

[Back](#)**7 page(s) will be printed.**

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MELBOURNE: IN AND OUT OF MY CLASS

LAST NIGHT I imagined I was home in Footscray again. Hocking Street seemed lined once more with weatherboard cottages and grey paling factory fences, and its rooftops fringed by the cypresses of the Western Reserve, the saw-toothed bays of Mitchell's Farm Machinery Works, and the rearing chimneys of the Olympic Tyre and Rubber Company. The workers who crammed the streets on their pushbikes at knockoff time had departed hours before and Thelma Leslie's yodelling call of 'Don--aid!' was signalling teatime for the kids playing 'Charlie over the water' under the street lamps.

Our street runs north-south from the tramline to the railway, but not straight, unco-ordinated subdivisions at each end forcing the roadway to describe a distinctive bend. At the north end there stands a Queen Anne villa with a carriage house and loft, all brilliantly festooned by flowering gums. On the south, a decaying timber mansion houses three tenant families--the carriageway, hedges and orchard neglected and overgrown, rusting water tanks homes for roosting chooks, the flagpole dragged earthwards by a mass of strangling creepers, and outhouses askew beneath a cumulus burden of ivy. Directly opposite, a local captain of industry and his family reside in late Federation comfort--motor garage, manicured lawns, clipped hedges, pencil pines and ornamental lilypond. For the rest, on lozenges of land sliced as thinly as regulations permitted, stand workers' timber cottages, mostly tenanted, unpainted since the Depression, faded, peeling and blistered greys, olives, ochres and browns. A scattering of wellmaintained owner-occupied weatherboard and brick cottages relieves the scene.

Our home, number 42, is round the bend--a rented single-fronted timber cottage, four rooms strung along a passageway, once pronounced 'an eyesore' by a Neighbour of delicate eye and nose objecting to the jumble of horses, stables, carts, piles of fruit boxes and perfumed horse manure. By 1950, the horses are stabled elsewhere, and a large fibro bungalow occupies almost the whole rear yard, which backs on to Mitchell's high corrugated iron fence, whence issues during the day the clink-dank of machines being assembled for dispatch upcountry.

Six o'clock one Friday night in 1950. I burst into the kitchen, ready to wolf down my fish and

chips and settle to my weekly swag of English comics (Film Fun, Comic Cuts, Chips, Knockout), to find the family assembling in the dining room before a photographer. I have the photo before me now--Mum and I in front, flanked by Bill and Ted (scrubbed up and suited, just returned from a wedding), with Don and Dad--Jack Lack--behind in their overalls.

We live among factories but Dad has never, to my knowledge, worked in one. The youngest of nine children of a railwayman who brought his family to Melbourne during the Great War, Dad broke his indentures to a city watchmaker and worked with the sky over his head and without a boss at his elbow, first as a milkman, then as a breadcarter, before enlisting in 1941, aged thirty-nine, in the 2/29th Battalion as a bandsman and stretcherbearer. This action, fed by imperial-national loyalty, left my mother to raise three school-age boys, with another child on the way. Instead of fighting for the Empire in the Middle East, and spending his leave' in England, Dad sailed for Malaya, witnessed the humiliation of the British army at Singapore, and wound up as a prisoner of war in Changi Gaol and on the Burma-Thailand railway. Dad came home, paradoxically strengthened by surviving the ordeal of captivity and enslavement; the family had been drained by four years of separation and uncertainty.

My family has a history--of Depression suffering, of the trauma of wartime separation--which I have not experienced and which I can share only vicariously. In one sense, I am an outsider looking in and, in 1946, I had to make room for a total stranger: 'Who's the man in Mum's bed?' Dad has to recover his health, resume his marriage, and take his place as father of children who have become young men during his absence. Two of my brothers have left school, one to work in a foundry, the other at the abattoirs; Dad takes his third son into his new venture as a street hawker of fruit and vegetables.

This business yields little more than a living. Dad is not so much a poor manager as a bad capitalist, a natural socialist unable to draw large profits, and extremely generous to hard-up customers and to children. But life in the open as his own boss is what he desperately needs, for a time. As often as possible, I accompany my new Dad to the Victoria Market and on his rounds, where he makes a great and public fuss of me. His take-one-day-at-a-time attitude, reinforced by the conviction that nothing worse can befall him than the Death Railway and Changi, exasperates my mother, a saver and a planner. Dad's enlistment in the AIF may have been irresponsible but the saving grace is that we regard his survival as an act of will. Against the odds, he has come back to us, and this gives him a tremendous moral authority. He forbids Mum, a factory girl on piecework before their marriage, to take paid work, even though employers are begging married women to enter the workforce. Dad is determined to be the sole provider. That his money-making schemes--as a saveloy man, an icecream vendor--never get off the ground, does not trouble us, for we know that he would give his profits away. After a few years, Dad gives up hawking, and takes a job as a fencer with Cyclone. It is heavy work for a slight man in his fifties whose constitution has been so undermined but it is outside work and team work. He learns the trade quickly and is in his element.

Dad is a great talker, with an endless fund of anecdotes and stories. He has witnessed major events, from bareknuckle fights on the banks of the Maribyrnong to the fall of Singapore. His optimism and gregariousness are infectious and, as a father, he is a firm but fair disciplinarian. I observe households where there is iron discipline and little joy, or where there is no discipline at all and resultant moral chaos. And then there is the household of the strange silence, where the air might be cut with a knife. I conclude that we are indeed a fortunate family, despite our precarious social and financial position.

We are a working-class family in working-class Footscray but 'working class' is an inadequate term for us and for our suburb. Footscray not only has its middle class of industrialists, contractors, retailers and professionals but its working class is divided into strata by social status based on skill and income, by religion and by subtle measures of respectability. The men of the family have no formal trade qualifications, so we occupy a bottom rung of the class ladder. We are respectable, not rough, working class: we pay our rent and bills, run a shipshape household, and mind our tongues. (Family reputations rest, however, not only upon the behaviour of the immediate family but of one's extended family too. The local papers cover the court and police news in detail, naming names, and families live in trepidation lest they be tainted by association.)

In religion, we are nominally Church of England. There are high church Anglicans and low church Anglicans, and we are no church Anglicans, my parents and the church having parted company during the depths of the 1930s Depression. We only go to church to be married and to be buried but Christian values are central to our behaviour as a family. We believe ourselves fortunate not to be Catholic, because the Church is so authoritarian, but we are not sectarian and count Catholics among our close friends. We belong to no lodges or political party, only to the relevant unions. We are absolutely clear about our class identity, and political loyalty is to the party of John Curtin, Ben Chifley and John Cain.

When I ask Mum how long her family has voted Labor, she answers 'Always'. Labor may at times fail the workers but it is axiomatic that a bad Labor government is always better than any anti-Labor one. Dad is a great hater of our class enemies: Hughes (never 'Billy'), Bruce, Lyons (never 'Joe'), 'Pig Iron Bob' Menzies and 'Piggy' Fadden. Menzies' string of election victories reduces us to an impotent rage and his trade treaty with Japan in 1957 infuriates us, for we have vowed never again to buy Japanese goods.

Dad appears to judge the races by his experience of individuals. He has absorbed a generalised Australian antisemitism--so-and-so is 'a good Jew' but I never hear him speak of a bad one. He despises the 'Japs' and the Koreans and believes that, as a nation, the Japanese escaped lightly but, in the next breath, tells of his friendship with an English-speaking and Christian guard, who treated him better than did most Australian officers. He has nothing but praise for the Chinese of Singapore, and several Australian-Chinese, befriended at the Victoria Market I guess, visit our home, as do many of Dad's European migrant workmates.

Family feuds, originating in a distant past, ensure that I am a child without grandparents. My maternal grandparents live across the street but for some years we are not on visiting terms. Neighbours and schoolmates become critically important to me. I am drawn into the fellowship of the West Footscray Methodist Church, through Sunday School and church, the teetotal Rechabite lodge and, as one of a group of teenagers, attracted to the evangelism of the Gospel Hall. I learn ballroom dancing at the West Footscray Progress Association socials. Forty years on, in Stirling, Scotland, I am startled by the ease with which I recall the steps of the Gay Gordon.

As a working-class family, we are defiant in the face of snobbery. Footscray is a despised suburb and we, in turn, heartily despise the inner-city 'slum' suburbs of Collingwood and Richmond. Leafy, middle-class Melbourne is almost a total mystery to us, for we rarely venture further east than the centre of the city. An uncle and aunt who have gone to live on 'the other side' are treated with withering scorn for their perceived betrayal. There is local snobbery within the working class, too. Dad likes a drink and the patronising airs of elements of lower middle-class wowerism are hard to take. Even less easy for a child to deal with, however, is the snobbery of the improving working class, particularly those aspiring to foreman status. Their putdowns can be breathtakingly audacious and wounding. The unkindest cuts, however, come from those fathers who consider me soft and overly bookish, indeed a bit of a 'siss'. Their wives, ambitious for their own sons, not always wishing them to enter the harsh and grimy factory world, prove kindly and encouraging. In the darkest hours of adolescent soulsearching, they are to be my confidantes and comforters.

School (Geelong Road S.S. No. 253) has proved a terrible disappointment. Not so much a place for the three Rs as a place of the three Bs: banal, boring and brutal. In 1950, I move from the infant school into Grade III Boys. We don't learn much but are punished with the strap a lot. It is pointless complaining to your parents, who simply say 'You must have deserved it'. Class offers momentary diversions: one boy pushes lollies up his bottom, retrieves them and offers them to unsuspecting classmates. The Grade IV teacher treats the slow and the grubby boys with a contempt and an injustice that angers me. 1951 is, however, the year I discover I am clever and destined for great things. I collect the class prize for boys (a Biggles book), to the surprised pleasure of my parents. I continue doing well at school and Mum confesses she 'doesn't know where I get my brains from'. Contact having being renewed with my grandparents, I attach myself firmly to them. Nanna, perhaps harbouring frustrated social ambitions from her middle-class girlhood, encourages me to become a teacher. As I rather like the idea of wielding authority, her ambition becomes my aspiration.

I have become an avid reader, swapping comics for books with neighbouring kids and making my own encyclopaedias by cutting articles from the Saturday Age 'Literary Supplement'. I devour the many newspapers and magazines that come into the house--the Sun News-Pictorial (daily), the Truth and the Weekly Times (weekly), the Age and Argus (Saturday), the Sporting Globe (during the football season), the Women's Weekly, New Idea and a number of English women's magazines.

We have a lot of time for the Salvos but the Army's War Cry lies unread. Dad avers that the text for the week is an encoded racing tip for Flemington; we don't, however, know anyone who's cracked it. I read other magazines (Post, Pix, Walkabout, Man and Man Junior) at the barber's. Recognising and encouraging my thirst for knowledge, Dad buys me a set of reference books, the encyclopaedias, an atlas and a dictionary issued by the Herald and Weekly Times. I begin borrowing from the Footscray Library, first consuming the vast literature of British wartime escape stories, which turn the Empire's recent military disasters into accounts of brilliant derring-do. The fall of Singapore has not dented my family's Anglophile and staunchly royalist attitudes. Commonwealth Youth Sunday is a big event in the churches. The death of our King moves us profoundly; when our new Queen visits, my family equips me with a banana box and a cardboard periscope to ensure I glimpse her in Flemington Road. She is much more beautiful than Tarzan's Jane, Mandrake's Nadia or Li'l Abner's Daisy Mae. I believe that I will love her till I die.

1953 brings changes at school. We have rarely seen the headmaster, other than at morning assembly and at 3.30 p.m. when he rockets through the gate to catch his bus. In my last year at Geelong Road S.S. No. 253, my class gets a teacher who is truly responsive to our maturing needs, and the school a headmaster who is a presence encouraging and praising learning. At the end of the year, kids from middle-class families peel off to private schools across the Maribyrnong-to Penleigh, Lowther Hall and Essendon Grammar--while the rest of us pass through a drafting gate that dispatches us either as lambs to the slaughter at Footscray Tech. (renowned for its classroom chaos and playground brutality) or out to pasture on the rolling plains at Spotswood. Here, on a clay site, without made roads, paths or an asphalt play area, the education department is building a high school, Footscray's first co-educational secondary school. It will be declared open by our beloved local MP, Ernie Shepherd, Newport Workshops patternmaker, union leader and now, minister of education in the Cain government.

From 1954, a whole new world opens to me. Partly it's the stimulating mix of those who enrol at Footscray High--not only the academic kids from Geelong Road but ambitious migrants and refugees. I have glimpsed them before, on a never-to-be-forgotten morning at Geelong Road, when a contingent of refugees dressed in bright pullovers, leather shorts and long socks were introduced to the school. They do not, however, enter our class, and what happened to them I never discovered--presumably assigned to lower classes where it was assumed that the English might be easier for them? At high school, migrants are significant in every form. They are intelligent, worldly-wise from refugee camp and migrant hostel, highly motivated and ambitious, the perfect complement for Australians already delighted to be given a chance to enter commerce and the professions. Poles, Hungarians, Latvians, Russians and Italians, they broaden our horizons with their stories of war-torn and depressed postwar Europe, which put Australia's Depression and war into important perspective. Europe starts to mean something to me; history starts to live. My father has taught me that history is a story grounded in reality and with a moral point but it has been difficult to relate his vibrant stories of bush and city life to the desiccated Australian history taught at primary school. History is different at high school.

Our headmaster is Bob Page of Williamstown, who has a science degree, an engineering diploma, and thirty-six years of teaching experience. He is a demanding, principled and fair-minded man, and the noble school motto--Vera Quarere, To Seek the Truth--breathes Page's idealism. He inspires his young and ambitious staff and the students. It is an unapologetically hierarchical and academic school, and it is the academic stream that enjoys the limelight. I am soon caught in the slipstream of a very able group of students. I become vice-captain of my form, secretary to my house and, eventually, a school prefect. The best of our teachers--university graduates, middle class and largely from suburbia incognita, the eastern suburbs--seem to me immensely confident, learned, articulate and cultured. I want to be like them; I model myself on them. Soon I seem to be inhabiting two quite different worlds.

My parents never visit the school or attend any school function; I suspect they know I don't really want them to.

High school is doubly important to me during the difficult years of my mother's increasingly fragile health. The accumulated uncertainties of the Depression and war years and the burden of keeping house for five men have taken their toll. Cooking, washing and cleaning for four working men is a heavy burden under primitive postwar conditions. While our material circumstances have improved as my brothers come to earn adult wages, then marry and leave home, our house still has few mad cons. Our furnishings are still those Mum and Dad started out with in 1927. Apart from the quality bedroom and diningroom suites Mum bought on lay-by before her marriage, the furniture is much as Richard Twopeny described a working-class household in *Town Life in Australia* (1883), augmented by a wireless and an ice-chest. Over the mantelpiece, there is a framed print of the statue, *The Flight from Pompeii*, which, in retrospect, does not seem inappropriate for the tough times Mum and Dad have weathered. The boys' room has iron bedsteads, kapok mattresses, army-issue blankets (the ones with blue stripes lengthwise) and candlewick bedspreads. We have shilling-in-the-slot gas and electricity meters, the pay-as-you-bum Depression-era principle. Housework is labour-intensive. Lino has to be swept, scrubbed and polished by hand; coir mats, rugs and the carpet squares must be lifted and beaten. There is no running water in the kitchen, only at a backyard gully-trap; water for baths and for the laundry must be heated in a wood-fired copper in the outdoor washhouse and clothes must be boiled, and rinsed, 'blued' and wrung by hand. Bedlinen and blankets, and work clothes are heavy work. Everything must be dried in the sun, aired, ironed and aired again. Only in the mid to late fifties do we acquire a vacuum cleaner, a 'Little Wonder' woodchip bath-water heater (you wonder when the copper coil will burn out next), a kitchen sink and a washing machine. A refrigerator and a television do not belong in the fifties, for us. Ever ingenious, Dad makes a rotary clothes line from fencing materials; it rotates but cannot hoist. Cruelly, when life should be getting easier for her, Mum's health collapses. She has no daughters to call on during the most demanding years and her younger sister has her hands full with a young family. Her daughter-in-law makes a great companion and help but the strain finally takes its toll.

They call it a 'nervous breakdown' and we men are at a total loss to know what to do. So, too, it seems, are the doctors. The treatments are crude, cruel and largely ineffectual. The costs of doctors, medicine and hospitals threaten to cripple us financially, for my parents belong to no lodges and we have no health insurance. But we hang in there and the family rallies. The pressure on those still at home is enormous. I escape at every opportunity--into a book or by going to the pictures.

For some time, I seem to go haywire. It's the era of rock'n'roll. I desperately want a white sportscoat with a pink carnation but, despite working part-time at Forge's department stores and being eligible for discounts, I must settle for black stovepipe trousers and pink accessories, including iridescent socks. It makes for a startling appearance at school socials. I go through a difficult stage--tetchy, bullying, generally antisocial. Somehow, with my father and family's steadying influence and the support of understanding neighbours, I settle down again. We have to see the crisis through as best we can.

Sex is the great mystery of life. It is the subject of knowing looks from adults, who aren't telling much. All around me in the family and neighbourhood, children are being conceived and born but I long remain ignorant of the most basic facts about sex and reproduction. Childhood experimentation--when peers and older boys play an important initiating role, when we drool over the models in *Man and Man Junior* and the semipornographic magazine, *Health and Sunshine*--a gives way to masturbatory fantasies (indulged with much difficulty in a crowded home and in a sagging bed that creaks) and then, in the mid-teens, to learning from boys who claim to speak from actual experience. Most of those in the academic stream at school are resigned to years of celibacy. Our professional ambitions demand long-term commitment and the deferral of gratification. We simply cannot afford 'mistakes' and cautionary examples are all around us. We listen lasciviously to the boastful stories of those who, having left school at fourteen, have bought cars (and thereby privacy and opportunity) and have money (and rubber) to burn. My gender identification has been one of Dad's preoccupations. He protects me from predatory older youths and is alarmed when he learns that the all-male Elektra Dramatic Club requires boys to assume women's roles. He promptly informs the club secretary that my

performance in The Whole Town's Talking has been my last. I am mortified by his peremptory action but there is no gainsaying his decision. Throughout my teens, I remain less worried by the Bomb than explosions from my father.

By the age of fifteen, I have stayed longer at school than any member of my family. Assisted by school bursaries and a supportive father, I simply stay on. I find mentors outside school, too, discovering in our local grocer a man with a great love and knowledge of music and an interest in public affairs. While I have always admired women who run their households confidently, I am impressed with the professional women I encounter, notably Miss Margaret Hennessy, Forges' department store office manager and my first boss. Just as I have avoided the world of the factory, I reject that of retailing, quickly declining an offer of a job as a salesman ('counterjumper'). I intend to be a schoolteacher. Only in matriculation year, 1959, at University High School, do I begin to develop any conception of what a university is, when I cross the road to the Melbourne campus and see, in the Baillieu Library and the university bookroom, more books than I have ever seen in my life.

The world of reading and learning can be a disturbing one. Of all the novels read in 'Mattic. Lit.', I respond most warmly to Dickens' Great Expectations, a story with a moral point that hits home hard. I have come to know, with Pip, that 'It is a most miserable thing to feel shamed of home', a truth that is not underlined in my much-scored copy. Although my father has done everything possible to help me and to forward me, the serpent of shame has entered. For some unaccountable reason, the world of school and learning has devalued the world of home and family. It is a painful admission, but my family is proud of me and I am ashamed of them.

Early in 1960, I learn that my matriculation results will guarantee entry to Melbourne University and a choice between a secondary teacher's studentship and a Commonwealth scholarship. I choose the studentship, for I not only want to teach, I also want the money. The die is cast. The social trajectory on which I have been moving inexorably since the early fifties is confirmed. Earlier generations of workers' sons have been consigned to the Depression scrapheap, recruited for war or sucked into the factories. From my generation, postwar Australia happens to be recruiting teachers for baby-boomers. I am one of those moving out of my class, with all the pride and guilt, all the excitement and trepidation this entails. Frank Hardy's Power Without Glory, a book the veracity of which Dad swears by, opens with this quotation from Charles Kingsley: 'A working man who deserts his own class, tries to get on and rise above it, enters into a lie'. Is this true? I am about to find out.

University of Melbourne

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Hocking Street and the Western Oval, early 1940s (Source: Airspy Collection, State Library of Victoria)

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By JOHN LACK

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[Back](#)