

# Mick: A life of Randolph Stow



# Mick: A life of Randolph Stow

Suzanne Falkiner

First published in 2016 by  
UWA Publishing  
Crawley, Western Australia 6009  
www.uwap.uwa.edu.au

UWAP is an imprint of UWA Publishing  
a division of The University of Western Australia



This book is copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the *Copyright Act 1968*, no part may be reproduced by any process without written permission. Enquiries should be made to the publisher. While every attempt has been made to obtain permission to publish all copyright material, if for any reason a request has not been received, please contact the publisher.

Copyright © Suzanne Falkiner 2016

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

National Library of Australia  
Cataloguing-in-Publication entry:  
Falkiner, Suzanne, 1952– author.  
Mick: a life of Randolph Stow / Suzanne Falkiner.  
ISBN: 9781742586601 (hardback)  
Stow, Randolph, 1935–2010.  
Stow, Randolph, 1935–2010—Criticism and interpretation.  
Authors—Australia—Biography.  
A823.3

Typeset in 11 point Bembo

Printed by Imago

This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.



## *Contents*

1	The ‘Monstruous Regiment of Women’	I
2	The Old Stories	17
3	Geraldton Schooldays 1943–1949	30
4	‘Christianity and stale bread’: Guildford Grammar School 1950–1952	48
5	St George’s College 1953	72
6	St George’s College 1954–1955	86
7	St George’s College 1956	111
8	Forrest River Mission 1957	143
9	Adelaide University, August 1957	174
10	St Paul’s College, University of Sydney, 1958	193
11	‘My mare turns back her ears’, Geraldton 1958–1959	214
12	Port Moresby, March 1959	231
13	At Omarakana, May 1959	255
14	Tropo Tropo	277
15	Perth to Hadleigh, 1960–1961	314
16	Perth 1961	334
17	Leeds 1962	346
18	‘Western Wind’: Scourie, Scotland 1962–1963	368
19	‘Simplicities of Summer’: Malta, March 1963	381
20	Perth 1963–1964	394

CONTENTS

21	New York to New Mexico, August 1964 to May 1965	411
22	Maine to Alaska 1965	436
23	Perth 1966	457
24	12 Bryanston Street, London, and Leeds 1966–1969	470
25	Fishpond Cottage; Canada, May 1969–1971	506
26	Fishpond Cottage; Lédenon, Languedoc, 1972–1973	535
27	Adelaide and Sydney, 1974	550
28	Dairy Farm Cottage, 1975–1979	575
29	Dairy Farm Cottage, March 1979–1980	599
30	Old Harwich, March 1981–1984	621
31	Harwich 1985–1989	647
32	Harwich 1990–2010	668
33	Wrabness, 9 June 2010	707
	A Note	718
	Notes	729
	Bibliography: Works by Randolph Stow	833
	Published Poems by Randolph Stow:	
	First Known Publication	840
	Selected Bibliography: Books, Alphabetical	845
	Selected Bibliography, Chronological: Interviews, Reviews and Critical Articles	848
	Bibliography: Libraries and Archives Consulted	855
	Acknowledgments	859
	Index	863

## The ‘Monstruous Regiment of Women’

My childhood was seashells and sandalwood, windmills  
 And yachts in the southerly, ploughshares and keels,  
 Fostered by hills and by waves on the breakwater,  
 Sunflowers and ant-orchids, surfboards and wheels,  
 Gulls and green parakeets, sandhills and haystacks, and  
 Brief subtle things that a child does not realise,  
 Horses and porpoises, aloes and clematis—

Do I idealise?

Then—I idealise.<sup>1</sup>

—‘Seashells and Sandalwood’, *Act One*, 1957

The *Merry-Go-Round in the Sea*, Randolph Stow’s most autobiographical novel, begins with a still centre: the stationary central pole of a rusting iron roundabout that stands between a Morton Bay fig tree and the Indian Ocean in the port of Geraldton. Then, as the outer wheel revolves, we follow six-year-old Rob’s whirling vision as it moves in ever-widening circles, past a rotting jetty to the Mechanics Institute in the old Geraldton railway station (where his mother is changing her library books), built on a track that once brought steam trains through the middle of the crumbling town. Our gaze sweeps past the convict-made courthouse with its cracked steps, and finally to empty shops with dirty windows. Beyond these again are the grace notes of a clear Western Australian sky, and bougainvillea and

sunflowers. Further away, beyond dwellings perched precariously on shifting white sandhills (the *Costa Branca* of the Portuguese navigators, as Stow thinks of it) is an old country—or a young country—that stretches into realms of infinite mystery. To the west lie mystic distant islands. Somewhere more distant still is the War, where some great wickedness has just occurred at a place called Pearl Harbor.

Shadowing this vivid ride in another dimension is its unattainable dream replica, a roundabout that Rob can never ride, the ‘merry-go-round in the sea’ of his imagination. This has a real-life counterpart in the mast and cables of a sunken dredge off the West End beach. This elusive vehicle for his inner life will dog Stow—a writer with the singular blessing of a fragile creativity and brilliance that sometimes approaches a curse—for the whole of his existence. But at this moment, caught between real and imagined worlds, he is also balanced on the cusp of innocence and experience: even now, it seems to him, he has discovered that time moves inexorably on, and he will never be this young (or this old), and the world will never be this perfect, again.

‘Thy firmness makes my circle just  
And makes me end where I began’<sup>2</sup>

This striking image, taken from Donne’s ‘A Valediction: forbidding mourning’—and later inscribed in the fictional Rob’s autograph book by his first great love, his idealised cousin Rick—forms a subtext that encapsulates many of the preoccupations of Stow’s life and work. Before long, he will need to break free of that protective circle, and find a home place and a way of being outside of it.



Julian Randolph Stow was born on 28 November 1935 in the Geraldton Maternity Hospital at 321 Marine Terrace, a dignified old limestone building that had once housed the district’s first magistrate. Geraldton at this time was a town of intimate geography: the hospital, fronted by oleanders, stood a half mile from Altorfer & Stow, his father Cedric’s legal office on Durlacher Street, and about the same distance from the modest brick bungalow at 150 Shenton Street where

he would grow up. A short walk away from Shenton Street was The Esplanade and its merry-go-round.

Cedric Ernest Stow, now thirty-three, and his wife Mary, twenty-six, might have welcomed the birth of their first child, coming as it did some five years after they married. So too his maternal grandmother Alice Sewell, recently widowed and living with her unmarried sister Eliza Sutherland Macdonald at 'Hadleigh', just around the corner at 104 Gregory Street. Julian Randolph—Mickey to his familiars—was well-equipped with aunts: Mary's sisters, Edna and Betty, were also as yet unmarried. As the first son and grandson in his immediate family, Mick settled contentedly into a warm domestic nest that he later fondly recalled as 'the monstrous regiment of women'.<sup>3</sup>

Accordingly, when local Anglican minister the Reverend K. B. Halley, a family friend, christened Mick at Christ Church at 129 Marine Terrace in May the following year, the entertainments (combining tea and tennis) that Mary Stow held at Shenton Street were entirely female affairs, according to 'Women's Realm' in *The West Australian*. Along with Mick's immediate relatives a dozen ladies attended: Eileen Altorfer, the wife of Cedric's legal partner, and her sister Mrs Bogle; Themetre Moustaka, whose family owned the local newspaper; the wives of several prominent citizens including the bank manager; and representatives from local farming families such as the Grants. A family friend, Mrs Charles May, brought the christening cake and two of her daughters, Noel and Julie.<sup>4</sup>

Beyond the neat rectangular grid made by Shenton, Gregory, Francis and Augustus streets, the old town of Geraldton sprawled back from a broad peninsula surrounded on three sides by sea. The ageing but elegant public buildings lining the grand coastal sweep of Marine Terrace included a Town Hall, several two-storey hotels with wrought-iron verandahs, and various banks and warehouses. The railway track running along it had once served the cargo ships tying up at the Esplanade jetty, a long span jutting into the sea at Town Beach that was now used mainly for swimming and diving. At the Terrace's northern end, beyond the gaol and railway yards, the scrubby wastes were scattered with small wooden cabins where the Afghan cameleers and fringe-dwelling Aboriginal people lived. South, and backed by the sandhills of Mahomet's Flats, was the Back Beach,

endlessly washed by Indian Ocean breakers and continuing for miles along the flat coastline.

It was the sort of town where you collected your paper and left your money on the newsagent's verandah, remembered Gay Moustaka.<sup>5</sup> A fishing and crayfishing fleet, market gardens run by Greek and Italian migrants, a hinterland of wheatlands and sheep stations, and a small industry of lead and iron-ore mining supported a population of about 5,000. Length of residence—permanency—counted: established families like the Fongs, who for several generations had been grocers, and the Moustaka clan, descended from a Greek engineer who had jumped ship in the 1850s to look for gold, were held in high esteem.

Mick's own social position was also secure. When Mary Sewell, descended from a tribe of intricately connected rural pioneers of the district dating back to the 1850s, became engaged to twenty-seven-year-old Cedric Stow, the new solicitor at A. N. Altorfer, Geraldton's only legal firm, her father George Ernest Sewell was the town's mayor. Mick's equanimity would remain undisturbed even by the arrival of a small sister, Helen, on 24 November 1937, almost exactly two years after his own.



There were girls in Geraldton, according to local gossip, who had considered that Mary Campbell Sewell had an unfair advantage with Geraldton's new young bachelor, working as she did as Arthur Altorfer's secretary. Cedric was undoubtedly good-looking: six feet tall, with dark hair and green eyes, and a quiet manner. At any rate, in late November 1929 *The Geraldton Guardian* reported that twenty-year-old Mary was happily displaying a platinum-and-diamond engagement ring. The Reverend Halley married the couple at Christ Church, decorated with pink gladioli, on Thursday 18 December 1930, shortly after Mary turned twenty-one. Mary, her striking blue eyes and curly brown hair set off by a dress of pink charmeuse, was given away her father, and her sister Edna, in powder blue with pink carnations, was her only bridesmaid.

Cedric's father Francis Stow had been too ill to attend, but his mother Annie, in black satin, came up from Claremont in Perth.

Peter Snodgrass, a Sewell relative by marriage, stood as Cedric's best man. In the evening, a large party of guests enjoyed a wedding breakfast set out on tables on Hadleigh's wide verandah, with music until midnight.<sup>6</sup>

After their honeymoon in Perth, Mary began her married life in a rented brick cottage at 98 Fitzgerald Street. Cedric, in suit and tie, drove each day to his office on the corner of Durlacher and Eleanor Street (later Chapman Road). At midday he came home for a three-course lunch and a short nap before returning to work. At Altorfer & Stow, where he was now a partner, a stream of minor debtors and motor-vehicle accidents, drunken and domestic assaults, illegal-gambling charges and wage disputes made up the firm's main business. Other clients were accused of stealing horses, allowing cattle to stray, or negligence while poisoning rabbits. Italian fishermen were caught with undersized crayfish, and in the Depression years a Carnarvon market gardener paid his fee in bananas. In March 1936, when Mick was four months old, Cedric acted for a railway man's wife who, with her male boarder's help, poisoned her husband with arsenic.

Social notes in *The West Australian* and *Geraldton Guardian* found the couple at bridge and garden parties, church fundraisers, and playing golf and tennis. Mary Stow—quick-witted, competitive—often won at guessing games for charity. Spring brought occasional visits to the Hotel Imperial in Perth to attend the Royal Show. In summer came picnics and crayfishing at the Greenough River, sailing on small wooden yachts, and beach parties where athletic young men and women in swimsuits posed for photographs in acrobatic pyramids on the sand. Friday afternoons found Cedric at the Geraldton Club (previously called the Gentleman's Club), where Mary might send up a note with a waiter when she needed a lift home with the weekly shopping.

Neither of Mick's grandfathers had lived to see his birth. Cedric's father, Francis Stow, died some six months beforehand, of septicaemia complicated by diabetes and Parkinson's disease at the age of sixty-five, on 12 May 1935. Cedric travelled to Perth to join his brother Basil as a pallbearer for his burial at Karrakatta cemetery two days later. On 8 November, twenty days before Mick was born, Mary's father George Sewell, aged sixty-eight, fell off his horse on his small

plot of farmland outside Geraldton and died soon after of a cerebral haemorrhage. The Reverend Halley buried him in the Anglican section of the Utakarra cemetery.

In early April 1937 Cedric Stow would again be called upon to act as a pallbearer when his partner in the firm, Arthur Norman Altorfer, died of appendicitis at forty-eight at his home in Eleanor Street. For the next two decades Cedric—his hair already greying in his mid-thirties—kept Altorfer’s name on the shingle and, aided by a secretary, conducted the practice alone.



Sometime before Mick’s arrival, Cedric and Mary had moved into their new double-fronted brick bungalow at 150 Shenton Street, built on part of a parcel of land between Francis and Gregory Street that George Sewell had acquired some twenty years before. Set back on a long block, it boasted a tiled roof and a wide, brick-pillared verandah running halfway along the front and all down the length of one side. Behind the front door a narrow central hall and polished wooden floor led between two bedrooms and the living and dining room, divided by fret-worked jarrah bookcases, to a kitchen and sleep-out at the back. A driveway gave access to a garage behind this, and a backyard with room for two corrugated-iron water tanks and a tennis court. Later, a maid’s room was added. It was considered to be quite special to build a new house at that time, not long after the Depression, Mick’s sister Helen remembered.

There was an adjoining wasteland at the back, full of berry bushes that had come out as seeds in the stuffing in the camels’ saddle bags, with a red berry that looks and tastes a bit like a tomato...My father always kept an alleyway cut through these bushes to Gran’s backyard.

When the war broke out and maids found other work, Mick took over the maid’s quarters: a proper brick room, but obviously an afterthought, as it made the house into an L-shape. But mostly he slept in the sleep-out, Helen recalled. Both slept in the sleep-out in summer, and when in winter she retreated to her own room, he

stayed there. Usually the maids were Irish, and couldn't cook, so her mother did the cooking. The maid looked after the children, and took them for afternoon walks.<sup>7</sup>

In July 1937, a few months before Helen's birth, Cedric gave away Mary's younger sister Elizabeth—Betty—on her marriage to Eric Gurr, who ran a garage and car dealership at Carnamah, ninety miles southeast of Geraldton. The couple immediately set about producing three small blonde daughters, Gillian, Diana and Susan. Early the following year *The West Australian* announced the engagement of Mary's elder sister Frances Edna to Robert Olivier.<sup>8</sup> The brief notice did not reveal that Edna's intended was the Marchese Robert Pembroke Testaferrata-Olivier, aged forty, who had emigrated from Malta thirteen years before to take up Dartmoor, 5,000 acres of marginal country about thirty miles northeast of Yuna.<sup>9</sup>



As the widowed Alice Sewell's first grandchild, and Mary and Cedric's only son, Mick himself remembered that he received rather more attention than the nieces and nephews who came later.<sup>10</sup> A plump, appealing child, dark haired among his blonde female cousins, Mickey came top of the family pecking order—'and he intended we should know that', Edna's son Paul Olivier recalled.<sup>11</sup>

Hadleigh, the home of Alice Sewell and Sutherland Macdonald, was a few minutes' walk around the corner by the footpath, and even closer by the shortcut from the Stow's tennis court to Alice's backyard via the sandy vacant ground known as the 'goanna paddock'. With its convict-built thick stone walls and small dark rooms, Hadleigh was one of the oldest houses in the town, and resembled a small station homestead, with an overgrown garden with fig trees, spiky date palms and a clutter of stables and wooden storehouses smelling of apples at the back.<sup>12</sup>

The two women, doughty offspring of a Gaelic-speaking Scot from the Wimmera district of Victoria, were indomitable. Thin and strong in her early seventies, 'Suthy'—Mick's Great Aunt Ap (pronounced 'Arp' by the children)—chopped wood like a man for the kitchen stove and could carry him on her back across the goanna paddock to his home.<sup>13</sup>

It was his beloved Aunt Ap (along with his Aunt Edna) who read aloud to Mickey from Andrew Lang's *The Nursery Rhyme Book*, Henry Lawson's poems and *Coles Funny Picture Books*, and Gran and Ap who instilled in him an early love of Scottish ballads: the 'mysterious, melancholy glamour' of 'Lord Randall, my son',<sup>14</sup> and long, sad poems such as 'Lucy Gray' and 'Beth Gelert'. While Mary Stow—loving but strict, and possessed of an acerbic tongue when roused—tended to be over-cautious about her small son's safety, foreseeing dire fates in climbable trees, deep washtubs, Coolgardie safes and unfenced lily ponds, Mick was certain that Ap could never be cross with him: he was a boy, and Ap loved both men and horses.<sup>15</sup>

'Mick wasn't at all shy when he was young', Helen remembered. 'My mother used to say that when he was about two or three and we were going out somewhere, they'd have to tell him, "Now, you're not to talk all the time...". Everything he felt came out in words. There was no holding in the words.'<sup>16</sup>

Barbara May, who lived on the corner of Francis Street, and was born so close to Mick that Mary Stow and her mother Rosalind were 'knitting together', remembered running back and forth between the houses before, at five, they were both sent to school.<sup>17</sup> On Sundays all the families would arrive at West End Beach, on the sandy end of the peninsula, where the gently sloping shallows were safe for small children. On hot nights a line of car headlights caught the glisten of fish leaping from the sea. One of Mick's cherished memories was of his father, fond but remote, carrying him on his back as he swam into deeper water.<sup>18</sup>

The world opened up still further on annual visits to the city, a two-day trip in the family's little cream Austin, a car that could just make sixty miles an hour on the sealed road—wide enough for one vehicle only—running 312 miles on the inland route between Geraldton and Perth. In 1939, to avoid the December heat, Mary joined her sister Betty and their infant children in a house in Claremont for a few weeks.<sup>19</sup>

Mary Stow had recognised that her son was precocious, but Cedric refused to let her lie about his age and enrol him in school early.<sup>20</sup> That year and the next, from age three, Mick attended Miss Shearing's private kindergarten, where he was sufficiently impressed

by her cuckoo clock that he would remember it seventy years later and buy one for himself.<sup>21</sup>

In 1941, at five, as his hair grew dark and curly and he shed his early plumpness and lengthened into a gangly child with long thin legs, he moved on to 'proper' school. At Geraldton Primary School, two blocks from home in Augustus Street, he was taught by a Miss Martin in the Infants class, or 'first bubs'.<sup>22</sup> Mick would later record the smell of paintboxes and crayons, of biscuits and oranges at playlunch, and the green cloth bags that hung on the back of their miniature wooden chairs to hold their possessions.<sup>23</sup> A friend later recalled his astonishing memory: asked over half a century later if he could remember the names of the pupils in his initial primary-school class, 'Of course,' he answered. 'All of them.'<sup>24</sup>



*The Merry-Go-Round in the Sea* opens in late 1941, in the Christmas holidays, when six-year-old Rob's mother is entirely devoted to his care and his sister 'Nan'—too young at four to challenge him in any way—is 'beneath contempt'.<sup>25</sup>

Beyond the dry precinct of his father's office and the township's neat rows of houses, the domain of women, lay the other pole of his existence, a glamorous realm in the hinterland where his Sewell relatives ranged distantly on horses and trucks on undulating sheep stations. Here were the wind-stunted trees on the Geraldton-Walkaway road that for Mick—or 'Rob'—resembled old ladies like his grandmother washing their hair; here also were the 'blackboys' on the way to Ellendale, home to his elderly 'aunts' Isa and Minnie Logue, and the beautiful, bunyip-infested Ellendale Pool.

Further north lay Sandsprings, where his mother's cousin Vernon Sewell and his wife May lived on a grazing property so old that the stone shearing shed had slits in the wall for rifles to ward off attack by Aboriginal people.<sup>26</sup> Sandsprings, in open country, meant to Mick the *ark-ark* of crows from ring-barked trees, lazy tennis games among the adults, and a house full of cups and silver spoons won by various Sewells at tennis, cricket and golf. Best of all, here was his second cousin Eric—'Rick' in *Merry-Go-Round*—tall, blond,

in his early thirties, but 'shy and rather remote',<sup>27</sup> and who knew about horses.

At this time Sandsprings measured some 12,000 acres and ran about 5,000 sheep, along with some horses, cattle and pigs, and grew crops of wheat and oats. Over the years the original primitive homestead, dating from around the 1850s, had been gradually replaced with one built of variegated stone with a corrugated-iron roof, semi-subterranean cellars, four chimneys and generous timber verandahs. With thick walls and a wide hall or breezeway running through the middle of it, the house was cool in summer. More rooms had been added by Chinese workers, who had left a pair of oriental characters pressed into the pale mortar that framed a window over the drive: mysterious symbols that might mean 'Good luck to this house', Mick thought, but which he rather worried might also be an insult to his great-grandfather.<sup>28</sup>

A nearby creek, rainwater tanks, and windmills pumping from a spring provided water. A generator attached to a Delco-Light plant, run for a few hours each day and with the power stored in batteries, lit the house at night. In the homestead garden grew a profusion of roses and lilies, olive trees, palms and pepper trees. A vegetable garden and an orchard of orange and fig trees, and pens for fowls and dairy cows, also surrounded it. Beyond these were a married station-hand's cottage, single-men's quarters, a coach house and the stone shearing shed holding a board for two men and an old manual wool press. A little further away again lay the family cemetery.

By this date, four generations of Sewells had lived on Sandsprings. Vernon's sons Reg and Eric had left Perth High School at seventeen to work with their father. The couple in the cottage, a general station hand and an apprentice, and another single man, Lancaster, who looked after the horses, assisted them. Stephen Newman, an old man who in early days had driven the mail from Geraldton to Gingin, and whose habit it was to wear four shirts and take one off when it got dirty, worked as a handyman for food and tobacco.<sup>29</sup>

By late 1941 the war was two years old, but it had taken time to impinge upon the lives of the people of Geraldton. Cedric Stow, now thirty-eight, had joined the 19th Garrison Battalion as a private in the

'B Class Reserve' in January. A body of mainly volunteers—middle-aged men, local business-people and farmers, and those with disabilities, including veterans of World War I—had gathered to act as a Home Guard, and trained mainly on weekends. Later that year Cedric would be called up for full-time service in the Third Australia Corps of Western Australian field troops.

By now, however, the feeling of comfortable isolation from world events was rapidly dissipating. The sinking of HMAS *Sydney* off the Western Australia coast on 19 November, soon after the battleship had visited Geraldton, was followed by the attack on Pearl Harbor in early December. Then, a few days after the fall of Singapore in February 1942, Darwin was bombed.<sup>30</sup> At around the same time, thousands of refugees—people with accents and clothes the townspeople found strange—began to arrive by ship from the islands of Indonesia and Singapore.

In early March, with Japanese air raids on Broome and Wyndham, a trickle of people from coastal settlements further north flowed down to seek refuge in the town. As fears of invasion grew, a barbed-wire fence was installed, running from Bluff Point several miles south to Mahomet's Flats, with machine gun posts arrayed to cover likely landing places such as the Back Beach. Rifle club members were posted to guard public buildings at night, shelters were dug in school grounds and backyards, and air-raid practices were conducted. Then the Americans arrived, building a pier—the 'Yanks' Jetty'—for their flying boats at West End Beach. A flying school and a military training base were set up, and soon the town was overflowing with Australian and American soldiers.

To the children, much of it was great fun, Gay Moustaka remembered.<sup>31</sup> They would show the American servicemen a thorny mountain devil—a small spiky lizard—and then put 'double gees' (a sharp local burr) in a matchbox and sell them to the soldiers as mountain devil's 'eggs'. But Mick—or his fictional counterpart, 'Rob'—felt insecure: his beloved country was threatened. One night when he was staying over at Hadleigh, he woke screaming, thinking he was in a coffin, only to find that when the air-raid siren sounded Gran and Ap had put him, still sleeping, under the dining-room table.

His world had changed. His father was in the Garrison all the time now and hardly came home. Everywhere there were soldiers, fifty thousand soldiers, somebody said, and soldiers called Yanks with flying-boats called Catalinas took up more and more of the beach, putting up more and more fences, pushing farther and farther back the merry-go-round in the sea. The Japs bombed farther and farther down the coast, and everyone agreed that it was the boy's town that they wanted: it was the boy's blue harbour and the silver petrol tanks and the great camouflaged wheatbins that they most desired to wreck or win.<sup>32</sup>

Then, when a small aircraft suspected to be a Japanese reconnaissance plane was spotted flying over Geraldton, many of the women and children began to evacuate south by rail. Margaret Cobley, Vernon Sewell's daughter, recalled discussing when they should leave with the other mothers at tennis on Wednesdays. Vernon Sewell, who was chairman of the local Roads Board, would be advised when the Japanese approach was imminent, they thought. Routinely, they would decide on a town a little further south that the 'Japs' must reach before they would depart.<sup>33</sup> Eventually, in late April or early May 1942—the month that Cedric Stow was promoted to the rank of lieutenant—the extended Sewell family retreated to Sandsprings, thirty miles inland. Mick packed the birthday books he had been given the previous November: *Now We Are Six* and the *Just So Stories*—but he also coveted Michael Cobley's *The Tailor of Gloucester* by Beatrix Potter, with its beautiful pictures, he recalled years later.<sup>34</sup>

Eric, the elder of Vernon's two sons, and still unmarried, had joined the 2/II Battalion 6th Division as a private in November 1939, but was discharged the following March after being diagnosed with an enlarged heart, although it never troubled him further. His younger brother Reg, who with his wife Noel, née May, managed the neighbouring Sewell property Koogereena, had enlisted in the 19th Garrison Battalion that December, a month before Cedric. Soon after Mick's arrival at Sandsprings, Eric took Reg's place on Koogereena. With most of the district's working men in the army, only sixty-year-old Vernon Sewell, handyman Stephen Newman, now in his late seventies, and a farm hand remained.

Thus, under the patriarchal gaze of Vernon Sewell—a tall, straight, fair-haired, stern-looking man of almost Scandinavian good looks—and his wife May, the clan that gathered was predominantly female. As the cluster of dislocated wives and children settled in for the duration, Steve Newman saw the girls he had watched grow up return with children of their own. With Mary Stow and her two children came Mick's aunt Betty Gurr and her three daughters Gillian, Diana and Susan, Mick's grandmother Alice Sewell, and Sutherland Macdonald.<sup>35</sup> Margaret Copley brought her own three sons and her maid.

Reg Sewell's wife Noel and her children Elizabeth and Peter, left behind at Koogereena with Eric, were joined by her two married sisters Julie Pearson and Dulcie Harman, whose husbands were also away at the war.

While the children settled in to enjoy their new life, the women busied themselves with cooking for an extra seventeen people and helping with the farm work. In case a further retreat became necessary, they packed up supplies—flour, sugar, clothes, books and children's toys—and sent them ahead to Boodanoo, a family property about sixty miles further inland, but the 'Great Trek' never eventuated.<sup>36</sup> Food was rationed, but there were no real shortages: the properties were self-sufficient in meat, milk, poultry and eggs, and the women made their own bread and soap. Once a fortnight an excursion was made into Geraldton in a car with a gas producer and hooded headlights, passing the army and air force camps that had sprung up all around, while white-painted stones placed along the roadside guided their journey home in the dusk. On one of these visits to town—to his mother's embarrassment—drunken soldiers showered Mick with sixpences and pennies when he told them he had no money to buy a soft drink.<sup>37</sup>

Mary Stow, missing her home and husband, blushing for her children's misbehaviour, was 'shy and dry and ironic by turns'.<sup>38</sup> Six-year-old Mick was joyful, however; he was in 'his' country—his threatened, innocent Costa Branca—a frontier beyond the constrictions of the coast. 'His country was where the small farms ended, where the winter rainfall ended, where the people ended. Beyond lay the open North....'<sup>39</sup>

“I am very happy here,” he told May Sewell—‘Aunt Mary’—gravely.

“Then you must be happy,” said Aunt Mary, “if you know it.”

“Because I know it now? Not later on?”

“Usually one knows afterwards. Long afterwards.”<sup>40</sup>

For the children accustomed to town living, life at Sandsprings was extremely interesting. There were dogs, and sheep, and Eric’s old chestnut mare Goldie<sup>41</sup>—one day to be found dead of snakebite—to ride. When the first May showers arrived, wrote Stow, the iron roofs roared with rain, the paddocks turned green and the ploughing began, and there were mushroom hunts amid crying plovers. There was a rabbit plague: rabbits in their hundreds were trapped in wire netting funnels as they came to drink at the dams at sundown, and were strung up for sale to a man who came from town in a truck.

Being a little older than the other children, Mick was allowed to accompany Vernon Sewell on his rounds, and when they drove to a deserted homestead on a distant station, he believed he saw a face in an empty window: the house was haunted by dead people, he concluded. So too, he felt, was the ‘Hand Cave’, an Aboriginal rock-painting gallery beneath a stone outcrop just a few metres over the Sandsprings boundary, lined with the silhouetted stencils of ancient hands. This dramatic image provided a dissonance with the ‘blackniggers’ of the town, who were reputed to have bugs in their hair and couldn’t be mixed with.<sup>42</sup>

Margaret Cobley observed that when the children trooped down to a clump of gum trees near the homestead to play, while the others ran around or swung on the low branches, Mick would sit further up in the tree reading a book, or ‘just thinking’.<sup>43</sup> Once he fell out of one of these trees, injuring his arm, but was unable to remember the fall, an experience of amnesia that would make him ponder the nature of memory and forgetting.<sup>44</sup>

When the women inevitably started to get on each other’s nerves, various shifts occurred. Sutherland Macdonald and Alice Sewell joined their distant cousins Isa and Minni Logue at Ellendale. Three months after arriving at Sandsprings, Mary Stow packed up her small car and took Mick and Helen to Koogereena, to join Noel and her sisters.<sup>45</sup> Koogereena, for Mick, was ‘an enchanted place’, with an endless

jungle of a garden, an Edwardian homestead with a stained-glass panel in the door that spelled out the station's name and a verandah covered with old-fashioned white roses. It also had a ballroom filled with toys and tricycles, and a dining room full of saddles, with a chicken incubator as a bonus.<sup>46</sup>

Auntie Noel, with her flashing eyes, was an accomplished 'rouser' of small children, and her daughter Elizabeth ('Didi'), about nine months younger than Mick, aspired to be a horse, and so was 'as good as a boy any day'.<sup>47</sup> Noel's younger sister Julie Pearson was small and dark and quiet, while her other sister Dulcie Harmon was tall and dark and noisy, so Mick—or 'Rob'—remembered.

One reason for Julie's subdued manner was that her husband John Eyres Pearson—known as Ian, a sergeant in the 2/4th Machine Gun Battalion—had been taken prisoner of war in Thailand. Ian and Julie May had been married in October 1940, a few months after he enlisted, and news would eventually arrive that on 13 February 1944 he had died of beriberi in a Japanese prison camp.<sup>48</sup> This unspoken absence, and the adult conversations Mick overheard and the questions he was not allowed to ask, would inform the fictional component of Stow's novel *Merry-Go-Round*, where Stow substituted his second cousin Eric—'Rick'—for Ian Pearson as a prisoner of the Japanese.<sup>49</sup>

But at Koogereena there were other distractions, not least a seventeen-year-old station hand, 'Harry'—Arnie Stokes, still waiting to join the army—who sang and yodelled 'Hillbilly' songs to his own accompaniment on the squeezebox.<sup>50</sup> Now it was Mary Stow who read him poems (not the ones Aunt Ap read to him, that was not allowed) but ones about sad farewells at the slip rails, and death 'Where the Pelican Builds', and 'Australia', which began further north near Robert and Edna ('Uncle Paul and Aunt Molly') Olivier's farm Dartmoor, in the marginal country near Yuna.

Gradually Australia formed itself for the boy: bare, melancholy, littered with gallant bones. He had a clear idea where Australia began. Its border with his world was somewhere near his Uncle Paul's farm, in the dry red country. Once past the boundary fence, the bones would start. He built in his mind a vision of Australia, brave and sad, which was both what the soldiers went away to die for and the mood in

which they died. Deep inside him he yearned towards Australia: but he did not expect ever to go there.<sup>51</sup>

His own country—here, in the more fertile regions—was different: in summer a spare, bare, clean-smelling country, and in winter ‘a soft green fire’.

As the spring of 1942 approached and Mick was about to turn seven, he and his cousin Elizabeth began correspondence lessons, taught not very expertly by his mother and Noel Sewell at Koogereena. In separate rooms they practised pothooks and wrote in their copybooks, and their work came back by mail from Perth strewn with red-inked corrections.<sup>52</sup>

Spring also brought a visit from his father, Lieutenant Stow, in uniform—‘totally, flawlessly, grown-up’—and Mick felt a certain awe. ‘The boy rather liked the look of his father, who was tall and had a face like the King. Watching him from a distance, he decided his father was probably a nice man. But they kissed one another with great reserve, and had nothing to say.’<sup>53</sup>

On 28 November Mick turned seven, and at the end of 1942 or in early ’43, with the fear of invasion diminished, the family returned to Geraldton.