

My first Australian

Thomas F Sandeman

The first Australian I ever met was a delightful lady doctor, recently qualified, who arrived in the wee Fife village of Kincardine in which my father had been the general practitioner for 17 years. She was to be his locum during his long and eventually fatal illness.

Her name was Pat Hodgson and she had just married when World War II broke out. Her husband, Guy, was a merchant seaman. His services were required on the very hazardous trans-Atlantic passage to keep Britain supplied with food and arms. Pat was certainly not going to sit at home in Adelaide while her newlywed was risking all on the other side of the world. At least she would be able to see him from time to time as he reached the eastern end of his voyages. As the ships most often docked in Liverpool or Glasgow, she was delighted to find a medical job in Scotland, within relatively easy reach of either port.

Scottish villages were not used to lady doctors in the 1940s. They preferred middle-aged to elderly males clad in suits and spats and smelling of tobacco and surgical spirit — or even non-surgical spirits — rather than perfume. My father, having been carted off to hospital, had no say in the appointment. To get a locum at all in wartime was an unusual privilege, as most of the young medicos who normally cut their teeth on such jobs were in the services. The population of this small mining and farming community could not have been cared for by the neighbouring doctors, who were getting on in years and lived at some distance. Pat had to be accepted.

Being only in my early teens at the time, I was not privy to the full impact that a large and vibrant Aussie woman had on the town. I am sure there was a considerable redistribution of the complaints usually seen in the surgery, and one can only imagine the boggling that eyes went through when first she paid a home visit to an unsuspecting patient with a painful set of piles. But the fresh air she brought with her was the first breeze of the winds of change about to overtake the professions in the postwar years. She became the most popular locum we had ever had.

It wasn't just Pat who awaited Guy's visits eagerly. My family rejoiced as he bore two large cardboard boxes, bound by marvelously concocted string knots, up our steps every 3 months or so. These contained the miracles of America's non-rationed society: the Hershey chocolate bars, the cans of Spam and, on one occasion, an entire case of Limburger cheese. This was a new experience in our household. Nothing so exotic had ever entered our doors — nor so quickly been banished to the outside laundry.



Dr Patricia Hodgson (née Richardson) as a resident medical officer at Royal Adelaide Hospital (RAH) in 1937. (Photograph courtesy, Michael Holt, Assistant Archivist, RAH Heritage Office.)



The stench pervaded the waiting room and led to a downturn in surgery attendance. When we eventually screwed up the courage to get past the smell, we were surprised to find the taste so acceptable.

Pat's eyes twinkled from the depths of deep sockets above generous cheeks. Her figure was similarly cheerfully ample. In spite of rationing, Pat's proportions failed to diminish.

When she eventually returned for a visit before returning to Australia, she had put herself on a diet. This proved to be so successful that she was unrecognisable when I opened the door to her. Apparently, she used this to great advantage when she was interviewed, as so many returning passengers were, on the wharf at Fremantle. "Look," she cried, "I left here a 12-stone dumpling. Now I am a 7-stone weakling. Send more food parcels, the Brits need them!"

The village never really recovered. My father's practice, sold after his death, was bought by another lady doctor. Unfortunately not endowed with a taste for cigarettes, whisky and good humour, that practitioner had more rigid views about life, death and the way to salvation.

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