

## Remembering Aunty Daph

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Daphne Margaret Cummins was born on May 28<sup>th</sup> 1921, in Crookwell in southern NSW, the fourth of seven children of Oz and Catherine Cummins. With her four sisters and two brothers she grew up at "Cliffords Creek," the family farm near Laggan. With numerous branches of the family on neighbouring farms, also involved in sheep raising, the extended family scene was a significant part of life.

The children, particularly the three youngest girls; Daph, Joan and Grace, had a carefree and happy early childhood. With only eighteen months between them they were a close knit trio, full of pranks and energy around the house, ranging across the paddocks, climbing rocks and trees. And it seems Daph was the ring leader in planning the mischief and encouraging her sisters to carry it out. In their latter years when they met up they regaled each with memories of these prank and giggled like school girls in the retelling.

Along with the extended family, their faith was a defining feature of the family life. Catherine was a very devout Catholic, and passed on this gift to her children. They made the trip to Laggan for Mass each Sunday, and the usual features of the rosary etc shaped their formation. Their mother shared with them a strong gratitude for what God had given, and reliance on what God would provide.

That strength of faith and family ties were called on in a special way with her father Oz's untimely death aged forty two, when Daph was only seven. Both her parents had fallen ill with a severe flu, and in those days before antibiotics her father was unable to fight the pneumonia which developed. He died after a short illness. Daph sometime shared the story of what as a young child she observed and sensed in that terrible time, of how she struggled to understand what was going on; and of the grief carried deep in her being.

School Days began for Daph at Myanga creek school, a little country school a few miles from their home. They rode a horse or walked. Her brothers, sisters and cousins accounted for most of the pupils on roll. In her final years of school, along with Joan and Grace she went to board at Sisters of St Joseph school in North Goulburn. I think she did well there, but her stories of her boarding school days were mostly of the pranks and escapades she was involved in with classmates. She was a keen hockey player, at school and in with her sisters and cousins in regional competitions.

After completing the Intermediate Daph went to work as a governess. But her long held desire to serve god as a missionary saw her entering the Marist sister at Woolwich in early 1940s

Daph's missionary vocation was a source of pride and gratitude for her mother, and all the family, who saw it as a special gift to have a family member in God's service. Missionary life took her far away, for many years. Like many of the family here I have memories of her leaving to go overseas.

For me those memories are of her 1951 departure. That January she was able to visit her home at Cliffords Creek for a week or so before leaving for Fiji. I was six at the time, and I knew it was

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something special because dad made the long train trip, with mum and us children that year. He usually had to stay home at work when we had our annual holiday at Mas.

It was an extraordinary family occasion as her brothers and sisters and their families came home for a special farewell. This was where my first memories of Aunty Daph come from. She was something of a pied piper, full of energy and fun. I remember her gathering us children after lunch for a walk in the paddocks, and climbing the Big Rock, while our parents had a couple of hours of quiet.

There was feasting and family photos, but for me an outstanding memory is of the last day of her holiday, the day she left. As the big black car that was taking her away headed off down the road, she leaned out the window, slowly waving a white handkerchief until the car was out of sight. I looked around at the adults gathered on the veranda, and all were crying. I don't remember explanations, but I knew something momentous was happening for the family, and Aunty Daph was central to it.

Over the years her letters from Fiji brought something of her new life into the world at home. They were special links for her mother and sisters. In gathering memories from various family members for this eulogy I heard from many recollections of hearing aunty Daph's letters to her mother or sisters read. There were vivid descriptions of the scene in Fiji. As one cousin remarked "I didn't know about any place outside Australia, but I knew about Latoka."

The letters to our family featured special enquiries and messages for each of us children, something that built a connection of interest and care. While her gift as a story teller brought the place alive, her artistic talent produced hand painted cards and shells with tropical island scenes, and pictures that had pride of place on lounge rooms walls. One of those shells she painted is placed on her coffin today as a memento of her creative links to her family.

On the occasion of her mother's serious illness in 1961 she made a visit home, Her return from that visit brought memories for the Huxtable and Phillips families, Dressed in their Sunday best they piled into the family cars and headed to the airport for a farewell as Aunty Daph headed off again for Fiji. There were special photos. There were special Qantas pins as a memento of the occasion.

Aunty Daph, Sister Domitilla, we remember as someone special. The life she had taken on, the way she was dressed set her apart. From the time of her entering the convent, irreverently referred to by her sisters as "drawing on the black stockings" the religious habit was a somewhat mystifying sign of distinctiveness. In recollections we recalled the white habit she was pictured in in photos from Fiji set her apart from other nuns we knew. She came on family holidays dressed in the habit. At first it was a white habit, then a blue habit, then a shorter blue habit. And as time went on and rules relaxed she didn't wear the veil- another perplexity.

There was always her love and interest in the family members, her sense of fun, her enjoyment at hearing of the children. As we grew from childhood to adulthood we recall with appreciation the

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deepening of relationship with Aunty Daph as she shared with us our work interests, and got to know our partners and children.

One of her nieces, Helen's recalled that on a holiday in Turkey she meet another tourist who turned out to have been at boarding school in Fiji. When Helen mentioned her aunt being there this lady waxed eloquent. She was not very enamoured of boarding school, but she recalled one sister who livened up the weekends by joining the girls for games, playing music and singing with them. It was Sister Domitila. This story from a former pupil was a gratifying witness to the gifts we knew of from within the family scene

Since she has been back in Australia, and particularly in Sydney, she has been part of family occasions for holidays, weddings, golden weddings, "big O" birthdays, family reunions at Golspie and Laggan, in my case religious profession and silver jubilee. We have been able to share with her her jubilees- the golden a special event in Crookwell, and her Diamond at Hunters Hill. And her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday just a few years ago at Marian House brought together various family members, including her sister Grace.

All Daph's brothers and sisters have preceded her on the entrance to heaven. Along with their parents they have no doubt had a wonderful Easter welcome for her this year.

Over the past month or so, Aunty Daph's illness limited her usual readiness to engage and share. My visit to her in Royal North Shore hospital was the last time she was able to speak to me, though it was a struggle. As I was leaving that day she roused herself, turned on her pillow, looked at me and said "Thank you for everything."

Aunty Daph, as we gather here to bid a final farewell to you today, there is pride and gratitude in our hearts for your love and witness.

For all you have been for the Cummins family we say,

"Aunty Daph, Thank You for Everything."

*Daphne McKeough rsm*

*(Daph's namesake neice)*