

After even a few hours in that terrible place, you began to forget there were still nice things in the world and that life would go on afterwards.

Next day (Feb. 19 -1983) with the last of the stock buried, I was able to do a few pressing jobs of my own. I dragged the fallen almond branch off our caravan, but didn't bother to get out the chainsaw and cut it up. There wasn't **that** much time to spare!

Grant, and I went down to the fire shed and volunteered to help repair fences, and were a bit put out to find ourselves sent to one of the big landholders, whose property didn't appear to have been as badly affected as most others had. A great number of other volunteers (finally reaching about 20 - not all of whom did much work) were also sent there, plus donations of steel droppers. This, plus the fact that it seemed to me the 'lady of the manor' was acting as if it was our duty to help them, made the day less satisfying than the others had been.

It was interesting however.

The first person I met there was 'Blue' Morris, a well known 'character' from Penola, whom I had never previously met, because we moved in different circles.

He was an enormous red-head, with the voice and manner of a jovial bull. "I'm the roughest cunt in Penola!" he boomed, nearly deafening me, crushing my hand in his grip.

For all his noise and coarseness, he obviously had the proverbial 'heart of gold' such people are said to possess. He probably did as much as some of the others put together.

One rather more cultured man I worked with, told me he worked for the Wheat Board, but seeing his route was still temporarily blocked by fires he had volunteered to help, rather than just 'sit around and wait'. One thing we had in common was a respect for Welsh Corgis. He'd had a pure bred one. My dog Taffy, was with us that day, and though he was part Corgi, it never showed physically.

He said he'd never realised Corgis were sheepdogs until one day his way was blocked by a mob of sheep the drover's dogs were unable to shift. After awhile, the Corgi had bounded out of the window and expertly cleared a lane through the sheep.

"You can leave him if you like mate!" the drover had called.

Exactly the same thing had happened to us once with Taffy; even to the drover's exact words!

In the afternoon, the pilot of a small plane patrolling the edges of the fire spoke to us via a megaphone of some sort, pointing out something that was still burning, and emitting sparks, a threat to what grass remained.

Grant and I went across to it and found a rotted tree stump below ground level was still on fire. There was a water trough nearby, but we didn't have suitable receptacles to carry enough water.

We called to the others, but couldn't make ourselves heard above the talking and laughter, of which Blue Morris comprised a large part. In the end, with a growing feeling of annoyance, we made numerous trips, and finally carried enough water in our coffee flasks to drown the fire. The others hadn't even seemed aware of the plane, let alone the fire!

In the late afternoon, when we had made temporary repairs to that fence, we all went to another fence on the same property. On the way the 'lord of the manor' stopped us, and in a peremptory way (as if we were paid workers sneaking off to the pub), he asked "Knocking off already?" He looked as if he had just emerged from the house!

Grant, who was driving, and closest to him, simply replied politely that we had finished that job and were going to the next.

At this, 'His Lordship' grunted something and went on his way. Like me, Grant was too surprised at the man's attitude to be less than polite. We hadn't expected a welter of gratitude from

anyone we helped, but that man's attitude was such a contrast to the warmth and sincerity of John (?)s impromptu speech when we'd completed the clean-up of stock on his place.

Twenty years later it occurs to me that Grant and I were probably tired and cranky by then, and after all we didn't know for certain the farmer was sitting as pretty as we thought he was.

We were glad to find there wasn't much work to be done on the next fence.

As we worked we heard an ominous crunching, and realised Taffy was eating tiny, heat dried birds, which had fallen to earth in the dry grass during the fire. Their feathers were still bright. They looked almost unharmed, and for a few seconds it seemed quite macabre that Taffy should be eating them with such obvious enjoyment; then we all laughed. It was, after all, part of nature that the survivors harvest the victims.

The 'lady of the manor' arrived with some other ladies, who had brought out cold beer and warm words of appreciation. Grant is not a beer drinker however. He just wanted to get home and enjoy the rest of his day off.

That did not deter me from accepting a 'cold one'. Before I could relax, Blue Morris (reacting partly to the beer, and partly to the presence of the fair sex) had wrenched an enormous unwanted strainer post out of its hole, and flung it aside like a Scot hurling the caber. He was so intent on lapping up the admiration (laced with a little sarcasm?) he didn't pay any attention to where the top fell.

It grazed the heel of Grant's boot! Another inch and it would have smashed his foot, but neither Blue nor anyone else besides Grant and me seemed to notice. It seemed a fitting climax to the Ash Wednesday Fires!

We returned to the fire shed, where my wife and daughter were still hard at work feeding men. I was feeling enormously tired and enormously proud of my wife and daughter. My prospective son in law hadn't done too badly either!

Throughout the emergency, my wife had been afflicted with an enormous black thrombosis on her calf that was as big as the palm of my hand, yet she had ignored it and spent as much time working in the fire shed as I had spent at the fire.

When the fire was almost out, two teen-age girls, who had not been as co-operative as our daughter, arrived excitedly at the shed, asking if I could get them onto a fire truck.

Well I knew how they felt! At that age, and for a good many years thereafter I had found firefighting exciting, but the Ash Wednesday fires were too serious to be exciting, and I had been tired.

As they prattled and pleaded, I suddenly realised that at 46 I had reached the stage at which neither bushfires nor teenage girls excited me anymore.

Perhaps someone would have taken a couple of untrained girls, but all the units were still out on the job. When I told them that volunteers **were** urgently needed, right there at the fire shed, to feed and look after the exhausted hungry fire-fighters as they came in, they turned up their noses and went home.

Normally my wife and I tend to be critical of the clergy as a class, but she said she had been most impressed with the efforts of the new Presbyterian minister, the Rev. Shellard. While the fire was still out of control and he was busily washing dishes or doing some other menial, but very necessary chore in the fire shed, one of the faithful asked him if he shouldn't instead be leading them all in prayer? "Oh I think we can do that when we get home if we want to," he replied, without stopping work for an instant.

Here, I thought afterwards, was a clergyman worthy of conducting our daughter's marriage service. Months later, with a tot of Alex Douglas's best whisky under my belt, I threw away my carefully prepared speech, and amongst other things, told the Rev. Shellard, and assembled guests, how he had passed the Adams acid test!

That night, after repairing fences, with life around us gradually returning to normal, I should have slept like baby, but I suppose that was when the reaction set in. At the back of my mind for the past few days I had been concerned about Anne's leg. Not only was I worried about her standing and walking about each day in the fire shed, perhaps making it worse, I suppose it subconsciously reminded me of the burnt, black, bloated bodies of the stock I had seen and smelt.

It has become fashionable now for men and boys to show emotion, but it wasn't during my formative years. Quite the opposite.

That night however I had a terrible nightmare about Anne's leg becoming gangrenous. I woke up half retching, shuddering, half crying, making such a to-do I woke her as well. Even wide awake I could still smell that peculiar stench of half cooked, half rotten flesh I had been smelling for days. That emotional fit was most embarrassing and peculiar, but only after I had looked at her leg and smelled it, could I convince myself it was healing nicely.

Even though I had not been directly affected by the fire, only by what I saw, the next day it was as if I was recovering from a nightmare that had lasted for days.

Although I had no more nightmares the next night, I had difficulty getting to sleep, and staying asleep, as I kept twitching and waking up. When I finally *did* fall into a sound sleep, I was rudely awakened by a mob of drunken louts shouting on the footpath immediately outside our bedroom window. (The glories of living in an old pub!)

I recognised the group as some of the youthful 'heroes' who had taken shelter on the showgrounds with the children and the elderly while the fire was at its height.

I discovered afterwards they had been thwarted while attempting to steal the stereo out of someone's ute, while the owner had been away firefighting. Now, having seen the ute, its owner and his mates, stopped by our inn for a quiet yarn, they had come seeking vengeance. In spite of the fact that they were carrying waddies of some kind, and outnumbered the other lads about three to one the 'heroes' chose to stay on our side of the street (right against our bedroom window) gesticulating and yelling, while the other youths leaned against their ute jeering.

They say you can never find a policeman when you want one, but at that very moment, as the 'heroes' were bolstering their courage prior to mounting an attack, a police car cruised around the corner, and pulled up between the two groups.

The clubs vanished, the 'heroes' became whining mice, and finally crept away after the policeman had spoken to the ring-leader.

They say it takes all kinds of people to fill the world!

I spent the next two days quietly clearing up the mess left by the wind on our two town properties while Anne hobbled about catching up with her work. On the evening of the second day I took a load of rubbish out to the dump, and on the way passed a fire truck which had all the paint burnt off one side.

I couldn't stop talking about the fire, and Anne kept reminding me she hadn't seen it. She had been cooped up at the fire shed all the time, so on the 23rd. we went for a drive, so she could see for herself.

Around Furner it looked as if an atomic bomb had been dropped. For miles not a farm or a tree remained unscathed. There were still a few unburied animal bodies to be seen. We saw many fire damaged vehicles. The chassis of one water tanker had bent until it rested on the ground. It looked like a kid's plastic toy that had been left too close to the heater.

Some people speak of houses exploding. Others said they don't, but some we saw, looked as if they had. How else would limestone ashlars scatter so far?

We went on through Millicent, Glencoe, Kalangadoo, and back home, feeling stunned all over again. I couldn't have faced driving home through the Penola Forest.

Throughout all my bumbling efforts, first to find the fire, and then to make some meaningful contribution towards extinguishing it, my heart had been with my old forestry mates on 181, which for all I knew, might already have been decommissioned by then.

Every time I saw or heard of some understandable bungle the amateur firefighters had made I had thought bitterly to myself, that couldn't have happened on 181!

Fires such as the one on Ash Wednesday are no place for what are now called 'volunteers'. No-one should expect a man to spend the time we forestry crews did in training. We were paid! We were far better equipped and supported.

I say 'a man' because I find this Communist inspired idea of women fighting bushfires or wars to be obscene. Woman's role is to heal and sort out the messes man's vanity has created.

Chief Forester Fred Pfeiffer said they didn't have to shoot trees after the fire. True, but the dead pines remained standing there in their funeral shrouds long after the last animal had been shot and disposed of.

When I had been planting pines in '71/'72, a job I hated because of what it did to my back, I had nevertheless made a note of some of the rows I planted, intending to return when the ones which survived gulleting had reached maturity. Maybe (if no-one was looking) I might even have hugged one, thinking I helped create this wonderful thing!

In the years following Ash Wednesday I sometimes drove along the highway through Penola Forest on my way to Mt. Gambier, but I tried not to look at what I believe the economic rationalization folly cost our country. I feel certain its nit-picking economies helped destroy both the workers' morale and the forest itself, because the cost cutting included fire control.

There seemed no urgency to clean up the fire-damaged mess. No doubt it wasn't economically viable to do so!

It was more than 20 years, before I felt like returning to the forest I had loved, taking the calico map I had scrounged from the office rubbish bin in 1971.

Only then, as I stood where District Forester Jack Hare's house had stood, did I realise my map had only historic value. The blocks of new pines had all been planted within a few years of each other. The blocks of insipid new pines were a featureless green wilderness. No longer did the 1907 and 1908 forest giants dominate the skyline behind the Headquarters block. The enormous variety of plantings, ranging from 1907 to 1971, had given the Penola Forest much of its character and beauty.

I wandered rather aimlessly around where the forest headquarters had been, trying to work out where the various buildings had been when I had last seen them 31 years earlier. As I eventually located the mangled office foundations, I recalled Rex Colbert's words during the clean-up of animals more than 20 years previously, when he had found himself lost in country he had grown up in.

I really didn't know where I was, yet I seemed to hear jovial, red-faced, red-headed 'Wattie's' guffaw from the pines where the workshop had been, and where the fire-trucks were garaged. "Not to worry!" he seemed to be shouting. That was Wattie's (Walter Jackson's) motto!

Behind him, busy at the work bench, I could sense the busy spirit of Bill Fennell the mechanic, as he smiled tolerantly at Wattie, who would not be making the slightest pretence of helping him, between driving jobs. Wattie would have been more at home on a pirate ship.

At fires Wattie drove the pillow tanker, another 4 x 4 Bedford, only a tray-top, on which a water filled rubber container was mounted in summer for refilling fire-trucks. For all his piratical ways, Wattie was a superb driver. At fires he was known to wield a hose with one hand, driving with the other, putting out spot fires, as he came out to re-fill our tanks, and those old Bedfords had no luxuries like power steering.

He could spread a load of gravel so smoothly with his tipper, we hardly needed our shovels when we were road mending. With his tipper he could drop a 25 foot telephone pole into its hole, and stand it up as easily as downing a glass of port - though he sank more ports than poles! Many, many more!

After economic rationalization had removed the headquarters that Ash Wednesday (and Thursday) had failed to all that was left of the HQ block were a few exotic trees, and the cattle grid over which I had sometimes driven Forestry Fire-Trucks 181, 209, the older Inters, various tractors, and numerous less exciting vehicles. Among other things I had been a relief driver.

Following Ash Wednesday, I saw the occasional fire damaged vehicle passing through Penola, knowing by the smell, which

ones had carted the dead stock. In spite of being thoroughly hosed off the smell lingered in the trays for a long time, or so it seemed.

Perhaps it was in my psyche as much as in my nostrils by then? Several years later when we were visiting Penola, I was walking down the street, not even thinking about the fire, when a truck went by. Once more that unique, never to be forgotten brand of Ash Wednesday putrefaction hit me with full force.

Whether it's because the Lower South East has been settled longer than the mallee I can't say. Whether its because they don't have so many hardships and droughts; whether the SE was settled mainly by dour Scots, and the mallee mainly by jovial Germans; whether it was just my imagination I can't say.

Could it have been that I went to the mallee, young and full of dreams and ambition, and came to the South East with my dreams of becoming a prosperous mallee cocky in ashes?

All I know is that I never felt as relaxed in the SE as I had in the mallee, but during the Ash Wednesday disaster I felt at home down there. I felt proud to work with the SE people, and proud to be an Aussie country bloke.

We seem to function better in disasters than in good times.

Ash Wednesday probably won't ever be a popular topic of conversation in my lifetime, but occasionally someone who was there will mention something they saw, and I will feel an instant bond with them. We might never have seen a war, but we saw something very similar to war damage in February '83, and we saw it bring out the best and occasionally the worst in people.

Apsley, 2/6/2003

THE INVASION

Thanks to the sacrifices of our ancestors we have been spared the horrors of real invasion but I have some idea of how it feels to be unarmed, apprehensive, and helpless.

I will never forget one Penola Show time back in the 70s when a group of drunken bikies wearing Gypsy Jokers colours came swarming into our deli late at night.

The police (who had until then been steadfastly patrolling the main street) disappeared. The couple in the shop across the road hastily closed and departed. We were on our own, apart from a mate from my forestry days, Ray Mills, his wife and little daughter.

As the bikies swaggered in Ray took up a position in the corner behind them, arms folded across his chest. He wasn't tall but he was broad in shoulders and chest, stocky and dependable.

One bikie, who appeared to be the leader, loudly labelled himself a "knight of the road".

Customer bulldust goes with having a shop of any kind I guess, so we let that pass. Then he took a fancy to my wife, who as luck would have it, was wearing her sexiest sun frock. Having him "chat her up" was just another of those things you have to put up with when you have a shop, but when he began kissing her fingers, then her bare arms the alarm bells began ringing for both of us.

There were a lot of bikie films on TV about then, a lot of horror stories, and a lot of public hysteria. About a year earlier about 200 of them had forced us to stop on a lonely stretch of highway. That's another story, but it will help explain why just a dozen made us feel anxious. "It's OK," Anne signalled me, treating it as a joke.

It wasn't OK, and it sure as hell was no joke but we felt it best to go along with it for awhile.

I was soon somewhat diverted by a proverbial 10 foot bikie who was either out of his mind or had simply never had a brain. He bought a king size can of baked beans from me then lost it and demanded another free of charge.

"Give it to him," hissed my wife. They say fear breeds aggression, and I had certainly been undergoing a previously unexperienced level of apprehension. Nevertheless I was astounded when my fear turned to fury and I made up my mind that if I gave him a free can of beans it would be full force between the eyes.

It was then that two negatives became a positive. Hearing the fierce argument the 'knight of the road' stopped molesting my wife and began reasoning with the King Kong bikie. At this the others took their leader's lead and began busily searching for the lost cans of beans.

I think it turned up in the pocket of his leather jacket, which helped lighten the situation a little and encouraged them to begin moving off.

As they went an extremely runty, inoffensive looking bikie slipped a comic into his pocket, then as his eyes met mine he guiltily returned it to the shelf and scuttled out.

With a mixture of firmness and pretended good humour we encouraged the movement from our shop saying we were already late closing.

Next morning we found they had urinated all along the front of our shop and left a few empty beer bottles on the footpath as "souvenirs".

A few months later we heard on the grape vine that our little chapter of bikies had been barely a paragraph. It seemed they had come from Mt. Gambier and were not really Gypsy Jokers at all.

When the real Gypsy Jokers next came to Mount Gambier, hundreds strong, to some kind of motor cycle event, we heard they had taken great umbrage to the handful of Mt. Gambier bikies wearing their colours and painted a grim picture of what would happen if they didn't immediately shed them. In seconds flat the entire Mt. Gambier branch of 'Gypsy Jokers' had assumed an extremely low profile. They had just been sheep in wolves clothing. In spite of that it was a frightening experience for Anne and me. For me it was humiliating being forced to stand by while a drunk molested my wife. Had I not had the comfort of my trustworthy old mate Ray, it would have been nice to have had my old shotgun handy, and be like the old Quaker, who hearing burglars downstairs, comes to the landing. "Friend," says he. "I mean thee no harm but thou art standing where I am about to fire my gun."

Having regard for the moral and legal consequences of waving guns about, even in the seventies I settled for keeping a waddy under the counter after that experience. Why, I kept asking myself for years after that, in a so called civilized society, should a shop-keeper feel the need to arm himself? Why were such large bands of threatening looking people allowed to congregate and move about like small armies? Now, at long last, State governments are talking about controlling what the media calls 'outlaw bikie gangs' but I'll believe it when I see it.

Apsley, 6/9/96 – rewrite 7/1/10

The Schriever Experience

I once asked my friend the late Bill Schriever if he, as a youth during World War 2, had experienced any anti-German bias. To my surprise he replied quite passionately, "Yes - it was nearly bloody unbearable at times." In those days his family lived at Back Valley, near Victor Harbor. Back Valley was probably one of the first rural areas in South Australia to be developed, and people, especially those who live in reasonable comfort in fertile, isolated places can be parochial. They have no need to chase work or make new friends and allies, so maybe that was why Bill's family were made to feel unwelcome? I think by time World War 2 started there were so many people in S.A. with German surnames most of us thought nothing of it because by then the majority were well assimilated. When I began primary school at Kadina I noticed that when we boys played 'soldiers' it was impossible to have a 'war' with the 'Japanese' because nobody would agree to play the part of a Japanese soldier, so we always fought the 'Germans' because they were more acceptable. To become a 'German' soldier we simply reversed our peaked caps! Apparently many families of German descent in the Barossa Valley continued speaking German at home because there were so many living there, but elsewhere I think most fathers banned it during World War 1 because in spite of the way they were often treated they still regarded themselves as Australian. I personally thought it was noble of them to abandon the use of German Christian names for their children.

During World War 1 many altered or anglicised their surnames as well. The Schriever boys, Bill's uncles, certainly altered their surname in some way when they joined the AIF. When they arrived in France the Colonel of the battalion they were assigned to must have seen through their little subterfuge because he told them that if they were good enough to fight for Australia they were entitled to do so under their proper names. Their names were accordingly corrected on the battalion records. Unfortunately, as so often happened in those days, a pompous English general thought it was his right to check up on the ignorant colonials, and in the process of inspecting the Aussie battalion he saw there were two (and probably more) what he called 'Huns' on the roll. Bill's uncles were deprived of their rifles and bayonets and taken from the trenches to work in the cook house – at least until the English general was well gone. Apparently it didn't occur to him that by putting 'Huns' in the kitchen he might be condemning the entire battalion to death by poisoning! In spite of there being such stupidity in high places the Schriever boys, like their nephew Bill (in later years) felt betrayed and humiliated, but it's quite possible that pompous Pom saved their lives by depriving them of the great 'honour' of fighting in the trenches. Maybe we need **more** stupid people in power – not fewer?

Apsley - Rewrite - 1/12/13

In 2013 Michael Collins Piper writes two books - a brief review by Fredrick Töben

Last week I communicated with Mike Piper and he let slip that his major 2014 problem was to decide what kind of book he would write this year, as if two books in 2013 wasn't enough of an achievement! The two 2013 books are: *Ye Shall Know The Truth. A Critical Survey of 101 "Must" Books American Nationalists Need to Read and Understand Before "They" Burn Them*, and *False Flags, Template for Terror. An Analytic Critique of the Covert Model Utilized by the Conspirators Who Orchestrated 9-11, the Oklahoma City Bombing, the JFK Assassination, Sandy Hook*

and Boston. The "how" and "why" and never explained before...

Let's begin with the second one. Piper is an American who has over the years developed a cult following among those who dare venture to think outside of that proverbial traditional square. Such uncomfortable individuals, who courageously think things through without worrying too much about whether they are being politically correct or not, delighted in his book *Final Judgment* where Piper made the then preposterous connection between President Kennedy's assassination and the Israeli lobby. I think the book is still the only one where we

learn that President Kennedy attempted to stop Israel from developing nuclear weapons, and that so upset Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion he resigned over the incident. After Kennedy's death his successor Lyndon Johnson reversed the US Kennedy policy towards Israel. The book was first published in January 1994 and ten years later the sixth edition appeared. It has been translated into a number of languages, and I just wonder whether there will be a concluding edition, which would also lead to a resolution of this long-running saga.

Once a reader is familiar with the author's realism, i.e. of not accepting the truth-content of the narrative of any officially published conspiracy theory, then we can inevitably accept the conclusion that such fabricated scenarios follow a definitive pattern. Piper's book, *False Flags. Template for Terror*, reveals what this template looks like, and he applies this to the Kennedy assassination and to the most recent acts of terrorism – the first attack on the WTC in 1993 and the big one on the WTC on 9-11, the Oklahoma City Bombing-1995, Sandy Hook School Massacre-December 2012 and Boston Marathon Bombing-April 2013, By literally sifting through tonnes of written material he assembles enough evidence, with lists of names, dates and times, that then clearly reveals the otherwise hidden hand of the Israeli spy agency Mossad working together with "elements" within the CIA, and with US-based crime syndicates, which also had a vested interest in, for example, becoming involved in eliminating JFK.

What I personally found interesting about 9-11 is that four days before it happened the UN-sponsored conference at Durban South Africa, from 28 August to 7 September 2001, on "Racism, Xenophobia and related matters" had concluded in uproar. Israel had been roundly condemned as an apartheid, racist state, and even labelled a terrorist state! Four days later 9-11 occurred and the table was turned on those mainly Muslim nations that had managed to agitate against Israel at this Durban conference. Now the new dialectic of Islam versus the free and democratic world had replaced the old Communism versus Capitalism dialectic that emerged after World War Two. The global war on terrorism had begun.

Even our Australian Jew, Jeremy Jones, had attended the Durban meeting in his capacity as a member of a non government organisation-NGO that condemned racism. He was going to talk about racism in Australia in the form of what Fredrick Töben and the Adelaide Institute were doing in propagating overt racism-antisemitism-Holocaust denial.

That 9-11 occurred just at this time indicates there is planning, long-term planning of such events not just some of the time but at all times – it is the stuff that makes conspiracy theories a basic factor in human behaviour.

Piper's in-depth approach shows how so-called acts of terrorism are manufactured by agencies and not by so-called "terrorists" or "terrorist organisations", and all the time such "false flag" acts serve not the interests of the USA but rather that of Israel, and 9-11 is Israel's most spectacular "false flag" operation. You need to read on and get the details, then judge for yourself whether Piper succeeds in making his case. For me, personally, in 328 pages of information overload, he has

succeeded in presenting arguments in support of his basic premise that is the "False Flag template". Now read on and be overwhelmed with the details the author offers in support of his basic premise.

It must be noted that at the beginning of the book he expresses his thanks to Willis and Elisabeth Carto for essentially making it all possible for him to have done what he has done over these past thirty-three years.

Michael Piper's *Ye Shall Know The Truth* is essentially also a warning against the emerging New World Order or, as he likes to call it, the Jewish imperium. Whenever we hear about book burnings the case of the World War Two symbolic German book burning comes to mind but few know what the USA did to occupied Germany after the war – US Jewish henchmen were in charge of destroying all German school text books from 1933 to 1945, as well as 34,645 titles. Under the Third Reich Germany banned 4,175 books only – and still today bans Holocaust Revisionist books that contain truthful statements about the so-called "Holocaust". It is shameful that no German judge dares challenge the rubbish contained in "Holocaust education" by testing such allegation for truth-content. Now "Holocaust Education" has become an expression of hatred against German. One may well agree with the statement that Judaism won against Germanism – but only because most Germans are cowards and will not defend themselves against such expressed hatred-defamation.

This 270-page book is again highly informative – exhaustively so! Just read what he says in the chapter *Dirty Secrets About Book Publishing*. He then goes on to discuss *The Manipulative Masters of the Media Monopoly* where this sentence sets the tone of his book: >>Now, today, in the 21st Century, America's elite: Princes they are – but not Arabian. The media talks about the wealth of the Arab sheiks but the accumulated wealth of American Jews–and the political influence that comes with it–dwarfs that of the Arabian princes.<<

He goes on to quote Professor Norman Cantor's book, *The Sacred Chain: The History of the Jews*, 1994: >>Nothing in Jewish history equalled this degree of Jewish accession to power, wealth and prominence. Not in Muslim Spain, not in early 20th century Germany, not in Israel itself, because there were no comparable levels of wealth and power on a world-scale in that small country to attain.<<

The next chapter deals with government and corruption, followed by some startling facts about US organized crime. One chapter, interestingly half-way through the book, is illuminating and definitive: 'Populism & Nationalism v Internationalism & Imperialism', something most revisionists know something about from personal experience. Here Piper is able to tell the story of Willis Carto, America's prime upholder of nationalism and populism, which he has done for more than sixty years – and he was also an early critic of the New World Order. Carto prefers international nationalism to any other political dogma.

And then Piper slips into the nitty-gritty of world history with the following chapter headings: 'Take a Deep Breath and Repeat After Me: World War II Was a War That Need not and

Should Not Have Been Fought', followed by 'Israel, Zionism & the Jewish Lobby: Those Troubling Topics People Prefer to Avoid', 'Yes, There Is a Jewish Problem—And There's a Lot to Be Said About it', ending the book with 'No, Six Million Didn't Really Die So Why Do "They" Say They Did?'

And so in this 270-page book you will find snippets of information that mainstream media outlets smirk at or dismissively dispute without ever asking what truth-content there is in what is being asserted. After all, the whole enterprise of attempting to understand what life is all about

requires that we independently think things through – and this Mike Piper has done so eloquently not only in the two above reviewed books but in his whole literary output, and that is quite an achievement of which he can justifiably be proud.

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Mad King Ludwig? Study Claims Bavarian Monarch Was Sane **By Frank Thadeusz**



People have long believed that Bavarian King Ludwig II, the man responsible for building the famous castle of Neuschwanstein, was mentally ill. Indeed, he was dethroned for that very reason. But a recent study casts doubt on that diagnosis. DPA

When the fate of the king of Bavaria was placed into his hands, Bernhard von Gudden was a highly regarded figure in medical circles. Not only had the doctor perfected a machine that could cut human brains into fine slices for research purposes. But he had also made a name for himself in the area of psychiatry, which was still in its infancy at the time, with a pioneering proposition. Gudden argued that so-called "moral treatment," which often involved inflicting violence on mental health patients, wasn't perhaps the best curative regimen.

Still, the psychiatrist thoroughly botched his most famous case. The doctor, together with several colleagues, provided the following diagnosis: "He is teetering like a blind man without guidance on the verge of a precipice." The king in question was Ludwig II, the most famous of Bavaria's monarchs, both for his moniker of "Mad King Ludwig" and for the fact that he built several picturesque castles that still dot the southern German state today, including the famous Neuschwanstein at the foot of the Alps.

Gudden et. al. declared Ludwig II unfit to conduct government business. The diagnosis led to Ludwig's being dethroned on June 10, 1886. Three days later he -- and, mysteriously, Gudden -- drowned in what is now called Lake Starnberg, located just south of Munich. But how accurate was this drastic medical report? Did it stem from a proper examination that lived up to medical standards of the time? And who had an interest in Ludwig II being toppled? These questions have now been addressed by a group led by Mannheim-based psychiatrist Heinz Häfner.

No Evidence

Their findings, recently published in the journal *History of Psychiatry*, contradict the conclusions reached by Gudden. Häfner says that at no time did the king's behavior "provide reliable evidence of his purported mental illness."

Many historians have refrained from questioning the conclusion that the king from the House of Wittelsbach was mentally ill. After all, Ludwig gave his contemporaries ample

reasons to question his sanity. He plunged his kingdom into massive debt with his megalomaniac construction projects. And he countered warnings that he wouldn't be permitted to complete ongoing construction projects by threatening to commit suicide.

Furthermore, he threatened one ill-mannered servant with deportation to America. He wanted to forbid another underling from putting milk in his coffee. He even confounded members of his family with his enervating behavior. But did that warrant his being declared insane?

Heinz Häfner found out that Ludwig was hard-working, contrary to his reputation. Each year, his majesty reviewed 800 documents pertaining solely to domestic Bavarian affairs. A few days before he was dethroned, the king had worked his way through a pile of papers which he signed and sent to the relevant ministries. Ludwig conducted government business far more quickly than his predecessor Maximilian II, Häfner remarked. If anything, Gudden's diagnosis of paranoia and insanity casts a dim light on the doctor's own decidedly odd methods. Instead of examining the king himself, he based his report on interviews with a few of his aides in secret night-time meetings.

Embarrassing Monarch

"By the way, a personal examination has just confirmed the written evaluation," Gudden telegraphed to the chairman of the Bavarian Council of Ministers, Johann von Lutz. That, however, was a bald-faced lie.

Ludwig's removal from power brought his uncle, Luitpold, onto the throne as prince regent. But this coup had less to do with a thirst for power than with a combination of understandable motives.

Ludwig hadn't just angered his family and come close to driving his country to financial ruin. He also embarrassed the Bavarian royal family at every opportunity. War Minister Joseph Maximilian von Maillinger, for example, was forced to leave office in 1885, partly because the gay monarch couldn't refrain from recruiting his lovers from a cavalry unit, the Bavarian Cheveau-légers.

As such, Gudden's misguided diagnosis was far from unwelcome. The lethal outcome was probably unintended, but couldn't be ruled out given that Ludwig faced the prospect of being confined to a royal cell in the Berg palace on the shores of Lake Starnberg, with barred windows, doors with observation slits and no handles. Harsh treatment for a man whose behavior these days would be regarded at worst as the product of a personality disorder.

It is a diagnosis that countless people live with these days, without being locked away.

<http://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/study-finds-king-ludwig-ii-may-not-have-been-crazy-a-946240.html>



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I mean to do what I dared to do and I still do not regret it.
Even though I may gain nothing from it, my honesty must be plain in what I believe.
Upon reflection, you must serve the commonweal and not one man alone,
Even though they call me a priest-hater I will let them lie and say what they like.
If I had concealed the truth, I should have many admirers.
Now I have spoken out and have been banished for it.
Though I shall flee no further I appeal to all honest men, and I may return.

*



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