

## INTRODUCTION: AUNTIE RUBY'S TEA-SET

I was fourteen years old when I realised that I was part of History.

It was July 1957, and we were visiting my Dad's aunt Ruby. On weekend afternoons we kids were sometimes packed into the back seat of the car and taken out visiting. There was a ritual to the start of these drives. Mum used to get us all, including Dad, presentable and out of the house by willpower alone, with hardly a word spoken. As Dad backed the car out of the garage she sat rigid with purpose. Then as the car swung onto the street she would open her handbag and take out an apple and a small knife. She peeled and quartered the apple and divided it amongst us, and as we ate the sweet/tart fruit the tension would dissolve.

Mostly we visited Mum's relatives, or Dad's on his mother's side. Dad had no time for his uncles and aunts on his father's side, but for some reason Ruby was exempt. She lived in Seacliff, then the furthest beachside suburb from Adelaide. Her little cottage was indeed set on a sunny, windy cliff-top high above the bay, but inside the rooms were dark with velvet drapes and crowded with heavy cedar furniture.

Great-Aunt Ruby served us tea in dainty cups that came with matching saucers and plates, patterned with flowers. My sister and I sat awkwardly balancing fruit-cake laden plates on our knees, trying to match our mother's easy poise. Grateful for being treated as an adult, I attempted polite conversation. I asked my great-aunt about the tea and coffee set prominently displayed in her glass-fronted cabinet. It was made of heavy cream coloured china and patterned with black and white etchings, not as pretty as the cups we were using. But it had pride of place in the cabinet.

Ruby was delighted to be asked. The tea set had belonged, she said, to Charles Hall, her grandfather and my great great grandfather. And it had been given to him by Sir John Franklin.

I knew about Sir John Franklin. At school we learnt nothing about the Australian past; History happened in faraway England. The historical novels I borrowed from the Children's Library were as distant from me in place as they were in time. But I had read G.V. Portus's *Australia since*

*1606: A history for young Australians*, and I knew that Sir John Franklin was a famous explorer who had been a governor of Tasmania. And here was a concrete link to that past, that march of events enshrined in the printed word. My family was part of History, and so was I.

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