

THE FORTUNES OF
MILLICENT BRYANT,
AVIATOR

The 'lost' life of Australia's first woman pilot: a true story

Contents – THE FORTUNES OF MILLICENT BRYANT, AVIATOR

Inspirations and sources: author’s note	5
From Sky to Water	9
Part 1: Wings of Fortune	19
1. Flight	21
2. Take-off	25
‘Sunshine and Water’	41
3. Grounded.....	43
4. The Race.....	57
5. The Spoils.....	71
‘A Life’	95
Part 2: The Fortunes of Family	97
1. Getting a Life	99
2. Millicent’s Children	115
3. Voyages	123
4. Delos.....	141
5. The Fortunes of War.....	157
6. Ferment.....	183
7. A Friend of the People	197
From Earth to Sky.....	211

INSPIRATIONS AND SOURCES: AUTHOR'S NOTE

This true story is a 'biography in fiction' of the life of Australia's all-but-forgotten first woman pilot, Millicent Bryant, who, like many of the aviators of her day such as Kingsford Smith and Hinkler, took the risks of flying in her stride. But unlike Smithy (or, slightly later, Amelia Earhart), her disappearance from the scene was not a flight into mystery for future generations to puzzle over, nor did she take with her the same vision of youth that left these pioneers of the air eternally young in the public mind. Even so, there are still mysteries, especially that of why a woman with a family and well into middle age took the risks of flying; but then, she took other risks as well. My great grandmother's life course was out of the ordinary in a number of ways, and provided puzzles that have taken a good deal of research, both historical and imaginative, just to reveal, let alone unravel. Yet it was not the dangers of early flight that claimed Millicent Bryant's life but a maritime disaster, the worst ever in peacetime in Sydney Harbour, when the mail steamer *Tahiti* sliced the Watson's Bay ferry, *Greycliffe*, in two on a late spring afternoon in 1927. From the date of her funeral, however, two days later on November 5th with its guard of honour and remarkable aerial tribute, Millicent's story began to lapse into obscurity until it was almost 'lost'.

To an extent, then, this project is one of rescue and retrieval. It was initiated by the key piece of good fortune that a neglected collection, primarily of letters, but also notes, personal jottings, photos, memorabilia and ephemera was rediscovered by my mother, Millicent Jones: this is the Millicent Maude Bryant Letters Collection (MMBLC), the project's starting point. It provides a scattering of correspondence across the years, diminishing as one goes back in time to its beginning around 1900; its main feature, however, is a correspondence between Millicent and her second son, John, when he was travelling overseas in the years 1925–1927. With the aid of Steve Brew's 2003 book on the *Greycliffe* disaster, the Bryant Scrapbook held by John R. H. Bryant, and archival material in NSW State Records, the National Archives of Australia and the National Library of Australia, this correspondence enabled me to develop a relatively detailed

account of what turned out to be the last year or two of Millicent's life when she became a pilot. To indicate this provenance, and that of other sources in this production of the work, I have included endnotes (see below for the abbreviations and citation conventions utilised).

Being focused, though, almost entirely on the end of Millicent's life, this would have resulted in a lopsided portrayal. The potential for something more complete was suggested, however, by a short, biographical sketch my mother had presented to the Royal Aeronautical Society's Australian Division in 1975; after reading this, it seemed that a genuine recovery of Millicent's story could only be satisfied by a portrayal of her larger life that included the years before flying. This would also enable exploration of the personality development that led to her becoming an aviator. Doing so, however, meant going beyond the sources and other evidence or, perhaps, using them differently: that is, as a base for an imaginative reconstruction of her life. Working in this way, the mode of fiction has permitted the creation of a closer, more personal and nuanced exploration of Millicent's experience as well inhabiting the spaces empty of facts specific to her.

The fortunes of Millicent Bryant, aviator is written in two parts, representing two kinds of inspiration; in recognition of the shadow that falls over both, I have enclosed them within the *Greycliffe* disaster. The first part begins with flight and its movement is generated primarily from Millicent's letters in this period. The second adds more imaginative accretion to known events to 'unfold' her larger story, but was inspired by the brief, handwritten outline, 'A Life', which is reproduced between Part 1 and Part 2. Although working in the mode of fiction I have entwined Millicent's own words from her letters to strengthen her presence and the biographical reality of the narrative; to create a slightly different but complementary effect, I have also inserted images of a few of her handwritten personal notes. The aim, overall, is to create a relationship with the real person, Millicent Bryant, and to invite the reader still closer to her.

Abbreviations and citation conventions

The following abbreviations are used in the endnotes:

JHB	John Harvey Bryant
JV	James Vicars
MEJ	Millicent Elizabeth Jones
MMB	Millicent Maude Bryant
MMBLC	Millicent Maude Bryant Letters Collection.
n.d.	not dated
n.p.	no page [numbers] or source 'not paginated'

Citation of source material

The collections of primary sources utilised are listed in the project bibliography, though details provided in the endnotes appear at the end of the relevant chapter. As the large majority of the sources quoted come from the Millicent Maude Bryant Letters Collection, its name is not repeated except where there may be ambiguity. Thus, all sources without other specific attribution are from this Collection.

As the Collection has not been catalogued, a description of the item quoted, as well as any relevant title or first line, is given, except in the case of letters. These being the most heavily quoted sources, letters from the Collection are simply styled by the names of the writer and recipient (abbreviated where possible) and date, eg 'MMB to JHB, 19 October 1925'.

FROM SKY TO WATER

NOVEMBER 3RD, 1927

It was a spring evening in Sydney, slightly overcast and humid, and it passed through Bowen Bryant's mind that he ought to be sweating.¹

But inside his jacket a chill was spreading and rising like a subterranean river from the pit of his stomach up into his chest. And as he turned into George Street from Circular Quay, the shadows of the buildings touched him with icy foreboding and the feeling that something was threatening to engulf him from the inside.

Yet some barrier held it back. Remarkably, it held back almost everything he felt and feared to feel, allowing him to take the necessary steps towards the morgue. No doubt it was some mechanism his science master could explain and probably Mr Carpenter had done, if only he'd listened more closely.² Suddenly school days seemed precious to Bowen; barely had they ended but the full impact of adult life, with its terrible realities, seemed to be coming down on him. Because there wasn't any other boy he'd ever heard of at Sydney Grammar School, or in his nineteen years of life, who'd had to go searching for his own mother's body. He faltered at the thought. He had to force himself to concentrate on the next step, and the next.

If only George or Jack were here. His eldest brother was in Tasmania on his honeymoon and Jack – his brother John – was at sea, on his way home from a business trip to England. It had gone very well, according to Jack's letters, and he'd made many promising contacts in the dairy industry. He had also been out to Hendon aerodrome and been given a flight in one of the latest De Havilland Moths, the same type their mother had taken into the skies above Sydney. Bowen thought of the newspaper clippings he'd proudly collected, with their praises of 'Mrs Bryant's cool efficiency' and the high excitement when she touched down perfectly, only months ago, to be hailed as Australia's first woman pilot.³ The photos of her in her flying cap, small and slight as always ...

His mother. 'Itz', as Jack teasingly called her. He could barely contemplate the possibility, now taking wraith-like shape in the twilight, that something awful had happened to her. It was only the day before that they'd been finalising plans,

packing and preparing to drive across the continent, across Australia from east to west and back. She might be the first woman to do that, too. Perhaps they would go as soon as next week, greet Jack's ship in Fremantle, then race him back.

He glanced up from the pavement. Suddenly it all seemed flimsy, like a schoolboy dare, but his life couldn't be shaken so easily. It had substance, like the new home his mother had built and furnished overlooking Vaucluse Bay, with its books and sofas and paintings and gramophone cabinet in the corner.⁴ They were familiar and solid, full of her presence. She would surely be back.

However, each step was bringing him closer to the possibility that she might not. Just a few hours ago he'd been reading on the verandah, idling, while his mother finished her business or shopping in the city – he didn't remember which it was. She'd been quite definite, however, about coming back on the 'school' boat, as everyone called the 4.14pm ferry to Watson's Bay.⁵ But it never arrived at Nielsen Park wharf. He mightn't have noticed until later but for the numbers of people hurrying along normally quiet Coolong Road in the direction of the wharf, talking loudly. Perhaps something had happened, though the voices saying the *Greycliffe* had been hit by a passenger ship and sunk seemed fantastic, absurd. It was nonsense, surely. They would be laughing about it tomorrow.

But he had to find out, and when he walked up to Vaucluse Point the sight of the *mêlée* of boats and ferries off Bradley's Head hit him in the face like cold sea water. Even so, he was unprepared for the scene that confronted him at the harbourside near the Man o' War steps in the last hour of daylight: more boats milling about, crowds of people, women crying and, worst of all, the news that *bodies* were being taken to the morgue.⁶ That was when he'd first felt the chill in his stomach. Because his mother was nowhere to be found, and no-one could say if she'd been among those pulled from the water; men had avoided his eyes when he'd asked. All except Sergeant Shakespeare, who'd gestured to the ambulances taking survivors to the hospital and suggested he check there – and then also pointed to the Coroner's Court and the city morgue just over the other side of Circular Quay. Bowen turned straight away for the hospital and began

striding up Macquarie Street as if he was late for school, leaving his friend Donald, who'd come with him from Vacluse, puffing to catch up.

Barely half a mile up the road there were almost as many people milling about on the footpath outside the hospital as there had been by the harbour. Inside, the chaos was a shock to them both. People were rushing from ward to ward looking for loved ones, their hysteria trampling all other contagions. It was some time before they found the Medical Superintendent, Dr Winston, and longer still until they could gain his attention. When finally Bowen spoke to him, he shook his head.⁷

'Mrs Bryant? No. I haven't seen her. At least, not yet. I'm sorry.'

At this, Bowen felt the chill spreading below his ribs. He searched the faces of the people wrapped in blankets and awaiting treatment but found it hard to recognise those he did know, so different did distress and injury make them look. As well, because of the Public Schools' Athletics meeting that day there weren't many students from his own year; it was mostly younger ones who'd been on the boat. Had anyone seen her? He recognised one boy from school, Jack Pfeiffer, his head cut and bloodied. He asked how he was but the fifteen year old was too dazed to answer. Alex Inglis, a medical student from his own street, looked much the same, so Bowen just smiled sympathetically. He looked around again, feeling lost and uncertain.⁸

'Bryant?'

He turned to locate the weak voice, a girl's. It was Ruth Moylan, from around the corner in Wentworth Road.⁹

'Are you all right?' he asked.

She touched her shoulder, hidden under a blanket. 'Something hurts. But otherwise I am, thank you. I ... I saw your mother,' she said with an effort.

Bowen was thunderstruck. He leaned closer, putting a hand out to steady himself on a chair. 'Where?'

'I saw her get on. That's all. Are you looking for her?'

'Yes. Yes.' He couldn't bring himself to say he hadn't found her. She gave him a small smile and he nodded and smiled back before moving away. He had to get outside. On the pavement he leaned against the iron railings and gulped in the sweet, early evening air while Donald watched for ambulances. After a while no more came, and Bowen went back inside to ask for the use of a telephone to call home. But there was no answer, no-one to pick up the handset at the house in Coolong Road, and he came back out knowing there was just one more place he had to go.

It was darker now as they walked briskly towards the Rocks, and Bowen stopped to peer ahead into the deepening shadows. Donald also stopped. It was good of him to come, Bowen thought, and a sudden, unaccustomed wish for his father to be there came up. But this died in his breast almost at the same moment; while only just responsible for himself, Bowen knew himself more capable in this situation than his father would have been. The thought made him wonder if he really did want Donald there, either. After all, it would not be Donald's loss – it would not be Donald's mother. Anger blazed in him at the thought. How could Donald understand? No, it wasn't *his* mother. He stepped forward again, not looking to see if his friend was with him or not. Donald could look after himself.

They finally found the brass plate of the Coroner's Court and Bowen glimpsed his own reflection, golden and ephemeral in the lamplight. Another sign indicated the morgue was at the back of the building, and they had to walk around, descend stairs and find their way through a dark tunnel of shrubs and trees. They heard disembodied voices nearby and, coming out into light again, Bowen nearly stepped into a drain, startling a dog near the building entrance that barked at him as he tried to make out the owners of the voices. He was taken aback at the number of them. Many turned to look, and he realized with horror that they were probably reporters there to witness the loss of those who'd had loved ones on the *Greycliffe*. Maybe even his own loss. But not to experience it. No, they'd take it away with them and it might appear in some miserable column in *Smith's Weekly* or *The Sun*. How he hated them! He would not let them see, and not one word would he utter to them. However, there was a

silence as he opened the door and came forward to the desk. Suddenly he was self-conscious. He was still, after all, merely a schoolboy.

The attendant looked up. 'Yes?' he asked, without ceremony.

'I'm here,' he said, taken aback, 'I'm here to see if . . .'

But mercifully the man interrupted him before he had to say the awful words in front of the waiting audience and, worst of all, out loud to himself: '*... to see if the body of my mother is here.*'

'Name?'

'Mrs Bryant. Millicent Bryant.'

'Was she on the ferry boat?'

'I think she was.'

'Come this way please.'

He was glad when the door closed behind them and hid the onlookers and reporters, but the next moment it dawned on him that at least they were the familiar and everyday. The living. In here it was airless and close, with a chill and dampness that made both he and Donald shiver. A greasy, yellow light showed them to be in a short corridor that opened into a larger room further down.¹⁰ It was lined with steel drawers, and Bowen heard the squeal and crash of metal somewhere as one was banged shut. He felt the barrier inside waver, as if a stream of dark, icy water was escaping and rising towards his throat. How can this be happening, he thought wildly. How? With a huge effort he steadied himself, concentrating again on putting one foot in front of the next as he followed the attendant. But a smell began to seep under his guard, an indescribable odour of corruption tinged with antiseptic. Voices, and a murmuring – or was it weeping? – began to seep through as well. He reeled slightly, then felt the solid presence of Donald's hand on his arm. He straightened. 'I'm alright, thanks,' he said brusquely, despite the help it had given him, and the hand was withdrawn as if it had been struck. He fixed his eyes on the back of the attendant's collar, but it abruptly stopped as they came to another attendant and a policeman who was writing on a crumpled piece of

paper. They looked up and his attendant said: 'Mister Bryant' ... adding, in a lower voice that Bowen barely caught ... 'Mrs Bryant'.

His counterpart nodded and gestured to Bowen. 'This way.' He chose a drawer, put his hand on the handle then stopped. 'All that's necessary is for you to say whether or not this is Millicent Maude Bryant.'

The sound of her name, spoken aloud in that place, seemed impossible, irreconcilable. Bowen felt nausea rise up inside him; the river seemed ready to burst through. 'Steady, son. Take a couple of breaths,' said the policeman. Then, to the attendant: 'Give him a moment.' Still light-headed, Bowen wondered if he was shaking and glanced at his hand. It seemed steady, though Donald, he noticed, was suddenly very pale. Somehow this gave him strength, and he looked up at the attendant and said something. The man nodded, pulled on the handle with both hands and took a couple of steps back. With a screech the drawer slid out about halfway. There was something on it. For a moment Bowen couldn't look, refused to focus – except that, now, he had to know. He inhaled deeply through his mouth, stepped forward and looked down.

For a few final moments the barrier held as he saw, without really comprehending, that it was her. He gazed at her face, at her closed eyelids, at her skin gone sallow and yellowish. At the grazes on her cheek and forehead.¹¹ At her hair, dark and wet-looking, pulled untidily away from her. She would not have liked that, he thought, and a softer, still feeling came over him momentarily. Here was his mother, not lost after all, just asleep in this terrible place and thankfully unaware of the foul smell. She would be home tomorrow and they would drive westwards, maybe finding fortune as well as fame. Though where, where, was fortune now? The question flickered confusingly in his mind. He would like to have sat down but was aware of the attendant still holding the drawer. A little longer, he willed, but in the next rending instant, as his eyes fixed on that dear face, he knew it would never touch his own again. He had to sit down, somehow ... Hands gripped his arms on either side, but when he sat down he could no longer see her and Donald was asking 'are you all right old chap?' At this he could only feel fury; this was like a taunt, as his friend knew the answer perfectly well. He wanted him away, right now, but could only gesture brutally

with his left fist as the barrier dissolved and the black torrent burst into his body, filled him up and began to pour out his eyes.

He had no sense of how much later it was when he became aware that the torrent had, for the moment, spent itself and passed like a flood. He was sitting still, with his elbows on his knees, holding his face. His breathing was calmer, and after the torrent there was no feeling. He was empty. He could face Donald now, and whoever else. He could answer the questions and make his signature, pass through the morgue and make his exit with dignity, without a word to anyone who spoke to him. At this thought, the faintest glow of satisfaction came. This is how he would hold her. No-one else had any right to her; she was his, and that had to be for always. He would be damned if anyone else was going to have her. He stood up, squared his shoulders and went out into the night.

NOTES

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- ¹ 'No Heading', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 November 1927, 1.
 - ² Gordon Cooper, Archivist, Sydney Grammar School, email to JV, 17 August 2011.
 - ³ 'No Heading', *The Bulletin*, 3 February 1927 n.p. Clipping in Bryant Scrapbook.
 - ⁴ Interior photograph c.1925. Millicent Maude Bryant Letters Collection (MMBLC). Private collection of Millicent Jones, Kendall NSW. All letters or items not otherwise attributed in subsequent references are from this collection.
 - ⁵ Steve Brew, *Greycliffe: Stolen Lives*, Roebuck Society series (Woden, ACT: Navarine Publishing, 2003), 1.
 - ⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.
 - ⁷ *Ibid.*
 - ⁸ *Ibid.*, 2, 127, 122.
 - ⁹ *Ibid.*, 127.
 - ¹⁰ John Haldane, former Sydney Police Officer, pers. conversation, 18 November 2009. John had to attend the old Sydney Morgue frequently and provided a detailed description of its interior and procedures.
 - ¹¹ Arthur Aubrey Palmer (Government Medical Officer), 'Report to Inquest no. 240 of 1928' [NSW State Records 2/10498]. Also Sydney Coroner, *Register of External Examinations of Bodies Feb 1927-July 1932* [NSW State Records, 7/1460], 46.

PART 1

WINGS OF FORTUNE

1. FLIGHT

EARLY 1925

The seat was a metal bucket, sparsely upholstered, and though the cockpit space was sufficient, it would be less than roomy for a man. It amused those watching the preparations, however, that she, Mrs Bryant, had to be fetched cushions to have a good view forward along the nose of the aircraft.

Having only met Edgar as a friend of her sons, it was curious to see him now as Captain Percival, the war pilot and commercial aviator. Millicent was becoming used to his friendship with her eldest son, George, though Edgar was three or four years older. This didn't seem to matter much as their enthusiasm for mechanical things seemed to erase all differences in age. They had spent considerable time designing, making and flying gliders, and George would, more than occasionally, join his friend for a flight in one of the two AVRO 504 biplanes Edgar had picked up for a song after the war and shipped to Australia. While rarely used in the front line, they were apparently a very stable craft and hundreds had been made for training and other duties.¹

Millicent had brought her own coat and wore jodhpurs for comfort but was loaned goggles and a leather flying cap for the outing. She stood by as the final preparations were made, observing their similarities to ways she had learned to check her Citroën motor car. She also glimpsed a more forceful, even imperious, side to Edgar than she had hitherto seen, as he supervised the fuelling of the 504 and checked the wing battens and struts. She watched with growing interest, until it came time for him to help her over the lower wing into the observer's seat. Surprisingly, this was in front of the pilot; Edgar told her this was to maintain balance when only the pilot was aboard.

He climbed in behind, and though the helmet made it hard to hear she heard him shout cheerfully: 'Ready for a flip?' She nodded vigorously. Jack, her second son, now in his twenties, stood to one side as another man fiddled with the fuel system. He turned the prop one direction a few times then, finally, at Edgar's

signal, he gave it a heavy heave in the other direction. The motor didn't catch but, when he heaved a second time, it did. She was then glad of the muffling provided by the side flaps of the cap, as little else could be heard over the sound of the exhaust.

The rudder pedals and the stick between her legs moved as Edgar throttled the engine, and she could feel the air pushing over them from the spinning propellor. It seemed to pull them forward, and the machine began to move. It eased to the right in a broad semicircle and began to bump over the grass as Edgar lined up the direction he wanted to take off. He opened the throttle and the roar of the engine and the draught from the prop increased simultaneously. The machine began to thrust forwards. They began to jolt along faster and faster, the uneven grass of the airfield hitting the wheels, rumbling and shaking through the frame and the metal bucket in which Millicent sat in the forward cockpit, ahead of Edgar. The noise of the engine and the propellor strained to overcome it and, for a moment, the rumbling ceased; then there was a jolt through the seat as the wheels touched down again. But only for an instant. The wind against her goggles increased and though she could see the ground still passing under them she realised they were no longer touching it. There was a smoothness, the rush of air was more audible and, with a thrill, she realised they were now riding the wind. The rooves of the Richmond airfield sheds could suddenly be seen as if from the top of a high building. And still the AVRO continued to climb, a skein of brown mist coming back from the engine and kissing her lips with the taste of castor oil. There was only sky in the view forward over the nose but, turning to the side, an instant's giddiness struck her as she looked down and felt the emptiness of the space below her, the lack of visible support. Nothing was holding them up. Lifting her chin again, this feeling was replaced by awe at the unexpected vastness of the horizon, which seemed to drop away at the corners of vision. Up here one could truly see the earth as a globe, its apparent flatness bent and illusory. At the same time, the town below seemed to be shrinking into the country that surrounded it, the cultivated fields to the west giving way to the green folds and ramparts of the Blue Mountains as she had never before seen them. The wind buffeted her face and clothing but the feeling of space and the sense of being borne upwards was exhilarating. She stretched out her hand and

felt the air catch it and fling it aside. Somehow the thought of riding a horse at full speed came to mind, the way you surged over the ground and hurtled over obstacles. There was also something like it in the finer movements of the aircraft, the little lifts of its head and flicks of its tail, with the effort involved akin to an easy canter. Seeing the Hawkesbury River glitter as they flew along it, the wingtips dropping down gracefully to trace each bend, brought Millicent a surge of delight as another town came into view; a few moments later, they swept over the steeple of the church at Windsor.

Edgar descended a little as people on the river bank waved, and Millicent waved back to them exultantly. Then they rose gently again, turning back in a wide circle, following the river back the way they had come. All too soon, the field came into sight and the great vista stretching out toward the city on one side and the mountains on the other began to flatten as they came lower and lower. The landing strip seemed a rather smaller space than it had before, but suddenly they were almost on it and the aircraft slowed and seemed to pause. Then the engine died abruptly and, with a lurch, they touched down, bumped along the grass, and came to a halt. Jack came running across the field to meet them while Edgar climbed out and helped her down. Her body seemed still to buzz with vibration and excitement.

‘Well, how was it?’ Jack called out, his voice loud suddenly as she removed her cap and goggles, but she could hardly stop smiling to tell him.

NOTES

¹ Virtual Aircraft Museum. <http://www.aviastar.org/air/england/avro-504.php>
Accessed 5 February 2011.

2. TAKE-OFF

It no longer felt like home as potential buyers traipsed through, whispering comments to each other. Millicent picked up snatches now and again and, whether disparaging or appreciative, they got under her skin. She caught one or two stealing glances at her; though she did not think the reason for the sale was common knowledge, the looks spoke of sympathy and superiority. This or that husband and wife were pictures of propriety and ease and, when asking questions, were polite, even unctuous. Feeling patronised, Millicent smiled and did her best but it grated and it would have left her feeling dispirited if she did not recall the flight and the indomitable feeling it gave her. Taking to the sky, she seemed to grasp much more than the world she knew, and distances seemed inconsequential. She was determined to go up again. And the question, prompted by those superior glances perhaps, also rose up inside her: could she do it herself?

But the demands of her situation were too pressing for an immediate answer. It was something of a shock to have to exchange the space and foliage of 'Grenier' at Pymble, on Sydney's Upper North Shore, for something much smaller, and also to be driven to it by necessity. Millicent went from agency to agency looking for something that would provide sufficient space for herself and her three sons. It wasn't easy, but in June she finally found a flat in a block near the bottom of Shellcove Road in Neutral Bay that she decided would do.

But before they could move in, Jack would be departing. He'd set his mind on going to England and seeking opportunities for commercial agencies, particularly ones related to the dairy industries he'd become interested in at college. But the resources to provide him with the opportunity were now, he knew, very limited from his mother. His father, when Jack visited him, had felt the idea too ambitious and advised him to get some money behind him first. While typically unadventurous of Ned, Millicent thought, she also had her doubts until an acquaintance pointed out smugly that 'beggars can't be choosers'; at this, she came strongly down on her son's side and helped explore ways his passage

could be obtained. In the event, things unfolded through Jack's own efforts and, a few weeks later, he was taken on as a greaser on the Commonwealth and Dominion Line's steamship, *Port Hunter*, which was soon to sail for England via Ceylon and Suez.

Though she was apprehensive at the conditions he might experience, Millicent was proud of her son's initiative. It interested the newspapers, too, this not being the usual way a former Sydney Grammar School boy was expected to make his way to the mother country, and the story was approving and admiring of Jack's efforts to work his passage.¹ From then on, preparations had to be made and letters written to family in England. The sailing date came all too soon, and Millicent was determined to replace tears with enthusiasm and excitement as they brought him to the dock at Darling Harbour.

They had both agreed to write regularly, weekly, if possible.

'I'll be so excited to hear your progress. We'll all feel like we're travelling with you!'

'Don't spare any detail of life at home, then. I want to hear it all from you, Itz,' he whispered, hugging her fiercely. Then he shook hands with his two brothers and turned his back abruptly, striding up the gangway with his duffel bag and suitcase, barely pausing at the top to give them a quick wave.

Back in the car, with just Bowen and George and no home that felt like their own, Millicent's world seemed smaller and as if it, too, had loosed its anchor and was floating towards the horizon.

That night she dreamed of paddling the ten-foot dinghy that Geo and Bowen had bought ... paddling endlessly and, despite weariness, continuing to paddle even though she could not see how far it was to shore. She'd forgotten it by breakfast but it came back to her when she listed the tasks ahead of her for the week. There was so much to do, the worries were endless. The battle would be to forget them, or hold them aside, lest she drown under their weight, when what she was determined to do was to get ahead. In fact, if she could manage it, she meant to fly.

She started her first letter to Jack that Saturday, July 13th, 1925, almost as soon as they had parted and, in fact, before the *Port Hunter* had cleared Sydney Heads and turned south.

His departure had been nearly simultaneous with their move into the flat, resulting in one emotionally-charged event almost immediately giving way to another because it was a huge and stressful effort to pack up and leave their old home and garden. Compared to 'Grenier' there was hardly any space in number 6, Rycroft Hall; not only that, but when George came to measure the room with her he was impatient and in a rush and only wanted to get out again to a football game. Perhaps this way he avoided part of the impact of a day that Millicent could only think of as 'violent', and which left her with the sensation of blankness, as if there were nothing more in her.

The packing was bad enough but they had to make ten car trips from Pymble to Neutral Bay, each round trip taking at least a couple of hours. As the house emptied at 'Grenier' it was not yet with the feeling of looking forward but of having to abandon belongings and furniture that had defined her, each with its own particular memories. There would be no place in the flat for the family dining table or some of the armchairs, the two large ceramic pots with the potted palms or Ned's smaller bookcase; they had to be piled in a corner until Lawson's could take them away for auction.

While the garden had died off during the winter, neither had anything much been done in the yard for months. Under the listless, cloudy skies, it felt like a ruin. And in its midst a bonfire burned all day, consuming the detritus of years; the smell, cinders and smoke were nauseous, particularly when Millicent brought to the fire, from the locked desk drawer, that pile of letters which had nourished her inwardly for so many years. Once it would have seemed impossible, yet now it wasn't so difficult to part with them: she picked up the whole pile, tied together with string, and only hesitated a moment before tossing them on. However, as the flames spread over and consumed them, pages with *his* writing curled up for a moment and a stab of the pain, like a moment of the longer anguish that had accompanied the end of her deepest hope, passed through her. She turned away quickly, away from the heat and smoke, and

gulped in fresh air, grateful for the many other tasks at hand: there was more still for the fire.

By the end of the July, she, George and Bowen had begun finally to settle into Rycroft Hall after several exhausting weeks spent unpacking, repacking, storing and even laying linoleum. But that was not the end of it: Millicent found there were unexpected changes to confront. While she no longer expected to see a great deal of George, whose degree in Engineering had quickly landed him a good job after finishing at Sydney University, now Bowen, her youngest, with his growing school sports and other commitments, was beginning to lead an increasingly busy life as well. Though she had known there would be the need for adjustments, Ned's absence created a series of ripples. There was relief she didn't have to live with the daily tension that had eventually made being together intolerable, but it brought separations from other people she had not really foreseen. It was awkward not only with Ned's family, of which Alice and Charles Bryant had been the closest, but also one or two members of her own family, the Harveys, who had found it hard to approve of what she'd done.

It also began to be apparent that the worst of it might be social isolation, the slights and separation from those who would now consider her *persona non grata* at drinks or around the dinner table. Already she'd felt the blush of humiliation when Sam and Stella Jeffreys had somehow failed to notice her passing on the other side of Livingstone Avenue. Very well then, at least Neutral Bay ought to be less suburban in its expectations of her than Pymble. But there was pain in realising how she was set apart; she would need to find an orbit very much of her own. So when Ida Stevens grumbled about her own boredom – which Millicent now sensed was a way of avoiding the word 'loneliness' – they decided there and then on a motoring trip to Robertson, at the edge of the New South Wales Southern Highlands.²

Such an expedition was not as rare as when they had acquired their first car some ten years before, during the War, but men were still often surprised at Millicent's mastery of the machine. This was made evident once again when,

having started their trip after lunch on a Friday, they had to stop near Bowral when one of the new Goodyear tyres went flat. Millicent pulled over and went about changing it for the old Dunlop spare but, as Ida looked on, three men in a Buick stopped and offered to help. However, being almost done, Millicent warmly thanked them and said she had the job in hand; at that, they glanced at each other then drove away laughing. She felt somewhat affronted but turned her irritation to the deflated Goodyear, now secured to the back of the Citroën.

‘Look at that, Ida. There’s a tear almost an inch long.’

‘Where do you mean, Millicent? I’m sure I can’t see.’

‘There’s nothing we’ve hit that’s done that. I’ll be having a word with the Goodyear people when we get back.’

They lost more time by missing the Robertson turnoff after sunset, and it meant that, while proceeding steadily but slowly along the uneven road in the weak light of the headlamps, it was almost ten o’clock that night before they arrived. To their relief, the hotel welcomed them like a stately liner appearing out of the dark with lights and cheerful fires. Not only that, they were able to get rooms with private baths for 57 shillings each; a long, hot soak and clean sheets helped to soothe not only the physical tensions of the drive but some of those remaining from the preceding weeks.

When Millicent came down for breakfast the next morning, however, she and Ida found two men on a golfing tour were the only others in the entire place. They hadn’t expected to be thrown together with company, and Ida raised her eyebrows when an invitation to take tea after breakfast was conveyed by the waiter.

‘Tell them we accept,’ Millicent answered calmly for them both. ‘That is, if they won’t mind joining us instead, and at morning tea time.’

If Henry and Gerald were at all taken aback by this response they didn’t show it and, after the initial pleasantries, they all found themselves at ease and quite enjoying the unexpected company.

‘Astonishing to find so little activity here,’ Gerald said. ‘It’s quite a fine estate.’

‘Is it good for golf?’ asked Ida.

‘Would be,’ replied Henry. ‘The links are there, and there’s plenty of rain up this way, but ...’

‘ ... it’s all gone to ruin.’

‘Cows and blackberries.’

There being no golf to be played, though, the consequence was they stayed together during the day, strolling the grounds and later playing cards together almost until dinner. They were then treated to special desserts from the chef, while the staff fell over each other to wait on them until nearly ten o’clock when Millicent and Ida stood up, smiled away the offer of a final nightcap, and went to their rooms.

They left on Sunday, despite the entreaties of their new friends to stay, coming back by Macquarie Pass. Ida had her heart set on it, even though two new visitors who arrived at the hotel on Saturday evening shook their heads. ‘Don’t try it,’ said one. ‘It’s hard enough for a man around all those bends.’

Millicent bristled at their tone and so did Ida, who kept saying ‘Don’t you think we might? It is an adventure!’ It was indeed an adventure: the road was frightening in places, and the steep descents required Millicent to keep changing the Citroën down into low gear to avoid overusing the brake as she wrestled it through the hairpins, with trees close on either side. Eventually they got down, without drama, and enjoyed the scenery of the coastal route back through Thirroul and back up to Sydney that much more because of it until they ended up with a one and half hour wait at Tom Ugly’s punt to cross over the Georges River.

‘Will it really be that long until we can get across?’ Ida asked when they walked to the front of the line of cars. But the boatman just shrugged crossly.

‘It’s Sunday, missus, everyone thinks I don’t have a home to go to, meself’ he grumbled.

They walked back, noting the works for the bridge that would eventually take the roadway over the river. ‘Pity we didn’t get the chef to pack us a picnic,’ Ida said ruefully.

Though Millicent didn’t come through the door until after ten that evening, Bowen had waited up and it was a pleasure to tell him of their exploits and how

the old Dunlop spare had seen them up and back just like the car: without a murmur. But she still missed Jack's ironic comments and more adult company, so she sat down and wrote to him of their small adventure. 'You would think us heroines,' she finished, 'if you knew the numbers of cocktails we resolutely refused – about every five minutes! But it was a lovely break in the drabness, and to be fussed over and chocolated was more than sufficiently pleasant.'³

It was only a few days later that a telegram arrived from Jack to say the *Port Hunter* had arrived in Western Australia. Soon after, though, came news that the mail at Wyndham had been destroyed by fire and Millicent resigned herself to the possibility that his letters might have been among them until Bowen rushed in a few evenings later with the cry, 'Letters from Jack!'. His brother told them of high seas off Gabo Island, a steward 'tight as forty cats' and work on marine piston rings and valves that made George's eyes glisten. If that weren't enough, the stories that followed of safaris and crocodiles at Wyndham kept them from their dinner a good while longer.

Jack was now halfway across the Indian Ocean, but Millicent replied at length, everything spilling down onto the page, including small household matters such as the fact she'd hoped to do without a phone but 'in despair' had ordered one the previous week. She also mentioned the huge renovations going on at their old house, 'Grenier', but the issue she had to really discuss was how to invest the money from its sale.⁴

This resource was what she had come away with after the 'separation', a word she avoided using with her sons, let alone socially. The topic, indeed, the situation, was simply skirted by all who knew in order to avoid embarrassment, particularly for the boys. How she wished, sometimes, it were otherwise. To other people, Millicent realised, she was tarnished no matter the truth of things. But she was ready to make the best of it, to make her own way, and it was essential that the money from the sale be used as effectively as possible. Thus, having been out to see the sand and gravel masses at Richmond with George, Millicent bought five hundred shares in Nepean Sand and Gravel. There would hopefully be a solid dividend; Beard Watson, in which she had also invested,

would be paying eight per cent. Of course, on the other side of the ledger was the lorry they'd bought for Jack's transport business, still unsold. Judging by the collapse in second-hand car values she could not see it bringing ten pounds. Getting ahead financially was going to be no easier than she had imagined, despite the lessons learned from her father and from her own experience with property. Still, things had been going ahead a bit more now that the Great War was some seven years behind them, and good investments, she felt sure, would both secure their future and provide an income.

'I must keep my eyes wide open for an "opening" now we are a bit straight,' she wrote to Jack. 'I've no inspiration as to what to do yet: Geo brings all sorts of importing ideas but I don't feel like relying on his advice – it's too enthusiastic and I can't get in touch with any other as a corrective. The basic idea of importing would be quite interesting but the "lines" must be good and I fear more money is needed than I have.'⁵

It felt good to write down all their trials and successes, all their fortunes. Confiding in him to despite waiting months for a reply. Letters were a vehicle for every bit of news, every business idea, false hope, speculation and gossip that Millicent found herself occupied with – and it was better to be so occupied than to struggle with the cloudedness that came in other moments and which was hardest of all to speak of.

And to whom but Jack? Though Bowen was becoming better company all the time, he was still growing up. George, on the other hand, was being anything but a helpful, adult companion. Though on a decent wage, he didn't concern himself with any of the household expenses and Millicent had to settle these herself. Then there was the next Robertson outing she was planning, after the success of her reconnaissance with Ida, that might help lay some new social foundations. A larger group would make it more enjoyable and more of an occasion, so she wanted to ensure both some compatibility and suitable dance partners if the group were large. However, having shared the plan with George, she was horrified when he came home and simply announced he had invited people without consulting her: 'I shall live in terror as to what misfits he will have "seen to-day" and been inspired to invite!' Millicent grumbled to Jack.⁶

In the end, the worry – and the plans – amounted to much less, though that was also the disappointment of the thing: only Edgar, Peggy, Ruri, Geo and she materialised. So she was the odd one among a younger set although, with fifteen or so other guests there, at least it didn't seem that way. They had something of a wild time, and the hotel's bed clothes got dragged from room to room along with the party; whereas originally there were five or six blankets and the customary number of sheets to each bed, Edgar ended up with only one of each to sleep with. But he came into his own on the way back when they stopped at Mascot airfield, where he now based his aircraft, and took those who wanted to up for a fly. It was late in the afternoon and the sun was starting to tint everything it touched with gold; to the east the sky curved away in a vast bowl of turquoise. It was Millicent's favourite time of day, and high above everything she felt a robust joy as they turned east at the harbour and saw the bright yellow of the sand of the little west facing beaches and the sails of boats. Then, coming back over the airfield, Edgar began to climb more and more steeply until they were upside down for a second, her heart beating with excitement as he completed the loop. The look on Peggy's face when Edgar taxied them into the hangar made it especially worthwhile.⁷

A car journey was not as liberating as flying but one's cares were behind for the interim and there were so many places to explore. Millicent had even reached the summit of Mount Kosciusko on an extended trip the previous year.⁸ Though many women of her acquaintance were – or affected to be – fazed by the mechanics of the machine, Millicent saw no reason for this. It was virtually a requirement if she wanted to travel and sightsee according to her own whim rather than being reliant on a man.

'One doesn't have to be a garage mechanic,' she lectured Maj Carey. 'Even a basic interest in its workings gives you the confidence to manage it. Even more so if you're prepared to roll up your sleeves and at least *attempt* to deal with the trouble.' It came down to simple determination if you were to do what you wanted. With this in mind when the school holidays came around, she took advantage of a persistent invitation from Nance, her brother Falkner's wife, to

get away on another trip and take Bowen to visit them at Dubbo, in central western New South Wales.

They left Sydney on the first day of Spring, laying in provisions en route and, after slowly climbing all the way to the top of the Blue Mountains, were able to lunch in view of Echo Point at Katoomba; Bowen had never seen the mountain views before and was delighted. There were odd fine showers as they wound slowly down to the plains but, as they approached Bathurst towards evening, the setting sun turned the distant hills the most vivid purple that Millicent had ever seen. Their soft radiance seemed hardly a thing of this world, and she felt it almost painful to witness.

Tired but elated with these sensory delights, they arrived at the Royal Hotel around sunset. 'All the way from Sydney? Today?' the publican inquired as he sent the bags to their room.

'Neutral Bay to Bathurst. 127 miles by my reckoning,' Millicent replied. 'We only used three and three quarter gallons of petrol, too, including the mountains.'

The publican's eyebrows went up. 'Not too bad at all,' he said. 'Still, you'll be needing a good rest tonight.'

She nodded. The next day's run ought to be about 150 miles to Dubbo, but it was the very devil to learn exactly how far one place was from another.⁹

They left early next morning but broke the drive to Dubbo with a short stop at 'Apsley', the property owned by Millicent's parents on the Macquarie River near Wellington. They found her mother, Georgiana Harvey, to be middling in every way and, as had been the case in the last couple of years, there seemed not much to say.¹⁰ Or too much. Georgiana had little to occupy herself with and unspoken, of course, was the absence of Millicent's father, Edmund. It was a similar kind of absence, in some respects, to Millicent's from her own husband, Ned: whatever had joined them was gone, and it was better that they now lived separate lives. Millicent did not know if it could have been helped, but now it simply *was*. She

felt for her mother to her bones but to say much about how she herself had chosen to live would have been less than sensitive.

They arrived at 'Ranelagh', Falkner and Nance's gracious home just outside Dubbo with its high ceilings and generous rooms in time for a late lunch and the start of some relaxing days with Nance and her children, including Jean, who was on holidays from her school in Sydney. By the time Bowen left on the day train to go home and study, a week later, Millicent found herself beginning to feel rested, despite the fact that, for no ostensible reason, they generally never got to bed until long after midnight. It was on one of these occasions, but when everyone else had retired early, that Falkner, poking the fire, said: 'Now what's the go with you and Ned, Mil? You've not said much, though you've said you're out of 'Grenier' and he's gone somewhere else.'

Falkner was the closest to her in age of her brother and sisters and Millicent was glad he'd chosen to speak plainly.

'You know it's been hard for a long time, Falk,' she replied. 'Almost intolerable. We weren't close anymore, if we were really ever. It felt like I was being slowly suffocated by his quiet, heavy weight on my chest. I don't think either of us wanted to go on. It was too tense and horrible.'

'But that's hard on him. Worked all his life and now no home and hearth.'

That hurt, and though she knew it was a fair comment, it was only one Falkner could have made. She shook her head and sighed. 'I've always thought of that. But the truth is he's more comfortable, and living in a way more congenial to him than with me. We're not two souls naturally meant to be together, though it might have seemed at first. I think he's as relieved, as I am. The boys say that. When they see him.'

'It's not hard for them? What people say?'

'It must be, but they could tell it was far harder for us to stay together, especially if it was just he and I. It's really difficult to explain how hard it was for so many years.'

Falkner shrugged and nodded, staring into the fire.

With this conversation the feeling of rest from her stay became a little more complete; it was something to have said this out loud, and for her brother still to accept her. She helped Nance and played some golf, and even though the course, with its two thousand and twenty stony yards and sand greens was no good for Millicent's particular style, she managed forty-seven from nine holes. '94-34 equals 60!!! Put that in your pipe!' she crowed to Jack.¹¹ But in the last few days she found herself restless and looking forward to leaving. She had paid three calls on friends and relations, staying about three hours and talking on, or, more truly, listening to quite harmless aimless, useless gossip with not one single stimulating original remark. And all so 'married' and 'settled'. *Mon dieu!* she thought, did they think of no other possibilities? No other uses for life, no other things to do? Might they not want to travel? Or even fly? Then, rather than dwelling on the small portion of envy within the larger certainty of her own choices, she turned to the next action ahead.

That was to leave Dubbo on Sunday, with Jean as a passenger. It was a fine day after three cold, windy ones, and they had a splendid run to Bathurst. But the road back over the mountains the next day seemed far worse than when they had come down it: stony and full of potholes.¹² The automobile crowd had just had a big stint at Bathurst and this must have been the last straw to a road already on the verge of disintegration. While Millicent delivered Jean in good order and got home in time for tea, she felt dead to the world after two days driving, especially hanging onto the wheel and brakes coming back over the mountains.

Nor had the trip back been too kind on the car: they'd finished off a broken leaf spring on the front wheel during the descent from Katoomba. So, with Bowen's and later Geo's help, Millicent installed new leaves the next weekend, much to the interest of their neighbours. And Millicent also had her car in mind when, several weeks later, she took Ida and her mother out to French's Forest. In addition to having a delightful afternoon with pleasant if not thrilling company and collecting wildflowers, she found a suitable spot, got under the car and opened the sump plug, allowing the black, sludgy contents to drain out.

Ida looked bemused. 'It's quite easy,' Millicent said, getting up after replacing the plug and rubbing the grass and dirt from her hands. 'Do please pass me the can with the fresh oil in it, could you?'

As the changes and move gradually receded, Millicent and her two sons found they were coming to like 'flat' living immensely. The place was very airy now that things were packed away properly, and the night and day views were ever-changing. It also allowed the boys to return to some of the seaside activities they'd grown up with at Manly, and when Edgar came over one Sunday morning he went out for a sail with Bowen and George on the ten footer the two of them had recently bought.

They returned soaked, with Edgar rather less enthusiastic than they. He clearly preferred flying, and, while he stayed to lunch, he was in a hurry to get off to Mascot afterwards. Millicent herself began to feel some equilibrium returning, and though the worry about money was constant, she felt her general outlook buoyed by the election, near the end of September, of Mr Thomas Bavin as Opposition Leader, giving him, perhaps soon, the chance to become Premier of New South Wales. The years of campaign support that Millicent had contributed since this principled, intelligent man had been their local member now seemed to be moving towards fruition. She wrote to congratulate him, and in October he replied in his own hand, in his usual modest way, saying how glad he had been to get her note. 'I hope it will be a winner you have picked – but I don't know,' he replied. 'Anyhow, the confidence of my friends will help more than anything else.'¹³

This acquaintance had nurtured her interest and belief in the political process and, with the political cycle now turned to the Federal sphere, Millicent went with Edgar and George to hear Mr Bruce open the election campaign at the Hippodrome. It turned out to be a fine speech, even a model one, she thought: perfect arrangement, balances and humanity, and it received a great reception.¹⁴ Attending this, then supper in the city afterwards, partly satisfied her hunger for company and meaningful conversation, though George's often veered off these tracks to practical matters or opinion when she would like to have liked,

occasionally, a more reflective or questioning approach from him. Fortunately, such books as Romain Rolland's wonderfully living Burgundian tale, *Colas Breugnon*, also helped make up the lack, and she commended it to Jack if he could get it, as well as Zweig on Rolland himself and Ibsen's works: perhaps *An Enemy of the People*, *The Wild Duck* or *Hedda Gabler*. At the same time, Jack had left Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* for her and, far from being put off, found herself charmed by its delicious fancy.¹⁵

These thoughts wakened other yearnings. On the one hand, an ache to go to Italy and soak in its cultural riches, especially music, and, on the other, someone to be really close to and share things with. But that possibility now seemed closed to her. She felt a sense of desperation and longed for a yarn with Jack, but, rather than telling him so, she wrote from another part of her heart: 'I want you to live as long as possible in freedom – or semi-freedom – there will not again come a time when sights and sounds and things good, bad, strange or wonderful will be so vital to you.'¹⁶

But, a few days later, this wish was replaced by one about his more basic well-being when news came that he possibly had appendicitis. While his letters didn't themselves give great cause for concern, Millicent remembered the speed with which pneumonia had taken her brother, Arthur's, life and the terrible shock and loss. 'You suggest leaving the appendicitis matter for further development,' she wrote back, her words tumbling over each other. 'I'm just trusting that the Blacks or someone has seen that you have "gone into the matter thoroughly" – seen a specialist first and then duly attended to his advice ... If it should really be appendicitis there is nothing to be gained but greater risk and expense by delaying things because it will have to be done sooner or later – if not too late – and you may get an attack when it cannot be done and yet again it's better done when you are comparatively well. I do so pray you have not left things in doubt.'¹⁷

This needed to be said but when she drew breath she also remembered the excitement of the journey she had wished for him not long before, especially compared to the alternative, the mundane reality she felt bearing down on her.

The mind absorbs the new, however trivial, and 'sees' it, she noticed, while the 'dull routine' passed with as little 'seeing' as possible.¹⁸

Being not so far away, her other two sons were simpler to contend with: at this point, Bowen was a dear and George was not. Frequently in a bad temper, he'd go for periods being quite uncommunicative, yet so buzzy and restless while *seeming* to like his job. It certainly seemed far from exacting for him. But he had such wild ideas and, when one didn't accede to them, was so dreadful; yet she dared not fall in, without some corroboration. Bowen, on the other hand, was trying hard to study for his 'Leaving' exams, though how usefully she couldn't easily tell. The exam test results just out gave him five 'B's and he came third in the class in English, which was not his strong suit. The rest of his concerns were cricket and football, especially since he'd been made Captain of the 2nds and debuted at the Sydney Cricket Ground with a win against St Joseph's.¹⁹

She was certainly happy for him in this, but Bowen impressed his mother almost as much with his considerate and helpful nature. Unlike George, he could be counted upon not only around the flat but also as company. This was more frequent socially, now he was older, and Millicent could also rely on him – out of school and sport hours – for company on the golf course. It was a pastime she never tired of, always looking for improvement in her game and enjoying the physical activity and the mental relief it provided.

She could, in fact, hardly have done without it, along with such diversions as motor trips and, especially, flying, when she could. Because, as the weeks went by, nothing else seemed to buoy her spirits; she didn't feel like seeing anyone. She felt so up and then down, down, down. Bowen, of course, noticed, and asked what was the matter: 'I'm just finding it hard to keep my thoughts on capturing an idea we can turn into bread and butter and odd tins of jam,' was all she could say, straining to give him a confident smile.²⁰

Scanning the newspaper was a regular part of this search and, especially since her reading had broadened over the last few years, Millicent had sometimes wondered about writing or journalism as a way of adding income. Then one

Saturday she recognised the name of the correspondent who had supplied what she thought a very ordinary travel article. She had no doubt she could do better herself and, for that matter, so could Jack. It might even be a way he could earn a little money from his travels.

‘I’m sure you could get anything you sent published,’ she wrote, ‘especially of uncommon sights. Try it, and if the point of view is fresh or unusual – or whimsical perhaps – so much the better.’ Thinking of an exquisitely described scene from *The Rescue*, she added: ‘Try the Conrad stunt on a moonlight night picture. A day at sea – use the crew as material as long as they *live*.’²¹

Having passed this advice on, the idea began to bubble up further, provoking Millicent to reconsider her own possible talents. She cut out the ‘Advice to Contributors’ from the newspaper, as well as a piece on Sydney University’s possible offering of a Diploma in Journalism and tried to think of a few ideas over the next few days.²² It was easier to do while unoccupied and out of the home. While on a tram she toyed with the idea of ‘A Smile Smites: the pleasure of a smiling face’, as few seemed in evidence that day, or ‘We Learn to Drive a Car: by a victim of a young hopeful’. That ought to get some interest.

But while waiting for the ferry to depart from the Quay early one afternoon and mulling over her concerns, the sunlight on the lapping water drew her into a trance-like calm. As she kept watching, aware faintly of the reverie, her mind became softer, absorbed for a few moments in what she was seeing. Then the ferry whistle blew and, while the crew stood by to cast off, she quickly took out her notebook and pencil.

Sunshine and water²³

There is a joy so potent to charm from the sad or weary heart its load of care, that I would share its illusive beauty with all who daily pass so near to the skirts of the angels yet may not have seen their radiance. We are often told by the average person that they will believe what they see with their own eyes. When anything is approached with a mind full of preconception, albeit involuntary, it is very difficult to see truly. Things may not be what we think them and it is so necessary to approach every appeal to sense of sight or sound, or any other, with the mind "tabula rasa" if possible. To those who can do so, wondrous beauties will flash both upon the inward and outward eye. If for instance one rides on the lower deck of a harbour ferry boat on some sun-kissed day and gazes intently across the water, what unexpected vision of beauty will meet the eye. If the day be calm, the somewhat oily surface of the water, as it slowly, restlessly, laps the sides of a nearby ferry steamer or coaxes round the piles and pontoon of a neighbouring wharf, will reveal to the dreaming gaze a wondrous picture of strange loveliness; for upon the surface of the water will appear irregular figures of brown, or perhaps green, the edges sharply defined as if by pencil and bordered by a quite uniform band of grey, appearing to float in a liquid of different colour.

The fantastic, changing shapes hold the attention enthralled; it is all so new and unlike what is usually thought of as the surface of the water, and, dancing so beguilingly in the drab surroundings of Circular Quay, they recall the words of Francis Thompson,

"But (when so sad thou canst not sadder)
Cry, —and upon thy sore loss
Shall shine the traffic of Jacob's ladder
Pitched between Heaven and Charing Cross."²⁴

To bathe the mind for awhile in these sparkling sights is to find where but a moment ago was tenseness of care is now the smile of relaxation as well as the inspiration to look for new wonders in every commonplace thing.

"Each cloud capped mountain is a holy altar,
an organ breathes in every grove."²⁵

For the consideration of the editors

NOTES

- ¹ Newspaper clipping, untitled and undated, c.1925, Bryant Scrapbook.
- ² The 'Mrs Stephens' Millicent mentions in her correspondence appears to be the same as Mrs Stevens and, as this spelling is more consistently referred to, it is used here.
- ³ MMB to JHB, 3 August 1925.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁵ MMB to JHB, 17 August 1925.
- ⁶ MMB to JHB, 3 August 1925.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ A story repeated in the family and told by MEJ. Possible reference to this trip in MMB to JHB, 24 August 1925.
- ⁹ MMB to JHB, 1 September 1925.
- ¹⁰ MMB to JHB, 8 September 1925. Her mother was Georgiana Harvey (née Bartlett).
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² MMB to JHB, Tuesday, (no day date) September 1925.
- ¹³ T R Bavin to MMB, 3 October 1925.
- ¹⁴ MMB to JHB, 11 October 1925.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ MMB to JHB, 19 October 1925.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁹ MMB to JHB, 19 October 1925 and MMB to JHB, 25 October 1925.
- ²⁰ MMB to JHB, 10 November 1925.
- ²¹ MMB to JHB, 19 October 1925. Note: 1) the word 'sights' after 'uncommon' is an approximation as the original is illegible. 2) The reference to *The Rescue* is inferred from the description of a sunset from this work written out in MMB's reading diary.
- ²² MMB 'Clippings' (undated, newspaper unknown) pasted into notebook entitled 'Notes on Literature - writing ...'
- ²³ A literary piece written by Millicent probably written sometime between 1924-27 when she was living in Neutral Bay or Vaucluse and using the Sydney harbour ferries. Forming part of the Letters Collection, it may or may not have been submitted but appears as a typescript, except for the annotation at the end, which is handwritten.
- ²⁴ Francis Thompson (1859-1907), 'The Kingdom of God', in Nicholson & Lee (eds.) *The Oxford Book of English Mystical Verse* [1917] accessed from <http://www.bartleby.com/236/245.html> This poem, as the Rev Andrew Sails describes it, is about 'people overwhelmed by the chaos and sorrow of everyday life - yet finding in their need the light of the angelic host'. (<http://www.themint.org.uk/z021.htm>) Note that Millicent has typed it out incorrectly, leaving out the word 'so' before the word 'sore' in the second line.
- ²⁵ Thomas Hood (1799-1845), 'Ode to Rae Wilson Esq', http://gerald-massey.org.uk/hood/c_poems_02.htm Hood was an English poet and humourist.

3. GROUNDED

Jack was lying on a table, partly covered. Robed figures were moving around him and, though no instruments were noticeable, it was clear he was under sedation. There he was, but she could not speak or reach out.¹

Millicent awoke, breathing hard and a little disoriented. Gradually she took stock of the darkened room in Rycroft Hall, sometime in the wee hours of Christmas morning. She wondered at the visitation she had witnessed, vivid and with the foreboding that usually came with such things. She got out of bed, went to the kitchen for some water and switched on a lamp. She sat down in an armchair; apart from soft creakings and the occasional lap of a wave against the sea-wall, the flat was silent. No-one else was at home. Bowen was still out west cherry picking and Geo was goodness-knows-where considering he and Edgar did not fly to Palm Beach as planned after all, the crankshaft having failed just as Edgar made a landing at Mascot.²

She did not think she had ever felt more absolutely alone in the world. The late hour made the sound of a car pulling up nearby and the soft voices and laughter emphatic. Everyone else had someone to go out with but she always seemed to be the odd one.³ The feeling was particularly painful at this time, and, though she expected George would turn up at some point for Christmas dinner, there certainly seemed little to look forward to this year without the other boys. She had even contemplated letting the flat and moving somewhere inexpensive while Bowen was away.⁴ Her thoughts returned to Jack once again, and she felt tense with worry about the operation which, if not already completed, must be forthcoming in the next week. Yet she rejoiced that he was seeing the world and the extraordinary things in it, which would be worth so much to him as experience and be something to dream upon when the drab routine of life caught him up in its clutches.⁵ It made her think of London, and where Jack might be in it; that city and its people had a soul he must have felt, particularly after Queen Alexandra's death last month.

As long as he'd not let this illness, which started so small, cause him harm.

A few days after Christmas, Millicent could stand being alone no longer. She got George to help her, with much bad language on his part, to fix a flat tyre so she could go and visit Ida Stevens in her new house at Pymble.⁶ She wished there was the possibility of golf or something but it was too hot for that. Anyway, she thought disconsolately, everyone was wrapped in the bosom of family, at home or at the beach. Only the prospect of an occasional flight gave her much to look forward to, and she was becoming minutely aware of the weather each morning. She was almost afraid to arrange to do anything for fear of a calm day when Edgar might be able to take her up.⁷

But such selfish concerns were swept to one side when news came from Jack the following week that the operation had in fact taken place: on Christmas Eve.

Millicent was taken aback but not surprised. 'At the exact moment of losing consciousness ... it clearly showed the power of a genuine wish or desire over matter and space and is exactly similar to several previous experiences,' she wrote in reply. 'From your cable I had supposed that the operation would be on Monday or Tuesday. I never imagined for one moment its taking place on Christmas Eve till that evening late when, after feeling so upset and restless, your mental or spiritual state coming through no doubt, this startlingly vivid thing flashed by my mind's eye and I felt sure you were under the operation at that moment. I mentioned it to Bowen in a letter, just for the record. I was most startled to find absolute confirmation of every detail of what I was seeing in your accounts ... I am immensely glad that it is over though and hopefully you will feel quite a different person afterwards. It remains to take proper care and precaution and use judgments. On all of which scores I feel sure you will not fail.'⁸

From his letter it was apparent, however, how much care had been provided by the Blacks, and Millicent felt this acutely. 'You simply cannot go on living with Mr and Mrs Black, you must be firm. I've written lecturing them. I can manage some hundreds of pounds yet and if the bottom falls out of all income before I

can get going I shall have to take a housekeeper's job and Bowen leaves school but we may manage to get going otherwise in time.

'You are not to fret over things ... and don't worry over me worrying,' she added. 'It is a trying thing for me to be thrown on my own, to start afresh – untrained, in a world that specialises over everything. But you can't alter that.' She imagined how he must have felt, so far distant from them and going 'under fire', as it were. 'One faces nearly all the crises of life alone I find. I suppose it must be so, and all that is possible is the loving support of friends.'⁹

The summer became busier as it wore on providing, thankfully, not too much time to ruminate but enough for an outing to the Sheffield Shield cricket – Bowen coming with her one day and George the next. She had also started a course at a business college in the city and, while not finding the book-keeping much of a puzzle, the weekly 'business principles' were eye-opening. 'It is laid down that it is business acumen and duty to, by almost any means, get the better of your neighbour,' she recounted to Jack. 'He, meanwhile, being engaged upon the same schemes. ... It's purely a battle of bluff and wits.'¹⁰

Others were busy too, including Edgar, who'd been frantically fixing up his aircraft with the help of his right-hand man, 'Alick', until late every evening in order to fly some 'veiled actress', as he mysteriously put it, probably for another of Arthur Shirley's films. Happily, the new engine contraption he'd contrived was very successful, gave lots of pep and was put to good use with large, arguing queues of people wanting flights the next weekend at Palm Beach.¹¹ A Mr Peters, who spent £50 on family flights, also paid for the Newport police, beaming like giggling school kids, to have their turn.¹²

George, however, was quite the busiest of them all, so much so that he was often off-colour with indigestion from irregular food and late hours. He was out every night, Sunday to Sunday with three different girls.

'How do you think you can keep going like this?' she finally asked him. 'We almost never see you!'

His reply was characteristic: 'I don't care especially for the company of the opposite sex – so why should you?'

Millicent was not only flabbergasted but hurt. Coming from him, that wasn't too bad when he saw one or other of his fancies at no longer intervals than twelve hours, and then for hours on end.¹³

This left her, once again, with her own feelings apparently little valued so when, out of the blue late the following Sunday, Maisie McDouall rang her about a possible job on *The Sun* newspaper, it seemed a breakthrough for herself was in the offing.

At last, here was a possibility for regular income, and somewhere interesting. Maisie's friend, Miss Cameron, was moving on from her job of looking after the photographic collection to become secretary to Campbell Jones, the Managing Editor, and she was much happier to help Millicent than to keep the 'seat' warm for Phil Ducker, who was still in America. But the main problem was the fact that married women were taboo. 'They might be off anytime to have a family, just when they had become "useful"', was the way Millicent had heard it put, and she snorted at the thought. Her age and circumstances would surely set their minds at rest. However, the first question Campbell Jones asked was if Millicent was married and, on receiving the answer that she was, immediately said *no!* But Miss Cameron persisted, and when she called with the news that Mr Campbell Jones had finally agreed to make an appointment to see her, Millicent felt her excitement and relief almost to be unbounded, even though she didn't yet have the job. She lay in bed thinking about it that night, imagining herself being in charge of all the photographs and being able to put her finger on a given one at a moment's notice. But there was plenty of idle time and she'd have an office to oneself, with a carpet. That was much better than Miss Williamson, the women's editor of *The Herald*, had had all these years. Then the salary, at £3/10 per week, wasn't huge but was hardly a bad effort for no training or anything. And it would be permanent.¹⁴

Despite her excitement – or because of it – George’s comments when he came home were very dampening. ‘You’ll find it awfully monotonous,’ he said. ‘And you’ll be stuck there. Long hours.’¹⁵

The days dragged by expectantly until the following week but, when the notification came, it was a bitter disappointment. *The Sun* had made ‘other arrangements’, and it left Millicent feeling it was useless for her to hope to do anything, unless it was off her own bat.¹⁶ Without inspiration of some sort soon, or unless Jack was getting some really good prospects to work up, she would have to bog in to a tea shop almost at once to keep things going. If, that is, a paying one could be obtained for a reasonable sum. She looked at a few establishments as she passed by in the city and tried to enthuse herself about being in one of them. Simultaneously, however, she couldn’t help noticing the city centre was literally papered with notices about office and shop spaces to let. There were two shops on George Street, one near Lasseter’s and one further down, with the rental posted up. The many new offices going up, such as the Sydney Morning Herald Building, must further swamp the market. Back on the ferry, she wondered at the possibilities.¹⁷

But fortune had not finished frowning: barely days later, news came that Ned had been admitted to a private hospital and was very ill. Millicent and George immediately went up to see him and were told that it seemed to be a form of pernicious anaemia, where the blood wouldn’t form normally. The only thing for it was a blood transfusion to give the patient a start again, though this almost always worked only for a short time. George would have a blood test and, if he was all right, a transfusion could take place, on Tuesday possibly, though the doctor said there was very little hope of it being any use. Generally it was only a way of lingering on from week to week. George also saw his uncle, John Bryant, about Ned retiring, concerned that if his father died before doing so that any retiring allowances might be lost. Certainly there looked no hope of Ned ever returning to work, and the retiring allowance could help pay the hospital fees.¹⁸ But barely had Millicent written to Jack about this than she had to cable him – or,

rather, the Blacks, who could better break the news – that his father had passed away.

Ned had only been in hospital about a week and sank very suddenly. The doctors said he suffered no pain, only weakness, and died on the morning of February 15, 1926: the call came that it was over just as Millicent and George were getting ready to go up and see him. She felt numbed, and her feelings were confused; had their separation affected him? Could she have held on if she had known? There was something crushingly sad in the moment, and though she just *had* to move away, today it seemed a mess she had foisted on Ned as well as the boys. A selfish mess. She stood outside, looking over Shellcove Bay, and watched the ferries in the distance heading towards Manly until Bowen called out if it was time for tea yet.

Falkner's Nance came down from Dubbo and it was a comfort to have her there, though they were kept busy, over the next couple of days, making clothes to wear for the funeral. Ned's brother, Marcus, had made the arrangements, and they went down to St Matthew's in Manly for a short service. The temperature was exhausting, up to 104 degrees they later heard, and the numerous wreaths from office associations, clubs and private individuals wilted accordingly.¹⁹ It felt to her like the distorted reality of a fever and, while there were apparently quite a number of people, Millicent seemed to see no one. She was thankful Nance stayed with her until George and Bowen came back from the burial. It was a bit better later when they went to meet her own father, who came down on the evening train; Edmund was very kind and supportive and wouldn't hear of Millicent's worrying on Bowen's account, insisting on paying her a pound a week for his board and giving him ten shillings a week for his expenses.²⁰

The rush of those first few days had kept herself and Bowen reasonably steady. George, on the other hand, was quite hysterical the first night and Edgar came and sat with him for two or three hours till he was calmer, talking of his own mishap: a minor crash which had broken the prop, made a few scratches and, most fortunately, not thrown the passengers out. However, it meant tearing into repairs, and was rotten luck, considering his record. The only thing one could do was to bob up serenely.

Millicent wondered if she herself could do so: all the good and bad she'd experienced during her marriage was fully behind now that Ned was gone; the sense of parting was complete. It was different for the boys she supposed, though Jack's next letter only acknowledged his father and what had taken place in a sentence or so.

Ned had left a will made in 1904 or 1906, naming Millicent the sole executor. It was amongst papers that Uncle Marcus handed over, and George took it straight to Mr Nicholls to attend to probate; it seemed there might be £800 or £900 before that was paid and possibly a widow pension of one pound per week.²¹ This again stirred Millicent to look to the future, so the following Sunday, she took George for a look at some blocks at Bellevue Hill which were to be sold by auction. Land was scarce there, and she wanted to try and get one or two allotments. The terms were liberal and the deposit small so she went to the land sale and in the end bought one lot at £15 a foot. At that price it wouldn't bring in a fortune, however, and Millicent knew she would still have to cast around for something else.²²

With money fairly committed and Edgar busy, there was no prospect of flying for a while. However, when she received an invitation from her father to go up to 'Kanimbla', his 'new' property just over the other side of the Blue Mountains, it was not a prospect she relished. She hated the thought of Miss Allen, who she still thought of as a governess and who was only two years older than herself, with her father, and hoped she wouldn't show it. In the event, there was little to say to Miss Allen or her woman friend when they reached 'Kanimbla', very late, after a nightmare drive in which the tap fell out of the tank in George's car and it began to leak petrol somewhere around Blaxland.²³ Still, one benefit of the trip was to talk about finances with her father, and he arranged for Millicent to get £1000 as an overdraft on security of the Kanimbla deeds to help her buy land and build. It gave her confidence that he had faith in her, and she felt grateful for his continued support in furthering her business plans.²⁴

Even so, Millicent again wished she had a job. 'It's the one or two pounds a week coming in, without any going out, that would really help,' she wrote to Jack,

whose own ideas about a milk business were still forming. He would need to do more to tease out his thoughts about import agencies given, as she put it, 'we won't escape the mad tariff-ites for many years to come and the wild, frantic, "made in Australia" yell.'²⁵ These anxieties seemed to push her more and more until, once again, she felt herself on the brink. Yet, as before, her instinct was not to cling for dear life but to leap: into the air, or the void, she didn't know which. Wasn't it Nietzsche, in the voice of Zarathustra, who said you had to have chaos in your life to give birth to a star? She remembered noting this in her reading diary. Perhaps it was the same with chaos as with anxiety or uncertainty because, little more than a fortnight later, Millicent was borne up in the rushing currents of her own business.

It had started to form with Jack's quest for import agencies, but was born from an idea of her own, stimulated by George's talk, for selling men's mercery. It was also spurred by the city rentals that seemed to be going begging. But once she had committed to the shop in Hosking Place, just off Pitt Street beneath the Boomerang Tea and Luncheon Rooms, there was no standing still for a moment. She had to talk about, think out and order things she hardly understood for a moment, developing ideas on the fly as she dealt with people in the absence of any knowledge to kick off from. There was registration of the businesses, as she'd planned with Jack, finding suppliers and spending hours with the managers of Pelaco and Wallace Buck & Good, who supplied socks, sweaters and ties. They had perfect commercial manners and, along with scepticism, were full of helpful advice. For example, they told her most definitely not to touch hats, as too many had to be stocked to have the range of colours, sizes and shapes.

The net result of all the talk was, though, in spite of the attitude of those firms, not to make Millicent more hopeless but rather less so. 'I have no very glowing hopes about things,' she wrote to Jack 'but something must be done at once and I shall only use about £500 to start.' Moreover, it provided an address in a very central position for the firm of Harvey, Bryant and Co., General Importers, a name she thought sounded rather effective. She looked forward to the fitting out and furnishing, hoping for a very chic result, and the furnishers, Seagraves, did

her proud: the fitment and counter in polished maple and glass was really a beautiful job.²⁶ Together with the fawn velvet curtains the whole look was almost too good for Hosking Place, as one of the business reps told her admiringly. She arranged just a few articles in the window, which seemed to stop a good eighty per cent of the passers-by. Then, with a final rush to get fittings and the delivery of a special stock order, Chesterfield Men's Mercery opened on Monday, April 12th, 1926.

The first week was not promising. Two pounds two and sixpence on Tuesday, for example, made a profit of fourteen shillings according to Millicent's calculations. Things would have to do better than that, though one couldn't expect too much on the first few days. Things were looking more promising for Edgar, on the other hand. He had at last completed his new prop to replace the one broken in the crash, and was rewarded by finding it perfect. Now the two 'buses' were almost ready. He'd called by the shop the Sunday before it opened with a very morning-after-the-night-before look; whether he was celebrating or otherwise, he'd spent a wild night at Vaucluse with friends, so much so that he couldn't remember what he'd done with his car and had been relieved to find it safely in the garage the next morning.

The next few weeks' trade was an exercise in perseverance and the management of anxiety. While Millicent always found it satisfying to come in each morning, make sure the glass counters were clean and dusted, arrange new stock and open up for trade by 8.30am with a cheerful smile, the takings were barely meeting the overheads. To provide some relief, she took Bowen to see Pavlova's ballet at Her Majesty's Theatre and felt amply rewarded for the expense and anticipation: she was breathtaking. It eased the everyday effort and stress, while Bowen's company provided something of a counter to the impact of the pace and manner in which George seemed to live his life.

She'd mainly see him when he and Edgar and Edgar's brother-in-law popped into the shop – for some seconds only it seemed – to meet before making their way to the Horseshoe for lunch; she was scandalised when he asked her to lend

him £10 one day. His salary, now £7/10 shillings a week, was one on which many people kept the home and family. Of course, he spent plenty on taking girls around, but on that occasion it was to pay for Doctor Parker, whom he owed from nearly six months ago, plus other arrears. Even worse – and more fool her – he'd needed a wedding present and she'd let him take one of her own wood cuts because he had no money. She always threatened never to do it again but the long face made her relent, time after time. Perhaps this was a major source of her frustration.²⁷

Or was it because, to borrow an old phrase, man proposes and Geo disposes? When planning a run down to Dee Why one Sunday to look at some land in company with George and Edgar, she was pressed by Lillias Strang, whom George was giving an increasing amount of attention, to come and take afternoon tea with her family. So a round trip was agreed, before getting home for tea.

But after they arrived Lillias mildly suggested they should try and find enough meat so they could also take tea together. 'It would save you the pain of making your own,' she added brightly.

'No, thank you dear, we need to be getting back,' said Millicent quickly, knowing the Strangs always attended evening church. But then up spoke George with a hearty 'yes', and they couldn't then escape. He then proceeded to smoke like a chimney all afternoon and evening in the drawing room, and an old aunt eventually had to flee and light a fire elsewhere. And finally, after a dainty tea, which was, for George, an enormous dinner and Edgar a sandwich, Mrs Strang took Millicent's arm and said: 'Now, let us have some hymns!' It was intensely languorous and dull. The girls pleaded sore throats and the three visitors sang hymns for at least an hour. Finally, Millicent concocted some lies and herself fled at the earliest opportunity to the relief, she was sure, of everyone except George.

'Poor Mrs Strang will never get the smoke and ashes out of her drawing room and probably spent the night in prayer,' she wrote to Jack. 'Geo is apparently incapable of imagining the feelings of any other person but himself. The puzzle is how he manages to hustle and bustle Edgar into doing anything he tells him ... it's a study of the power of the tongue. Goodness I was fed up with him spoiling a

quiet tea and chance to get ready for Monday – singing hymns!! Mrs Strang and Geo did all the arranging: “Shall we have some more verses?” (Mrs S) “Yes, Mrs Strang, this is a bonzer hymn ”(lying Geo) – and so on.’²⁸

Not long after, with the worry more fatiguing than the activity required in the shop, Millicent took the chance, for the first time in months, to get up to Killara for some golf with Edgar when Bowen agreed to stand in during the school break. It was wonderful to get out and away from the shop, which also smelled due to its bad ventilation, and she thoroughly enjoyed herself.

Edgar talked about flying and Millicent realised just how much she’d missed it.

‘What about taking me for a flip if I come out ahead today?’ she said playfully.

‘Certainly!’ was the reply. Edgar was always up for a game but, as they played on, he added: ‘It’s a shame you can’t go by yourself. You like it more than anyone I can think of, and nothing upsets you in the air.’

‘Of course not. Why would it?’

Edgar laughed. ‘It does for plenty of people!’

‘There aren’t any women who fly. Are there?’

‘No. Still ... the Aero Club is growing. There are already women flyers in England and in America. It must come. Have you ever thought of asking the instructor?’

‘Who is it? I don’t think Kingsford Smith would be bothered with *me*.’ She smiled ironically, as did Edgar.

‘No, it’s actually Leggatt. Very experienced man, very good. Maybe I could enquire.’

This seemed to inspire Millicent’s play and, while Edgar finished in good humour, he was left muttering about his handicap. If it wasn’t the thought of flying, the fresh air and sunshine lifted Millicent’s spirits. The upshot was she finished by proposing Edgar and her sons as members of the Club, even though it

might be three years before they got in and would cost seven guineas when they did.²⁹

But the very next day brought her down to earth hard. Crashing down, in fact. Some little time after they had returned to the shop, closed up and left for home, fire broke out in the Boomerang Tea Rooms upstairs. As the *Herald* reported the next day, despite Hosking Place being in one of the city's fire danger areas, with difficult access, the fireman arrived early enough to control the outbreak.³⁰ The fire had not extended past the tea rooms and the building was saved by ample water being applied to the source. In the process, however, the flood made its way down and, less than three weeks after opening, Chesterfield Men's Mercery was inundated.

NOTES

¹ Paraphrased and slightly modified from description in MMB to JHB, 29 December 1925, and MMB to JHB, 26 January 1926.

² MMB to JHB, 29 December 1925.

³ MMB to JHB, 14 December 1925.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ MMB to JHB, 29 December 1925.

⁷ MMB to JHB, 15 January 1926.

⁸ MMB to JHB, 26 of January 1926.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ MMB to JHB, 26 of January 1926.

¹¹ MMB to JHB, 3 February 1926.

¹² MMB to JHB, 8 February 1926.

¹³ MMB to JHB, 3 February 1926.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* MMB misspells the name of the Editor, Delamore MacCay, assuming the more common 'MacKay'.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ MMB to JHB, 14 February 1926.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ MMB to JHB, 21 February 1926.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² MMB to JHB, 2 March 1926.

²³ MMB to JHB, 10 March 1926.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ MMB to JHB, 22 March 1926.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ 'Fire in the City', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 April 1926, 9.

4. THE RACE

Captain Edward Leggatt was clear in his own mind about how the flight would go.

He'd seen more than enough bold, young men – as well as the not so bold, who were trying to escape the terrors of war on the ground, or under it – destroy themselves and their aircraft. The wartime training had been haphazard and rushed, even though it was vital, from his experience of going up for the first time with many new chums to flying, to be sure of how comfortably they sat in the aircraft and how they reacted. Things were different now, but a pilot could still panic if something went wrong or the unexpected happened. Therefore, the first instructional flight was a preliminary one to both introduce and evaluate the pupil and, since completing the instructor's course in the RAAF after the war, he could better see the qualities that showed suitability for pilot training.¹

This morning would be something new, however: the pupil was a woman. While he'd taken plenty of women for flights, this would be the first as a prospective pilot. The only ones he'd heard of were in England, America and France. No woman had done it in Australia before and there were those who questioned why they would do so anyway. It was sometimes uncomfortable and dangerous, and could require not just courage but fearlessness. Besides, there would surely never be work for women as pilots. There were enough men as it was, and to learn was an occupation in itself, which few women had time for.

But these arguments were simply swept away by two facts. One was that women had themselves come forward to learn, encouraged by the enthusiasm of the Aero Club. That had all been on show at the Flying Ball, held only a few weeks ago at the Palais Royal and attended by many lights of both society and the aviation world from the Governor and Lady De Chair down.² The other was the Government's wish to increase flying skills in a nation inspired by the new heroes of the air such as Kingsford Smith, Hinkler, Ulm and others. Here were men of courage and determination pioneering a new age of peaceful expansion that literally put Australia on the map. Hearing of their exploits in the news, people all over the world were drawing ever-longer tracks on charts that

followed the aviators as they crossed continents and oceans. These lines were like strings that drew the countries of the Empire and others in the world closer together, and gave Australia growing status in its affairs. Most importantly, the gains in communications and transport within the continent would be undeniable, and he was certain these would play a crucial part in the nation's future development and economic expansion. This momentum fuelled the challenges and record attempts, the longer and faster flights over new and little-known territories that kept expanding the boundaries of what was possible. One fed the other, and perhaps the Flying Ball was as important as the flights themselves in showing that aviation was not only to be aspired to by war pilots and wealthy sportsmen. Perhaps it would be for everyone, eventually. Hence the loan, by the Department of Defence, of three De Havilland Moths of the latest type to support the development of flying training; one of the machines had even been brought into the Ball and placed by the bandstand.³ The Commonwealth was also offering a bonus of £20 for each member wholly trained by the Club who gained a Private Pilot's Licence, bringing not only more men eager to get their 'wings' but the opportunity for women to join their ranks.⁴ And it would be up to him, as the Club's Chief Instructor, to see that they could do just as well as men; a task in which, considering the easy handling of the new Moths, he felt confident.

Even so, this particular woman was unusual. For a start she was fourteen years his senior, and a widow. She had raised a family. What was she doing, wanting instruction to fly? The question was answered in part when he was introduced to her by Edgar Percival some months back. Taking in Mrs Bryant's diminutive figure, he saw she was neither a matron nor a flapper but a person of considerable will and determination who wanted to master flying for herself. Some evidence for this was her keenness as a motorist. She had not only driven some 35000 miles on her own account but was also willing to effect her own repairs, so she was handy with machinery.⁵ That was a very good start.

He knew there would be many watching with interest, and not just in the Club and the Ministry. The press had got wind of the fact Mrs Bryant would be taking her first lesson that morning, followed, in the afternoon, by Miss Follett, the sister of Frank Follett, Superintendent of Aircraft in the Department of Civil

Aviation. Sure enough, as he turned the corner and came around to the front of the new Aero Club Clubhouse, he could see a couple of reporters and photographers waiting at the door. He barely had time to acknowledge Bryant, who looked relaxed in her woollen golfer despite the excitement, before the questions came. How did he think women could fly? Would they be able to fly as well as a man? Was it safe?

‘They’ll fly as well as a man,’ he said. They’ll take their lessons in stages. A pupil finds that he – or she – has control of the machine, hardly realising how it has happened. You fly before you know you are doing it. Safe and easy,’ he added.⁶

Which it was, if you were well trained and confident. And part of that was ensuring a strong knowledge of the aircraft and its mechanical principles before you even left the ground. So, despite the impatience of the press, he spent perhaps the best part of an hour describing to his pupil how the machine was started, controlled, taxied and stopped, getting her to touch some of the engine parts herself as he explained them.⁷

He then checked she was properly kitted: a leather helmet with a strap and provision for earphones, which he supplied and fitted, goggles with unsplinterable glass and light shoes with rubber soles to feel and move the rudder easily. She eschewed the *Handbook’s* suggestion of overalls, preferring her golf jacket and jodhpurs, but he didn’t blame her for that.⁸ Finally, he helped her into the pilot’s seat of the Moth and adjusted her belt and earphones. ‘Ready to go?’ he asked, as he climbed into the observer’s seat in front of her.

A look of excitement and determination crossed his pupil’s face before she answered, firmly and calmly: ‘Whenever you are!’

Millicent knew the short, fifteen-minute flight was a test of her own ‘air worthiness’ but it was a beautifully clear day⁹ and, having already experienced rolls and the like, she was unconcerned by Captain Leggatt’s less dramatic manoeuvres. It was more exciting to be asked to take the stick for a few minutes and make some turns and climbs before he took back control. But just before he did so, the Moth suddenly lurched and plummeted, as if there was suddenly

nothing holding it up. Her stomach seemed to rush to her throat but she fought the immediate impulse to yank the stick back and risk a stall. Then, equally abruptly, she felt the aircraft lift again and steady: 'air pocket' came the scratchy voice in her earphones. Millicent's heart was racing and she felt the sweat on her forehead underneath the leather cap, but she was determined not to be panicked or allow herself to be perturbed, especially when they got to the ground. And, in a way, the whole experience had the opposite effect, making the forest of chimney stacks at Waterloo and St Peters, rushing towards the aircraft at sixty miles an hour, seem as inconsequential as the gusty wind that chopped across the aerodrome from the heights of Bondi, making the aircraft slip and skid as they came down.¹⁰

However, the incident had been seen clearly from the ground and the reporters rushed to the aircraft as they climbed out. Captain Leggatt told them it was the worst 'bump' he himself had experienced for perhaps six years but Millicent chose not to dwell on it. 'I've been up before, there's nothing to say about it,' she observed. The reporter from the *News* then asked whether she thought taking flying instruction was brave or unusual, and she gave him a more considered response.

'The Aero Club offers the first opportunity for civilians to learn to fly,' she said. 'I have merely taken advantage of that opportunity. Aviation is of profound importance to Australia, and credit is due to the Aero Club for promoting the development of it along practical lines.'

'When are you likely to be taking your next lesson?' he asked.

'Oh, it will probably be a daily session,' she replied with a smile as she placed her cap and goggles in the back of the Citroën and got in to drive back to the city.¹¹

But, after leaving the aerodrome behind, Millicent felt her hands on the wheel shaking with energy and excitement. She could hardly believe she would herself be learning what Edgar and others did so casually and often. Looking back over the last seven months following the Hosking Place fire, it seemed hardly possible. Yet, following that disaster, in which many of the beautiful new shop fittings had been damaged by water draining down into the shop from the fire

hoses that quelled the burning tea rooms upstairs, fortune had shown the other side of her frown. Firstly, the new counters had protected more of the mercery stock than they'd first thought and, though Millicent did not profit, a fair portion of their value was recouped from other merchants who bought the stock at a discount. This reduced by some hundreds of pounds the outright loss, catastrophic though that still seemed. As well, the landlord agreed to terminate the lease, the premises being unfit for use. It may have seemed disastrous, Millicent reflected, but perhaps it was also a quick end to a loss-making venture. On the positive side, Jack had also been able to make a little from the business he brought back with him on the *Orvieto* in June. Most of all, though, the property purchases had progressed – in a few days, she would own adjacent blocks in Vauclose to add to that in Bellevue Hill, and could set to doing something with them. Finally, the strength of the stock market had buoyed the value of her investments, and it was the proceeds from these that provided the £40 or so it would cost in total for her lessons with Captain Leggatt.¹²

As it happened, the weather gods also were kind and, after starting on November 15th, Millicent was able to take eight more training flights before the end of the month. After the first flight, the next was spent on the use of controls in the air during a thirty minute flight, followed by longer and varied length flights in which she learned straight and level flying, turns, slip turns and, of course, landings.¹³

When she came home one day after the second or third flight, she found newspapers all over the table.

'Your picture's in the papers, Mum!' Bowen was busy extracting clippings. 'This one starts: "There is a woman in Sydney who has no nerves. ..."!' ¹⁴

There were other stories, in papers from the *News* to the *Herald*, and friends and family rang to tell her about them during the afternoon and evening. 'Don't worry,' she told Jack. 'It'll die down just as quickly. It'll hardly be of interest to anyone in a few days.'

But it didn't, quite. Anything to do with flying was in the papers, the feats of aviators being very regular copy readily devoured by the public. In December, Dr Earle Page, as Acting Prime Minister, enthused about how a six-day trip by air had enabled him to do the equivalent of three weeks' work, because he'd been able to fly from Melbourne to Broken Hill in only six hours and thence to Mildura, Deniliquin, Cootamundra and Sydney. 'One gets a wonderfully comprehensive view,' he'd said, 'of the enormous extent and resources of the country, which ... impresses one with Australia's possibilities for absorbing people.'¹⁵ And only a few days later Edgar himself, along with George Cutts, set a new record for non-stop flight between Sydney and Brisbane in a De Havilland four-seater.¹⁶ 'Four hours, thirty five minutes: not bad!' Jack said.

As for Millicent, she'd not expected she herself would get so much attention, or that her picture and her story would appear down south, in the cities and out west. 'Oh, they've got nothing else to write about,' she said disdainfully, while privately being rather pleased. It also made the notion that it was a 'race', now that other women were taking instruction, more tangible. She disparaged it thoroughly of course, while flying every day she could.

And it was no chore: just the opposite. Every day increased Millicent's confidence at the controls, and she had no fear of another 'bump' such as had happened on the first day. It was really little different from what might happen on a rough road or a track. You felt what was happening, held on, corrected and kept control, just like you did with a car. The more she flew the more comfortable she felt, as well, because not only was Captain Leggatt a capable instructor but, after the first lesson or two, he gave her almost total control all the time. She hadn't realised it would be like this, but, of course it made sense. She had to be able to do it on her own as soon as possible. They didn't go far from Mascot initially, but it was glorious on occasion to trace the seaward route of the Georges River, flying over boats and fishermen and beaches and the suburban edges of the city before returning. They were vistas she never tired of. She looked forward to flights even further afield, reading after Christmas in the paper about Mr Tyler, an Aero Club member she knew who'd recently flown to

Canberra with two passengers in his Curtiss-Ireland Comet. It had only taken two and a half hours and, with the aircraft getting around fifteen miles per gallon, 'no three persons could make this trip under mechanical power more cheaply,' Mr Tyler boasted.¹⁷ Millicent imagined flying out to 'Pomona', or 'Edithville'; though getting over the Blue Mountains was a serious matter, how much faster it would be than by train or car.

She practised steep turns and gliding with the motor cut, a time when you felt the air current and wind directly. It was at times like that she began to realise the absolute importance of knowing or assessing the landing ground accurately and as quickly as possible. There were times crosswinds lifted a wing at a crucial moment as you neared the ground; how would it be without as wide and well-cleared a landing area as the Mascot Aerodrome? What would it be like landing in a paddock with hidden rabbit holes and tall timber nearby?

The experienced pilots had plenty to say in this regard as they sat with pupils and visitors of any importance around the 'pilots' table, the large, oval, cedar dining table in the Aero Club, where a baked dinner would be served, with dessert, for less than two shillings. Kingsford Smith and other war pilots would often be there, and the stories were usually hair-raising.¹⁸ Millicent wondered how many were exaggerated, but it seemed there was something in most of them. Even since the war, with the better machines, aerodromes, weather reports and training, flying still needed dash and determination, as well as the ability to get out of trouble; and, if that didn't work, the capacity to rise from disaster, like Edgar had had to do. It wasn't yet for everyone, either, but that brought together those who did and those who wanted to try in a very convivial and dynamic group. She knew no doubters or men who were not 'enthusiasts' among the members, or even their wives. Almost all flew for the love of it and paid their own way. Captain Leggatt, the engineer Mr Mitchell, and the Secretary, Mr McConnon, were the only ones receiving a salary.

It was pleasant, when she had the time, to join others on the lawn outside the Club to watch whoever was learning, seeing their achievements and wincing with them at their mistakes. By January, Millicent had gotten to know the two other women pupils, Evelyn Follett and Margaret Reardon, who had followed her

in starting instruction. They were much younger but it was nice to have them to talk to as well as the men.

Things, in fact, now felt less 'lost' than they'd sometimes felt to her in the past year, when the lack of someone close to share life's burdens with had pressed down between Jack's absence, George's selfishness and Ned's passing. 'He', the man who had once been the object of so many feelings, now only rarely shimmered in her dreams. With the mercery business resolved and probate on Ned's will being finalised, the financial stress had also been reduced, but having Jack back was the greatest pleasure. He was such wonderful company, and the experiences of the past year had made him even more charming and more of a man. To have someone to chat to, confide in, and test out plans with, made all the difference. He also understood her need for activity and achievement and it was his active encouragement that, added to Edgar's, had so helped her take the steps toward flying instruction. First it was the possibility, then the money ... then the medical. But when Dr Willcocks, the examiner appointed by the Club, had certified her fit, the remaining barriers seemed to fall away.¹⁹ The time was right.

Millicent had spent lots of time doing circuits and landings in December. She continued this in January, as it consolidated the skills necessary for her to do basic solo flying.²⁰ There were half the hours than in December, though – four hours compared to around eight, partly due to new year 'idleness' and partly due to weather.²¹ As well as blustery days, there had been some of excessive heat. Not only did this affect the glue holding the wing battens, but there was less lift on take-off. However, as the month progressed and her skill and competence increased, there was a buzz around the club: her test for solo flight was closer, and, in the 'race', she was still well ahead of Miss Follett. When a Mrs Marshall became the first woman passenger to cross Australia from Perth in a plane, she was photographed at the beginning of February wishing Millicent luck as she sat in the cockpit before her lesson.²²

As the day, now likely to be in early February, drew closer, she not only flew but re-checked the skills and knowledge she'd acquired against the Aero Club's training syllabus.²³ On this list were:

1. Taxiing and handling of engine.
2. Demonstration of effect of controls with and without engine.
3. Straight flying, level flying, climbing, stalling.
4. Gliding straight.
5. Taking off into wind.
6. Landing into wind and judging distance.
7. Turns up to 45°.
8. Gliding turns.
9. Turns over 45° with and without engine.
10. Elementary instruction in forced landings.
11. Solo.
12. Spinning and recovery.

There were also the lectures in Elementary Aeronautical Engineering conducted by the University of Sydney Extension Board that she had to attend.²⁴ This meant extra trips to the city each week and she found the lecturers variable and the information not always new. However, added to the checking before the flight and Captain Leggatt's experienced advice, she tried to see how it could be put into practice, looking forward to flights even in the most doubtful weather. Once aloft, the world seemed bigger than it did from the ground and one felt like master of all one surveyed.

The months of flying had also coincided with good progress on *terra firma*. Thanks to Jack helping to oversee things, the house in Coolong Road, Vacluse, where they would live, and the one next to it that they would sell, were nearing completion. The land sale had been conditional on houses of at least £300 value being erected and, though theirs were not huge dwellings, they should meet that

specification. By March, they ought to be able to move in and, though she'd now be paying it into the mortgage, Millicent looked forward to saving the rent on Rycroft Hall.

After that ... well, things seemed less sure. Who would be living in it besides her? Bowen was back at school and, whatever happened with exams, this would be his last year. George was seeing an awful lot of Lillias Strang and this, Millicent was beginning to suspect, would lead to something; as with Bowen's progress to the end of his schooling, there even seemed something inevitable about it. But the movement creating the most ambivalent feelings was Jack's. Since his return last June he'd become much more involved in the dairy business, had done courses, built on contacts and agencies, and was already talking about going back to England, perhaps as early as April. There seemed to be real momentum in the business he was developing but, though it would certainly be necessary, part of her wished he wouldn't go. There it was: the spectre of loneliness hiding just over the horizon of her view, visible in absence, audible in silences or when the phone didn't ring. The only remedy was forgetting it, filling the days and having things to look forward to.

She looked out the window, over the choppy water of Shellcove Bay, and wondered if it was too breezy for a fly.

Then, near the middle of January, the date for her solo flight was set down for February 7th, weather permitting.

The week beforehand, Edgar had come around and quizzed Millicent on the various rules and information she had to know. She quizzed him in return, as usual, on a few flying matters. But on this occasion he waved them away, saying 'You know all you need to, and you've done all you need to. It will be perfectly fine. Just remember that you know it, be steady and use your instincts.'

The day, a Monday, dawned calm and she left home not long afterwards. The flight would be early, when the stillest conditions could be expected. She kept looking skyward on the way in, at the clouds and speculating about the possible breezes, so it came as something of a shock when she arrived at the Aero Club to find not merely Captain Leggatt but what amounted almost to a small crowd.

Other pupils and pilots were there, along with the Aero Club President, Captain Hughes, and she realised that he had risen even earlier to come out and witness her flight. But it was the newspapermen present, forming a distinct part of the gathering, that made it especially clear that this was not just an important day for herself. Replying to their greetings, she slipped into the Clubhouse to don and check her helmet and goggles before emerging and escaping to the Moth, which stood ready outside the hangar.

Captain Leggatt greeted her and ran through the flight plan.

'You'll have a flight with me and we'll do the practice as usual,' he said. 'Then you'll go up and do two circuits and landings. Easy.' She smiled, having no questions.

He smiled back. 'Well, let's get on with it!'

She went through the pre-flight checks as usual: the care was routine. Wing battens and struts, control wires, rudder, engine and so on. Then they got in, strapped up and connected the phones. The engine was started, she took the usual observations for wind direction and traffic, checked the revs and stole a glance towards the Clubhouse. The crowd seemed to have swelled slightly but she forced her mind back; this was her only job and her only focus. She took off and they stayed aloft for half an hour or so and did some turns, circuits and a couple of landings. After the second, Captain Leggatt instructed her to bring the plane closer in to the hangar and the Clubhouse. He unstrapped, stepped out and came around beside her. With the engine still going he had to shout.

'All right?' he asked. Millicent nodded vigorously. 'Any questions?'²⁵

She shook her head. 'Fine!' she shouted. He grinned and, stepping back, gave her a little wave. She was now clear to go up on her own.

She did the checks and visual observation of wind direction again, grateful for the routine to follow. She glanced around a final time and advanced the throttle. The Moth moved forward, with no hand on the controls but her own.

The take-off was quicker than usual, and this would have been surprising if Captain Leggatt hadn't reminded her the craft would be lighter without him. It

was also emptier, with his flying cap in front of her conspicuously absent, but instead of fear Millicent felt euphoria. She was fully in control, aloft and flying at her own whim. She felt tempted to do some turns to enjoy the feeling but kept to the circuit, then came down for the first of two landings. It was no different than usual, the nose coming up slightly more easily without the extra weight in front of her, and she touched down, rolled, then took off again for a second circuit. It was delightful, and she felt a deep satisfaction as the Moth responded to her touch. The Mascot suburbs rolled past and the ocean glittered to the east, then, with a purposeful calm, she lined up the approach and brought the Moth down for the final time.

The second landing was as perfect as the first. Only this time, when she brought the aircraft to a halt at the indicated spot and cut the motor, Captain Leggatt jumped onto the wing ahead of the crowding reporters and the other flying men who were offering their congratulations.

'Well done!' he said, genuine excitement breaking through his usual restraint. Then he turned and said over his shoulder to those behind him: 'She's the first!'

NOTES

¹ Service Record of Edward Wilmer Leggatt, series no. A9300, control symbol: Leggatt E. W. National Archives of Australia.

² 'Flying Ball', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 October 1926, 17.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Handbook and List of Members*, Australian Aero Club (New South Wales Section), 1927. MMBLC.

⁵ 'No Nerves', no publication title, hand dated 16 November 1926 n.p. Clipping in Bryant Scrapbook.

⁶ 'Women on Wings Among Us', no publication title, c. 16 November 1926 n.p. Clipping in Bryant Scrapbook.

⁷ 'No Nerves'.

⁸ *Handbook and List of Members*.

⁹ 'Aviation', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 November 1926, 12.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ 'Woman Pupil', no publication title, hand dated 16 November, 1926 n.p., section 'News'. Clipping in Bryant Scrapbook.

¹² 'First Flights', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 August 1926, 10.

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- ¹³ 'Pilot's Log Book' in Millicent Bryant, *Papers*, 1927. MS 291, National Library of Australia.
- ¹⁴ 'No Nerves'.
- ¹⁵ 'Over the Country,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 November 1926, 10.
- ¹⁶ 'Non-Stop Flight', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 December 1926, 11.
- ¹⁷ 'Pleasure Trip', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 January 1927, 13.
- ¹⁸ Nancy Bird, *My God! It's a Woman* (North Ryde, NSW: Angus & Robertson, 1990), 28.
- ¹⁹ H J McConnon to MMB, 16 August 1926.
- ²⁰ 'Pilot's Log Book'.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² Captioned newspaper photograph, untitled, hand dated 2 February 1927. Clipping in Bryant Scrapbook.
- ²³ *Handbook and List of Members.*
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ 'No Heading', *Evening News*, 7 February 1927 n.p. Clipping in Bryant Scrapbook.

5. THE SPOILS

Legs planted apart, Millicent stood in the middle of an orgy of gardening and stonework. They were desperate to ready the property adjacent to their own house for sale and she'd planted in lobelia, gerberas and a mignonette seed border to fill in.¹ So much had been done over the last couple of months, which had seen them move from Rycroft Hall to the new house in Coolong Road, Vaucluse, but there was still a great deal left to do. She set herself to do it, to fit into the day everything that could be fitted into it. She did not care for spaces, she decided, adding an extra couple of lobelia.

Much of what had been done in the previous months had been due to Jack's additional help and supervision of contractors, but that was now at an end. He'd set sail once again for England, taking with him great hopes for the dairy business that he'd begun to build. Millicent had agreed, in addition to her other tasks and goals, to act as his 'agent' and 'accountant' in Australia, forwarding products, answering enquiries, and sending invoices. She would take this on as well as the building project, knowing that she could count on Bowen to assist with the physical work needed even with his schoolwork, sport and, lately, social life. He'd helped greatly in the garden over the last few days, as well as with painting inside. George, on the other hand, was 'unavailable' most of the time, and his visits home were late at night, if at all. He was now properly smitten, it seemed, with Lillias Strang, and seemed to see her every second day. He hadn't seen Rurie or Janet McDouall since Jack's farewell party, and Millicent wondered whether, were it not for the want of a bed, washing or a meal, it wouldn't have been the same for her.²

These feelings made Jack's departure even more wrenching. He was so capable now, so keen to forge ahead, assisted by good qualities she herself did not possess. His sense of humour especially stood out, but he was generally better with people than she felt herself to be, and he could hide impatience better; he got more out of them and they gave more gladly. The drive to act and achieve, on the other hand, they clearly shared, which was partly why it was so easy to get on together. She thought of his warm, sardonic smile, as if an

amusement was shared just between the two of them, and which he'd thrown to her while going up the gangway onto the ship: it was hers to carry and hold on to while he was away.

His laugh, the one that often followed the smile, was one they'd heard frequently over the last few months in the wake of her solo flight. The consequence of the 'win' had been flurries of newspaper stories, phone calls until late at night and she didn't know what. Bowen had searched out and collected the newspaper clippings, putting them in a scrapbook, and Jack had read the very words she'd spoken on the day of her first solo back to her with tears of laughter in his eyes.

'You've just batted this one straight back to the reporter, Itz! Listen.' He read aloud:

Alighting from the machine as calmly as if she was stepping from a tram, Mrs Bryant was not looking for limelight. 'Why say anything about the flight?' was the question she put to a *News* man. 'Flying is not a new thing, nowadays. There were no thrills, no nose-drives, no nothing. I kept fairly close to earth without any trouble.'³

'The poor man. And what about this:'

It is because of its utilitarian value rather than as an instrument merely for sport, that Mrs Bryant appreciates flying ...

'Is that so, now? It's no fun whatever?' He and Bowen were both laughing.

'No, no, of course not ...' she smiled, and was about to add something from her station at the kitchen stove when Jack read out another comment.

Fear! said Mrs Bryant. I don't know the meaning of the word. I took up aviation as I took up any sporting activities. They are all education and good for one's health. ⁴

This brought even more violent fits. 'But wasn't there more I said in that one?' Millicent finally managed to ask.

'Yes, yes,' Jack said. 'But you sound like he's got you cornered. Listen to this:'

Yes, I play golf. I didn't take to it, as so many do, as the 'refuge of the repressed' but because I like it, as I like so many other sports. Flying is not my only hobby. I have a

host of them. The making of this record did not excite me, except for the moment. I was glad to make it, of course, but, as I am interested in so many things I can't get, from the making of the record any particular reaction. I'm glad that I'm the first Australian woman to fly, of course.

I am especially interested in Australian aviation because I come from the far bush. I believe that aviation will solve the problem of transit where it is needed—in the bush—and will prove a blessing to many people ...

There was hardly a serious conversation to be had after this, and she had to laugh with them at her manner, varying from the disdainful to the defensive but which the newspapers reported with same *gravitas* as the words of the Aero Club president. Captain Hughes, in offering his congratulations to Millicent. 'There is no reason why women should not fly as well as men and I hope others will follow her example,' Captain Hughes had said. 'The solo flight by Mrs Bryant, as our first woman pupil to achieve that distinction, marks yet another practical step in the progress of flying in Australia, where its value cannot be too strongly emphasised.'⁵

The Bulletin was a little different though and, having got photographer May Moore to make another portrait, the story commented on Millicent's 'clear and steady gaze' and how the onlookers had been filled with admiration at her 'cool efficiency'.⁶ Millicent rather liked that. With her fur-lined flying cap making her look like a polar explorer in the closely cropped photograph, she could see an air of romance and excitement appear around her. It began to make sense of the things written about aviators that she hadn't realised before – no wonder the public were excited and wanted to know about them. It made her feel she belonged a little less exclusively to herself and her family and more to a mass of other people she didn't know, but who now knew something of her.

It was still only with Jack that she really cared to share her feelings though, spilling out each week's details, large and small, on the pages of her letters. This now included his business matters, and some of this she did while taking the ferry when she needed to go to the city; rather than driving or walking all the way up the hill for the tram, she only had to walk along Coolong Road and

through to the wharf at Nielsen Park. It was then only twenty minutes or so from there to the Quay. Sometimes she went in with Bowen, or came back with him on the 'school boat', as the 4.14pm ferry going through to Watson's Bay was known.⁷

The trip was a perfect time to catch up on a letter but also to relax and reflect for a few moments, and it was on one such ride shortly after Jack's departure at the end of March, 1927, that she found herself wondering again at the things she'd 'said' in the papers. The clippings they'd collected seemed to show no one person. They were all different. In one she was abrupt and business-like; in another she was begging not to be fussed over the 'trifle' of her record, and for the phone calls to stop.⁸ In yet another she sounded unbearably arrogant, telling the *Sun* reporter how 'I felt quite confident and I usually succeed in anything I try to do ...'⁹

This didn't seem like the person she knew, the one who doubted herself and yearned for loving closeness with someone. It only showed the determined Millicent who put her head down and worked hard to achieve what she wanted and who didn't suffer fools. Except that person didn't sound particularly nice, and she pondered on it most of the way to the Quay.

Several days later, on a similar trip, something emerged from this rumination: she would tell the story of her life. There were the days at 'Edithville', with the river and the flood years; learning to ride, Manly, the War, Arthur and Vere ... or she could write it in fiction, as a yarn, or a novel, with characters drawn from her life. She pulled out a sheet of plain bond and started to jot down some notes about herself, entitling it 'A Life'.¹⁰

But 'A Life' kept getting overtaken by *the* life. The house would not wait, nor would the garden, if they were to sell and make money. As well, though, Millicent had been preoccupied, even up until Jack's departure, with making sure she knew, and could do, what was necessary to pass the flying examination. Having gone solo, on no account did she want to fall at this final hurdle to being granted her licence, so she pored over technical matters, and dipped into recommended books such as Barber's *The Aeroplane Speaks, Practical Flying*, and even the

Royal Air Force Manual.¹¹ This was not only to pick up practical pointers, but also to make sure she had the required knowledge of lights and signals, rules of the air and air traffic, and relevant international air legislation. Copies were hard to get, so she'd had to content herself with the dog-eared copies in the Aero Clubhouse, which were in constant use.

That month, February, she had not merely flown solo but continued instruction, doing more flying than ever.¹² She spent longer at Mascot in order to get more than one lesson per day when conditions were good, continuing on turns, both powered and gliding, solo and dual, approaches, and landings and more landings. Captain Leggatt had also introduced her to the manoeuvre of side-slipping, which was using the rudder in the opposite direction to the bank of the turn. This helped greatly to increase the rate of descent without increasing airspeed, and was essential for slowing the aircraft as you came in to land. It was also a standard approach to landing in a cross-wind, a common enough situation. On one landing practice he'd specifically told her to come in on a shallow descent and showed her that when skimming close over the ground the Moth seemed to stay airborne for longer than expected.

'You're expecting the plane to settle and touch down more quickly than it actually does when you fly just above the ground,' he said. 'That's all right here but you might be in trouble on a short airstrip. Side-slipping both slows you *and* brings the plane down.' This took practice to get exactly right and to be confident in, but was very effective when you did.

As the month went on Millicent began to do figure-of-eights in preparation for the examination. In the test of flying skill she would have to do a series of turns in a figure-of-eight pattern around two buoys or posts 500 metres apart, and flying at an altitude of no more than 200 metres, as the international regulations framed it. She would then have to land, shutting off the engine at touchdown, and bringing the Moth to within 50 metres of a point on the airfield nominated prior to the test.¹³ In this there was certainly competence, though Millicent thought not such great skill or daring. One only had to show one could fly effectively. It was not like barnstorming – not that she'd ever seen anyone fly through a barn.

The other part of the test was flying at altitude and glide landing. Towards the middle of March, Captain Leggatt took her up to 6000 feet, higher than they usually flew, and showed her the approaches for the glide landing. That was a critical part, and as she climbed into the Moth for the test, nearly two weeks later, it was one of the things uppermost in her mind.

The day was a little windy but it wasn't the same as her first solo flight. This was about her broader competence, skill and technical knowledge and how well she used the controls, not whether she was able to take them. But if solo had been the first step, this was the final one that stood between her and the issue of her licence. She felt resolute, waiting on the field, and more sure of herself. So did Captain Leggatt, who'd been happy with her solo glide landings a couple of days earlier. Once the aircraft was ready and she was seated and strapped in, he wished her 'good flying' without further ado, giving her a confident smile as he stepped down from the wing. Having done her checks, and with the engine running, she glanced over to the small group of observers and reporters, and then to where Captain Follett, who was the examiner, was standing a little further away. He nodded, and she advanced the throttle and brought the Moth to the northern end of the aerodrome where she turned and took off into the fresh southerly breeze.

The usual thrill of ascent was tempered by the tasks ahead of her but, feeling the breeze to be only moderate, Millicent relaxed and lined up the first of the markers around which to do the figure-of-eights, making sure she kept below 600 feet. It was a steepish turn in order to come around for the first time, and needed more power from the engine and use of the rudder to maintain height, but once the rhythm of the turns was established it was perfectly straightforward. A wave from the ground indicated the completion of the skill test and that she could now move on to the altitude test, which was to be at least an hour's duration. She circled the Moth higher and higher to reach 6000 feet and, during the hour, flew to several reference points within sight of the aerodrome. She also had time to gaze out to sea over the long stretch of coast north and south of Sydney and, of course, Jack's impending departure had come

to mind. She thought mischievously of what it would be like to surprise him by flying to England. The air races showed it could be done! She imagined flying over the deserts and the oceans, out of sight of land with only the occasional seabird for company, until some new continent appeared, like a low cloud, on the horizon.

But it was first necessary to get her licence and make her landing. After the hour she began to descend, making a circuit over the aerodrome until, at around 4500 feet – the international regulations put it at 1500 metres – and having planned her approach, she cut the engine. Its noise died, to be replaced with the soft rush of the wind and the creak of the wings and struts. Lower and lower she came, when a gust tilted the aircraft and pushed her wide. She gripped the stick hard but, keeping her hands steady, adjusted the approach, her heart beating. Then, with the landing strip in sight, she descended, slide-slipping into the breeze on a path that would bring her to a landing within 150 metres of the spot Captain Follett had marked out. She came lower still but the Moth felt balanced against the small gusts of wind and, with the landing point lined up, she touched down, rolling to a stop barely 50 metres away. Then, once again, people were rushing towards her over the grass and hands were extended to help her out. A voice – several voices – cried out: ‘You’ve won, Mrs Bryant!’¹⁴ Pulling off her flying cap, she beamed heavenwards just as the sun broke through the clouds.

They heard the ‘news’ of her success in a day or two but it was nearly a week before Mr Smyth rang from the Aero Club Office in Hunter Street to say there was a letter from the Department of Defence.¹⁵

‘It’s from Colonel Brinsmead, the Controller of Civil Aviation, Mrs Bryant. He says you passed the necessary tests on the 23rd for a private pilot’s licence. He offers his congratulations ... and he says you are the first lady to have passed those tests in the Commonwealth!’¹⁶ He offered his own congratulations, but as soon as she put down the phone and told the boys, Jack had said, with ironic pride:

‘Well, what now, Itz? Ever upwards?’

That was almost the same day he'd boarded ship, but the answer was already plain, even before the further letter came from the Department of Defence in April issuing Millicent's 'A' licence and enclosing No. 71 in its smart blue booklet with her photo on the inside.¹⁷ His mother was continuing instruction, and was determined to take the advanced course so she could convey passengers.

It turned out, though, that there was to be little more flying for the moment. For one, they'd all been sick with terrible throats and colds since the week leading up to Jack's sailing; then the house and garden that were to be sold still had to be worked on as a priority, and that between bouts of pouring rain. But it was Easter with her mother and father, in the same place at the same time, that left Millicent reeling: the 'worst week on record' was how she later described it to Jack.¹⁸

She'd suggested Georgiana and Edmund both come and see their new home, thinking blithely that this might be an opportunity for a *rapprochement* of sorts. Even if she'd been more realistic, she'd have found her mother's behaviour gruelling, but she hadn't anticipated it, hadn't really entered into her mother feelings on the subject of her father living elsewhere and in circumstances that no-one in the family cared to discuss. It hadn't crossed her mind that, after eight years or so, her mother had still not come to terms with a situation which simply had to be accepted, just as it had to be with Ned and herself.

Georgiana, it transpired, took an entirely different view, and the week left Millicent feeling barely lucid, almost incapable of speech or thought. It seemed hardly possible that any living soul could be so horrid and selfish and hopeless, let alone her own mother. Her father, of course, had a charming time too, his cheerfulness helping to keep things just above board. Unfortunately, Georgiana also had Millicent's own room, requiring her daughter and Bowen to share the maid's quarters. This made it impossible at times to get bits of wanted clothing, and her mother never seemed to care a damn if her daughter was dressed or standing virtually naked waiting to be allowed, grudgingly, to rush to a drawer to obtain the necessary articles. Easter Sunday dinner was almost unendurable, with the good food barely seeming to taste. It was followed by Georgiana retiring

in a huff, for Lord knew what reason, and, in consequence, Millicent was again shut off from her personal 'supply'. On top of it all, she was expected to bring tea and toast in to her mother by seven o'clock each morning, only to be compared to the housekeeper's husband at 'Apsley': ' 'Arry is the laziest, may I ever say,' Georgiana scolded, 'but he has one good point: he always brings me my tea at 5.30am!'¹⁹

After these 'festivities', Jack's dairy business, with shipments, payments and invoices for the discs and couplets he had now started supplying, looked easy, though it was now requiring considerable attention and time. Consequently, it was nearly a month before Millicent managed another flight. This had been prompted by Bowen's excitement about the Greater Public Schools regatta, the 'Head of the River', a day which loomed large for the top Sydney boys' schools. It ended in an aching close loss for the Sydney Grammar VIII but, from Millicent's own side, it brought back the thrill and exhilaration she'd so missed in the past month. Once more, she was able to soar above the troubles of the world or, at least, above those on the ground and river levels. She took off from Mascot with Captain Leggatt at 3.50pm with the aerodrome's landing areas seeming almost under water.²⁰ It was still drizzling and the visibility was bad, but she made a bee line for the Parramatta River at Gladesville entirely on her own judgement, not having seen a map of any kind, and came out of the low cloud exactly over Cabarita Park. The crowd on every available spot was enormous, and there seemed to be thousands of cars. The eights were just taking up their positions, the oarsmen manoeuvring the long shells awkwardly as the Moth flew over the starting line. Millicent had come in at 1200 feet but, by dropping a few hundred feet, they could make out the positions. Captain Leggatt offered to take over, so Millicent was able to hang out and gaze while he flew in wide circles. The lanes were only announced in the official program, so it was a puzzle to work out which was which, as both the favourites wore dark colours; she eventually decided that the black and gold of Grammar were in lane one and their main rivals in four. This was unfortunate, as the word was that the race couldn't be won from that lane, and the wins in the Wednesday events had all gone to crews in lanes three and four. But it was a wonderful view all the same, and she could

see the various movements perfectly and follow each one. Sydney High and Grammar were always almost level but, very gradually, the Grammar crew seemed to feel the lack of the slight tidal help available in middle of the river and fell back foot by foot. Though the Shore crew was also neck and neck for more than half the race, they too fell back, obviously spent, while Kings kept going to get the third place. Captain Leggatt circled around until the flags seemed to correspond to what would have been Bowen's worst fears, whereupon Millicent took back control and they turned towards Mascot. Patches of low cloud were worrying but, again making her best judgment, they came out of it just a little on the Sydney side of the airport. The breeze was up to 35 knots they later found out, but Millicent put the plane down without difficulty and they didn't get wet, except when picking their way through puddles and wet grass after alighting from the Moth. As they came in, Kingsford Smith was just leaving to take a spare prop to the *Sun* newspaper's plane, which had broken one that morning at Menangle; however there was no word from them by a quarter to five and, when Millicent left, the mechanic was debating whether to set out lights.²¹

Lillias Strang and her family were beginning to take more of her attention, however, just as they were taking George's: their affair was beginning to proceed with some speed. George went up to Wahroonga at the end of the week and stayed a number of days. When he returned she heard that they had bought some land there and seemed to be proposing to build *at once*.²² Despite this, the date for the wedding had still not been fixed and it seemed to be out of Millicent's hands anyway. She was consulted rarely and received only sporadic news; the engagement itself had rushed past without ceremony. Truly, George was busy establishing his own life and his own household independently of her and this made a kind of simple sense. Yet he was doing it without much feeling for his own family and for her in particular. It hurt, but there was little to say about it any more and, anyway, George seemed not hear.

Finally, though, the house was finished and ready for sale: hopefully it would bring £6000, and soon.²³ While she didn't exactly celebrate this progress with a

fly, she had a dual lesson on the new Mark II Moth – it was only available for solo use if pilots had passed the advanced course – and she looped and spun and stalled turns. She found it wonderful after the older models she was used to, hopping about as lively as a butterfly rather than a moth.²⁴

There were also flights further afield now as part of the Advanced Course and, at the beginning of July, Captain Leggatt had her fly out to Richmond. ‘I was given a small map while the engine was warming up – just an ordinary small sort of railway thing, about 3 inches to Richmond size,’ she wrote in her first July letter to Jack.²⁵ ‘Capt. Leggatt just said to fly, land and he would not make any remark unless something was very wrong. We climbed to 3000 ft. and I saw at a glance my points and managed a bee line, picked out the aerodrome and landed – quite simple after all. Coming home we had some forced landing practice.’

This felt like good progress, as flying to more distant places enthused Millicent all over again for its possibilities. She remembered recently receiving a copy of the *Country Life and Stock and Station Journal*, which had published an article about her in June.²⁶ In it, she’d said to the writer that flying was ‘just as easy as riding a horse,’ and, in fact, could best be compared to that form of exercise. Thus, being able to ride well meant that bushwomen would make better pilots than city bred girls. She had been immodest, though, in breezily talking of riding through the air at a hundred miles per hour because that was still a rare event. But she stuck to the thought that planes would be as common as cars in twenty years, and that bushwomen with the means would see how flying could cut out distance and thus be unable to resist its fascination.²⁷

She herself was now up to around twenty-one hours solo and, as well as climbing turns, side-slipping, taking off and landing across the wind, simple aerobatics, and flying and turning at low altitude, the Advanced Course included cross-country flights of eighty miles solo. She ought to get through all that soon now, though she’d probably been too brief with her answers in the recent examination on the aeronautical lectures.²⁸ They wouldn’t know for a month or so but, despite the financing difficulties, she was impatient to get a machine of her own. Edgar had taken up the A. V. Roe agency, so maybe there was a possibility. They generally had some golf on Sundays and he seemed a bit

restless; not being able to fasten on to any real job was really at the bottom of it. Hearing that Kingsford Smith had flown around Australia in eleven days in the Bristol didn't help much either. At the other end of the scale, poor little Miss Follett hoped to have her test at the weekend, but had just put a machine on its nose in the mud and broken the propellor.²⁹

Flying kept her mind on things other than just her own family. Though she shared Bowen's struggles and successes, there was bitterness in telling Jack that she had no idea what George was doing 'nor where he was nor any of his plans.' This seemed to reflect on herself somehow, and she couldn't help feeling the fault to be her own; reason might make the case much more even but it didn't stop the doubt nagging. And if there was a way, other than sheer activity, of dealing with these feelings and the sense of guilt and need all rolled together, Millicent didn't see it.

She was tearing off to golf more and more often, whether it was at Moore Park or Killara. It felt rushed, even strained at times, but golf, flying and bridge gave her thoughts less space and caught her up in their own whirl of society. She could, for example, find great satisfaction at doing 47 for 9 holes, even having a 5 at a 3 bogey hole, a day after playing at Moore Park in aid of girls' playgrounds.³⁰ Then there was a night at 'Pompadour' with a party of six before taking for a fly, with Captain Leggatt, the goalkeeper of the visiting English hockey team who, Millicent observed, had little to do because her team always won games 20 to 50 to nil and the only goal keeper working was on the Australian side. In the same week, there was another woman aviator from a Lancashire Club, Miss Brown, whose family made cigarettes or something. Anyhow, they had money and, at Mr Broadsmith's request, Millicent took her to Mascot for a tea party and a fly. Afterwards they drank cocktails, before dining together at the Wentworth, where the visitors were staying. The next evening she took Miss Brown, along with her parents, fiancé Mr Adams, Bowen, Edgar and Mr Broadsmith to see 'Cradle Snatchers', followed by supper at the Australia and then more wine back at the Wentworth.

While she did enjoy herself and the frenetic activity countered, for a while, the feeling of being on the outside of things, she got even more pleasure to arrive home one day to find a parcel containing a little pencil from Jack. 'I'll put it on a long narrow ribbon and hang round my neck for golf use: it will make its debut tomorrow when I'm playing at Moore Park in an open event,' she wrote in thanks.³¹

She also confided Edgar's plans. Despite an offer from Royal & Co. to go to the gold fields at £30 week, he didn't want to be away from Sydney because he was expecting to have delivered an Avro Avian with the Genert engine. With this he planned to fly, alone and non-stop, to New Zealand. It was a secret of course, especially as one or two others were enquiring about Avians for seemingly the same purpose, and Edgar naturally wanted to get in as soon as possible. He was disappointed, though, when a cable came from A. V. Roe saying that they couldn't ship for some four to five weeks because no engine was available. This made the time near Christmas, and Kingsford Smith and Co. might try some stunt from Tasmania, or somewhere not so far, in their Bristol. And they'd deserve credit if they did.

With one thing and another, she hardly flew in three weeks. In that time, however, Evelyn Follett was through for her licence and possibly Miss Reardon, who was having the test when Millicent was out at Mascot with Miss Brown and making a fearful hash of it: two goes, and then she had to try again on Tuesday.³² However, having put herself on Edgar's list of interested buyers for Avro Avians, Millicent found herself wishing the same thing he was: that 'those beastly Avian people would do something about a plane for me! Someone else will be doing some distance flights and I'll be left lamenting,' she wrote to Jack.³³

In the meantime, the Flying Ball, now one of Sydney's gala events, was approaching. Millicent had been asked to help sell tickets, and managed to do very well, but after it was all done no invitation for herself was in the offing. She felt forgotten, and depressed. It was a small thing and she needn't expect more, but still the feeling was there. Then, by chance, an agent for Locomobile who had called her the week before and offered her a new car at a large discount 'because

we want to have the distinction of supplying you with a car', called again, and this time she decided to accept. The Citroën was almost rattled to pieces in any case. It would be a sedan, dark blue, but Millicent's signature on this contract meant that, even while she continued with the Advanced Course, flying whenever she could, an Avian temporarily fell from the sky of her dreams.³⁴

This seemed, somehow, to link together a chain of woes. For one, the house remained obstinately unsold. Perhaps it was because the bush was suffering drought and the summer outlook was bad. Or it could have been because Lang's government were increasing the price of everything: bus fares were going up, the ferries were at it and also the railways. But all this paled when Bowen was brought home from St. Vincent's Hospital after being bashed in the face and sustaining rib injuries during a football match. He was in a semi-comatose condition all the next day, his face badly swollen and his head aching. He was almost vomiting. Millicent put iodine and wet bandages around his head and throat, which was also sore, but his breathing was bad and through the mouth only, of course. He could only take broth and a little milk, then some baked custard the next day, though he was, thankfully, more coherent and restful by that evening. It took him a couple of weeks to mend but it was as if, early on in that time, the injury had turned into a malaise that Millicent herself caught as winter wore on. Even writing to Jack seemed not to lift the heaviness she felt, exacerbated by colds that persisted into August. 'Two letters from you today, so very glad to get news & seemingly such good news,' she wrote, on hearing about his business developments. 'I shall look forward to hearing your plans in a week or two. I feel too depressed to write much now.'³⁵

Little had changed by her next letter, but following the promise of better weather after a westerly gale, Millicent forced herself to go out to Mascot, hoping a flight would buck her up.³⁶ She met Edgar and found he was equally down, with a planned New Guinea venture coming to nothing: he'd tried for too many concessions and lost the throw of the dice.

'It's a blow. I was hoping to get rid of the old bus, engine and spares at a good figure and be done with it,' he said, sounding in the depths of a world that was

dark indeed. Yet Millicent wondered if it might not work out for the best by forcing him to take an interest in other work.³⁷

‘What about more film flying perhaps?’ she asked him. ‘What about the film you did with Arthur Shirley which came out the last year?’

‘*The Sealed Room*?³⁸ Poor reviews, I’m afraid. I think Shirley’s going to England. Perhaps I should too.’

That wasn’t an option for Millicent. Only action was, doing something. Or anything. It seemed to be the only way she knew. From recent experience that meant getting out, so, despite feeling unwell and lethargic, she struggled into the city and got tickets upstairs for ‘The Ringer’ mystery play with Maurice Muscovitch in the lead role. The Campbells, Ida, Pat and Maj Carey came but the blues persisted: though the show itself was quite good, Millicent wanted someone to bring *her* in a car and pick *her* up for once, instead of always doing it for other people. The Campbells just counted on it and never seemed to think of a petrol fill up, though they’d been saved many shillings in transport. So, after that, Bowen and she agreed they would cut it out forthwith.³⁹

But there was also her treatment by George and Lillias. Triumphant procession seemed to have completely put Lillias off her old self, or perhaps it was just that Millicent had served her purpose and was no longer required as a possible ally. She wouldn’t be sat on and snubbed into oblivion by them anymore, she decided, yet being sick, or the lack of activity resulting from it, seemed to allow feelings that were normally swept aside to creep out onto the landscape.⁴⁰ She felt so utterly hopeless, the days and hours passed in a meaningless haze and everything was heaviness and misery. She couldn’t heave herself out of it; when she almost began to feel able to face things, some setback came. The utter loneliness was impossible, the sense of always looking on, with George always managing to press home any pain that might arise.⁴¹

She thought of how Ida was buying a car as well, an Oldsmobile coach, and wrote to Jack that ‘she will enjoy the car and feels, as I do, a bit pushed on one side and out of it sometimes. Our own generation have their husbands and the younger their interests so we must make ours.’⁴²

By the middle of August the illness, at least, had turned the corner, and getting back outside and onto the golf course helped Millicent's outlook. She took Bowen along to make his debut, having forbidden him to risk his recovery by playing in the last rugby match of the season. Though she had also, out of sheer determination, struggled through a number of flying lessons over the previous two or three weeks, she suddenly realised again how much she liked it and had missed it; she was having some good flights and making, if she said so herself, some picture landings. Unfortunately, the mandatory Aero Club lectures were still no better than before. When three speakers from the British Air Mission lectured to air-interested people she found Group Captain Fellowes, lean and middle aged, most interesting; the other two young johnnies, well set up and plump, were the worst she had ever heard, droning on in monotones until half the audience was asleep and the rest gone: Millicent had never heard an audience of weight and respectability shuffle so, then steal out in twos and threes.⁴³

Here and there, the year seemed to be one of progress, but almost the same number of setbacks. It had seen some improvement in her financial situation but, on the other hand, the house remained unsold, and Millicent realised she didn't dare get the new car until then. George had no money either, so it was particularly galling when, after he found his own car stripped of tools and battery one morning and took hers to keep an important appointment, he left it standing with only the broken handbrake on.⁴⁴ The result was that it ran back and crushed the rear back mudguard badly. She simply couldn't do without it for the ten days or so it would take to fix. 'How I do respect knowalls who are above taking simple precautions?' she complained to Jack. 'He knew so well the condition of the brakes and was too inconsiderate to care a hang.'⁴⁵

And neither had he cared to consult her about clothes for his wedding, which was looking like it would take place in late October. She had no idea what he intended: he seemed to her a bit mad. However, he'd evidently taken Lillias up to 'Kanimbla' for a weekend, probably for the purpose of enlisting Grandpa's

sympathy and help for house building. In their absence, Mrs Strang invited Millicent up for golf on Saturday afternoon and to stay to tea.⁴⁶ There was no escape, and the prospect seemed to give her impetus to put in two tremendous days of activity in the garden. She put in fifty-six plants down the side of the ramp, twenty-eight lantana and a rock between each. Stone and bed were done right to corner of the house at the back, with steps set in concrete, and the project culminated with her wheeling fifteen barrow loads of sand to the back for levelling purposes on Monday morning.⁴⁷

Predictably, this came at the cost of feeling a wreck for the next day or two, but Millicent managed to fly well enough later that week in the special lessons on spinning and side-slipping landing. It was then that she learned that the Advanced Course had been 'tightened up' greatly, probably to reduce accidents. The Club continued to have various 'break ups', all by men, about one a week; on the previous Thursday, someone had even taken off into a bunch of barriers stacked on the aerodrome.⁴⁸

Though flying was the greater challenge, Millicent found, in golf, a civilised but intriguing test, and her game seemed to be improving along with her flying: the next week, playing with Bowen and Elwyn, she broke 100 for the first time.⁴⁹ Fortunately, playing also afforded her the chance for a rare catchup with George, who she saw at Killara the following Sunday with Jack Charley. It was then she learned the wedding was to be an evening affair in the Presbyterian Church at Wahroonga. Lillias, who was also there on the short course with Mrs Jack, had already shown Millicent the plans for their house one day at afternoon tea, telling her prospective mother-in-law that they'd paid £625 for land but were about eighty or a hundred pounds short of the building cost.

'I think to offer them the round £100, payable at least at, or near completion,' Millicent confided to Jack. 'Surely this house will be sold then and it will save any further worry over the present I can't imagine giving either of them a chosen present that they wouldn't dislike, or find unsuitable at least. Lillias said she had just received a cheque from Scotch relatives for £250 to buy a piece of furniture

– or what they liked! But they don't seem to want to use any of that for the house. They seem to be at balls and parties six or so days a week.⁵⁰

It wasn't until a little later that month that she could tell him George and Lillias' wedding date was settled: they were to be married on October 27th, 1927. She didn't know any other details but supposed Edgar would be Best Man. She hadn't actually seen him for a while, even at the Aero Club Annual Meeting where she was presented with her flying certificate.⁵¹ The applause from the members, led by Captain Hughes and Captain Leggatt, had been gratifying, and perhaps the recognition added something to her own efforts because her flying was continuing to become more skilled and confident: after demonstrating spins in dual flying she was told she was free to do them solo when she liked. All this cheered her, finally, especially after hearing she'd passed some of the Advanced Course tests – side-slipping landings and figure eights – the previous week.⁵²

There was, of course, a corresponding setback. Millicent had left a suitcase and her flying gear, goggles and her big overcoat, in the car in Hamilton Street in the city, not far from the GPO. After posting letters and doing odd jobs, she returned to find the car empty, all her flying kit gone. She was upset and went to the police detective's office but they held out no hope; it was an awful loss.⁵³

Wanting badly to fly the following week, she managed to borrow and replace some of the items. However, it was windy and gusty at home as she waited to hear from Mascot: sort of easterly, she fancied, as she saw spray come over the bows of the *Greycliffe* on its way to Watson's Bay. Instead, she and Bowen attended to the Citroën, which was now misfiring. They removed the cylinder head again, after having done the valves a few weeks back, and found water leaking, so got a new head gasket. But after trying that evening, the result was the same: it was still missing. One cylinder oiled up after each 'go', seemingly a different one each time.⁵⁴ The car was thus out of action, and it was just as well she and Bowen had constructed a shelter of tarpaulin and verandah blinds for it to live in when the new car arrived. It led, however, to one of Vauclose's first

efforts at neighbourliness when a sour-visaged dame stuck her neck out of the adjoining house and told Bowen the improvised shelter was an eyesore.⁵⁵

It was only a morning or two after that the Locomobile agent turned up. Serendipitously, he not only procured the new car and registered and insured it, but also brought along a solution to Millicent's financial difficulty. This resulted in her having only to pay £25 up front for the car – a pretty fair offer, she thought.⁵⁶

That was the Saturday before the state election. Mr Bavin seemed to be performing well and Lang had his liabilities, but Millicent could form no idea how things would go. She had not been called on for help this time, and, anyway, her attention was focused on the weather. She wanted to fly, to get past the spinning test, though people were saying the Aero Club was dragging things on with 'dual' flights as they were more of a paying proposition.⁵⁷ She herself felt she'd seen through the Aero Club when she realised they'd helped to persuade the Civil Aviation people that the 'Advanced Course' Certificate plus 25 hours solo flying, a couple of other stiff landing tests plus a cross-country flight of eighty miles, would be a good and sufficient reason for allowing the victim of all that to carry non-paying passengers.

Even that, however, wasn't how it worked. 'For the most part they take jolly fine care one doesn't get the Advanced Course certificate under 30 to 40 hours flying solo and 6 to 10 dual, which all works out infinitely more expensive than 40 hours simple solo!' she harangued Edgar, who could only smile and nod. 'They hang back so gracefully and egg one on from day to day, but who was that fellow who got through the Advanced Course then hit the fence on take-off, neglecting to fully use his perfectly good engine? Goodness, I'm doing solo, spinning and landing now, so surely they can't hang back much longer. I've told them that I'm feeling my way to get on with them is to crash a machine, at which they laughed!'⁵⁸

She had some slight revenge, of a kind, when, at the inaugural Ladies Oaks Race in October, she managed to get around the course, over the city and back in

one of the old machines and come in slightly ahead of the newer Moth. A handicap, she considered, gave you something to aim for.

Jack was planning to leave London and come back, and it was a relief as well as a pleasure to think of him returning. The steamer *Oronsay* was scheduled to leave soon, and to arrive in late November, but it would still be worth writing once or twice more to possibly catch him at Port Said or Fremantle. Most of the news now concerned George and Lillias' wedding which, sadly Jack would miss. She herself was fixing a lunch on Friday week for Hamilton and Enid Matthews to meet Mrs Strang and Lillias, and would be going to the Strang's big house, 'Craignairn', on the corner of Burns and Grosvenor Roads in Wahroonga, for dinner on Tuesday to see the trousseau.

'Bowen is going to give Lillias a copper plate and printed cards but I still have to get an inspiration for something to add to the glory box,' she told Ida. 'There's another £50 which has arrived from British relatives, so the cheques must total a quite big figure now. £400 I know – one £250, my £100 and that 50 and there are sure to be others, so they don't need sympathy!'⁵⁹

Millicent wrote her last letter, which she hoped would still connect with Jack, on October 19th, 1927. That was the Wednesday after the election, and the results, she considered, were excellent. The voters, somewhat to her surprise, had dumped Lang, and Mr Bavin was now sworn in as Premier of New South Wales. At last, here was someone who would do what the State needed if anyone could, and she would write to congratulate him personally.

She boarded the 2pm boat from the city and sat down with a sense of relief. She had taken to sitting inside the saloon, which gave her about twenty minutes worth of quiet writing or thinking space before it reached the Nielsen Park wharf, so she went over the plans for the wedding. It was now only a week away and, with a hundred guests, was going to be a horrible strain, not to mention the question of a hat suitable to wear with gold lace. Something else, however, had shifted. She had scoured the city, determined to reach out and to find really something special to contribute to Lillias' glory box. Eventually she had found it: an yellow, enamel vanity case that was a gorgeous dainty thing, and the sweetest

at any price for £2/17/6. She saw the pleasure on Lillias's face and on George's: 'Beautiful, Mum,' was all he said but in his smile was the warmth of old. She leaned back against the wooden bench, closing her eyes in satisfaction for a few moments against the brightness of the afternoon.⁶⁰

The wedding the following week affected her much more than she expected. Despite George's ways, she had to say he was both determined to get ahead and to marry Lillias, his thrusting impetuosity carrying everything forward. She glanced around the church, less plain than the usual Presbyterian form and more substantial, like the suburb of Wahroonga itself.

What would it be like for them? She thought of her own wedding, her hopes before it and after, the life that had emerged by twists and turns, and all the effort it seemed to take. She would be fifty in January, and maybe ought to feel tired. Yet there was no reason for it, no reason as yet that things should change. The currents of life were beginning to take the boys in their own directions and she felt a pang of sadness, if no longer alarm. George's progress in his own direction, and Jack in his, showed the inevitability of their divergence from her own life. What would it leave her? She winced to think of Georgiana and determined she would continue to *live* in whatever way she could. Within this reverie she heard George firmly say 'I do' and Lillias more softly, and it struck her that this, considered as an affirmation, would suit herself as well. She would eschew doing nothing, and its temptations of ease: she would – she had to – 'do'.

By the time of George and Lillias' departure to Tasmania on their honeymoon, Millicent had decided on the next step of her 'doing'. She couldn't yet go out and break records like Kingsford Smith had done but the chance would come, she felt sure; there were many opportunities for records for a woman, and she was the first in Australia who would be ready to take them.

In the meantime, she would do it by car. Bowen, now he'd finished school, would come with her, and they would drive together across the continent, and back, in time for Jack's return. That ought to be some sort of record. She and Bowen had both frantically pored over maps, organised supplies, food and

clothing and talked about the route, and she'd spent the day in the city making final arrangements. Bowen was organising the packing of the Locomobile and they would leave very soon, perhaps in the next few days.

She stepped on board the *Greycliffe* at No. 1 jetty via the aft gangway, and made her way to her usual spot in the Saloon. The whistle sounded and they pulled slowly away at 4.15pm, a minute or so behind schedule.⁶¹ Three minutes later they had rounded Bennelong Point and were heading for Garden Island, and Millicent felt the sun come through the stern windows. Looking through them, the works around the new bridge were taking shape, framing a liner following down the harbour not far behind them. It was a beautiful afternoon, and as they pulled away from the pontoon at Garden Island, Millicent watched as the soft irregular figures of brown and green swirled softly on the surface of the water. She closed her eyes and relaxed, the rare and delightful feeling of being aloft in the breeze coming over her as she imagined skimming above the water.⁶² Then a cloud, or some sort of shadow blocked the sun but, eyes still shut, she saw herself in her plane lifting above the ocean and into the bright, empty sky.

NOTES

¹ MMB to JHB, 1 April 1927.

² MMB to JHB, 9 April 1927.

³ 'A Triumph for Aero Club Instruction', publication unknown, c. 8 February 1927 n.p. Clipping in Bryant Scrapbook.

⁴ 'Woman Will Soar', publication unknown, c. 8 February 1927 n.p. Clipping in Bryant Scrapbook.

⁵ 'A Triumph for Aero Club Instruction', publication unknown, c. 8 February 1927 n.p. Clipping in Bryant Scrapbook.

⁶ 'No Heading', *The Bulletin*, 24 February 1927 n.p. Clipping in Bryant Scrapbook.

⁷ Brew, *Greycliffe*, 1.

⁸ 'Least Excited of All', publication unknown, hand dated 8 February 1927 n.p. Clipping in Bryant Scrapbook.

⁹ 'Brava', *The Sun*, hand-dated 7 February 1927 n.p. Clipping in Bryant Scrapbook.

¹⁰ 'A Life'. Writing fragment, c.1924-1927.

¹¹ *Handbook and List of Members*.

¹² 'Pilot's Log Book'.

¹³ *Handbook and List of Members*.

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- 14 'No Heading', *Country Life and Stock and Station Journal*, 27 June 1927 n.p. Clipping in Bryant Scrapbook.
- 15 'Aero Club', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 March 1927, 14.
- 16 Controller of Civil Aviation to MMB (Ref. no. AS/3218), 28 March 1927.
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- 37 *Ibid.*
- 38 Edgar Percival interviewed by Karen Foley [sound recording], 29 February 1980. National Library of Australia. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.oh-vn198001> Accessed 13 September 2012.
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- 45 *Ibid.*
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- 47 *Ibid.*
- 48 MMB to JHB, 28 August 1927.
- 49 MMB to JHB, 4 September 1927.
- 50 *Ibid.*
- 51 *Ibid.*
- 52 MMB to JHB, 26 September 1927.
- 53 MMB to JHB, 18 September 1927.
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- 55 MMB to JHB, 18 September 1927.
- 56 MMB to JHB, 4 October 1927.
- 57 *Ibid.*
- 58 'Pilot's Log Book'; MMB to JHB, 11 October 1927.
- 59 MMB to JHB, 11 October 1927.

⁶⁰ MMB to JHB, 19 October 1927.

⁶¹ Brew, *Greycliffe*, 1.

⁶² 'A Flighty Lady', publication title not given, c. July 1927 n.p. Clipping in Bryant Scrapbook.

A Life.

Early hopes & false standards - reading did not help because lacking experience. There was no touchstone whereby to test knowledge gained. Imperious temper - shy reserved & dainty - loving refinements in everything - perhaps overmuch -

Marriage - mistakes - children - despondency, ill health - great desire to "live" & "do" things - planned trips abroad in spite of opposition - built home also on own initiative entirely - (Early realization of future needs for family insurance -) Trip abroad a complete success but it furnished a heart interest wh. lasted for fourteen years & when hope died owing to a marriage ^{this love} coloured every action for the whole of that time & was a daily prayer & a daily ideal. Conduct & action alike being in the light of the ideal set up -

Then death of this hope removes all desire to maintain a home in wh. the loved picture might inhabit - Sale of home or change of life venue - influence of opera or friends - influence of personalities -

— Millicent Bryant, c.1924-27 (MMBLC).

