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Norman Lindsay's *The Cousin from Fiji* and the Lindsay Family Papers

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On 5 October 1945, Robert Lindsay, a retired gentleman of Creswick, wrote to his brother Norman:

> I really started out to say how we both enjoyed your last book, and have had many enquiries by the curious, if they might borrow it, but as somewhere are floating about "Red Heap" and "Saturday" — through the kindness of borrowing, I draw the line at lending books. You must have enjoyed writing it. The old grandmother is splendid and the elegant walking stick—is a lovely touch. (Lindsay Family Papers)[1]

The book was *The Cousin From Fiji*. As with most of Norman Lindsay's successful novels, it is set in the early 1890s with characters largely based on members of his family and former friends. *The Cousin From Fiji* has been overshadowed in this regard by *Redheap* which gained its notoriety, in part, from being banned (Hetherington 182, 202; Mendelssohn 210–24). In *Redheap* Norman Lindsay gave the hero, Robert Piper, many of the characteristics of his brother Lionel, and supported this identification by quoting sections of Lionel's teenage diary (29–31, Lindsay *Comedy* 132). In his posthumous musings, *My Mask*, Norman Lindsay admitted the use he made of this brother as "an enchanting figure of comedy" (33) in some of his novels, including *Saturdee* and *Half Way to Anywhere,* but did not mention *The Cousin from Fiji* or, indeed, other family members as source material. Norman Lindsay rarely ventured far from his family in creating fiction. Even his children's food fantasy, *The Magic Pudding,* draws on family sources. Both the description and the drawings of optimistic koala, Bunyip Bluegum, are easily identified as being based on the Lindsays' father, Dr Robert Charles Lindsay, as well as the many uncles who visited the family home.

Robert Lindsay was the second Lindsay son (Norman was the fourth son and fifth child). He had a special reason to relish *The Cousin From Fiji* as he had supplied significant details for the fashionable clothes worn by the female characters, as well as supplying information used to colour other characters in the book. Its publication reinforced his self-image as mentor to his younger, successful brother.

There was another reason for Robert Lindsay to admire *The Cousin from Fiji* above other Norman Lindsay novels. In its judgements on the characters based on family members, the novel also validated his own assessments (Lindsay Papers MS 742/13). This is hardly surprising as Robert and his sister Mary had for many years been the principal sources of information on life in the old Lindsay home at Creswick.

As far as can be ascertained, Norman Lindsay did not visit Creswick after late 1915 when he farewelled his younger brother Reg, who was to die in World War I. Norman disliked travel and avoided it where possible. For some years there was the excuse of needing to avoid the social awkwardness of introducing his mistress, Rose Soady, to his mother. Later he claimed his health was too poor to consider journeying home. "I haven't been in a train for ten years" (Lindsay Papers MS 924/3232), he wrote to Robert in about 1931, when he explained why he would not travel to see the senile Jane Lindsay. He had recently returned from the United States, so it is more likely that the strain he wished to avoid was caused by the domestic situation at Creswick rather than the physical stress of travel.

From 1916 onwards, the widowed Mrs Lindsay lived at Creswick with her two unmarried daughters, Mary and Isabel, her widowed daughter Pearl, and Pearl's three small children. Mary was the third child, but eldest daughter; Isabel was the youngest, born in 1894 when Robert was twenty-one and Mary seventeen. These two elder siblings regarded Isabel, who appears to have suffered from minor brain damage, with open contempt. Pearl, described by her brother Daryl as "a cheerful, happy-go-lucky girl" (*Leafy Tree* 67) whose flirtatious teasing had made her extremely popular in her girlhood, was five years younger than the more serious-minded Mary. Because of tensions between the women, Pearl and her children had moved to the nearby town of Ballarat in 1929.

In the same year, Robert Lindsay, who had spent many years abroad, returned to Creswick. When he had lived in New Orleans and London, Robert designed costumes for the Mardi Gras, and hats for women he claimed were duchesses (*Leafy Tree* 67), had written some minor verse, and befriended Martin Boyd (Boyd 223). His return was partly prompted by problems with his health, acerbated by the Great Depression; but the event that precipitated his return was a plea from

his siblings for support in caring for their mother in her extreme old age (Mendelssohn 136). The Lindsay family were frequent correspondents and their many detailed letters encompass emotions as well as facts. Norman was kept especially well informed by his siblings on their activities and attitudes, and these letters are often accompanied by expressions of gratitude for the considerable financial support he was giving to the Creswick household. As much of this correspondence survives, it is possible to see the debt that Norman Lindsay owes to these siblings in this novel.

The Cousin from Fiji was published in 1945, and written in the years following Jane Lindsay's death in 1932. The novel ostensibly deals with territory familiar from Norman Lindsay's fiction, the Ballarat of his boyhood. In doing so it creates a more liberated version of the past than either historic reality or, indeed, than in his other novels. In the 1920s, when Mary Lindsay had written to her brother about her own experiences of the 1890s, she described a society where she, a doctor's daughter, did not know the basics of human reproduction. She remembered a town where a girl's reputation was ruined if she went off alone with a man (Mendelssohn 255). In Norman's fantasy version of the past, the liberated girl is not ostracised for her behaviour, and instead the upholders of middle-class morality are revealed in their lascivious hypocrisy (*Cousin* 232).

The Cousin from Fiji is an optimistic confection, created by using sources who were themselves experiencing tragedy when they wrote to the author. Letters by Mary and Robert, written in the early 1930s, describe the final years of their mother's decline into senility as a nightmare (Lindsay MS 742/13; Lindsay Family Papers). In the mid-1920s Mary had given Norman a depressed account of how family and cultural constraints had robbed her of a meaningful life (Mendelssohn 254), but by the 1930s there were certain elements of black humour in her accounts. Robert wrote in precise detail of his distaste of the physical details of geriatric nursing and the tedium of small town life (Lindsay Papers MS 9104/4900–1; Lindsay Papers MS 742/13). These letters are the raw material transformed by Norman into a ribald comedy of manners where two depressed households are transformed by the intrusion of exotic strangers.

Why did Lindsay choose Fiji as the source for his romantic intruders? It was not just because they were apparently mysterious and foreign. Indeed, within the novel it is made clear that for adolescents even exotic settings can be as banal as Ballarat (76). The islands had an important place in the imagination of the Lindsay children. Their grandfather, the Reverend Thomas Williams, was one of the early Methodist missionaries. Their mother had been born there, so they knew of the glamorous food, the uninhibited islanders, and their lack of proper Protestant

restraint. The islands became the Lindsays' exotic Other, more so perhaps than that most common Australian foreign destination of England. Therefore Ella Belairs, the cousin of the title, has the privilege of the outsider in that she is unconstrained by the rules of polite society. At first she does not even see the stratified class structure of small-town Victoria, even though this governs the social behaviour of all around her. To her, the great act of rebellion of breaking the class barrier and marrying Darky Tyrrell, a grocer's delivery boy, is a natural act.

This is a deliberate twist on the part of the author. The Lindsay boys romanced girls who worked in grocers' shops, but never with the intention of marriage (Lionel to Norman, 7 November 1897, Lindsay Papers MS 742/6). One of the scandals of Lindsay's 1930 novel *Redheap* was that Ethel, the character identifiably based on Pearl Lindsay, has an affair with a bicycle shop owner, then dumps him for an uninspiring doctor rather than admit the relationship. The hypocrisy of good women is a constant thread in Norman Lindsay's art and writing. Ella's directness, her honesty of character, makes her different from any other Norman Lindsay heroine. It is almost as though Lindsay is giving her the characteristics he usually associates with males. There is an intriguing description of her virginal body: "[with] her long legs, her smart rump and her clean-run young back, she looked rather like Cecelia's boy friend" (*Cousin* 18). Ella gets her womanly curves later. In typical Lindsay fashion, these are the result of male attention (196).

Cecelia is Ella's mother, the character who dominates the book, despite the title. She is a real Norman Lindsay heroine in that she is a calculating goddess, apparently artless in her effective manipulation of men. Cecelia is newly widowed and with Ella in tow has returned to Ballarat to the family home. Lindsay draws her as childishly self-obsessed, a quality that she shares with Ethel in *Redheap*, Polly in *Halfway to Anywhere*, and Cora in *The Age of Consent*:

> [Cecilia] took a small mirror from her hand-bag and made a half-inch adjustment to her small picture-hat trimmed with white ostrich feathers, while giving two sideways glances at the perfect finish of her long, refined nose. This was the only really mature feature of her face, for her large violet-tinted eyes had the wide-open stare of startled girlhood and her mobile underlip never knew what to do with itself. (2)

In both her appearance and demeanour Cecelia echoes the adolescent Ethel in *Redheap*, and she could indeed be described as a mature incarnation of this persona.

Cecelia's mother, Grandma Domkin, controls the family home, despite her senility. In the context of the novel, there are historic reasons for this:

> In her great days Grandma had made it her express purpose to quell irresponsible conduct in others, snorting disapproval through her war-horse nostrils and trumpeting orders in a voice that rattled the crockery. She brought her family up under the knout, so to speak—in her case a section of buggy whip, always kept handy and wielded with lightning speed and precision. (136)

But now, in the year 1892, her ability to terrorise is gone and she rules through the calculated obstinacy of senility. We meet her, indeed, after she has locked herself in the outdoor dunny:

> Grandma was perched up on the seat glaring with basilisk severity at nobody. She was so gaunt that hats could have been hung on her salient angles, and she had been fitted with a terrible set of false teeth, which gave her a pretty diabolical expression. (7)

Grandma Domkin has also acquired the alarming habit of giving the full juicy details of local scandals, including unscheduled pregnancies and philandering clergy. These accounts of small-town gossip, plus the very graphic accounts of Grandma Domkin's behaviour, echo Robert Lindsay's letters to Norman, especially this description of his dying mother written on 24 June 1932: "At the moment Mother is making noises like a hot water bag belching when it is being filled, and keeps up an almost incessant groan" (Lindsay Papers MS 742/13 102).

The letters that Robert Lindsay wrote to his brothers reveal that he did not make a comfortable transition from his bijou apartment in Knightsbridge to the family home in Creswick. For over two decades he had led the life of a discreet sophisticate, devoted to decoration and appearance. Martin Boyd described him as a man "in whom the family artistry was confined to appreciation and discriminating taste" (223). In Creswick, it was possible to establish a stylish public persona, even though the mother he had once admired for her elegance and strength had become a senile tyrant presiding over domestic chaos. But he could not confide to anyone in the town; he did not want the pity of people he regarded as his social inferiors. His response therefore was to write to his brothers, giving graphic descriptions both of the primitive culture of Creswick, and of the horrors of family life. These letters were in part punctuated by demands for the financial support necessary to maintain the family. Lionel and Daryl reacted to these letters with fury, destroying most of them but keeping some as evidence against him, but they did continue to fund the Creswick household. Norman gave generous financial support and kept most of his letters.

Norman also encouraged Robert to write more, which he did:

> letting off steam on you, but it's as good as a talk—and as there's absolutely no one I can exchange ideas with here—it's a relief—even

> though you curse me. I've started putting down some recollections every time one comes along, and later, perhaps between the two of us we might make them into a book—if it pleases you. I'll later send them to you when I have sufficient for you to be able to judge if it is worthwhile. (no date, but probably 1932; Lindsay Papers MS 742/13 105)

No detail of family life was too small for his disdain. On 21 October 1931, he wrote to Lionel Lindsay describing dinner-time at Creswick:

> The vegetables are discovered still to be in the pot, everyone rushes out, to bring them in and . . . confusion. They are burnt from sitting too long on the overhot stove. Mama carves. She cannot give up one of her habits of a life time, spattering the cloth, the wall, herself in her attack upon the unfortunate joint. By the time Mary and I are served, no one is in much heart for anything. And then to be offered some baked custard or other wholesome dish as an aftermath, accompanied by a cup of doubtful tea, inclines the gentlest to sigh for a juniper tree under which to die . . . I have said loudly. I do not like puddings, and seldom does anyone eat them. (Lindsay Papers MS 9104/4900–1)

That distasteful meal has something in common with the meals served in the house next door to the Domkin's in *The Cousin from Fiji*. This is the home of the solicitor Hilary Shadlet, who lives with his sisters, the tyrannical Elvira and imbecilic Selena:

> Always he found Elvira's cooking detestable. She did something to food that extracted all flavour from it, or else so demoralized the palate that it was incapable of separating one flavour from another.
>
> [There was] a nostalgia in Hilary for a life of gracious gestures and refined food. When he read of rare wines, delicate dishes, aromatic coffee and expensive cigars, he was aware of a life sterilized at the core of all that might make it worth living. (44)

Hilary Shadlet has more in common with Robert Lindsay than a longing for fine food. He is described as "a tall slack-jointed, middle-aged gentleman with a long face supporting a handsome bony nose from which the rest of his face retreated a little, as though leaving it to maintain his personality on its own" (29), a description that would fit photographs of Robert. Hilary, like Robert, is also very aware of his appearance; he reflects on the cut of his clothes, and he carries a walking stick like the one so admired by Robert in his letter to Norman (quoted earlier). Hilary is written as being decent, honourable, and his only failing is that he is tyrannised by a dominant sister and, until the author arranges for Cecelia to seduce him, he is impotent.

There is a significant difference between the fictional Hilary and the fraternal Robert, as one of the reasons for Robert Lindsay's sense of alienation in Australia was that he was gay. His sexuality had not mattered in London, and indeed he had discreetly entered the gay literary community there, but in Creswick he felt the need to conceal and disguise. His isolation was increased as he thought his family was unaware of his sexuality. Yet Robert's sexuality was known by his family and discussed in correspondence between Mary and Norman (Hetherington Papers 14/16 1318/1b). Norman Lindsay shared with his generation certain beliefs about homosexuality, one of which was that it drained the creative abilities from a man and prevented him from being a great artist. The debilitating nature of homosexuality was the main subject of a number of letters from Norman to his official biographer John Hetherington:

> I cannot think of one true homosexual whose achievements have ever been of the order of greatness. You do, I think, get many scintillatingly clever homosexuals, but there is always an incompleteness about even their best work; it is always underlaid with what they themselves would call, I suppose, bitchiness; it just isn't the product of a male mind, but how could it be? (5 July 1958; Hetherington Papers 6/16)

When Norman came to incorporate elements of his brother Robert into his novel, he could only imagine him as a heterosexual, albeit one damaged by a tyrannical family.

Robert Lindsay became Norman's historic reference point. Because Robert had such a fine eye for detail, Norman asked him for reminiscences about costume, clothing and characters of the past. He even sent Robert small female models to dress in late nineteenth-century fashion so that he (Norman) could get the details of dress right in his paintings and in his writing (Lindsay Papers MS 9242/3251). Robert sent Norman reminiscences about past scandals and characters, including this account of a scandal with a local bank manager:

> I remember him, when I was in bed, in deep conversation with Robert Charles in the consulting room, the latter reassuring him that he would be able to perform the marriage act, the voice and the vanity rather suggest the homo-sexuality, and his constant visits to Mother imploring her to get him out of the entanglement help this too. After his housekeeper had been there a week she sat at the table with him, and he came hopping to Mother for advice, which was to get rid of her at once, and not allow such familiarity, but he hadn't the guts and glances [changed?] when she threw things at him. Eventually she married him, and he took badly to drink—which was the end of him. He was recalled to the Melbourne Office—when she

> used to ask for him and have a nice row—twice she called. They said he was out. (Lindsay Papers 742/13 131)

In *The Cousin From Fiji* Hilary Shadlet has a similar problem. He is tyrannised by his sister Elvira, who is a bad cook and will not let him drink alcohol. He has twice balked at having sexual intercourse with a woman, and feels he will fail the enchanting Cecelia. In Norman Lindsay's world he is safe as she simply

> gave everything and demanded nothing. He had such a magnified sense of her rarity and mystery that it struck him as a revelation and a miracle that she gave all this to him. It was a tribute to his worth that almost took his breath away. It restored his lacerated self-respect by a magic healing. It restored something much more important than his self-respect. (183)

Elvira reacts to Hilary's liberation by screeching and screaming. In this, she is remarkably like Mary Lindsay who, as Norman recalled, had an "aptitude for early histrionics, pretending to weep bitterly, and arousing great consternation in me for your dire sufferings" (Hetherington Papers 1318/16). From the early 1920s, when she first exhibited symptoms of menopause, Mary was regularly sedated with morphia for hysterics (Lindsay Papers MS 742/22 145).

> [Elvira] was understood, especially by herself, to have a ruthless wit. It gave her a little tight superior smile and twitched her nostrils into two white rims. She had her brother's long face without its urbanity and she also wore nose glasses through which she stared down inferior beings. (30)

This description is remarkably similar to Mary Lindsay as seen by her siblings and in photographs from the 1940s (Mendelssohn 134).

In the 1920s, as Norman Lindsay was rewriting *Redheap*, he wrote to Mary, asking for memories of how she remembered her adolescence in the 1890s. The result is a series of remarkable letters that echo both the text of *Redheap* and *The Cousin from Fiji*. At the time of writing, Mary was in her forties. The strain of caring for her mother, her sisters, and her sister's children had led to her being treated with morphia for hysterics. She wrote:

> My firm belief is that women always have known, consciously or otherwise, that sex for them, was the beginning and the end. Looking back at those girls and young women of my youth, I believe their subconscious knowledge was deeper than that of these moderns who, disillusioned, look this way and that, uncertain questioning everything. Those earlier ones I'm convinced, knew more; knew that to miss the fulfilment of their sex life was to miss everything. Clear-eyed women, speaking in rare moments of confidence, among themselves, will say "Slaves every one of us, slaves to sex from the

moment of birth." (Lindsay Family Papers)

Denied a formal education, and too timid to take the opportunities offered to her to become a journalist, Mary Lindsay, in these letters, nevertheless attempts to formulate one of the crucial questions of twentieth-century feminism.

She gives several instances of repressed women, many of whom were dead. In particular she writes of a girl, Gwyn Lewers:

> Can you remember her at 16? That was her prettiest time. Her face had lost its look of childish delicacy, and developed a soft fullness. Her black hair, parted in the middle, and curled into a crinkled mass that framed her face and gave it an oval shape. Her lips that used to be too pale, had taken on a healthier red. The picture of her at that time that always comes back to me is one getting off her bicycle, breathless from the ride.
>
> "Hullo! Mary!" she called ~~up~~ out, dropping one slim black stockinged leg over the pedal, and getting both slim feet down on the ground. "Come along and have some tea," she said, wheeling the machine inside the gate. I followed, admiring the pretty slim figure, which seemed all at once to have taken on firmer, fuller curves. Dressed in a black serge short skirt, she was, with red flannel blouse, and white collar and tie. On her head a black wool Tam. O. Shanter, pulled just a bit on one side. She wore a big red bow of ribbon tying up her heavy plait of hair. . . . —Then she turned and I saw her face just as I see it now. Flushed from neck to brow she was with a faint dull pink from heat, her eyes glancing out bright and clear, her full red mouth half open, showing the strong cream teeth. Tiny sweat drops glistening over every inch of skin. "How pretty Gwyn is getting," thought Mary to herself. . . . Gwyn, who danced like thistle down, was simply mad to go [dancing]. There was a family council. Hardly the thing, of course—a young girl not "out." Gwyn sulked, finally had her way. . . . It was a big concession to both damsels. Tremendous excitement! A new frock and shoes! Gwyn was scintillating! Finally, after the days and days of anticipation, The evening of the party. Gwyn walked into the Hall that night sparkling all over, and flaming inside with sheer joy.
>
> A big dark man standing in the doorway, saw her, and fell at the sight. That must have been her supreme moment. Perhaps she saw an endless vista of such moments, mercifully blind to Fate. . . . Gwyn and the dark stranger danced together again and again and again. The big girls didn't like it, scenting a dangerous rival—they needn't have grudged her that triumph. It was never to happen again.

> Safety bicycles for girls had just come in.—rather an expensive luxury. The family clubbed together, and bought a bike for Gwyn. She had seen pictures in magazines of alluring damsels, riding by the side of brave young men. All the girls knew why Gwyn wanted a bike. With the advent of the bicycle arose the need of fresh rules for conduct. The arbiters of etiquette decided that though the correct girl must on no account walk out alone with a young man by arrangement . . . it was permissible to cycle by day-light with the same young man, he in the position of guide and protector. It might even be done without a chaperon.—chaperones not yet being addicted to the bicycle—Next day the dark stranger called, after effecting the necessary introduction, thro the Broadbents.—Big, heavy, sensualist, with experience, he simulated successfully the semi-paternal role, and took Gwyn out for a ride. Every day for a week they went out together, perfecting Gwyn in the art to ride a bike. Then he went away, leaving Heaven knows what dreams behind him. "You have a face like an Angel," he'd said, and again "Call me Bertie; as they do at home." (Lindsay Family Papers)

But he didn't call again. Her reputation was ruined as a "fast" girl. There was no respectable future for her, and she died young. The eagerness and sensuality of Gwyn Lewers is recreated in Ella, but Norman Lindsay gives her story a happy ending. By the time *The Cousin from Fiji* was published, Gwyn's sister Millie—Mary's close friend—was the only surviving member of the Lewers family.

The glue that connects the different narratives of the Domkin family—the dishonesty of uncle George as he is ruined by the bank failure of 1892, the smug Florence impregnated by "secular communion" with the appropriately named curate Slithersole, and the upwardly mobile shop assistant Gussie Maguire—is Grandma Domkin. She is woven throughout the text as a malign presence, adding commentary with total indiscretion to the horror of her family. When Cecelia asks about the whereabouts of an old friend, and is told that she left town, we get the following comment:

> "They bundled her off in a hurry to her Aunt Tabitha and everybody with an eye in their heads could see why," said Grandma loudly. "And Egbert Grudle bolted before they could get at him and make him marry the girl. She's got a grown-up daughter boarded out in an orphanage to this day." (12)

These amusing items of gossip also appear to have fascinated Robert in his letters to Norman:

> A victorious virgin lady at Streatham called in the local Dr. to pronounce and gaze upon her swollen legs, which he did upon her

> equally swollen stomach—predicting the birth of someone's chick at any moment; she indignantly dismissed the charge, and when asked if she had any dealings with any one, hotly denied she hadn't and the only one who had been near her for months, had never been familiar, merely "hover around the brush." (Lindsay Papers MS 742/13 105)

The letters that Robert Lindsay wrote to his siblings describing the situation at the Creswick home and the dementia of Jane Lindsay are not easy to read (Lindsay Papers MS 742/13). They describe the crude physical details of her last years of life, including her mental deterioration with her obsession with matters sexual:

> She rambles on about the various men who wanted to marry her—feeling her physical attractions, of the different servants we have had who got married and how many children they had, and then to the children of her old friends, who have grandchildren—continual fornication—and ramblings of the villagers. News supplied by Sam [the gardener] and Isabel as to the coming marriages—with the marriage bed in the background—just now having exhausted everyone she could think of, she confided to me that Mary had secretly married the head of police—but didn't want it known—she told me this days ago—and I can't think what she's got in her tangled brain—she can't even leave the cat alone—Isabels, "if its a female, it must be done away with" implying that no promiscuous fucking is to be allowed to pollute the purity of the home. (22 July 1932; Lindsay Papers MS 742/13 121)

When Jane Lindsay eventually died, Norman wrote to Robert asking for the precise details of the manner of her death, and Robert complied in precise, distasteful, detail:

> She was unconscious off and on for the last three weeks, and when one went into her room she would either look vacantly at one—or else follow one with a piercing look.—She never stopped talking. day and night she was disgusting—she never got further than—"No. No, no that is wrong. No Annie. that is naughty." She continually spoke of Annie—and confused her with Mary. . . . Once when she was rambling she said—"No Annie those are bad men, come away. I don't like them—I hate Fiji"—This must have been some childish recollection of something happening, before she left at the age of 5 or 6—its interesting for the fact that all through her life she has taken such a vast interest in the place, and always anxious to meet anyone that had been there to air her opinions about the place, and seemed to have a real reverence for the place and anything that came out of it. . . . For the last three days and nights she screamed continuously. It was

> horrible to listen to—in a vigorous voice. Sleeman [doctor] gave her morphia for the last 24 hours and that quietened her. I would have collapsed if I'd kept up the roarings for ten minutes. She fought with unnatural strength when ever M[ary] or I moved her to make her comfortable—calling Mary "cruel witch" she would let her do things for her, but would keep M[ary] waiting interminably—up till the last she fought and struggled for breath, and two or three times, she stopped breathing, and I thought it was all over—and then she began again—a grim determination not to give in.
>
> When it was all over . . . it seemed unnatural for her not to be roaring objections—or fulminations—as she was quite warm and remained so for hours afterwards. About an hour after she died, her face became small and her nose pink—it had grown gross—and she looked more like the better photographs of her about the time of her marriage—but I have never seen such determination, and inflexibility. I always have heard that after death all traces of emotion go, and the face becomes peaceful and calm, it did become the latter, but the mouth down—as it was in life. (Lindsay Papers MS 742/13 147–149)

This is more detailed, and less kind, than Norman's description of the last weeks of Grandma Domkin, but again there is a connection between the two:

> In states of semi-consciousness she kept up a febrile muttering in a key of anger, while her hand had a trick of reaching stealthily out of bed to clutch at something not there—a phantom length of buggy whip to wallop her family into subjection. (213)

Norman Lindsay's famous hostility to his mother only emerged after her death. Until the 1920s there was an affectionate exchange of letters—indeed after Reg Lindsay's death in World War I they were especially close as they both had ghostly visions of the young soldier, and Norman relayed his conversations with his dead brother to his mother. Bearing in mind that there was no physical contact between Norman and his mother after 1915, the only reason for the dramatic change in his attitude towards her, from brave widow to malevolent harpy, are the contents of the letters sent from Creswick to Springwood. There was a relentless stream of correspondence as Norman's brother and sisters blamed each other and their mother for their lot in life. At the same time the letters revealed the snobbery that stopped the remaining Lindsays from fully participating in town life in Creswick.

As with the fictional Domkin family, there was more than sentiment at stake for the Lindsays in keeping their mother alive. Grandma Domkin had an annuity that died with her, and Jane Lindsay had inherited Reg Lindsay's war pension, which likewise ceased when she died. The successful Lindsay brothers (Norman,

Lionel and Daryl) were happy to provide for their mother, but they could not be relied upon to support their siblings. But for the Creswick Lindsays, money was less important than finding a scapegoat for a world-view that divided the population of a small town into those who should be acknowledged and those who could be ignored.

Robert Lindsay, with his acerbic eye, noted the way his mother divided the townsfolk into the elite and the damned:

> The Ancienne noblesse of those days were the Tremearnes, Mrs Lewers, Mr Dowling, Mrs Saby, and Aunt Say. Mrs Fiddian and Frasers in the distance. Then the middle class. trades people the Jebbs, Miss Soloway, The Gardners and the dissenting clergy—these latter were never intimate with the nobility, although occasionally Maggie Jebb, through having been to England, and journeys to Mt Lavinia when in Ceylon, would gate crash with Pollie Soloway. When leaving the sacred edifice next door on Sunday morning—and would discuss the lower orders—and the local preacher. Pollie Soloway being a wit had always something caustic about Mactons—giving themselves "airs." Maggie Jebb to try to live up to her superiors always quoted her trip to England and having visited Mr Lavina on the way. On her way back she met Mrs Russell-Jones, whom she spoke of with bated breath, who mixed in the rarest society—Maggie must have strayed from the truth considerably, when informing them of their family mansion, little thinking she would see it, much later through a constant change of letters, the noble Russell-Jones suggested a visit to the house of Jebb—and on the first morning was so horrified by having to pass dunnicans, costumes and heads of sewing women to get out of the back gate—she fled early the next morning. Mama after deciding with a shut mouth to leave the beau monde—gave up calling on the Dowlings and Labys, and only occasionally exchanged the courtesies and dash of tea with the Tremearnes and Lewers. But never with the Jebbs, till much later. (Lindsay Papers MS 742/13, 141–2)

In London, in the 1920s, Robert Lindsay had pretended to be related to Scottish aristocracy, and decorated hats for clients who may have been duchesses. In Creswick in the 1930s he ridiculed families whose wealth was based in the gold rush of the 1850s and cursed the crudity of his life. In doing so he gave his young brother essential ingredients for one of his better comedies of manners.

Along with Mary, Robert Lindsay seems to have seen himself almost as a valet to the greater talent of Norman, laying out in his letters the raw material for creative art. Unlike Mary, he did want some recognition for his own talent, although he

realised it was in a minor key. After Jane Lindsay's death he wrote with relish of his efforts in redecorating his mother's room to rid it of any evidence of her presence (Lindsay Papers MS 742/13 149–51). He also tried his hand at painting, and sent some examples of his work to Norman, who replied with offers of advice, which Robert thanked him for: "its monstrous kind of you offering to send me instructions, as to how to glaze or varnish others if ever I do them" (Lindsay Papers MS 742/13 145). Robert Lindsay had minor success as a poet. His verses, written in response to Arthur Waley's Chinese poems, were published at his brother Lionel's instigation. However, much to Robert's horror the name attached to the verses was "Bert Lindsay" (Lindsay papers MS 742/13 133).

The connections between Robert and Mary Lindsay's letters and the novels of Norman Lindsay are more than the novelist plundering the memories of siblings as source material. They also show him drawing on their perceptions of themselves as he fashions a light and frothy confection from ingredients steeped in depression. It was only after his death that Norman Lindsay caused to have published a less saccharine view of his family and boyhood circumstance. In *My Mask* he damned both his mother and the times in which she lived for producing such misery, but this kind of analysis had no place in his fictional world. It could be argued that Norman Lindsay's act in using his siblings' letters places him in the well-known tradition of writers taking material from all available sources, to bend it to an ultimate purpose. But in this case the original story is so grim, and the fiction so comic, that it seems the writer is almost in denial. He wills his world to be a place that never was, in a town he will never visit, so that he can continue to see the past with affection.

Endnote

1 When quoting from Lindsay family papers I have retained the spelling and syntax of the original manuscripts. This includes amendments Mary Lindsay made to her written text and the extended dashes used by both Mary and Robert Lindsay. The Lindsay family papers are in the possession of the children of Jane Glad, Norman's daughter.

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