



LEIGHTON SMITH

BEYOND THE MICROPHONE




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 HarperCollins *Publishers*

Dedication

*In memory of my cousin Warren Jones —
older 'brother', mentor in my early years,
friend, guide and my favourite relative.*

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Introduction

My first response to the invitation to write this book was 'No'. I never wanted or intended to do on in spite of being asked on a number of occasions. Having interviewed numerous authors, I have learned the amount of concentration and dedication, not to mention discipline, it takes.

Consequently, I have not made a habit of retaining records such as magazine and newspaper articles, interviews and photos. Those I have kept are in no sort of order, rather thrown in boxes and drawers, waiting for a cleanout. Much of what appears in the book has been kept by others. More than once while writing I regretted being so casual.

The original contact was made not to me but to Carolyn Leaney, my producer. She sounded me out one morning during a newsbreak. She conveyed my disinterest to Vicki Marsdon at HarperCollins. As I was to find out, Carolyn thought it a much better idea than I did and these two colluded, eventually wearing me down.

It will be cathartic, I was told. Write it for the boys, they suggested. Well, now that it's written I can say 'cathartic in part', but also disturbing to a small degree. Excavating memories has not always been pleasant and some of those are not included. I have and still value my privacy, jealously so.

After nigh on 40 years behind the micro phone I have been privileged to meet a lot of fascinating and legendary people. I have been able to travel to places and experience things not always available. And I've worked with some great folk who share a similar passion for radio. I believe it is the most rewarding medium of all.

So this book is for those who have the tolerance to read it, especially those listeners and participants who have shared at least part of what has been and gone and hopefully what is yet to come.

Especially, it is for the three most important people in my life:

Charles,
Christian
and Carolyn.

In the beginning

It's 8.40 a.m. Music up.

'Morning, New Zealand, I'm Leighton Smith.'

Music up and fades.

'Morning and welcome to the programme. We're here until midday. Our number, if you'd like to join us, 0800 — eighty — ten — eighty.'

Monday to Friday, for the best part of 28 years, with just the odd variation, that's how I've opened my radio programme to the ZB audience. By anyone's standards in this business, 28 years doing the same programme at the same station ain't bad. When I resigned from 5AA Adelaide, my then producer Jenny Manley was more than a tiny bit annoyed.

'You'll be bored s***less in 18 months,' she exclaimed.

Her opinion of a future in Auckland wasn't high.

Certainly, those 28 years (and climbing) have exceeded anything I anticipated. Up to that point in my life the longest I'd remained in a job was the five years in Wellington. Apart from that it was six months to 18 months with no serious roots established. So why has it been so enduring? I put it down to the coming together of numerous factors. It has interested me, fascinated me even. It has challenged and rewarded me with experiences, friendships and contacts. I have been privileged to be able to help people in all sorts of circumstances. And, best of all, it has delivered the most wonderful relationships of my life.

Like everything, talk radio has changed and continues to do so. Society and technology demand it. So does management. Generational change forces it. But I've long believed that there is much that stays the same. Each generation makes its own set of mistakes and hopefully we learn from them.

Talk back revolves around two things: information and opinion. The most dramatic change has come about with the introduction of the Internet. It has benefited both sides of the microphone. In the early www days I was the first at News-talk ZB to utilise the net. I trawled it for hours, searching for information. Prior to the mid to late 1990s, I bought foreign newspapers, particularly Australian and international magazines. While that was expensive, it is arguably more costly now.

Staying ahead of the audience with news and information is vital, but as that information becomes more easily and widely available it's harder to be first. Why? The information is just so voluminous it's impossible. In fact, at the time of putting this book together, there are a number of listeners who, unsolicited, contribute a great deal by forwarding articles and stories to my in-box. They are literally a team of voluntary stringers. The information then needs to be filtered for my naturally conservative use.

But now to where it all started.

I was born at Preston Hospital, Melbourne on 13 December 1946. I may not have always done the right thing by my mother, but on this occasion I was exemplary in not keeping her waiting. My arrival came a week early and I weighed in at a manageable 6 pounds 13 ounces. At that time my father was studying at the University of Melbourne, changing his direction in life from teacher to architect, and Mum and Dad were living in a sleep-out type arrangement at the back of Granddad's real estate agency in Preston. Just a few years ago we went back there and had a look through the area. A lane runs past it at the rear of the building and it is all still intact. That was my first home, my first bed. S

on the social strata at that time, with Dad at university, we were probably struggling a bit and we were looked after to some extent by family.

Moving up in the world, Dad built a house at Montmorency, about 18 kilometres from the Melbourne CBD. It was a very avant-garde construction for the time. From there we went to Mount Martha, some 60 kilometres south-east of the CBD, where Dad built once again before we came back into Melbourne and rented in Camberwell, a middle-class suburb. This was an interim measure before Mum and Dad went overseas for two years and everything changed. My sister Meredith and I went and stayed with Grandma Smith who lived in the country on a dirt road with tank water and an 'outback house'.

Some of my earliest memories are of the new house at Montmorency. Dad was at the forefront of post-war architecture. The Montmorency house had floor-to-ceiling glass in the living area and, being on the outskirts of the city, there was plenty of Australian wildlife still about — which is why a redbellied black snake found its way inside. I have always remembered its frantic slithering along the living room windows, desperately trying to escape. In the end it was dealt to. I was well into my adult life when Mum assured me I was asleep at the time and never saw the snake. An early example of how the mind can trick you. I had patently absorbed the detail, in the telling.

Then, there was the accident that might have affected my whole life. At Christmas time we were and sat on Santa's knee in a department store. I don't recall what I wished for, but Santa gave me a little tin whistle, about six inches long. Back home, I raced off to show my mate Michael Conroy with the whistle in my mouth. It was raining, the dirt path was wet. I slipped and fell, and the whistle went down my throat, cutting it badly but missing the vocal cords. Repairs were required and I recall the chloroform mask being frighteningly put over my face, before blackness ensued. If I remember correctly there were three or four stitches inserted.

A much more pleasant early memory was when we eventually moved out of the house. The purchaser had a model yacht that would float and sail. It was a big yacht and so enthusiastic was I about it that he presented it to me. That gave many years of pleasure.

Ruth, my mother, was the youngest of five children and considerably the youngest. There were three older brothers and her closest sibling, a sister, who was nine years older. Her father, Llewellyn Jones, was the mayor of the city of Preston for two periods — the last mayor of the town in 1925–26 and the first mayor when it became a city in 1926. Mum had her twenty-first birthday at the Town Hall. Granddad was not only mayor but a real estate agent and auctioneer, in which role he was responsible for the subdivisional sales of Preston. Eventually, the middle son (Uncle Laurie) took over the business and made a great deal of money. I learned some interesting lessons from him later.

Mum was an attractive young woman, about 5 feet 3 inches (as opposed to Dad who was 6 foot 1). She grew up very close to a cousin, Jack Irwin. Jack went off to join the Royal Air Force in the Second World War only to get shot down and killed by the Germans. A year after the end of the war, I was christened Leighton Irwin. From that point, and for the rest of her life, Mum never had any regard for Germans. She worked as a secretary and then, like many of her era, became a full-time mother and, I think, a very good one — not that I appreciated it at the time.

The family was raised in the Seventh Day Adventist faith, but by the time I appeared a few things had changed. Poppa Jones was no longer a church member. While I never saw him drink alcohol, I recall the wonderfully sweet smell of pipe tobacco which was never far from his old leather chair by the fire in the house 'Moonshine', in Mount Martha. 'Mumma' Jones was just what a boy's grandmother should be — loving and caring, funny and a good cook. Mince on toast for breakfast was something I'd never get at home. She gave wonderful hugs and never got cross. She deserved to live forever.

Poppa died in 1962 and Mumma in 1974. In the last few years of her life she moved the 40 miles

from Mount Martha, on Port Phillip Bay, up to Preston to live next door to Uncle Laurie. During the time I worked a Christmas university vacation with the local council and stayed in 'Moonshine' on my own. It was a Saturday night when I drove up to Melbourne to see the new hot movie *Rosemary Baby*, a psychological horror film. There was a strong wind that night and an overhanging branch kept banging on the corrugated roof. Consequently, I slept not a wink and for that I always thought director Roman Polanski deserved his later problems.

Sidney, my father, was one of three children, and while his parents weren't originally Seventh Day Adventists, Grandma Smith found God after her husband came back a mental wreck from serving in the trenches in the First World War. Granddad came from a farming family who lived north of Perth and he was a school teacher. Returning from the battlefields, he tried teaching again but couldn't handle it and went back to the farm before ending up in a mental asylum. He died in 1949 when I was just three.

In the family records there's a very poignant letter from Granddad Smith to my dad at the time of his wedding to Mum. It was in 1944 and the letter is written from the mental asylum at Claremont. Clearly, Granddad was not well enough to attend the wedding, but he wrote fluently and conveyed some sage advice, 'Be kind and patient and honourable come what may', and signed off with 'much love from your old Dad'.

Dad was the oldest in the family and with his father off the scene he became the surrogate main head of the house. His younger brother Don left for the United States as an accountant and there pursued himself through medical school to become a doctor. He and his New Zealand wife Nita had two daughters, my cousins, of course. It is a sad fact that they are the only cousins from my father's side of the family. Adelle, I met briefly, once, in Austin, Texas at my sister Meredith's. I was there for the Willie Nelson Fourth of July concert in 1999. Adelle lived in Dallas and died of colon cancer in 2000. Karen I have never met.

Dad's sister Norma didn't marry until much later in life. I never met Norman, the man she married, but I understand he adored her. Tragically, he died in the surf off Wollongong beach some years later.

My father left Perth to undertake teacher training at the Adventist College near Newcastle. At some stage his mother and siblings followed, but after graduating Dad moved to a teaching job in Victoria. He met Mum in Melbourne. They married quite quickly and moved to Bendigo in central Victoria. When the Second World War was over Dad enrolled in architecture at the University of Melbourne. He was patently good, borne out by his winning a major scholarship to work in a large architectural firm in London for 12 months. The result of this scholarship success was that both my parents left Australia in 1952 by ship, bound for London. Meredith and I didn't see our parents for two years.

Over the years there has been occasional conjecture over how they could leave two young children for so long and what the effect on us might have been. I was six and Meredith about 18 months. So here, at least in part, is my take on it. For as long as I can remember, there has been generational change in attitudes. Not just as regards raising children, but in practically every aspect of life, so that judgement calls based on today's standards (or lack of) and applied to yesterday's circumstances are sometimes a bit precious. This was the post-war era. People made all sorts of sacrifices. I don't recall any grave trauma. I don't recall Mum and Dad leaving but certainly remember their return.

At the time I was unaware of it, but they had a plan. They were going to London where they would get established and then have us brought over. I think they intended to stay for longer than 12 months. Of course, what they discovered was that post-war London of the early '50s was considerably different from what was imagined. They were reduced to living in a boarding house, in one room and a shared bathroom (my first job in radio was painfully similar). So plan 'B' evolved. Meredith and I stayed with Grandma and Norma. Shared bedroom, chip water heater, and an out-house 20 metres away with

newspaper for you know what. Not terribly different to what Mum and Dad were experiencing.

~~Meredith was too young at the time, but I started to learn about responsibility and other aspects~~ life: collecting firewood; cleaning everyone's shoes for church on a Friday. I learned to sow seeds and pull weeds in the vegetable garden. There was a vacant lot next to us where I once built a hut out of split logs. In that hut I kissed my first girl. On the cheek! I have no idea now who she was nor, for that matter, where the idea came from. Life around Grandma's house was very proper. Which reminds me of the time I'd been playing in the surrounding bush and a tick attached itself to what is medically known as the scrotum. As Grandma was busy she sent me off to find Aunt Norma who happened to be in bed. In I bowled, delicate part in hand. Norma screamed and rolled to face the wall uttering instructions to 'Go away'. It was my first experience of rejection.

MEREDITH: I think Mum and Dad being away had a major impact on us as kids. For me, I didn't really remember my parents when they came back and, for Leighton, I think it was very hard living with a maiden aunt and a widowed grandmother, meaning there were no male role models around him. Also our grandmother and aunt were very strict and into their religion, and that meant we had a lot of restrictions. For Leighton it meant going to school in Cooranbong, south of Newcastle, where our grandmother lived. Every Sabbath we went to the local Avondale church and kept the Sabbath in a very strict way as the Seventh Day Adventists do. I remember they took in boarders too, who lived in a cabin out the back of the house. Usually, they were foreign students attending Avondale College.

Our only contact with Mum and Dad was by regular aerogramme — all addressed to Master Leighton Smith — some in block printing so I could read them and others in Mum's or Dad's normal handwriting.

17 SEPTEMBER 1953

We are so pleased that our dear children are so happy at Grandma's and that Leighton likes school and his new teacher. Hope he is being an extra good boy for Grandma. Mumma would love to hear from you. Perhaps you could write her a little letter, Leighton.

11 DECEMBER 1953

We are thinking of you, our darling boy, because it is your birthday on Sunday. How we should like to be with you. We do hope you have a happy birthday with a pretty birthday cake and some friends to tea.

26 APRIL 1954

Mummy and I were so happy to get your letter. We are glad you are both well and you are so happy at school ... we do love you very much and miss you. We know Jesus will look after you until we come home and we pray this every day.

28 MAY 1954

How is your bike? I hope it is not getting too small for you as you grow ... we are now in Rome. The other day we climbed the Leaning Tower of Pisa. We are sending you a flag for your bike with a picture of this tower on it.

So much for thinking they would be home in a year's time. After 12 months in London they went to the United States where Dad had been offered a very good job in Washington DC which they decided to take, and so it was two years before they came back. While I can't recall in any detail speaking to Mum about what had transpired, I do know from later conversations with my father that there was some marital trouble. Mum wanted to come back and Dad wanted to take advantage of the opportunity. So they went to Washington and naturally the experience stood him in good stead for the rest of his working life.

MEREDITH: I think the two years was very hard on both of us, but maybe more on Leighton as he was well aware that his dad and mum were gone and he didn't have a good substitute. At that age, though, he didn't tease me and seemed a kind big brother. We both had pets in the form of some bantam hens that were in with the chickens our grandmother kept for a supply of eggs. It was almost a rural life in a small country town. I think Leighton resented our grandmother and aunt from that period on, as he associated them with the absence of our parents who I know he missed terribly.

For that whole two years they were away, Meredith and I shared a room with Grandma at Red Hill Road. It was a reasonably large room in a two-bedroom house. I remember the layout. My bed was by the window. Sharing didn't bother me at the time, but now I think, 'Good grief.' I picked up on something was afoot when I caught Grandma and Norma whispering in concerned tones. Even at that age I knew they were not looking forward to losing us.

Dad arrived by taxi late one night after catching a train from Sydney to Morisset. I was supposed to be asleep — to heck with that. I was wide awake, heard the cab arrive, car door shut and gate open. Through the fly-screen I called out.

'Dad!'

'Yes, it's me,' came his reply.

I was out of bed, through the front door and jumped into his arms.

And that is the recollection I have of their return. Mum and Dad were staying in a house on the waterfront at Rose Bay in Sydney. The harbour lapped against a stone retaining wall at the bottom of the lawn. Flying boats took off and landed right in front. The house was owned by family friends who were in Europe for six months. It was total luxury and quite in contrast to Red Hill Road in Cooranbong. Meredith moved down straight away, but I had to finish the school year at Grandma's and this I was not happy about.

Two years without your parents at such a formative age is a long time. There is no question that the experience contributed to my attitude and make-up. While I learned a lot from Grandma Smith — what's good and bad and about responsibility — I think her strictness encouraged a rebellious side in her grandson which is present to this day.

I had started school at Mount Martha and within the year we moved back into central Melbourne. I had only a year or so at school in Hawthorne before uprooting to Grandma's — two years there — and then Sydney. That is a lot of schools for a young bloke with no time to establish solid friendships. Many years later, a friend with some experience in these matters announced that I had grown up and become independent too quickly in life. He may have been right.

There is almost five years between Meredith and me, so in those early years we weren't particularly close. While that has changed much for the better as adults, she will probably remember me as an incessant tease.

MEREDITH: Having a brother who was five years older than me probably made me tough in the end. ~~He was bigger, stronger, faster and had friends at the same level. He had an innate desire to tease his little sister, whether it was a punch on the upper arm as he passed by, or throwing away in a 'garage clean-out day' all my treasured scrapbooks full of carefully collected, cut-out and pasted pictures of the Beatles. The only time we were allies was Christmas morning when, before our parents were up, we'd unite to feel and shake packages to see what might be inside. Most of the rest of the time we were at war.~~

Leighton and I drew closer as we became adults and both married, although my moving to the USA meant we didn't see each other for years at a time. When our father became ill from colon cancer we became closer than we'd ever been. His death and the subsequent death of our mother about eight years later made us both realise how much we meant to each other as the last of the family. I think we've regretted not living closer as our children haven't been able to know each other growing up.

Those years were very active — lots of biking, with quite a bike ride to school. On Dora Creek there a place known as The Point, at the intersection of two creeks. That's where we learned to swim in the dark, murky waters. There are wonderful childhood memories of rope swings and diving boards and lots of water games. It was the best of times in an era when kids roamed free and safely. In writing this, the memories come flooding back.

Mum moved into care in 2003. Meredith and I met in Sydney to do what responsible children do. We went through her small apartment, sorted things, tossed a lot out, and decided who would keep what. I'm pleased to say there were no disagreements. I wanted her to have whatever she wanted to remember her mother. She insisted I must have some items. I've heard some ugly stories of sibling squabbles. Ours wasn't one of them.

I returned to New Zealand with some photos, particularly of grandparents. There was an album with my school records, photos and various letters. It has been in the cupboard ever since and only fully examined for the purposes of this exercise. Going through it was both embarrassing and rewarding.

When we resumed life as a family we lived in a rented house at 52 Campbell Avenue, Normanhurst in Sydney. It was a bike through the bush to the Seventh Day Adventist primary school in Fox Valley Road, on the other side of the valley. Reports from the time carry comments like 'I am of the opinion Leighton can do better.' To the next term's — 'Conduct and attitude are constantly on the up-grade. Marks are higher this time and a more true indication of his worth.'

These reports are signed by Miss G Peatey, one of two female teachers who had an effect on me. Miss Peatey would grip my jaw and demand eye contact. To a nine year old she was severe and threatening. Her favourite phrase with me was 'Don't you dare do that again.' Years later when the James Bond movie *From Russia with Love* came out, it clicked who Rosa Klebb had been based on. Miss Peatey couldn't teach in today's PC environment, more's the pity.

High school caused minor domestic ructions. There was a choice between the Seventh Day Adventist High School, Knox College, and the recently opened Normanhurst Boys High. Mum and Dad couldn't agree. I seem to remember that Mum got her wish. Normanhurst was the equivalent of Melbourne College that she had attended. It was a challenging time. The kids had quite different backgrounds to what I was used to, and guess who fell into the wrong company. It was an exclusive 'state school', just built. I was the second or third intake and in class 1c. Classes extended from 1a to 1f, so you could move up or down according to ability or effort.

I didn't settle well and as a result got off to a bad start. I fell in with a classmate called Richard. He was the kind of kid your parents wouldn't want you associating with. By the age of 13 or 14 he was smoking, shoplifting, wagging school and failing. Goodness knows what happened to him in the long

run. He lived a couple of suburbs away, and our association was restricted to school and after. He was proud of his shoplifting tactics and I witnessed the cigarette-filching from Woolworths more than once.

It was at this point that I must reluctantly admit to joining his exploits. Right by Wahroonga railway station was a family-owned business called Mussetts. They sold everything from milkshakes to golf balls. Any afternoon after 3.30 the shop would fill up with kids from a number of local schools, most leaving their bags piled up outside the two entrances. It was a popular place for drinks and snacks, and the staff were run off their feet. It was in this environment that Richard was cleverly, or so he thought, filling his bag from the shelves. That is, until Mr Mussett put a restraining hand on his shoulder. After being admonished for the company I kept, I was invited to leave while the police were on the way to deal with Richard. Calls were made to the school, and the Headmaster, Mr Pearson, called Richard's parents. He also thought mine should be made aware.

Under severe questioning from both Mum and Dad that night, I confessed and produced my ill-gotten gains. You see, after leaving my bag outside the store, I had secreted one item at a time and had gone outside. I thought I was much smarter than Richard.

There was only one time my father hit me, but this wasn't the occasion. The next day I was back at the store in front of Mr Mussett, confessing and apologising and returning his property. I did it on my own and it may have been the hardest thing I had done in my life so far. But oh, the shame I had brought on my parents. Funny thing was, Mr Mussett took an interest in me and we became 'friends' after that. As for Richard, we didn't spend much time together from then on.

There was, fortunately, a positive side to schooling that was developing. When Mum was young she had learned piano and cello and was determined I would do the same. Both Meredith and I started piano in primary school and I picked up cello at Normanhurst Boys High, joining the school orchestra under the wing of the music director, Mr Dalby. As the only cellist, I started featuring in school concerts and reached a point of ability where Mr Dalby commanded me to play at his wedding. Not just an ordinary wedding. It was held in St Stephen's Cathedral in Macquarie Street, Sydney and it turned out Mr Dalby was well connected in the symphonic world. After the service, the lead from the Sydney Symphony Orchestra told my parents that I was orchestra potential. Oh no I wasn't!

MEREDITH: Leighton was a great music lover, mostly of the pop music of the '50s and '60s, although he was an accomplished cellist like his mother. Even I thought he had musical talent. In addition he seemed to find most satisfaction in watching *The Three Stooges*, hanging out with his teenage friends and idolising rock stars like Bobby Rydell. I'll never forget how long he took in the bathroom trying to get his hair to look like Bobby Rydell's and the 'rockers' of the time. He found his role models in them.

My other hobbies were girls and getting out of anything I could. In those early high school years I talked my way out of piano so I could concentrate on cello. I dropped French because my maths were bad. It was almost a game of avoidance. When I left Normanhurst Boys High, I also dropped the cello. It could or must be said that I worked hardest of all at avoiding the opportunities I was presented with. It should be also recognised that by default Mr Dalby had an unintentional influence on my broadcasting career. While waiting for a lift home in his VW after orchestra practice I first listened to and then got hooked on radio serials: 'Tarzan', 'The Lone Ranger', 'Flash Gordon'; they all became part of the attraction of radio.

Then there was music, albeit the wrong sort of music — at least according to Mr Dalby and my parents. Rock 'n' roll and radio joined forces to divert my attention even further and 'ruin' my life.

wasn't long before I knew more about songs, records and artists than the rest of the school combined. But for some time I was not allowed to buy records — not one. Dad wouldn't allow it. But as we know, things can move in strange ways. In 1959 Dad went to England on a business trip and returned via Hong Kong, where he bought me the smallest transistor ever made. If you want a contemporary comparison, think how today's iPhone compares to the original brick cell phones. It influenced me considerably. Maybe more importantly for a young teen, it was a 'chick-magnet'.

From here on, for better or worse, things started happening fast. At about 14 I walked into the mini bar attached to the Hornsby picture theatre and said to the Greek man behind the counter, 'Three packets of PK, please.'

Intentionally looking above my head, around the empty store, he replied, 'Who said that?'

My voice broke young. I mention that he was a Greek for a reason. Greeks (and Italians) had been flowing into Australia in the post-war period and were having a profound effect on the culture. I had discovered they were there to succeed and they worked hard. And those who moved into retail seemed to have a good sense of humour. It was my first contact with multiculturalism — the natural, non-PK kind.

At 16 I was in the 2GB studio with John Laws as a viewing guest. It was a Sunday and the station manager, Ken Taylor, casually strolled in. Laws introduced us.

'Leighton's interested in becoming an announcer.' To which Ken replied, 'I can hear the voice.'

You don't forget these things. Taylor almost got me a job at a country station, but I was too young and my parents said no.

At this point Dad decided that if radio was such a passion, it should be approached properly. He organised some training with a professional by the name of Bryson Taylor. After a few weeks he encouraged me to enter the Sydney Eisteddfod Arts competition. It was the H.E. Beaver Memorial Award for commercial broad casting. The script for the preliminaries arrived two weeks prior to the competition. Without Mr Taylor goodness knows what I would have done with the pronunciation of, for example, Herbert von Karajan.

There were 51 entrants and seven finalists — underage me and six others. The age qualification for entry was 17, so I put down 17. Nobody asked for age evidence. This time you got the script 15 minutes before going on stage, in the State Theatre, in front of too many people. Unfortunately, I didn't do so well. Ad libbing for two minutes was beyond me at that stage. To be blunt, I blew it. I would be a number of years and plenty of life experience before I sat behind a mike professionally. Mind you, being the youngest of 51 and making the final seven wasn't a total disaster.

I might embarrass myself less if I am brief at this juncture. While I would get to university a couple of years hence, I was not a good student. Application evaded me. Girls took far too much time and attention — one in particular. Even at the Australian National University, Canberra, enrolled in Law, there were too many other attractions. I joined the student union, got involved in the student newspaper and the debating club. Through the latter, I became friends with a graduate named Peter Paterson, about whom more later. But Peter would appear and disappear from my life for a number of years.

MEREDITH: The two years of our parents' absence, among other reasons, probably scarred him to the extent that he found it difficult to settle down to school and academic studies. I think Leighton found his emotional outlet in rebelling against the strict rules of the Seventh Day Adventist church, our grandmother and to some extent our parents when he was a teenager. Part of that spilled over into his inability to stick to something he found boring like schoolwork studies and he always found more satisfaction in being with his friends and music.

It was only after my own children gave me experience as a parent that I realised what I'd put my parents through. They gave me more support than I was entitled to. However, they were not without their own tribulations. At 14 I recall telling them they should get divorced. And this from a child raised in a church environment that didn't believe in divorce. But they seemed ill-suited. Dad was a successful professional. In those years he was doing exceptionally well. One thing they constantly discussed was the geography of our lives. Dad hated driving to work in the CBD of Sydney, but he needed to. Every time a new set of traffic lights went up on the Pacific Highway he would get more frustrated, and the traffic engineers were having a field day installing lights. Nothing changes. Mum refused to move. Eventually, Dad rented and then bought an apartment in Elizabeth Bay. He spent the week in town and came home for the weekend. Finally, the inevitable happened. By then I had left home and Meredith was in the United States.

Along the way Dad discovered yachting. He bought a Heron, a 12-foot sailing dinghy. Mum tried it, didn't like sailing and that was that. I didn't like it either, much. Especially after Dad hit a sand bank, tipped the Heron over and I got cracked on the head by the boom. Twenty years later in a more civilised 35-footer it became a lot more fun.

Hate is a strong word, so let's say I did not think highly of my father in my mid-teen years. What would I, getting knocked about by the boom, knowing the other guys were playing spin the bottle under the church hall — literally? It was about a year before I came to New Zealand that Dad asked to see me. He had been sailing in the Greek Islands for the second year in a row and was just returned. He told me he had met a woman he was going to spend the rest of his life with. They had met in Greece. She was German and also an architect. Dad was 53 and Brigitte 33 — a difference of 20 years. Brigitte moved to Australia and they had 20 years together until Dad died prematurely at 72 and 5 weeks. I know they were the happiest years of his life.

Over a period of time Dad and I got closer, and very close in the latter years. After some tumultuous periods during my teens, the first conciliatory steps came about quite unexpectedly. I told him we needed to talk. He sat at the end of the dining table. It was quite a long table and I intentionally sat at the other end. His reaction to what he heard next was quite unexpected.

'Dad,' I said, referring to the girl I had been seeing for the last year, 'she's pregnant.'

I was 18.

The lure of radio

In my impressionable early teen years the Sydney radio wars were being fought between two big names and two different radio stations. Bob Rogers on 2UE was the first DJ to make a name for himself. I recall waiting outside the 2UE studio during the school holidays, waiting to get Bob Rogers and Bobby Rydell's autograph before he went in for his interview with Rogers. Bob had a light voice for radio but he is a stayer. After owning a women's dress shop on Sydney's northern beaches for a number of years after retiring, Bob made a return to radio on 2CH. At the time of writing he is still doing the morning programme at about the age of 85.

Over at 2GB John Laws was the psychological competition. They were on air at different times during the day, but the competition was going on for who would receive and play new records first. It was a radio war zone. In those days, it was all about Top 40 and artists, and it was vicious.

Laws was about nine years younger than Rogers but had considerably more presence and a voice that was pure testosterone. There were lesser lights, but the fact that both these men are still on air speaks for itself.

Another station, 2UW, battled for our attention in different ways. They had an after-school programme called 'Rumpus Room', which involved a live audience. Some of us took part a few times. Howard Craven ran it, and I was to come in contact with him later.

However, my first ever radio appearance was on 2CH. The station had a half-hour pre-recorded daily show, Junior Disc Jockey. You applied and, if lucky enough, recorded a show which was played a few days later. I recorded on 30 October 1962, so I was 15. A 2CH employee played the records but the 'junior' got to do the verbals. This was my list of selections.

45 JOHNNY O'KEEFE

'Yes Indeed I do', Glasser, Leedon, LK-272

45 ROB E.G.

'5-4-3-2-1-Zero', Rob E.G., Festival, FK-274

45 GENE PITNEY

'Only Love Can Break a Heart', David/Bacharach, United Artists, UA-1029

45 THE SPOTNICKS

'Orange Blossom Special', Rouse, W & G, WG-S-1450

45 TOMMY ROE

'Susie Darlin'', Luke, Southern, ABC-Paramount, MK-280

45 DUANE EDDY AND THE REBELETTES

'(Dance with the) Guitar Man', Hazlewood/Eddy, RCA, 101373

45 BOBBY RYDELL

'The Cha-Cha-Cha', Mann/Appell, Columbia, DO-4317

45 DIG RICHARDS

'Raincoat in the River', Schroeder/Kaye, Festival, FK-258

'Susie Darlin'' I played for a girl at school in whom I was rather interested. At the time she didn't reciprocate. In what was like something from the radio serial 'As the World Turns', I was to work in

that studio about 15 years down the track.

It was in the same period that I saw an ad in the *Sydney Morning Herald* for a job in Melbourne. That city's top station, 3UZ, was looking for an announcer. With no training whatsoever I used a friend's father's reel-to-reel tape recorder, read a bit into the microphone and dispatched it to The Greater 3UZ, 45 Bourke Street, Melbourne, Victoria.

Eventually, the form letter arrived. 'Thank you for your application but the position has been filled.' Not to be put off that easily, I wrote back that I would be in Melbourne with family over the Christmas holidays and asked whether I could visit. The answer being in the affirmative, I spent a day at 3UZ, undoubtedly testing their patience. More so when I told them that Sydney radio was better than Melbourne radio. They suggested that, when back in Sydney, I make contact with Bob Rogers. I'll never forget the call I made to Rogers, then at 2SM.

'There's nothing much I can do,' was his response. 'Get some training.'

Thanks a lot. In other words he wasn't interested, so I thought I'd approach the bloke I really liked. The woman I spoke with on the phone at 2GB returned with the message: 'John asks if you would like to come in after school one day.'

Would I? Whadayathink?

In those days John Laws did 4–6 p.m., Monday to Friday, and a split shift on Sunday — something like 8–10 a.m. and 3–5 p.m. So there I was, waiting in the control room with the panel operator and Laws says, 'Leighton, come on in,' and I stayed for the rest of the programme. There are a couple of things I have always tried to remember. First, for a seasoned broadcaster it's an everyday occurrence but to a young dreamer it's the thrill of a lifetime. Second, that someone who was an established star showed me a generosity that I should also show. I hope I have. John Laws was a TV star at the time with a Saturday night variety show, *Startime*, on Channel 7. I couldn't believe my luck. Over the next couple of years I would make frequent visits on a Sunday.

During that time I met a number of industry and show-business people including the expat New Zealander Brian Henderson of *Bandstand* TV fame. Brian did a two-hour music show once a week on 2GB, following Laws' morning stint. It was also how I ran into Ken Taylor, the 2GB manager. When I worked for the Taxi Council in PR a few years later we built a relationship between Laws and the industry. In spite of all this, a radio career was still a few years away.

I had enrolled in law school at the Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra but dropped out at the end of my second year. After a few months of fun and freedom, I found a job at a law firm. Well, it was a sort of law firm. A.J. White, Solicitor was the legal arm of the NSW State Insurance Office, so it was a public service job, although I tried to ignore that aspect of it.

Eighteen months later and I'd had enough of the public service approach. But opportunity is for the grasping. Ian Fincham was a fellow worker and Ian had a taxi licence which he utilised on weekends. He would regale me with stories of weekend exploits and how much money he made. Sydney was and remains a very cab-orientated city. It didn't take long before I followed him into the business. I drove for a couple of years in the early '70s and would still nominate it as the best time of my life.

After three or four weeks of perhaps eight shifts, I ventured out on a Good Friday eve, one of the two busiest nights of the year. I took home \$140 after expenses. In the law office I netted \$66 a week. To put it mildly, this was unsettling.

Having decided to leave A.J. White's, I found a job at Philip York Real Estate in Double Bay, just a three minutes' walk from our flat. I was quite enthusiastic about this prospect but didn't enjoy it and left after three months. There was a silver lining, though, in the form of a fellow worker who would shortly have a major influence on my life.

In the meantime I had a cab licence and went driving. The cab industry is structured so that the

'plates', as in the number plates, are owned by individuals. They were allocated sparsely by the government, and then only on the basis of population increase. It wasn't possible to buy new plates but there was a secondary market and the value of a set of plates was frightening. Still is, I believe. Taxis in Sydney are driven by owner-drivers. And a large number are managed by entrepreneurial types. The owner I drove for was elderly, semi-retired and generous. He hoped his son would work for him, but he preferred to work for the council on the rubbish trucks. Old 'Buzz' worked Monday to Friday from 4.30 a.m. to 12 noon. I mostly drove Wednesday, Thursday and Friday from 12.30 p.m. to whenever. As long as the car was ready for Buzz by 4.30 the next morning, he didn't care. Recharge meant filled with petrol and washed. It used to cost me \$19 to do all that — \$12 for the owner, \$6 for the petrol and \$1 for the wash. The official Sydney cab shift change-over was 3 p.m. (this has always made finding a vacant taxi difficult in the mid-afternoon). But under my arrangement, by three o'clock I'd usually covered my pay-in expenses and from there the rest was mine.

Cab driving taught me an enormous amount about life. Compacted into that period were everlasting lessons about work ethic, money and how to manage it, and, maybe most importantly, lessons about human nature. It didn't occur to me at the time, but I was learning valuable lessons for my career in talk radio. If you approach people the right way, they frequently love to talk, and it's surprising what they'll reveal. There was the chief executive I ferried occasionally from the city to his home in the upper North Shore suburb of Gordon. He told of things he probably shouldn't. I also witnessed things I shouldn't.

There was the famous bookie and entrepreneur John Harrigan. I picked him up one night at his home in Vaucluse, along with his woman. We dropped her at Whisky A-Go-Go in Kings Cross and then we picked up another female friend in Darling Point. These were the halcyon days for me. I recall a somewhat flamboyant type (he owned a kitchen company) had me wait outside a restaurant for over an hour before dropping him a short distance away. It was no surprise his company went into liquidation not long after.

There were numerous actors and show-business types, names that at the time were well known. Allan Moffat, the champion touring car driver, complimented me on my driving. I recall working on a rare Monday night. It was wet and windy and business was dead. It was not late, but I was about to call it a shift. Driving north on Elizabeth Street on the corner of Park Street, a shadowy figure in a raincoat hailed the cab. His appearance almost caused me not to stop. But I did, and when he asked to go to Manly (an expensive trip) I was on the verge of asking to see his money. But I didn't. It was small talk for half the journey and then it all changed. His name turned out to be Robert William Lane, better known as Tex Morton (1916–1983). Tex was born in Nelson, New Zealand and was an international star of song, stage and screen. I think I gave him a discounted fare.

And there were moments of tension. I picked up a couple in Paddington on a weekend afternoon. They were arguing and it got worse; he got violent. I stopped the cab in the middle of what is known as 'Five Ways' and commanded him to cease. It was the victim who spoke, telling me to mind my own business. So I did, but at least he stopped. Actually, Paddington was a trouble magnet. One midnight one Friday night, I collected a radio hiring from a club. Three males got in and it was obvious one was crying. Seemed his boyfriend had dumped him, and between sobs I learned words that were new to me. Next thing I realised his back-seat partner was doing unmentionable things to pacify him. It didn't stop there, though. We arrived at the Paddington address and the front-seat passenger decided I was fair game. Hand on my leg, he invited me in. I removed his hand, suggesting we weren't suited. So it was hand on, hand off a few times before I realised my numerous deflections weren't getting through. He still wouldn't get out until I reached for the cab radio, mentioning police. His departing words were something like, 'You know where to find me.'

That first cab belonged to Green Cabs (how ironic), which was absorbed into De Luxe Red Cab

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