

In Their own Write
Judy Murphy

The word Album is tooled, in gilt, on the green cover of the little book. The dye is starting to fade and speckles of tanned leather show through here and there. A dark stain, fading too, on the top left-hand front corner must have marred its elegance at first. Now it is laying an extra wisp of charm on the patina of time. A crack near the press-stud on the leather tab fastening the front cover to the back tells me that I will have to be careful when I am opening this book with its gilt-edged pages.

I wonder if a gilt-edge still speaks with the authoritative voice, brooking no arguments, allowing no disrespect, over-powering dissenting voices in minor keys, that it did in my younger days, in my culture. The Gospels, missals and prayer books, holy books, were blessed and kept on altars or in handkerchief drawers. The gilt and leather bound sets of Great Literature, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Burns and Yeats, the Art of the Renaissance which had tissue paper between the plates, all lived behind glass doors in the bookcase in the lounge room and were only taken out as special treats or homework references. Everyday books, *Algernon Ant*, *The Famous Five*, *the Billabong* books and Henry Lawson, Agatha Christie, Grace Metalious, Emily, Charlotte and Jane, a.k.a. *Cathie*, *Jane* and *Emma*, to say nothing of Chandler, Hemingway, *007*, and *Bertie Wooster* ... so many more, non-gilt but sometimes guiltily pleasurable, rubbing dog-eared shoulders with each other on shelves and under the cushions of the settee on the back verandah.

So, where did this little gilt-edged book that I have in my hand live? And who are the people who live in it. Because people, real people do live in it. It is a very peopled space.

It is my grandmother's autograph book. She kept it in the period between the year she was married, 1910, and about 1918, the end of World War One, although one or two later messages have crept in:

**In your golden chain of friendship
Regard me as a link**

Freda Corbett
23/12/39

I wonder about this epigram, and my reaction to it, that surge of warmth I feel every time I see it. I feel my mouth starting to twist in a wry smile because I have never really thought of this mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relationship as one of friendship, linked or unlinked. But as it is in a gilt-edged book I will take it as gospel. It won't shatter the world if I don't look at it critically, especially after all these years. Both my grandmother and Freda are dead, Nana long ago and my aunt just recently. The old animosities did not die but why rake over that ground?

I am more interested in Freda's handwriting. I recognise it, and it is a shock to me. It is not great penmanship, not aesthetic or artistic, or even practiced, she was a seamstress not a clerk. But it is even and firm with a slight list to the right and definite dots over the 'i's, fancy loops on the tails of the letters that fall below the invisible line, and the 'F' and 'C' of her initials are flowing and curly. In my mind's eye I can see the young newly married woman with her long hair looped over her forehead in an Andrews Sisters bang, a polka dot dress and platform shoes, sitting in the breakfast room, writing her friendly perhaps, diplomatic certainly, autograph at Christmas time. I never did see her like this, of course, but there is a photograph album as well as the autograph album.

It would have been a lonely Christmas for all the family, all the nation. My Uncle Pat was away with his squadron on His Majesty's Australian aircraft carrier [censored], somewhere in the [censored] Ocean.

The writing on her last Christmas card to me was infirm. Wispy, spidery, I wish I was sensitive enough, aware enough to have felt the trembling of her hand as she held the pen passing to me through the paper - but I am not.

Graphologists say¹ there is an indestructibility and uniqueness in every person's writing which records, or betrays, their talents and characteristics. If that is so, the same signs of the binary bravery/fear must be present in the young/old woman's handwriting as they/she contemplate Pat's/her death. Despite the gradual deterioration of age that,

¹ ... according to Tamara Thornton, who jokes about how her own scrawl caused her to write *The History of Handwriting in America: A Cultural History* (1996, Yale University Press).

like the stain on the cover of the autograph book, painted the palimpsestic layers of her life she always looked serene. How strange if I could have looked to her writing to see a different truth beneath the layers.

Roland Barthes says 'every photograph is a certificate of presence', the presence, for him, of death, the noeme, 'that-has-been'. I always want to say to him, "for heaven's sake, get a grip. Can't the glass be half full, not half empty? Can't we drink a toast to life not to death?" We all know death happens, stuff happens, shit happens, punctums happen, they can pierce us at any time, any place, but can't they make us laugh as well as cry? I wonder if the phrase 'happy snap' has any meaning for him?

A photograph is a reproduction, an image, a concept, a pose sometimes, a parallax view, someone else's view, someone has to manipulate light so that you can see the image, and process it in chemicals, or pump it full of electronics, or whatever they do these days.

But this autograph is Freda. Her own self-writing. Her own self. The product of her own action. She put thought into that message, whether she meant it or not and the message, and her signature, is her own certificate of presence.

And what is more, her DNA was on the page once. For all I know it might still be there. No picture of a pretty girl with a pen in her hand can capture that.

My kinesthetic reaction, the awe that I feel every time I look at Freda's page in the book, and at every page, does not come from the words written by all these different hands. Wise words, trite words, all affectionate. Nor does it come from a sentimental nostalgia for the people who wrote them, these people I am curious about - are there signs foreshadowing the Anzac spirit in the signatures of all those young men whose messages are dated pre-1914? Before the war to end all wars. The war before Freda's war.

No, I feel that the warmth of my reaction comes directly from their hands. It is the link in the chain of friendship that is the act of writing.

Nellie Ryan

I wish that I could do justice to replicating my grandmother's maiden name on this computer which has a multiplicity of fonts and colours. One hundred and fifty seven fonts. Sixteen colours. None of them match the style and charm of the inscription in the book. The ink and watercolour inscription is meticulously done but there are nuances in it, subtle unevennesses of brushstrokes, lines that are not quite straight, curliques that could never be parts of perfect circles, flourishes and furbelows, shadings and lightnesses. They show the touch of a hand, a humanity, a frailty, or strength, that no computer can ever hope to generate. No colour photocopy can be a faithful reproduction even though it will not take as long to make. 'Busy, busy'. We are now in the twenty-first century. We have no time to waste. No time to be a craftsman in this *Age of Mechanisation*.

An autograph book is a forgotten concept, it seems. Workshopping this piece I was taken aback when a class-mate asked what 'an autograph book' was. She had never heard of such a thing.

Your relatives and your friends, your acquaintances, even people you don't like but have to ask because they are in your group and you can't leave them out, these people pen a thought, a wish to you, or even just a wise-crack. It is addressed to you and written in their own hand. Self-written. Auto-graph.

- People tell you how to live your life. Be kind, have faith, hope, courage. The more musical ♪ of them draw a stave and tell you to:

*Never **B I***

*Sometimes **B #***

*Always **B ♪***

Martin J Donovan,

'Glen Iris',

October 30/12

There is a punctum here, and it pricks. Nellie was Always ♪, Never #, but sometimes, too often, she was I? She would sit on her Glory Box looking out of her bedroom

window at the street and cry. And I couldn't help. All the love we had for her, and she for us, was not enough. Her glass was always half empty.

This motto makes me want to retract some of what I said about Roland Barthes. I must be more careful before I jump in and reject the thinking of others too smartly.

- Your girlfriends pledge undying friendship:

*Whilst greeting the new friends,
Remember the old;
For if the new friends are silver,
The latter are gold*

~ Lily Stewart ~

1.12.17

Nellie and Aunty Lily, as I used to call her, were lifelong friends. She seems to be the only one of the women pledging undying friendship to keep her promise.

Hilda Curran, before she was lost in the mists of time, wrote:

*Remember me is all I ask,
But- if remembrance prove a task,
Then forget.*

11.6.10

Perhaps it is, on the whole, a more realistic view of friendship. It would seem that Christine Rosetti thought so:

*Better by far you should forget and smile
Than that you should remember and be sad.²*

- Your boyfriends say cheeky things about courting and heartache, and other things:

*Tis Sweet To court
But: Oh how bitter
To court a girl
And Then not get her.*

M O'Brien

Rozelle 3/1/13.

*Money is the root of all evil
Please give me plenty of root.*

“Lakemba”

I beg your pardon? You can't say that to my Nana. Even pseudonymously
What a spin time puts on things.

And that's it. I've had enough. I haven't enjoyed this trip through the autograph book. Most of the pieces are, at the best, quaint, cute. There is not much merit. No depth. I can't go back and re-read them, over and again, and get new value out of them, the way I can re-read Shakespeare, Burns, Yeats, the gilt-edged poets. Or the writers (some of them - I have to pick and choose) of the Bible, the Gospels, a startling realisation for a lapsed, an ex- Catholic.

I asked at the beginning who the people are who live in this book. I found out. There is Nellie first and foremost, and most potently, although hers is the only handwriting that is not there. Then there is Freda, Aunty Lily, lots of young men and women, who wrote happy, affectionate, silly messages, who died very young in war or who live long lives and then died. I feel a connection with them, it is a very peopled space. But they are all dead people. And who am I to intrude, to pry into their handwriting, their actions, to poke around in their space?

² Christina Rossetti, “Remember”.