

THIRD DECADE

NEW ZEALAND

My Third Decade started with one of the best holidays as my parents had rented a house called Sefton on the top of Mt Macedon above the summer heat of the plains and some way out of Melbourne. The house was surrounded by a private four-hole golf course, had a croquet lawn and a tennis court. It was the perfect spot for a family holiday. Beyond the lawns there was a forest of giant gum trees in which we could walk, look for, and find koalas.

Every weekend my parents would ask their friends to come and stay and, of course, the newly-weds, Mike and Bern. There was a billiard table so after dinner we could play snooker or cards and have a family game of Hearts as in the old days at Chute Standen in England. Magnificent food was prepared by our cook, Marianna, with my father's chauffeur, Jim, helping where needed.

The halcyon days of that wonderful summer came to an end when a letter arrived from Guy Dampier-Crossley in the South Island of New Zealand saying he would accept me as a jackeroo. Another arrived from the manager of the Swift meat packing company in the North Island agreeing to my working in the factory for a three-month period. It was time to return to work. Aeroplane tickets were purchased and I set off on a new adventure.

Guy and his wife, Bridget, met me at Christchurch Airport and we drove north to their farm on the Canterbury Plains. So began a glorious six months of fun working for one of the nicest couples I have ever met. They had a little boy called Christopher, who was looked after by a nanny most of the time. This meant that the parents were free to party during the weekends and oh boy, did the South Islanders know how to party.

Most of the houses in New Zealand are built of wood because of the earth tremors that continually shake the countryside. I shall never forget the first night I spent on the farm. I awoke to feel the bed shaking and hear the walls creaking. Immediately I was out of bed and on the lawn, barefooted and freezing cold. The house remained standing and I returned to bed when I saw that no one else was going to join me. Next morning I asked Guy if he had felt anything in the night and he told me that he hadn't, but that he had heard on the News that they had had a minor earth tremor. He assured me that I was not to worry, that the house had stood for over 100 years and that I had better get used to such events as they happened quite frequently! Within a week I would quite happily sleep through much worse earthquakes and not bat an eye.

During the week we worked hard on the sheep farm, looking after the stock or ploughing the fields for seeding in the coming spring. The weather was very English and sometimes a bit like Rugby because our boots would be covered by hoarfrost until ten in the morning. When it was time for the opening of the duck-shooting season Guy organised a party of guns to meet at six o'clock by the river before first light. I have never been so cold and was not in the least surprised when I saw that my gun barrel was white with ice crystals. The problem was that we had each brought a flask of whisky knowing that it would be needed to keep out the cold. When the sun came up and the duck flew, surprise surprise, not one was hit. The river that flowed through the valley was also home to the largest trout I have ever seen.

Guy owned the grazing rights on a mountain. The sheep used to be taken up when the snow had melted and left there to fend for themselves over

the summer. This was fine until it was time to muster them again for by then they could have wandered anywhere over a vast stretch of alpine countryside. To muster the sheep the shepherds would climb several thousand feet with their dogs before sunrise to hunt the animals back down the valleys to a yard. The problem is that having been left to roam wild for so long the sheep were not very keen to give up their freedom. It is very hard walking in New Zealand's Southern Alps as many of the slopes are covered by loose scree. The shepherds carry long poles that they use as a balance when they are sliding down them like skiers. It is spectacular to watch and a real art, as if you fall you are liable to be engulfed in the landslide you have started during your descent. Fortunately Guy didn't participate in this activity and didn't ask me to either.

Occasionally on weekends we would go up into the mountain to shoot deer. Like the sheep they have the freedom of the mountains but, unlike their woolly companions, they can't be rounded up with dogs. They have multiplied to such an extent that they have been classified as vermin and professional shooters have a full-time job trying to keep their numbers down. I am afraid our shooting skills were quite inadequate to make any difference to the numbers, but we had a great time trying. We would walk up during the day and camp overnight in the huts used by the shepherds after having a delicious barbecue washed down by rather too much whisky and wine.



'Guy and Bridget' at a shepherds hut in the mountains

Guy was a keen follower of the horses so occasionally we would all down tools and go to the races. It must sound as though we did no work at all, but that isn't true as Guy's philosophy was work hard and then play hard. He and Bridget treated me as one of the family and when they found out that I was about to turn 21 they asked all their friends to the farm and gave me a brilliant party. It was not until I had left the South Island that I learnt that in

those days New Zealand was one of the largest whisky-consuming countries in the world per head of population. I shall always remember Guy and Bridget as one of the friendliest couples I have ever met and my time with them on their property as being full of happy laughter. I could not have had a more fantastic 21st birthday party as it was a night I shall remember for the rest of my life.

I suppose what had made the stay with the D-Cs even more memorable was what followed. It was time to move on up to the North Island and the Swift's meat packing factory. I sailed overnight on the ferry up to Wellington from Christchurch, boarded a train and after hours of slow travel arrived at a small town on the east coast. There was one street and one hotel and the factory. When I was shown my room in the hotel I literally groaned with horror. It was an icy cell with one iron bed, one chair, one table, no curtains, dull grey linoleum on the floor, walls painted a faded blue and my home for the next three months.

After dinner, that was served at six, I walked down the only street to see what I could find. Absolutely nothing! There was no pub, one shop and several houses all in darkness. There were a couple of streetlights but otherwise everything was black and looked completely deserted. I had arrived at the end of the Earth!

A message told me that I would be collected at eight o'clock the following morning by the man I would be working with. I was ready when a car arrived and an elderly man got out and introduced himself as the Farm Adviser to the meat packing factory. I was to travel around the countryside with him for the next few weeks on his visits to the local farmers. His job was to advise them on how they could improve their land with fertiliser, in order to provide the factory with better meat.

The most interesting thing about the job as we went from property to property was meeting the farmers and their wives. It was soon very obvious that they all needed help from my boss as most of them were not well educated and many of them lived very basic lives indeed. It was an eye-opener, especially having experienced the lifestyle that Guy and Bridget and their friends enjoyed. This was a real backwater, a forgotten world.

During the weekend there was absolutely nothing to do in the town, which didn't even have a cinema, the nearest one being too far away to reach even if there had been a bus service. I soon got tired of reading trashy novels and as I hadn't yet started my self-education phase of reading facts, I became terribly bored.

I was saved by a letter arriving from my godmother, Angela Govett, containing a cheque for my 21st birthday. I had noticed that the one shop in the street had a portable typewriter on its shelf. I decided to buy it with my cheque and teach myself how to type during the long lonely evenings. In those days typewriters were the old hammer type that used the QWERTY layout which was invented to stop the keys meshing together when they were striking the paper. We are still stuck with this format and probably will be for ever. I took my new acquisition up to my room and every evening I would try typing on it and I suspect that the click-click of my activity was the only sound in the whole town.

Time was passing very slowly and I was counting the days to my release when the manager asked me if I would mind giving his son-in-law a hand to split logs on his farm as he had been given a big order for battens and needed

help to fulfil it in time. I jumped at the chance because it would mean getting out of the hotel and a change to the awful food that was served in the dining room every evening. I had met the manager's daughter, a round jolly character, and I knew she cooked excellent cakes as she had given us some one day when we called in for afternoon tea.

Her husband was a Tarzan and being an expert axe man had built the little wooden house they lived in. It was all very quaint and had a path that led down to an outhouse. Luckily there are no spiders in New Zealand, so at least I didn't have to check under the seat for lurking Red Backs before sitting down. In Australia, where they are prevalent, their sting can make one very ill indeed; such is the joy of country living. The farmer's wife turned out to be just as good at cooking gigantic meals of meat and two veg as cakes for tea, so taking all into account, things definitely were looking up.

Splitting battens was fun. My boss had felled several giant gums, so our first job was to cross-saw them into three-foot long barrel-shaped logs. As the trees were all at least four foot in diameter this was quite a job, but as the saw was razor sharp and I had an expert partner, I soon learnt go with saw and let it do the work. When we had cut up the tree into several logs we would drill a one-foot deep hole in the side with an inch auger. We then packed black gunpowder into the hole with a fuse and lit it before retiring. There followed a dull thump and the log split in half, which we would upend and then sledgehammer wedges into the top, slowly working our way around like slicing up a cake. The end product was a beautifully neat batten of wood that looked like a cricket bat. The farmers stapled the battens on to the fence wires as spreaders. I didn't know it then of course but learning to use gunpowder came in very handy when I had to start planting fence posts in solid rock the following year on my own farm. The only way to make the required hole was to use sticks of dynamite, which in those days you could buy at the local store!

When the batten job was completed I had to leave, as there was no more work. I was sorry to go as the meals had been superb, but fortunately I had been introduced to a young bachelor called David who owned a farm nearby. He needed help mustering so I took my leave of the meat packers and went to work for him for the last two weeks of my stay in New Zealand. David turned out to be great fun and after work we would set off to meet up with his bachelor friends who gathered at the local hot springs at the end of each day to recover from walking up and down the very steep hills mustering sheep. I had never been in a sulphur springs bathhouse before and, although I enjoyed the experience at the time, I don't think I ever want to repeat it. When you first walk into the communal bathhouses the smell of rotten eggs is overpowering.

It was time to return to Australia. I couldn't believe a whole year had gone by and that it was again time to relax over Christmas. I had learnt a great deal about sheep, how to blow things up with gunpowder and also how to type after a fashion, although I still have to look at the keyboard. Thank goodness for computers, spellchecker, and being able to make mistakes and correct them without having to start all over again on a clean sheet of paper, although if anyone reads my story they will notice that I still have a lot to learn about the English language!

I am glad I learnt on an old hammer machine as it is a bit like learning to drive a car with a gear shift rather than going straight to an automatic, if you know what I mean!