



# MUG SHOTS

a memoir

BARRY  
OAKLEY

Wakefield Press

# **MUG SHOTS**

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Wakefield  
Press

Wakefield Press  
1 The Parade West  
Kent Town  
South Australia 5067  
www.wakefieldpress.com.au

First published 2012

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Edited by Julia Beaven, Wakefield Press  
Cover designed by Liz Nicholson, designbite  
Designed and typeset by Clinton Ellicott, Wakefield Press  
Printed and bound by Hyde Park Press, Adelaide

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Author: Oakley, Barry, 1931– .  
Title: Mug shots: a memoir / Barry Oakley.  
ISBN: 978 1 74305 167 2 (pbk.).  
Subjects: Oakley, Barry, 1931– .  
Authors, Australian – Biography.  
Dewey Number: A823.3



*To Carmel – life support*

*How dost, fool?*  
*Dost dialogue with thy shadow?*

Timon of Athens

## Teeth

My mouth is wide open and my brother Gavan is peering into it. It is 1970. He's not long back from America and keen to try his new expertise on me. He wears a pale-blue gown and mad-scientist magnifying glasses as he picks and prods. Newly Mastered in Dental Science, he is the Isambard Kingdom Brunel of bridges, and he's going to construct a tricky one across the gap between my lower teeth. It's called a Maryland Bridge, the first to be built in this country.

Lifting his mask so I won't miss a word, he explains that despite innumerable injections there may well be some pain: a payback, he jokes, for what I did to him when we were kids. Like the Chinese burns inflicted on him when he sat on my school lunch. Or my pushing him into deep water off St Kilda pier.

With a mouthful of cotton logs, all I could do was shake my head. 'Intra osseus,' he seemed to say to the nurse. Os? Latin for bone? Into the bone? He moved in on me with the kind of syringe vets use on large animals. Shouldn't it be osseum, the accusative? Had he forgotten how I helped him with Latin grammar?

He sank the nightmare instrument deep into the gum, then the bone, beyond the reach of novocaine. I yelped, and



prayed for numbness. Then he began his drilling, with a device that could have broken concrete. I yelped again. Oblivious, he stepped back, admired his excavations and began photographing each step.

‘This is the tricky bit. If the cement sets too soon, you’ll have metal half in and half out of your mouth, and I’ll be halfway down the street.’ But it worked, and the furled lips, pitted teeth and bleeding gums would one day be studied by dental pornographers, and my food properly masticated at last.

At one stage, as he moved in close, I noticed a small white scar on top of his right ear. It was the mark left when a truck backed over him in 1938 when he was playing in the gutter outside our house. A back wheel had missed his head by a fraction of an inch. He was carried inside bleeding and screaming, but according to the rapidly summoned Dr Darcy, otherwise unharmed.

It had been Dr Darcy – horn-rimmed, pin-striped and reeking of chloroform – who etherised me on our dining-room table and removed my adenoids – mysterious entities somewhere behind the nose. He was a brusque little man who was held, as doctors were then, in inordinate respect. ‘Clean up your room – Doctor’s coming.’

## **The Christian Brothers (quickly)**

Nineteen thirty-eight was also the year I began at the Christian Brothers’ College in St Kilda – when, one February morning, I was dragged screaming down the driveway behind their residence into a seething quadrangle – a brief anarchy before

a whistle was blown, order imposed, and I was enclosed in a regimen that would last ten years. It was not a preparation for life but an intensification of it. When, in life, are you publicly strapped? When do forty of your peers see you blush as you suffer the teacher's ridicule?

It was weakness that was despised, by both teachers and kids. If you were strapped and cried (I managed never to), if you fainted (as I once did during a graphic description of a compound fracture – ‘Take that boy out, will you?’) or worst of all vomited (as Kevin Cherry did across two desks – to be ostracised at lunchtime from then on) your humiliation was absolute. School was the kind of test that belonged at the end of life, not the beginning.



With brother Gavan at the Estate Agents' picnic, 1939.

War broke out when I was in third class, and the Christian Brothers' College had its similarities: you too had been conscripted, uniformed and sergeant-majored. And in third class you moved up to the front line. If you didn't get the sums Brother Egan wrote up on the blackboard right you were strapped. Sometimes, when most didn't make it, we'd line up on the platform in pairs. Your and your classmate's hands were held out together, so one strap did the work of two: mathematics in action.

In my first year of secondary school I sat next to Eric Donnelly. Eric was dexterous, and devised an ingenious rubber-band-and-ruler mechanism which, when the lid of the desk was closed, would make a tongue poke up from a paper face pasted over the inkwell. He became a surgeon and did missionary work in Papua New Guinea. When an operation on a tribesman failed and he died, a nun was axed to death in a classroom as payback. Eric blamed himself, and when he visited me years later in Richmond he was unhinged. The world, he told us, was running out of silver nitrate, which would mean the end of photography. In the meantime, he said, we must look at our walls. 'See?' he said. 'Look hard – Christ's Holy Shroud face is imprinted there – can't you see?' Eric is buried in Africa somewhere, in the loneliest of lonely graves.

This was also the year I became close to Dick Hughes, who occupied a nearby desk. We had the greatest of teachers, a layman called J.P. Ward, a tall raw-boned man in a worn blue suit, who salted his teaching with stories of his early days in country schools: snakes in the classroom, disembowelling by an enraged boar of a man thrown from his horse, bush hermits raving mad from loneliness, goannas big enough to kill a dog.

The stories had an invariable beginning: 'Up bush,

thirty-odd years ago,' which was enough to send Hughes and all those luckless enough to sit near him into implosions of giggles. Mr Ward had a scooter tyre as a strap, and the more his stories set us off, the angrier he'd get. Dick would start his giggling, the whole row would shake, and a cabal would be summoned out the front to put out our hands for, as Mr Ward termed it, 'a smack'.

Hughes was also a master mimic. He'd developed a passion for Dixieland jazz, and his specialty was an imitation of the great drummer Gene Krupa 'in a frenzy'. He'd wait for a Brother to turn to the blackboard, and while the voyages of Magellan were being sketched out, Hughes would do his imitations with two whirring rulers, soundlessly, stopping the moment the Brother turned to face us. His neighbours would laugh but the phantom drummer would not: strappings again.

I had only one skill, and that was tennis. I still have a photo of the 1944 school team, my bone-thin arms cradling one of those racquets with flattened tops that went back to the days of Henry VIII. You went out on the orange gravel en-tout-cas (the word has disappeared) and because you represented your school, your racquet became heavy, your strokes uncertain and often you lost. Top sport is about temperament. Neurotics didn't have a hope.

## **Operatic Melbourne**

After Pearl Harbour and the Japanese drive south, trenches were dug in the parks, air raid shelters in the backyards, and Air Raid Wardens appointed to ensure windows were blacked

out at night. Wooden shutters shielded the light of the trams, with their drivers' compartments in total darkness – you could hear but not see them. At night, Melbourne was a dark and scary place, a set for an opera that was never produced.

The Oakley family had moved from number eleven Montague Avenue to number four, directly opposite. But there was a grand finale beforehand. Number eleven had flaunted above its front gate a large banner on which was painted GRAND BAZAAR. FOOD FOR BRITAIN FUND. STALLS, LUCKY DIPS, RAFFLES. In an unprecedented display of communal feeling, neighbours had gathered in our lounge to organise it, chaired by the masterful Mr Reginald Green who'd been spared military service because he was in charge of much of Melbourne's electricity supply.

The highlight was Mr Green's creation in our garage (empty, because our father was away at the war). Spotlit at its end were portraits of Musso, Adolf and Tojo, all with the twisted evil look that Armstrong captured in his *Argus* cartoons. Get a tennis ball through one of their gaping maws and you won a prize. Overall, we raised an unprecedented thirty-three pounds ten shillings.

The Japanese might have been getting closer, but we'd already been invaded. American soldiers were everywhere. They crowded St Kilda's Esplanade, looking for diversions in this end-of-the-world city. They were polite, their uniforms were tailored (a painful contrast to the Australians' hessian bagginess), their staff cars were late-model Buicks, and if you rode your bike down to Fisherman's Bend and parked it by the airstrip fence, you could watch Kittyhawks, Lightnings and Bostons roar in a few feet over your head.

A rat-grey Messerschmitt 109 fighter was exhibited at

Melbourne Town Hall, and you were allowed to climb into its cockpit – it was metallic and claustrophobic, and seemed to smell of Nazi Germany. Later in the war, a Japanese midget submarine also did a tour, and one could crawl into a confinement even more totalitarian. For a schoolboy, wartime Melbourne was pure excitement.

## Ours and theirs

Perhaps the Axis Powers didn't worry us because we were living in a benign totalitarianism of our own, ruled by a dictator of our own – Archbishop Daniel Mannix. It was Mannix who Confirmed a church-full of schoolboys, followed it up with an interminable homily, and then tried to persuade us to pledge to abstain from one of the few permitted Catholic pleasures – alcohol – until we were twenty-one. 'Stand up those boys manly enough to do it,' he said. Many stood, the intrepid did not, and I, in a posture that would perhaps prove typical, half-rose in a crouch.

Below Mannix in the authoritarian pyramid was the parish priest, and below that CBC St Kilda's headmaster, the urbane Brother Rooney, MA (a rare distinction then). One day early in 1945 Rooney told the assembly that people might be wondering what a big school like ours was doing for the war effort. He had the answer: a cadet unit.

Rooney had already filled me with dread with two earlier announcements: dancing and debating were arts we needed to learn. We trained for the first with our classmates as partners on the school handball court. ('Boys,' said the mustachioed

instructor, ‘once you learn you’ll go dancing eight nights a week.’) This was followed by anthropological ordeals with the girls from Presentation Convent, closely supervised – ‘You, go and dance with that fat girl over there.’ I never mastered the complex art of conversing, doing the *Pride of Erin* and concealing signs of sexual excitement all at the same time.

Debating was even more frightening. My maiden effort, in 1944, lives with me still. I went out the front with my little speech on helicopters ready, but couldn’t raise my eyes to the class. Staring at the floor I declared, in a quavering voice, that they were now ‘a practical proposition’. I was right, but my delivery was without conviction, and the case was lost.

I failed to dance or debate, and now there were richer possibilities for failure: cadets. It was voluntary, but everyone had to join, and soon all the Leaving Certificate class – small boys and big boys, skinny boys and wide boys – were bagged in khaki sacking.

We were used to taking orders, but not from our classmates. The ambitious went off to do courses, and came back as cadet lieutenants in smart uniforms with Sam Browne belts across their chests and pips on the shoulders. The go-getters and the no-getters were now clearly defined, and every Friday afternoon the first were put in charge of the second.

We would assemble before portly Brother Lewis (‘Thunderbum’) corseted in captain’s uniform. He’d bark out orders (‘Hand away from your face, McCarthy!’) then each platoon would stride into the adjoining Alma Park, where we were taught to slope and present arms, and sent on mindless marches round the oval.

This would build up to something even worse – cadet camp. What was the point if, a week before, Japan had surrendered?

Never mind, we had a double holiday. We celebrated the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary on 15 August, and on 16 August there was V-J Day. Victory was scrawled everywhere, blackboards included. 'People trickled into churches to give thanks,' admonished one newspaper, 'but there was the usual sprinkling of exhibitionists who thrive on mass revelry and wallow in the licence of unrestrained behaviour . . . to sing Tipperary in an absurdly high key, to dance jitterbug-style in a cramped space, and play two-up in a laneway.'

A week later, the war over and everyone going home, we were under canvas at Watsonia Army Camp, maybe in training for the next one. The first night we returned to our straw-stuffed palliasses stunned. We'd just seen a hygiene film crude even by schoolboy standards. It showed a soldier with diarrhoea on a latrine, wiping himself clumsily afterwards, not washing his hands, then getting into a bread delivery van, where he sits on the loaves and has a smoke.

It was the beginning of a process of brutalisation that would last a week, and it started to come out in our language. There was no sentence in which fuck could not be used, as verb, noun, adjective or participle. One morning, at the rifle range, we were told not to touch the triggers of our 303s before receiving the command to fire. 'These bullets are live fuckers,' warned the sergeant, showing a creative use of the word. Somehow, Dick Hughes's rifle went off. 'What fucking fuckwit did that?' he shouted. The applications of the word seemed endless.

Sleep was difficult, discipline unrelenting, the food inedible. (Cook, ladling out treacly-brown curry into our pannikins: 'This'll make you shit.' It did, but to the horror of middle-class sensitives like myself, the lavatory bowls were uncubicled. The shy had to take to the bushes or hang on and go in the dark.)



I celebrated my return to civilian life by going to the Palais to see Abbott and Costello in *Lost in a Harem*. How pleasant to escape to the Arabian kingdom of Barabeeha, ruled by the wicked sultan Nimativ (“Take him to the dungeon! The damp one!”). And the beautiful Marilyn Maxwell, and Jimmy Dorsey’s band marching through the bazaar in turbans. Apart from Churchill, Eisenhower and Curtin, no one did more for the war effort than Abbott and Costello. They made us laugh when that was what the world needed most.

## **The Christian Brothers defended**

How to explain a regimen predicated on a God of love and mercy, where the Hail Mary was said every hour and the strap used in between? Where sanctity and savagery co-existed? The Brothers would have called it discipline, of the kind needed for the formation of the Christian gentleman. This fabled boy was neatly dressed in school uniform, his cap straight and his socks pulled up. He treated others with respect – especially girls, with whom he’d never contemplate going further than a passionless kiss on the cheek.

The Brothers were like disadvantaged parents, determined that their boys were going to do better – as doctors, lawyers, public servants, or, best of all, priests. They were hard on us because their lives depended on it. If we proved intractable to their shaping, their vocation meant nothing. They trained us like athletes, to win.

The notion of sacrifice in the Christian Brothers ideal is now virtually incomprehensible. I can still recall the cheap