

**FROM BUSH HUT
TO INNER BAR**

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C. S. WITHNALL KC

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by C. S. Withnall

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To my wife Marilyn, whose support and encouragement over nearly half a century, in good times and in tough times, and her dedication to our children, are the rock upon which my professional career, and indeed my survival in times of ill-health, were built. I am eternally grateful for having you share my journey.

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Preface

IT WAS ABOUT 4:30 a.m. on a dark and calm tropical morning, and my 70th birthday. I was standing in the bow of the 72 foot ketch “Ranui” motoring towards the pass through the coral reef which encloses Suva harbour, Fiji. We had left our anchorage at the head of the harbour about half an hour earlier, and were quietly threading our way into and down the main shipping channel towards the waiting Pacific Ocean. From my position in the bow I could look back over the wheelhouse roof at the leading lights on the hill at the head of the harbour, which signal the correct line to follow to navigate the pass. My job was to signal to the skipper, Richard, the course corrections needed to keep the boat on the course indicated by the leading lights, which led to the middle of the pass through the reef.

The other members of the crew, Richard’s two sons, my son James, and two young men from Dunedin were asleep in their bunks. *Ranui*, and the Dunedin based ketch *Evohe*, had been engaged as “mother ships” to accompany a fleet of five Polynesian ocean-going waka, transitional voyaging double hulled sailing canoes, which had previously sailed from their home islands in the Pacific to Auckland, and were then on their return journeys to their respective home islands. They had been at sea for about three months by the time they reached Suva, the home port of the last of the waka.

Richard had invited James and I to sail one of the legs of this odyssey across the Pacific, but work commitments had prevented me from taking up that offer. Instead we had arranged to meet *Ranui* in Suva when she arrived on the last leg, and then sail on to Vanuatu. *Ranui* was carrying a cargo of various tools donated by Auckland benefactors to tribes on some of the smaller, remoter islands of the Vanuatu Archipelago, to assist the Islanders in building wooden floors in their houses. This was part of an ongoing program of assistance to the ni-Vanuatu people being provided by and through Richard's-family trust.

So James and I flew to Nadi and then drove across the island to Suva, and were in Suva when the two yachts and the Fijian waka, *Uto ni Yalo*, arrived.

We had spent three days anchored at the head of the harbour, which was the time it took to get *Ranui*'s diesel tanks refilled, and to get clearance from Fiji's immigration Department to leave Fiji. Trying to get officialdom to move on the weekend in Fiji can be a somewhat frustrating experience.

But at last we were on the way. Leaving in the early hours of the morning meant that we could take advantage of the daylight to get well clear of the islands and reefs in the Mbenqa channel ahead, and inshore shipping, before nightfall.

As we approached the pass I could hear the sound of the surf on the reef, and by the lights of the millions of stars could see the white water where it was breaking on the reef to either side of us. Then I felt the boat rise beneath my feet as we reached the first of the ocean swells rolling in from the vast Pacific through the pass, and *Ranui* settled into the rhythmic pulse of the ocean.

It was a truly magic experience. I felt awed, humble, and truly blessed, that I was still here to do this, but also that I was still fit and active enough to enjoy it to the full.

Everyone has some unique experiences in their life. I think I've had far more than most. I was born during World War Two and survived a bombing raid. When I was nine my family immigrated to New Zealand

from England, and I spent six weeks on a ship traveling halfway around the world to a completely different environment. I left school at 15 and got a job as a builder's labourer. As a teenager I survived falling off a motorbike twice, and two car accidents. In my late teens I joined the New Zealand Forest Service as a professional hunter, and plied that trade in various parts of the North and South islands. In the course of doing so I managed to survive being swept away in flooded rivers three times, being bluffed high on a mountain, and being "geographically bewildered" in the Urewera Bush. In my early 20s I went back to school through the Government's Correspondence School, and eventually passed the University Entrance exam. I went to Otago university and got a law degree, supporting myself and my new family by working part time as a painter, including working on long ladders and on scaffolding on multi-story buildings. For a year I worked on night shift in a woollen mill and went to University in the daytime.

I practiced law for nearly 50 years, during which I was appointed as a Queens Counsel. I appeared in many significant and important cases in Courts all over New Zealand, both criminal and civil, including the Court of Appeal, the Supreme Court of New Zealand, in specialist tribunals and, one case in the Privy Council in London. Some of these have led to the quashing of wrongful convictions. In between cases I built and sailed a 30-foot timber boat, did two trips as crew on a square-rigged sailing ship in the South Pacific. In the course of the many cases I did I learned about things as diverse as economic theory, pig nutrition, gold mining, building and construction, and more. I don't think I've ever been bored. If I was I don't remember it. I was too busy anyway. I've been many things; among others, at various times I've been wet, cold, hungry, terrified, unhappy, ecstatic, in between all the more pleasant experiences I've had, but I honestly cannot remember actually being bored. So I suppose that makes me pretty fortunate.

PART
ONE

The
Adventure
Begins

1.

Early Days, Wartime England

I WAS BORN in Manchester, England, in 1941. My mother was a shorthand typist and my father, during the war years, worked at the Avro factory near Ringway Aerodrome, (now Manchester Airport) building Lancaster bombers. Our home was in the village of Cheadle, about six miles from the centre of Manchester. It was a semi-detached two-story house in what had originally been a Council housing estate. As one of the major industrial cities, and a seaport serviced by the Manchester Ship Canal, Manchester was a target for German bombers, and not one of the safest environments in wartime England.

My grandmother on my mother's side came from the hamlet of Westmancote on the slopes of Bredon Hill, near the town of Tewkesbury, in the Cotswolds. She was one of 11 children, all of whom lived long lives. Her father's family, the Ricketts, can trace its ancestry back into the 17th century. The names of some of my forebears are engraved on plaques on church walls in the district. They had been churchwardens of the local parish churches.

So it was that my elder sister Jean, two years older than me, and I went off to live with our Gran in Westmancote, to escape the dangers of the Blitz. Gran was a widow; my grandfather had been a driver of horse drawn artillery in France or Belgium during World War 1, and had been

gassed. He survived but his lungs had been damaged and he died in 1934, well before I was born. My mother was their only child.

I don't know how old I was when we went to Westmancote, but I do have a photograph of myself aged about two, at the house clutching a broom. I'm told I was very keen on "fweeping up", so even at that age, I obviously liked to be busy.

The house was an old house made of Cotswold stone; it was one of a number occupied by members of the family in the hamlet. It was semi detached, and in the other part of the building lived one of Gran's brothers, who we called Uncle Frank. A little further down the lane was Granny Rickett's house, and on the road which leads up Bredon Hill from the Bredon–Kemerton road lived Granny Payne and her family.

We didn't have anything much in the way of modern conveniences. I recall we had a water pump in the yard, bath night involved a tin tub on the kitchen floor, we had gas lamps, and in the bedroom a little oil lamp consisting of a wick in a small circular dish of oil. I don't think we had electricity.

Our garden, such as it was, was separated from Uncle Frank's by a stone wall far too high for me to ever look over. Uncle Frank kept pigs as well as hens, and Gran kept hens as well, so we had the luxury of eggs and bacon to supplement our war-time rations.

The wall, however, was not enough to shut out the squealing of the pigs when it came time for Uncle Frank to kill a baconer. And Gran, being a country woman, was adept at wringing the neck of a hen which had stopped laying, so we grew up being well aware where bacon, pork and poultry came from, and the realities of what was required if you wanted to eat meat.

And we ate well. Gran was an excellent cook; she and her husband had had a small hotel in Brighton, until the outbreak of World War 1. Being born and brought up in the country, she had learned how to make the most of what working people could afford, which included all the "offal" at which so many people turn up their noses, but which she could, and did, make appetising. During the war years (and after) when meat was tightly

rationed, “offal” was cheaper because of its lack of popularity.

So pigs trotters, pork knuckles, pigs chitterlings, tripe, hearts, livers, kidneys, sweetbreads and brains, all featured on the menu. I still enjoy them today and feel sorry for people who simply recoil at the very thought. They don’t know what they’re missing.

Gran’s father had been a gamekeeper at a nearby country estate, so she also knew what to do with the occasional rabbit or hare which found its way into the larder.

So my early culinary experiences were much more varied and interesting than those of many children growing up in wartime Britain.

Across the lane from our gate was a low stone wall, and beyond the wall were fields which led up the lower slopes of Bredon Hill to the woods. Gran was a great walker, and she used to take us walking on Bredon Hill – and indeed everywhere else we needed to go because that was the only form of transport, until you got to the Bredon–Kemerton Road at the foot of the Hill, where we could catch a bus.

There was and still is a public footpath to the top of the hill, where there is a stone tower, and from where you could see for miles in all directions. There was also a large rock up there called the Bambury Stone, which according to local legend, at midnight went down to the river Avon to drink. There were parts of two other villages at the bottom of the hill further around. There were copses, and patches of brambles, where we used to go to pick wild blackberries, which went into blackberry and apple jam or blackberry and apple tart.

And there were orchards. The Vale of Evesham is a well-known fruit growing area. Gran used to supplement her pension by fruit picking, and of course she had to take Jean and I with her, and we used to help – although how much went into the basket and how much went into our mouths is debatable.

We picked cherries, raspberries, strawberries, apples and probably plums and apricots.

It was even an adventure getting there. We would walk to the end of the lane early in the morning where we would join the other pickers on

the back of a truck driven by a man called Jack Hall, who would then roar off at terrific speed (or so it seemed to us) along the narrow lanes to the orchard of the day. The pickers were virtually all women, and their children of similar age to us, so there were lots of games to be had, and trees to climb.

Fruit picking was not always quite so innocent. I can remember when I was quite small when Jean and I joined with some neighbourhood kids in a raid on a nearby farmer's fruit trees. We were having a great time until the farmer arrived, and he was not happy. Everyone scattered and legged it out of there. I was only a little fellow with short legs and was the easiest catch. My big sister had disappeared, and there was no one to save me. So I was marched off to Gran, howling my eyes out.

Wheat was also grown up on the hill. At harvest time women would help out stacking sheaves of wheat into stooks. The horse drawn harvester would work around the field from the outside in, which meant that any rabbits would gradually be driven into the centre, until they were forced to make a run for it across the harvested field. We were given little tins or containers of salt and told that we would catch the rabbits if we could shake salt on their tails. Of course we believed it. So there would be excited children hovering along the mown edge clutching their little containers of salt, eyes wide with excitement and anticipation, and then the mad dash and squeals whenever a rabbit made a desperate run for it. But it was always the dogs which were quicker than our little legs, and they didn't even need salt!

So there was always something going on.

At some stage during the war. I can remember being back in Cheadle. We lived in a street of semi-detached two-storey houses, each of which had an Anderson air-raid shelter in its little backyard. All the windows in everyone's house had heavy blackout curtains to avoid being bombing targets. Dad was also in the home guard, and one night, Mum got us up out of bed. There was Dad in his home guard uniform, and we turned out the lights and went outside to the air raid shelter. There was a bright light in the sky and a loud roaring noise. My childish understanding was