

**Jessie Isobel Henderson CBE  
1865 - 1951**

**Memories of a Grand-daughter**

OUR paternal grandmother, Jessie Isobel Henderson, was a figure of dignity and awe and somewhat remote benevolence to her grandchildren when she presided at Sunday tea at 'Lymwark'. Attendance was well-nigh obligatory. We wore our best dresses from Hick's Atkinson (on her account); mine were pink crepe-de-chine in summer and brown velveteen in winter. There was a confusing assortment of great-aunts, occasional great-uncles and even at times great-grandmother Martha Dowdell, a wizened old lady in full black skirt and bonnet, with a stick. There was a large garden with fig trees and monkey-puzzles, an 'under-the-house' with trunks full of moth-eaten army dress uniforms and dangerously decrepit stables with their own treasures. The afternoon concluded with high tea "whitebait in white sauce in a silver dish" (Jocelyn now recalls cutting out the eyes before she could eat them) and jelly and trifles.

Our Grandfather George (always known to us as "Fa") bore with these occasions for the sake of his grandchildren. He was naturally gregarious and entertaining and followed keenly our achievements at work and in sport. He could enjoy playing games with children in a way that was foreign to Jessie. We adored him and we revered her .

Until I was ten, and my sisters nine and six, we saw our grandparents mostly on these rather stifling Sunday afternoons, but when we moved to St Peter's Adelaide we migrated to spend the Christmas holidays at Beaumaris in a house near Beach Road. Gran rented this annually and hired a pantehnicon to transport the extra beds, pots and pans, ice-chest, table linen and the housemaids. This was a happy and relaxed seaside holiday. In 1925 we moved to Perth and contact was limited to letters and one visit from the grandparents until I returned to Melbourne in 1934 as a second-year medical student.

It was then that I came to appreciate the full scope of Gran's humanity, her organising ability and her breadth of interests.

Courtesy of a scholarship, I was living in Janet Clarke Hall, but I was quickly caught up in the preparations for the wedding of Lynette with Brian Cornell. Lyn was the youngest of her six children and only seven years older than myself. I was to be a bridesmaid, one of three - I doubt if Lyn had much say in this but we subsequently became very close friends. It was a big social occasion. Our dresses of cream chiffon with gold lame sashes were made by two Russian refugee dress-makers in Carlton - Mmes Surjenko and Kotliaroff. The reception was in a large marquee at Lymwark and Gran made the trifles herself; she excelled at those and at the traditional Christmas puddings - I think the lesser ranges of cooking and housework were for her a matter for supervision rather than hands-on-action. She had two housemaids, Sonia and Bertha, and the meals were adequate and predictable. If she hoped to launch me on the social scene in Melbourne she must have been sadly disappointed; student life was far too absorbing - but I was glad to appear quite often for the Sunday evening meal.

In my final year I was out of College and lived at Lymwark. It meant more travelling but conditions for study were good and I could be a reassuring presence at a time when my grandfather's health was fast declining through diabetes and a prostate disorder. In a rising tide of anxiety and distress Gran was finding it hard to keep up her outside interests and responsibilities.

JESSIE Isobel Dowdell was born in Hobart Town in 1865, the seventh of eleven children of Charles and Martha Dowdell. She was educated at the Ladies' Grammar School.

Her father was a man of standing in the community, a churchwarden and member of the Parish Council of St David's and on the executive committee of the Hobart Town Regatta. After coming to Melbourne in the 1880s he bought a house in Hawthorn and conducted the business of a Marine Surveyor and was appointed to the Court of Marine Enquiry. In 1891 he was elected to the Committee of Management of the Melbourne Hospital, at that time quite a privileged position. He died in 1892 at the age of sixty-four, but Martha lived to be a very old lady and is recalled by many other great-grandchildren.

Jessie revealed an early streak of independence in going to Sydney as a governess - the financial pressure of that large family must have been enormous and Hobart was as yet a small community in a State with limited resources. She was a beautiful young woman, and legend has it that she was already engaged when she met George Gabriel Henderson. His ardent suit prevailed and they were married in February 1890 in St Columba's Church of England in Hawthorn. George came of a large, staunchly Roman Catholic family and Jessie was a seriously committed Anglican, who withstood the efforts of the local clergy to have her children baptised into the Roman Catholic Church. In his last long illness it was an Anglican priest who ministered to him and conducted his funeral. In all important family decisions Jessie's was the dominant voice, but all their life together was one of mutual respect, companionship and deep devotion.

They were a handsome couple: George was bearded, with the fine physique and carriage of an oarsman and a beautiful singing voice which had been schooled in the choir of St Patrick's Cathedral. Jessie was tall with strong regular features, fine brown eyes and dark hair. They set up house in Hawthorn and their first son, Kenneth, was born in November 1891. Three boys followed, Rupert, Alan and Wilton, then two girls, Melanie (Peggy) and Lynette. When the growing family moved to 89 Harcourt Street on the Burke Road corner, their initials LYMWARK formed the name of that family home.

The boys first attended Hawthorn Grammar School but when a parish school was started at Holy Trinity, Kew the three older boys were enrolled as foundation scholars. This was the beginning of Trinity Grammar School which virtually grew up with them. The girls went to school at 'Fintona', then within easy walking distance of their home, and Lynette had a final two years at Merton Hall.

The first grave breach in the family came with the death of Wilton at the age of ten, from the complications of appendicitis. He is buried in the Boroondara (Kew) cemetery in what became the family grave.

The other boys played active roles in the small and growing school, on the school magazine, the Cadet Corps, as prefects and in rowing and other sports. Kenneth went on to Melbourne University with a scholarship to Trinity College - his family nicknamed him 'Prof'. Alan studied accountancy and it seems that Rupert was destined to take on his father's business as an estate agent and city valuer.

The years before the First World War were a halcyon era for the young in that comfortable Melbourne suburb. There was no great affluence and they made their own social life in dances, tennis parties, musical evenings and holidays in Lome and Upper Beaconsfield. 'Lymwark' was well-suited to big parties. It is a large late-Victorian villa with wide tiled verandahs, built around a central vestibule, and set in a generous, undisciplined garden. Jessie and George loved entertaining,

often, on her part, with an undisclosed match-making intent. Kenneth was firmly committed to Sharlie Tickell, and Rupert strongly attracted to her sister, Lucy, a student of Architecture.

When war came in 1914 it seemed a huge adventure to these young men, and Rupert and Alan rushed to enlist in the First AIF. (Kenneth was studying for Holy Orders and contemplating marriage.) On the strength of their Cadet Corps experience they were commissioned in the Seventh Battalion, Rupert as a Captain and Alan as a Second Lieutenant. After some months in camp at Broadmeadows they went overseas in the 'Honiara', sending enthusiastic letters from Adelaide and Albany. Their destination was not France as expected but Egypt to counter the threat from Turkey and with the idea of striking at Germany's 'soft under-belly'. Their letters recount some of the discomforts and frustrations of the months of training in the desert, but they are full of an eager optimism and faith that the war could not last long and allied victory was assured.

AT the Gallipoli Landing on April 25th Alan was shot in the stomach. In the course of evacuation to Alexandria he died, on April 30th, and was buried at sea. His name is inscribed on the memorial wall at Lone Pine for those who died at sea or whose burial places are unknown.

For his parents the shock and grief were almost overpowering. Jessie wrote to Rupert a letter full of agony and loss, feeling and praying that it surely could not happen again. It was returned unopened, scored with the stark message 'KILLED'. Rupert had fallen to a sniper's bullet at Cape Hellas on May 15th, after leading his men into action with outstanding courage and success. He is buried on Cape Hellas in Redoubt Cemetery. The parents were inundated with messages of grief and sympathy. They had later a moving letter from Colonel 'Pompey' Elliott, commanding officer of the battalion, after he had fully enquired into the circumstances of the deaths of the two boys. Parental grief was tempered by a fierce pride in their sons' courage and commitment. Their own loyalties must have been sorely tried when Kenneth left in April 1916 as a Chaplain in the Army, leaving his five-months-old daughter and his young wife pregnant again.

George's response was to put his energies into the recruiting campaign and to fight for compulsory military service. Jessie never ceased to grieve for the three sons she had lost, but after a few weeks she took up again her work in the relief of poverty and distress, and in support of conscription. In November 1915 she was elected to the Lyceum Club, on the grounds of her philanthropic work. Her proposer was the redoubtable Dr Constance Ellis.

The Hawthorn Ladies' Benevolent Society was probably the first of her charities and the nearest to hand. She later became President of the Victorian Association of Benevolent Societies. She had a soft spot for the local ne'er-do-wells and alcoholics and some found transient jobs in the Lymwark garden, to the despair of George. She was known to appear in the local court on behalf of those she felt in need of some help with the authorities; she had a great feeling for the battlers and the larrikins.

In 1921 she was President of the National Council of Women of Victoria, and subsequently she became a life Vice-President of this influential body.

Her Presidential Address was delivered at the Annual Congress in Melbourne in November 1921 and reprinted in full in *Woman's World*. As well as an agenda for the council it reveals her own social philosophy and her priorities. She was concerned first for the right of education of children in good citizenship and held that "the importance of play in the self-development of the child calls for our attention... the community cannot afford to pay the cost of not having playgrounds - the cost in stunted minds and bodies". She supported the teaching of Domestic Science and the raising of the school-leaving age to fifteen. Reforms in housing should be essential policy for those seeking election to municipal bodies. She was concerned about juvenile crime and held that "women with a

sympathetic comprehension of the nature of youth, both girls and boys, could, as Justices, do much to assist in the matter of reform... We must petition for only qualified women, women capable of comprehending the laws of their country". She advocated more women in local governing bodies and the support of a Bill to amend State electoral laws to enable women candidates to stand for Parliament.

She courageously supported the cause of women with venereal disease, pointing out that it was not a moral issue and that "three-fourths of the victims of the scourge are innocent sufferers". She was in favour of expert intervention in cases of child neglect "the State need not be clumsy, wasteful and rigid in its administrations. It is only this because it lacks the ready and devoted help of experts". She challenged her fellow-members through standing committees to "condense, analyse and formulate" information and views of experts to lay before political bodies, but emphasised detachment from party politics and the need to rouse community concern.

It is a remarkably far-sighted and statesman-like promotion of social awareness and legislative reform, free from sentimentality and moralising. She concludes with a tribute to the Women's Movement of the preceding ten years "nothing like it has ever been seen". As a manifesto for feminism and social welfare it could hold its own in any age.

In 1923 the Government of the day instituted the Charities Board of Victoria with Jessie Henderson as a member. Such appointments at that time were entirely honorary and entailed much responsibility but no privileges. She became President of its Metropolitan Standing Committee in 1940-41. For all her numerous meetings she had no transport except the local trams and trains, no secretarial aid and no diary - notices of meetings were pinned to the study curtains.

In 1930 she was asked to join the State Relief Committee set up to meet the poverty and misery of the Great Depression. Her particular concern was for the unemployed girls, who received just seven shilling and sixpence a week towards their food. She invoked the help of Miss Muriel Heagney and Mr Albert Monk, trade union stalwarts, in organising a factory where the girls could learn to be machinists and make clothes for themselves and for sale. She solicited spare sewing machines from her friends and from the public and donations of material from wholesalers and drapers. It was a resounding success; at anyone time the factory had over a hundred girls at work. It gave them skills, support and self-confidence and when it finally wound down the girls presented her with a handbag which she greatly treasured.

Her abiding interest and major contribution was undoubtedly in the Melbourne District Nursing Society - later renamed the Royal District Nursing Service. This she joined in 1912 as a member of committee. She became President in 1922 and remained in that office for twenty-five years until 1947. In that time she played the chief role in the founding of the After-Care Hospital in Victoria Parade.

The MDNS came into being in 1885, when Dr Charles Strong of the Australian Church convened a meeting of citizens concerned about the destitution and neglect in Melbourne's slums. It was "To care for the sick poor in their own homes" and started with one trained nurse and a bicycle.

After the inevitable struggle for funding, both government and public, it became well established and extended its work beyond the squalor of the inner city into suburban Melbourne and a more middle-class clientele. Its work included a great number of home births, with the Midwife Sisters often accompanied by fifth-year medical students from the Women's Hospital (of whom I was one).

In 1923, the year after Jessie Henderson became President, the society set up a fund for an After-Care Home, to take mothers needing a rest during or after pregnancy and patients who the District Nurse decided needed nursing care but were not sick enough to qualify for admission to a public hospital. This was formally opened in 1926 in Victoria Parade and was soon used to ease the pressure on public hospital beds rather than for referrals from the District Nurses. Its name was changed to After-Care Hospital in 1933. Ultimately its use diverged from Jessie's original vision, the administration became burdensome and after much controversy and legal action the ACH was split off from the MDNS as a separate body under the Hospitals and Charities Commission.

The Society was always innovative. It established its first Ante-Natal Clinic in 1930, under the supervision of Dr George Simpson. In 1934 with Drs Victor Wallace and Mary Herring he proposed the setting up of a Women's Welfare Clinic for advice on birth control - the first in Victoria. This had the enthusiastic support of the President, but in the climate of the times a great deal of tact and talking were needed to overcome moral and religious opposition. Victory was in no small measure due to the negotiating and persuasive skills of Jessie Henderson. With the further acceptance and availability of contraception the need for the MDNS clinic evaporated by 1940.

Another pioneer venture was the inauguration in 1928 of a 'Committee of Almoners' from among the members of the Society's general committee. The social and financial needs of their patients had always been core concerns of the nurses, and these 'almoners' were able to access charitable funds, advise on pensions and appear in the Children's Court as needed. It was the first and only organisation in this field until in 1933 the Institute of Almoners was established with professional advice and training from Great Britain. The MDNS relinquished the name in favour of the professionals, but continue both in committee and in the field to pursue social action. Jessie Henderson became a Vice-President of the Victorian Institute of Almoners and the Council for Social Training. Her daughter Lynette was one of the first to qualify.

She was a wily and diplomatic chairman, aiming always at consensus rather than confrontation, and she usually managed to get her own way. In times of financial crisis she stood up to some of her more timid associates when they wished to close beds or reduce wages. She had great faith that the money would be found if the need was great enough, and undoubtedly her style and humour smoothed the paths of negotiation with bureaucracy and government. The range and success of her work were recognised when she was created a Commander of the British Empire (CBE) in 1937, an honour which she wore lightly.

Most of her spare time was taken up with minutes and reports. She didn't play cards and had no ear for music, but she enjoyed the radio, particularly Eric Welch's reporting of the wrestling. She kept in close touch with her daughters and their children and by letter with Kenneth in Perth and in Sydney. She made good use of the facilities of the Lyceum Club, then located in the beautiful rooms designed for the manager of the ES & A Bank in Collins Street - she nominated me for membership when I graduated. Her friendships were numerous and wide-ranging, mostly related to her work; and she remained the family focus for her own descendants and her brothers and sisters as long as they survived.

George developed diabetes in the 1920s and after some years of the rigorous dietary management of the day became one of the first patients to be treated with insulin. It fell mostly to Lynette to give his twice-daily insulin injections. Although this improved his general health he suffered increasing prostatic obstruction for which surgery was considered too risky. This meant

a supra-public catheter and regular nursing care until the end of his life. He died at home in 1939 at the age of eighty- four, and was buried in Boroondara Cemetery .

His long illness and death took great toll of Jessie; they shared a bedroom until his death (but with separate beds). She had extensive arterial degeneration with an abdominal aortic aneurism which caused considerable pain and circulatory changes affecting her mobility . She was firmly resolved to stay in her own home and her own bed although this ultimately required both day and night nursing as well as the services of a housekeeper. She remained interested in her family and responsive to their visits but progressively weaker until her death in 1951 at the age of eighty-six. She joined George in the family grave and Lymwark was sold.

It was the life of a vigorous, intelligent and intensely human woman, a very private person tempered by private grief but a stronghold for her family and those she perceived to be in need.

***A note on 'Lymwark', 89 Harcourt Street, Hawthorn  
(on the corner of Burke Road)***

'Lymwark' in the 1990s has a new name, a new front gate and some additions at the rear. The monkey-puzzle and the poplars have gone - as have the stables - but the house from the street is almost unchanged. It is a late Victorian villa, single-storeyed but raised up on a solid bluestone base, with a wide tiled verandah round three sides, supported by graceful white iron columns. The approach is by a wide flight of bluestone steps. The hall is spacious and flanked by the dining-room and the sitting- room (in our day used only on Sunday afternoons). The floor-length windows and lofty ceilings remove any sense of Victorian stuffiness. The working centre of the house was the large vestibule, separated by etched glass panels from the surrounding corridors and the bedrooms, study and kitchen; the walk-in pantry was below floor- level down a precipitous flight of steps. The kitchen had a wood-fired range lit only in winter for the 'girls' and a handsome pine dresser (riddled with borer we later discovered). The rather venerable gas stove was in a small scullery and the laundry was outside next to the old stables.

There was one bathroom with gas bath-heater and indoor toilet, on the side of the house furthest from the master-bedroom. Outside it was the big shoe-cupboard where Fa used to clean all the family's shoes on Saturday morning.

'Under-the-house' was reached through a trap-door on the back porch. A young person could walk upright among the dust and debris of half-a-century, including the solid leather trunks which held the uniforms and personal effects of the sons of the house who did not come back.

@ Margaret Henderson Parkville  
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## Sources

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Lyceum Club Archives

Family letters and recollections