

Strabane County Tyrone 1966 - 1967

Remarkably I graduated in October 1966. Through the aegis of classmate Paddy Raffan I secured a job as sole assistant with Bob McRae in Strabane, County Tyrone, Northern Ireland. Paddy's father was headmaster of the local High School. I'd actually started work before graduation as many of us did. You had a choice of jobs in those days. I chose this location for two reasons:

1. I did not want rumours of my 'incompetence' to leak back to my father in Northumberland
2. I wanted a busy small practice where I could gain practical experience very quickly

I chose well although this was undoubtedly the most difficult period of my life; even to this day? Mr McRae had interviewed me in Edinburgh. I think it went quite well. He offered me the job. He was a gruff but honourable man; both a strict and sound tutor. I needed it. He was an excellent country practice veterinarian if slightly lacking in professional polish. I retain the highest regard for him. By remarkable coincidence he was both a class mate and army buddy of my next employer Murray Bain. Both attained high levels of distinction in the armed services achieving the exalted rank of Major. Murray was actually an acting Lt. Colonel.

I lived with the McCrae family in their spacious Georgian House to begin with. They were courteous and kind if a little abrupt. It was not the happiest of households. There was constant tension and bickering due to overwork from both parties. They had two children: William and Anne. William had just started boarding school at Coleraine but was very unhappy. Anne was much more resilient. I didn't sleep for the first two weeks. Isolation was profound. Mrs McRae ran the show with an iron fist and indomitable will. The office and surgery were in the house yard. Anne from Sion Mills was the secretary; but couldn't type. She was a very feisty young Irish girl full of zest. We worked incredibly hard with extremely long hours. I needed supervision to begin with but was very soon let off the leash on my own. Mr McRae always gave me sound advice and a tentative diagnosis with recommended treatment. He always said to make up my own mind knowing full well I would follow his instructions to the letter. I had to write it all down as well as directions along the myriad tiny country roads in both County Tyrone and County Donegal. Our other office was in Raphoe, Co, Donegal. This was staffed by Hazel; a very young timid red-haired local lass. I think she earned the princely sum of £2 10s per week? We often crossed the border between Northern Ireland (Co. Tyrone) and the Free State (Co. Donegal) several times per day. You needed a pass book which had to be stamped at customs every time. The bridge over the River Foyle formed the natural boundary between the two countries. The Donegal County Town of Lifford was just across the river. There were also some 'unapproved' roads elsewhere such as at Clady. These unmanned border posts were well known as smuggling portals more like a sieve. They became even more sinister during 'The Troubles' a little later. Smuggled items included guns, ammunition, explosives and rebels rather than butter, cheeses and tobacco during my time.

There is an apocryphal story about a young veterinarian a few years after me who was in the wrong place at the wrong time straddling the border. There was a quantum difference in farming and agriculture between the two countries. Northern Ireland was part of the UK. Agriculture was heavily subsidised. Northern Ireland even enjoyed a more privileged status than much of the rest of Great Britain. There were no such government sponsored luxuries for farmers in the Free State.



The 'Lifford Bridge' over the River Foyle linking Lifford (Co Donegal) with Strabane (Co Tyrone)

There was also an unmanned rail bridge which acted as a conduit for enterprising smuggling entrepreneurs. Part time employee Joe Caulfield was one; he was caught with contraband butter and a sack load of squealing piglets! I was once apprehended with tobacco I was asked to bring.

Nearly all our farm visits and consultations were cash payments at point of service. Pay now. We had a sliding scale for each country depending on time and distance in travelling. We were cheaper in Donegal. Farm visit fees usually fell within the range £1:2s:6d - £2:10s:0d plus drugs administered or dispensed. Revisits were cheaper or perhaps no charge. It was a hectic life at full speed. Mr McRae worked at least as hard as I did. There was very little time for social interaction or relaxation. You had to get away to make sure of any down time. The average working week began at 7:30am on Monday and ended 'about lunchtime' on Saturday. This could be as late as 3:00pm – 4:00pm. You could not commit to any team sport. Strabane had a very good Rugby Team. I was never ever able to attend a match. There really was no such thing as 'the average working week'. We shared week end duty. In the busy springtime Saturday and Sunday were sometimes busier than during the week with only one on duty. You could be exhausted by the time you went to work on Monday morning!

I recall one day when I finished routine day calls at 2:30am: the next morning! I think that was the day I did over 40 farm visits. There could be several night calls when on alternating duty. It was very unusual to have an undisturbed night; but you were constantly alert anticipating the telephone to ring at any ungodly hour. The farmers watched over their limited stock with assiduous care. Scouring piglets were treated as an emergency because they knew any delay might prove fatal to the litter. Any cow that calved was supervised around the clock in case of Milk Fever; also a dire emergency.

There were post-lunch consultations at the 'surgery' which clients liked because no visit fee or travelling applied. Hernia operations on piglets were the busiest category. They were brought in on any old contraption capable of transporting pigs. Many were highly inventive with vivid imagination. Hernias could be umbilical or scrotal. Anaesthesia was basic using a cotton wool gauze swab impregnated with a bolus of 'Trilene' in a tin jam jar with holes in the bottom. Using the ears as levers the tin can anaesthetic machine was forced over the snout of the piglet. Secretary Anne was the unskilled and untrained but ever willing assistant. Screaming was excruciating until the victim succumbed to the anaesthetic. This could be very quick. It could also be permanent. A few expired. It was most embarrassing. You cannot talk your way out of it even though many piglets could well have suffered from Erysipelas heart valve lesions. Try explaining that to an extremely irate Tyrone farmer under duress! Usually there was no charge for inadvertent euthanasia?

After all that it was back on the road again. I always felt sorry for the Donegal farmers. Most were subsidised by expatriate sons and daughters working 'over the water' which could be the UK or more frequently the USA. Later I moved into lodgings with Mrs Wilson in Strabane. This was better excepting for one impediment. Conor McMahon worked for the opposition Joe Slevin. It was partly the Catholic/Protestant divide. I had met him as a student in Dublin. We hit it off very well; except that Conor was an alcoholic insomniac! Paddy Clancy's bar in Clady was a favourite. Paddy left you alone after hours and trusted you to put 1s 9d in the till for each bottle of stout (Guinness) consumed. He recognised no closing time. Trust was implicit.

You knew you were accepted when you were invited for cup of tea. This amounted to a huge china mug of strong tea, two hard boiled eggs plus a massive slice of home-made wheaten bread liberally spread with salty home farm butter. It was even better if you were invited 'to have a drop of the poteen'. This was genuine trust; and consummate acceptance! The illicit brew was invariably secreted away in some very inventive locations; like the bottom of a full corn bin or right down the back of the ancient family lounge chair. It could always be found. I didn't like it but it was the height of rudeness to refuse. It was customary to down the colourless draught in one swift gulp; similar to skolling vodka. You hoped the intense burning sensation invoked would soon be dissipated by the local anaesthetic effect on the oesophageal lining! One draught was enough!

There was a lot of government subsidised cattle work in Tyrone. This included both TB (tuberculosis) and CAB (brucellosis) testing. I became very adept at both. The limited cattle handling facilities were often overcome by the willing expertise of some very hard, tough, fit and strong young Irishmen.

They were frequently expatriate labourer sons and grandsons from 'over the water' who came back home specifically to help out with the testing. Looking back now I was fortunate in making the choice I did. The practical experience I gained was invaluable. However I decided I did not want to stay there. I felt a tad guilty when I told Mr McRae I was moving to Australia.



Abercorn Square in Strabane was short walk downtown from the surgery. The Abercorn Hotel on the left was the main watering hole of many. There were 30+ small bars which were also mixed business and grocery shops

In summary my experience in Northern Ireland and Donegal was a positive one. There were elements of enrichment, encouragement, embellishment, enlargement and enhancement. I'd never worked so hard or such long hours either before or after in my life. Professionally the experience was invaluable. This was what I was after. It was not all work and no play. One found avenues of expression and relaxation. The night before I left international singing star Engelbert Humperdinck played at the singing pub in Lifford. He had reinvented himself from the more prosaic Gerry Dorsey. Strabane had its own champion Irish Show Band, the Clipper Carlton. There were trips to Dublin with the locals. I shared one weeks' holiday touring Eire in a hired car with Brain Wain, Pete Campbell and Les Clerihew. The Strabane Hunt held its Point-to-Point races at Coleraine; no doubt to draw a larger crowd. However I made my decision. 'To Australia's sunny shores I was inclined to roam'; but I think that's been done before? Personal and professional isolation was the down side. I was to become even more familiar with this dark pejorative later in life.

## The Voyage Out

I believe it was Virginia Woolf who first coined the axiomatic title as the subject of her first novel? Her journey out took her to some dark places. She wrote evocatively about the “fin rising on a wide blank sea”. Waves to her were symbolic of the vicissitudes of her often quite violent mood swings. Significantly she called a later novel ‘The Waves’. How does this accord with Matthew Arnold’s description of the tide in Dover Beach: ‘with tremulous cadence slow and brings the eternal note of sadness in’? I guess we all have to deal with gremlins at some stage of our lives? I’ve had to contend with mine which may also be related to the isolation of journey? However I digress.

My journey began as far back as I can remember. That probably applies to us all. The major translocation occurred when I migrated to Australia on my own in 1967 aged just twenty-four. I first entertained the idea about two years before when I heard a most impressive scientific presentation by a Scot then resident in Australia. This was at the British Veterinary Association Conference at Edinburgh in 1965. I was an undergraduate student at the time and hoped to graduate the following year. I did. After one year cutting my teeth in North West Ireland this same Scot Murray Bain placed an advertisement in the British Veterinary Record for a suitable assistant willing to come and join him in Scone, NSW. I applied immediately and was accepted - I was told later partly because of my apparent enthusiasm and keen attitude? A sense of humour may have helped? I had lubricated well my interviewer Dr Jim Swanney at Glasgow Airport. Like many of his genre, gender and generation, he enjoyed a wee dram: and perhaps one more?

Like many young men and women of my ilk, I was fascinated by faraway places with strange sounding names. Flaubert put it more eloquently: ‘When we are children we all want to live in the country of parrots and candied dates’. Flaubert had a ‘thing’ about parrots. I longed to travel but did not have the means. *“There is a tide in the affairs of men, which taken at the flood, leads on to fortune. Omitted, all the voyage of their life is bound in shallows and in miseries. On such a full sea are we now afloat. And we must take the current when it serves, or lose our ventures.”* There’s that tide again with the highs and lows of its waves. The infamous Hill at the Sydney Cricket Ground beckoned enticingly with its Mexican waves of people. I succumbed to temptation and applied for a visa as an Assisted Package Migrant. This made me a Ten Pound Pom. It takes a bit of living down. I was lucky. Murray Bain’s neighbour and very good friend Sir Alister McMullin was then President of the Australian Senate. I was fast-tracked and jumped the queue. I was on my way in a hurry. All this had taken only three months. Some locals in Strabane, County Tyrone were a bit taken aback. A few had been waiting a matter of years for favourable consideration. My last evening was spent at a concert in Lifford, County Donegal: Engelbert Humperdinck was the star. He had recently achieved international fame after changing his name. Was this nominative determinism? We did not expect him to turn up: but he did. They sang rebel songs in the singing pubs. ‘You’ll end up in Botany Bay’. Very soon I would land on it. I did not look back.

My parents were more than a little dismayed when I called to say goodbye on Saturday 30<sup>th</sup> September 1967. It was my father's birthday. He was sixty-three. We had recently lost the farm which had been our childhood home. My father subscribed to the ultra-right wing of the political spectrum. His heroes were Enoch Powell and Winston Churchill. He once stated all Germans, Jews, Blacks, Catholics and Japs should be shot. Who said 'blood in the streets'? His view of an ideal world was that a small farming enclave would persist in the Upper Coquet Valley of remote rural Northumberland. It would defer to a Conservative Government in Westminster as head of Empire. He hadn't been more than eighty miles from his birthplace in his life. My Irish born mother once shocked my outré daughter by proclaiming that the Williams sisters of tennis fame should be back in the jungles of Africa swinging from the trees where they belonged. She also spoke occasionally of Papist scum. I'm not sure what they would make of their libertarian First Nation Civil Rights Lawyer granddaughter. Her unmarried partner is a doctor of Indian ethnicity surname De Souza from a large Catholic family. Our grandchildren are beautiful and already baptised. They might have been more at ease with my son who is a teacher and chaplain at an Anglican school. I digress – again.

My parents' apprehension barely matched my excitement. I was full of optimism and hope, if a little apprehensive. I took the train from Newcastle upon Tyne and headed for Heathrow Airport with my travel documents clutched closely and my small amount of cash clutched closer. As it turned out, I was very early. My morning flight was delayed by some ten hours due to a mechanical failure. With my fellow passengers, I was entertained with a *gratis* bus tour of London. I remember seeing Charles Dickens' birthplace. I was able to identify for the very first time with many icons of the country I was just about to leave. I had to attend to one important task. I wrote to the Manager of the Ulster Bank in Strabane to inform him I was just about to leave for Australia but would pay him back the £285 I owed him as soon as possible. I did before Christmas 1967. Trust me! I was afraid he might block my departure. I had £19 in my pocket.

The QANTAS commercial flight was memorable as my first ever experience of long distance air travel. I had taken several short trips in the UK and a few to Europe. We flew west via Boston, New York, San Francisco, Hawaii, Fiji, New Zealand and eventually Sydney. Today it would be excruciating. Then it was the greatest adventure. I recall a very loud stentorian group of grey nomad American couples who burst into raucous applause on landing at San Francisco. They had been on a frantic whistle stop tour of the capitals of Europe for anyone who was prepared to listen. Everyone on board could hear. They only knew where they were by what day it was. If it's Thursday this must be Berlin?

My flight was scheduled to land at Kingsford-Smith early on the morning of Monday 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1967. The very late departure had delayed the expected time of arrival to about 6:00pm. I remember the Captain saying it was the second day of the AJC Spring Racing Carnival at Royal Randwick Racecourse. I think he had hoped to be there. We were able to see the crowds leaving just as a massive dust storm blew up at dusk to engulf the whole area including the airport. After a seemingly interminable interlude of circling Botany Bay, the decision was made to head for Brisbane.

We were unloaded later that evening. I was processed at Eagle Farm International Airport. I had landed in a new country. I distinctly recall a laconic local immigration official with a very strange accent ask me where I was going. He recognised Scone as where all the thoroughbreds were bred. He may have been a closet racing fan himself.

Very late that same evening we were told to board a TAA charter flight to Sydney. The crew seemed to be very peeved indeed and had clearly not expected to be called to duty when they might have been partying in Fortitude Valley. We unloaded in Sydney well past curfew deadline. I was most impressed to receive a special letter addressed to me. It informed me I was booked into the Australia Hotel in Castlereagh Street. I climbed into my bed at about 1:30am on Tuesday 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1967. Although travelling non-stop for well over 48 hours, I was too buzzed up to sleep in the lap of luxury.

At about 8:30am that same morning, I received a telephone call from the spouse of my new employer Mrs Mace Bain. Mr Murray Bain had caught the 6:00am flight to Scone because of pressure of work. Mrs Bain was going out shopping and would meet me in the hotel foyer at 10:30am. I described myself as best I could. I was on time but Mrs Bain had arrived a few minutes earlier. Much to her chagrin she had already approached a young gentleman who she thought matched my desultory description. She was as mortified as he was startled when he rebuffed her approach. Luckily he was still around. Mrs Bain was almost too apologetic in feigning innocence when explaining her dilemma. Methinks she doth protest too much. I'm not sure what the young man thought of the denouement. He didn't look convinced. It will always remain one of life's little mysteries. Approaching strange young men in the foyer of the Australia Hotel was indubitably NOT Mrs Bain! I did meet Tiggy Moses for the first time. He and his extended family would form one of my closest enduring friendships in Australia.

We set out for the four hour drive to Scone with Mrs Bain at the wheel. We drove along the convict built Great North Road via Wollombi. The sandstone convict drinking trough was indelibly imprinted on my memory. At Peat's Ridge as a gentleman I offered to buy lunch for Mrs Bain which she gladly accepted. My kitty was reduced to £12. I guess you could say my financial situation was precarious. After about the same time as it takes to drive half way across England, we arrived at 'Chivers', Scone the home of my employer. The next new Australian had arrived. I liked to tell people who asked – and even if they didn't – that I finished work in Strabane, County Tyrone on Thursday and started work in Scone NSW the following Tuesday. It's a good line - and almost true.

It was easy for me compared to some. Robert Towns was born in the village of Longhorsley, Northumberland in 1794. This is very close to where I first saw the light of day. He was the tenth of eleven children and at age ten he set out alone for the port of North Shields sleeping under the hedge rows and eating berries as he went. It must have been late summer. He secured jobs on dirty coastal coal steamers plying their trade between the Tyne and Thames. He survived and prospered.

In 1813 he was captain of a brig in the Mediterranean and in 1827 he made his first voyage to Australia as captain of *The Brothers*. In 1833 he married the sister of W. C. Wentworth and established a mercantile and shipping business at Sydney in 1842. He afterwards bought station properties in Queensland. About 1860 he began growing cotton employing South Sea islanders to do the cultivation and picking. This was thinly disguised black birding. Many attempts had been made to grow cotton in Australia before this time but Towns was the first to do so on a large scale. Realizing that a port was needed on the Queensland coast north of Bowen, Towns arranged for explorations to be made from his stations. A suitable site was found at Cleveland Bay and on October 1865 it was gazetted as a port of entry and named Townsville. He went there only once in his life. Towns had been a member of the legislative council from 1856. Being Wentworth's son-in-law may have expedited his progress. Nepotism in government is not new. Although he did not take a leading part in politics his advice was much sought in matters affecting business. Working until near his death, Robert Towns died in Sydney on 11 April 1873. The memorial stone from his Sydney grave now stands atop a monument at Castle Hill, Townsville. He lived from 1864 to 1873 in Cranbrook House now Cranbrook School. This was an intriguing ultimate destination for a residual waif from Longhorsley.

The Voyage Out

*Dear Bill,*

*Thank you for this one. It is a very engrossing text, a striking journey.*

*You have a preference for the inverted commas. I find them a distraction, drawing attention to an expression which is invariably a routine piece of language.*

*It's attached.*

*Sincerely,  
Ben*

Did I do it tough? Now embarking on my eighth decade I will leave the final word to Joseph Conrad:

*"I remember my youth and the feeling that will never come back any more - the feeling that I could last for ever, outlast the sea, the earth, and all men; the deceitful feeling that lures us on to joys, to perils, to love, to vain effort - to death; the triumphant conviction of strength, the heat of life in the handful of dust, the glow in the heart that with every year grows dim, grows cold, grows small, and expires --and expires, too soon, too soon before life itself".*

Freya Stark: ***'Dust in the Lion's Paw'*** – Autobiography 1939 – 1946:

*'A great traveller, a woman of astute judgement and an extremely sensitive writer'* – Sunday Times  
*'Persuasion alone looks like the weapon of the future, with annihilation as the alternative'*.

*'It's a poor world where we are impartial through ignorance, prudent through impotence, and equal through mediocrity'*.