

SUMMARY

If I had enjoyed my schooling, paid more attention to my lessons and gone to university, surely my destiny would have been to work behind a desk either in England or Australia! Life at Rugby after WWII was a pretty Spartan affair. If we left water in the dormitory basins it would freeze overnight, and with food rationing of one egg a week and 'guaranteed-no-meat' sausages, we were always hungry. However, this was not the reason for my unhappiness. The main problem was the sheer boredom of school life when compared to holidays.

The one bright spot at Rugby was the Art School. It was my first experience of actually having a 'hands-on' opportunity of practising art. The lessons took place in an enormous studio above the school library. We had three art masters: the Big Chief, who never talked to us, his assistant Fabio Barraclough, and a Junior Master. There was no instruction in art history at all, which in retrospect staggers me.

I was really enjoying myself in the painting classes until the day our task was to design and illustrate a book cover. As the lessons were double ones, I had plenty of time to try two covers. Along came the Junior Master and said, "I see you're one of those people with too much imagination," a remark that still causes me pain. The teacher's sarcasm had the effect of completely putting me off the one subject I was enjoying! Fabio Barraclough must have noticed this and asked me to join his sculpting group in the tiny studio he had under the stairs in the basement. The room was about 15-foot square and smelt pleasantly of wood and linseed oil. He gave me a chisel and mallet, a block of wood and asked, "What would you like to carve?"



Hula Hula Girl

Rugby was strictly a 'boys only' school in those days, resembling a male prison as girls were kept well out of reach. Being a red-blooded 15-year-old and starved of any contact with the opposite sex, when Fabio asked me what I would like to carve, my reply had to be, "A Hula Hula girl in a grass skirt." Learning to carve the wood was a fabulous experience and remains the happiest memory of all my days at school.

Fabio became a friend and the finished sculpture won me my only prize while at Rugby. I shall never be able to thank him enough for taking me under his wing. Many years later, when I was a farmer in Australia, the *Hula Hula Girl* became the catalyst of my starting to sculpt again. Now she overlooks me from the window sill of my study while typing.

Except for geography and geometry all the other subjects bored me rigid and, longing to escape, I asked my father if it would be possible to leave after passing my O Levels. He agreed and with luck I managed this, so left at the age of 16, my one regret being parted from Fabio's carving studio.

As I was too young to do my Army National Service, my father suggested joining the Merchant Navy as a deckhand to work my way around the world. I boarded a cargo ship named *Port Napier* as a Supernumerary, with the pay of one shilling a month and keep. The ship set sail for Australia from the London docks on a wet January day in 1951.

To my surprise, when we arrived in Adelaide, my father was there to meet me! He suggested that I should leave the ship when it reached Melbourne, our next port of call, visit my cousins who lived on a sheep station on the Murray River, and then rejoin the ship in Sydney for the trip home. My brother Mike and I, like many other children during WWII, were evacuated from England to escape the London bombings, and sent to Australia to live with my cousins. Visiting a place, that had such fond memories, seemed a fantastic idea, and on reaching the property it felt like I had come 'home'. I decided to make farming in Australia my career!

On telling my father about my wish he agreed, on the condition that I attend Roseworthy Agriculture College in South Australia. Fate decreed that I only managed to stay at the College for part of the three-year course, so I left to become a jackeroo (farm apprentice). The next five years were spent working my way around Australia learning about the land and hard work. They were wonderful carefree years spent in a young man's Paradise.

Then began the serious business of earning a living and becoming independent! After five years of roaming the Australian Outback, working on sheep and cattle stations, it was time to settle down. By chance I found a semi-developed block of land in the Ninety Mile Desert of South Australia that cost ten shillings an acre, and asked my father to lend me the money to develop it.

I built a house, fell in love, got married, and with Margie's help, worked the property. Over the next ten years the sheep numbers grew to 2,000 and our sons to three, Tim, Peter and Mark. When the property was developed my workload lessened enabling me to have some spare time at weekends.

My mother had sent my *Hula Hula Girl* carving out to Australia. The sculpture sat on the bookshelf in our sitting room and was the catalyst that took me back into sculpting, because on looking at the wooden figure it made me want to carve again. One day I happened to pass an art shop in Melbourne that had an offer of 'clay for sale at half price', so I bought a bag and took it back to the farm. It wasn't carving, but could be the next best thing!

I began by modelling figurines and when the clay was dry, finished them off by carving them with my penknife. This led to modelling relief heads of our own sons, casting them in plaster and colouring with bronze paint. Next came busts of willing victims like my mother when she visited us.



Sculpting my mother's head in the shearing shed with Peter watching

Life on the farm was unbelievably kind to us. Our children were healthy, the sun shone and the air was fresh. We were free and we could make just enough money to live on from growing wool. We lived amongst beauty and we had fabulous friends. The one drawback to the Ninety Mile Desert was that it was a long way from schools and we had three little boys who needed educating. It was time to sell up and move on.

That summer was a scorcher, with the temperature reaching 115 degrees in the shade. One day I came into the house to escape the heat and found it as hot inside as outside! We decided to sell the farm and move nearer to a city and schools, but before looking for another farm, go to England for two years and rent a furnished house in the country so I could sculpt and show our sons where I had grown up. Regrettably my father had died by this time, but my mother lived in London and it would be marvellous for her to get to know her grandchildren and for me to get to know her again.

I wrote to my mother and told her about our decision and waited for a reply. Her letter arrived and was read with some surprise. *Do you remember my giving you a set of woodcarving chisels when you were twelve? It was because a fortune-teller had told me that my youngest son would be a sculptor.* I don't believe in fortune-tellers, but it certainly helped that my mother did!

I flew to England and was lucky to find a lovely house in North Devon to rent. The house even had a barn beside it to use as a studio. We arrived in England in 1969 at the beginning of January, 12 months after we had decided

to make the change. We left a boiling-hot summer to arrive in a snow-covered winter, something the boys had never seen. Life was idyllic and the house was bliss to live in. Our landlord, Jimmy Smart, was one of the kindest men we had ever met, the locals were incredibly friendly, and there was a village school. The countryside was beautiful and Margie found superb beaches for children's picnic teas after school while I worked in the barn.



'Tim', my first life-size sculpture in England

I bought some clay from the nearby pottery, asked our eldest son, Tim, to pose for me playing marbles and started my first sculpture. By luck I was given the name of a master plasterer, Mr Manzini. On my finishing the figure he drove down from London and took a waste mould of the sculpture. He in turn introduced me to a man who did cold-resin-bronze casting, (which is a cheap way of producing bronze-looking sculptures), so my sculpture was cast. I was thrilled and, although a complete amateur, felt like a real sculptor!

Fired by the whole adventure, the first sculpture was followed by more children sculptures, then a mother teaching her son to walk, who was followed by a figure of a kneeling mother holding her daughter up in the air. This last became my first sale as our landlord bought it for the island he had created in the lake of the gardens. It is still there and you can buy a picture postcard of it!

During my trips to the resin-bronze foundry near London to collect a sculpture, I got to know Roy Wakeford, the man who had done all my casting. Roy's craftsmanship and the care he put into the finished work 'had to be seen to be believed'. He was not happy with his employment and wanted to start his own business using his garage as a workshop. We got on very well so I agreed

he could do all my work, which turned out to be one of the best decisions I have ever made.



'Mother and Children' was the first sale

Without Roy, my sculpting days would have soon ended. Instead, over the next 25 years he took every waste mould and cast every positive-plaster of all my sculptures. According to Roy's records he cast 100 different children. On top of that he did several athletic figures, one of which was 16 foot high, and all cast in his one-car garage!

Having committed myself to Roy, it became imperative to find a market. I went to London to meet Derek Crowther of Syon Lodge after seeing an advertisement in the *Illustrated London News*. The Chelsea Flower Show was due and Derek said that he would take the sculptures 'on sale or return' and show

them on his stand. Much to our joint surprise they all sold and he took repeat orders! Now, not only did Roy have to cast the original sculpture in resin bronze, he had to make editions of nine of each of them. How he coped I shall never know!

Our first two years in England had come to an end. We asked our landlord if we could remain another year to see if my new career would stay the course. He agreed, but said that at the end of the third year he wanted to sell the house. We had discovered we were too far from London, so decided to buy a cottage in Somerset near King's School, Bruton. We settled into our new home and have remained there for 35 years. Fortunately an old barn came with the cottage and so I had a studio.

One other stroke of luck played a very important part in the establishment of my new career. After doing several sculptures, I had to obtain an opinion from a real sculptor as to whether or not to continue. After all I was a 35-year-old father with a wife and three sons! Were the sculptures any good and would they continue to sell and provide an income?

I had seen some of Enzo Plazzotta's bronzes advertised in an art magazine and greatly envied the skill of the sculptor. I wrote to him enclosing some photographs of my own work, asking if we could meet, and if he would give me some advice. Luckily he agreed and for the first time in my life I entered a real art studio with northern light, turning stands, even a changing room for models! I was overawed by the sight of the stunning wax figures that he was working on.

Enzo gave me a cup of coffee and while he looked at my photographs I asked, "Should I continue to try and earn a living as a sculptor?" He asked in return, "Do you want to do anything else other than be a sculptor?" "No." He looked me straight in the eye, "Then why are you asking me? Go and do it."

Enzo became a great friend. He took me to Italy and introduced me to the Fonderia Mariana, who later cast all the Symbolic Sculpture bronzes of the *Universe Series*. He lent me his studio in Pietrasanta and taught me to model in wax. I shall never be able to thank him enough for the encouragement he gave me and convincing me to believe in my own intuition. Another Fabio!

At the time of Enzo's death in 1975 I had begun my Symbolic Sculptures. By now all my Figurative Sculptures were being cast in real bronze and the Harrods Fine Arts Gallery had become my main outlet, even showing my sculptures in their windows! Roy was still handling all my plasterwork, but the Figurative bronzes were now cast in England and Symbolic ones in Italy.

Neither Harrods nor any other gallery were interested in my Symbolic work. "Stick to what we can sell," Harrods advised. Well, you can't live like that if you are full of ideas you want to try. But how to solve the problem?

When my mother died she left me her flat in London so we decided to sell it and invest the money in our own gallery. I talked the idea over with Joanna, the manager of the Harrods Gallery, and asked her if she would consider working for me as gallery manager. She agreed and found some spectacular premises off Piccadilly on Albemarle Street. Using my mother's maiden name, Freeland, the Freeland Gallery was born.

The gallery displayed the bronze children in the front window, and the Symbolic Sculptures inside. We only kept the gallery for two years for during that time three men visited it and completely changed my life. The gallery was no longer needed, because I had found my Patrons.

Damon de Laszlo is the grandson of the famous portrait painter Philip de Laszlo. He and his wife Sandra had seen my *Leapfrog Children* in the Summer Exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts and asked me to sculpt their three children. This commission led to Margie and me becoming great friends with them. When we opened the Freeland Gallery I was able to introduce them to the Symbolic Sculptures and they now own a large collection!

When Robert A Hefner III walked past the gallery window he saw the Symbolic Sculptures in the background, walked in and asked Joanna if he could meet me, saying that he was leaving the next day for the States. The story of how we breakfasted together in his hotel before he left for the airport will have to wait. Robert is passionate about art and is the owner of a superb collection of contemporary Chinese paintings. At our first meeting he bought two heroic Symbolic Sculpture pieces for his Aspen home in Colorado where he now also has a large collection of my work. Robert and Damon have become my closest friends and we have shared many adventures together over the past 40 years. Our partnership touches nearly every page of my life's story.

My third friend is Professor Ronnie Brown. When we met he was Dean of the School of Mathematics of the University of Wales, Bangor. Ronnie was on his way to give a lecture at the Royal Institution, next door to Freeland, when he saw the Symbolic Sculptures and recognised them as models of mathematical knots. Because of Ronnie, the Symbolic Sculptures became known to universities around the world, many of them wanting sculpture and have received them through the generosity of my patrons.

Robert and Damon have donated Symbolic Sculptures to Aspen Centre for Physics, Aspen Institute, Field Institute Toronto, Cambridge Institute of Astronomy, Universities of Macquarie Sydney, Wales Bangor, Harvard, Montana State, Durham, Oxford and Cambridge's Isaac Newton Institute.

Enzo Plazzotta introduced me to Mario Benbassat in Geneva. Mario created Edition Limitée which published a book on my Symbolic Sculptures with 90 colour plates. Edition Limitée has donated sculptures to the Universities of Cambridge, Oxford, Wales, Barcelona and Zaragoza in Spain and Mario personally financed the writing of this story.

In the 16th century the Florentine art critic, Sperone Speroni defined *Civilisation as the creation of wealth and the patronage of the Arts*. How incredibly true that statement is. Just look at the world's artistic treasures; buildings, paintings, music and poetry all depend on patrons. Without the support of my patrons there would be no Symbolic Sculptures!

My Figurative Sculptures gave way to the Symbolic Sculptures over a period of years. To me it has been a natural progression of the analysis of my innermost feelings about the *Values of Life*. Recently I read a statement by my hero, Brancusi, concerning the searching-element involved in sculpture. *Simplicity is not an end in art, but one arrives at simplicity in spite of oneself, in approaching the real sense of things.*

This story is about the need to create sculptures for myself. Being able to share them with others is a secondary joy. For me the Symbolic Sculptures are the individual steps of my search for answers to the question of 'purpose'. It has been the most exciting adventure that anyone could imagine and I count myself among the luckiest of men who have ever lived.

As my life comes to a close, again chance played a part by introducing me into the world of cast glass. Later I shall tell the story of how

Michelangelo's *Pitti Tondo* was turned into the *Blue Madonna* and how it has come to rest in the new Roman Catholic cathedral in Los Angeles.

I know how insignificant my own work is when compared to the great masters of the past, but what fun I have had in trying. What a barren world this would be without ART! The beauty of the Neolithic cave paintings; the glories of the Renaissance; the Dutch and English Masters; the French Impressionists; not forgetting the master skills of the Orient. Art is Man's finest achievement.

Ars Longa, Vita Brevis : Art is long, Life is short : Hippocrates

Some might construe this autobiography (remember it is written for our grandchildren) as an ego trip, but be assured I have no hidden ambition to be successful in the eyes of others! I have led the life of a *Robinson Crusoe*, but am a very ordinary *Alexander Selkirk*! It would not worry me in the slightest if all my sculptures, or this book, vanished, as they are merely the product of my selfishly indulging in the opportunity to exercise my imagination. This is the story of someone passionate about using his hands as his imagination dictates, be it farming, sculpting, painting and now writing. Competition and ambition find no place in my world, because, as all artists will agree, no financial reward can equal personal gratification. The world has nothing better to offer.

I have been extremely lucky always to be self-employed and able to navigate my way across the troubled waters of life under the banner of independence. I have been fortunate not to have to compete with anyone.

My morning walk with our spaniel, Holly, takes me to one of the best views in the world, looking out across the Vale of Camelot. In the distance glitter the red roof tiles of our village and I can see the trees Margie and I planted 30 years ago in our garden, their tops dancing in the wind.

If, having read this shortened version of my story, you are brave enough to continue, I am sure you will understand why I am so content!

Bon Voyage.