

JOAN BUTLER: ENGLISH and HISTORY TEACHER 1964 - 1967

Introduction



My parents are fourth-generation Australians of Irish background and all my paternal grandparents were from Tipperary, Ireland. When I was over there this year I visited the places where they came from. When they emigrated to Australia they all left from a port near the city of Cork, which is on the south-eastern coast of Ireland. It was fascinating to be standing on the spot where they would have migrated from, not knowing anything about the place where they were going, just like many of the European immigrants who ended up in St Albans, I guess.

My paternal grandparents were John Butler and Margaret O'Connor (who were amongst the thousands of Irish who fled Ireland after the great famine). John came out to Australia about 1860, which was just after the main gold rushes in Victoria. The Butler brothers in fact did have a gold mine that they were working for a while, but they didn't strike any fortune so gave that up and then went into farming, because they'd come from a farming background.

My maternal grandparents were James Alipius Maher and Mary Josephine Mulcahy. James wrote an early history of the district that was published as "The Tale of A Century, Kilmore 1837-1937" for the town's centenary celebrations. Unfortunately he died in 1940 so I never knew him personally. My parents were Mary Lucille Maher of Pyalong and John Kevin Butler of Kilmore. They married in 1940.

I was born in 1943 in Kilmore, which was a small country town with less than 1,500 people 60 kilometres north of Melbourne. Kilmore's claim to fame is that it is the oldest inland town in Victoria and developed quickly because it was a convenient stopover for overlanders and for people heading to the gold fields. After the decline of the gold era the valley was settled as a farming district because it has good soil, a moderate climate, and a reliable rainfall. The town's history reflects the Irish Catholic farming background of the early settlers, and that is indeed my own family background. The Butlers still figure there - all three of us.

My parents had a sheep farm to start with and then shifted to raising cattle, but it was still mostly operating as a sheep farm when I was growing up. Mum got very sick during that time, because she contracted encephalitis.

Early Education

All our early education was done locally. My brothers went to Assumption College, which was a boys school run by the Marist Brothers. I went to St Josephs Convent, where the Sisters of Mercy operated a girls school. The schools weren't very far from the farm so we used to ride our bikes there at the time, about two miles around by road, shorter through the college farm. The convent school has now closed down and the buildings are used as an International School, but the Assumption College has gone co-educational, so all genders in the Catholic fraternity of Kilmore are still catered for.



When I first started school I combined Preps and Grade 1 in one year, and later Grades 3 and 4 in one year. That was commonplace, but it meant I ended up in Form 6 at the age of sixteen and looking to enter university, which had an intake age of seventeen. It was extraordinary actually, there were only two of us who completed Form 5 at the convent in my final year there. I became a teacher and the other one went on to be a nurse, the two professions most open to girls at the time. For my sixth year, I came down to Melbourne and boarded at Genzanno to complete my studies there, because my cousins were already going there. I was very young, and it was a strange year. Because I was quite young I think some strings were pulled somewhere along the line to get me into uni, and I got in. I think that impacted on me all through university, because I was younger than the other students.

Looking back, I'm fascinated by the fact that my parents, neither of whom was very well educated, took it as a matter of course that the three of us, my older brother Gavan, younger brother James, and me, would have the same educational opportunities. That was very, very different to the rest of the local scene. As I mentioned before, there were only two girls doing Form 5 in my year, so it was not common for local girls to apply for tertiary education. There was no background for me to be going on to university, but it was accepted. So, I ended up boarding with aunts in Hawthorn and going to Melbourne University.

The only way we could go to uni was on scholarships - Gavan on a Commonwealth Scholarship, and me on a Studentship which provided extra support and training during the uni degree and diploma.

Teacher Training

The Studentship covered my degree and extended to Dip Ed and we had concurrent from the Secondary Teachers College, which paid you to train as a teacher under an arrangement that bound you to teach with the Education Department for three years, or, if you were married, you could get out after one year.

The Education Department asked us to apply for the schools we wanted to teach at in order of preference. We'd heard about people who'd gone to Rainbow and Sealake just by putting 'country' on their preference list, or being totally and randomly put somewhere, so we all decided to put 'city'. I'd never even heard of St Albans. Never. Neither had my parents.

Introduction to St Albans

When I got the appointment Mum and Dad took me for the first trip to see where St Albans was, and we couldn't believe how isolated it was coming across that area between Ballarat Road and St Albans. You turned north off Ballarat Road and suddenly you were driving past paddocks high with thistles. It was going to be quite an experience.

I was 20 years old when I started teaching at St Albans High in 1964 and I stayed until the end of 1967. It was my first appointment after graduating.

I was only twenty, and I was a young twenty, because I started at university when I was sixteen and probably didn't get all the benefits that I could have got, though I was with a good group of friends, but we were all middle class, white Australians. I was from a country background, my friends were city, so my life experiences weren't particularly grand. When I arrived at St Albans it was such a great experience because it was the first time that I met people from various cultures. Those particular first students were very aspirational, very friendly. There was that incredible mix of nationalities and the sheer joy of being there. Many of the staff were young and I had excellent mentors in Ivan Matthews and Alison Gliddon - he was the senior master and she was the senior mistress.

Teaching at St Albans

The school had some set ideas and you just had to go along with them. Women staff had to wear stockings and shoes - no sandals allowed. Each morning we had to sign in the attendance book when we arrived. We had segregated staff rooms. We'd invite the male staff across for morning tea as 'we' had the urn; they weren't allowed to come unless they were invited. One of the older members of staff told us off if we took too many biscuits from the tin at morning tea. It was quite scary going into the men's staff room, I don't know why actually, but maybe because I was very young then.

I've been wondering why it was such a good experience and I think it was because it was my first teaching appointment and it was a combination of the students and staff. We often stayed after school and therefore were able to interact and socialise. We didn't have to rush home, we were young and single, and we got to know the students better that way. I think we had very good relations with the students. In my first year when Annie Gibson and Eril Murray were there, that must have been Form 6, we used to go to Annie's place; there would be 5 or 6 students there, and we'd listen to music and talk. There was a fair bit of interaction going on like that. The students were articulate and open to new ideas. Later, Mrs Kriksciunas and Sandra Crofts organised evening theatre visits for students, which was quite outside the organised school curriculum but introduced students to a wider experience of the arts.

I was teaching mainly Forms 5 and 6, to kids who had already made it fairly well through the school system. I remember there being large classes. I had the girls in the commercial stream for English - we used to call them "Scarffie's girls" because he used to kid with them. Worland was another one who used to kid along with them. The girls loved it. I used to have them in the lecture theatre, and thinking back there must have been some large classes. I remember that Form 4 group in that lecture theatre and there must have been about 40 students.



Joan Butler and Form 4A, 1964.



Staff team for the Staff v. Students hockey match, 1965: (rear) Mike Smith, Ian Smith, John Grieve, Brian Belden, Brian Safe, Arnold Shaw, Norm McLeish, Martin Clancy (front) Joan Butler, Katrina Boas, Judy Sandwell, Robyn Campbell, Seng Min Phua.

In my first year there Judy Goodwin was teaching Australian History and she bailed out in the middle of the year. They asked me if I'd take it on. That was my first experience of teaching nineteen-year-old Year 12 students, close to my own age. I went up to Assumption College and got a lot of help from them. They provided me with notes and I chatted with the Australian History teacher there. It was good support.



Joan Butler and Form 5A, 1965.

I taught at St Albans for four years, leaving after the end of 1967. Barry Rayner and I had started going out and he went overseas during 1966. When he came back in 1967 we were thinking of getting married, but that didn't work out so Sandra Crofts and I went off for our own jaunt to Europe in 1968. I came back after 14 months of touring, but Sandra stayed behind. She married an Englishman by name of Henry Hatch and came back later with her English husband under the ten pound assisted migration package.



What are they trying to tell us? The school camp, Belgrave Heights, May 1965.
Katrina Boas, Sandra Crofts, Joan Butler, Mrs Gliddon, Jan Oscar.



Keeping an eye on things: Joan Butler, Ian Smith, Judy Sandwell.

I went to Sunshine High School and helped in the library for the rest of that year and then went to Braybrook High. In the meantime Barry and I married, which was in 1969, also the year of the moon walk, for which the whole school stopped to watch on T.V.

Barry and I were not the only ones who married through meeting each other at St Albans. Other marriages amongst the teaching staff from that early era were Gordon Baker and Barbara Coutts, Ian Smith and Leonie Geer, Barry Hocking and Judy Sandwell, and George Gunton who married Renata Gerbec from the office.

Val Noone

When I came to St Albans I was surprised to find that Val Noone was also working in the area. When my brother Gavan was about 14 he went overseas with the Sun Youth Tour, and one of the other boys on that trip was Val Noone, but I certainly hadn't expected him to have any connection with the school where I was teaching. My brother said that the Sun Youth Tour was an incredible experience. They went on a ship for a tour to England, they had their own uniform, they had school on the ship, and in England they were billeted out to local families, attended school there, and then came back. It was absolutely amazing, and Val was one of those boys. Gavan still keeps in close contact with Val, sharing historical and political views. Then Val surfaced at St Albans as a parish priest and he also came to the high school to take some religious instruction classes. He became a critic of Australia's involvement in Vietnam and fought for the cause of conscientious objectors. He's also written a book about the Vietnam era.

Val was the priest at the ceremony when Barry and I married in 1969. I have a Catholic background but Barry does not. Val got into terrible trouble because he invited us into the priests' private sitting room during pre-wedding visits.

He later left the priesthood, married, and has a couple of children. He now works as a senior tutor at Melbourne University in the history department. At the moment he's constructing a book about the Irish community in Victoria, and also publishes a magazine called Tain. He also organises a series of Irish history seminars at the university and has been involved with Kilmore Celtic Festival. We've kept in touch with him and I see him relatively often.

Teaching at Braybrook

Working at Braybrook High was also interesting, and, like St Albans, it was quite a large school. Ken Chilton, the woodwork teacher from St Albans, had also transferred there. Ian Mills was also a teacher there at the time. He was a strong supporter of the ALP, became very active in the district as a Sunshine councillor, and was heavily involved with the Western Region Council for Social Development.



Joan Butler with Form 6b at Braybrook High School, 1971.

I was at Braybrook for two years and by then Barry Rayner was teaching at Sunshine High. I married Barry in 1969 and we were living in Windsor for a couple of years, during which we taught at our respective schools.



Starting a Family

In 1971 we bought a house in Beaumaris and Barry travelled from there to Sunshine for the last couple of years of his work there. I was pregnant with our first child so I took maternity leave, returning to school for the last month of 1971. We - Barry and I - shuffled Karyn between Braybrook and Sunshine in a.m. and p.m. shifts.

In 1979 we spent the year in Canada as part of a teacher exchange programme.

Return to Teaching

When our first two girls were fairly young I started back with the Education Department doing

emergency teaching at Mentone Girls School. They allowed me to bring the children and have them at the back of the room occupying themselves with drawing and so on. It was during this time that I did my Bachelor of Special Education at Monash University. I didn't have to be at Mentone all the time and stipulated that I wouldn't be working on Thursday afternoons. I started working at Beaumaris High under the same sort of arrangement - tenure work they used to call it - where I'd be there for six weeks or so at a time. I was there at the beginning of 1983 just because they didn't have the full complement of staff, and they offered me the job as a 0.9 position. That was also when I was doing the uni course, so it fitted in well.

I put Suzanne, my third daughter, in a crèche after kindergarten but that didn't work. It was a difficult time because she didn't take to crèche and I used to arrange with other people from the kindergarten to take her for the afternoon. We got through that. Once the girls were all at school and I was teaching just down the road it wasn't an issue at all. In 1986 we again took all the girls for eight months around Europe, America, and Canada.

I completed my Masters in 1994 at the Faculty of Arts, Monash University. My thesis was about "The Politicisation of the Cultural Sphere," using the work of American photographer Robert Mapplethorpe as a case study.

I stayed at Beaumaris High from 1983 until I retired. In 1988 four schools amalgamated to become Sandringham College and I ended up as Acting Principal of Beaumaris Campus for the last two years. I was not ambitious for that to occur - it came by default - but it was a good experience.

Voluntary Work

After finishing at Sandringham College I took up some voluntary work with the Victorian Court Network. They are a support group I had heard about and made some inquiries about six years ago. When I stopped teaching I rang them again and joined as a volunteer. The Network operates state wide in all courts and is thinking of going interstate. We have a CEO, paid programme leaders, and a big bank of volunteers. We went through a twelve-week training course one day a week, then were on probation and mentored until we got our wings.

I'm rostered at the Childrens Court in Melbourne one day a week, where my role is to support all-comers. In the Childrens Court, the court users are supposed to be there from 10 o'clock in the morning and could still be waiting at 4 o'clock in the afternoon for their case to be heard. They are usually quite anxious because they don't know what is going to happen. Our job is to talk to them, listen to them, help them cope with the anxiety, and above all be non-judgemental about whatever the reason they are appearing in court. That's what we do from 9:30 a.m. until the last people leave. We do not get involved with ongoing support.

Children's Progress

My children have all grown up now and completed their studies, sort of. Karyn trained in veterinary sciences at Melbourne University. She and her husband Craig have a couple of acres at Monbulk. She practises at Heathmont and her husband works in local government. They are both environmentalists and conservationists

Janine did Arts and Sociology at Latrobe University. She's another international traveller, having been to Russia, Africa, and England, where she spent the two years open to Australian young people in mixing, working, and travelling. When she came back to Australia she took on a whole lot of other jobs: swimming coach at the Harold Holt pool, trained as masseur, then got a job at a call centre for a recruitment agency and now works in the interstate section. She's doing her Masters in Environmental Management. She is going overseas again as soon as her studies finish.

Suzanne studied Environmental Sciences at RMIT and is now working with Visy in Moorabbin. She's also completing a Masters in Environmental Management. She is employed by Visy to make sure that environmental concerns are properly addressed in their factories. She writes policy, runs training courses, and sees that the environmental policies are promoted amongst the workers. She and her husband Dave have a property in South Frankston.

Reflections



In summary, I was ripe for new experiences when I went to St Albans, and the four years there both formed and informed my subsequent teaching practices and radically broadened my world view. I often think with great affection of those years - the students, their personalities, and their avid thirst for learning; the teachers, their professional and private friendships, some of which continue to this day. It remains the highlight of my teaching career.

Joan Rayner, 2005



Reunion 2006. Stefan Czyz, Peter Barpopoulos, Joan Rayner, Lynette Maddock.



Reunion 2012. Joan Rayner in the pink shirt, middle row. Barry Rayner in the blue shirt, front row.

2012 Update:



After retiring from teaching and her school principal responsibilities, Joan continued her volunteer role as youth mentor. Morning Melodies in Melbourne created the opportunity for meeting friends and for coffee and discussions at Federation Square.

She joined a book club, enjoyed philosophy classes with the CAE and ethics lectures at Melbourne Uni, dabbled in poetry, and was a regular volunteer for the Melbourne Writers' Festival. Regular workouts at the gym kept her limber of limb. Combining walking expeditions and overseas travel was almost an annual pastime.

Joan Juanita Rayner nee Butler passed away in July 2012. Much loved by Barry. Mum of Karyn, Janine and Suzanne. Loving Nana to Lily, Ollie, Flynn and Isabel.

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School and class reunion photographs courtesy of Nick Szwed.