

Tribute to Phyllis Pettit (2 November 1923-7 October 2010)

Phyllis Muriel Pettit was born in Arapito, Karamea, on 2 November 1923. She was the younger daughter of Ernest Colville Pettit and Ruby Elizabeth Scarlett, who were farmers in Arapito (then called the Promised Land), the southern Valley of the Karamea River on the West Coast.

Her mother was born in August 1893, a Scarlett, one of four children, James Alexander born 1888 who moved to Auckland where he died in 1951, Albert Thomas born 1889 (who married Clara Mason and whose daughter Bessie married into the Clist family), Ella Verbena born 1891 (who was my grandmother), and Iva Rose born in 1899 (who married Walter Batty who was a dairy factory worker in Karamea until at Ivy's instigation they moved to Masterton). Arapito was a very closed community. Mrs Pettit, Ernest's mother who was from Scotland, taught Ruby at the Arapito School¹. Basically Arapito consisted of two families, Scarletts and Linehams and a few others who had come to New Zealand on the Adamant in 1874 in a Vogel Special Settlement. Arapito and most of the families were Exclusive Brethren as a result of the visit of an evangelist in the 1890s.

The Pettit family seem to have moved to Karamea about 1885 while some of their cousin stayed in Nelson. Uncle Ernest (1892-1923) was a dairy farmer and a member of the Pettit family of Nelson, an early settler family who were Baptists. Dairying had begun to flourish in New Zealand with the introduction of refrigeration and then the export of all the butter to Britain during the First World War. But sadly the Pettit family saw little of this prosperity, because father – Uncle Ernest, died of Ptomaine (food poisoning) on 30 July 1924 in that isolated community where medical services were so poor, when Phyllis was only nine months old.

Move North

We can imagine how desolated mother was at this time in 1923. She decided there was no place for her in the settlement (perhaps because of tensions then existing in the Exclusive Brethren in Karamea), and moved initially to Wellington where she lived with Ernest's sister who worked in the civil service. Ruby did the housework.

But then in 1924 they moved to Masterton where the Batty family lived. The family lived at 86 Worksop Road in Landsdowne. Their house was a large one with steep roof and verandahs and a large garden. Mother would mow the lawn with a handmower and Phyllis and Hazel would stand

¹ This information from Roger Moffat's website roger.lisaandroger.com and Roger Clist's *Clist Connections* website, tng.roots.lochneil.com

behind and push their mother to help her. Mother worked very hard to earn a living. They took in boarders. Mother did sewing for “old P Wright” who toured around the countryside selling clothes etc. Grandma Scarlett came to live with them. There were visits back to Karamea and to cousins, but it was still quite a hard life.

School

Mother wanted the girls to have an education which she had not had. Phyllis was soon recognised as very bright. She gained her certificate of proficiency from Masterton Central School at the end of 1935 and was thus able to go on to high school.

In the second and third terms of 1937 her school reports for the fourth form from Wairarapa College noted her frequent absences from school (for illness) and she shone at English where she came second in the class, and in Drawing was noted as having original ideas. Then in 1938 she and her mother moved to be 12 Raroa Road in Kelburn, Wellington to be closer to Hazel, and attended fifth form classes at Wellington East College and by the end of the first term her report indicated “this is a pleasing report, and Phyllis has managed in all but one of her subjects, to secure higher marks than the average for the form.”² In the next term her 23 half days absent were causing problems in her results, but her ‘good ability’ was still noted. It was back to 14 half days by the end of the third term and she passed her school certificate and University Entrance with her highest marks in History but was too young to receive her Higher Leaving Certificate. The school reference for her described her rather oddly as showing “promise of initiative and self reliance. We feel sure that she will develop along good lines.”³ Then in 1939 she attended the sixth form at Hutt Valley High School in order to achieve her Higher Leaving Certificate and had 8 half days absent and came second in English and History, first in English in the second term, but with days absent rising in the third term she was criticised as somewhat careless in English. The school reference called her “a girl of good mental ability”, and mentioned she had showed promise in drawing.⁴

University and Teachers College

She followed her sister into Victoria University College in 1940, and quickly imbibed the secular and lively attitude of this rather different and more liberal College than the others in the country. She passed in English and Education and received 79% in History. Sickness returned in 1941 and she needed an aegrotat pass in English and History and also passed Political Science. In 1942 she passed

² Wellington East Girls College school report for Phyllis Pettit, 6 May 1938.

³ N.G. Issac, Principal of Wellington East College, 20 September 1940.

⁴ J.N. Millard, Hutt Valley High School reference for Phyllis Muriel Pettit, 15 December 1940.

History III and Greek History but failed French. However in 1943 she passed French reading knowledge, and stage II in Political Science. She did her honours papers in History in 1944. Freddie Wood, the Professor and Head of History at Victoria University College, and teacher of the best and brightest of New Zealand's historians at that time could see the features that became characteristic of Phyllis: "her work has been of sound quality and certain of her essays really good. All her work has been vigorous and with a sensible and individual approach. ... My main criticism has been that that it needs compression and further thinking out".⁵ Ian Gordon from the English Department described her as having "the personality and character that brings successful social relationships".⁶ However her results were not outstanding, second class honours, were and Freddy Wood explained why: "partly because she was a part-time student and partly because of a vigorous and independent attitude which refused to take short-cuts, or follow conventional lines."⁷

She graduated from the university college on 12 May 1944. With these references she was admitted to Wellington Teachers College with a Studentship for Division A in 1943, and studied there part-time in 1943 and full time in 1944, focusing in the latter year on art and craft and PE. By 1944 the Board of the Training College commented on her "highly commendable record" in her work.⁸ A testimonial from the Principal, the great F C Lopdell, referred to her "sound philosophy of education, an intelligent understanding of teaching principles, and the good taste and sound judgment that will make her a very able teacher and a fine influence over her pupils."⁹ A later reference calls her "a student of exceptional character and ability" and refers to her extra-curricular involvement in Art and crafts, swimming and Esperanto.¹⁰

Teaching Career

In February 1945 she commenced teaching as a probationary assistant at Miramar South School at £144 salary. Then in February 1946 she went to Berhampore School for a year. Then in 1947 for a couple of months she commenced secondary teaching as a relieving teacher at Martinborough District High School, teaching unfamiliar subjects with an ease that impressed the teachers. The principal commented that "she was quick to grasp and tackle the problems of organisation that arose, very quickly gained the confidence of her pupils, and, in short, impressed as a young teacher of considerable promise."¹¹ She remained at Martinborough as a reliever until March 1947. She also

⁵ F.L.W. Wood VUC reference dated 18 September 1941.

⁶ Ian A. Gordon, VUC reference dated 16 September 1941 attached to Teachers College Studentship.

⁷ F.L.W. Wood VUC to New Plymouth Rotary Club, 2 November 1950.

⁸ Chairman, Board of Studies, Wellington Training College, note for 28 April 1944.

⁹ F.C. Lopdell, Principal, Teachers Training College, Wellington, 9 October 1945.

¹⁰ F.C. Lopdell, Chief Inspector of Primary Schools, to Rotary Club, 9 November 1950.

¹¹ Thomas Blackburn, HM, Martinborough District High School, 7 February 1945.

taught briefly as a reliever at Masterton Central School for a couple of months after the end of her secondment in December 1947.¹²

Historical Study

In 1945 Professor Fred Wood wrote to the secretary of the Labour Party noting that in her study she had become interested in the history of the Trades Union Movement, and wanted to research the Wellington Waterside Workers Union, and had “a sympathetic understanding of the problems which have faced working class organisations” and asked them to help her work.¹³

This was the background to her MA thesis undertaken in 1946 on the Wellington Watersiders. It was a significant thesis, made more striking because as a woman, she faced a battle to gain acceptance. In the absence of complete records she spoke at length to Lew Glover, Big Jack Roberts and T. Bellamore. Fred Wood commented that the thesis was “really excellent” and commented that the interviewing “involved courage and persistence and also the ability to win and hold confidence among men who were in the first instance inevitably suspicious. She was eminently successful in this field work, thus showing herself to be resourceful, good in human relations and able to make her way quickly and confidently in a new environment”.¹⁴ The thesis was published in 1948, under the initials P N Pettit (blame that on her hand writing), and its clear precise prose, sensitivity to those tough watersiders and the fairness of its analysis were very well executed. Lew Glover wrote to Phyllis on its completion, commenting that “I feel sure that there are few ladies who know more about Waterside Workers and their conditions than you do.”¹⁵ It is still well regarded by those in the Trade Union History Project, but of course few could know that the watersiders were heading for the testing days of the 1951 strike.

Then in 1947 she was invited by General Kippenberger to apply for nine months leave of absence to research the history of the wharves during the war period as part of the war histories, and was keen to take up the offer.¹⁶ She served in this role from March to December 1947, and wrote one of the sixty narratives prepared to help writers for the War History. In her case her work covered the Waterfront Control Commission. She collected information from the commission, the employers and the workers. Kippenberger thought her work was among the best three or four of the sixty narratives. It was never published, but fed into the *War Economy* volume 1965.¹⁷ Kippenberger

¹² For the early teaching career see her Application for appointment, 14 October 1954.

¹³ F.L.W. Wood, VUC to Secretary of Labour Party, 27 March 1945.

¹⁴ F.L.W. Wood to New Plymouth Rotary Club, 2 November 1950.

¹⁵ Lew Glover, Northern, Wellington Union, to P. Pettit, 1 December 1948.

¹⁶ P.M. Pettit to General Kippenberger, 10 February 1947.

¹⁷ The chapter in question is chapter 17 of J.V.T. Baker, *War Economy: the New Zealand People at War*, Wellington: Historical Publications Branch, 1965, pp. 443-480.

thought Phyllis “an intelligent girl with a quick attractive personality, and in this narrative she showed both judgment and commonsense.”¹⁸ Her career up to this stage bore a striking resemblance to that of Ruth Ross née Guscott, who went through Victoria 1939-41 but she decided not to write any more of these studies, because she decided that teaching was to be her career.¹⁹

New Plymouth

In February 1948 Phyllis began to teach at New Plymouth Girls High School, completing her country service requirement at the school where her sister was teaching. She taught Social Studies and English in the third and fourth forms and history in the fifth and sixth form. Her reference from this school refers to the enthusiasm she could arouse in Social Studies from classes of low abilities as well as those of high ability. The Headmistress also noted her enthusiasm for extra-curricular activities, including buying history books, the drama club, basketball and lifesaving.²⁰ She later commented that Phyllis “has a first-class brain and is a very keen student of History”. She also noted how reliable Phyllis was, how quickly she made friends among other staff and welcomed newcomers, with adequate discipline linked with an “easy atmosphere”. She also fitted a girls’ school for “she has a friendly attitude but has also sufficient dignity and reserve”. She noted her wide cultural interests and interest in international affairs.²¹ A later headmaster commented that she took real interest in the girls in her form and combined friendly co-operation and discipline.²² A very funny letter from the School Secretary implies inter alia that her pay of £430 per annum was spent on smart clothes and hints at an incident between her car and that of a painter from Darby and Hannan & Co.²³ Certainly she had a reputation along with Hazel for brightening up the dull world of New Plymouth.²⁴

Her next move was to Auckland, awarded a position in 1951 and 1952 at Epsom Girls Grammar School. She taught History, Geography and Social Studies in third, fourth and fifth form classes. It was a large school of 1000 girls, and the roles for a young teacher were not as interesting. She was a house mistress in the junior hostel in 1951, and coached a third form in life saving, but apart from

¹⁸ H.K. Kippenberger to F.V. Morine, New Plymouth, 31 October 1950.

¹⁹ Phyllis Pettit, c.v. 1977. For Ruth Ross see http://www.rosarosam.com/articles/waimate/ruth_ross.html

²⁰ D.G. Bethel, New Plymouth Girls High School, 1 August 1950.

²¹ Dorris A. Bethell Palmerston North Girls High School, to Rotary Secretary, 3 November 1950.

²² A.R. Allum, New Plymouth Girls High School, testimonial, 20 December 1950.

²³ Owen Burford, Secretary, New Plymouth High School Board, to P.N. [sic] Pettit, 13 February 1951.

²⁴ Christine Cole Catley, *Springboard for Women: New Plymouth Girls High School*, Whatamonga Bay: Cape Catley, 1985, p. ?

that showed her superior mind by taking responsibility for the lost property office.²⁵ In 1952 she was also a house master at Patteson House at Diocesan School in 1952.²⁶

Overseas Travel

By this stage Phyllis seems to have been restless and searching for something more. She applied for a Rotary Fellowship at the end of 1950. Then in 1953 she went off on her great OE, without any fellowship, I think. She took up digs at 3 Adamson Road, NW3 and her qualifications were approved by the Ministry of Education in March 1953.²⁷ She initially taught in the London schools. She held a position at Boroughmuir Secondary School at Viewforth, Edinburgh from 12 October 1953 to 27 November 1953 and was caught up immediately in teaching History and other subjects to senior classes. This was one of the largest schools in Europe at the time. She made a quick impression for her “admirable and efficient” manner of picking up what was expected of teachers.²⁸

Looking back at her time overseas she felt that she had “the opportunity of applying teaching theory to groups of children widely differing in character and temperament from the average New Zealand child.” Beside her appointments she had visited schools in Holland, Aden, Curacao, Switzerland, Sweden and Norway, and discussed teaching in Holland, Belgium, Italy and Sweden. She had investigated the practice of school journey parties and vacation parties, and had researched the craft syllabus. As a history teacher she had looked at domestic and church architecture, studied castles in England, Scotland and Wales, visited and studied historic towns including Chester, York, Ludlow and Bath, visited Neolithic barrows and stone circles at Stonehenge, Avebury and Keswick, Roman ruins at Hadrian’s Wall, battlesites at Runnymede and elsewhere, visited the Tower of London, historic homes, including the houses of Dr Johnston and Dickens, the Houses of Parliament and the High Court. In Europe she had gone to historic places in Scandinavia, Holland (especially Rotterdam), Pompeii, Versailles and Napoleon’s tomb, Viking ships in Oslo, castles in Denmark (including Elsinore) and Germany, modern churches in Germany, museums including folk museums in Scandinavia and Holland, Florence, Venice, Rome and the Vatican City. Indeed museums absorbed her, from the British Museum, to the Louvre, the Vatican Museum and the Academy and the Uffizi in Florence. She had been to the regatta in Venice. All this was presented as evidence to the Education Department that she had equipped herself as a history teacher, but she also offered a case for preparation as Geography teacher, listing the geographic features she had visited and the events she had attended, and the fact that she went to Britain via the Panama Canal and returned via the

²⁵ M.G. Johnston, Headmistress, Epsom Girls Grammar School, testimonial, 15 December 1952.

²⁶ See 1977 c.v.

²⁷ C.C. Bell, Ministry of Education, London to P.M. Pettit, 13 March 1954.

²⁸ R.L.S. Carswell, Boroughmuir Secondary School, Edinburgh, 27 November 1953.

Suez.²⁹ Perfect for a Geography teacher! Phyllis may have done some things just for the fun of it, but she never admitted it! She returned to New Zealand on the Orion leaving London on 18 December and then transferred to the Monowai, arriving in Wellington on 1 February 1954.³⁰

Northland

By the time that Phyllis arrived back in New Zealand Hazel was teaching in Kaitaia. Phyllis got a few months in a relieving position as one of two teachers at Broadwood District High School in the Hokianga in the first term and taught at Whangarei Girls High School in the second and third terms of 1954, teaching English and Social Studies to the third form and Geography and Social Studies to the fourth form. Once again her firm control and warm sympathies with the girls were noted.³¹

This was a short term position. She applied for an Assistant Mistress position at Henderson.³² Then in the third term the position of Senior Mistress of Northland College at Kaikohe was advertised, which took her close to Hazel at Kaitaia. It was an outrageous application for a recently ranked grade three teacher, but she impressed the principal, N. P. Pitcaithly, and she began at the beginning of 1955. The school was more than half Maori, and had 745 students by 1965. The roll of schools in strong Maori communities was always challenging. Pitcaithly thought that she

has had a difficult task in maintaining racial relationships and in maintaining high personal standards with the Maori girls. I have been impressed [he went on] with the individual work she has done in this respect. Her concern over details of personal appearance in her pupils has been marked. She has a clear conception of the value of tone in a school.³³

So speaks an appreciative headmaster. Another commented on her “determined but quiet personality” and her “sympathetic understanding” of low achievement students as well as high achievers.³⁴ Another described her as “a strict disciplinarian, demanding and securing, a high standard of conduct, deportment and dress; pupils are encouraged to build up a healthy self-respect and a pride in their school, based upon their acceptance for themselves of worthwhile ideals and aims.”³⁵ She was always remembered with great affection by former pupils from Northland.³⁶ Three spoke at her funeral, including Samuel Muru, the prominent Maori artist, who said that she alone

²⁹ P.M. Pettit, Whangarei to Senior Inspector of Post Primary Schools, Auckland, 18 July 1954.

³⁰ Union Steam Ship Company Orient Line to H.M. Pettit, 17 November 1953.

³¹ A. Littlejohn, Principal, Whangarei Girls High School, 28 October 1954.

³² Teacher’s Application for Appointment, 14 October 1954.

³³ N.P. Pitcaithly, Northland College, 8 November 1955.

³⁴ J.K. Bogue, Northland College, 5 August 1971, attached to Auckland Secondary College Application, 1977.

³⁵ T.R. Buxton, Northland College, testimonial, 13 October 1965.

³⁶ See Yvonne Ambler, Ex-Pupils Association, Northland College, to Phyllis Pettit, 15 March 1980.

acknowledged the racism present in schools. Others had been inspired to be teachers through her work, and others had a great deal to do with her and loved her glamour, her charm and her skill as a teacher. She was keenly involved in sport at Northland College, particularly in the Netball Association. She was involved in many school drama productions, as stage manager and producer. It seems also that because of the failings of one of her headmasters she ended up taking far more of the brunt of administration than was customary.

Birkdale College

Hazel had moved to a new and significant appointment at Rangitoto College in Auckland in 1956, so Phyllis repeatedly made visits to Auckland in the weekend to visit her sister and her mother. Finally in 1971 she gained a position at the new Birkdale College to the regret of the Northland College Board.³⁷ It was a challenging position involving the establishment of a new school, with many administrative burdens, and she was also dean of form seven, in a school of 1150 by 1977.³⁸ She was acting Deputy Principal in term 2 of 1974, and she set up the social Studies Department. A former pupil commented that she was unpopular with most students, but nice once you got to know her.³⁹

Possibly Phyllis was not very happy in this new position for it seems not to have been a happy school but possibly she wanted to indulge in the cultural opportunities of Auckland and teaching had lost its challenge. After various attempts to get another position, Phyllis retired at the end of 1979, praised by inspectors for her care of new teachers.⁴⁰ She had always nurtured links with the training college and the selection of new teachers.

Continued Overseas Travel

Phyllis had always been a traveller as befitted a person with a free spirit. In 1962 she took leave from June to September and led a tour to America and England.⁴¹ Her youth hostel card suggests she spent the month of August 1962 in Ireland, and she went on a side tour of Greece and Asia Minor.⁴²

In the years after their retirements and after the death of their mother, overseas travel became very special to her and Hazel. Especially the trip to China awakened her excitement. Phyllis's photographs of these trips were numerous and fascinating.

³⁷ J.M. Cribb, Secretary, Northland College Board of Governors to P M Pettit, 30 October 1971.

³⁸ T.R. Buxton Auckland to B J Shearer, Auckland Secondary Teachers College, 4 November 1977.

³⁹ www.olympic.co.nz/birkdale-college.htm consulted 7 October 2010.

⁴⁰ R.A. Scott, Department of Education, Auckland, to PM Pettit, 30 November 1979.

⁴¹ J.L. White, World Circle Tours to P M Pettit, 4 September 1961.

⁴² T.R. Buxton, Northland College, testimonial, 13 October 1965.

Further Education at the University of Auckland

In 1982 Phyllis began regular lecturing of further education courses at the University of Auckland's Centre for Continuing Education. There are records of courses on Elizabeth I, Henry VIII, Three Tragic Queens (she was clearly re-using her old Form 7 course notes) New Zealand Challenge (about 19th century New Zealand characters), and especially after the visit of she and her sister to China, a course on China Today which looked at the period from the Cultural Revolution to the emerging new China.⁴³ She retired from this position at the end of 1990, aged 67.

Public Speaking and Writing

Phyllis gave two broadcast talks from Saturday 11 September 1948 "on your recent northern tour". (but was the subject, the watersiders?).⁴⁴

She must have enjoyed this because in 1952 while in Auckland she took Saturday classes for the Diploma in Journalism but did not complete the practical side of it at this time, and did not receive the Diploma until 1960 when she had done some practical journalism.⁴⁵

In retirement she decided to write the history of [Bishop] Philpott's sword from up north but this was never published and she threw the manuscript under her bed.⁴⁶

Painting and Photography

From early on Phyllis had enjoyed art, and had taught sculpture at Wellington Technical College on Saturday mornings for a year and in retirement she began painting particularly in oils, and these paintings adorned the house at Mairangi Bay and latterly her room in Rosedale Village.

She was a keen photographer from early on, and in 1975 she became involved in the work of the committee of the Auckland Photographic Society.⁴⁷ She was a member of committees of various film societies and public libraries as well.

Swimming and Life Saving

Phyllis always had a wide variety of other interests which extended her attractiveness as a teacher. In the summer of 1946 she taught swimming for the Wellington Education Board and in 1947 Phyllis

⁴³ There is a file of 8 contracts for the period 1986-87 and a letter of thanks from Noeline Alcorn, 6 November 1990.

⁴⁴ A.L. Curry, 2YA to PM Pettit, 26 March 1947, 5 August 1948 and two payment advice notes.

⁴⁵ See the diploma scroll, dated 28 September 1960.` `

⁴⁶ Information from Heather McGregor and John McCaul.

⁴⁷ Joan Donald, Auckland Photographic Society to P Pettit, 13 April 1976.

taught eighteen children at Star of the Sea home at Seatoun to swim and there are two letters of thanks from students and one from the Board of Education for her tuition.⁴⁸

This continued in her later schools and in 1969 she was given a Recognition Badge by the Commonwealth Council of the Royal Life Saving Society for many years of teaching life saving in sundry schools.⁴⁹ She was also quite involved with the work of the Save the Children Fund.

Faith

Phyllis, one must recall, had an Exclusive Brethren background in her family, although her mother had clearly broken links with it shortly after Phyllis's birth. She had clearly been "liberated" at Victoria University College, and took a very secular outlook, but Aunty Ruby never lost her faith, and later in life Cousin Hazel clearly found hers. So Phyllis made her way with Hazel in the 1990s to All Hallow's Methodist Church, probably because she enjoyed David Bell's preaching. The constant care of Heather McGregor, née Clist, over the last few years has undoubtedly deeply shaped Phyllis, and she has at times regretted the cheeky attitude which led her to defy Aunty Ruby's conservatism. Over the last weeks despite her dementia she found comfort as Heather and a few of us sang her favourite hymns which you are singing today.

Family Life on the North Shore

I know that my father used to call on the family at Kelburn when he was in training at Trentham during the war and corresponded with these favourite cousins. My mother corresponded with her until her death and she kept a real interest in all of us. I know that the Clist family especially Heather have been so caring to their cousin.

Hazel and her mother lived initially at Milford but then moved to 319 East Coast Road at the top of Mairangi Bay. Aunty Ruby died on 19 July 1980 and was buried in Karamea. When Phyllis reappeared in Auckland, she built the extra room above and garage below in the house.

Phyllis wanted to improve the standards at the house at Mairangi Bay. She introduced a glass of sherry before dinner and getting dressed for dinner.⁵⁰

But the greatest aspect of family was the love between Aunty Ruby and Hazel and Phyllis which was always so special for those around them. It was very hard for Phyllis when Hazel's dementia began

⁴⁸ Letters from Brian Bebbington, (5 March 1945), Margaret White (5 March 1945) and Board of Education, 22 May 1945.

⁴⁹ Certificate on file.

⁵⁰ Information from John McCaul, who was from an old Karamea family and used them as his Auckland base.

to appear about 1999. Phyllis cared for her, moved in here with her and after Hazel's death, Phyllis missed her very much.

Focussed

All the way through Phyllis had a very clear head for details, carefully watching her financial position and buying back superannuation with the refund from her British superannuation.⁵¹ She watched her grading very carefully, and got a significant recognition of her overseas trip.⁵² She was always strongly opinionated compared to Hazel. People knew exactly what she thought, and if sometimes she regretted coming across a little too strongly, that was what Phyllis was like.

There is a fascinating consistency in the descriptions of Phyllis down the years. A reference from her first secondary school described her as "a girl of unusual ability and a good worker. .. She has a bright and cheerful personality and is of excellent character."⁵³ Wellington East College said rather oddly that she was "quiet in manner, pleasant in her relations with others and anxious to work."⁵⁴ The principal of the next school said: "She is a good type of girl, quiet and well-mannered, and she is very helpful in class:" said the principal, Mr J. N. Millard.⁵⁵ Fred Wood described her as I earlier mentioned as vigorous and independent attitudes. The Principal of Wellington Teachers College, the great F. C. Lopdell, referred to her "bright and pleasant manner."⁵⁶ The New Plymouth Principal commented that "she has a friendly attitude but has also sufficient dignity and reserve".⁵⁷

To be a successful school teacher in the 1940s and 1950s involved considerable sacrifice and dedication, a life of singleness, an almost monastic existence, and an independence of outlook. All the early photographs of the family show an extraordinarily beautiful young woman, who later matured into a glamorous person with a noble character, a vigorous and free spirit, a sense of purpose and vision but also a gutsy and somewhat alarming determination. For a woman from the 1920s, the daughter of a widowed mother, she was a stellar achiever, a person never to be forgotten. And nor will we!

Peter Lineham
10 October 2010

⁵¹ Of many letters see especially ED Sinclair District Administration Officer, Department of Education, Auckland to P.M. Pettit, Kaitaia, 16 March 1954.

⁵² H. Henderson, District Superintendent of Education to P.N. Pettit, Whangarei, 11 August 1954.

⁵³ Reference by G W Morice, late acting principal, Wairarapa College, 20 September 1940, attached to her Teachers College admission, 1943.

⁵⁴ N.G. Issac, Principal of Wellington East College, 20 September 1940.

⁵⁵ J.N. Millard, Hutt Valley High School reference for Phyllis Muriel Pettit, 15 December 1940.

⁵⁶ F.C. Lopdell, Principal, Teachers Training College, Wellington, 9 October 1945.

⁵⁷ Dorris A Bethell Palmerston North Girls High School, to Rotary Secretary, 3 November 1950.