

Preface

This book came about through the initiative and encouragement of my older son, Bruce. I was in my late eighties, no longer allowed to drive and no longer able to play golf because of a chronic back problem, among other increasing ailments. I have been a fit and active man all my life and I think that Bruce was worried that depression or anxiety might set in, if I didn't find another keen interest to replace my previous physical activity. At least I could be stimulated mentally.

I grew up as part of a large, very close-knit family in country New South Wales, during the early part of the twentieth century, through the Depression years and to the outbreak of World War II. I have very fond memories of my childhood and youth, despite our straitened financial circumstances. It appealed to me to jot down a few of those memories, perhaps as a keep-sake for my children and for interested members of the extended Francis family, so I didn't take much convincing.

And so the tale I tell in these pages was originally planned for the eyes of my family and perhaps a small number of friends only. I would ask any stranger coming by whatever circumstances to this story, to keep in mind the original audience, when reading parts that might be considered too intimate for a wider readership. And to any friend not seeing themselves in these pages, please understand that sometimes more public events, and a request to consider a more general readership, have at times gently nudged aside the close and the personal in the retelling. And this has complicated the task. Family and friends are my life, and are always in my heart and my thoughts, even if my limited skill with the pen and restrictions with space have affected my ability to tell their story along with mine.

Having decided to take on Bruce's challenge, I found myself very quickly with writer's block – I didn't even know where to start. I sat with a writing pad in front of me, pen poised. I sat there for hours, doodling, writing a few sentences, then scrunching up the paper and tossing it aside. On the rare occasions that the creative juices would flow, my pen would race away with me; I'd fill a page, tear it off the pad, and place it on the then tiny pile of papers that would become my manuscript. I think I saw that in a movie once, and was attracted to the theatre of it. In retrospect, in the movie it was probably sheets of type-written paper, being whipped out of the machine with great fanfare, and sense of accomplishment. Clark Gable was the prodigious journalist in that movie, and the hero certainly knew a lot more about the written word, and how to go about it, than I do.

At school, I was always in strife for not beginning a new paragraph on a new line – being frugal perhaps. Old habits die hard. I hand-wrote hundreds of pages in the first draft of this book. I was oblivious to the fact that I hadn't delineated paragraphs until Bruce and my wife, Audette, struggled to understand my intentions, when trying to transcribe my handwritten script into type. Even more of a challenge to them was my simplistic interpretation of my daughter Margie's advice when I first contemplated putting my thoughts on paper. She told me not to worry about structure or sequence – if I thought of something I wanted to say about my life, I should just write it down, and put a structure to it later.

I took her advice literally, and it certainly broke my writer's block, but created havoc. Even when I managed the paragraphing, I failed to see the value of a new section, to separate random memories of different periods in my life. And I didn't number pages. A gust of wind through an open door, and hundreds of pages of random, non-sequential thoughts ended up scattered across the dining-room floor. Bruce and Audette had offered to share the typing of the manuscript, but with the disorder, combined with my sometimes shaky hand-writing, they found it impossible to sort through the chaos. I effectively had to start with pen and paper again.

This time I started with eight blank sections and re-ordered my script to fit each piece into one of those sections. I paragraphed every new thought, and numbered pages. With this new, orderly approach, Bruce and Audette assure me that it was a breeze and a pleasure to transcribe my written words into type. One false start, but 77 years on, paragraphing has become second nature. Who said that you can't teach an old dog new tricks?

In the event, the story unfolded, almost of its own accord, as the weeks and months passed at the dining-room table, and soon I found myself with 13 chapters. There were still many periods of writer's block, and many interruptions for one health scare or another, but the project was exciting, and the surprise of rediscovered memories, thrilling, if sometimes also a cause for melancholy, however brief.

For anyone who has known financial deprivation and barely noticed it; has experienced the vagaries of the Australian climate in the country; the love of a large family; of a woman; of children; the distress of war; the anxieties associated with small business; the enormous pleasures of sport; the experiences of meeting the rich and famous, and discovering that they're just like the rest of us; I hope that you will find something that is familiar here and will enjoy the trip down memory lane. For those of you whose experiences have been different, I hope that you will find some of our shared humanity in my small story.

It is a simple tale, told from the heart, and I hope that you enjoy it.

Cass Francis