

## Christmas 2015



næm dwɔŋ ænd ælən brænfɔ:d

**Idiopathic Peripheral Axonal Sensorimotor Neuropathy** – Some people collect stamps. Some people collect spoons. I collect weird diseases with unpronounceable names. And in 2015 I struck gold: idiopathic peripheral axonal sensorimotor neuropathy. *A disease of the peripheral nervous system (as opposed to the central nervous system), that is affecting the axons (the nerves themselves) rather than the myelin sheath. Both sensory and motor nerves are affected. The qualifier “idiopathic” means “of unknown cause, as a disease”.* This condition has come to dominate my year: there have already been major changes to my life, and the future is quite uncertain.

During 2014, I had had “problems” with my right leg that were not able to be tied down. It was presumed initially that these were orthopaedic in nature. Years of Crohn’s disease and treatment with prednisolone have given me degenerative arthritis – I’m basically a shambling wreck – and a CT-scan of the lumbar spine suggested some impingement to nerves leading to the right leg. However, by September 2014, I was experiencing burning pains in my right torso and arm that felt distinctly neurological, and certainly were unrelated to degeneration in the lumbar spine! MRI scans of the brain and the cervical spine in late December 2014 were uninformative, apart from confirming that I did indeed have a brain and a spine (albeit with a “small volume of non-specific white matter disease, likely (to be) chronic small vessel ischaemic change” – I don’t know what that means but it sounds impressive). Nerve conduction studies in March this year found that they did not, at least not properly, and peripheral neuropathy was declared. I had a trip to hospital for a lumbar puncture to extract spinal fluid for analysis, but this was also uninformative, hence the label “idiopathic”. At this point, the physicians threw in the towel and gave up.

I now have burning pains down both sides of my torso, across under my breasts, down both outer arms and both legs. By April, I had reduced work to part-time, and by July I had stopped work completely. I am currently on a Temporary Incapacity Benefit until at least May 2016, and who knows what the future holds. My primary physician opines that the condition will deteriorate gradually, but that it is unlikely to be fatal. I’m still not sure whether to be comforted by that opinion!

I’ve often said that I would live long enough to be a burden on society. Well thanks to this idiopathic peripheral axonal sensorimotor neuropathy, I am now officially a burden on society! This is a few years before I’d intended, but at least I have a disease with a really impressive sesquipedalianistic name. Sigh!

Unlike a planned retirement when one is still reasonably fit and active, I am of course quite restricted in what I can do in my newfound leisure time due to the neuropathy. It has been suggested, after over thirty years in the University sector, that I write a tell-all memoir. That should get a few people worried!



**The Pinnacle of Success** – Late last year I was approached by The Pinnacle Foundation to mentor a University student whom it was supporting. The student and I attended a weekend workshop in Sydney in February, the highlight of which was the surprise visit by one of the Foundation’s Patrons, The Honourable Michael Kirby AC, retired Judge of the High Court of Australia. The students naturally flocked to have selfies taken with the distinguished jurist. I was my usual calm and dignified self, and pushed my way to the front.



**Brave or Beautiful?** – My friend, Matthew Schiavello, is a Melbourne-based photographer and artist. Early this year he published an on-line photographic project entitled “Brave or Beautiful?” which “aims to create an opportunity for the viewer to explore their own prejudices about body shape and to reflect upon the impact of these prejudices.” The funding for the project had been crowd-sourced, and so the on-line publication and associated e-book are available free at [braveorbeautiful.com](http://braveorbeautiful.com) (Downloading the low resolution version of the e-book is the easiest way of accessing it.) *Warning: this site and the downloadable e-book have full frontal male and female nudity, which may offend some people. You are advised to take particular care with pp. 87 – 93!! I’ll leave it up to you to decide: “Brave or Beautiful?”*



*Banquet for the Installation of the new Grand Master*

**Down and Debauched with the Don** – Nam and I attended the State Opera production of Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* in May. I have been to many productions of this classic opera over the years, but I would rate this one as the best I have seen. Grant Doyle was wonderfully debauched as the Don, particularly in the last scene. The arrival of the animated statue of the Commendatore and the damnation of Don Giovanni were particularly spectacular.

As fate would have it, the very next weekend I was in Melbourne for two Opera Australia productions, one being *Don Giovanni*! As I said above, the State Opera production beat the Opera Australia one – although seeing Teddy Tahu Rhodes in leather hot pants in the Opera Australia production was worth the price of entry. The other opera that I saw in Melbourne was another Don – a wonderfully sumptuous production of Verdi’s *Don Carlos*.

Damnation seemed to be the theme for the year – appropriate under the circumstances, I suppose. In August, Nam and I saw the State Opera production of Gounod’s *Faust*, with the delightfully demonic Teddy Tahu Rhodes as Méphistophélès. In one memorable scene, as Méphistophélès sings about the women of the world, there is Teddy in drag, garishly dressed in a nineteenth century full bustle dress!

During the Adelaide Festival Fringe, we went to a lighter operatic offering, two opera singers doing a burlesque sendup of their art under the name *Diva Licious*.



**By the Rivers of Babylon** – In late 2014, I was installed in the Chair of King Solomon as the Worshipful Master of Prince Alfred Collegians’ Lodge, a Freemasons’ Lodge that was formed by Old Scholar Freemasons over a century ago. It is the oldest School Lodge in Australia and one of Prince Alfred College’s oldest Old Scholar associations. In the development of the program for the year, I displayed my professional bias as an academic: many of the Lodge meetings included not only the familiar rituals and procedures, but also analysis and exegesis of their origin and meaning. It was unfortunate that my illness coincided with my term as Master, as I was unable to implement my strategic plan for the Lodge and in the end had to limp towards the end of my term in October. I am also a member of St Andrews Lodge and had been their Senior Warden, but I was forced to step down from all office there as well. Also, I am a Companion of the Holy Royal Arch of Jerusalem, a higher Masonic Order, and now revel in the title of First Assistant Sojourner – hence the label “By the Rivers of Babylon” – how well do you know your Ancient History?





**Renovation and Rejuvenation** – Although clearly I could do with a bit of renovation and rejuvenation, after just over twenty years it was time for the house to get some care and attention. Nam surpassed himself: painting the inside of the house, doing major repairs to the fence, high pressure cleaning of the outside pavers and reupholstering and recovering of the lounge furniture. Then, after years of prevarication, we finally had the bathroom completely renovated. We are now luxuriating in our new shiny ablution facility.



And for the finale, we are about to have the floor coverings replaced throughout the entire house. The job is scheduled for a few days before Christmas, so Nam is emptying furniture contents into packing boxes ready for the shuffling exercise when the floor is laid.

**You'll Never Walk Alone** – On a bone-chillingly cold July evening, Liverpool FC played an exhibition soccer match against Adelaide United at the Adelaide Oval. Cliff and Louise from Melbourne organized tickets for them, my sister Judith, Nam and me. I am not likely to be converted to that football code any time soon, but we had fun singing and waving our scarves



It was only the second professional soccer match I had ever attended, the first being a game between Cambridge United and Rotherham United in the early 1980s in England – I had spent most of that match with my eyes on the crowd in fear of my safety!

**Fac Fortia et Patere** – This year marked the fortieth anniversary of my graduating class from Prince Alfred College. In October, we had a reunion luncheon for The Class of '75 – it was just as well we wore name badges, as some of us had not aged that well!



**Fair Cop** – In November, Nam and I participated in our first ever protest march, and rally on the steps of State Parliament. We didn't have to worry about trouble from the Police, since the Police had organized the protest! My long-time friend, Brett Gibbons, is the poster boy for the Police Association's campaign against changes to State law that would significantly curtail their compensation rights. Brett was a first responder to a triple murder a few years ago and took a shotgun blast point blank in the face for his trouble. Please look at [protectourcops.com.au](http://protectourcops.com.au) After the rally, Brett's mother, Christine, and I got to ride in a police van from Parliament House back to the Police Association. (Unfortunately the policeman wouldn't put on the siren – or the handcuffs!)



**Wishing You All a Blessed Christmas –**



Oops – I nearly forgot ...

**and a Happy New Year in 2016!**