

# THE SNOWS OF YESTERYEAR FELL IN ADELAIDE

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The quirks of fate, the surprising coincidences that defy the odds, the chance meetings, unexpected and delightful reunions—these are the spice of life.

I had one such unexpected and delightful reunion recently in Adelaide—a chance encounter that was as charming as it was out of the blue, though perhaps not entirely "inattendu". I shall explain later.

But first, for the sake of being intriguing I shall tell of another most felicitous outcome to yet another chance meeting which happened two years ago.

Both events, in a way, complement each other and complete a circle—not a vicious one, but one might say a "virtuous" one, I hope.

In my school days two good chums were Tony Wilson and Tony Tripp. Both lived in Hamilton, as I did, and both attended the Marist Brothers' Saint Francis Xavier Boys' School. We were, in a way, all rather eccentric. I think there were more eccentric people around in those days, and certainly more eccentric schoolboys. None of us was fond of football, a compulsory part of Marist boys' curriculum in those days. Wilson and I played grade rugby league, much against our grain, but Tripp simply could not play the brutal contact sport—"thugby" I think the members of the anti-football league called it. He just simply was not the right shape. He might have snapped if he had been tackled hard. The two Tonys had a strong artistic and humanities bent (Tripp more of the former, Wilson, of the latter). This ran counter to the prevailing monoculture of the school where a fanatical emphasis on rugby league, cricket, handball, boxing, indeed most team sports and contact contests was the order of the day. Science and mathematics were at the core of the curriculum, with religion and monthly confession and mass at the nearby Sacred Heart Church thrown in for good measure.

Wilson and I were both francophiles and pursued our French at school right up to the Leaving Certificate when most other boys had abandoned it. Tripp left school earlier but was always involved in theatrical activities and eventually worked in the field of theatre design in Perth and Melbourne after a stint in Newcastle. He and I were

foundation members of the Newcastle Young People's Theatre. Tony is currently designer for the Melbourne Theatre Company. He and his wife Helen, also a Novocastrian originally, have five grown-up children. By yet another quirk of fate, the Tripps' second son, Ben, is a professional footballer—Australian rules, not rugby. Tony's old father, who died many years ago, would have been delighted. The football talent had leapt a generation and alighted upon Ben. Tony and Helen now live in a leafy street in St Kilda, a tram ride from Tony's workplace at the Arts Centre in St Kilda Road, by the Yarra.

Tony Wilson got his degree in French at the young Newcastle University College and obtained a post as "assistant anglais" at a *lycée* in Saint-Etienne in France a year after graduation. Once in France he later transferred to the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Lyon and started a doctorate.

I always received Tony's letters with eager anticipation. The francophile in me yearned to be in France too, and as a nineteen-year-old primary school teacher in Granville, in Sydney's western suburbs, I too looked forward to the day when I'd be able to study French at university and follow my friend Wilson on his wondrous exploits.

But his meteoric career soared while I remained earthbound. He eventually gained a scholarship in diplomacy, and after a cadetship in Canberra was posted to the Australian delegation to the United Nations in New York. Heady stuff! Later he became an expert in Latin American affairs, learned Spanish (thus becoming an hispanophone as well as a francophone) and worked in the Australian Embassy at Buenos Aires. In these years I hardly ever heard from him. I seem to remember I saw him once, on one of his rare return visits to Australia to report to Canberra and visit his family who still lived in Newcastle. Tony and Helen Tripp once visited Wilson in Buenos Aires when they were on their way to spend a year on the idyllic Aegean Island of Kythera, immortalized by Watteau in one of the "fêtes galantes"—"L'Embarquement pour l'île de Cythère" I believe it's called.

By this time, like Tripp, I too was married and had a young family. I had returned to teach in Newcastle and begun studying French under a number of teachers at the university who became famous or infamous in one way or another. The head of the department was Dr Kelter Hartley who left a bequest of over a million dollars for a scholarship to the university's French Department upon his death in

1987. Others I remember were Colin Thornton-Smith, Jean-Félix Audoin des Cartiers, Marc Caillot and Dr Ivan Barko, who later became Professor of French at Sydney University.

My university career, despite these distinguished teachers, was unremarkable but I nevertheless won a "bourse" to go to the Sorbonne in Paris. I'll come back to that later.

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The years went by and at last, in 1979, I received a communication from Wilson. He had also married—a Mexican—but the marriage had ended in divorce. He was returning to Australia on furlough or to be briefed on another diplomatic posting somewhere in the Hispanic world, no doubt. He would call in on my wife and me in Newcastle, in our small flat above a book-mender's shop, in Beaumont Street, Islington. This same street was devastated by the Newcastle earthquake in 1989.

I was full of anticipation at the thought of seeing Tony Wilson again. Then the stunning news of Tony's death reached us. He had succumbed to a massive heart attack while on holiday in, of all places, New Guinea.

We were devastated. My wife and I attended a memorial service for Tony at the Sacred Heart Church in Hamilton where we had attended so often in our school days and where Tony and I had been altar boys together. The ceremony was bleak, with no coffin—particularly sad, I thought. We offered our condolences to Mrs Wilson and to his sister Pat.

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That might have been the end of the story but sometime early in 1992 I received an unexpected telephone call from Tony Wilson's mother, still a sprightly, alert and charming woman. She had had a letter addressed to Tony and written by a Frenchman, Jean-Marie Laxenaire. Would I please translate it for her?

I did so willingly of course. It was nice to see Eileen Wilson again, a lady of about my own mother's age, and I suppose the meeting was the more poignant as my own dear mother had died only a few months before. It transpired that Jean-Marie Laxenaire, the headmaster

or "provisieur" of a school, the Lycée Mansart at Saint-Cyr L'Ecole, near Versailles, was trying to renew contact with Tony, with whom he had conducted a pen-friendship back in the '50's when we were all at school. Out of the blue Laxenaire had written on the off-chance that his letter would reach someone at least with some knowledge of Tony Wilson's whereabouts.

It was my sad task then to write to Monsieur Laxenaire and tell him of Tony's death. A reply soon came and his old penfriend was deeply saddened, he wrote, to hear of Tony's untimely demise. He was interested to learn that I was a French teacher and expressed the wish that we might one day meet, either in France or in Australia.

Then, as luck would have it, I received a "bourse" from the French Government to allow me to do a three-month "stage" at the Centre de Linguistique Appliquée at Besançon, in Eastern France, in late 1992.

This would be an excellent opportunity to meet Jean-Marie Laxenaire. I wrote and told him so and he graciously replied that he was looking forward to my visit.

So in late September I arrived in Paris, spent a day or two with my dear friends Jacques and Dorothée Pinoir at Rueil-Malmaison, and dropped in on the *provisieur* at the Lycée Mansart. The walk from the station at Saint-Cyr was very interesting, past the Military Academy designed by the architect Mansart. The Lycée was in the rue Victorien Sardou.

Monsieur Laxenaire received me most courteously into his sparsely furnished office, with a Gobelins tapestry on the wall. Because we both had a vested interest in schools and languages, we explored the possibility of a pupil exchange between the Lycée Mansart and my school, Newcastle High. This, we calculated, would be of mutual benefit to pupils and teachers of both schools and would be in the interests of international goodwill and harmony.

Then I had to leave the next day for Besançon where I had just missed the balmy autumn weather and brought the rain with me. I made several trips to Paris by TGV over the period, but did not see Jean-Marie until the day of my departure from Paris to return to Australia. This time had allowed the *provisieur* to be well advanced in his preparations for the visit of a group of Saint-Cyriens and their teachers to Newcastle some time in the following year. The visit was envisaged as an exchange, and

a group of young Novocastrians would make the return visit, perhaps in 1994.

The wheels had been turning, the teachers had been found who would accompany the young "lycéens" and "lycéennes" on the adventure trip of a lifetime to Australia, and by July 1993 no fewer than twenty-eight Saint-Cyriens were in Newcastle, hosted by Newcastle High families and friends. Under the direction of the teachers, France Collas and Eliane Decailot and France's genial husband, Gérard, these senior pupils were able to visit Alice Springs and "le centre rouge", Cairns and the Great Barrier Reef and of course Sydney, Newcastle, the Hunter and its vineyards. They were to be thoroughly spoiled for one whole month in Australia.

Now a group of Newcastle High pupils and other senior French pupils from the Hunter region are to participate in the return visit to Saint-Cyr L'Ecole in March this year.

I think Tony Wilson would have approved.

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"What happened in Adelaide?" you are asking.

I shall reward your patience.

Returning from a German Summer School in January (which I'm often wont to be doing at that time of year, this time with my partner, Ann, who also went to the Hobart Summer School with me two years ago when I had the great stimulus of a German creative writing course with Franz Hohler—this year it was Achim Bröger—but I digress!) we had arrived at the airport earlier than expected thanks to the hair-raising driving of a taxi driver of the old school who referred to a motor cyclist who drove across our path as "a temporary Australian". This was by way of an apology for slamming on the brakes and nearly sending us through the windscreen several times on the short journey.

So there we were at the airport. Early. I changed the booking to Melbourne for an earlier return flight and, with about five minutes to go to take-off, and with our shoulders still smarting from the taxi's seatbelts, we were taking a moment's respite in the lounge.

My gaze wandered idly in a lateral direction and fell upon a craggy, bespeckled face which was very familiar. I hadn't seen that face for thirty-one years. The skin was tanned, the hair was now grey, but unmistakably it was Colin Nettelbeck, and beside him, still lovely as I remembered her from 1963, was his wife, Carol.

"You wouldn't be Colin Nettelbeck?" I asked, knowing full well there could be no mistake.

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Colin's name had been given to me by another Colin—Thornton-Smith, the lecturer from Newcastle in 1962, when I was planning to spend the year's study-leave in Paris. Nettelbeck had proven most helpful and had done his best to make contacts for me to assist my settling-in.

During that eventful academic year 1962-3 Colin and I moved in a circle of French, American and Australian students and enjoyed many of the delights of Paris together. We frequently ate together at the university restaurant at Mabillon, near Saint-Germain-des-Prés, drank coffee and the odd "Ambassadeur" at Monsieur François's café near Mabillon. One day Brigitte Bardot called at Mabillon to visit her sister who lived or worked nearby. That caused quite a sensation. We frequently saw President De Gaulle, fleetingly, as he drove by in one of a column of black Citroën DS's on the Boul' Mich' or the Boul' Saint-Germain.

We went to the cinema: Bunuel, a Humphrey Bogart festival, a Gérard Philippe film or *Brief Encounter*, an Ingmar Bergman movie, *A Bout de Souffle* or *Les Quatre cents coups*. We went to the theatre, to the "chansonniers" at Montmartre, to the jazz "boîtes" in the Latin Quarter, to lectures, concerts, and on the pilgrimage to Chartres in May 1963.

This was the highlight of a year which, with Colin's and Carol's strong allegiance to the Sorbonne's "Centre Richelieu", and the influence of other Catholics like Françoise Lemarchand, stirred even my wavering faith at the time and prompted me to accept the invitation of Colin and his fiancée, Carol, to serve at their nuptial mass at Saint-Séverin's. I hoped I could remember the Latin of the mass. We were only on the cusp of Vatican II. The old thirteenth-century church, on the Left Bank, almost in the shadow of Notre-Dame, had been the chapel of the Sorbonne for centuries before Richelieu built the present one, up the hill,

in the precinct of the Sorbonne itself. The chaplain of the "Centre Richelieu", Père Jean-Marie Lustiger, officiated at the nuptials. Today Lustiger is Cardinal Archbishop of Paris. The reception was held in the famous Rôtisserie Périgourdine, overlooking the Seine. Indeed a memorable occasion. I ate truffles for the first time and won the heart of Carol's aunt who had come especially from the United States, Carol's homeland, to treat us all to this sumptuous feast.

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In the airport lounge in Adelaide we hurriedly exchanged telephone numbers and addresses. Colin and Carol had spent eight years in America before returning to Melbourne. Then Colin had taught for twenty-two years at Monash and now was about to take up the post of Professor of French at Melbourne University. They lived in St Kilda and knew the Tripps! When Ann and I got back to Melbourne we rang Helen and she graciously invited all of us to dinner (Greek cuisine, of course, echoes of Kythera!). The wine and nostalgia flowed freely. With Tony and Helen, nostalgia for Newcastle and especially Cooks Hill, the Novocastrian St Kilda; with the Nettelbecks, nostalgia for Paris—the lost Paris of 1962–3, of Fernandel filming at Montmartre, Place du Tertre, of Françoise Hardy singing "Tous les garçons et les filles", of me "starving in a garret" in the Petit Palace Hôtel, Avenue du Maine and playing Canon Chasuble in a cute production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* at the Théâtre de la Gaîté while Edith Piaf, in the last year of her life, was singing next door at the Bobino. And there was a crazy, mid-winter escapade to Normandy and Brittany with Colin's brother Ted, and another madcap South Australian, Dick Cooper. I remember our midnight arrival at Rouen, trying to walk along the frozen cobbled streets, finding the plaque in the Place du Vieux Marché where Joan of Arc was burnt at the stake, scratching the ice off it, and then our ending up in a hotel which turned out to be more than it appeared to be and we had to go elsewhere. We were young and very silly.

But why was the meeting with Colin not altogether "inattendu"? Well, he's an old Adelaidean, you see. Of German stock, from the Barossa, and I knew I would run into him again one day, possibly in Adelaide. The wonder is that we hadn't met at some time over those twenty-two years long before.

Now, at least, Carol's aunt will no longer have to ask "Whatever happened to that young man who was at your wedding, Michael Taper?" and I shall no longer have to ask myself, "Whatever happened to Colin and Carol Nettelbeck?".

*Newcastle*