

Personal Recollections of Florence Grylls

by her niece Margery Grylls, later Fenton

Florence Grylls was a favourite aunt of mine, a strong and independent woman who had a large influence over my early years; the years that she was her busiest, engaged in helping many of Australia's and the wider world's children.

I grew up in the same house that she did, a mudbrick home with substantial cellars and outbuildings on the edge of a natural lagoon called the Tang". Affection for the Tang and its wildlife, our relative isolation from city life and our respective positions in the family (she the youngest, me the eldest) built common bonds between us.

I have an early but vivid memory of 'Aunt Flo' recognising my distress at the "scary" noises of the many nocturnal birds of the Tang, and of her taking me out into the dark to listen for and identify each and every species. As the ghostly Bittern boomed she told me "that's the Bittern calling to its mate"; then eerie Mopoke, and so on until every noise had a name and bird I could picture alongside it. I went back to bed never to be bothered by the constant all-night swamp chorus again.

Being isolated on the farm I participated in the Girl Guide Association's "Lone Guide" program, where via mail and annual get-togethers we studied the tests and skills that made a successful Guide. At the age of 13 I was sent to Melbourne to attend a Lone Guide function and was taken under wing by Aunt Flo who took me on several excursions showing me something of the exciting big city. I remember fondly riding on the pre-war trams to my accommodation at the Princess Mary Club with Flo, feeling both grown up and sophisticated.

Flo was also a no-nonsense person, a gift of personality, her nurses training and her wartime experiences. I remember her admonishing me to stand up "nice and straight" during a visit to her workplace at the Children's Health Bureau. No doubt because posture was linked to health but also because she liked us to stand tall and proud.

But Flo was also a very generous person in her personal life. Recognising the fact that many in the aboriginal community who had congregated in the inner city had neither personal nor clothes washing facilities she welcomed them to use hers. The contagious and happy laughter emanating from the aboriginal women using her washhouse at her Collingwood home made a big impression on me at the time.

Whilst Flo was my paternal aunt she had many characteristics that my mother celebrated (and some other strong women) were exerting for the first time. She was curious about the natural and scientific world, sought to demystify girls and women's health issues and was unafraid to live outside the institution of marriage.

I was very fond of my aunt, partially I guess because she was fond of me, but also because I saw in her a role model of a strong, independent woman making a positive difference for the world.

Margery Fenton

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