

MY INTELLIGENT AUNTS

NEW BOOK ON AUNTS

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The Hon Justice Michael Kirby AC CMG

Like most members of an Anglo-Irish family, I was blessed with a close-knit group of people who were most influential in my development. They included my aunts.

My great grandmother, who taught my mother how to attend to her squawking first-born child, was widowed at quite an early age. She was the salt of the earth. Practical, caring, sensible, industrious. Even though she died when I was quite young, I still recall her most vividly. She had seven children. They were given the names typical of the turn of the century and rather lovely to my ears: Ruby, Jack, Norma, Gloria, Frank, Anne and Lillian.

Jack when only 18 years of age witnessed the terrors of the First World War. The true extent of the suffering, including of Australians, in those terrible battles was brought home to me last year when I visited the battlefields in Northern France. Row after row of crosses mark the graves of the Australian soldiers who fought on the other side of the world for "King and Country". Few visitors attend those manicured lawns nowadays. On ANZAC Day there are still official speeches. But for the most part, those soldiers

sleep in the midst of the farmlands of France. Jack came back from the Light Horse. But he was shattered by the experience.

Ruby, the eldest aunt, was a serious and thoughtful person whom I did not know well. She was a great reader and encouraged reading in her family.

Norma (Normie to my brothers, sister and me) was my father's mother. She was an outstanding person of cultivation, intelligence and sensitivity. She was a person of poetry and literature and she helped to inspire me to enter those realms of gold. My tales of her generosity (and of my neglect) would, sadly, fill a book. That must await the coming book on grandmothers. They certainly deserve a special book all of their own.

The next daughter, Gloria (Aunty Glory to me) was ever an independent spirit and happily is still so. She was one of the early visionaries in the women's movement in Australia, like the intrepid Miss Hayes who unsuccessfully applied to be admitted as a barrister in Perth in 1908. Gloria from the start, refused to tolerate a world dominated by men. She was a friend and colleague of Lady Jessie Street, a great leader of the movement for reform. She was against war - perhaps she saw what it had done to her brother. She took part in the International Peace Movement and was a strong supporter of what we would now call Social Democracy.

Gloria used to travel a lot. My first visions of the big world out there beyond Australia came from the postcards she sent me from foreign parts. The postcards followed the

grand trunk route of the Empire. One from Ceylon; another from Bombay; an exotic one from Port Said; views of the Pyramids and of Copenhagen. Aunt Gloria stimulated my vision of myself, then a small schoolboy, as a citizen of a wider world.

Aunt Anne is also happily still alive. Actually, she, like Gloria, is a Great Aunt. As my father was an only child I had no other aunts on this side. Anyway, these aunts were too young to be "great". To me they were just my aunts. But they were "great" in other ways. Aunt Anne lived in Bellevue Hill when I was a boy. She had married a most cultivated and refined gentleman. I still remember their spacious home which I visited during the War. Anne and her husband Gerald later moved to Turramurra. They were always my ideal of gracious living. Persian carpets. Beautiful mahogany tables. Fine china. Always a touch of elegance. In fact, a true auntly figure. And she still is.

And then there was Lillian. Tall, shy, beautiful, sensitive Lillian. As a child, my cousin Angela and I could not get our mouths around that name. So it became Lilyanne. So Lillian signed her letters and cards to me to the end of her life. She was a marvellously delicate soul. She was living with my parents when I was born. My mother, ever prepared, had her nightdresses neatly packed with tissue paper months before I arrived on the scene. When the time came she left in the taxi with Lillian, dropping her off at work on the way. Lillian was always close to my parents. This was the end of the 1930s and times were hard. Lillian said I was a false alarm. Some alarm. When I came into the

world, Lillian and her mother provided respectively support and guidance for my parents, so inexperienced but soon surrounded by a growing family.

Lillian was a highly intelligent woman who learned secretarial skills. She became the secretary to a series of American executives of the Goodyear Rubber Company. Years after they had returned to the Land of the Free they wrote to her, such was the admiration of her efficiency and grace. When the time came for me to seek my first job as an articled clerk it was Lillian who faultlessly typed up all the letters of application. Most of them came back rejected - but it was no fault of hers. I had no connection with the legal profession which was then very largely a family affair. Ultimately, one of Lillian's letters produced a job. All other applications in my early days in the law were typed by her.

Lillian never forgot a birthday or an anniversary. She was generous to a fault. She married late, meeting her husband Harold on a visit to Tasmania. She never intruded but was always there when help was needed. When times were especially hard for my parents bringing up young university students before public grants were available, Lillian would always dip into her own pocket, matching words of encouragement with practical relief when it was necessary.

Lillian became the secretary to the Bursar at the Scots' College, Sydney. She was very proud of the school. Loyalty was a strong quality of all these sisters. In fact Lillian bombarded me with news of the Scots College. I retaliated with news of my own school, Fort Street High - the

oldest public school in the country. She remained with Scots until her retirement. Sadly, her retirement did not last long enough. I deeply regret the fact that a busy life prevented my knowing her better. But is that not common? We neglect our family and friends in the rush of daily events which necessarily gobble up the hours.

My aunts were, and some still are remarkable women. They were a hardy group, born in earlier, tougher times. They were self-reliant. They read much. They loved poetry. Their lives are an inspiration to me.

A strange beast is the aunt. She is not typically in your immediate family circle. And yet she is not a stranger. You can get to know her as a person, even a friend - if you try. Yet there remain the assumptions and invisible barriers formed by blood and affection. My aunts are no exception to this general rule. Though in every other way they were, and are, exceptional women.