

Newcastle Boys High School Old Boys' Association
Annual Dinner 9 August 1997
Ted Morrisby - After Dinner Speech
Original Draft

Yes, it is certainly true, as David Helmore has said, that I have had an interesting and varied life. Right now I am in the process of writing my memoirs which will be published next year, and I am calling them "What You Need Is A Hunchback". Let me tell you why. In 1965 I was on the Gallipoli Peninsula filming the 50th anniversary of the landing there by the ANZACS, for the ABC, the NZC, the BBC and the CBC. Although there were no Canadian troops involved there were Newfoundlanders - Newfoundland was then a separate dominion and only became a province of Canada in 1949. On that 25th of April there were also French and Turkish veterans taking part in the ceremonies. My father was among the Australian contingent.

Apart from Turkish camera crews we were the only ones filming the events and, during the forenoon, I was approached by a man who spoke good English and informed his name was Emin Hekingil and that he was the Turkish Minister For Tourism and Information. He enquired whether we were shooting in colour or not (colour was just coming into British television at that time) and who we were working for. I explained that I was an independent documentary producer based in Britain. He then said that he wanted a film on Turkey that could be transmitted over television as well as shown in cinemas. It would be about the civilisations that had existed in Turkey over the centuries. "Did you know", he said, "that there were more Roman ruins in Turkey than in Italy, more Greek ruins than in Greece, not to mention Hittite, Armenian, Carian and Seljuk as well as the Ottoman remains?" He went on to explain that Troy was in Turkey, Homer had been born in the country, St Paul had preached to early Christian communities, St Nicholas, the Santa Claus of European legend, was a bishop in Southern Turkey, and so on. Would we call on him in Ankara within the next few weeks to discuss the proposal?

I agreed and drove up to Ankara (I had brought my car - a Vauxhall - with me), booked into a hotel on one of the city's seven hills and arranged an appointment with Emin Bey. It was the first of many meetings, not only with the Ministry of Tourism and Information but also with the Ministry of Finance. The sticking point, as you might expect, was money. How much, and in what currency? The Finance Ministry wanted to pay us Turkish rates and in Turkish lira which, then, were virtually worthless outside Turkey and even today are not a strong currency. The

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Ministry of Tourism and Information, though anxious to have a film made by what was obviously a professional (they had checked my record in the U.K. through their Embassy in London) were palpably in the hands of the Finance people. And, as all the negotiations were conducted in Turkish, which I don't speak - we were given a précis each day only - I decided to ask the British Embassy for help, as I lived in London and all the post-production of the film would be done there. They produced a Levantine (a product of a mixed marriage with a Turkish citizen) called Mr Wotherspoon, who wore two-toned shoes, a hacking jacket with a vest that almost reached his shoulder-blades, and sported an old Etonian tie, who would attend the meetings, watch out for our interests and interpret for us when needed. It didn't take Mr Wotherspoon long to put his finger on the solution to our problem.

"You need a hunchback," he said. "A hunchback?" I replied. "Essential for delicate financial matters. The best possible omen." I explained that I didn't know any hunchbacks. "We can hire one."

The next day Mr Wotherspoon turned up with a small, neatly dressed man. He had a fine face, a rather large head and a hump on his back. Throughout the proceedings he sat quietly and didn't say a word. But his presence caused a stir among the Finance representatives and, in the end, a deal was hammered out. We were to be paid at British rates but in Turkish lira by the Ministry of Tourism and Information. As well the Ministry would pay all our expenses in Turkey and put their people in every vilayet or province at our disposal. In addition the Turkish Embassy in London would pay all lab., pre- and post-production costs etc. The Finance Ministry guaranteed that, within six months, permission would be granted to convert the lira into pounds sterling, or US dollars, and they kept their word, though I still have a few lira left in a bank account they opened for me in Ankara.

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Serendipity was a word coined by Walpole to describe the faculty of making unexpected discoveries by accident. Though not exactly this, my life has been highlighted by episodes like the one I have just related. For instance, how I got my first job on Fleet Street when I arrived in London. It was in 1956 that I left Sydney on a Flotta Laura boat, the Sydney, bound for Colombo. I had been the front page columnist on the Sydney Daily Mirror for three years, writing under the name of Sidney Mann. There were four newspapers in Sydney at that period, two morning

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and two afternoon. They all had columnists and people read more newspapers than they do today, despite the fact that Sydney had about 11/2 million people and now has almost 4 million. But back in the forties and fifties there were not so many cars and people bought newspapers to read on the buses or trains that took them to work and back. It was also the days before television and columnists were the pop stars of the newspapers. Most of the embassies were in Sydney - later they moved to Canberra - and I cultivated them as part of my beat so I had no difficulty in getting invited to Sri Lanka (or Ceylon as it then was), India and Pakistan as a guest of the government in each country. I also had an accreditation as a Special Correspondent for the S.M.H. During the six months I spent in the Indian sub-continent I met everybody who was anybody - Bandaranaike, Nehru, Suhrawardy the political leaders; Satyajit Ray, Dom Moraes, Tarzi Vittachi the intellectuals - and I saw just about everything in the three countries.

On May 30th 1957 we boarded a British Indian Steam Navigation ship at Karachi bound for Basra in Iraq. The following morning we were in Gwadar, an Omani enclave of 30 square miles on the south coast of Pakistan (later the Omanis sold it to Pakistan). I went ashore and called on the governor, an Englishman named Martin Wynne. He had been in Gwadar for eight years, the only European there. I asked him why he stayed in such a place where the only occupation was smuggling whisky and cigarettes into Pakistan (according to the Pakistanis I had met the whisky turned to water when it passed the lips of a true believer). He said that his wife lived in Croydon in London in a house with the only swimming pool in the suburb. I then asked him how he passed the time in Gwadar and he told me he read the classics. "Come and I'll show you", he said, taking me into his bedroom. On one side of the bed were a pile of books written in Latin - Virgil, Horace, Catullus, Tacitus, Cicero - and on the other side a pile of books in Greek - Homer, Herodotus, Plato, Pindar, Sophocles. I opened one at random and pencilled on the title page were a number of dates - 8/i/50, 7/ix/52, 3/iv/56 and so on.

Later that day he came aboard with one of his books and shared my cabin to Muscat, the capital of Oman. "You won't be able to land there", he told me, "unless you have a Non-Objection certificate signed by the Sultan. But you'll meet all the people of any importance there in the evening. They're all British and they'll come out to the boat to get a drink. Oman is officially dry." And it was as he said - the Collector of Customs, the Chief of Police, the C-in-C of the army, the Sultan's

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adviser and so on all propped up the bar from five o'clock on. The talk was all of the crisis looming in Oman. Oil had been found by one of the American companies and an agreement signed with the Sultan by which he got all the royalties. The sheikhs in the interior where the strikes had been made were angry. They wanted a share in this wealth and had visions of fresh faces in the harems, Cadillacs in the garages and trips to the Lebanese casinos. "Mark my words", said Martin Wynne, "there'll be war."

Some weeks later I was in London, down to my Last 10 pounds and desperate for a job. I had knocked on all the doors in Fleet Street to no avail. In most cases I had not got past the doorman. When I had been able to talk to the Chief of Staff or the News Editor on the house phone they had told me the same thing - You don't know Britain. Get a position on a provincial newspaper first and work your way up to Fleet Street. One even said "What would you say to someone who came into your office in Sydney and said he was a hot-shot from Suva? You'd tell him to get lost."

So I sent a letter to Eric Baume, then Editor in Chief of Truth and Sportsman asking whether he could help me with a job in the London office of the company. Which he did. It was in Red Lion Square off Fleet Street and our main activity was to cut anything of interest in Australia out of the British nationals and post the clipping back to Sydney. The first edition of the nationals came up about 10 p.m. and one night in July, 1957 the lead story in all of them was: WAR IN MUSCAT. I read the reports carefully and realised that no one had a correspondent in Muscat itself because of the Sultan's Non-Objection Certificate. The closest was the daily Express which by-lined its story from Bahrain, while journalists from other papers were reporting from Kuwait, Baghdad and Karachi. The farthest away from the scene of the action was the News Chronicle's man in Beirut, so I called the News Chronicle and asked to speak to the Foreign Editor.

"I have just been in Muscat," I said, fudging the fact that it was some seven weeks before "and I know all about the war there, its origins, the plans of the Sultan's C-in-C, and so on."

"You interest me," said the Foreign Editor, whose name was Sylvain Mangeot. "Can you come and see me?"

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I rushed down to Bouverie Street where they were and Mangeot listened to me quietly, then said "I want you to go into that room over there and I'll get a journalist to take your story down."

"Wait a minute" I replied. "I'm a journalist. I can write the story myself."

"In that case I'll give you a typewriter."

The piece was run on the foreign page next day. The News Chronicle billed me as "Our Man on the Spot" and gave me a poster headline: INSIDE MUSCAT.

That afternoon the editor rang me. "I would like to meet you," he said. "Maybe we can offer you a job." I was in and two days later started on the features page of the News Chronicle, a great liberal paper that Charles Dickens once edited. And it was all due, in a way, to Martin Wynne, the man who read the classics.

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But, to come back to Turkey. We spent almost five months there and went from one end of the country to the other. I picked up a bit of Turkish - necessary to order meals in a restaurant and to understand road signs, and also did some stories about the American Peace Corps in the country for National Educational Television (now Public Broadcasting Service) of the U.S.A. (the non-commercial network) as well as British news magazines.

One of these was about the kerhane or brothel areas that existed in all Turkish cities. We first became conscious of them when we were in Ankara as our hotel overlooked the kerhane there. These areas have a wall around them and the entrance is guarded by police, who frisk every one entering. Once inside you find coffee-shops, sometimes restaurants and, of course, the houses selling sex. These have a large room facing the street with iron bars on the front. Inside, around the other three walls, are divans on which the girls are sitting or lying - half clad or naked. By the way, any Turkish girl who commits adultery is sent to the kerhane. In the centre of the room is a cash register with the madam behind it and over her head a price list. The walls are lined with telephones and, every so often, one rings and a girl gets up to answer it. This sends the Turkish peasants, who come to the nearest city from their village at least once a month to patronise the kerhane, into paroxysms of lust, as it is for them the ultimate in sophistication to be able to handle a telephone. The calls are fake. The idea was one of Kemal Ataturk's.

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Another story from Turkey was about dancing bears. These are quite common in the country but forbidden in Istanbul. My car broke down near Antalya in southern Turkey and parts had to be flown out from London. This took some time but was finally done and I went to pick the car up. The garage used the footpath and part of the street as its workshop and I was standing talking to the proprietor when a dancing bear and its trainer came along the street. The bear, which was muzzled, grabbed hold of one of the mechanics and danced a few whirls with him before fastening its attention on me. I tried to get away but was told by the proprietor that this would only infuriate the beast and I had best dance with it. Well the bear's breath was foul and his paws gripped me like a vice. It's not an experience I'd recommend. (Needs a tag like "A bit like dancing with . . .").

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In 1968 I was in Paraguay with Alan Whicker, the well known English television reporter, doing a series of South American stories about men who never hear the word "no". We were there to shoot a profile of General Stroessner, the dictator of Paraguay, who governed under a permanent state of siege that was renewed every sixty days until it was finally lifted in 1987. We had sat for hours in anterooms at the Palacio de Gobierno, assured we would eventually see the General. No hay problema. But when they tell you that in Paraguay there is a problem.

General Stroessner had, it appeared, three pet hates - journalists, foreign journalists, and English-speaking foreign journalists, in that order. We began to lose hope. One such day we were told that the General would be opening a fiesta at a place called Itacurubi de Rosario the following morning. If we got to the airport at 6 a.m, we could go in one of the Paraguayan Air Force planes. We were there and made the trip in about an hour in an ancient DC3.

The Fiesta del Trigo (Harvest Home) consisted of schoolgirls marching, gauchos riding solemnly past and a few floats. (A bit like an early Mattara). After it was over the whole populace assembled in the plaza and Stroessner addressed them. After that he set out to open a school and a hospital. He opened everything in Paraguay. Nothing was too small. (There must be a tag line to this!). I decided to confront him and try to arrange a meeting. As he came out of the school I planted myself in front of him and began "Senor Presidente, con su permiso." He glared at me and his bodyguards, their shoulder holsters bulging under their light-weight

suits, pushed me out of the way. Stroessner crossed the plaza and headed for the half-built hospital. I saw him go in the front so I ducked around the back. I came out onto a small yard. The bodyguards were arranged in a semi-circle around the General and he was having a pee. My appearance caused some comment and Stroessner looked up. He caught my eye and followed my gaze down to his member. (Opportunity here for some comment on the size of a politician's vital part - as per William Hayden and his comments on Bob Hawke). I retreated. Yet, that afternoon, we were told that the General would grant us an interview at seven o'clock the next morning. When we were finally shown into his presence he looked at me with a twinkle in his eye and said, "Al que me conoce intimamente tendre que otorgar entrevista." (I must grant an interview to one who knows me intimately).

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Paraguay had a charm all its own. The main nightclub in the capital, Asuncion, featured a strip-tease. Young girls did a dance then stood in a line on the stage and took their clothes off, dropping them in a heap at their feet. When I said that wasn't a strip-tease the manager said they had been told a strip tease was girls taking their clothes off and that is what they did. (The strip was OK, but the only tease was the fact that they didn't.)

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There was an Australian settlement in Paraguay in 1893 - a Utopian Social one led by William Lane. Dame Mary Gilmore was one of the settlers and I visited Nueva Australia in the centre of the country where descendants of the original colonists still live. There I learnt about Major Arturo Bray, an Australian-Paraguayan who is described in the definitive history of the Chaco War by David Zook, an American, as "a scholarly and brilliant officer with exceptional command ability." It was Bray who turned the first major clash of this war between Paraguay and Bolivia (1932-35) at Boquerón into a victory. It was also Bray who devised the strategy that won the war for Paraguay though the Bolivians outnumbered them three to one. This was by using small groups of men in mobile formations suitable to the desert of the Chaco. It is said that there was a German observer with the Bolivians - Erwin Rommel - who learnt Bray's lesson well and eight years later applied it against other Australians in the Western Desert of Egypt.

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Eight years later I was filming in Tonga and invited to have afternoon tea with the king. He chatted about this and that and then excused himself to go to the lavatory. When he returned he asked me whether I would like to see his lavatory - it was a two seater specially built by an Australian. The king was a very big man and had a reinforced chair carried in his car always. I told him I'd seen two seaters before in the bush and related the story about Menzies and how he had shit himself trying to decide which one to use. This tickled the king's fancy and he laughed and laughed at the joke. In return he offered to do something for me. The film required a battle scene in the lagoon when Finau, an ancestor of the king, invaded Tongatapu, the southernmost of the three groups that make up the kingdom of Tonga, landed his troops on the fringing reef and they fought it out with the defenders in the shallow lagoon. The king asked how I was going to do this and where the couple of hundred men I needed were coming from. I said I was going to approach the high schools and get the final year students as extras. He then told me he had a better idea.

"I'll order the police to fight the army," he said. "They don't get on and they'll welcome an opportunity to have a go at each other. It will be a real battle. In addition I'll lend them some of my clubs - all famous Tongan clubs have names - and arrange for other clubs to be donated."

The battle went as he had prophesied and was a bloody affair indeed with many of the warriors hospitalised. And one or two of the famous clubs were splintered. That night the fockisis or whores outside the International Dateline Hotel, where we stayed, were full of it. Incidentally fockisi is not what it seems to be. It is the English word fox put into Tongan. They are "foxy ladies" in effect.

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Another time when I was indebted to authority was when we were making a film in Torres Strait about Mrs Thompson and the Convict King of Badu. I'd done a recce on the islands concerned - Prince of Wales and Badu - and they were out of the question with grass strips, no accommodation for the crew and not many people. In the end I got permission from Joh Bjelke Petersen to use Bamaga on the tip of Cape York. This was the Northern Peninsula Area of the DOIA (Department of Islander and Aboriginal Affairs) - a Qld Government department that was out of bounds to anyone not employed by the DOIA - where there were five villages, two Torres

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Strait islanders and three Aboriginal, a motel and an airstrip - Jacky Jacky. We were told we had to work through the village councils. But when I wanted vehicles, bodies and help with the construction of an islander village and an aboriginal camp we got nowhere. The village councils didn't have any power - that rested with the manager of Bamaga and he had had no instructions to help us. Everything ground to a halt. Then one day there was a notice on the board at the Manager's office that Joh was due to make a call at Bamaga in a few days' time. An election was coming up in Queensland and he was on a whistle stop tour of the electorate. The NPA had five thousand voters. I went out to Jacky Jacky to meet his plane, a Cessna. He got out and walked to the terminal.

"Mr Premier" I said, bailing him up. "I'm the film producer who approached you in Brisbane and you kindly allowed my crew to use the facilities of Bamaga for the film."

"Yes, I remember you," he said. "How's it all going, well I hope?" "On the contrary," I replied and told him of our problems. He listened intently (He didn't say "Now don't you worry about that!" That was something he was to make famous much later.) and then turned to Pat Killoran, who had accompanied him on the plane and was head of the DOIA, and said two words only "Fix it." Killoran, in his turn, beckoned to the Manager, who was hovering around, and said "You heard. Do it." The chain of command. The next day we had all the bodies and vehicles we needed. [Comment: this story seems weak.]

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One of the aboriginal extras was Roy, a man of about sixty with a small white beard who called me "Dear Boss" and was very attached to me. In fact the aboriginals we used in the film all cried when we left. Roy took me for a drink in the wet canteen they had in his village. There he proudly showed me his war medals - a Pacific Star, a Victory Medal and a General Service one.

"What did you do in the war?" I asked.

"I was a cook with a forward unit in New Guinea," he said.

"Did you see action?"

"My word yes. Every time the unit moved up the line I was tied to the stove and thrown out of the plane with a parachute on. It hurt when I landed, I can tell you!"

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There are other stories I can tell. There is the one about the Portuguese daughters of the manager of a roça or plantation on the island of Principe in the Gulf of Guinea, the elbow of Africa so to speak. There were six of them, including two sets of twins, who woke us up (we were three men) in the middle of the night and offered themselves to us. Their reasons were that they thought they would never see Portugal again, there were no unmarried Europeans on Principe, their father had threatened to kill any African they had anything to do with, and the servant girls talked about sex all the time. (Well, it was a big ask, but someone had to do it!) Or the story about the Baster Gebeit (Bastard Reserve) a settlement of half castes in South-West Africa (now Namibia) who are prosperous sheep and cattle ranchers and anxious to whiten themselves up so much that they pay a fee to any young white who will sleep with a succession of Baster girls.

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