

NOEL FLINT
A COURAGEOUS EXPONENT OF PRACTICAL LOVE

Occasional Papers in History and Theology

No. 16

NOEL FLINT



by

Dennis C. Nutt

The Conference of Churches of Christ in NSW will consider for publication short papers on historical and theological topics relevant to the development of Churches of Christ. The publication of a paper does not constitute an official endorsement of the view expressed therein.

The Early Years

A country lad, Percy Noel Flint was born at Cowra on 2 October 1921. His childhood was rather difficult. He grew up in an unhappy family, suffered at the hands of the priests and nuns of the Convent School that he attended, worked without wages in the family transport business from the age of 14, and at 16 years of age lost the sight in his left eye in a painful accident that would cause difficulty for the rest of his life.

When World War II broke out Noel was unable to serve because of his blind eye. However, he had to have an occupation. Directed towards fitting and turning, he left Cowra and travelled to Newcastle where he boarded with a Christian family that kept a Bible on the lounge room table. This was during the time of his indentures. At that time, Noel was a practising Catholic. When he returned home from Mass the daughter of the house used to ask him what verse of the Bible the priest spoke on. When Noel told her she would ask if he wanted to see it in the Bible. He did. He was given a Bible and took a year to read it.

He was twenty-one years of age when he gave his life to Christ at a Hinrichsen mission at Tempe and was baptised. From this decision resulted a very simple faith that he maintained for the rest of his life: a perfect God loves us all; he, Noel, was less than perfect, and Jesus enabled a friendship with God.

An Accidental Minister

Noel decided that he wanted to learn more about the Bible and Jesus, so what could be more beneficial than to go to a Bible college. He was attending the Chatswood Church of Christ at the time, so it was natural that he went to Woolwich where he studied for three years (1944–1946). Initially he had no intention of going into the ministry, he simply wanted to learn about the Bible. He proved to be a most able student despite his limited education and graduated Dux of his year.

When in college he liked to take an early cold shower. This disturbed the sleep of Mrs Patterson, the Principal's wife. Patterson asked him "to stop taking hot showers so early in the morning as it disturbed Mrs Patterson." He agreed, and took a cold shower the next morning. Patterson summoned him again and reinforced his edict on "hot showers." Noel replied that he "didn't have hot showers, he had cold ones." Immediately the embargo was extended to early cold showers. That he was not overawed by authority is shown clearly throughout his ministerial career.



Noel with fellow collegians.

He entered fully into College life and into the life of the Churches of Christ family. As a student he ministered at Lane Cove (1944), Greystanes and Granville (1945) and South Granville (1946). E.C. Hinrichsen launched the Woolwich Evangelistic Party in 1946 as an exercise in hands-on evangelism. It built an evangelistic fervour into the College's ethos. Noel became a part of it. At the half-yearly conference of Churches of Christ in New South Wales, held in October 1946 at Bowral, the theme was "Evangelism" and the four speakers dealing with different aspects were Harold Patterson (College Principal), Arthur Ladbrook (Senior Lecturer), and student preachers Noel Flint and Jim Luff. The "practical experience gained" from the Woolwich Evangelistic Party, as Jack Blankley put it, enabled Hinrichsen to identify those who would take up his mantle, but it also enabled others to develop their expertise in the more church based side of ministry. Noel was one of the latter.

Some time in 1947, twenty-seven year old Noel Flint brought a 30-year old A-model Ford and began to remove some of the bodywork and build a rudimentary shelter on the back. Post war rationing meant that materials were hard to get. Everything had to be scrounged and modified. He did not have much money either. The tiny car also had to have room for petrol and water containers, a bed, two bikes, some meagre possessions, and of course a toolbox with which he could fix anything.

That done, on a sunny Saturday afternoon, 2 August, 1947, among friends and family, he married the love of his life, Jean Foley at Granville Church of Christ where they had met when he was a student. On graduating at the close of 1946 Noel went to South Granville to conduct a part-time ministry while he waited for Jean "to grow up". He had wanted to marry her when she was sixteen, but her father wouldn't allow it until she was eighteen.

Thus began an adventure and an unbreakable partnership that would not end until 70 years had passed. As the record shows, they went wherever they were called to serve, motivated by the most extraordinary love of God and their fellow human beings: particularly the poorest, most despised and most needy. Jean understood poverty, having come from a "dirt-poor"

family whose mother had taught them how to sing and be happy when their stomachs were empty during the Great Depression.

Into the Parish

So what is the story of the car? One of Noel's fellow students was Cyril Beale who graduated in 1945 and went to minister at Townsville. He had elicited a promise from Noel while they were in college to come and help him there. On their marriage, Noel suggested to Jean that they go straight away to Townsville to help Beale before settling into normal parish ministry. It was an horrendous journey. The newly weds travelled the unmade roads that linked Sydney to the wild army town of Townsville. The dirt roads had been bulldozed by the American Army for their trucks to supply the northern defence. There were few bridges. No one thought they would get past Newcastle and their family and friends hoped they would come to their senses, return home, get proper jobs and settle down near Jean's much loved family. They had seriously underestimated the calling and true grit that would drive the young couple for the rest of their lives. At one point a policeman warned that there was no water or petrol for hundreds of miles. However, they had extra petrol, water and two bikes so they proceeded and eventually reached Charters Towers, then Townsville. Noel worked on the railways as a fitter and turner for the two years in Townsville where their son John was born.

Aiding an Evangelist

E.C. Hinrichsen had survived an attack of viral meningitis and for a time was unable to conduct tent missions. So, in 1950 he took up the pastoral ministry at the Wollongong church that he had established a few years earlier. There was a large manse and Hinrichsen was single. He invited Noel and Jean and their son to live with him. At Easter the Flints arrived to care for the recovering Hinrichsen, and help with the Wollongong church. Noel continued to work as a fitter and turner. Hinrichsen left at the end of the year and Glen Brown came from New Zealand to minister at Wollongong. Brown and Flint had shared a year together in college and got on well. However, as the Browns were going to live in the manse it was necessary for the Flints to move. They purchased a farm at Lisarow.

Lisarow and Wyoming (1951–1956)

Noel always wanted to farm; the farm boy was back on the farm where he cultivated a market/vegetable garden. He grew tomatoes, corn, gherkins, peas, beans etc. and everything

was done by hand except when he used a draught horse called Frank to plough or pull the sled. This was extremely hard physical work, and the farm was not economically viable.

For ministry, he became involved with the Gosford church, which was unable pay him. Once again, fitting and turning came in handy. It was a district that presented a tremendous challenge. In the area encompassing the Entrance, Gosford and Woy Woy there was a permanent population of 20,000 with a holiday influx of a further 20,000. At the same time a Bible school was meeting in a home at Wyoming. The work at Gosford was not without its problems and he became convinced that the future of the work ought to be centred on Wyoming with its substantial Sunday school. There were 51 scholars in 1952. He urged the Home Mission Committee to find the funds to erect a suitable hall.

During 1953 the Home Mission committee increased the subsidy to the Gosford/Wyoming church so that Noel could “give more time to visitation”. The building was completed and he commenced gospel services. The church had twelve members. A mission conducted by Glen Brown (Wollongong) in early 1956 resulted in the addition of ten new members. Noel concluded his ministry at the close of 1956. So far he had had eight years of tent-making ministry.

A Return to the Illawarra

In 1957 Flint began a five-year ministry at Warrawong (1957–1961). It was his first full-time ministry, in an area with which he was familiar from his year in the Illawarra in 1950. The Warrawong church was established in 1950 as an offshoot of the Wollongong church. When he arrived it had 36 members. It was a Home Mission church. It could be said on his arrival that every adult member of the congregation was a Bible School teacher. This was because the church undertook the care of a complete Bible School in nearby Berkeley Vale, which was a new and expanding district.

It was not an easy field and he did well to maintain a sustainable membership. The addition of new members was balanced by an exodus of young people, going to Sydney for their post secondary school studies. There was no university in Wollongong during his ministry to keep them there

Back to the Outback

Gilgandra (1962–1965) was a successful and enjoyable ministry. It enabled Noel to exercise his very practical bent in ministry. He preached in the morning and then went and helped a farmer in the afternoon and preached again at night. One day the poorest farmer in the church

called in. He was on his tractor going to where he share-farmed about a hundred kilometres away. Noel felt that he was finding things difficult and was somewhat downcast, so sent him off in Noel's car to set up camp. Noel then drove the tractor towing a combined harvester on a five-hour trip and got there just before dark. The tractor would go 24 hours a day so Noel did the twelve-hour night shift to allow the farmer to get the sleep he needed. This was before tractors had cabins and air-conditioners or even heaters. Flint did not have a lot of clothing so by morning he had a wheat bag on his head, another over his shoulders and two bags over his lap. The crowning feature was the frost on his head and shoulders. Noel was not paid for this, and was criticised for 'doing the farmer's job'.

Noel Flint was driven by a deep love for all God's children. That love was expressed in the language of practical kindness that characterised his whole life. Aboriginal people were treated appallingly in this era and that only began to change in the 1960s. They were not considered human by many, and not allowed near towns. Their living conditions were shocking, confined to isolated pockets of land where they lived in cardboard and tin humpies. His children's memories are filled with images of waking up with a sick aboriginal or hung-over itinerant sharing their room. At that time none of their school friends had even seen an aborigine.

The assistance he gave to embryonic aboriginal businesses in the era when it was illegal for them to own anything, or even have a bank account, made him deeply unpopular. The law changed in the early 1960s and aboriginals were allowed to own property. One of the aboriginals, Bill Naden, wanted a house in Gilgandra. As this was not acceptable to the locals there was resistance. By buying the land in his name and then building the house Noel was able to realise Bill's dream. The title was simply transferred. This increased Noel's unpopularity. However, he never wavered in the face of criticism, and when he saw injustice and disadvantage his moral compass never failed him.

So it was that he became heavily involved in indigenous work. Two farmers who were members of the church had jointly purchased some land at Balladoran. When the high floods inundated the area the indigenous settlement was badly hit. Noel organised for the indigenous people to be established at Balladoran and a work of ministry commenced there. One of his roles was to manage this aboriginal mission about 20 kilometres out of town. The "Freedom Riders" came to Gilgandra and Charles Perkins sought an interview with him. However, Perkins did not want good news stories and moved on. While Perkins was having his

“freedom ride”, Noel was phasing out the “settlement” and integrating the people into town. He was socially progressive.

The Flints also became the conduit for the distribution of clothes to the indigenous population; these clothes were provided by the NSW Churches of Christ Christian Women’s Fellowship.

A Country Boy on the North Shore

Leaving Gilgandra he took up the challenging ministry at the North Sydney church (1966–1973). The church was very much in decline and almost closed. The Conference had written to ministers asking for advice on how the church might be revived. Noel responded with some suggestions and was invited to take up the ministry there. When he arrived he found a small aged congregation. He decided there was need for a Sunday school so went out and scoured the streets to invite children to Sunday school. If they were willing to go he took them home and sought permission from their mother before conveying them to the church. His next strategy was to develop a youth work. It began with his two teenage sons and a teenage girl and three other teenagers he rounded up. Thus began “the loft”. Later he convinced the adults that they should allow the youth to run the church service occasionally.

His flexibility was displayed at North Sydney where he was effective in meeting the needs of young people. The church grew from about twenty mainly retired people to two meetings with a hundred or so people each Sunday. This was despite the resistance of some of the senior members who were less flexible.

Possibly his greatest attribute was that he believed in every person he met and always found the good in them. This was not some ideal to attain, it was his default position. What was not well known was his great belief in young people and also belief that you should “feed the starving before you try to save their soul”. This often led to conflict with the more traditional and conservative church hierarchy. In the early 1970s he authored a publication for the Conference Executive to try and influence pastors and church boards in how they viewed youth. He advised among other things:

Trust your kids. Because their hands fumble with some tools, at which I am expert, this does not mean that their heads are not capable of making them engineers when I am only a mechanic. We won’t find out unless we trust them ...

Shield the kids from the ultra-conservatism that has restricted our churches for far too long. You may need to be the buffer and take the knocks from some people who think anything new or different is wrong ...

We have made mistakes while doing very little for the Lord. Allow extra mistakes for extra areas of activity ...

Never betray shock. The first time I went to a Christian Rock program I was appalled—the noise nearly drove me out. I had been taught that the beat was the satanic beat of the jungle. How gullible I had been. This group used the music to get the interest of the holiday crowd. Then it started to change—a depth of meaning came across. I was glad I stayed. It was a shock at first, a thrill at last. There have been many shocks and many thrills. We have to live through one to get to the other.

Noel was not given to committee work. However, during his ministry at North Sydney he served five-years on the Aborigines Committee, bringing the depth of the experience gained at Gilgandra to bear on that committee's work. In 1968 this author received a letter from the Woolwich Bible College inviting him to accept a casual teaching position. The letter was signed by Noel Flint as secretary of the College Board. He was able to return something to the College that prepared him for ministry.

“I'll Be Gone in a Month!”

During the Biafran war the Council of Churches wanted a clergyman to lead an Inter Church Aid Team to the Biafran-Nigerian War Zone. This was to ensure there was no misappropriation of funds. One day Jean recalls Noel walked in and said, “I'll be gone in a month.” With these words he advised Jean that he had been accepted to lead the team. It was late 1968 when the team arrived in Nigeria and came under the direct control of the International Red Cross and was allocated an area in which to work at Enugu. Immediately on arrival Flint received an invitation to a drinks party in the Government House at Enugu, a photograph of which appears below.

*His Excellency the Administrator
East Central State
has the pleasure of inviting
Mr. Noel Flint*

*to a drinks party in the Government House Enugu,
at 5 p.m. on the 31st December, 1968 in honour of
Voluntary Agencies in Relief and Rehabilitation Duties
in Enugu.*

R.S.V.P.
Aide-de-Camp.
Government House
Enugu.

Government House
Enugu.

Invitation from the Administrator

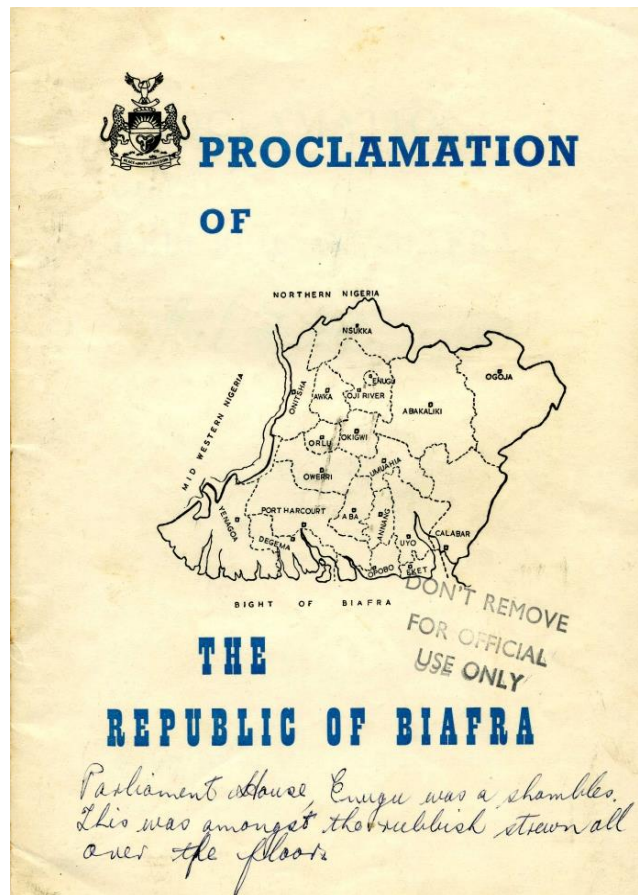
As manager, Noel ordered supplies and arranged their distribution. His team had responsibility for 65,000 refugees, and the distribution of seventy tons of food a week at bush clinics. Because there were three nurses and a doctor in the team medical care for the starving was provided. However, before they could do this he had to put the Enugu hospital, where the team was based, into working order. His skills as a fitter and turner came in handy in this situation. They fed and vaccinated 1.25 million mothers and children in hostile conditions, saving untold lives.

The war in the Enugu area was more like a siege. It was a brutal war and the government forces used starvation tactics. For the first time images were shown on television screens around the world, and the reality of war and starvation was brought home to first world countries. His letters at the time were censored, but it is obvious that what was seen on television here and recorded in the press was not exaggerated.

Noel developed a system to prevent rioting for food that reflected his background in working sheep at Cowra. He built large compounds that everyone could come into early in the morning. They had a series of races like a sheep yard for the people to get out. The gates were locked, and everyone was given their rations of high protein food, grain, salt etc. as they went along the race to go home. Soon everyone learnt that they would be fed whether they were first or last. A subsequent study showed that this program was effective in the long term. This contrasted with the other Red Cross programs that did not use food regimes.

Noel was courageous. The Nigerian Army refused to allow the Australians into the war zone and the team returned to the safety of Enugu: but not Noel. He found a group of Nigerian drivers who were willing to risk their lives. He procured ten trucks, painted red crosses on them, loaded them with American cracked grain, and drove to the front line. Ignoring threats to his life and gunshots over his head he drove the first truck into no man's land and the other trucks followed close behind. He did this for six days a week over the whole deployment.

He was the first white man into the Biafran capital after it was destroyed in the war. In addition, when a child died in his arms he decided that he had to respect the parents' need to bury the child in their tribal land. He took the dead child across the war front; he was the first known person to cross no-man's land and return alive.



A Souvenir

Not content to return and bask in the glory, he caused quite a stir. On television he contradicted the Department of Foreign Affairs's version of Australia's glorious relief project. But that was Noel. He would never condone an untruth no matter what the reward. If he saw something wrong he would try to make it right in the most courteous and humble way possible. There are many untold stories of his heroism during this time. They greatly affected his sons who were young men of eighteen and twenty. Noel went away a dark haired young man and returned nine months later grey haired and so much older. In one letter home he referred to that time as "the loneliest period of my life".

His church at North Sydney supported Noel, Jean and their sons through this stressful and dangerous time.

The Indonesian Odyssey

Noel was always interested in Indonesia. When Federal Conference debated in 1970 which area they would expand into for mission work two countries were under consideration: Indonesia and Papua New Guinea. Noel spoke for Indonesia. In 1974, when the Noel and Jean's son John needed a three-months placement to complete his degree he took up a

position with the World Bank in Indonesia. Noel and Jean went with him and came across an American Churches of Christ missionary couple. They had an exciting journey to Majalenka in North Western Java to visit Trevor and Lynn Kallmier who were working with World Evangelisation Crusade. Noel and Jean became involved in the problem of the education of missionary children. As a school counsellor Jean was able to help with teaching and advice on children. At her suggestion, some of the American Christian Missionaries and Bethany Press U.S.A. contacted the government to allow the Central Java Intermission School to be established at Salatiga. The government agreed as long as more than Christian children could be enrolled. This was a time when many World Aid programs were helping Indonesia to develop their economy and many business people wanted their children taught in English. It became a tool for evangelism as English-speaking people from the surrounding regions sent their children there and paid fees.

It became a routine for Noel and Jean to return to Indonesia every 18 months. In 1985 they went to the school for two years. They became instant dormitory parents. Both taught subjects. They filled the role of grandparents to the children and counsellors to their parents. It was an exhausting but fulfilling time.

Some of the families of those Indonesians who became Christian during those years are now lecturers and leaders in the two Churches of Christ Bible Colleges in Indonesia, and many are pastors and leaders in the many Indonesian churches. To God be the Glory.

One More Church Plant

Following a three-year ministry at Padstow in Sydney's western suburbs Noel "retired," if you can call it that, and they moved to Warrimoo in 1979. They had bought a house in Edna Street when they were on their way to Gilgandra in 1961. When they arrived in 1979 they found a group meeting in a garage of a member's home. The minister was Ken Mason. Noel threw himself into the work. When the NSW government was selling off land in Blaxland, Noel bid for one of the lots, which he won for \$28,000, without having consulted the church. He paid the deposit. This is the site on which the current church now stands and Noel entered into the physical effort of building the church. He gave of himself as an Elder and was as active a member as his health would allow. This remarkable couple found the rich and fulfilling retirement they deserved in Warrimoo centred in the church in Blaxland. They loved their years in this church community where they were founding members and have been greatly loved in return.

He became something of a stonemason in his old age. His passion was his vegetable and permaculture garden, and the harvests were generously shared. He also threw himself into the establishment of the gardens and landscaping around the church, a source of pleasure for many. It is a wonder how he cut those heavy rocks and moved them from Warrimoo to the church garden, and how he produced a rich harvest from such a stony piece of ground. Perhaps this is a metaphor for his life.

A Generous and Compassionate Man

Noel Flint was a generous man. It is common to hear the phrase that someone would give you the shirt of his back. Noel literally did that. During the deprivation of the fifties warm clothes were expensive and hard to get. He spent those years permanently cold because he would give his warmest coat, his only coat, to someone more needy. An example of this was when he picked up a hitchhiker. As he said goodbye he asked if there was anything he could do for the fellow. The chap asked for a coat so Noel took his overcoat off and gave it to this stranger even though he did not have another one or enough money to buy one.

Because he felt God loved him he knew that others were loved too. He desired to share this with people, to value individuals and the broader world. Family, friends, people he meet in the street, children in orphanages in Africa and neighbours in Indonesia were of great interest and worth to him. These Christian values directed everything the he did and gave him his drive.

Three characteristics stand out when you seek to evaluate his life: his love of agriculture, his fascination with engineering and technology, and his living out his faith. Two incidents show his character after he moved to Warrimoo. There were a few boys up Edna Street and he was concerned that they would get up to no good unless something was done. He entered them in a billy cart race that went down a very long and steep hill. Their cart did not win, but Noel was very proud that it was the fastest cart there. The speed was because it was the heaviest, slow to start but with its mini wheels on the front and FC Holden wheels on the rear it could fly. The second was when a woman up the street was diagnosed with cancer. Noel would go and read classic novels to her, which she loved. Not something he would normally read, it was one of her few joys.

None of this would have been achieved without Jean by his side. Throughout their seventy years of marriage they worked together and supported each other. For most of their

life together they lived in relative poverty, which Jean understood from her own experience during the Great Depression. They understood poverty.



Jean Flint

Everything they had they gave in serving their Lord and in loving their neighbour. Many of these neighbours were on the other side of the world. As a neighbour Noel had an amazing ability to solve all manner of problems and a wide range of tools to enable his endeavours. He offered a horticultural consultancy, a handy man service, a regular call by with the church newsletter and a bucket of fruit from his incredibly productive garden. His mulberries were superb and he provided everything needed to harvest the crop including lemons to clean the stains off your hands. When a neighbour had given up on the tree house construction in their liquid amber and gone for a swim, they returned to find that Noel had readied it for occupancy in their absence. He tracked down the awful smell pervading a neighbour's house to a dead mouse in the oven-lining. He managed to extricate it and enabled them to venture into the kitchen again.

Noel also had a slightly offbeat sense of humour as one young lass discovered when, on her Halloween birthday one year, she opened Noel's carefully wrapped gift box to discover a large and active spider! In another act of thoughtfulness, he provided a terrifying but practical bench saw that assisted his neighbour to keep up the wood supply over the winter. His tool kit included a wise and generous listening ear; though sometimes it did require a loudish input at the speaker's end.

By many measures Noel and Jean had a hard and difficult life together, but the reality is that they had a wonderful adventure full of love, singing, friendship and a sense of purpose. Noel saw in her the beauty of an intelligent soul, one who could direct her love and kindness to make those around her become their best selves. Noel Flint died on 18 October 2017 aged 96. He was indeed a courageous exponent of practical love.