

Being Frank

A man from Snowy River

JOHN FRANCIS LAVIS

Introduction

When Frank came into the world at Tumut Base Hospital in 1923, he became the sixth child of Helena and Walter Claude Lavis. He was brother to Elmo, Grace, Mary, Jack, and Brian, who had died in an accident at the railway station in Gloucester nine years before.

He lived an ordinary life in his early days. He grew up in the small town of Tumut in the Snowy Mountains area of South Eastern Australia. He wasn't good at his school work. He couldn't read or write very well. During the Great Depression he hunted rabbits, fished the water holes and picked field mushrooms to help feed the family. It was a good, Catholic family. There was Mass every Sunday. He was baptised, had his first Communion and regularly went to Confession.

He left school early and completed a plumbing apprenticeship. At the age of eighteen he had enlisted in the Australian Army. He was to see war service in New Guinea in its fight against the invading Japanese. At a training camp in Toowoomba in Queensland, he met Jean Barron. They were married soon after. He was nineteen, she was seventeen.

After the war he and Jean moved back to Tumut and he resumed his plumbing business. They had two extra people

to feed – my sister, Helen, and me. He started writing his diaries much later, almost fifty-seven years after his birth. And here I am, in my seventy-third year, having read Dad's words over and over again in the last decade, trying to tie them all together in this book. I am doing it for myself, as homage to my father, but it may well become a useful family history.

Before you read any further, please be aware this is not just a story of happy family events and beautiful people, nor is it a story of prayers and self-development tips. Frank's diaries are full of his innermost thoughts and his dark introspection into family secrets.

In attempting to tell Frank's story, I have relied on what he has written himself and on my own reactions. His words are in bold print, taken directly from the diaries. I have corrected the spelling, grammar and punctuation to ensure his meaning is communicated clearly. I may have spelled some names incorrectly and some events may not be exactly as they actually happened. For that, I apologise. I have deliberately changed the names of a few people in the story to protect their privacy. Otherwise, this is an honest attempt to tell you the story of my father's life.

Francis Joseph Lavis started writing his diaries on the 29th of September in 1981. He wrote in a red-covered school exercise book in blue texta. He began with a prayer: **Dear Jesus. Today I wish to receive and give respect and love to Jean and our family.**

It was written in his distinctive capital letter printing. He used the book to record the self-help courses he had been

attending. These obviously were to have a large impact on him as he refers to them often in his writings. "This little book," as he called it, also served as a record of his work commitments and of his financial statements, how much money he owed and to whom.

Jean, by now, was his wife of thirty-eight years and mother to not only Helen and me, but to our sisters, Moira, Terri, Madonna and our departed brother, Mark. From this day on his words are directed to Jesus. He asks for peace, health, love and prosperity. He offers each day to one or more family members.

Dad was a plumber working for himself in the Wynnum/Manly area of the city of Brisbane. A typical note in the diary was made on Monday 15th of October:

Box cutters and pipes for John St job

Price job in Wort St

But essentially, his plea was to Jesus: **Oh, my Jesus you said verily ask and you shall receive. Seek and you shall find. Knock and the door shall open. Behold I knock I seek I ask for strong faith hope charity love happiness peace and prosperity for my wife and my family.**

On Sunday the 1st of November he wrote: **Just one month since I started this morning talk to Jesus God. The results have been exciting. They have been spectacular really. I feel so much better in myself. The torment has gone. I am much more at ease. These early hours are so wonderful, I didn't know it was possible to be so content. The money matters have improved so much it is almost miraculous. Thank you, Jesus.**

Early in the mornings, sometimes as early as 2 am, Dad would write down his thoughts for the day. Some days he

would seek help for one of the family. Sometimes he would announce his own personal problems. He was smoking cigarettes regularly but declared: **I do want to stop this filthy wasteful habit.**

On Friday the 16th of November he wrote of the bond he had with his brothers, Elmo and Jack: **Important I write to them. Time is running out for all of us now. Tragic, that each of us has lost a son.**

Elmo had lost a son three years previously to a brain tumour and Jack a son to diabetes the following year. Early in the morning of Saturday the 21st of September 1980, Frank's own son, Mark, had lost his life in a fire in our house in Oceana Terrace, Manly, Queensland.

Mark had been out celebrating his new job with Qantas as an on-flight steward. He came home inebriated, lit a cigarette and fell asleep. The burning cigarette fell on to his mattress, set it out smouldering poisonous fumes and without any flames took Mark's life. He was twenty-six. Dad had been awakened by a neighbour shouting, "Frank! Your house is on fire." Smoke was billowing out of the downstairs window where Mark's bedroom was. Dad got down there too late.

This sent my parents into a deep, despairing grief. My sister, Madonna, was there at the time. Helen, the oldest, was in Sydney, Terri in Cairns, Moira in Brisbane and I was teaching in a small school at Legume in northern New South Wales. Dad spent the next twelve months in a state of depressed confusion; Mum was angry and inconsolable. Their already rocky relationship was headed in a downward spiral.

Mum decided to get on with life. She went to Weight Watchers, learned to drive a car and took up tennis. Dad continued working at his plumbing business but it was his early

morning writing sessions that started one year and one week after Mark's death that changed him forever. Thus began the diary writing which continued until his death twenty-nine years later and filled the pages of thirty-three school exercise books. This is my attempt to give him the respect his journals deserve by interpreting them the best I can.

I am John Francis Lavis, second born, first son.

Chapter 1

The fact Dad was writing anything was a surprise to the whole family. He had always claimed to be dyslexic; he didn't like reading or writing at school. Taught by The Sisters of Mercy at Saint Brigit's school in Tumut, he left school early after achieving the Intermediate Certificate, took up a plumbing apprenticeship and joined the workforce at the age of fifteen.

At the age of eighteen he was in the Australian Army. World War Two had already started. He met Jean Barron while in camp in Toowoomba. She was two years younger. They were married on the 13th of March, 1943.

He served time in the war in New Guinea as a sapper in the AIF in unit fifty-eight Field Park Company. His unit's job was to provide infrastructure like roads, bridges and camp facilities for the troops. If he ever saw any action, he never spoke of it. In later years he was full of stories about the **wonderful fuzzy-wuzzies**, New Guinea's Indigenous Peoples.

When he wrote in his diary it was always in capital letter printing with poor spelling. For example, **smoking is a filthy habit**. There was little punctuation, some rich vocabulary

and it was in a laconic, Australian voice. I can hear him speaking when I read it.

Thankfully he gave away the blue texta and took up biros, using mostly blue ink, sometimes green and even red. He used red when his emotions were running high and, therefore, when he was disclosing his debt situation.

Debt had been his nemesis ever since moving to Queensland from Tumut. He left Tumut in 1961 after a big construction job had run into difficulties when the developer became bankrupt owing Dad a lot of money. He had been promised a leading role in a building business in Brisbane but, in less than six months, that project had folded.

On Monday the 16th of February, 1982, he owed \$16,061 mainly to banks, credit unions and hardware suppliers. There had been a reduction of \$4,239 in the four months since he had started writing.

I thank you God for the improvement. Complete financial abundance is at hand.

Now into his second school exercise book, he continued to lament the lack of progress in family matters. Moira suffered anxiety attacks which had besieged her early in life and continued to haunt her even more after the trauma of Mark's death. Mum had long ago resisted any attempt by Dad to be accepted by her. She became antagonistic towards him and criticised him constantly in front of the family. Madonna told me recently it was like "walking on eggshells", so palpable was the tension in the air.

His smoking habit affected his health. His two brothers, Elmo and Jack, were advancing in years and even one of

Mum's nieces, Margie, was stricken with mental health problems. She lived not far from them in Lota. No wonder he turned to prayer and philosophy. Where he got these sayings, I will never know. Are they his originals?

Failure is success turned inside out

Only he is beaten who admits it

The timid seldom attain great fulfillment

Despite his lingering depression, there was improvement in his family life. He was making good money by working with well-known builders doing their plumbing work in the local area. He took on an apprentice, a young migrant from eastern Europe. Zoran turned out to be a great worker and formed a genuine respectful relationship with Frank. He went on to forge his own plumbing business in later years.

A friendship also grew between Zoran and Madonna who had just finished high school.

Mum and Dad holidayed in Cairns with Terri and her boyfriend, Jim. Zoran and Madonna travelled south to visit me and my family in Port Macquarie where I had recently taken up a new classroom teacher position at Hastings Public School. They then went on to Sydney to catch up with Helen, her husband, Robert, and their family. Moira had her thirtieth birthday on 24th April, 1982 and had moved away from home into a rental property in Brisbane

On the 26th June 1982, my wife, Joye, and I celebrated the arrival of our third child, a brother to Belinda and Tod. We named him Benjamin Mark Lavis. Dad was delighted that Mark had been chosen as the second name.

Grant him a happy holy life. I say holy because there is no happiness without God.

The third exercise book was started on the 1st of July, 1982. Frank Lavis recorded that date as the first of the new year. His finances were constantly on his mind. He hoped the new financial year would be wonderful.

Peace and prosperity are at hand, he affirmed.

Smoking still haunted him. **Stop smoking or die**, he asserted.

He was not going to Communion or Confession. **God first. Self second**, he admonished himself.

However, the entry that caught my full attention was his disclosure that he had tried to **be intimate with Jean** in the early hours one morning. Her rejection of him was absolute and brutal. He went on to write that this had been the situation for twenty years and that her hatred of him began about twenty-five years ago.

Madonna, who was born in 1963, was called by Dad a gift to the family. She was a happy, intelligent, very pretty girl – very popular with her friends. In her final year at Wynnum State High School, she was voted Miss Wynnum High. No doubt, Dad is her father but it's no wonder he called her a gift. In his diary he mused that “Madonna” was a very appropriate name.

Meanwhile, the family life was moving on. Helen regularly phoned Moira. Terri and Jim were living quietly in Cairns. Madonna and Zoran were romantically involved. I was enjoying my teaching job in Port Macquarie with Joye and our young family. Dad was still philosophising:

Whatever the mind of man can conceive and can believe it can achieve.

The four steps to the habit of patience:

1. A definite purpose

2. A definite plan

3. A mind closed against negatives

4. Alliances that encourage the purpose and plan.

Then, on September 12th, 1982 came this bombshell: **I took my frustrations out on Mark. Showed him very little understanding or love. Mark fought back with rebellion and open resentment.**

Madonna told me, just recently, that Dad and Mark almost traded punches about this time.

“Dad I am a homosexual” he screamed at me only days before his tragic death.

This would have shocked Dad to his core, not that it was a surprise to anyone else in the family.