

Chapter 9

'I'm not a good mother': gender expectations and tensions in a migrant woman's life story

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I'm not a good mother—not what Dr Spock calls a 'slow mother' who leaves her chores to make sure junior gets the right treatment. In fact, tho' I love my 2 children, I just loathe the continual 'hampered' feeling.

— Dorothy Wright, letter to 'Mummy', 16 March 1961

Dorothy Wright was a perfectly 'good' mother. When her two children were growing up in the late 1950s and 1960s, in Britain and Australia, Dorothy was a full-time housewife and mother. She cooked her children's meals and cleaned up after them; she sewed and knitted their clothes; she read stories, organised birthday parties and took them swimming. Like most mothers, however, Dorothy struggled to be good enough as a mother and as a housewife and, despite what Dr Spock had to say, it was not easy to do both jobs well at the same time (in fact, for mothers such as Dorothy, the prescriptions of childcare experts such as Dr Spock sometimes made the job harder and the feeling of failure greater). Although Dorothy loved her children, being a mother was not an entirely satisfying role and it 'hampered' aspirations for her own life apart from the family.

Dorothy Wright's years as a young mother coincided with the family's move to Australia. The letters she wrote home to her mother and sister back in England, and the stories she now tells of a memorable chapter in her life, evoke in rich detail the experience of motherhood in the 1960s and the challenge of meeting the competing expectations of society, family and self. A transnational perspective enriches our understanding of the lives of migrant women such as Dorothy Wright. We know about her experiences because she was impelled to write letters to bridge the emotional distance between Australia and home and sustain intimate relationships with her British family (and because she preserved her letters and photos as a keepsake of a memorable episode). Letter writing was perhaps the most significant reflective space in Dorothy's hectic life and, in her letters, Dorothy articulated and explored her experiences as a migrant mother. In return, Dorothy's mother and sister wrote back with advice and

encouragement, and occasional admonishment, about mothering. In Australia, Dorothy had to make her own way as a mother and housewife, but her maternal path was shaped powerfully by transnational lessons from family and society, from Britain and Australia, and from past and present.¹

Figure 9.1: ‘The end of a perfect birthday’ (caption in photograph album). Dorothy Wright reading to her children, Nicholas and Bridget, at home in Hornsby Heights, Sydney, on Bridget’s first birthday, 25 March 1961.



Born in 1928, Dorothy Bailey was the second of three sisters in a middle-class English family. The Baileys lived in a village on the rural outskirts of the Surrey town of Guildford and, as a girl, Dorothy relished outdoor life and adventures in the open fields beyond the home, away from the strict domestic routine and stuffy moral codes of elderly parents who had grown up during Queen Victoria’s reign. Dorothy left Guildford County School for Girls at age fifteen to follow her dream of a farming life, but opportunities for a fulfilling career on the land were limited for a young woman in the late 1940s, and Dorothy soon took a more typical though less satisfying path into secretarial work. In 1955, at the age of twenty-six, she married Mike Wright, an engineer who had also grown up in Guildford, and three years later she had her first child, a son, Nicholas.

Marriage and motherhood was a conventional pathway for young British women in the 1950s. Dorothy, however, had an adventurous spirit and a lifelong enthusiasm for Australia that had been inspired by school geography lessons that ‘entranced’ her with ‘all that sunshine, those enormous areas of waving corn, sheep by the million, open spaces, horse riding and so on...as an 11 year old I was in a very romantic phase and saw myself as a “tough guy” living the

great free outdoor life'. Images and ideas about another country and another life had a resonant place in Dorothy's imagination and now unsettled conventional domestic expectations. A few months after Nick was born, 'itchy feet set in'. Mike's best friend's sister-in-law, June, 'had gone to Australia and was sending back glowing reports' from Sydney, including news of plentiful employment. Mike wanted to get head-office experience to further his engineering career and Sydney was more appealing than London, Birmingham or Manchester. The 'ten-pound' assisted passage scheme would pay their way and June agreed to sponsor the Wrights and find them accommodation in Sydney. This would not be an outback adventure, but Dorothy knew from June that the outer suburbs of Sydney were 'far less densely developed than, say, Wimbledon', and promised a sunny climate for outdoor living. 'We would have sufficient money to put down on a house, and we had bags of optimism that we would do well.'²

The Wrights arrived in Sydney on 23 December 1959. For the first few months they rented accommodation until, in April 1960, they moved into their own fibro bungalow in Hornsby Heights on the edge of bush and suburbs in north-western Sydney. Mike secured a well-paid engineering job with Nestlé Australia that required daily commuting into the city office and regular stints away refitting factories around the state. Dorothy managed the practicalities and economics of buying and creating a new home in Australia, mostly by herself, with impressive skill and confidence. Managing two young children was much more difficult, and Dorothy's first year in Australia was shadowed by exhaustion and emotional pain as she struggled to cope as mother and housewife in a new country and without the support networks of family and home. Dorothy was five months' pregnant on arrival and, with an active and demanding toddler who was just about to walk, motherhood in Australia was never going to be easy.

Though the baby she was carrying was 'fit as a flea', in her autobiographical writing Dorothy recalls a miserable period as she came to full term in the heat of an Australian summer.

I was very lonely during the daytime, homesick, increasingly uncomfortable with grossly swollen ankles, and Nicholas suffered from prickly heat all round the folds of his chubby neck. The heat was dreadful, as the flat faced north—I'd never realised that in Australia that is where the sun is. Shops were in walking distance, but there was no shade on the way, and at that time opening hours were only 9 am to 5 pm, so I had to go shopping through the heat of the day.

Bridget was born on 25 March 1960. While Nick was boarded out at a nursery, Dorothy and Bridget spent a fortnight in Hornsby Hospital while Dorothy rested and recovered from stitches.³

When Nick was born in England in 1958, Dorothy had been ‘just *clueless*, it was *Mike* who sort of knew how to change nappies and things’. She explains that ‘Mother wasn’t terribly maternal and having children round her all the time like some mothers are’ and that, as a tomboy, Dorothy had no girlish interest in babies. As a first time mother, she had ‘soon caught on’ to the hard work of washing terry-towelling nappies in a bucket of cold water. She had learnt the lesson of routine from her mother and from Phyl, a ‘mother’s help’ who lived with the Bailey family for more than a decade and who was ‘the real Mary Poppins’ in Dorothy’s childhood. ‘We were routine-ised as children. You know, you feed every four hours and you bath at the same time every day and go for walks in the afternoon and do all this sort of thing.’ In Dorothy’s own upbringing, Phyl had performed much of this routine child care (for example, Mrs Bailey often had a rest in the afternoon when Phyl took the girls out for a walk in the pram). Dorothy could not, however, afford a ‘mother’s help’, and assumed the prevailing postwar attitude that the mother should be the primary child-carer, and, perhaps in response to her own mother’s maternal limitations, she wanted to raise her own children. ‘The very *thought* of somebody else going through the stages of Bidy being weaned and starting on solid food and seeing her walk for the first time and all that, I just couldn’t...[I thought] “I can’t do that, don’t think I want to do that”.’⁴

As a young mother in Sydney, Dorothy was guided, apart from the lesson of routine, by *The Good Housekeeping Baby Book*, a gift from her mother, and the English magazine *Parents*. Dorothy was particularly impressed by *Parents*, which Mrs Bailey posted to her.

Whenever you get a problem with the children, and the *Parents* comes, then, the answer is always there in an article by them, it seems most extraordinary...I do enjoy it, and you can get all the other English women’s books out here—but not that. Funny, only one Aussie mag. offers anything similar & that’s a Dr. Spock sponsored thing—& he & I don’t agree.

Dr Spock’s modern, scientific recommendations about the ‘placid’ mother who should follow the natural rhythms of the child and prioritise the child above all else, did not match up with Dorothy’s more traditional preference for routine, in child care and housework.⁵

Feeding routines were particularly important for Dorothy, not least so that she could cope with two small children and her other domestic responsibilities. She wrote to her mother about following feeding advice from their sponsor, June, who was an experienced nurse and mother of three sons.

I’m doing some rather unorthodox things with her, but with Nick to cope with too, it does make life easier. Of all the awful things, I prop

little Biddy's bottle up beside her & leave her to feed herself! Last night also I ignored her cries for food at 2am, she went into the farthest corner of the house & just waited till 6am. It was nice to get 7 hours sleep straight off & Bridget seems none the worse.

A few weeks later, Dorothy reassured an anxious Mrs Bailey that 'I haven't choked Biddy yet!! Don't worry I keep a careful eye on her & keep popping in to look at her while she's feeding.'

By July, Dorothy proudly reported that Biddy was regularly sleeping through the night, though Dorothy sometimes woke her in the morning. 'Have to do that or the routine is all to blazes & I get muddled & can't get breakfast ready in time.' In December, Dorothy wrote to Barbara about another mother who seemed to manage without routine: '[H]ow I wish I could happily be as chaotic as she is!! You can set the clock by the times I feed my kids.'⁶

Bottle-feeding helped with routine. Bridget had fed well at the breast from the start, but was doing complementary feeds from the bottle within a fortnight. Much later, Dorothy recalled that her sickness on the voyage to Australia had been so traumatic that she was able to breast-feed Bridget only for a few weeks. At the time, she was advised about bottle-feeding by a nurse from the Nestlé Feeding Service (a connection made through Mike's work, and a sign that Dorothy's approach to child care was informed by ideas from Australia as well as England, and by the powerful influence of domestic science and consumerism that prevailed in both countries). Dorothy wanted Bridget to sleep through the night after a big feed (she also wanted a decent night's sleep herself) and was keen 'to put her completely on the bottle then I shall *know* what she is getting'. Within a month, Dorothy had established

a revolutionary routine for dealing with two babes...It goes like this 6 a.m. (and one has to keep rigidly to time) give B. her bottle, leave her to go and wash and dress myself, return to burp, top and tail her, put on her day clothes. 6.45 a.m. Wash and dress Nick. 7 a.m. Breakfast, and in the evening 5 p.m. Feed Nick, then return to B. and burp and change her. 6.15. Baby in cot asleep (?). 6.30 Nick in cot. In between whiles Nick has to go in his playpen and he is very good about this...It all works very smoothly although nighttime is a bit breathless for an hour or so.⁷

Dorothy's reassuring letters to her mother at this time convey the impression that she is busy but coping. Just occasionally, a glimpse of exhaustion and misery sneaks through. The worst that she can write about her pregnancy is that she is uncomfortable and impatient (though two days before the birth 'Mike is beginning to feel the strain & says to me every morning rather pathetically "Have a baby to-day, Dossie".') When Bridget is about two months old and Mike has just returned from a week working away up country, Dorothy admits to her

mother that 'I'm glad he's home, gets a bit boring on my own', and that she feels 'fine but get tired at the end of the day which isn't to be wondered at when I start at 6a.m. & finish at 10.45 p.m. However, it won't last forever.' Two weeks later, writing on a 'miserable dull, windy & cold day...to the tune of Bridget "exercising her lungs"' and 'Nicholas...in his playpen beating hell out of one of my baking tins', Dorothy confides, 'I always think you will understand with two babies life is hectic & somewhat tiring.' In August, she writes of another English mother with two small children: '[S]he is indeed feeling very lonely & I can sympathise—we are only just coming out of the state ourselves.' The careful language and third-person pronoun soften the impact of an admission that can be shared only once the worst is almost over.

In November, with Dorothy 'nearing screaming point', she and Mike agree to use the £9 quarterly child allowance to pay for both children to stay with a child-minder so they can have their first weekend away together since arrival in Australia 11 months earlier: a Peter Sellers' movie, a picnic drive in the Blue Mountains, dinner and star-gazing with friends from Mike's work, and 'my first bathe in the Australian surf...most exhilarating and exciting'. To her sister, Barbara—who often received letters that were more frank about domestic life than those to her mother, but who had heard nothing of her sister's difficulties to this point—Dorothy now explained that 'I feel as if I've just emerged from a rather bad dream, I look back over the last 7 mths & feel with relief (& some pride) "well, alone I done it"!! Tho' not alone, Mike's been wonderful.'⁸

Many years later, Dorothy found it easier to articulate this immensely difficult period of her life and to explain it in terms that were not available to her in 1960. In 2000, she wrote that

things were not right for me. I was still so lonely, especially as winter and short daylight hours drew on. I was homesick, I was over-tired, nights were disturbed by the children—Bridget cried a lot in the first six months, and I always went, Mike never heard. Did I suffer from culture-shock? Always I had a terrible feeling in the pit of my stomach. I cried often, sometimes when I was on my own with the children, and I remember Nicholas at 2 years old trying so hard to comfort me. Perhaps all these things contributed, but it was not until years later when Bridget was expecting her first baby and had all the latest books about pregnancy etc that I suspected the real cause. Post-natal depression. I read to Mike the symptoms from her book, and said 'Does that remind you of anyone?' 'Yes', he immediately knew that had been my problem, when such conditions were not spoken of—at least to me. But I battled on.⁹

Figure 9.2: Caption in Wright photo album, 1960: 'Under our gum tree. 13 weeks old (not the gum tree or Dossie).' Dorothy wanted to show off her new baby in this photo, which she sent to family in England, but the look on her face hints that all was not well.



Hormonal changes caused by pregnancy and childbirth could well have contributed to the cluster of physiological and psychological effects that could now be labelled as 'postnatal depression'. The severity of Dorothy's depression was, however, almost certainly exacerbated by other factors in her life as an isolated suburban mother in the early 1960s. In her migration memoir, Dorothy wonders whether she suffered from 'culture shock', but there is not much evidence in her contemporary or retrospective accounts that she struggled to deal with a new culture and society; indeed, this was an aspect of her life that she seemed to manage very effectively. A letter in April 1961 suggested that the success of her family's migration was challenging but also positive and affirming for Dorothy. 'One is busy, there is a new and completely different life, and it may sound odd, but one seems to change—perhaps in my case "grow-up" or "mature" may be better words than "change".' Though Dorothy missed her family, she also relished the adventure of making a new life in Australia and took pride in her independence and success.¹⁰

Dorothy was, however, as she recalls, 'over worked...lonely and homesick', and the loss of support of close family and friends was especially difficult—as it was for many migrant mothers and, indeed, for any Australian mother who had moved to a new suburb and away from extended family networks. In September

1961, and then again in March 1962, Dorothy wrote to Barbara to squash family rumours that she might be expecting a third child.

Between you & me I don't feel I've recovered my breath since Bidy yet, but I expect that's partly due to the fact of our being here & having no relations to dump the kids on even for an evening of relaxation...I'd like a third sometimes—2 doesn't seem a complete family (is that because we were 3?)—but can't contemplate an addition while we're here—in simple Bernard Shaw language it's B_ not having anyone to go to who really *will* think your kids are sweet & won't mind the hell they raise in the house.

One elderly aunt by marriage who lived at Wyong on the north coast was a particular solace, and her daughter, Mildred, served as godmother at Bridget's christening, but they lived 50 miles away and could not offer practical everyday support. In her letters, Dorothy emphasised that Mike did his best to help. Before Bridget's birth, he was 'very helpful with Nick—getting him up before he leaves & foregoing [sic] his evening pint of beer (or "schooner" as it's called here) to get home & help bath & bed him', and after the birth he cleaned the house and prepared a roast chicken for Dorothy's return from hospital. During the working week, however, Mike had little time for the children. He had a busy and demanding city job and was often working away from Sydney for days at a time. Just occasionally, Dorothy's letters expressed her frustration at doing the child care mostly on her own, and in our interview she recalled one particular tension.

Just after seven the bus would come round and off he'd go. He didn't get home till about eight. And I couldn't make this out for a long time, and *then* I found out [laughs] that he'd go down the 'Rubbity' [the pub], wouldn't he, with the others! And come on a later train.¹¹

Managing a baby and a toddler was a particular difficulty for Dorothy—she wrote to Barbara, 'Isn't it awful with only 18 months difference'—and Nick was a particularly challenging toddler. Teething and tantrums were a constant refrain in letters. 'Nick reduces me to a quivering lump of jelly by the time Mike gets home most nights...Wish I knew how to cope.' Barbara, who also had young children, was attending a psychology class in England and Dorothy wondered what that had to say about what 'one does about "the stage of development to be expected between 2 & 3"'. She bought herself a book on child psychology that explained 'a lot of things but doesn't tell you what to do about them'. Eventually, Dorothy made her own sense of the problem, in a painfully frank letter to Barbara.

Nick is dreadful sometimes, rude, cheeky, difficult & just plain 'ornery', in fact sometimes I actually dislike him—get quite a guilt complex over it! Then he can be quite sweet. I think several things make N. like he is.

1. I had so little time for him when Bidy was a baby & so little experience with children & no-one to ask (like mothers or sisters you know) 2. Bidy is such an easily managed child that seeing her do the right thing makes him dig his toes in & be even more obstinate 3. He is 'sensitive' (a phrase I always connect with sappy mothers with unruly kids) 4. He adores Mike & Mike doesn't have enough time to spend with him & when he is home he's tired & very 'cranky' with the children. 5. He really needs his relations to spoil him a bit & show him love whatever he does 6. He's over-ready for school. Adding it all up I feel a bit of a failure with him!

At the time, Dorothy probably could not articulate another possible cause of Nick's behaviour: that he too had been affected by his mother's depression and from trying, as a two-year-old, 'so hard to comfort' his depressed parent. In retrospect, Dorothy still feels that 'perhaps it was my fault as much as his, you know, I wasn't placid, and he was always into everything. He was a typical boy, I expect, and I didn't know about typical boys, 'cause we didn't have boys in our family! [laughs]'¹²

Dorothy's determination to be a good housewife as well as a good mother also contributed to her depression. Throughout these first difficult years in Australia, Dorothy worked hard to maintain the domestic cooking, cleaning, washing, shopping and clothes-making routine that she had learned from her mother in England and that was expected of a modern suburban housewife. Her letters are packed with details of domestic work and the challenge of combining child care and housework. As she wrote to Barbara, 'I never seem to have the time to get on with things.' Of course, the routine that she inherited from her mother was almost impossible without a mother's help, as Dorothy came to realise.

Oh, I couldn't keep pace, 'cause you see there it was my upbringing, my mother had one day for doing the washing, one day for doing the downstairs and one day for doing the upstairs and another day she went shopping and it was all very organised. Well, she had somebody to look after us in between whiles!

At the time, however, Dorothy internalised failure as a mother and housewife as her own fault. In March 1961, she wrote to her mother about enrolling Nick to start kindergarten later in the year.

I find him very difficult to entertain, especially in the mornings when I'm busy, & I'm sure he's bored. So thought school would be the answer. I'm not a good mother—not what Dr. Spock calls a 'slow mother' who leaves her chores to make sure junior gets the right treatment. In fact, tho' I love my 2 children, I just loathe the continual 'hampered' feeling. I'm afraid I'm apt to scream at him to get out & let me get on—which as

Mike points out does neither of us any good. How does Barb. manage?
I've a feeling she has a lot more patience than I.¹³

In Dorothy's eyes, she was 'not a good mother' because she was distracted by her chores, but also because she loathed 'the continual "hampered" feeling'. Dorothy did not get a break from the children until she reached 'screaming point' almost a year after her arrival in Australia, and in that first year she had very little time for herself or for activities outside the home that might affirm her own sense of self-worth. Even letter writing, one of her only personal pleasures at this time, and an opportunity for quiet reflection, was often interrupted and delayed by other demands. In our interview, asked about her domestic and maternal role in the first years in Australia, Dorothy exclaimed,

Hated it! I really hated it. Did my best, I always did my best but they didn't seem as if they wanted to respond!...I didn't like doing it. I suppose I wanted to sit and read or write or do my own thing or something, you know.¹⁴

Dorothy began to emerge from her postnatal depression after about eight months. The weekend away from the children in November 1960 was an important turning point, and other more gradual changes had a positive impact. As Dorothy got used to coping with two small children, she eased her load through 'a bit of rearranging of the children's routine', as she explained to her mother in September 1961:

We now all have supper to-gether at 6 p.m. and only a light lunch at mid-day. I'm sure you will have qualms about the advisability of giving the children a big meal just before they go to bed, but they don't seem to come to any harm, and it is certainly easier for me, than preparing vegetables and a sweet twice a day.

Household economies such as this were more feasible as the children grew older and Bridget became a toddler. Dorothy recalls that 'the children were easier to manage at the toddler stage', especially after Nick started one morning a week at nursery in July 1961. Nick 'loved it', and Dorothy relished 'a bit of peace!!' and the chance to leave Bridget with a neighbour and do the grocery shopping on her own. School holidays, and illnesses that kept the children home from nursery or school, now became the most frequently noted stress points in Dorothy's letters.¹⁵

Dorothy slowly developed a vital support network of neighbours and friends. Among her new friends were an English migrant mother she had met in the maternity ward, another Nestlé family that had just moved to Sydney and lived 10 minutes' walk away, and neighbours of Phyl's in England who were on a two-year posting and lived in an inner Sydney suburb. Phyl's friend, Pat, was also 'feeling very lonely...Pat and I just got on like a house on fire. She was like

Phyl and she giggled and giggled and I giggled and giggled and we all giggled and giggled and we had a *lovely* time!' From August 1960, Dorothy's letters began to fill with accounts of daytime visits with the women in these three families, all of whom were at home with young children, and occasional evenings out with Mike and the other couples or weekend excursions to the beach or bush. These friendships—and the new car that made them possible—were a lifeline. Neighbours in Hornsby Heights provided more practical support, minding Bridget when Dorothy was shopping, or babysitting when Mike and Dorothy went out for an evening. Dorothy, however, still felt the awkward alienation of a foreigner and found it 'difficult to know the women round here', as she wrote to her mother in November 1961.

The Aussies seem very 'sticky' to me—seems like they have a defensive wall around them as if they have an inferiority complex. Julie (English as you know) is fine but the 2 miles between us are awkward when there's kids to think of. Even now I can't really call [next-door neighbour] Shirley a bosom pal. I just can't seem to find anyone close by to click with! perhaps I'm rather aggressively Pommie!¹⁶

By the end of 1961, social and recreational life with Mike was also much improved. Until that point, Dorothy's letters had often detailed Mike's recreations away from home—drinking with workmates at the end of the day, a weekend of bushwalking and dinner functions at work—and, just occasionally, Dorothy's envy was apparent.

I suppose Daddy used to go out a lot to dinners, did it make you mad? No I don't suppose so, you aren't the type! I just feel I'll *never* have any unencumbered social life again. I suppose I'm selfish! anyway can't help feeling a little jealous when Mike comes rolling in full of conviviality and about 4 doz. oysters (they are about 2/- a doz. here)! Oh, well...

In September 1960, Dorothy and Mike had their first night out together since Bridget was born—a meal with friends—and, after that, with friends and neighbours willing to babysit, they began to enjoy more frequent dinner parties, trips to the theatre (in June 1961, Mike bought *My Fair Lady* tickets as a wedding anniversary gift) and Nestlé social events ('[V]ery pleasant, I seem to know Mike's mates & their wives now'). They also began to make their own home entertainment. In July 1961, Mike built a table-tennis table 'to get our figures in trim, & get my circulation going' during evening workouts, and, in December, a new television supplanted the radio as a dominant presence in the evenings. By March 1962, Dorothy was blaming a reduction in her letter writing—and the loss of her quiet reflective space—on 'the T.V., a complete menace, I'd turn it off many times but Mike finds it relaxing (& I do think his job makes him need relaxation & time to unwind...), anyway evenings go like a flash & no letters written'. When the television eventually went back to the rental company

in May 1963 (while Mike was away setting up the family's move to Victoria), Dorothy mused, 'I don't know which I miss most my husband or my T.V.!!' On a more serious note, during the worst of her depression, Dorothy had not wanted sexual intimacy with Mike, but now, as her spirits and social life improved, so too did their sexual relationship, as 'we learnt things to help us'.¹⁷

Perhaps most important for Dorothy's re-emerging self-esteem were new activities just for herself. As well as writing letters, Dorothy had always been a keen reader. In July 1960, she joined the Reader's Digest Book Club, which delivered four condensed novels a quarter, and, in September, she joined the Hornsby Library (she was annoyed that you had to pay to use a library in Australia), though three months later she reported that it had closed. Her letters list an eclectic, international assortment of reading: French novels, Australian history, *The World of Suzie Wong* (Dorothy told her mother 'it might shock you'), the new English Bible ('you can read it like a novel, makes everything much clearer, tho' I don't say it completely replaces the Authorised version, one misses the old well known phrases that are poetry') and Maurice Nicole's 'enlightening' religious book, *The Mark*. From February 1961, Mike babysat one night a week when Dorothy joined an art class at Hornsby Evening Institute. 'I went last night for the first time. The teacher just said "To-night do a landscape"!!! I felt really flummoxed, however managed to produce something.' Within a few weeks, she was 'really enjoying' the class. 'I do find the colour and freedom of expression very relaxing.'¹⁸

Meditation was not mentioned in letters home, but it played a significant role in Dorothy's recovery. A friend in Guildford had introduced Dorothy to Subud, a spiritual movement that had its origins in Indonesia. In Sydney, Dorothy joined a Subud meeting that helped her overcome the depression.

Initially you were supposed to go twice a week and I used to go on Tuesdays and Thursdays or something like that. Mike used to come home in time to be with the children and then I'd get a train, I suppose, about half past seven, and go in and then get back...You just stood there [laughs]. It sounds ever so silly...it's not something one talks about very much and I don't *like* to talk about something, but it had a great influence on helping me through. And someone said, 'Begin' and you closed your eyes and sort of waited and you might dance or laugh or sing or cry or anything. And then, after half an hour they'd say 'Finish' and you'd stop. That's all. It sounds *silly*, doesn't it?...It helped, yes, tremendously...I improved, I wasn't so utterly depressed and, and...upset all the time. So, it just helped.¹⁹

The reflective and expressive social opportunities of the art and Subud classes were matched by the physical pleasure and exuberance that Dorothy experienced through swimming. On Dorothy's first weekend away from the children, she

enjoyed an 'exhilarating and exciting' initiation in the Australian surf. Because of the wartime closure of English public swimming pools, Dorothy had never learnt to swim properly.

Figure 9.3: 'Dorothy on beach by the surf' (caption from family photograph album), Hawks Nest, March 1963.



As the Wright family began to visit beaches around Sydney most weekends, Dorothy decided that she needed to learn to swim so that she could save her children if they got into difficulties in the water. In February 1962, she started swimming lessons at a local pool and within a few weeks her letters reported that 'I've enjoyed every minute'. A year later, after swimming 50 metres out to sea on a 'wonderful' family day at Narrabeen Beach, Dorothy declared that 'I count my last year's swimming lessons among the "best-things-I've-done" and they've paid off in opening up new fields of enjoyment—or rather "oceans" of enjoyment!' With both children now at kindergarten and three mornings a week for herself, Dorothy enrolled in advanced swimming and diving lessons. Years later, and after a career as a swimming instructor, Dorothy wrote about her discovery of swimming in Australia: 'I can't begin to say how this changed my life. I never would have had such opportunities in England, nothing would have induced me into our cool (or cold) waters. But there in the warmth I blossomed.'²⁰

The outdoor lifestyle of Dorothy's adopted country enabled and symbolised a personal transformation, a 'blossoming'. The pleasure and skill of swimming in pool and ocean was an energising and affirming alternative to Dorothy's more 'hampered' life at home. The outdoor physicality of swimming recaptured the exhilarating sense of freedom and adventure that had been so important in Dorothy's semi-rural youth, which was vital for her sense of self but had been missing in her life as a housewife. Most importantly, swimming, along with new friendships and socialising, and Subud meetings and art classes, enabled Dorothy to enjoy herself and to feel good about herself, not just as a mother and housewife, but in her own right, and it helped lift the depression that had marked her first year in Australia.

This account of one episode within the life of a migrant woman illuminates a number of historical themes. Dorothy Wright's experience matched that of many migrants who struggled as mothers, housewives or workers in a new country, who had lost family support networks and had to create new ways for everyday living. Dorothy's experience, however, also matched that of other postwar women—migrant and otherwise—who were 'hampered' or unfulfilled in the role of suburban housewife, and who Betty Friedan identified in her 1963 best-selling critique of *The Feminine Mystique*. Eventually, as her children grew older and more independent, Dorothy's life began to 'open up' again. Dorothy Wright's life story is a journey to herself, as she negotiated changing social circumstances and expectations for women, and an inner conflict between the domestic role model—inherited in England and reinforced in postwar Australia—and her own interests and needs.²¹

The letters through which we know of Dorothy's early years in Australia are also evidence of the significance and value of letter writing within transnational family relationships. Dorothy wrote home to maintain intimate relationships, to

reassure and seek assurance and advice, to describe and explain her new life and, occasionally, to conceal and protect. Letter writing was emotional work with significant practical benefits, but it also sustained some of the tensions and difficulties of family relationships. Dorothy was justly proud of her independent success as she made a new home and life for her immediate family in Australia. Through letters, however, Dorothy's mother communicated advice and expectations—from 19,000 kilometres away—about how a 'good mother' should perform. These were expectations that Dorothy had learned in childhood, which she struggled to maintain as an adult, and which she sometimes resisted and subverted: by adopting new childcare routines; by expecting Mike to take a more active role in family life than had her own father; by eventually developing her career as a swimming instructor. Dorothy Wright 'blossomed' in outdoor Australia, but perhaps also because, away from her English family, it was easier to assert her independent self. Transnational family relationships required—and were sustained by—regular correspondence, yet the tyranny of distance and separation also created an opportunity for practical and emotional independence. a transnational perspective opens new and unexpected windows into the intimate detail of migrant family life.

If the maternal bonds of this life story—between Mrs Bailey and her daughter, and between Dorothy and her son—carried deep psychic and social significance, there was another arena of psychic tension that was forged in Dorothy's childhood and played out within the social and material circumstances of her adult life. The responsibility and routine of the housewife and mother was internalised in Dorothy's Surrey childhood and from cultural expectations for postwar women in Britain and Australia. From her childhood, however, Dorothy had a competing passion for outdoor life and adventure, for physical activity and freedom that could not be satisfied in the kitchen. The Wright family's Australian sojourn offered an adventure alongside motherhood, but in Australia Dorothy suffered a depression that was, in part, caused by the difficulty of reconciling the maternal and domestic roles and her personal need for affirmation and fulfilment beyond the home. On the beach and in the surf, Dorothy found a way to link her maternal responsibilities and her adventurous self, and a way forward to being more than just a good mother.

Notes

¹ The letters, photographs, memoir and oral history interview that comprise the evidence for this essay were donated by Dorothy Wright and will be archived with the British Australian Migration Research Project collection (Wright Papers, W16) at the Mass Observation Archive, University of Sussex, England. Dorothy Wright commented on and approved a longer version of this essay, which will be part of a forthcoming book by Alistair Thomson (with Phyl Cave, Gwen Good, Joan Pickett and Dorothy Wright) to be published in 2009: *Moving Stories, Women's Lives: British women and the postwar Australian dream*, Manchester University Press. In this essay, Dorothy's words—from letters, memoir and interview—signify and highlight her significant contribution to our writing. Punctuation of letters is reproduced as in the original.

² Wright, Dorothy 2000, I was a £10 Pom, Unpublished memoir.

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³ Ibid.

⁴ Dorothy Wright interviewed by Alistair Thomson, 6 June 2006; letters to Alistair Thomson, 22 June 2006 and 8 August 2007.

⁵ Wright interview, 2006; audio letter to 'Mummy', c. Easter 1964; letter to Mummy, 4 October 1963.

⁶ Letters to Mummy, 26 April 1960, 19 May 1960, 22 July 1960, 6 December 1960.

⁷ Letters to Mummy, 10 April 1960 and 15 April 1960; Wright interview, 2006; letter to Mummy, 1 May 1960.

⁸ Letters to Mummy, 3 March 1960, 23 March 1960, 19 May 1960, 3 June 1960, 5 August 1960, 1 November 1960; letter to Barbara, 15 November 1960.

⁹ Wright, I was a £10 Pom.

¹⁰ Letter to Mummy, 3 April 1961.

¹¹ Wright, I was a £10 Pom; letters to Barbara, 28 January 1962 and 21 September 1961; letters to Mummy, 23 March 1960, 10 April 1960; Wright interview, 2006.

¹² Letters to Barbara, 21 September 1961, 12 April 1961, 6 December 1963; letter to Mummy, 26 March 1961, 26 April 1961; Wright interview, 2006.

¹³ Letter to Barbara, 6 December 1960; Wright interview, 2006; letter to Mummy, 2 March 1961.

¹⁴ Wright interview, 2006.

¹⁵ Letters to Mummy, 7 September 1961, 11 August 1962; Wright, I was a £10 Pom; Wright interview, 2006.

¹⁶ Letter to Mummy, 5 August 1960; Wright interview, 2006.

¹⁷ Letters to Mummy, 10 November 1961, 29 June 1961, 9 December 1962, 20 July 1961, 28 May 1963; letter to Barbara, 18 March 1962; Wright interview, 2006; letter to Alistair Thomson, 8 August 2007.

¹⁸ Letters to Mummy, 10 May 1961, 15 September 1961, 10 November 1961, 8 February 1961, 16 March 1961.

¹⁹ Wright interview, 2006. See <http://www.subud.org/english/faq.html>, accessed 20 June 2007.

²⁰ Letters to Mummy, 1 November 1960, 12 March 1962, 28 January 1963; Wright, I was a £10 Pom.

²¹ Wright interview, 2006.