

Olive Pink's letter to her friend Joan Ridley Walker (undated - written during WWII - between 1942-5?)

Notes: Joan Ridley Walker was born in 1886 – (unmarried) – she was the niece of Mary and Sarah Walker and the grand-daughter of George Washington Walker and Sarah Benson Walker. Letter transcribed by Gillian Ward - July 2007

Pages 1 and 2 are missing.

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am sorry to say. Especially (ground) crested Bell-birds. But the rabbits would leave me no seedlings and they also pollute the drinking water-supply. And the dingos and bush mice would eat all my food (not in tins!) if I let them! Dingos are awful thieves – and cowards.

That is the unpleasant side of bush life. The other is lovely – especially when there is no war-worry at the back of one's mind as there always is at present. Birds become very unafraid of one – especially when quite alone as I often am. The “Black” family only comes and goes – as water is so scarce (It is the “dry season” now and we have only had about 1/8 inch since I returned in March from Hospital!)

On Saturday I was sitting reading on the camp stretcher to the Eastward of my Utility truck (for shade) when a Love-bird (just one – they usually are in flocks so that one must have got left behind!) “sat down” – almost within arm's length of me on the stretcher.

It is very touching when they are so trusting. There is also a little (Black-hood) Robin – only the female one now – which comes right up to the flap of my tent for crumbs. The male one used to too but he has either eloped with another “huzzie”[sic], or is dead, poor fellow. Quite a number of single members of species spend a day or two here en route to their homes.

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There has been one dotterel, one Sacred Kingfisher, one Wild turkey and one singing Honeyeater – one Eaglehawk.

There are numbers of zebra finches, Budgerigars – Wood Swallows, Blue wrens, “Bush canaries”, Crested Bell-birds, sparrow hawks and owls here quite often – And a few Major Mitchell and Ring-necked parrots. (Blue and green with yellow band on neck).

But apart from my “pet” singing Honeyeater – I think the migration of hundreds [in the tree behind my tent] of swifts and Fairy Martins and Rainbow Birds is the most thrilling thing I have seen (of birds) for years. (I saw those three species in Alice Springs in 1941. But the hundreds of swifts were here too, last year). They “play about” for a day or so – to rest and get water I suppose – and then go on to Soviet Russia or somewhere else in Central Asia to breed. They must (I think) return to Australia by another route? – as I have not noticed them flying South. (In Central Australia)

(How the fighting planes and the whole war-business must upset and terrify them.)

I shall never forget those Rainbow birds in Alice Springs. (I was then living in the 'the Wurley' that had been the Mohammedan

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prayer place formerly – in a neglected but none-the-less lovely old orange and lemon and fig orchard and vineyard. (formerly belonging to Afghans.) In the pioneering days in Cen. Aus and Northern South Aus. there were a great many Afghans who made their living either as loading-contractors – (with camel teams) – or as hawkers (on camels) to the outback stations and mining fields.

But to return to the Rainbow birds. Have you Leach's "Birds of Australia"? If so you will see an illustration in that. But as bush flowers seldom look their best out of strong sunlight – so with this bird. It flies in graceful curves – a la expert skaters – and the colours look iridescent [sic] as it swirls this way or that!

I left off this letter last night – and am continuing it in the shade of "N.T. 942" (the car). Before I continue about birds you might be interested if I gave you, here, my "daily round, the common task" – for this morning. Up before sunrise (I am not sure that is true this morning! – as it was cloudy – but it usually is quite true) went and gazed lovingly – or proudly – according to whether they were flowers or vegetables – at my "garden". (They are all still in tins and boxes – awaiting transference to my home-camp – when I can get a truck to go across. (mine is too small for all the loading I have. And taking several trips is not workable). I nearly wear out my seedlings and plants looking at them! I transplanted the Rosemary recently from a honey tin (poor thing.) into a Kerosene tin. And around it I have planted seeds of lavender (Tasmanian!) marjoram, thyme, and mignonette – as water has to be

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so severely rationed. (Except the mignonette the others will have to be transplanted later) the mignonette – only planted about a week ago, is growing "visibly". I have one strawberry plant and it had four blossoms – but no strawberries formed. (I hope they will later). There is a box of mint (invaluable) and parsley anywhere where there is room (also invaluable). You see I only have tinned meat out here and (in War time) there is only one brand of that that I can eat. (I loathe even sheep's tongues!) So I have to depend on various herbs (as do "the Boys"!!) to make some change. As someone stole my Heinz (dry) Horseradish so I can't pretend it is "beef" (actually it is veal tongue and ham) with that. But mint sauce turns it into "roast mutton" and parsley sauce into boiled mutton! And then there is curry, Worcestershire sauce (no tomato "frozen" unfortunately) and red currant jelly. (and sometimes chutney.) When I can grow nasturtiums I'll be able to make caper sauce – which I really don't like. – But it would be another change! As a child I refused to have it ("that stuff with buzz ("blow") flies in it"!). So herbs are invaluable out here.

As a rule I have no butter. I can't get tinned and the other soon goes rancid in heat (with no "cooler".) No cream ("frozen") no bacon, and worst of all no eggs. (I have had 1 doz. Since March 21st!)

So Kraft cheese, honey, tinned vegetables, tinned meat (one kind) jam (can't get most kinds I like now!) potatoes and onions are my regular diet. (With a little fresh fruit or a pumpkin every few months (-with luck!!!). When the water is rain water I usually drink only water (but every drop boiled for fear of dysentery again (which nearly killed me in 1933 out in this area). But when "soakage" water – as at

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present – I have black coffee. (I give the Blacks my share of (rationed) tea.) to make it more bearable to me.

In summer, (when possible) I have lime juice or home-made Lemon Syrup in the water. By the way have you had any of a delicious drink that comes from the Huon (Tas) "Huon Cri" brand? "Loganberry" is a drink for the gods!!! (A friend used to give it to me when I came out of hospital.) There is also Raspberry.

But I don't suppose we will be able to get it any more during the war! As we may not "shop" Interstate now. Or were not allowed to – Which is extremely "rough on " the Territory" as except beef – a little mutton- some eggs and some vegetables we grow nothing in the Territory. Nor manufacture anything here.

As one doctor (bitterly) said. "Our chief export is Half Castes"!! (He was at the time a "protector" of aborigines!)

Well to get back to that "daily round"! I have "a lick and a promise" kind of "bath" (for lack of water) – dress and have breakfast before the flies arrive. (after putting bedding to air – shaking the "Persian" (potato bags!) "carpets" and spreading the tablecloth (a Chinese appliqué tray cloth) and arranging the flowers. (Today's, - delicate mauve pom-poms (will enclose some) and a yellow cassia (rather like cow-slips to look at – (with plenty of imagination used!) and wattle blossom.

"Breakfast" Menu. Malt extract; scone and honey: (and small piece of cheese) water: Iron pill. (Bland's)

Then I washed up – put away bedding – watered a few of the plants (they get their chief "ration" at night) and boiled the water for today's coffee. Then make a batch of scones (instead of damper) which will last two or three days. Put them to cool in the car

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in a basin covered over with muslin – and got into my helmet and green veil (which is tied in round my neck.) Joan you have no idea what the flies are like!!! – thousands from sun –up to sun down!!! And if one does not wear a veil they are diving at one's eyes or biting (or walking on) face and hands all day. They are (mostly) smaller than house flies.

I always have my "dinner" after sun-down – to be free of them and breakfast before they are "up" if possible. But lunch – (usually a scone and cheese) has to be eaten with no plate but scone in left hand and cheese in right and waved about like two fans in between alternate bites. So it is a very uncomfortable "meal"! So are drinks during the

day. (rather like the Israelites Passover eaten standing, and with loins girt and sandals on one's feet.) One spends 20 minutes or so boiling the day's water supply, then later pour out a cup and (quite often – in dashes a fly (to commit hari-kari) and so all the sterilizing is cancelled, probably. And yet one cannot spare the water to throw it out. (So I usually put my veil round it. But that also is a very uncomfortable way to have a drink!

We have them winter and summer and all day. – But, blessing of blessings, not at night. (Unless one goes through the Spinifex and disturbs their Slumbers.) I used to think they were “vegetarian” and did not have such a horror of them then. Now I know they are not! (The Govt. truck drivers told me it is the sign of a city person to wear a fly veil! So I shall be one to the end of my days!!!)

There are also literally hundred and hundred of “sugar” (or “meat”) ants even in ones tent – in a quite

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short time if one leaves any thing sweet or meaty about. Even without that there are always scores of “scouts” roaming around – night and day – (and getting into the water too if possible.) They also, have repulsive habits (which make me feel sick to think of if they crawl in one's food.) Everything of mine, - unless being used – is in a tin with lid, bottle or jar with screw top or biscuit or other large tin with lid. Then flour etc has to be protected from bush mice and dingoes (and (I think) a certain repulsive looking lizard. (Anyway they [the lizards] “camp” in my tent if I allow them.) There are also large lizards that camp there “for company” and which I would not mind if they did not go exploring in the night! And there is an occasional wild (“bush” and spotted) cat to frighten away one's pet birds, and night hawks and owls. – and the harrowingly mournful howls of dingoes (I don't have that now as there seems to be only one left near here. But before I poisoned the others – I could get no sleep with them.)

They are filthy creatures and arrant cowards. Some of the Blacks make “pets” of them and use them to hunt for them – snatching away (as a rule) the poor creature's “catch” before he can eat it. So they are, as a rule, all skin and bone – (although not always). Some “spoil” theirs (I have even seen them allowing them to eat their own jam and damper.) The “pet” ones become awful flour thieves. Fortunately the “walking skeleton” of the “pet” one the “blacks” here (then) had – got poisoned – through their not doing as I warned them to do (tie it up at night). (They are alternately hit and punched and petted and caressed.)

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especially by the women and children. In fact (but I must check that) I think they always do belong to the women and children.

Domestic cats (run wild) are becoming a pest not far from here. Fortunately the Aborigines – like the Chinese think them a delicacy. – (When there is plenty of water in the more distant rockholes they go off for two or three days and when I ask how many? There are often 4 or five in their tally of “Pussy cats”. They also hunt their own wild cats which have white spots on them.

Near here there are bandicoots – “rabbit-bandicoots” – occasional (very) kangaroos – “quiet” (non – poisonous) snakes – lizards (as large as small flathead and salmon pink underneath) – “goannas” – and various other small marsupials for them to eat. (And rabbits – in places near water.) There are also native fruits and vegetables “in season”. (Some of the fruits are quite pleasant in flavour but all smallish.)

They have quite an interesting variety of methods of cooking – or preparing various “dishes” – Some quite clever and expert. (I am going to try some myself when I can gather them myself!!) and so know they have only been in clean hands and utensils!

How I meander! But I think I’ll leave about the “Singing Honey Eater” for Phyllis’ letter (as the boys would like to hear about it too and you can hear it that way.) I want to write to you, Ursula and Phyllis all by the same mail. (I loved getting letters from you all in (my) one mail.

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There are very few flowers out now. A few mimosas (is that what one calls flowers with a fluffy blossom like “wattle”? I am no botanist!) a few Cassias – a number of bushes of the (enclosed) little mauve pom-poms:- I think that is all. Later the 23 Bean trees will be in blossom and numerous small plants and the yams (which have a blossom like a puce-pink convolvulus. They are half a “bush” and half a creeper.) There are Mulga, Beefwood, Corkwood, Bloodwood (a gum), Tallow wood – “Widgetty bush” a white stemmed tree with small leaves and two species with large dark leaves. Of the majority I do not know their “white” names – only the Blacks’ names for them which are (usually) infinitely prettier.

For instance one “Corkwood” is “Birriwarr” (It is my totemic tree so I of course like it!) The Bloodwood is “Orgulli” etc.

But I think the most musical of all is a (useless) but pretty mauve pussy tail growing about 3 to 4 ft high – Its name is “Windi’low’indil’la” (to spell it non-scientifically) Isn’t that pretty?

A grasshopper is Jin’dil’gar’!)

It is a very pretty language as there

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are so many vowels and much softer than Aranda (and much more than Alluritcha of which I know little but it sounds harsh.)

I should like to be a clever linguistic scholar. It would be fascinating. What astonishes me is the absolute division between the languages of the adjacent tribes – In most of their words no similarity – whatever.

For instance my totemic tree in Aranda is “Oon’jee’am’ba” (to spell it as pronounced) And water is Quadtja’. (Here it is nubba – and to south Gab’bi’.) As

different as Italian, German and Russian!!! Aborigines are however quite clever linguists. Or like among Europeans – some are. Some speak several languages and use English in a way that shows they know the full implication of the word. On one or two they put a different meaning . If I said to a small child (being rude) “Don’t be cheeky” he would wonder what I meant. “Cheeky” to them means poisonous dangerous. – A snake or insect is “cheeky” if it bites. The same with “swear”.

I of course never swear – (or not anyway in anyone’s hearing – much less Blacks!) So it rather shocked me when an aborigine accused me of “swearing at him”!

What he meant was “scold” severely. (And he deserved it!!) They hate being scolded – it upsets them very much – If it has any effect at all!!

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I wonder would you feel sympathetic towards the aborigines? (They should be called “Browns” - not “Blacks”. The Bush ones are Vandyke – but those wearing clothes constantly become paler. (Two interpreters I brought out here once went to wash with the “bush” black at a soakage. They came back to me very angry. The local people had asked them were they Half – Castes? (Their bodies, when stripped, were so much paler).

As they were both grey-haired Head-men of their respective clans to be called a “Half-Caste” (a nothing!) was a real insult.

As you know probably they are supposed to be of Dravidian stock – on the Mainland. So would originally be the colour of the Southern Indians. And you know how dark some surfers get. (I do also. I am pie-bald. (Feet white and body white - legs and arms “biscuit” – face “walnut”!!!!) The palms of their hands are often the colour of the backs of mine – when compared. (They admire whiteness and call it “clean”. They do not admire the yellowish skin of Half-castes – apparently.) Nor do they admire Europeans – as such.

I have never yet been able to find out their ideals of beauty in male and female (I wish I could.) among themselves.

Almost the nicest compliment about my eyes I ever had was given to me (unintentionally) by an old Black. I was trying to find out the Aranda word for grey – so asked him what colour my eyes were. He said “like nice whitey-black smoke.” Their own vary from “Black-ball”(lolly) brown to the limpid brown of rocks under water in a shady creek. They almost always have delicate hands (men and women) and lovely (“filbert”) nails which I greatly envy – as I have hideous nails. When able to wash it they have very pretty (wavy) hair. Did your Grandfather

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leave any private letters about the Tasmanians?

Do tell me about your “batching” Joan. Why don’t you get a pot-plant or two – if your old landlady is too greedy to let you have a tiny flower-bed “to feed your soul”? Do you remember Aunt Nan’s white Azalea? Why not get an Azalea and some other things

so that you have one in blossom – all the year round? (Opposite my window in Mosman was the roof garden of the chemist next door. It was a perfect joy to me. Roses, Freesias, Franjapanni, Poinsettia, Zinnias, bulbs, Irises, Hibiscus, etc. Japanese and Tiger Lillies (sic) all in tubs (wooden). Have Broom (Spanish) in one of your tubs, the Azalea in another. Zinnias in another. Lavender and “Seapinks” (which I always connect with you!) in another, (those tiny pinks).

Do you know the (enclosed) verses? I love them. (at the end of the letter).

Have you been to the Museum recently? If so – have they still the Aboriginal group I designed and (Mr.(?)) painted – in the upstairs room? And is Dr Pearson still the Dictator there?

I wonder have you read a book I bought when in Hobart in '37, but had previously read in Cen. Aus – “The Story of San Michele” by Axel Munthe? (A Swedish doctor and a passionate bird lover. You would not like parts but other parts would appeal to you as much, I think, as they do to me. (Especially Chap. XXVIII about his fight for his bird-friends). If you have not read it see if they have it in the Public Library.

Do you like “Cranford”? I have a beautifully illustrated one out here with me – (by way of contrast to the life I am living!) I also have Milne’s childrens’ verses “When we were very young.” Most of my books (and all my scientific ones) are stored in Sydney – so I only have about a dozen with me (including a Dic, a “Cookery book”, “Motor vehicles in a Nutshell”, Leach’s “Aus Bird Book” – and a book on Linguistics.) Violet

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Mackenzie sent me a touchingly beautiful booklet for my birthday. I wonder have you read it? I think you would love it too. It is entitled “The Snow Goose”, by Paul Gallico, and is about a deformed artist, a Canadian “Snow Goose” (in England) a young girl – and the evacuation from Dunkirk.

Try to get a loan of it Joan (the only parts I don’t like are the “pious” bits – which they always seem to have to (and so obviously,) drag in and the remainder is to my mind perfect).

This letter should be burnt.- But if I do I don’t know when I shall have the energy to write again – (while worried) so make excuses for its dullness Joan and write again soon.

There are lots of things I should like to write to you – but not for a censor to (possibly) read one’s most intimate thoughts. So “après la guerre”!

Our inward mail is not, I think, censored. Whether the outward mail is I am not sure. It used to be – but regulations are constantly changing – with the changing War situation in the Southern Pacific.

I am longing to hear War-news. I have heard none since Montgomery landed in Sicily(?)!

Did you know him as a girl, when at Bishopscourt. Ursula Holden's brother married his sister didn't he? Who did Ursula marry? (I liked her very much). I used occasionally to go to her home to afternoon tea and loved the huge cane chair they had! – Large enough to hold two (grown) people!!! (The kind like magpie cages used to be made of. (Willow?) and padded.

If you have any spare flower – (or herb) seeds at any time send them along Joan(and I'll have a Joan "patch" too! I now have a "Muriel", "Violet (white)"

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(as I call Violet Bartlett) and "Violet (blue)" = Violet Mackenzie _ "patches". (Or they will be later – At present their flowers are in tins or boxes.)

Do you ever draw or paint now? I wish you'd draw me a bird sometime. I never saw such alive fowls as some you did (when 12ish!) were.

How I envy you the next few months in the gardens – With fruit trees coming into blossom – lilacs – Laburnum, "May" and Guelder Roses – All the lovely things I so enjoyed when I had that room in the A. P. Miller's old home at top of Liverpool St. (They even had Solomon's Seal, Bleeding Heart and Box borders!!!) And little field daisies in the lawn. Have you seen the Cinararias – in Botanic Gardens since we saw them together?

I never forget gardens. Or flower presents. My first memory of you and Ursula and Bernard (in your home) is of having afternoon tea in deep cool grass (lush green) with Irises and forget-me-nots in it and flowering (cherry?) – plum over-head. (Or anyway a fruit tree. And I think Hawthorn too?) On right hand going in front gate in what is now Bernard's lawn. (A blue-eyed trio and forget-me-nots – in the foreground!!!) Fond love Joan dear and write to the "way-back" soon. Letters mean a great deal to me – when it is often months before I get any. (I send you two "texts"!!!).

Ever your friend

Olive

*If thou of Fortune be bereft
And in the store there be but left two loaves
Sell one, and with the dole
Buy Hyacinthes to feed thy soul.*

Ce n'est donner rien donner aux hommes que de ne pas se donner soi-même.
