

Chapter 7

Beautiful Strength (6,161 words)

My mother came into the world red-faced and angry. Who could blame her? It was 29 February 1911, a leap year. Would this mean one birthday every four years? That is how I heard the story: a good one but for the fact that 1911 was not a leap year and my mother's birthday fell on 25 February. I can't have been paying close attention or, perhaps, my mother was embroidering her story a little and why not.

If the timing of her birth was not a legitimate source of anger her names were. The tiny thing appeared with a name as long as she was: Glasson Maude Wallace Bourne, unwieldy names that lurched dangerously towards the laughable. It was a James James Morrison Morrison Weatherby George Dupree kind of name. Young James had made quite an impression on me as a child. There was his impossible name and commanding nature. He was the fellow who, when only three, took great care of his mother, warning her against going to the end of town unless he accompanied her; sensible advice which his headstrong mother ignored. My mother must have read A.A. Milne's catchy little poem to me. In any event, I always linked Glasson Maude Wallace Bourne Walker with James James Morrison Morrison etc etc. I could not have known as a child that my mother and James's would end up in much the same state, both 'wandering vaguely', lost to themselves and the world.

Glassons were very rare - I have never encountered another one - and have no idea how she came by the name. 'Glasson' is a boy's name of Scottish origin meaning either 'from Glasgow' or 'son of a glassblower'. I suspect I must be missing something. There was no scope for shortening Glasson to something lighter, less informal, more feminine. Nor was there anything to be gained from changing the order of her names. Maude had already gone out of fashion by 1911. Across Glasson's lifetime 'Maude' experienced a disastrous fall from favor to become a risible sort of name associated with spinster aunts and the rapidly receding Victorian age. Lord Tennyson, the most sonorously Victorian of Victorian poets, had endowed 'Maude' with an air of breathless romance. Maude! His poem, 'Come into the Garden, Maude' appeared in 1857 and was immediately embraced by the reading public. The poem was later turned into a popular parlor song. It may have

been the song that ensured that my mother's mother also had Maude as a second name. In any event, Maude also became my mother's second (and not very usable) name.

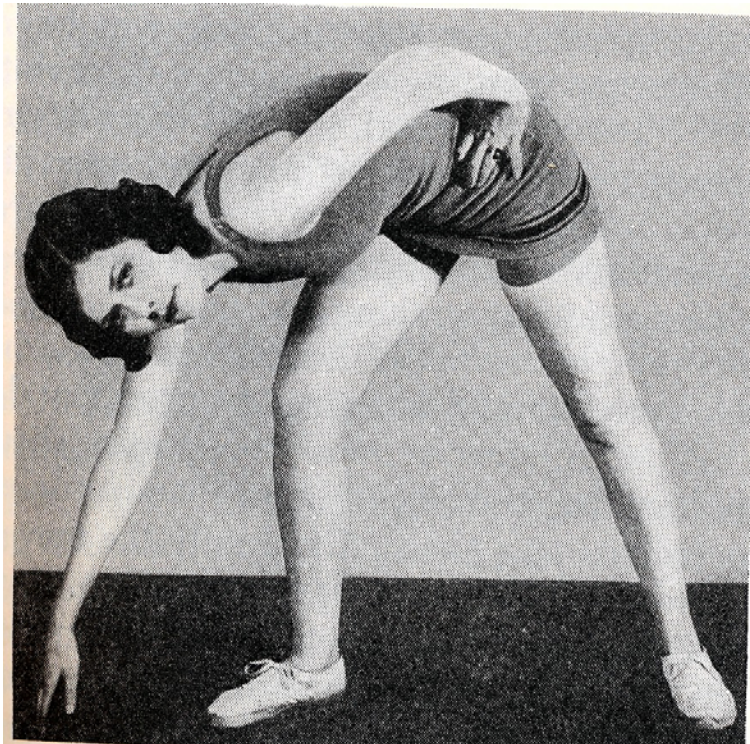
And Wallace? I seem to recall a compelling family reason for adding that to the list. Whatever the reason, it was hardly a name that could be called into service. There is a certain chilly quality about 'Wallace' and even if it worked with 'Bourne', Wallace Walker was not a winning combination. Bourne was my mother's maiden name and she added it to the list largely for dramatic effect. It brought out the full absurdity of her naming. In



Glasson's mother Lottie Maude and her grandmother Charlotte Wallace

theatrical moments, with head thrown back, her right arm extended, Glasson would recite her name: Glasson, Maude, Wallace, Bourne, Walker. In her sixties, Glasson, still wrestling those names, announced that she was now 'Jill'. Jill? I wondered how this was

going to work exactly. The phone rings. Glasson answers with, 'Jill here'. The caller either hangs up or says, 'I am so sorry, I must have a wrong number'. 'No, no', answers Jill, 'this is Glasson'. Or would Gil introduce Glasson as Jill to people who knew her as Glasson? This was not a successful experiment. It was too late in the day to discard Glasson. Besides, while 'Glasson' didn't go badly with my father's name, Gilbert, Gil and Jill were names better suited to goldfish. No, 'Glasson' had acquired a gracious, dignified patina. In the age of plastic it suggested French oak, wood grain and craftsmanship. 'Glasson' could not be just thrown away.



Physical culture in the nineteen thirties

As children we learnt that Glasson had been talented at gymnastics and calisthenics while at Teachers' College. Evidence of this Great Age had faded when I was an adolescent. There were no overt gymnastic moments, no kitchen calisthenics, only the story of a young performer who had been chosen to represent her state in a national competition. This may well have been the Royal South Street Society's famous Ballarat Eisteddfod, the first in Australia to include calisthenics in its program. Calisthenics entered the Victorian State School curriculum in the 1930s. Over the years the legend of this interstate competition had become less a story about balletic movement than one about the power of bureaucracy. Glasson asked for leave to attend the competition, so the story went, and the South Australian Education Department refused her request. We carried the

Education Department around with us from town to town and school to school. It was a Dickensian presence, a vast tangle of rules and prohibitions apparently designed to render the little people even smaller than they already were. Glasson Bourne, gymnast, disappeared and was never seen again, though her ghost may be heard as you pass by the Challa Gardens school where she undertook her training in physical culture. Gil would assume a melancholy air when he told this story or when he listened to Glasson telling it.

There was another, more mysterious story: Glasson's nervous breakdown, hinted at rather than told. As I was the third and youngest child by five years less family information filtered down to me (or so it seemed). It came as rather disjointed fragments from a remote past. Glasson had an older sister, Blanche, whom she evidently worshipped. Blanche was clever and accomplished, a lively spirit. Blanche and Glasson shared a double bed; plenty of giggling and shared secrets there. Then Blanche fell gravely ill. She was in agonies of pain. It took too long to realize that she had acute appendicitis. She died of a burst appendix, screaming in her father's arms as he struggled up the steps of the Adelaide Children's Hospital. That phrase, she died in her father's arms, has stayed with me. Glasson saw it all unfold, heard her sister screaming, saw the futile dash to the hospital, the agonizing death, the lifeless body. It must have been a scene of terrible desolation and bitter recrimination. Had Blanche not been taken to a doctor? Had the doctor failed to diagnose her condition? Had there been delays and hesitations that cost Blanche her life? Glasson was always suspicious of the medical profession and never quite trusted it. Perhaps the doctor had been at fault.

My mother may have mentioned Blanche, but I cannot remember being told the story. I have no memory of sitting down and being spoken to about her. We occasionally made gloomy Sunday visits to the cemetery; dead lilies in discoloured glass bowls, cracked headstones, the loud crunching of gravel paths. I trailed along behind my parents not wanting to be there among the dead. These visits became less frequent as the years wore on. Did we ever visit Blanche's grave? Not to my knowledge. I went to her grave site at the West Terrace cemetery in Adelaide and was pleased to see she was not alone in death; other members of her family had been buried with her. Blanche had died years before I was born, in another era on 3 September 1920. She was twelve and Glasson nine. At a time when death was omnipresent, was it harder to mourn the passing of a twelve year

old girl, a private grief unconnected to the great events of the time; the recent war, sacrifice and patriotism?

Blanche's death was surely traumatic enough to explain my mother's breakdown, but the story, vague as it was, had an added twist. Not long after Blanche died, how long I have no idea, the family went to the pictures, nine year old Glasson included. The film turned out to be some kind of horror movie. This proved too much for my mother, hence the breakdown. Attending such a film seemed an irresponsible thing to do and there was always a suggestion that Glasson's parents had been seriously negligent. The upshot was that I became aware that something terrible had happened to my mother well before I was born, something that evidently explained why at times she seemed on edge and, at other times, right over the edge. Yet that can only be part of the story, for it was clear that my father, who disliked any display of uncontrolled emotion, would invoke Glasson's real or imagined emotional fragility as a good reason for backing off when things looked tense. For this reason, we backed off from any serious discussion of short-sightedness because that might have created a scene. It seemed a more peaceful option to have us put up with a blurred adolescence in the hope that things might eventually clear up.

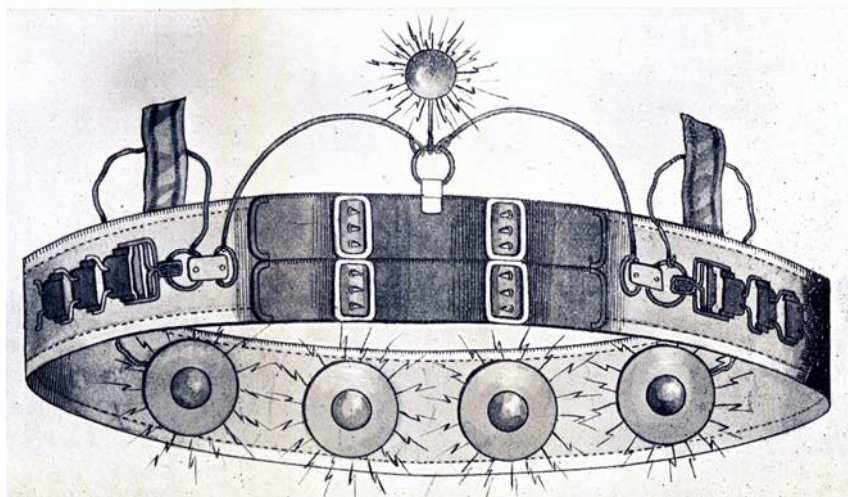
I was never in any doubt that my mother was a delicately balanced hydraulic device. The nineteenth century was the great age of steam. The British Empire surged forward on steam power, boilers straining under immense pressure and, on occasions, bursting. Factories, trains and ships devoured forests and mountains of coal as they generated yet more steam to drive their relentless turbines. Boilers of various descriptions entered the home. For years we had a chip heater in the bathroom, another moody device, that seemed to veer erratically between not doing nearly enough to get the water warm to doing far too much, building an ominous head of steam that threatened to scald us all. Out in the kitchen the pressure cooker worked hand in glove with the chip heater to reinforce the message that a build-up of steam could prove dangerous. When the pressure cooker really got going it let out an operatic shriek. Stand back! The metal escape valve gyrated, hissed and whistled like a mad diva. Glasson was somewhere on the chip heater/pressure cooker continuum, an appliance that had the potential to go dangerously wrong. I learnt to watch for the first signs of steam.

While the idea of the nervous breakdown might seem clear enough what took place is far from clear. Was Glasson diagnosed with this condition and treated for it? If so, who in Adelaide at that time might have made the diagnosis and what were the favored treatments? In the specific case of Glasson Maude Wallace Bourne there is little or nothing to go on. We do know that the modern world was thought to be particularly hard on the nerves. The theory went (more or less) like this: as industrial civilization gained momentum through the nineteenth century there was a shift in population from the country to the city. The city was deemed to be a place of unnatural crowding and discordant noise, a hissing, clanking, banging, grinding place. City people were pushed and pulled and jostled; tugged this way and that. They were always driven, always in a hurry, always conscious of time rushing by, of being late. Schedules and timetables proliferated and grew ever more detailed.

The nature of modern work shifted from manual labour to what nineteenth century theorists called 'brain work'. Brain work had more to do with pushing a pen in an office or adding up columns of figures than with big ideas. The typical urban brain worker was a desk-bound labourer with an unnecessary body and a brain burdened by a narrow, but relentless range of tasks. This mode of living drained, taxed and stretched the nerves. City folks could be so highly strung that even the smallest incident could result in them snapping. A loud bang or unexpected movement was all it took. That was supposed to be Glasson's state. She might snap at any time.

With the link between modern urban living and depleted nerves evidently established beyond reasonable doubt, an army of miracle workers moved in with tonics and therapies designed to restore robust health to nerve sufferers. More often than not they were out to make a quick dollar. Officially, the condition was known as neurasthenia. Two respected American physicians, George M Beard and S Weir Mitchell, put neurasthenia on the map. Beard's major study, *American Nervousness*, first appeared in 1880, while Mitchell devised a famous 'rest cure' for the condition. Glasson was a precocious recruit to the swelling ranks of neurasthenics struggling with the mysterious ailments of modernity, not that the cause of her condition was all that mysterious. Electrical therapies achieved quite a vogue on the assumption that the nervous system was a kind of electrical circuitry. Beard's first book has the unsettling title, *Electricity as a Tonic*. Feeding electric currents into sufferers via electro-magnetic belts proved lucrative

for practitioners if not necessarily very beneficial for their patients. In the 1890s, Sydney acquired a large and impressively titled Electro-Medical and Surgical Institute, specializing in 'nervous and chronic diseases'. There was money to be made from nervous exhaustion.



A restorative galvanic belt

Pills and tonics abounded. According to the advertisements, cigarettes also proved particularly restorative. Smoking Craven A provided a perfect opportunity to snatch a moment's relaxation in a busy work schedule. Craven A cigarettes 'never varied' and, better still, they soothed the throat and calmed the nerves. The alliterative Dr Morse purveyed 'Pink Pills for Pale People' which promised to bring a healthy colour to the pinched faces of the nervously impaired. The tonic 'Bidomak' worked wonders on 'sick nerves' and was a particularly effective treatment for listless children, or so it was claimed. For people entering their 'foolish forties', Indian Root Pills provided a necessary dietary supplement. They worked wonders in keeping people regular while also restoring lost vitality. There was altogether too much sickliness about. There was a plague of pale people.

It was common enough to link the supposed decline in health of city populations with the bogey of 'race suicide'. Advanced urban civilizations, of which Australia was considered a pretty good example, were considered to be leading the way in declining birth rates and the decay of the white race. In 1934 two gentlemen, a psychologist (John Bostock) and a physician (L Jarvis Nye) published a book for the times called *Wither Away? A Study of Race Psychology and the Factors Leading to Australia's National Decline*. The withering and declining that so concerned Bostock and Nye, parallels the collapse

attributable to neurasthenia. In popular parlance the condition was better known as nervous exhaustion, prostration or break-down. Brain fag and nerve fag were also used interchangeably. In *Wither Away?* the nation itself had become a neurasthenic patient; pallid, listless and in steady decline while all around the populous nations of Asia, bustled with demonic energy, threatening Australia's future. Driving home their point, Bostock and Nye placed a map opposite their title page showing Australia in relation to 'The Population of the East'. It was a common enough theme at the time: there were far too many of 'them' and not nearly enough of 'us'. Would we survive? The prospects were far from encouraging for, according to the authors, 'the restless vortex of world forces' once again threatened our civilization. Tackling a restless vortex, even with the benefit of Dr Morse's Pink Pills, was no easy task.

Billy Hughes, Prime Minister in the Great War and still a political force in the 1940s had a lot to say about Australia's threatened racial future. Hughes was deaf, wizened and irascible, all in all a very poor advertisement for the white race he had championed throughout his long political career. In 1937, the year before the 150th anniversary of white settlement in Australia, Hughes warned that modern habits and life styles threatened the nation's future. Our foods were increasingly processed, our lives were hurried and we lacked exercise. An epidemic of unfitness stalked the land. Hughes put it this way: 'We inherit the appetites of our ancestors, but our lives are ordered to a very different pattern. They lived a life in the open-air and earned their living literally by the sweat of their brows We, the descendants of one of the most vigorous, active and adventurous races, lead sedentary lives, take little corrective exercise and live on devitalized food.' There was no doubt about it. The vital energies of the race were ebbing away. Glasson was about to have her first child. Keeping the race on track, even improving it, had become a personal responsibility.

Although it might not appear so, a diagnosis of 'neurasthenia' was not necessarily all bad. Modernity and city living, which were offered as causes of the condition, certainly had their attractions, particularly so as neurasthenia was also associated with the creatively gifted. Neurasthenics claimed more than their fair share of artists, writers and performers. A highly tuned nervous system could help explain an appreciation of the poetry of life. Since calisthenics combined musicality and graceful movement, it could only be fully appreciated by people with an artistic sensibility. Neurasthenia could be

viewed as a kind of gift. There was certainly a theatrical streak in the Bournes. They were entertainers. Legend has it that Glasson's grandfather was a skilful dancer. One of his tricks was to fix pigeon eggs to the heels of his shoes. He would dance and cavort before an audience intent on the fate of those eggs. Presumably he managed not to break them. One of Glasson's brothers, Jock, carried on the showman tradition. Jock was the wit of the family, the fellow everyone turned to when a speech was called for. He was full of beans, the life of the party. The Bournes were not exactly feckless, but they enjoyed a laugh and had a robust sense of the ridiculous. Glasson did not have Jock's verbal flair - few people did - or his vivacity, but she had a dry, sometimes wacky sense of humour.

Glasson was keen on the comedian, Danny Kaye; 'wacky' is about the right word for his comedies, not that I have seen a Danny Kaye film in the last forty years. Glasson took me to *Knock on Wood* which was released in Australia in the mid 1950s. I didn't go to the films often and this was the only time I can recall just the two of us going. The theatre was quite full and we ended up near the front row. I have no recollection of the film at all partly because whatever was happening on the screen was nowhere near as diverting as what was going on next to me. My mother was convulsed with laughter, tears streamed down her face and as fast as she dabbed them away more would come. The more she laughed the more I laughed. Glasson had done so much laughing that by the end of the film she was barely able to get out of her seat. I rather fancied myself as a budding comedian and was already a keen student of Abbott and Costello. Danny Kaye was a new discovery and no doubt a revelation. Comedy could be powerful. Glasson may have taken me along as a fellow spirit or, given her state, as a chaperone and moderating influence. Perhaps I was serving as James James Morrison Morrison. I was well aware of my mother's brittle side, but I also knew she enjoyed a good laugh.

There was another story she told from her Teacher's College days. She was with a group of her fellow student teachers. They were being subjected to a tedious address on nature study. Their lecturer was evidently a fey kind of fellow with an excessively tender regard for his plants. When he pointed daintily to a pot and asked the students how they would determine whether the plant was alive or dead one of Glasson's friends leapt forward, ripped the plant from the pot, and announced: 'You'd check its roots'. Loud laughter all round. I heard the story several times and on each occasion there was lots of laughing, gasping and dabbing at the eyes. 'Ya gotta laugh', Glasson would say on such occasions,

watching me, hoping that I'd get the message. She once told me that the tragic mode was not my strength and that I'd be better off sticking with comedy. I may have been overdoing woe is me or, perhaps, I was turning out to be a good source of laughs. After doing or saying something particularly ridiculous she'd say to me with obvious approval, 'You're a fool lad. You know that don't you?' Or she'd tell me to 'Stop acting the giddy goat!'

There were phrases that stayed with me. They lent a touch of theatre to everyday life. As we bundled into the car and set off for home, Glasson would turn to Gil with the imperious command: 'Home James, and don't spare the horses'. Her father was a 'James' and I wonder if this ringing phrase dated from her own childhood. As we rolled along in the Vanguard, Gil driving sensibly as always, it pleased me to think of those horses, spittle flying, belting through the night at a cracking pace. Good old James, what a fellow he was! There were other quirky usages: eggs were 'cackle berries' and cornflakes, 'elephants' dandruff. I remember a teacher once showed a picture of a pumpkin and asked us what it was. My hand shot up and I gave the name we all used at home, 'yellow feed'. Amid loud laughter I stoutly protested that the name was correct. Glasson's father, James Henry Bourne was evidently a great one for these domestic performances. After a shopping trip he'd stride into the Marryatville home and say to Maudie in a voice so stern that his grandchildren became a little apprehensive: 'touch your purse, touch your purse'. James may also have been the source of a phrase Glasson used often when she wanted me to do something. I would earn her 'eternal gratitude' she would tell me, if I did so and so. When I formed a clear idea of what 'eternal' meant I suggested to Glasson that I had accumulated more than enough eternal gratitude to keep me going and offered this as a reason for declining her invitation to do whatever it was she wanted me to do. She took this response as evidence that I had done some thinking. On the rare occasions that I said something genuinely worthwhile, Glasson would say to me: 'You sure dribbled a bib full there baby'.

Like the Walkers, the Bournes had their dream of sudden, transforming wealth, though not in dusty mining districts. Theirs were urban and metropolitan dreams. Somewhere along the line they had formed the view that the Bournes either owned or had a claim upon the Old Curiosity Shop in London, made famous by Charles Dickens' novel of the same name. The story went that our claim was tied up in the great legal labyrinth known

as Chancery. We have a photograph of James and his father on the eve of their departure for England to make good their claim. They returned empty-handed. Glasson remained convinced that the Old Curiosity Shop was ours. On my first trip to England I made sure that we photographed 'our' atmospheric sixteenth century premises. Of course, the Bournes knew deep down that the grasping English would not hand over something so valuable to mere colonials.



I do not know when Glasson's affair with Mario Lanza, the American tenor of Italian parentage, began although it lasted for a number of years. Lanza had a voice that was at once powerfully masculine and softly caressing. Behind the scenes he battled alcoholism and weight problems, but on the screen in *The Student Prince* or *The Desert Song* he was as handsome and passionate as they as they came. He sang of love, longing and passion and there was such emotion there, such depth of feeling that Glasson knew that when Mario sang of 'you and you alone' as he appeared to do in almost all of his songs, he could only mean Glasson Maude Wallace Bourne Walker. I could see that Mario Lanza had romantic qualities that Gil Walker seemed to lack. Gil could not sing to save himself; his Burra upbringing denied him the flowing gestures and sweet cadences of romance. That was not something Burra Methodism did well. When Mario Lanza sang of love the very word 'love' soared magnificently from his mighty chest dripping with chocolate. He sobbed, he cried:

Beloved, With all my heart I love you,
With every breath I pray some day,
You will be mine,
Summer or Spring,
Winter or Fall,
You are my Life,
My love my all.



Mario Lanza

From:

<http://s3.amazonaws.com/findagrave/photos/2001/222/lanzamariobio.jpg>

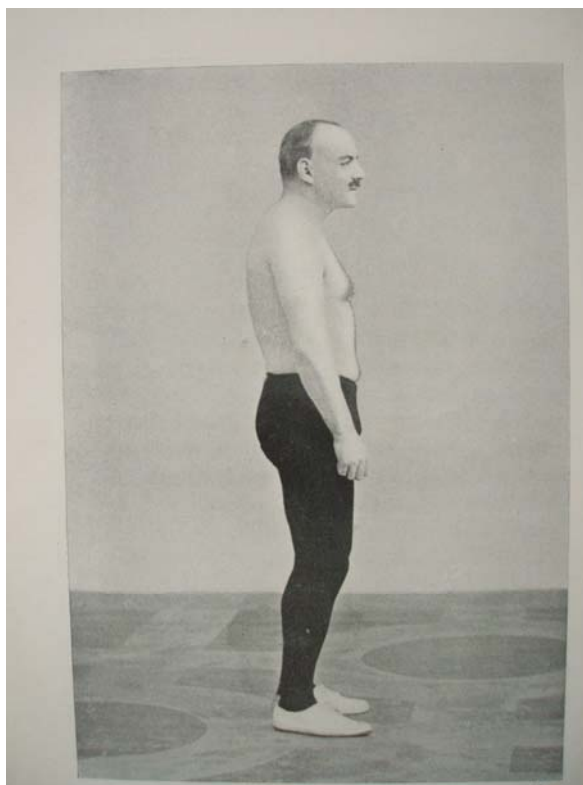
The 'Moonlight Serenade' was another of Glasson's favorites:

Overhead, the moon is beaming
White as blossoms on the bough
Nothing is heard but the song of a bird
Filling all the air with dreaming
Would my heart but still it's beating
Only you can tell it how, beloved
From your window give me greeting
Hear my eternal vow

That voice, so rich, creamy and melodious, so theatrically Italian and extravagant, touched Glasson in a way that Gil's ability to catch a yabby or shoot a rabbit with a .22 rifle at a considerable distance did not. It always seemed faintly scandalous to me that Mario Lanza had such an effect on my mother, even in our own home. Surely she could see that he was just another dodgy show pony like Latin lovers the world over. I had become nervously aware that if Mario Lanza was permitted to set the standard for romance, I was in a spot of bother.

Can we ever know our parents? The breakdown and the story of the thwarted gymnast point to broader and harder to name injuries and disappointments. Glasson had entered the teaching profession at a time when the clamp of respectability came down particularly hard on women. Teachers, especially women teachers, were expected to be exemplary citizens, beyond criticism. Moreover, no woman teacher, however skilful or talented was paid as much as her male equivalent no matter how incompetent. The rather zany Bourne inheritance was not necessarily well suited to school teaching or the great bureaucracy of the Education Department.

The teaching profession was inevitably caught up in the business of monitoring and improving the health of the rising generation. There was lots of measuring going on. Chests attracted a lot of attention. The science of anthropometry flourished. In the 1920s and 30s, the physical culture movement (which included gymnastics and calisthenics) was permeated by talk of racial renewal and racial fitness. It was part of the mission to breed a fitter race capable of carrying the torch of civilization into the future. The Germans seemed particularly advanced in this regard. Breeding was the responsibility of the fit, though all too often, or so it seemed, it was the unfit who took the bit between their teeth. While the fit held back, the weak, the deformed, the retarded and the scrofulous got to work reproducing their many debilitating mental and physical defects. Inferior types seemed to be out-breeding their betters. Glasson had a foot in both camps. By the standards of the day her nervous breakdown was a sign of unfitness. Yet her calisthenic prowess suggested a eugenically sound specimen. Glasson was 'fit' according to some lights and unfit according to others.



Demonstrating the poor posture typical of civilized man

There is quite a literature on physical culture. I am the proud owner of numerous sought after titles, including F.A.Hornibrook's *The Culture of the Abdomen: The Cure of Obesity and Constipation*. I paid a dollar for that little gem: worth it for the photographs alone. Much of the physical culture literature, like Don Athaldo's *Health, Strength and Muscular Power* was directed to men. Athaldo's mighty chest was a thing to behold. One of my happiest finds was the complete, updated edition of Bernarr Macfadden's 1937 *Encyclopedia of Health and Physical Culture* in eight lavishly illustrated volumes. There it was, in an unassuming op shop in Dunedin, patiently awaiting my arrival. *The Encyclopedia* was not a particularly sensible purchase for a traveller. The Macfadden Book Company Inc had really gone to town with this one. These were weighty volumes with thick, expensive paper and heavy embossed leather binding. Each volume carried Bernarr's image in profile, like a Greek medallion. All up, 3,846 pages. The eight volumes weighed a ton. Lifting them was an exercise program in itself. As I flicked through the pages, debating whether to buy the book, I was struck by how much it reminded me of Glasson Maude Wallace Bourne's world. She may not have seen Bernarr's *Encyclopedia*, but it represented the apex of physical culture publications of the 1930s. As for dazzling Bernarr, he was one of the greatest contemporary exponents of physical culture. Glasson must have heard of him. Leaving *The Encyclopedia* in Dunedin was out of the question.

Insert picture of Bernarr in his green underpants from Heat magazine

Bernarr in his green underpants

While noble sentiments about the betterment of humankind abound in Bernarr's work, there is also something just a bit risqué about the whole physical culture enterprise. It was about building beautiful bodies and, if possible, displaying them. (Calisthenics was an adaptation of two Greek words meaning 'beautiful strength'). Although Bernarr was past his prime at 65, he was keen to display what he had to offer. We find him striking impressive poses in green underpants and Greek sandals, not an easy thing to do well at any age. Elsewhere, the reader is urged to adopt the healthy German practice of going on walking tours, an activity which gained 'added health value by the development of interest in sun-bathing and freedom from clothing'. More underpants. Bernarr was a great supporter of women's athletics, believing that athletic exercise had helped take women out of 'the prison-house of convention and superstition' and no doubt out of their prudish clothing as well. Athletics had helped put modern women on an equal footing with men. When Glasson was 17, Calisthenics was accepted as an Olympic sport for the first time in the 1928 games held in Amsterdam. She was riding the wave.

Bernarr was a physical culturist after my mother's own heart. He was a great believer in nature providing all the clues we needed to live long and healthy lives. Fresh air, natural foods and good posture were key articles of the McFadden credo. Bernarr was no fan of pills and doctors, nor was Glasson. No Pink Pills or Craven A for them. Correct posture was vital and all the more so, as Bernarr explained at considerable length, because city

living and office work produced hunched, misshapen bodies. Bernarr laid out a demanding regimen with high expectations.

I don't think I turned out according to plan. I had quite an appetite and was always asking 'what's for tea', often enough when we had already eaten. I was called Robert (my second name) 'the rabbit' because I was always eating (and for no other reason). Glasson also took to calling me 'a skinny gutted herring'. 'Where does he put it all?' she would say, 'He must have hollow legs'. Clearly, there was not much to show for this prodigious food intake. I was not Don Athaldo. Even for a skinny gutted herring the fundamentals of posture were important. There was nothing worse than becoming round-shouldered. Round shoulders cramped the chest, restricted the lungs and reduced the vivifying flow of fresh, oxygenated air into the system. I remember having round-shouldered specimens pointed out to me, unobtrusively of course, by my parents. Shoulders had to be drawn back, the abdomen drawn in (Hornibrook is good value here) and the spine held erect. A weak or defective spine was a very bad business. Bernarr had a wonderful spine, square shoulders and a chest so expansive that ladies swooned at the mere sight of it. I did see merit in having one of those. I too was encouraged to keep my shoulders held back, no doubt in the hope that this might help turn me into something resembling a fine specimen of manhood.

It must have come as an added disappointment to Glasson that her third and final child was, if anything, more short-sighted than the first two. Short-sightedness carried with it quite a stigma. In severe cases a life of bumbling ineptitude seemed almost inevitable. I once came across a story from the 1920s, published in a Boys' Own style of publication, about a chap called 'Goggles'. The object of the story was not to condemn the merciless bullying that 'Goggles' was subjected to, that seemed only natural, but to applaud his heroic application at the batting crease which enabled his team to fluke an unlikely victory. For Glasson, not wearing glasses was the answer. She may have felt that this might reduce the bullying and the stigma, though I doubt that was her real motive. More important was her belief that wearing glasses weakened the eye muscles. She was not alone in thinking that if the eyes were made to work harder to see things that were otherwise foggy and obscure the eye muscles would grow stronger and sight would improve: Glasson's theory of muscular effort. Glasses were an artificial and harmful intrusion; let nature take its course.

It follows that Glasson was a great believer in fresh air and the only place to find it was out of doors. Indoor things, especially beds that had been slept in, had to be well aired. She was always 'airing the beds'. The notion that being indoors was not as healthy as being outdoors helps explain the problem with books. Reading was primarily an indoor practice. I sensed that whereas being cooped up indoors (that was the phrase) would weaken me and weaken my eyes, being outdoors in the open-air was strengthening. I learnt that being an outdoor, free-range people made Australians healthier than the English. Racially speaking we were all whites (of course) but we Australians had a healthier colour than the English because we got more fresh air into our lungs: none of their sickly pallor for us. And we had the Australian sun to bring a bronzed glow to our bodies.

Glasson was big on salads and fruit. Again, Bernarr would have approved. I suspect that the salad was also a labour saving device. It could be pretty rudimentary. Two iceberg lettuce leaves cradling an uncut tomato, lightly dressed with the hope that such an offering might prove nutritious. On better days, cucumbers and potatoes would appear. Silverside, heartily red and prepared in the pressure cooker, often accompanied the salad. And on Sunday there was the roast. We 'filled up' on fruit. I grew up with the idea that fruit was free. When we lived in Cadell on the River Murray, a fruit growing town, half-cases of apricots, peaches and nectarines would appear on the back step, left there by the locals as a friendly gesture to the school teacher.

While a healthy diet was considered important, the precepts underpinning 'beautiful strength' were never spelt out or intellectualized. There were no speeches on healthy living in part, I suspect, because large statements or overt commitments could appear opinionated. It was more important to conceal thoughts in order not to stand out than to have ideas that might attract attention or possible ridicule. In the end, Bernarr parading around in his underpants, poking out his chest, showing off the body beautiful, was a bit of a joke. He was an American when all was said and done. They were odd that way. We Australians were not so showy, not so full of ourselves.

Over the years Glasson plugged away at bodies, hers and mine. I was reminded to keep my shoulders drawn back, assuming an upright stance. A firm handshake was part of this

repertoire of bodily skills. Firmness was altogether preferable to flabbiness. Flabby people invaded other people's space. They lacked control. People with flabby bodies had flabby minds. I am not sure when Glasson took up yoga, a continuation of the quest to master the body. As far as I know she did not attend classes. This was a private, even surreptitious pursuit, although I sometimes caught her off guard, touching her toes or doing her stretches. While I know it is wrong for a son to comment on his mother's legs, I was struck through these yoga workouts in the living room that her legs were strong and well-muscled. At first glance she may have seemed small, but looks were deceiving. There was a compact strength about Glasson Maude Wallace Bourne Walker. She could stand her ground.