

Crocker Prize for Biography

Entry 1513

She called Three
Countries 'Home'

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The plaque on my mother Marjorie's headstone in Sydney reads: "She called three countries home. " My sister and I chose this inscription as our mother, Marjorie Robinson (nee Weekes) had a deep and abiding love of three lands: Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) where she was born, England, which was always called "Home" by British expatriates around the world and her adopted home Australia.

Marjorie was the only child of Thomas Earle Weekes, (an Irish-born tea planter) and Jeannette Isabella Egan, whose own parents, Henry Lumsden Egan and Eliza Palmer were Ceylon tea-planters. Marjorie's mother was nicknamed Queenie and was reputedly a great beauty. She married Earle (as he was known) in 1901 at St Margaret's, Forest Creek. My mother, Marjorie, was born there in 1904. One year later, while the family was holidaying at Bentota Beach on the west coast Earle tragically drowned. Contemporary newspaper accounts from 1905 describe how he was trying "to save a lady "(who survived) and that attempts to resuscitate were in vain. He was buried next day, as was the custom, at Kanatta cemetery, Colombo¹.

The widowed Jeannette married another tea planter a few years later in London and returned to Ceylon to live on the tea plantation "Stockholm Estate". The bungalow's simply-furnished rooms had fireplaces set for cool evenings and polished concrete floors, essential in that humid tropical climate.

However, children were sent "Home " to boarding schools in those days, often at a tender age, so Marjorie's idyllic childhood ended. As a schoolgirl in Britain from about 1913, she spent summer holidays at "Everton ", Carlow, Ireland, the home of her great-aunt Janie Fitzmaurice and her husband, Edward. Young Marjorie would be taken to visit the neighbours in a three-wheel dogcart and she soon acquired a thick Irish brogue.

My mother always told me that "Everton" house, a grand mansion (resembling a French chateau) had an interesting history, and that it had later had been burnt down by the radical political group Sinn Fein and that Aunt Janie had "died of the shock". So I was surprised to learn, from a Carlow researcher, just five years ago, that the house was still standing, in fine condition, and that Aunt Janie had lived to a ripe old age.

This revelation led to my correspondence with the current owners and an invitation to visit "Everton " in 2012 on a beautiful summer day and a meal outside of barbecued chicken and salads garnished with blue chive flowers from the garden.



“Everton”, Carlow, Ireland, ca.1909

Marjorie often spent some boarding school holidays at the country home of her close friend Joan. The two girls would gather flowers from the fields, pack them in attractive boxes, and send them to sick children in London’s hospitals. Marjorie’s education came to an abrupt halt when the school headmistress curtly informed her that her mother had died at the age of forty-one. Aged only sixteen Marjorie caught the first available ship back to Colombo, a voyage of several weeks to be with her adored step-father, Ted Mellersh. She took on the role of mistress of “Stockholm Estate” homestead.

In her mid-twenties she travelled to England and on board ship she met a fellow passenger, Maurice Hugh Robinson. Maurice had been born in India to British parents, educated in England, and then packed off to Ceylon to learn the tea trade, as his parents wanted to remove him from his older brother’s bad influence. In those days their shipboard romance was considered shocking and my father’s elder sister castigated her for being "fast".

Nevertheless, Maurice and Marjorie married at Holy Trinity, Nuwara Eliya in Ceylon’s high tea country, the bride carrying a handkerchief with 3.3.30 (the auspicious date of the wedding) embroidered in the corner. They made a handsome couple. Marjorie had ordered a full-length cream satin wedding dress from London, but it arrived with the shorter shin-length that was fashionable in London at the time. She decided to be daring and wear it, which scandalized some of the ladies of the Maskeliya Tennis Club.

For their honeymoon Maurice and Marjorie drove across the island on poor roads to Batticaloa on the east coast, famous for its lagoons and "singing fish " which some believe was caused by the sound of water gurgling over coral reefs. My father spent a lot of time shooting snipe, a common British pastime in those days.

I was born in 1931, my sister Hilary in 1933. When she contracted polio in those Salk-vaccine-free days, she became unable to walk at the age of three. We learned of a Sister Kenny in Sydney, who had a reputation for curing this disease, so the three of us left our beloved home in Ceylon and came by ship to Sydney, in 1937, and immediately succumbed to chickenpox. My father, Maurice remained in Ceylon for work, but visited us in Sydney on leave.

Life in Sydney was a dramatic change for Marjorie. She had had servants all her life but she had to quickly learn how to boil a copper, starch the clothes, put them through a mangle, iron and cook meals, things she had never done before. Luckily we boarded

at first with a capable woman, Rene, a piano graduate of Sydney Conservatorium of Music, and a bushwalker, who taught Marjorie household skills and remained a life long friend. I remember them setting off for the station in long summery evening dresses and fur capes to go to orchestral concerts at Sydney Town Hall.

Later, Marjorie bought a secondhand Morris car with yellowy mica windows which cracked easily. Fortunately she was expert at replacing spark plugs, and changing the oil and tyres, skills she'd acquired from her stepfather on a remote hill station. This was the start of a series of long camping trips, in my school holidays, during which Rene would instruct us in camping and bushwalking while Marjorie drove. War had broken out and I remember passing soldiers route marching and we'd toss them oranges.

In 1941, when a Japanese invasion of Australia looked likely in 1941-1942, my sister's hospital at Darling Point, on the waterfront of Sydney Harbour, was evacuated to Fairbridge Farm outside Molong, N.S.W. My mother, Rene and I also decamped to Molong and rented a cottage and took up country-like pursuits such as spinning. There were wide streets, a huge peppercorn tree opposite and over the bath a terrifying chip heater which produced a dribble of scalding water while threatening to explode. We saw frost for the first time.

Petrol was rationed so Marjorie bought a horse and sulky and taught herself, with some help from the next-door neighbour, to drive it. This was our only way to reach the farm to visit my sister on weekends. The mare, Jinny, meandered reluctantly on the five mile outward journey but cantered home dangerously fast on the return, anticipating her feed. The family dog often accompanied us, but continuously fell off the side-less sulky, so my mother had to keep stopping to collect him. Later that year, a Japanese midget submarine fired a torpedo in Sydney Harbour, landing harmlessly at the waterfront where the hospital had been. However, another torpedo sank HMS *Kuttabul* on which young sailors were berthed, and some were killed.

After a year in Molong, we returned to Sydney and started school afresh, Marjorie driving us there each morning in her newly-acquired Vauxhall. When my sister started a millinery apprenticeship in the city a few years later Marjorie drove her there and back several days a week. Driving in Ceylon on poor, winding roads had been a different story altogether.

We underwent two more house moves and finally my father retired from Sri Lanka, to join us permanently, Ceylon having gained its independence from British rule. This required some adjustment as Marjorie was not accustomed to having "a man about the house". However Maurice learned to wash dishes, and he shared Marjorie's love of gardening. Although as ex-pats they were more British than the British, in one sense they were ahead of their times, turning their tennis court into a productive orchard and vegetable patch, and a beautiful flower garden. They never travelled overseas again and settled down to a more mundane existence in suburbia. Marjorie made many friends through her local church and flower club, and was very proud to help arrange flowers for the opening of the Opera House by Queen Elizabeth.

Marjorie was a woman of strong opinions who survived for many years as a capable single mother, after emigrating to a “foreign country”. She was deeply loved by her daughters and grand-children, who remember her kindness and thoughtfulness.

On a hot summer evening in 1994, at the age of ninety, surrounded by her daughters and granddaughter, she died in her bed at home, having decided earlier that day that it was "time to go".

ⁱ *Times of Ceylon*, 5 December 1905.