

# Chapter 1. Childhood, 1914 to 1932

## Birth and Housing

My father, Charles Fenner, had been appointed to the Ballarat School of Mines in November 1914, and, with his wife, Peggy, and Lyell, the only child at that stage, had moved into a house at 2 Doveton Street, Ballarat. I was born there on December 21, 1914, the second of a family of five. I was given the name 'Frank Johannes', the second name being that of my grandfather. The house was right next to 101 Eyre Street (which we used to pronounce 'Ay-er'), where Mother's two unmarried sisters and a widowed sister lived. Later, when we had moved to Adelaide, one or other of the children would be sent to stay with their aunts for the Christmas holidays. On my father's appointment as Superintendent of Technical Education in South Australia, in November 1916, the family (now three children, with the birth of my sister Winifred in Ballarat on 28 August, 1916) moved to Adelaide and initially lived in a rented house in Barton Terrace, North Adelaide. In 1918, the family moved to a house in 42 Alexandra Avenue, Rose Park, which was very close to the Rose Park Primary School, where all five children received their primary education.

In the latter part of 1938, when I was in final year Medicine at the University of Adelaide, I must have been getting worried about Hitler's antics and thought that I should change my second name from 'Johannes' to 'John', a change which Father endorsed before a Justice of the Peace on 11 October, 1938. Several German place names in South Australia were also changed at that time. In retrospect, it must have been hurtful to my father, since it was the only acknowledgement of his parents in the children's names, but I don't remember knowing of any misgivings he may have had. For many years, I have rarely used the name 'John' or the initial 'J'—only 'Frank'.

## Family Life

'Nature, nurture and chance.' The next few chapters will reveal two examples of 'nature'—i.e., the effects of my genes—namely, my ability to work hard and my lack of mathematical skills. What about the effects of 'nurture', essentially my family life, on my career? This was undoubtedly substantial. As described below, we were a very happy family. Our parents were always loving, to each other and to all of us. We played happily together at home, and we had occasional wonderful motoring holidays. The one I remember best was during the summer holidays in 1930, on what we called the 'Africa Speaks' expedition, after a film of the time. This was a trip from Adelaide through the Coorong and around much of country Victoria, where our uncles, aunts and cousins lived. On this trip, and whenever we went into the country, as on trips organised by the Field Naturalists Society ('Field Nats'), of which he was an active member, Father

would explain features of the countryside to us, geological, botanical, historical, in a fascinating way. I was attracted to geology from a very early age; my parents kept a drawing I had made of the section of a volcano at the age of four years, and, while I was still at secondary school, I had accumulated quite a good collection of fossils during our trips around Victoria and South Australia and by exchange, including a Triassic fossil of *Ginkgo* leaves (I now have the best *Ginkgo* tree in Canberra in my garden). I am sure that this childhood experience played a large part in my later interest in environmental problems.

My mother's influence was important but less obvious. As was usual in that generation, although she had trained as a school-teacher, after she had children she devoted her life to her family. One has only to read the diaries Father wrote on his two overseas trips in the 1930s to see how much he depended on her (see Chapters 15 and 17). As well as offering all possible support for the children to study at home (there was not even a wireless to distract us then), she made the home a haven of affection and support during the sometimes turbulent times of adolescence, and she skimped and saved as much as possible to ensure that each of the five children had as good an education as possible, within our interests and capacity.

## **Finding a Home in Adelaide**

Father, Mother and the three children, Lyell, Frank and Winn, moved from Ballarat to Adelaide in November 1916. Two more boys, Tom and Bill, were born there. For about two years, Father rented a house in Barton Terrace, North Adelaide. After investigating the quality of the primary schools in various suburbs he decided that the best primary school was at Rose Park. After looking at houses near that school, the family bought the house at 42 Alexandra Avenue, Rose Park. Father called it 'Iramoo', after the Aboriginal name for the plains where Melbourne now stands. The name was first used by John Batman on 6 June, 1835, when he 'bought' Melbourne from the local Aboriginal tribes. When I was at Thebarton Technical High School (see below) I made an appropriate copper name-plate, which was put on that house. Some years after I moved to Canberra I placed it on the front of our holiday house at Dalmeny, on the South Coast of New South Wales.

Alexandra Avenue was one of the very few streets in Adelaide that consisted of two roads, one on either side of a wide strip of lawn containing two rows of elms. There was also a row of oak trees on each footpath. It was close to the Victoria Park Racecourse, which was situated in the parklands that surround the city of Adelaide. Some years later, as the children grew up, we used to join the local children to play football on the lawn, and I played cricket and learned to play tennis on the open spaces and public tennis courts near the Racecourse. The house itself was five houses down the street from the Rose Park Primary School. There were two tram-lines within easy walking distance and the house

itself was only about a five kilometre walk from North Terrace and the Museum, Art Gallery, University, Botanic and Zoological Gardens and the Royal Adelaide Hospital.



Figure 1.1. Iramoo, the house at 42 Alexander Avenue, Rose Park in 1931, after adding the second storey as the boys' shared bedroom

On the verandah, from the left: Winn, Tom, Lyell, Mother, Bill, Frank.

The house was relatively large. There was a lane at the back, which provided access to a garage, and reasonably large lawns at both back and front. Around the back lawn there were several quite productive fruit trees: grapevines, two fig-trees, and apricot, peach, lemon and orange trees. Father was no gardener, but I became interested in the garden from the time that I undertook first-year Botany at the university. In the early 1930s, Father had a second storey built on the house (Figure 1.1); this was a large single room with fly-wire around three sides, accessed by stairs at the back. The four boys slept there and, at the side of the stairs, there was a series of shelves that I used for my collection of fossils.

## The Fenner Children

At the time of the move, the family comprised three children: Charles Lyell—born in Melbourne, 17 August, 1912; Frank Johannes—born in Ballarat, 21 December, 1914; and Winifred Joyce—born in Ballarat, 26 August, 1916. Two more children were born in Adelaide: Thomas Richard—born on 18 June, 1918; and William Greenock—born on 11 March, 1922. Brief biographies of my siblings follow.



Figure 1.2. The family in 1937

From the left: Thomas (in naval uniform), Lyell, Father, Winifred, Mother, Frank, William.

## Charles Lyell Fenner

Born in Fitzroy, in Melbourne, on 17 August, 1912, the eldest child was named after the famous English geologist, Charles Lyell (1797–1875), and always went by his second name. Like the rest of the children, he received his early education at Rose Park Primary School. For secondary education, he went to Adelaide High School, where he progressed as far as Leaving (Fourth Year), which was the matriculation year at the time. He then went to the Teachers College and the South Australian School of Arts and Crafts, and, after training, he waited for a teaching post to become available. In 1933 he made an overseas trip to England and several European countries with the Australian Scout contingent, attending the World Jamboree at Gödöllő in Hungary in August. After his return he was appointed to a number of small, one-teacher country schools.

On 10 September, 1938, he married Theodosia (Thea) Kleinig, who he had met while teaching at Dutton. They went to live at Watchman, north of Balaklava, and the eldest of their three children, Theodore (Ted) was born in Balaklava Hospital in July 1939. When the Area School system was being planned, Lyell decided to apply for a position as a Manual Training Instructor in 'Boys Craft'—or, in more recent parlance, a Technical Studies teacher. This involved a year of training in the performance and teaching of woodwork, sheet metalwork, saddlery and boot repairing. The woodwork and metalwork courses were conducted at various Boys Technical High Schools, chiefly Goodwood and Thebarton, but the only place for saddlery and boot repair training was the Magill Reformatory. The last named institution was a grim and forbidding place, and the conditions that prevailed there made a long lasting impression on Lyell. Goodwood Boys Technical High School was a much more convivial place, especially since one of the young art teachers there was Jeff Smart, now the famous artist Jeffrey Smart, who used to hone his skills by drawing 'heads' of staff and students. An early Jeffrey Smart, in the form of a pencil 'head' of Lyell, made in 1942, serves as a reminder of the training period.

After gaining the requisite certificates, Lyell was appointed as a Boys Craft teacher at Maitland Area School in 1943. Two further sons, Max and Christopher, were born in Maitland in 1945 and 1948 respectively. Lyell taught there until May 1951, when he was transferred to the Wudinna Area School, in Central Eyre Peninsula (usually known as the 'West Coast'). This was one of the most enjoyable periods of Lyell's teaching career. As well as having many talented craft pupils, there was new scenery to draw and paint, and he could indulge his love of natural science to the full in the Nature Study courses, with a huge surrounding area of diverse and frequently ill-researched source material. It was the time of booming agricultural prices, and much land was cleared for cropping, with the consequent destruction of wildlife habitat, a practice that brought forth relatively little comment in those days. Fortunately the Nature Study lessons had some impact upon the community, so farmers and their children kept an eye out for all sorts of animals and plants that 'the Boys Craft chalkie and his missus might be interested in'. As a result, the family acquired a considerable variety of native animal pets, including a tawny frogmouth, numerous finches of several different species, 'mountain devils' (small, spiky lizards), 'sleepy lizards' (stump-tailed skinks), honey possums, a brush-tailed possum, fat-tailed marsupial mice and a family of Mitchell's hopping mice, along with transient wombats and echidnas. In addition, several boxes of insect and plant specimens, together with maps and collection data, were sent to the Entomology and Botany Departments of Adelaide University, or delivered personally by Lyell during school holiday visits. The resultant enumeration of new species and revelations of unexpected distributions prompted a number of visits by research staff from those Departments and also some zoologists, who were equally surprised.

In December 1957, Lyell was transferred to Adelaide, where he returned to primary school teaching at Challa Gardens and Campbelltown schools, becoming the librarian at the latter for the last few years before retirement in 1977. He also prepared and presented several nature science broadcasts for the ABC. After retirement, he spent much time with the Retired Teachers Association, Art Gallery and Museum visits, reading and, to a more limited extent, travelling. He fulfilled part of a lifelong ambition when he took one of the first Antarctic flights offered by the airlines and finally saw Antarctica, even though no landings were possible. His wife, Thea, died on 15 August, 1993, in her 80th year, and Lyell died on 25 May, 1997, aged 84.

### Winifred Joyce Fenner

Born in Ballarat on 26 August, 1916, Winn took primary education at Rose Park Primary School and then went to a private school, Wilderness School, located in Medindie, for her secondary education from 1930 to 1933. She then learnt 'retouching'—i.e., removing blemishes from negatives using a very sharp pencil—and then practised this in photography studios as a career. Then came the war, and she contemplated joining the Women's Australian Air Force (WAAF), but the Education Department was crying out for teachers, since so many young men were joining the armed forces. So she entered the Adelaide Teachers College in 1941, and, after one year's training, went to a one-teacher school near Lock on the West Coast. After a year there she returned to Adelaide and did an 'Area School' course and then went to Area Schools at Loxton, on the River Murray, for 1944–45 and then to Penola, in the South East, in 1946. Father resigned from the Education Department later that year and Winn moved to Walford Girls School, a large private school in Hyde Park. She stayed there from 1947 to 1976, always cycling to work. She was Sports Mistress and taught art and design. After retiring, she continued to go to Walford as a volunteer, doing calligraphy and helping in other ways until 2001. From 1951, she lived with a somewhat older friend, Phyllis (PM) Stoward, initially at Colonel Light Gardens, and then at her current residence in Myrtle Bank. PM died in 1967. Since then, Winn has always had a dog and, at the age of 89, still plays tennis twice a week.

### Thomas Richard Fenner

Born in Adelaide on 18 June, 1918, Thomas (Thos) was named after his uncle, who died (from 'friendly fire') while fighting on the Western Front in 1916. After completing his primary education at Rose Park Primary School, he went to Thebarton Technical High School for one year and then to Unley High School, to study subjects required for entry to the Naval College. At the age of 14, on 1 September, 1932, he was admitted as a Cadet Midshipman to the Royal Australian Naval College, then located on Westernport Bay in Victoria. He graduated as a midshipman on 1 May, 1936, was promoted to Sub-Lieutenant on 16 November,

1938, and was seconded to the Royal Navy in Britain from 30 January, 1937, until 27 January, 1939. He was promoted to Lieutenant on 16 March, 1940, and Lieutenant-Commander on 16 March, 1948. When Mother and Father were in London in 1937, they met with him while he was working as a lieutenant with the Royal Navy. He served with the Royal Australian Navy right through World War II, being discharged on 26 January, 1950, with the rank of Lieutenant-Commander.

He married Beverley Slaney on 12 February, 1942, while on leave. They had one daughter, Vicki, born on 1 March, 1943. A few months later, because of a fire in the house, Beverley died of burns, but Vicki survived. Some years later, Thos married Margaret Legge. They had two children by the second marriage. Later, when Vicki was about seven years old, my wife Bobbie and I were advised by a friend and paediatrician, Dr Stanley Williams, that Vicki was so badly treated by Margaret that we should adopt her, which we did, with Tom's approval.

After discharge from the Navy, Tom served for a few years with the Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation, but he did not enjoy that and got a managerial job with the firm that was involved with the construction of the Tullamarine airport. Early in 1964, he was diagnosed with lymphoma, which progressed rapidly in spite of treatment. He died on 21 September, 1964, aged 46.

## William Greenock Fenner

Bill was born on 11 March, 1922. His second name, Greenock, is the name of the volcano behind Dunach, where Father was born. Like the rest of the children, Bill had his primary education at Rose Park Primary School. In 1935, he went to Thebarton Technical High School. However, in 1937, when Father and Mother went overseas, he was sent to St Peters College as a boarder for one year. He stayed there as a day boy until 1939, when he matriculated, enrolling in Mechanical Engineering at the University of Adelaide in 1940 and graduating BSc(Eng) in 1943. He went back in 1945 to do some extra subjects so that he graduated BE at the end of that year. From 1947 to 1950, he worked in the South Australian Department of Mines, as a geophysicist, then from 1951 with Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI). This involved a number of different jobs and included his first trip abroad, to Europe in 1958. In 1946, he was married to Monica Lewis, and while still in Adelaide they had three children, Murray (b. 1947), Peter (b. 1949) and Patricia (b. 1955). In 1961, Bill decided to leave ICI and got a job with Comalco (part of Conzinc Riotinto Australia (CRA)), which meant moving to Melbourne. Over the next 14 years, he had a leading role in four major projects: bauxite mining at Weipa (north Queensland), a salt field at Dampier (Western Australia), an alumina plant at Gladstone (Queensland) and an aluminium smelter in New Zealand. These projects took Bill all over Australia and the world, especially to Japan. Then came a major change, a senior management position

in Victoria Railways. While in this last job he had become very interested in Total Quality Management (TQM) and, after retirement in 1985, this, together with a hobby farm at Heathcote, became his major activity, involving him in lectures, conferences, much overseas travel and the production of a massive 588-page book, *Quality and Productivity for the 21st Century*.

## Family Life

Our life as a family was very happy, even though much of it occurred during the Great Depression. In our house, this led, symbolically, to the use of lard instead of butter and torn-up newspaper as toilet paper. Mother was the 'Rock of Gibraltar', loving to all of us, very supportive of Father at home and indispensable on his overseas trips. She was helped in the house from time to time by her unmarried sisters, especially Christina (Crin), who came over from 101 Eyre Street and lived with us for months at a time. Another Aunt, Anna, died in our house in 1927. For all of the children, it was our first experience of death.

In his otherwise perceptive essay (see Chapter 14), Hyams comments that Charles Fenner was 'a rather stern father to his children', presumably because he 'never took them to sports games; instead he delighted to conduct them on nature study walks and expeditions'. The latter statements are correct, but in the collective memory of the three children currently alive, Frank, Winn and Bill, he was anything but a stern father; the children had little interest in watching sports games but considerable interest in playing them, and we all delighted in the nature study walks and drives. As noted in the testimonial written at the time Father left the Ballarat School of Mines, Charles Fenner had 'the power of inspiring in his students a love for the subjects he teaches', and this applied to his children as well.

As well as the usual bedrooms, bathroom (water heated as required by burning paper), 'front' room and dining room (both used mainly for visitors, although we used to sit in front of the dining room fire in winter), kitchen and bedrooms, there was a large room at the back of the house, the 'den', which was sacrosanct. It was here that Father wrote his scientific papers and fortnightly articles for *The Australasian*, and the shelves and desks were filled with his papers. Besides his own extensive library, Father bought us Arthur Mee's *The Children's Encyclopedia* and we were encouraged to use it whenever we asked a question, and among the other books was a series on the *Myths and Legends of Greece and Rome*, which I remember reading from end to end. We had plenty of space to play in the back garden and the lawn on Alexandra Avenue, and for much of the time we had a much-loved dog, a fox terrier named 'Flinders', after the great explorer. We had fowls and different children had responsibility for looking after them as we grew up.

Associated with his government work, in the early years Father had use of a car and chauffeur, and later we had our own car. As well as his use of the car for driving to work, the family were often taken for drives to Golden Grove and Teatree Gully, in the Mt Lofty foothills, and during the Christmas holidays, trips to various parts of South Australia (notably the tip of Yorke Peninsula) and Victoria, where the majority of our relatives, on both sides of the family, lived. These were memorable because Father knew so much about the geology, wildlife, plants and human history of the countryside and explained it all to us.

Other experiences that remain in my memory were the summer holidays on a wheat farm at Ebenezer, near Kapunda, which was owned by German relatives on my mother's side, the Kleinigs. It was wonderful for city kids to be able to wander in the countryside, see horses and cows at first hand, participate in the reaping, have a chance to try milking the cows, and enjoy the family meals, always preceded by a prayer in German (which I could not understand).

## **Primary School**

One of my few memories of my early days was when my mother took me to the kindergarten at the beginning of 1919. I remember crying bitterly when she left me, but I soon adjusted and enjoyed my school days. Once past kindergarten, the classes consisted of 50 to 60 students, teaching was largely by rote, the schoolyard was small and paved with asphalt, and woodwork was taught across the road. My best friend there was John Dowie, who was almost exactly the same age as me. He became an outstanding sculptor. I enjoyed school and was, by nature, a hard worker. When I did the Qualifying Certificate examination in 1926, I received top marks in the State and got my photograph in the local newspaper. In the accompanying article, I attribute much of my success to teachers Miss Vera Dawe and Mr N. Carmichael; there is also the comment that I 'had a keen desire to be a farmer', possibly because of the enjoyment of school holidays at the farm of the Kleinig family at Ebenezer.

## **Secondary Schools**

In 1927, when I was due to go to secondary school, my father was promoting an experiment in teaching at the Thebarton Technical High School on the use of the Dalton Plan for secondary education (see Chapter 14). The essence of this plan was that there was only one lesson a week in each subject and work for the rest of the week was set out in assignments and individual study at the student's own pace. I enjoyed this and, as well as doing woodwork, sheet-metalwork and architectural drawing, I did several additional 'academic' subjects. Thebarton Technical High School (later called Thebarton Technical School) was a boys' school situated on the far side of town from our house, and I had to take two trams daily each way. I enjoyed travelling through the city and I liked school. The mode of teaching, involving considerable individual initiative, was a very

good introduction for the type of teaching offered at the university, and I had none of the problems of school–university adjustment that were common among my contemporaries.

I passed the Leaving Certificate at the end of fourth year, with more subjects than were usually taken and several credits. I then went to Adelaide High School (then a co-educational school in the Grote Street, in the centre of Adelaide), in the hope and expectation that I might win one of the 12 University bursaries offered each year at the Leaving Honours examination. My experience was mortifying. The course concentrated on six subjects: Physics, Chemistry, Mathematics I, Mathematics II, English and French. I failed in mathematics but, like many other students, went back next year to try again for a bursary. The Great Depression was under way, my father's salary had been cut, and a bursary would have been a boon. Next year I passed all subjects with some credits, but again failed to win a bursary. I did not enjoy Adelaide High as well as 'Thebby Teck'. The competition at the Leaving Honours level was substantial, since the class comprised the bulk of the students in the State whose parents could not afford to send them to one of the two élite private schools (St Peters and Prince Alfred Colleges) but who sought to gain a University bursary. The teaching consisted of a continuous series of lessons and practical work. Mathematics loomed large, in physics and chemistry as well as in maths itself, and although the maths teacher, 'Doggy' Nietz, was a good teacher, I had little intrinsic mathematical ability.

## Religion

From the time I knew them, neither of my parents was a practising Christian, although each had taught at Sunday Schools before their marriage. However, because both were the children of German rather than British parents, they believed that an understanding of the Christian faith as practised in an Anglican church was a desirable part of our upbringing for life in what was then an Anglo-Celtic, Christian community. On 26 September, 1920, I was baptized at the Anglican Church of St Theodore, Rose Park, where I subsequently went to Sunday School and was confirmed at the age of 12. I was even then sceptical about the truth of Christian teachings, but occasionally with boy friends (and later with the hope of meeting some girls) went on Sunday evenings to one of the local churches, St Theodore's or the Congregational church across the road, until I was 17 or 18 years old. Since then, I have attended churches only for official events: marriages, occasionally baptisms, and deaths. I am still interested in religion as a widespread human activity (an 'anthropological' interest) but I am without religious beliefs myself—I accept the 'unknowable'. At times I was intolerant of what I saw and still see as the evils of some Christian teaching, especially that of evangelical Christians, and the Roman Catholic prohibition of contraception.

## Sport

Father was no athlete, although he had represented Melbourne University at rifle shooting during his student days there. Although the Victoria Park Racecourse was very close, none of us took any interest in racing, nor in football (Australian Rules was the only game in Adelaide at that time). However, until I went to the University I was an enthusiastic cricketer, and participated in an early morning 'school' for young hopefuls, given at 6 am one day a week by former Test player George Giffen in the Parklands, some five kilometres away from our house. I used to walk over and back before breakfast on Saturdays. I was a passable slow bowler, and at one school match notched up eight wickets for 36 runs. However, when I came to play at the University my bowling was too slow and after the first season I gave up the game, although until after the War I went to all Test matches played in Adelaide and was a great admirer of Clarrie Grimmett as a bowler and Bradman and Jackson as batsmen.

At Thebarton Technical High School, I tried playing Australian Rules football, but found that I ran up and down the field and never seemed to touch the ball. Influenced by Norman Dowdy, a teacher who one evening each week conducted gymnasium classes that I attended (along with Lindsay Pryor) at a church building across the road, I tried playing hockey for a team called 'The Wanderers'. It turned out that I was quite good at that, and quickly gained entry to grade A hockey as soon as I went to the University.

The other game that I learned to play locally, with a friend on the public courts at Victoria Park, was tennis. Although I dropped this during and just after the War, I took it up again as soon as I came to Canberra, and I still play doubles at a court near our house in Canberra every Saturday morning.

