

Molly, in Her Own Words

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A founding member of the Queensland Oral History Association, Lesley Synge collected three interviews from Central Queensland subjects for the Australia 1938 Oral History Project in 1982 then resumed her career as a high school teacher of English and History. She is now a widely published poet, fiction and non-fiction writer. She has found joy in revisiting two of her original interviews and developing them.¹

‘Contraception!’ my grandmother Molly exclaimed. ‘Never heard of it...not for years and years.’

It was a winter’s night in Mount Morgan, Central Queensland, in 1982. I’d tucked my three-year-old boy into bed and we were settled on her Art Deco three-seater Genoa lounge, the tape recorder between us, when I reached the topic of contraception and childbirth on my questionnaire.² Molly Doherty, almost 80, had been widowed for more than 30 years when I cajoled her to take part in the Australian 1938 Oral History Project.³ I was almost 30, her oldest grandchild, visiting from Brisbane. Molly (Mary Ellen O’Keefe), born in 1902, had already lived through most of the twentieth century. The voice of a working-class woman from an Australian mining town was just what the oral history project needed, I believed, to have a rounded picture of social life before World War Two. Her daughter and only child – my mother – had been dead for four years. While my grandmother still suffered

1 The interview with Violet O’Keefe, the sister-in-law of Molly, by the author, took place on 11 May 1982. <https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/catalog/930420>. Lesley Synge, ‘Fortunato Stabulum: the fortunes of an Italian mining labourer and the puzzles of oral history’, *Queensland History Journal* 24, no. 9 (May 2021): 858–870.

2 Quotes have been extrapolated from the transcript of the interview with Mary Ellen (Molly) Doherty (1902–1990) conducted on 10 May 1982 for Australia 1938 Oral History Project, the National Library of Australia ID 937920. Other information has been sourced from various government and newspaper records.

3 The Australia 1938 Oral History Project is a collection of over 500 oral history interviews held in the National Library of Australia with people talking about their memories of Australian life before and during 1938. The project was one of the many historical initiatives created in preparation for the Australian bicentennial celebrations of 1988.

heartbreak about it, the loss bonded us in a woman-to-woman sort of way that would not have otherwise occurred.

Molly generally had a quirky way of talking, a reflection, perhaps, of the mix of voices from many backgrounds and nationalities that had surrounded her in childhood, first in the goldmining town of Ravenswood in North Queensland then here, in Mount Morgan where she had lived since her teens. In the intimate sphere of family, her mother Elizabeth (Lizzie) Dennis was colonial-born and raised by English parents (Lizzie's father was from Dorset). Molly's father Philip O'Keefe was an Irishman from county Cork and William (Will) Hancock, the stepfather who took over the family, was colonial-born whose parents had immigrated from Cornwall. A rich mix – and one that reflected the earliest years of the post-colonial, national tongue.

Although her expression was quirky and 'old-worldy', Molly was also naturally low-key and reticent. By the time I reached the intimate subject of contraception and childbirth mid-interview, I registered that her responses were often a confetti of stumbles. Without realising that I was witnessing the onset of age-related dementia, I felt faintly disappointed in her.

Molly had already disclosed to me that she had innocently fallen pregnant at 21 and joined the ranks of Queensland's sole parents at 22 when she gave birth to my mother Estelle on 11 November 1924. As anticipated, Molly was reluctant that evening to record much detail about the events that resulted in this traumatic experience. I knew of the context to the biggest drama of her life from other occasions: the man who immediately left town to avoid his responsibilities; the mother who packed her off to a nunnery on the Capricorn Coast to escape the prying eyes of Mount Morganites, with the order that Molly must give the baby up for adoption. The gossip that circulated in whispers – that these nuns often killed babies born out of wedlock; that they delivered them, then buried them behind the convent, including the offspring of liaisons between nuns and priests.

Although she quickly dispensed with the topic of contraception as something she'd 'never heard of', Molly happily elaborated on the next focus – the birth itself. She

explained that it lasted two days and was riddled with complications. ‘That’s why I never had any more children...They [the nuns] never, ever, used to get you a doctor.’

Did they give you pain-relieving drugs? I asked.

‘No drugs.’

Does she remember the pain?

‘I’ll say.’

When her daughter arrived, Molly would not ‘give her up’.

‘I wanted a girl.’

Why?

‘Cause I wanted one, that’s all. When I had her...I wouldn’t part with her.’

Instead, Mary Ellen O’Keefe left the convent with her newborn – marched out, she’d declared to me on one of those earlier occasions – and caught the train that then ran from Emu Park to Mount Morgan via Rockhampton. As I conducted the interview, I recognised that, without my grandmother’s gutsy courage and loving heart, I would not exist.

‘He wasn’t much [of a father], I can tell you that,’ Molly said bluntly of Philip O’Keefe in the earlier part of the interview. ‘He was a bit of a bombastic sort of fellow,’ often out of work, and ‘used to drink a good bit, too.’

Irish Philip was a Roman Catholic, Lizzie followed the Church of England. Molly’s younger siblings were Frank, Florence, Elizabeth (known as Pearl) and George, the last of the five, born in 1911. They were sectarian times and the religion of the father determined the religion of his offspring. All the same, the O’Keefe children attended the state school in Ravenswood.

According to Molly, her father provided next to nothing for Lizzie to raise the children on. 'She used to buy a few soup bones and cut off the meat to make a curry out of them.' Frank, the oldest boy, did what he could to help. He 'used to get a bob [a shilling] or two out of fighting...down the gully near the creek up at Ravenswood School...Dad would always give him a bob for doing it.' Frank handed the coins he earned from boxing over to their mother. Lizzie also maintained the family with washtub toil.

Lizzie Dennis had two sisters and five brothers (one of whom enlisted at the outbreak of World War One) but Molly rarely spoke about her Dennis grandparents, aunts and uncles. Her father's influence seemed more enduring.

In the early twentieth century, conflict between Catholics and Protestants was widespread. 'The kids used to call each other names over the fences [of the schools]. Catholic dogs, go like frogs, jump into the holy water, or something like that.'

Hers was a short walk to Ravenswood State School 'across a creek'. There she played tiggie, pass the handkerchief, and marbles. She was good at marbles and used to 'win 'em all'. As she reached her teens, she saw the transition of Ravenswood from prosperity to hard times. The town 'had been a big place' but after 'the miners' shutdown' most of the population left. Lizzie moved too, south to Mount Morgan. Mother and daughter would spend the rest of their lives there.

I asked Molly why her mother had settled in Mount Morgan. Molly answered, 'My father was dead...He was killed on a railway trolley [the means of transport used by the workers who mended the line]. We came down to Mount Morgan after that... My stepfather [Will Hancock] was going to work down here.' Lizzie and the kids caught the steamer *Canberra*. 'Will came down in one [vessel] and we came down in the other. She had a hard time...looking after us. The other four kids went to an orphanage [down the range from Mount Morgan near Rockhampton for a time but] she always kept me with her...before she married Will.' Molly added that her

younger sister Florrie ‘cleared out of the orphanage once. She was a beauty [i.e., rebellious], that one.’

Molly didn’t name the year or the orphanage but it was the Meteor Park Orphanage (later renamed Neerkol Orphanage) and the year was 1916.⁴

Molly found the well-resourced Mount Morgan State High School ‘very nice’ although it appears that she left at the end of the year when she turned 14. The Wauchope family who ran one of the town’s many butcheries employed her. She did domestic work in their ‘private house’ and sometimes helped in their butcher shop.

Molly was aware of Aboriginal people who camped along the Dee River that the town straddled – we know them as Gangulu Nation today. She recalled ‘some coloured folk doing some dancing and that, and having songs and that’ – a corroboree – and knew a woman called Mary Ann considered to be the last ‘full-blood [tribal] Aborigine’. Molly recalled that Mary Ann – who on other occasions she’d called the queen of the tribe – was around ‘for years and years...She used to go around. She was just an ordinary person...a loving person...had a big family and she was good to them all.’

As usual when she spoke of Mary Ann, my mind clung to a childish stereotype of a barefoot woman dressed in kangaroo skins outside a bark hut. It was not until a 2022 visit to the Mount Morgan Museum that a photograph of the elderly Mary Ann Lamb put paid to that. The undated photograph on display depicts a woman dressed in a long button-down dress, shoes, a handbag and a rather fancy hat adorned with an artificial flower – attire typical of her peers in the early 1930s. The caption read: A well-known identity...she died in 1947 having lived for many years with close relations in bag humpies at the lower end of Race Course Road.

Did the community accept Aboriginal people? I asked.

4 For how the remaining four O’Keefe children fared in the orphanage, see Lesley Synge ‘Ruptions and Resilience: A Family Crisis and the Meteor Park Orphanage, 1916’, *Hecate* 44, no. 1&2 (2018): 175–188.

‘Not much...in the early part.’ Molly continued, ‘We had a lot of Chinese people here. In shops and looking after [their vegetable gardens] and taking around vegetables and that [to sell].’ As for other ethnic groups, ‘A lot of new ones came around after the war.’ She was probably referring to the first World War but it seems true for both.

A couple of years into her employment, when the expanding Hancock family had settled in a house in James Street close to the town centre, Mount Morgan was rocked by the arrival of Spanish Influenza. The pandemic had been spreading around the world in the aftermath of World War One and arrived in Australia in 1919. In the first six months the toll for the nation as a whole was about 15,000 people, half of whom were in their twenties and thirties.

Because of the ‘plague’ as Molly called it, ‘We had to look after our neighbours with a bit of soup and that. Put it on a post. We couldn’t get in because it was so bad with this flu. And they died by hundreds too.’

Molly had told me on other occasions that she dreamed of becoming a nurse. Because the Mount Morgan Hospital employed quite a number of ‘domestics’ and wardsmen, she initially applied for the position of domestic worker to increase her chances of selection. She had ‘worked for seven years’ for the Wauchope family...‘After I left [around 1923], I went to the hospital to work.’

Domestic work? I clarified.

‘It’s all I ever did.’

Molly’s duties included looking after the nurses’ quarters and doing the washing. There were no unions or 40-hour weeks. ‘You just had to work,’ whether it was for eight hours, or longer. ‘You started at 6 a.m. and finished when you finished your work.’ She had to answer to Matron Ayland.

By this time, her O’Keefe brothers Frank and George had left Mount Morgan to take up work, Florrie had married young, and Pearl went teaching in Byfield on the Capricorn Coast where she met her future husband.

‘I was always quiet,’ Molly said of herself as she recalled her life before her ignorance about sex and contraception changed its course irrevocably. ‘They reckoned I used to look as if I had all the worry of the world on my shoulders.’

In November 1924 after the birth that lasted for two days without any pain relief but with insults from the nuns who delivered the child, Molly arrived at the Mount Morgan train station with the baby and walked the short distance to the family home in James Street where Lizzie and Will Hancock lived with three children Myrtle (7), Charles (6) and Doris (4). They refused to accept the mother and child. I remembered Molly saying on one occasion that she’d walked up to the hospital to seek refuge with her fellow workers. She resumed scrubbing the hospital floors as if nothing had happened while her pals kept the newborn quiet and out of sight by feeding her condensed milk out of a tin. They didn’t fool Matron Ayland for long – when Molly collapsed on the job.

‘I had septic poisoning.’

The condition, also known as postpartum or maternal sepsis, develops within six weeks of delivery and is life-threatening. Without urgent medical attention, it can cause death. Molly re-approached her family for help.

Overcoming their shame about the scandal, Lizzie and Will Hancock accepted the pair and Molly moved back home. She did not register the birth, presumably because she balked at the space on the form requiring the details of the father. (She didn’t ever divulge the details and took the mystery of his identity to her grave.) Although Molly recovered, she could not have any more children ‘because of the care not taken, when she [Estelle] was born.’

There was no government assistance. No Commonwealth maternity benefit. ‘Not a penny,’ Molly clarified. Three months passed before she made a full recovery from maternal sepsis and returned to work.

‘The nurses were always good to me. They gave me lots of clothes and I used to cut them up for Estelle.’ While Molly scrubbed and laundered, ‘My mother looked after her. And I used to come home...when I finished my work...I used to give her ten bob a week for looking after her.’ At some point, Lizzie Hancock considered that the ten shillings payment was insufficient so Molly increased the payment to ‘15 bob... She was a bit tough, poor old mother was. But she was a good mother just the same.’

In mid-1925, eight months after the birth, Molly underwent ‘an operation’, a hysterectomy. ‘Mount Morgan always had free medicines. We never had to pay for anything...that operation up in the hospital – I never had to pay for it.’

She took six weeks off then ‘back at work again I went. Well I couldn’t get any money anywhere. I didn’t have money in those days.’ The Hancock family wasn’t able to help out – ‘They were poor.’ Due to Mount Morgan Mine company closures, ‘We lived on social service...or whatever [it was called, while Will Hancock] did a bit of work on the roads to get money...from the government.’

After recovering from surgery, Molly enjoyed good health and kept her job as a domestic worker for Mount Morgan Hospital for seven years. ‘I was never sick...I never went near a doctor.’ Her diligence, strength, endurance and confidence in the domestic sphere remained a lifelong source of pride.

Estelle’s health was a different matter. ‘She used to vomit a lot, my little girl did, poor little thing...she had a weak stomach...Mum took her to the doctor’s because I had to work.’ The Hancocks continued to raise Estelle alongside Myrtle, Charlie and Doris. They were technically her aunts and uncle but must have felt more like older siblings. Myrtle, Doris and Estelle remained close all their lives.

Molly lamented how gossipy Mount Morgan could be, finding small-town disapproval a challenge. ‘They used to give you a terrible time if anything went wrong with you [i.e., a pregnancy out of wedlock]...They talked about you...Gossip...I don’t think I ever had a fight with anybody until I had your mother. And if they said anything about my kid, oh, didn’t I tell them off. Told them what I thought about them, too.’

Estelle started school in 1929. Some years before the interview night, Molly habitually declared that she married Bert Doherty ‘to give my baby a name’. Clearly she felt angst about her daughter’s lack of a family name, a lack which made her the subject of schoolyard taunting. She avoided voicing this motivation on the interview record but the absence of romantic detail about the courtship with Herbert (Bert) Doherty before she married him in 1931, is telling.

Herbert Doherty (registered at birth as Bertie) was born in Mount Morgan in 1900 to Kate and Robert, the fourth son in what would be a large family of six sons and three daughters. Bert initially followed in his father’s footsteps as a miner employed by Mount Morgan Gold Mining Company Limited. When ‘the mine shut down a bit’ – Molly might have been referring to 1927 when the company went into liquidation, although mining resumed sometime later – he found a new employer in the Mount Morgan Shire Council.

The council labourer and hospital domestic worker became interested in one another in 1929. In October that year, the Wall Street Stock Market crashed, the Roaring Twenties ended, and the Great Depression began. They met at a place ‘where they were playing piano music. And I started going with him later on.’ There wasn’t much time for courting or going to dances – ‘only work, I did.’ Bert Doherty may have said the same of his life.

The Dohertys followed the Methodist faith as did Molly’s stepfather Will Hancock. When Lizzie married him, she stopped identifying as Church of England and ‘went Methodist’. The O’Keefe siblings remained staunchly Roman Catholic but at some point, Molly switched to the Methodist Church – all that she’d generally say to me about the transition was that she’d had a dispute with a priest. I know now that my sisters found her more forthcoming. To them, Molly claimed a priest had ‘talked dirty’ to her, asking if she kissed boys. When she told her mother, Lizzie gave her a thrashing.

Bert's mother 'didn't like the idea of him getting married,' Molly commented, 'because he was her breadwinner...one of the sons that worked hard...and earnt a bit of money.' Nevertheless they married in March 1931, Molly at 29 and Bert at 31. Bert must have known that due to Molly's 'septic poisoning' and consequent hysterectomy that they'd never be able to have children of their own. He had a physical disadvantage too – he suffered from stomach ulcers. They honeymooned in Yeppoon while Estelle stayed with her grandparents Will and Lizzie Hancock. Having spent her life with them and with her playmates Myrtle, Charlie and Doris, my mother might not have been looking forward to the prospect of living with Bert Doherty.

The newlyweds rented a place and Molly left the hospital to keep house, as was the tradition. In 1934, they bought the cottage in Ganter's Gully on the east side of town, towards the Mount Morgan Dam on the Dee River, the very place in which we now sat engaged in the dance of question-and-answer. (The location would have been named after an early prospector who'd camped up that way; it wasn't renamed Ganter *Street* until the 1960s.)

Their home – like most in the town – was on Crown, not freehold land. It was made of wood and fibro, with a lounge and dining room, kitchen, two bedrooms, and verandas that wrapped around three sides. It came with 'a bit of furniture' Molly said, and 'we gradually bought some other stuff – all the furniture we needed.' An ice chest kept perishables fresh; they later bought a refrigerator.

There was always enough food. 'We always had money. I never went short of money in my life. Not much, but we always had it.'

As Molly spoke about her marriage, my mind easily dredged up a memory of Bert stretched out in his 'squatter's chair' on the front veranda, looking skinny and unwell, although I must have been barely five at the time. I also remembered a specific occasion when he came home after a day's work of road maintenance and edged the council 'grader' off the dirt road to straddle the top of their sloping driveway. His Chevrolet was parked further down under the dual shelter of a tin shed under a mango tree. I asked why there was a canvas bag slung on the front of the grader and

was told it held his drinking water for the day. It was always impressed on me that I must not disturb him in any way.

From the beginning of their relationship, he had suffered from stomach ulcers and these were clearly worsening. (Molly usually described the situation as ‘my old man was always terrible sick.’) In 1959 Bert Doherty died at the age of 58 and is buried in Mount Morgan cemetery where his parents and several other family members are also interred including his older brother William who’d served in the Light Horse Regiment of the AIF in World War One. Private William Doherty was wounded in Gallipoli and Egypt but survived his injuries and predeceased Bert by a year. Like her son-in-law, Lizzie Hancock also died in 1959.

There was a marked contrast between Molly and Bert’s Ganter’s Gully working-class household and the continuing household consumerism that has become the norm. Furniture was built to last a lifetime. Most of the purchases they made in 1934 when setting up a home are – from my point of view – still useful, and even beautiful. When visiting my grandmother’s home regularly through childhood and beyond, I could not fail to notice that nothing much changed from year to year or decade to decade, and that this seemed true, not only for Molly’s house, but for all the Mount Morgan houses of her generation. The Hancock house in James Street where Molly’s half-sister Doris Hancock continued to live – she worked as the secretary to the manager of Mount Morgan Mine – was stuffed with items that were originally purchased when the Hancocks set up a home. After their initial outlays, families didn’t bother with ‘make overs’ or with following fashion trends. ‘Waste not, want not’ was the motto. New inventions like washing machines and television sets were added to the original purchases but only after a great deal of ‘saving up’. A somewhat stultifying stability perhaps but case studies in sustainability.

In her eighties when Molly faced her decline, she encouraged each of us three granddaughters to stake a claim on our favourite pieces. It was accepted that I would inherit the ‘good bedroom’ set in Queensland maple manufactured by James Stewart & Co in Rockhampton: double bed, wardrobe, duchess and bedside cabinet. I still



Figure 1 1930s Queensland maple duchess. Photograph by Lesley Synge

have half the set, minus the wardrobe which was too narrow to be practical and the bed. I have also ended up with the Art Deco Genoa lounge on which we sat in 1982, talking into the night. My youngest sister initially bagged the three-piece set which included two single armchairs, each roughly the size of an electric car. When she replaced it, something made me beg her to send it on to me. I had it re-upholstered but its springs are definitely the worse for wear at it approaches its ninth decade of service. Still, nothing beats it for lolling around on it with a book.

I'm also grateful to Doris Hancock who noticed when I was a teenager that I liked a child's rocking chair hanging on a rafter under the James Street house. As she had no children of her own, she gave it to me, telling me that her father had made it for her. Will Hancock, who died the same year I was born, therefore bequeathed me an item that has served both my sons and their teddy bears, and my granddaughter. At time of writing, it looks set to serve my first grandson. It occurs to me as I write about it that my mother, who was four years younger than Doris, must have rocked in it too.

I also claimed the red cedar storage chest that Bert Doherty made, since bequeathed to my older son who stores books in it; it's a fixture in my granddaughter's life.

No-one else in the family goes to the trouble of recovering, restoring and nurturing the pieces like I do, but nonetheless each of us values the items that once meant a lot to our ancestors. Perhaps the gap in my life made by the loss of my parents in my early twenties has made the preservation of these tangible links with my ancestors especially vital for me, as the oldest.

Bert Doherty's working life was demanding, as was typical of the times. Molly 'got up...about five o'clock to get him off to work. Mostly he got himself off...he used to come home about three in the afternoon.' While he laboured on maintaining the town's dirt roads – later using machinery to do so – Molly 'cleaned up the house and tidied it up.' She had milk and bread delivered, a service that endured into the late 1960s. The main evening meal was 'always meat and vegetables. And a pudding.' Several times a week Molly baked cakes and scones in her wood stove oven. In the evenings she listened to the wireless, did fancywork and 'a lot of sewing'. She made most of the clothes. 'Always kept plenty of clothes. Didn't cost much in those days.'

Estelle played with 'the kiddies around the neighbourhood'.

In his spare time, Bert 'worked around the house, he tidied up...the yard...[kept busy] building things and getting things into shape. He was a good worker, Bert was.'

Their main family entertainment was to visit their families of origin and other relatives. Molly – and I presume Estelle – went to the Methodist Church every Sunday to join her parents and Myrtle, Charlie and Doris. 'I was in the Methodist Maids... doing fancywork for the bazaars.' She was also in the choir. Molly had a fine soprano voice and I could imagine it lifting above the other voices.

As she answered my questions, I realised with some surprise how very central the Methodist Church had been in her life before the Second World War. Sunday church services, the Methodist Maids sewing circle *and* choir practice!

In 1940, according to the *Morning Bulletin* newspaper printed in Rockhampton, my mother was dux of Mount Morgan High School – but I did not know that in 1982. I knew only that she left at 16 to attend teacher's training college in Brisbane in 1941 and returned to find that Molly had converted to the Jehovah's Witness sect. (Estelle stuck with the Methodists.) At the time of the interview and into her eighties, Molly was a stalwart of the sect, ranked as a Christian faith but far from the mainstream. Her soprano voice intact, she attended two or three 'Witness' gatherings weekly until hospitalised. She would notch up some five decades of intense spiritual practice! In

adopting such a spiritually oriented life, was she still proving to neighbourhood gossips that she had atoned for the sins they judged her as having committed?

Returning to the economics of the household, I asked if Bert handed his whole wage over to her.

‘Whole wage. He did.’ She was emphatically in charge of the household budget. ‘If Bert wanted anything, he always got it. But I always looked after the money.’

‘He was always sick, poor old fellow. For years he was sick with a...gastric ulcer.’ He died because of this ailment. ‘People didn’t go to the doctors so much those days. They used to look after them at home...They’d give them a bit of Scott’s Emulsion.’ Its active ingredient was cod liver oil.

Her mother and stepfather were Labor voters. But on the night of the interview, Molly didn’t recall discussing politics with anybody. She claimed, ‘As long as we [her generation of women] were looking after our husbands and children, that’s all we wanted to have to do...That’s all we thought about.’

I pointed out that the strikes and mine closures that affected Mount Morgan in the late 1920s must have created a political atmosphere but Molly’s uninterested rejoinder was that there were a lot of ‘red-raggers [Communist Party of Australia members identified by their scarlet banners] around at the time, fighting’. I knew that being a Jehovah’s Witness required a dedication to ‘the scriptures’ and an apolitical orientation. Much to my modern disappointment, I had to accept that my grandmother’s focus always had been the domestic sphere and that she craved no other.

Conscious of the framed coronation portrait of Queen Elizabeth II that leaned out from the tongue-and-groove hallway wall above us, I asked Molly if the British royal family interested her. The royal child Elizabeth, who became Queen in 1953, was born in 1926, nearly two years after Estelle.

‘I...didn’t bother with the Royals. As long as they left me alone...they were all right.’

Had the abdication of King Edward VIII in 1936 bothered her?

‘It didn’t seem to worry us.’ In the late 1930s, the global political climate was of more concern. ‘It looked like [there was] going to be another war. Things were in a bit of turmoil...[And in the end, the] second world war was worse than the first one.’ Enlistment records show that Bert’s younger brother Thomas James signed up, as his older brother William had for World War One.

‘I wouldn’t have changed [my life] for anything,’ Molly claimed as we wrapped up. ‘It was hard trying to keep your mother and...give her the best of everything. But Bert always...gave me the money and I was able to do anything [I needed to].’ With these rose-coloured glasses, she continued, ‘He was always...good to her [Estelle]. We had our ups and down, but still, he was good to her. Never denied her anything.’

It had been *much* harder for her mother Lizzie, Molly believed. ‘I don’t reckon I’ve had a hard time,’ Molly reiterated with a sense of contentment. On that upbeat note we ended our session.

I packed up my equipment, humbled by her youthful audacity. In her own understated and plain way, Molly had stared down her family, the Roman Catholic Church and the disgrace the town itself had foisted on her, to take charge of her life – and she had never regretted it.

There were several times over the course of the evening when her voice had risen with passion. On a recent re-listening to the interview, I was struck by the tigress in my grandmother when she said vehemently:

I can honestly say I don’t think I ever had a fight with anybody until I had your mother. And if they said anything about my kid, oh, didn’t I tell them off. Told them what I thought about them, too.

What was then called 'gossip' we might call bullying and discrimination – and we also understand the damage it can do to a young person's psyche, for life. Through it all, Estelle could never have doubted her mother's courage, determination and love.

My immediate priority soon after recording my grandmother's oral history in 1982, was to provide for my little son. Just as Molly had faced sole parenting of her daughter in 1924, I too was caring for a child solo, having returned to Australia after a couple of years with his father in London where the marriage broke down. I longed to continue with writing projects but circumstances demanded that I accept a high school teaching job. A few months after my visit to Mount Morgan I was teaching history and English subjects to teenagers in Brisbane.

In the years that followed, Molly loved nothing more than to visit me for weeks at a time and to pass the days making my place as spick and span as hers had always been. 'Domestic work – it's all I ever did.' We tend to think our relations will live forever but she died eight years after the interview, three days shy of her 88th birthday in 1990. Molly had lived continuously in 10 Ganter's Gully from 1934 until the late 1980s when she was admitted into Mount Morgan Hospital, the former workplace that witnessed her most challenging years.