

Isabel Michie

Local custom dictated that the baby should be born on the farm where her father worked, near the village of Reston, in Berwickshire, in the Scottish Borders area. However, local custom did not stand a chance when it came to Isabel Skeldon. At 10 pounds, she was a whopper, and therefore required a special welcome at Edinburgh's Royal Infirmary. Serendipity had intervened, as it has done so frequently in the life and times of our Club's warm-hearted Member Liaison Officer.

Custom also decreed that little girls walk to school, one mile away, even over three-foot snow drifts, at the age of five. Dr Spock had not yet overtaken the world of parenting, so Isabel and her sister were strictly brought up with impeccable standards of behaviour. Their school was at Reston and custom also decreed that all students progress to the local secondary school, from which they would be summarily ejected at the age of 15. Young Isabel bucked the trend once more. The family lived much closer to the bus route for another school, so those two little girls managed to be transferred to Berwickshire High School, which had considerably higher standards of tuition, leading inevitably to university education.



Isabel with her partner Nigel Clark

At that school, Isabel came upon her first Australian : a large attractive lady who taught Mathematics with zest and humour, and of course the students nicknamed her "Kangaroo". Another highlight was the student drama competition where Peter O'Toole gave an address on the making of "*Lawrence of Arabia*", displaying hands damaged by camel reins. (O'Toole's fellow actor Omar Sharif is recorded as lamenting that filming in the desert took "18 months with no Bridge.")

During childhood Isabel had sat one day with her mother in the quadrangle of the ancient and majestic Edinburgh University, granted a royal charter by King James VI in 1582 and officially opened in 1583. The little girl had vowed to return as a student, and finally she did. In love by then, with Shakespeare rather than a strapping lad in a kilt, Isabel read for a Master of Arts degree in 1960, blissfully studying English Drama, English Language and British History, along with Moral Philosophy. She joined the Dramatic Society and indulged in her passion for the theatre.

Emerging from academia, she was determined to avoid a career as a schoolteacher and undertook a commerce business course at the Scottish College of Commerce (now the University of Strathclyde) in Glasgow. Friends were in the Voluntary Service Overseas organisation (somewhat similar to the American Peace Corps) and as young Isabel had very itchy feet, she arranged to be interviewed and in a system conducted a bit like a raffle, won a post in Monze - a small town in Northern Rhodesia, near the Victoria Falls.

Shortly after Isabel arrived, the country gained independence and became Zambia. She became a teacher : not of small Scottish infants, but fully grown African agricultural students, who needed to learn English. She and an economics graduate were the only women in this all-male college, relishing the opportunity to teach students so hungry for knowledge. She started a college magazine for them and a small drama group. Will Shakespeare did not get a guernsey, this was (in hindsight an excellent choice) a play about corruption.

As the only two single (sorry, this is politically incorrect) white women within 500 miles, Isabel and Joan were somewhat sought after. When a date with two District Officers was proposed, Isabel displayed her impeccable behaviour upbringing, initially bridling at the prospect of a blind date. After she was told one fellow was a graduate of Edinburgh University, she agreed. Serendipity took over, and Isabel Skeldon met a handsome young Scot called Jim Michie.

An Administration District Officer in the Southern Province of Northern Rhodesia, Jim had been overseeing the gargantuan dam-building project at Lake Kariba, on the border of Zambia and Zimbabwe. Following independence, he left for home, driving 99% of the way with a friend in a Volkswagen Beetle. They traversed all the game parks, took the sea crossing to Gibraltar and ended up in Aberdeen. During his stint in Rhodesia, Jim had been driven around in a Government Landrover. The corrugations in the road played havoc with his vertebrae, and while he waited for the return of fiancée Isabel he underwent a laminectomy.

The couple married in 1965 and went off to the Solomon Islands, where he became District Officer in the Western Solomons, frequently touring the whole fascinating area and also acting as local Magistrate. Isabel was immediately co-opted by the District Commissioner's wife to work for the Red Cross, organise a basketball team of local women, and teach English wherever possible. Their house overlooked the area where JFK was shipwrecked by the Japanese, and swam ashore. Tiny Plum Pudding Island inevitably became Kennedy Island, with local residents glorying in this link with the White House.

Independence, again, was the endgame. UK Cabinet Ministers visited occasionally, their wives arriving somewhat shell-shocked by the small mail boat crossing from the local airport to Gizo HQ. Guadalcanal veterans also came to visit the battlefields. At 23, Isabel played hostess to the lot.

Transferring to the Secretariat in Honiara, now with a daughter Serena and son James, the couple found they had to send the children to boarding school in Edinburgh from the age of ten. Holidays, however, were spent in the Solomons. Isabel worked in the local shipping office, while still doing a little English teaching, radio work and amateur dramatics. Jim's stellar achievements brought him an O.B.E.



In the Solomons with James and Serena



The high-flying real estate star

Following the independence of the Solomons, Jim was posted to Hong Kong in 1982. Isabel found it a very exciting city. While considering getting proper qualifications for English teaching, she happened upon an advertisement for a real estate person to join an Australian lady dealing with expatriates. She took to real estate like a horse to water, shepherding new arrivals around to look for houses.

A couple of years later she joined a bigger firm, which eventually became so successful it was taken over by huge London firm Savills. Along the way, her marriage started to falter. She met an Englishman called Nigel Clark who had transformed himself into an Australian real estate agent and eventually they became partners.

They settled in Noosa in 2002, and now live at Noosa Waters with Nigel's English memories on the wall alongside marvellous reproductions of Chinese antiques Isabel brought from Hong Kong.

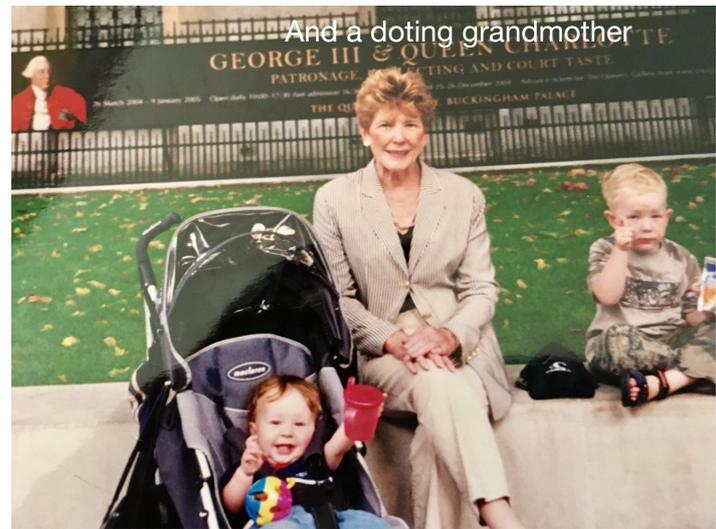
She has placed in the names of her children a huge family apartment in the historic Edwardian section of Edinburgh, to which she returns whenever

possible to attend the celebrated Edinburgh Festival.

Whist had been her parents favourite game and during one holiday with her mother Isabel bought a book on Bridge (Acol) and they taught themselves to play. Kitchen bridge continued in the Solomons and when she arrived at Noosa Waters a Club member talked her into attending a Saturday session and she adored it. During her first year she joined the Committee, in the era of Colin Regan as President.

Back on the Committee again now, as Member Liaison Officer she excels in keeping the Club in touch with members who are in need of heaps of TLC, and often hospitalisation as well.

There were times when this high-achieving Scottish heroine seemed headed for the stage, or to remain in Europe or Asia. But serendipity intervened again, helping her find a new partner and delightful lifestyle in Noosa - just what she deserves.



by Susie Osmaston