

***WHY I CALL TASMANIA HOME***  
**AN ADDRESS TO THE HAMILTON LITERARY SOCIETY**  
**BY MRS FRANCES UNDERWOOD**  
**WIFE OF HIS EXCELLENCY THE GOVERNOR OF**  
**TASMANIA**  
**MATHER HOUSE HOBART 7 NOVEMBER 2013**

My father told me that I came to Tasmania in a washing basket. As a child I worried that I had been tossed into someone's dirty washing. What he really meant was that I was brought to Tasmania in a bassinet by my mother, upon whom I was then entirely dependent. *That is why I call Tasmania home.* I had absolutely no say in the matter. However, having been able to call Tasmania home for the last 64 years has had a hugely positive impact on my life.

I was fortunate to have had parents who were passionate about education, and fortunate to have had inspiring mentors at every stage of life. Tasmania has given me the opportunities to build on those foundations personally, professionally and creatively, throughout my life including in my current role.

In 1948, my mother with three young children and me, then a baby, accompanied by a governess, boarded the *Stratheden* in Liverpool, bound for Australia. It was a momentous decision that was to change our lives. War and its consequences had been a defining element in my parents' lives. The First World War had claimed my grandfather, missing in action presumed dead. My grandmother, with two young children and a newborn

baby, returned to her mother in Lahore, India, to rebuild her life. My mother was then 3 years old. The family grew up in a house in Jhelum, *which is now the residence of the Chief of Staff of the Pakistan High Command*. My parents met at that seat of British power in India, the Club, and in 1937 were married. My father, although raised in Bristol, was an officer in the 16<sup>th</sup> Punjab Regiment based in Lahore.

Their life in India was eventful and much travelled. My siblings were born in Muree, before the war and Poona and Wellington during the war. My mother acclimatised to the structured life of a memsahib, the wives who formed the societal foundation of British India, based on etiquette, decorum, protocol and precedence. *“To get things out of order was to offend the entire British way of life in India<sup>1</sup>”* my mother told her granddaughter. Lengthy, lonely separations from the men, especially during the long hot summers spent in the hills, in Simla, with the children, fostered independence and resilience in the women — resources my mother was going to call on in Tasmania.

My father fought in Palestine and North Africa during the Second World War. Then, having survived the war, my parents, my mother’s sister and my grandmother found themselves caught up in the bitter communal conflict in an India that, understandably, wanted to be free from Colonial rule; a nightmare of unsurpassable horror, violence and terror that both

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<sup>1</sup> Teresa (Tilly) Northam, as told to her granddaughter in *The Mem-Sahibs of India*, unpublished academic paper of Lucy Ogilvie, University of Tasmania, 1989.

preceded and followed independence, in which Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims turned on each other in a bewildering frenzy of unreasoned savagery and spontaneous irrational slaughter. Antagonism between India's 300 million Hindus and 100 million Muslims had reached boiling point. Muslim leaders demanded a state of their own. Hindu leaders were just as determined to resist their demands. Britain was ready to give India her freedom but not able to find a way to do so. The boundaries for partition, *that in the end became the only solution to the explosive situation of escalating violence*, were published two days after independence, on 17th August 1947. It caused an immediate mass migration of millions of displaced people of differing tongues, cultures and religions and ignited a mania for murder unforeseen in its magnitude<sup>2</sup> and an arms race between India and Pakistan that continues to this day. All in all an estimated 1 million people died. Freedom at midnight and India's tryst with destiny was no less than that for our family<sup>3</sup>.

My mother pregnant with me, my father and my siblings were evacuated from the violence and bloodshed in Lahore by train, in the dead of night, to board the *Empress of Scotland* for the voyage back to England where I was born in Somerset on the 1st October 1947. Relief at being out of the conflict and back with family in England was tempered by conditions in postwar England. It was the eighth consecutive year of severe rationing of almost everything. "England," said my mother in a letter to her sister who had sailed to Tasmania, "is grim. Everyone who can is getting out"<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Larry Collins and Dominique Llapierre, *Freedom at Midnight*, London, William Collins and Co Ltd, 1975, p. 358.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*

<sup>4</sup> Tilly Northam, Yarlinton, Wincanton, UK *Letter to her sister, Verna Tozer*, Railton Tas. 21/1/ 1948.

And so it was that my mother decided to visit her sister, and with three young children and me, a baby, arrived in Barrington, Tasmania while my father went back to the new country of Pakistan to complete his assignment in connection with the demission of power following partition. My father came to Tasmania in 1949, breaking his parent's hearts. They never saw him again. It was tough for my parents, so far from family, with little money and few luxuries other than an Aga stove and a piano, but as children growing up in Tasmania, it was the best gift they could have given us but I know in their hearts they still called England home.

I had an idyllic childhood living on that farm in Lower Barrington. The rich experiences I had there until the age of eight became a defining element in my life. Tasmania provided optimal conditions for a happy, stimulating and enriching childhood nurtured and nourished by three extraordinary, well-travelled, well-read culturally aware people, my father, mother and her sister, who, grateful to be released from the horror and trauma of war, re-lived the memories of their life experiences before war, with stories of India and England that ignited the imagination of a young child and became as real to me as if I had been there.

My brother described my mother as *“a woman of indomitable will, penetrating intellect, and patrician bearing, [who], unswerving in her determination to nourish the spiritual and academic development of her children, sent her two eldest to boarding school in Melbourne and took on*

*the education of the young ones herself, unfolding to us the treasures of learning and literature<sup>5</sup>”.*

Her sister, a teacher and mentor of genius and a uniquely gifted pianist, artist and mother, leavened the somewhat stern life syllabus decreed by my mother with the magic of her prodigal gifts and with her genius for imparting a profound understanding of and enthusiasm for music, painting and poetry and almost all of the accoutrements of civilised living. Her inspirational teaching engendered in me a love of learning and an enduring passion for music that has sustained me throughout my life.

My father, a man of extraordinary sparkle and brightness, humour and wit, an officer and a gentleman and a graduate of the Royal Military College Sandhurst and a citizen of the world,<sup>6</sup> opened our eyes to history, politics, and geography. Every day he read to us from a literary diet including AA Milne, Kenneth Graham, CS Lewis, Beatrix Potter, Kipling and Dickens with lashings of *Little Black Sambo*, *Aesop's Fables* and *Grimms' Fairy Tales* and, he kept us laughing. Only later did we learn of the scars that war had left; of nightmares that invaded his sleep. He never spoke of it.

So, although I had no say in calling Tasmania home I am glad that that is what my parents did. I have Tasmania to thank for a fortunate life. My mother, who died in 2002, lived long enough to know that. On their 30<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary in 1967 my father said, “I was convinced during our first two years in Tasmania that the greatest mistake I made was coming to

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<sup>5</sup> Hugh Northam, eulogy, funeral of Teresa Margaret Northam, Hobart, 19 August 2002.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Tasmania. There were many times when I nearly packed up and went back home. But I'm not so sure now. The children are educated and three are happily married. Life is very pleasant for older people in Hobart<sup>7</sup>." He died a few weeks later, never having gone home. I wish I had thought to tell him that he made the best decision of his life in coming to Tasmania and how much I appreciated what he had done for us; and that, in his position, I would have made the same decision; a decision that enabled his children, grandchildren and great grandchildren to call Tasmania home.

Thank you.

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<sup>7</sup> Victor Northam, 30<sup>th</sup> Wedding Anniversary Address, 90 Swanston St, New Town, Hobart March 1967.