

COME OUTSIDE AND PLAY

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'From this solid base (the suburban home),
Ginger...set forth to experience both joy and tribulation.'

Barry Andrews, 'Ginger Meggs: His Story', in *Se Dermody, J. Docker and De Modjeska (eds.), Nellie Melba, Ginger Meggs and Friends*, Malmsbury, 1982, p.214.

On and off, for almost a quarter of a century, Barry Andrews and I swapped stories, making comparisons and contrasts between our respective upbringings as Sydneysider and Melburnian. In recalling memories of our childhood, boyhood and youth, we frequently alluded to our mutual hero, Ginger Meggs, and to how the social milieu created by James Bancks in his comic strips from 1921 to 1952 refracted the real worlds that each of 'us fellas' had inherited and inhabited.

For me, looking back on the years between 1946 and 1958 which saw at either end my fifth and seventeenth birthdays, the little universe in which I lived was centred on my home at Number 8 Butters Street, Regent. I moved there with four others: my mother, a native-born Australian of Anglo-Irish descent who had grown up in Carlton; my father, an emigrant from Scotland who had been demobilized from the RAN at the end of the Second World War; my sister, twenty months younger than I; and my maternal grandmother who was dying of cancer. We arrived as tenants of a recently built, red brick Commission house then situated on a dusty 1/4-acre block devoid of trees but luxuriant in weeds. Three horizontal wooden rails, 2'6" in combined height, constituted the front fence; three slab or paling fences, 4'6" high, marked our side and back boundaries, A narrow concrete path ran from the wire gate at the entrance to three steps that led to the porch. Inside the house were six rooms: a lounge room, kitchen, bathroom and three bedrooms; outside stood a wash-house (laundry), an adjacent lavatory and, at the rear of the backyard, a woodshed. The interior walls of our dwelling were sand-

finished, fawn roll-up blinds were fixed to all the windows and the lounge room was equipped with an open fireplace (the only form of heating in the house); mats and scatter-rugs soon relieved the bareness of wooden floors, as did linoleum in the kitchen; 'a few framed photographs adorned the mantelpiece, but no painting or print was ever hung from the 'picture-rails' on the walls; straw and hair brooms kept the rooms spick and span before the belated purchase of Mr Jolly's electrolux vacuum cleaner. In the front garden the planting and digging of potatoes predated the sowing of lawn and the bedding of hydrangeas; vegetables (beans, pumpkins and tomatoes) and fruit-trees (apple, plum and apricot) gradually appeared in the backyard, and a fowl pen was erected close to the woodshed. In time the three-strand washing line made way for a Hills rotary hoist. Serviced with running water, electricity and sewerage, our home was of basic and manageable design, solid, durable and new. Having previously lived in rented rooms, it seemed to us that 'our place' provided a measure of space and comfort, privacy, happiness and hope. That the bathroom had a bath but no shower, that the kitchen had an ice-chest rather than a refrigerator and that the copper in the wash-house was fuelled by wood were mere inconveniences, although they magnified with the passage of the years. It was a home without ostentation that played a central role in a modest dream of suburban existence at a time when our concept of 'good' was more associated with a full belly than with notions of plenty.

Butters Street ran from east to west and comprised thirty-eight houses - even numbers on the northern side and odd on the southern. In one way an instrument of the post-war reconstruction experiment, its calibrated proportion of private and government-built homes was made possible by an accelerating housing boom. About one-quarter of the street was flat, up to Numbers 9 and 10, whence a hill rose to Numbers 19 and 20 before levelling again towards the intersection with Excelsior Street at its western end. The serpentine course of a municipal water pipeline determined that two blocks would remain grassland which furnished the kids with a fortuitous playground of sorts, albeit a quagmire in winter and a snake and spider and fire hazard in

summer. The road was unsealed, the footpaths simply tracks; between the one and the others, space had been left for what were grandiloquently termed 'nature Strips'. The last houses under construction generated badinage from carpenters, bricklayers and tilers by day, childhood adventure at dusk and pilferage after nightfall. In the early-1950s the street, the gutters and the footpaths were macadamized and concreted. By that stage, a higgledy-piggledy tableau of detached and semi-detached residences had arisen wherein the individuality of the private homes counterpointed the uniformity of the Commission houses whose predominant colours of red, brown and off-white painted them with an external sameness.

The suburb of Regent lay seven miles due north of Melbourne in a limbo between larger Preston to its south and Reservoir to its north; farther to the west sprawled Coburg with its Pentridge Prison and, to the distant northeast, a cemetery and an asylum as the paddocks approached Bundoora. Presumably, someone named 'Regent' after the nearest railway station, though who named the station and in what way it evoked the place or title of some English antecedent remained opaque and in no way interested us. In similar vein, we turned our backs on the nearby countryside of Thomastown and Eltham with its opportunities for camping, swimming and mushroom-gathering, preferring on occasions to walk to the closer venue of Edwardes Lake on forays to capture tadpoles and yabbies, or to Crisp Park where, with a handful of other spectators, we saw tough men who reeked of liniment play games of football. The eastern end of Butters Street joined Spring Street, a larger thoroughfare, in which we shopped. The proprietors of the small retail outlets there knew us all by name, as we did them: Mr Ellis who ran a virtual general store, Mr Moore the butcher, Mr Monaghan the baker, together with the newsagent, greengrocer and two rival milkbar owners. In the late-1940s we continued to use ration coupons, a practice dictated by the short supply of the fruits of prosperity. Better times brought to Spring Street a ladies' hairdresser, a chemist and two competing garages. The survivor of that struggle eventually celebrated victory by calling his premises a service-

Station. The nearest pub was a mile and a half away and we saw drunks spasmodically, usually on a day in December when Mr Ayton, the builder at Number 5, threw an annual party for his workmen. Whether sobriety was a shibboleth, whether adults cherished some unwritten code of maintaining appearances, whether people had too little money to squander, or whether children were packed off to bed too early to notice their elders drinking alcohol, I cannot say.

Our insularity was breached by vendors of another kind, door-to-door salesmen who made perfunctory calls to offer wares that ranged from hairbrushes to cutlery, but who usually departed crestfallen. The more regular and successful pedlars included the rabbit-oh, ruddy and loquacious, renowned for the acuity of his witticisms on the weather, and a vinegary tinker who repaired kettles and sharpened knives, scissors and secateurs. In contrast to these itinerants, our most frequent incomers - each pivotal to the daily and weekly cycles - were the milkman, newspaper boy, baker, postman, iceman and garbageman, four of whom alighted from carts drawn by a single horse whose droppings we collected on a spade for use as garden fertilizer. I best remember the athletic dexterity of the newsagent's son, the aroma from the baker's van, the postie's shrill whistle, the broad shoulders and needle-sharp pick of the iceman who threw chips to the kids, and the appearance of the dustie, indisputably the filthiest person I had ever seen. If these couriers extended our horizons from street and suburb, the more so did travel, 'Going to town', journeying by train in a second class 'dog box' compartment to the city, afforded fascination with the rituals of uniformed porters, station masters, guards and drivers, followed by a sense of dwarfing wonderment at the multitudes in Melbourne's streets and at why all of them hurried, Weekend or Easter visits to Aunt Lida in Caulfield, to Uncle Ted, a poultry farmer in Nagambie, or to Aunt Vera and Uncle Dan in Nathalia, introduced me to customs, manners, accents and words different from those I knew; so, too, did the only family holiday I can recall when we stayed for one full week at an erstwhile army camp at Point Lonsdale and I first saw the sea and fell in love with

everything to do with the beach: the lighthouse, cave, ti-trees, sand, water, boats and fishermen.

Such outings were exceptional and gave place all too soon to humdrum existence. From Monday to Friday - and for some on Saturday morning as well - the men and single women of Butters Street woke early and set off for work, some of them whistling as they went. Crowned by a grey felt hat, the males mostly wore navy or khaki overalls, a shirt, a sweater or a jacket, socks and boots, and normally kept their suit and tie, their overcoat and scarf, their Sunday best, for special occasions such as a wedding or a funeral. Female employees donned a blouse, cardigan and skirt, and wore flat-soled shoes, preserving their frocks, nylon stockings and high heels for grander rituals. The Mums stayed at home and did the myriad jobs that housework entailed, clad in a sturdy dress of some shade of blue or beige which was partly covered by a bright apron. Boys wore shorts and shirts and sand-shoes in summer; colder weather saw them pull on a jumper, leather shoes and long woollen sock that always fell about the ankles; at the age of fourteen they went into long trousers. Girls, while changing with the seasons from cotton dresses to woollen skirts, continued to wear a pinafore. Barbers cut and trimmed each lad's hair in the 'short back and sides' fashion, but the girls grew theirs to shoulder-length and tied ribbons to their plaits or braids, their pigtails or their curls. Skinny and wiry, freckled and tanned, parents and offspring might have given the appearance of conformity to any outsider, of seeming identical save for age and sex, of being conventional, even drab. For all that, we continued resolute and undismayed.

In keeping both with our routine and our clothes were the meals our mothers cooked. The food was standard, unimaginative and overdone, eaten at the regular hours of 7 a.m., noon and 6 p.m. Breakfast consisted of cereals, toast and tea, with a boiled egg twice a week; lunch brought sandwiches of vegemite, peanut butter, honey or jam; at dinner (or 'tea' as we knew it) we were served a hot meal of corned beef, or chops, or sausages, or rabbit, accompanied by two different well-boiled vegetables. A custard, a piece of fruit, rhubarb or a sponge cake made up our

dessert. Friday evening's fish and chips and the roast at Sunday's lunch completed the unvarying pattern. We ate all our meals in the kitchen, seated at a wooden table until the 1950s when Dad bought a laminex setting. Between meals, in hot weather, we drank water or cordial. Lemonade, ice-cream, a sweet sherry and a bottle of beer materialized on birthdays and at Christmas, but coffee we never tasted.

Our nutritionally unbalanced diet may have repercussed on our health. Scrawny and knockkneed, as children we fell prey to colds and flus, to mumps, measles, chicken-pox and whooping cough; a tiny minority contracted pneumonia and diptheria; Kenny Simpson died of Leukaemia. There were, as well, the usual bruises (some parentally inflicted), the accidental cuts and grazes, a broken arm, or leg, or nose. Only one suffered from mental disability, Billy Sewell, the idiot who wandered aimlessly, talking loudly to himself. At the age of six I had my sole first-hand experience of death when made to file past Grandma's coffin and kiss her chiselled lips of stone. None of us wore spectacles, although a number manifestly needed them; few of sat in a dentist's chair until propelled by pain to undergo extractions. We cleaned our teeth less often than we should have; we took a bath once a week in water that was shallow and shared; for the most part, we washed our face and hands, combed our hair, cut or bit-our nails, picked our noses and stank in differing degrees.

The majority of the fathers in the street were ex-servicemen who had returned from the loyalties of conflict and resumed jobs as semi-skilled labourers or as artisans; only two of the thirty-eight had white collar occupations. The predominantly working-class composition of Butters Street was further indicated by the ways in which its inhabitants went to work: for the most part, they travelled by public transport, the train, the bus, or the tram; some rode bicycles, other motorbikes; only two owned cars and one a truck; taxis seldom came near the vicinity. As for religion, while we all professed to be Christians, only a minority attended church every Sunday, noticeably the Roman Catholics and the Methodists. Of their political persuasions, I gained an

impression that the men voted for Labor, that a number of women - including my mother - admired Mr Menzies and that the D.L.P. gained adherents like the parents of my cousins. The surnames of the householders - for instance, Garland, Thornton, Cox and two Smiths - gave more than an inkling of their background; the less common names - O'Toole and Boyle - reminded us of another stock, as did the family known as the Pappases. Children were commonly and prosaically christened John, William, George or Robert, or Robyn, Edna, Maureen or Kathleen. Although theft was a stranger to the street, its shadow hung over us, for every family scrupulously locked its doors and windows whenever they left their house unoccupied. Given the homogeneity of our neighbourhood, it is surprising that intimacy was neither encouraged nor extended. Friendly, without being familiar, neighbours rarely entered each others homes. One might come to the front door to borrow a cup of sugar, another might reach over a side fence to lend a tool, several would have a yarn by the front gate or a natter in the street, but the grown-ups usually addressed one another as Mr Gilbert and Mr Sprague, as Mrs Speedy and Mrs Hickson, conscientiously employing the prefix as a form of respect. While adults had friends, while children had best friends and even a very best friend, I never heard one individual from either group use the word 'mate', yet the term 'love' was an inherent part of our vocabulary and one that knew few boundaries in its affectionate, if indiscriminate, application,

United in their wish for a better life after the years of depression and war, our parents watched their pennies and avoided excess. Their outlook helped to confine much of our entertainment to the home and heightened our introversion. At night the wireless provided diversion with serials ('Blue Hills' and 'Biggies'), dramas ('Caltex Radio Theatre') and quiz programmes (Bob Dyer's 'Pick a Box') when we gazed at the fire or at the window as we listened. Late in 1956 the family at Number 7 bought a television on time-payment: we all tended to resent and envy such extraordinary recklessness. For us, the newspaper also provided entertainment day by day. Butters Street received more copies of the *Sun* than the *Argus* and had hardly a taker of the

Age; in the evenings Dads returned from work with the *Herald* under their arms and on wintry Saturday nights kids dashed to the local shop for the *Sporting Globe*. Offering stories of crime or comic-strips, crossword puzzles or horoscopes, titbits of news or gossip about filmstars, comments on sport, classified advertisements or entries in the births, deaths and marriages columns, each part of the paper had its appeal to particular members of the family and was devoured by them,, The newspaper, in a sense, substituted for a library, since few people in our street bought books. In my own home we owned but four: a missal, an encyclopaedia by Arthur Mee, a much-thumbed pocket dictionary, and one entitled *In Golden Realms* embellished with an illustration of a knight in armour facing a poem by someone called Alfred, Lord Tennyson.

An attitude prevailed that books were things one read at school. From the age of five to eleven, Butters Street's youngsters either attended West Preston Primary or St Gabriel's Reservoir, according to the faith or the finances of their parents, Shouldering our leather satchels, at 8.30 in the morning we sauntered one and one-half miles to our place of education and at 3.30 in the afternoon scampered the same distance home. Each week began with marching, drums and assembly when we chorused:

I love God and my country;
 I honour the flag:
 I will serve the King,
 and cheerfully obey
 my parents, teachers and the law.

State School Number 3885 crammed *forty-eight* pupils into its co-educational classrooms and drilled the three Rs into each innocent; within that imposing three-storey brick building in Murray Road, we came to love Mrs Fletcher and Miss Horne for the gentleness that tempered their discipline and to fear Mr Potts and Mr Smith who laid into the boys with the strap. After completing Grade Six we were systematically siphoned to a Central School, or to Preston High, or to Preston Girls', or to Northcote High. The first of these institutions took those who were deemed to be inept students, the second trained boys before their apprenticeships, the third taught girls that cooking and sewing were more

important than literature, the fourth streamed its boys into science, arts and commerce. Most of my peers from Regent finished their secondary schooling at the age of fourteen or fifteen; to stay on after the Intermediate Certificate was unusual, to matriculate quite freakish; to enter Melbourne University was almost unique: any loner who did so was derisively nicknamed 'the scholarship boy' or 'the Professor'. All in all, the education we received aimed at equipping sons and daughters to adopt similar occupations to their parents. It was geared toward that segment of society which largely continued to work with its hands to earn a living and which regarded permanent employment and a yearly income of £500 to £1,000 as guarantees of security.

Jobs already existed before we began full-time work. After school and at weekends the errands seemed unceasing: 'Just run down to the shops and get me...' Other tasks always awaited boy's idle hands, whether cleaning and polishing boots and shoes, mowing the lawn, cutting the edges, or, the most unavailing of all, weeding, weeding, weeding. Girls assisted their mothers to sew and darn, cook and iron. Children of both sexes helped to wash the clothes, peg them out and bring them in. To supplement our families' incomes, as well as to earn some pocket-money for ourselves, a number of us found part-time employment in selling and delivering newspapers, vending lukewarm pies or soft drinks at the Melbourne Cricket Ground, sorting mail in December, washing windows and, occasionally, baby-sitting. Exploiting the 'bob-a-job' scheme, householders 'wrung labour from the Brownies, Guides, Cubs and Scouts for a shilling which grown men would never have done for a pound. Through these many chores we were schooled in obedience. Through our upbringing we unconsciously absorbed an implicit work ethic that emphasized duties, obligations and responsibilities rather than whim-driven self-indulgence.

It would be a distortion, however, to leave on record the fag without the fun. Dad shared with a number of other fathers a liking for Roy Rene ('Mo') and relished a night at the Tivoli. In contrast, Mum was attracted by plays that featured Googie Withers at Her Majesty's; she also liked musicals and looked for-

ward to the appearance of Bunty Turner as 'My Fair Lady'. Together, my parents went to the pictures almost once a month at the Planet, St James, or Circle suburban cinemas and - once my sister and I had turned fourteen - took us with them now and then to sit in reserved seats in the back stalls, the proximity of which to the exit enabled us to be at the head of the queue for the last bus. My father set off, alone and preoccupied, on Saturdays during the Spring Carnival for a day at the races; he remained alone at Number 8 on that hot afternoon in 1954 when the rest of his family travelled to the corner of Queensberry and Rathdowne Streets in Carlton and waved at our royal visitors, Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip. There were, as well, annual days of celebration and commemoration: Christmas Day, the happiest day of the year, birthdays, Show Day each September, the Anzac Day march on the 25th of every April, Melbourne Cup sweeps on the first Tuesday in November and crackers on Bonfire Night when we baked potatoes in glowing ashes. If outings to Wirth's Circus, or Luna Park, or to the wrestling and boxing at the Stadium in West Melbourne were few and far between they were treasured all the more for that and lingered longer in the memory. Once or twice a year we walked in the Fitzroy and Botanic Gardens, or swam at St Kilda beach, or watched spellbound for hours on end while Lindwall, Miller, Hasset or Harvey performed cricketing feats of magic; once in a blue moon we had the fortune to be at Windy Hill when John Coleman plucked marks from heaven and made it rain with goals. If we could afford to go to them, we watched Saturday afternoon matinees showing the adventures of Robin Hood (Errol Flynn), Superman (George Reeves) and Tarzan (Johnny Weissmuller) in feature films, the perils of Hopalong Cassidy and the Lone Ranger in the serials, together with cartoons and previews; the theatre also offered lucky seat numbers, the magazine, *Screen News*, and free ice-creams for members of the Birthday Club when they walked across the stage during interval and shook hands with the manager on their one day of the year.

Despite their variety and attractiveness, such treats in an average year could be counted on the fingers of two hands. By

any calculation, we had time and enough to amuse ourselves. The street became our playground. With few toys or indoor games - 'snakes and ladders', draughts, toy soldiers, meccano sets and dolls - we grew to detest wet weather that confined us to the house. Opportunities for escape and for liberation lay beyond. Our call to summon one another, 'Come outside and play', was resonant with freedom and exhilaration. At one stage more than a hundred children lived in Butters Street. Someone could always be found with whom to play. By and large, girls had their netball, skipping-ropes, hopscotch and rounders, boys their handball, gings, cherrybobs and marbles ('taws', 'tombowlers', 'butterflies'), but none of these pastimes belonged exclusively to one sex. Whether we played Cowboys and Indians, or hide-and-seek, whether we organized bike races, or billycart derbies, or clambered on building sites, our imaginations were untethered. Now and again we fought: always one against one and toe-to-toe; few blows were thrown, fewer landed; the bout usually degenerated into a wrestling match which ended when the stronger pinned the weaker and asked, 'Do you give up?'

For all the competitiveness and cacophony that characterized our games, rules were observed and harmony generally prevailed, even when rivalries were intense. One of our obsessions was to charge downhill at a particular lamppost, spring up its face and make a mark with a piece of chalk as high as we could reach; as budding Frank Sedgmans or Lew Hoads, we borrowed Mr Martin's battered racquet and hit a ball anchored by a piece of elastic to a brick, endeavouring to set a record for the most consecutive half-volleys; in the fervour of the 1956 Olympic Games we arranged events by age (under 16, under 14 and so on down to under 6) that involved sprinting, hurdling, high jumping and, for the seniors, a three mile 'marathon' (six times around the block) for which every competitor received a ribbon of designated colour. Cricket and football stood enshrined as the most popular games for boys; although girls were not banned, we drowned on their participation. When two lads joined together, it was sufficient for a game of cricket: one bowled, one batted, the lamppost was the wicket; when three joined in, we had our keeper;

when four or more, fieldsmen. At first, our bats were home-made, but commercially manufactured ones quickly followed; in an attempt to reduce the number of broken windows, we bowled rubber or tennis balls and observed the regulation that a hit over the fence on the full was 'six and out'. Similarly, two were sufficient to kick a football 'lend to end'; five or more composed a team (ruckman, rover, full back, centre, full forward); the original balls - made from old newspapers or socks tied together with string - were slowly superseded by authentic leather ones; without a clock or watch to keep the time, we 'changed ends' each quarter after five goals had been scored. These matches took place on the flat part of Butters Street, between Number 2 and Number 8, and, in their heyday, involved as many as twenty players; an older or an injured boy umpired, but, in the epic contests, an adult officiated with a whistle. The host of games we played offered chances for self-realization and enhanced our awareness of each other. In subtle and elusive ways the street helped some of us to realize and then to move beyond the inked-in images in the panelled world of Ginger Meggs.