



ONE MORE NAIL

Chapter Two **Family History**

My great-grandfather came out from the Isle of Man in 1838 and started farming at a little place called Cudlee Creek in the hills a few miles east of Adelaide. From there the family grew and spread all over South Australia, most of them being farmers. My grandfather, Robert, settled on the family farm “Merrindie” a 2200 acre property west of Tarlee in the 1860s and we have lived there ever since, except when sallying out to put the world right. The tendency to do this could be said to be a family failing.

My grandfather Robert started this practice. His brother, H.C. Kelly, who was by all accounts an outstanding person, was elected a Member of Parliament but was killed when his buggy horses bolted down a very steep hill. So Robert then stood and won the seat of Wooroorra. However, he only held the seat for a short time as he transferred his activities from politics to administration. While still a Member he was appointed a member of the Pastoral Lands Royal Commission. Then, after he had ceased to be a Member of Parliament, he was appointed a member of the original Pastoral Board also. His work entailed a great amount of travelling in horse and buggy all through the State. And it also entailed making nasty tough decisions about what should be the size of pastoral properties and these were not easy judgements to make when so little was known about the soil and rainfall. Evidently Robert was a competent administrator as he was in the job for 20 years.

My father, William Stanley Kelly, was born in 1884. He attended the tiny Merrindie school and later Prince Alfred College in Adelaide. He had the typical undistinguished Kelly school performance but he must have had an unusual hunger for knowledge, because, after returning to the farm he studied, by correspondence, university subjects under Professors Henderson and Mitchell. He did Psychology in 1907 which was the year Mitchell’s *Structure and Growth of Mind* was published. He managed to scrape through his exams in six successive years, one subject each year, which is no mean performance when running a farm and raising a family at the same time.

In 1909 my father married Ada May Dawson, whose father, Charles Dawson, came out from England to South Australia in 1838 and who was a station manager until he came to the inside country to farm at Mt Bryan. My mother was a very serious and studious person with a very stern sense of duty, but she had many endearing qualities also. One of these was the ability to read aloud and before the days of radio she used to hold the family spellbound on winter evenings, reading books like *Treasure Island* and more serious works.

In 1917, when the first war was reaping a grim harvest of the best of the young men in the country, my father left his wife and four children and went away as a private and joined the 48th battalion which had suffered very heavy casualties. He was seriously wounded at Villers Bretonneux in 1918 in March and was sent back to England for hospitalisation.

When the war ended he joined the education unit that was formed to give the Australian troops, who were awaiting return to Australia, some useful and interesting instruction. So he was made lieutenant, asked to write a simple text book called *Beef, Mutton and Wool*, and to do all kinds

of interesting tasks. They were able to teach a lot of soldiers woolclassing and other farming skills. It was during this period in Britain that my father met F.L. McDougal, who was later prominent in the Australian civil service, particularly in the field of international trade negotiations and who was later responsible for my father being asked to join the Tariff Board.

My father returned to Australia in 1919 and quickly settled down to being a good farmer again and was made a member of the State Advisory Board of Agriculture and was soon showing up as a potential leader in the farming field. But then, out of the blue, in 1929 came an invitation to join the Tariff Board. He later found out that McDougal had been so impressed with my father's ability to think clearly that he strongly recommended my father to the then Prime Minister, Mr Bruce, who was looking for a Tariff Board member with a rural background.

My father served on the Board all through the dark depression days when it took real courage not to recommend protection for industries that were not economic and efficient. In those days there were very few trained economists in Australia, but my father was particularly fortunate in striking up a firm friendship with Professor L.F. Giblin who had a great influence on him. And at about this time the authoritative enquiry into the Australian tariff headed by Professor Brigden was made public. This document still remains the most respected work in this field.

My father stayed in Melbourne on the Tariff Board until 1939. Because of the outbreak of war there was then little interest in the erection of tariff barriers to keep overseas goods from competing with Australian goods. The Germans were soon to demonstrate a great competence in doing this. There being little interest in the work of the Tariff Board, my father sought and obtained leave to go to Britain to see if he could do something to help the war effort. So my mother and he set off by sea at their own expense and stayed in Britain until 1942 doing all kinds of interesting things. He was a member of the Home Guard, his digging partner in the Cambridge vegetable allotment was the famous animal geneticist, Professor Hammond. He became the Australian representative on the International Wool Secretariat, he helped in the development of some rough land in the Brecklands in Norfolk. It was then that he got to know that remarkable man, Ian Clunies-Ross, who later headed the C.S.I.R.O. And it was then that he got to know and respect Professor Charles Martin whose work on myxomatosis on rabbits led the world. Both my mother and father were often in London during the bombing raids, so altogether their stay in Britain was full of interest and opportunity.

They returned to Australia in 1942 and my father came back to the farm so that I could go into the R.A.A.F. But he was almost immediately asked to go to Canberra to act as adviser on agricultural products to the Prices Commissioner, Professor Copland. He also served on the Meat Commission which had taken over from the Meat Board during the war. There was a nice little story told by Fred Brodie, the representative of one of the big meat companies at the farewell ceremony the Commission gave my father on his retirement. "There was a Kelly well known in Australian history who operated on the squatters," Brodie said, "but the Kelly to whom we are saying goodbye today squats on the operators." This comment was typical of the good humoured respect with which my father was held during those difficult days. It was far from an easy task to keep prices high enough to encourage increased production of some products and less of others. And even in war time, when you had the flame of patriotism to reinforce the edict of law, black markets abounded. The story was told of the two doctors during the way who were talking together about experiences in their practices while in the lounge of a hotel. One said to the other, "I have four cases of meningitis in my area," when a chap sitting behind them who wasn't supposed to be listening, tapped him on the shoulder and whispered behind his hand, "I'll take the lot!"

My father also had a good deal to do with the end of the war. The lessons of the dangers that followed the erection of barriers to world trade were then all too clear. During these negotiations, and at other times also, there grew up a firm friendship between the then Prime Minister, Ben Chifley, and my father. The last time Chifley came to South Australia, he spent it with my father on Merrindie.

My parents stayed on in Canberra until 1948 when they came back to live on the farm, in the house that had been built for my grandfather Robert, but he had died before it was finished. My father's next task was very interesting. There had been some exciting developments in the use of trace elements in the sandy soils of the Ninety Mile Desert area in South Australia. As a result of this the life assurance company, the A.M.P., decided to develop a large area of this country and then to sell it to selected settlers. They asked my father to chair the committee that had the general oversight of this scheme and this took up a lot of his time.

My father's last official duty was to represent the rural industries on the Consultative Committee on Import Policy. This group was formed when the government felt that it had to introduce import licensing in order to safeguard our overseas funds in 1952. I know that my father did not enjoy this task as much as he did the others in his life, and towards the end of the Committee's existence he became very concerned that import licensing was being used to give protection of a very high order and that would leave Australia with a lot of problem industries when import licensing was abandoned. This indeed turned out to be the case.

This brief summary of the history of my family would not be complete without the following story. One day I met my mother hurrying down to our house and I could see that she was upset about something. I jumped off my horse and anxiously asked what was troubling her. "It's all your fault, I know you are behind this awful affair. You ought to be ashamed of yourself for causing all this embarrassment to your father and me." "What on earth is the matter, mother?" I wanted to know, so she told me to go and face my father's wrath. So I hurried to my father to find out what devilment I had been up to. I found him sitting at his desk regarding a letter with deep suspicion, as if there were a snake about to bite him. I approached the offending epistle cautiously and this is what I read, in a letter written on the Governor-General's paper:

PERSONAL AND CONFIDENTIAL

*Government House,
Canberra.
1st December, 1950.*

Dear Sir,

I have the honour to inform you it has been ascertained that His Majesty The King would be graciously pleased to approve of your being created a Knight Bachelor.

I am, therefore, directed by His Excellency the Governor-General to request you to indicate to me by telegram whether such an honour would be acceptable to you. A prompt reply would be most helpful.

Then followed directions about how to advise acceptance or rejection. The letter was signed by M. L. Tyrrell, Official Secretary and Comptroller to the Governor-General.

After my father watched me read this he said, "I hope you have had nothing to do with this foolishness, my son, because, if you did, your mother is going to be very angry with you. You surely must see that for her to be called Lady Kelly would be the end of her. Perhaps you should see if we could get it changed to an O.B.E. or some lesser Order." I scouted anxiously around but was smartly told that it was quite improper to even ask for such a favour. So my father wrote a little note to the good and great saying that he was sorry he could not accept such a high honour which he felt would be quite out of keeping with our modest way of life. My mother watched this process with anxious and suspicious eyes.

Then without any consultation between the State and Federal authorities, the State Government wrote to my father offering him an O.B.E. which he accepted with alacrity so everyone was satisfied, even my mother. But I always had a feeling that she was suspicious that there was some devilment somewhere. And really the coincidence was a bit thick when you come to think of it.

My father became very weak and deaf and his voice, too, became almost inaudible before he died in 1969. I used to visit him at the nursing home as often as I could. Because he was so deaf and frail, we used to exchange information by writing everything down on a writing pad which he kept by him to read after I (and other visitors) had gone. Because I was Minister for Navy at the time I always had to be careful what I wrote on the pad because I was never certain who would be reading it besides my father. On one visit he wrote in his feeble, faltering hand, "How if Gorton going?" So I replied with two pages of carefully qualified praise. He read it through, raised his eyebrows, asked for the pencil and laboriously spelled out this perceptive comment: "He seems a bit tinny to me."

He died at the same time as the collision between Melbourne and Evans.