

My Dad

How do you know someone? How do you span 100 years? How can you encompass such a vast amount of time - in one lifetime? What can you say of a man who has lived so long, seen such changes, loved, lost, triumphed, suffered, hoped, despaired, adventured, quailed, and, finally, died?

My father was born into a world where children were seen and not heard; where cuddles were rare, emotions held in check, the "stiff upper lip" was seen as manly; where a boy might be allowed to have the top off his father's boiled egg as a treat; and where children who did not please were "cut off".

The boy Edwin had two sisters, Ernestine, red headed and feisty, and Rhoda, softer and quieter. His father and mother brought their children up in the Victorian mould. Who knows what dreams they had for their children, in those days of the First World War, followed by the Depression? What dreams did the children have? What prospects? What fears?

I know my father grew up feeling not good enough. Whatever he did, it was never enough. After my mother died, we found three certificates in the house - Dad had studied and had succeeded in attaining not one, not two but three separate degrees in Engineering and Science! When we asked him why we never knew of these achievements, he said "Ach they are just bits of paper." Never good enough.

Those three engineering degrees - I'm not surprised he got them - he was a brilliant engineer. He had an engineer's brain. No mechanical problem was too big for him. He loved to design and create things.

He went to sea as a ship's engineer, on a ship called "Arandora Star". I think that was the happiest time of his life. He often talked about life on board, and the places he visited, especially Canada, which he particularly loved.

He met my mother, his Princess, in their home town of Belfast when he was on leave, resplendent in his dashing white uniform. They fell in love, married and had their children. From then on, Dad worked tirelessly to support his family, and he would do anything to please Mum.

My father was not affectionate. I remember when I kissed him his face was hard and unmoving, as was the man. It was hard to love him, for he had never been shown love, nor knew how to show his love to others. Yet he was a passionate man, and I saw that passion expressed in many ways. I would like to share some of this with you.

Dad hated it when things did not work, and would worry away at a problem until it was solved. Mike, my husband, tells of the time when, as a young policeman, he drove a flash new police car, a Riley Pathfinder, capable of doing more than 100MPH. One slight snag - the brakes were erratic, and sometimes locked on unexpectedly. He took it to the works depot for repair, which was where my dad worked, and there he left the car.

Dad examined the problem, and I remember him coming home and drawing the braking system, teasing out the ins and outs of how it worked, and finally came up with the cause of the problem. Then he set about designing a modification for the car's braking system. Finally he wrote to Riley in England, explaining the problem, and enclosing his suggested modification. This modification was built into the Rileys after that. Dad never got any acknowledgement for it, nor did he expect any - why would he? He was never good enough.

So that was Dad, the engineer. Brilliant, modest, unassuming.

Then there was Dad the Tenor. My happiest and fondest memories are of Dad singing. He had a wonderful voice, and found a great mentor in a lady called Dora Middeldorf, who was a true patron of the arts, and Niki Antoniadis, his singing teacher.

Dad used to practise his scales, or his songs from the next show, in front of the mirror when he was shaving. He'd work away, like he did with the Riley's brakes, going over and over a phrase or a jump from one note to another, until he got it just right. He had "perfect pitch" where he always knew exactly the relationship between notes - like a sort of musical engineer.

Mum and Dad were churchgoers, and soon Dad was singing the tenor solo in *The Messiah*, *Elijah*, and *Sleepers awake*. Mrs Middeldorf introduced them to light opera, and, together with a few others, they founded the Bulawayo Light Opera Company, which staged Gilbert and Sullivan musicals, and others like *Maid of the Mountains*, *Pink Champagne*, *The Desert Song*, and so on. Mum, who had an attractive contralto voice, performed as well.

In 1953, when Dad was 39 years old, and had 3 children under 12, there was a big celebration of the Centenary of the birth of Cecil John Rhodes, after whom Rhodesia was named. Bulawayo, where we lived, staged an extravaganza, which included performances by Sadlers Wells Ballet and the Covent Garden Opera. On the bill were "La Boheme", *Gloriana*, and *Aida*. It happened to be the first tour for a young soprano called Joan Sutherland.

Aida requires a big chorus for the major Triumphal March sequence, and members of the BLOC were recruited as supplementary chorus members for these performances. During the season Dad was offered a contract with Covent Garden. This would have meant returning to live in the UK, and Dad decided not to risk taking the family back, and refused the contract. I wonder how much was his own sense of not being good enough caused him to turn his back on what I consider to be his God given talent.

He continued to work as an engineer, and life took him through many trials and tribulations as Zimbabwe plunged into chaos, and Mum and Dad had to manage as best they could to survive.

They joined Mike and me in Australia in 1967, where Dad, took a job in Whyalla as a steelworker, but they went back to Africa not long afterwards. In 1980, my sister (18 years my junior) got married, and we went to Zimbabwe for the occasion. I took the opportunity to record my Dad singing two songs, for he wasn't singing much any more, and I wanted a keepsake of the happy times.

At that time Zimbabwe was a dangerous and war-torn country, and we persuaded Mum and Dad, to come back to Australia, and urged John and Rona to come too. They did, and settled in Whyalla, where Dad became the Reception Officer for BHP. He was a caring and resourceful man, and gave a great deal of help to many newcomers to Whyalla.

When Mum died in 1990, Dad fended for himself, helped by John and Rona and their family, until he moved into Copperhouse after breaking his leg, and then Yeltana as he became frail.

How do we know someone? Only by what we experience with that person. Our knowledge is limited by that experience. I have tried to give you a glimpse, unique to me, of my experience of my father as I knew him. You will have your own memories, your own knowledge of this man.

Dad never thought he was good enough. Well, he was wrong. Of course he was good enough - and better than many. He lived a good life, and leaves his legacy in his children and those he has served over nearly a century.

Dad requested that we play some of his singing on this occasion, and I would like you to think, as we listen to the songs, recorded in 1980, at the age of 66, of the man, his journey, his passion, and his life.