

Finland Through Australian Eyes

Ruth Bonetti



Wilhelm Anders Back (29.7.1886–2.4.1974) immigrated to Australia on 26 November 1902 – a 16-year old eager to take on the world. He and his brother Karl Johan Back (20.10.1877–20.6.1962) settled in the Byron Bay-Mullumbimby area of New South Wales. They often wrote home to urge their family to sell the farm and emigrate to the ‘Promised Land.’ Civil War intervened and the elderly parents balked. Wilhelm travelled in 1924 to Finland – via the world at large – to encourage and persuade. That yearlong Grand Tour culminated in a Finnish summer. He sponsored a wave of migration from Ostrobothnia – but his own family was not amongst this.

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Wilhelm’s eldest son, Eric (16.12.1909–29.11.1993) chronicled their experiences in his 1991 memoir and in his 1924 daily journal. Ruth transcribed her uncle’s exercise book to preserve his observations for this article.

Eric Back was a true historian. His Box Brownie photographs bring alive his account of life in Finland through the eyes of a 14-year-old Australian lad.

My visits to Ostrobothnia in 2008 and 2014 gain fresh perspective after reading Uncle Eric’s writing. My cousin Gretchen drives me around villages whose names are familiar since I typed up the journal’s frayed exercise book. I can compare the places with his written record and photographs. Here is Chitton (Tjiitiika), where they drove the cows daily to pasture; there at Udden they held picnics and sailed their boat in similar winds that wave banks of reeds against the waters’ edge. I learn that ‘Grassern’ is actually ‘Gräsön’.

Eric’s memoir gave a mature overview of this World Tour together with his brothers Elwyn (age 12), my father Aubrey (10), Allan (2) and sister Gloria age three. He wrote:

‘By 1923 my parents were planning a trip to Finland so that Dad’s family could meet us all. At that time to travel so far, and with a young family,

was unheard of. Tourism had not been invented then. It was a do it yourself business, and the only way to travel out of Australia, in any direction, was by ship. To go to England in those days usually took about six weeks, and I think P & O Orient had about one ship per month going in both directions.’

‘Mum and Dad decided they should take a nurse along to help with the family. They put a small advertisement in the Sydney Morning Herald, and the first responses filled the letterbox in Mullumbimby, but the next day the post office phoned and said we had better come and collect the mail. They had a mailbag full. There were over 600 replies to the advertisement and they all had to be opened, read and drafted into some order. And the winner? How was she chosen? Nurse Neilson sent a telegram saying she was coming to be interviewed, and she jumped on the first boat or train and came to Mullumbimby. Afterwards I can’t remember any complaints about her, so I guess she was satisfactory.’

‘Our World Tour started from Mullumbimby railway station at 9.30 and a large gathering of people was there to cheer us on our way. On Saturday 2 February 1924 we sailed from Brisbane in the Orient liner Osterley of over 12,000 tons.’

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Ruth: They disembarked at Toulon and travelled to Italy where Wilhelm ordered a large six-cylinder Fiat car. It would not be available for 20 days so they toured northern Italy; Venice, Florence, Genoa and Milan. 'We had ample time to see thousands of paintings.' Wilhelm's postcard from Ventimiglia already rued his travelling circus, 'It's so boring to travel with so many to look after, especially with so many children, and fifteen bags. We should have come straight from England so we wouldn't have everything with us.' Shopping expeditions in Geneva, Zurich, Paris, London and Helsinki would add more.

Eric continues: 'In Turin, Dad applied for a driver's license. He could not talk to the Testing Officer, but he got the car going and weaved through traffic and people around a big square, after which the Officer jumped out, wrote out the license and told him to go!'

'Dad decided it would be safer to get a bit more tuition before starting across Europe, so he picked up a young fellow (via Fiat) – the chauffeur had been driver for Lloyd George doing the peace talks in 1919 at Lugarno – to go with us. As we could not speak to him Dad got a guide who knew most places and languages. So we ended up like a modern tour coach with the driver responsible for the working of the car, and a guide who could get you into a mediaeval town and bring you out on the right road on the other side. He also found hotels, as we had nothing booked head. Of course there were mistakes, like when little boys went behind the car to do a wee, and the driver thought the petrol tank was leaking! Sometimes petrol buying was primitive. It was in a very large glass bottles with the plug in the top. Then our driver would sniff them all and make a choice.'

'You will ask "Where did we put all the people?" Well usually the driver, Dad and Elwyn sat in the front seat, then there were two "Dicky" seats that folded against the front seat and the guide was behind the driver. I had the other one. Mum and Nurse were in the backseat and the little ones were spread around. The car was an open tourer; it had a folding canvas roof and was pretty cold when heading into the Alps. Luggage was strapped on running boards and at back. Mum and Nurse learned to pack a couple of bags on top with smelly clothes to discourage customs officers. Well, we did Switzerland and France including Paris and the battlefields, which were still in a mess then through Berlin to Stettin

on the Baltic. There our driver and guide returned to Italy and Nurse to England.'

'In Helsinki Dad took us in the car to a hotel and we said "It is up to you to speak to the natives now," but after a while the receptionist said "Sir, if you speak English we may get along better."'

'Dad managed the car quite well, and after leaving Helsinki we stayed the night at Tammerfors. The Finnish roads then were not designed for motorcars. On flat country they twisted and turned around small farms, and any granite small hills they went straight over, so it was slow travelling. We got to Munsala about 10 p.m. when the sun was setting, home to a warm welcome, even if we could not speak to our Finnish family. We arrived 29th of May 1924.'

No doubt tired, Eric's journal noted a brief: 'All cordially welcomed home.' Next day: 'As we did not retire early we rose at the record time of 9 A.M. which seems the custom here, & we have seen where there are big families half work in the day while the other take the night shift helped by the mid-night sun. In the morning we helped the chaffeur (sic) wash the car (witnessed by a crowd, who, as it looked had never seen a car before) & in the evening we went Kavyocke (sic) the nearest railway station to get our luggage.'

To return to Eric's memoir: 'At the Munsala home that time was Granddad Back, a little man with a lot of snow white hair, and when walking seemed to shuffle along. He would have been about 76 at the time. Grandma Back was not very big, but very energetic and a good talker. When the house was built they had put two large granite slabs down, one on top of the other, as steps into the house. Grandma fell and broke her hip when those slabs had ice on them winter many years before. Doctors were not so good then, and although she got over it, she always walked with a limp but it did not seem to slow her down. Then there was Aunt Sofia and her daughter Helmi and Dad's younger brother Edward, his wife Esther and their boy Rolf, a little fellow learning to walk.'

'Edward had a farm of his own some distance away but he would come over to help with the farm work, such as planting potatoes and haymaking.'

On their first day in the family home, Eric wrote in his journal: 'As there is plenty of water (lakes and rivers) we decided to make a boat, which would be big enough to go picnicking in.'



The highlight of summer in Finland for the Back sons was to build and sail a boat. They 'boiled the billy' on 'Picnic Island.'

'We three boys found some nice wide boards on the beams near the ceiling in what used to be Dad's old carpentering room. We asked if we could have them to make a boat. At first Granddad hesitated, then he agreed. Elwyn was the main builder and marine architect for the boat and I am pleased to say it turned out well, because long afterwards we learned Granddad had put those boards away to make his coffin when he died! We had a lot of happy days with the boat. (In fact it came to an unhappy end. In those bootlegging days a lot of smuggling went on across the Baltic. One poor unfortunate appropriated the boat to meet a rendezvous at sea. But the timber had shrunk, the boat leaked and the fellow drowned.)'

'This morning we got up early, about 8 o'clock, which is early here, for a day's work on the boat. I spent a good deal of my time in making the nose or bow, and in the afternoon we joined the side of the boat to the bow. We went to bed pretty stiff that night.' (5 June)

Boat building progress was frustrated by distractions of entertaining and daily chores like taking the cows to pasture and minding them.

'This morning Elwyn went with Grandpa in my place while I went on with the boat... but was very slow work. When Elwyn returned we continued with the boat all the evening, one of the wonders of the far North we think is the Mid-Night sun which is just like a sun in the middle of the night, so far we have not used an artificial light since we came here.' (June 11)

The following days were busy packing between the big holes and boards of the boat, mixing paint

and tar for the bottom. Did Sanna grit her teeth at the mess? 'As it was raining we could not take the boat out so we laid paper on the floor. We put the tar on first which was like varnish, and afterwards we painted the upper part with red paint.'

Two weeks later the boat was ready to sail. But the next day '... after we had performed our usual duty of leading the cows to grass, I set to work with Father on a batch of correspondence which had to be attended to before the mail closed the letter writing occupied half the day.' Hyperactive Wilhelm relied on Eric as his own English writing could not keep up with his many plans and projects. Their Uncle Edward took the boat in his cart to Udden by the sea, and introduced the boys to 'the most important lady in the district, 'Herrin Surlinksa' (it sounded like this).'

This was Betty Hallén who allowed them to use her landing and boathouse, to moor it at her manor ('man-o war') steps on a peninsula at Udden. According to R. Blomqvist, writing in the early 1900s, she gave refuge to political refugees and supported smuggling of Fria Ord activist newspapers and weapons. (http://sydaby.eget.net/swe/jp_munsala.htm)

Eric described her as 'a very old lady 83 years old whose husband was once governor of one of the Finnish States, she has a large number of visitors staying with her & employes (sic) a large number of servants.' (4 July)

A hard day's fencing further delayed the boat's maiden voyage until the 19th June:

'This-morning we decided to go out in the boat, which we left to swell the night before & after a walk of two killometers (sic) we arrived at the pe-

Wilhelm Back (right) gets his hands dirty shovelling manure.



ninsula, & got to work bailing out the water & fixing it up for its maiden voyage. We rowed towards the sea & landed on shore opposite an island to have our picnic. After we had lunch, we thought we would see the boats sailing possibilities & as there was a light breeze blowing from the sea we sailed home.' (19th June)

Snapshots show two boys – for Eric was the photographer – sitting in a chunky vessel anchored at the shore. At Picnic Bay, their rug was strewn with hats, apples, a flask and a lunchbox. In true Aussie fashion, a billy swung on sticks over a fire. Elwyn lifted his pannikin in a party boy toast.

'This-morning after helping Father clean the car & put benzine in, we set out for Udden where we had our boat moored, & after making the boat seaworthy we set out for "Grassern" (Grass island) which is an island covered with grass & Northern Forest trees such as Birch & Pine.' (26th June)

Ruth: Did they play out stories of escape as they launched it from Udden? Visitors must have told of friends and family who skied through blizzards to safety in Sweden, or in summer strained at the oars; how frenzied rowing stripped the flesh from their hands. This experience made as strong impression on the lads. Building the boat was a highlight of my father's summer in Finland – one he tried to recapture all the rest of his life. He made many abortive boat-building exercises – that was the Finland Swede in him. Such early enterprise set them into 'can-do' enterprising mindsets. It is a trait typical of our family through to present generations that we invent or create that which we lack.

The Fiat car was a novelty in the village. 'This morning was industriously (sic) occupied washing the car, which is always a magnet in drawing a crowd as there is not many cars here and the novelty has not worn off yet.' (12 July)

Eric described the landscape: 'There was no undergrowth but instead heaps of stones, both trees and stones being covered with moss, which makes it look like a snow scene, at the farm we mended the fences, which are made of trees cut down & split into sticks. ... As the land is divided up into plots & each man in the village owns so many plots of potato land or hay land, forestland, & grass land, & as they are too small to be fenced, the cattle have to be minded.'

During a hectic summer on the farm 'Everybody seemed to be busy, Uncle Edward & Father were ploughing & harrowing while the women had the dirty job of spreading manure which they faithfully fulfilled, after lunch every person that could be mustered was in the potato planting, briskness being shown by all hands in the potato races.' (6 June)

Wilhelm posed for the camera at the plough, raking manure and hay. Eric captured scenes of the family working to furrow, plant potatoes and make hay. He described soap making, combing wool to get it ready for the spinning machine, and spinning ('Grandma proved to be the best spinner the threads being almost as thin as cotton.') He was anxious about sheaving the wheat harvest, having never seen this done before:

'Aunt Sofia and Father cut the wheat with reaping hooks, a very slow process, and then Father was put out of action by cutting his finger, Elwyn, Aub

and me did the sheaving which is tying wheat in bundles and then standing them up in heaps.' (23 August)

He went haymaking with his father. 'Our first job was to cut the grass which was very thick, and as none of us had worked the machine before, it took us a while before we got it working properly, but we all thought it was a good job when it was finished. Afterwards we spread it all out to dry.' After coping it into heaps the boys stacked the hay in the larder and stamped it down.

Eric often wrote of being 'nearly eaten alive with mosquitoes... This-morning we took the cows out to Chitton like prisoners as we surrounded them and marched them through a sea of water and Mosquitoes.' (9 July)

They picked berries, 'which is the only fruit in Finland' and 'have a feed of 'Orchaberry'. 'In our hunts we discovered a big patch of Blueberry and did not rest until we had finished them.' Another day 'the ground was just covered with berries and as the cows were enjoying themselves with the grass we attacked the berries vigouresly.' (sic).

'This-morning we fitted out an expedition to one of the distant farms, our intentions being to construct a fence, & as the fence is made intirely (sic) of trees, Elwyn, Aubrey & I was given the job of chopping down the trees in the nearby pine forest & hauling them out into the clearing, where Grandpa & Father made the fence. We were finished work at 5.30 & set out on our way home through the forests which was like a swamp & returned home wet-footed.'

Another day: 'Aubrey and I pulled down an old fence and then we punched holes in the ground to put sticks in which formed or acted as posts, then the flexible plants were binded round the pairs of sticks to hold up the saplings.'

By now 'we are used to the fences which at first nearly made us cross-eyed.'

By 18 July the carts and hay cutting machinery were overhauled. Eric described the grass cutter pulled along by a horse. 'It draws a blade up and down working like a sheep shearing clipper.'

On 19 July everybody turned out with a rake for haymaking. 'The grass was made into heaps, and in the evening it was all raked up and loaded on the wagon, Elwyn and Aubrey being on the load to tramp it down and thus get more on. My work was to pack it in the larders or barns when it was brought to its destination.'

A week later they set out to bring in some hay and spread it all out as some of the underneath grass was damp. 'I had to salt the hay which seems to keep the hay in a better condition until the winter. As the weather is still very warm here we went for a swim after we were finished haymaking.'

But it was not all work, for Wilhelm hired a motor launch for a large picnic on 22nd July.

'There was 20 in the party, so we had plenty of company. We embarked on the launch at Mona after visiting a steamer loading props we set out for the open sea, which was like a lake, at our first stopping place we had coffee and then went in for a swim also taking some photoes (sic) (everybody naked) we then visited other islands.'

Next morning the boys set out for Udden 'with the intentions of fixing the bottom of the boat, which had come loose, owing to Father taking a large crowd of bouncing people in it. We took our fishing lines to drag behind with imitation fish for bait and caught two decent fish, like a cross between a schnapper and a bream.'

Several times they sailed to Mona, 'a village on a fjord which is known as the "Mona Pass" for crossing to Sweden we also saw a steamer waiting for a cargo of props.'

Swimming Finnish style fascinated young Eric in spite of 'water like an ice-chest':

'This-morning a picnic was organised and everybody set off at 11 a.m. straight after breakfast for a popular picnic place near Udden with a name as long as Constantinople, but all the same it was very nice, we did not expect it to be so warm here so we had a good swim, but it was a bit cold. Everybody about the country seemed to be in swimming and as bathing togs were (as yet) not introduced into these parts men, women and children were naked. (I am trying to get a good snap with my camera around some of the watering places.)' (16th July)

Sure enough, the photo album sported people sunbathing nude, but Wilhelm wore his black swimming costume, with a towel around his shoulders. He was used to nudity in the sauna and lakes as a youngster; did he become prim in Australia? Was he reluctant to be exposed in front of the locals? His sons, also clothed, seem gauche on the sand amongst the nude bodies. In another snap, four young men posed on a rock holding tree branches over their privates in defiant ridicule.

By 25 July 'The weather is getting cooler and the swimming season is over, it only lasts for one week (no wonder none of the people here are good swimmers.)' In August 'It was very hot to-day 85 degrees so we decided to go for a swim but we nearly got frozen.'

Eric was unused to Finnish name days: 'The breakfast table was full of cakes and flowers sent by different people to Mother as it happened to be "Christina Day", so the morning was spent getting ready for a big party in the evening. Father gathered the people up in the car. The party was a great success at least we thought so the lemonade being well looked after.'

They attended the wedding of his father's cousin:

'We went to the church to see the sermon, and as they were leaving the church I took a photo of them. The wedding party consisted of two musicians while all the other people filed behind two deep. We went to the wedding breakfast which consisted mainly of porridge and potatoes.' (15 June)

He described the church as very big and 'built of stone the walls being about 3 ft thick, the church also possessed an organ about the size of the one in the Sydney Town Hall.'

Frequent entertaining created a flurry of cooking and preparation for the visitors. Snapshots of picnics revealed the grandparents' fatigue, as if this deluge of family took as much in strain as it gave pleasure – or they sigh to think they will not see their son again. At a picnic all the family gathered around the gramophone Wilhelm had bought in Geneva and smuggled through customs.

Eric had noted purchasing 'a few souvaneers (sic) of Geneva including a portable gramophone (sic), a patent electric torch, and a Swiss made wristlet watch... At the frontier the customs officials started to overhaul us, but with great stealth we managed to hide the gramophone under our feet, they opened the dirty clothes and boot bag and then let us go.'

'Father went to Nykarleby and returned with a crowd of visitors after dinner so of course we had to make ourselves look respectable, much against Elwyn's will who thought he could spend his time more valuably. The people stayed for afternoon tea, supper, and mid-night supper and then thought of going home in the rain.' (29 August)

A shopping trip to Vasa was an ordeal: 'The passengers in the back seat began to complain of not

being able to get their feet or some other limb into the car owing to the rugs, winter coats & numerous parcels but were helped by soothing remarks such as "put them in your pocket" etc. The babies' temper was as bad as it could be, which made everybody a bit tired of affairs. We went to purchase some odds & ends [and meat] at the street markets. The women are fine butchers hurling axes over their heads it is a wonder they don't bash one another's brains out.' (2nd July)

'It was pretty late when we set out for home but as it is light all night it did not matter if we set out at Mid-night (sic) or Mid-day.' (sic)

As secretary to his powerhouse father, on 9 July Eric wrote that he wrote letters until lunchtime 'which is on at 5 o'clock and as tea was not on till 10 P.M we decided to go into Nykarleby where we posted the letters and sent some telegrams.'

Next day 'was the scene of great activities as everybody was busy writing letters under Fathers directions, 2 pots of ink ran dry but one blessing we had plenty of pens, and as there was only half a bottle of ink left we used to dip 3 pens in at once. As we had missed the mail at Munsala we had an early dinner at 5 P.M and Elwyn and I set out on bicycles for Nykarleby we had 14 kilometers (sic) to cover and an hour to do it in but we got there in time.'

Such letters planned meetings with governors, lunch with a Lord Mayor and a Wool Conference in Bradford England.

The visit neared its end, a poignant prospect. 'Today was spent in entertaining visitors who came to say good-bye before we left for England next Monday, the most useful entertainer was the coffee-pot (from the amount of coffee drunk by the people it is a wonder they don't die of indigestion no sooner than they have drunk a cup they are in to another).' (27 August)

'Everyone was up at 6 am, this morning busy packing and getting the portmanteaux on the car. Amidst tears we had breakfast and then came the terrible time of bidding good-bye. Everyone was weeping (sic) but at last we got away, and watched Munsala church until it disappeared from view.' (1 September)

Eric's memoir gives more insight: 'At parting Granddad gave us all his blessing. Uncle Edward came to Helsinki to see us off, with the car, for England, via Keil Canal. We disembarked at Hull and it was good to belong, to be able to read all the signs



The Back entourage visits Nykarleby in the Fiat.

and talk to people after being in foreign lands for so long.'

The next weeks were a flurry; the London Exhibition, touring, tracking down Christina's forebears – and of course, Wilhelm's business. The family sailed from Southampton on 16 October and arrived home at Bryon Bay on Christmas Day 1924.

Fast forward to Finland of 2008: As with my other visits to my Swedish-Finnish family, this first day's pilgrimage lead to the village of Munsala, its church and cemetery. My cousin Gretchen drove me through the town of Nykarleby. She pointed to a building. Remember Eric's 1924 photograph of the family in the Fiat automobile parked outside a bank? This is the very place.

This reminds me of my own family's three-month tour across Europe in 1995 – less grand than my father's experience in 1924. In November we brought our three sons through the arctic winter in a campervan. The boys lined up on the puce coloured divan for a photograph under that of their great-great grandparents.

In Munsala, the barn was stacked with a spinning wheel, kick-sled, utensils, brooms and spades. A bicycle hung on the wall. Carpentering tools lay on a bench. These crafted the boat in 1924.

Gretchen showed me pencil marks in the barn that chronicle the heights of my father and his

siblings seventy years earlier. I thought to call my boys to mark their heights alongside but they were engrossed kicking lumps of ice outside (wearing shoes; they often ran into the snow in socked feet.) Their heights might have been similar; my eldest son was fourteen like Eric in 1924, my middle son aged ten like my own father Aubrey; our youngest was five.

We didn't linger or hold up our relatives' busy lives so hugged farewells and drove away. I mulled over that missed opportunity for fifty kilometres wailing 'I want to go back and mark the heights.'

But there are some things that, once the time has passed, can never be recaptured.

Seize the moment. Who knows, it may create history. I writhed for days.

[Note: Eric's spelling and approximations of Finnish names are shown in the first instances then edited for clarity thereafter. At times the memoir has been edited without ellipses. His diary refers to 'Father' and the adult memoir 'Dad'.]

GLOSSARY OF PLACE NAMES

Kavyocke – Kovjoki

Grassern – Gräsön

Chitton – Tjitiika