

CONNIE ELLIS

Constance Ellis was born in London in 1860 and came to Queensland in 1889 because she wanted a job in a new land. Connie was educated at the Turret Lodge school in Kent. She worked as a telephone operator at the London Telephone Exchange. Connie's first job in Australia was as a ladies' companion at Kyabra, more than 1100 km west of Brisbane. There she married the storekeeper, Irish born, Tom Ellis. They travelled widely through the bush in search of work, particularly in the timber industry.

Connie and Tom built a house in Charleville in the 1890s with pine from their property. Connie took one end of the cross-cut saw to fell big trees for the slab walls. They stripped twelve big sheets of bark, each 12ft x 6 ft, which they dried on the ground before hoisting them to form the roof, a mammoth task for two people helped only by a horse and dray and rope. A tent sufficed until the bark was dry. They rescued boards washed down the river in a flood and used them for flooring. This was a luxury for Connie who had become used to dirt floors which she kept clean by pegging down flour bags which could be washed. Their sleeping area was partitioned off and shutters were installed on the window openings. One end of the verandah was partitioned to form a pantry. Flowers and vegetables grew in a small fenced garden.

Finally, Tom became a miner at Mt Morgan in 1899. Four children were born during their travels, and two more in Mt Morgan. Connie taught her eldest son, Malcolm, to read without any suitable educational materials, using newspapers and any adult books which came her way. He wrote on scraps of paper or bark using charcoal from the fire. She encouraged him to display his skills by entertaining workers in the timber camp with songs he made up. Arthur, her second son, was more fortunate. By then, Connie had acquired the *First Century Reader* as his primer. Her educational style was informal. The children 'just followed me around and asked questions and I would stop long enough to show them what they wanted'.

Education became more formal when the family moved to Mt Morgan. Malcolm and Arthur won scholarships to the Brisbane Grammar School, and Pierce to the Queensland Agricultural College at Lawes, near Gatton.

Connie's daughter, Winifred, became interested in politics and worked for several Country Party members of parliament. Three of Connie's sons, Malcolm, Arthur and Pierce, became journalists. Ulrich, Connie's youngest son, became political secretary to Sir Earle Page, leader of the Australian Country Party, and later wrote the first history of the Country Party. He was also an ardent advocate of the New South Wales new states movement. Arthur became secretary to the Queensland Premier, T J Ryan, in 1916 and, in 1917, Malcolm became secretary to the leader of the Opposition, Sir Edward Macartney. Malcolm wrote several well-regarded histories of early Australia and wrote for the *Bulletin* between 1933 and 1965. He was the first person to traverse Australia by car, an experience he recorded in *The long lead*; Arthur Ellis became a financial consultant to the stock-broking firm, J B Were, whose history he wrote. Pierce Ellis was editor of the *Weekly Times*, the country journal of the Melbourne *Herald*.

Connie remained active into her extreme old age. She mowed her lawn with a hand mower when she was 90, and died just before her 100th birthday¹.

¹ C Ellis, *I seek adventure*, Sydney, 1981.