THE WASHERWOMAN

Winifred Steger: Her Life And Work 1882-1981

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WINIFRED STEGER: HER LIFE AND WORK 1882-1981



Her home at Watervale: painted from memory by Winifred Steger

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Winifred Steger c.1960. Photograph: the *Advertiser*.

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ABSTRACT

Winifred Steger, deserted by her mother as a child and without education, distinguished herself as a journalist and was hailed as "South Australia's foremost humorist." But because she wrote as Winifred the Washerwoman she remained virtually unknown.

Married in a "shotgun wedding" in 1899, at the age of seventeen, she ran away eight years later, leaving her four young children. She was to have two more husbands, both Moslems, and lived with them in Ghantowns where they worked as camel-men. In 1926 she made the pilgrimage to Mecca with her third husband and on her return to Australia published the story of her trip in the *Register* (South Australia). This launched her on a literary career that lasted until just before her death in 1981.

In her seventies she began to write novels, and over the next ten years bombarded Angus and Robertson with manuscripts until the readers pleaded with their editor, Beatrice Davis, to tell her "to stop writing these terrible novels." Success came in 1969, when they published an account of her trip to Mecca with a fictionalised childhood and marriage under the title *Always Bells: Life with Ali.* For the first time the woman behind Winifred the Washerwoman was revealed. Steger revelled in the publicity but had to maintain the lies she had told in print. A larrikin to the end, she celebrated her 100th birthday in 1979 and died in 1981 at the age of ninety-nine. She left a wonderful legacy in her manuscripts and articles.

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I also acknowledge the *Advertiser* (Adelaide) for permission to reproduce the *Star Dust and Soap Bubbles,* and *Sapphire Bill* stories; HarperCollins for giving me access to and permission to copy the letters between Beatrice Davis and Winifred Steger, and the readers' reports on Winifred Steger's work, in the Angus and Robertson Collection in the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales; Peter Steger and Winifred Barker for permission to reproduce their mother's letters; and the *Northern Argus* (Clare) for permission to reproduce material written by Winifred Steger for their newspaper.

I am grateful for the assistance of staff from the following institutions in Australia: the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales; the La Trobe Library, State Library of Victoria; the John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland; the Mortlock Library, State Library of South Australia; the Toowoomba Library; the Australian Archives (South Australia); the South Australian Archives; the Australian Genealogical Society; the National Library; the Queensland State Archives; the Toowoomba Family History Society; the Dalby Family History Society; the Roma and District Family History Society; the Fisher Library, University of Sydney; the Morven Historical Museum; the Mt Horrocks Historical Society; the Chinchilla Historical Society; the Alice Springs Library; the Public Library of Port Augusta; the archives of

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

On 1 November 1929 the *Register News Pictorial* (South Australia) published "A Page from Winifred's Indian Diary" under the title "South Australian Washerwoman Hostess to Nadir Khan: First Hand Impressions of Afghanistan's new leader." The entries were dated 21 February and 23 February and refer to the period when Steger travelled to India en route to Afghanistan to become governess to the children of King Amanullah.

It is probable that Steger kept a diary at other times but, if so, I did not have access to it. There were no diaries among the papers that Winifred Steger gave to Nancy Flannery. The diary entries and other passages printed in italics in this work are recreated from my imagination, and based on my research.

Dedicated to Philip Lindsay for his unfailing support

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ABBREVIATIONS

A & R	Angus and Robertson
ABC	Australian Broadcasting Commission
SWW	Society of Women Writers (Australia)

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

In 1971, when president of the Society of Women Writers, I became aware of the vast amount of writing by women which was unpublished and I began to look for reasons. I suggested that the members of the SWW write their life stories and send them to the National Library so that they would be preserved for posterity. In 1971 I advertised in the print media both in Australia and overseas, seeking details of women who had experienced difficulty in having their work published. In one month I received four hundred letters, which I answered. The letters continued to arrive and a picture emerged of women deprived of education; women whose creative energies had been submerged in domesticity: housework, children, aged parents; women whose families actively sabotaged their writing by emotional blackmail. It was a sad story. I organised workshops through the Society of Women Writers and also magazine branches for isolated women. These took the form of a "round-robin", in which members commented on each other's work. They established a network for women writers, who supported one another in their literary endeavours. Many went on to become published writers.

There was one woman who stood out. I first saw her interviewed on *This Day Tonight*, ABC Radio, in 1973, after the publication of the paperback edition of *Always Bells:Life with Ali* [1]. She was then in her nineties and remarkably lucid. When asked what advice she would give to younger women writers she replied: "Grow mentally." I wrote to her and, as we began to correspond, discovered that she had fourteen unpublished novels. When she went into a nursing home in 1979, her letters ceased and I had no idea what had become of her. But she remained in my mind, together with her unpublished novels.

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[1]Winifred Steger, *Always Bells: Life with Ali* (Sydney:A & R, 1969), reprinted (Adelaide: Rigby, 1973). Published under Steger.

In 1992 I began to research her life. I wrote first to Helen Baker in Adelaide, a member of the Society of Women Writers, who referred me to Stella Guthrie who had interviewed Winifred Steger for the ABC Rural Department. From these tapes I gleaned clues about Steger's early writing for the *Register* (South Australia) but I still had little to go on. Steger hid her tracks well, she had told so many deliberate lies in print, which she justified as part of a writer's craft, "Why let the truth stand in the way of a good story?"[2] There was a deeper motive for Steger's actions which she could not reveal: she had a past she had buried. After a deprived childhood and a disastrous teenage marriage, she reinvented herself in an heroic mould - anything which might destroy the illusion had to be suppressed. The grand old lady who "died in her 101st year" in 1981, after the much publicised celebration of her 100th birthday in 1979, was in reality only ninety-seven. This was her idea of a joke, a fitting last tribute from "an admiring public" which had known her for years as Winifred the Washerwoman as they followed her adventures in her weekly serials in the Adelaide press. She basked in the adulation she received when her identity was revealed after the publication of her "autobiography", *Always Bells*. Having lied about her early life and marriage in print, she was forced to keep up the fiction. Even those who thought they knew her well were suprised when I discovered that she had been married before and that the "love of her life" Ali Mahomet, the hero of *Always Bells*, was an invention.

Unravelling Steger's life seemed an almost impossible task but bit by bit it fell into place. Poring over early copies of the *Register* in the Mitchell Library, Sydney, I discovered the first printed version of her trip to Mecca, something she had not disclosed to Angus and Robertson when they published the later version with her fictionalised childhood and marriage. It was through the articles in the *Register* that I came upon the by-line Hadjani[3] Bebe Karum Bux. I wrote to Steger's daughter by her second marriage to find out if Karum Bux had been her father. In reply I was told: "My grandmother was an abnormally private person to the point where she did not even

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[2] Nancy Flannery, personal interview, 3 March 1992.

[3] Hadjani is a title bestowed on a woman who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca.

confide in her own family." I was asked "to find some other source for [my] enquiries."[4] This made my task more difficult, but I could understand the family's feelings.

I traced Steger to the Darling Downs and found out that she had had two sons by a former marriage. It was two years before I discovered she had given birth to four children during her first marriage before doing a bolter, and that two of the children were still living. A letter to the forty-five Stegers in the Queensland telephone directories yielded rich pickings. I found a family divided between resentment and admiration of their "illustrious" forebear. Some had not forgiven her for deserting her young family and publicly bestowing their surname on her second Indian husband,[5] albeit a slight change of spelling.There was sadness on the part of her elder daughter, Winifred, who was only one year and ten months when her mother left. She did not have a chance to get to know her mother in their three brief meetings more than fifty years later. She was over forty when she managed to trace her mother to Alice Springs, to be initially repudiated. Later she was not told that her mother had died until well after the event, even though by this time the two sides of the family had established a relationship through personal visits and letters.

As I got closer to the heart of the Winifred Steger mystery, I felt the need to follow in her footsteps and journeyed first to the Darling Downs to see it through her eyes: the lush waving grass, the remnants of prickly pear that destroyed her father and the site of her first home at Boonargo. I looked for her name in old school records but could find no trace of her, though the early Jondaryan School records are missing. I travelled to Oodnadatta by mail car and experienced the vastness of the gibber plains, the savage beauty of the landscape that touched Steger so deeply that she immortalised it in print. I saw the house[6] in Billy Goat Lane where she had lived, and walked there at

---

[4] Letter to the author, 17 December 1992.

[5] Rita Dunstan, "Always Bells - Story of a Remarkable Woman", *Australian Women's Weekly*.24 September 1969, 13.

[6] I have tried to have her house listed with the South Australia State Heritage, without success. It seems likely that it will be demolished. Steger's other home in Watervale, which now houses a wine merchant, is listed.

midnight with Lynnie Plate from the Pink Roadhouse (who had offered me hospitality), hoping to conjure up the spirit of the Washerwoman, gazing up at the spangled night sky that had been witness to Steger's lonely night vigils after she had lost her beloved Ali Ackba Nuby.

The camel-men and their camel-strings had left with barely a trace, except for a few unmarked graves and the date palms which they had planted[7]. I felt the heat rising from the black polished gibbers that dot the plains under the blazing sun, and saw the beauty of the burnished sand dunes that lie beyond the town and change colour with the light. I could understand how the landscape grew on Winifred and imprinted itself on her soul, so that in her old age she was able to recreate it from memory in her oil-paintings - like her gift for writing she had a natural talent for painting which she had never had a chance to fully develop.

In 1996 I followed Steger to London and found the house where her mother, Louisa Dennis, was living when her daughter was born. But I could find no record of a marriage between Louisa Dennis and Wilfred Oaten, which may have accounted for the fact that Louisa Dennis did not accompany Winifred and her father to Australia. I walked the streets of Lambeth and tried to see it as Winifred saw it in the late 1880s.

The year before I went to Bombay (Mumbai), trying to follow in Winifred's footsteps, but here the trail was blurred, until one evening at dusk I found myself near the Towers of Silence, where the Parsees bring their dead to be consumed by vultures. As I stood gazing out to sea, at the same spot where Steger had stood after witnessing the funeral procession of a young Parsee girl almost seventy years before,[8] I felt Steger's spirit very close and was deeply moved - that one moment had made my trip worthwhile.

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[7] When the camel-men left the local policeman transplanted them to the police station, where they continue to flourish.

[8] Winifred Steger, "The Towers of Silence", *Senior Citizens' News*, August 1974.

In the four years that this work has consumed me I feel that I have come very close to the real Winifred Steger. When I lifted the mask, I found the face beneath to be a very human, loveable one, though like us all she was still vulnerable, guarding her secrets. As a biographer my task was to uncover those secrets and, in so doing, pay tribute to a remarkable talent. Poring over her articles I saw the world through her eyes. She left a legacy that was undervalued, a social history of Australia in the 1930s when the world was still a troubled place but moved at a slower pace. ~~She immortalised the bush in a way that no other Australian writer has done before. This was where her special talents lay.~~ She tried to recreate herself as a novelist but she never mastered the art. And yet there is a quality about her work that is unique. Hers was an original mind but she lacked education and knew it. She wrote:

> One of the hardest punishments is to be thrown into a world with asperations [sic] and dreams that cannot be fulfilled for want of education.[9]

Two other women who helped me in my quest stand out in the saga of Winifred Steger. We all met her on the same day in 1976, when I was in Adelaide to launch a branch of the Society of Women Writers. I had arranged for a hire car to bring Winifred Steger to the meeting. Nancy Robinson of Nadjuri Press was to speak at the meeting, and, like me, fell under Winifred Steger's spell. It was through her that Winifred's ten boxes of manuscripts found their way into the Morlock Library to be preserved for posterity. Stella Guthrie also fell in love with "old Winnie" and interviewed her for ABC rural radio. She continued to tape-record her story until a few months before Winifred died. Both Nancy Robinson and Stella Guthrie visited her in the nursing home and later shared their memories with me.

To me fell the self-appointed task of restoring Steger to Australia's literary history, sorting fact from ficition in a long and often legendary life. The pilgrimage to Mecca and her story of it earned her a place in the neglected history of Australian

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[9] Winifred Steger, letter to the author, n.d.

women. It is an incredible story, but even more incredible is the fact that an obscure Australian woman, with no formal education, could be invited to become the governess to the Royal Family of Afghanistan.[10] Even though political events in that country prevented her taking up the appointment, the invitation elevated her to a different status in the public perception - it created a mystique which she capitalised on by the use of her Winifred the Washerwoman pseudonym. It gave her the opportunity to invent herself in print, to tell lies with impunity in the name of art. The art of lying is part of the stock in trade of the writer; it adds spice to a narrative. The art of the biographer is to separate fact from fiction: sometimes the lines become blurred, but does it really matter?

Mine has been a long search and I have learned much. There is the touching story of her last romance with Jim Godfrey who read her work in the *Senior Citizens' News* and wrote: "as soon as the weather breaks I shall be standing on your door-step with a box of chocolates!".[11] He became an ardent admirer. On 9 April 1975 he sent her the following poem:

From what strange land friend did you come?
You princess from some fairyland;
With honeyed tongue and puckish wit -
You, with the dainty foot and hand;
You who can waken old-time dreams,
And new dreams stir when we despair,
Embodiment of mystery,
From whence came you? I wonder where!

Ah, we may guess and we may probe,
But Fate, no veil of mystery lifts;

---

[10] Elizabeth Leigh, "Bebe Zatoon en Route for Afghanistan", *Register* (Adelaide), 18 December 1928.

[11] Jim Godfrey, letter to Winifred Steger, 6 February 1975.

born of some strange romantic love,
Inheritor of Heavenly gifts;
A visitor to Eastern lands,
Of sacred mountains, secret dells,
Where infant ears first listened to
The tinkling of temple bells.

What matters dear from whence you came,
Since you such joys can radiate;
Though still unsolved your secret birth,
You quarrel not with Time or Fate;
You prove, when Age with Wisdom dwells,
That words are precious, and they seem
When they with laughter rippling run,
To ever kindle, dream on dream.

Sadly for Winifred Steger, he died not long after. In one of her last interviews with Stella Guthrie Steger said:

> On Sunday I wrote a letter and when I started to write that letter the other day I cancelled it. Do you remember the silver tongued poet - I've spoken about him several times - Godfrey? Oh, I met him. He was wonderful. He used to write me such beautiful letters - so lovely. And when he got sick I had such a wild idea that he might come to one of these places where I was and we could be married. I had that wild idea... I wanted to write a requiem to him and I started to write and I wrote "Requiem to the Silver Tongued Poet". And I began: "I sat me down by the crystal gate where none will open." But I stopped short... never finished it because somebody said to me, "How do you know Godfrey's people will like it?"
>
> I said to myself, "I don't want to hurt Godfrey's people."

He was such a beautiful man. But I've lost heart. He's gone now and I can do nothing.[12]

There is so much more I could say about Winifred Steger, but I have said enough to show the woman behind the work, and some things are better left unsaid for the sake of the living. My one regret is that I could not discover the whereabouts of Steger's eldest son by her second marriage, Yusef Deen, whom she falsely claimed was lost at Guadalcanal during World War ll. I searched for him because he could have told me so much. Born in 1916, he would have remembered his father. Just the same I am content. It is time to set the spirit of Winifred Steger free. *Salam aliakum*, dear old friend.

3 December 1996

[12] Guthrie tapes.

PART ONE: THE LIFE

3421

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1882 BIRTH in the Sub-district of St Mary in the County of Middlesex

Columns:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10*
No.	When and where born	Name, if any	Sex	Name and surname of father	Name, surname and maiden surname of mother	Occupation of father	Signature, description and residence of informant	When registered	Signature of registrar	Name entered after registration
238	Fifteenth November 1882 Queen Charlotte's Hospital Marylebone Road	Jane Winifred	Girl	Wilfred Isaac Oaten	Louisa Caten formerly Dennis of Lambeth	House Painter	L. Caten Mother 97 Traiscant Road South Lambeth	Eighteenth November 1882	E. Hassiter Registrar	

CERTIFIED to be a true copy of an entry in the certified copy of a Register of Births in the District above mentioned.

Given at the GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE, under the Seal of the said Office, the 9th day of June 1993

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Chapter Two

LONDON

Jane Winifred Steger was born in Marylebone Hospital on 15 November 1882 to Wilfred Isaac Oaten, son of a schoolmaster of Bath, and Louisa Dennis, of whom little is known, except that just before the family was due to sail to Australia she walked off the ship. By so doing she walked out of her daughter Winifred's life. Winifred never referred to her mother again, except once in the Guthrie tapes shortly before her death on 16 March 1981. It was only a fleeting mention in her long saga.

> Yes, we went down to the ship. Everything was arranged. We got on board the ship near the gangway. And then she - water over there - and she walked across to me. She was dressed in a little violet frock with a couple of daffodils here at her waist. I always admired her. She was pretty. She walked across to me and she bent over me and she gave me one kiss. And then she went to Dad and he blanched and stiffened up and then she turned and she ran and she had some sort of clickety-cluckety shoes and she ran down the steps and on to the wharf and the last I ever saw of her. And we found out afterwards - it was years afterwards before I ever found out what she said to Dad. He had been too much of a Don Juan for her and she could take no more of it and she wouldn't. And here was her chance to get away and she took it. That was the end of her.

Steger never talked about the pain she must have felt at losing her mother when she was so young, or of the devastation her father must have felt when they sailed without her. They had no choice. Once they had decided to emigrate and had paid for their passage they had severed their connections with England. There was no turning back. What became of Louisa Dennis is hard to say. If women did not want to go into domestic service they could find work in the vinegar factory, the steam laundry, or in one of the "sweat-shops" where women did tailoring work on a piecework basis, though

the wages were abysmal, barely enough to keep body and soul together.

It is understandable that Steger preferred to put her childhood in London and the loss of her mother out of her mind. Instead she invented a romantic story of a childhood in China where she was the favourite of Sister Angela.

> Just three English ladies, banded together to rescue abandoned waifs, of whom I was one, race and name unknown. Sister Angela loved me the best, she gave me my name, Winnie, because when the children found me, a few days old, wailing under a bush in the grounds of the dragon pagoda, she said I was a winsome little thing. Because of my abandoned state, she added the name of Strange. (*Always Bells*, 1)

But the past intrudes at unexpected times because it is impossible to control the subconscious mind. Could Steger ever really forget her early life in South Lambeth, and the terraced-house at 97 Tradescant Street where she lived with her parents? Memories must have come flooding back as she lay in the rough hut her father built on the Darling Downs in Queensland, with no friendly street-lamp to penetrate the blackness of the night. And no sound of neighbours quarrelling, or the Salvation Army singing hymns on the corner on Saturday night, or the rumble of the trains crossing the new iron bridge. Nowhere to walk except along a lonely bush track through wild cattle country to collect water from the creek. No one to talk to except her morose and unhappy father. At times she must have yearned for the comfort of the corner shop, two doors from where they lived, the companionship of the other lodgers who shared their house and the bustle and excitement of South Lambeth Road which she could see from the front gate.

> The South Lambeth Road commences at Vauxhall Cross...The open space called Vauxhall Cross, because six roads converge there is one of the ugliest spots in London. [It] has not one redeeming feature to save it from utter contempt. The lovely nursery grounds, famous for the camellias... and grapes, even to the middle of this century, are now occupied by a railway-station and cab-yard and a stone mason's works. At three of the street corners stand as many public houses of the ordinary

type, one of them [The Elephant and Castle] being surmounted by an elaborate sign, so hideous as to be an architectural nightmare. The Cross is the favourite prowling-place for those outcasts of society, the low book-makers, who lie in wait there for errand-boys and shopmen... Opposite the railway station... the high dead wall of the gasworks stares you in the face... Let us hasten away from this place, and enter the South Lambeth Road... we have to pass through the *via mala* of the Railway Bridge... Passing under that bridge in a handsom cab is a trial for nervous people, for horses startled by a train suddenly coming on the bridge are apt to bolt.[1]



The Elephant and Castle Hotel, Lambeth. Photograph: the author

There was little to commend about the fast developing village of Lambeth, where old houses were knocked down to make way for "commonplace, monotonous, and small

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[1] Heckethorn, Charles William, *London Memories: Social, Historical and Topographical,* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1900) 240. All future references are to this edition and are in parenthesis.

houses." (Heckethorn,65). The advent of railways did much to destroy the area, cutting the old village of Lambeth Marsh in two and dividing it from the waterfront "with a half mile thick bastion of raised brickwork."[2] The railway lobby was granted the right of compulsory purchase of land needed to build the railway. As a result, a large amount of densely built housing, much of it only forty years old, was destroyed. Though the railways brought benefits in the form of rapid transport, what had once been a desirable residential area with many gracious homes and gardens became an area inhabited by working class people. No grand hotel was built opposite the railway station, which was a feature of almost every other main-line terminus. And the air was poisoned by a "sulphorous stench and a solid black smut descending continuously through the air." (Gibberd, 51).

> The establishment of works like a brewery and a laundry... totally destroyed the residential character of South Lambeth Road... which suffered further in this respect by the construction of a tramway, laid down in the road in spite of the almost unanimous opposition of the most respectable frontagers, and the palpably demonstrated absence of any need for such a means of conveyance. Yet the Lambeth Vestry, in the arbitrary exercise of its power, disregarded the wishes of the inhabitants of the road; and the parliamentary committee, caring little for the matter one way or the other, but giving way to the public clamour of those whom the construction of the line could not in any way affect injuriously, sanctioned the line - which has depreciated property along the route, whilst the shareholders, as they watch the cars as they pass along, often nearly empty, must feel anything but comfortable. (Heckethorn, 253-254).

At the same time the South-Western Railway Company purchased land which bounded on South Lambeth Road.

> Most of the houses facing the park will be pulled down, and flats erected

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[2] Gibberd, Graham, *On Lambeth Marsh: The Southbank and Waterloo* (London: Jane Gibberd, 1992) 51. All future references are to this edition and are in parenthesis.

on their sites; whilst the gardens at the back will be turned into a coal-yard. The present amenity of the northern end of South Lambeth Road will not thereby be increased. (Heckethorn, 254).

Tradescant Street, where the Steger family lived, had once been the site of famous gardens stocked with exotic plants collected on their travels by John Tradescant and his son.

> The estate extended down Albert Terrace, and along the South Lambeth Road was enclosed in a park fence. [When] "Turret House", the former home of the Tradescants, was advertised for sale by auction in the year 1880, some of the Lambethans appealed, through the press, to the public to save it from the destroyer's hand, but sentiment generally gives way to pounds shillings and pence, and so the road and its locality lost one of its most interesting relics. (Heckethorn, 265).



Childhood home of Winifred Steger, 97 Tradescent Street, South Lambeth. Photograph: the author.

When the Oatens moved into 97 Tradescant Street, sometime between the 1881 census and the birth of Winifred in November 1882, the house, one of a row of terraces almost flush with the street, had just been built. It was here that Winifred Oaten probably spent the first nine years of her life, sensitive and unhappy because of her parents' domestic situation. She said:

> [I was] always self-conscious, self-conscious - from a little baby I was self-conscious. "Look at that kid there... wonder what her mother's like" - a little three or four year old, and I began to think there must be something wrong with me. And I'd look in my mother's glass and my eyes were the same and my nose the same as other children's. I wasn't any different. So I said to myself I must be a badder girl - badder girl - called myself a badder girl and I grew this self-consciousness which I still have and always will...
>
> They didn't want me from the start. "Look at that child. Look at that giant." I wasn't a big person Dad always had his set on me. Mother much the same.[3]

One of her earliest memories was of standing by their front gate watching the men come home from work as she waited for her father. Her mother was lying down. "Stop bothering me. I've got a headache," she had said when Winifred had asked if she would take her for a walk. "Go and talk to Mrs Watkins." But Mrs Watkins was out with her barrow. The child had gone to the front of the house and, dragging a chair to the door, had unlatched it and let herself into the street.

It was still warm, even though it was almost dusk. She had stood there watching the trams rumble along South Lambeth Road, the harness jingling, the driver sitting in the front flicking his whip at the horses. Then she had seen a man lurch past and thought, "He must be a tipsy

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[3] Guthrie tapes.

man." She'd heard her mother talking to Mrs Watkins about men who got tipsy. It was a strange word that sounded like gypsy. She knew what they were. Sometimes they camped on the common and grazed their horses. Mrs Watkins had said, "They steal little children and they never see their mothers again." Her brown eyes had grown very round and large as she stared at Winifred, who made up her mind that she would never ever go near the common in case the gypsies got her and she never saw her mother again.

But the tipsy man wasn't on the common. Winifred thought he looked funny lurching from side to side, and holding on to a lamp-post. Then he let go and staggered out of sight. Winifred went to the corner and saw him go into the lane behind the shop where her father bought his tobacco and her mother bought bags of flour and tapioca and sago and sugar. When her mother had no money the man in the shop put it on the slate. Sometimes he would beckon her over to the counter and give her a paper spill of boiled lollies. She liked the black and white ones best. Mrs Watkins called them humbugs and said they were better than the human sort. Winifred didn't know what she meant. She couldn't imagine a human shaped like a humbug. And you couldn't eat a human humbug unless you were a cannibal. She knew about the cannibal islands from a story her father read her. She liked her father's stories. They were all about adventure and sailing off to places far away. "How would you like that, eh? Sail on a big ship far across the sea." She thought she'd like it very much. But her mother always said, "Don't talk nonsense. You'll not get me on a ship, and that's that." "We'll see," her father used to say, "We'll see."

When the tipsy man went into the lane Winifred stood there watching him. She saw him unbutton his fly and then a stream of urine came spurting out, splashing on the paling fence. He looked up suddenly and

saw her standing there and began to laugh. "Spying on me, are you youngun'. Come and have a good look." He lurched towards her with his trouser-fly open, holding something pink in his hand, something that moved. He put out his hand to grab her and she screamed and ran back to the corner shop and down her street. She hammered on the front door with her small fists but it had shut behind her. She wasn't tall enough to reach the door-handle. No one came to open the door and she sat down on the doorstep feeling cold. The warmth had gone out of the day though it was still light. She was still sitting there when her father came round the corner carrying his bag. "You're a strange one, sitting here by yourself."

"I couldn't get the door open.".

"Did she lock you out again?" He opened the door and Winifred followed him down the dark hall and up the stairs into their room where her mother was lying down. Her father bent over the bed and shook her roughly. "You're a lazy slut. Too lazy to look after your own child. I bring in the bread, the least you can do is look after her."

Her mother sat up and, picking up her hair-brush from the dressing-table, began to brush her long fair hair. "You know I never wanted her. I told you that when she was born. You wanted me to keep her. Now you look after her." Her father raised his fist as if to strike her but he restrained himself. "God knows why I stay," he said as he struck a match and lit the paraffin lamp. It shed a circle of pale light onto the small round table where he emptied some coins out of a leather purse. He handed them to Winifred. "Run to the corner-shop and get a bundle of saveloys and a loaf of bread. Take the basket."

Winifred pressed herself against the door, shaking violently. "There's a typsy man... a typsy man... I saw his willie," and she burst into a flood of tears and flung herself to the floor.

Long after she left England Winifred's mind would travel back to her early life in London, and the house where she lived with her parents in two rooms on the top floor, though her room was more of a box-room that overlooked the back lane and the tap in the yard and the length of rope where the women fought over the clothes line. The privy where they emptied their slop pails in the morning stood in one corner.

The roof was slate, and often in the night Winifred would hear something scrabbling across it. "They're water rats," a boy told her once when she was down by the river.. "When I'm wif a tosher we chase 'em up the sewer and knock 'em on the heads. It's capital sport... and we git a farthing a dozen from the sanitary." She had shuddered and turned away when he held up a string of rats by the tails. He was one of the mudlarks who earned their living by diving in the river looking for coins and bits of rag, and bone that they sold to the man who came around with a horse and cart.

Winifred knew from her school geography book that the River Thames separated their part of London from the other side where parliament met and where Queen Victoria lived in her palace. She'd seen the back entrance once when she'd walked with her father to Victoria Station. There were guards in uniform standing in the street. "That's where the tradesmen go in and out," her father had said.

"The butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker," she had recited as she skipped along beside him. She liked to imagine the Queen sitting on her throne choosing the best cabbages, and feeling the tomatoes to make sure they were not bruised, and perhaps biting into an apple. She wondered if the grocer gave her children spills of boiled lollies.

The thought of rats scrabbling on the roof frightened her. She would bury her face under the blankets in case one came scuttling down the chimney and under the crack beneath her door. It might find its way into her bed and bite her. She knew that rats had bubonic plague which made you sick until you died. A sick man lived on the floor beneath them. She could hear him coughing when she passed his door. It was the coal dust, her father said. He'd been a coal-whipper. It was something to do with unloading coal from boats that came down the river. Sometimes her father sent her in to give him a cup of milk. She would hesitate at the door, almost afraid to go in because of the smell of sweat, and piss in a bottle under his bed. He had a tin mug he spat in and sometimes it was full of blood. He'd gaze at her, his unshaven face almost transparent, so that she could see the bones poking through, and two bright spots of colour on each cheek like blood plums. He would beckon her to come closer, curling up one long thin finger with a blackened nail, trying to focus with his filmy blue eyes. She would sidle up to the bed and put the cup on a chair beside him before he could touch her. Then she would turn and be out the door like a flash and helter skelter into her own room. He was dying, her father said so, "and the sooner the better, otherwise it's the workhouse."

But on a summer's morning when the sun shone into her room she could forget the rats and the dying man. There would be sparrows pecking in the yard among the weeds and wildflowers that somehow had survived from the garden of the man who had been there before. She knew his name. It was Tradescant. She liked the way it sounded, though it had been a long time before she could say it properly.

The thing she liked best about her room was that it faced the sun. In summer she would wake early feeling it on her face and reach for the book under her pillow until it was time to get up and get dressed for

school. She knew when it was time because of the hooter from the steam-laundry further down South Lambeth Street. Mrs Watkins' daughter, Aggie, worked there and sometimes she came home with her hands all swollen and red from being in the water all day. She would rub sugar and dripping into them and then put on a pair of white cotton gloves, and not take them off again till the next morning when she went to work again.

Sometimes when Winifred woke in the night and the wind was blowing from the right direction she would hear the train whistle at Waterloo. It was a friendly sound - and exciting because it meant travel. She liked to imagine the people sitting in the carriages in their fancy clothes, the men in top hats with a carnation in their buttonhole, and the women wearing diamond tiaras and feather boas. She thought that the Waterloo train might be different from the train that took the working men down to the dockyard, and the match girls to Bryant and May's factory. Her father walked to work. He was a house-painter and had a regular job, not like Mrs Watkins' husband who unloaded ships. He had to line up every morning with thousands of other men hoping for a day's work. Sometimes when he got work he forgot to come home until morning. Then there would be shouts and screams in the night and the next day Mrs Watkins would have a swollen face. Once the police came and she was taken to hospital. On Fridays she went to the markets to buy fruit and vegetables. She'd wheel them round in a hand barrow, ringing a bell and calling out, "Oranges, lovely oranges, fresh cabbages and apples." She'd got a loud voice. Once she threw a cabbage at a policeman. But he let her go. She couldn't have paid the fine. She had six children. Five of them died. Now there's only Aggie. My father never hits my mother but they quarrel a lot. I don't think my mother is very happy. She used to work in the vinegar factory but once I was coming she had to stop.

Life was hard for the working-class and those who were out of work had to fall back on the Poor Law Unions for assistance. "The Poor Law Acts of 1597 and 1601, and the Act of Settlement of 1662, had placed the responsibility for poor relief firmly in the hands of each parish."[4] Unpaid overseers were charged with the responsibility of collecting rates from occupiers of property and land and spending the income on the destitute, which included apprenticing the children and making sure the able-bodied worked. Sometimes they were taken back to their own parish. One difficulty was that

> the desire to offer outdoor relief in exchange for work directed by the poor law authority was thwarted by a lack of opportunity for such labour, some recipients were seen to be paid for being idle, and employers were believed to pay deliberately low wages, knowing that the balance of the living wage would be made up by the parish or Union... (Gibson, 5).

The New Poor Law of 1834 was aimed at eradicating pauperism, which was seen as a "character defect involving idleness, unreliability, drunkenness etc." (Gibson, 6) It was decided to get rid of outdoor relief and instead offer places in a workhouse where paupers would be made to feel "like unwelcome guests" (Gibson, 6.) At the same time there was criticism from humanitarians in the community who formed the opinion that it was lack of employment, and not a character defect, which was the true cause of poverty. Charles Booth demonstrated this in his surveys commenced in 1887 and continued for seventeen years. Described as "The map of poverty" they were published under the title of *Life and Labour of the People of London,* in seventeen volumes from 1889-1903.[5]The Charity Organisation Society, founded in 1869, also recognised the weakness of the pauperism theory. They divided the poor into two classes: the "deserving" poor who became the subject of their charity, and the "undeserving" poor whom they considered to be the responsibility of the Poor Law Unions.Those that went

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[4] Jeremy Gibson,Colin Rogers and Cliff Webb, *Poor Law Union Records: South East England and East Anglia* (Birmingham, 1993) 5. All future references are to this edition and are in parenthesis.

[5] Beatrice Webb, *My Apprenticeship* (1926, Longmann, Green. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971) 14. All future references in the text are to this edition and are in parenthesis.

into the workhouse did so reluctantly because there was shame attached to it. They were treated like prisoners, as if being poor was a crime. Conditions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had changed little from when Engels wrote *The Conditions of the Working-Class* in 1844.

> The food is worse than that of the most ill-paid working man while employed... the workhouse is a jail too... he who wishes to go out must ask permission, which is granted or not according to his behaviour or the inspector's whim; tobacco is forbidden, also the receipt of gifts from relatives or friends outside the house; the paupers wear a work-house uniform... families are broken up; the husband is placed in one wing, the wife in another, the children in a third, and they are permitted to see one another only at stated times after long intervals, and then only when they have, in the opinion of the official, behaved well... the inmates are permitted to receive visits only with the consent of the official.[6]

Little had changed by the time the Oatens lived in England. Charlie Chaplin, a contemporary of Winifred Oaten, spent some time in the Lambeth Workhouse in 1905. His father had deserted the family and stopped paying the ten shillings a week maintenance. His mother was unable to work because her sewing machine was repossessed when she was late in the repayments. They were destitute. Chaplin wrote:

> Although we were aware of the shame of going into the workhouse, when Mother told us about it both Sydney and I thought it adventurous and a change from living in one stuffy room. But on that doleful day I didn't realise what was happening until we actually entered the workhouse gate. Then the forlorn bewilderment of it struck me; for there we were made to separate. Mother going in one direction to the women's

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[6] Gillian Avery, *Victorian People: In Life and Literature* (London:Michael Joseph, 1964) 211-212. All future references in the text are to this edition and are in parenthesis.

ward and we in another to the children's.[7]

He recalls seeing his mother dressed in workhouse clothes looking "forlorn and embarrassed", and that both he and his brother had their hair "cropped." They saw their mother on visiting days until, after three weeks, the boys were removed from the Lambeth Workhouse to the Hanwell School for Orphans and Destitute Children, about twelve miles out of London. The two boys were separated and seldom saw each other. Charlie was only six years old "and alone, which made me feel quite abject." (20) He wrote:

> Although at Hanwell we were well looked after, it was a forlorn existence. Sadness was in the air; it was in those country lanes through which we walked, a hundred of us two abreast... We were known as inmates of the "booby hatch", a slang term for the workhouse. (22)

He also spoke of the cruel public beatings:

> For a minor offence, a boy was laid across the long desk, face downward, feet strapped and held by a sergeant, then another sergeant pulled the boy's shirt out of his trousers and over his head, then pulled his trousers tight.
>
> Captain Hindrum, a retired Navy man, weighing about two hundred pounds, with one hand behind him, the other holding a cane as thick as a man's thumb and about four feet long... would lift it high and with a swish bring it down across the boy's bottom... the minimum of strokes was three and the maximum six. If the culprit received more than three, his cries were appalling. The spectacle was terrifying. The birch was different. After three strokes, the boy was supported by two sergeants and taken to the surgery for treatment. (23)

On one occasion Chaplin's mother had herself discharged. The boys were returned to the Lambeth workhouse where their mother met them at the gate "dressed in her own

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[7] Charles Chaplin, *My Autobiography* (London: Bodley Head, 1964) 19. All future references are to this edition and are in parenthesis.

clothes." After the family had spent a day together, Chaplin's mother had herself re-admitted to the workhouse "in time for tea... this ruse was her only means of being with us." (21)

Florence, another Lambeth resident of Winifred Steger's generation, spent two years in the workhouse. Her mother was pregnant and, as with Chaplin, their father had deserted them.

> My earliest memory was from when we were in the workhouse. We were sent to Shirley School which was... run by the Council. It was for children who had no homes or whose mothers were widows. There were so many of us in each cottage. I was too young to do any work... My eldest sister had to clean out the toilets at six o'clock every morning before she went to school. They had a school in Shirley but the boss... didn't believe in teaching us grammar or how to speak properly... I must have been there about two years altogether until they found my father... at Shirley you all had the same dress and pinafore.

The family moved into one room and for "years and years after that my mother still had to go to what they used to call `the Guardians' and they gave her a big loaf of bread and milk tickets. There were no handouts of money."[8]

Those who were given outwork were also humiliated and given hard and demeaning work. James Greenwood described their situation in "The Wilds of London" (1864). If men were fit enough

> they were set to breaking stones; while young boys and old men picked oakum - that is they were given a set amount of ship's rope saturated with tar and hard as wood, which had to be shredded into pieces small enough to be used to caulk ships' timbers.

He commented on the demoralising aspect of work which could be performed "more

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[8] Florence, *90 Years Down Lambeth Way*, Andy Lewis, ed., (Lambeth: Lambeth Adult Education Insitute,n.d.,) 2. All future references are to this edition and are in parenthesis.

quickly and economically by machine" and was angered by the sight of "the vagabond... earning with ease enough at least to buy him bread to eat and beer to drink, and tobacco to smoke, while the hundred times more deserving" but respectable out-of-work artisan "is sweating under the rags of his old respectability and straining his uneased muscles that he may carry home a dry loaf for his children." (Avery,215-6)

It was very much a stratified society with the gentry and well-to-do middle class secure and well fed on one side and the working class, who were unable to save for their old age and who had nothing to shield them in the event of ill-health or loss of their job, on the other. At the bottom of the pile was an underclass of the genuinely poor, such as widows and orphans and the homeless.

> By mid-Victorian times London contained no less than fifteen per cent of all workers in England and Wales employed in manufacturing industries... it was also the largest single market for consumer goods in the world.[9]

This should have meant steady employment but there was an over supply of unskilled labour because of the constant stream of migrants. These included the Irish who were forced off their land by the Great Famine of the late 1840s, unskilled rural workers from England, and people fleeing from the continent because of political and religious persecution. They crowded into the already overstretched inner metropolis because there was more opportunity for work. According to the 1881 census there were 3,813,544 people in London of whom 253,699 lived in Lambeth. Added to the intense competition for jobs was that of finding somewhere affordable to live. The railways had "cut a swathe through heavily populated areas, shattering and reshaping the urban scene like a succession of minor earthquakes." (Seaman, 9) By the 1840s it was estimated that 3,000 working class homes had been demolished. This continued with the building of new railways, and between 1850 and 1900, 100,000 houses appear to have been destroyed. Those responsible believed

that the poor would leave areas of unsanitary squalor and go off to live

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[9] L.C.B. Seaman, *Life in Victorian London* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1973) 11. All future references are to this edition and are in parenthesis.

in the healthier suburbs... They moved instead from the old slums into new ones because they could not afford train fares. (Seaman, 64-65)

In addition to gobbling up housing the railways also gobbled up open spaces. By 1887, in Lambeth, an area once renowned for its beautiful gardens, there were only four open spaces available to the public. These were Kennington Park, the Albert Embankment, the churchyard of St. John's, Waterloo Road and the Recreation Ground in High Street. Concern for the health of the residents caused Dr Walter Vernon, Lambeth's Medical Officer, to attack the government for failing to stop the "shrinkage of open land in London and for permitting houses to be built in very close proximity".[10] He argued that if access to open spaces in which to walk and take exercise benefitted the health of the well-to-do citizen, why was not the same privilege extended to the poor and the working class who lived in cramped and unsanitary conditions and spent long hours in badly ventilated factories? His was the voice of a concerned man.

There were many such people, including William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army (1878), who not only ministered to the poor in London but also provided food and shelter. Others, like Beatrice and Sydney Webb, founders of the Fabian Society (1884), wrote essays which publicised the plight of the poor and the need for an improvement in working conditions. Henry Mayhew wrote a study called *London Labour and the London Poor*, (1851)[11] to highlight the evils of "sweating", the practice of subcontracting tailoring work which was then given out to women who worked from home. The payment for sewing a dozen buttonholes was fourpence halfpenny; by working excessively long hours a woman might earn ten shillings a week, with a deduction of two shillings for silk. (Webb, 316-317)

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[10] Marie C. Draper, *Lambeth's Open Spaces* (Lambeth: Borough of Lambeth, 1979) 105. All future references are to this edition and are in parenthesis.

[11] See Elie Halvey, *A History of the English People in the Nineteenth Century: Victorian Years* [Incorporating *The Age of Peel and Cobden*], 1841-1895. *The Age of Peel and Cobden* (London:Bouverie House, New York: Barnes and Nobel, French edition, 1946, English edition, 1948, *Victorian Years,* London: Ernest Benn, 1951, paperback 1961, 1962, 1970) 253. All future references are to this edition and are in parenthesis.

An effort had been made to ameliorate the conditions of work, particularly the exploitation of child labour, with the passing of The Factory Act (1833). Added to this was the Public Education Act (1870) which made education available to all. Because so many children were working to support their families education was not made compulsory until between 1878 and 1880, when all children over the age of five were required to attend school. This was an important step in helping the working class. Once they had learned to read and write they were better able to articulate their grievances. The schools were managed by a board and became known as board schools, the education rarely progressing beyond teaching a child basic skills in reading, writing and arithmetic.

The closest school to Winifred's home was Wyvil Road, a short walk on the other side of South Lambeth Road. It is still standing, a solid and rather forbidding building in the dark brick typical of the time. The buildings were not "impressive architecturally" but described as "often the roomiest, best-ventilated and most hygienic surrounding in which poor children might spend their lives at any time in the Victorian era." (Seaman 48)



Wyvil Road School, South Lambeth. Photograph: the author

Of her own schooling Steger wrote: "I received only a few weeks schooling, just enough to learn my letters. Ignorant and alone I lived in the world of makebelieve."[12] . Whether Steger stayed away from school because of illness, or because there was no one to see that she went to school, I do not know. The fact that she learned to read and write shows that she had a rudimentary education. Because her birthday was in November it is likely that she started school at the beginning of the first term in 1888, and continued for a further two or three years until she left for Australia. Her first day at school would have been one of bewilderment, particularly as she had no older siblings or cousins to tell her what to expect.

> *"Molly Smith, will you look after Winifred Oaten. She's a new girl. Take her to the infants room and tell Miss Jones I sent her."*
> *"Yes, sir," Molly Smith curtsied. Winifred stared at the big girl. She was wearing a navy woollen skirt and white blouse with a red cardigan and long black woollen stockings with lace-up boots. The headmaster turned and walked back into his office. Winifred looked towards the front gate but her father was out of sight. She wanted to go home, tears prickled the back of her eyes, and her bottom lip trembled. The big girl gave her a little push. "Cry baby. Come on, the bell will be going soon. I want to finish my game of hop-scotch." She grabbed Winifred by the hand and hurried her along, pausing to ask, "What does your old man do?" "He paints things," Winifred said. "My father's an engine driver," the older girl tossed her head, "and I'm an ink monitor." Winifred didn't have the faintest idea what that was and she had a stitch in her side from hurrying. They stopped beside some steps leading up to a porch. "Up there," Molly said, and gave her a little push. "Up there. That's where the babies go." Winifred stood there, bewildered. The older girl sighed, "Just my bleedin' luck. Come on," and she dragged the child up the stairs and to the door of a large classroom where a woman was bending over stoking a coal-fire. The woman turned when she heard Molly knock.*

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[12] Winifred Steger, letter to the author, n.d., c.1974.

"It's a new girl, Miss. Sir told me to bring her here." The woman advanced toward them, her long black skirt swishing as she walked. Underneath Winifred caught a glimpse of black-polished-buttoned boots. She was wearing a white shirt-waist with a high collar and long sleeves. Then she spoke. Her voice was soft and melodious and her face softened into a smile.

"Thank you, Molly. You can go now." Molly turned and hurried out the door and the teacher bent down towards Winifred. "What's your name, child?"

"Winifred, Jane Winifred Oaten."

"What do they call you at home?"

"Just Winifred."

"Well, that's what I'll call you. It's a lovely name." She took out a large book and wrote in it. "There, you're on the roll now." She pointed. Winifred stared. She had never seen her name written down before. It was something to tell her father. She thought that perhaps she might like school after all.

Miss Jones led Winifred out into the hall where there was a row of pegs. Put your school-bag there and your bonnet. "Now come with me." She took her by the hand and walked her outside . Winifred watched as a boy pulled a rope and heard the sound of a bell clanging. "That's the school bell. You must always try and get here before the bell goes." She led Winifred to where a group of small children were standing in two lines and put her at the end of the front line. "Today's Monday. We have school assembly. You must stand very still and be quiet," and she walked down to the other end of the line.

As Winifred stood there she felt a violent push from behind and she almost fell over, and then someone tugged hard at her apron and she staggered backwards. She turned around and a freckled-faced boy with ginger hair poked out his tongue. She faced the front again. A man with

a stick was walking towards them. He stopped in front of Winifred. She could felt her heart thumping in her chest like a frightened bird. Her throat felt constricted. "What's your name?" he asked. She stared at him in panic. He was tall and thin and wore a black suit. His cold blue eyes seemed to bore into her. She hung her head, terrified. He poked her with the stick. "What's your name?" She was unable to speak. She wanted her father. She wanted to be back home again eating bread and sugar and talking to Mrs Watkins. School was horrible and she began to cry.

Then she heard Miss Jones' voice, "This is Winifred Oaten. She's only new today." Winifred threw herself towards Miss Jones and buried her face in her skirt. Miss Jones pulled away, "Come now, Winifred, you mustn't go on like this. You want to learn to read, don't you?" and she held out a white handkerchief. "Blow your nose and stop crying." Winifred did as she was told. She felt better now and looked around the playground. A boy was playing the bugle and two other boys were hoisting the Union Jack up a flagpole until it fluttered in the breeze. She watched as the children stood to attention and chorused, "I honour my God, I serve my Queen, I salute my flag." The man in black with the stick called out, "Quick march," and the children turned and began to march, groups breaking off to go into their class-rooms. Her group was last. They straggled along in two lines, sixty small children, with Winifred leading the way holding the teacher's hand.

Another day stood out in her mind. When she woke she imagined she could hear the school bell ringing. With a sense of terror she leaped out of bed and hurried to the cupboard, where she took out a slice of bread and spread it with dripping and ate it hurriedly, washing it down with a glass of water from the jug on the dresser. Then she dipped her face-flannel in the jug and rubbed it over her face and eyes and pulled her white flannelette nightgown over her head and hung it on a peg behind

the door. She always wore her drawers and bodice to bed. In a kind of frenzied desperation she pulled on her long black worsted stockings, noticing that there was a hole in the toe, then she sat on the floor to pull on her lace-up boots. Her brown and white checked dress was lying in a heap on the floor. It had a stain on the front where she'd spilt some raspberry vinegar that her father had brought home the night before. Winifred had been afraid to show her mother, knowing it would make her angry. After she had put on her dress she found a clean white pinafore in a drawer and pulled this over her head, but couldn't manage to fasten the ties at the back. She looked at herself in the mirror on her mother's dressing-table, relieved to find that the pinafore hid the stain, and picked up her hairbrush and flicked it through her hair, wishing she had a blue ribbon like some of the other girls. Instead, she fastened her hair back with a tortoise-shell clasp that her father had bought her at the Cut when he had taken her there on her last birthday.

Winifred glanced quickly at the bed where her mother lay sleeping, the bedclothes pulled over her in a crumpled heap. She knew that if she woke her mother she would find her an errand to run to the corner shop, or make her stay home to keep her company because she had one of her headaches. She grabbed her sunbonnet from behind the door and picked up her schoolbag and ran downstairs. Mrs Watkins was standing at the front gate, talking to Mrs Jones from next door. Winifred called, "Good morning, Mrs Watkins, Mrs Jones," as she dashed past. She felt her cheeks burn as she heard Mrs Watkins whisper, "Look at that poor child... pinafore strings undone, hair unbrushed. It's a disgrace. That mother of hers. She ought to be ashamed."

The child paused briefly to gaze at a bucket of daffodils in the doorway of the corner shop. She wished she had some money to buy one. She'd already spent the halfpenny her father had given her on Saturday on

lollies. Still thinking about the daffodils she dashed across South Lambeth Road without looking and almost into the path of a Hackney cab. She heard a horse whinney and the voice of the driver calling out to her, "Watch your bleedin' neck, or you'll git your head knocked off." But Winifred didn't pause or look back, intent on getting to school. There was no one else running along the road and no sound of children playing in the school-yard. She knew it must be late as she hurried to the cloakroom and hung up her sunbonnet. In the classroom Mr Cornwall was calling the roll. Then she imagined she heard footsteps behind her in the hall, terrified that it might be the headmaster. Once he had made her stay back after school and her name was read out on Monday at assembly and she had to join the `late squad' and march around the school-yard as punishment.

Winifred opened the door and tried to sidle into her desk but it was no use. "Ah, the late Winifred Oaten," Mr Cornwall said. "Have you an excuse?" Winifred flushed and hung her head. Everything was horrible and she put her head down on the desk and began to cry.

The teacher turned away. "Today I'm going to read you from a new book by Robert Louis Stevenson.[13] *I want you to listen carefully because I'm going to ask you some questions later. He opened the book and began to read: "Squire Trelawney, Dr Livesey, and the rest of these gentlemen having asked me to write down the rest of these particulars about* Treasure Island... *" He continued reading, glancing up from time to time to make sure that the children were paying attention. Some of them were fidgeting up the back, others had a vacant look on their faces, but Winifred Oaten was sitting there, elbows on the desk, her chin in her hands, her grey-green eyes shining with excitement, a look of rapture on her face.*

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[13] *Treasure Island* (1882).

That afternoon, when the bell went for the end of lessons he said, "Winifred Oaten, I want you to stay behind." He saw a look of panic cross her face. "It's all right," he said. "You like hearing stories, don't you?" She nodded. He held out his copy of Treasure Island. *"This belongs to the school but you can borrow it. Take it home and bring it back when you've finished it. I have another copy."*

Winifred was still holding the precious book in her hand as she ran across South Lambeth Road and into Tradescant Street. The daffodils had gone from outside the shop but she didn't care. The front door of her house was open and she heard Mrs Watkins call out, "Is that you Winnie? Your ma's out. You wait here till she comes home." But Winifred pretended she didn't hear. She flew up the steps, dropped her sunbonnet and bag on the floor, and propping herself up on her bed began to read.

Because of the way she developed later as writer it is likely that Winifred would have been a keen student, good at English and with a flair for composition. But her life was far from ideal. "I was always a loner - a lonely child. I had neither brothers or sisters, nor other children to play with so I had to use my own judgement."[14] Her saving grace was her lively imagination which she put to good use. She began to practise visualisation long before it became popular as a tool for helping people to cope with stress.

When I was about eight or nine years old. When I had trouble with my relatives, or those in charge of me, I'd get very angry, and I'd wait until they went outside and I'd get a stick and I'd flog those chairs till all the varnish came off the side. I always felt better after flogging those chairs. Anyway I began to think about those things and I wanted something different, something nice to think about. And I started making up little

[14] Guthrie tapes.

thoughts in my mind and I made one up. I thought nobody should ever get this one. This is mine. And whenever I'm in trouble I'm going to throw myself into this thought and be cured. So I made up a picture. And the picture was a little mental room in the brain. And I'd think up a little mental fence around it so that nobody should get into it and nobody should interfere with it. And when I grew absolutely annoyed and I couldn't take it out on the furniture, I'd jump into this little shangri-la, as I called it then. And forget all outside and just live in my little room. For a while I made all sorts of pictures of that room and at last I decided that I must make one separate picture, and where would I make it? I found the atlas and I made a little picture and I put it on a mountainside in Tibet. And there I built a little white tent. I put a white mohair carpet on the floor... I couldn't play the piano, but I put myself a little white piano with gold markings... Everything I had to put in that tent was snow white. There was a snow white bed and outside was a lovely mountainside... [it] sloped down to a big watery creek. Ferns and other flowers grew round it. It was a beautiful place and it was my own. My shangri-la. And I used it for years and years. Any time I was worried and sick and tired I'd fly to my little secret place in my mind.[15]

Winifred's formal education ended about this time because her father decided to migrate to Australia. Wilfred Oaten probably left England for a number of reasons: a craving for adventure; the chance to make a fresh start with Louisa Dennis, imagining, as people often do, that a change of scene would solve their marital problems; the chance to own his own land and be his own master, free from the insecurity of the labour market in London. His sense of insecurity would have been exacerbated by the dock strike and the knowledge that if he lost his job he might end up having to apply to the Union Workhouse for outdoor relief, or worst of all, to be admitted with his family.

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[15] Guthrie tapes.

There is no doubt that the dock strike was a major upheaval and must have sent shock waves through all other industries. It began on 12 August 1889 and quickly gained massive support. It had been preceded in 1888 by the "match girls" strike at Bryant and May. Their conditions of work had been exposed by Annie Besant in an article called "White Slave Traffic in London", published in her journal *The Link*. Besant pointed out that the value of the shares in the company had risen from five pounds to eighteen pounds seven shillings and sixpence, and dividends sometimes reached thirty-eight per cent. Yet a woman doing piece work earned only five shillings to nine shillings a week, with young girls earning less. The cost of glue and brushes was deducted from the wages. Outworkers earned twopence farthing for making a gross of matchboxes. Workers were fined threepence if they had dirty feet and two shillings and sixpence if there was litter under their work bench. One of their difficulties was that the matches often ignited when they were being packed and there was nowhere to put the spent matches. They worked from 6.30 a.m. to 6 p.m in summer with an 8.30 start in winter, and a half hour break for breakfast and an hour for lunch. If they were late they were fined half a day's pay.

Annie Besant interviewed two sisters who worked at the match factory. The older one earned eight to nine shillings a week and the younger one, who was sixteen, four shillings. Out of this they paid two shillings a week for rent of one room and lived on bread and butter and tea. Once a week they ate out as a treat and had "coffee, bread and butter, and jam, and marmalade, and lots of it."

Conditions also included an occasional blow from the foreman when he was angry. One of the worst aspects of the work was that the women were expected to eat their meals in a work-room full of "phosphorous mix fumes." Many of the women developed "phossy jaw"[16] from exposure to phosphorus and were dismissed.

A meeting was held on 22 July 1888 to form a trade union and the London Trades Council, which represented various organisations of workmen, urged all trades

[16] Gangrene of the jaw bone.

to give money to the strike. Money poured in, and there was also great public support for the match workers. When the women resumed work they were provided with a separate room for meals and the system of fines was dropped.

The dockworkers' strike the following year was a bitter and long drawn out affair which lasted for five weeks. Because of the seasonal nature of many other trades, such as the gasworkers who were laid off in the summer, thousands of men gravitated to the dockyards seeking casual work. "These labourers had to compete against their fellows to be employed for a few hours or a day at a time, and were at the mercy of the contractors and foreman, who hired and fired at will."[17]

The organisers of the strike gained great public support because of their peaceful demonstrations but the cost of providing meals and clothing for thousands of men and their families seemed an impossible task and there was a chance the strike would collapse. Meal tickets to the value of one shilling were distributed to be exchanged for food, "on the first occasion 4,000 of these were given out." [17] On 25 August 1889 there was a Great March.The organisers made sure that the strikers didn't harrass blacklegs or upset the police. "One entrance to Star Street bore the banner: No rent paid in the West End till the docker gets his tanner." (Wasp, 88)

Supply of food became critical; the Salvation Army, the churches and many others fed the strikers and their families. But by the end of the month many were starving. People pawned everything they had, including their mattresses. Within a few weeks things were at crisis point. The Union was issuing 25,000 meal tickets a day and were running out. Then the Union received a telegram from the Dockers' Union in Australia, saying that their members would support their English brothers.They sent two hundred and fifty pounds with the promise of more money. Out of the forty-six thousand, five hundred pounds given to the strike fund, thirty thousand pounds came

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[17] Greater London Records Office, "The Great Dock Strike, 1889" (London: Greater London History Library, Leaflet Number 2, n.d.) 1.

from Australia.

The intervention by the Australian dockers must have had a tremendous impression when made public. It demonstrated how much better things were in Australia. The English dockers went on strike for sixpence an hour and eightpence overtime, which they were awarded. The Queensland dockers were receiving one shilling and threepence an hour. At a time of great uncertainity in England, with industrial unrest and increasing competition for jobs, Australia must have seemed like a land of opportunity. At the same time it was calling for immigrants to take up land.

> They put an advertisement in London saying: If any man with a wife and child or children would come to Australia they would give him 176 acres of land for his very own. And, of course, it fired all London. It fired my little daddy. My little daddy was only a pound high but he had ambitions higher than the sky. When he saw a little thing he would imagine it bigger and bigger. Anyhow Daddy got the idea he was going to Australia. He had a wife. He had a youngster, so we'd go.[18]

To leave one's own country for an unknown land is a great act of courage. It means tearing up one's roots and leaving behind all that you know and love, but, like many before and after him, Wilfred Steger took up the challenge. What ship they travelled on, or the actual date, is not known. At the time the Oatens left England the Board of Trade had become responsible for migration. Though there are some records in the archives of the Public Records Office, London, individual emigrants are difficult to trace. But what is known is that Wilfred Isaac Oaten received two land orders, the first for ten pounds and the second for twenty pounds. According to an archivist in the Queensland State Archives, there was no land attached to a land order but it could be exchanged for the cost of the passage.

> Under the 1860 Queensland Land Act, orders entitling the holder to purchase any available Crown land to the value of eighteen pounds were

[18] Guthrie tapes.

given to emigrants who arrived in the colony at their own expense, and to any person who paid for the passage of the immigrant... A further land grant worth twelve pounds was made if the immigrant stayed two years.

Generally, the operation of the land-order system was not successful, for migrants readily sold their orders for cash. Among the buyers were land-hungry squatters and the British shipping company, the Black Ball Line, which accepted the orders as payment towards the migrants' passages. Henry Jordan, a former and again later a member of the Legislative Assembly, the Government Agent appointed to adminster the land-order system in Britain, had arranged for the company to have a monopoly on the carriage of migrants.[19]

Wilfred Oaten would have received the first land order before he left England and the second after he had been in Australia two years. The entry in the Land Order Register in the Queensland State Archives is dated 13 February 1894. According to Winifred Steger she was eight when she left England and nine when she arrived. [20] It is easy to visualise the scene at the wharf the day they sailed.

Winifred stands on the wharf watching the other passengers going aboard - families laden with assorted bundles, holding fretful children, cluching babies in shawls. There is the noise of shouting as people struggle up the gangplank anxious to get settled before the ship leaves the channel and starts bucketing in the open sea. Women with baskets of apples and oranges add to the din with their calls of "Lovely oranges, fresh apples." The lavender sellers join in with their cry: "Who'll buy my lavender? Lavender, a penny a bunch." Others with armfuls of hand knitted woollen shawls importune the travellers at the foot of the

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[19] Patricia Clarke, *The Governesses: Letters from the Colonies 1862 - 1882* (Victoria: Hutchinson,1985) 129-130. All future references are to this edition and are in parenthesis.

[20] Guthrie tapes.

gangplank, pressing them, "to feel the quality, dearie, real Shetland wool. There won't be nothing like it where you're going." And the muffin man is there with a tray of muffins on his head, ringing a bell and calling, "Fresh muffins. Fresh muffins".

Winifred, engrossed in the scene, watches as someone throws an apple core into the water, sees the ever widening circles as it sinks, then turns when she hears her father's voice: "Come along now, Winifred. Don't stand there gawping." Obediently she picks up her bundle of clothes tied in an old grey blanket. She is wearing a woollen dress and a little grey woollen cap from which her brown curly hair escapes. Her legs are encased in thick black stockings and she wears a pair of stout black leather boots. It is serviceable garb - the garb of a working man's child. Her mother has made no attempt to make her look pretty and she clutches no doll or toy like many of the other children.

She is not an engaging child, but there is something about her that makes her stand out - her wide grey-green eyes perhaps. There is a look in them that belies her age, it is as if she is trying to commit the scene to memory.

Her father, holding a battered suitcase on one shoulder and a large bundle tied in a calico sheet on the other, hustles her up the gangplank. His paint-brushes and tools are in a tin-box which he pushes with his foot. He glances back and calls to his wife who is standing uncertainly on the wharf. "Come along, Louisa. I want to get settled, otherwise we'll only get what no one else wants. It's a long way to Australia."

The young woman looks up at the sound of his voice. She has fair hair caught loosely in a knot at the back of her neck and wears a dress of violet wool with a fashionable bustle at the back, on her head a

matching felt hat with a veil. Holding a bunch of daffodils she has been given in one hand, she drags a large carpetbag up the gangplank with the other.

The man waits for her at the top and helps her with the bag, lifting it on board. For a moment they sway together, the slightly built young man and the pretty young woman, while Winifred stands watching them. It is as if she doesn't exist. The young couple are intent on each other. She sees her mother lean forward. She is speaking but she cannot hear the words. A shudder goes through her father and he staggers, clutching at the railing for support. Her mother moves towards her and kisses her on the cheek. The child is conscious of the daffodils in her mother's arms as the petals brush against her face. They feel cool and give off a fresh, clean scent which she is to remember all her life. Then her mother is gone, her high-button boots going clickety-cluckety on the gangplank, the carpetbag bumping along behind her, a trail of daffodils in its wake, as she pushes her way through the passengers coming on board. As Winifred watches, her mother disappears among the crowd.

Later she would recreate the scene in her mind. She had stood there watching her father, feeling bewildered. He had his face hidden in his hands and his shoulders were shaking. She walked towards him as the funnel let out a huge shuddering blast. The all aboard had gone a long while before and she had watched the friends and relatives making their way down the gangplank, then stopping to gather on the wharf, calling out, "Don't forget to write," and "God bless you." She wondered what it would be like to have relatives to come and see you off. She knew her father had brothers and sisters she had never met who lived in Taunton. But it was a long way from London. She'd seen a daguerrotype of his mother and father... "Your grandparents," he had told her. And he had a brother with his wife in Australia. But her father had no idea where

they were. So for the moment there were just the two of them... all alone in the world... no mother... no Mrs Dawkins with her bread and sugar or an apple with a spot of brown in it that she couldn't sell. Winifred thought that perhaps it made them special, just the two of them, like people in a book. She looked for her mother in the crowd on the wharf, not really expecting to see her because she had pushed her way through the crowd until she was out of sight.

Winifred looked up as the funnel gave another loud triumphant blast and snorted out a cloud of black smoke.She heard the command, "Weigh anchor", and knew that the great adventure was about to begin. She walked across to her father and took him by the hand. "They're pulling up the anchor," she said, her eyes shining with excitement. Her father turned his head and, dropping her hand, gripped her by both shoulders. "If anyone asks, your mother is dead." He shook her violently, while she struggled to break free. "Your mother is dead - dead - do you understand? Dead, I say. You must never mention her name again." Winifred could feel her teeth chattering, a cold wind had sprung up and suddenly she was afraid. She thought of Mrs Watkins and the day she told her that the gypsies might take her and she'd never see her mother again. It was something too awful to think about and she began to cry. Her father released her. "You're cold, child. Let's go below and find a spot to spread our blankets. I've got some muffins and a bottle of raspberry vinegar in my bag."

Winifred didn't remember much about the sea trip except that it seemed to take forever. Every day she went for a walk on the lower-deck with her father, watching the sailors with their mops swabbing the decks and polishing the brass railings. Sometimes she saw flying fish, or a whale spouting in the distance, or schools of porpoises that dived around the ship. When the cook emptied food scraps over the stern there would be

great flocks of seagulls screeching above the water and often a great albatross following for miles. On dark nights she would see the waves tipped with mysterious blue lights and the stars very low and bright. Sometimes she saw the moon rise out of the ocean with an orange glow and later looked out across a silver sea. Then there were the stories she made up of mermaids in palaces under the sea - stories she sometimes wrote down on scraps of paper with a pencil. She felt free. The sea air suited her, her cheeks coloured and her face filled out.

When the ship docked at Cape Town her father took her ashore. She had never seen so many black people before and she clung to her father's hand as they strolled through the market buying bananas, fresh dates and a coco-nut to take back to the ship. Later she watched from the deck as the coal-lumpers shovelled coal. And there were long lines of coloured men bowed under huge baskets of fresh victuals, which they stowed into the hold, while the overseer yelled at them in a language she did not understand.

It was out of Cape Town that a woman died of fever. The next day everyone assembled on deck while the Captain read from the prayer book. The body, sewn into a piece of canvas, had been placed on a wooden trestle. Beside it was bunch of red lilies that someone had brought on board from Cape Town. Winifred didn't remember much about the service except for odd flashes. One was when they began to sing "Abide with Me" and she became conscious that her father was crying. She wondered why. Winifred didn't think he'd ever spoken to the dead woman. She'd seen the boy before. Now he was standing by his mother's body wearing a black armband. He was about her own age. She didn't like boys, they were bullies and she'd always kept away from them at school. But she felt sorry for this boy who began to sob as they lowered his mother's body over the side, while the Captain said, "Lord,

we commend her body to the deep." As the body splashed into the water someone threw the bunch of lilies after it. The flowers floated but the body went straight down into the deep. Winifred wondered about the deep. She liked to imagine that underneath the sea was a wonderful cave, lined with mother of pearl where the King and Queen of the Sea lived, surrounded by mermaids. Now she wasn't so sure. She thought about the bodies of drowned sailors and the body of the boy's mother. There had been seals around the ship as they left CapeTown and a great flock of pelicans. All sorts of creatures lived in the sea. She wondered if the body would lie there in its canvas shroud for ever or whether it would be eaten by fish.

The boy was still standing forlornly leaning over the rail when everyone else had left. Winifred watched him for a while. She knew from an old gentleman who spent his time sitting on deck reading, that the boy's stepfather was in New South Wales. The boy and his mother had been on their way to start a new life. "I don't know what will become of him now," the old man had said."He'll find it hard without his mother."

Winifred went up to the boy and touched him on the shoulder. When he turned round she could see his face all red and swollen from crying. "My mother's dead, too," she said.

The boy looked at her. "What's it like, not having a mother?"

"Oh, it's all right."

"What did she die of?"

"Oh, she was drowned." In her mind's eye Winifred could see her mother's body in its violet dress being sucked into a whirlpool, drawn deeper and deeper into the water until only her head was visible. Then it too disappeared. A few daffodils floated, until one by one they vanished and the surface of the water was smooth again as if nothing had disturbed it. The picture was so real that she almost convinced

herself. For the first time she realised how easy it was to make up stories.

Chapter Three

LIFE ON THE DARLING DOWNS

Winifred Oaten's first impressions of her new country were of contrasts, contrasts so marked that it was a long time before she came to accept them as part of her normal life. The prickly pear like high prison-walls, so that all inside the prison was in perpetual gloom, while above the sun bounced off the crown of silver-grey leaves of the occasional iron-bark[1] *that managed to rise through the forest of pear. Outside the prison walls, the sun hit the dusty road with an unrelenting glare that made her shade her eyes, while she breathed in the crystal air with the scent of eucalyptus and the astringent perfume of wild flowers which appeared by the creek in the spring.*

Accustomed to the greyness of the English sky, the smoke-laden air from coal-fires, the stench from the blood and bone works, and the pea-souper fogs that hung in the air in winter like a deadly miasma, the clean air was a surprise. The landscape, with strange trees - iron bark, yellow box, belah, as they journeyed from Toowoomba, so different from the English oaks, elms, and larches in St. John's Churchyard. Sometimes she recalled with nostalgia the gasometer near the Railway Station - its weird shape obtruding into the skyline had always intrigued her. Then there was Lambeth Palace, the Elephant and Castle Hotel, the solid brick building of her old school, and the bridges over the Thames with ferries and barges buzzing underneath. There was always noise and excitement.

She missed the song of the blackbird at dusk as she listened to the raking

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[1] Silver-leafed ironbark, *Eucalyptus melanophoia.*

call of the currawong, yet she was elated by glimpses of grey kangaroos, while the sight of a koala crawling up the trunk of a gum, with a baby on its back, enchanted her. She learned to keep her distance from green stinging-ants after she had brushed underneath a tree and been bitten, and cast a wary eye at the huge spiders that built their webs from tree to tree, until she plucked up courage to break their webs with a stick so that she could pass underneath. In the heat of the day she marvelled at the almost deafening drone of insects that rose with a shrill crescendo from thickets of bush, then the sudden silence as she approached, to burst forth again the minute she stood still.

Nights were different. It was years before she rid herself of the feeling of terror once the sun went down, and the night-breeze sent a shiver through the bush. It was like a shutter being drawn. An immediate and utter blackness. There were no neighbours, no sound of voices to break the silence, no street-lamps, only the almost impenetrable blackness that surrounded their shanty, with one spluttering candle to cast strange shadows on the walls. And with night came clouds of mosquitoes, like an evil presence, to torment the child and her father. She gathered cattle-dung which they burnt, the stench of the dung adding a torture all its own and she would pull her blanket over her head and almost suffocate before she finally dropped off to sleep, to wake in the morning covered in red blotches which itched so that she scratched them and they became infected.

Inky-black nights brought other horrors. In the stillness she would hear a dingo howl in the distance and sometimes a rustling in the bushes outside and would imagine a snake slithering through a crack in the shanty and into her bed.

"Them death adders, now," the woman had told her when they stopped

at a store in Dalby for a bag of flour and some sugar, a tin of treacle, a box of candles, some matches, a billy-can and a metal-bucket, "once they bite you, you're as good as dead." It was she who had told them to burn cow-dung for the mosquitoes. She tried to sell them some citronella but Wilfred Oaten had said sharply, "Leave it... we'll manage." Winifred knew that he was short of money. "We must only buy bare essentials until the farm starts to produce," he had told her. His one luxury was a packet of tea and some tobacco-twists for his pipe. The storekeeper had offered her a boiled lolly from a jar and she had thought with longing of the spills of lollies that the man at the corner-store gave her when she lived in Lambeth. Now she chose a black and white striped humbug and popped it in her mouth, trying to make it last forever, while her father leaned on the counter listening to the woman gossiping and Winifred hopped from one foot to the other. She was not interested in the long-winded description of how to make damper on an open-fire, and only half heard the warning to keep the food on a table with the legs in tins of water because of the ants. She could not conceive of such things. She had no notion that the life of high adventure her father had talked of was a myth.

Like many migrants before him Wilfred Oaten's expedition to Australia was doomed, because the reality of life in a new land did not measure up to his expectations. But once he had arrived there was no going back. He also had a severe handicap. A man who hoped to succeed on the land needed a strong woman by his side, one who not only shared his dreams but was willing to sacrifice her own comfort, was able to do a man's work and, in addition, was capable of raising a large family of children to share the burden of farm work and provide for parents in their old age.

But there were other forces which militated against Wilfred Oaten's success. One was the handicap of a dreamy ten-year-old daughter who needed to be looked after. The other was the misinformation given to intending migrants to Australia about their

prospects as land-owners, of the depression of the 1890s, the industrial unrest and the possible lack of paid work to tide them over until they produced their first crop.[2] It could have been done deliberately to entice new settlers to Australia, it could have been because of the laissez-faire attitude of the officials in the Board of Trade, or simply that the would-be migrants had already made up their minds, convinced that anything would be better than their life in England. There was no mention of the prickly pear. The pastoral regions of Queensland were described as

> probably the richest in the world, and their value has been enormously enhanced by the discovery of artesian water in immense quantities... Cattle in particular are remarkably abundant... In 1891 Queensland owned 6,200,000 cattle, 20,300,000 sheep, 400,000 horses and 122,700 pigs.
>
> The Darling Downs... on the summit of the Dividing Range, west of Moreton District... is one of the richest pastoral districts in the colony, and also contains much good agricultural land, which produces wheat, maize, barley, oats, arrowroot, potatoes and all kinds of English vegetables and fruits.[3]

A chance to share in this wealth was too good to be missed.

It is hard to piece together the story of WinifredOaten and her father from the scant references she made to her life on the Darling Downs.

> We came. We landed. And when we finally got up into this Queensland place where the land was to be given away my father saw it. He grabbed

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[2] Geoffrey Sherington, *Australia's Immigrants 1788 - 1978*, The Australian Experience No 1, (North Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1980, 4th ed., 1987) 85. All future references are to this edition and are in parenthesis. C.M.H. Clark, *A History of Australia V : The People Make Laws 1888-1915*, 6 vols., (Melbourne:Melbourne University Press, 1981) 44-45, 83-88, 90-96 All future references are to this edition and are in parenthesis.

[3] *Manual of Australasian Geography*. Collins' School Series (London: William Collins, n.d. [c. 1892] 97. All future references are to this edition and are in parenthesis.

the 176 acres and signed the paper - very good. He did it. But nobody else. Other people had more sense and they saw this prickly pear - the awful shocking thing. He started chopping. We lived in this prickly pear thing.[4]

If Wilfred Oaten had doubts about his future,he made light of them in a letter he sent to his sister in Taunton, written soon after their arrival in the colony.

1 *March 1892*

My dear Clare

We have arrived safely at our destination for which we thank God. The voyage was tolerable. Steerage was very crowded & we were heartily sick of salt beef & biscuits by the time we got to Brisbane. I have to tell you that Louisa did not make the trip, for which I was sorry. But it is in the past now & there is just Winifred and myself. You wouldn't recognise us, we are the colour of walnuts & Winifred is growing so quickly that the clothes we brought from England are almost too small. There is a custom here of making clothes out of sugar and flour-bags. I expect we will come to that soon, though I am no needlewoman.

I have a piece of land. The Government Land Agent met us in his buggy & drove us here. I must say that at first I was not happy with what he offered. There is a plant growing here called prickly pear. They tell me it has yellow flowers & I believe you can eat the fruit. But so far we have not seen any. It is like a forest, so thick that it strangles everything else except a few belah and iron-barks & some brigalow scrub. But the agent assures me that it is easy to remove. You chop it & burn it.

On the way through the mountains we saw some wonderful patches of tall thick grass called Mitchell grass. The agent says it's a native & once

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[4] Guthrie tapes.

the land is cleared it will grow naturally, then I will be able to stock it with cattle, keep a cow & grow some vegetables for the table. Sweet potato and arrowroot seem to do well here. So I took the agent's word & we shook hands on the deal. Now this land is mine, or will be when I pay it off. Imagine me - a landowner. Father would have been proud of me, God rest his soul.

I must tell you that the agent was surprised to find that I only had a small daughter to help. He told me that I needed a few strong lads - there's no hope for that now. I have put out an enquiry for brother William. If I can get him to come and manage the farm then I can go out to work to earn some money. We need a lot of things. We couldn't take much on board, only bare essentials. We are sleeping rough on the hard ground with blankets. The mosquitoes drive us mad. Here they burn cow-dung. It helps, but when the fire goes out they come in swarms like an invading army. It must be our English blood. There is nothing we can do about it. As soon as I get a patch cleared I'll build a hut.

There are great distances between neighbours. A Scotsman, McNab, called on us the first day. He brought over a batch of scones which we ate for supper. I think he got word of us from the local store. He told me to send Winifred over because they were killing a sheep. He's got ten children and drives a buggy. So far I have no means of transport except shanks's pony. The land agent dropped us off at a general store run by a widow, Mrs Dobson. I got a few supplies. We had a five-mile walk back to our land. It was very trying in the heat & not much shade, except under the prickly pear & Mrs Dobson had warned us about death adders, so that we were afraid to sit down. I bought a billy-can & she filled it with water from her well. I was hoping for a natural spring or a well on our land. As it is Winifred has to walk down a track to the creek to fetch back what she can carry. There's no school here. I read

Tennyson to her at night by the light of the candle. She likes to make up stories. She's very like what you were at her age.

I often think of us sitting around the table at home, with a loaf of Mother's bread on the table & a pot of damson jam, & a pat of butter. It was a good life & on Sunday in our pew in the old stone church listening to father reading the lesson. He had a beautiful voice. I like to think he would be proud of me. This is a far cry from Bath. Just the same a man can get ahead if he works. There is a sense of freedom & wide open spaces & everyone is equal.

I yearn for news of home, so write to me care of Dobson's at Dalby. It'll find its way to me. I'll send this letter with Winifred when she goes to McNab's tomorrow to get some fresh meat. He'll drop if off when he goes into town.

Give my best to everyone at home,
Your loving brother Wilfred.

The Darling Downs in Queensland had gone through many stages before the prickly pear arrived to render large parts of the land useless for agriculture for many years. Queensland had originally been known as the Moreton Bay District and was part of New South Wales. It became an independent state in 1859 and was named in honour of the English Queen Victoria. In 1824 a detachment of soldiers and thirty prisoners were sent to find a suitable site for a convict settlement. The following year

> a batch of convicts of the worst character was landed at Eagle Farm, near Brisbane... The convicts were principally employed in clearing the land, in building, and in making roads. (Collins, 101)

The convicts were withdrawn and in 1842 the district was opened up to free settlers. The Darling Downs provided rich pickings for the first comers who were referred to as "Pure

Merinos." [5] Originally the term applied to free settlers but later came to refer to wealthy squatters of good family. They

> attempted to create a society as similar as possible to that in the Old World they had left. Those who had never known or had escaped from this confining and partly illusory class-structure quickly assimilated the mores of their "betters". (Waterson, 12)

They squatted on vast holdings, employing shepherds to mind their flocks which roamed over thousands of miles of unfenced land. "In 1844, 259 stockmen and shepherds worked on the Downs, representing over half the total male population over fourteen." (Waterson, 20). Fifty years later there were over 1,051 pastoral employees. In addition, as more settlers arrived, different work became available to service their needs. The Land Selection Act of 1868 gave an opportunity for small farmers to take up land and helped to break up the large holdings, though many of the squatters put "dummies"[6] on runs to ward off newcomers. But this was to change as more and more independent selectors arrived to grab a share of the spoils. With closer settlement came the fencing off of runs and the need for other services, such as schools and churches. It was a much more friendly atmosphere for the small selectors and it was beautiful country.

> The inner Downs had a "savannah-like appearance... with its thousands of acres of rolling grassland, distinctive, isolated volcanic cones and numerous watercourses flowing west through black and red loams to join the Condamine River." (Waterson 9)

In 1891 two-thirds of Queensland was held under lease by squatters for sheep and

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[5] D.B.Waterson, *Squatter, Selector, and Storekeeper: A History of the Darling Downs, 1859-93* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1968) 11. All future references are to this edition and are in parenthesis.

[6] A practice whereby squatters got land under false pretences by getting sisters, daughters and employees to select land on their behalf. See Raelene Francis and Bruce Scates, eds., *Women, Work and the Labour Movement in Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand* (Sydney: The Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, 1991) 318. All future references are to this edition and are in parenthesis.

cattle raising. In a good season with plentiful rainfall the grasslands were able to sustain a large population of grazing animals. But in a dry season the picture changed, creeks dried up and without feed stock died. Between 1865 and 1889 there was a succession of droughts. Typical was the 1871 drought.

> For miles around Dalby the country... is as bare as the road and almost entirely devoid of water... about the creeks... carcasses may be seen in hundreds. The lambs were perishing in immense numbers, the ewes through weakness being unable to rear them... public prayers for rain have been offered in Dalby. (Waterson, 51)

If the severe droughts devastated the land, it was renewed when rain eventually fell, and the damage from the often resulting floods could be repaired. But the prickly pear was something different. Once it took hold the land was rendered useless. Nothing else would grow. The cactus was introduced by Captain Phillip in 1788,

> who collected some plants from Rio while on his way to Australia. He was hoping to rear cochineal insects on them in order to supply red dye for his soldiers' coats... In 1893 a single pot of prickly pear was sent from Sydney to Scone (eighty miles north west of Newcastle)... during the next twenty years or so prickly pear was grown as hedges around the homesteads. It is recorded that at Chinchilla a workman was dismissed for failing to keep the hedge watered... By 1875 it was causing concern, by 1885, alarm... By 1895 thousands of pounds had been spent on attempts to control it.[7]

The settlement around Chinchilla, where Wilfred Oaten had taken up land, became the centre of infestation.

Chinchilla had become a thriving community with the coming of the railway, which opened on 18 January 1876. The first settler was Matthew Groggs.

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[7] Henry Rees, *Australasia*. The New Certificate Geography Series Advanced Level (London: MacDonald & Evans Ltd, 1962) 184-185. All future references are to this edition and are in parenthesis.

> In January of 1846 [he] applied in Sydney for a licence to depasture stock on land on the lower Condamine by which means our pioneer squatter established a run which he named "Wongongera."[8]

According to a map made by the explorer Ludwig Leichhardt, the station was about thirty kilometres north of the junction of Rockly and Charleys Creeks. In August 1848, Groggs applied for a further 14,500 hectares of land on the Condamine which he called Chinchilla Station.

The first railway in Queensland had been built from Ipswich to the Darling Downs "within six years of gaining independence as a colony. New lines crept westward, not from Brisbane, but from Townsville, Rockhampton, Cairns and Maryborough" (*Chinchilla*, 7) to service the outlying stations. But there was a pressing need to

> tap more fully the potential food areas in the State's southwest. In 1876 Dalby, situated on Myall Creek, was the terminus of the Brisbane Line. It was the most important centre on the northern Downs with traffic from the north, far west and south flowing through it. (*Chinchilla* ,7).

By 1878, in addition to the pastoralists, there was a thriving community of railway workers, their wives and children, a school, a dairy farm where butter and cheese was made, and many other services needed by a small thriving community. But within a few years the area was devastated by the rapid growth of the prickly pear.

> The spread was so rapid, the situation was desperate. Thousands of hectares of land had been overrun by the invader and homesteads were already being abandoned. The menace was met by the stout-hearted settlers with knives, mattocks, hoes, slashers, ploughs, poisons, blood, sweat and tears, plus a variety of mechanical devices, but, like a green octopus, the plant was gripping hold of the land at the rate of 400,000

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[8] Chinchilla Centenary Celebrations Committee, *Chinchilla Centenary 1878-1978*. (Chinchilla:Chinchilla Historical Society and its Historical Research Sub-Committee, 1979). 3 All future references are to this edition and are in parenthesis.

hectares a year. (*Chinchilla*, 29).



Remnants of tree prickly pear, Darling Downs. Photograph: the author.



The hall at Boonarga, 8km east of Chinchilla, built as a memorial to the Cactoblastis, a tiny bug imported from Argentina in 1926. The larvae of the insect destroyed the prickly pear. The hall is built on the site of Wilfred Oaten's first block of land which was declared unsaleable on his death. Photograph: the author.

Wilfred Oaten's land was at Boonarga "in south-east Queensland, on the way to Quilpie... It lay near the centre of the infestation, and was threatened with extinction." (Rees, 185). When he took possession in 1891-1892 he, along with other migrants, had no idea of the extent of the problem.

> Infected land contained a dense growth of pear in which fences were topped and all grass and herbage strangled, where stock-rearing was manifestly impossible. Where a narrow lane could be kept open the musterers wore leather armour and their horses needed leggings as a protection against the thorns. Many farmers were forced to abandon their holdings and desert their homesteads, and soon the abominable cactus was growing through the floors and through the walls. (Rees, 185).

Despite the difficulty, Wilfred Oaten made a valiant attempt to make a home.

> He started chopping... there were a few brigalows and a few iron-barks. A few saplings Father cut down to make our shanty, and a table out of bark on four forked sticks and we lived in this prickly pear stuff... We crawled in and he made a little shanty... We were supposed to clear and cultivate the land and make a farm. No one told us about the prickly pear. I can see it today twelve feet high. Nothing lived in it except centipedes and spiders.
>
> It was a horrible life... near a place called Jondaryan... about eighty miles from Brisbane on flat black country - brigalow country... My hands were covered with blisters all over. We chopped this prickly pear and we burned this prickly pear, and when we had no more food and practically nothing else to live on a little black boy came along and he was carrying a wallaby. I think it was a wallaby and he used to hang it dead and we bought it for meat. [We were] supposed to clear and cultivate this land and make a farm. They didn't tell us pear was on it. Other immigrants

knew and they snorted off.[9]

> The majority of newcomers selected or purchased cheap Crown land after they had inspected it in company with the local agent or knowledgable farmer. Hasty selection often meant rapid ruin... After selection the lessee would bring his family and possessions to the property by dray, buggy, sled, horseback and even wheelbarrow. A few of the earliest settlers walked across country to their new homes. A long period of isolation ensued. Even when neighbours arrived they were often miles away and the local school, store, hotel and church much further (Waterson, 146).

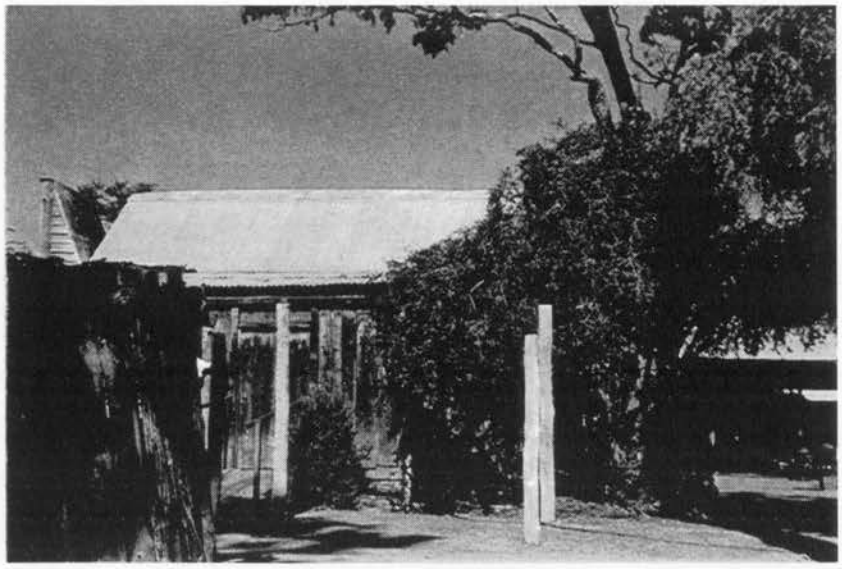
While her father struggled to clear the prickly pearWinifred fetched the water.

> Three times a day I had to walk through the wild cattle country to the waterhole. I had to drag the water two miles. I had no bucket. I had one big bottle and a billy-can and two or three times a day Dad'd drink that much and I'd have to go for another load and my work was nothing [to him]. One day he met a man and the man said if he wanted some meat he could send the kid down and he described the place and he gave me a threepenny bit and he'd give me a sheep's head and we'd live royally for two or three days - that was our meat... until a black boy came along... and we bought the meat from him. It was our meat. Other food was very scarce...
>
> Dad borrowed a maul - a great big heavy hammer thing and wedges. You beat it [timber] with the maul, and made it into slabs. And there was no floor. The cracks were very pretty with air between. I had a lot of trouble with those cracks. Dad said, "Stick some mud in those cracks and plug them up." It sounded simple. As soon as the mud dried it would come

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[9] Guthrie tapes.

"plop" on top of you. We had no bed. We laid down on a blanket. Every now and then "boomp" a lump of mud, and if you sneezed or coughed it flew all over the place. [10]



First dwelling in Chinchilla c.1860. Now at the Chinchilla Museum. Photograph: the author.

Though the walks were long and tiring, it was the time she spent alone by the creek that developed a stoicism in the child that helped prepare her for her adult life. At the same time she developed a great love of the Australian bush. It was so far divorced from her life in Lambeth that her past life took on a dream-like quality. She had no companions of her own age and had to come to terms with the fact that this isolated existence was all she could expect. There was no chance of going to school because there was no school within walking distance. In addition, her father needed her at home to help. Carrying water took up a good part of her day.

The Settled District was comparatively well watered by river and creek. The sluggish Condamine River, flowing from south to north along the

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[10] Guthrie tapes

western margin of the area, drained several creeks flowing from the eastern slopes of the Main Range. Except in times of prolonged drought these streams - Freestone, Swan, Glengallan, Hodgson, Oakey and Myall Creeks -provided permanent water but their small tributaries were usually dry in the winter months and were often little better than stagnant ditches in summer. Some areas of small settlement were completely without surface water... Sub-artesian supplies, however, were to be found at reasonable depths all over the Downs, although in some areas... the selectors were compelled to dig expensive wells over 200 feet deep in order to gain water. (Waterson, p. 146)

Geared windmills were introduced after 1876 but few of the selectors could afford to pay "for the construction of these invaluable devices." (Waterson, p.146). The cost of wells was also beyond the reach of most small selectors, as contractors charged one pound per foot in 1878. (Waterson, p.146).

Where there was no water on site "families would venture to the creek to do the washing, the clothing spread over bushes to dry, and all would either bathe in the creek or the wash tub." (*Chinchilla*, 40)

Winifred liked to sit by the creek, lazily swishing a piece of bush around to keep away the persistent flies and listening to the creek talking. The sun glinted off the wings of dragon-flies as they skimmed the surface, while below the brown beetle-like water-boatmen paddled furiously. Some days the wind would ripple across the surface of the water and rustle through the saplings that lined its banks, stirring the dead leaves underneath, while the girl drowsed in the sun. Sometimes a crow would come to rest on a bough above her head, taking no more notice of her than if she was part of the landscape because she was so still. These were the moments she felt at peace, knowing that the wild cattle were on the other side of the creek and couldn't touch her.

Once she had been frightened by a whole herd of long-horned beasts that came charging past her, while she hid behind the trunk of a tree. She had seen cows before in the cow-keepers' yards in London. But they were moon-eyed, docile creatures that chewed their cud while their keepers coaxed jets of rich creamy milk from their udders. Often she had been sent to fetch a jug of milk from the cow-keeper who walked along South Lambeth Road, balancing two wooden pails on a stout pole and calling, "Fresh milk. Fresh from the dairy."

These red-eyed beasts were a different breed. Their coats were tangled with briars and they were thin and wiry and tough, with a mean look in their eyes. She imagined that if she got caught by one alone on the track it would toss her up in the air on its horns and she would land in the prickly pear and be stung to death by the thorns. By the time her father missed her it would be too late.

Once she tried to tell her father she was afraid. He had turned on her angrily, picking up a stick and beating her round the shoulders while he screamed at her that she was useless. Later he came into the hut where she was lying down with her face buried in her blanket. He smoothed her hair and took her in his arms. When she opened her eyes she saw that he had been crying, his face streaked where the tears had cut a path through the black dust that covered his face. As he pressed her close he said, "I should never have come to this accursed place." And then he released her and picked up the water-bottle, pouring a little into his hands to wash his face. He drank the rest and went outside again to work, while she rose and carrying the empty billy-can and bottle began the long walk to the creek, hurrying because the sun was in the western sky and she wanted to be back before it got dark and the dingoes started howling.

As time went by Winifred adapted completely to her new environment. In her old age she said:

> Some feel lonely in a crowd. I do. I feel more comfortable in a quiet room. Going to the creek I like very much or the banks of a river. You can talk to the river and the river will talk to you.[11]

Lacking formal education, and deprived of books, she invented an ingenious game.

> If you want to get a practical education and you have no school or college to go to, and you have no friends to talk to, the birds will not answer you back. Well, don't worry... on every back track and every road you'll find a jam tin. Yes, a jam tin. And a nice label on it and you can spend hours with a jam tin. You can learn to read and you can learn to write from a jam tin. You just say, Here's Mr Jones, Jones jams and you start off, pick a "J" and what will go next, jams, jam, Jim, Jon and as many letters as you like. Just keep on transposing those letters over and over again and you'll find they'll form many many words and then pick up other letters further along the line and add them on and you have a sentence. No more letters rub them out and start all over again... Just educate yourself on jam tins and when you can't get any further along the line with them get another jam tin... there's mostly quite a lot on pickle bottles too.[12]

Winifred's life improved for a short time when William Ivanhoe and his wife, Lydia, arrived from Brisbane. William was probably glad of the invitation to come and live with his brother, Wilfred, because on 20 March 1893 he had been sacked from his job as station-master at Bald Hills Station in Brisbane , where he had been earning one hundred and twenty pounds per annum, plus residence. Though the file relating to his dismissal "is no longer available"[13], in view of his subsequent behaviour, he was

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[11] Guthrie tapes.

[12] Guthrie tapes.

[13] G. Carter, Manager, Railway Historical Centre, Ipswich, letter to the author, 18 August 1994. File No. 93 2/1621.

probably sacked for drunkenness.

William Ivanhoe and his wife had migrated to Queensland in 1882.[14] Their stay on the farm "didn't last long. Uncle didn't do us any good. He was lazy... had been an officer all his life." [15] Just the same it was a happier time for the eleven-year-old Winifred. She developed a bond with her Aunt Liddy who

> was gentle, tender, kind, French training behind her - well trained. Uncle Bill was crude, and I hated him. He was horrible. He was coarse and hideous and he took a dislike to me. He was always sneering at me, "Great ugly thing. Don't do that. Don't do this." I had no fun from any of them except Aunty Liddy. Aunty was good to me. She would tell me stories and I got to love to listen to her stories.
>
> Aunty Liddy had beautiful things. Now for instance she had a big silver teapot and beautifully polished... She brought it from her own home in France and she used to put it right in the middle of the bark table and I'd sneak up and try and look at myself in the glass. It was my looking glass.
>
> People were beginning to settle around there, especially with Cobb & Co coming. And after that one of those wretched little wine shanties. And uncle started to drink. But Daddy kept on going and got a job and sent money home... not money but things. First we got a bed... then the house.
>
> I must have been nearly twelve on this prickly pear farm. Never see anybody. Only Cobb & Co came down at that time and made a road through. That was a wonderful thing. Now we could get things. Dad had sent a message over, "Please clean up that kid. Do her hair and put a dress on her. I've got an invitation to a dance. You can come too if you

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[14] They arrived on board the *Scottish Admiral.*
[15] Guthrie tapes.

want to."[16]

The dance was probably at Jondaryan, a thriving station, where it was likely that Wilfred Oaten had found work.

> It was the custom to celebrate the end of the shearing with a sort of "Harvest Home" which was generally called "The Shearers' Feast"... In the evening after the annual races there was a banquet at the manager's house, tables the whole length of the verandah were arranged on trestles, and everyone on the station sat down to a generous spread... [later] the folding doors which separated the dining and sitting rooms were removed, and dancing was kept up till midnight or later.[17]

The invitation caused a lot of excitement. "We never heard such a thing as an invitation to a dance" and Lydia asked Wilfred to buy some material so that she could make Winifred a dress.

> We were practically naked. Aunt Liddy only had a few dresses and she cut a lot of them up for me and I'd nearly worn them out.

Her father brought home a roll of black "moulton cloth" which was mostly used for blankets or school blazers. According to Winifred her aunt

> hadn't much idea of sewing. It started here and went to the floor. She was one of those ladies you don't show your legs. That was the time, Queen Victoria was on at that time. And she was very strict in her morals. And I grew up on her morals to a great extent. Anyway she made this dress up and there were three cards covered with tiny pink ribbon not much wider than my finger, yards and yards of pink satin ribbon... She didn't know how to use it. If she'd used it as a binding it mightn't have been so bad. But she just made up little pink bows that she just stuck here and

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[16] Guthrie tapes.

[17] Jondaryan State School Centenary Committee, *Jondaryan* 1872-1972 (Jondaryan, 1972) 6. All future references are to this edition and are in parenthesis.

there, all dotted with little pink bows... When I had it on I thought I was Queen Victoria's daughter. Only the thing was so stiff I was sitting in it like a little tent. Anyhow Dad rolled up in a black buggy. He'd found a black buggy and a black horse and we went in style. And when we got to this place everyone looked at me, looked at my strange dress... There was a bit of a dance that night and I watched them. Some bare necks and some little below the knees. I thought, "disgusting creatures, ought to be ashamed of themselves." I was very prudish. Anyway some of them said very rude things to me. I couldn't take it. I just bolted out the door... I didn't wait for my father, he found me. I was lower than the dirt.[18]

This was an unfortunate episode when social gatherings were such a rare event in Winifred's life. But the coming of her aunt at least gave her a mentor and a role model at a crucial stage in her life. Her aunt "brought a few tins of food with her" and showed Winifred how to stew the fruit of the prickly pear which became a "pearly purplish colour." This was the one use for the prickly pear, which continued to rampage through the district. Though Winifred described her Aunt Liddy as "her lady aunt", and said she was not expected to work on the farm, the same did not apply to Winifred. When she was about eleven it suddenly struck her father

that he was keeping a loafer who was big enough to help. "Come out here, you lazy thing and do something for your living." And I went out. He put this long fork in my hand and it was so heavy that it nearly tipped me up to lift it. Anyway I bent down and he said, "Pick up the leaves and throw them on the fire." He was right behind me with a great heap at the back. Anyhow the fork caught in his coat and away he went in the prickly pear. For three days Aunt Liddy was pulling the prickles out of him. He never forgave me.[19]

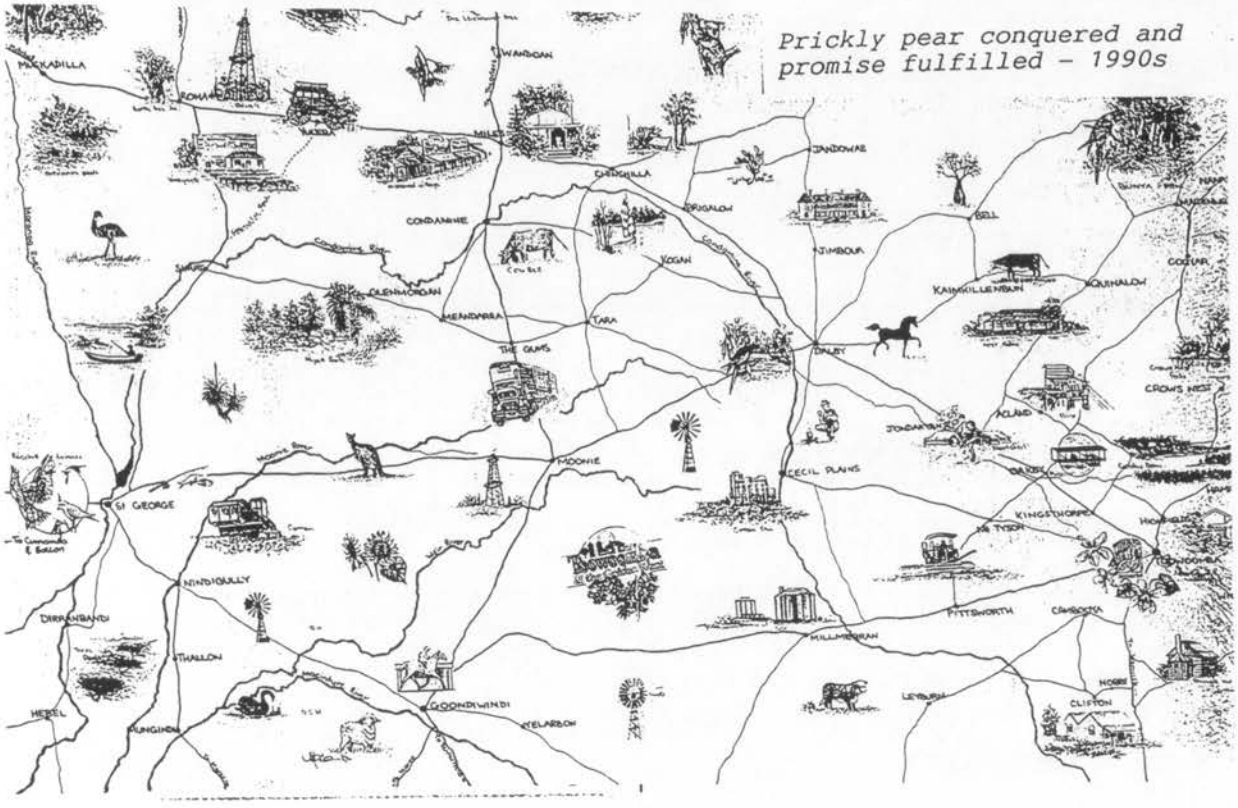
Wilfred Oaten never managed to clear his land. With only himself and hand tools

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[18] Guthrie tapes.
[19] Guthrie tapes.

it was a heartbreaking task. The government had imposed impossible conditions. Another English immigrant who selected land a few kilometres from Chinchilla in 1909 described his experiences. The ranger had suggested that he "fell scrub and burn." He said he "would recommend two shillings and sixpence per acre bonus." However, after the burn conditions were eighty per cent worse. There was not enough timber with which to burn off the prickly pear. After the selector had spent more than eighteen pounds on clearing, the ranger "refused to recommend two shillings and sixpence per acre (bonus), but would recommend ten shillings." The selector wrote:

> Consider, myself and family trapped on the property - deliberately by the Government as it should have known the conditions imposed were worse than slavery and impossible to be accomplished... Conditions imposed meant 20,000 tons of prickly pear per annum to clear and keep clean.



Once the prickly pear was destroyed by the cactoblastis larvae the area around the Darling Downs flourished. Map: courtesy Toowoomba & Golden West RTA.

He was advised by the ranger "to leave the place and drop my first loss." (*Chinchilla*, 28-29).

Besides the difficulty of eradicating the prickly pear there was also the personal danger to those who lived among it. "Death adders were notorious for their numbers as the prickly pear was an ideal hide-out for them." (*Chinchilla*, 41). Because the pear grew so tall it was easy to become lost. "Where this occurred men would ride night and day, calling, firing guns, and tracking in search of a child or an adult." In 1894 four-and-a-half years old Harriet Connors was sent to bring in the cows and became lost. She spent four days wandering around and survived by eating the fruit of prickly pear. She eventually found her way to the creek where an Aboriginal child saw her and ran back to camp to break the news. The black people fed her on duck broth until her father arrived. (Chinchilla, p.41)

Wilfred and his brother William parted company because "One of those wretched wine shanties started up."[20] and William started drinking. The wine shanties took root wherever shearers and itinerant workers gathered at the end of the season with their cheques. Many intended to return to their home, if they had one, others planned to go back to their country of birth. Invariably, after a few drinks they forgot their original intentions and spent all their money on drink. The grog-shanty was an unsavoury place, usually

> a tumbled down one-roomed shed built of bark. The place was full of men drinking, and drunk. It was dark, because it had no windows and a door just wide enough to squeeze through, and smelt of sweat, dust and rum. A bar, made of bark slabs nailed on saplings driven into the dirt floor... A couple of logs and boxes provided the only seats... the only liquor... a villainous black, thick mixture of rum, tobacco-juice and bluestone. Flies blackened the tops of the bar, the walls, the faces of the drunks fallen asleep; flies buzzed in the thick air, brawled over the barman's ragged beard, bred and eternally replenished their voracious

[20] Guthrie tapes.

stock in the bunches of gum leaves hung from the ceilings.[21]

Often the drinks, which had names like "phlegm cutter", were adulterated by the grog-shanty owner.

> The storekeepers where I bought it... would show me how I could have two-thirds of the rum and still keep it over-proof by mixing it with water and tobacco. So with brandy, all sorts of vile poison and most disgusting stuff was offered me to mix it with. [22]

These shanties, built on main roads, often provided the only meeting place for the itinerant workers who spent their whole time between jobs in a state of intoxication. Once they had cut out their cheque they returned to their isolated life in the outback.

When William Oaten and his brother split up, William took up his own land at Evergreen and Wilfred

> disposed of the prickly pear ranch, as he called it and he bought himself another piece of land from a man anxious to get back to England. He was sick of it and he took over his property and that's how he started and built himself up... He was indomitable. What he wanted to do he'd do.[23]

This meant another change of scene for Winifred. With her Aunt Liddy gone she no longer had any female company, and there was no one to stay with her when her father was away from home working. Her father passed the responsibility for his twelve-year-old daughter over to a woman who needed a nursemaid to help her with her large family of children. In return, Winifred received sixpence a week and her keep. Steger only mentioned this episode in passing.

> The first thing he did was put me with a woman who had a lot of children. I was to mind these children for sixpence a week. That wasn't

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[21] Brian Penton, *Landtakers* (Sydney:Endeavour Press, 1934) 16. All future references are to this edition and are in parenthesis.

[22] Thorvald Peter Ludwig Weitemeyer, "For all the gold in Queensland", *Gold Fever,* ed., Nancy Keesing, (Sydney: A & R, 1967) 268. All future references are to this edition and are in parenthesis.

[23] Guthrie tapes.

too bad. She gave me the sixpence and I thought of Daddy. Daddy had suddenly taken sick and he was in a private hospital so I went round to Daddy and bought a little stick of tobacco, no thicker than my finger and in a twist, they used to call it a twist. And I got orders to bring another sixpennyworth the next week when I came. So I got nothing out of the sixpence. Oh, life wasn't easy. [24]

It was quite common for young girls to work as nursemaids. Sometimes they helped their mothers with the younger children, or went to work for a neighbour. Most boys of the same age were already earning money as shearers or odd-job workers. Only the very privileged were able to undertake [illegible] education. Often the young girls were exploited, particularly those who lived-in and were at the beck and call of their mistress. It was equally hard for the woman, often overworked herself and with a large family. Mrs Mary Allen, whose husband had tried numerous occupations and was unemployed during the 1890s depression, wrote:

> I have had the help in the morning lately of a little girl of twelve, but had to let her go as two shillings and sixpence per week for wages is not manageable, any longer, indeed should never have been paying it, it should have been going towards baker's bills. (Francis, 140)

Steger's break with home was permanent. In the next four years she had a succession of jobs as a domestic. She wrote about the experiences of a girl who became a live-in domestic worker in her serialised novel "Four Rings on her Finger".

> She had been twelve years old at the time. Her mother had said the child was far too young to be sent out to earn her living, but her father's will dominated their lives...
>
> "She's twelve and as strong as a horse. If there's one thing I can't stand it's seeing people lying around eating their heads off; besides it's not as if she's going to complete strangers... the woman who wants her is a

[24] Guthrie tapes.

decent old sort... and Toowoomba ain't on other other side of the globe, it's barely fifty miles away. Grace will get her food and clothes and two bob a week wages... she ought to be glad of the chance." To him there was an acknowledged relief in getting Grace off his hands...

The morning came and Grace and her couple of little frocks in a tight bundle was put into the old spring cart and her father drove her away. The journey took two days. Grace wished it were longer... she felt terrified of her future. Once the child cried and begged to be taken back, but a threatening look and an uplifted hand, and her pleas trembled away to silence.

Grace lived in sick terror of her mistress... Grace knew little of housework, never having done any except dry a dish or two in her home life. For this reason she was constantly in trouble. She lived in an atmosphere of blows and bruises. Mrs Sybil, not hygienic herself, saw nothing to check in Grace's dirty face or her matted hair. Her few clothes she had brought with her wore out and were not replaced. Mother Sybil maintained that the child's services were not worth two whole shillings, so she cut her down to one shilling and threepence and this she insisted she spend on home made toffee from her shop... Only once had her father come. She had flung herself piteously at him and cried to be taken home. He was rather appalled at her filthy state, then it occurred to him that it was only a matter of a bath or two, so he told her... that she was dashed lucky to have a job.

Later, while he was inside "laughing" with Mother Sybil, Grace hid in the spring cart which was waiting outside.

Her father coming out later espied a tiny portion of her leg not quite hidden and hauled her out, beating her angrily as he did so, then flung

her back into her misery of slops and filth, slaps and bruises.[25]

Like many domestic workers of the time Steger's Grace was exploited. A report in *The Worker* (1 March 1890) said: "The Queensland girl gets ten shillings a week, is generally regarded as a machine and housed like a dog." (Francis, 142). Grace was much worse off. Because of her age she received a pittance rather than a wage and was expected to spend her money in her employer's shop, rather than save it. She was also physically abused by both her father and her employer. Her status was that of a slave. Without money she had no hope of escape.

Winifred probably drew on her own experiences when writing about Grace. For the next few years she had a succession of such jobs. She wrote: "I took a job at sixteen in a clergyman's family. He was termed a moderator but Lord only knows what for." Here she appears to have been treated with respect and given a chance to express herself because she "scrawled little things for his magazine." [26] However, this was short lived.

> My father brought me back from where I was and stuck me in charge of the cattle and I had to round up these cattle and sort them out from the wild ones. I had many adventures there and expected to be killed but never got killed as you can see. Remarkable, isn't it. I got hurt, but not badly. I was there alone and he bought me two ponies. He would not allow any such thing as a man's saddle. He was too Victorian. And I must not ride cross legs each side. I always had a side saddle, and a horse that was rough as bags and quite untrained. [27]

It is likely that while she was alone on this property Winifred met her future husband, Charles Steger.

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[25] Winifred Steger, "Four Rings on her Finger", *Northern Argus* (Clare), 27 January 1965: 8. All future references are to this edition and are in parenthesis.

[26] Winifred Steger, letter to the author, n.d. (c.1974).

[27] Guthrie tapes.

Chapter Four

THE GERMAN CONNECTION 1899-1908

In her dream she is on her bay mare, flying high above the trees, her hair streaming in the wind. Far below she can see the cattle standing in her father's paddock, the smoke curling lazily from the chimney of their hut and beyond it the creek, brown after rain. As her horse carries her higher she laughs, feeling an incredible sense of lightness. She is free. Behind her she can hear Charles on his black stallion and she glances over her shoulder, her eyes sparkling, daring him to catch her. She hears him laugh and the crack of his stockwhip. Then she feels an incredible pain as the whip snakes around her waist. The next thing she is falling.

Winifred Oaten's affair with Charles Steger was a mistake which she was to regret bitterly because it led to a "shotgun wedding" and marriage to a man who did not love her, who was nine years older and a "boozer".[1] After the wedding Winifred's father seems to have disowned her, or was too busy with his own life to take an interest in her welfare. Perhaps, like many parents of his generation, his attitude was that she had brought it on herself. There was widespread condemnation of women who became pregnant out of wedlock. It was recognised that "The majority of women giving birth to illegitimate children were servant girls who were at the mercy of their male employers and their sons."[2] Some people were genuinely concerned about the situation where women took all the blame. During the 1890 parliamentary debates, Charles Powers MLA asked:

> Who are the parents of children sent to orphanages? Time and again we see the same thing - domestic servant - the time has come when we should give women the right to say whether this is to continue - whether

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[1] Marjory Engler, personal interview, 9 January 1996.

[2] Pam Young, Proud to be a Rebel (Queensland, University of Queensland Press, 1991) 54.

we should hang a man if he commits rape and treat him like a gentlemen if he seduces a poor innocent girl.(Young, 54)

> In New South Wales The Infant Protection Act (1904)... allowed mothers to sue the putative father for maintenance before the child's birth. However the man's denial of paternity in a court of law was sufficient proof of his innocence, it was his word against the woman's only. Her evidence "had to be corroborated in some material particular"... it is doubtful whether many women would have had the money, knowledge or confidence to initiate court proceedings. One young woman who did wish to sue the man "was never able to afford the five and sixpence necessary to do so" until granted 5s by the Benevolent Society for the purpose.[3]

Even if it had been possible it would have been difficult for Winifred Oaten to pursue a legal claim in court. Normally, once parents became aware of their daughter's condition, she was regarded as "a disgrace" to the family and sent away to an institution to await the birth. Often she did not see her child which was adopted by strangers. She was expected to return home and resume her normal life as if nothing had happened. The alternative was to force the father to marry her if he was free to do so and accepted that the child was his. Evidently Charles was prepared to accede that he was the father of Winifred Oaten's child.

Carl John Steger (known as Charles) was born on the Darling Downs on 4 May 1871, the second son of Johann Carl Steger and Barbara Gengenworth, passengers in the *Alfred*, which left Hamburg on 24 August 1862 and arrived in Sydney on 26 November of the same year. They were naturalised and married in Sydney on 16 December 1862.

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[2] Pam Young, *Proud to be a Rebel* (Queensland, University of Queensland Press, 1991) 54.

[3] Anne O'Brien, *Poverty's Prison: The Poor in New South Wales 1880-1918* (Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1988) 116.

Because of the close association between Britain and Germany thanks to the marriage of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha on 10 February 1840, German migration was encouraged, with agents being sent to both Germany and England. The resulting influx of "German settlers concentrated mainly on the south east corner between Brisbane and the Darling Downs." [4]

The first Germans came to the Darling Downs in 1854. They were bonded to work as shepherds for two years and had assisted passages. They looked after a flock of 5000 sheep for a wage of thirty to forty pounds per annum plus rations. They could save enough in two years to buy land. By 1859 there were 30,000 people in Queensland, among them 3000 German settlers. "Between 1861 and 1879, 17,360 German migrants arrived in Queensland." (Waterson, p.127). By the time Wilfred Oaten and his daughter arrived this had declined to 2,318 (Waterson, 127). In 1891 there were twenty-eight German settlers in Dalby.

It was the ability to manage land and grow crops such as corn and wheat which made the German settlers stand out. They survived where many other "national groups had sold out before seeing or quickly walked off." (Waterson, 128) Though the Irish and English population exceeded the Germans it was the latter who were the most successful. It could have been this which led to bad feelings in some quarters between the Germans and other European migrants. Many of the Germans were determined to maintain their national identity and practise the Lutheran religion. In 1893 there were ten Lutheran congregations, served by five pastors on the Darling Downs. Conflicts arose because the Germans were endeavouring to establish themselves in a new environment whilst at the same time trying to maintain their German identity in a prevailing British culture. Waterson described the Lutheran church as a "puritanical, fundamentalist and all embracing religious organisaton":

> Members believed in verbal inspiration, and Luther's interpretation of the Bible... The Church claimed no secular power but it influenced all

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[4] Ian Harmstorf and Michael Gigler, *The Germans in Australia* (Melbourne, A.E. Press, 1985) 30.

activities. It reserved the right to discipline its members... a member who committed a gross or flagrant sin was admonished three times... If he refused to repent he was called before the congregation; if he persisted in error he was expelled from the Church. This was regarded as complete and utter disgrace as it carried not only social ostracism but eternal damnation. However, the door was always left open for a genuine repentant... The German-born pastors attempted to exercise the same degree of spiritual and temporal control over their flocks as they did in Germany. This aroused great resentment among the Australian-born who felt that such anachronisms as the penitential seat were humiliating and unnecessary in an open society. (Waterson, 132)

Most of the German immigrants had large families.

> Most farmers could never have managed without the arduous and unpaid services of their families... an essential ingredient to successful farming was to have as large a family as possible. Adolescents worked without wages. Racking tensions between patriarch and his sons were not uncommon.[5]

Johann Carl Steger's ultimate destination was the Darling Downs; he and his wife travelled to Ipswich and joined

> a party that was coming to the Darling Downs. Owing to wet weather, and bullock drays being the only method of transportation, the journey from Ipswich to Toowoomba occupied six weeks. Mrs Steger was the only woman in the party and at one time when crossing the creek the dray that she was riding in was almost swept away by the current.[6]

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[5] Robert Dansie, *Records of a Dynamic Young Toowoomba* (Toowoomba, Darling Downs Institute Press, 1985) 150-151.

[6] A. O. McGowan, letter to the author,n.d.

It must have been a hard introduction for those used to the comforts of civilisation. Johann Carl Steger's first job was as a shepherd on Cecil Plains. Shepherds lived in small huts often in "abominable conditions".

> A German and his wife employed as shepherds on Lagoon Station died of scurvy after being left alone in their hut for several weeks. Single workers were crowded together in corrugated-iron huts in which they ate and slept, and even married couples had sometimes to share their quarters with other employees.(Waterson, 20)

In addition to the isolation and lack of amenities the newcomers had to contend with the forces of nature in an alien and hostile environment. There were periodic droughts which caused creeks to dry up and pasture to die, so that there was no feed for stock. At other times the creeks and rivers became raging torrents. On one occasion Johann Steger and his wife

> had to be rescued on rafts during the historical flood of the Condamine River in 1865... Blacks being plentiful their small bark hut was twice surrounded, but on being tactfully treated the blacks decamped peacefully.[7]

Later Johann Carl worked on Felton Station, then as a teamster from Balgownie. In 1875 he had saved enough money to select land on the North Branch in the Pittsworth District where he raised sheep. A venture to raise cattle and sheep on land he selected in the Cooyar District in 1888 failed because "the sheep died on account of the grass being sour."[8] In 1898 the family took up land at Rangeview near Evergeen and it was here that Charles Steger brought his wife, Winifred, after their marriage the following year.

Charles, also known as Ganger because he was a shearer's cook,[9] was twenty-

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[7] A.O. McGowan, letter to the author,n.d.

[8] A.O. McGowan, letter to the author, n.d.

[9] Marjory Engler, personal interview, 9 January 1996.

eight when he met the sixteen-year-old Winifred and swept her off her feet. Lonely and naive she was no match for her worldly lover, who abandoned her once she became pregnant. She rarely spoke of her feelings, or of this period of her life which must have been so painful. I can only imagine the scene which took place between herself and her father once she could no longer hide her condition.

She was standing by the door of the shack when she heard the sound of horse's hooves and for a moment imagined that Charles had returned. Charles who had been so kind and had spoken soft words to her... words that touched her heart because he said he loved her. That night he had taken her with him when he had played the button-accordion at the dance in the wool-shed at Jondaryan at the Harvest-Home. She had felt so proud when she heard someone say, "That's Charlie's girl." It made her special... She felt wanted and loved. When he kissed her she had melted in his arms, dreaming of the day when they would be married. At first when he didn't come she hadn't worried, knowing that his work took him away from home. But when a few weeks had gone by and there had been no letter she had a niggling doubt. She asked for him at the local store when she had ridden in to get a bag of flour and some sugar and candles. But no one had seen him or any of the men he worked with. She had almost given up hope of ever seeing him again. Now she smoothed her hair and took off her apron made of old sugar-bags, feeling clumsy and awkward, wondering how he would react when he saw her and whether he still loved her. She hesitated in the doorway, she had lost the slim waist that he had admired, her hair was matted and she had grown out of her dress that was stretched tightly across her stomach. She did not know whether she could bear to face him looking as she did. Suddenly she hated him, hated him for what he'd done to her. He had said he loved her and then had gone without a word. She listened as the sound of horse's hooves became louder. There was another sound. It was the sound of wheels crunching in the dirt. With a feeling of terror she

thought of her father. He had been away for a long time. He did not know that she had been dancing. He did not know about her and Charles. If only Charles had come. They could have faced her father together. Then she heard her father's voice, "Winifred, where are you? Hurry up and open the gate." She kept quiet, wondering if she could creep out without being seen and hide somewhere until it got dark. But there was only one door and it faced the front. Her father called her name again with mounting impatience. She grabbed a blanket off her bed and wrapping it around herself like a shawl she went to meet him.

As she untied the sagging wire fastened to a piece of sapling that passed for a gate, and dragged it back so he could drive the buggy through, the blanket slipped, but her father was intent on unharnessing the horses and unpacking a roll of fencing wire and a few supplies for the house. It wasn't until she said, "I'll put the billy on," and turned to go into the hut that he really looked at her. She had grown heavier and there was something different about her gait. He grabbed her by the wrist and spun her round to face him. He took in the distended stomach with a look of shock. "You filthy slut. You've been with a man, haven't you?" He forced her to her knees. " Who was it? I'll kill him".

She crouched there hiding her face until he brought his whip down savagely across her shoulders. She screamed and made an effort to rise but he held her fast. "I'll find out his name if I have to beat it out of you."

She began to cry, great gulping sobs, holding him around the knees, her face hidden, until he pulled her up and helped her into the hut. Bit by bit he dragged the story out of her. Later, his face like a thundercloud, he forced her into the buggy and drove her to the Steger farm where Barbara Steger and two of the girls were in the kitchen making bread. He drove up to the fence and called out, "Look what your son has done

to my daughter. He'll marry her or I'll shoot him." The women had come out, hands covered in flour, and the older woman had sent Kate running to fetch her father. Winifred had sat there in the buggy, tears streaming down her face, wishing she was dead while Charles' sisters stared at her with undisguised hostility.

Steger never discussed this incident but the subject of the pregnant unmarried girl became a recurring theme in her novels, as in the following excerpt from "The Door that Loved", which reads as if it could have been written from personal experience.

> Several times they had planned to ride into the next town and be married before a justice of the peace, but always some little thing intervened... The weeks passed into months. Only one letter... then silence... [she] realised that all was not well with her. She became short of breath with an unfailing sickness each morning till at last she admitted the thing she had been desperately trying not to, she was going to have a child. No one but a girl can fully realise the despair when she realises her condition. The desperate ideas, eagerly grasped hopes, that maybe some miracle might avert the oncoming fate, the last hopeless apathetic acceptance that this thing must be.[10]

On 7 December 1899, Winifred Oaten and Charles Steger were married in the Church of St. John's, Dalby, in the presence of Wilfred Isaac Oaten and Ina Alice Mary Woods, the wife of the presiding minister, The Rev.W.Maitland Woods. On the marriage certificate Winifred's age is given as nineteen, though she had only just turned seventeen.

After the marriage the young couple returned to the Steger family farm and it was here that Winifred gave birth to her first son, Charles Wilfred known as Fred, on 22 February 1900. Though Winifred did not discuss it, the shame and bitterness of being

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[10] "The Door that Loved", *Northern Argus* (Clare), 1963. n.p.

MARRIAGE

MARRIAGE solemnised in the District of DALBY in the Colony of Queensland
1900 Registered by Frederich William Roche District Registrar

Marginal notes (if any)	Column		
	1 Number	515	941
	2 When and where married	7 day of December 1899 Dalby	
	3 Name and surname	Bridegroom Charles STEGER	Bride Winifred Jane OATEN
	4 Condition	Bachelor	Spinster
	5 Birthplace	Toowoomba Queensland Australia	London Middlesex England
	6 Profession, trade or occupation	Labourer	-
	7 Age	28 years	19 years
	8 Usual place of residence	Rosalie Jondaryan Queensland	Rosalie Jondaryan Queensland
	Parents - 9 Father's name and surname Mother's name and maiden surname	Charles Steger Barbara Ward	Wilfred Isaac Oaten Louisa Dennis
	10 Father's rank or profession	Farmer	Painter and decorator

Married in the Church of St.John's St.Dalby Queensland

according to the rites of the Church of England

Date of registration 1st day of January 1900

This marriage was solemnised between us) Charles Steger) Winifred Jane Oaten)

In the presence of us) Wilfred Isaac Oaten) Ina Alice Mary Woods

By me W.Maitland Woods
Officiating Minister or Registrar

, Signature of Registrar

CAUTION:- Whosoever shall unlawfully alter any Certified Copy of an Entry in any Register of Births, Marriages, or Deaths, whether by erasure, obliteration, removal, addition, or otherwise is guilty of a CRIME, and is liable to the punishment by law provided in that behalf. (Vide Sections 486 and 488 of the "Criminal Code.")

I, Colin James Green , Registrar-General, do hereby certify that the above is a true copy of an entry in a Register of Marriages kept in the General Registry Office, Brisbane, and I further certify that I am a person duly authorised by law to issue such certificate.

Extracted on 21 December 1993

Registrar-General

Exd. by

forced into marriage with a man who did not love her, and the rejection by his family, remained with her till the end of her life. She gave birth to three more children while she lived on her in-law's farm: John Henry known as Jack (ll June l902), Peter Andrew (30 December l904) and Winifred (2 February l907). When her youngest child was one year and ten months old Winifred Steger left home. It would have been in December, about the time of her ninth wedding anniversary. Her two older boys were working away from home at the time, leaving her with the four-year-old Peter and her baby daughter. Whether Steger planned to leave or whether she fled from an abusive and drunken husband I do not know. But one evening she walked out empty handed. There are two different accounts of this incident. One, told to me by two family members (Marionne Diggles[11] and Marjory Engler)[12] is that Winifred attempted to leave home with her four-year-old son, Peter. However, she was intercepted by her husband who "ran alongside her trying to persuade her to take the baby girl instead because she would have a better chance. But Peter was her favourite and she refused. Her husband held on to both children and drove her off at the point of a gun." The other version, told me by Winifred Barker[13], is that her mother was attempting to take both herself and and her four-year-old brother, Peter, when her husband "drove her off at the point of a gun" and she had to leave without either child. I think the first version could be the correct one, because it would have been impossible for Winifred to have taken both children. The younger one would have needed to be carried. It does not sound as if her flight was premeditated because "She spent the night in a paddock and then walked miles until she found work with these people."[14] If leaving home and losing her children was a heartbreak for Winifred Steger it was equally devastating for her children. The hostility towards their mother seems to have been extended to her children by their Steger aunts. Winifred Barker said: "Dad had sisters who could have taken us in. They wouldn't even bother with us. They could have kept me, the baby that I was." [15]

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[11] Marionne Diggles, personal interview, 8 January l996.
[12] Marjory Engler, personal interview, 9 January l996.
[13] Winifred Barker, personal interview, 9 January l996.
[14] Winifred Barker, personal interview, 9 January l996.
[15] Winifred Barker, personal interview, 9 January l996.

The oldest boy, Fred, who was eight, became the surrogate mother. He had no bitterness towards his mother, perhaps because he was old enough to understand the true circumstances of her life and sympathise with her. His younger sister said, "Fred was kind to me. He was lovely. Oh dear, he was kind to me. He brought me up when he was there."[16] Little is known about the circumstances of Winifred Steger's married life except what can be gleaned from family gossip. When her children found their mother again she was an old woman. Her daughter, Winifred Barker, only met her mother three times: "I had to get the story in the few times we met".[17]

Winifred Steger never really recovered from the bitterness of her first marriage and the loss of her children. Over seventy years later, when she was was ninety- five, she wrote the following letter to her daughter after hearing of the death of Fred her first born son, on 7 October 1977.

> Oh my girl,
>
> What can I say to comfort you. Words are such empty things. And Fred has left us and gone to his rest, God be with him. His life was hard since he was born, well, soon we shall join him and you my dear one will be at rest from your pains and I too will have found peace at least. Dear One, I have not had a happy life at any time. I have done my best to keep our name clean, that's why I have never changed names. Looking back I can see that the great war was our curse.
>
> The Steger family put some curse on us and we did nothing but be English. Were we not God's children too?
>
> I look back and see the hatred in the old folks eyes. Especially the days or rather the three days in which Fred awaited birth. They watched - in agony - and she cursed me lying there and prayed aloud that we would both die. All their thoughts on their enemies, the English. The sisters too

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[16] Winifred Barker, personal interview, 9 January 1996.
[17] Winifred Barker, personal interview, 9 January 1996.

were bad. Fred showed me the dents on his scalp where Kate's dog chain had bit into him. You will never know the suffering and how they messed up all our lives. Well, we must forget and I pray we forgive.

Won't your poor legs ever feel better? Yes this last ten days have been cruel to us. I heard through Pansy who received a letter from someone up there that Fred was gone and I thought owing to your long silence that you too were gone and then a woman who was a friend dropped dead and a letter came to say that Pansy's youngest brother was very ill in Queensland. Everything came at once. I still don't know about the last.

I myself am now very weak and not allowed outside the door because am all but blind and hope to pass any night now and finish my long saga of life. Fred, Peter, John and the rest are no one knows where. Never was a family so split up. But, my dear, you have one glorious comfort. Your husband is still alive beside you. I live here quite alone and have too much time to think as I sit and brood and hope for something better in the next.

These things I've spoken of, forget them. I suppose the Great One planned all. Goodbye, my darling. We shall meet later in a better world.

Your tired lonely old Mother.

The letter expresses feelings of alienation on the part of the young wife and hostility from her husband's family which Steger had never been able to come to terms with.

There are two sides to every story and there may be some justification for the behaviour of the family of Charles Steger. They may have felt that she trapped him into marriage. There was already a large family to be suported when the pregnant young wife

was forced on them. Her presence would have put an additional burden on resources, though the older sons and often the father would have been earning outside money as shearers or labourers when there was work available. This made it harder for the women "who bore the brunt of the pioneering" (Dansie, 1151)

> When farmers and petty selectors joined the annual migration to the shearing sheds to supplement their pitiful income, women took over all the farm work, including ploughing and slaughtering of beasts and keeping accounts. (Francis, 139)



Shingle hut on the site of the boyhood home of Steele Rudd (Arthur "Hoey" Davis) at Greenmount (formerly Emu Plains). Photograph: Philip Lindsay.

There was no respite from the hard work.

> We toiled and toiled... till every tree and sapling that had grown there was down... With our combined male and female forces and the aid of

a sapling lever we rolled the thundering big logs together in the face of hell's own fires; and when there were no logs to roll it was tramp, tramp the day through, gathering armfuls of sticks, while the clothes hung to our backs with muddy perspiration.[18]



Commemorative plaque: Arthur "Hoey" Davis (Steele Rudd).

That women also prepared the food, including making bread, and tried to make a comfortable home was taken for granted, together with the fact that they bore and cared for children who eventually shared in the farm work like the young wife in "Jack's Jane": (*Northern Argus*, 1963, n.p.)

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[18] Steele Rudd, *On Our Selection* (1899; Sydney: A & R, 1979) 4-5.

When Jerry was barely two years old, Tom, a lusty eight pounder was born. Jane was but three days in the hospital, when Jack, bringing her in some clean nightdresses, urged her to hurry up a bit, because she was wanted at home. So still very weak, she returned to her daily grind - cows, pigs, calves and fowls. Feed to cut, milk to separate, dishes to wash, clothes to wash, food to cook, children to mind... She thought that if only she did not have to carry so much water, her labours would be easier... Jane struggled on, and eighteen months later Roy was born. In her rundown state it nearly cost her life...

Jane's once pretty curls were now nondescript wisps, that dangled in her eyes when her arms were too full to push them back. Her eyes wore the look of one burdened beyond endurance.

In all the years since her marriage, Jane had not taken a holiday from her grind, except the few days in which the lads were born.

Like Jane's, Winifred Steger's life was one of constant struggle. Added to the shortage of money, her husband did not own their own farm so that they had no chance of getting ahead. Living in close proximity to her husband's family also caused tension. Winifred Steger was the outsider. German would have been the language spoken in the home by Johann and his wife, Barbara. The family was Lutheran, even if not everyone adhered strictly to their religion, whereas Winifred had been married in the Church of England. And she had disgraced herself by getting pregnant before marriage. Her life was made miserable. "Charlie didn't treat Winifred very well. He spoke rudely to her and made derogatory remarks about her English background. He treated her with contempt." [19]

The young couple had their own quarters away from the main house. It would have been a rough dwelling similar to the place that Jane was brought to after her

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[19] Marionne Diggles, personal interview, 8 January 1996.

marriage in "Jack's Jane".

> The house was a three roomed shanty built of slabs and iron. It had three windows whose glass was torn hessian. The front door was also the back entrance. The toilet was the neatest part of the structure and was made of a round iron tank with a door cut in the side.
>
> They were not devoid of furniture. The back room held a stretcher made of wire netting tied to four posts sunk in the earth.
>
> In the kitchen was a tired old stove, whose sound days were long past. Also there was a table which still hung on to three of its own legs, whilst an upturned case served for the fourth. There were also sundry pots and pans, not to mention a cracked teapot.(n.p.)

The dwelling where Charles and Winifred lived was probably the original humpy Johann Carl Steger built. Later he would have built something more commodious to house his growing family.

> Cottages were usually of two to three rooms with a chimney at one end serving an open fire or colonial oven though sometimes cooking was done outside... Progress from humpy to homestead... while common was not a fixed rule. Farmers with capital built cottages or large houses soon after arrival. Others deliberately refrained from what they considered to be unremunerative investment and applied their profits to other purposes. (Dansie, pp. 145-149)

Charles and Winifred had a struggle, Winifred more so because she had the care of her children. "He'd drink the money and we didn't have any food. And she'd have to grow some vegetables in the garden. She'd swop them for sugar and tea. She did have

a hard life." [20]

If "Jack's Jane" is based on Winifred's married life, she was driven to desperation by the sheer drudgery of her life. Like Winifred, Jane also left her husband and family, but not before she had vented her rage.

> Grasping an axe that stood nearby she aimed a vicious blow at the stove, followed by another and yet another. "I'll smash you," she shrieked... Blow after blow crashed on to the stove, which shattered like an egg shell under the onslaught... Over with one blow went the wobbly table, and she beat off its last two legs. Next she smashed at the dresser. The ancient wood split to bits. The large dish of eggs, sauce bottles, sugar bowl, teapot and crockery, she smashed them all... It was well that no one but the flies could see her just then. Her lips were clenched, her hair hung in witches' wisps about her sweating forehead. The worm had turned at last.

When she has destroyed everything in the house, including her husband's clothes, she writes her husband a note:

> I've had it. It's not a wife you want but an unpaid slave... you've used my strength and my heart's blood... I shall have to work wherever I go, but at least I shall be paid for it. I will have normal hours and sometimes I may get a whole day to rest in...
>
> Don't worry about what happens to me; you haven't done so before so there is no need to now.
> Yours no more,
> Jane

Whether Charles drank before Winifred left, or as a result of her leaving, I do not know. There seems to be no doubt that he was a drunkard. One family member described

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[20] Winifred Barker, personal interview, 9 January 1996.

Charles "as the black sheep of the family [who] was reputed to have been a hard drinking man in 1907" [21] which was before Winifred left. And a report dated 8 May 1915 by Mr W.H. Smith, a school inspector, who was investigating the need for a new school at Kulpi said, "I called on Charles Steger, but he was suffering a recovery from a drunken bout and would have nothing to do with the matter."[22]

In 1994, and again in 1996, I made a trip to Queensland to talk to Steger descendants, who all had their own version of events which had become part of the family folklore. Belinda Steger, granddaughter of Winifred Steger's eldest son, said that "Charles didn't harbour a grudge against his mother. He had to look after his family when his mother left."[23]

Irene Steger, a granddaughter of Jack Steger, the second son, said:

> Jack never forgave his mother for leaving home. He had a ghastly childhood. His father drank and was a difficult man to live with. As children they had very little fun. They were expected to work hard and had no pleasures. Once they had to pick all the fruit and Jack was promised a pocket-knife. But his parents returned home from selling the fruit without it. Instead they brought a bag of boiled lollies which the children had to share.
>
> They had a German grandmother, Barbara. They were very close to her. Kids used to walk down to their grandmother, who kept a pot of black tea on the stove. He learned to drink black tea from her. She was kind to them. She gave them food and treats. He left home when he was eleven.
>
> He only spoke of his early life twice, just before he died. He never

[21] Marionne Diggles, personal interview, 8 January 1996.
[22] Kulpi School Records, Queensland State Archives, Educ./251.
[23] Belinda Steger, personal interview, 1 July 1994.

forgave her for leaving.[24]

The children lost the support of their grandmother, Barbara Steger, when she died on 1 August 1913. Jack was still at school, as his name appears on the Admission Register of the Rosalie Plains State School on 13 October 1913. He was aged eleven years and eight months. Irene Steger described Jack as

> a very gentle man and a stickler for doing the right thing. Very reliable and very honest. He never spoke of his childhood except twice just before he died. He selected land at Mulgildie near Monto but during the depression he walked off and became a fisherman and boat builder. He built boats that sailed overseas, fifty to sixty footers. He had confidence in his own ability. He was unusual like his mother. He had a good ear for music and could play any tune. He was well read and gifted - self educated. He lived at Tin Can Bay. [25]

Peter Steger, the third child of Winifred and Charles Steger, was ninety when I met him at Wallaville, where he lives on a cane farm with his adopted son, Mark and Mark's wife, Gabrielle. He did not remember much about his mother because he was only four when she left. He said that he ran away from home when he was eight because his father whipped him so badly that he still had the scars.

> Jack broke his bloody razor and told him I done it. I walked for miles through the bush, and I heard the sound of a horse and sulky. It stopped beside me. It was the inspector of police, Bob Garrity. He asked me what I was doing. "Looking for work," I said "What can you do?" "Chop wood, milk a cow." "Hop in," and he took me home. When he saw my back... well, he wanted me to give evidence against my father. But I wouldn't. I never went home again. Garrity wanted to adopt me and take me to Brisbane. But I wanted to work in the bush. I went timber-

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[24] Irene Steger, telephone interview, 2 July 1994.
[25] Irene Steger, telephone interview, 6 January 1996.

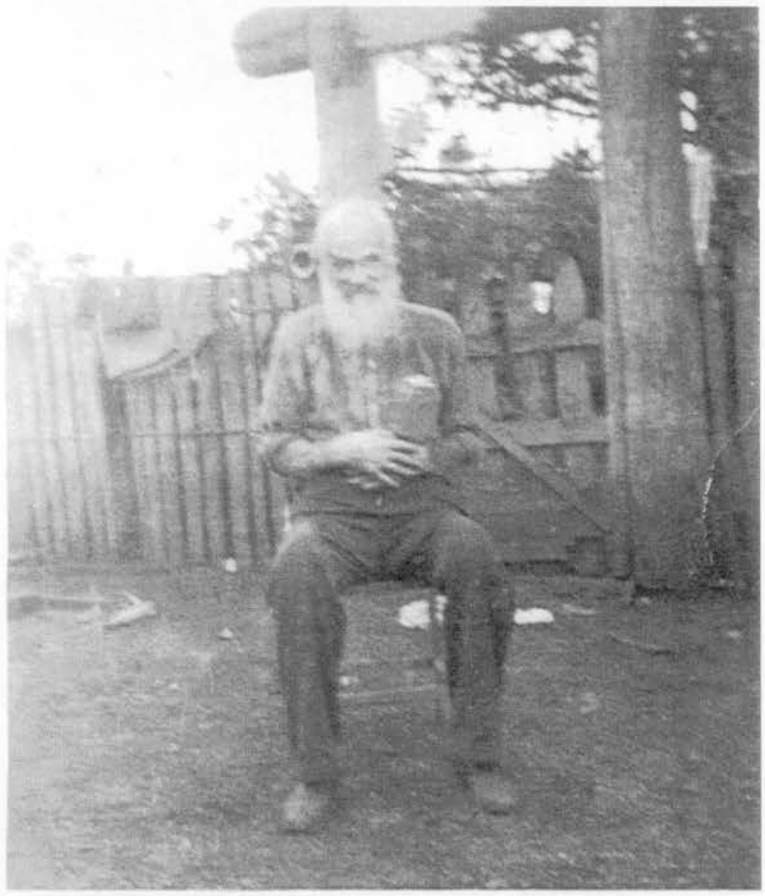
getting.[26]

From his account, Peter's life in the bush as a timber-getter and bullock-driver had been hard, but it had also been the life he loved. He made no attempt to fit into a changing world. He has never used a telephone, has not been inside a shop for thirty years, and is not used to electricity. Mark Steger showed me a photograph of their home when he was a boy. It was made of canvas and corrugated iron. He slept "under a sheet of corrugated iron for a blanket."[27] Peter could tell me nothing about the circumstances of his mother leaving home. But he remembered his two grandfathers. He described Johann Steger as "a savage old bugger who'd bring the hide off you but well liked" and "little grandfather", who was Wilfred Oaten, as having black hair. He didn't hold a grudge against his father who suffered brain damage after an accident with a horse. He gave him a home until his death on 4 October 1952, aged eighty-eight, and also buried him.[28]

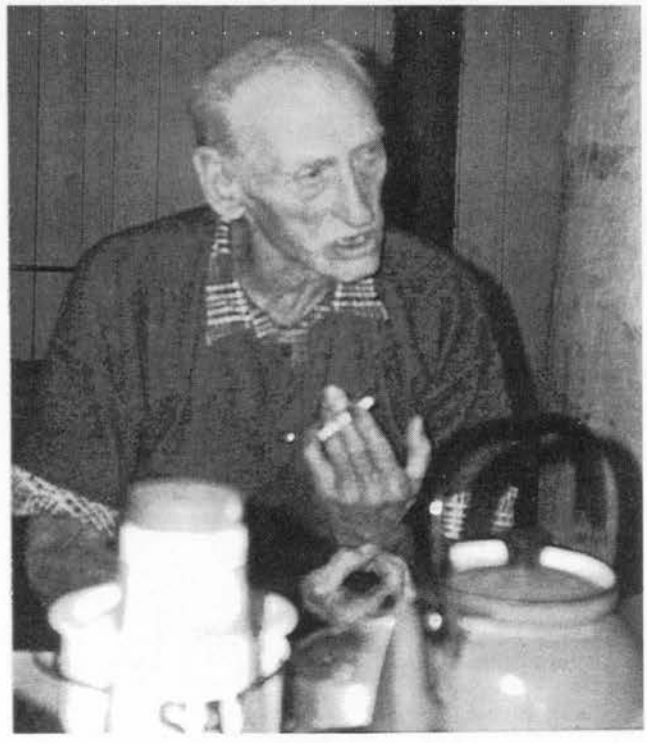
According to his sister, Winifred Barker, Peter had no interest in finding his mother. She also discounted his story about running away at eight and said he was still at home until he was fourteen. On 13 October 1913 he is shown as being admitted to Rosalie Plains State School, formerly Oaklea School. Both he and his brother Jack were still at home on 15 May 1915 because the school inspector said, "I also saw four [children] belonging to Mr Steger." [29] Peter would have been ten years and five months. It is possible that the boys came and went from school. Marionne Diggles said that the two older boys were away working when their mother left.[30] "Schools often emptied at harvesting time as children were forced into heavy farm duties at an early age without any choice" and a school inspector reported "chronic absenteeism among primary school children on the Downs and the reluctance of some parents to send their children to school at all." (Dansie, 151)

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[26] Peter Steger, telephone interview, 29 June 1994.
[27] Mark Steger, personal interview, 29 June 1994.
[28] Peter Steger, personal interview, 29 June 1994.
[29] Report into the need for a new School at Kulpi, Queensland State Archives. Educ/251.
[30] Marionne Diggles, personal interview, 8 January 1996.



Charles Steger, husband of Winifred Steger, 1948. He died 4 October 1952 and was buried at Evergreen. Photograph: Ted Engler.



Peter Steger, third son of Charles and Winifred, Wallaville, 1995. Photograph: Philip Lindsay.



Fred (Charles) Steger, eldest son of Charles and Winifred, Mulgildie, 1948. Photograph: Ted Engler.



Winifred Steger, daughter of Charles and Winifred, 1924. Photograph courtesy of Marjory Engler.



Winifred Steger, wife of Charles Steger, Ridgehaven c.1972. Photograph: Ted Engler.



Marjory Engler, daughter of Winifred Barker (nee Steger), Toowoomba, 19[illegible]. Photograph: Philip Lindsay.



Winifred Barker (nee Steger), Toowoomba, 1996. Photograph: Philip Lindsay.



Neville Steger, son of Fred Steger, Mulgildie, 1948. Photograph: Ted Engler.



Norm Steger, son of Fred Steger, Mulgildie, 1948. Photograph: Ted Engler.

I talked to Winifred Barker, the youngest child of Charles and Winifred Steger, in a nursing home in Toowoomba on the eve of her eighty-ninth birthday. Out of all the children's her story is the most touching. Too young to remember her mother, she developed a loving relationship with her father. "I loved him and he loved me." Though she said he beat the boys he never touched her. I told her about Peter's story of being beaten with a stockwhip. She said that he only hit them with his belt but never her and he did not beat her mother. She gave me the following account of her life with her father after her mother left.

> She had to walk. She walked for miles she told me. I had to get all this story in the little time I saw her. She was at Evergreen beside grandma and grandpa Steger, on his mother's and father's property. A few years after she left Dad bought a piece of ground out at Kulpi and he built a one-roomed house on that. We had windows, shutters that you push wood across and shut. We didn't have much furniture... I had a corn bag for a blanket and I stayed alone in there many a time at night when the boys all left one by one... I wasn't frightened... Dad only had a small

farm and he only grew corn and watermelons and different things like that - onions. He exchanged those for food. Dad would belt the boys no matter what time they did the offence. If it was twelve o'clock when he came home he'd give them a belting, with his trouser-belt. He never touched me. He loved me and I loved him. He never brought any women to the house. Fred brought me up, when he was there. But Dad used to make him late for school. Every morning the teacher used to say, "I'll give you the cane if you're late again." Every morning. Of course he couldn't help it. He was late again and the teacher was giving him the cane. My brother Jack was sitting beside me and he picked up the inkwell with the ink in it and he threw that at the teacher. Ink everywhere. The teacher got him down between his legs and he was going to belt his bum and Jack got the cane and broke it in two and they got expelled and of course I had to go with them. We went home. We went to Kulpi after that. That's when the boys started leaving home.

Dad played the button accordion and the concertina for the dance. He used to take me with him when I was about six. He could play that concertina. I've never heard anyone play as good as him. And if they give him a few beers he would sing. He could sing too. If he didn't do something he'd be jumping up and down playing the spoons. Dad used to keep his accordion in an old tin box under the bed and the boys used to break the lock open. They loved that concertina.

Not having known her mother she did not appear to have missed her. Her father seems to have been kinder to her than he was to his sons. But her relationship with her father came to an end when well-meaning neighbours had a meeting about her future.

When I was twelve I was taken to the Pope's. He was a policeman. The neighbours had decided that I shouldn't stay alone with my father. They went to court and my father cried when I was made a ward of the court.

> I had six years of hell. Mr Pope belted me black and blue with a riding whip because I forgot to shut the back gate. I was in bed. It was 9 p.m.
>
> That man did some awful things. I can't tell you what the worst ones were. It was too horrible. I told his wife but she didn't believe me. When I was eighteen I left.

She talks of the relationship between her mother and her husband's family.

> They hated her because she was British, called her Dom Britisher. She used to write to us but we never got the letters. We found out from relatives later. We got a postcard once with a woman's face on it. We always thought it was her but it wasn't. Often we went to school without anything in our mouths. The teacher would bring us food.

She only saw her grandfather, Wilfred Oaten, once. "I think he and Dad must have fallen out. He didn't have a woman with him." The real whereabouts of Winifred Steger after she left home remain a mystery. Her daughter said, "Mum left Dad and worked for some people on a farm. The woman who brought me up met her and didn't know she was my mother."[31]

Winifred Steger never found out what happened to her father.

> I saw nothing of him for years and years and years. I don't really know what happened. He disappeared. I don't know who got the property. I got nothing... He began to drink.[32]

She was not aware that he had died in Toowoomba Hospital on 20 November 1917, from "exposure to prickly pear" after being thrown from a sulky. Winifred's name appeared

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[31] Winifred Barker, personal interview, 9 January 1996.
[32] Guthrie tapes.

on the inquest documents as next-of-kin with her last known address as Morven "but a telegram so directed was undelivered".[33]

Wilfred Oaten had not prospered in Australia. At the time of his death he owned two blocks of land to which he had "clear title". His personal effects were four blankets and an alarm clock. He had no money on him at the time of his death and there was no money included in his estate. He died intestate. His estate was valued at sixty-six pounds. His land was described as follows:

> All those portions of land situated in the County of Aubigny, Portion of Milton, near Peranga, on the Cooyar Line. Being Portion 131V - Area 135 acres 10 perches.
>
> This property is practically of no value, the majority being hard sandy soil, and heavily infested with pear. The Rosalie Shire Council place their minimum value of 10/- per acre on it, which is far beyond its value. Value 20 pounds. Improvements: Old worn out fence of sapling fence, and some wire hanging about, and over grown with pear - valueless.
>
> Subdivision 38 of Portion 27 of Portion A of Exchange No. 32 Parish of Jondaryan, about 3 miles from Bowenville. Area 4 acres 2 roods, 3 perches. This is a V shaped piece of Land and not in a marketable positon; Value 8 pounds. The Rosalie Shire Council have not valued or rated this land. Improvements - small hut built of scraps of old iron. Value 2 pounds. Fencing 4 plain wire fence in bad order: Value 1 pound 10 shillings.
> signed by the valuer Mr Robinson at Toowoomba 25 March 1918.

It is obvious from the above that Wilfred Oaten had never been able to conquer the prickly pear and was not a successful farmer. The report said that "deceased was thrown

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[33] File held by the Public Trustee of Queensland "in respect of the late Mr Oaten who died in 1917." Ref. L033.

out of a sulky at Highland Plain near Oakey a day or two previous to 16 November 1917, when he was admitted to hospital." His occupation was shown as painter and decorator and his last place of residence Goombungee.

In a sworn statement completed in his handwriting on 8 October 1924 his older brother, William Oaten, gave the following information about his family. His parents were William Oaten and Eliza Harris. He could not supply the date or place of marriage. He knew that his father died at Leeds in 1874 but did not know the date. There had been four children of the marriage: Clare Oaten, born in Bath, date unknown; Adeliza Oaten, born in Bath, date unknown; Ivanhoe William Oaten, born in Thulbarton, Norfolk, 4 November 1854; Wilfred Isaac Oaten, born in Bath, date of birth unknown.

He also testified that in addition to his brother, Wilfred, his two sisters, Clare and Adeliza Oaten, were deceased, but he had no details. Clare Oaten (Selman) had had six children. Their names were Frank, Edith, Eva, Charles, Henry and Robert Selman. He stated that none were married. In the same section on the document he stated: "Winefred [sic] Oaten, only child of Wilfred Oaten is dead." He made no mention of the fact that she had married and was the mother of four children. He said that he had not seen his brother for about eight years before his death and they did not correspond.

An Intestacy Election was held and Walter Cutler of Raleigh Farm, Kulpi bought the land at Aubigny, Milton for twenty pounds on 27 February 1918. The land at Jondaryan was declared unsaleable.[34]

I like to imagine that Wilfred Oaten cared for his daughter but that his life, like that of many other settlers, had been marred because the promise of making a new life in Australia had not lived up to expectations. To him fell the care of a young daughter without the support and comfort of a wife. In his wildest nightmares he would not have

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[34] According to Winifred Steger (Guthrie tapes), the Memorial Hall to the cactoblastis which destroyed the prickly pear, was built on her father's land. This is likely. If it was unsaleable it could have reverted to the local council for unpaid rates.

imagined that he would die a painful death from prickly pear, far from those he loved.

His feelings for his daughter have occupied my imagination. I dreamed up the following letter to her which he dictated to his brother, William Ivanhoe, on his deathbed - a letter she never received because William Ivanhoe's base nature got the better of him. For the sake of six pounds, sixteen shillings and tenpence, which was all that was left of the estate of his brother, after the hospital and funeral expenses plus government taxes had been met, he was willing to testify that his niece, Winifred Steger was dead, even though he must have known that she had four living children who often went hungry because there was no money to buy food.

Toowoomba Hospital

Dear Daughter

There is so much I want to say to you but I have so little time. I had an accident. A stupid one. I was driving into Toowoomba when Betsy, my little mare, shied. It must have been a snake. You remember how bad they were and still are. I was thrown into the prickly pear. When I came to it was quite dark. I lay there in agony. I didn't break any bones but the spines of that wretched pear - oh, the pain. I felt as if I was on fire. I lay there for a long while and then I heard the sound of horse's hooves. I managed to call out. It was my neighbour, Klaus, going into town with his milk.

He was surprised to find me in such a state. He told me he heard Betsy trot in my gate last night and imagined I was safely home.

I can't tell you how hard it was for him to get me into the spring cart. But finally he managed it and drove me here, half lying, half sitting among the milk cans. My body was burning as if I had a fever, and I had a cough from lying out all night.

At first I thought I would be back in my own bed in a few days once the

spines had been removed. But when the doctor came and sounded my chest he said I had bronchitis. He was whispering to the nurse in the corner of the ward later. I heard him use the words arsenic poisoning. It is something they have been doing to the prickly pear to try and get rid of the accursed stuff. Now I fear I may be dying.

Last night I had a fever and I thought you came and stood by my bed. You had a child in your arms but I could not see your face. It is nine years since you ran away. Often I wish you were back so that I could undo some of the harsh words. I should not have forced you to marry Charles. You could have kept the child and we could have raised it together. I knew he was a feckless man even before you married him and yet I shut my mind to what your future might be.

You were never wanted. I could have deserted your mother but she was beautiful and I thought things might work out.

You've had a hard life. At least I had some schooling. My father was a schoolmaster in Sussex. He was a hard man, but just. He died when I was sixteen. He was hoping I would follow in his footsteps. But I wanted more than that. I had high hopes when I went to London - so much was happening. But then there were the strikes and I got worried. When I saw the Government calling for new settlers to Australia, and the chance of owning some land, it seemed too good to be true. It meant a fresh start for your mother and me. I thought we could make a go of it.

I didn't expect your mother to leave the way she did. It was hard bringing you up alone. I was glad when your Aunt Liddy came to live. I thought we'd get ahead then if William managed the farm - and I worked away. But that accursed prickly pear. It broke my heart.

If I was hard on you I'm sorry. Life should have been easier for you. I've asked my brother to find you and give you this letter. He's writing it for me.

All I have is yours - the farm and the land - not that it's worth much - my paint brushes, the horse and sulky.

May we meet again in the next world under happier circumstances.
Your loving father
Wilfred Isaac Oaten
19 November 1917

Wilfred Isaac Oaten was buried at Drayton Cemetery,Toowoomba, in an unmarked grave No 405, Church of England, Section 2. He was sixty-three years of age. His death certificate stated that his wife, Louisa (Dennis) was dead. His funeral cost fifteen shillings, which was deducted from his estate.

Death certificate, Wilfred Oaten.

DEATH

DEATH in the District of TOOWOOMBA in the State of Queensland.

1917 Registered by John Joseph Leahy, District Registrar

Marginal notes (if any)	Column	
	1 Number	4626 4043
	DESCRIPTION -	
	2 When died and where	20 November 1917 General Hospital, Toowoomba
	3 Name and surname; profession, trade, or occupation	Wilfred OATEN Painter and Decorator
	4 Sex and age	Male 49 years
	5 1. Cause of death	1. Exposure to Prickly Pear 2. Shock 3. Collapse
	2. Duration of last illness	1. 5-6 days
	3. Medical attendant by whom certified	A.D. McKenzie
	4. When he last saw deceased	19 November 1917
	6 Name and surname of father Profession, trade, or occupation	Wilfred Oaten Schoolmaster
	Name and maiden surname of mother	Charlotte -
	7 Signature, description, and residence of informant	Certified in writing by J.C. Very, Secretary, General Hospital, Toowoomba
	8 1. Signature of Registrar	J.J. Leahy
	2. Date	3 December 1917
	3. Place of registration	Toowoomba
	If Burial or Cremation Registered -	
	9 When and where buried or cremated	21 November 1917 Toowoomba Cemetery
	By whom certified	Richard Ezra Philp
	10 Name and religion of minister, and/or names of two witnesses of burial or cremation	F. Quirk, Church of England T.G. Brown D. Carroll
	11 Where born and how long in Australia States, stating which	Bath, Somerset, England 30 years in Queensland
	If deceased was married -	
	12 1. Where	London, England
	2. At what age	19 years
	3. To whom	Louisa Dennis
	13 Issue living, in order of birth, their names and ages	Living years Winifred 30
	Deceased, number and sex	Deceased

CAUTION:- Whosoever shall unlawfully alter any Certified Copy of an entry in any Register of Births, Marriages, or Deaths, whether by erasure, obliteration, removal, addition, or otherwise is guilty of a CRIME, and is liable to the punishment by law provided in that behalf. (Vide Sections 488 and 488 of the "Criminal Code.")

I, Colin James Green , Registrar-General, do hereby certify that the above is a true copy of an entry in a Register of Deaths kept in the General Registry Office at Brisbane, and I further certify that I am a person duly authorised by law to issue such certificate.

Extracted on 21 September 1994

Registrar-General

Exd. by N.B.

Not Valid Unless Bearing the Authorised Seal and Signature of the Registrar-General

Chapter Five

MORVEN: 1908 -1916

I remember feeling sorry for myself that first morning. I was sick at heart for my children, and for myself, because for the first time in my life I had no home, nowhere to go. There had been a heavy dew, my hair and face were wet, my dress damp and crumpled from lying on the ground and my body stiff. But then as the sun rose and the birds started a wild chorus I had a sense of exhilaration. I had escaped. For the first time in my life I was free.

I wasn't sure how far I had walked before it got dark. I had travelled into the sun, so knew that I was going west. There was nothing else to do but keep on walking until it got too dark to see. I curled up under a tree in a paddock and made myself comfortable on the ground. I was exhausted, but too tired to sleep, and the infernal mosquitoes almost drove me mad. There were cattle in the paddock, I could hear them lowing and moving about and I was comforted by their presence. And when I looked up the stars were very close. I chose one bright star to be my guiding star. I remember praying to the spirit of the star to guard me while I slept. I felt better after that and must have fallen asleep.

When I woke I was hungry and thirsty. The cattle had moved to a far paddock and I could see smoke rising in the distance and guessed it must be a homestead. I would have liked to have gone and asked for food and water but I was afraid someone might tell Charles and he might come and drag me back home at the point of a gun.

When I think of the quarrel. Everything happened so quickly. I had been angry because Charles had taken my egg money - my money. It was all

I had to buy meat for the children with. And when he came stumbling in from the shanty I turned on him. I picked up a log from beside the fire and threw it at him. Peter was crying and so was little Winnie, though she was too young to know what was happening. I ran outside with Peter. When Charles pointed the gun at me I fled.

That's in the past now. I was lucky to get a lift to Morven. The races were on and the hotel was full. The kitchen staff had run off, so I went into the kitchen and washed up and made myself useful. Mrs Dawkins was so pleased. She offered me a pound a week and my keep if I'd stay.

When Steger left home she was penniless, her only skills those she had acquired working as a nursemaid and domestic. But in a period when there was a chronic shortage of domestic help she was able to earn her own living. Instead of travelling to Toowoomba, the hub of the Darling Downs, where there was chance of work in more comfortable surroundings, she went further west to the Maranoa area. Here she spent the next eight years, working first on an isolated station and later at one of the hotels in town.

Little is known about this period of Winifred's life. The letters she wrote to her children, and which relatives kept from them, have not survived.[1] Steger made no mention of this part of her life in the Guthrie tapes. It must have been a very painful episode which she tried to put out of her mind. The one clue to Steger's whereabouts was a handwritten note on the documents relating to her father's estate, which stated: "Mrs Winifred Steger, last known address Morven."[2]

Morven township had been built on what was known then as Saddlers Waterhole on a hole in the Hamburg Creek.To the north and north west

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[1] Winifred Barker, personal interview, 9 January 1996.

[2] General Report in the Matter of the Goods of Wilfred Oaten late of Goombungee, 22 January, 1918, from the file held by the Public Trustee of Queensland. Ref. L033.

of the town was plain country, to the south sandalwood, ooline[3] and mulga country, some of it scrub and inclined to be hilly...

A one-line telegraph line had been put through in 1880, going through Morven and on to Charleville. A police station had been built, staffed by two constables. Most of the properties were called runs, smaller ones selections. Cobb and Co passenger coaches were also running at this time, coming from Mitchell and Roma in the east through Morven and on to Charleville and places beyond.

There were a lot of Aborigines camped below the town. They got their water from the dam on the edge of town. In 1887 the railway line reached Morven from Brisbane on its way to Charleville. Sometime later the [Cobb and Co] coaches stopped running.

From time to time horse races were held in Morven and dances held in the hotels...

In 1898 there was trouble with travelling Chinese giving the Aborigines opium. This caused them to get what was known as opium sickness (*Zin Zow*)...

There were two Chinaman gardens on the edge of the dam. Getting water from the dam to water their vegetables, carrying it in kerosene tins on a pole across their shoulders and using a watering can to spray their plants.

In 1912 there was a lot of prickly pear in this area and gangs of Chinese were employed to poison it with what was known as a pear spear, or to

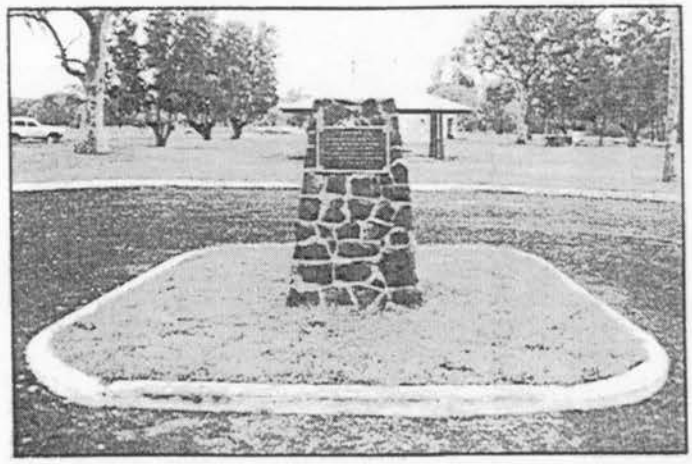
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[3] A rare tree commonly known as Ooline (*Cadelia Pentastylis*). It is said to be a remnant of rain forests of a previous age. The trees often have black orchids on them.

cut, stack and burn it...

> Morven was a very big trucking centre for sheep, cattle and horses on the railway, as four stock routes met here and most stock was trucked east to Toowoomba and Brisbane. Sheep and cattle mainly to meat works, and horses, some of which were sold to the Indian Army. In those years a lot of people were passing through Morven going to towns and stations further out.[4]

Morven was first settled in the 1850s when pioneers followed in the footsteps of the explorers: Mitchell in 1845, Kennedy in 1847-48 and Landborough in 1862.



The cairn commemorates Major Thomas Mitchell's naming of the Maranoa River, 1846. The town of Mitchell grew by its banks. Photograph: courtesy Travel Action.

> The first settlers seemed to have followed reports of good land available made by Mitchell and they came up from the south along the river systems of the Balonne, Maranoa and Warrego to explore for themselves and settle.[5]

These early settlers endured the floods of 1864 and the disastrous drought of

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[4] A.R. (Bob) Johnson, letter to the author, n.d., 1996.

[5] Morven Historical Museum Inc, *Morven and District, 100 years: 1887-1997* (Morven: 1987) 7.

1866-1868 which caused many of them to surrender their land.



Map showing coaching routes from Toowoomba to Morven and Mitchell and further north. Courtesy Travel Action.

> There was no way to move stock, as lack of feed and water was universal and the stock routes were bare and of course there was no railway to bring in fodder and water or take stock out. It was a very hard life in the west, particularly for the first twenty years before the railway came.
>
> Everything had to be carted by bullock waggon from the nearest rail head at Ipswich... A houswife had to... make her own... everything from the clothes she and her family wore, to the soap to wash them... her own candles, keep a few chooks, milk a pet goat, teach her own children... all amenities far away and medical help non-existent. However, some families held on, survived and prospered.(*Morven*,7)

As the land around was being taken up by selectors, a small community sprang up which was to become the town of Morven. Mr and Mrs Corbett opened a store and hotel called the Victoria Downs Hotel, on the station of the same name. By 1880 the town had been surveyed and named after a place in Aberdeen Shire in Scotland. A government dam was built with a Chinaman's Garden beside it and another garden further down Hamburg Creek.

In 1887, when the school was built there were four hotels in town, the last one being the Royal Mail Hotel, which was opposite the railway station. Beyond Morven the west was being opened up. The town "serviced the passing traveller as well as the growing rural community." (*Morven*, 10)

Winifred's first job could have been on one of the outlying properties where she would have been hard to trace. She may have had the job organised before she left home. But it seems likely that at some stage she came into town and worked at one of the hotels. With the number of drovers, shearers and farm workers passing backwards and forwards, there would have been a constant demand for reliable domestic help. Women working in hotels and boarding houses were better off than those in private service. The latter were usually relegated to the kitchen where they ate their solitary meals. The stations were isolated and the domestic worker had little chance of getting to town. Life was equally hard for the station-owner's wife but she had more status, as well as the company of her husband and children. In a hotel or boarding house the work was just as arduous but there was a constant stream of visitors and, in addition to wages and her keep, a woman had a chance of earning tips. Also, being in constant contact with men she had more chance of finding a husband, at a time when women in Australia were still outnumbered by men.

From her writings it is obvious that Steger was familiar with hotel work. Grace Vance, the protagonist of "Grace Vance: Convict"[6], worked in a hotel in outback Queensland. Steger described it as a rough place run by a man who took down the

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[6] Unpublished MS in the Mortlock Library, State Library of South Australia.

itinerant workers and "always milked them down to their last penny, sometimes even to their horse and saddle." Grace Vance

> instituted a new usage. When a lad would hand me his cheque, if he was staying for a few days, I asked permission to hold back a little from his change, so that when he left he would not be penniless... I pasted up notices in the card room that all betting must be limited to five pounds - no larger gambling allowed. There were quite a few arguments about that, but I explained that the police had threatened to close the place down unless my requests were complied with. They thought the matter over, realised that the next place they could get a drink was some sixty miles away, so resolved to do their big betting completely off the premises. Oh yes, there were a couple of other small notices tacked up in the bedrooms, such as "Spurs not to be worn in bed" and "No Spitting in the rooms." Also, a notice on the verandah that "All fighting be done at the back of the stables."
>
> I think the first three months... was the hardest. The men, if they wanted accommodation, had to see things my way. But they soon began to realise that I was acting entirely in their best interests. I gave them well cooked food, clean beds and always, if they had paid by cheque, money to leave with and a parcel of food for the track. Any men with bad hangovers, I helped to recover with hot coffee or saline drinks.
>
> I ran no Sunday School for them, as they had at first complained, but tried to let them leave me no worse than they had come. I fed their dogs... because men in drink are apt to forget their hungry animals. Yes, I took a pride in my job and the men respected me for it... "The boys were sayin' the other night as they hopes you stay put here... reckon they never had things so good."
>
> To me that rough praise fully compensated for the labour and trouble

involved. Yes, as far as that was concerned - but that was only appertaining to the outer me. There was another me that was apt to creep out in the long nights and again, the feeling of utter loneliness. Here I was, a middle-aged woman, who had never really lived the normal happy life of other women. For me there was no strong shoulder to cry on, or smile up at; no child would ever claim me as its mother; no relation to claim as kindred - when I cried, I cried alone. This trying to help these bush boys - what did it avail the real me? I might leave here and be forgotten in a week. They say that every heart knows its own bitterness - I knew mine. ("Grace Vance:Convict", 101-102)

This was written from experience by a woman who had known loneliness.

Then there was Sally in "The Golden Chariot"[7] who runs away from a drunken father.

The evening star was sinking in the western sky - a still night breeze rattled the tins on the flat and still the girl stood immobile. At last, with a strangled sob, she said in a low voice of utter anguish, "Oh, I cannot; I'm still young; I'm buried alive. I've stood all I can. He doesn't need me, only to work for his drinking money. I'm going, and now death would be better... than to live here any longer - Heavenly Father, if you really are up there - if you do care about miserable girls - then, Oh! watch out for me this night." So saying she turned and almost running threaded her way through the mullock heaps and yawning holes till gradually darkness threw its soft blanket upon her, and she could be seen no more. (2)

Like Steger, Sally had a long walk without food or water before she found a haven in a rough slab and corrugated-iron general store, with a shanty attached, which was known as "The Brigalows".

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[7] Unpublished MS in the Mortlock Library, State Library of South Australia.

> The shanty verandah was jammed tight with drinkers and not all using glasses, for the supply of these dainty utensils had run out and tin mugs, small basins and anything else that could be utilised was in use. The overflow of drinkers from the small tight bar was both merry and orderly. (41)

This was not the usual shanty where men were taken down by the publican, but a well run establishment owned by the Clancys, a childless couple. The customers were drovers and miners who had come in for a local race meeting. The Aboriginal women who were working in the kitchen had absconded and Sally took it upon herself to clean up the kitchen and wash the dishes. Mrs Clancy was overjoyed and gave her a five pound note. Later she was shown to a room that was only a small enclosure on the end of the verandah.

> Sally stood for a minute looking at the clean little bed with its white sheets. The white cover under the candle. The door with a key on the inside. Her thoughts as she lay between the cool sheets that night were chaotic. (26)

To Steger a room to herself and a bed with sheets would have been a luxury. Sally described the Clancys as

> the best and kindest people she had ever known... Some folks are apt to scorn those who sell liquor... yet not all publicans are the same... The owners of "The Brigalows" were known both up and down the track for their genuine help and hospitality.(27)

There are other aspects of the life of a woman working in a hotel which Steger explored in both these novels, the type of things which must have happened to her. One was the predatory male who had no respect for women so that a woman needed to be constantly on her guard. In "Grace Vance: Convict" a stranger rode in.

> He was truculent, filthy mouthed and boisterous. I politely asked him to moderate his language. His reply was to call me a string of filthy names

and make a movement as thought to strike me... the usual men were down in the horse-yard breaking in a colt. With a sudden movement I had him around the neck and the next his head struck the edge of the bar with tremendous force. I thought I had killed him, but a bucket of water from the horse trough brought him around. He scrambled up, looking rather dazed, walked around and disappeared. (106)

Sally had a similar encounter at "The Brigalows" when Tom Baxter boasted to his mates that he would kiss her and tried to do so by force. She

bent down and seized young Baxter in her arms and tossed him flying through the open kitchen door to lodge with a wrenching smash out in the yard. A couple of others who had been watching Baxter's antics looked awestruck... and retired thoughtfully. (44)

Grace Vance also had a suitor who, while criticising the way she ran the hotel, offered to marry her. Grace, having overheard his remarks about her work, took her revenge.

"I cut your potatoes down Mr Flannigan because I heard you running down both me and the way I run the Shanty... so I took it out on you with potatoes." Mick Flannigan apologised but got in deeper when he said that "It's not fitting for females to run drinking houses." (134) When he finally proposed Grace was touched.

This man was in earnest... he really wanted me... oh, the heart swelling feeling of being "wanted". Well, why not? I had nothing against him... To have someone to confide in - to care for - well, why not?

The power a man has when he speaks tenderly to a woman is beyond comprehension. It's not force that turns a girl into forbidden worlds; it's the lowered, tender pleading voice of the man that saps away all common sense and resistance. Mike Flannigan never knew how close he was to winning; then in one thoughtless sentence, he lost. As I stood, my brain urging consent, he said thoughtfully. "And being the age you are

we shall not be pestered with a lot of brats getting under our feet."

That did it. He had insulted my dream children - the children I would never have, but the dear ones who might have been. (136)

And so Grace Vance, despite her loneliness, refused to compromise, because she knew that the marriage would not be a success, that Flannigan was more interested in taking over the hotel than in making her happy. She needed someone to care for her and he was not the man.

Despite the company of the other people at the hotel, and the constant stream of men coming into the hotel with their stories and their troubles, Steger was lonely. She had her independence but she had lost her home and her children, and it was only natural that once the full realisation of what she had done hit her she was filled with bitterness and regrets.

2 January 1911: For once I know the date. I managed to get a notebook and a pencil and now I can write. It's been a long while since I've put pencil to paper. The urge to scribble left me but now it's coming back.

Sometimes I have no idea of the date or the day of the month. I go into the bar and look at the calendar. Or I ask one of the men. Sometimes they look at me as if I'm daft. But the days go by so quickly and there's always so much to do that I just fall into bed exhausted.

Yet I can never go back. Not after what happened. Sometimes I cry and it helps, but it won't change things or bring back my children. Today, a glorious day, Mrs Dawkins told me to stay in bed. She brought me a cup of tea and some toast and honey. She said, "You've earned a rest." It's true. I was run off my feet over Christmas, so many men came in for a week, men without homes or families.

The luxury of lying back in clean white sheets and a soft pillow filled with feathers, white curtains at the window and a view from the back of the hotel across the acacias to the distant mountains. In the morning the trees are festooned with green and red parrots like exotic blossoms and I close my eyes and imagine that I am in Arabia. Then at night the birds squabble and squeak as they fight for a place on a branch. I have to laugh watching them... not that I get much time to stop and stare. I like to look across to the mountains. It's a long way off. Too far to walk.



The Chimneys and Marlong Arch, Mount Moffat, 200 km from Mitchell. Photograph: Travel Action.

I like to imagine that I'm there all by myself in a little white tent. No beds to make, no sheets to wash, no washing up, no cooking or cleaning. Just me sitting there quietly with a pencil and a piece of paper writing stories for myself. I am the queen of the mountain, with kangaroos and possums as my subjects. I live on nuts and berries and drink from the waterfall

that flows down the mountain side like a fine veil, crystal drops dancing in the sunlight as it splashes against the side of the cliff.

2 February1911: For the first time this morning I didn't cry when I woke up. I feel as if part of me is healing. I am tired - so tired. So much washing to do here at the hotel. My hands are red raw by the end of the day. I rub mutton fat and sugar into them. And my legs ache - the veins. Some days I am so tired that all I want to do is to lie down with my legs wrapped in wet towels. Yet I found myself singing the other day - a silly song that the men were singing in the bar called "Waltzing Matilda." Someone came in with an accordion and played all night. It was like a party. Even though I had been up since dawn I joined in. I don't drink, but there were some sore heads in the morning. Rusty, the rouse-about, hosed down the verandah, but the smell of vomit! Still, it was good for business. Mrs Dawkins gave me an extra pound and a box of handkies as a Christmas present. And some of the men gave me tips. I'm saving money. I won't have to stay here for ever.

30 March 1911. Nights here are strangely quiet once the drovers have left. I think of the nights as velvet. The days are like gauze with a fine film of dust that shimmers in the heat. The sun sets very quickly. The birds quieten down and the night noises take over. A horse whinnies, an owl hoots and sometimes I hear the beating of its wings as it swoops through the air to seize a mouse. Then there are the dingoes that howl to the moon. Everything is white in the moonlight and the stars disappear. I try to pretend that it's snowing outside so that I can snuggle under the sheet and get back to sleep. The air is so hot, without a whisper of a breeze - except the mossies fanning the air. I tried sleeping under a net but I found I couldn't breathe and even so one found it couldn't live without me and had a fine feed. I was covered in red welts when I woke.

Now I burn cow-dung in an empty jam tin - it keeps them away. It keeps the men away too. Sometimes my hair reeks of it when I go into the bar. But I don't care. I've no time for men. They want to dance with me, ask me to go for a walk. But I know where that will lead. I don't want to get caught again. Still, they're good to me. I got so many tips over Christmas and one man, Paddy the men call him, he's Irish, gave me a piece of opal potch - or that's what he called it. You can see the fire in it if you turn it to the light. He said it wasn't worth much - I put it in the tin box under my bed. I want to get my money in the bank. I've saved almost fifty pounds and I'm frightened someone will steal it.

1 August 1912: Sometimes I write a letter to my children but I never hear back. The first time I wrote the page was wet with tears. I didn't write again for a long while after that - I don't want them to forget me. I wonder if they ever see my letters. Sometimes I think I might just as well walk to the creek and put a letter in an empty lemonade bottle, seal it with a marble, pull the wire tight around the neck and toss it in when the water's high. A fanciful thought. I don't think Hamburg Creek meets up with Oakey Creek. It would be funny if it did and the lemonade bottle bobbed up in our back-paddock at Evergreen.

15 November 1912: It's my birthday.I don't know why I remember that. No one else ever did, except Aunt Liddy. She made me a cake once with eleven candles on it. That was when they were living with us. I never had another cake. I wonder where she is now. She was kind to me. But Uncle Bill kept us apart. She told me she wanted to come when Charles was born but he wouldn't let her. She was there when Winnie was born.

I wrote a letter to little Winnie to let her know that I still love her. I wrote to Peter on his birthday too. I sent him a copy of Mark Twain *that one of the men left in the bar. But that was three months ago and no*

word. I keep hoping. Charles was so angry with me for leaving... I can't understand why. It's not as if he ever loved me. Once I thought he did. It was just because I was lonely. I was weak and foolish. I needed someone. When he took me in his arms and said he loved me, I believed him.

Whenever anyone comes this way from the Downs I ask about the family, hoping for some news. I've heard nothing since I left. I'd just like to know that my children are alive and well, especially my darling Peter. He was always my favourite. He used to put his arms around me and hug me. Little Winnie was too young to remember me. And she had her grandmother - that hausfrau. How she hated me because I was British. Fred and Jack, I wonder how they turned out. Jack was a bit too much like his father. Sometimes I wonder if they'll walk into the bar one day and I won't know them.

10 July 1913: I dreamed of home last night. That I walked across the cornfield and in the backdoor. The family were seated around the long bark table - Vader Karl at one end and Mutter Barbara at the other. He had his stockwhip by his plate so that he could lash out if anyone spoke out of turn. His gun was in the corner by the door. There were fourteen places set. As I stood there I was conscious of heads turning and fourteen pairs of eyes staring at me. I was hungry and there was an enormous loaf of black bread on the table. I leaned forward to take a slice but Vader Karl said, "Nein. We have fourteen mouths to feed already. In this house you have to earn your brod."

I wanted to explain that I was expecting a child - Charles' child, but then I woke and found that I was crying.

I never wanted to be like Mutter Barbara. Twelve children and one that

died. She wanted me to be the same. She hated me from the first. Blamed me for what I did to her son. It was what he did to me. Dear God, my life is such a mess!

1 September 1913: There's no meaning in my life. Every morning I get up at five o'clock to light the fire. I carry cups of tea to all the rooms, listen to men grunting and breaking wind, smell their foul breath from drinking too much, dodge their hands when they try to drag me down on to the bed. I've had enough of men to last me for life.

I'm saving a little money. Perhaps one day I can escape.

24 December 1914: I washed up for fifty today. So many men came in for Christmas. They slept out in the yard, on the verandah, every room was full. Yesterday the cook had a fight with Ma Dawkins and left on the train. She promised me another pound a week if I can manage until they get another cook. I've never cooked for so many before. I was up to my neck in flour, and the heat from the stove. It's hard not to let the meat spoil. Someone said it was 140 degrees. I had to scrape the maggots off the mutton before I cooked it yesterday.

It's a luxury to go to bed at night. Clean white sheets and a soft pillow filled with down and a clean woollen blanket - when I think of the cornsacks we used at Evergreen. And no husband to come home drunk and drag at me and call me a slut when I pulled away. Once he pushed me out of bed. I slept on the floor that night. I think it was then I made up my mind to escape. I didn't want to face up to another child. Not in that place, with a man who hated me.

Sometime in 1915, Winifred started a relationship with an Indian hawker, Ally Ackba Nuby, who delivered vegetables from Mungallala, a neighbouring town.

10 March 1915: There's a hawker who calls here, an Indian. His name is Ali. He comes into the kitchen and I make him a cup of tea. I bought a dress length from him to make myself a new dress. It's sprigged muslin. Ma Dawkins showed me how to use the treadle machine. I patch the sheets and do the mending. Sometimes I do little jobs for the men - sew on a button, turn a collar, patch a pair of pants. They pay me for it. I'm saving some money. There's nothing to spend it on here.

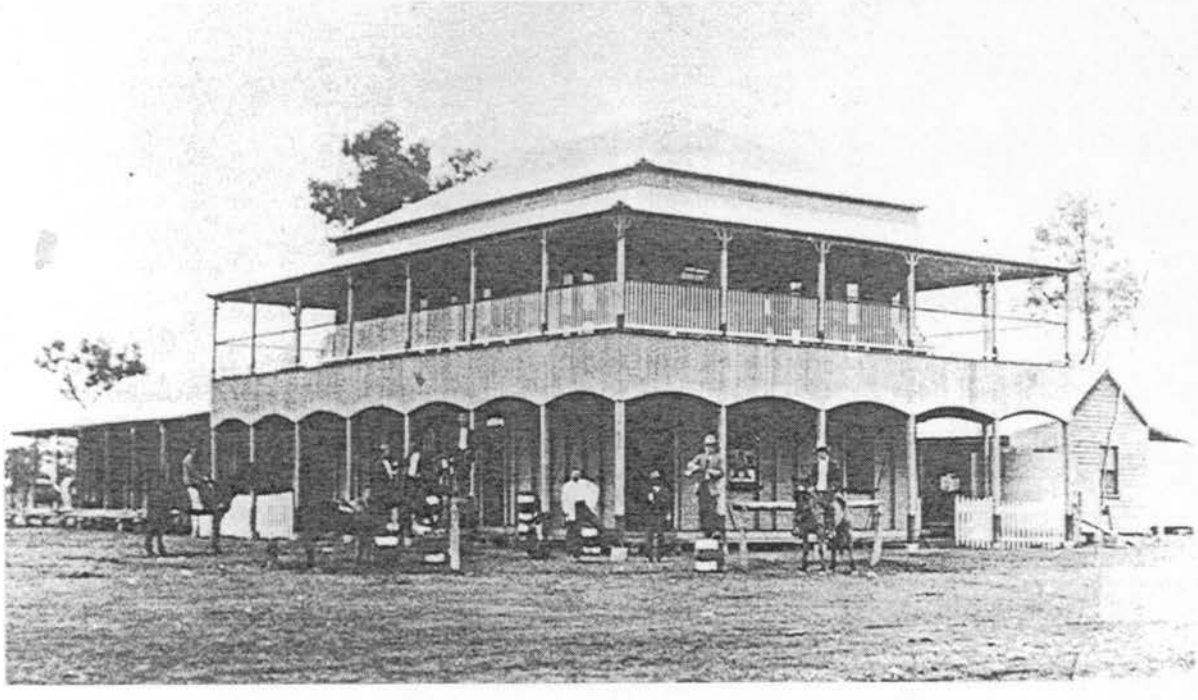
11 March 1915: Ali came again today.He has the most beautiful brown eyes and white teeth. He calls me mem-sahib and treats me with respect. He gave me a length of hair ribbon to match the dimity. He speaks English but with an accent - not like Vader Karl with his thick guttural voice, but in a soft lilting tone. He talked about his home in India and his little mother and his brothers and sisters. I had tears in my eyes listening to him. He doesn't go into the bar with the other men.

I watch him sometimes from my bedroom window. He is a Moslem. He prays, kneeling and prostrating himself on the ground. He always comes to the tap in the yard to wash himself first.

Sometimes he wears a turban and baggy pants. He looks different from the drovers in their mole-skin pants and shirts. Some of them don't like him and call him "that bloody Afghan". He is gentle looking and smells of curries and spices. He delivers vegetables in his horse and cart, and spices and fancy goods. He keeps these in a tin trunk. When he stops outside the hotel he lets down the side of the cart and everything is on display. There is a smell of sandalwood, and spices. Often I smell it in the air long after he has gone, and imagine I am in Arabia with date palms and desert sands with a full moon turning the sand to silver. I pretend I'm waiting for a lover, listening for the sound of horse's hooves.

Next time Ali comes I'll buy myself a lace camisole. He has such pretty things. I bought a little red wooden-top to send to Peter for his birthday. He would be eleven now. I didn't hear back so I don't know whether he got it or not. There is no news. It's like another life. It's strange to think that on the other side of the world there's a war on. Some of the men have gone off to fight the Germans. There used to be a German man who came into the bar. He stopped coming after a fight out the back. I don't know why there has to be a war. The men argue about it and about conscription. Sometimes they get heated and Ma Dawkins says, "Calm down, boys. You're not in the trenches here. How about a song?" and gets out the accordion.

I hope the war ends before my boys are old enough to fight. They're half-German. They could be fighting cousins they'd never met. Ali doesn't know I'm married. He thinks I'm a widow and my husband was killed in the war.



Tryconnel Hotel, Mungallala c.1914. Photograph: Stafford Burey

Chapter Six

THE INDIAN CONNECTION: 1915-1925

When Winifred Steger fell in love with Ali Ackba Nuby she could not have forseen that she would be drawn into another world, another culture that was completely alien from anything she had known before. And that for the next fourteen years she would submerge herself in a new identity as a Moslem wife, whilst at the same time achieving high public status in the Moslem world.

Steger had spent nine years as part of the German community in Evergreen, but because of her British background had never been accepted by the strait-laced Lutheran women of her husband's family. The Steger family was part of a small ethnic group seeking to maintain their cultural identity in an alien country, but because they were of ~~Anglo-Saxon~~ European stock they did not suffer the stigma of ~~the~~/~~Asian~~ some other workers who were imported into Australia as indentured labourers.

Many were brought from Melanesian Islands in the Pacific to work in sugar and cotton plantations. Chinese also arrived in large numbers which led to

> riots on the remote Palmer Goldfields in 1877. The immediate response was the passage of Queensland legislation restricting Chinese access to those goldfield areas which had already been worked over by Europeans.
>
> Chinese were also active as ringbarkers in clearing land for settlement and began to develop the banana trade in north Queensland. Other smaller Asian minorities were specialising in trades which often brought them into competition with the majority, such as transportation with the Afghan-camel drivers and hawking with Lebanese and Indians.[1]

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[1] James Jupp, *Immigration* (Sydney University Press in association with Oxford University Press, 1991) 44-45

It was with the Afghan community that Winifred Steger became associated. Afghan was a general term applied to all Indian workers. Any Asian man who wore baggy pants, a long flowing white shirt and waistcoat and turban was referred to as an Afghan, irrespective of his place of birth. Winifred Steger said that you could tell whether a man came from Afghanistan or India by the way he tied his turban. The former wore a pointed turban and the latter a flat one.[2] The majority were Moslems.

> These Indian people can be traced back to the two largest tribal groups in Afghanistan - the Pathans and the Baluchis. The Pathans were the Pashto-speaking tribal group in the Pathan region in Afghanistan. The Baluchi people came from the province of Baluchistan. Parts of both Baluchistan and the Pathan region today are included in Pakistan.
>
> In Afghanistan both the Pathan and Baluchi people were nomadic traders who often used camels to cart their loads of merchandise through the valleys and mountains of their arid country into British-north-west India via the Khyber Pass and Peshawar, and down into the Punjab region.
>
> People from the colonies of the British Empire were allowed to migrate from one colony to another. Thus, men of Afghan and Indian orgin from north-east India obtained travelling papers to come to Australia to work with camels.[3]

The men came under a three-year work permit obtained in British India and at the end of that period were expected to return to their own country, though they could apply for a re-entry permit once they had returned home. The one concession they received as British subjects was exemption from the dictation test.

> This test required any intending immigrant to pass a written test, originally in "any European language". However, the language did not

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[2] Guthrie tapes, n.d.

[3] James Jupp, ed., *The Australian People: an encyclopedia of the Nation, its People and their origins* (North Ryde: A & R, 1988) 261.

need to be one understood by the immigrant. (Jupp, *Immigration*, 49)

Many of the Indian migrants had already served as mercenaries with the British Army on the north-west front in India and had a knowledge of English. They were referred to as *sepoys*. When work became available in Australia they seized on it as a way to make money. The first three camel-handlers arrived in Melbourne in 1860 with a shipment of twenty-four camels, purchased by George Landells to accompany Burke and Wills on their ill fated attempt to cross Australia. Two of the men, Dost Mahomed and Esan Khan, were Moslems. The other, Samla, was a Hindu who left the expedition early because the only food available, apart from bread, was beef which his religion forbade him to eat. The two Moslems survived the harsh conditions but later Dost Mahomed was severely injured by a camel and lost the use of his arm and "at twenty-three was disabled for life... Disillusioned, depressed and ill [he] was never to see his country again... He was buried at Menindie, the first Afghan to lie at rest in Australian soil."[4]

> Other expeditions followed which demonstrated the worth of camels. They thrived on salt water and saline herbage too salty for other animals... [they could work] for eight hours a day... in a working life of 20-25 years. Where horses and bullocks cut a good road to pieces, the camels' immense feet consolidated it and they did not have to be shod or cued.[5]

Soon pastoralists were importing camels to carry goods from the railheads to the outlying cattle stations, with the camel-men under contract. But after a strike on 25 January 1870, many of the camel-men set up their own independent carrying companies, importing and breeding their own camels.

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[4] Christine Stevens, *Tin Mosques & Ghantowns: A History of Afghan Cameldrivers in Australia*,(South Melbourne:Oxford University Press)32-33. 1989

[5] R.J.Anderson, *Solid Town: the History of Port Augusta*, (Port Augusta: the author, 1988) 58. All future references are to this edition and are in parenthesis.

> But the arrival of so many foreign workers created problems which arose from having come to Australia under contract to fellow countrymen, such as Meer Dost and Abdul Wade... upon arriving they were told there was no work for them. Many were not even given the money to pay their fare back to India, as originally promised... Gunny Khan accused Abdul Wade of deceiving his fellow country men and of being the cause of their destitute state. According to Khan Abdul Wade had induced the camel-men to lend him money to buy camels in return for three years employment as carriers.[6]

Many of the men were destitute until country further north was opened up and gold was discovered in the west, when more carrying work became available.

> A network of camel-strings worked by Afghans and some Aboriginal helpers continued to expand from the 1870s. One route veered west of Lake Eyre to Oodnadatta, over the border to Alice Springs and beyond into the Northern Territory, going as far north as Newcastle Waters, the other track went past Lake Eyre, along the Birdsville Track, over the borders into Queensland into the Channel Country. (Jupp, *Immigration*, 49)

By 1880 there was considerable agitation about the number of coloured workers coming into Australia. This culminated in the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901. There were two main reasons for the implementation of the Act: one was the desire to maintain a pure European racial strain in Australia, the other was the fear that Asian workers would take jobs away from Europeans.

> The Australian Workers' Union excluded non-Europeans from membership, whilst insisting on union membership before employment could be gained in shearing, the sugar mills, mining and other industries

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[6] Pamela Rajkowski, *In the Tracks of the Camelmen: Outback Australia's Most Exotic Pioneers* (Sydney: A & R, 1987) 69-70.

which it organised. (Jupp,*Immigration*, 45-46)

It was a very restrictive policy. "Aliens could not own land, were barred from public sector employment and were often denied hawking or other licenses." (Jupp, *Immigration*, 50)

Entry into Australia became increasingly difficult, demonstrated by a request on 9 October 1900 for permission for three Afghans from Karachi to be admitted to Australia to work for J.W.Manfield, importer and general storekeeper, of South Australia. The Collector of Customs replied on 4 December 1900 in a letter headed "Aliens", which stated that "unless the Afghans in question are British subjects they cannot be permitted to land in this colony." A copy of the letter was sent to the Visa Surveyor "for his information." Mr Manfield subsequently withdrew his application and apologised, because he could not guarantee that the applicants were British subjects, even though they were coming from India. Few official records were kept of these early Moslems, unless they had outstayed the period of their work permit when they were described as "wanted" and their photographs circulated so that they could be apprehended and deported.[7]

Because of the restrictions on their occupations, "Indians... were frequently itinerant hawkers or country storekeepers. They were widely scattered in rural areas," (Jupp, *Immigration*, 51) including Morven. It is likely that the fresh vegetables, spices and fancy goods these storekeepers and hawkers sold only brought in a subsistence living. But the men were thrifty and did not drink. Many would have been sending money home to their families. Others were saving up for their fare home or to make the pilgrimage to Mecca. The men did not trust banks and hid their money. In the 1930s, a hawker called Ali Khan operated in the Singleton area, calling on outback farms in a horse and cart. Bill Abbington, the store manager of Heads Grocery store in Singleton, befriended him, writing his letters and arranging bank drafts when he sent money home. Ali Khan had told him that he had hidden his money behind a loose board in his cart.

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[7] From documents held in the Australian Archives, South Australia.

He had made a will and wanted the balance of the money sent home when he died. The old man died while Bill Abbington was on holidays and his horse and cart was sent to Swan, Murray & Hain in Maitland to be auctioned. Abbington managed to stop the auction and recovered about two hundred and fifty pounds in notes which he sent to Ali Khan's family in India.[8]

Steger told a similar story.

> Ali got a letter from a man who had gone home for a visit some six months ago. The letter said he was very ill and felt that he would never live to see Australia again. He wrote of money left behind in his hut and asked Ali to get it and have a bank send it to India, so that he could give it to his only son.

It was almost a two-day journey to where this man had "his lonely one-roomed hut... the place where he had camped between trips for twenty odd years."

> It was dim inside because the hut was without a window, the farther end of the room seemed to be a rubbish dump about four or five feet wide... Ali grabbing a shovel started to remove the heap... and in a few minutes had uncovered a small stack of baking-powder tins which he laid carefully to one side... then told me to get a sugar-bag from the bed-roll. When I spread it for him he opened the tins and poured their contents on the bag; they had been packed with sovereigns and half-sovereigns. We counted them: there were six hundred sovereigns and five hundred and forty half-sovereigns. This was before the Government called in the gold. Sher Mohammed, like the others, had not trusted the banks; he had another reason for hoarding and that was the higher rate of exchange for gold in India. (*Always Bells*, 46-47)

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[8] Philip Lindsay, personal interview, 30 October 1996.

Many of the camel-men ended up very well off because real money could be made delivering equipment and supplies to the outback stations and returning with a backloading of wool. In the early years cartage was worth about twenty pounds a ton.

> With two 150 lb bales balanced on each side of his hump, 600 lb in all - uncomplainingly [the camel] does the work of a small truck, plodding along day after day for hundreds of miles to the railhead.[9]

A good camel was worth from twenty pounds up to one hundred pounds for a good riding camel. A man needed quite a few hundred pounds to set himself up with a string of ten or twenty camels, but once so equipped he had a chance to become rich.

Ali Ackba Nuby was one of three brothers operating as a storekeeper and hawker in the Morven area at various times. He used to deliver vegetables to the Tryconnel Hotel at Mungallala, a town about halfway between Mitchell and Morven. It was probably while working here that Steger and he met.

Just as Steger invented the story of her childhood in China in *Always Bells*, she also invented the story of their meeting and marriage. She wrote that at nineteen she was working as a clerk in a silk warehouse in Peking when she met a young Indian who had come to China to buy silks.

> He was one of the nicest-looking young men I have ever seen. Mostly he wore suits of cream or dark grey, his shirts were usually cream silk, and high on his gold-fringed turban he wore the Moslem crest in the shape of a large silver brooch.

He invited her to lunch where he talked politics.

> I nodded and hoped he would not question me on the subject, for it had already slipped away like water off a duck's back. I had been too busy

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[9] Ernestine Hill, "Blessed Beast of Allah: the Camel in the Outback", *Advertiser* (South Australia), 17 September 1932, 70.

watching and loving the gold fringe that lay so tenderly across his left shoulder, and how I longed to touch it - to straighten, to feel its soft comfort. Just to touch it.

Ah, those gold-fringed turbans so dear to my memory. When he slept his last sleep I tied a green and gold-fringed turban on the post at the edge of his grave for the northern sun to shine upon and the winds to play with. But the winds through the years have been rough, and the shreds of the last turban are blown no one knows where. The turban was his headstone, for such is the Moslem custom...

Somehow, after that, he was often sitting on the edge of my desk. Life for me became a wonderful, beautiful thing. His smile lit my days, the weeks flew into months, and then he asked me to marry him (*Always Bells*, 24)

Steger does not elaborate on the wedding except to say it was "a quiet wedding and a week or so later we sailed for Bombay, on our way to visit Ali's parents, who were merchants a few miles from Lahore." (*Always Bells*, 25) To Steger's chagrin they rejected her because she was not a Moslem and her husband had been betrothed at birth to Feroza, a baby cousin. But Ali had been educated at Oxford University in England and refused to be forced into an arranged marriage. When his mother suggested that he take Feroza as his second wife, Steger, fearing that "the thought of two wives appealed to him... bailed Ali up under the big peepul tree, for there was no privacy in the house". She told him that she had no "intention of becoming number two... I have lived alone before, without you, and I can do it again." (*Always Bells*, 26) Ali replied, "But, Curly-Nob... I have no intention of marrying Feroza or any other woman while I have you." As a result he was disowned by his father. "The family were not exactly poor, and Ali would have, by right, a considerable inheritance." (*Always Bells*, 26)

Because of the break with his family the couple decided to migrate to

Queensland where Ali's brother, Sherali, lived with his wife. They remained with Sherali's brother for a time, working in exchange for their keep: Ali "delivering goods to outlying places" (*Always Bells*, 28) and Winifred helping in the store and doing the book-keeping. When Sherali's wife became jealous of Winifred the young couple decided to leave. Ali had heard "that the Northern Territory is the best place for us; they say camel-men are needed there to carry rations and loading to the outback stations." (*Always Bells*, 29)

This is a very romantic tale of Steger's marriage but it is a lie. At nineteen she was already married to Charles Steger and had a family. But it is possible that she worked in a store run by one of the Nuby brothers.

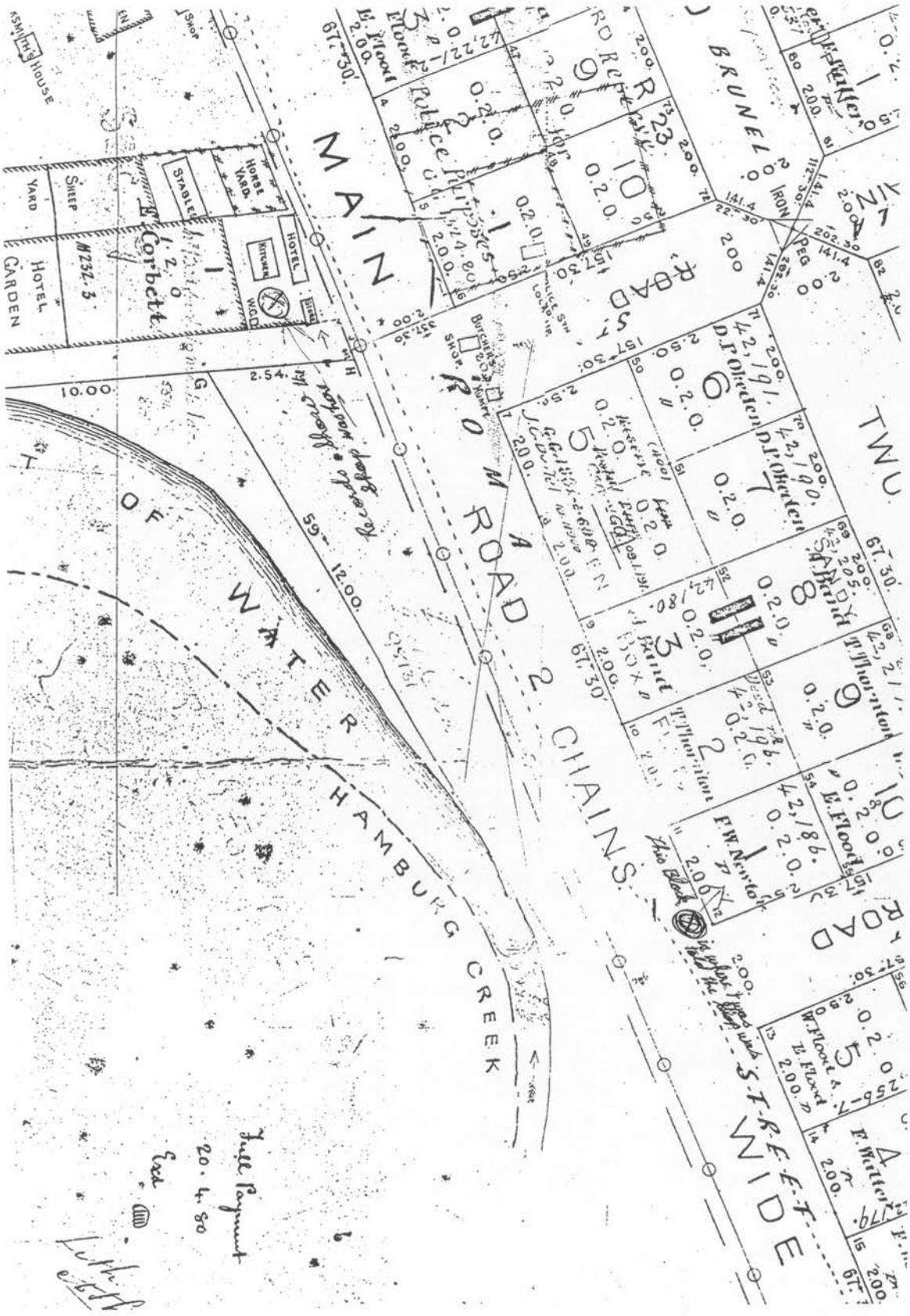
Records in the Morven Historical Society Museum show that as early as 1884 a Llaneal Nuby was looking after a store for Elizabeth Corbett, who also owned the Victoria Downs Hotel. Eighteen years later, on 11 February 1902, Ali Ackba Nuby is listed as the storekeeper. An entry of 5 April 1917, says that the Ali Ackba store is being run by Goolamon Nuby. The Historical Society records also show an Ayesha Nuby enrolled at the local school for one year. Her religion was shown as Moslem and her father was a storekeeper. She could have been the child of the brother Steger referred to as Sherali.

Until recently there were people alive in Morven who remembered Winifred Steger.

> The lady lived with an Indian by the name of Ali Ackba Nuby and they had a little boy. They had a tin shed and had groceries in it close down to the creek.

The shop was in a one-storey wooden structure that contained thirteen rooms and was roofed with galvanised iron. It was close to Hamburg Creek and was once a hotel. The Nubys used four of the rooms.

Map of Morven showing location of the Nuby Brothers' store: Courtesy Morven Historical Society.



Inside the shop there was

> a large tin of sultanas on one side of the door and currants on the other side and Ali Ackba and his son used to eat them by the handful.

> Ali Ackba Nuby lived in Mungallala at times... the next little town to here on the road to Roma and Brisbane... He used to take vegetables to Mungallala and sell them there... he sometimes wore a turban.

> My mother used to tell me of Indian hawkers in the area... They used to carry flowers around in buckets and go from house to house and sell them. [10].

> The Indians made the flowers from tissue paper, they were different colours. There were no flowers growing here except paper daisies [11] that came up after rain. They were white and yellow. There was wattle[12] also. It flowered in the spring, the flowers were quite nice.[13]

Probably we will never know the true story of this period of Winifred Steger's life, but it appears that she fell in love with Ali Ackba Nuby and went to live with him sometime between 1915 and 1916. She was an independent woman without family ties and not subject to the same strictures which normally applied to women who were brought up in the Moslem faith.

> A number of formalities preceded a Moslem marriage, but the girl was never a direct party to these, nor did the marriage need her consent. The preliminary arrangements were made by the respective mothers; the suitor approached the girl's father... Finally a contract was drawn up affirming the girl's age... and her virginity, as well as the purchase price that the man paid his bride, and which remained hers in the event of a

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[10] Ethel Johnson, Letter to the author, 25 February 1996.
[11] *Helichrysum bracteatum.*
[12] *Acacia aneura.*
[13] Ethel Johnson, telephone interview, 10 October 1996.

divorce.[14]

A wedding was a special occasion and celebrated with feasting and dancing. But, except for Ali's brothers, who may not have lived there the whole time, there was no Moslem community in the Morven area and no mosque, which was a feature of the outback Ghantowns where a number of Moslems congregated together. In addition, Winifred Steger was thirty-three when she took up with Ali Ackba Nuby and knew that she could not legally marry as she was not divorced. Even if she had been free it was unlikely that Ali Ackba Nuby would have married her had he known she had deserted her husband and four children. This was unacceptable behaviour in any society.

It is possible that Ali Ackba already had a wife and family in India. The Islamic code permitted a man to take up to four wives as long as he treated them all equally. Many took another wife in Australia because they were unable to bring their wives with them. Often they deserted their Australian families when they returned to India.

Whatever the circumstances, it is likely that Winifred Steger and Ali Ackba Nuby began to cohabit with a minimum of formality.

> *She was in the kitchen up to her arms in dirty water washing up, her hair, like rats tails, falling into her eyes, and her face running with sweat. It was the end of shearing and the hotel was full. Though she could hear laughing and shouting in the bar she had made up her mind not to go in. Her ankles were swollen, her head ached and she felt ready to drop. For a week she had been run off her feet. "I can't go on like this," she told Mrs Dawkins. "I have to get to bed." She could tell Mrs Dawkins was angry because she had replied sharply, "Oh, well then I'll have to manage on my own, I expect."*

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[14] Desmond Stewart, *Early Islam, Great Ages of Man :A History of Early Islam* (United States: Time Inc,1975) 92.

When Winifred heard the sound of a horse and cart she knew it must be Ali and wondered why he was coming to the hotel at that late hour. He had already been once that day with the vegetables. She finished the last of the pots and dried her hands. There was a piece of cracked mirror above the sink and she glanced in it. I look a fright, she thought, and took a comb out of her pocket and combed her hair, wiped her face on her apron, then grabbed the bottle of lemon essence from the pantry and dabbed a few drops on her forehead to hide the smell of sweat. She turned as his shadow fell on the kitchen wall and saw that his arms were filled with yellow wattle. She took the flowers and put them in a jug of water on the kitchen table. She was conscious that he had come closer and turned to face him. He leaned forward and took off her apron and hung it on the nail behind the door, then held out his hand,"Come," he said.

"I'm too tired to go for a walk."

"That is not what I mean. Come with me and be my wife."

"But I can't... I can't walk out just like that. Who will do the work?"

"Mrs Dawkins will find someone else. I have watched. You have worked too hard. You must come to me, my beloved. I have waited a long time." He folded her in his arms and she began to weep. "Come," he said, and led her out the door. "I will fetch your things tomorrow."

She hesitated, glancing back at the wattle that glowed on the table beside the lamp, hardly knowing what was happening. In her heart she knew that she wanted to be with him. He saw her gazing at the flowers and took her hand and put it to his lips. "I will give you flowers that you have never dreamed of, your days will be filled with perfume and at night your body will flower like the Rose of Sharon."

Later, she was to remember the night breeze, cool on her skin, and the clip-clop of the horse's hooves on the hard baked road. The moon had not yet risen and the air was full of the fragrance of acacia in bloom.

She had nodded off and woke with a start when he stopped the horse outside his hut. He got out and and lifted her down, holding her close for a few seconds. She could feel her heart beating faster as he released her. He spread a blanket in front of his door and said, "Wait here, beloved, while I tend to my horse." Then he unhooked the hurricane lamp from the side of the cart and hung it on a nail outside the hut.

He unsaddled the horse and led it into a shed and returned holding a tin trunk which he opened, spreading the contents on the blanket. There was a pair of white baggy pants and a black waistcoat embroidered with red and yellow flowers. "My wedding garments," he said. And then he handed her a dress of soft white silk. "But first we must bathe and then pray to Allah to bless our union." He led her to a tap at the door and filled a tin dish with water. "Cleanse yourself so that we come before Allah with pure hearts and clean bodies." She went into the hut and in the darkness sponged her body with the cool water then pulled the dress over her head, marvelling at the softness of the silk against her naked body. There was a smell of sandalwood and the air smelt fresh and clean. For a while she stood there listening to the noises of the night - a frog croaked in the creek, a cricket chirped and a bird called as it flew overhead. The enormity of what she had done overcame her. She had run away with a man she hardly knew, a man who might be unkind to her, a man who might not really love her. She went to the door of the hut. Ali was standing there beside the lamp looking into a mirror, as he wound a length of white silk around his head to form a turban. He had changed into his wedding garments and she thought how handsome he looked. He moved towards her, holding out a string of gold coins, which he fastened around her neck. Then he took a length of shimmering cloth, embroidered with gold thread and draped it over her head and shoulders, covering her face. "My bride," he whispered, "my little bride. You are more beautiful than life itself." He took her by the right hand

and led her to the blanket which he had decorated with sprays of wattle blossom. Around it he had placed sticks of lighted incense, one at each corner and wisps of smoke curled lazily upward. The breeze had dropped and the air was still and warm, and fragrant with sandalwood and acacia blossom.

Ali spread his prayer rug beside the blanket, the lamp hanging on the wall cast a circle of light and beyond it stretched the bush, dark and mysterious. Winifred had the feeling that they were the only two people in the whole world. "First we must pray to Allah to bless our union." He stood beside her and with his arms raised above his head said, "Allahu akbar!"[15] *Then he gently pulled her down until she knelt beside him. She watched as he prostrated himself, calling aloud in words she did not understand. When he had finished he turned to her and took her by the hand. "Allah, I ask you to bless our union. I thank thee for giving me this woman for my own. I will care for her and will guide her in the true faith so that she becomes a true daughter of Islam." He rose and extinguished the lamp. In the darkness she sensed him moving towards her.* "Salam alaikum,"[16] *he whispered and lifted her veil.*

She was to remember that night with wonder. She had given birth to four children and had been married for seven years, yet had never experienced such tenderness. For the first time in her life she felt herself truly loved.

The moon rose some time in the night and she woke and raised herself on her elbow to gaze at Ali, her husband. He lay beside her sleeping gently, moonlight shining on his face which was framed with acacia blossom. She bent and kissed him softly on the forehead and he stirred

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[15] Allah is most great.
[16] Peace be with you.

in his sleep but did not wake. Suddenly she was afraid. She knew that if she ever lost him it would be more than she could bear. "Allah," she whispered, "keep my Ali safe."

For Steger life with Ali was a tranquil existence, for the first time in her life she was living with someone who loved her and whom she loved in return.

Ali is always up before dawn to recite his prayers as the sun rises, spreading his prayer rug on the damp grass and turning to face Mecca. I lie in bed half asleep, dozing, until I notice that Ali is not beside me. Then I hear the sound of splashing and know that he is washing himself before he begins to pray. He has a beautful voice and when he prays aloud it sounds like music with the birds singing in the background. The only word I understand is Allah. But Ali is teaching me the prayers. Men and women do not pray together and I find it strange, the women are supposed to pray quietly inside the house. When I asked Ali about this he said, "Men must find their own path to Allah, they must not be distracted by woman's beauty. They must come before God with a pure heart. If we lived in my country you would stay behind the curtain with the other women. Only the other women and your husband would see your face. If you went to the market you would wear the chador."
"But I wouldn't like that," I replied.
"You would have no choice. It is a matter of honour. A woman must be modest and obedient to her husband. It is the will of Allah. "

I am learning to be a Moslem. Ali says that Islam is the true path. That if we lead a good life we will find paradise. But if we are bad then we go to hell. He doesn't like the way Australian men behave - drinking and swearing. He said that it offends Allah. He told me the story of how Mahommed had a vision and saw: "the form of a man with feet astride the horizon, saying, "O Mohammed! thou are the apostle of God and I

am Gabriel," (Stewart, p.15) *and of his wife, Khadija, who told him that he had been visited by an angel. "Islam owes a lot to women," Ali said.*

I learned to recite the First Pillar of Islam in Arabic and one night we knelt together facing Mecca while I said the words Ali had taught me : "I testify La ilaha illa Allah; Mahommmed rasul Allah."[17] *I found it very easy to become a Moslem, though if I had not married a Moslem I would probably still be as I was before, no religion except my own instincts which tell me that there is an eternal being who cares for us and who has created a beautiful world for us to live in. There is ugliness too and this is something I have never learned to understand. All I learned was acceptance. Life is to be lived and there is no use complaining. But with the help of Ali I have learned to put a face, a name, to a God I can believe in.*

Ali had been very moved the night I became a Moslem. He had prayed for a long time, sometimes in a loud voice, calling on Allah and at other times silently. When my knees began to ache from kneeling and my back from prostrating myself I stood and very quietly went back into the hut and prepared myself for bed. I woke to find myself in his arms and when I put my hand to his face I found it wet with tears.
"Why are you crying?" I asked?
"Because now we are truly blessed. You have become a daughter of Islam and my heart is overflowing with joy."
I think it was that night our son was conceived.

Winifred Steger was to have three children in the next six years. Joseph Deen, who became known as Yusef Deen, was born at "River View", Milton on 6 November 1916. On the birth certificate the mother's address is given as Mungallala. Her next two children were born in New South Wales at Boggabri Hospital. They were Rhamat

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[17] There is no God but Allah, and Mahommed is His Prophet.

Hannaf (12 May 1920) and Pansy (5 April 1922). There are no details of the father on the birth certificates.The children were all registered under the name of Steger. Ali Ackba Nuby's name does not appear in any of the written records about Indians or Afghans in Australia. The only references to him are as a storekeeper and hawker in the Morven Historical Society's archives; the recollections of an old resident of Morven, now dead; and a photograph of Ali Ackba standing outside the Tryconnel Hotel c.1914.

The relationship between Winifred and Ali ~~was short-lived~~ lasted ten years. Pansy Steger has only one memory of her father.

> I remember playing with a top on a table. I must have fallen off. I remember being in a little bed and my father gave me a necklace of sovereigns. The sad part about it is that it is only a shadowy recollection.[18]

She was probably three years old at the time, which would make the year 1925.

Even though Winifred and Ali Akba Nuby were never legally married, he was the only one of her husbands whom she publicly acknowledged. He became the Ali Mahomet, the husband with whom she purported to go to Mecca in *Always Bells*. She also hid the fact that she had had four children by Charles Steger. They were not mentioned on the birth certificates of her later children who were also given the name of Steger. Neither did their names appear on her death certificate, or on her headstone at Enfield Cemetery in South Australia. It was as if they had never existed. She changed the spelling of her name to Stegar and conferred it on Ali Ackba Nuby. He became Ali Ackba Mohamet Stegar ("pronounced Staygar") in an interview published in the *Australian Women's Weekly* on 24 September 1969. Stegar had to keep up the pretence because she had lied about her marriage in *Always Bells*, in interviews with the media, and to her friends and associates, probably because she wanted to protect the three children who were born out of wedlock. By the time the article in the *Australian Women's Weekly* appeared both Charles Steger and Ali Ackba Nuby were dead. Her children, who knew the truth, were hardly likely to contradict their mother in public, so

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[18] Pansy Steger, telephone interview, 4 April 1992.

that her secret was safe, though some of the descendents of Charles Steger were angry because they felt Winifred had abused their family name by giving it to Ali Ackba Nuby.[19]

Whatever the motives for her actions, Steger appears to have been genuinely in love with Ali Ackba Nuby; they had ten happy years together and then it was over. She never stopped grieving for him. In 1979, when she was ninety-seven, Stella Guthrie asked her where she was living when she met Ali Ackba. Steger told her that it was when he bought camels and started out on camels. "And of course I had to go with him. I never let him go without me." Guthrie remarked how extraordinary it was to think back, which prompted the following outburst.

> Think back? Think back kills you half the time. It's not the pleasure that people seem to think it is. It hurts... everything hurts, even the sight of a broken canteloupe lying on the ground hurts. Everything hurts. It's remembrance. I know when he died, I died too.[20]

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[19] Marjory Engler, personal interview, 9 January 1996.
[20] Guthrie tapes.

Chapter Seven

LIFE IN GHANTOWN

15 November 1916: Today is my birthday and I'm so happy. I have a son, Joseph, though Ali calls him Yusef. He was born at River View, Milton which is a very comfortable place and I had a doctor and midwife. Ali is so thoughtful, the dear man. He had just got home when the first pains started. I was lying down under a tree because it was too hot inside and the flies were bothering me. I think if it had rained things might have been easier. I've felt this pregnancy worse than any of the others. When Ali saw me he became alarmed and bundled me into the horse and cart. He had terrible trouble getting me in. I'd put on so much weight I was like a baby elephant - not that I've ever seen one in the flesh. But finally, after pushing and shoving he managed to get me on to the seat and then he whipped up the poor horse. I'm sure its hooves were striking sparks off the road. The pains were coming very strong but I didn't want to alarm Ali. I think the jolting did me good because the baby came quite quickly soon after I arrived.

I'll never forget Ali's face when they called him into the room and showed him his little son. The midwife said, "He's the spitting image of you, Mr Nuby." Ali took the tiny bundle in his arms and his eyes were full of tears. "Allah, be praised," he said and then he bent over and kissed me. The nurse took little Joseph and said, "Your wife is very tired, she needs to rest. Go now. You can come back tomorrow." I watched him from the window. He took his prayer mat from the cart and unrolled it and began to pray. I closed my eyes and lay back exhausted. When I woke and looked out the window the night had closed in and it was quite dark, though I could see flashes of blue sheet lightning above the mountains and hear the faint rumble of thunder.

Birth certificate, Joseph Deen Steger

4108412

BIRTH

BIRTH in the District of MARANOA *in the State of Queensland,*
1916 *Registered by Alfred Bernard Hansen, District Registrar*

Marginal notes (if any)	Column	
	1 Number	*13726* *10331*
	CHILD	
	2 When and where born	*6th November 1916* *River View, Mitchell*
	3 Name	*Joseph Deen*
	4 Sex	*Male*
	PARENTS Father -	
	5 1. Name and surname of father	-
	2. Profession, trade or occupation	-
	3. Age	-
	4. Birthplace	-
	6 Issue - living and deceased	Living years Deceased
	Mother -	
	7 1. Name and maiden surname of mother	*Winifred Jane STEGER formerly Oaten*
	2. Age	*35 years*
	3. Birthplace	*London, Middlesex, England*
	INFORMATION	
	8 Signature, description, and residence of informant	Certified in writing by *Winifred Jane Steger, Mother,* *Mungallala*
	WITNESS	
	9 1. Medical attendant	*Dr. Clarkson*
	2. Nurse	*Nurse Barden*
	3. Other witness to birth	
	REGISTRAR	
	10 1. Signature of Registrar	*A.B. Hansen*
	2. Date	*23rd November 1916*
	3. Place of registration	*Roma*
	11 Name, added after registration of birth	

CAUTION:- Whosoever shall unlawfully alter any Certified Copy of an entry in any Register of Births, Marriages, or Deaths, whether by erasure, obliteration, removal, addition, or otherwise is guilty of a CRIME, and is liable to the punishment by law provided in that behalf. (Vide Sections 486 and 488 of the "Criminal Code.")

I, Alistair Douglas Dodds , Acting Registrar-General,
do hereby certify that the above is a true copy of an entry in a register kept in the General Registry Office, Brisbane.

Extracted on 6 February 1996

Acting Registrar-General

Exd. by

N.B. Not Valid Unless Bearing the Authorised Seal and Signature of the Registrar-General

15 December 1916. It is so hot in Morven. Every day I hear thunder and see lightning in the distance but nothing happens. I'm tired, even though I had three weeks at River View. Ali came to see me every day and brought me dates and figs. It was heaven just to lie back with nothing to do but feed little Joseph. It's different from when I had my other children. I was expected to get up and help with the milking as if nothing had happened.

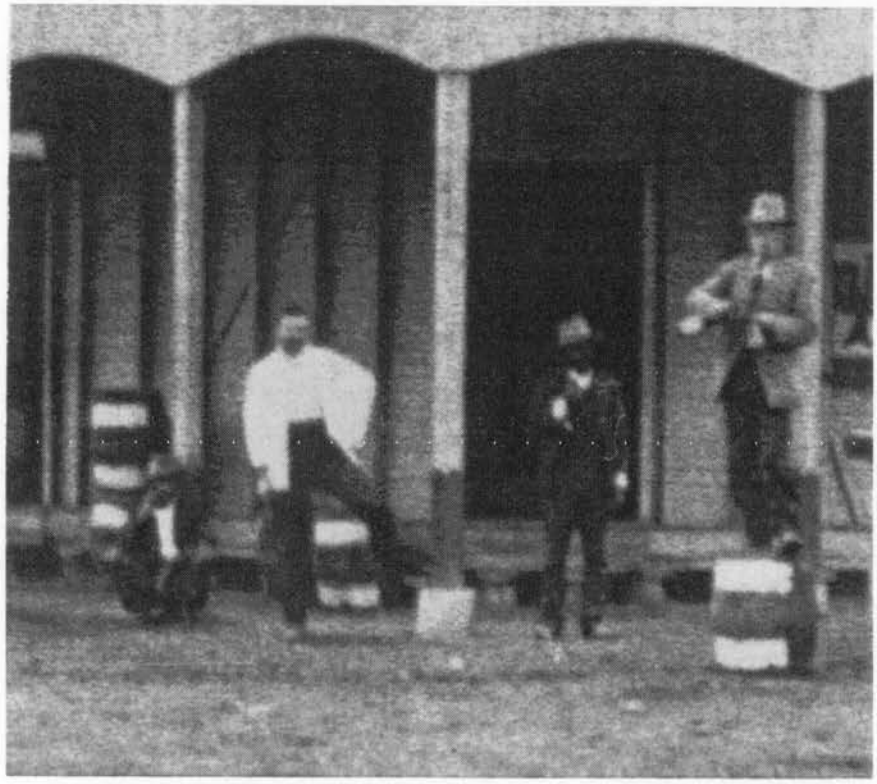
Joseph is a beautiful child. He has a stock of dark hair and his father's eyes and such beautiful little brown hands. He curls them around my fingers. He's so strong and healthy. I hope he grows up like his father. I'm so happy. I love Ali so much it frightens me.

1 March 1919. I've been so busy helping in the shop and looking after little Joseph. I've written nothing for a long time. He's such a lively child. I have to be careful he doesn't wander and fall in the creek. He's such an adventurous little boy. I can't take my eyes off him for a second. Sometimes Ali takes him when he delivers the vegetables. Ali's mother sent him a little suit of clothes from India. The jacket is black velvet with mirrors sewn on to it and red and yellow flowers. And there's a pair of baggy silk pants and a little embroidered cap to match the jacket. Ali's sister made it. Josephs talks a lot. He prattles away in a mixture of English and Arabic. Ali is teaching him the prayers. But he wants him to be good at English so that he gets on in the world.

We're leaving Morven today. There is not enough to support us all at the shop now that Goolamon is back from India. And Ali wants to save up and get his own camel-team. He and Joseph will work together once Joseph is old enough.

The family moved first to north-west New South Wales where there was work

carrying to the outlying stations. Here Steger had two more children, both born in Boggabri Hospital. The family probably left the area about 1924 and went to Marree where Ali was hoping to find work with camels. Conditions had changed. Motor transport had taken over from the hawker with his horse and cart and had also become "an increasing threat to camels." The Bourke Carrying Co, which was managed by Abdul Wade, had been dissolved in the 1920s. Many of the men went to Marree where there was still work on the Birdsville and Oodnadatta tracks.[1]



Ali Ackba Nuby (centre) standing in doorway of Tryconnel Hotel, Mungallala, c.1914. Photograph: Stafford Burey.

1 September 1923: Joseph is very excited at the thought of going in a train. I heard him say to Rhamat, "You've got to be very careful not to

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[1] Litchfield, Lois, *Marree and the Tracks Beyond in Black and White: A History of the Birdsville Track* (Marree: the author, 1983) 7.

lean out the window because if you fall out you'll be a deader. The train will run over you and cut you into little bits."



Pansy Steger, the entertainer, c.1960. Photograph: the *Australian Women's Weekly*.



Winifred Steger with her grand-daughter Cherie, daughter of Raymond (Rhamat) Steger, Darwin c.1958. Photograph: Mary Steger.

His little brother began to cry and then Pansy too. I was beside myself and gave Joseph a smack and then they were all crying. I felt like sitting down and crying myself. But then I saw the funny side and began to laugh. I laughed till I cried and the children stopped crying and were looking at me so strangely. They'd never seen me like this before. I'm full of nerves and edgy. I feel apprehensive about the future and how we'll manage. At least in the shop we had a roof over our heads and food to eat, even if we were crowded and Goolamon sometimes made me feel in the way, and there was no privacy.

I'm not sure how we'll manage on the train. It's a long way to Adelaide and from there to Hergott Springs. There's a lot of camel-men there and Ali says he's sure to find work. It won't be easy travelling with three children. They can sleep on the floor. We've got our prayer rugs. We're going to Adelaide first. Ali wants to visit the mosque and we can stay in one of the tenaments in Gilbert Lane. They belong to the mosque, so it won't cost anything. We're trying to save our money to buy some camels.



The mosque off Gilbert Street, Adelaide, built between 1881 and the early 1890s with money donated by camel-men. The four minarets were added later. The mosque is still in use. Photograph: the author.

The trip to Hergott Springs was Steger's first taste of the real outback. Years later she wrote:

> We joined the fortnightly train with its terminus in Oodnadatta. The journey took three days and we carried our own food with us; in those days restaurant cars were unknown. Sometimes when the train changed crews we had time to get out and wander around. Once we were able to have a wash in warm, bubbling spring water. At the small lonely sidings the natives would gather to watch the train and the passengers would toss what food and fruit they could spare. The scenery was monotonous, not even a fence, just the empty stony plains right to the horizon. Towards evening we saw herds of kangaroo and watched swift emus racing the train.
>
> In later years I travelled on this line a number of times, and always as evening came I felt a deep sense of the strangeness and loneliness of the country. It was at that time of the day when the shadows chase daylight that I first saw the edge of arid, desolate Lake Eyre. A weird place by night, it made me think of a meeting-place for lost spirits.
>
> An old Territorian who was in our carriage spat through the open window and, looking towards us grinned, "That out there is the cemetery of the wild dogs - dingoes. When a dog gets too old to travel and to hunt he comes here and digs a hole in the soft sand, a hole big enough to climb into. After a last look round at the world he is leaving, he settles into the hole and slowly the sand seeps round him till he's covered, and that's the end."
>
> Many years after I stood on the shores of the Dead Sea, and of the two lonely places I still feel that Lake Eyre is the sadder and lonelier. I have odd ideas at times. I can believe the earth is alive, a huge living creature of moods like us small fleas who dwell on it.

> On that first journey... we went only as far as Hergott Springs, its offical name was Marree, but it was not until the First World War that this name became generally used.(*Always Bells*, 30-31)

Marree lies within the Kujani Tribal Territory. It was first penetrated by Europeans in 1840, when E.J. Eyre, accompanied by an Aborigine, rode north leaving the rest of his party at Depot Head near Spencer Gulf. He located "precarious waters in the area." Pastoralists followed and "scattered spring water in creek beds made it possible for a patch-work of runs to extend north as far as Wilpena and Arrona by 1851 and throughout the Flinders by 1857." (Litchfield,1) Favourable seasons prevailed in the early 1860s when most of the country was covered with saltbush which proved to be good stockfeed. Among the pastoralists were Thomas Elder, in partnership with Samuel Stuckey and his brother. Because the seasons had been good the Stuckeys, like many other pastoralists, expanded their runs and overstocked. Things went well until the drought of 1864. The Stuckeys had 13,000 ewes.

> The seasons were so dry that we determined to kill the lambs in the hope of saving the ewes. We sold 1,000 very fine cattle on the Fortress Hill run recently purchased at 27/6d per head... In 1866 Stuckey did a muster of his cattle, out of 4,000 head only seventy survived.[2]

The situation became so bad that bullock waggons were unable to get through because the bullocks died. Horse teams were tried but the horses had to be spelled every few days and the waggons had to be overhauled each trip. The cost of cartage was forty pounds a ton. A substitute for bullocks and horses was needed, so Samuel Stuckey went to India to purchase camels. In January he landed at Port Augusta with 121 camels (3 had died on the voyage), among other livestock, and thirty-one Afghan camel-handlers. According to Stevens (24) the camel-handlers "were accorded no more documented detail, often less, than that extended to the camels they accompanied." They travelled

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[2] Stuckey, Samuel, "Reminiscences of Samuel Stuckey", unpublished MS, Mortlock Library, State Library of South Australia, 11.

in the holds with the camels and later were treated "as an extension of the camel-cargo, waiting on the wharves for their unloading and being housed in camel camps." (Stevens, 24) Many of the men remained in Australia and, after initially working for Elders, went into the cartage business on their own account. The camel-men established colonies at Broken Hill, Farina, Port Augusta West, Oodnadatta, Lyndhurst and Marree, close to the rail-heads from where they collected their freight. They grazed their camels on common land and paid the Goverment an agistment fee. Because

> the cameleers were constantly on the move and often seemed to belong to no particular place... it was difficult for officials to make accurate assessment of their numbers... Their names do not appear on electoral rolls as they were not granted citizenship. Compatriots at the camel camps and Ghantowns were wary of bureaucracy and often elusive.(Stevens, 24)

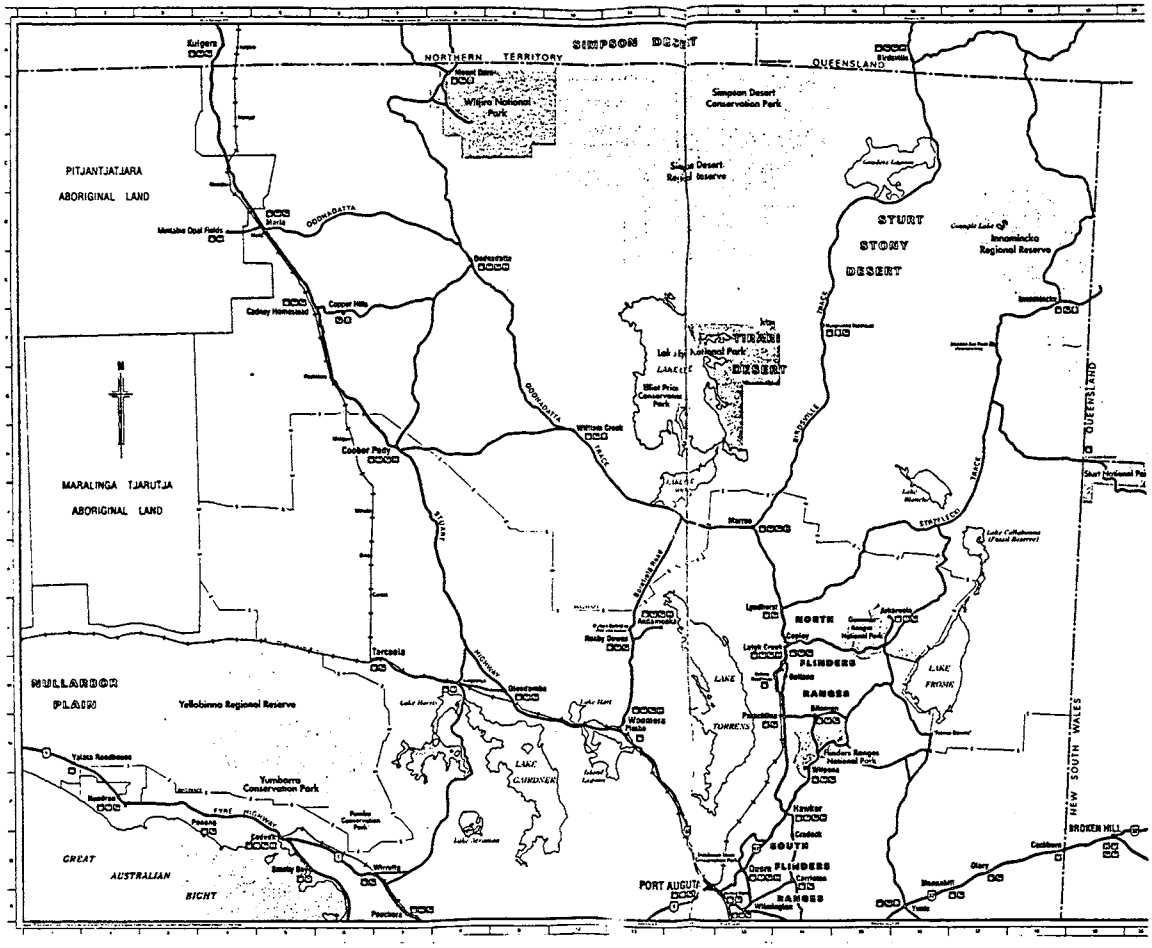
In 1860, agitation for a railway had begun because of the copper mines established in the Flinders Ranges, but no action was taken except the surveying of a series of small towns which were the site of wells. These followed the teamsters' tracks "up the Western plain as far as the Nuccaleena and Oratunga mines."(Litchfield,3)

By 1872 the Overland Telegraph Line was completed. The first repeater station north of Port Augusta was located at Beltana where a town was surveyed and another town took shape at Sliding Rock copper mine. As wheat farmers moved north land sales increased, with money flowing to the Government. This led to the passing of the Railway Bill in 1876, which allowed for a narrow gauge railway from Port Augusta to Government Gums which eventually became Farina. The line was intended to go through to Darwin. A town was also surveyed at Hergott Springs in October 1883. Hergott Springs was "the long established name for this important watering place and camp-site which marked the parting of the ways to the Northern Territory and Queensland." (Litchfield, 4)

The late 1890s was a period of prolonged drought. There was "widespread

devastation caused by rabbit plagues and over-stocking, hordes of dingoes that had multiplied on the rabbits and declining wool prices". (Litchfield, 5)

The previous optimism over what the country could produce, induced by good seasons and before the era of the rabbit, never returned. As Farina went into decline Hergott Springs took over the Birdsville Track.



Map showing the Oodnadatta and Birdsville Tracks. Courtesy Flinders Ranges & Outback of Australia Regional Tourist Assoc. Inc.

Birdsville, five miles north of the Queensland border on the Diamantina River, was 300 miles from Hergott Springs and 1100 miles from Brisbane. It was cheaper to ship goods up the Birdsville Track from South Australia than from Brisbane. Like many of the outback towns in Australia, Birdsville just grew. It was not surveyed until 1885. A letter written to the government by Robert Frew read:

> There are now two licensed Houses, three large stores, Custom's Office, and Mr Murray (inspector) has selected a site and let contracts for stone buildings for Police Barracks and Court House. There is also a blacksmith and other residents in the place. I have myself, during the last three months, imported goods for a Store to the value of 5000 pounds. (Litchfield, 6)

The main street was built wide enough to accommodate a mob of cattle being driven through and before Federation (1901) a toll of one shilling per head was levied, with a further duty on supplies crossing the border. Once a year the Birdsville Races were held and between four and five thousand people flocked to the town.[3] At the time all goods were coming from Farina, as the railways to Hergott Springs had not been built. But once this was completed the camel-men were quick to seize on the opportunity for cartage. "Freights from Hergott Springs to Birdsville were from nine pounds [to] ten pounds a ton." Competition among the Afghans had led to a reduction in the price "from an earlier twelve pounds a ton. At the time there were some 1500 camels quartered there, one Afghan possessing 800 of them." (Litchfield, 7)

This was the profitable business that Ali Ackba Nuby hoped to break into. Winifred wrote:

> When I saw it the place seemed split in two; on one side of the railway track stood the one hotel and store and a few houses and the school, the other side was where the camel-men and their families and native helpers lived. Beyond their homes, on the near horizon, was a thick

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[3] *Reader's Digest Guide to Australian Places* (Sydney: Reader's Digest, 1993) 527.

cluster of date-palms, and a short distance from that was the small mosque where the cameleers worshipped. It was a pleasant place among the date-palms, with water from a bore trickling about their roots. This small date farm was a government experiment.

Hergott Springs was kept on the map by the trucking of cattle here from outlying stations and by goods coming in for the same stations. The families of the camel-men lived in happy carefree comfort; their children, always neat and clean, crossed the line daily to the little school behind the main street...

We stayed a few days with one of the families till Ali heard that he could get work as a camel-driver at Birdsville... We were lent a pair of camels which would be collected at Birdsville and returned by a following team. Dear Ali, he seemed to wear a strong, sad air of seriousness; to him this was a great adventure, to set out almost alone, except for a woman who might make things even harder, on this trackless crossing, travelling with natives through unknown country. (*Always Bells*, 32)

This is a very idealised picture of Hergott Springs. The truth was that in these frontier towns there was real class distinction, with the Afghans living away from the European settlement and the Aborigines camped on the fringe. Apart from the xenophobic attitute of the European community, which considered the Afghans an inferior species of the human race, the Afghans needed to be close to their camels, and because they lived a nomadic life, travelling to wherever there was work, they rarely settled in one place. Their houses reflected this spirit of impermanence and were often only crude huts made of galvanised iron or whatever material they could scrounge.

Internal rooms were separated by pieces of hessian nailed to the wooden framework. An open fire was built among stones or bricks in one corner of the kitchen, with a brick chimney built above it, and over this fire

huge iron pots would be suspended. (Stevens, 224-245).

It was a hard life for the women, who were alone for weeks on end while their men were away on their long trips. The trip to Newcastle Waters took six months. But even when the men returned they socialised on their own.



The Mosque at Marree, South Australia c.1882. The pool in the foreground was used for ablutions before entering the Mosque to pray. Photograph: Mortlock Library, South Australia.



An Afghan camelman outside his home. Photograph: Mortlock Library, South Australia.

Often there was a favourite spot near Ghantown where a large fire would be lit regularly and the men would gather to pass the narghile (water-chilled smoking pipe), dance, argue or reminisce. Women were barred from these gatherings just as they were barred from any social gathering of men who were not within their immediate extended family units. (Stevens, 246)



Afghan men. Photograph: Mortlock Library, South Australia.



A group of Afghan children. Photograph: Mortlock Library, South Australia.

There was also no provision made for women to worship at the mosque, which was often just a crude brush shelter built near water so that the men could perform their ablutions before prayer. While the women did not have to wear the chador and were not in purdah, theirs was an isolated existence with only the other wives for company. It is little wonder that Steger, despite the hardships of the long camel-treks, preferred to travel with her husband, than remain isolated in Ghantown where she might be the only European woman.

> Many of the men married Aboriginal women. This was quite a common occurrence in towns like Oodnadatta. Nameth Khan, who married an Aboriginal woman who had been a Sunday school teacher at Hermansberg Mission near Alice Springs, settled with his wife at Oodnadatta. Nameth Khan left behind in Peshawar, a wife, two daughters and a son. This was also a common occurrence among the Afghans, as islamic law allows a Moslem to have more than one wife.[4]

According to Steger her first trip with camels was on the Birdsville Track, a risky venture with three young children, though by this time Joseph would have been old enough to help his father. And taken slowly, provided it had been a good season and at the right time of the year, the trip was not impossible. Almost seven years earlier, on 12 March 1916, when torrential rain had made it impassible for the horse and buggy mail to get through, Mr Jack Gaffney, proprietor of the Birdsville pub, bought a Ford car and set off from Glenelg in South Australia, with "its body bulging with five adults, three children and a mountain of luggage." It was a hazardous journey, there were no made roads and the terrain was not suited to motor vehicles.

> Beyond Hergott Springs the going became heavy through deep sand... When the sand eased for a time on the way to Coopers Creek it was replaced by rough stone-strewn land.

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[4] John Dallwitz and Daniel Fazio, *White to Black: Oodnadatta School 1892-1992* (Oodnadatta: Oodnadatta Aboriginal School, 1992) 4.

> The next day we encountered very bad country. Koppermanna sand-hills... most of which were sixty to seventy feet high, some being considerably higher with deep, precipitous drops... After a day's break the Gaffney party plunged head-on into the roughest country on the trip, which was completely trackless from Hergott Springs to Birdsville.
>
> From a deep bore at Mount Gason, water came out so hot that they used it for making tea. Then came miles of ironstone plains towards Goyder's Lagoon and beyond, the Diamantina River. In beautifully grassed country they were faced with floodwaters and had to follow a route close to what is known now as the "outside track". It took them over torturous, broken country toward Calamity Swamp, infested with flies and mosquitoes, and Crow's Nest where a severe dust storm wreaked havoc on their camp.

This was followed by the Coonchera sandhills which were worse that those at Kopperamanna and where they had to get a horse team from a nearby station to haul them out. They arrived at Birdsville after a 1200 km journey in an open car. (Litchfield, 54-55) In view of this trip it is likely that a family travelling the route on camels was not so unusual for the period.

How long the trip from Glenelg to Birdsville took by car the article does not say. In Steger's case the journey was accomplished in two weeks. Fully laden camels normally only travelled fifteen miles a day, with riding camels averaging twenty miles a day, if not more. This trip was Steger's first taste of the real outback of Australia. She described the terrain as trackless

> because most of it was over rolling sandhills; footprints of the morning might be completely covered by evening or even in an hour on a windy day. It was a dangerous crossing even for those who were used to it; of course we could have waited and crossed with one of the camel teams, but our money had run out and there was no team ready to leave at that

time...

All that day we travelled through the small gibber country, the rolling sands would come on the following days. Not a fence, house, or human anywhere, just treeless emptiness until towards sundown, when we reached a small fringe of stunted growth. I was so weary I was afraid of falling off my camel. The sun sank lower and lower, a cool breeze blew the fringes of Ali's turban, and then Ali stopped the camels, unsaddled them, and let them graze.

Ali built a small fire with the sticks we had carried with us, for we had been warned there was no wood along this part of the way. We had our meal and then, spreading our blankets, lay down to rest beneath the stars. The fire died, Ali slept; wild dingoes howled in the distance. In some strange way the night seemed holy. I felt at peace with myself and with my world. For the first time I was really alone with Ali, so far from all I had known and I was happy...

A fortnight later we rode into Birdsville on the Queensland border; we had come through safely, guided by odd empty jam or meat tins or sometimes by empty bottles. These rejects of travellers told us we were travelling where others had trod before. Just rubbish, but still doing a life-saving duty by being there. (Always Bells, 33)

A few days later Ali had been engaged as companion driver with a camel-team in charge of twenty camels.

It was a rough life, walking in the sun, heat and blinding dust but I did not let it worry me; I would brush the myriad flies from my eyes and face, and, meeting Ali's solicitous look I would smile; he would wink or smile in return. (*Always Bells*, 33)

Eventually they acquired their own camels "which Ali had been given in lieu of wages." Winifred helped by "rearing calves whose mothers had died or deserted them." (*Always Bells*, 33) Because "Ali did not wish to hurt the business of the other camel-drivers... he decided to leave the Queensland border country" (*Always Bells*, 34) and go to Oodnadatta.



Afghan men with camels. Photograph: Mortlock Library, South Australia.

> Six hundred long, dry, dusty miles to reach Oodnadatta; it was from there the real treking would begin. Having arrived there was no time to rest, we had our young camels to be broken in and branded, and saddles to make and repair. For a few days life was hectic, and then we had a week to get our breath before the fortnightly train from Adelaide arrived.
>
> We needed all our breath, for as the train steamed in this tiny oasis on the stony plains came to life and boiled with noise, bustle and confusion. Natives raced about in charge of numbers of loading camels and

sometimes there were hundreds of the brutes - snarling, grunting, and dribbling as they lumbered down to the bore or the yards, some to have fat and tar smeared on their mangy hides and some to be loaded for the road. (*Always Bells*,35)



A fully laden camel-train. Photograph: Mortlock Library, South Australia.

At the time Steger was living in Oodnadatta there were forty houses and a population of 100. But this was the European settlement. The estimate, including the Moslems and the Aborigines, was 250.[5] The Moslems lived in Ghantown with the Aboriginal camp alongside. There was little intercourse between the European settlement and the Afghans. In his memoirs of Oodnadatta, Cedric Gregory gives a lively picture of the town with its business and social activities, but only mentions the camel-men in passing: "North of this area was the Afghan camp where the Afghans...

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[5] Horrie Simpson, *Horrie Simpson's Oodnadatta*, John Dallwitz ed. (Oodnadatta: Oodnadatta progress Association) vii.

lived near their camel yards." [6]

The Europeans lived separate lives in which the Afghans had little or no part. Horrie Simpson also grew up in Oodnadatta but because he delivered meat to Ghantown for Westmacott's Butchery he was able to observe the life of the Moslems at close quarters. The meat for the Moslem community was specially killed by "Goolaman, a giant of man [who] performed the killing at sundown, praying as he did so, otherwise the Ghan population wouldn't buy the meat." The abbatoir was between Oodnadatta proper and the Afghan camp.

> Periodically the Ghans would put on a feast, each person in turn doing the honours. Extra goats would be killed for these feasts which would be held in a circular brush shed which was placed centrally in Ghantown. Often when I went down to get the orders I'd see the Ghans sitting in the shed smoking the bubble pipe, each one having a few draws before passing the pipe to the next recipient. For fun they would offer me a draw at the pipe. I refused, but dates, figs and nuts I would accept. (Simpson, 9)

Their women lived an isolated existence. They did not need to go to Wallis & Fogarty in the main part of town to shop because "Duraz and Sultan Mahomet both had small stores in Ghantown selling nuts, dried fruits and dress material beside the usual other merchandise." (Simpson, 9)

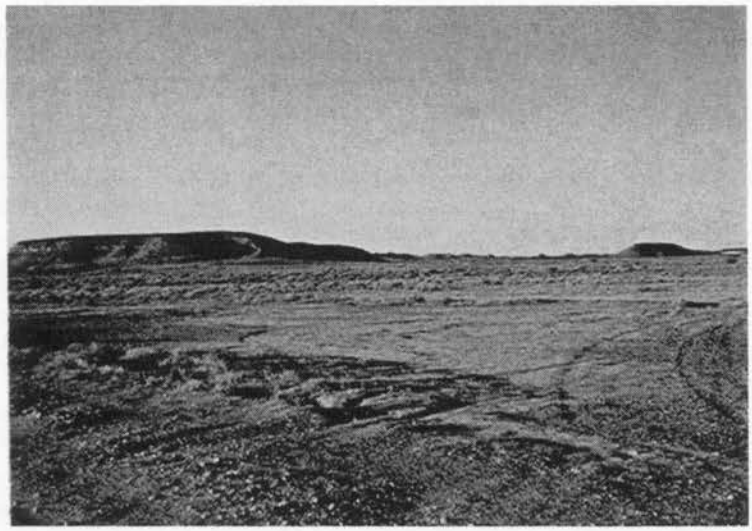
As a town Oodnadatta had little to commend it, being situated in the midst of a vast gibber plain. Gregory describes the gibbers as "heat and wind polished iron- stained smooth stones from small pebbles to large boulders [which] reflected much heat.(4) "It was shockingly hot in summer but in winter beautiful sunny days and cold nights. They

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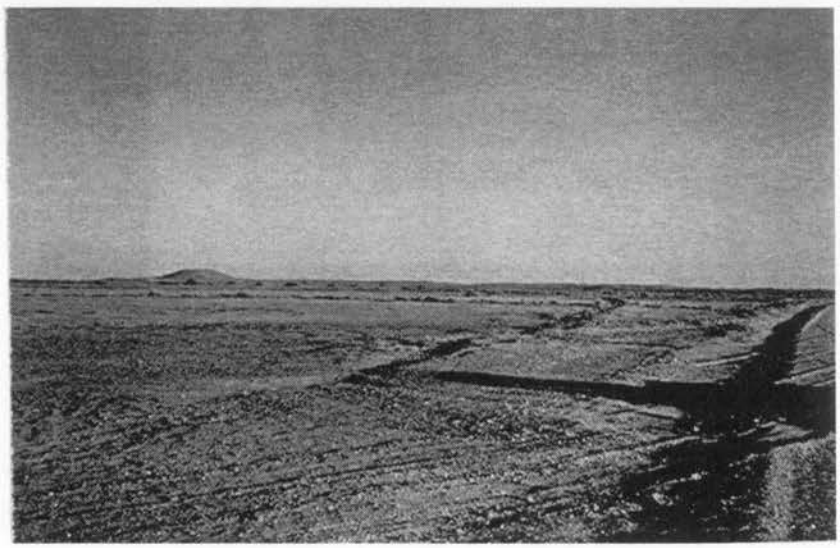
[6] Dr Cedric E. Gregory, *All Around the World in Eighty Years* (Toowoomba: the author, 1995) 4.

would put a dish of water out over night and in the morning it would be iced up."[7] It was

> not a frontier town, but really beyond the frontier. Oodnadatta received a mention in the Adelaide daily press almost every morning as the hottest town in the state. It was about 400 feet above sea level. (Gregory, 1)



Gibber plains, Oodnadatta. Photograph: the author.



Oodnadatta desert. Photograph: the author.

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[7] Maisie Mullane,telephone interview, 12 April 1993.

And yet, after rain, the desert would burst into flower. Horrie Simpson recalled driving the train through miles of Sturt Desert Pea. The conductor told him that the passengers would like him to stop the train as they wanted to get out.



Beginning of sand dunes, Oodnadatta. Photograph: the author.

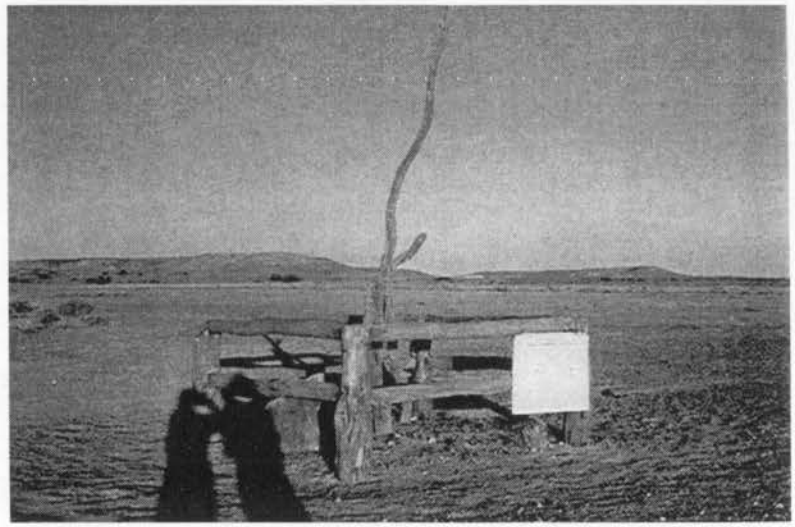
> He lost five or ten minutes before they came back again. The conductor said, "When you get to Alice Springs go and have a look." The refreshment car was decorated. There was so much Sturt Desert Pea you could hardly see anything else."[8]

Rain not only brought wild flowers but sometimes floods. About every seven years the Neales River would overflow into billabongs. "These held water for some years, sheltered from the sun's evaporation by gum trees along their banks." (Gregory, 8) One of these was called Hookey's Hole and in a good season Ned Chong cultivated a market garden and supplied vegetables to the town.

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[8] Horrie Simpson, personal interview, 2 March 1994.

Oodnadatta was never meant to be the terminus of the railway line. The grand plan was to match the Overland Telegraph Line, completed in 1872, and terminate the train at Darwin. At the time there was "widespread depression and drought and the extension of the northern line from Marree was made largely to provide work for hundreds of unemployed men." (Simpson, ix) The town of Oodnadatta came into existence in November 1889. The men building the north-south railway on the section of Warrina to Angle Pole had reached a point 688 miles from Adelaide when there was a change of government. There had been a bumper wheat crop down south and labour was scarce. The government decided that the men working on the railway would be of more use helping with the wheat harvest. Work on the line stopped at Angle Pole which became the terminus. At the same time the name was changed to Oodnadatta. The line to Oodnadatta was opened on 7 January 1891, after work on the railway buildings and water tank had been completed, and provision made for reversing engines.



Angle Pole, Oodnadatta. Terminus of the Great North Railway. Photograph: the author.

The town depended for its living on surrounding pastoral runs. Many of the stations kept a shack in Oodnadatta so that the stockmen would have somewhere to stay when they brought cattle to the railhead, or came in for business. There was a hotel and also a number of boarding houses which gave employment to the local women,

especially the girls leaving school.[9]

Life among the camels suited Winifred, it was a carefree existence and while her children were young she could travel with her husband. In an interview with Stella Guthrie, Steger was asked: "When you became a camel-driver's wife where were you living?" Her answer was:

> All over the territory. The camel people never settled anywhere. They just go on, backwards and forwards on their routes carrying food to the stations... It's not easy to find the camel trails... When you're travelling with your camels there's no one to talk to. Nothing to see but endless plains. Nothing to talk about. Just the plod, plod, plod of it. There's no adventure. I don't know how many years we spent... It would take a hundred thousand books to tell the story of the old cameleers and what they went through... It's a very hard life and they earned every shilling they got for it.[10]

When asked how the women fared with young children, she said: "We didn't travel all the time. We mostly had a base and when the children were too small we stayed behind in the base... we just fed our children and waited."

> Water and food had to be obtained on the way. We'd go into a station and you'd buy a big lump of meat and you'd wrap it in a bag and hang it on the trees at night and keep it fresh as long as you could. And when it wouldn't keep fresh any longer you salted it down. You made your bread in the shovel. Baked it on hot coals. We lived all the better for it.
>
> There were no wells up there at the time. You had to follow the line. The blacks would mostly find you a natural spring somewhere. They knew where water was and they would guide you. In fact the blacks were good

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[9] Hilda Doherty, telephone interview, 10 December 1994.
[10] Guthrie tapes.

to us. Yes, they were good to us.

At night they'd hobble the camels which could browse, eating grass and tree branches.

> You need to be careful not to overload them so they won't be worn out too soon. Sometimes they'd kill a camel. Young camel meat is very good and the milk from the camel for the babies... you could milk the camel. Milk is very rich, almost like cream.

In many ways it was a monotonous life.

> You get up early in the morning and blackfellows have got the fire ready and you have a bit of breakfast and the blackfellows run up the camels and put harness on them and then put on the loading which was thrown off the night before. And then we're off, each camel tied by the head to the next one's head in a long train, fifteen to twenty camels in one long line travelling along. It's like a train. Being Moslem we'd have to stop because of the midday prayers. There's the morning prayer at sunup, the midday prayer at dinnertime, the prayer late afternoon and one just before dark. And if we didn't have water we just got a clean piece of land clear of manure and rubbish, scraped it up neatly by hand into a little heap and rubbed our features with clean sand instead of water.

> You had your prayer suits wrapped up carefully in clean cloth and you wore your ordinary clothes for the rest of the time and carried a couple of blankets. Sometimes you didn't need blankets, it was hot enough without them.

> There were mainly two Moslems, maybe three, no more. You didn't need a driver for every camel. Being all tied up they just dragged along.

Steger said that she and Ali Ackba never travelled alone. They always had their native workers who looked after the camels. They had to hobble and unhobble them, grease the saddles and help with the loading. She wrote: "We cameleers had a strangely isolated life. We read no papers, or indeed very few."(*Always Bells*, 23)

On one trip, after they had been away three months, friction developed between Ali and Winifred. Sun and wind had played havoc with her complexion. Their camel-train pulled into a station almost on the western border. The camels had been settled down for the night, and the lubra who helped Winifred had taken the children to the lily-covered pond where they were enjoying a swim. (*Always Bells*, 25) Winifred and Ali Ackba were talking to the station owner, a man of forty-two, when his wife appeared. He had sent a letter to his mother in Scotland asking her to find him a wife. The girl she selected was nineteen, her mother had just died and she was penniless.

> She stood there, her beauty lit the scene. I walked up and stood beside her... She stood there so lovely and so dainty, and I, beside her... my face tanned with sunburn, my hair flying loose and straggly about my shoulders, the button burst from my faded dingy old blouse and wearing an old pair of Ali's pants, both soiled and torn. Ali was staring at the two of us. I saw the look of disgust as his eyes fell on me. I knew he was comparing us. (*Always Bells*,26)

Winifred had been chasing a recalcitrant camel, riding another camel hard and had not had time to bathe or change her clothes before they came to the homestead. In bed that night Ali had told her he was ashamed of her: "You looked like some filthy tramp." (*Always Bells*, 29) They quarrelled bitterly and then made up. He realised the life they led was hard on her.

Despite the hardship, to Steger it was an idyllic existence until Ali Ackba returned to India without her.

Ali received a letter from his father in India, asking for his help in some land transaction trouble. I hated the thought of his leaving me and pleaded to go with him, but he showed me it was not possible, I must remain behind to keep our haulage contracts moving, to watch our camels and our natives; in fact to hold our business together. We now had three camel trains operating, and I was kept very busy. I did not go out with the teams, but employed an overseer and remained behind to deal with contracts and accounts; the work included checking the goods at the railhead. (*Always Bells*, 40)

At the time "The railway was being extended from Oodnadatta to Alice Springs, and this was a vital matter for us." (*Always Bells*, 40) What it meant was that the carrying work from Oodnadatta would cease, the drovers would no longer bring their cattle into the railhead to be trucked south. Oodnadatta, a thriving centre of industry which catered for the passing trade,would become a ghost town. Whether this had any bearing on what happened to Ali Ackba Nuby I do not know. It seems likely that early in 1925, not long after they arrived in Oodnadatta, Ali Ackba Nuby went on a trip to India.

I am in a terrible state. It is weeks since Ali left and no word. With every day that passes I have the feeling that he will never come back, that I will never see him again. I didn't want him to go. I begged and pleaded but he said he had to. He had his parents in India who needed him.
"It is my duty as a son. They are old. And how would I feel if they were to die without giving me their blessing?
"But what about me? Your children? We need you too."
"My little copper-nob, it is only a brief moment in our life. It is the same as if I was going on a trip to Newcastle Waters with my camels."
"But then I know you will return. And I can always get news of you from the other camel-men or send one of the Aborigines with a message. India is so far away."

But my pleading and crying were to no avail. He went. I sent the boys to see him off. I did not want people to see me crying. And when he left he took our money with him. Since we came to Marree I have worked with the camel-men. Ali asked me to help them because I am good at figures. And I understand the language. They speak English but many do not read it. And so I read the bills of lading and fill in the dockets. But he never wanted me to help him. I used to watch him count his money, but how much he had I do not know. He left me some money to buy meat and I grow a few vegetables or send one of the children with threepence to buy a cabbage. And there are always dates to eat. Ali is generous and we do not go without. But I have spent almost all the money he left me.

I am suspicious now at the way the men look at me, as if they know something that I don't know. And yet when I ask if they have any news of Ali they say, "Be patient, sister. All in good time. It is the will of Allah." I do not want to be thrown on their charity.

I have been sending Joseph to meet the train when it comes in. Ali may have written a letter that has gone astray, and if he should return unexpectedly I do not want him to think that we do not care. I went myself once but when the station-master asked me if I was expecting someone I was ashamed to say, "My husband has not written and I am here in case he has come back unexpectedly." He would tell his wife and she would pass it on to the fettlers' wives. They all gossip among themselves. They look down on me because I am married to an Indian. But no one notices the boys at the station. They like to go for the thrill of watching the train come in. Sometimes they get an orange if a case is split. Joseph is a good boy. He always brings his home to share with his little sister. He is very protective. Oh, I hope Ali comes back soon. I can't bear to think of losing him. My heart twists in my body and there is a knot in my stomach when I think of life without him. But I mustn't cry. I

mustn't alarm the children. Oh, my poor children, what will become of you without a father?

Steger said that she was told that Ali Ackba Nuby "had died with a hundred others, of cholera"[11]. This time she was truly alone. She wasted money going to Adelaide to the mosque, no doubt trying to find out if she had inherited any of her husband's property. She found that she was penniless. Her husband had invested money in a farm in India only to discover that the man who sold it to him did not own it.

It would not have made any difference if he had been well off. She would have been dependent on his male relatives for charity. In their native land the Indians adhered to a strong patrilineal family system in which virtually all property belonged to the men. Women could receive gifts but a daughter could only inherit one-third of these, while a son inherited two-thirds. A widow could only inherit one-eighth of her husband's property. This was after bequests to others and the *Wakf* (obligatory charitable gifts to strangers) were taken out. Furthermore, the mother was not the natural guardian of her children, this rested with the father while he lived and then passed to other male relatives, though a mother was entitled to custody of her daughters until puberty. These practices were strictly observed in the Moslem community in Australia. Australian women married in a Moslem ceremony did not have the same inheritance rights as those married under British law. Mahomed Allum's daughter was not entitled to any of her father's estate "because there was no record of the marriage." It was not until the South Australian Marriage Act (1956) that Moslem marriages were officially registered and marriages were performed under both Moslem and civil rites.[12]

Steger stayed for six weeks with her children at a hostel in Adelaide and at the end of the time had only four pounds left.

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[11] "Wandering Winnie", unpublished MS, Mortlock Library, State Library of South Australia.

[12] Spokesman, Islamic Society of South Australia, personal interview, 3 March 1994.

> I knew nothing of what I call the hand-out. Such as cadging from charities, churches etc... I asked no one for help... It was agony to know I had not enough money to get back home again ("Wandering Winnie", 34)

There was no widow's pension at the time except in New South Wales. A report in the *Register* (Adelaide), 15 November 1927, stated that the Women's No Party League of Tasmania had sent out a leaflet asking for Federal pensions for widows. The 1926 census had shown that there were 20,000 widows in Australia with 29,500 dependent children, in need of assistance. It was a very precarious existence for a woman without a man to support her. Most survived by doing domestic work outside their home, or remarried, unless their husbands had left them provided for. Like many women of her generation Winifred had few marketable skills,

> beyond boiling a bit of meat, or driving camels... It was in derision of myself and my uselessness that I coined the nom de plume that later featured in every state in Australia, with the exception of Canberra, Winifred the Washerwoman. I have found in later years that my youngsters think it derogatory - well, never mind. It served its purpose. ("Wandering Winnie", 35)

Winifred registered with a labour exchange that hired domestic servants, but with three children she could not get live-in work. However, she could earn two shillings and sixpence for half a day's washing. Her day began at half past seven and finished at half past twelve. Sometimes she worked for the whole day and earned five shillings, plus her lunch. A neighbour looked after her children and in return she washed for her on Saturday mornings. It was a hard life. If it was wet she was unable to work and by the time she had paid her room rent of five shillings a week, plus food, there was little to spare for clothing. She could not afford to buy her children leather shoes because they cost two shillings and sixpence a pair, or half a day's pay.

Steger was rescued when she met Lamut at the mosque, who turned out to be a

distant relative of her husband. He was about to start a travelling picture show and needed someone to drive the car and sell the tickets. He had too much equipment to fit in his utility truck. The idea of a travelling picture show scandalised many of the Moslems at the mosque. With the Islamic taboo on reproducing likenesses of the human form in artwork, they felt he was committing blasphemy. Steger was also a little apprehensive about taking his offer at first because she thought Ali Ackba Nuby might not have approved. But, even though Lumut could not afford to pay her wages, it was a chance to get back to Oodnadatta. The moulvi at the mosque asked Lumut if he intended to marry Winifred, but he was already married. Instead, he swore that he would treat her like a sister.

Lumut taught her to drive, including the truck "Diamond Ruby". They worked the little towns with about forty people in the audience who paid one shilling for adults and sixpence for children. The hire of the hall was one pound and there was also petrol for the car. An example of the type of films that were popular was *The Dirigible* starring Jack Holt and Edmund Lowe, and *The Iron Horse*. Someone went ahead to hire the hall and put up handbills advertising the coming show. The equipment was bulky and included a generator for electricity. [13]

When Winifred finally arrived back in Oodnadatta her position had changed. She was a widow with no husband to protect her. She enrolled her boys into the local school, a one-teacher with about twenty pupils.

> The occupations of the student's parents reflected Oodnadatta's role in the region. Overwhelmingly, most people worked with the railway. School records show that many parents were stationmasters, railway packers, porters and gangers... A few parents were graziers and pastoralists but not many were stockmen. This is accounted for by the fact that many stockmen were Aboriginal and they could not send their children to the State school. (*White to Black*, 8)

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[13] Philip Lindsay, personal interview, 2 November 1996.

Not all Afghan children attended school regularly. "The boys were often away from school working with their fathers... even though many had not reached the legal school-leaving age of fourteen." (*White to Black*, 8) Winifred had no choice but to remain in Ghantown. With no income, she started dressmaking after the local storekeeper asked her to make shirts. She had no pattern and when they were finished the shirts didn't fit and "those wretched collars. The points would either point east together or due west." ("Wandering Winnie", 52) But this had given her ideas. She sent away for some cheap shirting in bright colours and made shirts for the natives without a collar. She followed this up with bright red mother hubbards for the lubras. But they didn't sell. The women said, "too much thunder all about him jump up". ("Wandering Winnie", 52) But she found that she could make up simple garments and added shalwars for the cameleers to her range. These consisted of "twelve yards of gathered calico with a cable around the waist that would anchor the *Queen Mary*." ("Wandering Winnie", 53). She cut these out on the floor of her hut and embroidered coloured flowers on the leg cuffs. She also sold goat's milk. As a sideline she did washing for single men. This led to a deputation from some of the camel-men.

> Sister, we have been thinking, thinking that it is not good that your *Butcha* (children) have no father. We have thought long on this matter and now we say that from any one of us you pick a man for their father. ("Wandering Winnie", 55)

She was "flabbergasted" because she knew that many of them had wives in India and she refused. The leader of the delegation replied:

> It is not right, this thing that you do - the mother of Moslem children takes in washing dirty clothes for *Feringhees* (Christians). In the name of Allah we forbid you to do this kind of work. ("Wandering Winnie", 55)

Winifred told them to muster all her "Lord's camels. I too will send out my loaded trains. I can get good boys I can trust to run it." ("Wandering Winnie", 56). She had been told

by her native boys that they had taken the camels into their strings, though the men denied it. Often the camels were not branded, the men knew their camels "like dogs." She was asked to go and identify her camels but could not.

In the end she capitulated, and on "26 June 1925 married a man called Karum Bux, a Ghan, in a Moslem ceremony in Ghantown." [14] Acording to Rajkowski there were four camel-men men with the name of Bux - Nobby Bux, Karum Bux, Karumdeen Bux and Ali Bux. "Both Nobby Bux and Karum Bux were hawkers and wore turbans and wide pants. Nobby Bux had a van pulled by four camels and worked up along the Birdsville Track. Karum Box had a shop at Oodnadatta and at Marree at different times." (Rajowski 147)

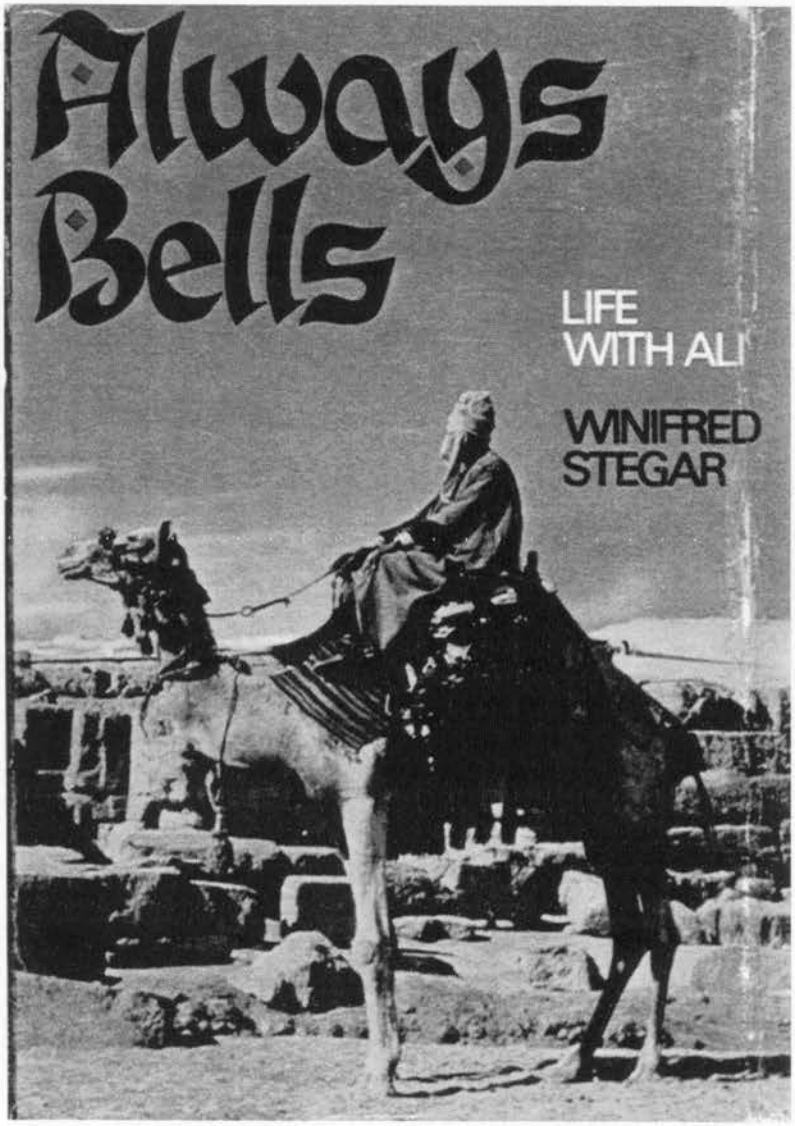
Hilda Doherty remembers Steger from this time and said she "lived first in Ghantown where she had a shop," which suggests that she took over the running of the shop for her husband.[15] This would have given him freedom to travel with the camel-trains.

Though her wedding to Karum Bux was probably more of a marriage of convenience than a love match, it gave Steger financial security and status, as well as companionship. It also reinforced her Moslem faith and turned her into a celebrity in the Moslem world when, in 1927, she went to Mecca with her husband and became "the only white woman to make the pilgrimage." [16]

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[14] Horrie Simpson, letter to Jose Petrick, 9 April 1989.
[15] Hilda Doherty, telephone interview, 10 December 1994.
[16] *Register* (Adelaide), 2 August 1927, 4.

Steger's only published book. The cover photograph was supplied by Winifred Steger, who claimed that it was the only photograph ever taken of her husband, Ali Mahomet. In her notes Beatrice Davis, the editor, wrote, "I don't believe this pic do you? Maybe surviving son." Ali Mahomet was a fictional character. It was with her husband Karum Bux that Steger went to Mecca.



Chapter Eight

MECCA AND BEYOND

On 2 August 1927 an article appeared in the *Register* (Adelaide)[1], written by Elizabeth Leigh, editor of the *Women's Page*, under the title "Women under Islam: the Strange Story of Mrs Kurum Bux":

> This page has chronicled many curious stories of women, but none so unusual and romantic as that of Mrs Karum Bux - Hadjani Bebe Zatoon Karum Bux - who passed through Adelaide last week on her return from some of the strangest adventures that have ever befallen to an Australian woman... Mrs Karum Bux is... a small, motherly humorous woman, with nothing about her to suggest that her lines have fallen into strange places, and that like the Lady Hester Stanthorpes of history she has passed forever out of the commonplace of modern life to the great world of Islam. Yet she is the only white woman who has ever made the pilgrimage to Mecca, and holds over the Moslems in Australia a power almost limitless in scope, the secretaryship of the Khalifat.
>
> Mrs Karum Bux talked unaffectedly over her adventures in India and Arabia, with occasional bursts of dry humour, and a style naturally racy and merry. Of her own life I already know something - her childhood in outback Australia, her break away from her homelife to earn a living of her own, and her marriage with a Mahommedan. On the loss of her first husband the Mohammedan community in Australia gave her a free choice - she might leave Islam altogether, or if she chose to remain they

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[1] All future references to the *Register* (Adelaide) are to this publication and appear as the *Register*.

would allow her 300 pounds a year, educate her children at college and prepare them for a profession. Mrs Karum Bux chose to accept the shelter of Islam, with its conditions of remarrying in the faith and the education of her children in India...

Mrs Karum Bux... intends to write a book about her experiences on the *Hadjj*.

There was no mention of Winifred Steger's disastrous first marriage or of the abandonment of her children. Winifred Steger had effectively buried her past and recreated herself under a new identity in which she assumed heroic status. It was the turning point in her life, an opportunity for her to develop her writing skills with the encouragement of Elizabeth Leigh. She was fortunate because "the *Register* was considered an especially good training ground for reporters... Casual correspondents, or `stringers' received one pound per column and a free newspaper."[2]

On 27 November 1927, the first episode of Steger's story "Arabian Days: The Wanderings of Winifred, the Charwoman" appeared in the *Register* under the by-line "Bebe Zatoon". By episode two she had become Winifred, the Washerwoman. The writing was fresh and lively and her introduction to the series highly evocative.

The carpet of Aladdin is not always woven tapestry; indeed its forms are myriad. A piece of torn rag, an old garment, a broken crock, sometimes a shoe or a gorgeous sunset, even a stray scent is enough to transport one in less than an instant of time to the northernmost end if there be one - of this whirling globe. In my case the carpet today was a tiny rosebud against an open window, through which a snarling mob of camels could be seen. I gave but one glance, one tiny breath of that dainty rose floated to me and hey presto! I was far away. My carpet had carried me to India,

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[2] Henry Mayer. *The Press in Australia* (Melbourne: Lansdowne, 1964, 1968) 193.

> right away to Lahore in the distant Punjab, and the days when I made the great pilgrimage which all good Mahommedans hope to make before they die.

And so the reader is led into the story of Winifred's great adventure. As the train waits at the station she assumes the status of royalty.

> Crowds of people thronged the platform. Many had climbed on to the great girders of the great roof, others swarmed on to the supporting pillars, many sat on the shoulders of others, all of them intent to get, if only one glimpse of the European mem-sahib who was making the sacred pilgrimage to far off Mecca, Islam's mighty heart. (4)

Steger wrote two versions of the pilgrimage. The later appeared in book form in 1969 as *Always Bells: Life with Ali*, partly fiction it was passed off by Steger as an autobiography. The account of the pilgrimage is the same in both versions but in *Always Bells* Steger padded the text with personal anecdotes. For instance, she said that Karum Bux planned to make the pilgrimage alone but she was just as determined to accompany him. The railway line to Alice Springs was almost completed "and gradually, one by one, the camel-trains were leaving Oodnadatta and making a new base at Alice Springs." Steger noticed that her husband had become "extremely thoughtful, sitting for hours without speaking" until he announced that he had decided to make the pilgrimage to Mecca and was worried what to do about her and the children. The idea of going on the pilgrimage appealed to Steger and she made up her mind to go too, insisting on her right to be with her husband. "We were married, remember? And where you go I go too, and don't forget it?" (*Always Bells*, 44) The argument was far from over. "He begged, pleaded, scolded, swore and roared, but I calmly rode out the storm until some weeks later he at last capitulated." (*Always Bells*, 45) He would have known that under Moslem law

> a husband cannot prevent his wife from going on the *Hadjj*. She cannot go alone but must be accompanied by a relative or a close woman friend.

If her husband tries to stop her she has a right to forgo his consent.[3]

To Steger, with her lust for change and excitement, it was an opportunity not to be missed.

> Though I made light of the journey I knew it would not be child's play. I had met so many pilgrims... and listened to so many stories that I had quite a grim idea of the future journey and of the very real dangers. For me there was a danger in addition to those usually encountered by pilgrims. I had never become an expert in the recital of the prayers, or *namaz*, as they are called. They were long and many and the language used was Arabic, with all the different gestures at their appointed place. Keen eyes would be watching if there was any suspicion of my being an infidel, and it would mean my life and Ali's[4] also for profaning the holy land of the *Hejaz*. I admit I was a coward at heart and deeply afraid, but I was more afraid of letting him go alone. (*Always Bells*,45)

Five months later their camels were sold and the farewell parties over and "we had a pocketful of commissions from relatives and friends to those in India." (*Always Bells*, 46).

The *Hadjj* is the Fifth Pillar of Islam. "Once in a lifetime every Moslem capable of undertaking it was obliged to go on this holy journey to the city where the Prophet had his first revelations."[5] "Mecca is a city so sacred that nonbelievers are not admitted. Annually, during the twelfth month of the Moslem calendar, the paths to Mecca are

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[3] Hamza Kaïdi, Nadjm Oud-Dine Bammate and El Hachemi Tidjani, *Mecca and Medinah today* (Paris: les éditions j.a., 1980) 18.

[4] Steger went to Mecca with her husband Karum Bux, but gave him the fictional name of Ali Mahomet.

[5] Desmond Stewart and the editors of Time-Life Books, *Early Islam: Great Ages of Man, A History of the World's Cultures* (1967, 1968, 1971, 1972; New York: Time Inc., 1975) 37.

choked with pilgrims." [6]

Steger was able to fully capture the sense of excitement, the anticipation of the pilgrims as they journeyed towards Mecca and the religous fervour as they observed the prescribed rites. At the beginning of what was to prove a journey to enlightenment, she changed to Indian dress:

> a long loose dress of white voile, encircling my waist a girdle of pearl and silver beads, over my head and shoulders a large covering of flame-coloured silk. On my feet were brown sandals, but was guiltless of stockings, and everywhere were flowers - rose and jessamine. And still the people came bringing me their floral tributes in a never-ending stream, they hung from my neck in a hundred strings, the top of my head was smothered with them, they covered my arms and slipped from the mound on my lap, the length of the seat was piled window high, they hung from lamps and festooned hat racks. And the scent. I lifted my hands towards the great crowd on the platform and said, "*Salam Aliakum Allah acbar*"[7]. The answering roar of that mighty crowd of Moslems made even the train quiver. Ah, well, that day is past now, but at least the woman who once washed your clothes in Adelaide received the homage of a queen. (*Register*, 27 November 1928)

They had travelled by ship from Perth to Bombay, and from there by train to Lahore where her husband's people lived. What struck Winifred most was the lushness of the vegetation after the "barren gibber plains" around Oodnadatta.

> High on the rooftop I looked out over the fields of sugar-cane and melons, the fragrance of roses and wild white jasmine drifted on the air, and in the distance soared the Himalayas, white crowned. It was on that

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[6] Floyd H. Ross, Tynette Hills, *The Great Religions by which Men Live* (1956; New York: Fowcett World Library, 1959) 4

[7] Peace be with you, God is great.

rooftop that I learnt Indian women were not the downtrodden creatures Europeans think them to be, level with my rooftop were many others, and I saw solid hunks of manhood return wearily from their day's toil, only to be met by a horde of shrieking, clamouring women, each one full of her wrongs. I have watched a man grab his turban and run frantically away. Another thing was that women wore the yasmak of their own free choice, considering it degrading that strange men should look on their faces...

In his homeland [my husband] had become more conscious of such things and suggested I might wear a yasmak. I vetoed that... It was hot enough without it, and the thought of that great black drape with its eye-slits was not to be borne. (*Always Bells*, 48)



Moslem women wearing the chador. Photograph: Philip Lindsay

Apart from her husband's objections there were other obstacles placed in Steger's way to make it difficult for her to go to Mecca.

> No less than four governments had to be wooed and won. First there was the passport from the Indian side then the French as the portion of Arabia I was sailing for had an overdominion of France; then the government of the Khalafate which is the religious head of the Mohammedans; and finally the government of the Wahabis who, under a king, rule a certain portion of the holy lands. (*Register*, 27 November 1928)

Once these were overcome they were free to undertake preparations for the journey. Steger said they stayed in a rest-house in Karachi in a *messafa khana* which she said translated into stable and is similar to the birthplace of Jesus. She says that all over Moslem countries these places are made available free of charge to travellers who are permitted to stay for two weeks, "lodging, water and bathrooms are free but you must supply your own food." Each pilgrim had to carry his own supplies plus a fireplace to cook with. Supplies consisted of

> a few pounds of flour, some chillies, and a few lentils, rice and onions, a few pounds of sugar and a pound of tea, two tins of sardines for me as a grand standby, and a pound of dates and a tin of condensed milk. (*Register*, 27 November 1928)

They were to travel on a ship which was a former Chinese convict transport that had struck a rock and sunk.

> Someone pulled her out of her quiet, clean grave, pasted some brown paper or something over the hole, sold her nice and cheap; so eventually with another equally worn out sister, she comprised a line to carry pilgrims. (*Register*, 27 November 1928.)

Steger said that because she had been ill with malaria they had booked very late when the ship was almost full, and had to pay an exorbitant price for a ticket.

The pilgrims took the minimum of clothing. No display of wealth was permitted. The men wore two pieces of unsewn calico, one to wind around the waist like a skirt and the other to drape over the shoulders. The women could please themselves but were permitted to go unveiled. "The idea during the journey is that all are sexless." In Steger's case the leaders of the church decided that she should assume Moslem dress. She was given three pairs of trousers, one white and one black and two men's white shirts.

> The trousers were of white calico and black sateen. There is fully ten yards in them; and they are gathered into the ankle with a narrow band no bigger than the cuff of a shirt... the other end, the whole width is gathered, or rather strung, on to a huge cord that could be described as the great-grandfather of pyjama cords, for an ordinary string would faint if it were expected to carry this load. (*Register*, 27 November 1928)

Steger said that the pants were "the curse of her life the first week and after that they became her best friend." She was also permitted to take a few bits of calico to be used as handkerchiefs, which could be discarded when soiled; a toothbrush made out of sandalwood tree and a comb.

The morning they embarked was not without difficulties. Steger was taking her five-year-old daughter with her but leaving her two sons behind, and she wondered if she would ever see them again. She could also feel a malaria attack coming on as the women

> were marched outside to a great whitewashed wall in the blazing middday sun and lined up against it for medical inspection. We had neither hats nor sheltering umbrellas, merely a headcovering of rag in the fierce tropical heat. (*Register*, 27 November 1928)

It was an explosive situation, particularly when the woman medical officer began to abuse, not only her own assistant, whom she "sent sprawling and practically blinded by blows across the face", but started attacking the women against the wall if they were not quick enough in disrobing. "Just imagine a dainty lady going aboard a liner at Outer Harbour and the doctor grabbing her by the throat and banging her head into the wall." Steger made up her mind that no matter what the medical officer did she "would not submit to this degrading inspection."

> At last she came around to me, and glaring like a wolf she demanded to know why I had not disrobed as the others had done, and ordered me. I absolutely refused. She made a grab at my shirt to tear it off me, and half did so. And I, OH JOY!, with all my might in my fist I caught her one on the left ear, and made her wobble, and as she did so I gave her another one a little more to the front. Those whacks rang glorious to my ears. She had false teeth; they left her and so did her spectacles. I managed another, and she sprawled on top of her servant and the two went down together. The red ink she was carrying and the thermometer also got mixed up in the matter, and the liquid gave a rather lurid hue to matters; but she also no sooner found her servant under her than she began to pummel her. I could not stand that. In fact I didn't want to! I was fairly on the war path. I remember there was a vague idea in my mind of putting her through the medical examination herself. But all good things come to an end. Somebody stopped me. (*Register*, 27 November 1928)

Winifred became the hero of the day and was given the name of Zatoon. "The name means fighter. There was once an Amazon woman, so the Mahommedan legends say, who conquered all men she fought with, and her name was Zatoon. That name was officially tacked on me that horrible day that I tried to kill the medico." This episode set the tone for Steger's trip. She became the official guardian of the 400 women, "and was asked to report on how they fared, because on other voyages there had been rumours of ill treatment." (*Always Bells*, 68)

On 4 December 1928, Steger went aboard the *Istophan* full of apprehension because she had left her boys with strangers, but an episode on the wharf put her mind at rest. She described the scene, with the dozens of vendors trying to sell their wares to the pilgrims who were crowding the deck. Baskets of fruit were hauled up by a string tied to a basket and the money returned the same way. "One venerable old gentleman who stood alongside me suddenly made up his mind that he would have a dozen mangoes for who knows he might never taste them again." They were on their way up the side of the ship when the jute twine broke and the mangoes fell into the water. When the man refused to pay for the lost mangoes a near riot broke out on the wharf with a rain of stones falling on the deck, while down below,

> an old woman of the sweeper class had slowly but surely been pushed and jostled to the extreme edge of the wharf... [until] with a frightened squeak and a flutter of rags she disappeared into the waters beneath.

Steger was appalled. She closed her eyes "with a prayer on my lips for the departing soul." To her amazement, when she opened her eyes again she saw the old woman strike out for the jetty. There was a log jammed underneath the wharf and from here the woman scooped up the mangoes which were still bobbing on top of the water and tied them firmly one by one in the corner of her chador until she had ten secure. She then scooped up the other two and

> seating herself comfortably on her log, she slowly, and with an air of manifest enjoyment, peeled and ate them... She was happy but how can I make you understand how happy she had made me? All my fears were gone. She had made me reflect. Surely Allah had been mindful of the old woman, so then it followed he would not forget me either. He the mighty One sees all, and I and my dear ones were also in His hands. I resolved, as a daughter, to lay away all my fears and go forward in peace, fearing not anything that might befall. (*Register*, 4 December 1928)

This episode reinforced Steger's faith, a faith that was to be sorely tried in the next few weeks because of the appalling conditions of the trip. The ship was

substandard and there were 1100 people crowded on board, including the crew. There were no lifebelts that Steger could see and only four lifeboats. But she refused to let it worry her. She had thrown in her lot with the other *Hadjis* "who didn't care. The only thing that mattered was that they were at last attempting to fulfil a lifetime's desire." (*Register*, 4 December 1982)

Conditions on board were primitive. There were no cabins, the passengers slept wherever they could find a space. Winifred wrote that they "were particularly fortunate in securing a lovely hatch three decks down. It was only a couple of minutes to hang a couple of sheets and blankets around the iron stanchions and behold! we had a fine secluded cabin." That was until Steger looked up and saw hundreds of eyes peering down at "the mad Englishwoman. For who could tell what she might not do next." But she was lucky. Others had to exist in an area that was covered with filthy water. Added to the other miseries was the fact that there were only twelve little fireplaces to accommodate 1000 people. For three days Steger was unable to make a cup of tea. She and her daughter survived by eating dates. "I cannot say more of that for the horror of it still lingers." But they survived the trip, though "the death toll was very large, particularly in the Red Sea." Partly this was caused by the age of the pilgrims, many of whom were poor and had saved all their lives to make the trip.

> As I looked at them the tears ran down my face and I prayed that all might go well with these dear ones... One felt that from the great love of each heart in this vile and filthy ship, it yet was holy. (*Register*, 4 December 1928)

As I read the weekly episodes in the *Register* I gained the feeling that, despite the hardships of the voyage, and whatever her motives for wanting to accompany her husband on the pilgrimage, Steger was caught up in the euphoria that gripped the other pilgrims, and drawn deeper and deeper into the heart of Islam. Their first port of call was at Kamerad, a French quarantine station past Aden. Here the pilgrims were required to bathe and have their clothes fumigated. Winifred was singled out for special attention

and permitted to wait until the other women had gone through. She was handed two pieces of calico in which to drape herself while she bathed and waited for her clothes to be returned. She and her daughter were enjoying the water in the privacy of a cubicle when she was approached by the attendant who asked her if she had noticed three Indian women in purdah, which meant that they never unveiled in public. They had refused to take a bath or remove their clothes for fumigation. The attendant asked Steger if she would mind if they saw her bathing, so that they would know that no exceptions would be made. This Steger agreed to, but the women were not easily convinced. It was not until the attendant pushed them under the water fully clothed that they allowed their sodden garments to be removed. Steger was rewarded:

> a lodge was given to me for for the sole use of myself and baby... A bed was sent for and a large block of ice arrived with buckets of drinking water, a bathroom was placed at my disposal. In the compound were several little shops where cooked food could be obtained. What more could any mortal desire? (*Register*,ll December 1928)

The next day she was back on board enduring the horrors of the ship but there was a heightened sense of expectancy because

> at 2 o'clock a bell would ring, and that minute would be the official opening of the great *Hadjj* ceremony. The bell must synchronise with the first sighting of a great mountain held most sacred to Islam.

The hour before that was one of frantic activity because each person must be bathed and change into the regulation dress of the *Hadjj*. The men wore a length of new calico around their waists and another over their shoulder.The dress for women was not so stringent, as long as the clothing was new. The main provision was that her head and forehead be bound so that no hair was visible. Failure to do this meant a penalty. For every hair that escaped there was a fine of a sheep or a goat. Steger was already dressed with her hair and her daughter's bound when she realised that something was wrong. There had been "a great buzz of excitement" but suddenly it changed to uproar and she saw men holding knives and sticks because there was no water for the men to bathe and

they would have to miss the *Hadjj*. Steger went to the upper deck and, throwing back her chador, so that they could see her she told them "to be quiet for two minutes and she would save them." She forced her way to the bridge and told the officer that the ship was in danger if they didn't get water to the men. "Already they are arming. Eleven hundred fanatics are loose and you have only ten minutes to give them water or you die and all your company." Her words had the desired effect and water was soon flowing into the men's bathrooms. But she said that the strain on her had been tremendous and she had to "swallow an aspro" because she couldn't stop shaking. Later when she went on deck the pilgrims crowded around her to touch her garments in gratitude, while the captain apologised, saying that some of the crew had never been on a pilgrim ship before and he had not been told that there was no water supply to the men's bathrooms.(*Register*,ll December 1928)

A few days later they arrived at Jeddah and the first part of the journey was over. Here they had to pay a landing tax of seven rupees to Ibn Saud who, in turn, had promised to protect the pilgrims from the Bedu,

> who came down from the hills, preying upon the pilgrims with robbery and violence. It was considered a sin to retaliate against them, since they are regarded as direct descendants from the Prophet's mother. (*Always Bells*, 92)

The pilgrims had to wait in Jedda while they negotiated for camels as well as stocking up with provisions for the journey. Because of the *Hadjj* water was scarce and "sometimes it took Ali a whole day to get hold of a tin." (*Always Bells*,93). Eventually they were on their way.

> Two pilgrims rode on each camel; there was an arrangement of two string beds, one hanging on each side of the animal with his hump running up between them. They were very lightly fastened and one passenger, the first up, had to balance himself on the hairy hump till the other party arrived, otherwise one bed went earthwards and the other

aspired to heaven. I learned my lesson of ascent and descent the hard way.

> The camels could not be properly hooshed down because of these beds... The usual way to mount was to place your foot on the camel's neck, and then leap backwards onto your bed contraption. The first time I did it, as I reached the creature's neck he snarled angrily and looked back at me. I missed the hump in my fright and shot back to earth...
>
> Over and covering both beds was erected a beehive cover of jute, its centre prop in direct line with the animal's neck. On this upright stick you locked your red-crock water-bottle. Your spare gear rode at the back of your pillow. When weary you could lie down full stretch. This then was your home - a home on the camel's back. In assigning pilgrims to the camels the drivers tried to match the weight on either side. (*Always Bells*, 96)

In Steger's case her husband occupied one side and she and her daughter the other. It was a long uncomfortable trip, hot by day and freezing cold in the early morning hours. The camel trains would stop at dawn for prayers when there was a break of ten minutes, and then "on again till midday." Sometimes when there was a longer stop they could buy firewood and "make curry and bake chupatis. But there were days when we did no cooking at all, but had to subsist on a handful of dates." (*Always Bells*, 98) It was a hard life, plodding along in a string of thirty or forty camels tied nose to tail, with two drivers walking alongside holding sharply pointed sticks. Steger said that the length of each day was determined by the distance between oases. Many of the wells had been ones used by the Prophet Abraham when he travelled with his flocks. The wells

> were two circles of water, rounded with an eight-inch wall or ring of stone or cement. The water was dipped by bucket from one and poured into the other from which both men and animals drank. (*Always Bells*, 97)

The journey from Jeddah to Mecca lasted ten days. Early one afternoon the camels were hooshed down and the pilgrims were told they were close to the Holy City which they could not enter till morning. That night "the moulvis prayed and instructed the faithful till nearly dawn." (*Always Bells*, 100) They were told they were not to fight among themselves and had to

> enter the city clean of heart and clean in action. No oils or scent were to be used at ablutions. Should we break any of these laws we must sacrifice an extra sheep or goat. Should any one harm us we must not retaliate, even if it meant our death, always remembering that the ground we walked upon was holy in Allah's eyes. (*Always Bells*, 101)

Steger said she went to sleep about midnight but that her husband remained at his devotions all night. There were set rituals to be performed and Steger described the first of these, which was a race to simulate Hagar's search for water for her dying baby. Steger was tired and had had nothing to eat since the morning before. Just the same, she was there when the moulvis organised the pilgrims into single file and then "we were madly tearing down the street, chasing one another's heels." Steger said that her child "was no light weight to be carried, cantering along stony roads". (*Always Bells*, 102) Her husband caught up with her on the second lap and took the child from her. Just the same she found it difficult and dropped back, "joining in on the tail of the seventh." (*Always Bells*, 102) She said that everyone was so intent on his own race that no one noticed her. The next ritual was to circle the shrine of the *Ka'bah* seven times and at each lap to kiss the sacred stone.The Black Stone has special significance. It is housed in

> a great cubic structure about 15 metres high and 12 by 13 metres square. It is covered by an immense piece of black drapery (*Kiswah*) which has verse from the Koran embroidered in gold thread around its hem. The *Kiswah* is renewed every year on the occasion of the Great Pilgrimage... The *Kiswah* is the sacred centre of Islam... The Black Stone... is an oval-shaped stone about 18 centimetres in diameter; it rests within a mesh of silver wire; some of which goes right through in order to prevent it from ever crumbling. It is set in an angle of the *Ka'bah*. (Kaïdi, 29)

The origins of the stone are unclear but when the *Ka'bah* was restored in 605 AD it was Mohammed who "placed the Black Stone with his own hands against the angle and sealed it in." (Kaïdi 30)

Steger was too tired that first day in the mosque to take it in, but as her strength returned she was able to absorb much of the beauty of the building with its walls covered in mosaics and glass chandeliers lit by electricity. Each day the moulvi arrived to give a talk and read from the Koran. Because it was the time of the pilgrim and "there was no sex, women moved freely, faces uncovered, amid the throng." They still had five weeks before the culminating ceremonials of the *Hadjj* fell due so they decided to journey to Medinah. Steger said "Pilgrims were not obliged go to Medinah, but it was an added glory to the pilgrimage for those who could." (*Always Bells*, 104)

> Medinah is the second holiest city of Islam, beloved by all Moslems... It was here that the Prophet... found refuge when he was chased out of Mecca by Qureishites, who wanted to get rid of him.
>
> It was from its base in Medinah that Islam expanded, starting off by ridding Mecca of its polytheistic religions to reappear in other parts of the world.
>
> It was also at Medinah that the Prophet Mohammed... was buried.
>
> The mosque which the Prophet built with his own hands... is also located at Medinah. One prayer in this particular mosque is worth a thousand prayers anywhere else, with the exception of the Great Mosque at Mecca (where a single prayer is worth a hundred thousand recited elsewhere.) (Kaïdi, 80)

It was on this part of the trip that Winifred and her husband ran into trouble. Karum Bux had been very generous with *baksheesh*. The word had spread, and people

who had nothing to do with the camel-train came to ask for money. In the end he refused and so alienated the camel-drivers. They began to prod the camels and use whips to goad the beasts, at other times they would poke the sharpened sticks into Winifred and her husband as they slept. They were three days into their journey when they ran into danger.

> It was about two o'clock in the morning, and we had travelled most of the night. Our driver had halted the train for a brief rest in a sandy pocket enclosed by sheer towering cliffs. These hills of Arabia are not nice, easy, sloping mountains; they go straight up like dark towering walls and end in jutting peaks that seem to scratch at the sky. No bush, tree, or grass, just walls, sometimes with dark caverns in them. Many of these had been the home of a race called the cave-dwellers. The gap that led into this pocket in the hills was barely wide enough for two camels abreast. (*Always Bells*, 105)

Steger had been lying awake stretched out on the sand, too tired to sleep

> watching the moon rise over the crest of the crags... suddenly a glint from the side of one of the cliff walls opposite, very high up, caught my attention. I watched and saw other moving gleams. (*Always Bells*, 106)

She alerted her husband who woke the others. As they watched they saw a man creep along a ledge holding a rifle, at the same moment they saw their head driver slinking away and realised that their camels had gone. Their driver was forced back at the point of a knife and told to call the other drivers and the camels or he would be killed. Steger said, "religious taboos connected to the *Hadjj* were forgotten." Once the camels were returned and resaddled the women were urged to mount, all except Winifred, who was handed the leading string and told to "Get going, take this lot and hurry."

> To cross that white sanded pocket, conspicuous in my black shalwars, with the moon shining on me as I led the escape, was not the most comfortable job to be given. Every minute I expected a bullet through my back from the riflemen on the hills. It was a bare hundred yards to the gap, but to me it seemed a hundred long miles... I walked those beasts on and on till at last, worn out and able to walk no longer, I sank to the sand. By this time it was fully daylight. Too tired even to think, I sat in the sand, the camel immobile behind me.

She was roused when she saw her husband running towards her. Rather than praise her for her efforts he was angry.

> Why didn't you wait outside the gap for me? It's by Allah's goodness that no wind came up to smother your tracks, or I might never have found you. A man can't trust you out of his sight.

Unable to contain herself any longer Steger flung herself "down on the sand and wept bitterly". (*Always Bells*, 107)

They travelled all that day and came out into an immense plain, "the air crackling with tension and hostility between drivers and pilgrims." They slept that night and woke to find their camel-string had been reduced from thirty beasts to seven. The drivers had cut the nose lines and absconded. The pilgrims knew that in the long camel-train they would not be missed. Their only hope was that some of the pilgrims who knew them might notice their absence and raise the alarm.

> There was no shade and our water was very low. The capacity of the red-clay jars tied on each camel was about three pints; during the night some had been drunk and few of us had as much as a full pint left.

> The pilgrims decided that it would be safer to remain with the camels and her

husband hooshed them down and they sat in the shade of the jute howdahs. Steger admired their stoicism. "The general idea was that if nobody came to their rescue they would perish... because it was the will of Allah." (*Always Bells*, 109) By the end of the second day some of the men wanted to move on but her husband persuaded them to wait.

> "When the camels get thirsty they will move of their own accord. They alone know the way from here to water... It remains for us to be patient and move as little as possible to preserve ourselves. Till then we are in Allah's hands."

Towards sundown on the third day the men resaddled the camels, knowing that if they left it longer they would be too weak to make the effort. They also cut the nose lines between the beasts so that each would be free to move. Steger wrote that she and her daughter lay "in a sort of daze." It was not long after this that the camels began to move until

> they gathered speed. Keeping bunched, they began to travel steadily forward into the night. Then just before dawn they broke into long, loping movements, and we felt in our hearts that water must be near. Suddenly they stopped with a jerk and their necks shot downward, and by the dim light we saw they were drinking. (*Always Bells*,110-111)

The oasis was off the pilgrim route but they were able to buy goat's milk, dates and cucumbers from a few Arabs who lived nearby. After two days resting they paid a guide to lead them to the rest of the pilgrims. Their mishap was treated as an accident and they "thought it wiser not to protest". (*Always Bells*,112)

The stay in Medinah refreshed Steger after her ordeal.

> Mecca was harsh and cold in comparison. You seemed to merge into the past with a gentle sadness here, feeling that the spirit of the great Prophet

still lingered over the place he loved so well.

She was even more impressed when she entered the mosque:

> you could have imagined you walked beneath the sea, so soft and green was the light beneath the mighty green dome. The dome . . was so high that date-palms grew beneath it; their fruit was sold at fabulous prices. (*Always Bells*,ll3)

Inside was a cottage with wrought iron walls and a small peephole through which could be seen the tomb of the Prophet Mohammed. When Steger looked through the peephole of the next room she was surprised to see a huge candlestick, "its holder larger than a man's body", with a great porcelain candle in it. She asked the mouvli what it meant and he explained that it had been prepared as "a resting place for Hazarut Esau (Jesus Christ) when he should come to earth again." She said that Christ is held in great reverence in Arabia and regarded as a prophet. The candlestick impressed her more than anything, because it demonstrated "the loving kindness of a people who would build a resting place for a prophet other than their own." *(Always Bells*,ll4)

After they had lived in comfort, resting, bathing and eating for a few more days they decided to return to Mecca, which was about two hundred and fifty miles away. It was on this leg of the trip that a man died. His wife had come to Winifred seeking help. When she saw the man she realised he either had pneumonia or bronchitis and suggested to his wife that he should not be moved, but neither would hear of it. They were determined to get to Mecca. That night he died, but the drivers refused to stop until late afternoon. The man had been tied to the stick that held the howdah in place and his body had stiffened around the stick. Some of the pilgrims dug a hole in the sand and, after washing the body and swathing it in the new calico a Moslem always carries for his shroud, they buried the body in a sitting position. Not till this was done did anyone prepare food, but before it could be properly cooked the drivers ordered everyone to

mount. As they journeyed on Steger looked back to see the people from the oasis stripping the calico from the body which they left lying on the sand. Later, Steger told the moulvi who said, "There is little law here as you know it. Still their bones decay in the land as they would wish." (*Always Bells*,l23)

It was a long, tedious trip back to Mecca with the camels travelling slowly, with a day of rest for *Juma*, the sabbath. Food was also scarce and Steger took up smoking to allay the pangs of hunger, though she made sure her daughter did not go without: "I always had a bit of bread or dates for her." When they finally arrived in Mecca there was no accommodation. "They slept behind a boulder under a tree on the hillside... I proved to myself that night that, though the stones of Mecca are holy, they are just as hard as those in far-off Australia." (*Always Bells*, l24) The next day they moved into a small room "with a grilled window from which we could watch the passers-by down below." Here Steger and her daughter spent the next ten days while her husband was in the mosque. She wrote that she found it "a trifle boring with nothing to do but stare out the window and take little walks." (*Always Bells*,l25) It was ten days before they rode out to Mount Ararat where the final ceremony of the pilgrimage took place. There was much haggling about the camels with the drivers saying they had none, until Steger, withdrawing from the group, heard "the soft, snorting cough of a camel." (*Always Bells*, l25) She discovered they were already saddled and went back to tell her husband. Once they were found out the drivers settled down and the journey began, but with two of the male pilgrims leading the camels for fear of treachery by the drivers who followed on behind.

They travelled through the night and the next morning came to the foot of Mount Ararat where they dismounted for prayers. Here they dismissed the camels. Her husband drove four sticks into the ground and covered them with a blanket to simulate a house, in accordance with tradition. They were told that at four o'clock a cannon would be fired to indicate that the pilgrimage was over. All that remained was the great sacrifice which took place the next day. The area was divided up into sections occupied by pilgrims from different countries. The Persian encampment lay behind that where Steger and her

family were seated with the Indian pilgrims. The Persians had a cannon pointing towards Mount Ararat. On the far rise, looking towards them were the Turks. They too had guns and beside them was the entourage of Ibn Saud. Steger described the spectacle taking place on the hill above. There was a regiment of guards and mosque officials which marched as a bodyguard to "a resplendently attired snow-white camel, bearing upon its back a magnificent howdah of gold brocade and tassels." There was no rider on its back because it was sacred to Mohammed's daughter Fatima, and said to be a direct descendant of one of the camels she rode whilst accompanying her father on his "forays or sacred duties". (*Always Bells*,129)

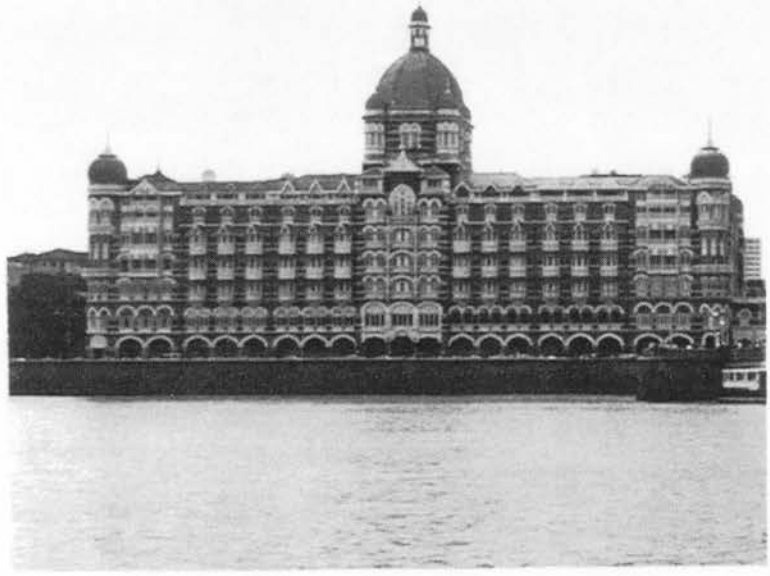
It was very uncomfortable in the heat, waiting for the cannon to sound at four o'clock and the green flag of Islam to be raised. Steger, watching from a distance, saw the change in the thousands of pilgrims as a great sigh of relaxed tension went through them. Then, as she and her husband went to look for transport back to Mecca, they were appalled to hear gunfire, and see people lying dead. Tempers had flared; Steger said she was not allowed to report the cause and, as she planned to return east she did not want to be in trouble, but the horror of it remained with her.

Her next memory was of being told to dismount from their camel to take part in the lapidation or stoning. The lapidation commemorates the occasion when Abraham threw stones at the devil to drive him away after he tempted him to disobey God, who had ordered him to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Steger said the devil had "turned himself into an obliging piece of rock." (*Register*, 22 January 1929)

There were many things about the pilgrimage which were alien to Steger's upbringing. One was the sacrifice of the animals, which takes place at the end of the pilgrimage. She could hear the noise of the cooped-up beasts, "wailing for their home pastures "(*Register*,22 January 1929),and was sickened to watch two Arab water carriers arguing over a goatskin waterbag until one drew a knife and killed the other, then walked away. Yet she was able to accept it as part of a larger experience which had changed her irrevocably. She had developed a tolerance and a breath of vision which she

expressed in the last paragraph of her series of articles on her trip to Mecca. She was about to return to India and wrote:

> Just a bit of lonely flotsam, I may perhaps pass from your ken, or cross the great divide. If I do it shall be with the fearlessness of a great joy. I shall truly fear no evil. In my Father's house are many mansions. The city to Heaven has many roads and all the roads are the property of the one supreme God. Many people tread many different roads to find him but at the end all roads meet. Kipling was wrong. East and west do meet. Remember the great golden candlestick of the Christ awaiting its hour, in the very heart of sacred Islam, and who shall dare to say that East and West had not there met. At what higher point can the Christians and the Mohammedans meet? Together at Mecca and Medinah they stand as brothers, the crescent of Islam the light of Christ. (*Register*,22 January 1929).



The Taj Mahal Hotel, Bombay, where Steger helped to organise a reception for King Amanullah and Queen Souriya of Afghanistan, 1929. Photograph: the author.

While the series was still running in the *Register*, another article appeared on 18

December 1928 which was headed "Bebe Zatoon: en Route for Afghanistan." She had distinguished herself on the *Hadjj* and had come to the attention of the Khalifat in Bombay, the religious headquarters of Islam in that city. As a result, she received an invitation through the Wazir to take up the position of governess to the children of King Amanullah and Queen Souriya of Afghanistan. The royal couple had travelled abroad and the Queen was trying to instigate reforms, especially in the treatment of women.



Winifred Steger, 1929. Photograph: the *Register*.

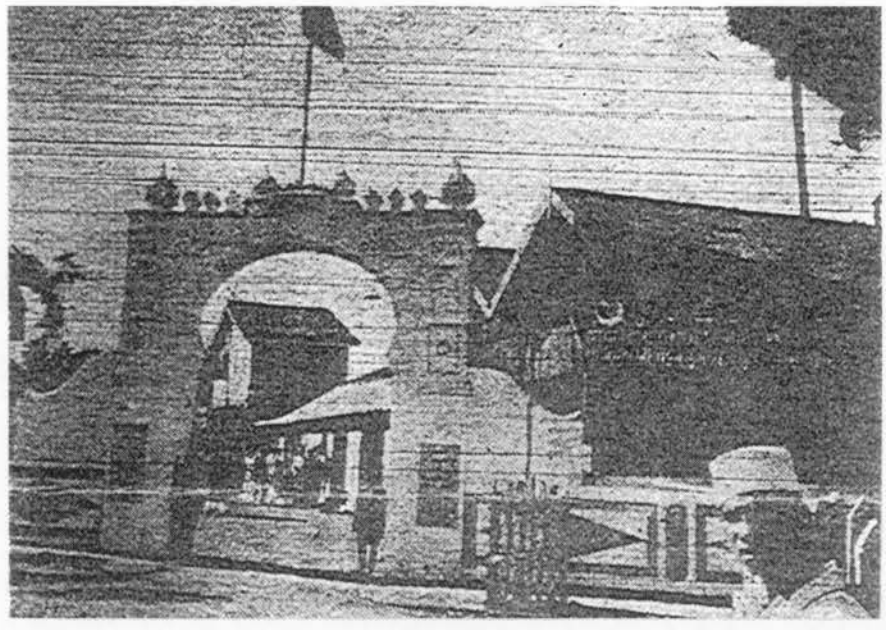


Winifred Steger wearing the chador, 1969. Photograph: the *Australian Women's Weekly*.

Steger had alluded to the trip in the last episode of "Arabian Days" when she wrote:

> The coins you of Adelaide have paid to read this paper will enable the editor to pay me for these articles so that I can place my children safely in school in India while I journey up the Khyber Pass to far-off

Afghanistan. Of what shall happen there who can tell. One gentle lady in Adelaide gave me the keynote of my next activities - I shall cherish it as my platform - to teach tolerance. (*Register*, 22 January 1929)



The Khalifat Building, Bombay, where Winifred Steger played hostess to Nadir Khan, one of the rulers of Afghanistan, 1929. Photograph: the *Register.*

Though Steger wrote an account of this trip in 1969, as a sequel to *Always Bells*, and submitted it to Angus & Robertson under the title of "A King there Was"[8], they rejected it saying:

> Though it has splendid spots, it is not in our opinion good enough or written with the conviction that made even the most incredible things in *Always Bells*, believable.[9]

The book lacked substance because Steger never got further than India. The

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[8] "A King there Was", unpublished MS, Mortlock Libary, State Library of South Australia.

[9] Letter, Beatrice Davis to Winifred Steger, 27 November 1969.

Register (16 January 1929) reported that the Afghan King had been forced to abdicate and had gone into exile. A week later, on 29 January 1929, the same newspaper reported that:

> Readers of the narrative of "Bebe Zatoon"... who left recently to take up a position in the Royal Household of Afghanistan, will be interested to hear something more of the fugitive Queen Souriya, whose efforts at enlightening the women of her country led her to peril and final disaster... The unfortunate Queen is now in hiding from the rebels. Even before they decided to depose the King, they demanded that he should get rid of Souriya.

Steger returned to Australia and the outback she loved, but her life would never be the same again. She and Karum Bux went their separate ways. But as far as Steger was concerned she had no regrets. She had received public acclaim, her adventures and her personality had captured the imagination of the readers of the *Register*. She had become a person in her own right, and was able to support herself and her children more comfortably with her pen, writing serials about her life in the bush and commanding a wide audience, as well as the title of "South Australia's foremost Humorist."[10] .

[10] Guthrie tapes.

PART TWO: THE WORK

Chapter Nine

VOICES FROM THE BUSH

Few Australian journalists have been writing and publishing from their mid-teens until the age of ninety-six and yet had so little recognition as Winifred Steger.

This was because she did not write under her own name but used the pennames "Winifred theWasherwoman" for her "Star Dust and Soap Bubbles" series and "Sapphire Bill" for the "Tales of Sapphire Bill." When *Always Bells* was published in 1969, with Winifred Steger interviewed and photographed by the media, the real name of the writer behind "Winifred the Washerwoman" was made public. But Steger's writing under the name of "Sapphire Bill" was never mentioned. If Steger had not made a reference to "Sapphire Bill" in an interview with Stella Guthrie two years before she died, this major part of her literary output, where she assumed a male persona, would have been lost.

Winifred Steger claimed she was first published as a teenager.

> I must have been about fourteen years I think. I'd always had a flair for writing fairy stories as a child. But this particular day I was watching Cobb & Co coach come along the Great Dividing Range in Queensland and a piece of paper flew from the top. And paper to me was a jewel... When the coach was gone I grabbed the paper, I read something in it. I shook my head and said, "Pooh, I could do better than that." I got a lead pencil and a sheet of paper... and I wrote a letter... it was a big company in England called Shaw Fitchett and I described my adventures with a bee and a bluebag. In those old days you used to rub the bluebag on a bee sting for a cure... I sent it to Shaw Fitchett and the months flew by and one wonderful day there comes a letter to me, addressed to me mind you,

and in it was a two pounds cheque from Shaw Fitchett, London, publishers... and they put a title on it which I had not done and the title was "A Rough Diamond."

She said that the name of the publication was *Life*.[1]

I have, however, found no record of any such publication by Shaw Fitchett in the newspaper collection of the British Library. There was a journal called *Life*, "A weekly Journal of Society" published by Louis Feilbermann which ran from 12 July 1879 to 22 July 1902.[2] The publication was concerned with the doings of high society, particularly members of the British and Austrian royal familes. It also had articles on finance, including information about investment in Australia.[3] There was no material of the type Winifred Steger claimed to have written.

There was also a magazine called *Life* which came out in an Australian edition. The copies in the State Library of Victoria run from 3 January 1887 until 26 December 1889, the proprietor was William Henry Williams of Melbourne. The magazine contained Australian content, with comments and cartoons lampooning both politicans and society figures, plus jokes, fiction and small paragraphs on unusual and interesting happenings around the world. Winifred Steger's piece on being stung by a bee would have fitted into this very well but the dates do not agree.

In 1904 Fitchett Bros, Melbourne, published the first volume of another journal called *Life* which ran until 1918. However, Winifred Steger claimed to be fourteen when she published "A Rough Diamond". This would have been in 1896 or 1897, well before the first issue of this journal.

Steger's other journalism as a teenager was for a local Presbyterian church

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[1] The Guthrie tapes.

[2] The dates are those of the copies in the British Library collection.

[3] 26 March 1895: Western Australian goldmine; 2 April 1895: Midland Railway Company of Western Australia; 6 June 1897: failure of goldmines in Western Australia.

magazine, while she was working as a mother's help in the home of the moderator of the Presbyterian Church. There are few copies of early parish magazines extant, according to the archivist of the Presbyterian Church in Queensland.[4] The ones that are available are dated 1905,1909 and 1916. By this time Winifred Steger was married with a family.

Her first professional work as an adult was the series on her trip to Mecca, which ran from 27 November 1928 to 22 January 1929, as Winifred the Washerwoman. She continued contributing a weekly article called "Star Dust and Soap Bubbles" to the *Women's Page* of the *Register* until it ceased publication on 20 February 1931.[5]

After this Steger wrote the "Star Dust and Soap Bubbles" stories for the *Herald* (Melbourne), from 26 September 1932 to 6 August 1933. The work had been commissioned by Sydney Deamer, her last editor on the *Register*. Before this Steger claimed to have written for the *Courier* (Brisbane).

> My first editor [Mr Forster] was on the *Register*... he got into trouble with drinking a little. And he went away and he went to Brisbane and he took over the *Courier*. He wrote and told me where he was and I wrote for him for a while... [Mr Forster] came back again for a while on to the *Chronicle* [South Australia] again.[6]

I have been unable to substantiate Steger's claim that she wrote for the *Courier* (Brisbane). However, Steger's next commission was with the *Chronicle*, where she published a weekly "Sapphire Bill" story until just after the outbreak of World War II. After the War Steger continued to publish occasional articles in the "Star Dust and Soap Bubbles" series until 20 March 1947. Steger's work running the mess at the El Dorado Gold Mine at Tennant Creek during World War II, had interrupted her writing output. In addition, the policy of the *Chronicle* had changed. From being a paper which

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[4] Joan Pigram, Records Department, Presbyterian Church of Queensland, telephone interview, 1993.

[5] By this time the *Register* had become the *Register News-Pictorial*.

[6] The Guthrie tapes.

contained both local and country news:

> It became after World War II an almost purely agricultural paper, features which marked this change were the special royal show issues introduced in 1933, and the annual stud stock supplements which commenced in September 1943.[7]

A shortage of paper during World War II meant the cessation of special supplements. These were revived after the end of the War but discontinued soon after because of cost. The last issue of the *Chronicle* appeared on 26 September 1975.

In an interview with Stella Guthrie in November 1978 Winifred Steger talked about the demise of the *Chronicle*. She said that in its latter years

> they didn't ask me for anything. I've seen it as Stock and Station. It's not... it doesn't fit. The *Chronicle* was quite different. We loved it and tried to make it so. But now they've done it and it'll never come back.

Stella Guthrie asked her what sort of writing she did. Steger replied: "Anything at all. Anything that came along. Anything that affected me." At the time Steger and her husband were working with camel trains "From Adelaide to Darwin. Among the natives and other people. I always had somebody to talk to." She described how she wrote:

> sitting on the ground behind the camel. That's absolutely true. Pull in the camel. Make him lay down, sit down if he's tired. I could write on anything. Mostly on the typewriter or partly by hand. I'm not much good on hand. But they [the *Chronicle*] were always good. They always took my rubbish. Forty long years they took my rubbish.

Of her "Sapphire Bill" series Steger noted:

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[7] Alvan Roman, "From the *Chronicle*: July 17 1858 to September 26 1975" (State Library of South Australia, August 1982).

> Sapphire Bill was a big-gun drover. And, of course he had a lot of young men under him as a big-gun drover would. And "Sapphire Bill" was based on all the fun and yarns the young drovers had. That was the basis of the things that went on in the *Chronicle*... every week

The first episode appeared on 10 December 1931 under the title of "Sapphire Bill from Daly Waters: as told by Himself," which ran as a weekly serial until 19 October 1939. Towards the end of the series the name was changed to "Tales of Sapphire Bill: By Himself" and had top billing on the page. At the end of the War Steger did not resume the series. Her life had changed, as well as tastes in writing.

The identity of "Sapphire Bill" was well hidden, with no mention in the *Chronicle* that "Sapphire Bill" was written by a woman. This probably gave the stories more credibility as they read as if they were written by a man. They were published on the pages devoted to fiction, which included both serials and short stories. But because they were written in the first person they read like true stories.

By the time Winifred Steger had settled on the Silver Crescent Poultry Farm in Alice Springs her "Sapphire Bill" period had ended. Times had changed with the coming of road transport. The days of the drover, and the long treks on horseback to bring cattle and horses from the Centre to the railhead at Oodnadatta, were over. Furthermore, the motor car had made the outback more accessible to those in the city. Now they could go and experience it at first hand.[8]

Though Steger left a bundle of odd tear-sheets of published articles, packed in an unbleached calico pillowcase, as well as copies of her novels, short stories and plays, there is no record of "Sapphire Bill" in her papers in the Mortlock Library. This is probably because she wrote the series early in her literary career. She was moving around without a settled home for many years and it is possible she did not make copies

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[8] By this time the tone of the newspaper had changed. The chatty letters from women contributors and the fictional serials had long since gone.

of her work. Paper was a luxury, she

> wrote on anything she could lay her hands on, including toilet paper, in fact she started one of her books on a roll of toilet paper (But she did not say which one)... cereal boxes were very popular, not for the food they contained, but for the box, which she could write a whole story on the inside of, instead of lots of scrappy bits of paper or cardboard or even bits of bark, put together to make up one short story.[9]

Given the difficulty she had to get writing paper it is a miracle that any of her work survived.

Unlike "Star Dust and Soap Bubbles", which grew out of her own personal experiences, Steger drew on other people's experiences for the "Tales of Sapphire Bill." She then embroidered them, adding her own touches. This is what brings them so vividly to life and makes them read like a firsthand narrative. She knew the men of the outback well.[10] She had worked with them and she was a keen observer of human nature. The bush was her home, a place she knew from her early childhood in Queensland, and later from her life sleeping under the stars with her second husband and his camel-train in the 1920s.

Steger was a born storyteller. ~~The vivid outback yarns show her to be a major figure in Australian literature~~. In the "Tales of Sapphire Bill" she has left behind a body of work full of lyrical descriptions of the scenery of central Australia, that have a pastoral quality like a fine landscape painting. In addition, there are humorous and skilfully drawn pen portraits of the characters who peopled the outback. These reflect the mores and manners of the time, with its patriarchal, sexist and racist attitudes. She also captured the idiom of the bush. Now, many of the colloquialisms she put into the mouths of her characters have disappeared from our language.

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[9] Geraldine Pearce, letter to the author, 1995 (n.d.).

[10] Joe Brearden boarded with Steger at Oodnadatta, Hilda Doherty, telephone interview, 10 December 1994.

Her style in this series is racy and extremely funny and her choice of language is just right for the subject matter. The work is tightly written in the form of a discursive narrative where the same characters recur. Mostly her stories centre on a group of drovers sitting around their campfire in the bush. This series is a valuable record of a time in Australian history when the centre of Australia was being exploited and developed by opportunists who came from all over the world. Some left better off than they had come. Some settled, took up land and bred cattle. Others were defeated by the isolation and hardship. In a country that was alien to the white man, and which he could never hope to conquer or understand as the Aborigines did, the code of the bush was important. Each man was expected to help his neighbour in times of trouble or be seen as a cad. It was still a frontier society: a part of the world where a man or a woman could escape the past. But women were in the minority; very few women appear in the "Sapphire Bill" series. Women, of course, did go droving and mustering cattle. They could ride as well as men, particularly if they had been raised in the bush. A woman was an extra pair of hands when labour was scarce. There are plenty of accounts of women working cattle. Coonardoo is described as the "best stockman on Wytaliba!" [11] And Evelyn Crawford talks of her work as a drover: "there's a code in a drover's camp. You're not girls or boys - just working men together." [12]

But to introduce women into the drover's camp would have changed the tone of the "Sapphire Bill" stories, as would showing them doing the work of men. It would have diminished Sapphire Bill and taken away his heroic qualities. In Sapphire Bill's world women are on the fringe, living either in the frontier towns or on outback stations. They work as barmaids, cooks, housemaids and prostitutes. Women are always the "other," to be respected if they are "decent" women, to be exploited like the country if they are not. As well, there is the idealisation of the "little bush maid" who represents unsullied nature (*Chronicle*, 17 March 1932).

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[11] Katharine Susannah Prichard, *Coonardoo* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1943) 245

[12] Evelyn Crawford, *Over my Tracks, a Remarkable Life,* (Melbourne: Penguin, 1993) 152

The series also reflects the attitudes of the day towards the Aborigine, the halfcaste and the coloured, who are both patronised and exploited and also shown as an inferior species of the human race (*Chronicle*, 31 December 1931 and 25 February 1932).

It is the sheer virtuosity of Steger's talent in this series which is remarkable. For almost nine years she turned out a weekly story where each episode differed from the one before. Even in 1978 when she was ninety-six and writing articles for the *Senior Citizens News* Steger said:

> Mr Clutterbuck,[13] never knew anyone with so many varied themes as I do. Everything is absolutely different. And that's a fact. I make sure that no two stories go in alike... you'll find me writing about boundary riders, camel-men. I can't think of them all. Life's too varied. Life's been too big. Too full. It's nearly all fiction. I don't touch true stories otherwise I'd have been in gaol a long time ago.

[13] Editor of *Senior Citizens News* who wrote under the name of "Les." He died on 29 June 1974. (The Guthrie tapes.)

Chapter Ten

TALES OF SAPPHIRE BILL

The "Sapphire Bill" stories are skilfully linked by beginning and ending around the campfire. This device acts as a frame so that each story is contained within itself, while still being part of a larger whole. The narrator is always Sapphire Bill as he relaxes after a day's work. His captive audience is the Masher[1] who, as the camp cook, is preparing the evening meal. The two men have a close bond, having fought together in World War 1.

A typical opening is that of "A Car, Some Flies and Golden Syrup," (22 June 1933):

> No thanks, I'm not too struck on duff today. In fact, I've been off it for a week or so. Just don't fancy it. I went past Old Cranky Bill's camp a fortnight come last Monday. It was just about pecking time and the old fellow was dishing up a bonzer looking duff. I had two helpings. Was just finishing the second half when I said to Bill, "Tip top stuff, old man. You could have sported a few more currants in it, anybody'd think you fired 'em in with a shot gun."
> "Them's not currants," grunted the old man as he gnawed away at a bone with two yellow fangs and his upper lip. "There's no currants in the camp. I can't afford 'em, them there's flies - better you pick 'em out."

Here Steger's use of the local idiom, plus her ability to develop a character in a few

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[1] The term masher is rarely heard these days. It refers to a man who dressed showily, or a "lady killer." There is no evidence of these qualities in Steger's Masher. Steger could have used it in a satirical sense. On the other hand it could refer to him being a potato-masher.

words, such as first naming the old man Cranky Bill and then showing him chewing "with two yellow fangs and his upper lip," heightens the humour.

One continuous story which runs through the series is Sapphire Bill's love for Diana, a young white girl who disappeared as a baby and has grown up with the Aborigines. These episodes are full of lyrical passages, as opposed to the almost slapstick humour in the rollicking adventures of the drovers. Because Diana has been raised by Aborigines, Steger is able to work aspects of their culture into her stories, as well as stories of white atrocities.

In "Renunciation" (15 September 1932) Diana has led Sapphire Bill to a secret place where the Aborigines have hidden gold and rifles from the whiteman. When Diana offers him some of the gold he nobly refuses it because the Aborigines

> were losing not only their birthright, but their lives, through white man's greed, lusts and diseases. Of what goes on in the back country, the half has never been told. With my own eyes I have seen the poor blacks shot down for daring to snatch a little water from the cattle troughs.

In the same story Sapphire Bill has to consider what is best for the girl he loves. He wants to marry her but wonders whether he has the right to take her from her simple life in the bush.

> Gradually my heart sank lower, even as the firelight died away from flickering flames to ashes. The great stars hung above, the scent of the honey-scented flowers of the gum trees, was brought on the soft fluttering gusts of night wind. A sleeping bird chirruped softly in its dreams. The great Australian night lay in a cool, clean dreaming beauty all about me.

In the "Sapphire Bill" series the beauty of the Australian bush becomes a metaphor for Bill's idealistic love for the young "wild girl." These descriptive passages do not slow

down the story but enhance it.

Steger had a strong romantic streak and turned the young white woman into a goddess-figure. Even the name Diana is significant as it relates to Diana, a goddess in Roman mythology. Steger's Diana rides a white stallion whose

> eyes looked as proud and inteligent as any King's... as to where his stock came from it's hard to swear by; but I've got my own theory, and that is that he runs from that thoroughbred that was reported stolen. (18 August 1932)

In "Beauty and the Beast" (2 June 1932), in a scene that could be straight out of classical mythology, Diana confronts a savage steer when Sapphire Bill's life is threatened.

> She runs towards the bull and, taking aim with a spear, she hurled it with deadly precision far into the animal's cheek... with a roar of rage and pain the beast... plunged forward to the charge, but the agony of the spear made him stagger forward full upon the shaft, and his own weight drove the point almost to his heart.

Still carrying on the earth goddess theme, Steger depicts Diana as holding a special place in the Aboriginal world.

> The Kaditchas or witch doctors... met together... and it was so decided that I was to be the mate of none because I was the Queen and spirit of the Rain. ("Litte Bush Maid," 25 August 1932)

Steger glosses over the fact that the Aborigines stole Diana as a child, while she was too young to remember her parents.

The story of Sapphire Bill and Diana comes to a head fairly quickly. In

"Blunders and Wins" (8 June 1933) they are married. Sapphire Bill asks Masher to "whip up a brownie, put plenty of plums and thingamys in it, so that when the boys ride in they can drink one on Mrs Sapphire." By 2 November 1939 Diana's transition from a "wild bush maid" to an ordinary woman is complete. Sapphire Bill, now the father of three children, complains about "A Trip to Town with the Family." It is show time and Diana's father, Mr Connors, has insisted on "swanking it up in the flashest and most expensive noshery." Sapphire Bill says:

> the porter looked a bit thoughtful when I handed him Diana's suit case; maybe he had never seen them tied up with strips of greenhide before. The lock things had given up the ghost years before. But when I lifted my swag on to his shoulders, and the black quart pot tied on it cuddled his neck and left the map of Africa on the shoulder of his flash white uniform. Strike but you should have seen his face.

And so the story progresses with Mr Connors looking like

> the Duke of Gloucester, to say nothing of the King of China himself... [in a] black cut-away dinner suit and the coat was faced with black satin; his shirt was like a sheet of stiff white enamel... Down the front three diamonds glittered. Straight wire, I hardly recognised the aristocrat I was in the habit of rolling around in the dust with.

Sapphire Bill's evening clothes consist of his gabardine pants which he "had the tailor to cut a bit narrow about the shin... I reckon I was fit to dine with the King." Just the same he decides not to go down to dinner.

Other women figure in the series but they are treated less kindly. One story (untitled, 23 January 1932) concerns a fancy dress dance which was to be held at Alice Springs. Sapphire Bills says, "After what I been through I wouldn't be seen dead in fancy dress." He tells of an episode in Borneo after World War 1 when he and his friend, Jasper, go into a nightclub which was down "a funny little street no wider than a girl's hair ribbon." A dancer "swathed in a diaphanous spangled green muslin... was grace

personified." Sapphire Bill "grinned fair in her face and strike me pink, the look she gave me made my bootlaces shrivel up." He takes offence because "It was the time of the war when all the women were sort of eating out of your hands. I was an Aussie... it was an insult to my country for a native dancer to eye me like that."

Later, when they are on board ship en route to Saigon, Jasper, disguised as the woman, creeps up and touches him on the shoulder. In a fit of rage Sapphire Bill throws him overboard and is devastated when he hears Jasper's voice.

> I got him back over the bars to the deck weak and shaking we stared at one another, then at the dark, cruel, swirling water beneath... I could have murdered the man I love best in all the world.

He justified the possibility of the woman drowning by saying

> In reality the shore was barely a mile away. She knew every inch of the place... as a girl she had earned money diving and clutching for coins on the seabed to amuse passengers of the stationary boats.

Bill's arrogance towards the natives races was common among white Australians in that period. Another story (untitled, 25 May 1932) concerns

> the housemaid at Regan's pub, a nice little filly, just up from the city, so sweet, shy and dainty... those silk legs of hers were the prettiest pair of twinklers I've ever struck.

However, she is not as innocent as she seems. Sapphire Bill picks up a yellow sapphire "dashed near as big as a nutmeg" which the young women wheedles out of him on promise of meeting him later. When he returns she has sold the sapphire and taken up with someone else.

"The Lost Calves" (27 April 1933) gives an insight into the lonely lives of many of the women of the outback. Mystery surrounds an abandoned run where the drovers

camp because there is good water. A calf often disappears. One night Sapphire Bill

> wakes to the sound of a woman sobbing. He strikes a match... I don't think I shall ever forget her as I saw her there by the flare of the match. Thin and emaciated she looked more like a death's head than a living woman. Her clothes were but wisps of rags and her uncombed hair hung around her thin face in scraggy tails.

He sends one of his men to Alice Springs and a policeman returns with one of the sisters from the Mission. Sapphire Bill discovers that the woman had come there as a bride thirty years before and had later run away with "a second-rate rotter of a cattle buyer." When she is abandoned by her lover she returns to find that her husband had gone to war and been killed. This is a sensitive look at the plight of such women.

Steger shows another aspect of the life of a bushwoman in "First be sure of the Stake" (1 June 1933). Tom Blake, a bullock driver, and his wife arrive at the drovers' camp with their team. Blake suggests a game of cards. A new chum holds the winning hand unaware that the stake is Tom Blake's wife. She attacks him when he refuses to claim his prize. Sapphire Bill says:

> He might have got past the one bleary eye and the wispy mop of grey hair but when added to that was a hare lip and two buck teeth black with tobacco juice.

This is an unkind presentation of Tom's wife, who is being judged by her looks - a different yardstick from that used to judge the men. But Steger is telling the story through the eyes of a man.

Apart from the romance between Sapphire Bill and Diana, one other continuous thread runs through a number of episodes. It tells of the discovery of the ruins of a Malay village ("Ancient Ruins," 21 July 1932). When Sapphire Bill stumbles across these he decides that:

> several hundred years ago a party of Malays sailed across or maybe in

> those days there was a mainland... They could have landed at the place now called Queen's channel, travelled up it... and from there to the valley that lies snug within the Adam and Elsmere Range.[2]

An old man who "looked as if he was the oldest man ever" lives there. In a later episode (4 August 1932) Sapphire Bill discovers that the old man has been waiting for him to arrive so that he can deliver the following message:

> Your armies? Man of Aussie, where are they? One stands in our Government who has blown them away with his breath. You have no armies, your officers are doled, and your ships dismantled. Your people run wildly while your Governments squabble like a rabble of Pariah dogs, you - with your great transcontinental railway of two thousand miles but naught to guard it but an absentee landlord or a stray Aboriginal herder. Yet even here I speak not of foreign invasion, for the evil is worse and within thy gates.

This was written at a period when disarmament seemed the answer to world peace. In the story for 10 November 1932, at another meeting between the two men, Sapphire Bill is warned about the lust for gold that was sweeping sections of Australia with the discovery of the Granite Gold Mine. The old man also warns of the dangers of communism when he says, "the shadow of the Samovar and Ikon stand side by side and rule the land."

Steger makes no attempt to explain how the old man is able to communicate with Sapphire Bill and why the drover feels compelled to follow his instructions when he is told to go on a quest with Cabbage, an Aboriginal man, who leads him to a cache of weapons and communications equipment hidden in a cave by the sea in the far north of Australia. After Sapphire Bill blows up the cave he says: "It behoves the men who

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[2] The early Malays who visited the north of Australia were Trepang fisherman. They were Moslems. See Mary Lucille Jones, ed., *An Australian Pilgrimage: Muslims in Australia from the Seventeenth Century to the Present*: (Melbourne: the Law Printer, 1993).

hold Aussie dear to watch her outer waters with greater care for we are indeed the golden fleece for the world's Jasons."

This is all highly melodramatic and fanciful. But it gave Steger a platform from which to air her political views in a much more telling way than if she had just written a letter to the editor. Like the love affair between Sapphire Bill and Diana it also added variety to the series.

The main focus of the series was on the life of the drover. The character of the bushman is epitomised in Sapphire Bill and his companions round the campfire. Steger idealised Sapphire Bill and his mates and in so doing immortalised them. The reader is able to share their jokes, hear their voices as they tease one another one moment and become serious the next. It is in these serious moments that the author is able to draw attention to the drovers' heroic qualities. Winifred Steger understood the responsbility they held. It was because of this they battled floods and adversity to bring their charges - the cattle and the horses, safely to their destination. Their livelihood, their reputation, depended on it. Steger's men also represent mateship, each one relying on the skill and dedication of the other. They are thrown on each other's resources for months at a time. They accept each other's weaknesses in moments of leisure, but there must be no weakness when it comes to their work. If a man is unable to hold his own in a time of crisis he is given short shrift.

In "A Wild Night for Droving" (4 May 1933) Sapphire Bill runs into trouble.

> The atmosphere was already distinctly electrical and the cows were obviously uneasy, though they spread out and started to feed a bit again. And then, as suddenly as if cut off by a huge heavenly shutter, the sun disappeared - a dull greyness leaped across the hills and valley beneath... Each bush and leaf hung motionless... the beasts stared around uneasily, a soft shuddering sigh coming from apparently nowhere, and then, as if with one accord each tree and bush, each blade of grass, swayed to the

> east, like the hollow of a great wave racing in from a quiet sea... a screaming rush from the west and the storm was on us.

Sapphire Bill on his horse Ginger is "drifting with the force of the wind". He is worried about his men who "were out there holding the mob." Then, in one flash of lightning, he "glimpsed young Thompson off his horse and cowering behind a tree." In the morning Sapphire Bill gives Thompson his cheque and sends him on his way. He says, "I prefer blokes in the camp that can stand a bit of strain without creaking all the time," and tells Masher to "make a bonzer duff... put whips of plums in it, and don't spare the sugar - they love a hot duff."

Added to the mateship is a genuine patriotism which found expression through stories of Sapphire Bill's experience in World War 1. In "The Southern Cross" (12 January 1933), a dying man says:

> I want to lie down where the old Southern Cross shines clear... See, I don't want anything in the road when I cuts loose to 'em... They've been more nor wife and kids to me... Those stars knew and comforted me more than anyone else.

This leads on to an experience in the trenches behind a ruined village called La Beauvirte.

> Twenty of us chaps had been on a sortie into No Man's Land. We had given the Boches gip, but they had given us Hell with the lid off a minute after the recall. I copped one in the leg... it was pitch dark, and somehow or other I got used as a door mat - must have got a kick in the head... for I went out for a while. When I came to again... I found myself in the oozing mud... bitterly cold and the sky overcast with great, rushing masses of laden black clouds... The guns were all silent and not a sound or light could be seen... A rooster crowed from beyond somewhere in a deserted village... I didn't start whining because I had come to cashing

in time. I decided that as soon as the old thing that was me was free, I would skedaddle with a hop and a jump, like a homing dove for Aussie... And then, Masher, as foul a thing that follows in the spume of the night, came the hideous thought: suppose there is no hereafter... this death that should turn me into a putrid corpse and nothing more... Time passed but I had no knowledge of it till it slowly showed to me a thin bluish grey vapor of mist which I took to be the Boches' gas floating low and coming towards me... I tried to stop breathing - or rather hold my breath... death seemed to be stalking me... I looked upward, the vapor had taken on the form of a man, with great, sad, wise eyes that looked so pitifully into mine, and then, looking through I beheld - beyond - a vision of the Southern Cross... I lifted my weak arms towards them, and then, I knew no more till I woke in a base hospital.

As in the other serious pieces in this series, Steger turns the story around at the critical moment so as to avoid sentimentality. She brings the reader back to the old man whose death had prompted the story. "I fancy old Bill tonight is following the trail of the Southern Cross to their dwelling land of heart's desire. Good night - I'm turning in, I feel a bit sleepy on it now."

Steger brought a breadth of vision to the "Sapphire Bill" stories that is rare in Australia. Bush yarns around the campfire have been a feature of Australia since the first settlement. She could be compared to Bill Wannan who made a reputation with his collection of bush yarns[3], many first published in the *Bulletin, Smith's Weekly,* the *Australasian Post* and other magazines. He was more intent on recounting the stories as they were told to him, and capturing a particular era in the folklore of the Australian outback, than in trying to develop character or plot. Many are simply humorous anecdotes complete in themselves. They are the type of stories which travel around the countryside, to be embellished with each successive telling.

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[3] *Hay, Hell and Booligal* (Melbourne: Lansdowne, 1961).

Steger also drew on anecdotes, but she added another dimension by creating believable characters and plots. Her stories are not simply bush yarns, but fully rounded stories which captured both the essence of the Australian bush and the people who lived there. Wannan wrote about other people's view of life. What Seger wrote about was her own vision which came from deep within herself. She was not just a visitor to the centre of Australia who spent time travelling around collecting material as one collects botanical specimens. She was part of the life of which she wrote and that is why she was able to recreate it so vividly.

Another well known Australian yarn-spinner was Frank Hardy. His material was similar to Wannan's but instead of taking an objective viewpont, as Wannan did, he wrote in the subjective voice, so that he became the narrator and part of his own stories. He personified his yarns and set them in hotel bars with a group of men characterised as Truthful Jones, Timetable Tommy, Sheckles Mitchell and Dooly Franks from Parramatta. Like Wannan he moved around gathering material for his yarns, which were published in anthologies. Some of his most famous stories are *The Yarns of Billy Borker*.[4] As well as being amusing, his yarns are tightly structured. Like Steger, he also dealt in social issues, but in an ironic way, without becoming emotionally involved. He rarely went back beyond the Depression to the old bush days.

Both Wannan and Hardy had the advantage of becoming well known because they wrote under their own names. Steger wrote under a male pseudonym to hide the fact that she was a woman writing about men. Steger's wit and irony and the yarns she told were as good as those by Hardy and Wannan. They represented a world inhabited by men - their world. It was the world of the pub, the racetrack and the camp. Winifred wrote about the same world but through the eyes of a woman. Few women could have done it with such skill. Though the experiences she wrote about were secondhand, this was not apparent in her writing, she used her imagination to fill in the gaps. She also knew and loved the bush so that she was able to transfer this emotion to Sapphire Bill.

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[4] Melbourne: Mandarin, 1992.

One thing which stands out in the series is the incredible sense of fun she is able to convey. With it comes the feeling that the writer had enjoyed herself in the telling of her yarns as much as those who read them.

To write a weekly serial for nine years was a remarkable feat. By the time the series finished at the end of 1939, Sapphire Bill had become a married man, but the stories around the campfire, of fistfights, war, adventure and love were still being recounted in the same vivid style as when they began in 1931.

Chapter Eleven

FROM THE WASH-TUB

Of all Steger's writing the "Star Dust and Soap Bubbles" series written under the pseudonym of Winifred the Washerwoman is the most endearing. Apart from Walter Murdoch[1] it would be hard to find her Australian equal as an essayist. Another Australian woman who excelled in this art was Charmian Clift, but her published essays only spanned a period of four years.[2] Both women had travelled widely. They were both wives and mothers. They were able to write about their experiences in a sensitive and evocative way which struck a chord in the reader, so that their work became extremely popular.

When Steger started contributing her "Star Dust and Soap Bubbles" essays to the *Register* she was living at Oodnadatta and working as a laundress at the Trans-continental Hotel. Her three children were enrolled in the local school. Her occupation appeared on the school register for 1930 as a domestic. She was named as the children's guardian.

The essays were illustrated with a small black and white sketch, by an unknown artist, of a woman bent over a clothes basket with a line of washing behind her. It was

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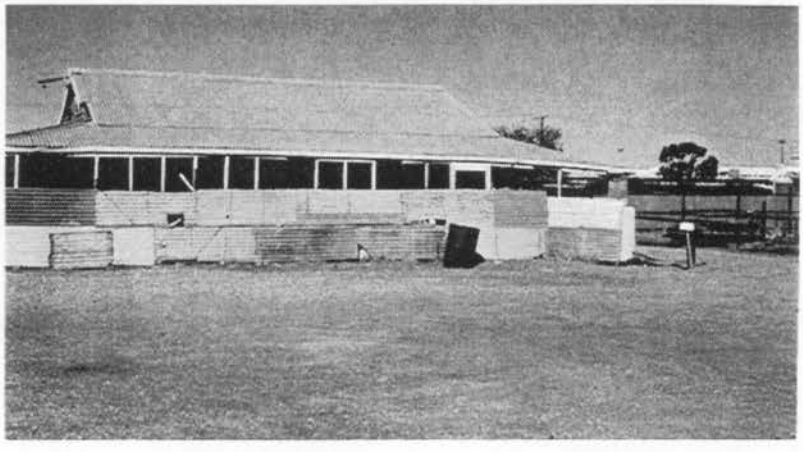
[1] He published a weekly essay *Books and Men* in the *Argus* (Melbourne) under the penname of Elzevit. His essays were later collected in *Speaking Personally* (Sydney: A & R, 1930) and *Collected Essays* (Sydney: A & R, 1938). He also lectured in English and became Chancellor of the University of Western Australia (1943-47).

[2] Charmian Clift wrote for the *Sydney Morning Herald* and was syndicated to the *Herald* (Melbourne) from 1964, plus writing a monthly column for *Pol*, after her return to Australia from Greece, until her death by suicide in 1969. Like Steger, who was discovered by Elizabeth Leigh, Clift was asked to write her essays by John Pringle, editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald.* Her work was collected into two volumes: *Images in Aspic* (London: Horwitz, 1965), and *The World of Charmian Clift* (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1970).

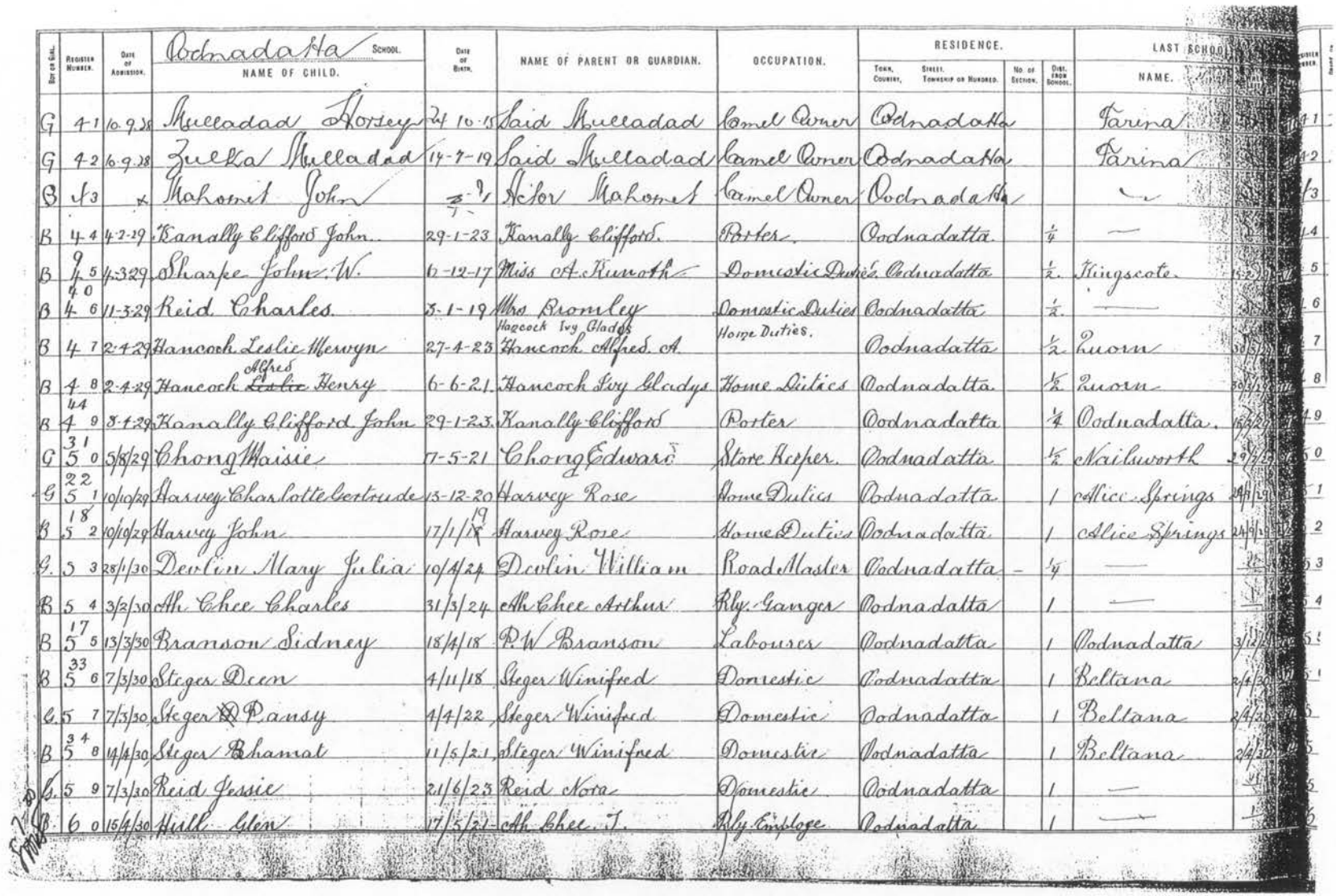
a homely scene, yet Steger's writing was filled with exotic images of nights in the Arabian desert and the scent of date-palm blossom, mingled with the author's homespun philosophy, as well as glimpses of her struggle to live. Despite this struggle there was no hint of self pity in her writing.



Oodnadatta school pupils, 1930.



Old school building, Oodnadatta. Photograph: the author



Oodnadatta — School

Boy or Girl	Register Number	Date of Admission	Name of Child	Date of Birth	Name of Parent or Guardian	Occupation	Residence: Town, Country, Street, Township or Hundred	Residence: No. of Section	Residence: Dist. from School	Last School: Name	Last School: Date	Number	Remarks
G	4-1	10-9-28	Mulladad Hosey	24-10-15	Said Mulladad	Camel Owner	Oodnadatta			Farina		1	
G	4-2	6-9-28	Zuleka Mulladad	14-7-19	Said Mulladad	Camel Owner	Oodnadatta			Farina		2	
B	4-3	x	Mahomet John	1/7/-	Actor Mahomet	Camel Owner	Oodnadatta			—		3	
B	4-4	4-2-29	Kanally Clifford John	29-1-23	Kanally Clifford	Porter	Oodnadatta		¼	—		4	
B	9 4 5	4-3-29	Sharpe John W.	6-12-17	Miss A Kunoth	Domestic Duties	Oodnadatta		½	Kingscote	15-2-29	5	
B	4 40 6	11-3-29	Reid Charles	5-1-19	Mrs Bromley	Domestic Duties	Oodnadatta		½	—		6	
B	4 7	2-4-29	Hancock Leslie Mervyn	27-4-23	Hancock Alfred A. Hagcock Ivy Gladys	Horse Duties	Oodnadatta		½	Quorn	30/5/29	7	
B	4 8	2-4-29	Hancock ~~Leslie~~ Alfred Henry	6-6-21	Hancock Ivy Gladys	Home Duties	Oodnadatta		½	Quorn	30/5/29	8	
B	44 4 9	8-4-29	Kanally Clifford John	29-1-23	Kanally Clifford	Porter	Oodnadatta		¼	Oodnadatta	15/2/29	9	
G	31 5 0	5/8/29	Chong Maisie	17-5-21	Chong Edward	Store Keeper	Oodnadatta		½	Nailsworth	29/4/29	10	
G	22 5 1	10/10/29	Harvey Charlotte Gertrude	13-12-20	Harvey Rose	Home Duties	Oodnadatta		1	Alice Springs	24/9/29	1	
B	18 5 2	10/10/29	Harvey John	17/1/19	Harvey Rose	Home Duties	Oodnadatta		1	Alice Springs	24/9/29	2	
G	5 3	28/1/30	Devlin Mary Julia	10/4/24	Devlin William	Road Master	Oodnadatta		½	—		3	
B	5 4	3/2/30	Ah Chee Charles	31/3/24	Ah Chee Arthur	Rly Ganger	Oodnadatta		1	—		4	
B	17 5 5	13/3/30	Branson Sidney	18/4/18	P W Branson	Labourer	Oodnadatta		1	Oodnadatta	3/12/29	5	
B	33 5 6	7/3/30	Steger Deen	4/11/18	Steger Winifred	Domestic	Oodnadatta		1	Beltana	24/3/30	1	
G	5 7	7/3/30	Steger Pansy	4/4/22	Steger Winifred	Domestic	Oodnadatta		1	Beltana	24/3/30	5	
B	34 5 8	14/4/30	Steger Shamat	11/5/21	Steger Winifred	Domestic	Oodnadatta		1	Beltana	24/3/30	5	
G	5 9	7/3/30	Reid Jessie	21/6/23	Reid Nora	Domestic	Oodnadatta		1	—		6	
B	6 0	15/4/30	Hull Glen	17/5/21	Ah Chee T.	Rly Employee	Oodnadatta		1	—		6	

This was a time of great activity among women in South Australia. They had won the right to vote in 1894, but they still lived under laws created by male politicians. Elizabeth Leigh's *Women's Page* in the *Register* reflected a picture of women's lives of the period. Unquestionably, she set a tone in her page which allowed women to discuss their lives and the limited role allowed them by the law, the church and society.



Logo "Winifred the Washerwoman". Courtesy the *Register*.

The lead article on 3 September 1929 was called "When does a Woman Grow Old?" By this time Winifred the Washerwoman had become sufficiently well known to be among the women whose opinion was sought. The question had been asked as the result of a report of a Baptist Conference in Melbourne, where the Rev. T.J.Tinsley had said that in church organisations in America "there were divisions for young married women, intermediate, and old married women." Steger's reply was that a woman was old "when she is dead." She went on to explain that

> different climes have different times for the fading of youthful charms.
>
> In India... all women are old at thirty-six. Their teeth fall out, their hair grows dull, their eyes are wrinkled with crows' feet. They come into full bloom before they are sixteen... after they are twenty, they fade like flowers.

She was asked whether country women grow old sooner than city women and replied:

> Of course they do... the paint shops are further away.
>
> In the city when you see another woman in a new dress with fresh looking skin you yearn to look like she does. In the bush there is no competition... Nobody cares. So you just look old when the sun and wind have withered your cheeks and taken the youthful light from your eyes.

On the same page was an article, "Girls in Politics," an account of a meeting called by the Political Reform League to interest society girls in politics. There was also a column by a mothercraft nurse on "Bringing up the Baby," and a report of the wedding of Iris Robertson, daughter of the Associate-editor of the *Advertiser* (Adelaide), described as "A brilliant student at the Adelaide University, and afterwards won honours at the Sorbonne University, Paris." The report, accompanied by a photograph, said that "Miss Robertson intends to study at Cambridge after marriage for the degree of doctor of philosophy."

Elizabeth Leigh's page was a catalyst for change in women's roles and the way they viewed themselves. While many other women's magazines depicted women as happy and fulfilled housewives who had little interest outside their home, Elizabeth Leigh demonstrated that women could look beyond the narrow domestic sphere and achieve in their own right. She balanced the general view of society, which saw marriage and motherhood as a woman's crowning achievement, with the growing demand for women to have a more equitable share in the governing process by taking an active interest in politics and making their needs and opinions heard.

Steger was introduced to the readers on 24 August 1929 with the words:

> Winifred is no ordinary washerwoman. She has talked with kings, and has been on the Moslem Pilgrimage to Mecca.
>
> Read her adventure every week, and you will find more stardust than

soap bubbles in it.

The view Steger presented of herself was of a woman without pretensions, who saw nothing demeaning in earning an honest living as a washerwoman. But the essays also showed a woman of intellect who was able to express herself in clear, lucid prose; a woman who could laugh at herself and a woman who cared for her neighbour. In her writing, Steger epitomised the qualities of the pioneer that were most admired in the Australia of the time. As Winifred the Washerwoman she became a folk hero.

She introduced herself to her reading public on 24 August 1929 with the words:

> My little iron hut stands four square, with a tiny gabled roof. Its windows have no glass, so require no cleaning. Their shutters are of iron, hung with leather hinges. It has but two doors, that give entrance front and back.
>
> Inside, my castle is divided into small rooms with the aid of hessian partitions. The windows and the walls are snowy white. No boards are there on my floor - just sweet smelling earth, with a few white goat-skins scattered here and there.

This is written in a seemingly artless fashion by a woman whom many city dwellers would have seen as living in depressed circumstances. Yet she expressed pride in her "castle," with its kitchen with a "plain scrubbed table; across its centre... a piece of crimson and gold brocade, and on it... a huge bowl of polished brass."

It was her use of language, her ability to see humour in everyday situations and share it with her readers, plus her descriptive powers in making a scene come alive, which gained Steger attention. In addition, many readers would have admired her for her stoicism in the face of adversity.

Galvanised iron had replaced the wattle and daub huts of the earlier settlers. It was stronger, and resistant to rust and white ants. It meant that a more permanent structure could be built, unlike the homes of the first settlers which were not far removed from the gunyahs made by Aboriginals. The iron huts became the permanent homes of the early settlers. Unlined, they attracted the heat and must have been unbearable in a temperature that reached 109°F in the shade in summer. In the desert climate in winter it could be equally cold. However, Steger's article only devoted two paragraphs to her home, to put herself in a setting that the reader could easily recognise. The real point of the story was about an episode with one of her Aboriginal workers.

Steger hears a commotion outside and "discovers Mary, the old lubra, hiding in the empty water tank." The terrified woman says, "What for you bin send it one big fella Debil Debil longa poor old Mary?" She confessed that she had been helping herself to wood from Steger's woodhead, but "Only bin take it two tree four little fella wood."

Steger explained that Mary had been too lazy to walk to the creek to collect her own wood. Yet Steger had been made to feel the guilty party. It was her eleven year old son who was reponsible for Mary's fright. "For a long while he had bemoaned the continual shrinkage during the night of the wood he had so laboriously dragged home." He asked some men who were digging a well for some blasting power and inserted some into a piece of wood which he left on top of the woodpile.

> I could not get the exact details of what happened... but I gathered from Mary that the lizard had flown from his nice warm bed and knocked out Snowy in the first round, that the billy-can had departed hurriedly in Paradise direction, leaving a trail of hot water and steam behind, that huge devil devils had seized the sticks from the fire and cruelly assaulted those who were not yet hors de combat till they had risen up and fled screaming in all directions.

This is not only very visual writing but also told in a fashion that brings out the

slapstick comedy of the situation. Steger had a rare talent for humour. She did not tell the reader whether she punished her son, but we learn that she gave Mary a tin of sardines to compensate for the lost lizard, plus a plug of tobacco, and allowed her to sleep in the washhouse.

Steger finished her essay on a serious note.

> To me all kinds of gunpowder are hateful. Horror and death are both its flower and its fruit.
>
> I have seen the roaring horrors of great cannons mowing down the shuddering innocent pilgrims in the recent war in Arabia, and I have met it in a sniper's rifle on the roof of the world. I wish I could resurrect the man who invented it.
>
> He would probably die the peaceful death of old age for I should never be able to decide on a mode of finishing him bad enough for his final execution.

We learn more about Steger's life in the next essay of 31 August 1929. She introduces John Martin, a drover, who was "mending his saddle beneath the shade of a date palm while he waited for his washing to dry." In this essay Steger also waxes lyrical about the sky "in the great roof of the Northern Territory."

> Summer skies are to me my northern skies...
>
> I have seen them peeping, deepest blue through snowflakes of gossamer cloud and I have revelled in the glory of gold and crimson of winter sunsets. I have quivered with awe when their faces turned leaden with rage, while they sent forth their mighty battalions of storms, wrath and hurricane, heralded by vast walls of blinding red dust, which always

remind me of the wall of fire that travelled before the Israelites...

My special sky, my particular gallery of art, is a spring morning with a line full of snowy sheets and garments, flapping and cracking with sharp little retorts in the fresh breeze, the green grass beneath the line, the deep blue sky above, and the pink flocked blossom of peach and almond trees floating downward and tenderly carressing the dancing linen as they pass.

I cannot understand why people look with contempt on washing, or at least on the doing of it. For me it is a glorious art and I revel in it... I may not help to clean the Aegean stables but I have my place in life...

Great artists paint pictures that will hang on insensate walls. I wash shirts to ornament and hang on living temples.

Steger was speaking directly to women whose domestic work was undervalued by society. She brought a fresh point of view, giving a status to washing which it had never had before. It was an original viewpoint which could have helped women to reassess their worth. In Steger's view washing was an honourable profession. In addition, Steger had none of the modern conveniences of the day, such as gas and electricity or laid-on water, available to housewives in the city. Before Steger started her wash she had to ensure that she had sufficient firewood to burn under the copper, as well as an adequate supply of water. When the tank was dry this would have meant buying it, or carrying it from the local bore. She had to contend with the hot climate in summer. This may have helped the clothes to dry faster, but it must have been very uncomfortable with the added heat of a wood-fired copper under an unlined galvanised-iron roof.

But Steger had a lot more to write about than her domestic arrangements. She was deeply concerned by the plight of the Aboriginal women who lived with their families in camps beside Ghantown. Her essay on 14 September 1929 speaks of the

funeral of an Aboriginal baby.

> Today the washing drags. Not that I am tired, but I keep looking away across the plain, which the afternoon sun has bathed in mellow gold to where a little group of people are slowly walking westward with long shadows behind them.

The baby had succumbed to influenza, because "Aboriginal babies have very little stamina and once sick, go very quickly." [3]

> Now Mr Page[4] kneels down, and the setting sun throws a crimson glory over the group. I know that he is giving that tiny soul back to the Creator. Death will be more merciful than life perhaps would have been.

Steger captured the mood of the occasion with the baby buried in "A little grave - such a tiny spot on this great northern plain." She also highlighted the plight of the Aborigines who lived on the fringes of white society, inheriting its diseases without being able to take advantage of its benefits.

The following week (21 September 1929) there was a change of scenery. Steger started off by looking at the problem of the disappearing sock.

> There is always a couple missing somewhere, if they were a respectable married couple it wouldn't matter half as much, but it's bound to be two odd ones. Thus, when I have discovered Mr Smith's brown cashmere lurking behind a bucket, then I find that Mrs Brett's pink silk stocking is lying alone on the floor, a lonely neglected matchless beauty... Why I have wondered a hundred times, could we not have arrived on this globe

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[3] In an untitled article in the *Herald* (Melbourne), 16 July 1932, Steger wrote, "In the old shed behind my goat-yard there were thirteen corpses one morning alone."

[4] A missionary at the Australian Inland Mission.

with one leg?

But the real purpose of the article was to tell of a wood-gathering expedition to the West Australian border. In the desert country to the north of Australia there are vast stretches of land without trees. Where there are trees they are often stunted accacia or mulga. Without electricity or gas, wood was needed for cooking.

Steger went with a party of twenty camels and two Aboriginal helpers. They returned three days later with six months' supply of sandalwood. Close to where it grew there was a waterhole about a mile long.

> All around it were great gum trees, full of screaming parrots, the air was fragrant with honey blossoms... Hundreds and thousands of ducks were swimming and diving about in the clear water.

Steger asked Snowy, her Aboriginal companion, who owned the land and was told, "No that white man no bin see him longa this fella place." She said, "I thought it a rather good chance to get my name on the map, so I christened the water, Winifred's Joy Waterhole."

Afterwards, "We each took an axe and stacks of ropes and began to make havoc among the gums and the sandalwood." She worked so hard that Snowy said, "My word, Missus too much good one fella longa axe." The same could not be said about Mary who "was lazy as usual." Steger sent her off to get something for their dinner.

> She scurried away and soon I could see her skinny legs and grubby skirts flying through the bush behind her dozen or so mangy dogs... She brought four rabbits, five grubs, one porcupine and one lizard. I generously allowed her to keep three grubs, the porcupine, and the lizard for the use of her own commisariat.

There is gentle humour in this piece, combined with pride in her own endeavours, which showed that she could be self-sufficient and work as hard as any man.

The mood changed on 2 November 1929, when she wrote about the death of an Afghan camel-man:

> within the hut lies one who will travel the long dry road no more... the camels he loved and called by name will turn their long necks and watch for him in vain... Thirty years and odd the long road had known him.

His friends prepared the body for burial and "bathed him and wound him around with snowy white calico." She questioned whether he loved

> the little hut that he may never more enter... I have seen the place on the Afghan border where the heart dwelt... of the little village beneath the Himalayas shaded with great banyan trees, of the sugar cane that waved near the well... of the purring of his mother's loom, as she spun the clothes to cover them, of the tinkling of his sister's anklets as she prepared the evening meal.

This was the place he yearned for but he was unable to return to his homeland because "ever the call had come from some needy relative. Help us or we die." The money he earned from his camels in Australia was needed to feed his relatives in India.

Over three weeks from 9 to 23 November 1929, Steger wrote about a Moslem wedding between a seventeen year old woman and the husband who was twice her age, because it was "regarded as distinctly an advantage, he having reached the years of discretion." There are fascinating glimpses of the wedding ceremony. The bride was not present when the groom made his vows, one of which was in response to the question "If you marry another can you treat them equitably?" In a state where women had gained the vote and were pressing for a greater say in government, the subservient position of the Moslem woman was striking. Her welfare was in the hands of her husband, who was asked if he knew "that for every tear they shed you must answer to God, who has given

life to this woman for you to hold till Judgement Day?"

The wedding took place over sixteen days, culminating in the wedding feast, to which the town folk were invited. They were served their food in bowls, instead of eating from their hands in Indian fashion. The Aborigines were also present, having taken part in the preparation of the food. The Moslem women remained in seclusion, while the men dined outside with their guests. The curry was cooked in huge boilers and contained six sheep. There were also chupatis (an unleavened bread made into little flat cakes). For dessert there was Halwa, which was made with five gallons of syrup. It was another eight days before the marriage was consummated, when the groom "was escorted to where the bride awaits him."

On 14 December 1929, Steger related an incident with an employer during the time she was in Adelaide, trying to earn enough money for her fare back to Oodnadatta, after her first Moslem husband had died. She was "such a sweet old lady. You felt you wanted to pay her reverence." At the time, a washerwoman was entitled to five shillings for a day's work, plus her morning tea and lunch. Steger was cheated of her morning tea, given an inadequate lunch and then short paid. Often there was no soap, so that Steger started supplying her own. But the final straw was the day she was handed an axe and told to chop her own wood from an old dead tree in the garden. Steger gave her notice and "the old lady released a stream of invective." At which Steger flew into a rage. "I told her just what I thought, which was quite a fair amount."

On 21 December 1929, the editor commented that the article had "aroused interest from the readers." In the same issue "Reply to Winifred the Washerwoman" by M.E.V. from Port Kenny, Eyre Peninsula was published. The author described how she washed for the workmen. The main material in use was hessian from empty sacks. From this was made bath-mats, aprons, shopping bags, table-cloths and woggas. The wogga was the outside covering of a shearer's swag. They were made by joining four cornsacks together and "used instead of an eiderdown." They also made their own soap, bread and currant buns. Like Steger, the writer waxed lyrical about the scenery.

A blue haze hangs over the uncut scrub. I have never before seen this haze in Australia since I left England...

Well, Winifred, the swallows build every year in between the eaves of the washhouse, a grape vine has grown along the inside, and supports a still feather-lined nest from which the brood has gone.The short evening draws to twilight. The animals are fed, the cows milked, eggs gathered, morning sticks collected. A night wind has sprung up, and a whisper amongst the leaves is restful.

On 4 January 1930, Steger commented on the fact that people write "drivel, such as how to manage your wife, or husband." She explained that her late husband never managed her and "I fancy that he realised that it was better not to try." She illustrated her point with a very funny account of a plague of cockroaches. "The kitchen fairly rattled with them at nighttime." When she complained to her husband he said, "A couple of beetles couldn't do such a vast amount of harm." After trying all sorts of remedies without avail, the author slipped a cockroach into the bottom of a bowl of peasoup for her husband. When he complained she said, "It's only a little beetle." Then he found a dead cockroach in his shaving water. Another one turned up in his porridge and at lunch there was one in his blancmange. That evening he returned with some poison and said, "Poor little woman, why didn't you tell me before what a nuisance they were." Steger concluded her article with the comment: "The male mind is hard to understand. But it was a horrible job to catch those slithery vermin, and decorate the meals with them."

On 8 March 1930, she wrote about the birth of a son to Ameer Kahn, and of the reaction from the other men who have memories of

other births of loved children that they have left or buried in the lands beyond the seas. Their old voices will quiver and dimmed eyes will be wiped unashamed on the fringed ends of their turbans as slowly they tell, and Ameer Khan will sit with the new wonderlight of proud fatherhood in his eyes.

This was an introduction to the real point of the story, which concerned the birth of Indiah, the daughter of Amanullah and Souriya,the former rulers of Afghanistan. The child was born after the king's abdication. Steger said that she

> sat beside the bed and watched the little thing nestling into its Queen Mother in St. John's Hospital at Bombay... As for the Queen, half the time her attendants told me she lay with her face to the wall, and we who loved her knew that her heart was back behind the Khyber in the cherry embowered palace at Kabul, whence Amanullah had taken her as a bride.

In her other long running series, "The Tales of Sapphire Bill", Steger introduced a love interest between Sapphire Bill and a young white woman who lived with the Aborigines. Steger followed the same formula in "Star Dust and Soap Bubbles" and introduced John Martin, who was a suitor for her hand. He only made an occasional appearance. In the episode of 29 March 1930, he proposed to her. But first he made her lock the children and animals away so that they wouldn't be disturbed. She said, "I found myself swept... up in his strong arms, and my head lay on his dear shoulder, and I discovered that I had found a mate." But Steger was never one to sentimentalise. It wasn't long before the ants, nesting in a log on which they were sitting, began to stir, biting John just as he began to outline his plans for their future.

The amazing thing about Steger was her versatility. She could write about homely domestic chores so that they achieved a religious significance. She could also describe the lives of the camel-men and the Aborigines and bring them vividly to life. When she needed a change of scenery she transported her readers overseas.

On 19 April 1930, she wrote about an incident in India, where she was standing on the Dufferm Bridge over the Ganges, watching a religious ceremony.

> The great snowy old-world buildings rise tier upon tier on the left bank, below me ranging from pink to crimson in the glow of the setting sun.

> Graceful minarets point heavenward, reminding the faithful of the duties awaiting. Feathery palm trees sway in the evening breeze above the river, now rippling gold and crimson... Dotted in the water and in the vast multitudes above the banks are the Hindu pilgrims who have gathered from all parts of India to pay their homage to thrice sacred Kashi. Benares is the name on the railway ticket, but Kashi is the name of love bestowed by the devout on this, their holiest city.

Steger described the boats and the water buffaloes jostling side by side in the water with the devout. And the corpses of holy men, supported cross-legged. These would be placed in stone coffins "and sunk deep in the flowing heart of Mother Ganges, the giver of life."

It was a vivid picture which Steger watched from her vantage point, wearing a pale-green voile dress and carrying a parasol with red and pink roses. She was overcome by the ecstasy of the moment, as thousands of people spread their hands in worship "towards the dying day." She tried to do the same and lost her balance. In an instant

> she is hurled into the water on to the worshippers below. She came up choking and gasping for air about the same time as the man beneath. I clung tightly to him as if he had been my Anthony. He was not. I would just as fondly have clung to him if he had been a post.

This is typical Steger writing. The reader is drawn into a superbly described scene as the sun is setting over the Ganges, and is invited to share the religious rites of the Hindu pilgrims. But then, like a clown, Steger breaks the mood. The reader is jolted out of a mood of contemplation into the world of slapstick comedy. Yet it is all perfectly believable as Steger tells it. This was her great gift. The little man she fell on, who was "dressed in three inches of calico around his waist," led her to the steps and into the care of some women who lent her dry clothes."They were very kind and not so much as a smile on their faces at my ridiculous predicament."

An interesting essay in the *Herald* (Melbourne) on 14 May 1932, called "Our Friends the Telegraph Posts," described the way lone men travelling the outback gained comfort from the humming of wires and often slept against a post for company.

In "The Golden Dream", *Herald* (Melbourne) on 11 June 1932, Steger remembered her lost love of thirty years back. Set in Queensland, the vegetation was a far cry from the barrenness of Oodnadatta.

> Wild apple trees gave tender, green shade to the red-dappled milkers, which fed beneath them. Dozens of wild parrots be-jewelled the hillside. Here and there a golden wattle offered royal banquet to the humming bees. To me, the crowning glory of that little Queensland valley was the time when the gold wattle was in bloom.
>
> It was that time now in my dream, idly talking and laughing we two wandered about. I think I had come to fetch the cattle home.

The young man was being sent away by his parents and he asked Steger if she would "promise to wait for him - and later marry; somewhere off in the future when he had made his fortune." The boy was "barely eighteen , and I was sixteen but the parting was fraught with tragedy." They never met again because he was killed overseas. The writing borders on the sentimental because it lacks Steger's leavening of humour. This could have been because it was a true account of an early romance during the time she lived on the Darling Downs in Queensland.

The "Star Dust and Soap Bubbles" stories have not dated. The philosophy of life Steger embraced is still relevant. Her humour can still strike a chord. The injustice she expressed towards the treatment of the Aborigine has become universally recognised, while her celebration of the Australian landscape and the need to preserve the environment have become an integral part of Australian culture.

Chapter Twelve

CHEATED OUT OF SUCCESS

The "Tales of Sapphire Bill" and "Stardust and Soap Bubbles" attracted a wide audience. After World War II the management of Station 3L0 in Victoria offered Steger a contract to combine the two series into a film script. Steger talks about the incident in the following transcript of an interview with Stella Guthrie c.1978.

> I was up in the Territory working on a station. I was having a spell and put my van to rest, people were very kind to me and wanted me always to come and stay with them. And I stayed with these people. They were name of Davises - nice people. And I got a letter one day and the letter said we want your permission to make a film out of "Sapphire Bill" and "Stardust and Soap Bubbles". We want to use "Stardust and Soap Bubbles" as the woman and "Sapphire Bill" as her brother - one film with your permission and we'll send you copies - the papers. I had to go into Coober Pedy. It was a long way from Miller's Creek. And in Coober Pedy I went before a JP and signing these papers and telling these people - these people were - well the number of the Melbourne Station 3L0. I signed the papers. I had to go down to Adelaide and naturally I went to see my editor, the big boss of the *Advertiser* [Sir Lloyd Dumas] whom I was working for at the time and I said, "Oh, I've sold the film rights - `Sapphire Bill' and `Stardust and Soap Bubbles.'" And he said, "What's that?" "I've sold the film rights." He said, "Hey, explain it." "Oh," I said, "I got this letter and I signed it and I had to sign it before a JP in Coober Pedy." He said, "Have you got any papers down here with you?" I said, "They're over at the Salvation Army Palace in my suitcase." He said, "Hold on a minute." He called up and came to the front. "You go

downstairs," he said, "and my car is down there. And you go and get those papers out of your suitcase."

Oh dear, oh dear. It was awful. I went to the Salvation Army and picked up the papers and back I came with the papers. The secretary's waiting there and the editor's sitting there. And I give him the papers and he looked at it and he said, "Winifred, you can't do that there 'ere." I said, "Why not, Sir? I thought it would be to your advantage to have the stuff that you're printing weekly turned into a film." "No," he said. "What about our rights? We've got rights in the stuff." But," I said, "can't you let it go and let the film go?" "No," he said, "we can't." And he told the secretary, he said, "Take a letter down, Miss so and so," and he dictated a letter to her. To those people, 3L0 - that's the station. Tell those people they can't have the film, that we own the rights - the royalties on this thing, and we can't let it go."

And so that was cut out. I don't know - I had a lot of trouble all my life with one thing and another. And that's the end of that. When I talked to the editor I said, "But why not?" He said, "Winifred, we want this ourselves. We're going to make a film of it." So my heart went up once again. There's hope yet. And he said, "How long can you stay in Adelaide?" I said, "Not too long." "What will it cost?" "I suppose it will cost me about three pounds a week to board." He said, "That'll be arranged for. Now you'll stay down here two months and write that film for us as you described it. As you were going to work for the others."

I thought that was a darned good idea. So I went to the Salvation Army and made arrangments to stay there and went back again. Well, they gave me, the *Advertiser* had a room that used to look out this way, corner ways, King William Street going that way and another street that way. And they gave me the room upstairs and they put a typewriter in for me

and fixed me everything, all the papers there. I could ring a bell if I wanted anything, but I had to work sometime in the morning to sometime in the afternoon. And I worked like blazes and every night a man would come in - a man named Chapman. I'll never forget that name. A man named Chapman came and he collected it from me and he'd lock it in the safe. Piece after piece was down and I'd work and work and work. Sometimes it'd be "Sapphire Bill" I was working on and somedays it would be "Stardust and Soap Bubbles." Well, the stack was growing, and then come one Sunday morning, people, an old couple in charge of the 5AD film-making business and they had an office in the Advertiser building and I come in that morning and Mr Chapman met me at the door of my room as I was going in to type. "I've got very bad news for you this morning, Mrs Steger. Haven't you heard?" "No, Sir." "Mr and Mrs - I forget the name - were killed in a motor car coming up from Henley Beach." That was on the Sunday, the day before."Now," he said, "we've been considering the matter. You'll have to stop this for a while because I've got a film coming on and I'm getting the actors employed. I've got to get my film over first. Now what I tell you to do. You go back to the bush for another twelve months. In twelve months time you come down again and we'll discuss the matter." I don't know how many months - he got the sack. Oh, I never came back. Nothing was ever done.

For Winifred Steger this was a tragedy. The publicity which would have surrounded the series would have helped her immeasureably. She would have become better known, so that when she tried to publish her novels later she would have had a much better chance of success. And she could have used the money. As it was she was exploited by the *Advertiser*, which not only denied her a chance of success in a wider field but kept her working without remuneration, except for her board and lodging. They also retained her manuscript. The *Advertiser* office appears to have no record of this

episode or of the whereabouts of the manuscript.[1]





Winifred Steger, 1935. At the time she was working as a hawker with an old truck driven by her son, Deen (Joseph). Photograph: the *Australian Women's Weekly*.

[1] Margaret Bullock and Gill Coleman, personal interview, *Advertiser*, 8 March 1994.

Chapter Thirteen

THIS MAD URGE: WRITING NOVELS

After the commercial market for her articles dried up Steger began to write novels. But times had changed, there was no longer a ready acceptance of her work, especially her novels. She wrote that she had "Fourteen unpublished novels lying tranced in an old drawer. Books that when I wrote them seemed to me to out do even Shakespeare or Macaulay." [1] In a later letter she said:

> I write a thousand things but they merely give editors mental indigestion, though strangely enough if I give them the stuff free of charge it's always gratefully acccepted, only thanks do not pay the rent. I once gave three eighty thousand word novels to a struggling little country paper to serialize them.[2] It, as they said, doubled the circulation and took over three years to finish. I asked for no money believing that one should always try to benefit the parts you happened to live in. Oh yes, the editor was very grateful but that did not cover all the countless pages of paper I had used. Even today I am supplying free stories for a small magazine[3] - stuff of humour in order to help brighten others' lives. But as I said before it does not pay the rent and the pension does not go very far. Only I cannot but wonder why since the stuff is always acceptable I cannot earn much by it. I wrote to Macmillans of Melbourne, offered them as a gamble my whole stacked up outfit. I told them the truth. I wanted the money to cover my passing over. There were all those novels and short stories, even a few plays and humour to cover many dozens of books. And yet so mad is this urge for writing that paid or not I keep going. If

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[1] Winifred Steger, letter to the author, n.d. March 1973.
[2] *Northern Argus*, Clare, South Australia.
[3] *Senior Citizens' News*, South Australia.

> I had had some grand family or noted person behind me it might have been different. A nonenitity is indeed handicapped... I am not dead yet and have fourteen unwanted novels in the box. Give another hundred years I might have them accepted, as it is the God of Fire will have a glorious glowing feast - anyway I believe in reincarnation and when I come back I mean to paint this old firmament in black shadows of printers' ink.[4]

By the time I got to know Steger in 1973 her novels had done the rounds of most of the mainstream publishers in Australia. I suggested she write to Nat Susman, editor of the Australasian Book Society. I had not read any of her work at this stage and did not know whether it fitted in with their list, which was biased in favour of themes which glorified the worker at the expense of the boss. They often published books which were not acceptable to the mainstream publisher. I understood Steger's struggle to get published and her sense of frustration as her unpublished books piled up. There were many other writers in the same situation. But because of her age my main concern was to try and ensure that her MSS were not destroyed on her death. At the time she was ninety-one. I sent Steger some information on the National Library and asked her to "please leave a letter requesting that when you depart this happy land your papers, letters, manuscripts will be sent to them for safe keeping until you return." [5]

I had already been in touch with the National Library suggesting that they make an offer to purchase Steger's MSS. Pauline Fanning, the Principal Library in the Australian Reference Section, wrote to Steger:

> Mrs Hilarie Lindsay has told us that you have been a prolific writer and that you might be willing to place your manuscripts in the National Library. We would certainly be glad to have custody of them, as we have a large collection of literary manuscripts and one that is used by many

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[4] Winifred Steger, letter to the author, 3 January 1974.
[5] The author, letter to Winifred Steger, 23 February 1974.

research workers.

> If you did decide to transfer your papers to the Library we would probably be able to make a small payment for them. We have a liaison officer in Adelaide who would be able to collect the papers and arrange their transport to Canberra.[6]

However, nothing came of this because Steger wanted her novels to be more than a resource for future researchers. Fortunately, there were others who took an interest in Winifred Steger and who made a genuine attempt to help her. Nancy Flannery (then Robinson) of Nadjuri Press had been a frequent visitor to Steger's home in Ridgehaven. She had sent "The Magnolia Queen" to the Lutheran Church of Australia Board of Publication in 1977 but it was rejected. At the same time a copy was sent to Pastor Doug Nicholls, the Aboriginal Governor of South Australia, which was also returned. Before Steger moved to Campbelltown Nursing Home in 1979 she was faced with the problem of the disposal of her unpublished novels which filled a small chest of drawers. Nancy Flannery agreed to take them, and later placed them in the Mortlock Library for safe keeping. Without Flannery's intervention Steger's large volume of unpublished work could have been lost.

I did a systematic search of the ten boxes of Steger's manuscripts in the Mortlock Library. Some of the novels were complete, others I managed to piece together from odd pages and chapters, including her one children's novel, "The Sleepy Mountain."

I had previously read Steger's three serials from photocopies sent to me by the editor of the *Northern Argus*, Clare. I knew the years of publication, because Steger had sent me a single tear-sheet from each serial early in our correspondence.The first one published was "Jack's Jane," which appeared in thirty-two weekly episodes from 11 December 1962 until 14 August 1963. This was followed by "Four Rings on her Finger." It ran from 27 January 1965 until 19 May 1965 and ended abruptly after Grace, the

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[6] Pauline Fanning, letter to Winifred Steger, 17 February 1974.

protagonist, married. The complete MS in the Mortlock Library is a much longer work. "The Door that Loved" followed and ran for thirty-eight weeks, finishing in 1967. These were the only novels Steger was able to place.

Though there are echoes of her "Sapphire Bill" and "Stardust and Soap Bubbles" series in the novels there is a difference. The newspaper articles were told in the first person through the voices of Sapphire Bill and Winifred the Washerwoman. They had an authentic ring which made it easy for the reader to empathise with them. Each weekly episode was contained in itself, though there was a thread running through the series in the style of a discursive narrative, with the same characters appearing in different episodes. This type of writing was Steger's forte.

Steger's novels ~~fall into a class of their own, so that they cannot be compared with those of any other writer of the period. They~~ are in the romantic genre, with a noble heroine who is harshly treated but rewarded in the long run with unexpected riches and marriage to a man who loves her. But the novels have an added dimension which lifts them above the category of a Mills and Boon story. Steger introduces minor characters, often stockmen, who indulge in long philosophical discussions. These are informative but hold up the story, though they give the reader a glimpse into the author's mind. Steger's love of travel is also reflected in her work. It means that her novels often lack unity because there is no one central place to which the reader can return.

One of the strengths of Steger's work is the settings which present an idyllic picture of the Australian bush. It was the place that Steger had come to love and to which she longed to return. Constrained by her age and financial circumstances, she yearned for that part of her life that had gone for ever. As she poured her thoughts on to paper, churning out novels one after the other, she was able to relive it in her imagination.

One of Steger's main difficulties was that she was living in the past. It was her colourful past which made her the focus of so much publicity when *Always Bells* was

published. It was her past life which evoked the most questions in the interviews she gave. The people who flocked to her door wanted to listen to her stories of the outback because she was part of Australia's living history, a link with an era that had gone.

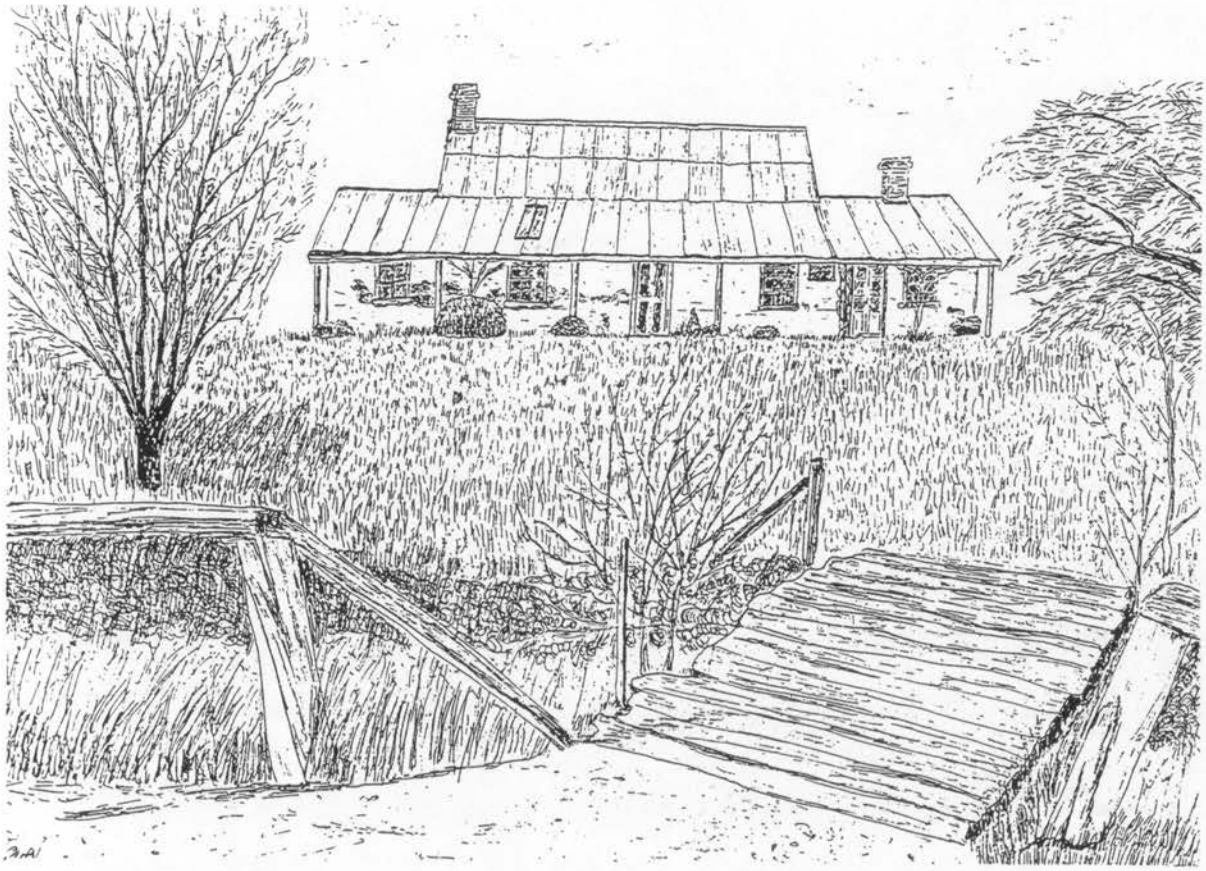
But the world had moved on and styles of writing had changed. Steger's main points of reference were Tennyson and the Bible. It is unlikely that she had read any contemporary Australian novels by writers such as Thea Astley or Jessica Anderson. She did not seem aware that literary tastes had changed, or if she was, she was prepared to ignore such changes. One reason could have been that she could not read without the help of a magnifying glass because of her deteriorating eyesight. Another, that she was obsessed with her own writing and believed in what she was doing.



John Rawsthorn, Adelaide, 1995. He boarded with Winifred Steger at Watervale c.1968, and acted as her typist and literary agent. Photograph: Philip Lindsay.

Steger also wrote five half-hour TV dramas. John Rawsthorn, who was boarding with Steger at Watervale, typed the manuscripts and acted as Steger's literary agent. He offered the plays to the Australian Broadcasting Commission without success. His name

appears as co-author on two of the scripts but "they were all Steger's own work." [6]



The house at Watervale, showing the bridge over the creek that ran past Steger's house and periodically flooded her out. Sketch courtesy Mount Horrocks Historical Museum.

Steger's plays fell into two distinct categories. "House for Sale", "Remorse too Late" and "Ten Little Bottles" were serious dramas. But the plots were contrived, the dialogue stilted and the characters stereotyped. They were set in the city and lacked the exotic bush settings which characterised Steger's other work. This was because she was writing for a market which demanded few characters, and one or two indoor sets to keep

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[6] John Rawsthorn, personal interview, 8 May 1995.

down the cost of production. Local TV producers were competing with syndicated overseas material, which could be purchased cheaper than it could be made in Australia.

"The Expectant Father" is a comedy and deals with a situation where a man is pregnant. This was an unusual theme for the 1960s. There are glimmers of originality in the script and some moments of humour. It could have been turned into a successful radio play. Another comedy is "The Trial Marriage," which concerns a young bride who lives on a dairy farm. The plot hinges on the fact that the bridegroom's mother wants her son to get married so that she will have someone to help with the milking. Some of the humour is at the expense of two Aboriginal workers who are unable to sign their name as witnesses to the wedding. In the 1960s, when the plays were written, the national conscience had not been stirred over the plight of the Aborigines. This type of humour was still acceptable. But the story-line, like those of the other plays, was too simplistic, there were no subplots, no real climax and no character development.

Steger also wrote thirteen short stories. With the exception of three which appeared in the *Senior Citizens' News*, there is no evidence that these were published. Some appear to be excerpts from her novels and do not work as short stories.

Reading Steger's unpublished fiction was a formidable exercise but I did not find it tedious. As a body of work it is impressive for the ideas it contains, as well as the insights into Steger's life. No one of the novels quite succeeds on its own merits, though there are the makings of some wonderful film scripts. Steger painted on a broad canvas and tackled controversial themes. Her characters are larger than life and Steger's bush settings create a wonderful backdrop.

Chapter Fourteen

BLACK WOMAN'S STORY: WHITE WOMAN'S VOICE

Part One: "Lady Nama of the Wongas"

Two of Steger's novels had an Aboriginal woman as protagonist. By so doing Steger was hoping to draw attention to the sad plight of Aboriginal women. "Lady Nama of the Wongas" [1] was written in 1966 and was the first novel submitted by Steger to Angus and Robertson[2]. A second and later book was the "The Magnolia Queen"[3] which Steger wrote in 1964 and submitted to the *Australian Women's Weekly.* She wrote:

> They said they could use it if I condensed it to 30,000 words. I did this but it must have bumped into a strange editor because it flew straight back. It speaks strongly of spinifex and eucalyptus - mostly factual as I know my dear natives so well.[4]

These were her two most ambitious works and ones she cared most deeply about.

While Aboriginal women did much of the work of food gathering for their tribe and were also exploited as domestic workers for white station-owners, they had little say in their own destiny. They were given away when they reached puberty. Their husbands were often chosen when they were born. If a woman displeased her husband he could beat her, and could divorce her simply by saying, "Go".[5]

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[1] Unpublished MS in the Mortlock Libary, State Library of South Australia. All future references are to this collection and are in parenthesis.

[2] Winifred Steger, letter to Beatrice Davis, 24 May 1966.

[3] Unpublished MS in the Mortlock Library, State Library of South Australia. All future references are to this collection and are in parenthesis.

[4] Winifred Steger, letter to Beatrice Davis, 5 November 1969.

[5] Douglas Lockwood, *I, the Aboriginal: The Story of Waipuldanya* (Sydney: Reader's Book Club, 1964) 119.

To try and speak from the point of view of an Aboriginal woman was a brave venture and one that would not be countenanced today. Steger had no qualms about it. She had had a long association with Aborigines, first as a girl on the Darling Downs in Queensland in the mid-1890s, where there were still remnants of a few tribes. Later, living in Ghantowns as the wife of an Indian camel-man, she came in close contact with Aboriginal women.

The camel-men depended on the Aborigines as a source of cheap labour. The Aborigines knew the country. They could guide the camel-trains across the desert to the outlying cattle and sheep stations and show the camel-men where to find water. In return, they received rations.

The tribal hunting grounds, which had provided food for the Aborigines for more than 40,000 years, had diminished, with many swallowed up in vast cattle stations which stretched for hundreds of square miles. These were held under pastoral leases which appropriated Aboriginal hunting grounds. The traditional water holes of the Aborigines were given over to cattle. The cattle also ate the herbs and shrubs which the Aborigines depended on for food and medicine. The rations the Aborigines received, though not providing the nutrition of their traditional diet, helped them to survive.

Steger had observed the breakdown of Aboriginal society caused by the coming of the white man. She also noted the behaviour of some of the missionaries who had no feeling for Aboriginal culture but saw them only as savages to be converted to Christianity. Another legacy of the coming of the white settlers was the degradation of the half-caste Aboriginal women who became outcasts. It was quite common for Aboriginal women to cohabit with Caucasian men. The white community saw it as a convenience in the absence of sufficient white women. Often the men were married but their wives remained south where the climate and living conditions were better.

In his journal "To Central Australia", written in 1887, James Arthur Vogan wrote: "Lucy is the name of a curious little black animal who waited on the boss with

two other older matured women known as stud gins, or more politely housemaids." He says that the Aboriginal husbands of the women were sent droving, despite not wanting to be separated from their wives. [6]

Halfcaste women were trained to become wives of white men in an attempt to assimilate them. "The only way a female part-Aborigine could be released from guardianship of the Chief Protector of Aborigines was through marriage to a European. The women were discouraged by law from any contact with men of negro or Asiatic origins, as these unions would have resulted in non-European racial strains."[7] The women were also trained to become domestic servants and often lived in compounds and were subject to a curfew.

Cohabitation between full blood Aboriginal women and white men was not encouraged. Milly Taylor was one of three children of a union between an Aboriginal woman and an Irish father. The father was forced to leave his Aboriginal wife because he wasn't legally married to her. The children ended up in a home.[8] European women were also discouraged from living with Aboriginal men. An early Australian Inland Mission sister married an Aboriginal man and was sent back to Sydney in disgrace.[9] This, then, is the background to relations between Aborigines and Europeans in the period of which Steger was writing.

The Wonga tribe, to which Nama belonged, lived on Freedom cattle station. The novel opens with Nama talking to herself in pidgin English as she wades in a lagoon filled with water lilies. She is feeling sad because she wanted to stay at the Mission School and become a teacher. Instead she has been claimed by her tribe because they are

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[6] James Arthur Vogan, "Journals of the Origins of Black Police Novel," 4 June 1887, Dixson MSlll, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.

[7] Ann McGrath, "Spinifex Fairies: Aboriginal Workers in the Northern Territory." *Women, Class and History*, Elizabeth Windschuttle, ed. (Victoria: Fontana/Collins, 1980) 10-11.

[8] Milly Taylor, "Born out Bush," *Women of the Centre*, Adele Pring, ed. (Apollo Bay: Pascoe Publishing, 1990) 139-156.

[9] Yve Reynolds, personal interview, Adelaide, March 1994.

short of females and need her "to marry for the good of the tribe." (2) She is torn between two cultures. On the one hand she promised the mission sisters that she wouldn't speak Pidgin English again, and yet back in her tribe it is difficult. She says:

> I think it's bad for us wild people to learn white things - it gives us too much sorrow. Our natural Gods are thrown away for a Mary God that we neither know nor understand... why could I not have stayed back at the Mission? (2)

The author tells us that Nama

> was one of a rapidly diminishing tribe of Wongas. Long, long years ago, a Wonga wife had strayed with a male of another tribe. They were chased, caught and both killed, and from that time both tribes were bent on killing each other.
>
> The Wongas being the smaller, suffered most, suffered so much that from several hundreds there remained now but fifty - gradually silting down from Upper Arnhem Land. Now down on its lower edge, there were too few males left now and those old enough to work found employment on the vast cattle stations.(3)

A Catholic mission had been established and "was endeavouring to teach the decimated Wongas Christian ideals, which were tolerated because of sundry shirts, Mother Hubbard dresses and a few blankets." (3) The mission sisters had taken four of the children to live on the mission in the hope of teaching them to be missionaries. Among them was Nama and a boy called Lomat.

Nama was lucky to be alive. She had been one of twins, the other infant a male. It was rare for twins to survive as one was usually killed at birth. In 1994, Sister Rose Barnes of the Australian Inland Misson at Oodnadatta recalled twins being born at the hospital. However, only one survived after the mother returned to her tribe. The Sister said that living conditions were hard. Often food was scarce and trying to care for two

babies would be difficult.[10]

In the case of the twins born to Nama's mother, the men had decided to let the male live. The girl child was taken to the river bank and left there to be eaten by crocodiles. However, she was still there in the morning and the tribe decided "That the Gods were angry with them and had decreed that the tribe should be punished by having to keep the dreaded child." (3-4) Nama was returned to her mother.

During the time spent together at the mission, Lomat and Nama had become attached to each other. They are hoping to marry, but first Lomat must survive an initiation ceremony. Even so, Nama fears she will be given to Narga, the Kaditicha's son. She feels that "The Christian way of selecting a mate by the path of love is best." (6) In the Wonga tribe

> laws are severe and the ruling Kaditcha saw that they were fully enforced. No lad could speak or even touch a girl's hand, till after the yearly man-making ordeal and then, if he got through that successfully, he was free to choose a maiden from those selected as the year's brides by the Kaditcha. The boys who failed must wait another year. (7)

Seven boys were selected to undergo the intiation ceremony. Steger tells us that "the Kaditcha had struck terror into their hearts." (8) He had a sadistic streak and the year before he had dropped a hot coal on to one of the boy's eyes to see if he would flinch or move. The boy lost the sight of that eye.

This, then, is the opening of a novel which seeks to explore the contrast between the old tribal way of life, and the new way of life which resulted from contact with the missionaries and the white settlers.

On Freedom Station things are far from happy. The property has been in the Grant family for ninety years. Now there is a drought with no feed for the cattle, which

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[10] Sister Rose Barnes, personal interview, Oodnadatta,November, 1994.

are dying. While this has been going on, Rodney Grant has been involved with an unprofitable racing stable. Rodney's widowed mother manages the homestead with the help of Aboriginal women, one of whom is Nama. Though Mrs Palmer is a kind woman her son is arrogant. His reaction is extreme when Nama trips and spills a jug of milk.

> With a vicious oath he pushed her off him with such force that she fell against the wall. "You filthy little devil," he shouted. "Can't you look where you're going. Get up and get out before I murder you - leave the station and get back to your filthy camp where you belong... clear out or I'll beat the life out of you." (41)

Back at the Aboriginal camp Nama's mother tries to persuade her to return to the Grant household but Nama has had enough. She hides when Rodney Grant comes looking for her.

Steger delves further into the life of the Aboriginal woman when she introduces Goonga:

> A scrawny skeleton of a man with impish eyes and an ever whining, cringing, clacking tongue; his thoughts too, as he sucks with toothless gums on an already well gnawed bone, were of the boys and the claiming of their virgin brides. His supper had been too small - just two witchetty grubs and somebody's already picked bone... Now, if he had a new young bride, she would hunt food for him and he would never be hungry like he had been for the last few years. Tassie, his wife, was old and now quite blind. The first eye she lost had been poked out accidently by a stick - the other eye, mourning its mate, had slowly dimmed into utter blackness. The old couple were kept alive only by the charity of others who tossed them an odd bone, bits of yam or a grub or two... Yes, times were bad old Goonga decided. Then the thought struck him. "I'm a man, am I not? I can have another wife... but first I must get rid of Tassie"... late that night the camp was disturbed by the angry shouts of Goonga as

he ordered Tassie to go. (47-48)

When she refused he

> whacked at her, thud, thud, with his stick. Then the Kaditcha, angry that his sacred rest was disturbed, rose and... advanced on Tassie and jabbed her with his finger. "Get out, old woman, Goonga says true. You are useless, blind and old." (48)

And so Tassie is driven from the camp to die. Nama, hearing this, wonders if she too will share the same fate when she is old. She knows that

> the men looked down on their women as fit only for breeding and hunting; she knew too they had not the spiritual rights of the men - for instance no woman could approach the tribal gods - that could be done only rarely through a male mediator... Oh why was I born native - why was I not a white girl? If the Gods are so strong, why can't they make people all white or black? (48)

Nama has no choice and she knows it. She had written to the Mission asking them to take her back but the reply had been that

> what was happening was her parents' will and she therefore must submit. In this matter the Protector of Aborigines was unable to intervene. She should remember all the good things taught her in the Mission and never forget her prayers at night and always remember that Jesus loves her. (49)

Nama's problem is a very real one. She has had a taste of the white world and learned some of the ways of white society. She has eaten white food and has learned to bathe and wear a dress. But she has been taught that she is an inferior being. She has low status in white society because she is black, and equally low status in the Aboriginal world because she is a woman. However, she does have a value in the eyes of Rodney Grant's mother, who is now left to do all the cooking for the station hands.

Steger goes into a lot of detail concerning the initiation rites.

> The sun not yet risen, the Kaditcha led his small group to the secret place selected for the ritual... the place they were being taken was sacred - a place of heavy taboo, and woe betide the hapless female who should accidently cross it and the fact become known.
>
> There are many such spots pertaining to each tribe, one sacred to the sad Mumbo who controls sickness and death, other spots sacred to the tribe totem either of animal or bird - the pigeon of the Wonga tribe...
>
> This particular spot where their Kaditcha was leading them was in the head of a deep water-torn gully, the surrounding country sandy with a few scattered old gum trees. Here the Kaditcha bade the boys lie down on the ground in such a way as to form a wheel, with their feet as the hub. They must lie flat on their backs with their faces upward to the sky. They might close their eyes, lest continual looking into the sun should blind them. Beside each lay a sharpened spear - should a boy flinch, or his health break, then the boy must rise and the spear be driven into the ground where he had lain, his ordeal over, losing, to try again some other year, brideless till he should win through. Should the boy die there, his body would be removed, the spear mark his empty place. (53-54)

This is a very precise description which Steger claimed was true.[ll] She writes that the Kaditcha was "fired with the idea of breeding a line of warriors."(54) He is intent on testing their powers of endurance which includes exposing their genitals to the sun's rays, as well as being denied water. To add to their torture, the Kaditcha dropped scorpions and other stinging creatures on to the boys who were not permitted to flinch. The ordeal was to last for ten days.

[ll] Winifred Steger, letter to Beatrice Davis, 24 May 1966, A & R papers, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.

Once the sun had set the boys were allowed to return to camp where they could "eat and drink and sleep" (54). The women prepare the food but the men eat it apart. There is no physical contact between the boys being initiated and their female relatives.

Steger diverts the reader at this point to explore the role of the Christian church as it impinges on Aboriginal culture. Mr Burns, a bigoted and despotic Protestant missionary, arrives to try and convert the natives. In a three-way encounter between Nama, Mr Burns and his wife, the reader finds out more about Aboriginal religious beliefs, as well as Steger's personal philosophy that there is more than one path to God.

Mr Burns soon shows himself to be not only a bigot but also arrogant. Nama confides in him and tells him that she wants to return to the Catholic Mission of Saint Barnabas. She does not understand his reply: "They don't belong to our religion... We happen to be Protestants." (56) The only comfort he can give her is to say, "All you can do is to pray to Jesus for help." (57) Nama asks, "Which do you think is the strongest - the Jesus God or the native Gods?" The Missionary is shocked at the question. There is no doubt in his mind: "Why Jesus Christ, of course."

Nama has been well schooled at the Catholic Mission but is not convinced.

> Then he doesn't work very hard. Why did he let the wind fall on Hijar and break his back, and Tassie be driven out to die and why does the rain fall on our enemies and none on us to make the yams and berries grow? (57)

While she is talking she sees a shell in the back of the missionaries' utility which is sacred to her tribe. She tells the missionary's wife that "In it the shades live who wait to enter another new born baby... My people will go mad with fear if they see it." (58)

Nama returns to her food-gathering, still not convinced of the power of the white gods. Praying to Jesus was no help to her when she had to leave the Mission. And there

is also the protocol of prayers at the Mission: "In talking to the Great One you wore your best dress."(90) Now her best dress is no more. Her only garment is the "Mother Hubbard" which "was a tunnel-like gown, with a hole for a neck and long sleeves... for the Missions had so devised them." (90) When gathering water-lily roots in the lagoon she is able to pray to Kunapipi wearing only "a wreath of tied poinsettia flowers."(91)

Mrs Burns is more understanding than her husband. She suggests that they return the shell to where they found it, but he refuses. He is intent on seeing how many souls he can win to Christ. He plans to use the shell as a christening font. His wife, regarding her husband as her spiritual mentor, is not as hidebound in her beliefs as he is. She asks him if he is sure "that ours is the one truth faith?" (94) He is incensed, but she keeps on with her probing.

> I read a quotation from the Hindu Vedas once - at least they are more tolerant than we are... It was: "By many roads man approachest unto Me, at the top I meet them all."(94)

Her husband replies that the natives are "heathen, steeped in ignorance and sin and the Almighty has put me here to carry out his work for the saving of souls." (94)

His wife refuses to be silenced; despite his anger and the fact that he does not speak to her at breakfast, she asks him how he knows the will of God -

> have you been up to heaven and talked with Him? Who are you to say what are His wishes... the shell you stole represents reincarnation - their shades, we call spirits. Our emotions to higher things, they call the Dreamings. The sticks they drive in the ground are their reminders of the Dreamings, even as our sticks crossed a reminder of the Cross. (96)

To her husband this is blasphemy. He says, "get down on your knees, woman, and ask forgiveness." (96)

The Kaditcha and his initiates are still away at their sacred place when the rest of the tribe arrive at the makeshift church. The minister tells them to leave their weapons outside. They are reluctant to do this but know "that if they did not obey, they might not get the clothes and blankets."(98) But both they and the missionary are to be disappointed. When the Aborigines see the sacred shell they flee, even breaking camp, so that that night the Kaditcha and the young men had to "follow in the wake of the others to the new camp." (98)

This episode highlights the effect the missionaries had on tribal life. While there were genuine conversions, many professed to become Christian because they hoped to benefit materially. The missionaries arrived uninvited. Like Mr Burns many of them had no regard for the Aboriginal Dreaming which stretched back over 40,000 years and was closely tied to the land. They were ignorant of the nature of sacred sites and sacred relics.

The episode also demonstrates the difference between the status of a woman in white society who is able to answer back to her husband, and that of a black woman who can be ordered out of the camp by her husband and has no choice but to obey.

After this diversion Steger returns to the Aboriginal camp where Nama is "standing by the women's fire" (100) when the Kaditcha returns with the initiates. She notices how haggard and sick Lomat is and watches to see if he eats any of the witchetty grubs she had given his mother to cook for him. The Kaditcha has decided that the ordeal will last for three extra days.

> Other tribes had pointed to the Wongas as weaklings. He meant to prove that his tribe were not weaklings, but warriors, who would prove themselves as famous as the Amepaws... who carried the fighting snake totem and were known for their prowess and courage in battle. (101)

Many of the boys are ill and Nama knows that the "added three days might be

the bridge between life and death for them." (101) Lomat's mother is also worried and sends Nama on a quest to find "the medicine the Gods gave us a thousand moons ago." (103)

It is a heroic journey that Nama makes through the lands of hostile tribes. She has to be careful not to be seen. First she goes through the country of the Wandimans - the natives of the Kangaroo totem. Here she sleeps in the fork of a tree to escape detection, with only a few wild peaches for food. On the third day she is lucky enough to catch a young wallaby. She makes a small fire near a group of rocks and when the food is cooked she tramps along, eating as she goes. All the time her thoughts are with Lomat, wondering if he had "missed the sight of her standing about the women's fire... would he fret for her if she never returned, or would his shade come questing for hers in the spirit world?" (129)

On the morning of the fourth day Nama swims across a crocodile-infested river to the land of the White Snake Totem. Steger describes these people as "known in other tribes for their strength and cruelty." (135) With a feeling of terror Nama begins the long walk across a stony plain. All the time she is "conscious of an odd smell... Nama had never smelt... the sea, so was puzzled as to what it might be." (136) Later she climbs a tree and has her first glimpse of the Arafura Sea. Then she sees

> the dreaming sticks and a huge painted boulder with dream sticks spiralling away from it - here too were no less than three sea shells surrounded by yet smaller shells. This then was the sacred spot of the great White Snake People. (138)

Beyond the dream sticks she sees the sacred bushes. She waits, hidden in the foliage of a tree, while a party of hunters walk underneath carrying a freshly killed calf. She sees the markings on the men's bodies and knows that they are preparing for a corroboree. She waits until she hears "the long wailing call of the didgeridoo, followed by the drums, then the measured slapping on the ground of bare feet... the roar of voices." (199) Then she darts from tree to tree until she comes to the sacred bushes, she gathers an

armful and turns for home.

If this quest for the "medicine bush" was a test for Nama, equal to the initiation ceremony undergone by the young men of her tribe, she is to be tested still further. She sees

> A flock of birds [flying] fanwise across the sky then, nearing the trees, suddenly veered in their course. Wise in bush ways, she knew they had seen something that had made them swerve... very stealthily crossing from bush to bush she drew nearer to the timber... She went closer and then saw the face. "Boss Rodney!" she said in startled amazement. She bent down and touched his hands.(156-157)

Rodney Grant had been thrown from his horse and knocked unconscious. Nama is faced with a dilemma. When she had been recalled by her tribe from the Mission she had no choice. Now she has. She has the medicine bush that Lomat's mother asked her to get. It is important that she return with it as soon as possible. On the other hand Rodney Grant needs her help. Despite the fact that he abused her and ordered her from the station, he has her respect. She sees her white masters as superior beings. It is an agonising decision but the young black girl, moved finally by the spirit of Christianity, remains by Rodney's side and helps him return to the homestead. By doing this she is risking the life of her young black lover. But Steger was a romantic. She arranges for an accident to befall the Kaditcha, who is pushed to his death, thus releasing the initiates from their ordeal. And so Lomat is spared, without recourse to the healing power of the sacred bushes. Through the intervention of Rodney Grant the young couple are reunited. Steger provides what she sees as a satisfactory ending: they marry and move to a cottage on the station. Here Nama returns to work in the homestead kitchen and Lomat finds employment as a stockman. Her novel would have been more powerful if she had not tried to provide answers. Yet, at the same time, it was a progressive novel with interesting ideas.

Steger offered the novel to Angus and Robertson. It was rejected on the strength

of a reader's report which described it as "uninteresting because it is badly written, and the interwoven Aboriginal beliefs and customs are lacking in authentic character."[12]

Steger submitted the novel again in 1970 and once again it was rejected. This time the reader took exception to

> the brief and pointless introduction of a Presbyterian clergyman [which] is so loaded with venom that the author forgets she is dealing with the church that has done more for the outback than any other - the chain of AIM hospitals and Flynn's priceless achievements - the Flying Doctor Service.[13]

This was a misreading of her MS as nowhere does Steger mention the Presbyterian Church. Her missionary is simply described as Protestant. Steger needed him to demonstrate the gulf between the Aboriginal Dreaming and the comparatively recent Christian philosophy. She also wanted to show the different status of the wife of an Aboriginal man and that of a white woman. The main weakness of the text is that Steger was unable to develop the story of Nama, except in a comparatively superficial way, because it is not possible for a non-Aboriginal to penetrate their culture. Even those born to it spend years learning the secrets. Just the same, Steger's insights into the lives of black women as she saw them are enlightening. Nama's conflict was caused by the incursion of white society into her life. Steger was describing what she had actually witnessed. She believed that the only way to help Aboriginal women was by intervention from white society.

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[12] Unsigned reader's report, 20 June 1966, A & R papers, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.

[13] Unsigned reader's report, 25 March 1970, A & R papers, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.

Chapter Fifteen

BLACK WOMAN'S STORY: WHITE WOMAN'S VOICE

Part Two: "The Magnolia Queen"

There had been a change in community attitudes to Aborigines by the time Steger wrote "The Magnolia Queen." [1] In 1967 a federal referendum to include Aborigines in the national census had been carried by a ninety per cent majority. A lot of work had gone on in the background by Aborigines active in the Aborigines Advancement League, formed in 1958. Among them was Pastor Doug Nicholls, who became the first Aboriginal governor in Australia when he was made Governor of South Australia in December 1976.[2] His appointment showed that it was possible for Aborigines to aspire to high office in the wider community, a theme which Steger explores in "The Magnolia Queen." [3]

The success of Nama in "Lady Nama of the Wongas," and Leeba in the "Magnolia Queen," is measured by their acceptance in white society. Steger was trying to provide solutions for what she saw as the problems of Aboriginal women. In the case of Nama the intervention of "Boss Rodney" makes it possible for the young Aboriginal woman to break with tribal law and marry the man she loves, though she will still live in close proximity to her own people. In the case of Leeba, Steger presents a fairytale solution where the young black woman is "rescued" from her Aboriginal culture by a Hollywood movie magnate.

Even though Steger had observed Aboriginal women at first hand, and had lived

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[1] "The Magnolia Queen," unpublished MS in the Mortlock Library, State Library of South Australia. All references are to this collection and are in parenthesis.

[2] He resigned owing to ill-health in April 1977.

[3] Another Aboriginal who achieved high office was Neville Bonner, who became the first person of Aboriginal descent to sit in federal parliament.

alongside them, she could not really come to grips with their situation, despite her feelings of sympathy, because she was an outsider. She was a member of the dominant white culture which exploited the Aborigines as a source of cheap labour. Though she set her story against a backdrop of Aboriginal culture she was unable to enter into the psyche of the Aboriginal woman. The story could have been written about a young white girl who was homeless, merely by altering the colour of the heroine's skin.

Steger's story deals with a rescue by a knight-errant. The difference is that, unlike most knight-errants who claim the desirable young woman as their reward, John West is motivated by the perverse notion that with money and training he can make a wild Aboriginal girl into a "pseudo" white woman who will take the world by storm.

As in Shaw's *Pygmalion*[4], the protagonist is left with a sense of divided self. The experiment in social engineering may have been an outward success but the young women have lost their sense of self in the process. Shaw's Eliza Dolittle is still the daughter of a dustman. Leeba is still an Aboriginal girl whose culture is inherent in her being, something she can never forget. The men who bring about the changes in the two women have no conception of this. They have achieved their aim, which was to take a girl from what they saw as an underprivileged background, and successfully groom her so that she can take her place in "high society." Shaw's comedy of manners seeks to expose the shallowness of the upper classes in the Europe of his day, which placed good breeding above all else. The joke is at the expense of that society. But Steger was making a serious attempt to right the perceived wrongs perpetrated against Aboriginal women. It was a difficult task because her vision was flawed. She was writing about a culture she did not fully understand.

As with Nama in "Lady Nama of the Wongas," the story of Leeba opens at the time of a man-making ceremony. Leeba, a thirteen-year-old Aboriginal girl, is a member of the Bullalwongs

a tribe high upon the Gulf of Carpentaria, a tribe now sadly decimated

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[4] George Bernard Shaw, *Pygmalion* (1913).

by the many feuds with their neighbours, caused long years back by a gay Lothario walking away with a maid of the next door tribe, and really if the lady had been as sweet as Leeba, no one could have blamed him. (1)

Leeba is out hunting for food and the opening scene of her catching an iguana and then diving into the river, where she is almost taken by a crocodile, is well done. Later she returns to her mother's wurly where she is upbraided for not bringing witchetty grubs. Leeba's mother is concerned for her son, Worral, who is undergoing the man-making ceremony. Her concern is passed on to Leeba

> who loved her brother dearly, though they had been parted when she was but five years old. The old ones had so decreed for Leeba was the despised thing - a woman thing, whilst Worral was a man child. They must no longer play together. (3)

But Leeba is a rebel. She decides to find out for herself how her brother is and breaks the sacred taboo.

> Like some half torpid snake Leeba crawled inch by inch to her brother's side, without sound it seemed but the dying lad caught her movement. His eyes opened and he saw her. The cracked lips murmured, or rather shaped the word "water." (3)

When she is seen by the Kaditcha, "The man making ceremony was broken, at least for this year." (4) Her offence is so enormous that she is condemned to death "at the setting of the Southern Cross... the time the evil spirits walked and claimed the spirits of those who disgraced their tribes." (4) This gives Leeba a brief respite, and at her mother's urging she runs away.

That night there is a terrible storm. In the morning Leeba finds a boat caught in the branches of a tree. And so she is able to escape her pursuers, lying hidden in the bottom of the boat under a tarpaulin, as it is swept by the current down the flooded river.

In the morning the boat runs aground and she is rescued by

> One of those strange white man creatures. Her first impulse was to escape, to leap in the river. But a gentle hand pressed her shoulder and he actually smiled at her, and oh, that smile was kind. (8)

And so begins another phase of Leeba's life with old Joe Timms, his slatternly wife and their five children. Leeba senses she is not welcome when the wife turns angrily on her husband, even though she can't understand the language: "the native of Australia is extremely sensitive and quickly and sadly knows where he or she is not welcome." (10)

Leeba remains with the Timms' family for almost a year, playing with the children, gathering food for them but keenly aware that Mrs Timms does not want her there. In the meantime Mr Timms is suffering from "the dust in his tortured lungs" (15) caused by long years of working in mines. He knows that he is dying and is concerned for his children. Then Mr Timms hears of a Catholic Mission that has started about fifty miles down the river. He cannot bring himself to send his own children there. "I've brought them up Protestant as my mother did me. I cannot sell mine for bread to the Catholic persuasion." (p.15) However, he has no such qualms about Leeba.

> He felt that Leeba being a child of the wilds had no religious faith. He had never heard the lubra mothers whisper tales of the gods to the children in the wurlies at night. (16)

Without telling Leeba where he is taking her, he asks her if she would like to have a trip down the river, where they call in at the mission. Leeba senses that something is wrong, but then a woman kisses her and offers her a piece of cake and Leeba's "fear completely vanished." (20) But the next morning when Mr Timms gets in the boat without her she breaks down.

> "No, Daddy Timms, you can't go without me," and she struggled wildly

> to get into the boat, but they held her back and her anguished eyes watched the boat with her late protector disappear around the bend of the river. (22)

Even though she is very unhappy at first she meets with kindness. The main concern of the missionaries is that Leeba might try and escape and find her way back up the river and thus perish. What they do not know is that Leeba has nowhere else to go.

As in all Steger novels, there are digressions from the main story. There is an imbecilic native boy of about eight who was picked up by Father Black, Irish doctor turned priest, and brought to the mission. The child had been left to die. The other pupil is an older Aboriginal girl. There is also the story of the building of the church, which gives a very vivid and convincing portrait of the way these early missionaries adapted to the harsh life in the Australian bush.

> There were many saplings to be cut and measured. Sheets of bark to strip from poor unprotesting gum trees for walls and roof. Then one long sapling divided the church in two with some hessian tacked to it from roof to floor because it was not thinkable that ladies sat on the same side of the church as the gentlemen. The picanninies and dogs could romp down either side of the division. There was ant bed to be mashed in water and spread over the floor, and as it hardened it made quite a nice good floor. (32)

Furniture was not easily come by so the priests asked the local stations

> to give us their unwanted kerosine tins. We can fill these with sand to make them heavy and firm and put saplings across them for seats... The congregation should sit in comfort except when dodging the nob on the saplings... The altar was another matter of care, but a large wooden tomato sauce case solved that nicely with one of Sister Monica's scant tablecloths draped over it. (32)

There is conflict once the church is finished. Technically it should not be used until it is consecrated by the bishop and this means a long wait. Father Blake is eager to begin his ministry and save "these poor heathen." (34) But Father Ward sees this as blasphemy, particularly when Father Blake says:

> "To my mind the church is already consecrated by the sap or blood, the life essence of this wet bark and these young saplings, the broken branches on the roof. They have lost their lives to the church. Think you not they loved their life, they danced with the winds above that river edge. They drank in the golden sunlight and paid obeisance to the azure skies, and now they are in obedience to us. Is this not consecration?" (34)

The younger priest is not convinced. "The very winds may carry your words to Rome. You could be excommunicated for them." Father Blake replies, "you are not long from the seminary and have yet much to learn." (34)

These exchanges between the priests are interesting. It took a particular type of dedication to survive in the heat and deprivation of some of these inland missions. When the bishop finally arrives for the consecration he finds it very trying. Fresh supplies of food have not arrived at the mission so that the bishop is forced to dine on bread and jam. He is in a sour mood by the time he is ready to consecrate the church.

The church is full but there is a stampede when the font is unveiled. The bishop is trampled as the Aborigines rush for the door. The missionaries have no idea what terrified the natives. But Leeba knows. The priests have used a shell which is sacred to the Aborigines.[5]

Once again Leeba is without a home. She is taken on a two day ride by mail

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[5] The fact that this episode also occurs in "Lady Nama of the Wongas" suggests that it might be a true story. The Aborigines were accustomed to leaving their implements and other items on the ground where they knew they would be safe. The whiteman regarded these items as abandoned and helped himself.

coach to another mission, where Father Blake promises that he will come and get her as soon as he can. It is a mission with a difference; instead of being governed by love the mission is in the hands of a Miss Jenkins, whose method of teaching was to beat "the evil" (64) out of her charges. Her one saving grace was that she was a good teacher and, despite the beatings, Leeba began to learn.

On a trip to the Zoo with Miss Jenkins, Leeba sees a kangaroo which reminds her of Dana, a pet kangaroo she once owned. It brings back memories of her past and she begins to sing to the animal, at the same time sobbing out her unhappiness. A small crowd gathers to watch. Miss Jenkins is mortified and drags Leeba away, but not before she has come to the attention of a Mr John West, who determines to find Leeba and mould her into the perfect woman, one who will "make men's hearts glow with the beauty of what a woman can be and achieve." (81) Everything is to be legal and above board, with permission from the Protector of Aborigines and a contract regarding Leeba's future drawn up by a solicitor.

From here the story changes. The reader is transported from the rugged life in the Australian bush, which, coming from Steger's own experience, is depicted in a very realistic fashion, to a world of luxury in the household of Mr West with a Mrs Adams as Leeba's governess.

Leeba soon settles into life on Mr West's country property, "Strongmans." She is given new clothes, has lessons in voice production and painting, and becomes a competent horsewoman. West is happy with her progress but realises that she needs company of her own age and sends for Molly, the oldest child of the Timms family. Molly has been earning her keep as a mother's help on a farm. Now, like Leeba, she has fallen on her feet. Instead of working, Molly becomes Mrs Adams' second pupil. It is an ideal arrangement, and the girls are happy together. However, there is a difference in status. The white girl, Molly Timms, is being trained to become a lady's maid whilst Leeba, the Aborigine, is destined for a leading place in white society as a concert singer.

A note of discord is introduced with the arrival of John West's wife and their five year old son. She accuses her husband of running "an Aboriginal harem." (126) In a melodramatic scene John comes close to killing his wife but recollects himself just in time. The next day he drives her back to the city with the child.

Life goes on as usual on the station, with the two girls studying, riding, having picnics, until one day Leeba is confronted by a black youth who has been watching her. He knows that she isn't married and makes up his mind to claim her. In a scene where he attempts to rape her he is beaten off with a stockwhip by Brown, one of the hired hands. There is another similar incident when Molly Timm's brother, Jasper, who is working as a garage mechanic, arrives to visit his sister. West tells him to "Get going before I put the dog on you." When his true identity is revealed he is invited to stay.

John West realizes that it is time to start on the last stages of Leeba's education. They are to travel abroad and she is to attend a finishing school in France. Molly is sent to work as a maid for a neighbour. The Aboriginal boy who sought to marry Leeba is not forgotten. Brown feels compassion for him as he thinks:

> It must be hard to be a native boy. How many I wonder realise how much he suffers the cold scorn of the whites... No lands left of the old tribal heritage of long ago. He remembered how not long ago a waterhole on a certain station had been deliberately poisoned to keep the natives from drinking on the property. His sacred places desecrated, his wives polluted, Lord it didn't bear thinking about. (148-149)

He offers to help the boy train as a motor mechanic and apologises for horse-whipping the boy saying, "women have to be protected." (150)

Steger introduces another long digression, in the form of a visit from the Indian hawker, Ali Khan. When Molly attemps to pat one of the camels Ali Khan tells her not to go near them because "camel have bad temper." (151). This leads to a discussion of camels in Australia which is of great interest from a natural history point of view, but

holds up the story.

Steger talks about the number of Indians who have returned home with an arm or hand missing, and of a monument in a railway station in West Australia to a man whose head was bitten off by a camel, which had been raised from a calf by its owner. There is also interesting information on the birth processes of the camel, and the fact that once a female had calved the team would move on. At night the bull calf would guide his mate back to where her calf was waiting. In dingo country the bulls would help the cows to form a circle, with the calves in the middle, to protect them from attack.

The visit of Ali Khan means a welcome break for the household. He lights a fire in the open beside the bore and cooks his curry and chupatis. Sometimes he smokes his water pipe wearing a "richly embroidered cap" in place of his turban. (155) He also plays the accordion so that the people on the station can dance. It is a charming picture but has no relevance to the story of Leeba. It is merely padding to fill out a story that at this stage tends to lag, as if the author was at a loss as to how to end it.

Molly and Leeba are alone at home with the servants when Mrs West arrives unexpectedly with her child. She is drunk and in an aggressive mood and they fear she will kill her son. Even though Leeba is terrified, she snatches the child from his cot and, together with Molly, takes shelter in an old wool shed until John West arrives. He takes his wife to a home for alcoholics where "She died a few months later." (169) After a brief discussion of his remorse about the way he neglected his wife, John turns his attention back to Leeba who has turned nineteen. There is no further mention of his young son.

The book develops quickly at this point, with John West proposing to Jane Adams, who accepts. There is no further mention of the finishing school in France. Instead, Leeba makes her debut as a singer and is an instant success. But she is in a strange mood the morning after her concert. She is to go on tour but she notices that she is to sing only to white people. There were no Aborigines in her audience and she yearns

for them. Her friends Jasper and Molly Timms are there, however, and Jasper confesses his love. Leeba says that she returns his love.

Later, she meets a black man and he arranges for her to sing to her own people who are willing to

> welcome the woman thing back into their midst into the tribe. She should be of their tribe and each year they would wait here beside the river to greet her and a mighty roar of approval boomed across the plain. She had won their kinds hearts, she was rich with love and race. (256)

As a novel this is not a success. The story of Leeba is unconvincing and the plot is contrived. John West, in his treatment of his wife and son, is far from kind, though Steger tells the reader that he is a noble character. He seems to have little interest in the child and the reason for his wife's drinking is not explained. The reader gains the impression that it is caused by her husband's neglect, as he pursues his business interests in Hollywood.

It seems that Steger had hoped to develop the theme of white and black races united in brotherhood, but this didn't work out. Steger never came to grips with the character of Leeba. She was more successful with Nama because the girl remained in her natural environment and with her own people. Leeba is separated from hers early in the story. Steger makes no attempt to explore Leeba's mind or show her sense of displacement. It is not until the very end of the book, when Leeba has succeeded in the white man's world, that she harks back to her own people, and her desire to be with them. The suggestion that she will marry the white boy, Jasper Timms, and go and live with him in a hut in the bush is also a little ludricous. When the book ends Leeba, as the Magnolia Queen, is committed to a six months' concert tour of Australia. She has been discovered. A new world has opened up to her with the chance to travel, to be acclaimed. Living with the wealthy John West she has developed a taste for luxury, for comfort. It seems unlikely that she would be satisfied to be stuck away in a remote place with an uneducated husband. For the same reasons it is impossible for her to return to

the Aboriginal way of life.

As with "Lady Nama of the Wongas," Steger set great store on this novel, but she lacked the skill to turn it into a convincing work of fiction. There are lyrical passages in the book but it lacks the lyrical descriptions of the landscape which typify most of Steger's work. It was not that Steger was unable to write well, but she seemed unable to create convincing and rounded characters with whom the reader could identify and which are needed if a novel is to succeed. She could have done this with editorial help but time was against her. She was ninety-two years old. Even though her mind was still active, the task was beyond her. "The Magnolia Queen" was her last major work.

Chapter Sixteen

THE SLEEPY MOUNTAIN

"The Sleepy Mountain" [1] is the only children's work among Winifred Steger's papers. She made a reference to a

> project I am working on viz a book for mothers to read stories to their children at night, consisting of twelve stories to suit ages from five to twelve... I have just finished the fourth story - should have the rest finished in about three weeks[2]

There is no further mention of this manuscript in Steger's correspondence with Beatrice Davis. However, in 1969 Steger wrote:

> I am now working on a children's book. Being a fairy tale wrapped on our precious metals. The idea I used some years ago back in the children's pages of the *Chronicle*. Now I am enlarging it into book form.[3]

It is likely Steger did not submit this manuscript as there is no further reference to it, perhaps because in 1969 Steger was caught up in the excitement and publicity of the release of *Always Bells*. Despite Steger's claim, I could find no evidence of publication of any part of "The Sleepy Mountain" in the children's pages of the *Chronicle*.

"The Sleepy Mountain" is a novel of 20,000 words. The story is a fantasy, but differs markedly from fantasies written by other Australian women writers such as Ola

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[1] Unpublished MS in the Mortlock Library, State Library of South Australia. All future references are to this collection and are in parenthesis.

[2] Winifred Steger, letter to Beatrice Davis, 1 June 1966.

[3] Winifred Steger, letter to Beatrice Davis, 11 February 1969.

Cohn,[4] Pixie O'Harris,[5] and Ida Rentoul Outhwaite.[6] Their fantasy world was inhabited by fairies and elves. They painted a magical picture of a world free from the harsh realities of poverty, sickness and death which impinged on many children's lives.

Steger's fantasy world is more robust and didactic in tone. It could be that she wanted to show children who only had one parent, who had to spend time away from home earning money to support them that this was not unique, and that it is not the end of the world when one parent dies. This is still relevant given the high level of separation and divorce in our society.

Betty and Jimmy, the two children in Steger's novel, are outgoing and anxious to please their father, who tries to teach them to be polite, honest, and truthful. The children have learned to be self-reliant. We see Betty making stews and sweeping the floor. Her older brother, Jimmy, takes the place of the absent father, as he combs his sister's hair and tries to keep her in order.

This could make for a very dull book but it is relieved by Steger's characterisation of the two children, who emerge as very real people. They have grown up in the outback, surrounded by the natural beauty of the bush, with a pony called Buster and a pet kangaroo called Thump. They know nothing of any other life and are content.

Their father, Mr Marsh, is a boundary rider whose wife died soon after Betty was born.

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[4] *The Fairies' Tree* (Geelong, Victoria: H. Tatlock Miller, 1932); *More About the Fairies' Tree* (Melbourne: the author, 1932). Ola Cohn carved a tree known as the Fairies' Tree which stands in the Melbourne Botanical Gardens.

[5] *Pixie O'Harris Fairy Book* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1925); *Pearl, Pinkie and Sea Greenie* (Sydney: A & R, 1933), *The Fairy who Wouldn't Fly* (Sydney: Marchant, 1945.) Pixie O'Harris also decorated the wards of children's hospitals with fairyland scenes.

[6] *Blossom, a Fairy Story* (London: A.&.C. Black, 1928). She was also a well known illustrator.

> They had no other relations. Neither had Mr Marsh money enough to pay anyone to mind the children. It worried him that he had to leave them so much alone whilst he was away working... He was trying to save enough to later send them to boarding school. Jimmy did his best during his father's long absences to care and tend his young sister... A hard lonely life for the children but they didn't mind it.(2)

Winifred Steger's personal situation was similar at one stage. She was often away for weeks at a time. Pansy looked after Rhamat, even though he was eighteen months older.

> She saw him fed, and washed and took themselves to school. I could not have carried on but for her care of herself and her brother. and the goodness of the schoolmaster and others. ("After the Bells", 87)

Steger does not sentimentalise their situation and there is no harking back to the loss of her husband. In the same fashion she speaks in a very matter of fact manner of the death of Mrs Marsh. Death and hardship were facts of life in the inland. There were no government handouts, so only those who were willing to work survived. There was always work for good stockmen in Australia where the cattle runs were thousands of miles across.[7]

Children became independent at an early age. Elizabeth Burchill, a nursing sister with the Australian Inland Mission in 1930, says that they

> lived in galvanized iron huts with earth floors... [and] received fortnightly lessons through the South Australian Correspondence School. "Invisible" teachers kept in touch with "invisible" pupils, whose lessons were supervised in most cases by mothers or A.I.M. sisters. Children looked wide-eyed at pictures of scenes they had never actually seen,

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[7] Innamincka Station covered an area of 1,000 square miles and in a good season supported 30,000 head of cattle. See Elizabeth Burchill, *Innamincka* (Melbourne: Hodder & Stoughton, 1969) 76-77. All future references are to this edition and are in parenthesis.

> things like trains, trams, strange animals, ships, modern houses with smooth green lawns and profusely growing flowers, shop window displays... We met children at thirteen or fourteen who could ride a horse or a camel, and pick off kangaroos and rabbits, with all the skill of a mature hunter. (*Innamincka*, 51-52)

Many children would have identified with Betty and Jimmy, and envied their lifestyle, free from the discipline of school and the supervision of adults.

The story opens on a high note which captures the reader's attention.

> "Oh for goodness sake stop wriggling! If you combed your hair every morning as Dad told you to, it wouldn't be so tangled, but oh dear no! not you. Too dashed lazy. What with grass seeds and jam, no wonder it hurts and I've broken two more teeth out of the comb." (1)

This is the older brother of nine talking to his seven-year-old sister, described as "A sweetly pretty little girl. Her hair long curly and golden. Eyes of violet blue but now full of angry tears." (1) She is one of the few female protagonists in a Steger novel who does not have red hair.[8] It seems likely that Steger's protagonists in her adult novels were based on herself,[9] but that Betty was modelled on her daughter, Pansy. The two-year difference in the age of the children is the same as between Pansy and her brother Rhamat. Rhamat becomes Jimmy in most of Steger's stories about her family in her "Star Dust and Soap Bubbles" series.

The description of Betty with "grass seeds and jam" in her hair is at variance with the "hair long golden and curly". The latter image conveys the idea of the romantic princess of fairytales, but Betty is definitely not that. She may be "sweetly pretty," but

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[8] The other two are the Aborigines, Nama, in "Lady Nama of the Wongas" and Leeba in "The Magnolia Queen."

[9] "her hair was not red, it had auburn tints." Peter Steger, personal interview, Wallaville, Queensland, 29 June 1994.

she is also wilful and not easily dominated by her older brother. He may look after her by brushing her hair. She is the one with the sense of adventure.

In "The Sleepy Mountain" the children are shown as having a carefree life. They do not go to school as Steger's children did. They have little contact with the outside world and are dependent on others to bring them supplies and clothes.

> Once a month the station waggon would arrive carrying their rations. The children watched for and loved those days. Often the station people would include a packet of lollies or biscuits for them. Then the driver of the waggon often took them for a small ride in the truck, but best of all were the times when the lady from the homestead would send them a parcel of clothes grown too small for her own children. Then there was the fun of dressing up in the new old garments. Pants and shirts for Jimmy. Little frilly frocks for Betty. How she would dance and squeal with joy as she unfolded each garment. (2)

The story unfolds as the children wander away to the foot of a mountain. They are looking for quondongs, a type of wild peach. "For these children who rarely ever tasted fruit they were a great treat." (3) They have been told by their father to keep away from the mountain because it is sacred to the Aborigines. They tell him that if they went there they wouldn't disturb anything. He takes them outside to "a small fenced enclosure" which is their mother's grave. "Would you like a lot of wild natives scrambling over her resting place? " The children are shocked. "Oh no - no!" they cried. "Very well then. Neither would the poor natives like us whites tramping about on their sacred grounds." (5)

They decide not to tell their father they'd been exploring in case

> he wouldn't let us come again. He gets so mad. I hate it when he's mad, sides we wouldn't be able to come and get more quondongs... Do you think other children's fathers are as mean as ours? He's got such a lot of

don'ts in his head and I just hate him when he's don'ting. (9)

This provokes a quarrel with Jimmy who says, "He don'ts because he is taking the best care of us that he can. If he didn't don't, then that would show he didn't love us and didn't care what happens to us." To which his sister only says, "Pooh!" (9-10)

While they are exploring Jimmy finds a cave. It has a door that is a "mass of moving colours sliding, gliding and fading into one another with an endless movement." (10) As they watch the door opens and they see

> A small wizened little man dressed all in black... the garments glittered with some sort of shiny dust... He looked at the children for a few seconds just as if he had never seen children before, then said in a shaky little voice... "Were you knocking, if so I didn't hear you, this dust"... He held the door invitingly open. (10-11)

Jimmy is about to refuse but Betty replies, "we should like to come in." (13) And so they are introduced to an underground world that is unlike anything else in Australian children's literature. Lewis Carroll's Alice also journeyed underground and found a world peopled with strange creatures. But Carroll's work had a distinctly English flavour, with tea parties and games of croquet. Steger's work is full of the flavour of the Australian bush. Carroll's Alice meets a series of fantastic characters like the Cheshire Cat, the Duchess, the White Rabbit, and the Mad Hatter, but in the end she is no better informed about the natural world than before. Jimmy and Betty also encounter fantastic characters, but Steger uses her text as an educational tool to teach children about the mineral wealth hidden in their country. The same information could be gained by reading a text book, or by visiting a museum, but Steger does it in a much more interesting way, with the children interacting with the strange characters they encounter. Because of this, the didactic nature of the work becomes acceptable.

Inside the mountain the children find themselves in a large hall where

> Walls, floor and roof glittered as if painted with broken glass. Two small

men not half Betty's size were up on ladders... washing down the walls.

As they worked they sang:

We never stop
Our wet rags flop
Upon the walls of Micah
We splosh and splash
We do our dash
But wish we hadn't ought ter.

When Jimmy asks what the shiny stuff is he is told that it's micah. "It's really a most useful thing. But I thought you people that lived upon the outside knew everything." To which the boy replies, "My father says that no one person can know everything." And so they discover the many uses of micah, and the fact that the old man wishes "its dust didn't sift down my back so. It itches and annoys me... of course it has a longer name given it by the scientists... but why bother now. You will learn all about that later when you are in school." (12)

They walk deeper into the mountain and enter what seems to be a cave of living fire:

> but Jimmy realizing quickly that the fire apparently had no heat in it, held Betty firmly by the wrist. The huge place was shaped something like the half of a scooped out orange. Flames, yellow, green and pink ran flickering in long tongues high in the domed roof and Jimmy was amazed to see them lapping around their bare toes yet they felt nothing at all... Seated on a small throne which also seemed on fire was a tiny lady and her gown was... made of some gossamer like stuff that allowed the fiery tongues to peep through... Upon her dainty head she carried a lovely crown whose points were leaping coloured flames. (13)

The Opal Queen puts the children in their place when they call her Mrs Queen. She tells

them she is to be addressed as "Your Majesty." Just the same she is pleased to see them because

> I get tired of only having my sister elements to talk to. They bore me. Each one claiming to be more valuable than the other, when really each one has her particular use in the great world up above. (13)

She tells the children that her use is

> mostly... ornamental... But also to some millions of people, who live in a land called Persia I am almost regarded as holy. You see these people revere fire as the great and mighty cleaner which makes all things pure... Each night at sundown these people can be seen holding high their hands in reverence toward the sun whom they regarded as the greatest fire of all... because Opal looks like fire they get all they can of it to remind them of the cleansing fire of the great sun... Opal is one of the stone quartz. We make and store it down here for you people up there. (13-14)

This is rather a long speech but Steger turns the focus back on the children when Betty says, "I wish our fire at home was like this... Often when I make stews it burns me." (14))

Their voyage of discovery continues when they are invited to visit the Opal Queen's sister who

> gets about far more than us. She comes up out of the top of the mountain sometimes... throws her ashes and burning stones all over the place, really most untidy. Not far from here in a land called New Zealand she makes the water hot so that the Maori people who live there can cook their meals. Must be funny to see them pop outside and dangle their meat and vegetables in a steaming hole in the ground. (14)

Jimmy is reluctant to go any further into the mountain but his sister reminds him that "Dad says we must not be rude to people and these are expecting us." (15) Here Steger creates a diversion with a description of Betty : "Her teeth were small white and

shiny so that when she smiled her face seemed like an angel's. If only her temper matched." (15) We learn that the white teeth were "not from the work of an ordinary tooth brush. These articles were a luxury that as yet they had neither touched or seen. Their brushes used daily were from some living tree. Their father would cut a round piece off a branch some four inches long then he would fringe out the end." (15)

Later the children are taken by a crab who is captain of the Opal Queen's bodyguard into

> a long narrow tunnel which sloped rather steeply downwards - so much so that they had a job to stop themselves from running... The tunnel was lit by rows of fishes standing on their tails and each one carrying a small torch. (17)

At the bottom of the tunnel they enter a room

> so pure so clear and lovely that the children only held their breath... [it was] as if they had entered into the heart of a great pearly rose, whose petals ran to the horizon.

Here they meet the Pearl Queen "so small and lovely in her shimmering robes of misty green and pearl." (17) As they watch

> a thousand sword fish all the same size stood in ranks. Their swords and scales on their bodies gleaming. A large fish stood on a rock and shouted orders at them. "Right," the sergeant bellowed and a thousand shiny tails swung to the right. "Left" came the command the tails swung to the left... Jimmy cheered wildly... The last order was "produce handky" and to the children's amaze a thousand soldiers each drew a little green handky from under its fin and waved it."... What ever do fish soldiers want a handky for?" Betty asked...."Why you big silly, to wipe their noses with which are always wet." (p.20)

They are invited to a meal. But first "A pretty shell dish holding a cake of pink soap"

(20) is placed before the children with the request, "you will please to wash your hands before you dine." The meal is served by lobsters. The author evidently overlooked the hint of cannabalism when one of the courses served is "broiled lobster." (20) "Jimmy was so hungry that he forgot to watch his sister and my how she ate. But strange to say the dainty Queen beat them both. She bit and snapped into the food like some small machine gun." (20) At the end of the meal the band with "little shell violins" played the national anthem while the Queen "kept time with a fishbone." (20)

An oyster there was in the deep blue sea
who swallowed a grit as big as a flea
Oh glory, said she.
A mother I'll be
of a rosy pearl
deep down within me. (20)

Once again there are overtones of Alice who encountered the Gryphon and the Mock Turtle and watched them dance the Lobster Quadrille. Perhaps Steger had these images in her subconscious mind when she wrote the Pearl Queen scenes. But the settings are different, as well as the ideas expressed.

The journey continues through the dominion of the Queen of Diamonds. Inside, the children "saw that floor, walls and roof were one great blaze of rainbow light. Not one soft dim corner anywhere to rest smarting eyes. Betty shivered and muttered, `Gosh I wish I had my woollies on it's awful cold in here.'" Jimmy leads Betty to the Queen, however, he refuses to kiss her hand. The Queen says, "Are there no manners taught where you come from?" Betty replies, "Daddy teaches us manners. Jimmy knows them all but I forget sometimes." To which the Queen replies, "Speak when you're spoken to... if you two are a sample of the people on top I don't think much of you... Perhaps you do not know who I am?" (24) The children confess that the guide didn't really explain. Once again there are echoes of Lewis Carroll and his Queen of Hearts when the Diamond Queen says, "Tomorrow at dawn off comes his head." (24) She goes on to tell

them that she is "the greatest queen in all the world. My dominions are wide... Women plead on their knees to wear a crumb from my table." (24) Betty isn't impressed and says, "When our bread makes crumbs we don't eat 'em but sweep 'em out the door. I've got a twiggy broom." (24) The Queen explains that

> the crumbs I speak of are not bread but royal jewels - that women crave for and men die for. I am more beautfiful than the sun at dawning... I am the most valuable thing in all the world. (24)

She asks Jimmy if he likes her. Steger tells us that

> the children had been taught by their father to always tell the truth - so now they felt very uncomfortable. If they said what they thought this great lady would indeed be angry. (24)

When she demands an answer Jimmy replies,

> When I touched your hand it was hard and cold like stone and that's all you are, just a lump of stone. I've read of you in my lesson books. You're just carbon. The book says that once you were a tree that turned into coal and later under great pressure and heat you turned into carbon, the stuff you are now... You're hard and cruel without a lot of love in you and the best you boast about yourself is disgraceful and very bad manners indeed... If you were very scarce then maybe you could boast a little, but there's plenty of you only you are not allowed to come freely out lest your price would fall, because our father says, "Too much of anything cheapens it." (25)

Jimmy tells her that, "I wouldn't trade Buster, or Thump my kangaroo for all your palaces and kingdoms. I like things that live and love me - not blobs of hard stone." (25) The Queen is very angry until Betty begins to feel sorry and says,

> Never mind, dear Queenie. Don't be cross, you didn't make yourself. You can't help it if you are only a pretty bit of carbon. You too are useful, good for something or other or God wouldn't have planned you. It's not

your fault that you can't love. Not your fault if men murder and do bad things to get you. It's men's fault. Dad says they should not be greedy.

At that the Queen begins to cry. "There is little else. I am just a false value." (26)

It is the interchange with the children that makes this such an interesting text. The minerals and precious stones emerge as real characters with real feelings. They react as humans, one moment full of self pride and then reduced to self pity. It is a difficult task to anthromorphosise inanimate objects and show them as living beings. It is easier to do with animals, which are more closely related to the human species. Certainly, Lewis Carroll did it with a pack of cards. But he had an advantage. The court cards in his pack of cards are humanised, with titles such as the King and Queen of Hearts. And they are pictured with human form. This makes it easier for the mind to make the transition from a piece of cardboard to a human being, in the same fashion that a cardboard cut-out doll can be vested with human characteristics in a child's mind.

One of the most sympathetic characters in the book is Tommy Coal. "He was shiny black and on his face was such a happy grin that they liked him at once." (27) As he shows them around his domain he says,

> It's not much to look at... Once it was a lovely green forest, washed by the rain, and warmed by the sun, but He who made us said that we had had our fun and now must become of use to his great earth. So he covered us carefully up with sand and stones and pressed us lovingly to sleep and after millions of years we woke up as you see us now. (28)

The Coal King has no pretensions. Betty wants to see his throne and crown. He only laughs and says he is just a poor carbon relation. He invites them to play games and soon "the three were racing about laughing and shouting till the coal palace rang with their happy noise." (28) The children ask him if he is lonely:

> The boy's face saddened, he sighed then said, "Well, I don't mean to complain. I have a few sister coals. The first has a rather long name. I'll

> spell it out for you, ANTHRACITE. Then there's my maiden sister, Miss Brown Coal. She happens to be the youngest. There's one or two other sorts of coal but I never see them because their palaces are mostly in different countries. (28)

He looks at Betty and tells her she is "the most beautiful thing I ever saw. I wonder if I gave you all my kingdom if you would stay down here and marry me." She replies,

> I'm afraid not. You see I have to make stews for my father and sweep the floor with my twiggy broom. My Daddy says everybody must work and help each other, so I do what I can because he works so hard to take care of us and comes home so very tired.

Here once again Steger is trying to instil a lesson into her reader. It is the sort of thing she would have been likely to have said to her own children. As a washerwoman she had to work very hard, added to that was her newspaper work which called for a weekly article. But the dialogue flows so naturally that it isn't out of place.

Tommy Coal decides Betty is right. "It would be too hard for you down here. You would be washing clothes night and day." Betty sees how "Her faded pink dress was now black. Her bare legs and feet were as black as ink and she looked at Jimmy and saw that he was just as dirty." (29)

The children are sorry to part with the Coal King, but find another room with a pool of warm water where they wash themselves and their clothes. And then the "Cave room began to glow with a deep red light and a clear voice called from the distance, `Hold there, who rents my kingdom with those horrid noises?'" (31) It is the Ruby Queen. The children are surprised to see the servants pay obeisance to their queen by lying flat on the floor.

The Queen asks the children what they think of the palace and Betty says, "It's awfully red, you should have more colours, perhaps yellow." Jimmy apologises for his

sister, "she's only a girl and they are always a bit silly like," (34) at which the Queen laughs and says, "You seem to have a rather poor opinion of us females." (35) She tells him that she is the most expensive gem in the world. Jimmy reminds her that the Queen of Diamonds made the same claim. The Ruby Queen says, "there are so many that if they were let loose you could buy them as cheap as our poor Brother Coal." She explains that she is very rare indeed. And then Steger introduces a brief geography lesson about Burma, using a wall as a screen so that the children are able to experience Burma with its elephants and temples.

Steger used the same idea in the "Tales of Sapphire Bill" when Sapphire Bill meets the old Japanese man in "The Malay Village" (28 July 1932). Like the Ruby Queen the old man has the power to project images on to a wall.

The children are also given a glimpse of the India Steger loved where

> roses grow thickly... and the earth people make scents from them and the perfume of flowers floats for miles. Great mountains fill the horizon tipped with snow. Rivers roam foaming between their banks and upon these rivers are hundreds of boat houses where people come for holidays. And flowering trees and tall bamboos cast a cool shade.

Betty is wistful. "I just wish we had some of your blue at home."

> "Oh, but my dear, you have and far more than me. All you have to do is look up to the sky above. That is a royal roof of blue and on some days watch your mountain ranges when she puts on her flimsy dreamy dress of purest shades of violet."

As they leave Betty notices that there is a scrap of blue sapphire caught on a bandage on her foot, but she doesn't say anything and moves very carefully so that it won't fall off. When her brother sees it he says,

> "It's just stealing. Oh yes, plain stealing when you know it was not given to you."

"Oh you bad thing, you are calling me a stealer. I didn't steal it. It was in my bandage." (43)

But in the end Betty decides to take it back. The Sapphire Queen is waiting:

I thought you would be returning... Why I noticed that piece of me was caught in your little sister's bandage. I knew that as soon as she noticed it she would be bringing it back again. I knew you were honest children. (44)

But Betty tells the truth. "I thought it wouldn't matter if I kept it... But Jimmy called it stealing... I'll never do it again." (44)

Later they encounter Mr Mineral Oil, plus a sleeping earthquake that wakes "and swallows a couple of towns" (46), and finally the Gold King. He turns out to be most arrogant of them all. He yells at the children: "Who are you that you do not fall down and pay me worship? I the great King of Gold? Are you not afraid of me?" (5l) But Jimmy is not impressed: "you are only a bit of stuffy cold metal looking like dirty mustard until kind hands polish you. You are only a form of exchange, lumps of mud would do as well." (5l) The Gold King says, "It was easier to hand me over the counter as a small coin than to hand up an elephant in exchange for a pound of sugar." (53)

Before they leave they discover that despite his wealth the Gold King is not happy. "I get very sad watching people use me for greed." (53-54) Betty says, "I'm not greedy. I always give Jimmy half of what ever I have." (54)

"Well, and so you should. If you could see me in the ground in my bed. I lie there quiet. I don't wish to hurt anyone. It's not easy being King Metal," and he sighed so heavily and then the thousand guards all sighed too, and the wind they made almost blew the children off their feet. (54)

The spell of this strange underground world is broken when they hear the sound of Thump their kangaroo and "found themselves sitting on a log with an uneaten

quondong in their hands." (57)

It is hard to find a plausible ending to a fantasy. Lewis Carroll ended his story with Alice waking up to find it just a dream. But her dream belonged to herself alone. The dream that Jimmy and Betty experienced was a shared dream, which is unusual.

Like *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, there is a epilogue to round off the story. Alice says:

> "Oh, I've had such a curious dream!"... and she told her sister, as well as she could remember them, all these strange Adventures of hers... and when she had finished, her sister kissed her, and said, "It *was* a curious dream, dear, certainly: but now run in to your tea, it's getting late."

As Alice's older sister sits there with her eyes closed

> The long grass rustled at her feet as the White Rabbit hurried by... she could hear the rattle of the teacups as the March Hare and his friend shared their never-ending meal... So she sat with closed eyes... though she knew she had but to open them again, and all would change to dull reality - the grass would be rustling in the wind and the pool rippling to the waving of the reeds - the rattling teacups would change to tinkling sheepbells, and the Queens' shrill cry to the voice of the shepherd boy. (ll2) [10]

In Steger's story the children tell their father of their strange experience: "very quietly he listened and was not cross because he was one of the kind of fathers who understands." (57) And then he tells them that it's time for bed.

> They vowed they were not at all sleepy which of course is not to be wondered at, but the wind swayed the branches softly on Sleepy

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[10] Lewis Caroll [Charles Lutwidge Dodgson], *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (London:1865).

Mountain. The night birds called to each other and the flowering wattle blessed the star dim darkness with its sweet fragrance. Down below as father and children slept Buster and Thump were out on the great plain nibbling the green grasses.

Later the family leaves for the city, after Jimmy finds a few lumps of gold which he recognizes from his dream. Steger ends her story with the words: "The curlew still wails above Sleepy Mountain and the sorrowing native still hides his dead upon her lonely sides." (58)

It is a most imaginative text, told in a vivid and entertaining manner and demonstrates Steger's great creativity and versatility. Whether today's children would be interested is hard to say. Children's books have undergone a change since Steger wrote "The Sleepy Mountain." Television has brought the outside world closer and influenced the manner of story telling. Children do not seem to have the attention span needed to read a long, wordy book, and parents do not read aloud to children as much as they once did. However, with an illustrator who shared Steger's vision, and a sympathetic editor to shorten the text without distorting or destroying it, "The Sleepy Mountain" would make an attractive picture story book for young readers. It would also lend itself to a radio play and a film or TV script.

Chapter Seventeen

TICKLING THE FUNNY BONE

A billboard for the *Chronicle* once described Winifred Steger as "South Australia's foremost humorist." [1] This was on her return to journalism after a break during World War II and referred to her "Star Dust & Soap Bubbles" series which was notable for its self-deprecating humour. More often that not Steger herself, or members of her family, were the butt of the jokes. However, it is the humour contained in her later works which is of particular interest. Steger was hoping to be regarded as a serious novelist, but sometimes her humour burst through in an unexpected way so that it became an intrusion.

Most humorous novels set the tone from the first paragraph. However, Steger's flashes of humour bob up in unexpected places to catch the reader unawares. The novels start on a serious note and are interspersed with great junks of philosophy and general knowledge which, while enlightening, hold up the story. But it is the incongruous characters, introduced deliberately to inject a note of humour, which make her novels different.

The butt of Steger's jokes are often women with pretensions to high society, women she had obviously come in contact with over the years. These characters occur randomly and serve no real purpose.

In "The Magnolia Queen" we meet Lady Carter, an elderly titled woman living on a property with her son and his wife. For reasons not explained, her son and daughter-in-law try to exclude her from the local picnic races when they decide to go by

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[1] Guthrie tapes.

horseback. Often the picnic races were the one big social event of the year, where all the familes from outlying stations came to town to renew friendships and exchange gossip. It was also a chance for women to dress up, so would have been a great deprivation not to be able to attend. Steger sets the scene by saying that once the word got round "that the great film magnate would be attending... every female in the district that could put her neck through a dress would be here." (ll)

Lady Carter, a formidable old lady, refused to be left at home. "The old dear was astride a huge clydesdale horse, her short stumpy legs sticking straight out from the animal's back, the fine lace on her pantaloons in full view" (p.ll) She is afraid to dismount in front of the crowd and is still seated on her horse when the starter's pistol goes off for the first race. Before she can rein in her horse he is off, trying to catch the leader, and Lady Carter is thrown to the ground. The only casualties are the buttons on her underwear which have popped off, so that her pantaloons fall down. There are no other attempts at humour in what is a very serious novel.

A similar episode figures in "The Shah Valley." This time it is the protagonist, Ruth, who decides to ride after her husband with a packet of consignment notes he has left behind. She also adds a parcel of clean shirts and a piece of brownie. She is riding a camel but has no straps or saddle. Instead of taking the main track she takes a short cut across the MacDonnell Ranges. Because the terrain is difficult "the animal seemed to be standing on its hind legs." (p.210) To add to her difficulties her camel chases a herd of wild goats. When the nose-line of the camel breaks, it takes off and runs

> slap into the middle of the racing field of horses trying to capture the Alice Springs Stakes... the frightened horses broke ranks and rapidly departed to all parts of the compass. The wind caught Ruth's skirts and ballooned them over her head. In a frenzied effort to protect her modesty she released the parcel. Flying shirts added the last touch of terror to the animals. One particular "carbine" received the leather wallet on its rump, and madly set off for West Australia... the playful camel set out after the horses. (210)

This is a very funny interlude but out of place in a novel which deals with family quarrels, illegal drugs, a father-in-law in gaol and his wife's death in a mental institution, plus a massacre of Aborigines.

"Four Rings on her Finger" tells the story of Grace Davies, a neglected child, who takes her revenge on men. But Steger also took the opportunity to ridicule the wife of the local mayor who, though she has come from a humble background, has an exaggerated sense of her own social standing.

> The brilliant bronzed tinted hair showed black at the roots. Her eyes somewhat resembled the bazilic glare of the blue tongued lizard. Her figure was heavy and bunchy. She could have played solitare on her bust. (8)

Steger tries to carry on the humour in what should have been a romantic scene with Grace's future husband, Russell. He takes his handkerchief out of his pocket and "scattered a shower of throat pastilles about their feet. Falling on the damp grass they soon enveloped the young couple in a strong medicinal odour." (8)

Steger uses humour again in "The Golden Chariot." This time it is an Aboriginal woman who becomes the focus, but this is a much kinder portrait than that of the social-climbing wife of the mayor in "Four Rings on her Finger." Sally Blake, disguised as a boy, has run away from a drunken father. She stumbles into an Aboriginal camp, desperate for food and water, and is given some kangaroo soup by an old Aboriginal woman. While Sally is sitting by the camp fire,

> Three young lubras crept close to Sally, finally sitting at her feet... though she was used to natives - there were always plenty around the mining fields - she had never noticed the females acting like this toward her... They were practically ogling her, with smiles and tender liquid glances.

> Suddenly the old matriarch noticed and grabbing up her waddy she aimed a blow at the nearest girl, which by rights should have brained her - but it didn't. "By crickey, what for you silly cranky fella make em eyes allabout? Me bin teach em you - this no boy fella... this bin white woman all about - you bin too much cranky fella." With a disappointed squawk the youngsters fled away to their respective wurlies. (7)

"The Devil's Pearl" opens on a note of fantasy with Satan and his wife engaged in a dialogue about the state of the world. Later the novel moves to a drover's camp and, in a scene reminiscent of the "Tales of Sapphire Bill," the men decide to give the cook a bath because "He's such a dirty cow." (13)

> "Hell! Put out your smoke - the cow is gassy enough to explode."
> The cook finally stripped, they tied him to a tree with sundry saddle straps and strips of an old towel. George, the matter-of-fact lad who was noted for saying exactly what he meant at all times, dumped down the tin of water and examined the wriggling, writhing, cursing man with a curious eye... "Christ, he stinks - ain't we got any disinfectant to put on our hands 'fore we touch him?" (14)

Steger used this episode to dispose of the cook who later

> picked up the axe and chopped the big damper into small fragments, tipped the meat tin over into the fire, then, gathering his own scant belongings, he hobbled away into town - leaving the camp cook-less. (17)

For the purpose of her story Steger wanted to introduce a Chinese cook to the camp. But he could have been there in the first place without changing the outcome. It seems that the scene was a misguided attempt by Steger to introduce some light relief into what is a very grim tale of murder over a rare black pearl.

"Grace Vance - Convict" is another of Steger's incredible works of fiction. Grace

Vance moves from poverty to riches in the course of the novel. The one brief moment of humour comes when Grace is on a visit to China. Her money has given her power and influence and a much younger Chinese man proposes marriage:

> I would be good and spend your money extremely wisely. My father says to marry a woman with plenty of money is a good thing, so I am willing to marry you and we can live here in my esteemed Father's so nice residence and save much expenses."

To which Grace Vance replies: "No thank you, Mr Foo. It's very kind of you to offer to spend, or look after my cash, only that's a service I can quite well do for myself." (77) This encounter is quite unnecessary to the story and no more is heard of Mr Foo.

Steger uses occasional black humour to lighten the grim story of Jane in "Jack's Jane." There are glimpses of Steele Rudd in a scene where a visiting minister wants to baptise her three sons. The boys put a dead cat in the bucket of water she has brought into the kitchen to be used in the ceremony. Later, after Jane has run away, Steger shifts the focus briefly on to the husband and sons who have to fend for themselves. She pokes fun at the ineptitude of Jane's younger son, Tom, who is sent to buy food. He returns with a case of sardines. He has to open the cans with an axe because he can't find a tin opener. But the humour does not flow naturally because these are two isolated incidents in a sad story in which the reader identifies strongly with the abused young wife. Steele Rudd's tales of life on the Darling Downs sustain the black humour from start to finish.

The one novel with genuine humour is "The Indomitable Biddy Malone" which rises out of Steger's own life and experiences as a sole parent. The character of the woman, which carries the story along, reflects Steger's own personality. Despite the hardships of her life she was able to survive because of her optimistic spirit and sense of humour. The story flows more naturally than most of Steger's other novels which have contrived plots and unrealistic characters.

The humour starts early when George, a sick drover, is brought to Biddy Malone

for nursing by Matt Bronson, the head of the droving team. George is badly bruised, with suspected broken ribs. Biddy Malone has nothing to use for splints. So she takes a pair of old corsets "strong enough to hold a struggling steer - beautiful creations of steel and whalebones complete with built in cuplike brassieres." It takes her an hour to get George into them because he keeps protesting, and when she has finished, "the poor boy did look a trifle odd with that brassiere affair, added to the fact that he had not shaved for a week or more." (10) Later, she tries to get him to take a dose of castor oil: "the stuff dribbling all over the bedding, in his hair and eyes and down his chest but not one drop in its proper place - down his throat." (16)

There are many such episodes in the book which, while not side-splitting as humour goes, create a strand of gentle humour which runs through the story and turns Biddy Malone into a very sympathetic character. This is the only novel where the humour works.

Chapter Eighteen

WILD BIRDS SING

Despite their obvious weaknesses, Steger's novels should not be dismissed lightly. Hers was an original mind and she had the ability to create a scene in a very vivid and convincing way. She was judged harshly by the readers at Angus and Robertson, whose comments about her work were blunt and damning. But because of her age and her unique personality, Beatrice Davis treated her gently. In addition she demonstrated a genuine affection for the elderly author, visiting her in Adelaide on one occasion and ending a letter addressed to her with the words: "With warmest regards and vivid memories of our one meeting."[1]

It is true that her novels are melodramatic with contrived plots. But there is much more to them than that. Reading the collection as a whole a pattern emerges. Certain stock characters recur over and over again. There are two types of ministers of religion. Some are portrayed as completely lacking in Christian charity as in "Grace Vance: Convict." Grace, just out of gaol, is in a desperate situation. She has no money and nowhere to go after being refused admittance to her parents' home. She goes into a church seeking sanctuary.

> A man in a clerical collar walked down the aisle. I turned to him and begged him to let me stay, I told him of my hunger, promising to work for what food he would give me.
>
> "There is nothing to be done till ten o'clock tommorow. I'll see you in the vestry then. Goodnight." And I was ushered into the cold, cruel night. (7)

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[1] Beatrice Davis, letter to Winifred Steger, 2 December 1971.

In "The Devil's Pearl" it is the church elders who lack, not only understanding, but Christian charity. Frank Eaton had brought new ideas to the church. "He saw that today's world was different. Slowly but surely new concepts were creeping into his sermons." (20) The elders accuse him "of not teaching Christ crucified... not following strictly the tenents of the church." From then on "they viewed his every action with suspicion." (20)

He is further vilified when he succours Rose, who is destitute and about to give birth in the street. He calls an ambulance and she is taken to hospital. He continues to visit her and suspicion falls on him when someone suggests he may be the father of her child. He confronts his accusers who say:

> We are as pained as you are. It does not embellish the name of the church to even have the mere suspicion breathed against our minister. We are sorry, Sir, but you have neither been wise or discreet in your visits to the girl, whom we all know is no better than she should be. (23)

And so Frank Eaton, who is shown by the author as having a genuine calling, is forced out of the ministry.

However, these men are minor figures compared to Steger's women who suffer for their mistakes. She describes the circumstances of the young mother in "The Devil's Pearl" as

> the age old story of love and betrayal. Far from her home and her parents, moneyless, without any means of support and unable to get work in her condition she had looked at the river but she was young and in her was the love of life. She couldn't jump in and end it all. So somehow she managed to keep life in her till His Reverence had found her on the street. Once in delirium of the fever a nurse heard her say, "It's not true. He does not care what happens to the sparrows." (22)

The woman's plight illustrates one of Steger's favourite themes: that of the ill-

used woman. Sometimes she runs away when life become impossible. Among these women are unmarried mothers who, deserted by their lovers, have to suffer the calmuny of society. It is an old theme that had been written about many times before, but mainly from the point of the view of the observer. Steger knew what it felt like to be pregnant and unmarried in an era when this was considered a disgrace.

There is no shame in Steger's heroines. They maintain their dignity, and also manage to keep and raise their children, at a time when the majority of babies born to unmarried mothers were taken from them at birth and given out for adoption. Their whereabouts were kept from the mothers, who were expected to go back into the world as if nothing had happened.

Steger's women do not escape lightly but their struggles are usually rewarded with marriage to a man who loves them, but who is not the father of their child. However, because of his kindness, he is willing to love and care for the child as his own.

The author mostly justifies the actions of these women, though there are exceptions. Robina in "The Devil's Pearl" betrays her husband and is punished. She steals the pearl and with her lover tries to find her way to Broome, 200 miles away. In a melodramatic ending her lover abandons her and her body is recovered later beside the body of her dead infant. Unlike most of the other pregnant women in her novels, Steger had little sympathy for Robina.

Clare, the faithless wife in "The Irish Dreamer," fares better. Thrown out by her husband and abandoned by her lover she undertakes a long journey to Ceylon (Sri Lanka). She gives birth to a child in the ruins of a Buddhist Temple, where she is discovered by a shepherd boy. Because she shows genuine remorse she is forgiven:

> My husband divorced me. I was unfaithful. The child is of another man. Now, you too will point the finger. I deserve it. You did not know what a worthless creature you saved... I bring trouble like the bird they call the stormy petrel. No one has ever gained by knowing me. (314-315)

The priest assures her that

> she has brought only good to the village... the old man had taught her that from sin one climbs to virtue, for sin and virtue are on the same string. He told her not to revile herself for loving... love itself cannot harm. (315)

Eventually she is fully redeemed and is reunited with her husband.

There is a feeling of authenticity about the people and events Steger describes. It is easy to imagine that she was reliving her long life, drawing on memories that stretched back over seventy years. Right up to the time of her death she was still searching for answers in a life that had been one of alienation and struggle.

Abandoned by her mother, she had had a deprived childhood. She lived in a humpy in the bush with a father who must have found her a burden. He died as he had lived, a poor man. He raised his only daughter without education or friends and at an early age sent her out to earn her own living.

Repeating the pattern established by her mother, Steger cut herself off from her four young children when she left home. She spent the next eight years in domestic service until she gave birth to the first of three more children in 1916. Left alone when her second husband died she struggled to support her children. She lost contact with the eldest son of her second marriage after World War II and spent her last days in a nursing home very much against her will.

It was these aspects of her life that she was re-examining through her women characters. Steger returned again and again to the theme of the woman who runs away, seeking justification for her own life story - a story that she never discussed. Though the names of the children of her one legal marriage do not appear on her death certificate it is unlikely that she could dismiss them from her consciousness. The eight year gap in her life from after she left home and abandoned her children, until she gave birth to her

first child by Ali Ackba Nuby in 1916, must have been one of intense loneliness. It must have been incredibly painful to have been separated from her baby daughter, Winifred. It is understandable that she recreated herself in her runaway heroines, seeking answers and providing ready made solutions in the wish fulfilment of unexpected legacies.

This was a far cry from her own situation. Society did not tolerate women who abandoned their children no matter what the circumstances. There were no refuges they could go to, no government pensions. Until 1934 women in Australia did not have custody rights to their own children.[2] Even if a woman had a just claim she still had to prove that she was fit to have the care of her children.[3] In addition, because Steger was rejected by her own mother, it is easy to see why all her ficitional mothers are distant and neglect their daughters.

The first of Steger's runaway women appears in "Jack's Jane", an early novel published in the *Northern Argus* in thirty-two episodes from 11 December 1962 to 14 August 1963. The novel had a subtitle: "The Story of A Farmer's Wife who Goes on Strike." But it was much more than that because Jane ran away from her husband and family, taking the money he had put aside to buy an extra block of land. In the opening chapter Jane is about to be married but runs away from the church when her husband-to-be turns up drunk after keeping her waiting. She returns home to a dismal scene where the mother is shown to be a household drudge and the father is completely unsympathetic to his daughter's plight. He orders her to "get out of that finery and get on to the milking." It seems that to Jane marriage was preferable to the continual drudgery of life on a dairy farm. When Jack appears to be repentant they have a quiet wedding. But she has only exchanged one unhappy situation for another. When she becomes pregnant her husband is angry with her. They are living in a crudely built hut. Jane's husband is too busy trying to cultivate ninety acres of land, only two of which have been ploughed, to worry about the house. When she becomes pregnant there is no

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[2] Custody of Infants Act, 1934

[3] Heather Radi, "Whose Child? Custody of Children in NSW 1854-1934," *In Pursuit of Justice, Australian Women and the Law 1788-1979*, Judy Mackinolty and Heather Radi, eds. (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1979) 120.

tenderness towards Jane but only anger because the baby is ill-timed. She wants a new stove and some lino for the kitchen floor but instead he buys a cow which she has to milk. He also gives her some fowls. She is able to sell the eggs but her husband takes the money. "She badly wishes for some cups and saucers, the tea in the enamel mugs was so hot." [4]

In a parallel with Steger's own life, Jane has another son two years after the first. Her husband collects her from hospital three days after the birth because she is needed at home.

> So, still very weak, she returned to her daily grind - cows, pigs, calves and fowls. Feed to cut, milk to separate, dishes to wash, clothes to mend, food to cook, children to mind.

In addition, Jane has to carry all the water to the house. Eighteen months later she has another son.

> The farm was now prospering, Jack had been extremely fortunate that the seaons had been so good. He had purchased another six-furrowed plough, a chaff-cutter and a hay-baler. He had also built a new barn to house his new machinery; but the old stove still wobbled on its three legs, and the floor was still as mother earth had made it.
>
> Jane's once pretty curls were now nondescript wisps, that dangled in her eyes when her arms were too full to push them back. Her eyes wore the look of one burdened beyond endurance.

She has her children but she feels that

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[4] There are no page numbers on the tear-sheets of "Jack's Jane," "The Door that Loved" and "Four Rings on her Finger" which were supplied to me by the *Northern Argus* (Clare), where they were published in the 1960s.

> she had lost them in their infancy... Yet strange to say, Jane knew a sadness as of one long bereaved, it brought back a lingering memory. They had clung to her once. She had clasped those tender limbs close to her.

Jane's position is untenable. In all the years of married life she had only left the farm to go to hospital to have her children, or to help out at a neighbour's who was sick. She has no money of her own. On the other hand, Jack visits the sale yards wearing his good navy suit, either alone or with one of the boys. The only saving grace in her life is the friendship of a middle-aged bachelor storekeeper, David Lane, who gets into the habit of dropping in just before tea while Jack is still out working.

> Jane's tired heart felt the sympathy of the man, and like a flower turning to the sun, she absorbed it, and slowly but surely she began to speak of her worries to him. She began to watch for this tall figure crossing the ploughed lands to the house. She did not realize where she was drifting, but David knew and flourished the drift. Jack engrossed by the farm and his new gadgets did not notice. He was blind to all but his growing prosperity.

She is tempted and when David asks her to come and live with him she is ready to go. That is until he stays over one night and she hears him snoring in the kitchen.

> For fourteen years she had suffered Jack... Her nights made hideous by it; their chokes, wheezes and gurgles... If ever she left home she would be sure that there were no snorers around.

That episode is finished but David had put the idea of leaving home into Jane's mind. The catalyst comes after Jack has promised to built her a new house and then changes his mind. Instead he decides to spend the money on some more land. When Jane protests he tells her that as he "does all the work around here," he has the right to

decide what they buy.

In one of the best chapters in the book Jane takes an axe, chops up the old stove and furniture and throws everything out the window. She puts on her old black dress, packs a suitcase and then writes a letter telling her husband she has taken the four hundred pounds he has set aside to buy the land. "It's not stealing. It's mine. I've earned it."

And so Jane goes. There is no remorse as she carves out a new career for herself. Steger glosses over the hardships, the loss and longing Jane must have felt for her children. She provides a fairytale ending in which Jane receives a five thousand pounds reward for foiling a gang of thieves. In addition, her husband realises how much he misses her. He comes to look for her and they are reunited. Jane returns to her old life but this time she has money and can demand respect.

"Jack's Jane" is the only book that has a runaway wife as the protagonist. In "The Shah Valley" the heroine is a put upon child, Ruth, whose parents are avaricious and prefer her younger sister. Ruth supports the family from her work in an office. Her father has an invalid pension from being gassed during World War l. Ruth is saved by a legacy of five hundred pounds from a maternal uncle. With it she breaks away from her family and moves to Timber Creek where she starts a market garden and eventually marries. Ruth and her husband settle on his parents' farm until the father is gaoled for growing marihuana. In a re-creation of Steger's own life Ruth and her husband travel to Oodnadatta and become camel-teamsters.

Steger uses this novel to tell the story of Lilian who cannot stand the isolation of life on a lonely cattle station. Her husband had written to his mother in Scotland to find him a wife and Lilian had arrived to meet a man much older than herself. She is left alone for long periods and eventually has an affair with a jackeroo. When her husband finds out he turns them both out at the point of a gun, without food, water or adequate clothing. They survive, but when they reach civilisation the jackeroo abandons the

woman. Ruth offers her a home but the young woman returns to England because she was "not the stuff of which the pioneer women were made... no heroine, but just a timid little woman like many millions of her sisters, so how could one condemn her?" (279).

Another story which concerns a runaway is that of Sally Blake in "The Golden Chariot: A Novel of a Miner's Daughter." Once again it is easy to imagine that Steger identified with her young heroine. Sally has come up the hard way, without a mother. She lives with her father in "a small hut built of bagging and odd slabs." (l) When the story opens she is staring at an empty jam tin. Her father has stolen the money she has earned "day after day... pulling buckets of mullock for a few bob." (l)

Driven beyond herself, Sally steals a pair of trousers and a shirt, which someone had left to dry on a log, and assumes the persona of a youth. She makes a heroic trek through the jungle without food and water, reminiscent of Nama's long walk in search of medicine for her Aboriginal lover in "Lady Nama of the Wongas.". It is obvious that the setting of "The Golden Chariot" is Tennant Creek, where Steger worked during the War, running the mess at the El Dorado Gold Mine. Sally is hoping to get to Darwin where she can find work. She has no remorse about running away when she recalls the way her father spent her wages on drink and

> the feel of the heavy mullock buckets biting into her hands as she strained to wind them from the dark depths below. She visioned the little slab shanty, the camp oven deep in its ashes, the two bark bunks on which she and her father had rolled down their one rough grey blanket each, the hessian partition, the old rusty tin dish for ablutions, and always the clamouring feeling of wanting more to eat. (ll)

There is a sense of Steger's own deprivation in those words.

Sally earns her keep as a kitchenhand in a wayside inn, the sort of job that Steger must have taken once she left her husband. She is rewarded for her courage when she discovers a gold mine which she calls "The Golden Chariot." She makes a disastrous

marriage but the husband is conveniently killed off. When her father inherits a title and a castle in England he becomes a reformed character and is reunited with his daughter.

The heroine of "Grace Vance - Convict" has just been released from gaol after a twenty-five year sentence for murdering her fiancee, who had been unfaithful to her. Steger paints her in a good light. Grace is destitute when her parents refuse to acknowlege her. After being taken in by a Chinese family, where she finds work in their laundry, she becomes a wealthy heiress on the death of her parents. Grace leaves the city behind and goes incognito to a country hotel in Queensland which is part of her legacy. She wants to think things out. It is here that she suffers her first feelings of remorse over killing her fiancee. She works as a kitchen-maid for a fortnight and then reveals her true identity as the owner. Eventually she returns to the city and uses her money to open a halfway house for women released from prison.

Another runaway is Grace in "Four Rings on her Finger." At twelve she was sent by her father to work on a property at Toowoomba, fifty miles from her home, in return for "her food and clothes and two bob a week wages." (8) This is the area where Steger spent her childhood and where she also worked from an early age for a pittance. Like Steger's own father, Grace's father is shown to be completely indifferent to the wellbeing of his daughter. When she runs away he beats her. When her employer is arrested for keeping a bawdy house, instead of letting the child return home she is sent to another situation. Here she is given two-shillings-and-sixpence per week to clean a travelling pie stall. One benefit from the job is that she can eat as many cold pies as she wishes while she is working.

But it is when Mr Jack's father comes to live with them that her troubles start. He is mentally unbalanced and Grace is given the task of looking after him. Eventually he threatens to kill her and she runs away. Steger gives a good picture of the little girl with "four shillings and twopence... tied in an old rag. On her head she placed the hat with two red roses, her most precious possession." She walks to the railway station only to find it closed, so she sleeps under a bush. In the morning she catches the train as far

as Oakey Creek, which was all she could afford. To go on to Jondaryan, the nearest station to her home, would have cost seven shillings. After she pays her fare she has only twopence left. To reach Fenshurst she is faced with an eighteen mile walk.

> In after years she often thought of the long and lonely walk. She had... never realised Australia was so big. She ran and walked, scrambled through fences, over cultivation and through brigalow scrub, sometimes skirting great mounds of prickly pear because that was before the land had been cleared by the cactoblastis beetles. She sipped water from her hands at stray water holes. She had no food and found her way by asking directions from an occasional ploughman or traveller.

She arrives home

> at the edge of dawn. Mrs Davies was waked from her sleep by a scrabbling noise at the door. She decided that it was only the wind, then she thought she heard a voice so she got up and opened the door to find a little bundle crouched on the step outside.
>
> "Mercy, whatever's this," she thought, then a wavery little voice croaked out, "It's only me, Mummy and I've only got twopence, please don't be cross."

This surely is Steger's own story.

This time her mother finds the strength of will to defy her husband and the child remains at home. Eighteen months later her mother dies and the husband takes a second wife. Once again the girl is without friends. She takes her revenge on society by marrying a clergyman she does not love. When he dies she bigamously marries three men in the merchant navy, so that she can collect their allotments.

In "The Door that Loved" Steger explores the feelings of Jonquil who at fourteen was put out to work as a mother's help. Later, as a domestic on a station, she is seduced by the son of a neighbouring farmer. "Several times they had planned to ride to the next town and be married by a Justice of the Peace but always some little thing had intervened to delay the trip." Like all Steger's heroines Jonquil is deserted by the father of her child. There is no one to help her. The farmer's wife is dying of cancer in hospital and her husband tries to take advantage of the girl. In a very brutal scene he says:

> Any fool can see what you've been up to and as a slice off a cut loaf is seldom missed, well, I aim to have my slice. I'm a lonely man, the Missus away, and I want company... I can make it worth your while. I'll raise your wages another five bob... most girls would be only too glad to have a bit of fun with a strapping fellow like me.

Jonquil is saved by one of the hired hands who offers her a bed at his house. She leaves her job with three months wages owing. But Steger wants things to work out for Jonquil. A solicitor's letter arrives and Jonquil finds that she has inherited an old cottage and eighty pounds a year from an uncle. She may have somewhere go and enough money to live on but life will not be easy. She has no furniture when she arrives at the house. And at the local store a remark is made about her husband, to which Jonquil replies, "I live alone for I have no husband." She tells her unborn child that "they will call you a funny name... but my pet you shall arrive without lies, your soul shall be truthful - so no sneaking false pretences."

Jonquil survives, though she does not marry the father of her child, whom she always thought would seek her out. Instead, the local doctor falls in love with her. She refuses to marry him at first for fear of compromising his reputation.

As Steger depicts these women they are almost too good to be true. But she uses her novels as a platform to try and right what she sees as a social wrong. In "Grace Vance: Convict" an unnamed girl is brought into the shanty which Grace owns. The girl had been a housemaid on a property but when she becomes pregnant the owner orders

her to leave. She is taken to town in "an old German waggon, a thing without springs, driven by a Clydesdale horse. The result was sure - rocking over that stony track was too much - she became ill." (175) She needs medical attention but the only doctor is hours away. Instead, an old lubra attends to the young woman who has a miscarriage. We learn that Grace is indignant at the way the girl was sent from the station. This leads to a long monologue on illegitimacy.

> Should it not be made obsolete? After all, it's only a man-made affair. It seems wrong to brand an innocent baby with a stigma. The birth of any child, however begotten, should be an holy thing, since God says man is made in His Image - and it's not only the child that is branded, but the poor unfortunate mother also.
>
> I believe that the number of illegitimates born each year is very large. I wonder if the false shame of it accounts for much of juvenile delinquency; in any case, what's the use of the ban, since it does no good to anyone. Love or lust, call it what you will, is not controlled through it...
>
> It's so easy to point the wrongs of social living. We need someone to show us the rights. We have to accept the fact that from all times, now and for all time, single women will have children... Well, since the married familes are considered a unit for orderly life, why not make the single women and their issue a natural and orderly unit of Life? Is it for the law to condemn, probably millions of children and their mothers to a stupid stigma - a stigma that can lead towards the gaols and thereby extra expenditure for the so-called righteous members of society, for let's face it, it's the law-abiding community that pays for the incarceration of the sinners (176)

If she were alive today Steger would be amazed to see the changes in attitude

towards the umarried mothers whose cause she so earnestly espoused. But at the time she wrote her novels children were still classed as "illegitimate" if they were born out of wedlock. The things she said were unpalatable to many in society, particularly the editorial staff at Angus and Robertson who had to cater to their readers.

Her novels are also characterised by the introduction of external forces which make sure that the good are rewarded and the bad get their just deserts. The rewards come in the form of unexpected legacies or lottery prizes, so that the struggling protagonist ends up with an abundance of wealth. Those who are willing to mend their ways find happiness in the end, while those who have done wrong and have not repented are punished.This was a type of wish fulfilment on the part of Steger, who had had to struggle all her life just to survive, and who owned very little at the time of her death.

It is understandable that the readers at Angus and Robertson lost patience with Winifred Steger because she bombarded them with "unpublishable books." From the very beginning they discredited her. The trouble was that they did not appreciate her as a writer. They could not view her work as a whole, as I have been able to do, like looking at a retrospective exhibition of a painter's work. It was not just that she was prolific, she was also versatile. She had ideas and imagination but she lacked the ability to hone and polish her work. Furthermore, there were few outlets for Australian novelists who did not conform to what was perceived as the market. The women's presses which valued what women had to say, the Literature Board with its assistance for writers and publishers, had not become established. Steger was born in a changing era. She had lived through the heyday of writers like the English Marie Corelli (1864-1924) who could command tremendous sales for novels where coincidence played a big part in the resolution, and where good was always rewarded and evil punished. This type of work was despised by critics and yet Corelli had a tremendous reading public in England and overseas. Steger knew Corelli's work, as she mentions her as one of the authors of books she read to her children. It is likely that she was influenced by Corelli's style, one well out of fashion by the 1960s, the period when Steger turned her hand to writing novels.

Certainly "Jack's Jane," "Four Rings on her Finger" and "The Door that Loved" attracted a large following when they were published as serials. But Steger wanted more than that. She wanted to be regarded as a serious novelist. She almost made it with "The Indomitable Biddy Malone." But Angus and Robertson were not prepared to jeopardise their reputation, or alienate their reading public. Publishing is, after all, an exercise in marketing. It is easier to publish "safe" books than run risks with books that could be decribed as sensational, with murders, rapes, Aboriginal massacres, jealousy, deception and self sacrifice; books set in a beautiful yet unyielding part of Australia, where nature is unforgiving, where floods occur without warning and yet where it is easy to die of thirst.

In a later age, with training, Steger could have succeeded as a script writer for films , or as a writer of blockbuster novels. She had the creative ability. Her trouble was that she was born at the wrong time.

Chapter Nineteen

THE LAST WORD

Steger's urge to write did not abate with age. When she moved to Adelaide at the beginning of 1969 she was still writing novels, but by 1973 this phase of her life had finished. She had developed cataracts in both eyes and could only see with the aid of a magnifying glass and even that, "is not much good to me nowadays. I can read about two lines sometimes... and then the letters all jumble together." [1] But she could still think lucidly, her sense of humour had not deserted her and she had a lifetime of stories inside her.

She found a publisher in the *Senior Citizens' News* (South Australia) and between August 1973 and June 1980 published twenty-two essays, first as "Winnie the Washerwoman," from February 1974 as "Winifred the Washerwoman," and from June 1987 as Winifred Stegar. Stegar was a variation of the spelling of her name she sometimes used, and which she had given as the surname of her second husband, Ali Ackba Nuby.

By this time the identity of "Winifred the Washerwoman" was no longer a secret. The paperback of *Always Bells* had been released and, among other publicity, Winifred Steger was the subject of several articles in the *Senior Citizens' News*. The first appeared in October 1974, together with a photograph of a smiling Winifred Steger surrounded by her oil paintings. The article mentioned the release of *Life with Ali*, the paperback edition of *Always Bells,* and then went on:

> How does one find the words to describe this wonderful lady, who though old in years is so young in heart. At an age when most are content

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[1] The Guthrie tapes.

> to sit back and vegetate, she keeps active in mind and body by story writing, painting pictures of the outback and looking after her vegetable garden.

In the issue of October 1976 there is another photograph of Winifred Steger under the caption "Winnie has a Way with Words," which refers to an interview she gave to Jim Robbins of the *Advertiser*. The editor refers to her as South Australia's "Pensioner of the Year." Steger was the subject of an article in the *Senior CitizensNews* (April 1979), which stated that she had been moved to a nursing home after she had a fall. Another article on October 1979 said that "on 15 November our beloved short story writer, Winifred Stegar[sic] will celebrate her 100th birthday at the Campbelltown Nursing home."[2] In the April 1981 issue Winifred Steger's obituary appeared, again with a photograph.

Even though Steger wrote her essays for more than fifty years, the ones written in her later years were just as vibrant, with the same depth of feeling, and awareness of current affairs, as those written in the 1930s.

She returned to the Northern Territory for the first in this series, called "Nobby in Rundle Street" (August 1973), which tells of a meeting between herself and Nobby whom she has not seen for years. She invites him home for supper and later is unable to sleep:

> My thoughts were back to my beloved North. I saw the glow of the campfires, heard the lubras giggling about them; saw in the darkness the faint outlines of the Murchison Ranges... I thought of a lonely grave in a far off land that I should never see again... my pillow was soaked with tears.

---

[2] Steger was born on 15 November 1882 and would not have turned 100 until 1982.

But when morning comes she gives herself "a proper dressing down." She recalls when Nobby's one ambition was to own a horse instead of his old camel, Gunner, which only had one eye. By chance he finds a horse bogged in the mud of a drying billabong and rescues it. He begins to care for it but soon "the horse's flanks were scarred with Gunner's teeth marks." Nobby decides to get rid of Gunner and turns him loose. However, Gunner refuses to leave.

Later, there is an hilarious account of a horse-race, with Nobby's horse, Ajax, being ridden by Steger because Nobby has the mumps. Gunner is in full pursuit of the field so that the horses panic and race off in all directions. Gunner finally knocks himself out when he runs into a tree. Ajax is the only horse to pass the winning post, but the judges declare it a no-race and refuse to give Nobby the prize-money.

In "The Voice of the Hills" (December 1973), Steger airs an injustice when she harks back to the time she wrote to the Government asking for some land for her son, offering to pay for it when it began to produce. "We are not beggars," she wrote, "just workers, and we can make good." When the letter came refusing she was sick at heart.

> Without money or education what chance did my children have?... And I - the washtub until my blistering hands and aching back refused its task... The wind and rain came down the chimney and filled the kitchen with smoke. Water ran under the door. The old rooster refused to crow, but stood with his head under his wing and the rain cascading from his drooping tail.

The wind had blown dust into the drinking water and Steger goes to the creek to find the water full of mud...

> I stood by the swirling waters; the world grey and dim... then moved beneath a great old tree and leant my face against its shaggy bark and there sobbed hopelessly... yet after a while I felt the old tree was

comforting.

Later she sees the hills "freshly washed, they pointed to the heavens - the great, the beautiful Murchison Ranges, serenely silent in their mighty strength."

Another bush story, "My Aggie" (June 1979), which has similarities to "First be Sure of the Stake" (*Chronicle*, 1 June 1933). The story concerns a card game in which the wife is the stake. In the earlier version Steger belittles the wife but in "My Aggie", the man, overcome by remorse, realizes how badly he has treated the woman who has stuck to him through good times and bad. Instead of losing the card game he battles to win and at the end says, "Aggie, old girl, I've done you wrong, but before these boys I'm asking you, Agnes Taylor, to forgive if you can and will you marry me?"

There are stories set in the city which deal with topical themes such as the introduction of the metric system ("Kill-0-Metres and Thingamyjigs," October 1975), and "Age Shall not Wither" (April 1974) in which Steger wants a new dress and is told to "get something sensible, suitable for your age... that won't show the dirt - maybe a Galatea or a nice grey gingham." However, she has set her heart on pink voile and has already ordered it. She knows that people will laugh at her and say, "Why can't the silly old thing know her place... it's not seemly to array herself in the glow of youth." "But what care I? Dreams maybe, but surely our Creator made the dreams as well."

"Ramblings" (April 1975) is a fantasy in which Satan decides to give the business world "a tablespoon of honesty." He drifts over to the Stock Exchange and "erased all falsified accounts" and then at the bank "wiped out all the rates over five per cent." He is surprised to see people shooting themselves and jumping off bridges as a result of his actions.

"Old Books" (February 1976) is a nostalgic look at some old books that a friend has given her, and how their appearance changes when they are in bookshelves with the light shining on them. It as if the authors have come alive to say, "We are not lost nor

forgotten. We live again as we shall ever live."

In "Some Kitchens" (December 1976) Steger talks about modern kitchens which look as if the "chef should wear a long white robe and a mask." She compares "the haughty white Madame of a stove" with her "little black cooker... which winks at the little tin kettle, who, in turn steams cosily when the brown teapot approaches." And she returns to her early days and her tin hut with the dirt floor and says, "wait till night dreams softly on the plains, the doors shut and the children gathered around the table... the stove winking red and cheerfully at all and sundry."

"Are Eggs Quite Respectable" (February 1977) is a farcial account of her first venture into poultry, when she orders a rooster for every hen. However, when she opens the crate "The Battle of Waterloo" starts with "blood and feathers mixed with sand."

There are episodes about Aborigines such as "Larry of the Dream Times," where Steger explores the theme of brotherhood between white and black. Larry is sent off on a foolhardy expedition to try and help a white man find a missing horse. He ends up having to bury the white man who is killed when his horse throws him, after being attacked by a dingo. The supply horses bolt and the black man ends up dying as well, but before he does he asks his gods to receive the white man as well as himself.

"Flotsam" (February 1987) is the story of two old women, one white and one black, whose lives were strangely similar: "both were long widowed, and both had borne sons who were scattered in distant lands." As they face their approaching end they know that "soon men would gather them up and place their bodies in the quiet warm earth... and none would be there to ease their passing across the great river."

They sit together in the gathering twilight and the white woman says: "Minnie... tell me what awaits us over the edge." Minnie isn't sure. She knows the religion of the Mission which says, "If you bin very very good he take you long a big nice Heaven place... but if you bin bad then he throw you down the big Hellfire." She likes to think

that "Good Woman come down and see poor Minne... and she pick me up and carry me beyond the stars." The white woman confesses that despite all the books she has read she still "craves for truth but gets no answers." As they sit there they hear the sound of water flowing and know that the river is about to flood. The women walk to the river bank holding hands and Minnie calls, "Oh, Great One listen. We come over... We not cheeky fella, only just bin want em your care, and wait now for we come, Big One." And so "they stepped down and the great white waters stretched out their arms and took the two old women to their kindly breast." This is very powerful writing which could have become sentimental, but Steger manages to avoid it.

Steger talks about Aboriginal burial customs in "The Passing of Poor Black Julia" (April 1980). An old black woman has died. This means that "the tribe will flee in terror from the camp" despite the words of the missionary, who tells them that "Julia's spirit will not hurt anyone. She has gone to a better place." He wants to give her a Christian burial but the Kaditcha overrules him. Steger stands on a cliff overlooking the scene. She sees the body of Julia placed between two sheets of bark, while the Kaditcha decorates the top sheet with "tiny tufts of white wool." Then the men wedge the body between three saplings. Before dark the camp is deserted.

Steger and her daughter are looking for a missing goat. "The silence is strange and weird... We walk softly, I know not why." Then her daughter sees the goat "silhouetted against the sky... the setting sun has clothed her in a garment of gold, splashed with crimson." Steger looks across to the trees where Julia is suspended. "The Mighty One... had made the sun to royally deck her in a robe of crimson and gold... the leaves made a royal lace upon that humble coffin of bark." The mother and daughter hold hands, while the daughter leads the goat, as "they climb down the darkening hill to home and supper."

In many of the stories Steger draws on her travels overseas. In "A Queen of Khyber Pass" (October 1977) she recalls an incident when she was on her way to Afghanistan.

> Down on the track it was dark and forbidding... glancing up, I see a woman... standing poised on a rock ledge and looking down at me... Just an Afghan maid of the people out seeking the family goats... her garments fluttered in the wind... the long hair floating free was a mass of burnished gold. The beads about her neck reflected back a thousand lights... I shall never see such living youth and beauty again.

One of the most moving stories is "The Towers of Silence" (August 1974) which refers to a funeral place in Bombay (Mumbai) where the Parsees bring their dead to be consumed by vultures. Steger had been in India at Ramadan, the time of fasting, and tensions were running high between Hindus and Moslems. Lord Irwin, the British Governor, had given orders that the Pathan guards were not to carry knives. As a result the Hindus fell on them and slaughtered them. The women of the household are taken to a safe house. Among the guests was a family with a small girl, Hamidah, who played with the Steger children. She wore

> Little pink satin trousers, or shalwars... a tiny shirt of white silk embroidered with little purple pansies... instead of a shawl cover for her head, she wore this dainty bonnet. About her tiny ankles were bangles that jingled, made of silver and gold and little velvet shoes. Her black hair peeped from the bonnet in long, glossy ringlets, her eyes just small pools of dark brown velvet, and her complexion like a frangipani blossom faintly shaded with pink... The streets were deserted, save for the rioters. The shops were shut and it was a very brave Moslem policeman who ventured out. Bodies lay about, sniffed at by the pariah dogs, not to be disposed of till law and order once more peeped around the corner.

When things had quietened down and the guests had returned to their own homes, Steger went out on business and saw a religious processon. She followed it. They were heading for

a huge four-square building on the side of the Malabar Hill. The flat roof consisted of heavy iron bars open to the sky. There were no windows in the four high walls. Only one small door almost hidden in blossom, but on the front wall ran a fourstaged iron staircase. No ornamentation on this mighty four square bulding, and it gleamed a snowy white. The great gates leading to the tower were flung wide as the crowd surged forward to enter. And it was then I caught a glimpse of the bier being carried in their midst, and I nearly cried out, for upon it, with open eyes turned to the sun she would see no more was the baby Hamidah. So lovely, she lay on her bed of flowers, her little form surrounded by the most beautiful blooms that India could provide. They had dressed her in a blue velvet gown, heavily embroidered and spangled. Her lovely hair left clear of the sweet baby features. No jewel more beautiful than she. I had no right in that spot.

Steger was wearing her chador so that her face was hidden. She continued to follow the procession going up the wall to the tower to where "the great grey cormorants swept across and on to the grilled floor, greedy and watching every movement of the surging crowd." The body was

placed on the grill, and then the last mighty "Ram" quivered on the air. The men came down the stair, and Hamidah was alone - alone with God and the vultures.

Later Steger walked to the top of the hill overlooking the ocean.

I cried almost aloud, "Oh God, please God, why?" A question asked since death first called. I've seen other strange deaths, but... today... is sacred alone to Hamidah, and her little lace bonnet.

Steger's themes were simple but they were also universal and she had a

wonderful command of language, so that she could strike a chord in other people's hearts. She could move them to laughter and to tears.It was this that made her essays so popular and kept the name "Winifred the Washerwoman" before the public eye for so long. These later works show that her power with words had not diminished with age.

Her last published piece, "Come where the Fireflies Dance" (June 1980), poignantly expresses her state of mind. Despite being confined to a nursing home, her eyesight fading and her life rapidly closing in, she is able to transcend her physical state and travel in her mind across the seas to the Ceylon she once knew.

> I will leave the smoke to choke the chimney and allow the rain to seep beneath the door. What care I? I will be no prisoner bound to circumstances. I will spread my wings of remembrance and cross the seas. The mighty waves will not even touch my skirts.
>
> Some liners are lying in the bay. The moon glints on the roofs of Lipton's tea factory. The palm trees know me and wave a salute. So often in past years I have walked beneath them. The spiced breath blowing from cinnamon gardens tell me this truly is Ceylon, land of Dreams. The lights gleam from the windows of the Galleface Hotel but I shall not need its hospitality. Tonight I am the guest of the paddy fields and the night winds. How gently with silver sheen the moon gleams on the rippling waters. So sweet and quiet, yet behind all, the dull boom of the ocean on the beaches. Strange, weird shadows fall on the paddy fields and I fear them not, because they are old friends, the great stone elephants with their gaily painted cement heads. Weird and strange they have tenanted the land since the great King Rama left India and settled here in Ceylon, so long ago that even the date is shrouded in mists... On the broad backs into small apertures the charitable are allowed three tosses with their coin. If the coin falls into an opening, the Gods have accepted the gift. If not, then the coin may roll or fall where it likes. The

Gods have spurned the gift. The paddy fields lie sleeping, deserted till the dawn, when the vestal servants of the great King Rice will again arrive to serve Him... The green fireflies are fluttering around...

Idle thoughts but on a night like this such fantasies are born. Many small fires are gleaming from the peasants' huts. The aroma of baking bread and sizzling curries mix with the island's spicy breath and I want to eat but cannot for memory trips have their limitations. I draw closer. The little Cingalese maidens are laughing gaily and whirling around the fire in a merry dance. How pretty they look, their skirts ballooning out, lit by the fireflies, which they have captured and imprisoned on their saris with thin gauze...

The girls need no other jewellery. The elders of the families laugh and clap, watching the maidens, for here the time of the male is not yet. The dancers tonight are all females, so lovely in their slim beauty, frangipani or lotus blossoms in their hair or tucked behind their dainty ears. Yet these maids so frail, sweet and dainty, swaying here beneath the moon, their skirts agleam with fireflies, will in the dawning be knee deep in the muddy depths of the paddy fields, the vestals of the Rice King.

But tonight the hour is yet early and they dance. Their elders stir the clay cooking pots, some scrape the white flesh from the cocoanut. The silver and glass bangles on their arms tinkle softly with each movement. Yet others bend low, stirring the cooking pots to cast yet further enticing odours, and their saris tilted, the fires gleam on the anklets about their knees.

Some are clapping small mounds of dough into flat cakes as thin as paper which will later be baked biscuit brown on sheets of hot iron. And, oh! the scent of the baking chupatis. To breathe it once, is never to

forget...

Why, hello! Here is trouble in Eden - two monkeys in the tree above Ayesha's cook fire have been arguing and torn loose a cocoanut, which falls with a vicious flop straight into Ayeshas' curry. The pot capsizes into the fire and the luscious meal is lost in a cloud of steam and ashes. Ayesha's wail for the lost meal echoes through the night, but her husband... in an instant is climbing the tree, intent on vengeance.

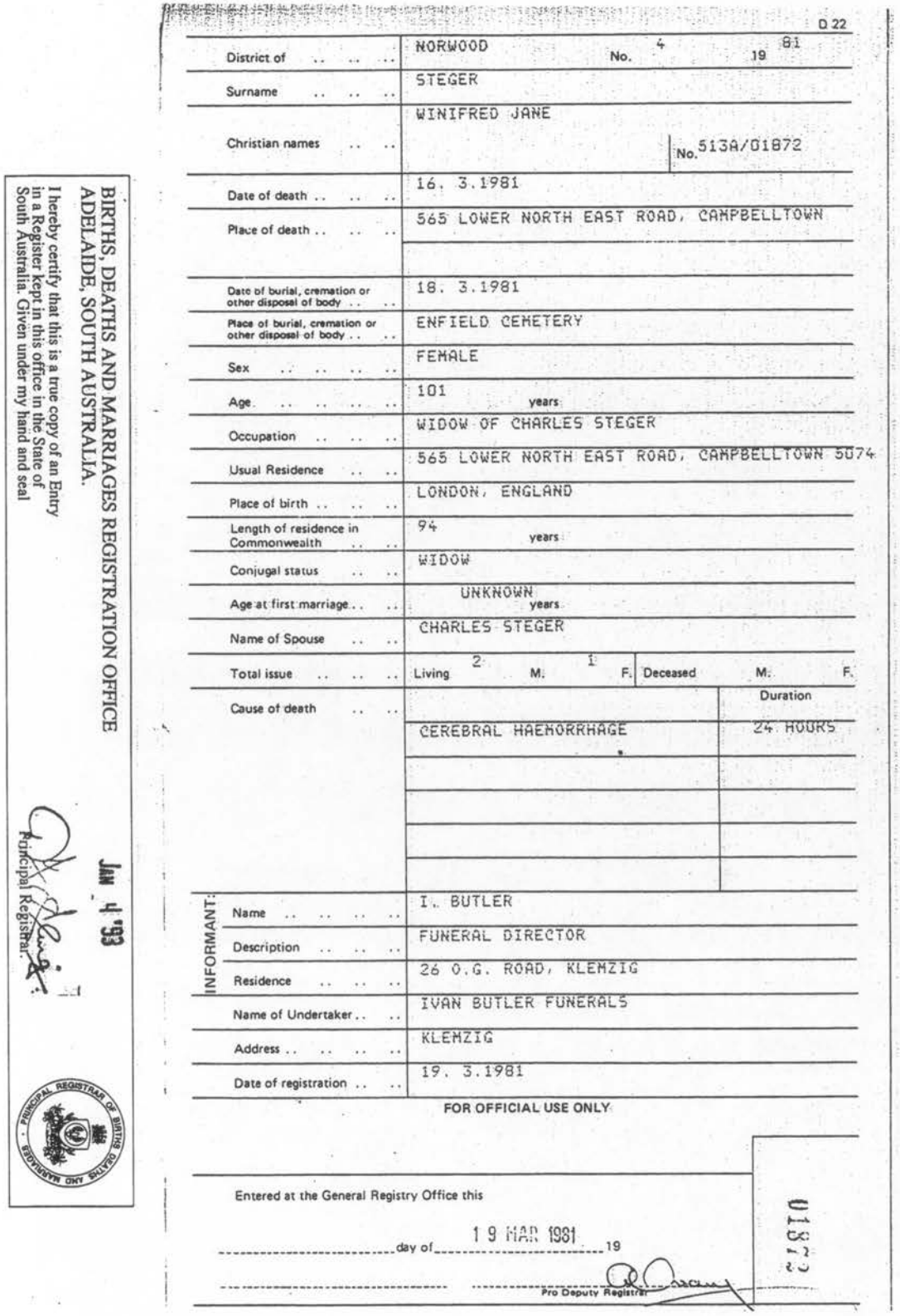
On the ground beneath, women from other huts have raced up, each to add a spoonful of theirs to Ayesha's depleted pot. The people of Ceylon are kind-hearted and tender; their manners as sweet as polished silk; to know them is to love and respect them...



Winifred Steger, Campelltown Nursing Home, South Australia, 1979. Photograph: the *Advertiser*.

Ceylon is sleeping now and I trim my wings and fly up and onward. Kandy and the tea plantations lie beneath, the bushes lightly blanketed in green swaying fireflies. Oh! yes, I remember how the moon strikes the temple of the Sacred Tooth. Idly I wonder if the Buddha ever missed that one tooth or why he did not leave to posterity more than one - I have woken with a shock. The wind has blown the kitchen door open. The smoke swirls, there is quite a pool of water beneath my feet. Ah well! thank you, dear dream of other days. I will fret no more. There is a Divinity that shapes our ends. Let me learn to be content. I still have memory.

Death certificate, Winifred Steger.



D 22

District of	NORWOOD No. 4 19 81
Surname	STEGER
Christian names	WINIFRED JANE No. 513A/01872
Date of death	16. 3.1981
Place of death	565 LOWER NORTH EAST ROAD, CAMPBELLTOWN
Date of burial, cremation or other disposal of body	18. 3.1981
Place of burial, cremation or other disposal of body	ENFIELD CEMETERY
Sex	FEMALE
Age	101 years
Occupation	WIDOW OF CHARLES STEGER
Usual Residence	565 LOWER NORTH EAST ROAD, CAMPBELLTOWN 5074
Place of birth	LONDON, ENGLAND
Length of residence in Commonwealth	94 years
Conjugal status	WIDOW
Age at first marriage	UNKNOWN years
Name of Spouse	CHARLES STEGER
Total issue	Living 2 M. 1 F. Deceased M. F.

Cause of death	Duration
CEREBRAL HAEMORRHAGE	24 HOURS

INFORMANT:

Name	I. BUTLER
Description	FUNERAL DIRECTOR
Residence	26 O.G. ROAD, KLEMZIG
Name of Undertaker	IVAN BUTLER FUNERALS
Address	KLEMZIG
Date of registration	19. 3.1981

FOR OFFICIAL USE ONLY

Entered at the General Registry Office this

19 day of MAR 1981 19

Pro Deputy Registrar

U1872

BIRTHS, DEATHS AND MARRIAGES REGISTRATION OFFICE
ADELAIDE, SOUTH AUSTRALIA.

I hereby certify that this is a true copy of an Entry in a Register kept in this office in the State of South Australia. Given under my hand and seal

JAN 4 '83

Principal Registrar.

PRINCIPAL REGISTRAR OF BIRTHS DEATHS AND MARRIAGES

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY OF WORKS BY WINIFRED STEGER

Copies of all MSS are held in the Winifred Steger papers in the Mortlock Library, South Australia, with the exception of "Just Fish and Chips" and "The Wilful Wanton". These MSS appear to be missing, though there is a possibility that they may be under a different title. Copies of the three serials which were published by the *Northern Argus* (Clare) are also in that newspaper's archives.

The dating of the MSS has been arrived at after reading the correspondence between Winifred Steger and Beatrice Davis, in the Angus and Robertson collection in the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.

SERIALISED NOVELS

"Jack's Jane:The Story of a Farmer's Wife who goes on Strike"
"Four Rings on her Fingers"
"The Door that Loved"

These were published as serials in the *Northern Argus*, (Clare), South Australia from 1963-1967.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL TRILOGY

Always Bells: Life with Ali (Sydney: A & R,1969) reprinted in paperback as *Life with Ali* (Adelaide: Rigby 1973).

It was first serialised in a shorter version in the *Register* (South Australia) from 27 November 1928 to 22 January 1929 under the title of "Arabian Days: The Wanderings of Winifred the Washerwoman." After publication in 1969 it was serialised in the *Australian Women's Weekly* in two parts (24September 1969 and 1 October 1969) under the title of "Always Bells."

"A King There Was", 1974, unpublished.

"Wandering "Winnie", or "After the Bells", 1970, unpublished.

UNPUBLISHED NOVELS

"Lady Nama of the Wongas", 1966, was the first novel Steger submitted to A & R[1]

"Just Fish and Chips", 1968.

"The Wilful Wanton", 1968.

"Grace Vance: Convict", 1968.

"The Devil's Pearl", 1968.

"The Shah Valley", 1969.

"The Sleepy Mountain", 1969

"The Golden Chariot: A novel of a Miner's Daughter", or "Sally from Randy Creek", n.d.

"Mrs Biddy Malone" or "The Indominitable Biddy Malone", or "Jumbo Valley" 1972, rewritten as "The Irish Washerwoman", n.d.

"The Irish Dreamer", 1974.

"The Magnolia Queen", 1974, small section published under the title "Different Gods", *Ink No.2*. Ed. Hilarie Lindsay, (Sydney: Society of Women Writers, 1977). 161-156.

UNPUBLISHED HALF-HOUR TV PLAYS

These were written while she was living at Watervale in the 1960s.

"The Trial Marriage"

"Remorse Too Late"

"The Expectant Father"

"House for Sale"

"Ten Little Bottles"

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[1] Winifred Steger, letter to A & R, 24 May 1966.

SHORT STORIES

"Twice a Hundred Camels Had I"

"Sweet Wee Jimmy Jamesy", published in two episodes, *Senior Citizens' News* (South Australia), October 1973, December, 1973.

"Ere's One You Nebbe 'ad", published *Senior Citizens' News* (South Australia), April 1974.

"The Panther"

"Those Green Girls"

"The Cleansing Fires"

"Quiet Afternoon For His Reverence"

"The Smell Is Not of Cinnamon," or "Chad's Army"

"A Little Child Shall Lead Them"

"Only One Egg"

"Little Old Church"

"Flowers that Bloom by Darwin Waters", or "Two Bunches Please"

"Hold your Man"

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