

Growing Up in Hobart

Vivian Smith

When I think of growing up in Hobart, two images spring to mind: the mountain at the top of the street; ships at the bottom of the road. The mountain wasn't always there, of course; there were days when it disappeared, when it was covered with mist, and a white blank filled the top of the street where the mountain should have been. And of course there were days when there were no ships at the bottom of the road. But these were the exceptions and for me Hobart remains framed between the mountain and the sea. Most of my childhood was spent at Battery Point, which still looks very much as it did then, though large sections around the edges, and many houses, have been demolished, and the wharves have been rebuilt. In my childhood the piers were huge oil- and tar-stained timber constructions. Ocean Pier was burnt down in a spectacular fire in the 1940s. Salamanca Place was a timber, coal and junk yard and factory area. Its transformation into art galleries and boutiques was unimaginable. The heritage industry was unheard of; the culture industry had not started. In those days immense chimneys behind the factories and warehouses billowed forth smoke.

Battery Point, apart from some larger wealthy houses (and several of those have been removed too) was then still a maritime village with lots of small crowded pubs and grocer's shops (now restaurants and antique shops), and many of the early colonial cottages that have since been restored were then in a rather run-down state. These houses were solid and well-built, as their survival attests, but most were in need of

basic repairs and a touch of paint. Tasmania, I think, has never been a wealthy state, and Hobart was still feeling the prolonged effects of the Depression. Jobs were scarce. My father in my infant years worked with the Forestry Department at Lady Bay. My parents couldn't stand moaners and complainers; my mother couldn't stand women doctors either, and she saw a bit of them during the war years, which she spent working at the munitions factory at Derwent Park during the man-power crisis.

There was a slight sense in my family, as in many Hobart families at the time, that they had been severely dealt with by the Depression and the various accidents of fate, including the deaths of parents at a young age, that had forced some of them to move from the country (Dover) to the city in search of employment and accommodation. Many of them had been forced to leave school at 12 or earlier. Of course we knew that money wasn't everything, but pounds and pence had to be watched and there was always the question of making ends meet. "Waste not, want not", was a family motto; "No, we can't afford that", a familiar reply. I can remember my mother's reprimand when I threw a piece of half-burnt toast back into the fire: "Never do that with bread. Grandma used to say it is feeding the devil." These things were not peculiar to my family; it was a time when everyone felt the pinch. Ration cards were soon to be introduced. Everything had to be saved and recycled to help the war effort: brown paper, string, toothpaste tubes, silver paper. My father had a small contraption for resharpening razor blades and another to hand-roll cigarettes so as to avoid waste. Sometimes I am inclined to think "it was the best of times, it was the worst of times".

I was an only child and I was left very much to my own devices. I had a degree of freedom that it would hardly be possible for a child to enjoy today. There were school friends of course and other children in the neighbourhood, and I lived next door to my six cousins who were always there if needed. But except for one boy, the baby, they were all girls, and all slightly older than I was. They were Catholics, like all of my mother's family, and they went to St. Joseph's which was just up the road from my primary school, Albuera Street. My mother had ceased to

practise her religion on marrying my father, though she insisted that she always said her prayers. She also used to say things like: "Why go to church anyway? I'd only see a hat I'd like and can't afford to buy." But through my cousins I came into close contact with the Catholic life of Hobart as a child and this at a time when the divisions between Catholic and Protestant, rich and poor, were taken more seriously than they are now.

When I think of my childhood, I think first of the sea—of the harbour seen from upstairs windows in Hampden Road or from the shore at Secheron which was not far from where I lived and where I used to go almost every day when I was very small to play shops on the shore with my cousins. We used to take with us a few old sheets of newspaper for wrapping and walk along picking up beer bottles, apples, sea-weed, flotsam and jetsam and set up our shop on the rocks. In those days Clarke Avenue was almost entirely open paddocks, with only a scattered house or two. Port Huon Fruit Juices (now demolished) had its factory on the Derwent there, but when the war came and the refugees started appearing, part of it was transformed into Van Diemen Wines. On long hot summer days the slightly over-ripe sickly smell of sugars and fruits filled the air. It smelt as if one had eaten too many lollies.

The sea meant shops on the shore. It also meant in those days fairy penguins, seagulls, fish, schools of dolphin which often entered the Derwent; on at least one occasion a washed up sea-lion; and sometimes a whale spouting half way between Hobart and Bellerive. I remember being told often as a child that next to one or two South American places, Hobart had the finest deep-sea harbour in the world. It certainly provided a huge mental and visual space for a child to grow up in. And then just around the corner and down the hill were the wharves and Salamanca Place and there we were likely to see Japanese, Indians, Norwegian or French sailors, and to hear a variety of languages. Various overseas liners called there to pick up passengers; soon after the war began there were warships, and then the Americans started to appear in 1942, bringing wildness and colour and violence into the streets, and a murder or two in the parks. Their arrival was an

invasion of a kind, but also a fulfillment, as we were already steeped in the American films of the time. The war was coming closer.

There was always something different to do in connection with the port: just wandering around the wharves looking at the ships and the names of their ports of origin, sometimes chatting with the wharfies or people fishing. In summer there were yachts, and yacht races to watch; and fishing boats and scallop trawlers in the docks, and various merchant ships loading and unloading cargo. Right on the wharves, or in the streets nearby, various shipping firms had their agencies, with bright posters inviting one to see various parts of the world. Soon taking photos of ships with a box Brownie became a favourite hobby.

The port brought intimations of the excitement and allure of overseas, of foreign places. I wanted to see the world. At one stage in my early adolescence I was so keen to get away that I used to haunt the shipping agencies asking if I could work my passage on a ship. The answer was invariably that the crew was signed on at the other end, that it was a round journey from London and that I would have to sign on there. Part of my restlessness at this stage came from starting to feel at odds with life at school and home. But it was probably best for me that I was not able to get away on a sailing ship going round Cape Horn. My ambition to see South America—I remember visiting ships that were on their way to the Falklands or Valparaiso or Rio—has not yet been fulfilled; and I cannot read poems such as Masefield's 'Sea Fever', Baudelaire's 'L'Albatros' or Sacheverell Sitwell's 'The Rio Grande' without recalling the excitements, the frustrations, the discoveries and the hopes of those early post-war days.

The harbour was always present with its smells and its often violent moods and storms, and I was brought even closer to it after the war when one of my uncles was able to buy a fishing boat on his returned soldier's pay. The mountain too was always there but it took much longer to get to and it wasn't until much later that I made my first contact with it. I think I would have been 9 or 10 before I got onto the

mountain for the first time. As I said, I had an extraordinary amount of freedom as a child. On Saturday afternoons I used to wander around on Mount Nelson or at the back of the Rifle Range, the present site of the University, which in those days seemed almost the beginning of the wilderness—or of one kind of wilderness at any rate. Mount Nelson was conveniently remote and deserted with only a few scattered farms and a dairy or two.

It wasn't very long before I started turning my weekend attention to the foothills of Mount Wellington. I used to take the Cascades Tram and walk up McCrobies Gully or along Strickland Avenue where there were a couple of English tea-rooms (in the grounds of one stood a huge statue of the Buddha), but very few other houses. In my first explorations I only just entered the fern gully, feeling initially a sense of fear at its vastness. It took some months to become familiar with the various sections of it. The entrance had huge carpets of sphagnum moss and rocks clustered with lichen so thick that they looked like studded leather chairs. I once saw a platypus there, and the creek was full of green yabbies—fresh water lobsters. Eventually I made my way to the top of the gully and was rewarded with a side view of the Organ Pipes which looked huge and threatening and barbaric. This sense of mingled fascination and fear and of my own insignificance in front of the landscape has always been part of my experience of Tasmania. I had been told of people who had disappeared on the mountainside and been lost in the bush, never to be found again, and a sense of threat seemed to be there in the look of the rocks and cliffs and boulders. This, I should add, was long before the wilderness movement and the conservationist awareness that started to develop in the 1960s, after I had left Tasmania. Of course there were Field Naturalists and the Hobart Walking Club which I read about in *The Mercury*, but their activities were out of my range. I have always had a strong sense of belonging in Hobart, and I belong to it by birth, but in my wary explorations as a child I never had any of the sense of belonging to a landscape that Thoreau talks about. To me its power to annihilate and obliterate was too strong. The pastoral, rural and humanised side of Tasmania could be intimate and consoling,

as my early poems show, but there are also poems which stress the elemental destructive aspects of the landscape and the coast.

Hobart has always had remarkable advantages as a place, all the features and opportunities of a capital city combined with the qualities of a small town. When I was a child it seemed a very concentrated place to me. Moonah and Glenorchy and Kingston seemed a long way out of the city to live. In the 1930s and '40s there was a relatively high density of inner city living and the huge urban sprawl and the emptying of people out into the suburbs had not yet begun. There were tobacco shops and barbers, hat makers and curio shops, not to mention all the second hand clothes and furniture and book shops that flourished in Liverpool Street; and I knew children at school who lived above shops in Murray, Macquarie, Elizabeth and Melville Streets, shops that were demolished to make way for petrol stations and department stores. The city contained a pleasant mingling of the urban and the pastoral, the cultivated and the wild. Bakers and milkmen used horse and cart for their deliveries, and there were Chinese market gardens not far out. One day as I was walking down Argyle street with my grandmother we saw a dray full of pumpkins with the driver at the reins whipping the draught horse to make it hurry on. My grandmother said, "That is a Chinaman" and she told me that the Chinese men used to wear pigtails in the olden days and were extremely hard workers; sometimes, she said, they worked all night by candle light in their gardens collecting snails and slugs to stop them eating plants and vegetables. It struck me as being the perfect life.

Hobart had most of the facilities of a big city. Department stores, several cinemas (at least five within a few streets of each other), a symphony orchestra, serious theatre, repertory and variety, where I saw a range of plays from Shakespeare to Shaw (who was still alive and often quoted in the daily paper) and at the Theatre Royal performances by the Boravansky Ballet, and later the Oliviers in *The School for Scandal*. When I was a student at the university I used to claim that I had spent most of my life in half a dozen streets of Hobart, with occasional walks on the mountain. My time was mostly spent going

back and forth from the only two schools I attended: Albuera Street Primary School and the Hobart High School, and I only missed one day of school in all those years. But there were other places that mattered to me which had a marked influence on my development and writing.

The first and most important of these was the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, a refuge on a cold winter afternoon or wet weekend. I cannot recall the exact date of the first time I was taken there but it was in the late 1930s. Two vivid impressions remain: the skeleton of Truganini in a glass case, and in the gallery upstairs a whole row of heads of African animals ranged like hunters' trophies: lion, tiger, elephant and antelope. I used to stare at the skeleton of Truganini in amazed wonder: is this what we are all really like underneath? And then I used to think about her in relation to the colonial paintings and charts that hung on the walls. The early maps, the portrait of Tasman, the picture of George Augustus Robinson 'The Conciliation' and the whole of the Port Arthur room with its ducking box and instruments of human suffering and cruelty: the cat o' nine tails in a glass case; the ball and chain. Something of the history of the island and its tragic past started to seep into me very early. What had all of that to do with me, I used to wonder.

There was another side to the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, the Natural History side, that brought home to me the life of the island: the aboriginal past, extinct prehistoric animals, the birds and insects of the place. Taxidermy and taxonomy, and later entomology and etymology, became obsessions for a number of years. It must have been in 1941 or '42 that the museum put on an exhibition that was one of the revelations of my life, an exhibition of Tasmanian wildlife, flora and fauna. There I saw for the first time live native cats and Tasmanian devils in cages; a platypus in a specially constructed tank; various lizards—blue tongues and charming little dragon-lizards; sun fish swam around in salt-water tanks while hermit crabs and starfish climbed over rocks. There was another tank with green and golden frogs; a box with toads; and a collection of Tasmanian snakes. I was born too late to see the last of the Tasmanian tigers whose destruction haunted

me. But there were more native cats and devils and wombats and bush rats and bandicoots than I was ever likely to see alone in the bush. Only the birds were missing; but I had already seen magnificent flocks of white and black cockatoos, blue jays, rosellas and green parakeets on the mountain. This special exhibition for schools—all this life among the skeletons and stuffed animals and shells—stimulated an interest in botany and biology and even made me think for a while that I should like to be a scientist. My father told me that it would be more sensible to go in for some branch of science like industrial chemistry. “That’s where the future will be,” he said, “rather than with animals and plants.” One of the other highlights of the exhibition was its display of native plants and flowers. There were ferns, padded spongy mosses, lichens, trigger plants, a sundew, waratah in flower, various glassy berries, and a whole range of native orchids, from nodding greenhoods to tigers. Some of these I later found growing wild behind the Cascades, where they flourished until wiped out by one of the annual bushfires.

To the museum then I owe an awareness of the life around me and its history, but it also helped to reinforce a puzzling sense of loss or absence which I started to feel from a very early age. There was the history of the Tasmanian aborigines and the exterminated tiger; there were decayed and abandoned and mouldering and haunted houses; factories and buildings that had been condemned; there were abandoned ships decaying in the Ships’ Graveyard at Risdon; cemeteries that were being transformed slowly into parks, and cemeteries like the one at Queensborough (now completely erased) with its crumbling tombs that one could wander about in. I am sure I do not exaggerate when I say that I grew up in a place that was haunted and weighed down by an oppressive past and a stagnant present; a world of death and decay in a world at war. The first poems I published in the school magazine are about the haunting past of the Tasmanian aborigines, and they use the gothic imagery that has since become so frequent in later writings about the place. As a child I was often puzzled by the sense of the discrepancy on the one hand, and the inarticulate relationship on the other, that I felt between the past and the present around me. I was growing up in an old 19th century colonial town, sections of which were on the edge of

dissolution. Wapping had not yet completely disappeared and the new developments that would replace the old had hardly yet begun.

In those years statements were often made that the past had to be forgotten, erased, eliminated; that the stain or the shadow over Tasmania had to be wiped away. The sense of class distinctions inherited from England was very strong; there was a lot of snobbery, and social pretensions; some people were afraid that their convict ancestry might be uncovered. There were forlorn pockets of gentility and much emphasis on family background and stock. People stressed their family connections in a way that made it clear that they were completely free of the taint of convict or proletarian origins. I remember the Archbishop of Hobart, Dr Tweedy, saying that Port Arthur should be demolished and thrown stone by stone into the water. Wipe out, forget, and build anew for the future seemed to be the motto as the war was coming to an end. It was obviously a difficult transitional phase in Tasmania’s history, but the sense of decay, corruption and threat that I felt intermittently as a child was reinforced by other formative experiences as well.

The first was the infantile paralysis epidemic that struck Hobart in the late 1930s (Christopher Koch has used it as a metaphor in his novel *The Doubleman*) and which afflicted a number of people at my school and in my neighbourhood. As a child I used to see young children being wheeled through the streets on flat pram-like trolleys, or later hobbling about with iron supports on their legs. But even more striking to me was the high incidence of tuberculosis at the time. My grandfather and his brother died of T.B. when I was a child, and all except one of my cousins who lived next door contracted T.B. and spent many years in the Sanatorium at Moonah until the scientific discoveries in the late forties allowed them to be released, cured, with partially collapsed lungs. My grandfather ran a small shop in Liverpool Street, in a section now demolished, and after his death the contents of his house had to be removed and burnt according to the custom of the time. I remember going to his place and seeing all the crockery and bedding put out, waiting to be destroyed. It was not unlike a scene from the newsreels of the time

showing bombed houses. Perhaps it is natural that notions of decreation have been central to my poetry from the beginning.

Hal Porter who arrived there in 1946 used to speak of Hobart as a town of Dickensian grotesques. His highly individual vision did I think capture some essentials of the place and I have no problem in finding much of my Hobart reflected in his images of it. Faces like gargoyles, strange distortions of nature, weird and eccentric figures were certainly visible in my childhood both in the city and the country. One of the most tragic was known as the lady with the pig face, a woman whose face was distorted with strange folds of skin. There was Miss Tibbs/Timms who used to walk along the beach at Sandy Bay or Bellerive, talking to the waves (it was said that she had gone out of her mind when she was jilted); and, most frequently seen, Cup a' Tea Annie who seemed to live in the war trenches that had been dug in front of Parliament House and behind the Town Hall and to survive on apples picked up off the shore or around the wharves and on sugar purloined from the local milk bars. She was extremely friendly and in no way frightening; I shall never forget her moss-green teeth. The Hobart of those days seemed to be extremely tolerant of eccentrics and misfits of all kinds, all of whom were harmless and added to the sense of life's incomprehensible variety and oddity. Also belonging to the special atmosphere of that time was the enormous number of clergymen one saw in the streets in all kinds of clerical garb; there were more churches in those days too. Many of those in the city have been demolished while those in the country have now been deconsecrated and turned into weekenders.

Another place which became important to me was the Botanical Gardens. I have always liked intricate combinations of the formal and the informal and places like zoos and gardens and parks which combine the man-made with nature in its vital and living aspects. During the war years I used to spend a lot of my time at the Botanical Gardens and became friendly with the women who used virtually to run them and set up the annual displays of hydrangeas and begonias. Most of the men by this time were away at the war, and many jobs were taken over by women.

Through them I got to know that side of the gardens usually closed to the public: the herbarium, the potting sheds. One of these women was Mylie Peppin, who set up the Van Diemen Pottery after the war and gave enormous stimulus to the development of pottery in the State. She was a devotee of the crossword puzzle and I used to invent crosswords as presents for her. Of the State Library of Tasmania, then opposite the Museum and Art Gallery, I need only say that it became my private study and club and I always arranged all my meetings there. "Meet you at the library" conveyed it all. I was a bookworm from an early age and I remember one teacher warning me to be careful not to become an intellectual snob.

The six years I spent at Hobart High School were among the most important in my life. They were not in any obvious sense of the word happy years, but during that time, thanks to the encouragement and interest of a few genuinely gifted and dedicated teachers, I started to write: essays, poems and plays; I became involved in the Hobart High School Literary and Debating Society. I developed an interest in modern writing: Australian, especially the poets whose work was then appearing in *The Bulletin*; novelists like Somerset Maugham (*The Razor's Edge*), H.E. Bates, Grahame Greene and D.H. Lawrence opened up new worlds for me; and the poetry of T.S. Eliot, Baudelaire, Dylan Thomas and Edith Sitwell became an obsession.

I was attached to Hobart, but through a fascination with foreign languages and literature, I was drawn more and more to a world overseas. Teachers were starting to go to England on study leave, and the feeling that one had to make the trip and see England, the place we had come from, was strong. Some older people used still to speak of the trip to the Old Country.

It was about this time that I got in with a group of local artists, still Tech students, who used to meet in a well known artist's studio in Elizabeth Street. There too there was often talk about various Tasmanian painters and artists now in London and of figures like Oliffe Richmond and Loudon Sainthill who had left Hobart behind and were living

A Writer's Tasmania

overseas. There was a sense in the air that there were those who had got away and those who had remained and a faint feeling of disappointment among those who had not been able to leave. We were Hobart born and Hobart was for the time being the centre of our web, but its threads stretched out to other parts of the world. The need to relate foreign influences and local interests started to exert its pressure.

Some of our teachers were refugees from the 1930s and the huge influx of migrants from the late '40s brought further intimations of a Europe stranger than any I had hitherto imagined. At primary school there had been much teaching of Australian and Tasmanian history and geography, and the secondary school emphasis on England and Europe, on British History and European languages and culture seemed a natural extension and progression from this. This perhaps unwittingly had the effect of making "where we had come from" seem like "where we belong". Everything was still very much centred on notions of the British Empire and its traditions. At school we had frequent visits from missionaries like Dr Paul White (The White Doctor of Tanganyika), and Mildrid Cable of Gobi Desert fame. We gave money for the lepers of Africa and the Pacific. We sent food parcels to people in England long after the war was over; a kind of old world idealism seemed to prevail. The White Australia Policy was still taken seriously, but these were also the years of UNRRA, UNESCO, and the United Nations. There was a fervent sense of internationalism in the air, especially for those of us who were still at school. I started to learn Esperanto as a contribution to world peace.

When I look back on my years of growing up in Hobart I have the impression, probably mistaken, that everything was simpler and more coherent in those days, but also much more isolated. There was no TV; I remember when we first acquired a wireless in 1940. Compared with present day, multi-cultural Australia, it was a limited and more clearly defined world. The apple isle of my childhood started to vanish when England entered the European Common Market, and the port has never been the same again. Hobart no longer feels isolated or remote in the way it once seemed to be. It was a beautiful place to grow up in. I

Vivian Smith remembers Hobart as it was

have always felt that the first twenty-one years of my life were richly varied within a very narrow compass. But by my early twenties I was ready to leave.

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Childhood in Paradise

Alison Alexander

In a paddock beside the Midlands Highway near Woodbury lies a grave, surrounded by a white picket fence. It's the spot where my great-great-great-grandfather, James Pillinger, dismounted from his horse and stood for the first time on land owned by a member of his family. 'This is where I want to be buried,' he said, and he was.

It was extremely rare for people from the Pillinger family to stand on their own land. James came from a poor family near Bath in England, and was sent out in the Second Fleet for stealing a watch. On Norfolk Island he married the daughter of another convict (a pair of stockings this time), and together they came to Van Diemens Land in 1808. James' sentence had expired and he was granted thirty acres at Droughty Point, but the story goes that he swapped it for a bottle of rum.

His son, also called James, was more enterprising, and in 1825 received a much larger grant on the grounds that he was a freeborn native of Australia. He married Sophia Peters, the daughter of a third convict (ten silver cups, obviously a superior criminal). Sophia had grown up on her father's land grant at Bagdad, where she and her sister Anne were attacked by Aboriginals, retaliating for being pushed off their ancestral hunting grounds. Anne's spear wound was mortal, but ten-year-old Sophia wore stout stays which deflected the spear.