

INSEPARABLE ELEMENTS

Dame Mary Durack

A Daughter's Perspective

by Patsy Millett



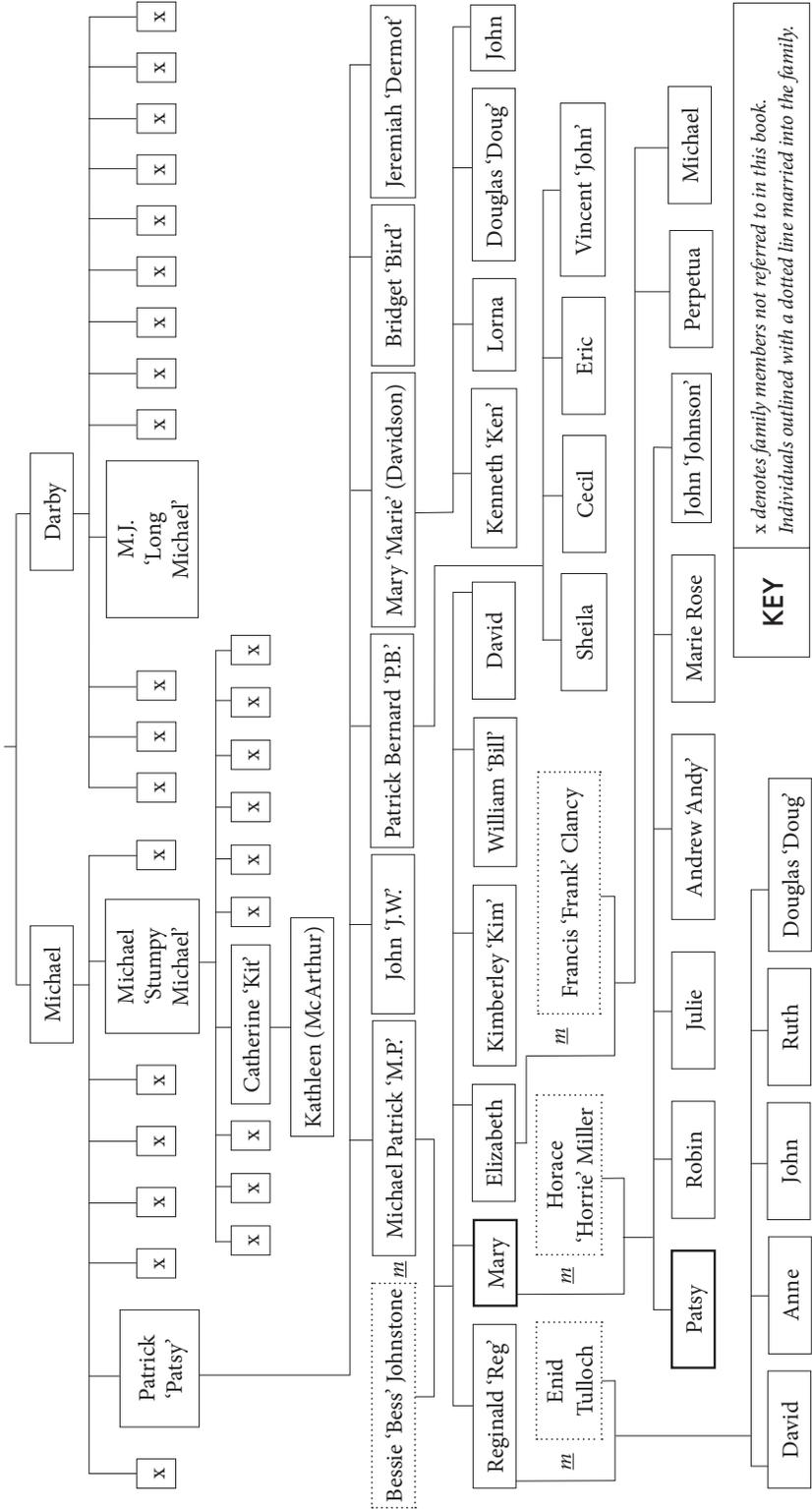
FREMANTLE PRESS

CONTENTS

Selected Durack family tree	6
Abbreviations	8
Preface	9
1 – Mildew (1939–1945)	11
2 – The Wider Circle (1946–1951)	33
3 – Broome (1952)	63
4 – Diversions and Deviations (1953–1956)	88
5 – Back on Track (1957–1960)	119
6 – The Rock and the Sand (1961–1964)	147
7 – ‘A Surfeit of the Fullness of Life’ (1965–1967)	168
Photographs	195
8 – The Coming of the Crows (1968–1969)	221
9 – Cross Threads (1970–1971)	249
10 – ‘Everything that We Belong’ (1972–1974)	273
11 – ‘Can These Be the Same Stars?’ (1975)	306
12 – The Main Job (1976–1977)	327
13 – Grounded (1978–1979)	351
14 – Bent to Burden (1980–1989)	379
15 – Ruffian Forces (1990–1994)	405
Epilogue	430
Conversions	432
Endnotes	433
Index	

SELECTED DURACK FAMILY TREE

Duracks of Ireland





Mary Durack Miller with Patsy, 1940.

ABBREVIATIONS

ABC	Australian Broadcasting Commission (later Australian Broadcasting Corporation)
ACF	Aboriginal Cultural Foundation
AGM	Annual General Meeting
AC	Companion of the Order of Australia
ATF	Aboriginal Theatre Foundation
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
BHP	Broken Hill Proprietary Company
CD&D	Connor Doherty and Durack
CLF	Commonwealth Literary Fund
DBE	Dame Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire
DCA	Department of Civil Aviation
FAW	Fellowship of Australian Writers
PWD	Public Works Department
LISWA	Library and Information Services of Western Australia
MMA	MacRobertson Miller Aviation (later MacRobertson Miller Airlines)
NIDA	National Institute of Dramatic Art
OBE	Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire
RAAF	Royal Australian Air Force
RAF	Royal Air Force
RFDS	Royal Flying Doctor Service
RSL	Returned and Services League
SHOF	Stockman's Hall of Fame

PREFACE

‘Spare me, dear,’ my mother was wont to say in her old age, ‘your analysis of me.’ This plea usually countered one of my lectures on her weakness of will – principally, her inability to say ‘no’. Did she also suspect, fixing me with an anxious eye, the posthumous biography: ‘Mary Durack – A Put-Upon Life’?

‘It’s all in there somewhere,’ she would say with a wave at the stack of journals containing the honest and reliable record of her days, bursting with photographs and other loose material by way of illustration. If not, it would likely be found in family correspondence files going back over seven decades or among those of exchanges with intimates and associates.

When contemplating how her story might be handled – as an episodic narrative, a soap opera, a vehicle for a dispassionate examination of her character and working methods, an intermingling of her many parts, principally the inseparable relationships with her sister Elizabeth and husband, Horrie Miller – consideration was given to whether it should be written at all.

Whereas she might not have been entirely averse to the notion of a biography, Mary Durack would have preferred ‘a dear person’ to tackle the task, particularly when it came to the selection of quoted material – someone perhaps like the author Brenda Niall, whom she had never met, but who would write a temperate and Christian summary of her life without offending living sensitivities.¹ Hopefully, such a book would also promote the work of her sister Elizabeth and complement their years of closely linked artistic and literary endeavour.

For the busy writer, regularly filling in the dated space in her diary was time-consuming discipline enough and, believing she had covered the contingency, she was not tempted to set about a formal autobiography.

What emerges here is as much a montage of the main players in her life as a biography of Mary Durack Miller, wherein while taking no more than the role of an extra, I stand at the end to take not a bow but rather the weight of the curtain fall.

CHAPTER 1
MILDEW (1939–1945)

We inherited opposite sides of the Irish coin, my mother and I. Hers belonged to a land of kith and kin, home and hearth, faerie folk and leprechauns. Mine lay with ancient clan wars, battles that rolled among the mountains by winter seas, grudges passed down the generations and the banshee wail. In keeping with a dark endowment, neither the timing nor the circumstances of my birth were auspicious, my mother's joy in her newborn tempered by the effects of a difficult delivery coinciding with the declaration of war and an ongoing rift with her father. Gran, making the best of it, visited the hospital and welcomed her first grandchild with agreeable noises. My grandfather, Michael Patrick Durack (generally referred to as 'M.P'), still deeply pained that his beloved and amenable eldest daughter could have so disregarded his feelings and her own interests, was not to be consoled or won over by the new arrival. Inasmuch as barely nine months had passed since the letter informing him of her ill-advised choice of marriage partner, insult had been added to injury.

Having made up her mind, however unwisely, my mother was determinedly unrepentant. Sympathetic to underdogs, she had not been overly – or sufficiently – discouraged by the likelihood that in taking on Horace (Horrie) Clive Miller, she donned a hairshirt, and, given her steadfast disposition, a permanent one at that. Had she been in need of a companion for a desert island survival scenario, she would have been hard put to find a more ideal candidate for the position. As it was, for the daughter of a distinguished and manifold family to have connected herself to an individual who more or less existed in a vacuum without a single known relative was an act of folly scarcely mitigated by his claim to being 'a self-made man' and the founder of a Western Australian airline. She would spend a lifetime fortifying herself against the consequences.

Horrie had neither the courage nor the class to write to the parents of his prospective in the regular way, although she begged him to send a short note that she would help him compose. M.P. Durack cared not a jot that he was sober, hardworking, healthy, a 'provider' and, with the divorce, unencumbered. H.C. Miller was unsuitable in ways that in earlier

times would have seen M.P. take preventative action, as he had done with his sister Bridget, ensuring her a miserable spinsterhood. Mary was not a daughter to be lightly given away under any circumstances, and here she was, stolen by a man without background or the education to appreciate her talent or share her literary inclination. Restrained from objecting to the non-Catholic aspect on account of his own marriage ‘out of the church’, in a letter to his son Reg he bemoaned her rash action as having sullied the family name.

While also disappointed at her daughter’s decision, Bess Durack had applied feminine intuition to the situation. Her own spouse had initially been frowned on by members of both families: hers because ‘Miguel’ (as she always referred to the man who bore a resemblance to a Spanish don) had been more than twenty years her senior, and his because of her Presbyterian faith. But she knew that unexpected blessings were likely to emerge from the most unlikely unions, and, given time, men generally ‘came round’.

In a desire to firmly claim my place within her family, my mother named me Patsy after her grandfather, the Durack patriarch whose migration from Ireland in 1852 had set the destiny of his lineage upon Australian shores. The artist Beatrice Darbyshire sketched me at eight weeks old, and there I am – pensive and wary. Katharine Susannah Prichard employed her author’s licence to assure the new mother that ‘your little person will be a fulfilment and source of consolation no matter what the Furies have in store.’¹

~

Horrie had bought the double block situated at Bellevue Avenue in the suburb of Nedlands during the early thirties as a good investment. Ever his own man, he would reject his wife’s subsequent hopeful appeals that he consider one of the many available riverfront blocks, his typical reasoning that such sites were ‘too windy’. So it was that a decent distance from wind or water arose a one-storey version of the ubiquitous Californian bungalow designed, for a token fee, by Mary’s architect brother, Bill Durack. There was then little regret felt for the upgrade from the rambling charm of the older style domiciles to modern guttering and plumbing, enduring Brisbane and Wunderlich tiling and narrow cement verandahs. As Gran put it: ‘All very well, “Old World stylishness”, but the upkeep, dear – the upkeep.’ M.P. and Bess, in company with their old retainer, Nurse Stevens, lived in Goderich Street, a short walk from their former home at 263 Adelaide Terrace, where the Durack children had spent their childhood. The elegant city mansion lost to a downturn in the cattle industry, Gran never passed her former

abode without memories and nostalgia but not real sorrow, as, from her practical viewpoint, it had served its term.

Beyond the Millers' ever-open green gate, paving slabs provided safe transit through a sandy wasteland to brick steps and the flywired, wrought-iron door with the letter 'M' at its centre, standing before the front door proper, sturdy and ripple-glassed. A number of features of the day were incorporated: porthole windows, Swiss-style shutters, brick window boxes, swing doors and a lounge-room ceiling sculptured like a wedding cake. 'Breakfast nooks' were a popular innovation and a section of the kitchen was allotted for this purpose. A passageway served as the spine of the house and, branching off, four modest bedrooms and one large, chilly bathroom tiled in hygienic green and cream. A three-seater couch and two chairs were installed in the lounge room, representing Horrie's idea of the maximum number who might at any one time be decently entertained. Notably absent from any display surface were wedding photos, since the nature of the Miller marriage had precluded conventional mementos or gifts. The back steps led down to a paved courtyard bounded on the far side by the laundry, outdoor toilet and Horrie's garage, which became in later years, as he drifted ever more into an outer zone, his room.

The house sat in the middle of an expanse, much of it never destined to emerge from a straggling wilderness into anything more sylvan or useful. A few grass trees and banksias had been salvaged, but the way was cleared for the planting of poplars, firs, lemon-scented gums and Rottneft pines, an ill-assorted mix of natives and imports, the roots within a few years putting paid to flowerbeds and the plumbing.

A rosebed, according to Gran de rigueur, was duly planted at the front, and Horrie saw to an elaborate reticulation system run by a capricious pump situated at the bottom of a deep well. As I watched him descend the vertical shaft, his feet clanging ever more faintly on the rungs, the courage required to venture into such an underworld seemed to me unimaginable. At the same time, I was seized with guilt at a small but recognisable hope that he would never resurface.

Atop the flat-roofed garage was an open balcony with an iron structure anchored in the centre for fixing and turning Horrie's giant telescope. Astronomy was one of his passing enthusiasms, although I have no memory of the instrument except as a mysterious elongated shape wrapped in green canvas. From this modest height, the river was then in clear view over the low roofs of an area as yet only semi-suburban. Among other long-vanished phenomena were the rising minor note of frogs at night, lions roaring across the river separating us from the Perth Zoo and the accelerating

thrum of the pre-dawn DC3 take-off from the airport – sounds woven into our dreams.

Set for a long cycle of procreation, my mother decorated the nursery with a painted wall mural of themes copied from nursery rhymes and Ida Rentoul Outhwaite fairies and gnomes. Her five siblings at a distance, she particularly missed the confiding and sharing presence of her sister Elizabeth (known to her family as Bet), who was living in the Eastern States with her journalist husband, Frank Clancy, and out of reach except by mail which had gone beyond the moment by the time it arrived. Their lives during the war years largely confined to domesticity, the continued collaboration on children's books and an intense correspondence – a far cry from what could be described as regular exchange – represented a vital escape from the humdrum. So stimulating and cathartic became the frequent to and fro, they began to play around with the idea of a publication in the form of letters going back over a decade, under the title 'The Young Know'.

Incorporating their youth and formative years, they wrote of their time together on the family northern stations, relationship with parents and brothers, trip overseas during the mid-thirties, the war and general observations on the uncertainties and inevitabilities of life. Husbands and children were mentioned merely in passing before getting down to the next instalment of the retrospective journey towards some form of existential insight. As the concept took form and shape, to the disappointment of her sister who had worked hard on the project, Bet's initial over-enthusiasm cooled, with second thoughts about being too open with her inner turmoil and private life in a public domain. The manuscript, a unique journey into two extraordinary minds, was mothballed pending the demise of anyone who might be offended or pass judgement.²

Two girls with four brothers, the sisters were to remain bound to one another in a fashion that defied understandings of 'normal' sibling attachment – an inherency that could only have been maintained by women not destined to be intellectually or emotionally supported by men.

~

Missing the north and lonely during the long marital separations, in August 1941 Mary seized the opportunity to accompany Horrie on a Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS) aircraft delivery to Wyndham. Arranging for an onward journey to the family stations with her infant daughter, she gave her father and brother Reg advance reassurance: 'Patsy is quite tractable, with immense enthusiasm for life, movement and animals, full of cute ways and words.'

I seem to remember a friendly white cockatoo inviting my fingers through the bars of a cage, and the subsequent betrayal of trust. My inconsolability at this incident and overall performance during what my mother intended as an introduction to the Kimberley pastoral empire for the first of the new generation have been embedded in family annals, and my grandfather, no stranger to any number and variety of hair-raising occurrences, was reportedly reduced to a distressed and helpless ‘Oh dearie, dearie dear’. Amusement was what was needed. Thinking it would be a fine entertainment, he carried me down to the yard where the beast selected to supply the station meat ration was about to be dispatched. My mother, hoping for a brief respite, heard the hysterical screams accelerating, until a panting Daisy delivered her stricken charge with the advice, ‘She got’m chore heart b’longta bullock’. Three previous generations of Durack children had been introduced to bloody sights at an early age without suffering sore hearts. Such a to-do was not in the family tradition.

If carried, I became a dead weight or, with bruising force, struggled to be free. If put to ground, evading more wholesome company, I made a beeline for old Lucy, who was awaiting transfer to the leprosarium. On a diversionary walk down by the lagoon, we came upon the aged and near-blind former stockman Tommy.

‘This your piccaninny, missus?’

When he reached a groping hand towards me, my mother, fearful of the endemic disease, instinctively drew me back.

‘I can just see her, missus, like a little shadow.’³

And, considering the way of things, that was all I was ever fated to be upon that vast stretch of land believed then to be a dynastic heritage.

~

My mother retained few happy memories of my infancy. It was difficult not to feel aggrieved at the persistent grizzling that drew attention to her obvious inadequacy as a ‘mummy’, even the title denied her since I addressed her as ‘Mrs Miller’, which amused her enough to let it stand. My father, who was not a father’s bootlace to me, was ‘Horrie’.

My term as a solo prima donna, one perfectly satisfactory as far as I was concerned, was short-lived, and I did not then (or ever) take well to alteration of the status quo that left me, as I saw it, worse off.

Within the minimum possible gestation period, Robin and Julie arrived, presenting my mother with three infants under three. Consequently, a variety of young ‘home helps’ came and went in quick succession. None of them was a treasure, all to a degree inept, unobliging and encumbered

with personal problems. But, in fairness to the girls, even for the sum of three pounds per week, it can't have been a job encouraging long-term commitment or enthusiasm, especially when the stifling conservatism of the small countrified city had been overtaken by the hot winds of wartime romance. With the realisation that the cost of female menials was greater than any service they could render, after six years my mother gave up on the whole idea, preferring instead to make use of relatives and friends willing to step into the breach when necessary. Live-in domestics, so taken for granted by the older generation, were a dying breed. With them went a primary component of conversation and source of complaint among those who considered household staff one of life's imperatives.

Visits from Gran and her live-in companion Nurse Stevens, or 'Snowy', as we were encouraged to call her since her role as midwife and child-carer had become superfluous, now included Grandpa. He had kept up the display of wounded chagrin until Robin's birth, refusing to listen to any news from 'Mildew', as the new domicile was drolly (and with the passing years ever more aptly) dubbed from a combination of the Miller and Durack names. Urged by Bet to apply his journalistic skills to the dilemma, Frank Clancy had written to his father-in-law in a bid to bring a little reason into the situation. Whether it was this or some behind-the-scenes no-nonsense talk from Gran, he came round, as everyone had always known he would. Nevertheless, I note in the few references to me in his journals my name is given inverted commas, as if in his mind I never quite attained legitimacy.

In his seventies, M.P. was still spending up to six months of every year in the north, his single-minded objective to pull station affairs back onto a footing that would pay off the accumulated debts of many decades. The success of these exertions would culminate in the sale of the seven million acre Connor Doherty and Durack (CD&D) estate, a prospect his children fought hard to prevent. He was a very old man, to me, tall and broad of girth, with tickling whiskers and amusing exclamations: 'Great living Scott, in all my born days ...', the outrage ranging from the cost of a pair of his wife's shoes to the threat of wages for Aboriginal employees. Jovially instructing me to hold onto his walking stick, he would swing me up into the air, where I hung between his work-roughened, blue-veined hands in some nervous anticipation of release.

So he proceeded, when in Perth, down the yet unworn Mildew path, once more calling my mother 'Dearie', although he contrived his arrivals for Horrie's departures. While they would eventually come to an uneasy civility, the two were never able to look one another in the eye. Gran, who developed likings for people she considered 'different' or 'comical', got on

well enough with her son-in-law, although she was inclined to address him with the cocked head and jocund tone of voice she adopted for ‘characters’. Horrie, always respectful, called her ‘Mrs Durack’ and Gran never suggested he drop the formality.



When Robin was born, at the sight of her worried face and jaundiced colouring my mother thought her a somewhat unattractive baby. Horrie at once sprang to her defence: ‘She looks like a Miller,’ he said, ‘and in my opinion, she’s by far the prettier of the two.’ So that was that. Horrie seldom deviated from first reactions. Robin, unlike his firstborn, seemed of gentler, more reasonable and possibly more solid stuff.

One name each had been considered by Bess Durack enough for her daughters, but my mother, perhaps to give us more substance, or in a bid for happy continuity, bestowed her eldest daughters with the second names Mary and Elizabeth.⁴ Robin and Julie were apparently names derived from novels she had read prior to the births. Surprisingly, when naming her children, originality was not a priority for my mother.

My two great-aunts, M.P.’s sisters Mary Davidson and Bridget Durack, known respectively as Marie and Bird, left a lasting impression, although both were gone before my tenth birthday. Marie made stately descents on her niece for afternoon tea after protracted advance telephone communication and enquiries as to when Bird intended coming, thereby circumventing any possibility of a one-stone killing. Visiting regularly, they made the most of a time when, in the interests of establishing family acceptance of her dubious marriage, their niece was willing to indulge their foibles and the repetitious recall of bygone days.

Her tall, spare figure attired in a full sallying-forth rig of ankle-length dress, coat, hat and gloves, Aunt Marie’s appearance was wont to provoke terror and inconsolable bellowing from minors. The principal purpose of her call seemed to be to off-load an inexhaustible inventory of trivial detail concerning other family members, friends and friends of friends. It was a matter of general speculation how these facts were ever conveyed to Marie in the first place, since she herself never stopped talking, her monotonous, palsied voice droning on into the afternoon until the rattling of cots and mutinous cacophony from the nursery became impossible to ignore and the narrative was put on pause while nappies were changed, shoes thrust over kicking feet and the menagerie confined to a rug within a playpen.

Bird, who was a ‘maiden lady’, did not avail herself of public transport. In defiance of the modest living allowance settled upon her by her brothers,