

## Chapter 6

# Life after St Francis House, 1957 to 1964

The general thrust of race policies in the 1950s was 'new assimilation'.<sup>1</sup> For Liberal and Country Party politicians this was the status quo, which was for us to conform to the idea that Aboriginal culture, language and peoples would soon disappear, and we would become like other white people on the continent. When this meltdown was complete our citizenship would be reinstated. This notion harks back to Macquarie's little known proclamation of 4 May 1816 stating that all Aborigines in the British-claimed area of the continent would be British subjects and would be equal before the law.<sup>2</sup> And, in order for this to be achieved the dominant society provided taxpayers' money for us to disappear into the morass of white society. However, we wanted our heritage, wealth, land and a fair share of the human rights that flowed from the 1949 United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and other United Nations' covenants.

It was in this milieu that I left St Francis House in the summer of 1956, a failure as an educated Aborigine, thousands of miles away from my birthplace and my people's culture. It was not just assimilation policies keeping me from my heritage but the ignorance and prejudice of Australian society and politics. The Anglican Church forced me to be a good Christian, but I was a misfit in Australian secular society. I had no place to stay when I left St Francis House and would have been homeless if it had not been for the kindly Mrs McGee, the woman who washed our clothes and bedding at St Francis House. She offered me board in a room on the back veranda of her home at Semaphore South. I gathered together a few clothes and my football gear and left behind my two brothers Dennis and Bill at St Francis House.

Mrs McGee's house was between the Ethelton dump and the Grange railway station. As I remember, the area was mostly saltwater swamp and the remaining sand flats were used to stable the Cummins' and Hayes' race-horses alongside the mangroves. When the 'king tides' came in on one side of the Port River the sea came right up to the Grange Railway station.

Mrs McGee's husband Bill was a waterside worker and had all the attributes of someone who had spent most of his life as such. He worked intermittently, drank heavily and it could be timed almost to the minute that he would arrive home full

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1 Gale 1972: 57-58.

2 McCorquodale 1987: 19.

of grog five minutes before the seven o'clock radio 5DN or 5AD evening news, having been tossed out of the Admiral Hotel near Black Diamond corner at Port Adelaide. Bill, like most wharfies, was a ruddy-faced, hard-working man who never scoffed at the most dreadful jobs that the Stevedoring company would ask him to do. Almost daily, if he was able to talk, Bill would recite the vulgar wharfie jokes he had learnt that day on the homeward bus. Notwithstanding his appearance, Bill was a most amiable man, drunk or sober.

For a wharfie Bill was unusual because he owned his own house and was able to support his ten children on his and his wife's incomes. Independence was Bill's lore and that was instilled into all his children. Bill was a Port Adelaide football team supporter and as predictable as most wharfies were in their politics. He hated the Liberal-Country Party and the Liberal Premier Tom Playford and Bill was someone who could pick the composition of Port's football team on Friday evenings at the Admiral Hotel without fail.

Bill wanted me to become a wharfie but I was not up to taking his advice and spent a few months doing casual work such as stacking wool, loading timber, truck driving and unloading wheat ketches around the Port Adelaide harbour. Not long after I got a job on the railways and was lucky to move to a room at a Rosewater boarding house close to the railway Round House in the Port marshalling sheds. By early 1957 I had passed my fireman's entry exams and worked on the Adelaide suburban and country passenger freight runs that took me as far north and south as Port Pirie and Border Town respectively.

By mid March I had transferred to Murray Bridge as a fireman on the school and freight train runs. When I arrived the Murray River was in flood and the main journeys were to take school children back and forth to Tailem Bend, twice a day. Although I was working for the South Australian Railways I was still a ward of the Northern Territory and South Australian governments. It would be over a decade before I would be a full citizen of Australia.

I was later posted to Port Lincoln on the Eyre Peninsula, which has a harbour on Spencer Gulf. Here I was accepted by most of my work- and sporting mates. Of these I was closest to the migrants, who were both workmates and soccer friends. I fired engines for a Jewish bloke called Jack Asher and a Hungarian migrant called Mat Giezler. Both these men were very out-going men with broad and worldly minds.

Very few Aborigines lived in the town of Port Lincoln when I landed. Mainly because they had poor education, thus poor job skills, and were still under the control of the Aborigines Protection Board. Out of sight out of mind! Most white people, therefore, were either oblivious of what society was doing to Aborigines or gave very little thought to their circumstances. There were one or

two Aboriginal families such as the Roderick, Betts and Burgoyne clans moving in and around Port Lincoln, mostly playing football for local teams. The Roderick twins, both engine drivers, worked alongside me on steam engines while the Burgoyne men played football for Wayback or Minindie football clubs.

Part of my job on the railways was shunting the wheat trains around the marshalling yards and pushing the wheat cars out onto the wharf. One day soon after my arrival a big bloke named Charlie Oliver jumped on the engine and said, 'Can any of you blokes kick a footy?' I said nothing at first but Jack Asher, the engine driver, said, 'Hey Charlie this bloke's a Blackfella; he must be able to play. Every Blackfella I know is football mad, and I've seen some beauties up at Peterborough, where I come from!' When I told Charlie that I wanted to play soccer, he blurted out, 'What, that's a Sheila's game isn't it?' He jumped down from the engine and shouted at me: 'Come to training on Tuesday night! OK?'

I found out later that Charlie was a scuba diver around Boston Island, where he photographed sharks and took others out to do the same. He looked and sounded tough so I went along to train with Souths and made the first team with Charlie Oliver when the season opened. I enjoyed the life as a fireman and playing footy. Souths went to the top in 1958; I was selected to play for Port Lincoln, and my photo now hangs with others in what Port Lincoln people call their 'Sporting Hall of Fame'.

When I went to Souths I knew many of the white players who worked for the railway and got on well with them. I was certainly more interested in girls and I was particularly interested in the migrant women who followed soccer. My weekends were busy; I played cricket or Aussie rule on Saturdays and soccer on Sundays. Nevertheless work dominated my life and I often had to struggle to get back for the weekends.

I had already left Port Lincoln when I learned that my uncle, Rupert Maxwell Stuart, had been arrested for the murder of a white girl at Ceduna just before Christmas 1958. Rupert was the son of my mother's grandfather, Paddy Stuart. As a small boy of about two or three Max was in a half-caste institution with my mother, who cared for him there. It is not difficult to imagine my feelings when I heard the news. It came at the time when I was about to resign from the railways, move to Adelaide and sign up to play soccer for Beograd for the summer season. Because Max was a relative of mine, I followed the case closely until I left for England in late 1961.

Max's story begins on the 20 December 1958, when a nine-year-old white girl named Mary Olive Hattam was murdered on the beach between Ceduna and Thevenard. Days later Rupert Max Stuart was accused of raping and murdering the young girl. The case gained national notoriety for a number of reasons

including the significant impact it had on the politics of South Australia, the press, legal and court systems and of course Rupert Max Stuart himself. It probably is a fair statement to say that under most circumstances white Australian country town people despised, loathed and resented Aborigines of any complexion. In particular in South Australia, many country people hated the fringe camps created by Aboriginal workers who lived there while tending the 35 to 40 kilometres of wheat stacks created by the Second World War wheat hoarding. This phenomenon created work rejected by whites for others to do.

Since whites dominated all forms of the labour force they rejected the burdensome, tiresome and heavy labour of lumping wheat-bags all day in the hot burning sun unless forced by profit or necessity to do so. This strenuous work left a gap for poor Aborigines to earn a living as an alternative to the wholesale burning down of native scrub for payment in kind such as sugar, flour, tea and an occasional sheep carcass. Max was an outsider on all counts; he was not a local but was born of Arrernte and Marduntjara heritage. His ceremonial and religious tradition was Arrernte through his father and Lutheran Christian through his Mardu mother, who was also related to my grandmother Kanaki, Kutju Kungaru.

There were a number of troublesome issues surrounding the charging of Max, issues that sparked the nation's interest and subsequently resulted in a Royal Commission into the way the police extracted the evidence to charge Max, how the record of interview was written, the English used by Max to express his ideas of admission to the crime and finally his footprint in the sand near the murder site. Max was largely convicted on the identification of this footprint. In his statement Max said that he was near the murder and saw it but denied that he was the murderer. Death by hanging was the initial sentence but was later commuted to 'Life'. The commutation process was long and laborious, and in my view, was a factor in the eventual downfall of the long-standing Playford Liberal-Country Party government. It also reflected badly on the Lutheran Church, some Aboriginal witnesses as well as the news media and the legal profession.

Ironically Max's saving grace could well have been his unconventional religious background. Well before Max went through Arrernte lore he would have come into contact with a number of religious creeds, including Presbyterians, Anglicans and Roman Catholics all vying for his baptism. That he claimed Catholicism but failed to commit himself probably saved him from the inevitable outcome of a death sentence. How did this come about? At the time there were a number of religious bodies involved in one way or another seeking political and religious salvation for Aborigines by collecting both full-bloods and half-castes together to feed them, attend to their sores or clothe them.

In Max's case there was a Roman Catholic mission at Charles Creek, a reserve created by the Northern Territory administration as a refuge for the remaining original Arrernte families whose culture was destroyed by the take-over of their lands. Max's parents stayed at Charles Creek out bush, as well as at a camp near Heavitree Gap when they came into the township of what was then Stuart. Paddy Stuart, Max's father and a police tracker, went to town regularly from the Finke region but he and wife Nada also stayed at the Presbyterians' camp at Mbartuwarintja which was near what is now Flynn's Memorial Church. At the time of his trial Max gave his religion as Catholic which to him could have meant either Anglican or Roman Catholic. However, whatever the religious technicalities of the Nicene Creed, it is quite likely there was some confusion about confessions and priests, which in turn saved Max's life.

Priests of all denominations began visiting Max and listening to him as they did with other inmates on death row. One doubting Catholic priest, the Reverend Father Thomas Dixon, saw a legal weakness in the way police had bashed Stuart in order to extract a confession on the assumption that they could get a conviction result by 'cooking the data'. However, the police misjudged the press and the groundswell of religious scepticism about the state processes. The state in the form of Tom Playford's Liberal-Country Party also misjudged the political capital of Max's treatment by white police and the justice system; including whether Max was guilty or innocent.

Father Dixon did not see Max until he was on death row and as a result of these meetings he later revealed in court evidence of Max's possible innocence. Father Dixon claimed that Max did not kill the Hattam girl and that aspects of the police case were unsound. He based these claims on his experience as a missionary of Arrernte, Unmutjara and Luritja peoples and the close contact he had with these groups. Unless you can either speak an Aboriginal language or have lived close to people who speak Aboriginal pidgin English it is hard to follow what is being said. In pointing out cultural differences such as language, Father Dixon was able to raise a political storm about the trial and police brutality. Police indifference to justice overlooked these important impediments; they wanted nothing more than a quick and easy trial without pesky priests or interfering notions of justice.

Soon after Father Dixon became involved, others were drawn into supporting Max's search for freedom, or should I say, his life. His death sentence was commuted to life in jail and he was later paroled. At the same time the Aborigines Progress Association also began showing an interest in Max's predicament. The Aborigines' Progress Association was a political organisation formed by Malcolm and Aileen Cooper, whose members included Aileen's sister Nancy Brumby together with Aboriginal friends Geoff Barnes, and Maude and George Tongerie. The organisation worked out of their temporary government home at

Taparoo and was where we met on a regular basis. Aileen had a number of sisters and Aboriginal women friends while Malcolm had the backing of Aboriginal men friends: some of whom were boys from St Francis House, including myself, Charlie Perkins, Jerry Hill, John Moriarty, David Woodford, Harry Russell, Tim Campbell, Ken Hampton and Wilfred Huddleston all of whom became members of the Association.

Millie Glenn, my mother's sister who cared for me at Mulgoa, was also involved. Millie had been a cook at St Francis House, but, at this time she was a hostel manager for Aboriginal girls at Millswood. The girls from the hostel attended high school in Adelaide. Millie and these girls all attended gatherings organised by the Progress Association. It was formed to voice protests against the Australian government as well as the racist and oppressive laws under which Aborigines in South Australia lived.

Malcolm Cooper worked at the Imperial Chemical Industry depot Osborne branch and later became a prominent Port Adelaide footballer playing many games with the great Foster Williams. Aileen was a Colebrook Home girl from Pitja Pitja country and had worked as a cook and domestic at St Francis House where she met Coop, as he was known. The Tongeries were brought up in the Oodnadatta orphanage, then the Colebrook home and Eden Hills. Aileen, Maude and George all came from northern South Australia and suffered the same discrimination as we and others did. So far as the Progress Association was concerned, any Aboriginal person could join this body.

Most of the St Francis House boys mentioned previously remained in Adelaide and suffered in many ways from the prejudices of both government and white society. These boys quickly became involved in one way or another with the Association. As individuals we had issues of our own but two things were uppermost in all our minds. First, we wanted to be political, to change the oppressive legislation under which we lived. This included the abolition of the exemption clause in the Act that forced us to hold a 'dog tag'. The clause meant that we had to apply to the protector to get an exemption from the *Aborigines Act 1934 (SA)* and in doing so deny our race and Aboriginal heritage. Most Aborigines rebelled against this law and refused to recognise it. Second, we wanted to live freely as Aborigines with rights the same as those people we worked and lived with. We had already been politicised somewhat in the late 1940s as a result of the British weapons and atomic testing projects. We would not lose these attributes and even though to some extent we went our separate ways, the social and political consciousness we clung to brought us together in one way or another.

In 1959 the Progress Association and the Aborigines' Advancement League and possibly Mrs Duguid's women's body were the only local Aboriginal

organisations around. Although we knew some of the white people in the League, that organisation was really the political arm of the Presbyterian Church. Dr Charles Duguid was its main spokesperson but the St Francis House boys preferred the Progress Association. The feeling at Coop's organisation was spirited. Members were both angry and full of plans for action. Resolutions were sent to Donald Dunstan, the Labor member for Norwood, libertarian bodies, feminist bodies and from memory an Adelaide lawyers' body operated by Cameron Stewart, who later became Chief Justice of South Australia. The Association met regularly and I attended when I could break with railway and sporting commitments.

On my return to Adelaide I lived at a boarding house a few streets behind my old primary school in Ethelton. The Exeter Aussie Rules Football Club offered me the chance to play with them alongside other Aboriginal boys I grew up with such as Wilfred Huddleston, Ritchie and James Bray, Tim Campbell and Harry Russell. Exeter found me a labouring job at a government foundry on the Port River and I worked there until about August of 1961. The foundry belonged to the Department of Water and Sewerage, and while appreciated by me as an income, it was one of the worst jobs the Port Adelaide district could offer. But the members of Exeter football club had supported me in getting this labouring job at the foundry, so I was happy to stay there until I went overseas.

In the 1959 football season I played for Exeter in the Aussie Rules amateur league A-grade side. The team that year was successful and went to the grand final, playing against Adelaide University to whom we narrowly lost. In this same season I was selected to play for South Australia in the National Amateur Australian Rules Carnival in Perth. Two other Aboriginal players were selected from Exeter, Richard Bray and Wilfred (Boofer) Huddleston. I played my last Aussie Rules game for Exeter in the 1959 grand final and subsequently returned to soccer. John Moriarty and I signed to play soccer for Beograd in the summer-night football season. These matches were played under lights at Norwood Oval. Charlie Perkins had recently returned from England and was instrumental in taking Croatia to the first Division and enticed me to play the winter season with them.

In the winter of 1960 Aboriginal politics and soccer were my passions. With Aboriginal politics high in the minds of the South Australian polity through the Stuart Case, the Aboriginal Progress Association (APA) took on the task of changing the *Police Offences Act 1953 (SA)* by using Dunstan's capacity to put up a Private Member's Bill. In 1959-60 we met Dunstan on several occasions at his home on Norward Parade to make plans for a wholesale onslaught on the *Aborigines Act 1934 (SA)*. Significant changes were made ultimately by the

Liberal-Country Party. The old *Aborigines Act 1934* (SA) was swept away as Liberals began recognising that Aborigines wanted change and were clamouring to dispose of welfare support.

Playford wanted to do away with the status quo and dismantle the Aboriginal Affairs Board together with the old system of Protectors in regional areas. Playford wanted Aborigines to be just like everyone else in society. At the end of Playford's vision Aborigines would be left with nothing; no land, no heritage, no wealth and no identity. This system in my view would have led to the disappearance of Aborigines and to what Playford saw as 'integration', another spin on 'assimilation'. This would have led to no specific government agencies for Aborigines and they would have to 'fit in' with other Australians. Playford had in his mind the idea that 'proof of Aboriginality' was to be an entry in a 'Register' (or 'stud book') still to be created. The state administration would alone decide if a person was fit to be deemed a citizen and then that person could be removed from the register. More than that, under discussion was the concept that any person whose name appeared on a register could be confined or removed from Aboriginal reserves. Dunstan was concerned about the new Act and asked us for advice on our thinking on these matters.

Our view was that Playford was pursuing a backward step and we rejected the idea of a register, and in general opposed the removal of any Aborigine by police under any circumstance from their reserves. What we saw was the blatant withdrawal of people's privacy if police had a capacity to have at hand a register to check our race and promptly remove, detain or incarcerate any person listed in it. We wanted the return of our civil liberties, a capacity to declare ourselves to be an Aboriginal person. In turn we wanted the return of our land, freedom of movement and protection of our cultural heritage.

On weekends Charlie, Moriarty and I would either go to soccer club cabarets or to hotels such as the Hendon Hotel that held dances in the saloon bars. It was here that Charlie first met Eileen Munchenberg and her friend Yvonne who was visiting from New Zealand. From the start Charlie was besotted with Eileen; not many white women accepted Charlie and from the word go he felt confident with her. Charlie and Eileen were married in the September of 1961 in Adelaide. After they were married Charlie talked about going to Darwin and even wrote to the Northern Territory administration about a job prospect. He was totally shocked when they dismissed his keenness out of hand and only offered him a job as a bush mechanic. He never forgot this contempt. When passing through Sydney he was offered a signing with the Pan Hellenic soccer club and he and Eileen decided to stay put. In Charlie's mind too was the thought of going to university.

I stayed in Adelaide playing soccer for Croatia, transferring to Polonia in 1961. But by the end of winter I decided to go to England to try my luck as a professional soccer player. I arrived there in October as buoyed as ever thinking that I was heading for a career in the home of world soccer. While playing in Australia I assumed getting started in an English club would be easy but got a shock when I found myself playing with boys much younger than myself. The weather was like mid-winter in Australia and many of my clothes were of summer weight. The trial I had for Hemel Hempstead was not a good one mainly because the wind and rain were too fierce and the muddy fields did not suit me. They asked me to play for an amateur side called Hemel Hempstead Rovers which I did and fared better. As the winter drew on I became more and more fearful that I would injure myself; my confidence was plummeting. I stuck it out in Hemel for that winter and moved to Preston in mid 1962.

However, one aspect of Hemel Hempstead that would have a profound effect on my life was meeting Norma, my wife to be, at a local dance hall. We met early in 1962 and were married in the autumn of that year. I think to start with Norma was fascinated with meeting someone from Australia. Her brother John had spent some time working at the Rum Jungle uranium mine in the Northern Territory in the 1950s and had always spoken well of his time in Australia, and in particular well of the Aboriginal people whom he had come across. To some extent this allayed the apprehension that Norma's parents, Beatrice and Ernie felt about us eventually returning to Australia.

Norma's family was originally from Willesden, a suburb of London, where she was born during a Second World War air raid. Norma spent the first ten years of her life in London attending first Leopold Road infants' school and later Oldfield Road primary school. The family left London in the mid-1950s just before Norma went on to secondary schooling at Apsley Grammar School in Hemel Hempstead. Her family background is quite diverse. Her mother Beatrice came from a transport/carrier family-owned business and was financially well-off until an accident killed a young neighbour and injured her father. As the story goes, the grandfather was never the same after the accident and died a few years later. Beatrice was 15 at the time of his death.

Beatrice was one of 12 children but it seems that none had the business acumen to successfully carry on the family business and tales abound of houses being sold cheaply to buy fur coats for wives! Beatrice had seven sisters and she was very close to all of them – Minnie, Louisa, Alice, Annie, Charlotte, Grace and Christine. Norma grew up listening to her mother and aunts regularly getting together and socialising with each other. Because they knew each other so well situations could be discussed in half sentences – the recipient knowing what was coming and in this way young ears were spared the finer details. Beatrice was also very close to her four brothers – William, Mick, Tom and Charlie.

Brothers Tom and Charlie lived close by during the war years, and the story goes that Charlie carried Beatrice and Norma, as a newborn infant, from the neighbours where she had been born to their flat while it was snowing. The godsend was that Tom filled the coal cellar up for her; between the brothers they looked after Beatrice and her young family while Ernie was away at war.

Ernie, or Pop as I always called him, also came from a large family. He often talked about his brothers Harry, Jim and Jack and sisters Sophie, Mary and Minnie. His father earned a living as a labourer and died when Ernie was just 21. Ernie's mother known just as Gran was a larger than life figure in Norma's life when they lived in London. Every Sunday Pop would take Norma to visit Gran who lived in nearby flats with Pop's sister Minnie and family. After they would go for a walk, weather permitting, along the canal to the local pub, the White Horse, where Pop would have a drink and then together they would hurry home for Sunday lunch.

Beatrice and Ernie were married in the early 1930s and started out their life together renting a small flat and sharing facilities in Harlesden, London. Like many of their generation the Second World War disrupted their lives when Pop was called up to go in the army. He served as a sapper in the bomb disposal unit and spent most of the war at John O'Groats in the north of Scotland. Norma's brother John was five when war broke out, and as the bombing intensified in London most children and some adults were evacuated to the countryside. Beatrice and John were both evacuated for a short time to Lord Carnarvon's castle in Wales. After six years in the army Ernie resumed civilian life as a slater and tiler. He worked for many years for London Transport and on the move to Hemel Hempstead worked as a glazier for Hemel Hempstead Housing Commission.

In mid 1962 I left Hemel for Preston by train with some confidence but nowhere near as much as I once had. I had my first trial game for Preston North End at their training ground on the outskirts of the city. I lived at Deepdale and got a job in a factory near Preston's ground. The truth hit me when I began training that most of the new players were again very young. I made the thirds and ended up playing reserves and thirds. But other events were overtaking my life. I took a short break to return to Hemel Hempstead where Norma and I were married in the local mediaeval church of St Mary's at Apsley. It was in a magnificent rural setting and this coupled with the fact that the church was made of flintstone made it very special. Her best friend Elaine and cousin Jean were our bridesmaids, along with Norma's brother John as the best man. We celebrated our wedding at a local hall with family and friends. Next day Norma and I left Euston station on the Flying Scotsman train to return to Preston.

I settled into a routine of playing on snow, ice, mud and rainy days. Just as I was getting used to the conditions I badly injured my ankle which took months to heal.

At about the same time we decided to return to Hemel Hempstead mainly because we were expecting our first child and Norma wanted to be nearer her family. While Beatrice was hesitant and fearful of the fact that Norma and her new grandson were eventually going to leave England, she and Ernie were always very good to me. Soccer was not paying me any money so I quickly got a job at a steel fabrication factory called Dexion. I found the job easy and soon became part of the production team and learned to enjoy eight and 12 hour shifts.

In 1963 our first son Aaron Charles John was born at St Pauls Hospital in Hemel Hempstead. He was a small baby at birth, little more than two kilograms, but soon flourished with lots of love from all those around him. Aaron was a very contented and agile baby who learnt to walk when he was just nine months old. He was a lovely baby whom the family all adored. We left England when Aaron was just 12 months old and looking back it must have been very hard on Norma's parents to see their only grandchild heading off to the other side of the world.

Charlie had phoned me a couple of times to persuade me to return to Sydney rather than Adelaide. We arrived in Sydney on the P&O liner *Iberia* in April of 1964. Charlie and Eileen met us at Circular Quay. England was for me a great success and I came back to Australia to where I spent some of my early life in the Church of England refuge. Meeting Norma and the birth of our first child were my greatest achievements. However, I also count living with Beatrice, Ernie and John as a success because as a family they always made me very welcome and through them I came to appreciate some of the foibles of the English way of life.

