

4. Coral Bell: Recollections of an Optimistic Realist

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Eighty-nine years separate Coral Bell's birth on 30 March 1923 from her death on 26 September 2012, but how Coral spent those years was, quite simply, remarkable. In one lifetime, she lived more than two. Despite earlier hardships and coming of age at the end of the Second World War, Coral's optimism about the outcome of world-shaping events never waned. With a pragmatic lens, she looked through her glasses clearly, never dimmed. She was, I believe, an optimistic realist.

Coral lived her life in three parts: her youth (spent mostly in New South Wales), her academic career (spent overseas and in Australia), and her twilight years (in semi-retirement, spent mostly at home and at The Australian National University).

When asked to contribute to this volume, I selected some of Coral's writings that were sitting on my shelf and considered my options: an academic essay or a personal recollection. Other contributors to this volume write of Coral's early years and her stellar academic career and impact on the international and domestic stage. I have chosen to offer a snapshot of Coral's recollections of her school and university years and time abroad, and of my own time knowing Coral during her later years in Canberra. The chapter ends with the eulogy I gave at her funeral.

Forging Connections

Sometimes you connect with a person instantly, and so it was when I first met Coral in August 2002. Coral may have been in her late seventies by then, but it was her computer that brought us together for the first time. I had just started working at the ANU Strategic and Defence Studies Centre (SDSC), while Coral was spending part of her working day at the Centre and part at home in Downer. At the time she was untangling the complexities of and linkages in the multipolar world that would be the focus of *A World Out of Balance*,¹ and

¹ Coral Bell, *A World Out of Balance: American Ascendancy and International Politics in the 21st Century*, Longueville Books, Sydney, 2003. The Lowy Institute for International Policy launched the book on 4 March 2004 at the State Library of New South Wales.

talking of a concert of powers. Yet figuring out how to use her computer was proving harder to crack. Some would have opted out, staying with pen and paper. Not Coral. She never got frustrated, choosing instead to see the rapid changes in technology as just another hurdle to overcome. So we joined forces with her: the Centre's then-administrator Anne Dowling, the rest of the SDSC team, and the IT team in the College all coming to her aid.

Coral was highly intelligent, as the writings about her in this volume attest, but it was her dry wit and warm personality that were infectious. You can admire a person with a razor-sharp mind: the exceptional person is one with such a mind who is also diplomatic, humble and empathetic. Coral never sought awards, fame or fortune. She spent her life in service: furthering our thinking on weighty topics, inspiring students, and communicating with colleagues. Most of all, even when living abroad, she spent her life in service of Australia.

Turning Points

For Coral 'the Past is a foreign country' was relevant to Australia. She had grown up in a society still dominated by the Great Depression. She was fifteen when she started writing essays on international crises. A wonderful teacher at Sydney Girls High School encouraged her to view current events as history waiting to be written, so Coral wrote an essay on the Munich Crisis of 1938. But it was in two exams to enter high school that Coral was faced with writing a paper on the same topic. She chose to do so from differing perspectives. Coral regarded this moment as 'the most valuable lesson of her life'. In the understanding of wars and crises 'one must have some understanding of "where each side is coming from", and how the history of the whole conflict looks to them'. Turning points in history was a theme that Coral would return to again and again throughout her life.²

After high school, during the Second World War, Coral studied at the University of Sydney and spent time at a physics laboratory sited on campus. She was one of three people in a team that degaussed ships (neutralised their magnetic field) to protect them from magnetic mines. Others at the CSIRO Division of Radiophysics were working on developing radar. In the days before computing, 'practically back in the Ice Age' as she put it, her calculations were done on graph paper and with slide rule. So it was that, between 1942 and 1945, Coral spent almost all her waking hours doing war work, surrounded by physicists. In the evenings she attended lectures on history, literature, economics and

2 One of Dr Bell's research themes was turning points in history and she started her Introduction to her Lowy Institute power, *The End of the Vasco da Gama Era*, with the words, 'The next landscape of world politics is just beginning to be visible through the lingering twilight of the unipolar world'.

philosophy. The war made living austere, but Coral took to university life from the start. She had found an intellectual home and considered seminar rooms and libraries to be 'my natural habitat'.

Towards the end of the war, Coral contemplated her career options. She passed the exams to enter the diplomatic service and in early 1945 travelled to Canberra. At the time the capital offered minimal accommodation (with hostels for most new arrivals) and few social opportunities. As Coral said, 'visiting nearby Queanbeyan was rated a big day out'. Coral walked and caught buses, and it was not until she was posted to Wellington, New Zealand, that she got a driver's licence.

We always remember where we are when life-changing or momentous events happen. Coral said the reason for her work revolving around wars and crises (what Coral called 'my preoccupation with the possibility of Armageddon and how to avoid it') dated back to the day a fellow diplomatic cadet rushed in to tell her that an atomic bomb had destroyed Hiroshima. What always kept this event to mind was remembering the pattern of the hearth-rug she was standing on when she heard the news.

Yet of all the changes in Australia and the world that Coral chronicled she saw the 'status of (and rules for) women in the workplace 'as the most radical'. She entered the Australian diplomatic service in an age when there were few female diplomats, and she recalled being told that she would have to resign if she chose to marry. Even after leaving the service, she selected a field of study then not often undertaken by women. In many respects Coral was a pioneer—ahead of her time by twenty to thirty years.

Today the diplomatic corps is larger than when she was a member—a time when all the staff could fit into a medium-sized seminar room. The small group meant that, even as a junior diplomat, Coral's work was varied and complex. In 1948 she was 'posted' to the Australian office in Wellington. She found the posting 'reasonably interesting' and the people she met 'able and amiable'. She attended balls at Government House, dinner at the Soviet Embassy, and many luncheons. In one notable episode, she found herself at a diplomatic function at the US Embassy. Having just learned to play golf, but never having played croquet, she swung her mallet back over her shoulder 'in my best golf style. The ball sailed over a group of trees and landed in the lake. There was a pained silence'.

The social side of diplomatic life was not, to quote Coral, 'my cup of tea'. She said she had never been 'a party girl, and diplomacy is a very party-ridden occupation, especially in a small post, as Wellington then was'. She noted, 'If you meet roughly the same fifty or so people at cocktail and dinner parties five

evenings a week, you tend to run out of small-talk, which has never been my favourite form of conversation anyway'. Anyone who knew Coral can confirm that idle chitchat was not her way to communicate.

Coral needed a 'more reflective kind of life', and in 1951 she applied for study leave without pay. When this was refused, she resigned from diplomatic service. A life of travel, research, teaching and writing was to follow.

Beyond the Horizon

Coral's mind never stood still and neither did she. In the decade I knew her she moved house four times in Canberra: first from a house in Downer to a unit in O'Connor, then to retirement villages in Deakin and Ainslie. How she moved was by car and tales of Coral's style of parking and her driving to and from the Centre became legend. If she nudged a pole too much, she would state matter-of-factly, 'only a slight bingle'.

These days we take the speed of travel for granted. In the age of jets, we often forget the main modes of travel of the past, by ship across oceans and by train across continents. When Coral left for London in 1951, 'taking the slow boat' meant the journey was a destination in itself. She spoke of the fun aboard ship, and visiting exotic, unfamiliar port towns and cities. One photograph from that trip has her astride a camel, visiting the pyramids in Egypt.

The war was half a decade past when Coral arrived in London. She thought the city had 'a melancholy romantic charm. The cathedral then still stood among a wilderness of ruins, which were overgrown by a pretty pink-blossomed wildflower called rose-bay willow herb, or London Pride. It all looked wonderfully symbolic'.

A few weeks after her arrival Coral moved into a shared flat in Kensington, and got her ration-book and first week's rations 'for three shillings and ten pence'. The rations were 'one chop, two eggs, a square of cheese barely enough to bait a mouse-trap, and a cube of butter about the size of a postage stamp, along with an ounce or so of tea and sugar'. She immediately missed the food from home. Coral's friend in the Royal Australian Air Force persuaded a friend who was flying aircraft back to England to bring her a case of tiny cans of condensed cream. With some brisk bartering, 'a lot more dinner tables than mine rejoiced in apple pie with real cream'. Coral supplemented the meagre rations with meals at the London School of Economics (LSE), which was to become the centre of her life for her first years in England.

She absorbed the political upheavals of the time, viewing the appointment of Michael J Oakeshott at LSE as ‘a straw in the winds of change in the general intellectual climate of the world’.³ While at LSE, she met Martin Wight. He was to become Coral’s friend and colleague and ‘the chief intellectual influence of my entire life’. Geoffrey Goodwin, another of Coral’s lecturers, introduced her to Chatham House (or the Royal Institute of International Affairs)—‘a second major influence on the way I saw the world’. At Chatham House she became rapporteur of the research study groups.⁴ A group’s meeting usually began in late afternoon and lasted through dinner until people had to leave to catch their train or drive or walk home. At Chatham House she met ‘the rising stars of both sides of politics’, who ‘were willing to come and talk frankly’. The small (about twelve people) informal meetings gave Coral the opportunity to meet people she would not otherwise have met, including the founders of the International Institute for Strategic Studies (years before its founding in 1958). At Chatham House Coral met Arnold J Toynbee, a man she described as ‘a most delightful old gentleman, everyone’s favourite scholarly grandfather’. Toynbee was the editor of the annual *Survey of International Affairs* when Coral wrote the 1954 issue.⁵ When Geoffrey Barraclough took over Toynbee’s role in 1956, Coral applied for a Lectureship in Government at the University of Manchester.

Once appointed to the position, she moved to northwest England. At the university she came to appreciate one of what she later called ‘the antique pleasures of university life ... the conversation of the Senior Common Room’. Those gathered in that room would ‘bounce ideas from their respective fields of expertise off each other’. It was at the University of Manchester that Coral began to develop her research into managing international crises by avoiding war and into managing defeat without recourse to war. Coral’s professor was WJM (‘Bill’) Mackenzie, who had been appointed Chair of Government and Administration in 1948. He ‘built up an outstanding Government Department which until the early 1960s was the best in Britain and gained an international reputation. He did it by spotting talent: from Aberdeen to Oxford’.⁶ He ‘created a culture, not of publish or perish, but of intellectual excitement and keeping abreast of developments in the discipline in the United States. In the early 1950s his young colleagues were pioneers in studies of voting behaviour, community power, pressure groups and developing countries. He had a remarkable instinct

3 Michael J Oakeshott (11 December 1901–19 December 1990) became Professor of Political Science at LSE in 1948, succeeding Harold J Laski (30 June 1893–24 March 1950). Oakeshott retired from LSE in 1969.

4 A person appointed by an organisation to report on the proceedings of its meetings.

5 Arnold J Toynbee (14 April 1889–22 October 1975) was Director of Studies at the Royal Institute of International Affairs (RIIA) in Chatham House between 1929 and 1956. He edited the annual *Survey of International Affairs* from 1920 to 1946.

6 See Dennis Kavanagh, ‘Obituary: Professor W. J. M. Mackenzie’, *The Independent*, 27 August 1996. www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary-professor-wjm-mackenzie-1311688.html (accessed 16 September 2013).

for where the subject was heading'.⁷ As the originators of containment were mostly based in Washington, Coral asked Mackenzie to back her application for a Rockefeller Fellowship.⁸ Once awarded, in early 1958 Coral left for the United States.

Upon her arrival, Coral found that the convivial atmosphere and 'intellectual excitement' in discussions over coffee hardly existed. Academics were so pressured to write that they 'drank their coffee in their rooms, with one hand on the typewriter'. Coral believed an academic's life should be half spent teaching and half spent doing research. She felt privileged to have known 'the system in its golden day' when academics faced few pressures. While in Washington, in late May 1959 Coral saw the funeral procession of former US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. A few days later she began her travels around the country—to the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, to interview Robert Oppenheimer and to Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, to interview Henry Kissinger, a young professor there at the time.⁹ Coral then set out for new territory by train: travelling across the north to San Francisco, then back across the south to New York. The trains were quite luxurious, and she enjoyed watching the scenery through the sight-seeing domes. While at Yellowstone National Park in 1959 she was caught in a 'minor' earthquake and had to travel on by bus.¹⁰ The convoy stopped at every small bridge in the park to allow the passengers to walk across before re-boarding the buses. After the three months of travel Coral ended up at Columbia University in New York for the September re-opening of the academic year.

Coming Home

Once her research was complete, Coral sailed back to England. When she returned to the University of Manchester at the start of term, she learned that her father had died of a heart attack in Australia (about the time she was embarking for the voyage back to England) and she had missed his funeral.

Coral turned her research into the book *Negotiation from Strength: A Study in the Politics of Power*.¹¹ She continued to teach as a Lecturer in Government,

7 Kavanagh, 'Obituary: Professor W. J. M. Mackenzie'.

8 Coral Bell spent her time on the Rockefeller Fellowship at the School of Advanced International Studies at John Hopkins University in Washington, DC, and Columbia University in New York.

9 Between 1954 and 1959 Henry Alfred Kissinger was a member of the Harvard faculty in the Department of Government and the Center for International Affairs.

10 Yellowstone National Park recorded a series of earthquakes from 17 August 1959. The first earthquake (also known as the Hebgen Lake earthquake) measured 7.3–7.5 on the Richter magnitude scale. With her gift for understatement, Coral called this 'minor'.

11 Coral Bell, *Negotiation from Strength: A Study in the Politics of Power*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1962, and Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1963.

remaining at the university until 1961.¹² But the call of Australia was strong, so she decided to leave for home. Her first appointment was as Senior Lecturer in Government at her *alma mater*, the University of Sydney, and she lived in a small flat at Double Bay, 'a long time before it became fashionable'. Coral's travels had taken her around the world to acclaim, and she would continue to garner accolades as her career continued at institutions such as the University of Sydney (1961–65), London School of Economics (1965–72), University of Sussex (1972–77), and The Australian National University (1977 until her death).

At 10:30am on 2 September 2005 I watched Coral Bell receive her much-deserved Order of Australia (Officer in the General Division) at Government House in Canberra. I was honoured to be one of the three people Coral chose to accompany her to this prestigious occasion; the others being a close Australian friend Betty MacFarlane, and another New Zealander Brendan Taylor, now the Head of the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre at ANU. The citation in the Investiture booklet reads: 'Dr Coral Bell: For service to scholarship and to teaching as a leading commentator and contributor to foreign and defence policy debate internationally and in Australia'.¹³ Few people at the gathering knew Coral's work, yet there was an audible murmur when the then-Governor-General Philip Michael Jeffrey mentioned Henry Kissinger when speaking about Coral.

Reflecting on an Intellectual Giant

In 2005 just after Coral's book *A World out of Balance* was published,¹⁴ Verona Burgess wrote an article in *The Canberra Times*. She started with the paragraph, 'Coral Bell might look as if she belongs in the knitting circle, but she has just published her newest book on global politics—sixty years after she first joined the Australian Diplomatic Corps in the era of the legendary 'Doc' Evatt'.¹⁵

When you conversed with Coral, you knew you were in the presence of an intellectual giant. Her ability to place events and patterns of thinking in context was admired greatly. She was able to stand back from any topic to get full view. She and I chatted in depth about education, history, politics, international crises, research, and writing. I even had the privilege to co-edit with Coral a book entitled *Remembering Hedley*, a compilation of recollections about Professor Hedley Bull and his work.¹⁶

12 Coral's academic qualifications were BA (Sydney, 1945), MSc Econ (London, 1954), and PhD (London, 1962).

13 Investiture booklet for 2 September 2005, Government House, Canberra, p. 5.

14 Coral Bell, *A World Out of Balance*.

15 Verona Burgess, 'US-style World Power "Not Seen Since the Days of the Romans"', *Canberra Times*, 5 February 2004, p. 4.

16 Coral Bell and Meredith Thatcher (eds), *Remembering Hedley*, ANU E Press, Canberra, 2008.

When I visited Coral in her residence in the Canberra suburb of O'Connor, we sometimes bought fish and chips for dinner. With much of her life spent overseas, Coral's favourite fish was barramundi. It brought back memories of her youth. When she moved into Goodwin Village in Ainslie, she couldn't wait until the social areas were built and we could lunch there. Until then we chatted over a roast meal at the nearby Ainslie Football & Social Club.

Coral kept minimal possessions, but she had a chair ready for whoever might drop in. Among her prized possessions were books and journals, including a bookcase full of *The National Interest* to which she contributed. She listened to radio and watched television less than she wrote, but always kept up with the news (usually ABC and SBS). She tried never to miss one of her favourite programs—the PBS NewsHour. If I was visiting, we would watch it together and debate the topics. Sometimes we agreed; sometimes we would agree to disagree. That's how it is with friends. Yet Coral had an even temperament and never raised her voice. Being so reasoned, she could make any disagreement a pleasurable experience. She never got cross, yet the one pastime we could never reconcile was crosswords and similar puzzles. I am a fan of them; Coral was not. She wisely spent her time on less frivolous endeavours.

Doing even the smallest task for Coral was a privilege. Towards the end of her life, Coral's mind stayed strong but her body became frail. She relented to using a walking stick and taking an arm when necessary as my brother Greg and I helped her with the weekly grocery shop. To my great regret, distance separated us in her final two years. But I visited her once and we corresponded by 'snail mail', her words always elegantly penned in flowing, open, cursive script.

Coral felt that today few opportunities exist for staff and students to sit down to discuss international and strategic affairs: the pressures of academic administration on the one hand and the need to pay off students loans on the other are simply too great. Her greatest wish towards the end of her life was that professors and others with long careers at a university might have a residence (even just one room) on campus where they could live the rest of their days. Coral had seen this while in England—the benefit of having easy access to chat with former colleagues and to continue enjoying university life after retirement. Lacking this environment she established a group at Goodwin, at first with few participants and Coral chairing the sessions. As word spread through the village that this new group discussed international affairs and the like, attendance increased rapidly and Coral started to share her chairing duties. I believe that underpinning Coral's intellectual pursuits was the need to always stay connected. I quote the words of Minh Bui Jones—a sentiment that echoes what I saw in her. Upon hearing of Coral's passing, he wrote:

It's a rare thing in an international relations expert to possess a balance of theory and experience, history and imagination, realism and hope. ... She brought an antipodean temperament and perspective to the great questions of our time; she was our George Kennan in thick glasses, blue floral dress, white sneakers and a string of pearls.¹⁷

I conclude this chapter with my eulogy, without amendment, as delivered at Coral's funeral in Canberra in late 2012.

Last Words for a Wise and Gentle Soul

As we gather in Canberra today, it seems fitting to start with an acronym: CORAL—Compassionate, Original, Remarkable, Astute, and Loyal. To these qualities, I would add gracious, humble and independent.

Coral mapped out and chartered her own life, sacrificing much as she sailed across oceans to unfamiliar horizons and back. Yet she always steered a centre course on an even keel—a lesson learned when very young. Coral said that she learned her most valuable lesson in history at age eleven. This was when a decision needed to be made about whether she would attend a Catholic high school, some distance away from home, or a public school in Sydney. The only way to decide was for Coral to sit the Catholic Diocesan exams and the State school exams. As you would expect, she sailed through both—until she reached the history essay. As Coral put it, 'the convent she was attending taught a narrative rather heavily oriented to the woes of Ireland; the state schools rather heavily oriented to the glories of the British imperial story'.¹⁸ What to do? For Coral, even at age eleven, it meant charting a course of what she called 'double think'—describing fourteenth century John Wycliffe as the 'morning star of the Reformation' for her Protestant examiners, and a 'dissolute and heretic monk' for her Catholic examiners. Coral said that 'such was her precocious ease with this post-modernist approach that, for her Catholic history, she won the Diocesan gold medal—and for her Protestant history, a place at Sydney Girls High School'.

In this tale we see a first glimpse of not only Coral's ability to stand tall and navigate through dilemmas, but her tolerance and ability to see events from differing perspectives. Not only was Coral elegant; the way she could weave the threads of disparate thoughts and patterns together into a cohesive fabric was also elegant. Discussions with Coral were never dull. You always felt the

17 Minh Bui Jones, 'On Coral's Calmness', *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, 5 October 2012: www.lowyinterpreter.org/post/2012/10/05/On-Corals-calmness.aspx (accessed 16 September 2013).

18 Coral Bell, as noted in her unpublished memoir, 'A Preoccupation with Armageddon'.

penetrating feelers of intellect entering your mind. Always weighing the options and giving measured yet thought-provoking responses, Coral continued to discover more and to question more—to the end.

Coral wrote to me saying that she was content with her decision to move to Goodwin. She liked the village atmosphere—the exchange of greetings when out for walks. She enjoyed greatly the group that discussed international relations. Most of all, Coral remained optimistic about the future for players on the international stage. She said she liked the ‘delicate, ironic scepticism and pragmatism’ of Michael Joseph Oakeshott. Indeed terms that might have suited Coral. She said the words she heard in his inaugural lecture haunted her through the years:

In political activity, then, men sail a boundless and bottomless sea: there is neither harbour nor shelter nor floor for anchorage, neither starting-place nor appointed destination. The enterprise is to stay afloat on an even keel; the sea is both friend and enemy; and the seamanship consists of using the resources of a traditional manner of behaviour in order to make a friend of every hostile occasion.¹⁹

Throughout Coral’s life, her intellectual anchor was international and strategic relations and crisis management. Her destination was our minds—and our hearts. And we found shelter in her kind words and wisdom.

A warm, engaging and humble spirit who gave of herself to others unselfishly, Coral imparted her knowledge without seeking validation in return. And, like some today and outside these walls, I came to understand the meaning of the word ‘mentor’. Coral was compassionate, original, remarkable, astute and loyal, gracious, humble and independent. And the world is poorer for her no longer being here with us. Coral was for me—as for all those gathered here today—simply irreplaceable.

19 See Michael Oakeshott, ‘Political Education: An Inaugural Lecture delivered at the London School of Economics and Political Science on 6 March 1951’, Bowes & Bowes, Cambridge, 1951. Also see Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics*, Methuen, London, 1962.

This text taken from *Power and International Relations:
Essays in honour of Coral Bell*, edited by Desmond Ball and Sheryn Lee,
published 2014 by ANU Press, The Australian National University,
Canberra, Australia.