

DAD: MAURICE WALSH

1903-1987

By Allen Walsh June 2006

Our father, Maurice Walsh, was a very complex character and I will try to describe his life as briefly as possible.

I think I owe more than half my total education to Dad although I would never admit it while he was alive.

He was born in 1903 in Geelong to Annie and Daniel Walsh. Daniel's Irish Catholic family had lived in Geelong since the original emigration from Ballyhahill, Limerick, in the 1850's following the potato famine. Annie's grandparents, Donald and Johanna Ross had come from far north Scotland in the 1850's and lived at Bulla, near Sunbury. Annie's mother, Christina, a staunch Presbyterian like her parents, married Patrick Burke at Bulla in 1875. Patrick's parents were Irish Catholics who arrived in Adelaide in the late 1840's and he was born there in 1852.

Generally the women in our family have been dominant where religion was concerned, and this has extended even to the present day, with Brian's girls.

When Annie, Presbyterian, and Daniel, Catholic, produced their only child (Maurice) they agreed not to push him into either denomination, but leave it to him to decide when he was ready. Dad died 84 years later with no interest in religion.

I am not sure which Primary School Dad went to (possibly Newtown) but he certainly went to Geelong High School where he graduated with the Leaving Certificate, which was fairly rare at the time. One subject he did at the High School was called Sloyd (woodwork) which was important because of the amount of carpentry and furniture construction he carried out in later years.

Mum's name was Vera Lillian Matthews and her father came from a family of Cornish miners. George Matthews and his family had moved from Ballarat to Geelong when Mum was a teenager and after finishing school, Mum worked with Ince Bros., men's tailors, for some years.

Dad's father, Danny, worked as a compositor on the Geelong Times newspaper and Dad became a proof-reader on newspapers including the Argus and Herald in Melbourne.

I don't know where they met (almost certainly Geelong) but Mum and Dad were married in Wesley Church, Melbourne, in 1925.

They first lived with Mum's parents, Nin and Grandpa Matthews in Footscray where Nancy was born, then in part of a 2-storey terrace house in Punt Road, East Melbourne, where I was born.

As I have mentioned elsewhere, Mum, Dad, Nancy and I moved into our new 5-roomed timber house at 15 Wales Street, West Brunswick late in 1928 and Brian was born on 28th February, 1929.

Dad must have put his knowledge of woodwork to use in the terrace house in Punt Road. I think our parents rented the upper floor and Dad said later that he built himself a workbench too large to get out through the doorway when they moved out.

I think Dad must have built our kitchen table and dresser at Punt Road and possibly also the furniture for our future second bedroom.

The table was wider than usual (about 3 ft 6 inches) with a drawer below at one end. The dresser had two drawers and two cupboard doors to the lower half, and three open shelves above for the display of crockery. The pine table top was stained, but all other surfaces of the table and dresser were painted a dark green.

The furniture for the second bedroom which was known for years as "Auntie Nell's room" consisted of wooden ends to the bed, a wardrobe with two doors and a large drawer below, a simple dressing table and a set of three light-weight timber drawers covered in floral cretonne fabric and sliding in a light-weight timber frame. All the bedroom furniture was painted a soft pearl grey colour and there was a patterned grey carpet square on the floor.

Auntie Nell Matthews was an un-married sister of Grandpa and lived all her life in Ballarat. When we were young she would come down by train and stay with us regularly at Easter and sometimes at Christmas. Like most of the Matthews family Auntie Nell was fairly tall, extremely thin and had a "hawk" nose caused by a bony projection at the bridge. She had white hair and the whitest face I have ever seen – she must have plastered white talcum powder on until none of the skin colour showed through.

Auntie Nell always tried to be pleasant, but she was not the type of person who could be called cheerful. She would have been on the 'Old Age' pension, but she always arrived with small gifts in her case for the Walsh kids. Often on the first morning after she arrived we three would be summoned to Auntie Nell's room to stand around the bed while she handed out her presents. We always dutifully thanked her, but even at that age I can remember thinking that it wasn't fair that she expected to hand out her presents individually and receive thanks, when Mum and Dad gave their presents to us almost anonymously, without fanfare.

Another occasional visitor from Ballarat was Mum's cousin, Adeline Williams. Adeline was the daughter of another sister of Grandpa Matthews, Auntie Hett. Adeline was about a year younger than Mum and the two had grown up together, almost as sisters, in Ballarat. Adeline was a generation younger than Auntie Nell and much more fun to be around – so much so that she was often invited to visit us on our annual holidays at Black Rock and Half Moon Bay. Our family never owned a camera, and nearly all

the beach photos we have from those days would have been taken on Adeline's camera. Adeline was another typical Matthews, tall, thin, with the hawk nose. She never married.

Back to Dad's woodwork. Little Grandpa, Danny Walsh, was so impressed with the furniture Dad had made with rudimentary tools that in about 1929 he presented him with a full set of best quality woodworking tools. Dad decided to build himself a special item of furniture in the form of a gramophone cabinet. The design was so professional that I think Dad must have bought detail drawings to work from.

The cabinet was a little over 3 feet long with curved cabriole legs at the front and a full-length hinged lid. The right-hand half contained all the working parts – clockwork motor, turntable, pick-up arm with needle, wind-up handle and speaker. The sound from the speaker came through a fretwork panel at the front covered with a fine silk fabric. The left-hand side of the cabinet housed Dad's fairly extensive record collection – mostly 10 inch, but with some special expensive 12 inch records of Caruso and Melba.

The cabinet was made from Australian blackwood and Dad arranged for a French polisher to complete the job in a rich reddish-brown colour.

I can just remember Dad talking about the French polisher, so the job must have been finished early in 1931. We kids would wonder how the singers could be in the gramophone cabinet and of course Dad played us along. I can remember asking Dad over and over for more of the 'big front door'. This was a line from Gilbert and Sullivan's 'HMS Pinafore' and I was very impressed by it.

In later years I fitted an electric motor to the turntable, but I'm very thankful that I left all the original good-quality chrome plated fittings in place.

After Dad died the gramophone went to Brian's place at Maidstone and later to Geoff's in Wagga. I think Geoff would have preserved it.

After the building of the gramophone, I always seemed to be around Dad when he was building things, particularly the dinghy, the catamaran and the outboard motor boat. Often I would be required to hold a piece of timber Dad was working on, but I was very interested in the jobs anyway. I still use some of the little tricks I learnt from Dad, such as holding a wood plane at a slight angle to the timber in order to get a smoother slicing action with the blade.

Throughout the 1930's and up to the time he joined the RAAF, Dad worked at the Herald Office. The Managing Director of the Herald during that time was Sir Keith Murdoch, who had made a name for himself as a war correspondent in WW1. Dame Elisabeth Murdoch, who is still going strong was married to Sir Keith.

The Great Depression affected Australia very badly from 1930 until about 1937. Instead of putting workers off when the economy was going bad, Sir Keith arranged with his employees to keep them all at work at two-thirds their former salary. Dad always thought Sir Keith was a wonderful man.

In West Brunswick we seemed to be shielded from the worst effects of the depression. There must have been local pockets of poverty, but I can't remember any families at school who had to go without food or clothing. At home we occasionally economised by eating bread and milk at breakfast and slices of bread and dripping with salt and pepper for other meals. Actually, we quite liked the taste of these.

One day I went with Mum to the city on the Sydney Road tram rather than our West Brunswick route. I was stunned to see several men who must have been unemployed whose clothes were so patched that there were almost patches on patches.

I think that the majority of the workers in the industrial suburbs of Collingwood, Fitzroy, North Melbourne, East Brunswick, Richmond and South Melbourne would have lost their jobs and before unemployment benefits, many families would have relied on charitable organisations for their food and clothing. Some men were able to work for the dole but this usually meant moving far from home.

I believe Mum never fully recovered from the worst years of the Depression. Our family of four children (after Geoff arrived in 1935) was considered large at the time, when two seemed to be the average.

Dad had always handed over his total pay packet to Mum and she would portion it out, including Dad's own living expenses, as required. In the good times this could be seen as a generous gesture on his part, but as the Depression got worse, all the responsibility for managing the finances was shouldered by Mum.

Our mother had always been naturally thin, but in the mid 1930's she seemed to be just skin and bone, with a permanent worried look. This didn't stop her from dressing up whenever she had to go to Sydney Road or the City. She would wear a skirt and jacket, hat, kid gloves and pointed-toed black kid shoes.

We kids didn't know at the time, but Mum must have been fighting to hang onto the house at all costs. Some other people in our area, including Mrs Harris next door, moved out and lived with relatives, renting out their houses to help pay the mortgage. Some just walked out – permanently.

Over a long period, extending into the 1940's the repayment sum on our house, including interest, had increased far beyond the original loan. Mum somehow arranged with a firm of Solicitors (Nicholas, O'Donohue) to take over the house loan, and although the debt continued to increase, Mum was grateful to Mr O'Donohue for allowing her to feel secure.

It was not until I started full-time work in the late nineteen-forties that we were able to make a concerted effort and fully pay off the house.

After so many years of worry, nobody could take Mum's house away from her.

Throughout the 1930's Dad worked as a proof-reader at the Herald office in the monumental building at the corner of Flinders Street and Collins Place, now the bottom end of Exhibition Street. As the Herald was published 6 days a week, Dad worked on Saturdays but had Wednesday afternoons off.

Working hours were 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. and Dad would take exactly an hour to get home – walking to William Street to catch our West Coburg tram.

We always had ‘tea’ together as soon as Dad arrived and he would entertain us with the day’s doings in the Reading Room. Each ‘Reader’ had an assistant and they would take it in turns to read the original copy aloud while the other checked the printed proof. If the original was poorly written the Head Reader, who was a perfectionist, would encourage the Reader to re-write the faulty work and would take full responsibility if the writer, who might be a clergyman or university man, objected.

The Head Reader was Charlie Crampton, an amazing man. He was brought up in the Jewish faith but knew both the Old and New Testaments so well that he could quote any verse of the Bible from memory. Charlie was also a first-class artist and did several cartoons featuring Dad.

One of the senior Readers was a man fondly known as ‘goat’s guts’. Apparently he had been on Gallipoli and had the whole of his stomach shot away. There was no hope of getting him to hospital so a doctor performed an operation in the trenches, substituting a goat’s stomach for the missing one. Twenty years later he was still going strong!

Another Reader was an Englishman who had spent many years in India without losing his English ways. He was given the nickname ‘Ranji’ after the great Indian batsman, Ranjitsinghi. One day he went around the Reading Room with a bag of confectionary, asking each person in turn whether he would “care for a sweet”. When he asked a brash young reader, Darrel Leeds, whose young brother was in my form at school, the reply was “Yeah Ranj. I’ll have a bloody lolly!”

A well-known seafaring Australian writer, who worked as a Reader between assignments on wind-jammers for the American National Geographic magazine, was Alan Villiers. He was a young adventurer who loved the old ‘tall’ sailing ships. We still have some National Geographics containing his articles.

One assistant Reader was a young cartoonist, Wally Driscoll, who became well-known in later years. In the mid-1930’s Wally had a low-slung red sports car. He invited Dad to drive it – the only case I know of where Dad drove a car.

The only other Reader whose name I remember was a well-off chap named Price. I don’t know how it came about, but when I was a teenager needing a pair of long pants for cricket, Price gave his cricket creams which his waist had outgrown, to Dad for me. These trousers were of best quality cream wool and Mum was able to alter them to fit me. They mightn’t have been a perfect fit, but what quality!

The Herald owned radio station 3DB which operated from the same building and Dad would come into contact with some of the 3DB personnel. One of these was John Stewart who went under the name ‘Daybreak Dan’ for his breakfast show, but also did a children’s show in the afternoon. One day after finishing talking to the little darlings, he turned to his off-sider and said “That should do the little buggers for today!” He had forgotten to switch his microphone off and there was a terrible fuss.

Back to the ‘tea’ table at Wales Street. Dad would tell us the stories of Aesop’s Fables, the Pied Piper of Hamelin and others, and encourage us to learn some of his favourite poems such as Masefield’s ‘Sea Fever’, and Paterson’s ‘A Bush Christening’ and ‘The Man from Ironbark’. His outright favourite was Gray’s ‘Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard’, but this was a bit too long for us to learn. Just to keep us on our toes, Dad would sometimes set us simple mental arithmetic problems or spelling contests. We three were of about equal standard at the time, so nobody suffered.

Dad had been a regular smoker as long as I could remember. He must have started fairly young and had a smoker’s cough long before middle-age. He was always a gambler – fortunately in a small way. He would go up to Melville Road on Saturdays, find an illegal S.P. (starting price) bookie in or near the Snooker Parlour and lay his bets on the races. The only time he appeared in the running for a big betting win was in 1939, when he had gone to Stawell for the Easter Gift – Australia’s biggest professional foot race. Dad went to Stawell every year for about thirty years, except in war-time. In 1939 we kids were hanging around the front gate on the morning of Easter Saturday when a telegram boy arrived on his bike. The telegram, from Dad, read ‘BUY ROLLS ROYCE IF SPRAGUE WINS’.

The Stawell Gift was a big-betting event with dozens of on-course bookmakers. Until recent years it was often won by an ‘unknown’ newcomer who might be able to get a better handicap, or start, than the known champion runners.

Dad had been told by a couple of good friends from Ballarat that Len Sprague, a tall fair-haired young runner from Ballarat was a ‘good thing’, so he put his money on Sprague.

Heats for the Gift were run on Saturday afternoon, Semi-Finals on Monday morning and the Final on Monday afternoon. We of course, listened to Sprague’s progress and he finished up winning the Final! It was a long, tense wait to see how rich the Walshes had become. Dad would often hitch a ride with the Herald-Sun photographer who would leave immediately after the Final and race to Melbourne to deliver his pictures in time for the 1st Edition of The Sun next morning. Dad had won the magnificent sum of ten pounds! None of us was game to ask about the Rolls Royce.

It must have been the following year that Dad had another of his ‘brain-waves’. The Stawell Gift was raced over 130 yards, and the handicaps (forward of scratch) went in increments of $\frac{1}{4}$ of a yard. Timing was calculated to $1/16$ of a second. A man who could run 100 yards in 10 seconds was said to run in ‘even time’, but it wasn’t easy to calculate the relationship to ‘even time’ of a man who (say) ran off a mark of $6\frac{1}{4}$ yards in a time of $12\frac{3}{16}$ seconds. Dad designed a ‘Ready Reckoner’, a folded card which would fit in a pocket and instantly give an ‘inside evens’ or ‘outside evens’ figure by reading the handicap across the top and the time down the side, and projecting across.

Long before calculators, Dad had worked out the hundreds of figures which appeared on the card and sold the idea to the Sun newspaper, which printed thousands of copies and distributed them free at Stawell to advertise the Sun.

Dad never drank at home before the 1960's. At this time he was working at home and Mum decided it was better to have him under her eye and drinking moderately than going out by himself. During the 1930's his drinking was not great but it increased during the war years when he spent more time in locations away from home.

In lots of ways, Dad was like a little boy who needed Mum to care for him. While he had the tough looks and the gruff voice when we were young, it was Mum who had the inner strength.

I think a lot of Dad's addictive problems, smoking, gambling and drinking may have come from his Irish ancestry, but he never used this as an excuse. In fact the only time I heard him questioned on the subject was when he was aged about eighty. I remember Nancy saying to him "Dad, why do you smoke so much?" and he answered "because I like it".

It always seemed to me that a person whose general knowledge would allow him to compete with the best brains in Melbourne (which he did through radio and General Knowledge quizzes before TV) should be able to see the waste and folly of his addictions, but it doesn't seem to work that way. He would certainly have known that it is impossible in the long run to win at backing racehorses (or any other form of gambling) but apparently he just liked the excitement of his relatively small wins.

Dad said that his father, Danny Walsh, could not pass two dogs having a fight in the street without wanting to bet on the winner.

During the war Dad told us himself that he went to illegal gaming dens in the City to play baccarat, a card game banned in England and Australia.

As a teenager I was well aware of Dad's addictions. I thought at the time they were weaknesses and because of our physical likeness except for height, and our similar sentimental natures, I thought I had better be on my guard to avoid going down the same path.

I smoked for a while at the Melbourne Tech (later named RMIT). In my second-last year many returned servicemen from the European War joined our year of the Architecture course. Most of them had started their courses before joining up three or four years earlier and they were men, where we could still be called boys.

To their credit, most of them treated us almost as equals and quite a few became my very good friends in time. Like most servicemen, many of them were heavy smokers and smoked during lectures, as did the lecturers, who were qualified architects. As was the custom at the time, these older students would offer cigarettes to members of the various groups they might be with during free periods in the big draughting studio. As a non-smoker I would feel a bit like an outsider, so I explained the situation to Mum and asked whether she would mind if I smoked.

I had a Commonwealth Government allowance that came with my scholarship so the small cost of cigarettes in those days would not be a problem. Mum gave her approval and I smoked off and on for about two years. While I quite liked smoking at the time, I

never got ‘hooked’ and one day thought to myself “This smoking doesn’t seem to be necessary”, and I stopped there and then.

I never got started at gambling. I didn’t ever have money to spare, and I was too frightened of losing what I had. I could see from playing cards with my mates that if I got started, I might find it hard to stop. So I didn’t start.

When Brian and I, together with Peter and Charlie joined the Northern Golf Club we found that it was the custom to end up at the 19th Hole (the bar) after finishing the round. Cheese and dry biscuits were provided and rounds of beer were bought and downed while we sat in comfortable club-type chairs arranged around circular wooden tables set on thick carpet.

Did I say ‘we’? There was one bloke, about my size, who always drank Dry Ginger or Lemon Squash. I realised that young drinkers were made to feel inadequate if they didn’t drink beer or keep up with the rest, but I could never see the sense of drinking something I didn’t like just to please others. I found that if I was firm in stating what I was drinking, nobody ever argued. On the other hand, if somebody said they might have only one beer (or two) they would be pressured by their companions to have more and more. I was never looking for popularity and was always confident of my position. I cared for the opinions of my friends, but not those of other people.

While I rarely drank in hotels, I saw enough drinking in Golf Clubs at Northern, Charlton and Skipton over decades to realise that normally sensible blokes, when they got together in a group and started drinking, would finish up having more than they intended. It was too bad for the lonely wife at home, waiting to serve the meal she had spent time and care in preparing.

Dad had willed his body to the University of Melbourne for medical research, and when he died Nancy had some trouble convincing the University to take him as their requirements had changed. They eventually accepted the body and I would think that he must have been the oldest mature-age entrant ever to go to Melbourne University.

However, this left the family with some unintended problems. While we put a Death Notice in the newspaper, there could not be a Funeral Notice and I am sure that some of Dad’s distant relatives who did not know the position would have been puzzled over how they missed his funeral!

In a similar situation other families would have organised a Memorial Service in a church or other suitable building, but knowing Dad’s attitude to religion and the fact that he had few friends outside the family, this would have been a farce.

A little later, when the family was getting the Wales Street house ready for Auction, Brian’s son Greg said “Aren’t we going to have a funeral or anything?” We then decided to get two memorial bronze plaques made, one each for Nana and Pa.

These were attached to special red gum blocks set beside two Chinese Elm trees which were planted at Brian and Jean’s property ‘Highercomb’ on the Pyrenees Highway at Chewton.

There were twenty-seven members of the family present on this special planting day, 20th April 1987.

Sixteen years after Dad died we held a 'Hundredth Birthday party' for him on 1st June, 2003. All Dad's children and grandchildren and their families were invited to a beach-front condominium at Port Melbourne for the occasion.

We thought this event should appeal to what Dad always called his 'strange sense of humour'.

