

AN UNBORING LIFE

L. R. B. Mann

Probus Club of Hibiscus Coast

3 Feb 2015

I was born, an only child, in Wgton, 1940. I discovered decades later that it was one week after that event that my father, aged 44, took a commission in the RNZAF, as an instructor at Weraroa (Levin), and then at Ohakea. Before long, he announced his impending arrival at Rongotai airport with a load of oranges subscribed for my health by his brother officers: he dived a Harvard from Kau Kau (the hill over Khandallah where the big TV transmitter tower now stands), doing a mock strafing run on Mother & me in our very humble dwelling on the harbour side of Khandallah. This is not in the copy of the file on him which I purchased decades later, but was presumably the reason why he finished his air force career with only observer's wings. A Harvard looked too much like a Zero or other Japanese plane for him to get away unpenalised!

At Ohakea Pilot Officer Mann was so disgusted with the flagrant homosexual Noel Coward's "entertainment for the troops" that he took him outside and punched him out. This also was not on the file, but was presumably a main reason why Dad relinquished his commission in 1943.

That wartime-only military career had begun at the boarding school in North Devon whence he had made a break at age 6 across Dartmoor trying to get back to his beloved home farm in South Devon. I pass around a glimpse of that happy farm - the silver medallion 'first prize, cider in cask, W Mann Broadhempston' from the 1906 national exhibition & market, brewing & allied trades.

The school was, I think, the one which inspired Kipling's minor classic 'Stalky & Co.', a school to train boys to become army officers. When the 'balloon went up' in 1914 Dad was on holiday in Argentina and was so keen to get into the war which was to end by Christmas that he jumped on the first steam-packet for Pongolia, which happened to arrive in Liverpool, and signed up as a Private with the first recruiting sergeant he could find near the wharf. This was probably good luck for me, since early in that war officers were killed at a higher rate than privates. He finished the Somme campaign as an acting Major but then decided to get out of the mud by volunteering for the Royal Flying Corps in which the death rate was known to be higher - but he didn't expect to survive the war anyhow.

Dad could not stop shooting after that war, volunteering for the invasion of Russia and then to combat the Irish rebellion, partly in plain clothes. He still could not settle back into the idyllic farm and was sent out to a cousin near New Plymouth - never to return.

A variety of jobs included managing plantations in Samoa - my mother liked to boast that she had peeled oranges on Robt Louis Stephenson's grave - but he was sent home for knocking into a horse-trough Leon Götz (later a cabinet minister). Dad finished his civil service career as a low-grade clerk in the civil service, commuting on the electric 'unit' from Khandallah where in 1946 he had a new house built with the newly-retired chief typewriter of the Health Dept. This second marriage followed very soon after my mother got locked up for behaviour

which today would be lauded as ‘discovering her independence’. The diagnosis was later confirmed by the eminent psychiatrist Fraser McDonald, and I have thereafter taken an interest in that mysterious illness schizophrenia. I even led, with the then head of psychiatry in the Auckland medical school, a boldly ambitious research project trying to discover biochemical causes of schizophrenia. I’m glad to say my most successful ex-student, Garth Cooper, has more recently pursued an even grander version of that research. (Sorry, no therapy has yet resulted.)

My mother was a Kiwi of Irish extraction, dux of Sacred Heart Wanganui at age 15, B.A. (Vic) in the 1930s, who told me at 4 during our ‘vagrancy’ perambulations that I was to become a medic. I never believed I could afford med school, and always wanted to be a teacher rather than a practitioner. The 1946 remarriage uplifted me from the sadistic nuns’ schools to the sunny uplands of Khandallah School and Anglican hymns. Wellington College, VUW, and the U of California at Berkeley led to academic positions – biochemistry, and then environmental studies – at Auckland, and public campaigning against nuclear weapons, 2,4,5-T, nuclear power, leaded petrol, genetic 'engineering', and other inappropriate technology. In retirement, I have developed inventions in appropriate technology – solar water-heating, solar air-cond, water-injection in petrol engines, and a continuously-variable transmission for low-power motor-vehicles. I continue my involvement in science, e.g regarding the folding of DNA.

Today I offer a few glimpses of this unusual life – little more than jigsaw-puzzle pieces from a whole which is complex and, you may well think, incoherent.

The versatility I have sought is not rare in my generation of Kiwis, but can evoke vituperation. I have often found myself the cleverest in this or that company, a role fraught with strife. In the mid-1970s I found myself stuck in a Wellington-Auckland flight next to a man who said he was head of Universal Homes. He made it his business to vilify me (in the third person, a novel technique) for claiming to understand and to explain publicly the several different complex issues I’ve just mentioned. I inferred he disbelieved anyone could understand all those issues, and deduced I must be an impostor. Such enraged jealousy I have encountered many times, and I therefore offer here my opinion against false modesty. I believe that only by shunning false modesty can one attain true modesty. In the attempt to be honest about my weaknesses I will be aided by frankness regarding what gifts I happen to have been given (while living in fear of the warning in the Parable of the Talents).

In reaction to my mother’s being taken away from me when I was 5, I adopted the assumption that intellect and humour would help to protect me from harm. I was the brainiest of the uniquely cohesive Khandallah School class of ’53 but I was also keen on sport. Cricket and table-tennis were my favourite sports until I discovered hockey, playing left half in the Wellington College XI which was the last for 30 years to win the annual grudge match against Christchurch Boys High.

I was the only boy to ride a motorcycle to that college in 1958 (Jawa 344cc).

My highest marks were in languages – School Cert English rumoured to be the highest to date – but I couldn't see a life's work in languages and therefore pursued my interest in science. But my old folks chanted "he can't do math", and I joined in.

I continued straight from college to Victoria University, on a post-primary teachers' studentship, residing at home. To major in Chemistry for the simple 8-unit B Sc of those days required first passing Math I. I decided to find extra tuition - a high-school math teacher who seemed able to discern little of my difficulties but had the brainwave to lend me Bell 'Men of Math', then the only history of its kind about the genii who had created these formulae e.g Newton's Binomial Theorem, and shapes, that I had been so poor at using. My marks & feeling of difficulty were not immediately much relieved.

But there was a delayed effect. At the end of that year I got A in Chem I; the highest B in Physics I; and a puzzling success in Math I. In the Geom/Trig paper within that unit, I had continued my past trend: 43%. However, in Algebra/Calculus I got more than any college classmate: 89%. This handy avg 66%, a modest improvement on my School Cert math mark, brought me great relief as I could now expect to enrol in Chem III in due course, having met that fearful prerequisite. Thus I gratefully left behind the study of math; never learned any computer language; minimized complexity of such math as had to enter into any science or technology I ever did; and maintain a sturdy antagonism to 'infinity', there being no such thing.

The Algebra/Calculus paper had been taught & examined by the much-loved HOD Prof J T Campbell – one of the few staff who took part informally in a Student Christian Movement (SCM) gathering the following year where he took me quietly aside and said "students are generally not allowed to communicate with examiners, but I think you might like to know how that mark of yours in my paper came about". I confessed I'd taken it for a clerical error but hadn't heard of any procedure for students to apply to be marked down. He said "you recall that question on permutations?" I murmured "vaguely". He said "you gave the answer that was evidently expected, and then you gave 4 or 5 other answers which no other student, nor I, had thought of. So I gave you much more than full marks for that question". I recount this to urge you to quash any chant "this child can't do math"; no good, and some harm, can come from such slogans.

Working in wool stores 3 summers and then a most memorable summer on a domestic rubbish round I could afford to buy & run a 5-y-old Norton 88. That job as a temporary garbagologist was in some ways the best job I ever had. Wadestown–Crofton Downs–Ngaio–Khandallah, 2,200 bins at breakneck speed in four days (I was never so fit) and then Friday off. At Christmas we were given a total of 60 dozen beer, numerous flagons, and 110 quid. Toward the end of that summer we would be plugging up a steep hill in Wadestown at a walking pace and crew captain Darcy Joseph Korokino White (originally from Waitara Pa) would toss back to me "why'n'cha chuck in that Varsity racket, Bob - you're never short of a quid in your pocket on this job, y' know". I was duly flattered. Like the woolstore labourers, they had little idea why universities existed; whereas I believed they were valuable and worked my whole career in them.

One week Darcy obtained from us loaders agreement that we work Friday for once, so that he could attend a big meet at Trentham the following Monday. Upon return to work Tuesday, we asked Darcy how the meet had gone. He said nothing about his bookmaking efforts on that occasion. What he did say, with great enthusiasm, was:

“There was this one sheila all in white - the skirt, the top, the hat, all white – with one red hibiscus on her bosom. I could‘a fucked the flower, let alone her.”

This job was abruptly terminated one fateful morning in Feb 1961 when, hastening to work late, I rode into an oncoming truck, causing near-amputation of my right foot. I was on crutches for months. The results have been a continuing handicap (somewhat relieved a half-century later by good luck with the still-novel insertion of an artificial ankle joint).

At Vic I thrived in Chemistry and even more in Biochemistry. My M.Sc thesis was awarded a first-class mark, and my supervisor recommended me to his doctoral supervisor at the University of California, Berkeley, who had meanwhile won a Nobel prize for chemistry. I thus worked formative years, the latter half of the 1960s, learning from top scientists at a university far better than any we’ve dreamed of in this little country, finishing as a temporary acting junior lecturer and marrying in 1968 a daughter of a prosperous stockbroker. Skiing in the Sierra Nevada, and two holidays in Mexico, were highlights of those years in the San Francisco Bay area, on the fringe of cultural novelties in music e.g The Jefferson Airplane, Big Brother & the Holding Company, etc, and in hallucinogens e.g LSD. As a biochemistry researcher I was surrounded by students saying LSD was the greatest thing since non-shiver jelly, but I declined.

Then in 1969 I was hired by the University of Auckland to teach biochemistry, at first to medical students and then also for B.Sc & M.Sc. The founding HOD biochemistry turned out to be a fourth-rate Pom governed by his sociopath wife. She was not on the teaching staff but got hold of students’ lab reports which I had graded, and marked them down viciously, signing her initials. I tried to get this outrage reversed by the HOD, and then had to request the first staff meeting ever in that department; justice was still denied, so I appealed to the vice-chancellor, Kenneth Maidment M.A Oxon. He put me at my ease but did nothing discernible. Maidment retired, to be replaced by a refugee from the USA military-industrial complex, Waiuku/Ardmore Rhodes scholar Colin Maiden who, to his credit, sent the HOD & wife on leave before they would have normally been entitled, and told them not to come back.

One of my main volunteer activities in the early 1970s was activism, with a loose group of staff, against our country’s involvement in the attack on Indochina. We showed in high schools to good effect the superb slide-tape show from the American Quakers entitled The Automated Air War. Quakers saturated Waiouru, Thames, and much of Wanganui, with our 8-page newspaper Indochina Report.

I joined many scientists in condemning the chemical warfare waged by the USA on south Viet Nam, mainly aerial spraying of Agent Orange (50:50 2,4-D & 2,4,5-T). In August 1971 I was interviewed for TV opposing aerial spraying in this country of 2,4,5-T. As soon as the camera stopped, producer Des Monahan said

“if ever you want to change jobs, just get in touch with me”. I actually did so, 3 decades later; but he was in Australia by then and did not reply.

On the strength of that TV appearance I was invited onto the board of the Environmental Defence Society (EDS), based in what was then a respectable law-firm. In a golden era, collaborating especially with Stephen Mills (then a lecturer in the law school, now a QC), we stopped billions of dollars worth of unnecessary power stations; stopped the Clyde Dam in the courts (to be overwhelmed in special legislation by Mulgoon with the crucial help of Bodgie Beetham); and were instrumental in stopping the nuclear power programme. We began the campaign to ban lead additives in petrol.

I was vice-president of the NZ Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, and my wife was secretary, instrumental in sending to Mururoa several of the peace fleet, 1972-74. CND raised the biggest petition till then to the NZ Parliament, advocating several policies for control of nuclear weapons. I was deputed to speak for CND at the secret hearing of the Petitions Committee at Parliament. Having pointed out to them the USA's 30,000 nuclear weapons, etc, I departed, only to find one MP, Whetu Tirikatene-Sullivan, following me out into the corridor proffering her copy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs submission to her committee. In those days, such materials remained secret until the committee should report to the House, which might be months later; it was within the powers of Mr Speaker to slap me, and Whetu, into gaol summarily, but she invited me to draft questions for her to ask the Foreign Affairs reps later. I happily agreed to this contempt of Parliament. She then invited me to lunch at Bellamy's. As we entered that dining room, we found ourselves in the baleful stare of Mulgoon, who pointedly glared at us as we were led to our table. For the first time I felt the force of the old saying “if looks could kill”.

The Royal Society of NZ invited me as a debater in Wellington against some apologists for low-dose radiation from weapons-tests fallout. I took the trouble to distribute a cyclostyled copy of my speech on that occasion. Later, reading in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs regular glossy A5 bulletin the pleadings by Dr Martyn Finlay on New Zealand's behalf for our successful World Court suit against the French tests, I found myself warmly agreeing with the wording; and then realised it was ripped off wholesale from that RSNZ paper of mine (without my knowledge let alone permission). A back-handed compliment, eh?

Some time later I received a phone call from Dame-to-be Dorothy Winstone, who had somehow acquired a copy of that text, and read back to me from near its start “we leave aside for this occasion the radioactivity from nuclear reactors, which should be dealt with by a full public inquiry”; she told me to bring that about, and she was not a lady fit to ignore. The Environmental Defence Society therefore proposed such an inquiry to precede (to quote the title of my article in the NZ Planning Quarterly) New Zealand's nuclear power decision. When a nuclear station reappeared in the annual 15-year Power Plan, in 1973, this campaign took off, including the new record-holder petition (against not only nuclear power stations but also, at my insistence, marine propulsion reactors). Mulgoon announced that US nuclear-powered warships were to be invited into the hearts of Wellington & Auckland, where improbable mishaps to their reactors or to the nuclear weapons they carried could truly devastate a city. A unique evening call-in

radio programme about nuclear warships on the YC network featured in a Wellington studio Mulgoon, myself, Prof James Duncan (later rewarded with the Commission for the Future, which was a good idea), and a shadowy transient spook. Mulgoon, evidently the worse for liquor, at one point tried to rasp menacingly “aaaah ... Professor Mann ... who ... aaaah ... may have an interest in this matter ...”, at which I interjected “of course I have an interest in it – so have all citizens concerned to keep major hazards out of our cities”. At the end of that year I complained in my annual report to my department head that the university had not yet regularised the title Mulgoon had conferred upon me.

My interest in dangerous technologies extended to bulk liquefied combustible gases. Cabinet minister Warren Freer entered into a secret agreement with a foreign chemical corporation to set up a factory at Marsden Point to manufacture the plastic PVC – polyvinyl chloride – from bulk imported vinyl chloride, a gas which can be liquefied by several atmospheres of pressure. An ocean-going tanker was to bring this liquid to Marsden Point where it would be stored in hundreds of tons. EDS lawyers Peter Horsley & Grant Illingworth fronted our objections to the zoning which was proposed to permit this installation. I presented evidence that, in the event of a large leak, some weather conditions would then roll through the city of Whangarei a plume of combustible gas which would be bound to get ignited in the city and could largely destroy it. As a bonus, one gas resulting from such a vinyl chloride fire is phosgene (a notorious war gas). There was never any formal admission of defeat, but that project quietly disappeared.

With the help of research assistant Brian Williamson from Waikaretu, I built up the main centre of expertise in New Zealand on hazards of bulk LPG, and appeared as an expert witness in several legal cases which led to decreased hazards. Shell’s project manager for the proposed Auckland regional LPG depot, containing thousands of tons, became EDS’s star witness, alongside Prof Mike O’Sullivan and myself, against the depot. This pioneering case was furtively torpedoed by Gary Taylor, EDS’s employee, and the depot was thus allowed at Wiri (fed by the coastal tanker ship).

But the most dangerous technology, against which little progress has been made, is gene-tampering, called by its exponents “genetic engineering”. When these techniques were invented in the mid-1970s, I moved in the Council of the NZ Association of Scientists to advocate a moratorium on them in New Zealand pending a full public inquiry such as had proven pretty good on nuclear power. This issue has been my main work since I went ‘online’ in 1998, and occupies me for some hours on a typical day. The reasons why success has been so very limited are not fully clear.

Back to my academic career in the 1970s: after I had got rid of the HOD Biochemistry, Maiden then, advised by his fellow Auckland Grammar prefect Prof Peter Bergquist, appointed another low-grade foreigner HO. I decided the department was jinxed, and went on a 3-year secondment to another department, the Centre for Continuing Education, to organise science teaching for the general

public and for scientists & engineers.

But meanwhile had occurred the annus mirabilis of science-based conservation, 1972. Landmark books made the case that excessive industrial activity was damaging the biosphere severely - 'The Limits to Growth', 'A Blueprint for Survival', 'Only One Earth', and a favourite Paul & Anne Ehrlich, 'Population, Resources, Environment'. With several staff of the University of Auckland I took part in starting a new Stage II course in Environmental Studies, i.e applied ecology, to survey the entailed issues. We all did this work beyond our normal workload, so it was difficult for Maiden to stop, and attracted 80-100 students for a couple decades.

But, in the 3rd term of 1977, Maiden made a major attempt to purge me from my academic position. One response was that the largest staff meeting ever voted 300-odd to 3 stating esteem for my work and deploring the attempted purger. Influential personages told Maiden to lay off. He went off to Wimbledon as usual at 'that' time of year, and left his hand-picked star chamber to hold a secret hearing. (I kept saying "let's have it all out in public".) My colleagues urged me to turn out a full range of staff & students testifying for me. My favourite turned out to be Maiden's protégé Prof Brian Henshall who testified "I'm about to go overseas on leave, and so Dr Maiden asked me who I thought should replace me on the NZ Energy R&D Committee (commonly known as the Maiden committee) – and I told him Bob Mann".

I later learned the Geography staff had told their HOD they wanted me to join them; but that HOD failed to transmit this message to Maiden. The Town Planning staff therefore succeeded in making a home-base for me in what turned out to be my final decade in the job, after which my medical advisors prevailed on me to retire a decade earlier than I would have in the normal course of events.

Editing the adsless magazine *NZ Environment* from 1977, I proposed the Official Information Act. This enterprise faltered when my marriage broke up in 1984, as did many other aspects of my life. After a couple decades dallying with various courtesans, including one nymphomaniac (stay clear of them is my advice), I recovered faith in 1993 and a decade later remarried, soon moving to this parish in 2008.

This century I have become an amateur theologian, especially in science/faith interactions. My long-standing antagonism to the church of Rome has been supplanted by friendly relations with the impressive staff of the College of the Good Shepherd. Reluctant for years to dignify by any discussion the irrational, totalitarian tendency "creationism", I have published a careful irenical refutation of it with my friend Prof Neil Broom. This and many other jottings can be accessed at <http://www.kuratrading.com/HTMLArticles/writings.htm>.

* * *