



impressions

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The Force of my Father



Guouogang

An Indigenous Totem

A short story written by Don Urquhart

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I think of my father every day. I loved him deeply, admired his intelligence, his resourcefulness, his warm sense of humour and his courage in adversity. He loved the Australian landscape: the desert, the mountains, the coast, the rainforests. He won a scholarship to Sydney Grammar School, and while he completed a Science degree at Sydney University, he also embraced the arts and humanities. In the 1930s and 1940s his family took long summer holidays camping at Gerringong and later Mollmook, and he forged a life-long friendship with a boy from another camping family. He and Wal called each other 'Charlie' in memory of a hermit who used to camp on Mollmook Beach in the 1930s.

Dad was first employed in 1945 as a radiophysicist with the CSIRO but he soon obtained a more preferred position as a geophysicist at the Bureau of Mineral Resources in Melbourne. Geophysics was perfect for dad as it combined classical physics with the outdoor life. He completed seismic surveys to determine whether the sand in the Burdekin River in Queensland was of sufficient depth to support thirty-one floating bridge columns. He was also seconded to the RAAF to help the British with their long range weapon testing facility at Woomera.

After marrying, he whisked Mum across the Nullarbor plains to Kalgoorlie where he had been sent to work for a gold mining company. His task was to map old under-

Charlie had always been an independent sort of coot, but of late he was admitting to himself that he was getting decidedly old. Still, despite repeated hints from his children that he needed looking after, he continued to live alone in his modest cottage.

On fine days his favourite occupation was to sit on an old seat in his back garden, puffing on his pipe – thinking, remembering and planning all those things he intended to do one day. He had made this old seat himself at some unremembered time and had positioned it very carefully so that he had only to lift his eyes to gaze at his precious living

landscape painting, framed by the branches of a turpentine and the top of a paling fence. In the foreground he could see the rugged bushland falling away steeply to the deep narrow valley of the Woronora River. Beyond, higher timbered land stretched away into the distance, to that hazy blue line of mountains so familiar to all those who dwell along the eastern rim of the Sydney Basin.

At the focal point of Charlie's painting, dominating the skyline, there squatted a giant, sleeping old wombat, or as the Central Mapping Authority would have it, Mt. Guouogang: one thousand two hundred and ninety-one metres above mean sea level and ninety four kilometres due west of Charlie's garden seat. Charlie could identify easily with a sleepy old wombat, and over the years Guouogang had acquired the importance of a personal indigenous totem in his life.

He had never been a religious man. His strongest spiritual feelings had been at those moments when he had been deeply moved by the beauty and mystery of some aspect of his native land, the space and stillness of the desert, the secret brooding excitement of a gorge in the rainforest or the breathtaking sweep of a wilderness area seen from a mountain top. So it now was, in a deeper, quieter way, with Guouogang. In fact, it was because of his mountain that Charlie had promised himself that the only way he would ever leave this cottage would be feet first.

The old man often wondered why a mere second generation Australian

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and a city dweller should identify so strongly with the land, and suspected some strange, mystical power at work. Consequently, he found it quite natural that the dark people who had lived under its influence for forty or fifty thousand years should make the land the centre of their religion and culture. In spirit, Charlie was quite convinced that it is Geography not History that makes us all Australian. No matter whether our grandfather came from Aberdeen, Venice, Vienna or Saigon, sooner or later this land puts its mark on us and we are Australian.

Over the years this idea had led Charlie into futile arguments with those

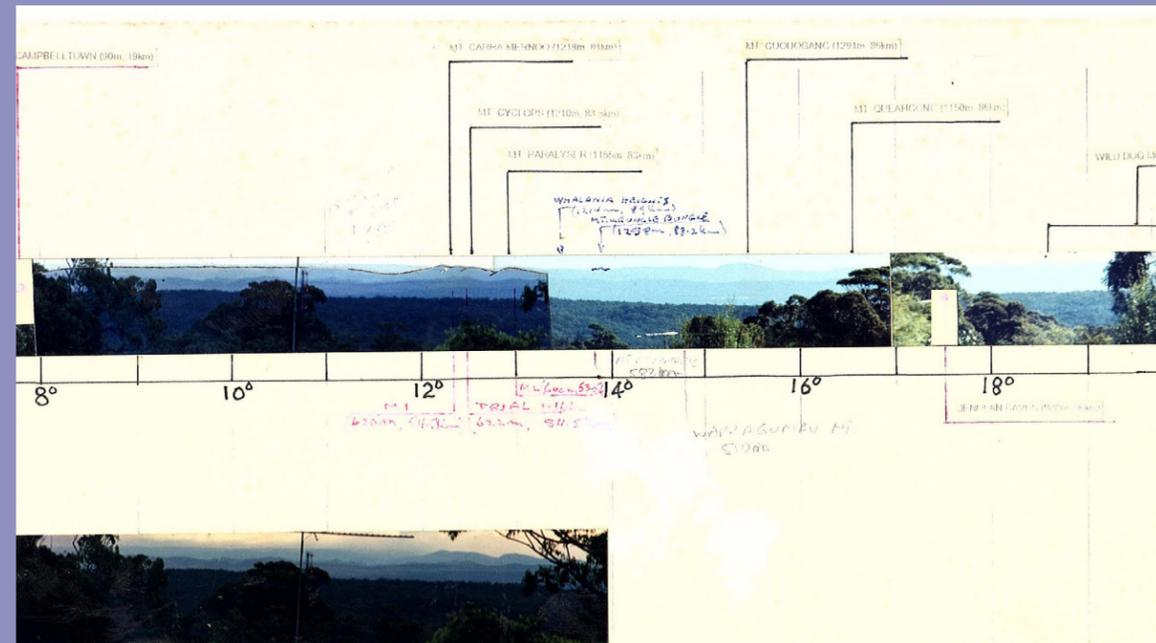
who cling to that Union Jack in the corner of the Australian flag. He saw it only as a pathetic symbol of dependence and found the notion that his British origin somehow made him an Australian decidedly illogical. So he cherished the hope that he would live to see a new flag that would be a true symbol of an independent, self-reliant community.

But now, as he sat in his garden enjoying one of those perfect Sydney days, controversy about national flags seemed very unimportant. The really important things were the deep blue of

the sky seen through the branches of the blue gum over his head, the chatter of the noisy miners as they searched through the grevilleas for nectar and, above all, old Guouogang, free of cloud and clearly visible in the sparkling air.

As Charlie gazed at his mountain he suddenly had a most extraordinary experience. It seemed that the giant wombat was getting larger and coming nearer and was projecting into his mind the strange idea that if he concentrated very hard and uttered the right words, the magic power would seep into his psyche. Charlie closed his eyes and his lips began to move, "Guouogang, Guouogang, Guouogang". Then he gave a great sigh that sent a shudder through his body, and he was very, very still. At last the old eyes opened. The old lips formed a slight grin and then began to move again, 'Stupid old bugger'.

Don Urquhart



ground river channels, a possible source of alluvial gold deposits. Sadly, Dad contracted polio in the year I was born.

At first he was totally paralysed. In an iron lung. But his upper body recovered and he gained muscle strength in his arms and chest. But his leg muscles never re-formed – they remained thin and wasted. He developed a lot of upper body strength so he could swim with his arms but could not kick his legs. After being hospitalised for 12 months followed by a period of rehabilitation at Jervis Bay, he recovered enough to walk with calipers and crutches, or rather, 'jump', as you would wearing a cast for a broken leg. The calipers kept his legs rigid. It was hard work! I know because when I was older, I tried it out!

Before polio my father was extremely sporty and active. He loved cycling regularly after school, often through Kuringai National Park, and he once cycled from Turrumurra to Kangaroo Valley. He would ski, play cricket and tennis, bushwalk, surf, and go canoeing. But after polio, even getting up in the morning was arduous, putting on calipers and big heavy boots.

Everyone used to stare at him. It was difficult for a shy retiring man, as he was. As a child, I was usually mortified. Especially on my first day at school when everyone stared at us. Dad took me as Mum had my sister at home as a baby.

Later I was proud of him, of course. Especially when one father came to school on Education Day flat on his back in a hospital trolley. His upper body did not have my Dad's strength.

As Dad aged and no longer had the strength to walk with crutches, he was confined to a wheelchair,

The story and the author

'Guouogang' was written in 1988 as part of an anthology to mark the Australian Bicentenary by the continuing group members of The Bathurst 1985 Creative Writing Workshop.

Members of this workshop first met and worked together at the WEA Summer School at the Mitchell College of Advanced Education under the tutorship of Lenel Moulds.

From that time on Don Urquhart met with members of the group several times a year to share lunch and workshop new writing.



then an electric trike for a time, and finally an electric wheelchair. He worked full time and in 1961 he secured a position at the AAEC, Lucas Heights (now ANSTO), as a nuclear radiation physicist where he created the Australian Standard Calorimeter – one application of his work being the accurate measurement of the dose received by patients undergoing radiation for cancer treatment.

He travelled alone to Washington, London, Germany, Paris and Hawaii to give papers at conferences at a time and in a world which was much less disable-friendly than it is today.

My father loved driving, and drove until the age of eighty-six. His first car was a Morris Minor, with heavy hand controls and a mechanically operated yellow metal 'hand' (before blinkers or indicators). Finally, years later, he had a specially designed van with a ramp that he could wheel onto and then transfer to the driver's seat.

Dad's retirement was as full as his working life. He read voraciously, played bridge regularly, swam, and attended cooking classes, writing workshops, art classes and continuing education courses. He even contemplated tackling an

Arts degree. He and mum had yearly subscriptions to the opera and the Sydney Theatre Company. He made a big effort to do lots. They dined out every week as well!

They also travelled to the UK on an extensive holiday. And to New Zealand, Tasmania, to North Queensland and across the Nullarbor, to see the desert again. They had yearly holidays, always in February in Mollymook, in 'a room with a view' at Cliff Cottage, and other South Coast destinations. My father began, but did not complete, a memoir: "Bits of a Bloke". He tried for a long time to care for Mum in her decline, redesigning the kitchen so that he could prepare meals for her. She died in 2010. Unfortunately, my father's post-polio condition meant that he was confined to a nursing home for the last 12 months of his life and died two years later. He had felt that life was over once his GP determined that he should no longer drive.

While there are some instances of fancy in the story that follows (for example, he did not smoke a pipe), the persona 'Charlie' is very much Dad. I can still see him sitting on the deck he had built, in his wheelchair, in the sun, reading or gazing out west, wistfully taking in

the view of the mountains beyond. He was devastated when his neighbours on the western side tore down their old home and rebuilt further back on their block, totally obscuring Dad's view of the western ranges and Mt Guouogang, the highest mountain of the Krungle Bungle range. Such was his determination to rescue this precious view, he had a structure built (at some expense!) outside his study window consisting of two mirrors, so that he could see Mt Guouogang once more. Mum disliked this 'structure' – and, indeed, it was ugly! But it showed Dad's passion for the Australian landscape and how important it was to his sense of well-being. It showed how inventive he was, how clever, to have worked out the necessary arrangement and dimensions of two mirrors to restore his view of the mountains.

Dad had never complained about his situation – until he found himself in a nursing home. Always when problems arose, he'd found solutions. Yes, he liked a room with a view. Don felt it was the landscape of this country that had made him Australian, and he felt a need to be part of it or, at least, to see it.

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