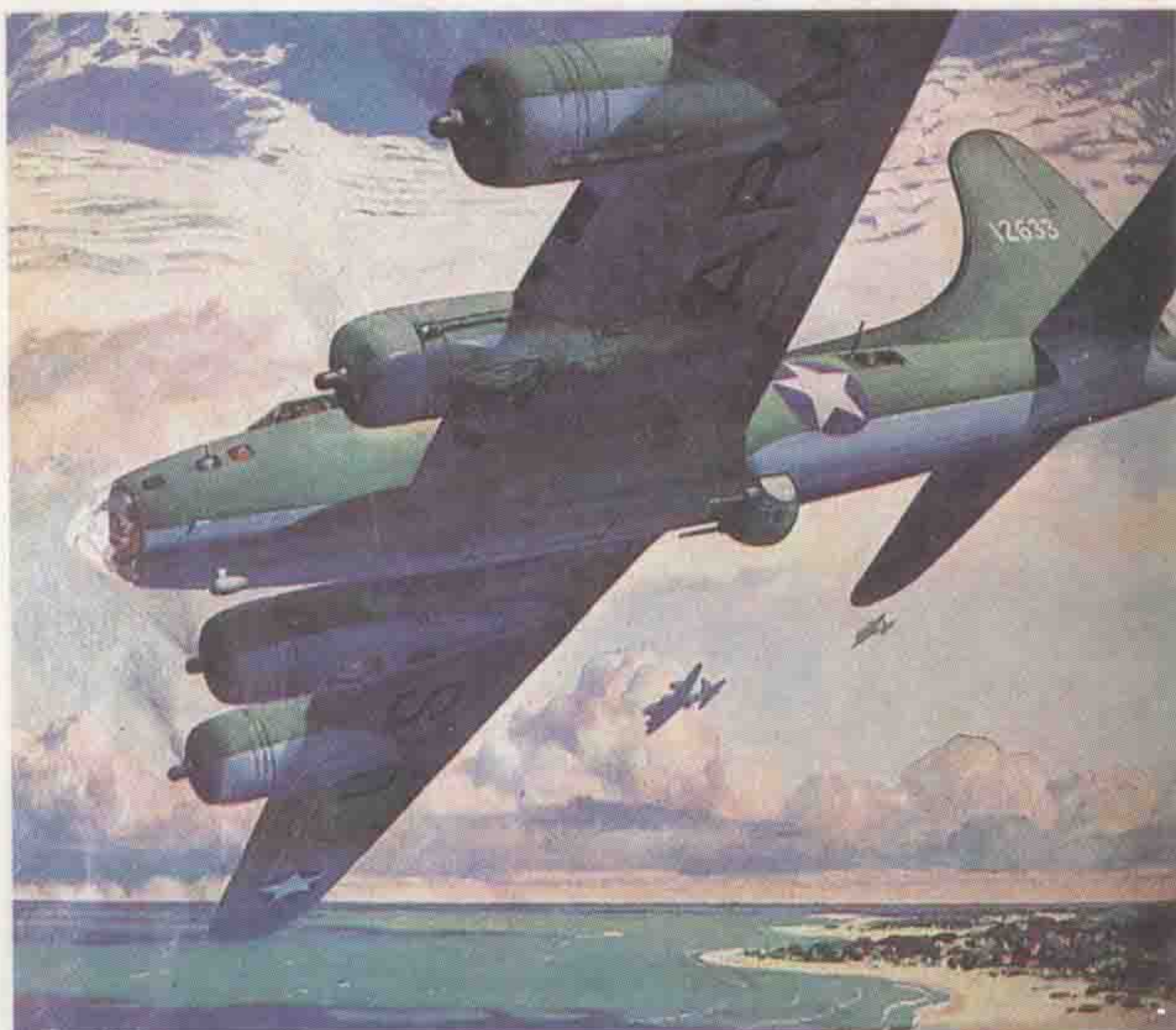


THE IDLE HILL OF SUMMER



*An Australian
Childhood
1939-1945*
GAVIN SOUTER

IMPRINT

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THE IDLE HILL OF SUMMER

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Gavin Souter was born in Sydney in 1929. He joined the editorial staff of the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1947 and stayed with the paper, in various editorial capacities, until becoming an assistant editor in 1981. He is currently writing a book about John Fairfax Ltd.

His other books include *New Guinea: The Last Unknown* (1963), *Sydney Observed* (1965), *A Peculiar People: The Australians in Paraguay* (1968), *Lion and Kangaroo* (1976), *Company of Heralds* (1981), and *Acts of Parliament* (1988). He is married with two daughters.

*On the idle hill of summer,
Sleepy with the flow of streams,
Far I hear the steady drummer
Drumming like a noise in dreams.*

A. E. Housman

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Fifty years have gone by since the Second World War began—exactly twice the length of time separating that catastrophe from the outbreak of the First World War. To my ten-year-old consciousness in 1939, the Great War seemed as ancient a conflict as Waterloo or Trafalgar. Yet the Second World War still seems as modern to me as last night's television news.

What makes the difference, of course, is having been there yourself. No matter how lowly your rank may have been (mine, inordinately cherished, was Volunteer Air Observer), or how distant the fighting (I spent the war at Kempsey on the north coast of New South Wales, Mackay in north Queensland, and Warwick on the Darling Downs of southern Queensland), you could not help hearing Pratt and Whitney engines overhead, drumming like a noise in dreams. You learnt by heart the black silhouettes of Mustangs, Airacobras, Kittyhawks and the rest; and you could distinguish the different squadron insignia on the flying jackets of the Fifth United States Air Force. That was my war record. I was a rapt spectator in the furthest back stalls.

I hope that others who may have been my age then will find in this book something of their own childhoods during the tumultuous years from 1939 to 1945. To those who were not there, the Second World War may seem even more remote than its predecessor did to me. I hope my recollection brings it closer for them.

This book, first published in 1972, has been slightly amended, only for reasons of style. It is still substantially the same book.

Gavin Souter
Sydney 1989

1939

My clearest memory of this languid year is not the outbreak of war between nations, but something out of the ordinary which I saw in Frith's zoo at Frederickton, four miles down the river from Kempsey. Both events happened at about the same time, certainly in September, and perhaps even on the same day. War was declared on a Sunday, at a time when our family would normally have been tuned in to 'Silas Marner' on 2UW. We could only have missed 'Silas Marner', and consequently the Prime Minister's interruption about war with Germany, through being late home from the beach at South West Rocks or Crescent Head. It was school holiday time, so that was probably what happened. I suppose the news of the Second World War filtered through to my ten-years-old consciousness next day.

It was also during these holidays that I went to the small private zoo beside Frith's hotel. We were on our way to South West Rocks, so that must have been a Sunday too; Saturdays were always taken up with cleaning the car, gardening and sometimes a matinee at the Mayfair. I am not sure whether we knew what was in store for us at the zoo, but one of the exhibits made such a lasting impression on me that I think it probably did come as a surprise.

A few kangaroos and wallabies flip-flopped drowsily inside their enclosure, and a pair of peacocks promenaded on the lawn. The zoo also possessed a monkey, which I rashly picked up and held against my chest. It was harmless enough, but incontinent, and before I realized what was happening my clothes were wet with urine.

The star attraction was still to come, and so remarkable was this animal, lying in a straw-covered stall, that I forgot about my soggy shirt. It was a two-headed calf. Someone called out

excitedly, and whoever it was must have said something about the nature of the prodigy because I remember wondering for a second or two whether the heads were set closely together or far apart. They were set together; in fact both of them sprang from one slender neck, and viewed from behind they seemed to share the one skull. In front there were two faces, each perfectly formed with two eyes, a nose, a mouth and a tongue. While we stood watching, Mrs Frith went into the stall and put a teat-bottle into one of the mouths. Both of them began sucking, and from the empty one a line of saliva spilled down on to the straw.

Remembering the calf now, I cannot decide which was the more surprising, its double head or the rest of its body. Because the deformity was so extreme, I was surprised at the perfection of everything else. How could anything so grossly misshapen have such delicate hooves and soft red hair? The calf was undeniably a monster, but a good-looking one.

Much later in life I came to associate this prodigy with the outbreak of war, but at the time there did not seem to be any symbolic connection between the two. The Second World War was like a new season imposing itself upon our year, and like the winter that had just ended it was slow to make itself felt in our part of the world. My knowledge of the World and War was limited, and although this combination of the two subjects seemed important, it also seemed infinitely remote.

What sort of country was Germany? The only real impression I had formed of the enemy was from my stamp album, and viewed through that narrow aperture the Germans seemed a drab and unimaginative people. Nearly all their stamps were the same square shape (no triangles like Mozambique's, no parallelograms like Tannou Touva's), and the designs were of three basic kinds: hunting horns, heads and numbers. The hunting horns came in many denominations, and were inscribed with the words DEUTSCHES REICH, which I knew signified Germany in the same way that OSTERREICH stood for Austria, MAGYAR POSTA for Hungary, and POCZTA POLSKA for Poland. The heads were anonymous and meaningless. Admittedly the stamps of Great

Britain portrayed little else than the heads of kings and queens, but these were all known to me by name from Queen Victoria through to Edward VIII and George VI. I had several brightly coloured Edwards, and had been led to believe that because of his Abdication these stamps would one day be worth a lot of money.

The third type of German stamp carried only DEUTSCHES REICH and a numeral that represented amounts varying from five marks to fifty million marks. Although I was puzzled by this enormous range of value, I was never curious enough to discover the reason for it. There was nothing about inflation in the descriptive paragraph at the beginning of the German section in my album. 'Always a leading Empire,' it read, 'Germany suffered a great setback as a result of the disastrous war of 1914-18, which caused the abdication of the Kaiser, the formation of a republic, the loss of two million soldiers, and probably half that number of civilians whose death could be traced directly to the blockade of allied warships. Valuable colonies were also lost, and the Hitler regime became powerful largely because the new generation of Germans, too young to understand the suppression that followed defeat, wholeheartedly backed the new leader (an Austrian), believing that he would recover Germany's place in the sun. The Germans have always been in the vanguard of literature, and the future of this great country is impossible to determine.' I doubt whether I was yet familiar with the word *Nazi*, but a few weeks before the war began I had heard Hitler delivering an impassioned speech on short-wave, and in my album I had one German stamp with a swastika on it.

I cannot remember reading about Great Britain or Australia in my album; in any case, I doubt whether I would have noticed how quietly supercilious the former was, or how proprietorial the latter. 'Great Britain, the land of intrepid explorers and soldiers, who ventured into the far corners of the world. Though perhaps with not quite the same intensity as formerly, Britain's influence is still felt in most countries, chiefly because she sticks to any promise or covenant she makes. The British Empire covers fully

a quarter of the total habitable land surface of the globe, and its subjects number four hundred and fifty millions of people. Its capital, London, is the largest city in, and the accepted financial centre of, the world.'

This was no more than reality. My father worked for the National Bank of Australasia, and each New Year he brought us home the bank's calendar. It was always the same: a map of the world with the British Empire marked in red, and looking appropriately as safe as a bank. Every second or third page of my stamp album carried some reminder of Empire. An Indian set showed George V wearing a crown, something that kings never did on British or Australian stamps. On my Straits Settlement stamps, George VI looked to the right between two palm trees; in Somaliland he looked straight ahead between two native spears and shields; and on my best Australian set, a series of ten different colours which I had soaked off old envelopes from our sideboard drawer, George V looked to the left between kangaroo and emu.

So far as my album was concerned, Australia was still a colony. 'This British colony, although the largest island in the world, has a population fewer than London! Diamonds, rubies, sapphires and garnets are mined there, but its chief export in the eyes of British boys is an exceptionally high-class brand of cricketer! Gold was first discovered in Australia in 1851, and the total value of this precious metal mined since then has reached the prodigious amount of six hundred and thirty million pounds! The Australians are a fine race of men, and acquitted themselves nobly in the War, especially (with the New Zealanders) at Gallipoli, where the Turks fixed barbed wire just below the surface of the sea in a vain attempt to prevent them from landing.'

I had never heard of Gallipoli in 1939. We were not a military family, and of my nine paternal uncles, all of whom were considerably older than my father, only two had fought in what my album called the War. One of these, Uncle Ivan from Manilla, had been captured by the Germans in France, and I remember hearing, either from Uncle Ivan or Aunty Ruby, how on his first

night of captivity a German officer had swiped him across the face with a wet raincoat.

My mother was at school in New Zealand during the war, and had kept her school magazines. I was given these to look at on one occasion, and what interested me most about them were the pictures of battlefields in France—of troops in trenches, and trees splintered by shellfire. I had also heard about the war in France from the *Champion*, an English comic book which I had been reading regularly for the last year or so. *Champion* dealt mainly with sports, but in ‘Rockfist Rogan, RAF’ it combined boxing with the First World War. ‘“Good old Rockfist! Now you’ve got him groggy! Give him an upper-cut, boy!” A crowd of delighted pilots of the 509th Squadron of the Royal Air Force, serving in France, were yelling themselves hoarse, forgetting the cares and dangers of the Great War. They were gathered in an empty hangar on the squadron’s flying field to cheer the efforts of their champion, Flight-Lieutenant Rogan, known as “Rockfist” because of his boxing prowess.’

Later in the same issue, Rockfist poured a stream of sizzling bullets into the underside of a German fighter. ‘The German’s motor was suddenly silenced in the middle of a full-throated roar. The thrashing propeller clawed the sky helplessly. The heavy weight of the nose pulled the plane over in a loop. It fell into a dive, gathering speed as it went down into the mist at a terrifying pace. Rockfist’s eyes glittered behind his goggles as he watched his beaten foe tumble out of sight.

‘Zing! Wham! Crack!

‘Bullets ploughed through his cockpit.

‘Rockfist banked his plane and hurled it round in a screaming half-circle. He still had two enemies to face! Instead of zooming to throw the pair of Germans off his tail, Rockfist whipped round and rushed straight at them. Bullets crackled past his head and pinged off the metal nose of his engine cowling. The two Germans were taken completely by surprise by Rockfist’s daring and unexpected move.’

I was also aware, though only dimly, that war could mean

more than a wet raincoat across the face or *Zing! Wham! Crack!* in the air over France. My first inkling of this darker significance came from an engraving I saw in the hall of a neighbour's house. It showed a boy and girl of about my own age sitting in the tiers of an arena, watching with terror-struck bewilderment a hand-to-hand struggle between several soldiers. The artist had spared his young spectators nothing, and although I have never seen the picture since that day I can still visualize the thrust of bayonets and the faces of the dead and dying in that weird arena.

At about the same time I saw a newspaper photograph of a Spanish soldier lying dead in front of a column of marching infantry. The soldier was described as a young woman, and even in her uniform she was easily recognizable as such. I was both shocked and intrigued by this picture, but I should not attach undue significance to such early insights into the true nature of the good-looking monster War. Flight-Lieutenant Rogan was more my cup of tea, and so far as I could tell at that stage the new war was no more relevant to life in the Macleay River valley of northern New South Wales than was one of Rockfist's daring capers in the *Champion*. I came to know better later on, but in its early stages the war was something I read about occasionally, and only partly believed in. Before the war, or rather before my father was transferred to Kempsey as manager of the National Bank, we lived at Hunters Hill, a Sydney suburb heavy with the mealiness of squashed Moreton Bay figs, the spiciness of briar roses, the rankness of nasturtium leaves, and the saltiness of Sydney Harbour. How different this was from Carlton, a harsh and leafless suburb on the Illawarra line where my maternal grandmother lived in spotless rectitude! Nana's house was the only freshly painted one in Fleet Street, and the polished linoleum on its floors always reflected what little daylight managed to get past her carefully drawn blinds. When I first became aware of her, she was about 70 years of age, the widow of a railway signals inspector. She lived for another 20 years, and was always the same: tall and straight, as sternly handsome as the portrait

of Queen Mary on my souvenir Jubilee mug, unrelievedly gloomy, and leading a solitary life compounded in equal parts of meticulous housekeeping and Presbyterian religiosity. Her name was Annie Cheesman, and because she had been born on the Victorian goldfields during the goldrush she seemed even older than her years. I liked her well enough, but rather as one might have liked a statue or a painting.

I was born in 1929 at Baroda private hospital in Carlton. My father stayed at Nana's place for the birth, but as soon as possible he and my mother returned to their small house at Hunters Hill, *Toinette*. We moved to *Basra* when my twin brother and sister, Rod and Mary, were born in 1932; and two years later we moved again to a larger house called *Rookery Nook*.

My earliest memories are not of *Toinette*, but of the Children's Hospital at Camperdown. I was born with a condition known as *Talipes varus*, and from the age of six months to seven years I was taken regularly to the hospital for massage—three times a week for the first year, then twice a week, and finally once a week. *Talipes varus* is an inward turning of the feet caused by pre-natal contraction of the tendons. The condition is commonly known as pigeon-toes, and once I had become conscious of it the possibility of being pigeon-toed for life was held up to me as an inducement to go along patiently with treatment. I was not much alarmed by that possibility, and in any case the inducement was hardly necessary. The long journeys to and from Camperdown, the endless hours during which a masseuse named Mrs Metcalf performed kneading movements with forefinger and thumb up and down the tendons of my insteps and ankles, the massage and exercises that went on at home between visits to the hospital—all these seemed a natural and not really disagreeable part of my life.

They were anything but natural for my mother, who at first carried or pushed me in a stroller, and who made the two-hours-long trip by ferry and bus until, in the fifth year of our travels, my father bought an Erskine car. Thereafter she drove me to the hospital. One afternoon another car ran into one of our rear

mudguards, jamming it hard against the tyre. A policeman prised the mudguard back as far as he could, but there must have been a slight wobble in the wheel, and at every revolution it touched the mudguard again with a loud scraping sound, doing who knew what damage to the tyre. Not a relaxed driver at the best of times, my mother became increasingly nervous as we made our noisy way home. Even I was jerked out of my habitual insouciance when at one busy intersection she began to cry and called out to my absent father, 'Oh, Arch!'

This was not typical of our journeys to Camperdown, which for the most part were conducted harmoniously, often with the twins in tow as well. My mother was inclined to go at things with great intensity, but was rarely in a bad humour. My father came home one evening to find her crouched over the electric cleaner on the lounge-room carpet, her face distorted with the effort and annoyance of trying to unscrew the suction hose. The cleaner was still running, and for an instant Dad thought she had been electrocuted. 'Roma!' he shouted, and ran across the room to pull her away. As my mother pointed out, this would have done for both of them if she had really been electrocuted. The mistake was excusable, however, because of the passionate way Mum went at everything—wrestling with an electrolux, polishing windows hard enough to break them, cooking until all hours, and taking me out to Camperdown until I was cured. The course of massage was successful, and the only trace left of *Talipes varus* was a pair of weak ankles which I continued to sprain from time to time.

I had a lot to do with doctors one way or another. At *Toinette* I tied one end of a rope around my neck, fixed the other end to a veranda rail, and ran off until brought sharply to a halt—an inexplicable act which I scarcely remember, but which is said to have caused me considerable pain for several weeks. At *Rookery Nook* I developed hay fever, which required various injections of dust and pollens in an inconclusive attempt to ascertain the nature of my allergy. One of the guilty agents was wattle, but my sneezing was not confined to wattle blooming time.

It was at *Rookery Nook* that we children all had our adenoids and tonsils out. Dr Hair and his anaesthetist arrived soon after breakfast, and the twins were done first. I walked around the veranda in my pyjamas—half frightened, half excited—until Mum came to get me too. The twins' adenoids and tonsils were in a steel tray on the sink, looking like small cherries. I lay down on the kitchen table, a slab of spotted terrazzo marble, and submitted to an ether mask.

The anaesthetist told me to breathe in deeply and count out loud between breaths. I did this, and shortly afterwards had one of the few dreams I have always remembered. I was in an apple orchard. The trees were laden with bright red fruit (tonsils?), and were taller than they should have been. They began to sway in unison from side to side, slowly at first, then faster and faster until I grew dizzy and sick from watching them. It seemed as though I had dreamt this while going under the anaesthetic, but in fact it had probably been on the way back to consciousness because I woke up vomiting blood into the Rosie, which was what our family called the bed chamber.

I was used to the sight of blood by then. Since starting school in Hunters Hill at the age of six, I had been falling over on the bitumen playground with tedious regularity. I knew all about scabs: how they softened and turned grey in the bath, then hardened again overnight; how they festered and went white at the edges if the mercurochrome did not do its job; and how it was possible to pick them off without causing a fresh flow of blood provided one could resist the temptation until the right moment. For several months I was permanently scabby, if not on one knee then certainly on the other. Before one scab had fallen away another had set up in business, sometimes on the very site of its predecessor. During one playtime I felt quite desperate as I came yet another cropper and realized that I had hit the bitumen fairly and squarely on a particularly large knee-scab which had formed only the day before. This must have taught me caution, for after that my falls became less frequent.

Hunters Hill public school was an old sandstone building

shaded by enormous fig trees whose leaves I soon learnt to convert into propellers which spun on a twig in the wind almost as efficiently as the celluloid propellers I used to bring home from the Royal Easter Show. I must have learnt many things during the year I spent there under the instruction of a pretty young woman named Miss Islet, but I have only a few specific recollections. I remember a picture in my first reader which showed an Aboriginal family in a gunyah looking out towards a sailing ship across waters as blue as the blue in my mother's wash tub. I remember my dislike of Writing, and the careless way I dashed off the required columns of successive letters in the alphabet. I remember, too, the Scripture lessons we received once a week from clergymen who came equipped with colourful posters illustrating biblical stories. One of these visitors was a Salvation Army officer, and in some context or other—it may have been the Crucifixion—he described how fakirs were able to pass needles through their cheeks without feeling pain.

Because my parents suspected that salt air was conducive to hay fever, we moved the next year to a house in Ontario Avenue, Roseville, a good five or six miles from the waters of the harbour which had been visible from almost every hillside in Hunters Hill. The house at Roseville was called *St Audrey's*, but my parents never referred to this one by name as they had done with our earlier homes. They were not very fond of the place, and I suppose their attitude towards it may have been influenced by the fact that my hay fever survived our change of address.

I liked the house myself. Ontario Avenue was conveniently steep for scooters, there was a vacant paddock near our home, and there were one or two interesting features about the garden. Before long I had broken my left arm in a scooter accident, and sprained my right ankle by jumping off a mound of builder's rubble in the paddock. The thing that surprised me most about the fracture was the sweet smell of filth on my forearm when the plaster cast was removed after six weeks. The sprain looked

and felt worse than the fracture, and for the best part of a month my leg was blue-black from toes to knee.

Our garden at Roseville was not especially well endowed, but I enjoyed it for three reasons: down one side of the house was a row of ferns whose sloughed-off fur (if that is the right word) bore a striking resemblance to the finely shredded brown paper one found in chocolate boxes; beside the front gate stood a young camphor laurel in which one could sit unobserved yet all-seeing; and almost anywhere in the backyard one could dig up a mysterious tuber which, to my cursory eye at least, seemed to flourish underground without benefit of foliage. There was something very satisfying about grubbing for these misshapen vegetables, even though we never put their edibility to the test. My friends and I used to assemble great heaps of them, and then return them to the earth.

I made my first close friend at Roseville. His name was Lyall Waddy. We walked together each day to Lindfield public school, and after school we roamed the neighbourhood gathering empty cicada shells from the trunks of trees, hurling clods of earth in the paddock, and on one occasion climbing into an empty backyard next to Lyall's home and slashing a child's tent to ribbons with our sheath knives. This was not my first anti-social act, but it was certainly the most heinous up to that time. We were detected, of course, and after dinner that night Lyall and I were taken separately by our fathers to apologize to the aggrieved family. There was no other penalty. The solemnity of the occasion left me in no doubt that this had been a Federal offence for which my father's only form of punishment, a very occasional slap around the legs with a port strap, would not have been appropriate. In any case, I was more afraid of Dad's bad opinion than the strap.

In our roving after school Lyall and I developed a game based upon an irrational fear which, once engendered, could be stoked with make-believe until it assumed almost frantic proportions. The idea was to regard some perfectly harmless object with suspicion, watch it closely for the slightest indication of