

# CHAPTER ONE

## LOSS AND UNCERTAINTY

*A man's mind is the most valuable thing he possesses next to his soul.*

Gordon Barton, aged seventeen

It was close to three in the morning as the beam of the Water Police launch searchlight fixed upon a lone figure in impeccable flannels and yachting jacket striding out confidently onto the private Double Bay jetty. The unruffled millionaire wanted to thank the authorities for rescuing his shipwrecked friends from a nearby Sydney Harbour island.

As the boat bumped against the jetty, it began to disgorge a rather unlikely party. A nervous transvestite in a brief leather skirt and bright red peasant blouse prepared to leap to safety. Tipsy and with his arms chained behind his back, he came close to toppling over as his high-heeled black pumps landed on the rough wooden planks. A blond, muscled German in a skimpy Roman gladiator outfit—somewhat drunker than his manacled companion—was next to alight. Even more distracting to the three police sergeants was a beautiful, bare-footed woman in a bedraggled leopard-skin jumpsuit.

It was fortunate the Water Police had not discovered the shipwrecked party earlier. Only two hours prior, one of the most respected men in

corporate and political Australia had been chained on that same island in medieval armour—his wrists and ankles secured by manacles. His timely escape, paddling a one-oared dingy through the night to the safety of the mainland, would have made great copy for the morning papers.

Even six months out from his fiftieth birthday, Gordon Barton still enjoyed the thrill of living dangerously.

It was an ancient city. Founded at the end of the thirteenth century, the city of Surabaya on the long, densely populated island of Java had been in Dutch control since 1746. Sugar had been the port's staple export crop for a century before Gordon Barton was born there. At the end of the nineteenth century it was the busiest port in the Dutch East Indies. The Australian trading conglomerate and shipping firm Burns Philp sourced much of its trade cargo from the region. By the time the Great War was bleeding Europe in 1914, Burns Philp had ten outposts scattered around the South Pacific, including one in Surabaya.

From the 1830s, expatriate settlers had built great open houses looking over their sugar plantations. Vines of bougainvillea hung from their terraces, hedges of hibiscus constrained green lawns kept neat by garden boys. By the 1920s, Dutch colonials would cycle to work in their white tropical suits, a formal straw hat protecting their fair skin from the harsh rays. Their children played amongst the Javanese rice paddies, climbed palm trees, drank the milk of coconuts and became accustomed to feasting on exotic fruits unknown to Europe—papaya, rambutan, mangoes and sawah. Each European family employed a *babu* for the housework, a *kokki* to prepare their meals, and a young lad—a *keban*—to do the rough work around the house.

Antoinette (Kitty) Kavellars had grown up in Holland. Her father had apparently died when she was a small child. For some reason her mother had surrendered her to a Dutch convent. She never saw her mother again. The grief and anger grafted to that abandonment would

scar her permanently. To her sons, their mother's childhood, adolescence and Dutch relatives were always taboo subjects.

Hundreds of Dutch families had continued to migrate to a new life far from the bitter cold of Holland. Aged 21, now fluent in English, French and German, Kitty escaped convent life, fleeing to the Dutch East Indies where she became a schoolteacher. She found herself in a congenial society of young military and naval officers, government officials and plantation owners—an environment of colonial clubs, parties and picnics. Those who came to know her in later years uniformly recall her as someone who yearned to be a woman of substance.

This tiny Dutch schoolteacher, to escape a persistent yet pompous suitor, was to take a holiday to the island of Ambon in the Celebes. Being quickly informed of the arrival of an unattached young lady, and always on the lookout for such to 'decorate his occasions', the Governor sent a messenger inviting Kitty to his tennis party.

Meanwhile, George Barton had grown up in Charters Towers, inland from the coast of northern Queensland. He was the youngest in a family of eleven brothers—all small, thin, earnest Protestants. Faced with economic necessity perhaps as much as any spirit of adventure, George had left home aged just thirteen, taking a job with the pearling fleets based at Thursday Island in the Arafura Sea. By the outbreak of World War I, George captained his own three-masted schooner. Putting ashore at Ambon to take on water, he was also invited to a tennis party by the welcoming Governor.

The unlikely meeting of pearl fisherman and schoolteacher was to lead in 1920 to a marriage in Batavia (now Jakarta). When news of the wedding reached George Barton's Queensland relatives, they were scandalised. It was rumoured the girl was a half-caste and, worse still, a Roman Catholic. George Barton simply cut off contact with all but his eldest, somewhat intellectual brother Basil, with whom he remained close. George and Kitty joined the large community of colonial traders and plantation owners in the Dutch East Indies, settling eventually in Surabaya.

Their first son, Basil, was already eight when Gordon Barton was born towards the end of the city's dry season on 30 August 1929. A year

later his parents shipped Basil away to boarding school in Sydney, so apart from annual school holidays, Gordon's first nine years in this Dutch colonial outpost were those of an only child.

For the Bartons, life in their large and rambling house was very comfortable. With the customary six household servants and an *amah*, Antoinette had time, with the help of a Blackfriars correspondence course, to school Gordon herself until he turned nine. Gordon admitted it was his mother who taught him 'to speak and write plainly and do sums in my head'. Gordon was made to watch ants as a model of virtuous industriousness. His mother taught him to swim and to play the piano. An old Chinese man was engaged once a week to teach him carpentry.

'Not having known it, I did not miss the society of other children,' he recalled. 'When not at lessons I travelled in the world of daydreams in the company of the imperial heroes of *The Boy's Own Papers*, and of the gentle and scholarly Arthur Mee, Editor of the remarkable *Childrens' Encyclopaedia* and the periodical *Childrens' Newspaper*.'

A thin, creative child with dark, curly hair and deep-set eyes, Gordon grew up in a once-great Asian city in decline. Worsening world sugar prices and the flow-on effects of the Great Depression were causing a downhill slide in Surabaya's economy. Nonetheless, this colonial outpost was protected more than most—unemployment amongst its European population would peak at just 10 per cent. The situation was far worse in Australia.

By 1934 Gordon Barton's father was assistant manager of Burns Philp's Surabaya interests—controlling its huge rubber plantations and negotiating trade agreements. The city was now one of nineteen outposts the firm maintained in the South Seas.

The heat of the tropics meant families rose at dawn, started work or lessons at seven or seven-thirty, finishing soon after midday. By one in the afternoon, the heat was soporific. Two hours' siesta was followed by the ritual of the *mandi* room—a favourite place in every Javanese house in the late afternoon torpor. To *mandi* was to sit on the cool of bathroom tiles, soap yourself, then splash cold water over your body, scooped from a large square cement basin built into the corner of the washroom.

The ritual of each languid day in the tropics wound down with tea served at four, followed by supper at six.

On his eighth birthday Gordon woke to find a train set carefully laid on tracks on the floor of his playroom. Not only the thrill of that eighth birthday surprise, but also an ongoing passion for train sets, would stay with him for over a decade.

In 1939, Gordon, like his brother before him, was accompanied by his mother on a journey south aboard a Burns Philp ship. Once aboard, the young boy was confronted with many refugee families from Austria and Germany. When he enquired why they had left home, their replies were either 'the government' or 'Adolf Hitler'. These refugees talked of intimidation, confiscated property, midnight arrests. To the youngster, these people appeared to be 'respectable, reasonable and likeable people'. Until now, Gordon had regarded Government as a benign authority. This evidence of something more disruptive and sinister was disturbing. Was it possible that governments did not always serve their people justly?

His mother warned her boy that some of these people were communists, many were misfits and troublemakers and almost all of them were Jews. Nonetheless, Gordon would later recognise these shipboard encounters as 'a big step in my political education'.

On a sunny day in January 1939, after fourteen days at sea, Gordon and his mother docked in Sydney Harbour. Gordon was enrolled at a private boys' school—the Sydney Church of England Grammar School, commonly known as Shore. Home-schooled, hence unused to a school environment of any sort, he was suddenly faced with the rough, arrogant and authoritarian environment of boarding school life. He hated having to wear a uniform and the discipline of a system that told him what to do without providing rational reasons as his parents had. His mother soon sailed north to re-join her husband. In Sydney, Gordon had only his older brother Basil, now studying Economics at Sydney University. The boy ached for his parents.

Basil and Gordon took regular trips up the northern beach coastline to Avalon, swimming together in the beach's rockpool as the breakers

crashed over the pool edge. Despite their age difference, Gordon became close to his brother, idolising him. Decades later he could still recall his brother's words—'Our parents are not rich and they have made sacrifices to give us the best education. Don't let them down.'

In September, just eight months after cementing a relationship with his brother, Basil enrolled as a trainee fighter pilot with the Royal Australian Air Force at its Bairnsdale training base in regional Victoria. Only eighteen, he had completed less than a year at university.

Gordon would recall: 'In the patriotic fervour of the time it became even more important that I should not let him down . . . I applied myself to the new school lifestyle with dutiful energy . . .'

A year or so on, with World War II widening in its reach, the Dutch all over the East Indies were becoming concerned at Japan's expansionist policies—the Japanese had already encroached upon China. If Japan entered the war, the Dutch East Indies, far from help, were at risk. When the Germans occupied the Netherlands in May 1940, the East Indies were cut off from their colonial protectors. George Barton sent his wife to the relative safety of Sydney.

Gordon was delighted. It meant he could persuade his mother to remove him from boarding school. Together they rented a pretty house in Mosman near the water. George sent money each month from Java to support the family. However, for the first time in her life Kitty Barton was faced with having to do her own housework. In 1941 she began making camouflage nets in her spare time. Although for most of 1940 and 1941 the war in Europe seemed far away, Gordon dug an air-raid shelter in their backyard.

On 7 December 1941 Japan entered the war, carrying out a surprise attack of the US naval base at Pearl Harbor. The conflict had reached the Pacific and the playing field was suddenly altered. Two Australian warships were sunk off the coast of Malaya the same month.

Barton's headmaster at Shore quickly called a meeting of housemasters to discuss evacuation possibilities for at least part of the school. After sending a party west to the Blue Mountains, the school decided to buy

the rambling old Mount Victoria Hotel. At the western edge of the Blue Mountains it was far from the Sydney coastline. Boys from the preparatory school and junior part of the main school were to be transferred there. A month later, after some frantic carpentry, 75 boarders and a few day boys started lessons.

Kitty Barton and her son shifted up to a neighbouring mountain town, Blackheath. She was a tiny woman, small and weather-beaten from years living under a tropical Indonesian sun. Despite her size, she had incredible energy and a quirky sense of humour. For a short time she took in two other boys in Gordon's year. His father continued to write weekly from Java.

John Cummings, a childhood friend of the Bartons, whose family had also spent time in the East Indies, recalls Kitty telling children that little boys were born with a bag of dirt inside them and no matter how hard you scrubbed it off, the dirt would find its way to the surface again. In Kitty Barton's story, only when boys became teenagers was the dirt bag exhausted—opening up a chance of keeping them clean.

In the hot summer months, with the dense Australian bush at their doorstep, it was bushfires rather than gunfire which posed the most immediate threat to those living in the mountains. Flames would roar up to the fence-lines of houses, defenceless but for a strip of mown lawn or ground cleared of scrub dividing the great bush from settled land. Women and children lined up against the heat would cough as the hot roar of flames threatened their wooden homes. Tears streaming down their faces, they flailed the burning ground with wet potato-sacks.

In the summer of 1942 Gordon began his first year of senior school, riding his bicycle the few kilometres to Mount Victoria from their rented house in Blackheath. For him, the mountains offered the freedom he had been used to in Surabaya.

From a young age Gordon was to experiment with games combining elements of surprise and suffering. These were to become a theme throughout his life. John Cummings recalls being fascinated whenever

he came over to play: ‘Gordon . . . had devised a treasure hunt for us. Each person was given the end of a piece of coloured wool and had to follow it to its end, where a small prize was to be found. This sounds simple but one of the rules demanded that the wool be wound into a ball as we progressed . . . This involved climbing trees, crawling through culverts, scrambling up rocks.’

The Japanese forces were fast advancing on foreign territories just north of Australia. In the first two months of 1942 they captured Rabaul, bombed Port Moresby, and invaded Timor and Java. Early in February 1942, Surabaya’s air-raid sirens wailed. The bombs began to fall on the city of Gordon’s childhood, thousands of kilometres north-west of Blackheath. George Barton began weathering air raids three to four times a day. Black smoke clouds obliterated the sun as military and oil facilities burned. In the same month Japanese bombers launched their first attack on Darwin—hundreds died in their first strike.

Little more than a month after the first bombs had prompted panic in the Surabaya streets, the Dutch East Indies fell to the Japanese.

In Blackheath all Gordon and his mother could do was listen to the radio news. In April, Kitty Barton received a letter from her husband: ‘The Japs are expected at any time. I have volunteered for the army. I will write again when I can.’

Only days after George wrote this letter in early March, the Japanese arrived in strength in Surabaya’s outskirts as air-raid sirens wailed continuously. Thousands of Indonesians poured out of the city. Amidst the chaos, locals looted factories, defence posts and offices. The Japanese quickly interned all male Europeans, civilian and military alike. The only exceptions were young boys and the elderly.

In time, more than a hundred prison camps were established throughout Java alone, two-thirds of them for civilians. High schools, convents, military barracks and whole neighbourhoods were fenced off and converted into prisons. The Japanese would ship civilian prisoners

from Java to Taiwan and later Singapore. Others were just shifted from one Javanese camp to another. A quarter of Far East POWs and interned civilians would be killed or die in captivity.

Abruptly, George Barton's monthly cheques stopped coming. Gordon had no idea if his father was dead, injured or a prisoner of war. It was to be three years before Gordon or his mother heard another word of his fate. Gordon recalled the period as traumatic, 'I had a tremendous feeling of insecurity'.

At the end of May, the Japanese surprised Sydney's defences, slipping midget submarines into its harbour and firing on Sydney's eastern suburbs. Amidst her despair, the safety of the mountains at least seemed a sensible choice to Kitty Barton.

Now only Basil's fortnightly air force pay would keep mother and son housed and fed. The pair were forced to shift to a Blue Mountains boarding house. Their life shrank to one room, one bed and a gas ring. The place creaked in the cold; the building crowded with hard-up divorcees, widows, transients and pensioners.

Nonetheless, with its many European plantings, spring was a season of great beauty in the Blue Mountains. Young Gordon told himself life could only improve. Instead, it darkened.

Unlike their Queensland Protestant cousins, the Bartons had never been religious, so it was unusual for the local minister to make a formal call on their boarding house room. The clergyman carried a telegram from Basil's squadron leader.

I regret to inform you that your son, Flight-Sergeant Andrew Basil Barton, is missing after an operational exercise. I will advise you when I receive further information.

On 12 September, the training flight Basil was piloting had vanished in Bass Strait somewhere north-west of Flinders Island. No further information ever came—instead a small parcel of his personal belongings arrived on the boarding house doorstep.

Neither Basil Barton's body nor his aircraft were ever recovered. Without a body, for years Kitty Barton would not accept her son's death, holding to the flimsy hope that he had swum to safety before being taken prisoner by a Japanese submarine. No son of Kitty Barton's could make a mistake. To friends and acquaintances she would point out there was a design defect in the Beaufort bomber.

While the RAAF awarded Kitty Barton a pension of 15 shillings per fortnight, it was not even enough to pay the rent. There seemed no way the thirteen-year-old Gordon Barton could continue at Shore. However, the school soon organised a compassionate scholarship, allowing the boy to stay on.

By the start of 1943, the school closed its Mount Victoria campus, moving its students back to the city. Kitty Barton swallowed her pride and found work as a live-in housekeeper close to North Sydney in return for bed and board for herself and her son. She raised a little cash by giving language lessons at night.

To avoid the terrible sense of isolation in this foreign land, Kitty Barton ensured she came to know every other Dutch immigrant in the wider neighbourhood. Gordon began to tire of hearing Dutch all the time as his mother chatted to her neighbours.

Kitty eventually found a job as a letter censor, continuing to teach at night. Meanwhile Gordon generated his first income at the age of fifteen by winning the huge sum of £15 in an essay competition run by a major Sydney newspaper. Of course his winning entry was nothing as obvious as Australia's war effort—instead he chose child delinquency. Perhaps he used his friend Tim Bristow—another Shore outsider—as a case in

point. Bullied at times, Gordon would do Tim's homework in exchange for his protection in the school ground. Bristow would become a close friend as well as a notorious Sydney standover man.

Gordon gardened and cleaned for neighbours at weekends to supplement his mother's meagre income. There was finally enough money to rent a small flat, with a bed for Gordon out on the verandah.

'Daddy and Basil will have a home to come back to', Gordon remembered his mother saying, once they had their own place again.

John Cummings recalls Mrs Barton pouring boiling water down the funnel-web holes in the red-brick apartment block's backyard. Cummings also remembers Kitty Barton staying up all night making Gordon coffee while he studied for exams.

It was 15 August 1945 when Australians gathered around their radios to hear Prime Minister Ben Chifley announce that the war had ended. News soon came through that Gordon's father was in fact alive and had been interned in camps all this time.

Gordon and his mother must have cried with relief. Sadly, the man who returned to Sydney was much changed. Years of harsh treatment had taken their toll on George Barton. After many months of recuperation in a Sydney hospital, he returned alone to Burns Philp's South Pacific operations, to a lesser role in Port Moresby. Poor health would plague him for years. Gordon wrote dutifully to his father every week with his home and school news.

Kitty Barton remained with her son in Sydney, making it clear to Gordon that 'further progress' now depended solely on his success. By progress she meant not only financial wealth but upward social mobility.

Looking back years later, Gordon would realise that these sad and frightening wartime experiences motivated him in an extraordinary way. Even before he was eighteen, he had money in government bonds, and soon after took out life and accident insurance to protect his parents if something happened to him. The boy promised his mother he would 'work harder than anyone has ever worked and become rich so that none of us will have to worry about money again'.

Gordon did not have fond memories of his last four years at school, which he blamed on Shore's authoritarian discipline and conservative Anglican environment. He had no respect for the school's tyrannical headmaster, L.C. Robson, and was always ready to go out on a limb to prove himself right on an issue.

Nonetheless, his weekly letters to his father in his final school year show him fully engaged in both academic and sporting pursuits. Although he shunned team sports such as rugby and rowing, Gordon followed cricket. He became a keen, talented runner as well as playing regular tennis and golf. He even took up rifle shooting for a time. As a sixteen-year-old he and a friend cycled over 930 kilometres north to Brisbane, not for the exercise but because he reasoned one didn't 'get as much out of doing something the way thousands of other people do it'. Already the boy was showing an independence of spirit.

On weekends and holidays, Gordon began spending time sailing on Sydney Harbour in a small skiff with a few schoolfriends.

In an effort to win the award for best original play, he wrote a script for the junior boys to perform. He set it in an ancient Peruvian temple in semi-darkness and ensured it was 'unusual, spectacular, and easy to produce'. To the conservative Shore schoolboys, the mystical green light in which Gordon bathed the set was seductive and intriguing.

Gordon read George Bernard Shaw's play *Back to Methuselah*, describing its journey as the 'most remarkable book I have yet read'. Already Gordon's love for learning was clear. He wrote to his father, 'the mind needs feeding just as much as our stomach . . . a man's mind is the most valuable thing he possesses next to his soul'.

In October he was deliberating over whether to spend four years on a Law degree or six on Arts/Law. He wrote to ask his father's opinion, torn by his desire to study and his determination to support the family. Six years of study was a long time, 'especially as I would like to see Mums having a better time while she can still enjoy it and I would also like to do more to support myself'.

The seventeen-year-old pointed out to his father that 'if you and

Mums decide to buy a house . . . later on I will be able to contribute to that, which would give me some pleasure’.

A month later, Gordon was talking about making his name as a writer by becoming a cadet journalist. As an escape from the grind of the last three years of study, he came up with a plan to travel to Java and work for a few months. He argued to his father that he would not only earn money but write articles or a book on his return, based on his experiences. ‘The Indies,’ he wrote, ‘are in their present state one of the richest fields of opportunity for men with initiative and you don’t stand any chances if you don’t look for them.’

Gordon pointed out that such a trip would give him specialist knowledge, life experience, new friends and the chance to learn to look after himself. His father wrote back from New Guinea with a firm ‘no’.

Then he toyed with the idea of script writing and film producing. ‘It isn’t a bad idea to be able to do more than one thing for a living,’ he reasoned in his next letter to his father. Others advised him to stay with law and do some journalism on the side.

In his end-of-year report, Gordon’s school headmaster L.C. Robson acknowledged the boy’s interests were wide: ‘He is, in my opinion, honourable and of high moral character. He has considerable initiative and is capable of sustained diligence. I think that he is likely to do well in his future career.’

While he attended end-of-school parties at friends’ homes, Gordon found himself something of a wallflower, ‘The sight of rational individuals shuffling to and fro in a restricted space to the barbaric beats of music has always depressed me . . .’

But he kept himself enormously busy. During the holidays, he travelled everywhere on his pushbike. Tennis and golf became a daily ritual; he took regular lessons in both. The young man’s bent for physical activity would not last. One of his favourite mantras would later become, ‘Beware of fresh air and exercise—they can be downright dangerous to Mankind’. To further his writing ambitions, he enrolled in shorthand and typing lessons.

As 1947 dawned, the seventeen-year-old explained to his father his New Year's resolution, 'to learn as much as possible about anything in general, and some things in particular. Later on, as opportunities arrive I hope I will have enough skill and knowledge to make failure impossible.'

In mid-January Gordon's Leaving Certificate results arrived. They were far better than he had hoped—honours in English and French, as well as A-grade passes in Latin and German. His Mathematics results were middling for an A-grade student; still, they had always been a weakness. It was enough to allow him to apply for an Exhibition scholarship to Sydney University. It would be his passport to a better life.