

Robert Henderson Croll

*I Recall:
Collections and
Recollections*

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CHAPTER I. EARLY DAYS (AND SOME OTHERS)

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I have been a wanderer all my days, in intent when not actually in action, so if I ramble a bit in these reminiscences it is from force of incurable habit.

I am reminded (I can't help this rambling) that in later years I discovered that an old friend, Jessie Stewart, had also been born on January 4. I sent her a card:

We are both of us modest folk, I hope,
Who would deprecate a fuss,
But I think they started the New Year well
When they started it with Us!

One of my earliest recollections is of a day when I was playing in the front garden of our house in Houston Street. I was a very small boy indeed. There was a sudden rush of feet, a roar of angry men, and I looked through the fence to see a hatless stranger, racing literally for his life, pursued by a group of miners.

'Jumpers!' said someone, and on the word I was inside, and hiding behind my mother.

That was my share of the famous claim-jumping riots in Stawell when the 'Pleasant Creek Jumps Association' was formed in Ballarat to 'jump' certain Stawell gold mines about the validity of whose leases there was some doubt, and the diggers of my native town turned out in force to repel the invaders. That memory goes back a long way: I was about three years old at the time.

Earlier still is the memory of a warm afternoon, a summer day of the old type when extreme heat would persist for a week or more without a break. How old would I be? I had been 'put down' for the day-sleep of very young childhood, so I must have been a tiny boy indeed. There was a plate of fruit at my side when I woke. Through the mists of the years I am aware of that fact and that the house was empty (which probably impressed the scene on my mind); also I know that my people had all gone to the near-by dam of water because a boy had just been drowned there. I could name that unfortunate lad now.

Stawell, and school at No. 502, and the sand-heaps of the crushing batteries, and the busy mines, and all the world (and his wife and children) walking up and down Main Street on a Saturday night, and the peppermint-flavoured Presbyterian Church on Sunday mornings—at first St. Mark's, for did not my people break away from St. Matthew's and help to build a kirk of their ain?—and always and ever the Bush—these made up much of my early life. Then walks to the Big Hill, right in the town; to the Cemetery, to the Hospital, and with greater years greater distances—to the Black Range on a Saturday (where I tore critically my only trousers on one sad occasion and had to lurk in the rocks while the picnic with Her in it, proceeded gaily below) and finally to that goal of every youngster's dream in those days—the Grampians.

Is there anything more deplorable in humanity, by the way, than the desire to destroy Nature's fine work, the craving to buy a paltry prominence at the expense of some magnificent natural monument! The remarkable Sister

Rocks near Stawell are covered from base to crown with names, painted or tarred or cut, the owners of which have even taken ladders to assist in the desecration. On the stone face of the Splitters' Falls in Hall's Gap in the Grampians (I blush!) are chiselled the names of three youths who now know better. Kindly Nature has modified my shame by covering those names with lichen, but they may still be traced by the curious, for they are cut deeply.

That was my first camp, just past Delly's Bridge in Hall's Gap. Bill Grant (afterwards General Grant, C.M.G., D.S.O., Order of the Nile and Bar), Bill Webster (later to become Chief Clerk of the Education Department), and myself were the trio. This trinity of bush-lovers increased at times to a quartette by the addition of Grant's cousin, Bill Blair, son of David Blair, the old historian of Australia, who, by the way, was the first man to encourage me to write. But that was to come much later. Bill Blair, coming all the way from Melbourne, was only an occasional partner.

My one school was the State School in Stawell, ruled over by Dick Davies ('Dick' was short for the incredible name Richard Zerubabel); a vigorous hearty man who administered firmly, but with humanity, and with a rare understanding of juvenile human nature. The odd things that linger in the mind after more than half a century!—I recall his coming into the junior second class (it was perched perilously in one of those abominations known as a gallery) and testing the class in spelling. Now I was good at spelling (no pun) and I scored until he gave me the word 'egg.' In retrospect I feel that my persistence in rendering it

'a-g-g' was a reflection upon the common pronunciation of the word rather than upon my abilities.

The teacher's life is not an easy one, but it has its compensations. A good teacher makes every year a new generation of friends who will honour his name in after days. Dick Davies was a fine man and he had a fine team. I wish, in gratitude, that I could say something here about each of those men and women, all now gone beyond the voices, who did so much for me, as for others. I shall mention two only—Tom Webster (a cousin of my lifelong friend Bill Webster) and that very successful and prominent man of business, F. J. Cato—the first because his influence upon me, as a member of the highest class in the school, was so stimulating; the other because of his remarkable progress, as one of the firm of Moran and Cato and because of his generous benefactions to charity in the years of his retirement. He abandoned schoolwork at an early age to take up commerce. My most vivid recollection of him at school is connected with a cane which he used across my shoulders one day in class. I'll bet that I deserved it.

It was a big school then, for the town was at the peak of its gold getting. Mines were indeed worth 'jumping' with the precious metal being produced literally by the ton. That is not overstating it. The Pleasant Creek Cross Reefs (known to us as the Duke) yielded 241,461 ounces in one period of eight years and eventually paid its shareholders £750,000 in dividends. One man held 2,000 shares: from 'Bill the Smelter' he became the Hon. W. H. Osmand, M.L.C. As a Legislative Councillor, by the way, he was noted, like the Harp of Tara, for his enduring silences—but that in passing.

Crushing batteries, reducing the quartz to sand, thundered away from midnight Sunday to midnight Saturday without a pause. So continuous was the roar that no-one was aware of it until it stopped (is that an Irishism?). Then the old folk woke up, wondering at the stillness.

All the mines, and there were many, were working three shifts. A miner's pay was 8/- a day, 48/- a week for 48 hours' work. One of my early jobs, when I left school to succeed my brother as the whole staff of Messrs. Bennett and Bristow, legal managers and insurance agents in the Main Street (with what pride I took home my £1 a week!) was to pay those wages every fortnight to the men of a couple of mines. Later, as yields decreased, I was to make many an excursion along the 'street called Straight' (Main Street, Stawell, has as many angles as a book on geometry) with a lump of smelted gold in my pocket to see which bank would give the highest price. Pure alluvial gold was then worth just over £4 an ounce; this smelted stuff was valued at from £3/17/3 to £3/17/9. To-day the price would be twice as high. I can still see the bank tellers rubbing the bar or dump on a test-stone before making an offer.



'THE WOOD-GOD'
(Web Gilbert carves a statue of the author.)

Low wages in those times! But there seemed to be no unemployment, and no real grinding poverty.

Social strata in the town there were of course, but, as is customary, they were mostly woman-created.

Men who had worked together in earlier days did not change as a rule when some struck riches and their mates didn't. One of the wealthiest stood in the porch of his new house one morning and saw his friend the old milkman pass, carrying two cans. Both men hailed from Scotland. Rain was falling heavily. 'Tak' the lids off, Jamie,' advised the sheltered one. 'No need, Wullie, they've had enough a'ready,' came the reply, and the two old friends nodded at each other appreciatively.

'Breathes there a man with soul so dead.'—Stawell has a halo about it which grows more definite to me with the years of separation. There are no impressions so vivid as those of boyhood. The bush about Stawell, the Black Range, Doctor's Creek, the Seventy Foot, the Silver Shilling, the Flying Doe, the Grampians—our Saturday and holiday tramps to such places gave me that taste for vagabondage which has since led me far. How we ate on those trips! Our careful mothers tried to over-estimate our appetites, but we came home each time with never a crust of the food we took away in such quantity.

Marcus Clarke had lived at Ledcourt, not far from Stawell, for a time. He was a legendary character in my day and later I was to come closer to that legend when I joined the Public Library, though I never saw the author of *His Natural Life*. One of his Stawell friends was N. Walter Swan, then editing the *Pleasant Creek News and Stawell Chronicle*. Swan wrote at least two novels—*A Couple of Cups Ago* and *Luke Mivers' Harvest*. The latter won a prize of £100 given by the *Sydney Mail* for the best tale by an Australian (they called it 'Colonial' then) author. His family at that time interested me more than did his writings: I was very young and his daughters were very charming. They still are.

CHAPTER II. 'THE MECHANICS'

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In 1886 I passed the clerical examination of the Public Service, an examination for which I had to sit in Ballarat, and I was appointed to the staff of the Melbourne Public Library. Was ever such luck! I was a booky boy, a reader of everything I could lay hands on, and here I was thrust into the midst of one of the greatest collections of literature in the southern hemisphere. My people had never been well-to-do, but mother had always contrived, somehow, to keep my brother and myself in reading matter. I said 'somehow'—as I grew up I realized that those books were bought very often with money which our mother should rightly have spent upon herself.

September of that year saw me embark on the great adventure. Armed with a carpet-bag (yes, truly, a carpet bag) in which my careful sister Mary had sewn a list of its rather scanty contents (I have that list still), I left the old Borough for the big City and duly reported for duty to Dr. Bride, then Librarian of the Public Library. I was raw, nervous, sensitive, and no doubt extremely gauche, but, I think, not so crude as some of the great band of provincial youngsters who were passing the service examinations in those years, so enriching the city at the expense of the country. One of them, it is alleged, announced himself to the head of his Department, a lordly being sitting in lofty seclusion, by marching in, placing his bag carefully down by the great man's table and remarking simply: 'I've come!'

The Library exercised a notable influence upon my life. There I began to write, so shyly that I would not show the stuff to my mother even—that mother who all her days was so interested in her children's progress.

It is a comical thing, by the way, that in most Victorian country towns the local library is known as the Mechanics' Institute—always shortened in speech to 'the Mechanics.' My birthplace, of course, had its library so-named. After I had been a year or two in the magnificent Public Library of Melbourne, long enough that is to have established the pride in its wonderful collection which I shall ever feel, I met an old schoolfellow just down from Stawell on a holiday. 'Let's see, Bob,' said he, reflectively, 'you're in the Mechanics, aren't you?'

Dr. Bride was then librarian (we had a Bride and a Husband, a Bath and a Brazier on the staff) and Dr. Gagliardi was engaged in a reclassification of the whole collection of books, following the opening of the Barry Hall.

Dear old Gagliardi: what a fine man he was to be with! He had excellent English in construction but some pronunciations were most amusingly beyond him. He would sound, for instance, the final consonant in such words as young, shilling, and lamb. His disgust with the accepted sound of a word like McLeod was comical. I enjoyed thoroughly, as we worked together, his lectures on the superiority of Italian over what he called our barbarous language. He seemed to me a much more able man than Bride, who, by the way, was never popular with the staff.

M. F. Dowden, E. La T. Armstrong and R. D. Boys, each to be chief librarian in turn, were on the staff in those days;

another was E. H. C. Oliphant, lately deceased, who returned from America as Professor Oliphant. My old friend James McConnell Kerr, surely the wittiest of barristers, was to join us later, and so was James S. Battye, now B.A., LL.B., LITT.D., Chief Librarian of the Public Library of Western Australia and Chancellor of the University there.

The Library still held traditions of Marcus Clarke and the great Sir Redmond Barry, founder of the institution. An old attendant told us of Clarke's coming in one day clad all in white, and Barry, a stickler for what he conceived to be suitable garb for a public officer, demanding with an oath if Clarke knew how a gentleman should dress. The retort was an inquiry directed to Barry's acquaintance with how a gentleman should speak. This sounds apocryphal.

I learnt to love (literally) that great institution—the Public Library, Museums and National Gallery of Victoria, and I have lost, and lose, no opportunity of serving it.

It was my Alma Mater, the source from which I drew most of my mental nourishment. I sampled everything in it from Theology (which commenced the classification in the north end of the main hall—this was long before the present rotunda was built) to Geography, which concluded it in the east end of the Barry Hall. The whole of the books, except a few shelves of indecencies, and some rare, and very valuable, volumes kept in the Librarian's room, as well as the art and medical works in the Gallery, were in bays open to the readers. There was no need to ask for anything: you went to the shelves and helped yourself. A wonderful institution, a true cultural centre with its associated art gallery and museums, a place which is in truth a monument

to the pioneers of the State, for they, led by the redoubtable Redmond Barry, had laid its foundations before settlement here was twenty years old.

I think it was in 1891—anyway, I was still a junior librarian—that I saved Rudyard Kipling's life, or so it pleases me to think. But for me, the world may never have known the Jungle Books, the Just So Stories, Kim, and, indeed, most of the works, prose and verse, which made Kipling such a leading figure in English literature. That sounds boastful: well, it is meant to sound boastful. Said firmly it tends to smother the feeling, which will unfortunately persist in me, that Kipling never realized that he had had such a narrow escape. Memory has a trick of wearing magnifying glasses—it is quite possible that that life-saving feat was not so very remarkable. This is what happened: Kipling was paying his only visit to Australia when I met him—a pleasant-spoken, well-knit figure of a man, young in those days, of course, with just a touch of 'bay' in his 'good-bye'; obviously, but not typically, English. He and Bill Blair (son of the then doyen of the Melbourne journalists) and a Japanese and I walked down Collins Street together from the Austral Salon (the Oyster Saloon we irreverent boys called it) and as we crossed Swanston Street a cab, a wild and wobbly one-horse cab, charged down upon us. I grasped the great man's arm and hurried him out of danger just in time.

It is odd to reflect, in these days, that a horse-drawn vehicle was once the terror of the crossings.

It is odder still to remember that the trustees of our Melbourne Public Library banned Kipling's books for a while on the ground (shades of the present-day censorship!) of

indecenty! I think it was a reference to Indian society "playing tennis with the Seventh Commandment" that caused the trouble. The offending volume was locked up in the librarian's room, and the public was saved from pollution—for a time, anyway! Well do I recollect the amusement of all (save the trustees) who knew of the embargo. He was also charged, but this charge was more general, with obscurity, mainly because of his use of Indian words in those early works. Apropos this he wrote in one of his books when here (if the owner is still this side Glory, may she forgive me the quotation). Girls in those days, by the way, had 'mops' of hair:

'If seven maids with seven mops
Should read for half a year,
Do you suppose,' the author said,
'That they could make it clear?'
'I doubt it,' said the publisher,
'They're only human here!'

The present generation may find it difficult to realize what an effect this brilliant and forceful young Anglo-Indian writer had upon us. We youngsters had a burning admiration for him—'Kiplingitis,' we named it. After all, we were only sharing what became a world-wide fever. His Indian stories had struck a new and arresting note which caught the public taste and, because it was so novel, had divided the critics into at least two camps. His truly remarkable Barrack Room Ballads were appearing in the *Scots* (later called the *National*) *Observer* and their vigour and originality stirred us like a trumpet call. It was about this

time that J. K. Stephen, with a savage note in his clever verse, prayed to be translated to a shore—

Where the Rudyard's cease from Kipling
And the Haggards Ride no more.

I pressed Kipling to say when he would give us the *Book of Mother Maturin* (see the final story in *Plain Tales from the Hills*) and I wanted badly to know when that grizzled Ulysses, Terence Mulvaney, would fulfil the curse of old Mother Sheehy and 'die quick in a strange land, watchin' your death before ut takes you an' onable to stir hand or foot!' (To-day I would ask him to finish *Kim*.) He put me off, of course, and countered with an inquiry regarding cash betting on our racecourses. I could hardly be regarded as an authority, having never (then) had a bet, but I was able to assure him that in my experience (I *had* seen the Melbourne Cup once, and then only from the Flat) it was ALL cash betting! How cheerfully omniscient is Youth, and how willing to oblige!

Kipling came to the Library one day, and, to my great delight (bear in mind I was very young), recognized me and gave me a cordial handshake. He left without having attracted the attention of the hierarchy of the institution, so far as I know.

Sitting in the little old Presbyterian Church of Evandale, Tasmania, in the month of January, 1936, I heard the preacher announce the death of the 'unofficial Laureate of the Empire,' and I recalled gratefully his wonderful contribution to the literary wealth of the world. I recalled, too, a small thing which showed the human side of the man.

My son Robin, when very young, was given *Just-So Stories*. I read them to him. He asked who wrote them. The result was a childish note in printed characters (the only way he could write) in which he thanked Mr. Kipling for the stories and signed himself 'with love from Robin Croll.' I thought such a testimonial, unsolicited, artless, might be valued by anyone. I posted it to Kipling and forgot the incident. By return mail, however, was a letter headed 'Bateman's, Burwash, Sussex': the great man had acknowledged promptly and in doing so declared that 'when an infant of that age is moved to sit down and write with his own hand, it is a most convincing proof of his gratitude and it makes me very proud.'

The sea-coast of Bohemia
Is pleasant to the view

sang Hebblethwaite. My earliest knowledge of that delectable land came when I was still an assistant in the Public Library. It came in the shape of a little weekly titled *Bohemia*, which was 'run' by a group of the younger journalists of the day, who took it in turns to act as editor. (To-day, by the way, a new *Bohemia* has come to birth—a monthly sponsored by the Bread and Cheese Club.) The *Argus* owes that original journal something, for out of it was born the 'Oriël' column, a feature of its Saturday issue for so many years. Rumour had it that John Sandes and Davison Symmons were told that they could choose between *Bohemia* and the paper which employed them; they could not serve both. So 'Oriël' was created, and 'The Passing Show' started to give exercise to their skill in light prose and

lighter verse, and very excellently did they perform in the new column.

To *Bohemia* I began contributing, first scraps of book gossip (I used to get first view of the old-world literary journals as the mail arrived at the Library—well do I remember announcing the forthcoming publication in Lippincott's Magazine of Kipling's *Light that Failed*), then I wrote prose sketches, then verse. All were anonymous, of course; so shy was I that I think I could have denied the authorship had anyone charged me! The Blair girls, Lily and Florrie, knew, for they were of the *Bohemia* group and to them I gave my stuff. One of them was later to do a great deal of *Bulletin* matter. Their veteran father (to whom I have already referred) was an astonishing mine of knowledge and good stories. He knew Dublin and 'Silver's Theayter' where, you may remember, Mulvaney claimed to have seen *Hamlet* played in a new black eye and the Queen as full as a cornucopia. An old tale David Blair repeated was of the night when the crowd proceeded to throw a man over the ledge of the gallery into the pit. The gallery at each end extended above the orchestra. 'Hould on, bhoys!' yelled a voice. 'Don't whaste the mhan! Kill a fiddler wid him!'

I have said that the old journalist and historian was a mine of knowledge. Well he knew it. Donald Macdonald told me he went along for a talk one afternoon. He had the talk all right—a monologue. When he was leaving, his host said: 'Come along some day and hear me again. I'm worth it!'

And so he was, as Macdonald confessed and as I myself can testify.

The little journal *Bohemia* lived longer than most of its kind; but of course it died in a very few years. The Public Library is a magnificent tomb in which lie buried the remains of numberless dead and gone Melbourne magazines.

Another which comes to mind was *The Outpost*. It, I think, was originally *The Cycling News*, cycling being the sport of the day. *Bohemia* was much above the average, and the *Outpost* was at times brilliant. Three of the outstanding artistic contributors were Norman and Lionel Lindsay and Blamire Young, and its columns attracted most of the interesting writers of the period, including that able journalist, E. C. Buley, then in the Mint, but earlier with me in the Library, who later published a number of books in London. I think it was he who invented the caption for the sporting column: 'The Quick and the Dead.' Carey, the editor, was a very able man. His departure from Australia was a matter of great regret to many. One thing I have not yet forgiven him for. Jack Castieau was doing a weekly sketch of men who had been prominent in the land boom. Each was supposed to be talking in his sleep and the revelations were very amusing—to everyone but the victims. To Carey one day there entered the burly figure of one of those notabilities, a man who 'came back' eventually and thoroughly rehabilitated himself. Indeed, he became Premier of Victoria. He had heard that he was to be served up next week and asked for mercy, pleading that the dead past should not be raked up against him now that he was on the up grade again. 'I know what you're going to say against me, Mr. Carey,' he went on earnestly. 'You are going to say that I have a wife and family in every suburb and that I

neglect them. I *don't* neglect them, Mr. Carey!' I have always thought that any editor with bowels should have 'let-off' a man who could make so naive a plea. But the article appeared.

Collectors should search for a very vivid poster issued by the Lindsays (Norman and Lionel) for the *Outpost*. It represents a pirate with all the raciness that those talented artists could put into such a subject, and it is probably unique in the fact that it is signed "Lindsay Brothers." Other posters of that period, rare enough now and worth collecting, are those done for Joshua Brothers to advertise their Boomerang Brandy. Blamire Young designed them.

When I think of the Library period I am reminded of the 'fine confused feeding' which the famous Scot said he found in a sheep's head. I came from the place with an interest quickened in an amazing number of things, if with no great knowledge of any. With E. C. Buley, Bernard O'Dowd, H. A. Corbett (who eventually settled in Western Australia), my brother, and a couple of other youthful enthusiasts, we formed a reading circle. How is this for a bill of fare for young minds—Herbert Spencer's *Principles of Sociology*, Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, Henry George's *Progress and Poverty*, Oliver Wendell Holmes' *Autocrat of the Breakfast Table*, Edwin Arnold's *Light of Asia* and, of course, Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. I still count it a well-balanced diet, heavy enough, light enough, thought-compelling, excellent from the literary point of view. We read the books aloud, a portion of each at a sitting, and discussed them.

I think Buley and O'Dowd were the leaders. Buley had a keen analytical mind and was blest with real humour.

O'Dowd had even then an encyclopaedic knowledge. Those two were to rise notably in the literary world, Buley to become an editor and author in London, where he died, O'Dowd to take a foremost place in Australian letters. The latter's Celtic ancestors had endowed him with a rare capacity for enthusiasm. It carried him from the Roman Catholic religion to rationalism and from there, or I should say while still there, to sample many forms of belief. A fellow poet, when we were amusing ourselves by composing epitaphs for people still alive, wrote this of O'Dowd:

Here beneath his sable shroud
Lies the Laureate O'Dowd,
Who upon Earth's flowery lap
Had all sorts of Heavens on tap;
Olympus, Asgard, Aidenn, and,
Worst of all, the Silent Land.
Undecided here he lies
Wondering which to patronize.

But that epitaph reflects very little of the true greatness of my old friend. He moved from opinion to opinion, from belief to belief, because of no shallowness of intellect, but because of the very intensity of his study of each and the sincerity and honesty of his mind. I confess to an admiration and a liking for O'Dowd which nothing can shake. My 'of course' with regard to *Leaves of Grass* referred to O'Dowd's devotion to Whitman, with whom he had much correspondence.

One day Emil Creed, musician and analytical chemist, who somehow had come to be a fellow assistant in the

Library, asked me if I cared for wine, women and song, because, if I did, he could put me on to something. It proved to me Fitzgerald's 'Omar Khayyam.' The music of it sang in my blood, the pagan philosophy wakened my mind to new and wonderful audacities—

O Thou who Man of baser earth didst make
And even with Paradise devise the Snake—
For all the sin with which the face of Man
Is blackened, Man's forgiveness give—and take!

An old diary shows that I copied almost the whole of that remarkable set of verses. This, of course, was long before they became a popular Christmas card! Creed it was who introduced me to good orchestral music and told me how to recognize a fugue when I heard it. We spent many an evening and afternoon at Cowen's concerts, both at, and following, the 1888 Exhibition. If my more common taste rejoiced particularly in Phil. Langdale and his amusing bassoon I came also, though more gradually, to appreciate Wagner and classical works generally. Melbourne was truly musical in those years and we could hear first-class renderings of great compositions by paying a shilling (no amusement tax then) for a seat in the south gallery of the Town Hall. And that south gallery was about the best place in the house for hearing—a knowledge we hugged to our frugal bosoms for it heightened our enjoyment.