St Andrew’s College Lecture

In honour of the Rev Theodora Hobbs (1931–2011), Hon Fellow of St Andrew’s College

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Defining Moments

Principal Wayne Erickson, Chairman of Council, Dr Robert Harper SC, Senior Fellow, Associate Professor Ian Jack, distinguished guests, Androvians.

When the Principal approached me about presenting the lecture, I was delighted at the prospect and had no hesitation as to whom might be honoured this evening—the Rev Theodora Emily Hobbs. I was drawing a slightly long bow with respect to this lecture’s dedication, as Theodora was not a ‘resident’ in the sense initially intended, as I understand it, by the address. But it is exactly an occasion like this—standing as it does as a singular tribute to those who have an honourable connection with the College—to honour Theodora Hobbs (née Milne).

And for my specific topic tonight I also was quick to suggest to the Principal that it would be about ‘defining moments’—those occasions in life that confront and challenge and that go to define who we are as individuals. It is in many ways a personal reflection on moments that can cause a change of course for a person and, at times, as a result, may even change history.

But first, about Theodora. Our paths crossed at St Andrew’s, in 1999. I joined her on the College Council, chaired at the time by the indomitable (and very charming) Andrew Murray. Theodora was nominated to one of the three clerical positions in June that year. I joined her a couple of months later as a ‘lay’ member of Council. I had been drawn to the College through my interactions with Dr Bill Porges, when he was in the Veterinary Science Faculty and later Acting Principal of St Andrew’s, and by events at the College, such as the Universities and Schools Dinner when I was Head of Dept then Dean of the Faculty of Law. Through an amendment to the College’s Act of Incorporation in 1998, Bill could become Principal officially, as he was not an ordained Minister. (The amendment to the Act also meant that I could be a Councillor. I had been confirmed into the Church of England and, while a good protestant, I was not technically a Presbyterian, as required under the old Act).

When I was invited to join the Council, I was also drawn to the College by my Godfather, the late Reverend William Porter-Young. He, like Theodora, was a Presbyterian Minister. I recall his retaining the echo of an Edinburgh ‘clip’ in his speech. Like Theodora he was also called later in life to the ministry, having been a journalist prior to that. He had an especially acute mind and was a fine poet. My Godfather enjoyed picking my brains over a cup of coffee in the bowels of the city near St Andrew’s Cathedral and Town Hall Station. There was always a constitutional issue to discuss arising from his role in senior church administration. I was very sad when he died, but I know he would have been proud of my joining St Andrew’s

* President, Australian Law Reform Commission and Professor of Law, Macquarie University (from which position I am on leave for the duration of my appointment at the ALRC). The views in this presentation are mine alone, and do not reflect views of the ALRC. I also wish to express my appreciation to Professor Ian Jack for his assistance in preparing biographical information about Rev Hobbs.
College Council. We never spoke about women’s ordination. If we had, I hope that he would have greeted Theodora’s ordination with rowdy acclaim.

Theodora passed away two years ago, on 23 July 2011. She was spectacular. The last woman Presbyterian minister ordained in NSW; the dux of Presbyterian Ladies College (PLC) as a girl, and dubbed ‘the walking dictionary’ by her classmates; she was a ‘doer’—a lifetime member of Save the Children and a tireless campaigner for women. Her son Andrew said in his obituary of his mother that she was so active that her children (she had four) remember playing ‘mummies and daddies’ by putting on coats, clutching papers and handbags and leaving the house, saying ‘Don’t bother me now, I’m going to a meeting!’ (I can certainly relate to that .... In the preface of the first edition of my succession book, I included a parenthetical plea that ‘perhaps one day our children will come to understand the meaning of “Mummy’s working”’)

Theodora had the Presbyterian ministry virtually imprinted in her DNA. Her mother, Violet Killen’s great-uncle was the Rev WD Killen, a prominent Presbyterian minister in Northern Ireland throughout most of the 19th century. Her father, John Milne, was a relative of the Rev James Milne, of Aberdeen, who was a Presbyterian minister in Paddington for 20 years from 1854. John became an elder at St Stephen’s in Macquarie Street.

(Senior Fellow, Associate Professor Ian Jack, who kindly provided me with pertinent biographical information, has identified a number of St Andrew’s College connections that led Theodora inevitably to us — for example that when she was studying for the Ministry she studied Greek with Jill Dougan, whose husband, the Rev Alan Dougan, Theodora had met at St Peter’s church, North Sydney, where she was an elder. Rev Dougan was later Principal of St Andrew’s — from 1957 to 1974.)

Theodora’s PLC Principal, Miss Dorothy Knox had a huge influence on her, something Theodora herself described as ‘immeasurable’. Miss Knox had sought, unsuccessfully, to establish a Presbyterian Women’s College on St Andrew’s land. Perhaps Theodora and I helped towards the fulfilment of that dream, in the wonderful St Andrew’s of today as a Men’s and Women’s College. We were both part of the Council decision on 11 November 2001 that began this marvellous transformation. I know how excited and proud Theodora would be to see the Andrew’s tradition triumphant in the college community of today.

Theodora’s calling in Christ came at the age of 12, when she attended a Crusader Camp. But her calling to the Ministry was much later. In the meantime she became a librarian, including periods at Manly Boys’ High School and then in the NSW Department of Education.

In 1987, at the age of 56, Theodora graduated with a Bachelor of Divinity, winning the McKibbin Prize, in preparation to enter the ministry. Why did she take such a step? I will put it in her own words:

> Why does a middle-aged woman offer herself for full-time service work with the church? For the same reasons as anyone else in response to our Lord’s great act of redemption and His command ‘Go and teach all nations’.

> I pray that some of my long experience as a wife, a mother and a teacher may help me to speak God’s truth and tell God’s love in language which those around me will understand.

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2. A bequest of Rachel McKibbin for the top student graduating with Bachelor of Divinity (Hons).
And she was truly committed to the equality of women, which embroiled her in the bitter controversy within the church with respect to the ordination of women. Her declaration in 1997 says so much about her:

Women do not seek the status of ‘minister’ through pride, but through a desire to serve ... God does not call all males to teach, nor all females, but those who are called know that they must heed that voice.

This was her ‘defining moment’ when, as a middle-aged woman, ‘heeding that voice’, she entered the Ministry. She was the fifth, and last, woman to be ordained as a Presbyterian minister. In September 1991 the General Assembly of the church changed its mind. Having allowed women to be ordained from 1974, this decision was reversed. The five women who had been ordained were allowed to continue, but no more were allowed to follow.

Defining moments take many complexions. There are moments of calling — as for Theodora and for my Godfather. There are moments of epiphany (like Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus). There are also moments of serendipity and those of personal challenge and response. I will share some of these with you, prior to returning to my tribute to Theodora.

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When doing some homework on defining moments for this presentation, I came across a course conducted by Professor J Rufus Fears, at the University of Oklahoma, on ‘Events that Changed History’, focusing on ‘moments that irrevocably changed the course of human civilization’. The much-hailed professor gives 36 lectures, each dedicated to such a moment. What I found most striking about his choice was how ‘blokey’ they were — not that this is a criticism; it is just an observation:

1. Hammurabi Issues a Code of Law
2. Moses and Monotheism
3. The Enlightenment of Buddha
4. Confucius instructs a Nation

It continues in this vein — jumping along: Caesar crosses the Rubicon; Erasmus — a Book Sets Europe Ablaze; and then there are lots of battles: The Defeat of the Spanish Armada; the Battle of Lexington; The Atomic Bomb is Dropped.

They are great, and defining, moments. But what about the ‘back stories’: Jochebed gives birth to a son, Moses, and saves him from Pharaoh by hiding him a basket and putting it in the Nile?

I won’t labour the point. But it is a different perspective. (I feel sure that Theodora, an avowed Christian feminist, would have found this amusing!) I am also not about to embark upon a counter-list.

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Two of the moments I have chosen in my list tonight have a Norfolk Island connection. I was struck by both when I visited the island in the 1980s.

Norfolk Island was spotted in the South Pacific by Captain James Cook (second of eight children of James Cook, a Scottish farm labourer) in 1774. Cook was on his second voyage to the South Pacific on _HMS Resolution_. He named the island after Mary Howard, Duchess of

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Norfolk, an intelligent and assertive woman — dubbed by the son of Prime Minister Robert Walpole as ‘My Lord Duchess’. (Cook did not know that she had already passed away).

(There is a further back story here — that Cook was of royal lineage to the Scottish throne — descended from the secret child of Lady Arbella Stuart with William Seymour. My mother has written of this story in her book, Captain Cook of Royal Lineage — The Intriguing Origins of a Man of Genius, Towerhouse Publications, 2011).

Norfolk Island was used as an extension penal settlement to New South Wales until 1855. The original settlement was in Kingston, with Emily Bay nearby. Here, too, you will find a graveyard. Such places provide an extraordinary window on the history of a place, providing as they do, snapshots in a cameo shorthand, distilling people’s lives in the aching poignancy of the few words left on a headstone.

As you would expect of this graveyard there were headstones of soldiers. And, in the context of a small island, many of them died through drowning. But there were other stories — like that of Ann Borgin:

In memory of Ann Borgin and her infant child. The wife and daughter of Corporal Wm Borgin, 50th Regiment, who died the former on the 8th and the latter on the 17th March 1838. Aged 30 and aged 10 months.

And this one on a raised tomb—

Reposes Susanna, the beloved wife of the Honourable WH Pery, who departed this life on the 22nd August 1841, aged 30 years, fifteen days after giving birth to a Daughter.

Added to the bottom was this:

Also Susanna Emily Lucy, their Daughter, died 18th January 1842, aged 6 months.

There were several others that were just about little children — like Joseph Scaisbrick, the son of Corporal Joseph Scaisbrick, who died on 23 August 1847, aged 8 months.

Ann Borgin and Susanna Pery, two women giving birth on an island of only about 35 km² in the South Pacific Ocean — 8 days sailing distance from Sydney. Their story is part of the background to one particular defining moment in medical history: the discovery of penicillin — a discovery by accident and observation that has saved the lives of countless millions.

Here we turn to the story of a Scotsman, Alexander (Alec) Fleming, born on 6 August 1881, at Lochfield near Darvel in Ayrshire, Scotland. He was the third of the four children of farmer Hugh Fleming (1816–1888) from his second marriage to Grace Stirling Morton (1848–1928), the daughter of a neighbouring farmer.

Alec studied medicine, researching in vaccine therapy. After serving as a captain in the Army Medical Corps during WWI, he became a Professor of Medicine in 1928. That year he was working on the influenza virus. He noticed that mould had developed accidently on a staphylococcus culture plate and that there was a circle, free of bacteria, around the mould. He continued experimenting and found that a mould culture prevented the growth of staphylococci, even when diluted 800 times. He called the active substance ‘penicillin’.

4 Part of that particular back story is that my own father reputedly forms part of that line: his father’s great grandmother, Jane Cooke, referred to Captain James Cook as ‘her old uncle’. It is an intriguing family legend.

5 The inscriptions are transcribed, with images of the headstones at: saustcemindex.com/cemetery-inscriptions.php?id=820, at 29 August 2013.
Use of penicillin did not begin until the 1940s, during the Second World War, when the Australian pharmacologist and pathologist Howard Florey and German-born British biochemist Ernst Chain isolated the active ingredient and developed a powdery form of the medicine. Their discovery led to the award of the Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine in 1945 to Florey, Chain, and Fleming.

War was the propelling force of the mass production of the medicine. The use of a penicillin dressing drastically reduced the chance of a wound getting infected and becoming gangrenous. The chance of survival for wounded soldiers was therefore greatly increased. But while penicillin saved soldiers, it also saved women and children: women from septicaemia from childbirth; and children from the illnesses that occupy much of the lives of children under five — middle-ear infections, tonsillitis, bronchitis. Penicillin most likely would have saved Ann Borgin, Susan Pery and their children.

For me, this ranks as one of the greatest defining moments in history: a drug, found by accident, that saves countless women and children.

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The other Norfolk Island story concerns William Bligh and a journey of enormous challenge — and triumph.

In 1776, Bligh was selected by Captain James Cook for the position of sailing master of *HMS Resolution* and, in July 1776, accompanied Cook on his third and fatal voyage to the Pacific. On returning to England at the end of 1780, Bligh was able to give details of Cook’s last voyage.

As a result of what happened when Bligh was Commander of *HMS Bounty*, Bligh’s story became inexorably linked to Norfolk Island — because it was to Norfolk that 194 descendants of the Bounty mutineers and their Tahitians wives were moved on 8 June 1856. They were resettled on Norfolk from Pitcairn Island, which had become too small for their growing population.

The story of the mutiny on the Bounty has become the stuff of legends and Hollywood movies. (1935: Charles Laughton and Clark Gable. 1962: Marlon Brando as Fletcher Christian and Trevor Howard as Bligh. 1984: Mel Gibson and Anthony Hopkins). But the story that I find the most fascinating and speaks to the theme of my presentation is Bligh’s journey after the mutiny. It was the most extraordinary feat of navigation and an incredible test of character.

On 28 April 1789 Bligh was set adrift with 18 men in the ship’s cutter, an open boat only 23 feet (7 m) long and about 7 feet (just over 2 m) wide. The *Bounty* was on the return journey to England from Tahiti, where they had been cultivating breadfruit.

Bligh was left with only a quadrant and pocket watch; no charts or compass; and only a little water and supplies. In the middle of the southern Pacific Ocean in a tiny open sailing boat, sitting almost to the gunwales in a vast expanse of ocean.

How did Bligh respond to this defining moment? Discipline — and sheer brilliance. Renowned as a skilled navigator, he needed to summon every skerrick of this skill — and his memory of the South Pacific.

Timor was the nearest European outpost, but it was almost twice the distance from Sydney to Perth. It took Bligh 47 days, reaching Timor on 14 June (a month before the storming of the
Bastille in Pairs, on the other side of the world). The extraordinary zigzagging journey is set out in the ‘Bounty Museum’ on Norfolk Island — which is where the story of this remarkable journey imprinted itself upon my consciousness.

Bligh kept a meticulous log of the 3,618 nautical miles (6,710 km) journey. He rationed every ounce of food and water: one ounce of bread and a quarter of a pint of water per day, supplemented by ship’s biscuit, an occasional mouthful of coconut, breadfruit or yam, the entrails of a seabird, a thimbleful of its blood. And for 21 days it rained almost continuously. Remember this was an open boat. All but one of the men survived. (The one who died was killed on a brief and abortive stopover on one of the Tahitian islands to try to pick up supplies. It meant that they didn’t try to land again, fearing further hostility). So meticulous had Bligh’s calculations been, that they actually had food left over, having made almost 90 miles a day — in itself a remarkable fact.

It was by all accounts the most extraordinary feat of seamanship. (Bligh then returned to Britain and reported the mutiny to the Admiralty on 15 March 1790, 2 years and 11 weeks after his original departure).

Later he became Governor of New South Wales, as the immediate predecessor to Lachlan Macquarie—the subject of the last St Andrew’s College Lecture given by HE Emeritus Professor Marie Bashir.

We know what happened to the mutineers. Some stayed in Tahiti. But Fletcher Christian, nine mutineers and their wives, six Polynesian men and a baby, sailed to Pitcairn Island — the longitude had been charted incorrectly by 3º but Christian punted for it as their chance to be ‘invisible’ — off the charts of the British navy. When the British navy eventually caught up with them in 1814, there was only one survivor of the original mutineers, John Adams. After his own ‘epiphany’, Adams had fostered the little community into a god-fearing and civilised one, using the ship’s bible as the guide. In recognition of this, Adams was granted an amnesty.

The descendants of the mutineers were resettled on Norfolk Island in 1856.

Bligh has been much maligned by some. For me, he is a true hero.

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The third defining moment I have chosen for this evening’s presentation is far closer to home — and intensely domestic. It is the day my father took command of the Cub Cadet ride-on lawnmower.

My father, Dr Frank McGrath OBE AM, retired as Chief Judge of the Compensation Court of NSW in 1993, at the compulsory retirement age of 72. In retirement he completed a PhD in History, on the ‘Intentions of the Framers of the Australian Constitution’, and took up playing the organ. Two years ago, in December 2011, he and my mother celebrated their joint 90th birthdays. Next year, in October 2014, they will celebrate their 70th wedding anniversary. But in recent years my father’s health has been declining. While otherwise hearty — due to a gluten-free diet and full-fat everything according to my mother’s dietary regimen — he has developed very bad scoliosis. It was crippling him. And for a man who had been relatively fit and strong all his life, it was bearing upon him, making him increasingly disheartened.
But then my husband, Professor John Croucher, and I bought Weroona, a former boys’ home in the Blue Mountains in May last year. (In another connection with St Andrew’s, Professor Ian Jack undertook the heritage assessment of the property for the Blue Mountains City Council). Weroona has 6 acres of gardens, with extensive lawns — and its own cricket pitch. It is a big property and my parents started spending each weekend there, staying in ‘The Lodge’ (a name that my mother finds greatly entertaining), the gatehouse of the original estate. Then one day my father said, “Ros, I think I can manage the ride-on mower”. He could — and still does. (I remember the first day we got the mower out. There was my father, my husband John and myself, five PhDs between us, three of them John’s, and only me reading the manual. Eventually John and my father mastered its operation!). Now every weekend my father is either mowing or pulling a large barrow that attaches behind it, as we embark upon the extensive program of gardening that Weroona requires. Dad has established his own distinctive mowing style. From above I am sure it resembles the crop circles of Britain. Together, we are quite a team!

It was a defining moment for a wonderful elderly gentleman. Last Christmas, we had a work-shirt embroidered “Frank’s Mowing Services”, which my father wears as best for tea. He said it has all added five years to his life, so he has just bought a new car. And it is truly magical to observe the beaming smile on his face now — astride the ride-on mower.

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To conclude this evening’s presentation I will return, in tribute, to Theodora.

In 1988 she had achieved her goal of ordination and she served the parish of Abbotsford where she remained until she retired in 1993, thereafter being given the title of ‘Minister Emeritus’. In her last years she moved to Canberra where her minister was the Reverend Joy Bartholomew — an ‘unexpected pleasure’ for Theodora, as one of the few women Presbyterian ministers of a parish in Australia. Theodora said that

> While that fact makes me sad in a way, we can’t do much but hope and pray for better relationships in the Presbyterian Church. I am not expounding sexist views, I just hope that the church — everywhere — will eventually accept the gifts of women and men, in all their different ways.\(^6\)

Theodora remained on the College Council till 2005 when she moved to Canberra to St Andrew’s Village, where she died in 2011 after suffering from Alzheimer’s disease.

In 2004 I had the pure joy of having the Rev Hobbs officiate when I married John on the grounds of Macquarie University, where we are both Professors and where we had met in late 2001. Theodora was delighted to be asked to do the honours at our wedding. And the ceremony in her hands proved most entertaining. She opened by saying that she had conducted lots of weddings in all kinds of places, but never married anyone ‘in a paddock’. She also said many more blessings than I am sure are usual — with an aside that was a wry self-jest, aware that her memory was failing, ‘Have I done this bit already?’ The illness that was to take her from us was perhaps already beginning to show its cruel symptoms. (To this day I am not sure whether John married me or my best friend, and whether I married him or the best man, as Theodora asked us to sign the certificate again, having indicated incorrectly where to sign first. I am sure any aberrations in the sight of God will be forgiven. The State certainly has the correct partnering!)

Professor Ian Jack concludes his summary of Theodora with the following comments that are worth sharing:

Her belief in justice and equity, not least for women, her dedication to St Andrew’s College and, most of all, her Christian faith did not falter, however difficult the times.

Theodora’s defining moments were clearly many and momentous. They made her into the woman I am honoured to have known and proud to have served with on St Andrew’s College Council. She is a worthy ‘Drewsman’ indeed — and a true embodiment of the College motto, *Christo, Ecclesiae, Litteris*: ‘For Christ; for the church; and for learning’.

Principal Erickson, I thank you again for the honour of the invitation to present this evening’s lecture and the opportunity to pay tribute directly — and in my theme — to the extraordinary Theodora Emily Hobbs.