

## Chapter 5

### Educated men or Christian misfits? 1950 to 1956

Let me begin by recalling how Father Smith's leaving affected me. Father Smith, as mentioned earlier, became a father figure not just to me but to some of the other boys too. Gradually as my eleventh birthday came and went I was beginning, like many of the other boys, to accept the fact that I was at the house for my own good and to get a better education. Along with the other boys I believed that we were there because our mothers had put their trust in Father Smith. My education continued as a series of failures even though the dream left by Father Smith was still the pathway for the good of Aborigines in general and in particular for 'mixed bloods'. We did know in advance of the Smiths' move but the big issue from the boys' perspective was the pace with which it all happened and the arrival of his replacement. While I did not display any outward psychological affects, inwardly, when I look back, I felt I became withdrawn and unresponsive to school and the other boys.

What possibly helped me cope with my feeling of loss was life on Semaphore beach, enjoying activities such as fishing off the jetty with Wally MacArthur, Vince Copley, Gerry Hill and John Moriarty. Soccer with Port Thistle junior's side also helped and would lead to a closer relationship with Charlie Perkins. But I kept the new boys from Alice Springs at a distance, boys such as Richard Bray, Des Price and Max Wilson. Some of the younger Mulgoa boys also got the rough end of my tongue too, like Wilfred Huddleston, better known as Boofer, and Tim (Bam) Campbell, Kenny Wesley and Kenny (Knobby) Hampton. Another outward display of my inner turmoil was caused by my general impatience with being lumped with younger boys because of my low grades at school. I certainly made a number of attempts to run away but soon after any escape, I lost courage to continue. In hindsight I always left the house a short time before meal-time and returned home just in time for meals!

In 1950 with Father Smith gone Charlie was regarded as one of 'the big four'. John Palmer had gone back to the Northern Territory too, and the new 'big four' were Charlie, Vince Copley, Ernie Perkins and David Woodford. My inability to cope spilled over into the winter of 1950, and I remember fighting with Charlie, Vince and Ernie. I do recall, however, that they teased me, and, in my own defence, I began throwing things at them. They were all bigger than me, and I got really angry with them, chasing them down the stairs from my dormitory towards what was the common room. In the end they evaded me and the only

one who came back to console me in my distress was Charlie. At this time too I became conscious of Charlie and our friendship grew over time through sport. Charlie continued to have confrontations with other people such as Sergeant (Sargy) Jarvis (a part-time superintendent). Later these incidents revealed to me the tensions that were affecting many of us. We were mostly all unhappy but looking back, both Charlie and Ernie Perkins were never very happy away from Alice Springs.

My performance at school was affecting my whole existence. In 1950 I was 11 and spending my second year in third grade. This pattern of failure stayed with me throughout my schooling. Although I was older than my classmates my saving grace was that I looked much younger than my age. It was never about whether I was immature but more that I did not care and could never work out why I was at school because it all felt meaningless. Learning to read, write and spell was always a drag and as I mentioned before what I was good at was telling stories about what I did on weekends or on special occasions. The new Superintendent, Father Taylor, was very unlike Father Smith and knew little about our predicament and our past. In hindsight I recall I was not the only boy disturbed by the new Superintendent. It was a sentiment felt throughout the house. Out of this despair with authority my relationship with Charlie grew, in part, due to our growing fascination with the game of soccer. Many migrants, including those known as 'Balts' and New Australians, flooded the country and these people showed a great interest in us as individuals.

Charlie, with his brother Ernie, John Moriarty, Jerry Hill and I, began our soccer careers together and for the same team, Port Adelaide Thistle, or Port Thistle as it became known. In 1950 Port Thistle won the second division championship and was elevated to the first division. To qualify for the promotion the club had to have teams in the lower or junior division. Port Thistle management approached Father Smith for permission to rent a large field in the front area of St Francis House owned by the Church, and he agreed. Thistles had enough boys in the area to make two teams: a full juniors' team and a senior colts' team. The house boys filled the junior team and Charlie, 'Truck' and Harry Russel made the colts. From the beginning Charlie was a natural, as were many in the junior side, particularly Moriarty (Baggy) and Hill (Skrulyet). The boys from the house, to a person, played Aussie rules for Ethelton School or Le Fevre Technical School. I continued playing Aussie Rules for Ethelton Primary School on weekdays while Charlie did the same for Le Fevre Technical School. Charlie had great talent in both codes but I believe that he chose to excel at soccer as a way of evading the bullies at the House and as a way of venting his frustrations at Father Smith's leaving. He also resented the prejudice he confronted by those who played and organised Aussie Rules.

It is worth reflecting a little on Charlie's early life to gain an appreciation of why he chose to distance himself somewhat from the other boys and play soccer. Like me, Charlie was born at the Bungalow half-caste institution at the Old Telegraph Station just outside Alice Springs. Charlie was the ninth of 11 children of Hettie Perkins. As a young boy others often looked after him at the Old Telegraph Station while his mother worked on cattle stations, down the mines at Arltunga and later as a day girl in the three Bungalows around Stuart and Alice Springs. Following the Japanese attacks in 1942 Charlie's mother chose to stay in Alice Springs and work for the military. Unlike me, Charlie was not evacuated to Mulgoa and spent the war years as a young boy in Alice. This period shaped much of his life to come.<sup>1</sup>

Charlie spent some time at St Johns before going with Father Smith to Adelaide. However, the street problems of Alice did not go away and lingering bitterness often flared up, particularly between Charlie and John Palmer. Even though John Palmer had left St Francis House, Charlie's interest in soccer was a way, to some extent, of escaping from the ever-present bullying tensions in his life.

Out of all who knew him, I was Charlie's longest friend and although some may have at times been closer to him, or had greater insight into his personality than I did, I knew his life and times better than most. Perhaps, like Charlie, I kept losing my dearest and closest carers! Charlie often expressed his dissatisfaction to me about Father Smith's leaving us, as well as Church and government policies towards Aborigines in general. However much these events affected me, I'm sure that Charlie was equally affected, because we'd lost our specialness

Father Smith's leaving impacted on us all, but because I was the youngest I had to cope with being levelled at the house by recent arrivals that I did not know, even though I was related to many of them. I was no longer seen as one of the 'originals' with special knowledge on how things operated or as having any authority over younger boys. I now shared the same class at school with inmates who were much younger than me. I noticed that the new boys would treat me as a 'know all' and their attitudes came with their title of me as 'the Professor'. This really put me in my place, a situation that saw me become more of a loner.

However, I did have a few outlets away from the house. During my early time at Pembroke Street I was taken by Sargy Jarvis to Adelaide Oval to see West Adelaide play and even, in the late 1940s, to see Don Bradman. Sargy had met Father Smith at the Anglican Church in Alice Springs when he was posted there during the War. Father and Sargy became good friends and this continued after the hostilities. When Father moved to Semaphore Howard Jarvis tracked him down. At this time Sargy was a single man. He introduced his parents to Father

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1 Perkins C 1975: 7-27. See also Read 1990: 1-50.

and the Smith family and soon we all ended up at the cricket. My connection to the Jarvis family continued as they had special South Australian Cricket Club membership tickets to all the big sporting games. Sargy Jarvis kept up the friendship until I left school, and meanwhile I'd go with the family to see England, the West Indies and India play against Australia. Having Sargy Jarvis as a friend with whom I could keep up these outings gave me a release from the tensions at the House. Before the war Sargy had played football for Port Adelaide with 'Big' Bob McLean but injured his knee on his return from the war, thus ending his football days. The Jarvis family all lived at Largs Bay, right near the Largs Bay railway station and owned an English car, a Morris Oxford. They would take me to football and cricket, and then onto their house after the game, have an evening meal, listen to the ABC Saturday sporting news and finally return me to the House. In my mind this special relationship was an escape from the mundane life at the House, Ethelton School and Church at St Paul's, Port Adelaide. Sargy was a favourite with the boys and often came to help out as a relieving superintendent.

Superintendents who followed Father Smith were discussed in depth among the boys, and I'll devote a small amount of space here to their period of control. All of us suffered in one way or another from Reverend Taylor's time at the House (Squizzy to us – the nickname of a notorious Melbourne gangster of the 1920s). He was an Anglican missionary who had spent time in Papua New Guinea and Malaya. Squizzy was a short, swarthy Welshman with a little dumpy wife we simply called Mrs Taylor and two children, a boy and a girl. These two children, sent to boarding schools in Adelaide, were kept at a distance from us and we never saw much of them. It seemed to us that when these priests came to dominate our lives, their wives did the dominating; they were more like ghosts always doing something else other than carrying out the duties that they had been placed there to perform. Squizzy, unlike Father Smith, never ate with us and the only time I ever had contact with Mrs Taylor was when I had to be treated for hepatitis, sporting accidents, gastro, cuts and bruises or was bedridden for one reason or another.

Soon after the Taylors arrived there was a severe outbreak of poliomyelitis. Many children in the Port Adelaide district were infected and so were some of the kids at the House. The first batch of boys infected were the two new Bray brothers Phillip and Robert, together with Glen Roberts, Gerry Tilmouth and Trevor Read. The Bray boys were related to Charlie and Ernie Perkins by marriage. Glen Roberts on the other hand was someone who was born in Arnhem Land and had been at Mulgoa with his mother Alice. When Mulgoa was closed, Glen went with Alice to St Mary's Anglican Hostel in Alice Springs but was sent south to St Francis for reasons which we were never told. The type of polio that the boys contracted seemed different to that of the children I had seen in the

Adelaide Children's Hospital when I went to have my tuberculosis immunisation injection. The children in hospital were strung up in big crates with ropes holding their legs up and some even in iron lungs. Phillip and Robert Bray were kept in a special room near the front entrance of the House. Most of the infected boys appeared to get over the paralysis fairly early in their confinement whereas Phillip and Robert's illnesses lasted for over 12 months.

When the polio epidemic was at its peak in-door activities were banned as quarantine barriers were put in place. Activities at the House were severely restricted together with those outside such as schools, picture theatres and public events, except football. I recall that much of the time we spent either on the beach or fishing off the Semaphore jetty catching 'Tommy Ruffs' and 'Mullet'. Another haunt was down at the Ethelton Swimming Club located near the CSR Sugar Refinery on the Port River. After our fishing expeditions we brought the catch back to the House, made a fire behind the boxthorn bushes, cooked the catch and stole potatoes from the pantry for a fish and chip meal. Another fishing haunt was the Port River swamp located at the back of the Ethelton 'dump'. The swamp was next to the Council tip where we went rafting at a location we called 'the deepy'. Some school days and many weekends would see us floating around 'the deepy' spearing flounder or flathead. So we did have a reprieve from the rigours of life under Squizzy Taylor's authority; but this time was all too short. It seemed to us that a far-reaching change had occurred but the solution never really dawned on us. All we knew was that life had become more difficult. Added to this was the drastic increase in the number of boys living at the House, from 17 in 1949 to well over 40 by 1952. In the summer of 1952-53, my own brothers Bill and Dennis made up part of the growing population of well over 50.

Taylor's period at St Francis House is remembered by all as a period of brutal repression. Taylor, I suspect, was a sadist who revelled in the power he exerted over a bunch of hapless half-caste kids. I have not been able to find one boy from the home who could say a good thing about Squizzy and his family. The period from 1949 to mid 1952 when the Taylor's were in charge was the most authoritarian regime at St Francis House. The first inkling that things were changing was that Squizzy used to control us with a one metre rubber hose. Squizzy would wake us up in the morning and give us ten seconds to be downstairs for breakfast. If his orders were not obeyed he would wait at the bottom of the stairs and flog boys indiscriminately, and with force. If you were hit by this hose it caused great swelling and this was not the only time he used it. He would hit boys when they were in the shower for taking too long; this overstay may have only been by seconds. In the showers and baths there was no escape due to the narrowness of the passages and I often had great red stripes on my legs and back as did other boys for taking too long to get out of

the shower. This treatment was cruel and it got worse if fruit or other foods were stolen from the pantry. Everybody including the high school and working apprentices would be assembled in the common room and made to sit down at the school desks spread around the outside of the room. Squizzy would then hold court by walking up and down with the hose in his hand, and slamming it with great force on the end table. At times there were nearly 40 boys crowded in that common room shivering and highly intimidated for trivial complaints. Squizzy would use the loud hailer to assemble us. While seated in the study desks he would make us put our hands on the desks and he would slam the hose between our fingers. But Squizzy was not nearly so hard on himself. He had an intercom system installed by the Queen Scouts for his convenience; it was used to summon children to his study like a concentration camp.

We felt that we were mistreated and could do nothing about our circumstances. If any of the boys committed a misdemeanour the process was standard. The court and sentences were forcefully meted out by public exhibition. These courts and other floggings took place fairly regularly. As time went by complaints must have filtered through to the Bishop of Adelaide, who intervened. There was no inquiry but it was stated that reforms were in train and, I recall, that here we were at the Churches' and government's bidding, many without parental consent, being brutalised by church-appointed officials trusted to be humane. During my research for this book I was unable to find any reports or records of Taylor's or the next Warden's term – perhaps they have all been mislaid!

Things got worse with the arrival of Reverend Goff Sherwin in 1953-54. The Reverend Sherwin came to St Francis House after serving the Church in Papua New Guinea. He took on the role after serving in that region during the Second World War. We were told that Sherwin was an Australian army commando and had been involved in liberating New Guinea. It was said later that he came to reform the boys after the chaos that had been created during Squizzy Taylor's regime. By the time Sherwin arrived at the House there were still close to 40 boys. Some of the 'originals' had left for the Northern Territory while others were still boarding at the House, completing their apprenticeships. 'General Goff', as we secretly called him, was quite a big man of strong stature, large chest, a bald head and powerful legs that, when not in a cassock, were dressed in army-style khaki shorts. 'The General' reintroduced early morning rises, chapel mid-week, confessions on Friday night and stricter retirement times for all junior and apprenticed boys.

It is quite strange that when strict rules are clearly set down, boys will find a way to circumvent them. For example, on most Friday nights the Port Adelaide and Semaphore picture theatres had movies, a popular night out for the boys. During this time all hotels closed at 6pm, but there were always dances at the Port Town Hall and the picture theatres were almost always packed to the rafters.

'The General' would hear confessions between 7pm and 8pm. The older senior boys with girlfriends had a system of going to confessions early. After they would bribe the younger boys with money to make sure that when 'the General' did his night rounds the beds would be full, or so arranged that pillows were placed to fake occupation. If 'the General' was busy he would let the younger boys fill in for him.

Each dormitory had a fire escape and boys would file down these escapes to either meet their girl friends in the outer grounds or go to the Semaphore or Port pictures. All sorts of things were traded to help make the system work. Money held priority but food was a very tradeable commodity, clothing was another, and I remember getting my first long pants from Moriarty as a trade. Football boots, socks and jock-straps were favourites and I cannot ever remember the system breaking down. Some may have been caught in forcing the system during the week but that was not as serious. My 'Stanley Mathews' baggy soccer shorts were a trade and I think I passed on my long trousers to 'Skrulyet' Hill for a trade. The military regime of 'the General' lasted for a year or so before the next Superintendent came and life fell back somewhat to normal.

In the three years from 1953 to 1956 we had three lay-people, Mr and Mrs Morris Wilson and Malcolm Bald, as superintendents. In this period religion was not as strictly imposed and, it therefore took a back seat to most other activities. The first Superintendent was Mr Morris Wilson (Whicky Wilson to us). Whicky had mission experience somewhere in the Pacific but I never knew much more than that. Morrie, as his wife called him, was a big strong man with rusty brown hair, freckles and bow legs that made him walk like a duck. Morrie, as I'll call him here, was a personable man. I think he tried very hard to bring a more humane approach to the care of the boys from the Territory, recognising to some extent the trust of parents to fulfil a government policy paid for by Australian taxpayers. The policy never reached the quality of excellence it purported to be in the beginning and conditions never rose above a rudimentary level.

We wore the same cheap shirts, the same shoes that we mended ourselves, the same basic food and perpetual gifts from 'harvest festivals' as well as the same patched pants and socks. The same mothers' clubs would come to mend our clothes, sheets and pillowcases and tablecloths. Being the perpetual recipients of the niggardly charity of others was a demeaning experience. So too were our living conditions that endured for 11 years. I mopped the same old floor boards each week that Captain Hart had put in place in the late nineteenth century when Glanville Hall was built. Similarly, the bedrooms never changed as more boys came and the gymnasium was never built. The workshops remained in the same dilapidated condition left by Captain Hart. The courtyard that was set down in the days of horse and cart, where we learned to play soccer and cricket with stolen tennis balls, remained in its original condition. The assimilation

policy achieved one thing for white society and that was making sure that the culture of our Aboriginal progenitors would be changed forever; and that that was achieved as cheaply as possible.

One great problem that Morrie and his wife (Turtle as we came to know her) had was how to treat the younger boys differently from the senior working and high school boys. Some of the older Mulgoa boys like Wally McArthur, and Harry Russell were indentured and successful apprentices, as were some of the 'originals' like Charlie Perkins, Malcolm Cooper, Peter Tilmouth and Bill Espie. They also paid board and so expected a measure of independence which Morrie and Turtle found very difficult to properly work out. It may have been Morrie's increased sense of authority at having both the Church and government behind him in making people behave in accordance with the policy of assimilation, and not just do-gooders 'serving the Church and the State'. But the worst thing that Morrie did in trying to establish his authority was physically to attack the boy's own true hero, Wally McArthur.

Before Wally came to St Francis House he was already a champion rugby player and runner. By the time Morrie Wilson came Wally was the hero of all the boys at the house and most learnt to play rugby league in an attempt to emulate him. The Mulgoa boys had played the game amongst themselves in New South Wales and at a higher level at Penrith and Mount Wilson secondary schools. For these schools they became champions; in particular Wally, James Stirling, Harry Russell, Jim Foster and Cyril Hampton. Later younger boys followed in Wally's footsteps: boys like Ken Hampton, Tim Campbell, Gerry Hill, John Moriarty and Wilfred Huddleston. St Francis House boys continued their association with rugby league by forming their own team called Semaphore junior colts. They also played rugby union for Le Fevre Technical School and it was there that Wally made history by setting the fastest running time by a schoolboy. He was even touted as an Olympic hope by amateur athletics officials. So Morrie had created a huge problem for himself without realising it. Wally McArthur never said what the real issue was but we do know that Morrie Wilson slapped Wally's face. Wally responded by telling Morrie that if he was not the Superintendent he would have retaliated. This response shows just how conditioned we had become and how we instinctively bowed to authority. After this Wally left the House and Morrie Wilson never regained the respect of the boys that he had once enjoyed. What followed was a series of revolts not just by 'the big four' but by both young and old boys.

To add to Morrie's woes, the South Australian Education Department sold off some of the land around St Francis House for a large housing project. Hundreds of what the government called 'temporary homes' were created to house needy and migrant people. This resulted in a number of issues as more people moved

closer to the House. Port Thistle lost the use of the spare land as a soccer ground; more young women came closer to the house and, finally, it caused strife between the new populations and the Aboriginal boys at the House.

Port Thistle Soccer Club moved to a new ground on Robin Road about 500 metres away which was not a calamity in itself but it cut off the major advantage it had of signing up the new boys arriving at St Francis House. By 1955 many of the top players were poached by the burgeoning 'New Australian' clubs such as Port Adelaide, Juventus, Polonia, Budapest, the Dutch Club Orange and a team called International. By 1955 Charlie was a first division player while Moriarty was still at school and destined for an apprenticeship.

Many of the boys at the House, including myself, were influenced by the increased availability of local girls and young women. In the evenings once dusk fell and the after dinner meal chores, such as washing up for 50 boys and staff, was completed, boys could be heard escaping to the temporary homes where we would meet our girl friends or head for a prearranged location on the House property. There was a time gap of about one and a half hours between the end of meals and bedtime so plenty of cover existed for us and the girls. From the temporary homes you could hear the girls' mothers yelling at them to come home, searching the grounds of the House as a last resort. However, no real trouble or long term romances ever eventuated from these liaisons. Sometimes other encounters took place on Saturday afternoon matinees at the Semaphore picture theatres, attended by most of the school-aged boys from the House. The theatres were where 'race' came in and there it ended, but once the lights came on it was all over for a week as things went back to normal and the social divisions of both race and gender returned. Morrie Wilson, however, never bothered himself too much by the problems of discrimination. Like Father Smith he put more trust and faith in Christian morality rather than 'the rule of law', but his time at the House was coming to an end.

In 1955, Malcolm Bald, the handyman and Morrie's assistant took over as Superintendent. Levelling had returned as a way to understand government policy where Christian values were mistaken for liberal ones and our heritage was set down in international law; but these concepts were either overlooked or totally ignored. Later as a student of politics, it always seemed to me, when reading Menzies's American lecture on Australian law that the prime minister of the day had no sense of human rights, mainly because it was an idea espoused by European Fabian Socialists. Menzies believed that those who inherited British law were protected by the underlying principals of an outdated Magna Carta. Race politics in Australia, in Menzies's mind, was set to disappear under his watch.

Malcolm Bald was a local man from Largs Bay and the son of a fitter and turner who worked at the Osborne Power Station owned by the Electricity Trust of South Australia. He had attended the Le Fevre Technical School and was the second of three boys, all tradesmen of one sort or another. At the same time they were all members of the First Semaphore Boy Scouts and Malcolm (or Mal as we knew him) rose to become assistant Scout Master. We got to know him in about 1952 when five or six of the boys at the House joined his scout troop. The boys from the House were encouraged to join the Scouts mainly as an outside activity during the school holidays while the majority of boys returned to Alice Springs. It was in the Scouts that we got to know Mal as someone who was interested in Aboriginal politics and who showed an interest in what we could teach him about traditional life too. Poorer than your average Scout, we were helped by wearing cast-off uniforms from other branches and boys in the troop. The benefit that we saw was the end of year four-week or Christmas-time camps. The troop had a very large block of land at Mount Lofty in the Adelaide Hills and scouting activities took up quite a bit of our time during these summers.

Scouting had a deep attraction for the few boys who took it up as it offered a friendship we seldom experienced. Mal was a King/Queen Scout and an avid yachting enthusiast. He attended the Largs Bay Baptist Church and through his civic activities and connections he was offered the job of handyman and eventually the general assistant's position under Morrie Wilson. As time went by Mal became integral to activities at the House. At the same time he continued his scouting duties around the Port district.

One of the things that interested me greatly was Mal and his brother's fascination with cars and motor bikes. Lance Loftes, a local motor bike mechanic and sales dealer in second hand and new motor bikes, was one of Mal Bald's close friends. As Mal became more integrated into the activities of the House he bought an old Chevrolet fruiterer's van, stripped it down and it acted as a carriage for the boys. He also built himself a scramble bike and sidecar, working on his truck and racer whenever possible. At first he used the English Velocette motor cycle or Velo for short, as a single racer but later changed it around to take a sidecar. In his youth Mal raced as sidecar speedway and road racing passenger for Lance Loftes and this probably was the impetus to put a sidecar on the Velo and practice in nearby paddocks. Other boys were terrified of this machine but I got on gladly and he used me to practise on his reconstructed scrambler. When he came to the House he continued his activities and nobody seemed to mind. As it happened Mal Bald took us to Rowley Park Speedway and while this event was a big hit with us, we were an attraction to the white speedway crowd too. All this was very new for us after being cooped up by the priests, forever going to Church and mixing little with the outside world.

Morrie Wilson's more relaxed approach at the end of his term tended to flow on to Mal's attitude with us. He would take us up to Loxton and Renmark where we would camp in the Anglican Church Hall for the whole seven or eight weeks of the Christmas break. Fishing in the River Murray, swimming most days and spotlighting for rabbits and kangaroos at night, were all new and exciting. One day we were fishing at Harple's Bend, up river from Loxton, when a number of us boys – Gerry Hill, Richard Bray, John Moriarty and I – were sitting on a log when I noticed a tiger snake under the log. We yelled out to Mal, who grabbed his single shot 22-calibre rifle and came towards us where he could see the snake. Mal put the gun down low and took a shot at what he could see. Moments later the snake, a huge two-metre brute, burst from the log and before Mal could reload the snake turned towards us with raised head and hood like a cobra. Its intentions were very clear. I was the only one with a stick and as the snake reared its head to strike I swung out in a classic cricket hook shot to the leg, caught the snake just below the head and down it went. The snake had a broken neck, but at that moment all you could see was river-sand dust and this big fat body of the snake squirming in the dust. Mal and I were still close to the snake. He took another shot as he saw its head move and killed it. I swung around to see if any of the other boys were close but they had all bolted a good 20 metres away.

That was a good year for me. About 14 of us had gone up to Loxton that Christmas and the scare at the log was the first of two incidents involving snakes. The second involved me, Ken Hampton, Boofa Huddleston, Gerry Hill and from memory, Les Nayda watching a snake swim across the Murray. There were two men in a small rowing boat who were fishing on the other side of the river and they watched the snake pass them on its way to what seemed a distant spot up river. But somehow, the snake kept floating towards us and we dropped our hand lines. The only defence we had was a large log which Ken and I decided to grab and swung it towards this large tiger snake that appeared determined to land where we were fishing. Luckily for us the snake dived under water and it must have been another 20 minutes before we saw its head come up near the top of the water and go down again. We were moving around, now with a shorter stick yet it was another five minutes or so before it decided that it had had enough and swam back to the other side of the river.

Some days later John Moriarty, Gerry Hill, Richard Bray and I, all strong swimmers except Fig, as we called Richard, decided to swim across the Murray River. The current was quite strong as we set out on a race. Hill and Moriarty were well in front but I could hear Fig grunting, as I turned around to see where he was I could sense he was struggling and as I turned a second time, down he went. I yelled to Hill and Moory (Moriarty) who were both some distance away that Fig was in trouble and I dived to search for him. The Murray River is the

colour of strong milk coffee, but down I went and suddenly something grabbed me from the back and I swung sideways and spun him around, grabbed him in turn by the neck and made my way up to the surface. Fig was in trouble, coughing and spluttering, as I made for the shoreline. Hill and Moory caught up to me pulling Fig up the bank to safety. Mal Bald was livid when he heard the story and Fig copped the biggest telling off I had ever heard Mal give. I still feel that had I not been so close to Fig he would have drowned. Although Fig never became a strong swimmer he went on to have a great football career with Pioneers in Alice Springs, Port Adelaide and Exeter.

Meanwhile Malcolm Bald became the Superintendent of the House in 1956 even though a government inspector had recommended earlier that his employment as a handyman and sports facilitator at the House be terminated because he did not have the appropriate skills or experience. It is, therefore, ironic that the recommendation by a Northern Territory administrative welfare officer was not only overlooked but that Mal later went on to become the Superintendent! Perhaps it highlights where we stood on the social ladder and how little the Church really cared in those years to instil forms of transparent management.

After I left the House I never saw Mal Bald again until the year of the referendum on constitutional change for Aborigines in 1967. He was then living on an isolated farm between Murray Bridge and Karoonda in South Australia with two young boys. I later heard that sometime between then and the early 1970s he left South Australia for the west following two prison terms; and while there I heard his life was cut short in circumstances I leave for other historians to investigate. It is only in hindsight that I recall a number of incidents that were sexually inappropriate while he was in charge of us. Mal would often take the younger boys out to secluded locations at Torrens Island and Outer Harbour where we would all swim. The mangroves were about 30 metres deep providing ample cover for Mal to sit on the bank and watch 15 or so young boys slide naked down the muddy bank of the Port River. I leave my readers to draw their own conclusions about his character. Suffice it here to say that his downfall made me realise how vulnerable the boys at the home were when we were subjected to the care of a number of misfits who were supposed to look after us both physically and spiritually. There were other incidents over the years of the staff behaving inappropriately, such as overzealous touching while supervising the boys' bathing at night. These were people employed by the Church and the State.

Late in 1956 I left St Francis House for Mrs McGee's house at Semaphore South, after spending Christmas in Alice Springs with my mother. During this holiday I spent a lot of time listening to stories relayed by my mother and her sisters Eddie Kenny, Maggie Taylor, Ruby Tilmouth, Nora Laughton and lastly Hetti Perkins who had looked after these and many of the other half-caste girls in the

three bungalows around Alice Springs in the period between the wars. Some of my memories returned with their help. When I left St Francis House I could barely read and write; I had spent much of my school life repeating year after year until I was too old for primary school. When I left for the last time I was nearly 18, a Christian lad believing the world was full of good Christians. My livelihood lay not with my education, as Father Smith believed, but with my sporting ability alone, but that could have happened anywhere. My heritage had been attended to by nobody and its reparation came only in part and for that I had to tread a very long road. The beginning of that journey came mostly over the next four decades, the story to which I now turn.

