

## Eulogy for Audrey Katherine Allen Abbie.

On 28 December 1941, Masseur Audrey Simpson in Singapore wrote a letter to her mother, to be opened in the event of her being killed, or taken prisoner. She did this “because things are getting a bit uncertain over here.” Given that the Japanese were at that time carrying all before them, this was something of an understatement, but it was also realistic. And as the letter tells us a lot about Audrey Abbie, I shall quote most of it. She wrote “so that if anything unpleasant happens you won’t have the added grief of believing that my peace of mind was upset. Nor that it is just a waste. I have been so very fortunate in my life up till now that I can’t have missed much – what lovely things we have done together! And you, darling Mummy, could not be improved upon.

“Do not think of me as being frightened, for so far I have not been. And in any case it is not the body that matters. Remembering how you and Jan do not fall down at a crisis I shall not either, with God’s help.

“I hope you do not have to read this, but if you do it is because I wanted you to know that twenty-five such happy years as I have spent are worth paying for.”

Here we see characteristics that remained part of her all her life: love of family, common sense, unsentimental acceptance of what she could not control, belief in a good cause (in this case the war), consideration of others, and belief in God.

In the event, Audrey herself opened the letter in May 1942, and we, 72 years later, are able to remember, and to celebrate her survival, and what she did with the rest of her long life.

She was born in 1917, the fourth child and second daughter of Alfred Allen Simpson, and his wife Doris. Two more sons were to follow her. It was a large family, and lived, from 1919, in a house to match. Alfred was able to buy Undelcarra and its nearly 27 acres as a result of a successful wheat speculation, and it remained Audrey’s home for most of the years before her marriage in 1967. It was a wonderful place in which to grow up – in those days parents seem not to have worried when their children were out of sight, and the Simpson children took advantage of its creek, trees, fruit trees and broad

acres. The children grew up as close-knit a family as was possible when 17 years separated the youngest and the oldest. Audrey was in the middle, and so was both influenced by her elders, and influenced her younger siblings. But only to the extent that she or they wished – the Simpsons were not a one size fits all family. It was not Audrey who threw the knife rest that damaged the portrait of an ancestor, Sarah Neighbour, in Undelcarra's dining room – which was after the children had graduated from the nursery. (Normally, meals were much more decorous, as the family often read. If someone asked for salt, each diner would raise the nearest condiment in the air, not lifting their eyes from their book, until a soft "thankyou" indicated the request was met, when all the hands would sink back.)

Audrey was educated at two schools, the first within walking distance of Undelcarra, which was run by her maternal grandmother, Edith Hübbe, who had been widowed in the Boer War. The two remained close until Mrs. Hübbe died in 1942. Her second school was Creveen, in North Adelaide, where she went from 1926 until 1934, in which year she was a prefect. At this school, and like her elder sister Janet, she entirely failed to master mathematics, but she seems otherwise to have been very successful, for she retained a lasting affection for the place, and, until she outlived them, many of her friends dated from that era. She was a girl-guide leader, debated, acted, and edited the school magazine. She also wrote poems, at least one of which was deemed worthy of disinterested praise by the English master of Form Remove A at St. Peter's College, when submitted (as his own) by a nephew. My own favourite was An Ode to Romulus Augustulus, the captive 6<sup>th</sup> Form Frog.

In 1936 she, her mother, and Janet sailed to Europe, according to family lore to remove Janet from an undesirable suitor. This was no small decision, for Allen had recently had the first of a series of strokes that ultimately killed him, but go they did – and had a high old time. Aside from England, they visited France, Germany (to visit relatives, where Janet found her Adelaide Hills German was understood by the natives), Ireland and Dalmatia. It was the time of Edward VIII's abdication, George VI's coronation (which they watched from outside the doors of Westminster Abbey) and recovery from the Great Depression. The

girls were presented at court, went to May Week balls at Cambridge – and helped in baby clinics in the slums.

They returned to Australia in 1937, having been away for 18 months. It had been a valuable experience for Audrey, enlarging her horizons, and, she said, giving her greater self-confidence. Also, she learnt to dance, a useful skill in Adelaide where a whole crop of her contemporaries were enjoying or enduring dances or balls for a variety of reasons – 21<sup>st</sup> birthdays, comings out and so on. One had to be fit in those days.

Audrey resumed her education. Despite, or because of, her Creveen education, she lacked the scientific prerequisites for Botany, and so studied physiotherapy. She emerged as a fully qualified masseuse, as physiotherapists were then known, and at the same time, the war had begun. Her first job was at the Royal Adelaide Hospital, but at some stage, she had decided she was going to war – as did two of her brothers; her brother-in-law was already in the permanent navy.

Her actual enlistment was dated 22 August 1941, and the description of SFX 14162 reads: height 5 ft 5 ins, weight 136 lbs, chest (max) 35 ½ ins, complexion fair, eyes blue, hair brown. In the photograph, she looks determined. She served for a total of 1678 days, of which 542 counted as “Overseas Qualifying Service,” and her war gratuity entitlement was exactly £99.

So much for the statistics. What actually happened?

Less than a month after enlisting she found herself on the “Wanganella” en route to Singapore, where she was attached to 2/13 Army General Hospital. With her was her colleague Marjorie Hill, and, uniquely, the two friends were to stay together for the whole of their war service. There were two months of peace, during which she and her colleagues learnt the Army way of doing things, and did their medical jobs. Amongst non-medical tasks was the ordering of suitable uniforms from local dressmakers, the Army having provided none – they used their Victorian colleagues’ clothes as patterns. Then the war came, on 7 December, and three weeks later, Audrey wrote her good-bye letter to her mother. Life had become real and earnest.

Initially the casualties came from motorbike and car accidents, but then military wounds came in. There was not much massaging to do. Instead, the physiotherapists were responsible for putting fractured limbs, sometimes compound fractures with long bones protruding through the skin, in plaster casts, after the surgeons had cleaned the wounds. As Audrey described it, when the hospital was back in a deserted boys' school on Singapore Island: "We can hear and see the bombing. We have had one direct hit so far – but no casualties. We are very busy. Our patients come in mainly at night. We physios have been trained to apply plasters – but under very different circumstances. Nothing could have prepared us for this. We rotate in 3 shifts through theatres where we apply the plaster splints. There are 4 operating tables and sometimes they are all occupied, so our wounded men wait, just outside on stretchers. We still have to do our ward work as well, but one of us is always in theatre."

Her escape was equally fraught. Two ships carried the medical personnel, *Vyner Brooke* and *Empire Star*. The former was sunk, and all but one of the Australian nurses died by bomb or bullet. *Empire Star* was lucky: twice hit, she suffered some casualties, and may have shot down two of the attackers; but she got through. In old age, Audrey pointed out that her ordeal was no different from that of any woman during the London blitz.

The rest of Audrey's war was something of an anticlimax. She had two years in Alice Springs, where the strangeness soon wore off, some months in Brisbane, and then took part in the liberation of Borneo. She was demobilized in 1946, and resumed her career as a physiotherapist. In 1947 she sailed for London, where she studied at the Brompton and Harefield hospitals, where pioneering work was done in chest surgery. A big role for physiotherapists was to promote useful patterns of breathing, both before and after lung surgery, to avoid chest deformities. Audrey became adept at this, and when back in Adelaide, she joined D'Arcy Sutherland's team at the Royal Adelaide hospital, and accompanied them twice to Papua New Guinea. As well, she had her private practice, and was much involved in the institutional side of her profession, for instance the founding of the Physiotherapy Society of South Australia, and was also associated with the Australian Physiotherapy Society for many years. She

taught in the physiotherapy school, and generations of students (including my sister-in-law) remember her for her incisive and questioning intellect, her integrity, and her high standards.

But physiotherapy was only a part of her life. She was a great traveller, visiting her old friend Anne Clemens, in Cyprus, on her way back from London, and she showed a taste for exotic travel – perhaps the most memorable trip was from Colombo to London by bus in 1960. She had also developed a great love for fly-fishing, and over the years became a formidable angler. This involved her in travels within South America, North America, Finland, the British Isles, Australia, and New Zealand by car, plane, helicopter, boat, you name it, in search of the elusive trout, with increasing success. It was my privilege to watch her land a 9 pounder in her 92<sup>nd</sup> year. She released it.

And when chasing fish became too complicated, she travelled to see plants and gardens – to Yunnan, Costa Rica, and other exotic places. Which brings me to another of her activities – her philanthropy. Over many years she gave both generously and anonymously to a variety of good causes. She was perhaps unusual in philanthropists in that she did not search for big ticket, highly visible items to support, rather she asked organisations what they needed money for, and then provided it. An exception to her usual anonymity is the prize for the top final year student in veterinary science at Roseworthy, which she handsomely endowed. She only allowed her name to be used after it was pointed out that a) most of the students were female and b) that she was female and c) anybody else's name would be inappropriate. And knowing her views, it would be inappropriate for me to detail her munificent gifts here, save only to mention the Botanic Gardens, where she continued the Simpson family tradition of generosity. And, more actively, she was a garden guide for some 20 years.

Another family interest Audrey involved herself in was the Travellers' Aid Society. In the 1950s she took over from her eccentric Aunt Katie as the Unitarian Church's delegate, and one thing led to another, so that she became president, a position she held until about 1984, and only resigned from the Society in 2005. She presided over the Society's transition from a body that

offered refuge to one that offers travellers assistance, as government gradually took over protection and accommodation.

I shall conclude with a few remarks about her personal life. Attentive listeners will note that I have got to 2005, and have not mentioned men. She was an attractive woman, and particularly in the war years, spent much time where there was a surfeit of men – so what happened? We know from her mother's letters – her own do not survive – that men did figure in Audrey's life; once Doris warned of the dangers of adultery, but we don't know if the warning was general or particular. There was a man named Angus, in the Dogras, and there were others, but all proposals were refused. I once asked her about one of her correspondents, and she said, yes, he wanted to marry me, too; there was then a thoughtful silence, which she broke by saying "He was musical." (She did, however, accumulate godchildren, who she enjoyed as they grew older – as she did her nephews and nieces, upon whom she exercised a disinterested and benign, but occasionally very direct influence, especially my brother and me, who also lived at Undelcarra.) So I was surprised when she wrote to me in New Britain in 1966, when she was 49, saying that this man named Andrew Abbie wanted her to marry him, and she was going to.

This may not have been a surprise back in Adelaide, for Andrew was the widower of Dr Ruth Heighway, who had been a dear friend of Audrey's for years. They married in 1967, and I formed a high opinion of Andrew's imperturbability as he awaited his bride in the church, the Wakefield Street ancestor of this building, while the Rolls circled the block under the mistaken impression that Andrew had not arrived. Both had to make concessions – Andrew gave up smoking in bed, Audrey fishing. But the marriage was all too short, Andrew dying in 1976.

Audrey thereafter chose to live alone, but certainly not in retirement. Many of the travels I have mentioned occurred during her widowhood, and it was now she got into her stride as a philanthropist. She marched for the last time on ANZAC day in 2006, when she reluctantly gave sciatica best but she still fished. And she at last built a fishing shack in Tasmania, a project she had mulled over for years, and was able to enjoy it a few times. But finally, the flesh ceased

being obedient, and she had to have care 24 hours a day. This was an invasion of her privacy she eventually accepted, having grown up with servants – and because of the superb qualities of her carers. Eventually, she died in her sleep, in her bed, in her house, as she wished.

John Mayo (nephew)