
PRG 1569/1/15 Ray Whitrod speaking about his mother, Alice Olive Whitrod (nee Haylock)

... to have you listen to this prepared note of mine about the suggestion that somehow you incorporate in your presentation, something about Ma's vision for me. The more I think about it, the more it eases my conscience that the book is not being written merely to inflate my ego but in order to acknowledge, identify, describe the social background, family background from where I came and the large input of my parents on me. I think, from my own reading, the influence of the early years tends to be downriden for its effect in later life because of other factors, but there is a great truth in the saying that the way the twig is bent determines the shape of the later tree. I don't think I've given you enough material as yet and I may duplicate some of the things I've already told you, but I would like to add to it.

You know my mother had a very poor formal education at school, lasting perhaps something over a year and a little bit. She had looked forward to the opening of the school with a great deal of excitement and expectation and hope and then she was only allowed to stay for twelve months or so, and then she was sent off to a little lonely isolated store half way between Marree and Birdsville. When she told me that story that she'd been sent down there as a girl of about twelve or thirteen to manage a store while the owner and his wife stayed out on the cattle property, I received it with a bit of scepticism and I think so did my younger brother when she told him, but I later read an account of where a traveller along the Birdsville Track had identified the ruins of a store half way between Marree and Birdsville and this was the site that Ma had described to me, and there she was, a lonely little girl in strange surroundings, away from her family, disappointed that she couldn't continue her schooling. She picked up a set I think of Dickens's book that had been left in the loft of the store or something and - Dickens or Shakespeare, I've now forgotten - and she spent her days reading that and getting some sort of education from that. Her handwriting was excellent and her speech was good. Her vocabulary was not very wide but I never noticed that it was any handicap to me until I started getting some sort of tertiary education myself.

I don't think I told you that when I was about eight years of age my mother had decided that young men really needed some musical background, and we were living in a very poor house at the time. I think it was the Halifax Street house. It was better than where we started but there was no musical instrument there and Ma went and consulted a music teacher at Mile End, a Milly Marshall, and spoke to her and Milly told her that pianos cost a lot of money, and she persuaded Ma that it would be worthwhile Ma paying one and six a half hour lesson once a week for me to learn the violin. Then Ma had saved up enough to buy me a boy size violin and for the next five years I went weekly to classes, the personal class at Milly Marshall. She in the meantime had won Tatts lottery and had moved to Henley Beach Road at Torrensville where she'd built a large home for herself and her parents and I used to travel down by tram on Saturday mornings for half hour tuition. I hated it.

I don't know if you know much about violins but they need to be tuned regularly. There's no point in playing scales unless they're tuned. You need a piano or some other instrument to tune them by. We had no access to a piano. Ma never thought about asking the church across the road if I could go across there and tune the violin and so I learned the scales with strings that were not tuned. It was horrible. And Saturday mornings I used to go down to Milly Marshall's and play some pieces that she set me and I was very upset about having to go and quite often I wagged it and didn't go. I told lies to my mother when I came home. Ma also had to pay of

course for the music and this used to weigh very heavily on my conscience that I was not taking advantage, but it was dreadful. I hated practicing. I used to practice half an hour after school in the bedroom and Ma used to come along and compliment me on what I was doing, but she didn't have the faintest idea about fingering, about how you use the bow, about tunes.

But I managed to get along for five years. I reached the stage where I had to sit for a final examination to get my letters for the London College of Music, and then I was then about thirteen or fourteen, and I refused, absolutely refused to go on any further. I know it was a big disappointment for my mother but I couldn't bear with it any more. It was dreadful. I played a few times at Scout concerts and Sunday School anniversaries. How the people put up with my out of tune playing I don't know, but they were all very kind. They all clapped. But it was an effort by Ma because Ma saw that an educated person needed just more than the alphabet and arithmetic. He needed a wider range of understanding of the world, and so she got me into music. It was tremendous. She couldn't play, couldn't sing, couldn't read music herself. She somehow scraped the money for me to do it.

Somehow she managed to find the money to pay for me to go off to a Scout camp every Christmas for ten days and that took up a fair bit of the Christmas pay that my father received. He would be stood down after Christmas for about a fortnight or three weeks without pay, as far as I remember, but somehow Ma managed to find the pound, or whatever it was, that she had to pay for my fares and for food for at least five or six years from the time I was eleven to seventeen in order to get me away to a Scout camp. She saw that my uniform was always clean, pressed, ironed and whenever I really was sick she got the doctor and she paid for the doctor by the simple expedient of trading in her Singer sewing machine for a new model. On that process she got a few pounds back for her old machine and committed herself to a fresh debt which was paid off two shillings every Monday morning by a collector, a Mr Gouch, who came around to our house for years and years and years, on Monday mornings, to get the two shillings from Ma.

I cannot remember any time in my youth of Ma spending any money on herself or on my father. She and her husband rated well behind her two sons and primarily me. I was the eldest and the strongest and so I managed to get most of her time and push and I was sort of a path-finder. But where Ma got her impetus from I don't know. Her sisters when they married - her younger sisters when they married - and her elder brothers when they were married, none of their children were ever sort of steered into a secondary schooling or into a tertiary education. It was very much Ma on her own. She didn't get much support from the neighbours because the neighbours were as poor and as uneducated as we were. Her parents were unhelpful. I don't know where Ma got her push from. It must have been some innate power that she had but I don't know.

In Ma's life there were some heroes. One was the sergeant of police at Birdsville. I think I've told you about him, how he provided Ma, when she was looking after the children, with access to the home medical book which he could read and she couldn't and between them they would sort out what home remedies were available for measles and chickenpox and whooping cough and all the little childish complaints that children get, whether in Birdsville or in Burke or in Brisbane. Somehow Ma made sure that her younger brothers, and then subsequently her children, survived fairly healthily. She was keen on us having baths and she saw that we bathed regularly in a tub. She lugged the hot water from a copper out in the back yard into a tub. Our clothes were always clean and ironed. She always made sure that when we went out we had a clean

handkerchief and she always insisted that I have a clean handkerchief. It was I think, for her, a sign that we were respectable.

Ma and Pa lived in our house while I was away the four years during the war and they helped Mavis bring up our two boys, and then after the war they managed to scrape together some money to buy a small cottage, a semi-detached cottage, in Norwood, and they lived there for the rest of their lives. Pa died when he was eighty-seven and Ma lived on in the house for the next twelve years on her own until she was nearly ninety-six and then she went into a nursing home at Illoura. The nurses at the nursing home still speak about Ma with affection. It must have been twelve very lonely years living on in the house by herself, but she was well supported by some caring neighbours and my brother and I paid weekly visits there and there were other callers as well and Ma managed to survive on her own. She died eventually at ninety-six, as I said. Gradually got weaker and died over a few days. It was a peaceful sort of death but it came too soon for Ma to realise the national honours that came my way, like the top rank of the Order of Australia, the invitation from the Governor-General to stay overnight, the honorary doctorate from the ANU. The various other honours that came my way in the main came after Ma died and so she never really experienced the fruition of her long-held dream.

... many years and had been an enthusiastic younger member of the Boys' Brigade and between them they had quite a sense of community responsibility. If I was to describe the most outstanding feature about them I would say it was their unselfishness in favour of their family. They were two of the most unselfish people I've ever met and I suppose it's natural that, when I got married, I would choose for my wife a young lass who was equally as unselfish and committed to the welfare of her husband and her family before her own.

[A church service takes up the rest of the tape. I take it that it wasn't wiped before the text above was recorded.]