

CHRISTMAS 2019

Till Death Us Do Part –

I reported in the 2017 edition of this august epistle that late that year the Commonwealth of Australia had enacted much overdue social reform by way of amending the Marriage Act 1961 to deliver Marriage Equality. Furthermore, it was reported that on Saturday, 18th November 2017, the ninth anniversary of our meeting, a marriage proposal had been made and accepted.

Then, in the 2018 Christmas Letter, there was silence on this issue.

The wedding of our niece, Phạm Dương Khuê (English: Khue Pham), and Nguyen Hoàng Phủ (English: Jason Nguyen) had already been planned for late September 2018 in Vietnam. Another family wedding, and in Australia, was simply impractical.

Thus, we decided to delay our wedding until 2019.

I had been brought up in the Fulham Methodist Church community, and furthermore had received my secondary education at Prince Alfred College, Adelaide's prestigious Methodist school for boys. So, I was not content to have a civil marriage ceremony, which I regarded as an elaborate way of filling out and signing a government form.

While I conceded that the civil administrative requirements are a compulsory part of a marriage ceremony, I could not see how marriage vows could be made with the appropriate solemnity unless within a service of Holy Matrimony.

The Methodist Church no longer exists per se in Australia, since, on 22 June 1977, the Methodist Church of Australasia joined with the Congregational Union in Australia and the Presbyterian Church of Australia to form the Uniting Church in Australia. The Church's doctrinal position had been expanded at the Fifteenth Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia held in July 2018 to permit a Liturgical Marriage under the expanded civil definition of marriage.

Nam was initially completely opposed to having any religious component in the marriage ceremony. I was equally adamant that we should have a Liturgy of Holy Matrimony recognised by the Uniting Church in Australia.

Being ever conciliatory, I agreed with Nam's insistence on a purely civil marriage ceremony. I proposed that we book a marriage celebrant and room for a civil ceremony at the Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages. We'd book a late morning time, invite two friends to be the witnesses and then afterwards the four of us could go out for lunch. But I'd be bugged if I'd pay thousands of dollars for a full-on wedding reception just to fill out a government form.

A few weeks later, after some discussion, Nam agreed to my insistence on Holy Matrimony.

I wrote in last year's Christmas Letter that I participate in a monthly *'Progressive Christianity'* service at Adelaide West Uniting Church. One of the organisers is Reverend Esmond Dowdy, and it was through Esmond that I had been introduced to this group. Esmond readily agreed to solemnise our marriage.

Reverend Dowdy is a retired minister – such as ministers are ever allowed to retire – but he still frequently performs weddings at St Andrews by the Sea Uniting Church at Glenelg. Now, Glenelg is a well-known Adelaide seaside suburb, it is close to where we live, and the Church is architecturally beautiful.



St Andrews by the Sea Uniting Church, Glenelg

So, I wrote to Reverend Christine Gilbert, Minister of the Word for St Andrews by the Sea Uniting Church, she took the request to the Church Council, and in hardly any time at all I received a

beautifully worded invitation from the Church for us to hold our marriage there!

The Service of Holy Matrimony was held on Saturday, 15 June 2019, at St Andrews by the Sea Uniting Church, solemnised by Reverend Esmond Dowdy. You can read all about it, and see the photographs, by going to the wedding link on my personal website, or by entering directly the URL

<https://www.alanbranford.net/wedding>

into your favourite web browser.



Parents express their support, ...



vows are made ...

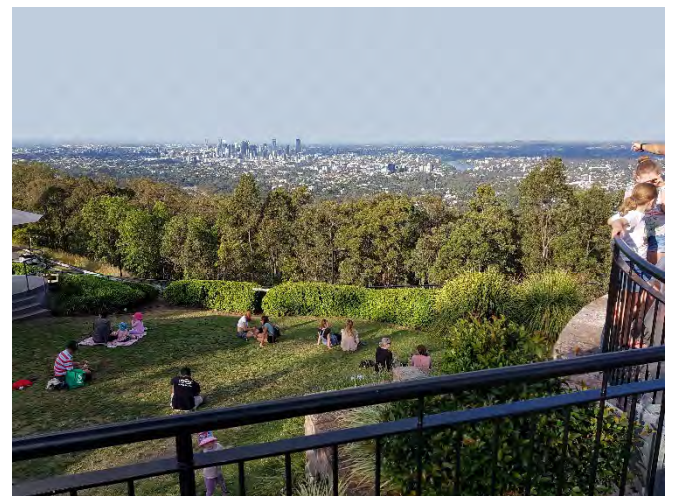


and Reverend Dowdy Proclaims and Blesses the Marriage!

Time is a Traveller, Tenterfield Saddler –

We never had a honeymoon after the wedding. Nam had nine close family members down from Vietnam. So, he took his relatives to Sydney and I stayed at home exchanging glares with Lily.

But in late July we had a perfect excuse for a getaway: we had a friend in Ipswich, a city about 45km south-west of Brisbane, who was turning fifty years old. So, Nam and I flew to Brisbane, hired a car and stayed a few days in a semi-rural area called Anstead about equidistant from Brisbane and Ipswich. As well as catching up with Gary Shooter, the birthday boy, and his partner Rod Snow in Ipswich, we also had some trips into Brisbane.



Brisbane City from Mount Coot-Tha; things have certainly changed from my first visit to Mount Coot-Tha in the late 1960s!



There was a captivating exhibition at the Queensland Art Gallery of works by the late Margaret Olley AC, Australia's foremost still-life artist

Then, from Anstead, we headed south-west through the Scenic Rim and Southern Downs Districts of Queensland, over the border into New

South Wales and on to Tenterfield. We travelled by minor roads a lot of the time, to really see the amazing countryside. Rocky outcrops were common in the pastures, and we had a scary drive up from the coastal plain to the highland hinterland on a rather twisty road.



Afternoon tea near the QLD/NSW border

We stayed a few nights in a renovated, historic cottage in Tenterfield. Tenterfield is famous for two things.

Firstly, Sir Henry Parkes, the ‘Father of Federation’, played a pivotal role in cajoling six argumentative Australian provinces to federate into a single nation. This movement was started in a serious way following Sir Henry’s “Tenterfield Oration” on 24 October 1889, delivered at the Tenterfield School of Arts. (Sir Henry had earlier been the Member for Tenterfield in the New South Wales Legislative Council during 1882–1884, one of a huge number of seats he held in his turbulent life in colonial politics.)

Secondly, Peter Allen, the internationally renowned cabaret performer and about whom the musical “The Boy From Oz” was based, was born in Tenterfield and grew up in the district. His paternal grandfather, George Woolnough, was the Tenterfield saddler. Peter Allen, whose real name was Peter Woolnough, wrote a moving, autobiographical song called “Tenterfield Saddler”, starting his story with his grandfather.

Tenterfield boasts many historic buildings and sites, and also driving around the district is a worthwhile experience. In late July, it is also cold, bone-numbing cold!! Nam and I commented on how dry the countryside was; this was a prescient observation, since three months later it was all aflame as Australia’s horror bushfire season started early and with foreboding ferocity!



Outside ...



*and inside our renovated cottage in Tenterfield *
(*actually, the historic Stannum House over the road)*

From Tenterfield, we travelled to Dorrigo, in the heart of some magnificent sub-tropical rainforest. Nam was able to take some walks in the National Park. We also spent a day in the Bellinger River Valley (after driving down the precipitous B78 road from the Dorrigo High Plain to the coastal plain). We lunched in the charming town of Bellingen.

As an aside, I have long been confused as to why the river is called the Bellinger River but the town is called Bellingen. The story is that the river was originally known as the Billingen, a transliteration of the local Aboriginal name for the river; other transliterations played with the first two vowels:

“Bellingen”, “Billengen” and “Bellengen”. The “g” was hard, that is, the “ng” was pronounced as in the word “singer” (IPA symbol ⟨ŋ⟩). The transliteration that stuck was “Bellingen”, but European usage altered the pronunciation of the word to make the “g” soft and part of the third syllable. A misreading of handwriting by an official led to the final letter of “Bellingen” to be copied as an “r”, leading to the Bellinger River, while the town name was correctly read as Bellingen. Makes a good story.



Dangar Falls, near Dorrigo

From Dorrigo, we again took back roads, and headed back up into Queensland to the Gold Coast where we spent a night and had dinner with our friends Nguyen and Russell. In the morning we drove straight to Brisbane Airport for the flight home. Nam had a surprise for me: he used accumulated supermarket loyalty points to upgrade us to Business Class. How can I go back to Economy Class now?

Unfriending Facebook –

“Social” media seems to be anything but sociable. It is well-known that social media has a disproportionately bad effect on the mental health of adolescents who are still developing their sense of self and identity. Since, clearly, I have never

given a rat’s arse about what people think of me, this aspect of social media does not directly affect me.

Actually, I was heartened recently to hear of a case in Sydney of a resident of a particular suburb taking civil legal action over a social media group meant to provide a forum for the residents to find a fourth for a game of bridge, to announce the birth of their first grandchild, to advertise the local school fete etc. Instead the group had descended into a slanging match between two factions of residents. Since defamation law applies to statements one posts on social media, the aggrieved resident was suing. But here’s the delicious twist. He also was suing the community-spirited lady who had started the social forum and who had long since given up trying to moderate it! It was her platform that had been used in the alleged defamation, so she was being sued as well as the alleged defamer.

I myself was caught up in a similar cesspit in a Facebook “group” for a society. Although civil litigation had been threatened, none eventuated. However, the society was riven by a massive schism that I believe is still bedevilling it. After I received two, extremely unpleasant emails directed explicitly at me, I resigned from the society.

But I also took much more aggressive and sensational action: **I abruptly deleted my Facebook account!**

Not only did I delete my Facebook account, I also took the opportunity to delete my Messenger messaging application account! (Mr Zuckerberg knows more about me than I do, Facebook is a time-wasting vortex of inanity and invective and Messenger just gives me the shits.)

Please note, however, that I still have not managed to complete the entire detoxification and colonic irrigation program:-

Twitter: [@AlanBranford](#)

Instagram: [@alanbranford](#)

WhatsApp: [+61411284414](#)

Skype: [alan.john.branford](#)

Snapchat: [jamalalan](#) (which means “Beautiful Alan” in Arabic – it’s a long story) – I recently made a mess of my Snapchat account, so if we were connected and are no longer, then it is just an accident.

I realise that the above social media applications are ultimately owned by Facebook or Google or Microsoft or the FSB or the CIA or the CWA or the CFS, but their utility currently outweighs their vulnerability.

You've Got a Nerve! Mine Aren't Too Good –

Medically, I am the same as I was a year ago, except worse!

That is an example of what is called “Cornish logic” or “Cousin Jack logic”, and is a nod to my extensive Cornish ancestry. What I mean is that every idea that my clinicians explored in 2019 failed to work, and, in that sense, I am back to square one. However, my neuropathic disease is degenerative, and so my condition is in fact worse than it was twelve months ago.

It is important to distinguish between the disease and its various symptoms. The disease is incurable. As necessary, each symptom can have a line of attack that merely is palliative

The disease is an idiopathic neuropathy of the (axons of the) peripheral nervous system. So far, there are three obvious symptoms.

Symptom #1: My left foot has "complex regional pain syndrome" (CPRS), a term which merely describes the condition. The foot is permanently swollen and scarlet red. The nails keep fracturing and falling off. It does not bother me much. It's being monitored, but thus far the foot is still healthy with proper blood supply. I don't fancy an amputation.

Symptom #2: Problems with the sensory and motor nerves in my legs impact my ability to walk. A leg can suddenly collapse under me with no warning. Outside, I can walk for short distances with a walker, but for longer distances I have to be pushed in a wheelchair. For the last couple of years, I have twice-weekly attended a supervised, Pilates-based rehabilitation class at my physiotherapists' rooms with a personalized program. This has helped enormously with strength in the leg muscles, especially the quadriceps, and thus with getting in and out of chairs and walking. There is the threat of eventual wheelchair confinement, so we are trying to delay this as much as possible.

Symptom #3: I've left the best until last. The killer symptom is that every one of my 24 thoracic nerves gives me debilitating pain ... for idiopathic reasons. Just imagine having shingles in 24 nerves all at once. Ordinary analgesics, even opioids, are useless.

(The thoracic nerves emanate from each side of the thoracic section of the spine, wrapping around the trunk of the body. The first two also influence the brachial nervous system in the upper arm.)

I now take an anticonvulsant drug, not because I have epilepsy, but to dampen the nerve pain. The only relief is with a massive overdose of pregabalin (common brand name Lyrica), a very nasty drug. The list of side-effects I actually have would fill a pulp fiction novel; the list of possible side-effects is even longer. The most immediately worrisome class of side-effects is cognitive dysfunction: short-term memory loss, confusion, memory loss, lack of concentration, memory loss, fatigue, etc. And then there's the short-term memory loss. My psychiatrist believes the overdosing may cause these side-effects to become permanent brain damage.

A pain physician tried three times to interrupt the pain process using ketamine. Ketamine is an anaesthetic agent, as well as being famous in the equine industry as a horse tranquiliser, and in the dance-party scene as a recreational drug to mix with excessive alcohol in order to induce a trance-like state immediately prior to death in the mosh pit.

The theory is that flooding the system with ketamine will cause the pain receptors in the brain to recalibrate. It's a bit like rebooting a misbehaving computer.

The first attempt consisted of three, same-day admissions to the Queen Elizabeth Hospital to be infused each time with a bucket-full of ketamine. I had lovely sleeps each time, but sod all else happened.

The second attempt consisted of a seven-day admission to The Memorial Hospital, being continuously infused with 10mg of ketamine an hour. Well, my week's worth of ketamine proved completely useless; I didn't even get to trip out and see pink elephants in my room. Perhaps I lack the right receptors, or perhaps I am in reality a Sontaran with a completely different anatomy. The doctors are not sure.

The third attempt was eleven days in hospital being infused with 18mg per hour continuously. Guess what.

The pain specialist is now undergoing intensive therapy to recover from having me referred to him.



Alan, high on ketamine, at a rave party



Flowers from my husband. ❤️

One day I had emerged from the shower and I was expecting a nurse to return with a towel to assist me. In response to a knock at the door, I shouted "Come in!" The volunteer flower-watering lady was quite pleasant to chat to while I waited for the nurse and the towel.

I now have five different specialists all agreed that the only option left is psychological therapy. I have not responded well to this in the past, so I have little confidence. Positive thinking, cognitive behavioral therapy, mindfulness – shoot me now!

All the specialists agree that the disease is incurable, degenerative and non-fatal. You'd have hoped that at least the damn thing could have had the courtesy to kill me. A previous specialist, with whom I had shared a robust, gallows humour, once remarked, "Well, there is always euthanasia."

Bits and Pieces –

- ❖ Nam and I have decided to bring forward our plans to build a bespoke home on our property in Lockleys. The two overarching principles are that it is to be a climate responsive house and a house that will be predictive of my future possible needs in respect of my degenerative neuropathy (wheelchair accessible, grabrails and the like; even a guest area that could become a carer's quarters). We've engaged a firm of architects. Nam is having great fun interacting with the architects on the design side; I'm trying to work out where the money is coming from. Perhaps I should look at crowdsourcing? 🤖🤔
- ❖ Nam is no longer obsessed with table tennis. Now he is obsessed with badminton. He is perpetually watching tournament games streaming on his tablet device. The afternoons and early evenings of Saturdays are now sacrosanct, devoted to playing badminton. Nam even joined a team in the Masters Games in October. I don't recall him dragging in a sack of medals though, but he had a good time.
- ❖ Readers of previous editions of the Christmas Letter would be aware that I had joined Freemasonry some years ago, achieving the rank of Worshipful Master. Earlier this year, I resigned from all my Masonic activities.
- ❖ For some years, I have been a member and financial supporter of the Neurosurgical Research Foundation. It is a little ironic, since I started this years before I was struck down by a neurological disease. Karma? Out of the blue, we received a formal invitation to a reception and awards presentation to be hosted by His Excellency the Honourable Hieu Van Le AC, Governor of South Australia, and Mrs Lan Le for the Neurosurgical Research

Foundation to be held at Government House in late November. So, we dug our best bib and tucker out of the wardrobe and mixed it with high society!



Government House – I reckon I could get used to living here

❖ Also in late November, the Branford family celebrated the sixtieth wedding anniversary of Noelene and Ian Butterworth. Now the Branfords and the Butterworths had both lived in the western Adelaide suburb of Fulham and became friends so long ago that even carbon dating Ian failed to resolve the question. I can certainly recall visiting the Butterworths in the early 1970s, so it was at least that long ago. Noelene and Ian had a daughter, Tanya, and a son, Garth, of roughly the same age as my sister and me. Nam and I were invited to join the celebrations at a memory-filled luncheon at “The Junction” Function Centre. For our card, I dug out an old photograph of Garth and me, and gave it a suitable pair of captions ...

“Look at these two reprobates!”



“Personally, I blame the parents!”

❖ I have known Julian Cooling for about most of my working life, having met him when he was a student at Flinders University around the time that I joined the academic staff. He married Alison Wood some years ago, and in what seemed to be hardly any time at all they headed off for England. Alison produced a PhD and two children in the U.K. (the latter with some help from Julian). Alison is now an academic at Homerton College, University of Cambridge. Julian, I believe, does the washing up. All four of the family came out to Adelaide this year to visit their extended families for Christmas. Alison and the children dropped Julian off at Brighton, so that Julian and I could have a peaceful lunch down the road.



Julian Cooling and Alison Wood, with some passing vagrant



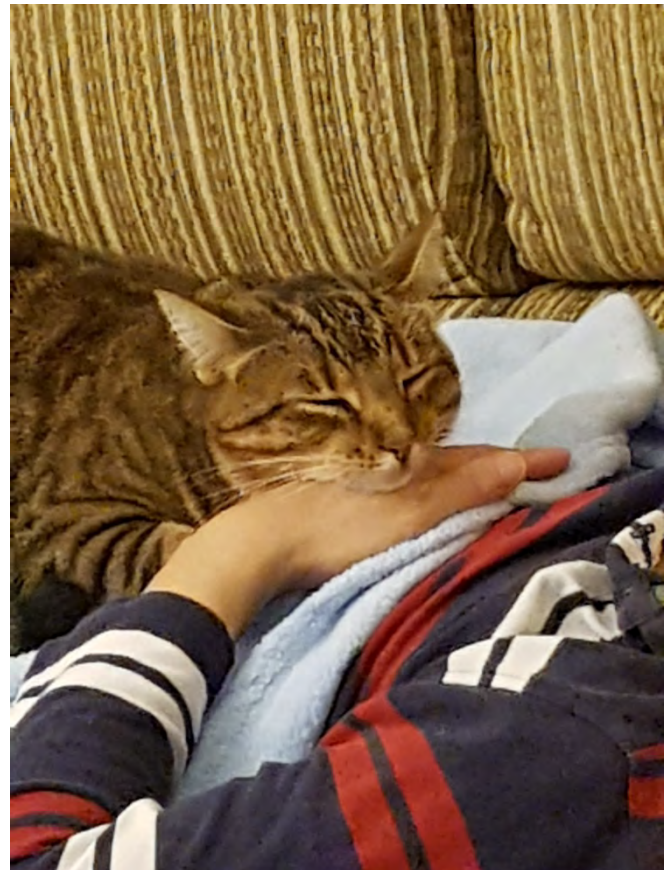
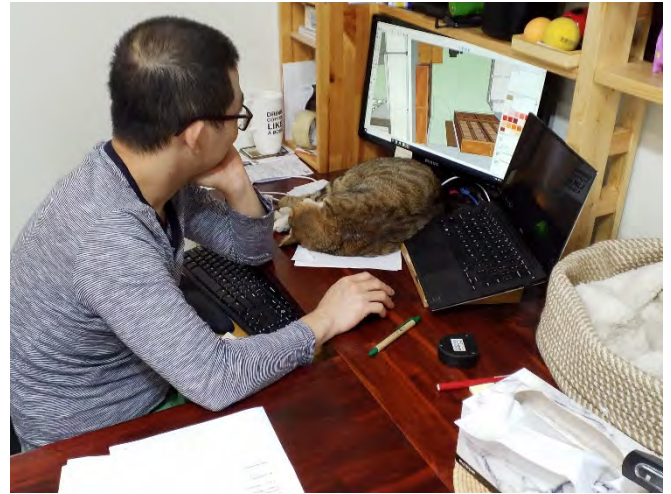
The vagrant scaring the Wood-Cooling children

❖ For many of the years that I have lived at Brighton, my immediate neighbours were Elaine and Howard Gulliver. The Gullivers were everything you could hope for in good neighbours. But, eventually, Elaine and Howard had to move from Brighton into a retirement village. We kept in touch for a few years, but then I found that they had moved into more advanced care. It was with mixed feelings that I received a Christmas card this year from Howard. It was wonderful to hear from him, but sad to hear that Elaine had died earlier in 2019. But, now armed with Howard's address, Nam and I paid him a visit in his nursing home during the day of Christmas Eve.



Old neighbours reminiscing

Cat Capers – The section you've been waiting for!
Add your own captions ...





Christmas Day 2019 – Lily had too much Christmas Lunch



The Christmas Conundrum 2019 – The Continuum Hypothesis conjectures that there is no set whose cardinality is strictly between that of the integers and that of the real numbers. **What does the Continuum Hypothesis and the existence of God have in common?**

Alan

**Alan and Nam wish you all a
Happy Holy Season and
Good Fortune in 2020**

And of course the last word
belongs to Lily ...



*I'm sorry, Joseph, there's no room
in my cupboard.
Have you tried the inn down the
road?*