



Chapter 1 — Why?

“Why is an automobile?”

“I don’t know? Why is an automobile?”

“Well, an automobile’s a car. Cars park and parks are green. Grass is green, and that reminds me that last week when I was mowing my lawn my Mexican neighbour leaned over the fence and said:

You orta mow Beels.”

Willie Fennel on the Bonnington’s Bunkhouse Show

I can't say that I boarded the aircraft with any great resolve. I wanted to 'go forth' and write something of great historical value but that wasn't realistic. At least I'd convinced myself that I should go. My little domestic emptiness was turning out to be a bit bigger than I'd thought and some time away probably would help. Certainly the rather strange responses I got from Tyro's friends left me with mixed opinions. Eventually, I came away from eight telephone conversations. They suggested that Tyro was helpful, interesting, socially unacceptable, and an incorrigible flatulent. He burped a lot, couldn't carry on a normal conversation, and liked good wine. They also said something about a stupid blue car. One actually referred to it as the Blue Lawn Mower. I was totally perplexed by it all. Uneasy thoughts about propriety and personal safety returned and flitted across my brain. "What the heck!" I sat back and enjoyed the flight.

Tyro sat on the couch with his legs crossed. We were on the flying bridge of his Grand Banks. For many years it

was his dream to own such a vessel. His research revealed that the original builders, based in Hong Kong, and later too in Singapore, sold out to the Australian company Riviera. That company improved the design, construction, and function of the already well-built and well-known vessel. This Banks, although quite old, was solid. It had a rear saloon, bow and mid-ship cabins, was eleven metres long, and suited to the tropics. It could sleep six people comfortably and was well fitted-out. When we came on board Tyro made a big thing about showing me how the toilet, the head, worked. He ensured my belongings were stowed safely and that I was ensconced comfortably and privately in the mid-ship cabin.

So far, so good, I thought. No signs of an unseemly overture.

He held a double skinned mug. It was made of tin and came from Bangka Island near Java. It was filled to the brim with cold Tooheys Old beer. He looked content but I couldn't help thinking that beneath the implacable expression a lot was going on. While speculating on the object of those private thoughts, I noticed that for a man of his age and bulky build, Tyro was fit. I noticed too that he was reasonably muscular and apparently quite strong. Conversation so far had ranged through the most eclectic of topics and amazing minutiae. Although not all of it was readily confirmable or entirely understandable, it was at once interesting, unusual and to some extent off-putting. After all, how was it that this man had experienced so much and thought through his experiences in so far as Tyro apparently had? He was dyslexic, a disability usually resulting in learning difficulties, and according to Will,

whom I'd telephoned, his up-bringing was conservative. I already was learning that Tyro's views weren't always easy to agree with, but often an elegant, albeit unusual logic pervaded his thoughts. In answer to direct questions he admitted having insufficient time to experience a mid-life crisis, and indeed, never felt the need to 'find himself'.

This question actually caused him to become quizzical and somewhat frivolous. He suggested, "If you're male, aren't too fat and the day isn't too cold, all you need to do is look down and there you are. I usually notice that I'm around most days, except when it's very cold. In this neck of the woods that's rarely a problem. Of course females don't have the same problem." He didn't seem to notice overtly that I was a woman and he spoke and joked openly. I did get the impression that he'd noted my quite reasonable attributes and that I'd passed some test or other.

During my school days I excelled in swimming and did well in the school gymnastics squad. After leaving school I kept up with my gymnastics for a couple of years until university studies got in the way. I still swim daily when possible, and, I must say, I've got a pretty good body and better legs. Men seem to notice those things. Over the years I observed that a lot of males seemed to prefer blondes and I'd felt that my dark chestnut hair was a disadvantage. Tyro, I believe, didn't think that at all.

I was interested in Tyro's views on Royalty and related matters, as a referendum probably wasn't far off, weeks in fact. It could be that in a short while our flag would change. It also could be that the growing desires in the States for secession would prevail and that the great Australian nation would succumb to separatist wishes.

“What do you think of what’s going on?” I enquired. “How did you arrive at these conclusions? To be honest, I’ve never considered nor even heard before some of the views Frank expressed.”

He retreated into a sort of meditation for a while. Simultaneously he scanned the Nara Inlet shoreline on Hook Island to determine the status of the tide and current movements. Hook is an island in the Whitsunday chain. The islands stretch from Mackay to Townsville along the central north Queensland coast. His Banks was like a spouse and its welfare always was uppermost in his mind — amongst all the other trivia, detail and maybe even profundity. A cooling breeze came up. Without warning or explanation, he bounded to his feet and sprang down the ladder to the rear deck. Then he scooted up the port side to the bow and tested the anchor rope.

“It’ll be okay for a while yet.”

Then, without preamble, and with a breath-taking change of topic, he began quietly to speak his mind.

At age five it’s peculiar to wake up and question Royalty.

“Thinks, and I apologise to Blue Bottle, the Queen of England lives in England. Dad, Norm, and others say England is twelve thousand miles away. People from England speak in a funny way and I like Australia.

As linguistic facility and intellectual development accelerated, I learned that a lot of English people, grown-ups called them Poms, spoke with plumbs in their mouths. Some grown-ups also said that they often had them up their bums too. This I wasn’t supposed to know, but a child hears everything. The next time I went to the

pictures, and saw on the screen the newly crowned Queen sitting on her horse, I didn't stand up. Dad got crotchety. Aunt Dana got embarrassed, even though she might have agreed with my protest. Granny Jennings, nee McDougal, was part Jewish and a direct lady. She pulled me to my feet by the scruff of my sailor suit. I declared war and by the time I'd reached about the age of eight I'd won."

He stopped talking for a minute or two, seemed to appraise me, and then continued, apparently on a new tack. His logic I was finding — well it was different — to say the least. The silences would be difficult to get used to.

"The next door neighbours were well-off, friendly, like family, and conservative politically. They carted me everywhere in their beautiful old '36 green Dodge. At that stage in my life I was developing a sort of love affair with things mechanical, and especially, things automotive. Later when they got a metallic maroon Jowet Javelin I was pretty disgusted. Little did I know that it'd become a reasonably valuable classic, particularly the fast and peculiar looking Jowet Jupiter Sports. The Javelin sounded like one of those wonderful inboard Hammond hulled speedboats of the '40's and '50's. Usually large American bent eights with exotic Idlebrock marine conversion propelled them. Early Subaru cars sounded similar but without the timbre of those mellifluous V8's."

He spoke as if I would naturally understand his passion for these things. I'm not ignorant of technical objects but my exposure, especially then, had been limited to computers, facsimile machines, and home entertainment equipment.

Mind you, his passion was catching and I found myself wanting to know more about his mechanical friends.

“We rode in the Dodge to the top of the escarpment above Wollongong. We stopped somewhere beyond the Heathcote Road. There we waited for the Queen who was visiting her antipodean colony after her recent coronation. As a slightly revolutionary seven year old I found most of this good because of the Dodge. At that stage in life I was called Zic as a term of endearment. I also found some of the activity kind of boring and un-Australian because of the Queen. Late in the morning she whizzed by us in her sartorial dark maroon Rolls. I approved of the Rolls then but later came to realise that the Marque was an expensive, elitist anachronism.

The Queen left me cold. Probably the Queen had a similar effect on some crippled people from a nearby convalescent home. They were organised to see her not far up the road from where we stood. So as not to assault the sensibilities of the Royal lady and her husband, those wretched souls were hidden from view behind a fence. This was not the Queen's doing but those pseudo-Australians running the country as a colonial outpost of ‘Mother England’. I remember too, pondering why grown-ups called the Duke Phil the Greek. Eventually I found out but it wasn't a grown-up who told me.

Sir Robert Oldclay, one of the most traitorous individuals in Australian history, abetted them ably. Oldclay managed to sell pig iron to the Japanese just before the Second World War started. His sale was just in time for the iron to be incorporated into the Japanese war machine. He spent much of his time in England during and after

the Second World War ingratiating himself with British politicians and Royalty. Once he returned from England after some Royal occasion or other and wrote, 'A sick feeling of repugnance grows in me as I near Australia.' This person was Prime Minister of our country and we allowed him to speak about it like that. In his favour was the ethos of the period in which he reigned. Australians generally were egalitarian and worked hard. Oldclay, by design or otherwise, oversaw, or watched, a most dynamic period in Australia's history. During that time the infrastructure development was enormous and it's unlikely we'll ever see such a time again. I'm cynical enough though to disagree with Julius Little's view of Oldclay's magnanimity and brilliance and that the developments were by design. Little after all was a very conservative politician and some might even label him a bigot. I believe Oldclay's objective was political kudos and not the betterment of Australia.

The Prime Minister of England, Clement Atetler, in 1950 asked Oldclay in a top secret communiqué for permission to test nuclear weapons in Australia. Oldclay didn't discuss this request with aides or cabinet and apparently was keen to acquiesce. So this he did. Anything that the British wanted was all right with Pig Iron Rob. Australians eventually were apprised of this about one and a half years later. In a one paragraph announcement they read that, 'an atomic weapon will be tested in Australia in conditions that will ensure that there will be no danger to the health of people or animals.'

At the time, Aborigines were not Australian citizens. If this is considered in context with the statement about the planned tests, it follows that Aborigines were not

considered people, animals, or plants. Nor were they considered organisms of any kind at risk. In the desert near the Aboriginal settlement at Maralinga, nuclear refuse remains. It'll remain for eons to come. Thanks Rob.

Oldclay seemed to be particularly good at keeping the electorate in the dark. Again the population wasn't told of his decision to send Australians to an American sponsored conflict in Vietnam. Oldclay's disciples all but got down on their knees to entreat the Americans to allow Australian troops into Vietnam. Australian soldiers were sent in 1962 to provide advice. On what it was not stated. Later the long suffering public heard that a lot of them were members of 'black teams' or 'death squads', commanded by the United States Government Central Intelligence Bureau. No details of these activities were provided to the Australian Military or the Australian Government. Apparently the British though were given information to entice them to remain involved. Australians didn't rate such intelligence because Rob guaranteed Australia's involvement.

Anyway, sitting on the running board of the Dodge we ate tomato sandwiches. Then we went home. What a peculiar pastime it was. I remember too that at the time, I knew tomatoes as ninganinganars. Adults do terrible things to the minds of their young charges. This especially is so in the interests of love, affection, and being seen to do the right thing. Itchy kitchy koo! Didums hurtums 'it-tle self. Why not just call them bloody tomatoes? For that matter, what's wrong with a penis? Instead, I had a whistle for goodness sake, and it was years before anyone blew it.

This last little revelation tickled me more than somewhat and I burst into almost uncontrollable laughter. Politely,

Tyro regarded me as my body rippled with belly laughs. Eventually I controlled myself and said, “Aah, sorry. I’m a bit like that. If something tickles my sense of humour I tend to lose control momentarily.” My face coloured and warmed so that my embarrassment showed.

“Don’t be embarrassed. Glad you’ve got a sense of humour. A lot of people don’t you know.” Tyro said and then went on with his story.

“Fortunately there were other more memorable outings in the Dodge and even in that funny Javelin. We went to places with names from over the sea and from the dreamtime of some invisible dark skinned people. I heard grown-ups speak of those people in quiet and knowing tones. Some of the places we visited were Wallacia, Windsor, Blackheath, Katoomba, Mount Victoria, Warrimoo, and Ebenezer. The Cumberland plain and the Blue Mountains west of Sydney were alive with ancient and modern history. In those days it still lay around for one to see, to take, ignore, or destroy thoughtlessly or with malice.

“Probably the most memorable times spent with the next door neighbours were those afternoons and nights when I ‘stayed the night’. In those days, not so long ago, you didn’t stop over, come for a visit, or even touch base. Staying the night was an evocative term for youngsters. It conjured visions of ice cream, cakes, and special drinks like Shelley’s Creamy Soda. There too was bread and dripping as a treat like in the olden days. Those special times were full of wonderful indulgences and enjoyment.

“There was one ritual, however, that vaguely disquieted my rapidly growing sensibility of self and Australianness.

Australianness is my kind of a politically unacceptable equivalent of what Aboriginals call their Aboriginality. Anyway, I had a problem about using the 'pot'. While the man of the house was banished from the room, the females held the 'pot' while I had a pre-retirement pee. The house male then was recalled to read from Coles Funny Picture Book. It contained what I thought then to be hilarious pen drawings of tortures, deprivations, and violence. My benefactors and others of Victorian conservatism and elitism, most definitely thought them funny. I would rather have heard about the rites of those invisible dark people or about cars and aeroplanes, but I was a polite boy then and didn't want to upset my kindly benefactors. Looking back, I wonder about their safety under later draconian child abuse laws that have fathers afraid to cuddle their daughters in public. Was it a Freudian thing that caused the two women, one approaching middle age, and the other already elderly, to peer at a little boy's dick while he tried to think of something else? Who'll ever know?

"At the next door neighbour's place there were several ferneries. They were filled to lush bursting with tropical and temperate succulents, wax plants, ferns, rainforest under-storey exotics, shrubs, vines, and delicate flowers. One small plant, a potted tree of a bit less than a metre, had a slender green leafless and branchless trunk of incredibly springy hardness. Its crown of largish Lincoln green leaves incongruously sat atop the trunk over small bunches of red berries. They seemed to fall only once or twice a year. A perennial fruiter and enigmatic it was in its ancient moss covered terracotta pot. Oscar was its name and it'd been in their family for three generations, or so

the story went. I loved Oscar and he got his name well before Alfred E. Newman's pet pot plant got his.

“On frequent occasions these well-off neighbours took holidays. I was commissioned on these occasions to water the ferneries for the remuneration of five shillings a week, a massive sum then. People of the time, you'll be pleased to know, took or went on holidays. They didn't have vacations and only military personnel took leave. When first I heard of vacations in American films I thought they were something like Laxettes, a well-known laxative of the day. In later life I learnt that much of American society and politics, although not the very many wonderful individuals, had a similar effect on me.

“Once I was less than diligent; the weather was hot and I didn't water the plants often enough. The next door neighbours returned to uncommonly brown and stressed plants. Nell, the kindly harridan and matriarch, castigated me mercilessly and I wanted to vanish, instantly, without trace. So ended my first lesson in accepting and then acting on responsibility. The humiliation was complete but thank goodness Oscar survived.

“I wandered next door one hot, slumberous, Cumberland Plain day. The air was so hot it could be seen, the heat reflected off the insides of my eyelids and paramercia played havoc with my perceptions.

“Nell I heard from some way off, instructed, ‘Norman, you should rest, it's hot! Sit down!’

“Yes woman, anything for ... “

“A strange and Victorian trait of leaving sentences hanging. Ayn Rand described this phenomenon, explaining that it's one of the accoutrements of the

psychologically or intellectually weak. Others believe that this hanging statement indicates that the speaker is a 'castle within themselves' and has no need of confrontation. Norm was not weak. He was kindly, big, physically strong, and full of stories and had wonderful hand skills. Perennially, he wore a pinstriped shirt without its studded collar, old navy blue railway uniform trousers with braces, and big, oiled leather lace-up work boots. He'd been a fireman on the Blue Mountains railway line west of Sydney. He told me about the zig zag, being snow bound, and setting his pocket watch by the trains as they arrived or departed. He told me also, of forest clearing and the attempted extermination of Dingos. It was a time, soon to pass, when friends could fish, smoke, and enjoy the view together without the need for discourse. Togetherness was sufficient and communication occurred on a much higher plane than speech.

"Perceptions were different then, not necessarily better or correct, just different. Our environmental crisis had begun. We just hadn't noticed it yet. Norm and others spoke in hushed and frightened tones of soil erosion and disappearing blue-tongued lizards. Throughout this time they condoned and voted for Governments that subsidised and encouraged wide-scale bulldozing, chain dragging of native trees from land of marginal soil, and extensive farming on fragile land."

I broke into the narrative and asked Tyro, "Are you suggesting that they were wrong in what they said and did? That generation certainly seems to have destroyed a lot in the interests of development."

“No, as I said, perceptions were different then, not necessarily better or correct, just different. You’ve been listening haven’t you?” Tyro said rhetorically.

“Well, it is my job! Just because I’m lounging here on your beautiful boat in paradise doesn’t mean my brain has regressed!” Immediately I regretted my rather strong reply.

Tyro looked at me appraisingly. I couldn’t help thinking he was looking at the whole package. Then he said, “I’m so pleased you can be direct and speak your mind. I like that. Don’t be embarrassed and don’t imagine that I’d ever take offence at your kind of honesty.” His perceptiveness made me feel somehow worse and better at the same time, but I felt that I’d just passed another test.

“Anyway,” I said, “you were saying ...” “It was a way out of my discomfort. Get him talking again. Fortunately he took the bait, or did he want to alleviate my mild embarrassment?”

He said, “Coincidentally, I was about to say that it’s important at this point to argue some of Burrows’, my benefactors’, case.”

“In voting for Governments, all members of an electorate are faced with the dilemma of, for whom to vote. Each party maintains its particular platform and dogma. Issues of electoral importance and value can be perceived differently according to the voter’s socio-economic situation. To the person of low socio-economic circumstances, welfare, health, tobacco tax and that on alcohol might be important, as might be the cost of education. On the other hand, one of more fortunate circumstances might put more store in quality of education, taxation structure,

foreign policy and the need for constitutional reform. A thinking voter'll be able to agree with some or even many of the components of a given party platform. One or more of the other platform components also might appall that voter. Logically, each should be weighted against the voter's predilections so that a decision may be made and a vote cast. My kindly neighbours fell foul of my extremely tender age. I was confused by their apparent duplicity and unable to reconcile their profession of Christianity. They had concern for the environment, extolled a polite racism and an almost jingoistic support of Australia. Yet, they supported the notion of Empire, the Queen and Mother England. Grown-ups could be beastly difficult to understand sometimes.

"Well, back to Nell on that hot summer's day. "Norman, get up, get up so I can clean under the seat!" Nell could not walk into a room or into someone else's private area without succumbing to a need to change the *status quo*.

"But I ... " He started to protest but he'd had his war on the back of a whaler in the Sahara Dessert in Egypt. Some of his livery was still around the house. Nell, not a very big person, filled the area on the back verandah, beside the fernery, in a flurry of 'necessary' activity. She was attired in a loose, shapeless, printed housedress, apron, felt slippers and was armed with a dustpan and brush. Inevitably she evicted Norm, terminating his three minute rest. Nell had about her the energy and vibrancy of a much younger person, but always exuded that peculiar old person's smell that somehow reminded me of an uncooked chook. We called poultry chooks then and young ones were chickens.

Now they're all just chickens. Is that progress? Norm and I fled to investigate Annie's room.

"Annie's room was a trove, a wonderland, an historical journey through the families Davies and Burrows. In there were bows and arrows and spears, grass skirts and things unidentifiable from — 'our cruises in the islands' — according to Norm. I still have a traveller's hat box from one of these 'cruises' to which is attached a sticker announcing 'TSS Katoomba-Burrows-Rabaul and return — Wanted In Cabin'.

"Brandishing a spear or a bow and some arrows, wearing a grass skirt, frequently I was pitted against the head-hunters of the South Seas beside the main fernery. A large coconut palm invariably became my target. Over the years it developed pockmarks from the onslaughts and witnessed the dispatch of the luckless head-hunters. I didn't know then what a head-hunter was but I'd been told that they must be done to death. R. M. Ballantyne confirmed this in his novel about the South Seas. Contemporary films of the time, and a bit before, did little to educate differently in this regard.

I wore the most colourful of the grass skirts once in my starring role as 'Golo the Island Chief' in the primary school play 'Peter Coffin'. Even at school, in the context apparently of comedy, we young 'British Subjects' of Australia were taught it was all right to assault, maim and kill. During the performance, Golo clubbed Peter Coffin, the pirate captain. George's son Geoffrey played Peter Coffin. George was well known for his work in industrial relations for employer bodies. Geoffrey later dabbled with the economy of Ford Australia, and became its Chief

Executive, while his brother, Colin became an advocate in the same field as his father. My clubbing was a little too hard because it nearly knocked Geoffrey out in front of all the parents. Revenge was near though, as Golo's grass skirt fell off, revealing large safety pins holding up black stockings to blue woollen swimming togs. Mortification is much more severe than physical pain.

"Annie's room was home to a mangle in almost new condition. A mangle is a large device made of wood and steel, and is used for ironing clothes. It looks something like a printing press. There was pristine Victorian clothing in camphor wood boxes that would make today's collectors weep. The Irish linen, also in camphor wood boxes, had never been used. The linen was part of Elsie's trousseau, and the boxes then were called 'glory boxes'. Elsie was Norm's daughter. All awaited that 'glorious' day when Elsie would marry. Glory boxes seemed then to be strewn across latter day Victorian Australia as testaments to those hopeful but destined not to marry. There were cabinets to kill for and a violin amongst many other treasures. An unwritten but often spoken arrangement between Norm, Elsie and I, was that at some later time, about which nobody spoke, the violin would be mine. With it would go a Brazilian topaz that lived at the front of the house in a hallstand drawer. I remember the hallstand well, and its surroundings. My parents later inherited it but burglars stole the lovely round mirror that went with it. On the opposite wall hung a Junghans Westminster chiming clock and a hat rack. Hats, including a derby, top hat, three pith helmets, a fedora, panama, deer stalker and a pork pie, stood sentinel and supervised the twice weekly winding

of the clock. Norm accomplished this with some ritual by using an ornate key kept inside the highly polished Edwardian case. The topaz was oval cut, clear, bright in colour and measured five centimetres by two and a half centimetres by one and a half. It was flawless.

“Over the years Nell had successive ‘falls’. She got weaker and sicker and eventually, became bed ridden. Sadness fell over the next-door neighbours. I still find it peculiar that elderly people have falls while younger ones just fall over or down. Although, in this narrative, the decline of the Dynasty Burrows nee Davies seems rapid, it actually occurred over some years. It was interwoven with my comings and goings to places far, near, exotic and mundane. One day Nell went into hospital. She never went home again.

I always wondered why, “Nell has passed away.”

“She has passed on.”

“She is peaceful now.”

Didn’t they mean that she had died and no longer had pain nor caused pain and inconvenience to those around her? I didn’t go to the funeral because I hadn’t ever been to one and couldn’t bear the thought of seeing the end of Nell. I just stayed at my long, school holiday job and ignored the passing of some important local history.

Nell ‘had passed away’. Nobody ever did say that ‘D’ word. Nell’s death had a severe effect on her daughter Elsie. She too became ill and got sicker and sicker until she wasn’t able to look after Norm. Elsie was the first daughter. Her little sister had ‘passed away’ when very young and lay near Nell in a small family plot. A Roger Townsend reputedly proposed to Elsie once, but Nell had said he

‘drank’, and that was that. The term ‘drank’ pertained in Nell’s parlance to the passing of any amount of alcohol between the lips. There was one other possible consort whose name was Alan Light. I never understood that relationship, if ever there was one. Alan seemed to have a wife named Pat. All remained a mystery though, especially to a young boy expected to be seen and not heard. Elsie never married and her solace became Chateau Tanunda Hospital Brandy — ‘for medicinal purposes only’. With her failing health and Norm’s increasing age and frailty, the circumstances compounded. Elsie didn’t look after Norm and her guilt and ineptitude grew. During that time the beautiful old house got to be too much for them. They moved to another house a block away after selling the old place to a well known pharmacist in the town.

When I returned to visit on one occasion, Elsie was gone. Norm, then in his late eighties, cried and told me how her face had become discoloured.

“She’d been very ill, you know.” He didn’t want to admit to himself or to me that she was an alcoholic, and had been for twenty years. In the latter stages of her illness she fell frequently, bruising her face and body, eventually succumbing to cirrhosis, the long-term destruction of excessive drink.

“Nobody for a long time, except my grandmother, actually said it, “Nell drove her to it and foiled her chance at marriage.” Self righteous words from a woman of stubborn demeanour, quick wit, broad intelligence and amazing egoism; who was doing something similar.

Norm’s housekeeper probably stole the set of Victorian doll’s house furniture and toys, the vases and many rare

and beautiful books. My parents believed that Norm, in his decline, gave away precious belongings as well, especially to friends and friends of friends who descended like vultures for the carrion not yet dead or spoiled. Norm gave me Elsie's Agfa Optima 35 millimetre camera, a gift about which I felt guilty. I half felt that I coerced that generous failing man into giving me his dead daughter's camera. Repeatedly I left and returned. On one visit Norm went into hospital. Like Nell, he never went home again. I wasn't at the funeral.

My father was the executor of Norm's estate and, not coincidentally, our family was favoured. Many of the beautiful things though, were already gone. Most of the money was used up quite rightfully on Nell's and Norm's hospital care. That is if it's fair to suck an old man dry, one who already has paid his way through society. Of the topaz, there was no trace. The violin had vanished. It was a Stradivarius.

The old house remained a few years later, albeit a bit renovated. The ferneries were partly intact and some artefacts of memories remained. The chemist's sister, her husband and sons lived there. One day I visited. An era closed that day. Oscar was dead and broken. His leaves were gone because, you see, no one gave him any water. Probably the greatest affront to that once notable family occurred some years later. Their graceful and historic old house of flush mortared brick, bull-nosed iron, timber lace-work, cedar interior and ruby glass front door, was demolished. During the demolition, vandals even broke up the ebony and corkwood fireplace and mantle in the dining room. In place of the old house, town-houses now

stand, of such boring proportions that they defy description and deserve none ... “

He paused for a while and then, almost reluctantly, spoke again. “Defilement of heritage and environmental destruction is a human skill of underestimated magnitude. With all the power and beauty of the human intellect, I have to ask, why?”

He must have sensed that I was about to re-ask a question, or more likely, he just got around to it in his own good time.

“Sorry, you asked about Royalty. I suppose it’s possible to answer similarly. Why?”

“Why does one person inherit privilege and another poverty and oppression? Why is it okay for Royals to leave their country during civil strife whilst the remaining loyal subjects slug it out for ‘We The Great’? You might ask. I’m speaking generally mind you and not of any particular group of Royals. Is it equitable that being on public view on State occasions should render one tax exempt and highly paid to boot? Proponents of Royalty hold that the ‘Royal person’ are a figurehead, something to look up to, a symbol of empire. It’s a symbol indeed, of feudalism, imperialism, oppressive colonialism, societal classes, uneven wealth distribution and demeaning arrogance. Above all that privilege there’s the assumption that the figurehead may stand apart from the common herd, to view it or to ignore it. Empire today isn’t necessarily a laudable concept.”

The tide started to run rather strongly and again without warning he was off on some errand.

“I’ll start the engine; you stay here and look after the boat. I’ll get the anchor.”

Together we prepared to move the Banks to a deeper part of the inlet. He waited until the engine settled down and burbled softly. Then he went off to raise the anchor with the very tidy stainless steel electric winch. He didn’t raise it all the way but left it dragging in the water, apparently just below the surface. At his signal I engaged the drive as he’d instructed. Cautiously I moved the Banks in the direction he indicated, towards safer anchorage.