

Canberra Memories

by Don Aitkin

My first memories of anywhere are of Canberra, and those memories are now sixty years old. They are from 1943, when our family arrived from Newcastle. Like slides from a slide show, they flash before me as I write.

Our air-raid shelter in the back yard, soon to be filled in. The air-raid shelters at Ainslie School, which were trenches at the edge of the school grounds, covered in maroon hessian. The Cotter Dam, for a family picnic. The wonderful forest surrounding Glebe House. Being ridden on the handlebars of Dad's bicycle. The sports ground at Hall, for another picnic, I think with the Methodist Sunday School in Reid, where we lived. The stables down behind Glebe House, where Dad collected horse manure for our tomato bushes. Scotts Crossing, over the Molonglo River, where we had another picnic. Icicles formed on the water taps in winter.

It was all new to me, and exciting. There was a war on, but what that meant I did not know. Reid was full of kids, and that was great. We wandered from one house to another, and were sent home by other kids' mothers when they thought it was time. I never heard of stranger danger, and no-one seemed to worry about where you were or who you were with.

We had a phone, though it didn't ring very much. Its number was F619. We had a car, too, but we didn't drive it much because you had to have petrol coupons, and they were scarce. Dad's car number plate was 2 * 012. When you are five years old those numbers seem very important, and they stick with you through life. Dad paid the Department of the Interior 37/6 a week in rent for our house in Currong Street. I didn't know the amount at the time — indeed, I didn't know anything more than it was our house — but that is another number from the past which sticks in the memory.

Canberra was tiny, about 15,000 people all up, I think. The pine break marked the northern edge of the town. Reid, Braddon, Ainslie and Turner were the suburbs that made up our side of Canberra, while Barton, Parkes, Forrest, Griffith and Deakin were far away across the Molonglo. There must have been some people living in Yarralumla, too, near the Forestry School, but I didn't discover it until much later.

Reid seemed fully grown, even ancient, to me. Its trees were tall, and I thought the hedges that bordered each house must have been there for centuries. Actually, Reid was less than twenty years old at, since its earliest houses dated from the mid 1920s. Mum had come to Canberra to stay with her Aunty Ollie in Ainslie in 1924 when she was 18, so she had seen the city right at the beginning. Aunty Ollie (the celebrated Olive Lott of Canberra bridge fame) now lived near Manuka, and we visited the Lott family occasionally. They had a kangaroo in their back yard, which was much taller than me and rather fearsome.

Mum had come back to Canberra in 1929 to teach at Telopea Park School, and she stayed at Brassey House. She met Dad at TPS because he was posted there too; he stayed at the Printers' Quarters in Kingston. So fourteen years later, in 1943, they thought of themselves as old Canberra hands. Yet only sixteen years had passed since Parliament had moved there from Melbourne. It was still an infant city.