CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY

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Who Knows What Lies Ahead
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Bella wept quietly to herself, anxious not to be heard by her children, as she peeled the bandages off her badly abscessed legs. No money for doctors, medicines or ointments was available for her in those depression years of the 1930s. Nothing in the years of her earlier life, difficult though some of them had been, had prepared her for the troubled years of the 1930s.

Margaret Isabella, known as Bella, was born into a working class family in Warnambool, Victoria in 1889, the oldest child of Murdo and Jean Macaulay. Her father was assistant lighthouse keeper at Warnambool, later working as a Customs Officer in Melbourne for the Victorian Government. He was always in full employment which meant that the family, while not wealthy, was comfortable. In 1902 at the age of 13 Bella was awarded a prize as the Dux of Footscray Academy. She had to leave school at this time to assist her mother, a rheumatoid arthritis sufferer, in looking after her five younger siblings. Bella nevertheless persisted with her education, studying at the Footscray Night School where she continued to win book prizes.

In 1912 Bella married Master Mariner, Alexander Murray Macleod. He was an old friend of her parents and only a few years younger than her father. Alexander and Murdo both hailed from the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland. Alexander had recently obtained a position as Captain with the North Coast Steamship Company. This meant Bella and Alex moved to Brisbane where they had their first son, far from the company of family and friends. Life at this stage would have been difficult for Bella because although Alex was no longer going on overseas voyages, he was still often away for weeks at a time. In 1914 the couple returned to Sydney, buying a house in Stanmore, where they had two more sons and a daughter.

Bella’s second son was named Alexander Macaulay after her brother Alex, to whom she was particularly close. Young Alex was born in September 1914 at which time his uncle had already enlisted to take part in the Great War. By October of that year Bella’s brother Alex was steering towards his training in Egypt and his fate on the Gallipoli Peninsular on 25th April, 1915. He was never heard of again after the landing that day. No knowledge, no body, no grave, just a name on the memorial at the Lone Pine Cemetery in Turkey. This bleak emptiness has travelled down the generations.

From 1918 Bella had been suffering from an overactive thyroid and an operation on her goitre had become imperative. With four young children and a husband who of necessity was often absent, Bella had no option but to pack up her young family and return to her parents’ place in Footscray, Victoria, to have her operation. The operation in those days was arduous and the recuperation period long.
After Bella’s recuperation the family returned to Sydney. Alex was now employed working out of Sydney Harbour. He was the Master of a coal carrier called the Balls Head which operated between Newcastle and Sydney and also worked on Sydney’s ocean going tugs. The family sold their Stanmore house and moved to First Avenue, Five Dock.iii A relatively happy and prosperous period ensued although Bella’s health never fully recovered. The children attended Five Dock Public School, the family joined St David’s Presbyterian Church in Haberfield, where the boys joined the Boys Brigade and Jean joined the Girl Guides. The family became involved in the building of community baths in the Parramatta River at Rodd Point.

Then 1929 happened. By this time Alex was 65 and regarded as too old to be employed by any government body and Master Mariner positions for men of his age were not to be found in private companies. With no employment, superannuation or government pension, the family was in dire straits. Their only source of income was some land at Rodd Point and equity in their own home. By 1929 the oldest two boys, Ian and Alex, were old enough to leave school and bring in some money. The third son, Malcolm, was also close to being able to leave school. Bella would have none of it. Her sons had to finish their education. Nothing was more vital to her.

So Ian and Alex completed High School, both winning scholarships to Sydney Teachers College and becoming the first trained Manual Arts teachers in NSW. Malcolm won a scholarship to Sydney University and began training for the Ministry. In 1932 Ian was sent to Hay Memorial High School and in 1933 Alex was sent to Emmaville in northern New South Wales. With the need to pay for board, lodging and travel expenses, the boys contributed only a little to the family coffers. In 1934 Bella received a call from the headmistress of Fort Street Girls High where Jean was in fourth year. The headmistress had been approached by the firm of Nock and Kirby’s seeking to know if she had a suitable student who could start work immediately with a view to future training as a book-keeper. The headmistress, aware of the family’s financial difficulties, suggested that Jean might take this position. This must have been a terrible decision for Bella to make, knowing her high regard for education and her own experience of having her education cut short. While the family had been prevented from becoming homeless by the Lang Legislation of 1929,ix everyday necessities still required purchasing. What other choice could Bella make?

Her health deteriorated, her legs became abscessed and she died in 1937x aged only 48. While she left no material legacy, Bella’s insistence on the importance of education, her determination not to allow her sons to truncate their schooling, has allowed her children and their descendents to live happy and fulfilling lives based on her strength and sacrifice.

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i Victorian Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Birth Certificate, Margaret Isabella Macaulay, 7851/1889
ii The Advertiser, December 20-27, 1902
iii These are valued items of family memorabilia
I. Victorian Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages, Marriage Certificate, Alexander Murray Macleod & Margaret Isabella Macaulay, 188/1912

II. Reference letter showing both appointment and termination dates, family memorabilia


V. Australian Electoral Roll, 1933, p 63


VII. NSW Registry of Births, Deaths & Marriages, Death Certificate, Margaret Isabella Macleod, 24228 /1937