WAKEFIELD PRESS

A Potter's Pilgrimage

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‘Pottery is, at once, the simplest and the most difficult of the arts. It is the simplest because it is the most elemental; it is the most difficult because it is the most abstract . . . judge the art of a country, judge the fineness of its sensibility by its pottery; it is a sure touchstone.’

Herbert Read

‘It is more difficult to forget things after one has learned too much, than it is to learn what is necessary in the first place.’

Shoji Hamada

Contents

Foreword

It is sixty years since Milton Moon was introduced to pottery.

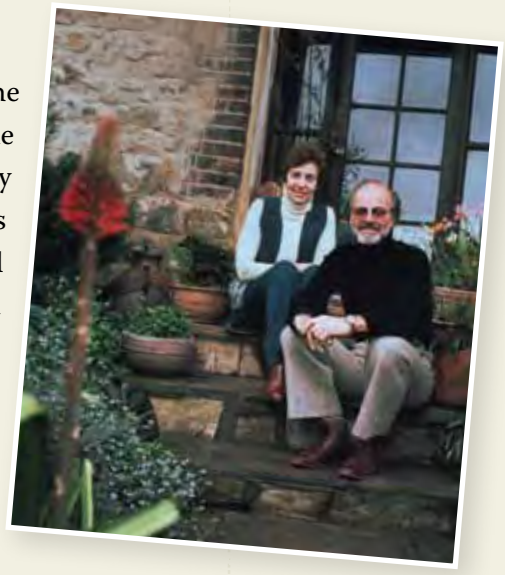
In the Brisbane of those days there were no formal courses and no pots in any Queensland public collection. The pioneer potteries that still existed made the most humble of objects serving a fast-vanishing social need.

The immediate post-war period, on many fronts, brought with it a fresh and youthful enthusiasm and in Brisbane Milton Moon was one of a small group of newer pioneer potters. He would say his beginnings were humble; there was no school from which to gain the knowledge he needed to pursue his path, but, as he says, even that, in itself, was formative. He insists he was not self-taught but merely learned from what knowledge that was available — most of which was generously given.

To read Milton Moon's account of that personal journey is to realise that although the path was at times lonely, it has also been both pilgrimage and privilege.

Betty Churcher, AO

Rusty corrugated iron and dirt floor



It is a very old saying that 'when the student is ready the teacher appears'. Close to sixty years ago, two people figured prominently in my pottery beginnings – Harry Memmott and Mervin Feeney. We all became friends and remained so until the end. It began where we all lived at that time, in Brisbane, Queensland, which showed little resemblance to the vibrant place it was to become. Neither Harry nor I were potters, although he at least was the grandson of a pioneer potter. Harry was an artist, but did anything to make a living in those early postwar years. Mervin Feeney was our teacher, although he might take issue with the 'teacher' label because he would say he did nothing more than tell us the things we wanted, and needed to know, at that particular time, which is a good way of learning. I am the only one left of us now and, maybe, in distant time someone may want to give shape and form to this particular piece of postwar pottery history – perhaps even as a PhD thesis – and not all of it will be right, but that is often the way of things.

Some years after we met, Harry wrote a manuscript on pottery. He showed me bits of what he had written, mostly on scraps of paper scribbled out as things came to

Above: The Moons, Summertown, 1979. Photograph by Milton Wordley.

mind, and I couldn't help responding to its spontaneity. I never did hear the final story about the manuscript's demise but it seems it got lost somewhere on the way to the publisher – or at the publisher – and there wasn't a copy; not even the title survived. Harry had called it 'The Way of Clay', which at that time was a fairly apt description of how we lived and worked. He wrote another book, and it was probably a more serviceable volume than the former, but the magic and burnish of the first had returned to the mists and weren't reborn in the second.

After those long and wasteful years of war the world was trying to find a 'way', and Harry and I were no different: we went about finding out how we wanted to live our lives after our stint in the armed services. Harry had been in an army intelligence unit, which was slightly ironic because, politically, he was something of a Marxist. He saw no contradiction in also being something of a Zennist – which no doubt inspired his book's original title, *The Way of Clay*. The title did have the sound of New Age west coast America at that particular time, but, in truth, we hardly knew what was happening elsewhere in our own country, in pottery terms, let alone being concerned with the rest of the world. In those days, some Americans thought Australia was behind the Iron Curtain.

Immediately after the war Harry had gone to art school as a full-time student and trained for many years as a painter. I too thought painting would be my direction but finally both of us chose 'the way of clay'. Pottery remained Harry's 'way' until his death, as it has remained mine. Neither of us were formally trained as teachers but we became teachers and taught what we knew; it must have worked because our students had students who, in turn, taught their own students. Perhaps our 'tradition' lives on, even if only in remnants, but with the source forgotten.

Merv Feeney was much more than a potter and, most importantly for Harry Memmott and myself, he was our friend and our teacher. He was generous enough to say that we also gave him a lot, but if we did add anything to the interest of his life it was a poor return for what he did for us. He was a mentor, an in-house genius and a very special friend. In fact, in every way he was a remarkable human being. Merv came into our lives at the right time and there was a certain synchronicity about this. After years of being projected into a regimented early adult life during the war, meeting Merv presented a turning back of the clock, a time of youth, enthusiasm, richness

and new beginnings. In some ways we were a little like the seeds that don't or can't germinate until they have been through the intense heat of a bushfire. It was almost a return to innocence, but one mixed with generosity. Perhaps that was a reflection of those years just after the war – the dry sterility and indifference that accompanies greed and selfishness hadn't yet become commonplace.

Romantic? Not too many people would have regarded the old Sandison Pottery at Annerley in Brisbane a romantic place, but it was for me when I first saw it, in the late 1940s. It had been 'founded' around the turn of the century by 'Grandpa' George Sandison. Grandpa Sandy, as he was known, was a pioneer potter and Harry Memmott's grandfather; Harry grew up 'in the shadow of the chimney-stacks of the kilns'. No one ever said why the pottery was built in that particular place, but there must have been clay there – clay underfoot was a better option than having to transport it from somewhere else. I once asked Merv Feeney how pioneer potters found their sources of clay and he said they used to ask the farmers who knew all about the soils and where the clay was. In the Brisbane/Ipswich area there is a lot of clay and it is said that Brisbane will run out of room to mine it before the clay runs out. In the early days houses would not have been built close to the pottery, so no one was too troubled by the smoke that belched from the kiln stacks. When houses did creep up close, housewives would have learned the habits of the pottery and avoided doing washing on the days when the kiln was firing. Anyway, in those times acceptance of such things was more the norm and, besides, not only was the pottery there first, it was a source of employment. The kilns were fired with coal from the rich deposits of the Ipswich coal measures, which supplied the power stations in Brisbane.

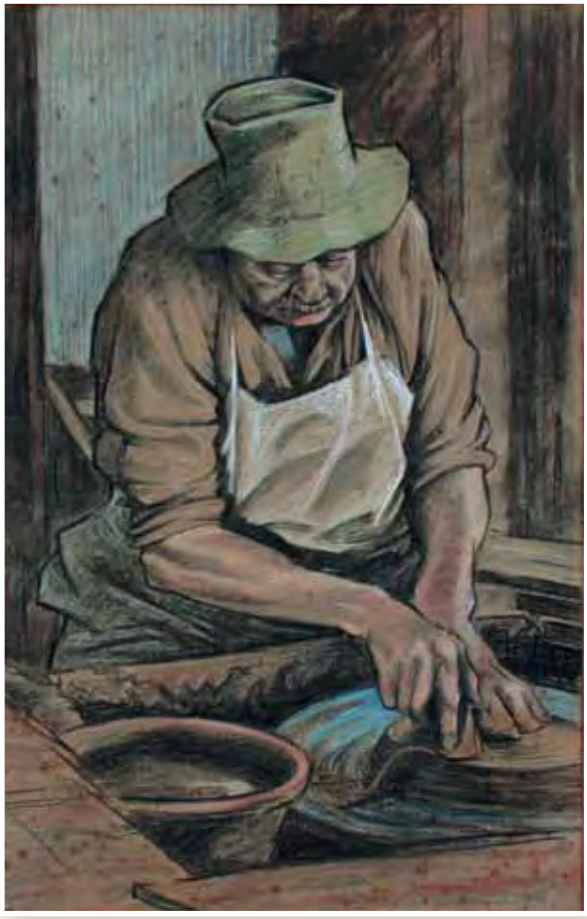
For many reasons Annerley was probably a good place to site a pottery: it was not too far from fast-growing Brisbane, and there was the railway and the arterial Brisbane–Ipswich road close by. The pottery must have been erected long before building codes. Its structure was of giant hardwood timbers, roughly cut, and it was still standing fifty years later despite the onslaught of termites. The original building probably didn't have walls, with only a roof structure covering the working area with its mounds of prepared clay, throwing wheels and stillages on which the pots were placed to dry. The corrugated-iron roof was probably original, but over the years had lost most of its protective galvanising due to the ravages of Queensland sub-tropical weather, and the

erosive action of acids released into the atmosphere from the firings. The corrugated roofs on the surrounding houses would also have shared in the corrosion. The floor was compacted earth, with rough-cut timbered steps dug into the slight slope. The interior was quite dark except for a few un-shaded light bulbs hanging loosely from the beams. During the time I used to haunt the pottery, almost all the pots being made were flower pots of varying sizes – this was long before the advent of plastic pots. (In later days the flower pots were machine-made, because skilled throwers couldn't compete with the machines Merv would devise.) The potters' wheels were still there in the late 1940s but were used only for special one-offs. Ware-boards, each of them about five or six feet (almost two metres) in length, were continually being covered with newly made pots. Row upon row they filled the spaces around the pot machines; then, as they dried, they would be shifted closer to the kiln to get the benefit of the warm and dry atmosphere. The pots would change in colour from the dark grey of wet clay to a lighter grey, and it was something of an aesthetic experience to see them, in line, all identical, pre-dating a later sculptural device that could make identical multiples of the one subject. When dried, the pots were carefully loaded into the kiln, and the geometrical open-stacking, which allowed a more even passage of heat, was also visually appealing. The final pleasure was to see them being removed from the kiln, not the grey colour they were before but now a rich, warm pink or terracotta. The change in colour is determined by the combustion, or burning-out, of the

Mervin Feeney, Bundamba Pottery, late 1980s.

vegetable matter, a natural impurity that gives un-fired clay its grey colour. The slight variation of the terracotta is caused by the temperature variations in the kiln firing – the higher the temperature the darker the colour. After being taken from the kiln the pots were stacked, one inside the other in varying sizes, in the yard awaiting delivery. (I can't recall anyone commenting about stealing, which would have been easy enough.)

The main kiln was a huge up-draft bottle type that had about six or eight fireboxes, each of which had to be rhythmically stoked until the right temperature was reached. The earlier part of the firing was with wood, but then the coal, the main fuel, would be shovelled in with increasing rhythm as the temperature climbed. With this sort of solid-fuel kiln, care has to be taken to maintain rhythmic stoking, to keep the temperature up and rising; and whoever was responsible for the firings had to get used to the required tempo. At Sandisons there was a camp-stretcher and an old-fashioned alarm clock alongside the kiln, allowing the stoker – who happened to be Merv's brother Eric – to snatch some sleep during the early part of the firing. But as the temperature increased sleep was not possible, and by the time the firing was over the stoker would be exhausted.



'Grandpa Sandy', pastel by Harry Memmott, c. 1949–1950.

Scattered around were several smaller kilns – made perhaps fifty or sixty years earlier – for special firings. The main kiln had probably been rebuilt many times, as wear and tear loosened the constantly expanding and contracting structure. It is likely that the smaller kilns hadn't been fired for half a century or more as they were full of bits of machinery and nondescript

junk, put to one side for future use. I suspect that for many years they served little purpose other than providing a home for rats and cockroaches and perhaps snakes, so it was prudent to leave well alone.

There used to be an area in the yard where the clay was milled and preserved that would have been of unique historical value. At Sandisons, after the clay was roughly crushed and mixed with water, it was thrown into a pug mill. A harnessed horse, walking in a continuous circle, powered gears revolving the worm-drive of the mill, which extruded the clay-body ready for use. Rough engineering can lighten any load, but not always. Uncle George, Grandpa Sandy's son, told me about another method using a pit, about two by two metres wide and half a metre deep, into which dried clay 'scraps' were thrown. After covering the pit with water the 'youngest or silliest worker' had to take off boots and socks and with rolled-up pants would tramp the clay until it was thoroughly wetted. On a cold, wet day, with clay squeezing between the toes, it wouldn't have been the most pleasant chore. The clay 'slush' would then be bucketed out, after which would begin the process of slowly removing the excess water until the clay became a plastic consistency. Covered with wet bags it was put aside until needed. There was no plastic sheeting in those days and keeping the hessian bags wet was a chore, especially in a Brisbane summer. This was long before my time, but I was a good listener and Uncle George would give me long and graphic accounts of the early days.

Harry Memmott's grandfather, Grandpa Sandison, was long gone before my time, when the pottery was run by Uncle George. I never heard Uncle George called by any other name, and I never saw him without a pipe in his mouth, even when he was throwing on the wheel. Grandpa Sandison had enjoyed much fame for the size and

Above: Harry Memmott, 1974.

consistency of his large thrown pots, but Uncle George had his own bit of fame, too: in his prime he could throw about four flower pots in one minute. One day we persuaded him to give a demonstration and admired the fact that he could still do it. His throwing stamina might have lessened by this time but the hands didn't fumble and he moved the clay in a way few people can these days. Why would he still bother? He had a younger working partner who had taken over the responsibilities of running the place and who could throw the heads off all of them anyway – Mervin Feeney.

The Sandison Pottery, like many others, almost went to the wall during World War Two. Labour was scarce and pottery was not an important part of the war effort. After the war was over, and Uncle George was no longer a young man, he would have known he wasn't able to keep up with what was required in the new postwar age. By nature he was not really a leader and, moreover, time had passed him by. However, Uncle George had the immeasurable good fortune in finding a working partner in Merv, a trained potter as well as a chemist and, as importantly, a natural engineer. During the war Merv was seconded to work within one of the essential and protected industries contributing to the war. Chemists had been needed for many things, including explosives, and Merv's abilities spread over many specialist areas. Merv was also a natural student. He had grown up in the Ipswich area, but not all the studies he wanted to undertake were offered at the local tech institution and this meant long periods spent travelling to and from Brisbane. (This would have been somewhat tedious because in those days not many young blokes had cars.) Merv qualified as an industrial chemist either before or during the early war years, and put this knowledge to use in the 'war effort'. He had an astonishingly open-ended curiosity about everything; I recall his wife Joyce saying she often shared the bed with an encyclopaedia. After the war Merv returned to his earlier occupation of pottery – a rundown old place like Sandisons was exactly the rehabilitation program he needed.

Harry Memmott's life and mine were very different but followed paths that ran roughly parallel for a few years. After being 'de-mobbed', Harry enrolled to study Fine Art at the East Sydney Technical College, where many of Australia's artists trained. He returned to Brisbane and married, and with a young wife and twin boys he was living in the old family home in Annerley, a stone's throw from the pottery. As it happened, this was close to where I lived at the time.

Gallery

'Lady vase', earthenware, 30 cm, made at Tarrangindi, 1962.

Vase form, mid-range firing, 20 cm, made at Tarrangindi, 1962.

Coffee pot, earthenware, 32 cm h, made at Tarrangindi, 1955–1956.
SA government grant, 1978. Art Gallery of South Australia collection.

Vase, mid-range firing, 21 cm, made at Tarrangindi, 1962.