

The story of my life

My family tree, on my father's side, goes back to Normandy, in France; the record fades out around 1000 years ago, with a man called "Baldric the Teuton". Later the family surname became Neuville, then Neville, then Nevill. I was born on the eighteenth of July 1947, in a little mining town, Luanshya, in what was then Northern Rhodesia, central Africa (now Zambia). My mother's maiden name was Hilda Evelyn South. Dad had a name he never liked or used: Hilary Fines-Clinton Nevill. He always went by his nickname: Bill. Mum's family line also had a French connection, with her grandmother French-born. I had an older sister (Janet) and a younger sister (Ann). In Luanshya my father worked at the Rhone Antelope Copper Mine, while my mother (as was expected of expatriate wives) was a lady of leisure, with three servants, and later three young children.

The family moved from Africa to Australia (Melbourne) in 1951, where dad commenced work as a lecturer in mining engineering at the University of Melbourne. Hilda had arthritis which had arrived at an early age; this gradually restricted her flexibility, particularly in her hands, and gave her a good deal of pain. Mum had ambitions to be a writer. Although she wrote well, few of her short stories were actually published, and many manuscripts were lost with the passing of the years. She was intelligent and articulate (still trading in shares at 90 years of age). Dad was a quiet, gentle character; a man of few words. He was at heart a prospector rather than a miner: that is to say a dreamer. Uncovering the mysterious secrets of the world below our feet was one of his great loves. His two other great loves were Hilda, and his children. Bill and Hilda were devoted to their children. After both had died, I was reminded of this when I noticed the inscription inside one of my scientific textbooks, published in 1950, which I was still using in 2006. They had bought their son an expensive technical textbook for his sixth birthday! How many parents would do that? Not many, I think.

In 1952 my parents bought an old weatherboard house at 15 Linacre Road Hampton, a suburb of Melbourne on the edge of Port Phillip Bay. The house was quite large with nine main rooms, so I had my own bedroom, as did Jan and Ann. The house was set up with servants' bells, a relic of an earlier era. On over half an acre of land, there was room for fruit trees and a vegetable garden. The dilapidated tennis court was converted to a chook-run. The old stables, also nearly falling down, became a garage for dad's car, a dark blue Buick with a straight-eight, side-valve engine. The house was built (1905) in the style of its day, with 14 foot ceilings, sash windows, and a fire-place in almost every room. The house was freezing in winter, except for the kitchen, where a fire (coal or wood) was kept burning in a closed heater. Our first refrigerator ran on kerosene, although the house had 240v power. There was no TV in those days, which, looking back, I count as one of the many great blessings of my childhood. I was 16 years old before a TV appeared in the living room. Mum enjoyed it, while the rest of the family paid it little attention.

The beaches of Port Phillip Bay were only a few minutes walk away. In those days the tea-tree (*Leptospermum*) scrub behind the beach was dense, full of rabbits and the occasional feral deer. Our home in Hampton was a wonderful place to grow up. We had a dog called Chum, a Labrador/border-collie cross. He considered himself an integral part of the family, and would look awfully sad if we went out without him.

The Sandringham Yacht Club occupied a part of the nearby foreshore. A submarine, I suppose from the First World War, had been sunk in shallow water to provide some protection for moored yachts, but this proved inadequate and a substantial rock wall was built, which still stands today. This soon became populated with a mass of fish of various species, and when I first started spearfishing at the age of 14, it was easy for dad and me to catch enough fish to feed the family in only 15 minutes. Today that would be impossible. The fish population of the breakwater has all but vanished.

My sisters and I attended a local public school, Hampton State, for years 1 to 6. Providing a good education for us was a top priority for my parents, and we moved to private schools for years 7 to 12; Jan and Ann attended Firbank, and I was sent to Brighton Grammar. I can't remember a single incident of bullying, which seems to be a feature of schools today. My

fondest memories of my school days relate to the pranks we played on our teachers, some of which were quite elaborate. I had two special friends at school, Ian Nixon and John Hardy.

My mother had a great love for animals, and my father had a love for the outdoors. I was lucky enough to inherit these traits. In many ways these have been the corner-stones of my life. Growing up on such a large suburban block, our pets included our dog, cats, rabbits, pigeons and other miscellaneous pets. My two sisters both became vets.

Janet caused quite a commotion on one occasion when she took her pet spider (a large huntsman) to school. The spider had become used to spending its time under the lapel of her school uniform. While in her final year at school, Janet won the Victorian Year 12 Science Prize for a study which demonstrated that a spider can form a dependant relationship with a human.

When my parents had their friends over at our place in Linacre Road, they would of course ask me and my sisters what we wanted to be when we grew up. Answering this question seemed easy for Jan and Ann, but I felt uncomfortable. Sometimes I would answer truthfully (which of course embarrassed my parents) "well, I don't really want to get a job". All I wanted to do was retire... preferably at the age of around 30, so I realised I would at least have to work until then. As matters transpired, by the time I reached 30 I had only spent two years in employment, and I would be 50 before I actually did retire. Even then I went back to work almost immediately, although by that time I was self-employed.

My first year at Monash University (1966) was spent studying philosophy, psychology, sociology and legal theory. The following year I discontinued study, and worked in various casual jobs in different places around Australia - in a sawmill in the Snowy Mountains, as a door-to-door salesman in Sydney, cleaning railway engines in Brisbane, in a brick factory in Townsville, as a road labourer in Darwin, and underground in Peko copper mine (Tenant Creek) as an electrician's offsider. I loved every job, except as salesman (here I was a dismal failure). These adventures took about a year, with periods of travel in between jobs. I particularly loved the freedom of being completely alone, without responsibility or fixed timetables. I stayed where I wanted, and I moved on when I wanted. At that time there was a shortage of unskilled labour in rural Australia, and I could always find a job, where-ever and when-ever I wanted.

In 1968 I enrolled again at Monash University, this time to study mechanical engineering. I had thought about marine biology, but there seemed to be very few jobs available in this field. However, if I had my time over again, this is the area I would study. Looking back, I realise that I made a mistake. But life is a one-way street... you can't go back.

A few months after starting the course I was involved in a serious car accident, which left me in a coma for three days, and in hospital for a prolonged period of time. However, with the help of friends, and the support of a wonderful girl (Rosemary) I completed the engineering degree in 1971 (although I have never fully recovered from the accident).

I began work as a quality control engineer in a furniture manufacturing plant in 1972. However Rosemary and I were restless, and the job not very inspiring, so (with the help of money from the estate of my Uncle Norman) we bought a VW kombi camper, professional camera gear, and a tinny (dinghy), and set off around Australia. Our idea was to make a one-hour professional documentary of Australia's national parks. We did a lot of study and had a plan and a rough script. We had no experience in film-making, and ultimately we were unable to produce a commercial product, although we did sell footage to Channel Seven, a TV broadcast company.

Those years, 1973-74, predated the explosion of the grey-nomad 4WD era, so the 'outback' was relatively empty. We were young and energetic, and we often felt as though we were the only ones in a huge empty country. Today, the world is entirely different. Many places we camped at (the Olgas for example, Katajuka) are now entirely closed to campers, while other places (like the MacDonald Ranges) are so crowded the experience is completely different.

Undine Reef, off the Queensland coast, is unrecognisable today, its former glory completely lost, largely through destructive overfishing.

It took two years for our money to run out. By this time the economy had slowed, and there was little demand for young engineers. We rented accommodation in Western Victoria (in the town of Broadwater, which was dying, like many other small country towns). I spent a lot of time applying for jobs, and trying to make money from the photos and film we had taken during our trip. Rosemary started writing stories about our travels, which unfortunately never found a publisher (much later she turned to novels). After a rather frustrating year, we returned to Melbourne, funded by a scholarship which enabled me to spend two years studying environmental science at Monash University. Once that was finished, Rosemary funded me through the remainder of my Arts degree, majoring in sociology.

At the close of that course, I was offered a scholarship to study wind energy engineering, but under pressure from Rosemary, who had been working (as a PA and office manager) for years to support us ("please get a proper job") I declined this opportunity and started work with the Victorian Environment Protection Authority, in air pollution control. We bought a lovely little house in Oakleigh, with our cat, Darq. Each day we travelled by train to Melbourne CBD for our jobs

We tried to start a family, but without success. Our relationship became strained. After some time Rosemary and I split up, and she quickly re-married. She chose well, and she and her new partner (Dave) moved to the country east of Melbourne, where they still live. I moved in the same direction, to work for the Department of Planning, in Traralgon, under the guidance of my friend Robin Saunders.

I enjoyed my work. I bought a house in Traralgon, and later a bush block on which I hoped to build. However fate had other ideas... By chance I met a family while I was camping at Wingan Inlet, in Far East Gippsland: one of my favourite places... remote, quiet and beautiful. I was spending a few days there, walking, kayaking and snorkelling. The family was a single mum and two kids, aged 2 and 4. For me it was love at first sight... and not just Nerida (the mum) who was a super-smart (if a little fiery) redhead, but also Jasmine and James, her children, who were out-going, clever, loving, and great fun to be with. James seemed to inherit his mother's dry sense of humour at an early age.

Nerida and the kids moved from their home in Wollongong to live with me at Traralgon. Almost immediately we made a memorable camping trip to Tasmania, based around my Holden HQ panel van (which I owned for 33 years). However, back in Traralgon, I simply assumed that Nerida would be happy being a stay-at-home mum - a huge and obvious mistake, given Nerida's remarkable intellect. With hindsight, I can see that I handled the situation badly, and after a time, Nerida and the kids moved back to Wollongong, where she commenced university study (in the field of human nutrition).

Jasmine said to me "Jonny, it's sad that you and mummy have split up, but **we** haven't split up, have we?" What a sweet little girl! "No" I answered "and we never will". In the years that followed I travelled to Wollongong every four or five weeks. We made two major trips as a family after our break-up. The first was to the Eyre Peninsula in South Australia (also in the HQ van), the second to Fiji. Both trips were wonderful times; being with the kids was just so much fun. They especially loved the swimming pools in the hotels in Fiji! And I was hoping it would be a 'cultural' experience for them!

I started looking for work that would bring me closer to the family. Traralgon was just too far away. My first move was to Canberra, where I worked in the environmental unit of AusAID, Australia's overseas aid agency. That was the most interesting, but also the most frustrating job of my life. The delivery of aid is unique: the people who pay for the product never see it, and the people who receive the product never pay for it. This creates situations in which incompetence and corruption can (and do) flourish. The long bicycle rides to and from the office kept me sane. Canberra has great cycle lanes, often far from ordinary roads. I bought a house in Holder, a southern suburb; the cycle ride to the office took 40-45 minutes. In winter

ice would form on my gloves during the ride, although I would arrive at the office warm and invigorated.

Two years later my friend John Bywater "rescued" me from a difficult situation in AusAID, where I had been transferred to work in the evaluation section (read 'cover up our failures' section). For the next four years I worked with John in the environmental unit of the Queensland Department of Mines. There I met Mike Patchett and Graeme Bartrim, still great friends. But the move to Brisbane had complicated my time with the family - I needed to fly to Sydney then get the train to Wollongong.

Although I enjoyed my work in Queensland I wanted to get back close to Wollongong, and after four years I was lucky enough to get a job in the Wollongong branch of the NSW Environment Protection Agency. This was an exceptional office, staffed almost entirely with smart, friendly and funny people. Out of hours, we would explore the so-called "canyons" in the sandstone escarpment country which surrounds Sydney. And of course I was in Wollongong, right there with the family. By this time I had a long-distance girl-friend: [Miriam](#), a research microbiologist, employed at the University of Melbourne. I had met her years earlier, on the train on the way to work.

As Jasmine and James entered their teenage years, they became increasingly dis-inclined to spend time with either me, or Nerida and her new partner. I remember a day when Nerida and I were taking the kids on an excursion to Sydney by train. James, not then a teenager, sat with us, as usual. However Jasmine (now a 'cool' young lady) sat as far as possible away from us, but still just within eye-sight. She re-joined at Central Station in Sydney, knowing then she would not be seen by any passing school-mates.

With the kids drifting away, the idea of marrying Miriam and starting my own family began to occupy my mind. Miriam also liked the idea, and we agreed to move in together and start a family: that sounded like fun. Miriam was one of those 'larger than life' girls – immensely bouncy. Just so much fun. So I resigned from my job and moved to Melbourne, just as Miriam was leaving for a scientific trip to Antarctica. My timing was bad. A few days before Christmas I got a phone call from Miriam. Surrounded by ice and snow, she had fallen in love with a fellow scientist. They would be married on their return to Melbourne. I was devastated... I had been hoping and dreaming of a life which now would never happen.

My mum (still living in Hampton, in the same house at 15 Linacre Road) agreed to look after my cat, Chasey (a gift from Jasmine). So, with no partner, no cat and no job, in 1997 I set off on a 12-month trip around the world, based on the overseas contacts in my address book. I visited Canada, England, Scotland, Egypt (with my friend Robyn, with whom I was staying in London), Kenya, Uganda (where I was robbed of my wallet and passport), Nepal, Thailand, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, and back home to Melbourne (in 1998). I particularly enjoyed Nepal.

At this stage I was thinking that perhaps I should re-train myself as a school teacher, by doing a Diploma of Education. I was offered funding to do this, but at the last minute I changed my mind. Looking back, I wonder if this was a mistake.... who knows? At any rate, environmental work was easy to get, and I spent the rest of 1998 working for the Department of Finance in Canberra. At the completion of that contract I got another 12-month contract with DPIWE, the Tasmanian Department of Primary Industry, Water and Environment, working on the implementation of the State's new water legislation. The 1999 contract was based in Hobart.

Hobart (apart from its cold winters) turned out to be a pleasant place to live, and I bought a house in the suburb of Sandy Bay in 2002. Once settled in Tasmania, I met and married a Korean, Hong Ja Kim (Sophie) in 2005. Unfortunately we separated five years later. In spite of counselling, our cultural differences turned out to be much more of a problem than we had expected.

While working on Tasmania's water resource legislation, I realised that there was a serious gap between Australia's commitments to international agreements (the RAMSAR wetlands convention, for example) and the programs which had actually been funded to implement

those commitments. I made contacts with other scientists working in the area, and we decided to prepare a book on the issue of freshwater protected areas. The Water Policy Institute at Canberra University and Professor Andrew Boulton provided funding, and the book was in due course published in 2004 (The Australian Freshwater Protected Area Resourcebook; edited by Jonathan Nevill and Ngaire Phillips).

I was now desperately low on funds. A friend (Ingrid) suggested I should apply for a PhD scholarship. I decided that a critical look at the way Australian fisheries were managed, both at State and Federal levels, would be a good idea, and I was successful in obtaining funding from the University of Tasmania. The beauty of PhD funding is that you can work in an area where you have no qualifications or expertise, provided you can convince the funding committee that you will be able to finish the project. This resulted in a final thesis in 2009, and the book based on the thesis in 2010 ('Overfishing under regulation').

The intensity of study and research (both freshwater and marine) over many years had distracted me from things which were important in my life... like friends, and outdoor adventures. I had been glued to my desk ... books, the phone, the computer... for so long my health was suffering. While I was still in contact with Nerida, Jasmine and James, I saw little of them. Jasmine died, suddenly and unexpectedly, in January 2005. A huge shock.

A change of lifestyle seemed necessary. I made the mistake of buying a cruising yacht. Although of course I had heard all the jokes about sailing being like "standing under a cold shower ripping up \$100 notes" I certainly did not understand the true costs of owning the boat, both the financial costs and the cost in time of the necessary maintenance. "Ocean Child" became the centre-pin of my life between 2010 and 2018. The highlights of these eight years were some very special crew, notably Anne, Alice, Brigitte and James (all from Europe), Samantha (Brazil), and Barbara (from the USA) as well as meeting a very special whale, known to the locals in Vava'u as "George". You can find photos of George if you google "the adventures of ocean child".

I am now 70 years of age. The years behind me seem to have slipped by so fast... Some dear friends are dead, while others I have 'lost'. I have lots of ideas for my second life (I hope!). As I write this, I am living alone on board Ocean Child. She is now advertised for sale. Today is a cold windy day in May in Hobart... it certainly feels like winter now.... People ask me "what are you going to do once Ocean Child is sold?" The truth is I don't know...

Dr Jonathan (Jon) Nevill
14a Flowerpot Crescent
Blackmans Bay TASMANIA 7052
Australia
+61 422 926 515
www.onlyoneplanet.com

17 May 2018