WE HAVE NO DREAMING

RONALD McKIE

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AN EXPOSE

I was born a few years after the invention of pyjamas, the safety pin, the X-ray, the paper bag and the dreadnought. My infancy coincided with that of the motor car, the aeroplane, the silent film, the gramophone and the mechanised hearse. I was well into my adolescence before wireless appeared, the saxophone wailed and jazz first drove the older generation dotty. And I had to grow up before I first heard 'Waltzing Matilda' and saw my first snow and zipped my first zip.

I have survived five reigns, fourteen American Presidents (from William H. Taft), about seventeen Australian Prime Ministers (some eminently forgettable), two world wars and several hundred minor wars, plus innumerable revolutions, coups d'état, rebellions, skirmishes and other forms of international mayhem, plus one catastrophic economic depression and many serious financial slumps and hiccoughs. And I have endured practically every known ailment and itching and aching affliction, including nasties like encephalitis and diphtheria which fortunately is almost unknown today. I have never been a hard drinker, except for a few beery years in my early twenties, but until I reluctantly gave up cigarette smoking for a pipe five years ago after contracting pneumonia, I smoked and enjoyed about 500 000 cigarettes.

As an Australian with more than one hundred and fifty years behind me, I was determined to celebrate the two hundredth birthday of my dearly beloved country, and would like to enter

the twenty-first century, too, though my chances of achieving that are pretty slim as I would have to be a nonagenarian.

I decided therefore, that it was time to begin and finish this attempt, not to write an autobiography, but to leave my grandchildren a smattering about myself and my time, to create a rough personal mosaic of the period in which I have lived, to take a sympathetically critical look at my fellow Australians, to explain a few of the events of my life, and to describe some of the personalities — particularly the personalities I have known over nearly fourscore years of this bloody, evil, cruel, greedy, hungry, terrifying, chaotic, insane, exciting, rewarding and, at times, beautiful century.

But before I begin this long journey of many stops and unnumbered diversions, since this is a story of decades and scattered events rather than one of detailed continuity, I would like to list a few of those moments in a lifetime which stand out in clamouring isolation.

Some are never to be forgotten because of their exhilaration of the spirit or some dramatic or magical quality which sets them apart or some challenge they provide, but others appeal because of the wonder or horror they stir or the questions they raise which can never be answered or because they evoke ineffable thanksgiving or sadness or everlasting pity or compassion.

My father's tears, for example, on that wet afternoon in 1917 when I was eight, as he read the yellow telegram that his young brother had been killed at Messines. That was the only time I ever saw him cry — when men and boys were not supposed to cry. I felt frightened, lost.

That day I became a journalist in 1930 and first knew the smell of a newspaper office — that heady amalgam of newsprint and torn files and ink and dirt and rats long before proprietors ever considered wasting money on carpets or even worn linoleum for their editorial staffs.

Or that night in 1938 when alone inside the great wat among the Khmer ruins of Angkor in Cambodia I knew terror as a wailing cry echoed among the moonlit stones. It came again,

closer, half animal, half human, and then across the courtyard well below me glided a Buddhist monk to disappear without even a rustle of his saffron robe.

Or in 1939, standing on the white marble Altar of Heaven in Peking where Emperors had annually reported to their ancestors and wondering what they in their exalted loneliness thought and said and, particularly, what they felt. As I stood there I remembered that only a few weeks before in Hsingking, capital of Manchukuo, I had watched the Emperor Kangte of Manchukuo, who was formerly Henry P'u Yi and before that the Emperor Hsuan Tung, last of the Manchus and tenth Ch'ing Emperor of China, lay a foundation stone for his captors, the Japanese Kwangtung Army, who ruled Manchukuo.

Or those days in the South China Sea that same year when our little ship *Tanda* struggled to survive the screaming wrenching wind and sea of a typhoon. Only afterwards, when we were safe in Manila Bay, did I know almost paralysing fear.

Or that hour I was married in 1940 when I knew that the most beautiful word in the English language was the verb 'to cherish', and when in 1947 our son was born what an unbelievable moment of joy and thanksgiving that was.

How could one forget that evening in 1944 when, from only a few yards, I watched Mahatma Gandhi at his prayers — sitting cross-legged on a white platform, among black rocks below Bombay's Malabar Hill beside the whispering Arabian Sea. He did not once move during that hour. He did not once blink. I had an alarming feeling that the essence of Gandhi was outside his motionless body somewhere in the darkening sky.

Or that glorious moment early in 1945 when, high in the night sky above Athens, and for the first time for four years, the floodlit Parthenon blazed over the liberated city — a politically divided city, full of hatred and confusion, where on Mount Lycabettus, high above Athens, a priest came from his tiny chapel to break bread and in silence to hand a piece to each of us. As we ate I was closer to Christianity than I had ever been.

Later that year, when we landed at wrecked Tempelhof, I

saw, with horror, that bombed-out Berlin was nothing but an obscene shell of ruined buildings and rubble-filled streets. I hoped that never again would I see such devastation.

I can never forget those three electrifying moments in that same year when history was suddenly frozen: standing near Winston Churchill outside Adolf Hitler's bunker in the garden of the bombed-out Chancellery in Berlin and only yards from the scorched earth where the Nazi dictator's body had been soaked with petrol and burned; bending over the naked body of Benito Mussolini, the Italian dictator, in his pine coffin in Milan and counting the six bullet holes, left by the Partisans, in his pigeon chest; and sitting within a few yards of Vidkum Quisling, the Norwegian traitor, in the courtroom in Oslo, knowing that this still-arrogant man, no matter what arguments were used or pleas in his defence made, would face a firing squad.

For the dictators, responsible for immeasurable destruction, cruelty and the death of millions, I felt only gladness that they and the terror and death they represented had been removed from the earth. I also hoped that men and women would learn something of benefit for future generations from their tyranny and the tyranny of totalitarianism of Left or Right.

But for Quisling, the traitor whose name had already become a dictionary word, I could understand why the Norwegians hated him so passionately. In a way he, and those who had supported him, were their conscience. But hard as I tried I could not hate him. For this totally friendless man, surrounded by enmity, I could feel no sympathy, only a deep compassion, since his desperate aloneness, his awful loneliness, was beyond measuring and even judging.

There are many more memorable moments in a long lifetime but here and there a few still stand out with extraordinary vividness.

Those thousand guns which fired as one to open the final Allied offensive against the Germans in northern Italy in 1945.

And at the war's end those thousand bombers — Flying Fortresses, Liberators, Mitchells — which the American Air Force sent over Paris as its farewell to that city.

An evening in the Shenandoah of Virginia in 1952, under the Blue Ridge gold and russet in the fall, when the air was saturated with the smell of cold apples and I felt elated, drunk, and so astonishingly happy that it almost hurt.

Or that brooding figure of Abraham Lincoln seen in Washington the following year, so massive, so still, yet so alive that his words etched on the memorial walls around him seemed to shout in the silence.

Or that sun-drenched morning in 1980 when, after a search that had taken years, I found my maternal great grandfather under his lone twelve-foot granite monolith a few yards from the Murrumbidgee River not far from Yass in New South Wales and felt that in that beautiful setting and on what was left of his own station property, he may have been alone but could never be lonely.

And finally, I must add this 'On Active Service' notice which was published in column 4, page 20, of the *Sydney Morning Herald* on Monday, 14 October 1957:

Godwinson: Harald, King of England,
killed in action near Hastings
October 14, 1066. Mourned by
Godwine, Edmund, Magnus and Ulf.

That announcement, on the 891st anniversary of William the Norman's victory at the Battle of Hastings, and one of the countless public notices I have read in my lifetime, takes first prize.

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Book One

1
BEGINNINGS

Not long after 5 o'clock on the afternoon of Friday, 6 May 1910, Edward VII was told that his horse, 'Witch of the Air', had won the Spring Two-year-old Plate at Kempton Park by half a head.

'I am very glad,' the King said, before going into a coma and dying five hours later.

I am indebted to Philip Magnus, Edward's 1964 biographer, for this anecdote and use it merely to confirm that in my race to prove myself historically at least an Edwardian, I had a lead of five months over His Majesty.

The Edwardians — at least the privileged few of that ilk and decade — were a loose, rebellious and brilliant lot compared with their more Calvinistic fathers and grandfathers, though I have never felt that the Victorians were as narrow and obtuse as later generations, so positive in their ignorance, would have us believe. Any century that could produce a Bronte or a Jane Austen, a Flaubert or a Tolstoi, a Turner or a Pasteur should not be despised.

On the day I was born, 11 December 1909, in a white cottage beside the botanical gardens in Toowoomba, Queensland, since many mothers had their babies at home in those days, my roots were already deep in Australian soil. A great great English grandfather, Joseph Thompson, and his wife Mary had migrated in 1833 to escape the post-Napoleonic War depression in England and to find a better life for themselves, and twelve of their thirteen children, plus a manservant, a maidservant Sally and a cow they brought with them on the Indiaman *James Harris* which reached Hobart in 1833 and Sydney on 1 May 1934. A stern sabbatarian, and a good businessman, Joseph was one of the deacons, with his friends John Fairfax and David Jones, of

Sydney's Pitt Street Congregational Church. He also lent his friend John Fairfax some of the money he needed to buy the *Sydney Morning Herald.*

A great grandfather Rees Jones, of Welsh farming stock, came from Llandilo in Carmarthenshire in 1834, to be followed by his brother David in 1837, the same David who started what was to become the big Sydney shop, David Jones. Great grandfather Rees, after renting land and buying cattle and then spending some months during the depression of the early 1840s in the Debtors' Prison, made for southern New South Wales where, after many adventures off the Old South Road, he established Taemas Station on the Murrumbidgee outside Yass.

Another great grandfather, Thomas Weedon, from Temple in Buckinghamshire, was an English classical scholar from Cambridge University — a gentleman of some intellectual precosity since at twenty-six years of age he translated into English the preface 'Christ the end of the line', to John Calvin's 'Geneva Bible' of 1550 which was published by H.S. Collins of Paternoster Row, London, in 1848. He also published in the same year *Practical English Grammar.*

Thomas Weedon abandoned his early intention to enter the Church when he and his elder brother, Richard Warren Weedon, who suffered from bronchial asthma, decided to sell their paper mills and migrate to the warmer climate of Queensland. Once settled in Brisbane in the early 1860s, the asthma symptoms disappeared almost overnight.

Thomas Weedon arrived in 1863 in the Black Ball Line clipper *Sunda*, but his brother and their mother (Mrs Thomas Weedon, born in Hemel Hempstead in 1793) came in 1866 in the *Young Australia* and the following year built Cannon Hill House, then about 5 miles outside Brisbane. It was almost a mansion for that time. Cannon Hill House was the genesis of the present inner suburb of Cannon Hill.

A Scottish grandfather, of Celt and Viking blood, whose ancestor had fought for Robert the Bruce at Bannockburn in 1314, was a professional soldier who resigned his subaltern's

commission after serving as an artilleryman in the Indian Mutiny in 1857. He migrated to Australia in 1863 because his young sister, who lived to ninety-four, was dying of tuberculosis. Grandfather Robert McKie, whose father and grandfather had both been slave-owning sugar planters at Antigua in the West Indies, never went to school but, under private tutors, became a passable scholar in Latin, Greek and Hebrew, an authority on the artillery of the British Army and a brilliant amateur naturalist. His butterflies and beetles helped establish the present collection at the Queensland Museum.

My grannies, too, were an intriguing lot. A great great grandmother was a daughter of the Navigating Lieutenant of the *Princess Augusta* and the *Royal Charlotte*, royal yachts of King George III; a great grandmother, who was buried at sea off Tasmania in 1863, so that she never saw Australia, was a grand niece of Sir James Thornhill, distinguished English mural and portrait painter who has been called 'England's supreme native baroque decorative artist', and the 'greatest history painter produced in England'. He lived from 1676 to 1734. His major mural work included the cupola of St Paul's Cathedral, the Queen's bedroom at Hampton Court Palace and, his masterpiece, the 'Painted Hall' at the Royal Naval establishment at Greenwich. And yet another great grandmother, at a time when education, especially for women, was the privilege of the rare few, kept a school for young ladies in London before coming to Australia to marry great grandfather, Rees Jones, at St James Church, King Street, Sydney on 3 March 1838.

But I have diverted. On the day of my birth, when most of the shallow news published in Australian newspapers came almost entirely from London, Mrs Pankhurst, the suffragette leader, had just returned from the United States to a large meeting at London's Albert Hall where two thousand pounds were raised in a few minutes for the cause; the 10 000 people who packed an election rally addressed by the Prime Minister (Mr Asquith) were all men; the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (Sir Edward Grey) announced that the 'Irish question would never

be solved without Home Rule'; Maeterlinck's *Blue Bird* was being performed in the West End; there were several warnings about Britain's 'unpreparedness for war', and at home in New South Wales industrial trouble in the coal and gas industries was causing concern.

The world was at peace, though not for long. The hideous events of the twentieth century, which had begun with the Boer War and the Russo-Japanese War, were about to be enacted in all their bloody detail. Soon the world would be in a mess and it would remain in that parlous state for most of my life — a time of almost continuous war, revolution, brutality, anguish and, for millions, terrifying poverty.

It is a truism, and tragic, that the First World War, which set many of the countries of the world on a chaotic path, did not end in 1918 and indeed has never ended. The world's neurotic behaviour ever since, its failure to live at peace for more than a few months or a few years at a time, and now its refusal to outlaw the means of its own dissolution, is a direct result among other things of the War-to-end-War, a nostalgic name that reflected the optimistic feelings of many of their time.

In 1909 Britain was at the peak of her political and industrial power. This had been achieved by being the first country in that economic steeplechase, the Industrial Revolution. But what of her neighbours? France was still planning revenge for her defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. The Austro-Hungarian Empire was tottering. The Turk, who had once threatened all, was now the 'sick man of Europe'. The Czar of all the Russias, after his defeat by the Japanese at Tsushima, Port Arthur and Mukden — the first far-reaching defeat of a European power by an Asian power — was in his final decade, a decade that would explode with the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the murder by the Bolsheviks of himself and his family in that chill cellar at Ekaterinburg. The United States, preoccupied for so long with the job of opening a continent against a fierce, brave but unorganised enemy, had not yet begun her drive for international status, although she had been busy as an imperialist power. She