

BECOMING AN ADULT

LOUISE DOUGLAS

'Here comes the bride'—a wave of excited whispering sweeps over the assembled onlookers. The rich notes of the organ wash out in triumphant chords and the bride walks into view on the arm of her husband. This is the sweetest most dignified moment of her life. She has shed her old life and not yet put on the new. All the beauty of her departed girlhood and the coming beauty of her wifehood join to shed a light of loveliness around her. No wonder the guests—the women inevitably wet eyed—say they have never seen her look so beautiful.

Australian woman's world, Brides' number, March 1938.

ONE WEEK BEFORE her wedding to Tom Tully on Easter Monday, Bernadette Pearson presented herself to the Racial Hygiene Association for premarital medical and psychological assessment. She received a certificate stating that she was free of contagious and venereal diseases, and was suited to marriage and parenthood. Her fiance fulfilled his side of the bargain by visiting his local doctor for premarital counselling.

Tom and Bernadette had courted mainly by letter. Bernadette earned £10 a month as a teacher at Peak Downs in New South Wales, and Tom earned £4 13s 3d a week as a factory clerk at Waterloo in Sydney. So their wedding had to be simple. On a Singer sewing machine given to her by her mother-in-law, Bernadette made her entire wardrobe, including her wedding dress and her bridesmaids' dresses, by the light of a kerosene lamp. They were married by Father O'Kelly in St Declan's, Penshurst. Bernadette's music teacher played the organ and her friends formed a choir. Afterwards a friend drove them in his 1926 Chevrolet to Hurstville station, from where they went by train for two weeks' honeymoon in a sparsely furnished cottage at The Entrance. They thought it a 'fairy palace'.

Getting married was one way of becoming an adult. Another was to turn 21, an event usually celebrated by a party and, in token of the fact that young adults



Bernadette and Tom Tully emerge from St Declan's Church, Penshurst, Sydney on 18 April 1938.

B. TULLY, 1938 COLLECTION

'Fashion portfolio', an insert in the Australian women's weekly with sketches by designer Petrov, gave readers advice on the latest spring fashion, 13 August 1938.



South Australian homes and gardens, Feb 1938.

usually lived with their parents, the ceremonial presentation of a front door key. But the steps to adulthood began well before twenty-one. At fourteen boys and girls began acquiring a bewildering array of responsibilities and privileges; some were even running households. They could legally leave school and were supposed to buy adult tickets at picture theatres. At fifteen they paid full fare on buses, trams and trains; at sixteen they could buy cigarettes; at eighteen they could buy an alcoholic drink in a hotel. At sixteen and ten months in most states they could get a learner's permit to drive a car, and at seventeen a licence. Minors could not engage in most legal transactions, but they could take out a life insurance policy. They could go to the races but not bet. Boys could volunteer for military service at eighteen or belong to the school cadets at fourteen. Until eighteen, lawbreakers appeared before the childrens court, after that age they were dealt with by ordinary courts.

Becoming a husband or wife conferred adult status immediately. With the consent of their parents girls could marry at twelve and boys at fourteen. But few young people married before their mid-twenties: the average for women was 26 and for men 29.5 years. Having children reinforced the adult status of those who did marry young. Of married males under twenty, 666 became fathers in 1938; 7274 females, almost a fifth of them unmarried, became mothers.

Teachers, nurses, bank clerks and domestic servants were among those who had to live in boarding houses and guesthouses, but they were a small proportion of 16- to 25-year-olds. Married or unmarried, most young men and women lived with their parents, who were accordingly able to influence their children's behaviour enormously. Deborah Jones, 17, daughter of Welsh-born parents in Subiaco in Perth, was taught that her family was superior to all others, that authority should never be questioned, that one should not wear one's heart on one's sleeve and that there was a funny side to everything. Her mother told her that any girl who wore a brassiere was 'common', and her father despised their Greek neighbours to the point of calling them names until he discovered that one of them had a university education. Lloyd Davies, a sixteen-year-old private school student from Christ Church Grammar School in Perth, the only son of a widowed mother, was taught a wide range of home wisdom: newspapers were not to be taken seriously; boastful and egotistical people were to be regarded with suspicion; advertisements were not to be believed; trade unions were to be avoided, honesty, independence, modesty and integrity were to be striven for at all costs.

Parents also influenced everyday decisions such as buying clothes. Young people had little money, and few clothes were marketed especially for them. Kenneth Laycock, who left Newcastle at seventeen to work in the public service in Canberra, waited until he returned home to purchase his first suit so that his mother could accompany him to Lowes menswear store. Deborah Jones bought her first brassiere with her mother, despite the fact that her mother found the experience excruciatingly embarrassing, averting her eyes while it was being fitted.

Precision in dress was highly valued, especially in women: a crooked stocking seam or hanging slip could produce disapproving looks or even reprimands from passers-by. High fashion was the province of the rich; working girls could only stand at the windows of dress shops taking notes on the designs and fabrics of the latest creations so that they could reproduce them at home. Oriel and Grayce Bennett spent their Friday nights copying designs, buying a few inexpensive pendants and clip-on earrings at Coles or Woolworths, paying off various lay-bys and finishing the evening at the Monterey, the first American style cafe in Melbourne.

Parents remained responsible for the physical well-being of older children living at home. Many had remedies for acne, for example: among the more spectacularly



With hair tousled by the fresh sea breeze, the young women of the party relaxed on the spotless deck of the "Sirius." A Pix cameraman was on hand to record the Australian yacht Sirius cruising around Sydney harbour with a specially-invited party on board. The Sirius, owned by Captain Harold Nossiter, had recently returned from its record-breaking round-the-world voyage. Pix, 17 Dec 1938.

unsuccessful were liquid soap containing ether, liquid magnesia, calamine lotion, parsley tea and steamed liver beet. On the other hand, 'puppy fat' was considered a normal part of growing up, particularly for girls. Few parents realised that the starchy diet so common in Australian homes was often the real cause of their children being overweight.

Parents controlled home recreation. Reading was popular, and parents tried to ensure that good books were available. Larky Weise's father selected books from the reading lists of the Rationalist Society and the Labor party, but Larky had a liking for *True confessions*, *True romance* and vampire comics, secreting the latter under her mattress.

Mr Weise was not alone in objecting to 'pulp' magazines. Women's groups and church organisations campaigned against them, and in September 1937 there were 78 titles banned in New South Wales. To the protests of the importers and distributors, the minister for Customs replied that 'it was better that you should suffer monetary loss than that youth should suffer loss of morality'.

Joan Dickson, a switchboard operator from Peppermint Grove in Perth, enjoyed having parents who read widely and belonged to a subscription library. 'I didn't have anything much to do at night except the homework for shorthand and typing', she remembers. So she read

John Galsworthy, Agatha Christie, Edgar Wallace. As a family we always belonged to a library. There was always both fiction and general in these small private libraries ...

Lending libraries lent out at 3d a book, with a membership fee or refundable deposit of about 1s a book. In states which did not have free municipal lending libraries, young working-class men and women could not read the latest books, and they relied instead on second-hand bookshops or newspapers and magazines for their reading.

The most popular magazine was the *Women's weekly*, which sold over 400 000 copies every week and had an estimated readership of 1 500 000. The publisher,



After a busy day as 'houseman' in a Sydney home, Ron Carrick, 'a hefty young man with a flair for cooking', winds down by listening to the radio set provided by his employer. Pix, 8 Oct 1938.



This issue of the Weekly bemoaned the fact that 'modern' parents were having smaller families—three rather than six children—pointing out that parents would have few offspring to rely on in their old age. Australian women's weekly, 13 Aug 1938.

Frank Packer, ensured that the *Weekly* could be read by the whole family by giving prominence to current news stories and features on serious issues. Young girls learnt cooking through the *Weekly's* pages, and pored over the columns offering advice on 'boy-girl' problems. The *Weekly* considered that girls should become 'homemakers': some young men and women wanting alternatives looked to *Young Australia*, price 3d, the newspaper of the Australian Council of Youth. It offered intelligent writing and strong views on matters such as the reform of the liquor and divorce laws, youth unemployment, the Spanish Civil War (it supported the Republicans), the false glamour of Hollywood, slum conditions, juvenile delinquency and local politics.

Another popular magazine was *Man*. Its combination of suggestive cartoons, girlie pics, excellent short stories and news won it an audience among adults and would-be adults. Roy Holt discovered *Man* when he was a fourteen-year-old post office messenger in Sydney, reading it in barbers' shops and with his workmates.

Young people listened to the family wireless when parents permitted. As a new boy at a Sydney school, Donald Horne was perplexed by catchphrases his classmates used, until he discovered that they came from popular serials and hit songs on the wireless. Some stations catered especially for young audiences. On Thursday evenings in Sydney 2KY allowed young people to 'come to the microphone to tell gripping stories of their struggles, their disappointments, their hopes and the great fun they have with life'. Edmund Sydney, 21, who left Sydney University

and became a journalist after suffering a case of 'brain fag', found a world of journalism revolving around 'sex, sensation, competition and cant'.

Away from home, most public entertainment cost too much for young people. If they had jobs they were expected to contribute money to the family. Ern Moroney, fifteen, a storeman in a Sydney mixed fruit business, handed over his entire pay every week, receiving in return a 'small pittance for spending money'. Jack Neighbour, a chemist's boy in Horsham, Victoria, gave 10s of his 12s 6d weekly wage to his mother. Some struggling parents became so dependent on this income that they even discouraged their children from forming friendships with potential husbands or wives.

Maturing boys and girls were expected to maintain their parents' standards of behaviour and morality. The 'modern' young men and women who peopled the pages of *Pix*, *Man* and even *Smith's weekly*, deciding on their own careers, picking their own friends and amusing themselves by drinking, smoking cigarettes and driving fast cars, appalled many of the older generation. Fearful that their children might become 'wasters', parents carefully monitored friends and activities. Strict times were set for return from social outings, new friends had to be presented for inspection, and activities that did not involve a number of other young people were frowned on. The only place her father allowed Joyce Arbon to go on her own was the tennis club on Saturday afternoon. 'We were very protected', Joyce recalls, 'and anyone new had to be taken home and looked over. My father always wanted to know who they were and what their fathers did'. Church groups, sports clubs and youth organisations were generally approved of because they supervised young people in a respectable way.

In fact youth organisations were important for social and romantic liaisons, and in introducing young Australians to national and international political issues. Ian McLaren and Eileen Porter found in the YMCA and YWCA a substitute for university, as these organisations gave them the opportunity to develop their intellectual and political skills through regular discussion and debate. Through the YMCA Ian became treasurer of the Victorian division of the Australian Council

Proper standards of dress were maintained by beach inspectors who were often satirised for their efforts. Man's cartoonist created a particularly voluptuous young woman to discomfort the inspector. Man, Jan 1938.



Ian McLaren, seventh from left, forearm to chin, talks with delegates from India, Czechoslovakia, France, Switzerland, Italy, the USA, Mexico and Uruguay, at a World Youth Congress in the USA.

I. MCLAREN, 1938 COLLECTION



of Youth, formed in 1937, which aimed to 'help young people in all walks of life to attain the highest and fullest standards in religion, education, recreation, economic conditions and international relations'. Council members included the Young Theosophists, the Workers' Sports Federation, the Girl Guides, the Presbyterian Youth Club and the Young Communist League. At the first Australian Youth Congress in January delegates passed resolutions deploring the Japanese invasion of China and the fascist attacks on the elected government in Spain. The press applauded such work: a Melbourne *Sun* editorial thought that 'youth has an energy and a capacity for faith which may yet do much to dispel the selfish cynicism of a weary world'.

Yet few young Australians participated in political activity; most preferred dancing or going to the pictures. Almost everyone danced, whether it was foxtrotting in a country hall or jitterbugging in a city dance palace. According to Frank Coughlan, band leader at the Trocadero in Sydney, the attraction of the dances was the 'boy-meet-girl romantic atmosphere'. For precisely this reason some parents forbade their children from going.

Nothing was more popular than the 'flicks'. Most young Australians within reasonable distance of a picture theatre went once a week, many to see films made for adults, although American cartoons and matinee serials were also popular; 70 per cent of the 1734 films imported into Australia during the year came from America. Church organisations and women's groups objected to many of them, arguing that they filled the young with 'the idea that it was the duty of a young woman to be idle, inebriated and overdressed and of a young man to be a loafer, cowboy or a criminal'. Gregory Fletcher, a 21-year-old public servant, found that American films painted an unrealistically glamorous world, but that the 'very mildly romantic and erotic movies' caused 'strong effects' on his genitals and led to fantasies about the female film stars. Deborah Jones learnt from American films that sophisticated women wore black dresses, heavy make-up and smoked, that

In 'Men I Like' journalist Elizabeth Hanson listed among her preferences the man who:



'Can say it with flowers.'
 'Believe me, flowers do talk.
 There's something about them
 no woman worthy of the
 name can ever quite resist.'
 Man Jan, 1938.

'Okay, Boys—"Advance
 Australia Fair" this
 time—and SWING IT.'
 Sydney's Trocadero's maestro
 Frank Coughlan. Pix,
 19 Feb 1938.



such sexual behaviour as 'long, long kissing' was smart, that America was a 'thrilling, wonderful, glamorous and marvellous new place', that white Protestants were 'the salt of the earth', negroes 'inferior', Asians 'sly', Jews 'evil money grubbers' and Catholics 'narrow idolators'.

For many young people films seemed to be a way to learn about sex. Sex was life's great mystery; usually it remained so until a person married. Many parents were embarrassed at having to discuss fine details of sexuality. 'We were told things in half a fashion', one adolescent remembers. 'There was an awful lot of guesswork in it.' Another explains: 'My father tried to say something to me once but it petered out after 35 seconds.' Older brothers and sisters or schoolfriends readily gave information, but were not always reliable; schools offered no assistance at all. Often the best sources were guidebooks and manuals written to combat venereal diseases, which contained valuable information on the physical aspects of sex and reproduction. Marion Piddington's *Tell them, or the second stage of mothercraft* and E. Josephine Bamford's *What should I know and how should I tell* were also widely circulated. For Catholic parents the Australasian Catholic Truth Society published a series of pamphlets which addressed wider moral issues as well as sexuality. Titles included 'Of dirty stories', 'Why be a wallflower' and 'Why marry a virgin'. The Father and Son Welfare Movement and the White Cross League also offered intelligent sex education, but many young people remained dissatisfied at how little they could discover. Their letters to newspaper columns declared their disappointment. In an article in *Young Australia*, 'I want the truth about sex', the writer, Alice Sherman, complained that she had spent a considerable amount of time with 'boys', read all the facts about life, scanned the available magazines, seen the current films, and attended philosophical discussions on companionate marriage and free love, but still felt that she did not know about sex.

Not even the sex education books wrote about homosexuality, and they presented contraception and masturbation as evil. Masturbation was sinful and could cost people their virility, their sight and their sanity. Gregory Fletcher masturbated until discovering this dire warning in a sex education book by Seymour Hicks. About the same time his mother, less prudish than his father, explained the function of the male erection. Pregnancy was something for married people only; unmarried girls were sent away for an abortion or to see the pregnancy through and have the child adopted. Many parents adopted the attitude 'if you get pregnant, don't come home', and for young girls the thought of having to confront their parents with news of a pregnancy was a great deterrent to sexual intercourse.

Finding a partner became a major preoccupation of most young men and women. Magazines and newspapers regularly featured articles on the qualities essential to the perfect husband or wife. George Antheil's 'Boy Advises Girl' column for the Sydney *Daily Telegraph* stressed that 'marriage appeal' was far more valuable than 'sex appeal'. A 'natural average Australian' girl with marriage appeal had radiant health, liked dancing, was a good talker but a better listener, was modern, frank and well dressed, and had opinions of her own. She was permitted to smoke, was probably interested enough to vote, and could cook, sew and keep house. In his 'Twenty Commonsense Rules for Girls who Want to be Attractive', Antheil advised that men found women who signalled too high a standard of living or who were too independent 'distasteful'. He advised girls never to admit to 'mistakes in the past': 'no matter what anyone says men want their wives pure. The nearer you can simulate that the happier you'll both be'.

If a girl could get permission to go out with a boy, she might still have to undergo a parental inquisition when she came home. Joyce Sandell was not allowed



Above. 'Short French letter or American tip.' Below. 'Pust's intra-cervical pessaries.' Most young people first learnt about birth control in school playground gossip. Some of the more inquisitive rifled parental bedrooms to discover such books as Norman Haire's *Birth control methods, first published in London in 1936 and widely available in Australia from 1937*. N. Haire, *Birth control methods, London 1936*.

ROYAL AUSTRALIAN COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS

to go out with boys until she turned sixteen, and could not stray further than the local picture theatre—if she returned more than five minutes after the picture finished she found her mother walking the verandah. Deborah Jones's father allowed her to go out only with boys who presented themselves to him for inspection and questioning. Only two did. Mr Jones made it quite clear to his eighteen-year-old daughter that he would call the police if she was not home by midnight, and did so at 12.30 one morning. Parental control relaxed after their children grew to adulthood, but did not cease completely until they left home.

Girls and young women were encouraged by tradition and their mothers to prepare for married life. Filling a glory box could take years of work and saving:

A few months before girls got married they would have a 'coming to view the glory box afternoon' where the girl's mother would produce a beautiful afternoon tea while her daughter's friends surveyed the contents of the box. While some items were bought, a substantial proportion were handmade: lingerie with hand embroidery always drew sighs of admiration from friends. At the end of the afternoon all would be packed away until after the big day.

Weddings were normally held in churches. The rich required grooms and male guests in full evening dress: white tie, waistcoat, black braided trousers, black silk socks, black patent leather shoes and white gloves. Their brides favoured satin, crepe and velvet in white and off-white. Muriel Cobcroft became Mrs Francis Graham when she married at St Mark's Church, Darling Point. Her recipe for the 'perfect way' to prepare for the ceremony was to have a maid to dress her, eat a light luncheon, limit the press photographers to certain times, rest with a glass of champagne and be called to the car just at the right moment. After Mr and Mrs M. Scott married at St Michael's Church, Vaucluse, Sydney, 200 guests attended their reception in the bride's parents' home, where they were entertained by Cec Morrison's swing band, one of the most popular of the era.

Most young couples had a simple ceremony in the local church and a small reception in the family home. Neighbours chipped in with crockery, tablecloths, transport and sometimes food. Eileen Bethune's plans for a nine o'clock nuptial mass on the morning of 26 January at Holy Cross Church at Bondi Junction in Sydney were thrown into chaos when the photographer rang three days before to say he would be unable to attend as the city streets were being blocked off for the sesquicentennial celebrations. After much panic and running around, a replacement was found, but many of the guests had to come from distant parts of Sydney and were not able to arrive until the happy couple were ready to leave the reception for their honeymoon.

Those able to afford a honeymoon could motor interstate, cruise on a coastal ship, relax at a seaside guesthouse or mountain resort, or spend a frugal week in a house lent by friends or relatives. Lorne, Marysville, the Grampians, the Gippsland Lakes and Mt Buffalo were popular Victorian honeymoon spots, as were Jervis Bay, the Blue Mountains and Manly beach for New South Wales couples. South Australian honeymooners favoured Victor Harbor, Glenelg and the Adelaide hills. A hotel or guesthouse for two weeks could cost around £20, although with interstate travel the cost could double. A 26-day return trip by coastal steamer from Melbourne to Cairns cost £27 2s 6d per person first class, or £19 5s per person second class. Overseas honeymoons were rare. Lilian James and her husband began their honeymoon with a week at Caves House in the Blue Mountains, then set sail on a 5000-ton Dutch ship through the Indonesian archipelago to Singapore, Mekong and Saigon, then home via Java, New Caledonia, the New Hebrides and New Zealand to Sydney. On the other hand, the Wicks had to cut short their

Joyce Sandell, a seventeen-year-old dressmaker from the Sydney suburb of Lindfield, accepted an invitation from Jimmy Hughes, a house painter, for a night out at Luna Park. They are here photographed at Luna Park as if in a motor car. The outing was spoiled for Joyce because she knew that her mother would be walking up and down the verandah waiting for her.

J. MILLICAN, 1938 COLLECTION





two-week stay at the Hollyrood Guesthouse in Katoomba when they ran out of money, and Margaret Noakes's fiance, who ran his father's property at Grenfell in New South Wales, arrived in Wollongong the day before their wedding with a temperature of 104° Fahrenheit and had to be drugged to make it up the aisle. They spent their honeymoon in a caravan while Margaret nursed her new husband through a severe bout of bronchitis. More typically the Spears had a pleasant stay in a Blue Mountains guesthouse, horseriding, bushwalking and playing tennis.

Many young couples rented their first home, but Bernadette Tully's parents advised her to 'never pay rent—you end up with a pile of rent receipts at the end of a lifetime. Better a tent that you own than a rented house'. Her husband, Tom, had managed to save £80 during their many years of courting, and they paid £50 towards the deposit on a new brick home in Kingsgrove, Sydney. The builder lent them the remaining £40 for the deposit, which they repaid at 10s a week, and the Eastern Suburbs Building Society lent them £820 for the balance. The £30 remaining from Tom's savings was spent on legal costs and two pairs of blankets, and Bernadette exchanged a solitaire diamond ring for £6 worth of goods—a 40-piece utility set, a set of silver cutlery and a cut-glass honey jar. She also bought a chipped enamel set of saucepans and a frying pan from Anthony Hordens for 5s. They bought a bedroom suite, a three-piece lounge suite, and a 3m x 3m carpet square for £50 on £5 deposit, and the store gave them a congoleum square free of charge because they had spent £50. Tom gave £4 of his weekly pay of £4 13s 3d to Bernadette, who budgeted it strictly:

Building society and rates	£1 10s
Hire purchase furniture	10s
Food and medical expenses	£1 10s
All other expenses, clothes and entertainment	10s

Tom's 13s 3d paid for his two ounces of ready-rubbed tobacco, lunches and fares.

Working, marrying, establishing a home and planning for the future were the most common steps to becoming an adult. Many young people stepped cautiously. The depression stalked them still, and economic necessity and parental advice encouraged them to make the transition to adulthood slowly and carefully.

The Mulhearns (second couple from right) were married in January and spent their honeymoon at the Holmesdale guesthouse in Katoomba, a popular holiday resort in the Blue Mountains west of Sydney. On a day trip to the Jenolan Caves they stopped at the Old Court House, Hartley, and posed in front of the charabanc. The Old Court House was a popular place for honeymooners to have their photographs taken on the way to the caves.

C. MULHEARN,
1938 COLLECTION



*Joshua Smith, Peeling vegetables, 1939, oil on canvas.
Smith studied at the Sydney Art School under Julian
Ashton. Here he captures the face of domestic labour.*

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