

Bob Dylan and Me

Chapter 1: Busy Being Born

We were war babies, him and me, cosy in our mother's wombs while the outside world exploded. After centuries of disputes and wars big and small, just twenty years after the so-called Great War and not long after the Great Depression, the Old World was at it again. Not that we greedy little buggers cared; protected from all that was going on in the outside world we grew fast, kicking around in our bubble, just a skin's thickness away from trouble.

Fascist forces were on the move. Germany had signed pacts with Italy and the Soviet Union. Poland was divided between the Soviets and the Nazis. Nazis forces were in Paris. British troops had been evacuated from Dunkirk. The Soviets were in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. Hungary, Romania and Japan had joined the Axis Powers. The Battle of Britain had begun. Rommel was in North Africa. The Old World was in turmoil, even as we were busting to get out of our warm watery world.

It wasn't just the Old World: Australia and New Zealand had already joined Britain in declaring war on Germany. Aussie troops were fighting in Europe, Palestine and other theatres of the ground war. America was 'neutral' but Roosevelt, uncomfortable with his nation's neutral stance, signed Lend-Lease agreements with the Allies. US merchant ships supplying the Allies with much needed supplies were being targeted by German U-boats. American seamen were drowning in the icy waters of the North Atlantic. America and Australia might have been far from the war but it was coming their way.

The places our parents lived in – his in a provincial city on the freezing shores of Lake Superior, mine in a provincial city at the edge of the somewhat warmer Pacific Ocean – had much in common despite being hemispheres apart. Both were places populated by people who'd fled old Europe. Escaping persecution, or simply seeking a better life, they followed in the footsteps of earlier European invaders who'd brought with them cultural prejudices and moral superiorities to inflict on unsuspecting indigenous populations, handing down attitudes of cultural and racial superiority that were, in the end, unsustainable.

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Our forebears came heavy-booted onto soil that had not seen such footprints. In the country into which I was being born Indigenous Australians had few rights, the purity of the white race protected by a 'White Australia Policy' supported by both sides of politics. The country into which he was being born had dealt with its Indigenous peoples through the Indian reservation system. While the US immigration system was more open than Australia's, African Americans were not equal. The country we now call Australia began as a convict jail. The country now called the United States of America grew wealthy on the back of slaves.

These brutal histories impacted on generations and affected the way citizens of those countries viewed the world. Not until after we were born would those old attitudes change. We would be part of that change.

My parents were Brisbane people. My mother, Dorothy Mary, was born at Logan Road, Woolloongabba on 16 February 1916. Her father, Manton Teed Sturgess, was a public servant. Her mother, Annie May, was a Threlfall. The Sturgesses were of English stock, the Threlfalls of Welsh ancestry. My father, Norman Henry Doolan, was born in Hardgrove Road, West End, on 29 April 1917. The Doolans were almost undoubtedly from convict stock. My father's father, Henry Hamilton Doolan, spent time in Brisbane's notorious Boggo Road jail, thereby maintaining the Doolan convict tradition.

On 9 September 1939 my father changed his name to Hamilton by deed poll. A few weeks later, on 14 October 1939, he married my mother in St Andrews Church of England, Lutwyche. My father hadn't just switched names, he'd switched religion. The marriage certificate listed my father's occupation as 'Electric Welder', my mother's as 'Clerk'.

Benjamin and Lybba Edelstein, Lithuanian Jews, left for America in 1902 and settled in Hibbing, Minnesota. With other members of the Edelstein family they operated a chain of Iron Range movie houses. Their daughter Florence married Ben D Stone, owner of a clothing store in Hibbing. The couple had four children, the last a daughter, Beatrice.

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Zigman Zimmerman ran a shoe factory in Odessa. Following the anti-Semitic pogroms of 1905 he escaped to America and ended up in Duluth. Once settled in America he sent for his wife Anna, whose maiden name was Kirghiz and whose family originated from Istanbul. They had a son called Abraham (known to most as Abe). At the age of 16 Abe was hired by Standard Oil as messenger boy and by his early twenties, rose to become a junior supervisor. In 1932 Abe met Beatrice Stone at a New Year's Eve party in Duluth. They married in 1934.

From 1824 to 1842 Brisbane was a convict settlement. After Transportation stopped in 1842 free settlers began arriving. The town grew in fits and starts. By the time I was being born the city's population was roughly 300,000, scattered over the largest municipality in the country. Most were from Anglo-Irish and German stock, although there was a small Russian community. Cantonese Chinese worshipped at the 'Joss House' at Breakfast Creek. Italians and Greeks operated fish and chip shops and greengroceries and there was a scattering of Indian traders. It was a conservative working class town. Nothing much was expected of it and nothing much was delivered from it.

Brisbane's beginnings were brutal. It was where the most troublesome convicts from Sydney were sent. Before the first soldiers and convicts arrived in 1824 Moreton Bay had supported a large and healthy Aboriginal population. By the end of the 19th century there were few survivors. "Of all the blackfellows who were boys when he was a boy there is only one survivor; most of them died off prematurely through drink introduced by the white men..." So wrote Constant Campbell Petrie in her book *Tom Petrie's Reminiscences of Early Queensland*.

It wasn't just Aboriginal people who suffered. The terrible conditions in Brisbane town were captured in a song by an anonymous writer that went, in part:

*One Sunday morning as I went walking
By Brisbane Waters I chanced to stray
I heard a convict his fate bewailing...
I've been a prisoner at Port Macquarie,*

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*At Norfolk Island and Emu Plains,
At Castle Hill and at Toongabbie:
At all those settlements I've worked in chains...
But of all the places of condemnation
And penal stations of New South Wales,
To Moreton Bay I have found no equal;
Excessive tyranny each day prevails...*

No convicts were transported to Duluth but the fate of the Indigenous peoples was just as severe. Long before French traders (Voyageurs) began visiting the area in the 1630s there had been a long pre European human history, beginning with the Paleo-Indian cultures and continuing through the 'Old Copper' people and the woodlanders. Daniel Greysolon Sieur du Lhut (Duluth's namesake) arrived in the area to settle disputes between the Sioux (Dakota) and Chippawa (Ojibwa) peoples. Franz Dietrich Von Ahlen arrived in Hibbing from Hanover in 1856 and took the name Frank Hibbing. By that time native Americans had already been rounded up and placed in reservations. America was, for people like Von Ahlen, a tabula rasa, with few impediments to progress. Frank Hibbing found a rich lode of iron ore and prospered, helping to found the Lake Superior Iron Company and becoming Hibbing's first millionaire.

In 1940 my parents moved south to Newcastle. Like Duluth, Newcastle was a town of shipyards and steel mills. We were being born into a world of iron and steel. Duluth shipped in iron ore dug out of the Iron Range near Hibbing. Newcastle shipped in iron ore from Iron Knob in South Australia. Local coalfields fed the furnaces of both cities. The shipyards were busy (Duluth would build many of the Liberty ships that played a vital role in supplying England with wartime essentials) and surplus iron ore was sent from Duluth's port down the Great Lakes seaway to the far corners of the world, some of it ending up as World War Two Lend Lease ordnance that found its way to Australia. Ships built in Newcastle exported surplus coal to Europe and pig-iron to Japan.

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Duluth prospered. It became a playground for the rich, at one point rivalling Chicago in size. But by the time he was being born the city had stagnated. It was still a productive port and a major part of the American industrial machine but its days as the great summer getaway for the rich were over. The great wealth generated out of the Iron Range had gone into the pockets of businessmen in New York and Chicago. As John Prine would later sing:

*And daddy won't you take me back to Muhlenberg County
Down by the Green River where Paradise lay
Well, I'm sorry my son, but you're too late in asking
Mister Peabody's coal train has hauled it away.*

America drew hard-working men and women from Europe; people seeking freedom and opportunity; people who played their role in developing the world's largest economy. By the time he was being born America was a self-contained country that looked to the future under a swirling star-spangled banner.

Australia had a Union Jack in the corner of its flag and the King of England as its head of State. To most people in the northern hemisphere Australia hardly existed. Australians, well aware of their unimportance, hid their inferiority complexes in sarcasm and a brutal but sometimes childish irony. Like an uncertain child, Australians looked for reassurance back over the equator to 'The Old Country'.

When in 1939 England declared war on Germany Robert Menzies, then Prime Minister, declared that if Britain was at war, so was Australia. But Menzies carried baggage. It was a difficult time for him. Not only was he head of a fractious minority government, he'd previously supported Hitler. In August 1938, as Australia's Attorney-General, Menzies spent several weeks in Nazi Germany and was 'extremely impressed' with the achievements of the New Germany, including the abolition of trades unions, suppression of the right to collective bargaining and outlawing the right to strike. On returning to Australia the following month he unashamedly expressed favorable views of Nazism and the Nazi dictatorship. In October 1938, after five years of escalating

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violence against the Jews and other minorities, scarcely one month before the infamous Kristallnacht, he made a speech in Sydney where he unfavorably contrasted the leadership of then Australian Prime Minister Joseph Lyons (a pacifist) with Hitler. In the same year he earned the epithet 'Pig Iron Bob' as the result of his industrial battle with waterside workers who had refused to load scrap iron for Imperial Japan.

Menzies changed his tune regarding Germany. He was the wartime leader of a small nation of 7 million people that depended on Britain for defense against the looming threat of the powerful Japanese Empire.

American sentiment was generally opposed to involvement in Europe's problems. In 1937 Congress passed a stringent Neutrality Act, despite fears about Hitler's rise. But Roosevelt was worried. In 1939 he rejected the neutrality stance and sought ways to assist Britain and France militarily. At first the President gave only covert support to repeal of the arms embargo provisions of the Neutrality Act, beginning a regular secret correspondence with Winston Churchill discussing ways of supporting Britain (Churchill was to become Prime Minister of Britain in May 1940).

The fall of Paris shocked American opinion and Isolationist sentiment declined. Roosevelt used his personal charisma to build support for intervention, declaring that America should be the 'Arsenal of Democracy'. He openly defied the Neutrality Acts by passing the Destroyers for Bases Agreement, which, in exchange for military base rights in the British Caribbean Islands, gave 50 WWI American destroyers to Britain. Hitler and Mussolini responded by joining with Japan in the Tripartite Pact.

Readers can, of course, source their own facts about this time; I simply give this potted history in order to paint a picture of the larger background to our parents' lives. For Australia the war would result in changing allegiances, forcing a drift away from Britain and the Old World towards America and the Asia Pacific region. For America the war would result in the abandonment of isolationist sentiment and the beginning of what some considered a new form of colonialism.

In reality the war had little direct impact on either of our parents' daily lives. There were jobs to do and homes to keep. Outside of work and home there was fun to be had. Big bands were playing in dance halls throughout the country. Fred Astaire was

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dancing on the big screen. Bing Crosby was crooning over the airwaves. I have a photo of my father in a striped sports coat and flared pants sometime in 1938 or 39. He's dressed like Fred Astaire and even looks like the dancing star. A photo of my mother from the same time could have been of any American beauty. Our parents might have lived on opposite sides of the world but they dressed much the same, listened to the same songs, danced to the same music and saw the same films. The musical score to their lives was swing.

If the war sometimes seemed far away, there was something that my father could never forget: the Great Depression. It left a scar that would never heal. It coloured his political outlook and led to a belief in socialism and involvement in the Union movement and left wing politics. The downside was that for too long my father maintained a rose-coloured view of the Soviet Union (echoing his hero Paul Robeson). He held this misguided view until the very end, until the true and ugly story of the Gulags came out. That was the serious side to my father. But while he worked hard and was serious in his political beliefs he loved a good time. He was, according to my mother, an excellent dancer and, disconcertingly for her, a lady's man!

I only know what I do about Abe and Bette Zimmerman from the abundant literature now available on their future son. It seems Abe Zimmerman felt much the same about the Great Depression as my father, except that his family was from a different background, where real political oppression had been experienced, with sometimes devastating results. His family had fled the Old World seeking a better life. Abe Zimmerman had experienced the Depression but the answer for him was to work hard and not rock the boat. Standard Oil offered security and the chance for advancement.

Our fathers' political and social attitudes would impact on both of us, leading, as we grew, to different forms of revolt. But that was in the future. By early May 1941, with the war well under way and America debating its role, Beatrice Zimmerman was preparing for the birth of her first son. Duluth was getting warmer. The buds were on the vine. The silos on the waterfront were preparing for the coming grain harvest. Long

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trains of ore and coal snaked towards the terminals. Abe Zimmerman went each day to the office at Standard Oil. He had a family to support.

By early November the same year Dorothy Hamilton was preparing for the birth of her first son. Summer was approaching. Storm clouds were building over the western ranges. Coal trains snaked in from the Hunter Valley. Ore ships berthed with supplies from South Australia. Norman Henry Hamilton, twenty-two years of age, went each day to the shipyards and pulled on his welder's mask. He may have felt guilty that some of his mates had gone full-kitted to the various fronts of the war but his skills were needed at home.

Hitler standing on a platform before huge banners of swastikas and eagles, Poland and Holland occupied, England fighting for its life, Japan flexing its muscles... things were about to get nasty closer to home. In the not too distant future Japanese bombs would sink American battleships and fall on Darwin. Scientists in America were busy perfecting a weapon such as the world had never seen. Such was the world into which we were being born.