

Rolling into the World

Packed with childhood adventures that are sometimes hilarious, sometimes terrible, *Rolling Into the World* begins with ABC broadcaster and former Federal MP Eoin Cameron's birth on the slopes of the volcanic crater of Mount Gambier. From riding on the lino polisher to homemade rocket launches, from Actavite to *Biggles*, his experiences growing up in a constantly expanding Catholic family during the 1950s and 60s make a terrific read.

Eoin Cameron was born in Mount Gambier in 1951, the second eldest of ten children. He worked as a farm labourer and roustabout in shearing teams in the Great Southern; did a stint in a salmon fishing team at Parry's Inlet and tried (unsuccessfully) to sell used cars in Albany. At eighteen he jagged a job as an announcer at Radio 6VA in Albany, where he met his wife Wendy. Eoin and his new family moved to Perth in the seventies, then Melbourne, then Perth again, to pursue his broadcasting career. In the nineties Eoin was elected the Federal Member for Stirling and served two terms in Canberra. Eoin is still married to Wendy and has three children and eight grandchildren. He is currently breakfast presenter on ABC Local Radio in Perth.

Rolling into the World

memoirs of a ratbag child

EOIN CAMERON

FREMANTLE 
fine independent publishing PRESS

This book is dedicated to my wife Wendy, who kept up the pressure to get it finished. To my parents Duncan and Imelda, who had the courage to 'seize the day' and head West with ten kids in tow. To Woz, Goog and Ig for their encouragement. To my cousin Rob and his family, and to Sister Andrina Foreman RSJ, born Margaret Foreman at Clare, South Australia, in 1929. She entered the convent at Kensington, South Australia in 1947. Sister Andrina dealt with 'ratbag' kids all over South Australia before she died at Tappeiner Court Nursing Home, Kensington in 1990. She was a great Tarantella dancer!

Contents

1	Jane Street	9
2	The Odeon	22
3	Space and the Spacemaster	41
4	Nangwarry	51
5	The Stork and Stuff	65
6	Kangaroo Club and Television	82
7	Beachport	96
8	Beanbri	112
9	Not the 'F' Word	130
10	Marist Brothers, 1963	144
11	Self Abuse	162
12	Bastards in Black	173
13	The Cheese Factory, 1966	190
14	Going West	200

1

Jane Street

On the fourth day of January 1951, Communist forces overran the Korean capital Seoul in what was to be the early stages of a bitter and bloody war. At about the time that the Communist tanks were rolling into Seoul, I was rolling into the world in Mount Gambier, South Australia — well not exactly ‘rolling’ into the world. I’m sure my mother would have been mightily relieved had it been as easy as that, but in the sunrise hours of that summer day I was born in the beautiful old Mount Gambier hospital.

The hospital was set high on the slopes of the decaying craters of volcanoes long since dead, overlooking what was then a town of medium size, serving the timber milling and agricultural industries which lay around it. The old hospital was something of a gothic structure, which would have served well as the set for ‘The Addams Family’ or ‘The Munsters’ — grey and foreboding with turrets and spires, ramparts and balconies. The high-gloss green wards and dark corridors were probably hell to work in, because of their age, but the building was imposing, even lovely in its own way.

As we Australians tend to do to most of our structural heritage, the wreckers' ball found its way through the old building in 1971 after years of its standing vacant and falling into disrepair. The magnificent old hospital was replaced by an atrocity after the style of a Stalinist bunker, but then Stalinist bunkers were all the go in the fifties, and every hospital of the era must have been built from the same set of plans.

I was born second of ten kids to Duncan and Imelda. My folks met at a dance at the old Glencoe woolshed. My dad lived on a farm at Glencoe owned by his grandmother and uncle. His father was a stock and station agent I think, but he died just a few days after Mum and Dad married. Although we kids never knew either of our grandfathers, we referred to them as 'Papa' Cameron and 'Papa' Harrap respectively.

For Mum and Dad it must have been love at first sight, because Dad used to ride for miles on his pushbike from Glencoe into Mount Gambier when he was courting my mum in the late forties. Dad was a 'rev head' before 'rev heads' had been heard of, and after the bicycle he got a motorbike, and by the time I came along they'd progressed to a Morris Cowley.

Religion didn't take long to rear its ugly head. Mum was the youngest of twelve kids, Dad the eldest of seven. The Camerons were Presbyterian, the Harraps Catholic. This may have been the cause of some early family tensions, but as kids we were pretty much oblivious to anything that might have been bubbling away under the surface in family relationships. All our Harrap relatives were Catholic, and all the Camerons Protestant, except for one great uncle who married a Catholic girl, and brought their kids up

as Catholics. In our case my mum won out too, because most of us ended up with Catholic names and, at least in the beginning, went to Catholic schools.

The best thing about being part of a large family is that you can seem to have literally millions of relatives. I had aunties and uncles coming out of my ears. Some people might see that as something of a setback, but growing up in a mid-sized country town, it was definitely a plus to be related to a large proportion of the population. For a start, it seemed that you knew someone in every second street, so ‘Safety Houses’ were unheard of and unnecessary. There were always plenty of cousins to muck around with, and some family or other would always be going to the beach or on a picnic with room for another child or two to tag along.

My older brother is Peter, then after me came Charles, Malcolm, Bernadette, Josephine, Gerard, Mary, Murray and Imelda. I suppose had there been more kids we would have surely included a Theresa, Clare, Damien or Patrick! My mother apparently wasn’t overly thrilled with my arrival — in later years she confided she had desperately wanted a girl, having just had her first boy. But, there I was, unwanted or not; I was here to stay.

If she was hanging for a girl, Mum was in for a pretty tough old time. Disappointment was to follow disappointment with the arrival of Charles and then Malcolm. I’m sure she wouldn’t have described their births that way, but the drought finally broke with the arrival of Bernadette.

Ignorance truly is bliss, and I didn’t discover for many years the facts about my frosty reception — it’s probably something that falls into the ‘too much information’ category — you don’t really need

to know you were rejected at birth. But it couldn't have scarred me too badly, because for all my life I've been under the impression I was a favourite. Of course, at some level I might have known, for once the thaw began, to pay my mother back, I promptly refused to breastfeed. Or this may have been nature's way of issuing an early warning: 'Don't push it, when this kid starts to eat he won't stop!' And I didn't! Although I was never obese, I was what might be called 'well covered', with a metabolism which was super efficient when it came to making the most of everything I ate.

* * * *

Not that I could have cared less at the time, but the big movies of the year of my birth have certainly stood the test of time. The Best Picture Oscar went to *An American In Paris*, which was some feat when you consider it was up against *The African Queen*, for which Humphrey Bogart got the gong as Best Actor, and *A Streetcar Named Desire* with Vivien Leigh as Best Actress. Interestingly 1951 was also the year of the introduction of colour television in the United States, though it would be more than twenty years before our TV screens burst into colour. Come to think of it, in 1951 we didn't even have black and white TV: we had to wait until the Melbourne Olympics in 1956 for that.

* * * *

Wanted or not, I was taken home from hospital to a little house in Jane Street. Jane Street ran parallel with Mount Gambier's main

drag, Commercial Street, and the house was of the kind where the verandah meets the footpath. The house had been there so long, it looked like it was sinking into the ground, an impression confirmed by the limestone walls, which drew up the damp from the earth and were covered in moss and mould. The inside, too, was gloomy and dank and very basic. Life probably wasn't all that easy for my mum, with a succession of new babies, and such basic living conditions.

* * * *

The kitchen had an old zinc sink with a razor-sharp edge. When I was very small I stood on my three-wheeler to get some extra height to reach the tap. Of course, the trike rolled out from under me. I grabbed the sharp edge of the sink to prevent my fall, and badly slashed three of the fingers of my right hand almost through to the bone.

With older toddler (Peter) in tow and new baby (Charles) under her arm, Mum ran me around to the doctor's house, fortunately only a street away, to have me patched up. Maybe my fingers were too small, or perhaps I was carrying on too badly for him to even attempt to stitch me, but for whatever reason the doctor treated my fingers with some kind of powder and bandaging. Under the circumstances, he did a fairly good job, though to this day I'm left with an impressive set of scars and a little finger the nerves of which are well and truly buggered. Over the years I've managed to impress people with various stories explaining how I got the scars: just about any tale has to be more exciting than grabbing the sharp edge of a sink when a trike disappeared from under me.



*I must have spent a lot of time naked in the backyard of Jane Street.
Here being hosed down by older brother Peter.*



Au naturel again in the Jane Street backyard.

* * * *

The house in Jane Street had a large backyard with a timber fence surrounding it. We had a great time in summer playing under the sprinkler and making a glorious mess with mud pies. Where there's mud there's worms, and I think my mum took a long time to recover after putting her hand into the pocket of a pair of Peter's shorts one washing day, only to grab half a pound of plump and juicy wriggling earthworms.

We didn't see much of Dad at Jane Street. He'd be gone before daylight and wouldn't get home until after dark. At the time he was setting up a partnership with Uncle Allen, one of Mum's brothers, to mill timber. They had a single circular sawbench, belt-driven by an old tractor engine. I'm not sure how long they operated like that before they built their first 'proper' mill, but they must have been doing all right because before I started school, Mum and Dad built a brand new house in a 'new area' of town in Acacia Street.

Altogether, my recollections of the Jane Street house are fairly sparse, and I probably only remember it at all because for years after we'd left it, we'd be told 'that's where we used to live' every time we drove past.

* * * *

While our house was being built in Acacia Street, Princess Elizabeth became Queen upon the death of her father King George VI, Dwight D Eisenhower became President of the United States, Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay climbed Mount Everest, Dr

Jonas Salk began inoculating children against polio, and Rock and Roll was sweeping the world. American disc jockey Allen Freed had used the term 'Rock and Roll' to describe the rhythm and blues music which up until the early fifties had mainly been popular with black Americans. Somehow the expression 'Rock and Roll' was more acceptable to white society. Bill Haley and the Comets were unlikely Rock and Roll idols — Bill was overweight with thinning hair, and the group looked like a collection of middle-class accountants — but 'Shake Rattle and Roll' they did, and hit the charts. Critics of the day wrote it off as a passing fad, but Rock and Roll was here to stay.

Grace Kelly was the darling of the big screen, she picked up the Best Actress Oscar in 1954 for *The Country Girl*, and the brooding and edgy Marlon Brando was Best Actor in the Oscar-winning movie of the year, *On The Waterfront*.

* * * *

Things must have been going fairly well at the mill, and quite a number of my relatives, mainly uncles, were working with my dad and Uncle Allen, and it wasn't long before we shifted to Acacia Street. The new area of town was full of streets called Banksia, Wattle, Redgum and so on; it was a veritable forest, with not a tree in sight.

Dad had managed the building of the house himself, organising the various tradesmen. Like most houses at that time, it was built from Mount Gambier stone, huge ashlar of sawn limestone. In the stone you could see all the little seashells and fossilised bits of

creatures from ancient times. Mount Gambier stone made an excellent building material because the blocks were so thick, about six inches. They made terrific insulation in summer, but were not so marvellous in winter when they always seemed a bit damp and cold.

If you didn't whitewash the house fairly regularly, it became discoloured with the damp into a dull blotchy grey colour. Even if the damp didn't extend to the interior, it looked miserable, so it was a regular ritual to paint the house with 'Boncote' to keep it bright and white. Contrast the white walls with bright blue gutters and rich red corrugated iron roof, and in the parlance of the time our new house was 'snazzy' to say the least!

Leading down from our back porch was a concrete ramp, and as we went down the ramp and around the corner of the house, we kids would often take a bite out of the edge of the limestone, chew it and spit it out. It made your teeth go all slippery and squeaky. Dad wasn't all that impressed. He'd say to Mum, 'You wouldn't believe it, but those little b's are slowly eating the house!' Dad didn't use the 'f' word in those days, but of course those were the days before he was truly tested, although the kids slowly eating the house should have given him a rough pointer as to what he could expect.

All our relatives and friends oohed and aahed over our new house, and it truly must have been a picture in a 1950s sort of way. The kitchen was a big room with a Rayburn slow combustion stove. There were overhead cupboards as well as under bench cupboards, and each cupboard door was painted a different colour. Vinyl floor tiles were laid in a random pattern, again in every colour under the sun, and some colours, I'm sure, which didn't occur naturally. They were very classy tiles, with flecks through

them to give a sort of marbled effect, and to keep them in peak condition, they had to be polished once Mum had washed them. Being resourceful, which was probably a matter of necessity, Mum would spread the Wundawax over the tiles, then let us kids slide all over them in thick socks. We also had a state of the art maroon and silver electric polisher, which looked like a cross between the front bonnet of an FJ Holden and a Second World War German helmet. It had three rotating polishing brushes and was virtually uncontrollable at any speed. If the polisher actually physically got away from you, the motor would automatically cut out as soon as the handle hit the floor. Which was good to know. Bernadette being the baby at the time would get to ride on the polisher as it whirled around, although Mum wasn't too keen on that idea. 'You could hit a wet patch,' she used to say, 'and the baby could be electrocuted.' I think what she was really worried about was the baby weeing into the polisher's motor, and getting electrocuted in that way.

In the centre of the kitchen stood our chrome and Laminex table and chairs. The top of the table was green fake marble and the chairs were padded with green vinyl with cream piping — the height of good taste, though I don't know why the chairs weren't all in different colours, to go along with the cupboard doors and floor tiles.

Off the kitchen was the dining room, except we hardly ever ate in there. The phone was in the dining room. It was the black Bakelite type with a rotary winder knob on the front of it and the bell fixed to the wall, separate from the phone. It had a particularly loud ring, and could be heard all over the house. The phone itself could be unplugged from the wall socket quite easily, and often proved an irresistible target for young hands. On one of the numerous occasions

when the phone had disappeared and the bell was ringing off the wall, Mum was dashing around screeching, ‘Where’s the ruddy phone?’ — ‘Ruddy’ was about as profane as Mum got — and Charles, the toddler at the time, was kneeling down by the empty phone socket, yelling, ‘Hang on, Mum’s coming!’

Between the dining room and lounge, and the lounge and the entry hall, there were double glass doors etched with mermaids blowing bubbles. Now we’re talking ‘real snazzy’ — the mermaids had breasts. As breast feeding was an ongoing feature in our house, the mermaids’ breasts were not particularly fascinating until we noticed that the kids of visiting friends and relatives were transfixed by them, with lots of giggling and snickering about ‘rude bits’.

* * * *

Because our house was fairly big for the time, Mum and Dad used to hold ‘Housie’ nights to raise funds for the church and for Mater Christi, the Catholic school — Housie was a game a lot like Bingo, if not the same. It was at one of these Housie nights, when sleeping arrangements had been changed about, that things went terribly wrong. Some people would bring their kids with them, and put them down to sleep in the big kids’ bedroom, which was more like a dormitory with four beds in it. This was the room we four eldest boys usually slept in, but for the purposes of the evening, we were all put in Mum and Dad’s bed.

Exploring Mum and Dad’s room was pretty exciting at any time, and this particular night was no exception. There was nothing spectacular to report, except that in the top drawer of the laminated

cherry wood dressing table with its circular scallop-edged mirror, there was a box of Aspros. Aspros were mysterious things that grown-ups took from time to time to make them feel better. They were packaged in a fascinating way, with all the little tablets folded neatly inside what was effectively a long paper tape. Aspros then tasted much as they do now — pretty dreadful — but what's a kid to do? I ate the lot! This was just before I started school, so I must have been about four at the time, and I should have known better, especially considering the Aspros tasted so horrible.

I don't recall whether the downhill slide was sudden and I certainly don't recall what brought my overdose to the attention of the adults — probably one of my brothers dobbed me in — but that was the ruin of one perfectly good Housie night. The family doctor, whom I believe secretly loathed us kids, told my mum over the phone to make me drink heaps of warm salty water. I don't know how much salty water was forced down my throat but it seemed like gallons, and it had the desired effect — the entire contents of my stomach, including the Aspros and probably one or two of my lesser organs, presented themselves into the bucket that had been strategically placed in front of me. I don't know exactly what part my Aunty Ev played in this little saga, but she must have had something to do with it, because to this day, whenever I think of Aunty Ev, I can taste Aspros and warm salty water.

About this time, Josephine made her appearance. At last another girl, and a sister for Bernadette. We called her Fluff because of her fluffy hair and the name stuck.