

Comments on the Book

‘An inspiring insight into the less well-publicised side of social care.’

‘An enchanting journey into a time that no longer exists.’

‘An honest tribute to Miss Martin and to life in a small East Lothian town.’

‘Memories of a bygone era.’

Tenterfield

My Happy Childhood In Care

by

Margaret Irvine

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Publisher's foreword

Imagine you had 39 brothers and sisters. Children's homes and their staff are better known nowadays for the sad cases when things go wrong.

This honest and direct memoir is a wonderful reminder of how good things could be, with loving and caring staff helping children whose own families had come unstuck.

Margaret was the youngest of twelve, and her delightful story tells how good an upbringing she had under the care of Miss Martin and the excellent staff of Tenterfield House, with strong support from the local community.

Read it and I think you will soon see why I decided to publish it.

Zander Wedderburn, Fledgling Press

Dedication

This book is dedicated to all the staff who worked in Tenterfield while I was a child in their care. I have never felt embarrassed about having been in care and have always been proud of the care that I was given; I certainly was given lots of love which I would not have received from my natural parents – there were always boundaries in Tenterfield but we children had freedom too.

I would like to thank Clare who has been behind me one hundred percent and helped with typing all my work, also her husband and girls for allowing their mum to help me with this task.

Thank you Clare.

Many thanks also to Neil Murray of the Aston Martin Heritage Trust.

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Margaret Irvine June 2010

1 Beginnings

I was born in Edinburgh on the nineteenth of November nineteen forty six, the youngest of twelve children, to John and Josephine Irvine nee Horne. After leaving Simpson's Maternity Hospital – based at the old Royal Infirmary in Edinburgh I was taken to the family home in Park View, Prestonpans, East Lothian. I can only look back now and imagine how difficult life must have been for my mother especially having no help from my father. I never knew him. I remember one of my older sisters – Nancy – telling me all about my father and from what

she told me he seemed to spend most of his time drinking in the local pubs.

As I was born just after the war, food was scarce and there were no Social Security benefits available as there are today, so you can understand why life became difficult for some very large families like ours. When I was around two years old our family was brought to the attention of the local authorities as we (the younger children) were often found wandering the streets while our mother searched the local pubs for our father, trying to find him before he spent all his money on drink. She needed money for food and heat but it was a regular occurrence for her to have to go looking for him.

As the authorities were on the way to collect us seven younger children my sister Nancy took me into our garden and rolled me up in an old carpet in an attempt to hide me. She waited until I fell asleep and then went inside to wait for the Welfare Officers as they were called then. When they noticed one child was missing they asked Nancy where I was but she refused to tell them; however thankfully I was found. She always told me that she had wanted to keep me. We were all placed in the Children's Shelter in Edinburgh until a suitable children's home could be found to accommodate us. At the same time we were made Wards of Court, which meant that we would not see our parents

again until we were very much older and able to decide for ourselves whether we wanted to see them. Our parents received a letter from the authorities regarding the decision.

Tenterfield House - a children's home - was found in Haddington, East Lothian, not far from Prestonpans. I don't remember anything at all about the Matron who ran the home when we first arrived but when I was about four a new Matron - Miss Martin - took charge of Tenterfield. My older brother Angus tells me that the previous Matron was never as nice as Miss Martin and that she left quite abruptly. He also remembers that she was quite young, perhaps around twenty five and engaged so perhaps this

was the reason she left. We were one of the first families in Tenterfield after it was taken over by the now defunct Midlothian, East Lothian & Peebles County Council .

The new Matron was here and I did not think much of her looks or appearance. She wore a grey pleated skirt and jacket, pink shirt and tie and black lace up shoes and also had very short hair. I thought to myself “What do we have here?” but my fears were soon allayed. Miss Dorothy Kathleen Martin was born in nineteen hundred and six in Chelsea, North London. Her father was Lionel Walker Birch Martin, the co-founder of the Aston Martin car group. Miss Martin did not talk much about her

father only saying that he liked to race cars and won many trophies. As we children became more comfortable with Miss Martin we would ask her questions about her childhood.

One particular question we liked to ask was why did she want to look after this ever-growing family of children. Her reply was that as a child she had had a Nanny and on one of her daily walks with her Nanny she had met a large group of children from the local children's home being taken for a walk also. She had asked her Nanny why the other Nannies had so many children with them and when it was explained to her that these children did not live with their parents she decided there and then that

she would look after all the children in the world. We were the lucky ones who did receive the privilege of being cared for by this wonderful woman.

Miss Martin had been given the authority to pick her own staff and along came Miss Florence McDean whom we renamed ‘Mackie’ or ‘Nanna Dean’ to the younger children. There was also Mary who was a gem too. Both Mackie and Mary had worked with Miss Martin in North Berwick. We also had other staff to help with our care – domestics, laundry staff, a cook and a sewing lady had all worked in the home prior to Miss Martin’s arrival and they stayed on and worked with her. The gardener Mr McLaren lived in a tied cottage in the

grounds. They were all to play a big part in my upbringing. As I became older questions such as “Do I have parents?” and “If so why was I in Tenterfield?” occurred to me. Miss Martin would sit me down, often on her knee, and explain my past to me in a way that I as a child could understand. She told me about the circumstances my parents had been in and how it was not suitable for children to be brought up in that way. She would also say that we were the lucky ones to have been taken out of such hardship and to have a chance of a much better life. Miss Martin also made it clear to me that this was not our fault and if necessary she would remind me of my parents’

situation. She was always there when you needed her.

We all became known as Miss Martin's children – never children from Tenterfield Home and we all loved this fact. We were brought up to always respect our house and ourselves and of course, each other.

2 Tenterfield Life

Once I remember some of us older children going for a cycle run under Mackie's supervision. We cycled so far that we all got lost and Mackie phoned home to let Miss Martin know. She was not too impressed with the situation and informed the police who found us and escorted us home safely. Mackie was told that under no condition must she do that again! And of course she didn't.

Mackie was also a very artistic person; she drew many pictures for the younger children and they would paint in the colours. The older children would also try and draw just like her; I'm afraid I wasn't one of them but many a child did learn to draw well. Miss Martin

always said all children are good at something as long as they are given the opportunity and she made sure that we were given opportunities. In the evenings when the weather was bad the playroom was a hive of activity. The older children did basket weaving and I enjoyed this very much. The weaving material would have been soaking in the bath for hours, and we would take it from the bath, give it a good shake and run with it dripping, all the way downstairs to the playroom, shaking it over each other. We would arrive at the playroom and begin weaving but only if we wanted to. If we didn't we could read or do something else to amuse ourselves in the playroom.

The best place to be with Mackie was outdoors; this lady was a free spirit – our ‘Maria’¹ – she loved the freedom of being outside and would always organise rounders, football or any other sport you could think of, never being short of two teams as there were so many children in Tenterfield. We would also spend time walking in the surrounding hills, being taught about the birds we saw and the rabbits and hares, racing up and down the hills and also learning all about the wild flowers. Mackie was a walking encyclopaedia and there was very little she did not know.

When the snow was on the hills we would all be eager to get home from

¹ From The Sound of Music 1965

church on a Sunday, have lunch then get changed out of our Sunday clothes, grab our sledges which were homemade, and head for the hills. What fun we had – we spent many a happy hour up there taking turns to sit on the sledge or even riding two at a time; flying downhill it was like total freedom. When Mackie and the other members of staff had a turn on the sledges all the children would laugh as they raced each other down the hill with us shouting their names. We would return home hungry and very happy, all trying to tell Miss Martin at the same time about the afternoon's events.

Mackie also had the job of looking after the girls aged from six to fourteen. She would get 'her' girls up at seven o'

clock and the older ones would help her get the younger ones ready before going off to the bathroom to wash and do our teeth. We would make our beds and then it would be downstairs for breakfast. This time of day seemed to be very quiet; maybe some of the children were still half asleep from the busy evening the night before.

Breakfast consisted of porridge, cereal, eggs sometimes boiled, poached or scrambled, toast and marmalade and a cup of tea. While we were having our breakfast the staff would have theirs, as Miss Martin always supervised mealtimes. Mealtimes always began by saying Grace and as the children got older they would start by saying “For

what we are about to receive” to which the rest of the children would reply “May the Lord make us truly thankful, AMEN!” However when we played outside we had our own version which was “One word is as good as ten, tuck in, AMEN!” If only Miss Martin knew!

Mackie would walk the younger girls to school with Mary who was in charge of the boys. They treated us like their own broods and when you reached the age of eight, if Mackie or Mary thought you were ready then you could go to school on your own and Mackie or Mary would let Miss Martin know their decision. The older children often walked with Mackie and Mary and sometimes one or another would call in

for their friends en route. We were encouraged to make friends outwith Tenterfield and our friends would often come to Tenterfield for tea and we would go to their homes.

When the staff returned home from the school run there was always plenty for them to do. They would check our play clothes and get them ready for us returning from school. They often helped with each other's tasks, wash the tables and set them for lunch and then have a well-earned break in their sitting room before it was time to set off again to collect all us children from school for lunch. They then took us back to school and repeated the same tasks all over again until it was time to collect us at

home time. When all the children returned home for the day it would be up to our rooms to change into our play clothes, hanging up our school clothes in the wardrobe and getting our homework ready.

After tea the younger children would go to the staff sitting room to do their homework and the older children would do theirs with Miss Martin. When homework was over we would have an hour of television then out into the field to play until your bedtime was called. At weekends, bedtime and in the evening a bell was used to call the children in, as we would be here, there and everywhere – it was a very large playing field we had. As you got older supper time was

added to your three meals a day. This was usually cocoa, toast and jam and the member of staff responsible that day would decide what we were having; it was usually something good! I remember that one time it was Mackie's turn to make supper and she reckoned that Tenterfield had the very first chip shop as she made chips with vinegar and handed them out the pantry window to us. We all sat outside and ate them – I think Miss Martin must have been on holiday as chips were never usually on the menu. At the weekends we stayed in bed a little longer but not much as many of the children were in the school football, rugby or hockey teams (I was in

the hockey team) so we had to get to school again for our matches.

On Sunday mornings we attended the West Church of Scotland in Haddington. After breakfast we would all be dressed in our Sunday best, all in line waiting for our penny for the collection. Miss Martin took us all to church; we filled the first two pews in the church and it never failed that someone would drop their penny. Often the Minister would pick it up and hand it back to the child, usually with a kind comment although Miss Martin would have a quiet word later with the child reminding them to be careful with their penny!

After the collection was taken the younger children went to Sunday School and the rest of us went home with Miss Martin. A member of staff would collect the younger ones later and bring them home in time to change for lunch. Until recently I was unaware that part of Miss Martin's job was to bring the children up in the particular faith that their parents requested. I personally found this strange having been more or less abandoned by my parents but Miss Martin made sure that those children whose parents did request a particular faith had their wishes honoured. I remember one boy who was Catholic and was taken to the chapel each week until he was old enough to attend

himself. I believe that this was an indication of the type of person Miss Martin was – open, fair and willing to accommodate every race and religion in our home at Tenterfield. As an adult now I am beginning to understand certain things about Miss Martin. She respected each family's own faith, ignoring her own faith which was Church of England. The fact that she was never able to worship in her own church never seemed to bother her.

After church and lunch we would all be dressed in our play clothes for a walk in the hills. Sometimes Miss Martin would come with us with her dog Patch – a white and brown cocker spaniel. I think Patch was our first dog.

He came to Tenterfield at around fourteen weeks old and was absolutely gorgeous; a little bundle of fun with big eyes staring at you. He must have thought he was in heaven with all these children to fuss over him.



Patch having a rest

Patch soon settled into our very large family and often the older children would take him for a walk. He was never allowed into the children's playing field until he had been taken for a walk which I now understand was to ensure he did not foul in our play area. After his walk he would always run to the playing field as he knew where we children would be and we often chased him around the field. He could be a bit of a pest if we were playing rounders but then someone would just take him in to Miss Martin where he would lie beside the coal fire if it was on. If not then he would lie in his bed – he was the best exercised dog in Haddington.

After many years of Patch being part of our family he seemed to become very quiet. Miss Martin gave him some time to rest in the hope that peace and quiet would help him. He stayed in her sitting room, only going out when Miss Martin took him in her car to exercise away from the bustle of Tenterfield. Things were not looking too good for him and the children were always asking Miss Martin how he was. He was taken to the vet and poor Patch never returned. After tea that evening Miss Martin brought all of us children and staff together to tell us that Patch had died. One child began to cry then another and another until we were all crying, staff included. This was my very first

experience of death and it took some time to get over Patch's death. We all helped each other and Miss Martin.

Time went by and Miss Martin announced that she would be bringing home another cocker spaniel and he would be here when we arrived home from school. She was true to her word and again we met another small bundle of fun. This dog was called Paddy and he was white with black patches with the same fun loving nature as Patch. He too settled into his new family and we soon had him up in the hills with us and in our playing field chasing our ball. All Miss Martin's children were so excited yet again. These two dogs seemed very special dogs with much understanding of

children: after all, there were so many of us for them to put up with.

One time whilst playing in our field I fell and skint my knee. Someone ran for Mackie who came at once and carried me to the upstairs bathroom where the Dettol was kept. The Dettol was diluted with hot water and she gave my knee a good clean. With the whole entourage looking on I had to put on a very brave face (which I did) and a plaster was applied, my knee was kissed better and we were all sent back out to play.

Our health was always important and the staff noticed if any of us were unwell. Our G.P. Dr. Russach was very nice, it amazed me how he

knew all the children by name. He used to come to Tenterfield and have afternoon tea with Miss Martin and discuss the health of the children. I used to see him on some of these visits as my feet were on the broad side and he recommended that I go to the Princess Margaret Hospital in Edinburgh to see the orthopaedic doctor there.

An appointment was made and I was given a day off school and driven to the hospital by Miss Martin. I remember thinking “What’s all the fuss about? I can walk, run and kick a ball!” I had my feet measured and was sent home to return when special foot splints had been made for me. When they arrived and I was shown how to put them on we all

had a laugh as I looked like a waddling penguin when I tried to walk in them.

Thank goodness I only had to wear them in bed but after a few weeks I just could not bear wearing them any longer. The sides were made of metal with leather straps to hold them on to your feet. When I turned over in bed they were very uncomfortable so I used to take them off. When Miss Martin discovered what I was doing she used to come and check every night before she went to bed that I still had them on. I remember pleading with her to ask our doctor to take these things away and she said she would speak with him. To my delight he agreed saying they were not going to help my feet if I didn't keep

them on, and to this day my feet are still as broad, one more than the other.

Like all children we had our share of childhood illnesses but sometimes a child would become seriously ill and I remember one such occasion when one boy was very ill with pneumonia and our G.P. decided to have him nursed at home. He organised a nurse to come from the local hospital – Roodlands – to nurse him by day, and another nursed him overnight. All the equipment which might have been needed came too and I remember him being moved from the sickroom to a little bedroom just off Miss Martin's sitting room so that she too could keep an eye on him. We would be sitting in our sitting room with

the television down low, all aware that we must be just like little mice until he regained his strength. With this level of care it was not long before he was back with us to Miss Martin's delight, and to ours too.

In the winter our G.P. would recommend to Miss Martin that we should all be given malt, castor oil and senna pods. Almost every child lined up voluntarily to take the malt but the staff had to come looking for us to administer the castor oil and senna pods – no wonder - they tasted disgusting. Miss Martin caught on to her disappearing children and the malt began to be handed out after the senna and castor oil which solved that problem. When I consider

how many children lived in Tenterfield (around forty at any one time) it is surprising there were not many more illnesses; we seemed to have been given excellent health care.

On one occasion there was a stay in hospital for six of us (myself included). We were taken to The Sick Kids in Edinburgh to have our tonsils taken out and were all put into a room together. We had such fun before our operations that you would have thought we were at home but that soon changed. While one of us was in theatre being operated on the next was being prepped. When we all came round, a little sore and very quiet, it was good to see Miss Martin's

face. She helped the hospital staff, feeding us with jelly and icecream.

We were only in for a few days then we all went home – I think the nursing staff were glad to see us go but in a nice way. On arriving home the other children were ready with so many questions – “What was it like in hospital?”, “Did we play?”, “What did we get to eat?”, “Were our throats sore?” – so many people to tell. Within a few days though, everything was back to normal.