

Biography of William Nicolle Oats

The preparation of this biography was made in many ways so easy because William Oats was a prolific writer and perhaps the hardest part of the task has been what to select and what to omit. The other issue was how to address him. Perhaps I should let him have the first word.

"Though christened 'William', my pre-school much hated version was 'Willie', but at school I was always known as 'Will' and only at University did I enjoy the much more pleasantly informal 'Bill'. Efforts have been directed since by some to revert to the supposedly more dignified 'William' Thus when I came as headmaster to the Friends School, the Chairman of the Board William Cooper, then over 90 years of age, hearing some who knew me well as 'Bill', called me aside and confided solemnly, 'Friend I think thee should now be called William'".

William, Bill, Oats was born in Kapunda South Australia on the 26th June 1912. His father Sydney Albert Boriston Oats was a gifted pioneer photographer and shoemaker with a fine baritone voice. His mother Rosalie Mabel Oats nee Nicolle came from Guernsey in the Channel Islands. He had one older sister Millicent (Millie).

His early life was firmly centred on the Kapunda Methodist Church as his father was the choirmaster and his mother the organist. In his own words the "choir was my creche". From this came his life long love of music although he wasn't noted for a strong affinity to organ music perhaps stemming from the day he was caught reading instead of attending to his task of pumping the organ bellows as the organ wheezed to a stop.

His life spanned an extraordinary epoch of development and change. In the autobiography "Such Wealth Brings" that he wrote for his grandchildren and later published in the expurgated version as "Headmaster by Chance" he describes going to bed with a candle not with a flick of a switch to light my way.... then came a brief period of gas followed by the excitement of electricity. For transport the horse-drawn cab hired by his father to take them on the annual family holiday and the hill where the passengers had to get out and push. In 1925 his father purchased their first car a Chevrolet for £230 and he learnt to drive immediately at the age of 13.

At the age of 8 he saw his first aeroplane, and it was a somewhat inauspicious first meeting for a man who would spend much of his life travelling, the plane on landing tipped on its nose and the propeller was smashed. His first personal flight in Brisbane in 1930 was a joy flight in the "Southern Star" one of Kingsford Smith's aircraft.

After his primary and early secondary school education at Kapunda he won a teacher probationary studentship from the results of the Intermediate examination taken at the end of Year 10 and in accepting this studentship he signed the bond which determined his future career. After another 2 years at Kapunda completing his Leaving certificate and winning first place in two state wide essay competitions, the first on "What does Anzac day mean to you?" won him an Anzac Gold Medal and when public support for British imports was flagging, the Buy British Watch for his essay "Why buy British?", he moved to Adelaide Boys High School where his horizons were rapidly expanded and he further developed his love of literature, Latin and mathematics. His cricket coach was the famous and many would still rate the greatest spin bowler Clarrie Grimmett.

In 1930 he entered Adelaide Teachers' College. He became involved in debating, the first subject being "That Tasmania and Western Australia should secede from the

Commonwealth" in which they, the affirmative, defeated Melbourne, followed shortly after by vanquishing Sydney a source of great satisfaction!

He also became deeply immersed in the Student Christian Movement, which became his "spiritual home" plunging him into whole new worlds of thought —political science, psychology, theology and philosophy and the attempt to relate these to religion. This was the time of the beginning of the great depression and the enrolments at ATC plummeted from 500 to 100 and no longer were jobs guaranteed at the end of the course. This gave him the incentive to take a year off to do his Honours, which he did as a combined English and Latin, the first time such a double had been approved by the University of Adelaide. Amongst his teachers at Adelaide University were Sir Douglas Mawson, Professor Raymond Wilton Professor of Mathematics and a Quaker, one of the first Quakers that he close contact with and whose papers he collated and edited with Wilton's wife Winifred in 1944.

In 1935 he took up his first teaching appointment back at Adelaide Boys' High – the following three years he described as a "most valuable apprenticeship in the art of teaching". At this time, also he had his first involvement with the New Education Fellowship, which opened new vistas of educational possibilities and set the scene for educational reform. In 1990 its successor the World Education Fellowship awarded him the Clarice McNamara Award for "excellence of service to Australian education and for upholding the traditions and principles of the World Education Fellowship"

Then came one of those chance moments that played such a critical role in the shaping of his life. When farewelling a fellow-worker from the Adelaide YMCA in Adelaide, Doug Deane who was off to take up a scholarship at the Geneva YMCA, his parting words to Doug were "Doug, old boy, don't forget to find me a job over there". On arrival in Geneva the YMCA was a victim of the Depression and closed down, Doug successfully sought out a position at the International School, and in late 1936 on learning that there was a vacancy for a teacher, cabled Bill urging him to accept the appointment. He was dejected in having to decline as his father had just died from a recurrence of a malignant melanoma and his mother faced an uncertain future. Two years later another similar cable arrived (in the middle of a Maths class) and with his mother now settled he left shortly after on the first of many overseas trips. I won't dwell in any detail on the next 4 years, the book of his letters to his mother "Choose your Dilemma" covers these years. Suffice to say that, that time had untold influences not only on his attitudes, his religious beliefs, but also his educational theory and practice.

His return after the excitement of Geneva, the escape from France and the journey back on the "Singing Ship" brought a new crisis. He wrote on the voyage back "My feelings are neutralised just now: perhaps when I cross the Line, the pull of gravitation will draw me south and I'll be looking forward to friends and home. I would never have imagined that I could have become so attached to the other side and so empty on return. I want solitude, time to be myself, and I wonder whether I shall find myself in Australia. It is for me a question of what to be, rather than what to do."

The salvation came in two ways – an opportunity to teach at the experimental school run by Clive and Janet Nield at Warrandyte, Victoria, a challenging educational experiment. The progressive curriculum was not pre-programmed and packaged but grew best from the child's developing interests, its physical, intellectual and aesthetic needs.

The other salvation came in a whirlwind courtship of our mother Marjorie, 4 meetings later and in his own words "I had no further doubts. It was as clear as that. The impulse needed no questioning, no resisting. Thus a door opened on what has been

the deepest experience of my life – and the most rewarding. Post Europe depression was over.” They were married on New Year’s day 1942 by our maternal Grandfather, Frederic Gordon Rogers in the Westbourne Park Methodist Church,. It almost didn’t happen. Dad forgot that it was the first day of the introduction of daylight saving in South Australia. He missed his connecting train, ran a “four-minute mile” to the home of the driver he had hired to take him to the church and just reached him as he was backing out to leave.

Shortly after he took up the position of Headmaster of Kings’ College in Adelaide. These were “interesting” times. The school was on the verge of closing, they had to share their home with the US Eighth Army headquarters. On appointment he had been promised a bonus if the school was still running at the end of the first year. It was thus with some anticipation in these cash strapped times that he returned from the Board Meeting. An outing to the Regent picture theatre admittedly sitting in the Dress Circle, an icecream at the interval and the insistent pleas from our mother on how much was the bonus was then met with “We have just spent it!” King’s College following its amalgamation with Girton, is now the very successful Co-Educational College Pembroke, on that bonus was based its survival. His youthful looks also gave rise to another favourite family story and I quote “On a public holiday not long after our arrival, I was relaxing in my shorts in the lounge when there was a knock at the front door. I answered and was greeted by an irate ‘I want to see your father’. Without querying the nature of the complaint, I asked him to follow me and led him through the lounge and down the hall through the swing doors turned right and into the study. Having beckoned him to a chair, I went round the desk, seated myself and said ‘Now what do you want to see me about?’. I’ve forgotten the reaction or the reason for the visit, but I enjoyed the occasion.”

One legacy from the Kings’ years was the introduction into Speech Night of “what for me became one of my greatest pleasures, one which I perhaps selfishly hugged to myself in many subsequent Speech Nights. I conducted the whole school in carols.....This interest in singing – and particularly in using singing to develop a sense of community in a school – became part of my style. I always found it challenging to come to a situation of resistance, particularly among boys, who for some reason often regard singing as “sissy” and to catch them out by persuading them that they could really enjoy dropping their inhibitions and sing.” I think that many of us who were at Friends during the Bill Oats era will have this enduring memory of Speech Nights.

And so to the Friends School. Following the death of Ernest Unwin in 1944 he was appointed as Headmaster a position he held for the next 26 years. Just before we moved to Hobart, his mother suffered a fatal stroke, an extraordinary woman who had such foresight in encouraging my father to take the opportunities that presented even though they meant separation from her.

Ernest Unwin before his death had recommended that Bill be approached to be his successor. When he arrived, the situation was quite different from that he had faced at Kings’. Friends’ was riding high on a wave of public reputation and its headmaster had been acclaimed as an outstanding educator and citizen.

Over a morning cup of tea with Will Clemes head of the sister School founded by his father Samuel Clemes who had earlier founded the Friends’ School but had parted company in less than happy circumstances, Bill made the chance remark “Wouldn’t it be wonderful if the two schools came together again”. This led rapidly to the amalgamation of the schools and the creation of the Friends School essentially as it is now today.

He was blessed with extraordinary staff, to name just a few: EK Cracker Morris the new head of the Junior School on the Clemes site, Charles Dolly Annells a previous head of the school and whose son Jack later became the first business Manager of

the School, Mary Stanfield (Stanner), Wilfred Asten the Deputy Head, Jean Yeates, Noel Ruddock, Nancy Newbon, Alec Nightingale. Coupled with this was a far-sighted Board of Governors and their Chairmen, first Frank Wells, then Robert Mather and Stan Wells.

Four years after his appointment he was given the opportunity to return to Ecolint as Co-director and the Board generously granted him 2_ years leave of absence. He was able to continue what he regarded as his three-fold role during all his years of headship there and at Friends', namely to regard some teaching as essential, and not to let administration obscure this responsibility, to give assemblies a central place in the school and to enjoy singing with the children.

One of the outcomes from this stint was that he chaired the session at UNESCO Summer course held at Ecolint from which emerged the International Baccalaureate, about to be introduced here at Friends'. He was very proud that one of his grandchildren Nick successfully gained his IB 3 years ago, another circle closed. At the farewell before he returned to Australia, Bertram Pickard, Chairman of the School Board in his tribute said "Here at Ecolint, we have seen William Oats "conducting" and bringing melody, harmony and above all symphony into the complex life of this essentially complex school".

A major building programme, the Preparatory School, followed by the Junior School, the school ovals at Cornelian Bay, highlighted the next phase at Friends. This meant a change in the traditional Quaker aversion to borrowing money to a policy of "borrow and build". Throughout the next 20 years there were numerous innovative educational initiatives pioneered at Friends that ensured that it maintained its place as a leader in education. In recognition of his leadership in this process he was made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire in the Queen's Birthday honours list in 1970.

Turning to his other interests – the School didn't seem to leave much spare time. He became very involved with Rotary International, first as President of the Hobart Club, then District Governor for District 283, which covered Tasmania and Gippsland and then International Counsellor. He was involved in the formation of the Australian College of Education, serving first as a member of Council for 12 years until elected president from 1971-73.

In 1965 he with Marjorie was a member of the Quaker team at the UN in New York, was Chairman of the Quaker Service Australia 1980-1986 and from 1983-to 1985 Presiding Clerk of the Australian Yearly Meeting and Chairman of the Tasmanian peace Trust from 1981-93.

In 1973 he retired - some retirement. Academically he added a Masters degree in Education to his B Ed followed by his Doctorate of Philosophy tracing the history of Quakers who immigrated to Australia from the UK. He wrote 9 books, The Rose and the Waratah, Backhouse and Walker, A Question of Survival, Headmaster by Chance, Dictionary of Australian Quaker Biography, The Nurture of the Human Spirit, I Could Cry for these People, Values Education and just a few weeks ago his last book Choose Your Dilemma.

Through this he served on the Parole Board, the Australian Schools Commission represented the Australian NGOs at an International Seminar on Genocide in Cambodia in 1989.

In his second retirement the Probus Club became a major interest and especially the Choir with Rick Burgess and it is especially fitting that they should be singing here this afternoon.

And his family. The central refuge and retreat was Aguerremendi at Killora North Bruny Island, named after the house in Hendaye in the South of France where he set up Ecolint in exile in 1940. Built with the help of a retired sea-captain, William Fazackerley and many friends it was the haven where he recharged his batteries and now the three generations have come to treasure it likewise. It is here that he will join Marjorie as his permanent-resting place. During our Mother's long illness another set of talents emerged - that of home keeper and cook, his bread making became legendary. In February at the time of his first official return to Kings' College, Adelaide it became rapidly apparent that he had a terminal illness. He used the next 4 months to close numerous circles, to say farewell to old friends and to launch his last book. Just 2 weeks before his death he celebrated his 87th birthday in the company of friends and family. For Bill his family was of central importance, his sons-in law Lyndsay Farrall and Michael Nicholson, his daughter in law Susan, his grand children of all of whom he was immensely proud – Jeremy and his fiancée Lynn Henderson and Reia Farrall, Simon, Rachael and Nick Oats, Zac, Romy, Tom and Sam Nicholson. His last message to Simon sums up his enduring relationship and his legacy to them "Over to you my future lies in your presence with my love Bill."

Before concluding this biography by reading the introduction to his autobiography, we, Stephanie, Alison and myself, would like to express our deep and heartfelt thanks to our aunt Ruth Rogers for the way in which she helped care for first our Mother and then our Father during the terminal stages of their lives. Ruth your quiet calm presence meant that Dad could spend the last few weeks of his life at the Nicholsons surrounded by his family cared for by Alison, Michael, Romy, Tom and Sam.

So from the foreword to his autobiography, let Bill Oats have the last words

This book had its genesis on a rock known to my children and grandchildren as Story Rock. When the tide is ebbing, a quick-footed dash from the shore at Killora Bay, North Bruny, makes this rock an ideal setting for the telling of stories. One day, as we settled down for a session, I was asked by two of my grandchildren to tell them a "true" story. What was the most exciting thing that had happened to me? Hadn't I been in France during the War? Was that the first or the second World War? That started my reminiscing. I realised that my life spanned an incredible period of change in conditions and manner of living. The world I grew up in might appear to my grandchildren almost as belonging to another planet. Yet, might it not be useful at least to recall for them the world as I saw it, personally, so that they could the more readily understand the hopes, fears, frustrations and values of my generation? In the telling I have realised how blessed I have been in so many ways, how rich has been my experience of people and events. So much was given me- friends, opportunities, even my life's work, teaching, for I did not consciously choose to take up this as a profession. I simply found myself committed to teaching and teaching opened so many doors.

Such is the wealth remembering things brings. But this title inspired not only the decision to recall the wealth of experience that has come my way; it was itself inspired by my sense of what I owe to others, and above all, to one, my wife Marjorie,

For thy sweet love remember'd such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

In her and in those for whom this book was written – my children and my grandchildren – and in the many good friends we have made lies my real wealth