

Milligan and Spike

By

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Photos: Lynne & Milligan at Macintosh Bridge 1977

Tony & Milligan, Snake Gully, Rosebery Tas 1976

As a young man brought up in the mining town of Rosebery on Tasmania's remote west coast in the fifties and sixties - on a diet that included white sliced bread and with a step father with a disdain for dogs - I developed a serious appreciation for Vogel unsliced bread and a strong desire to have a dog of my own. On infrequent visits to my father in Narrandera in the NSW Riverina, my brother and I were introduced to Muldoon, a rascally Pug crossbreed, whose exploits included stealing a cooked chicken and bringing home the bacon – so to speak. Within months of our marriage in 1976 my wife and I became the proud owners of Milligan the Boston Terrier. A small enough breed with a passing, puggish resemblance to the mischievous Muldoon.

Within a short time he is a welcome identity at the bottom pub and the footy club. The regulars take to his bull dog like looks, friendly nature and lively temperament. In a town of mostly nondescript mongrel dogs - Milligan is a minor celebrity. Now this is a small town with unwritten mores pertaining to excess and acceptable behaviour. One may be outstanding in sport or for any other achievement of note provided it is accompanied with a sufficient dose of humblebrag. One may commit the misdemeanours applicable to all walks of human society: drunkenness and non-attendance at work, illicit affairs, minor accidents and occasional fights. The grist to the gossip mill that endeavours to keep all small town residents pretty much in their place. For some however, generally the owners of hunting dogs and stag hounds, a line is crossed when upstart newlyweds have the hide to own a pedigree pooch.

Nonetheless there are class divisions even in this tiny gouged out sanctuary of the Australian antipodes. The managers and senior staff live at Barker's Crossing situated at a suitable distance from the hoi polloi. Indeed the mine manager's residence dubbed 'The White House' overlooks the footy ground with an air of secluded lofty disdain. Perversely there are mining families living in a section of the town known as Hollywood in modest dwellings far removed from the glamor of a Los Angeles' bungalow. Settling into our humble miner's cottage in 'tin town', so called after the ripple iron cladding of the company houses within the broader location of Snake Gully; named for eponymous reasons as well as a homage to Dad and Dave - I take up the art of bread making. No bread making machines to speak of in those days. Just flour on the kitchen table, hand kneading and a lot of trial and error.

So it was that one Saturday morning in the midst of rolling dough came a knock upon the door. Slightly out of breath and with cigarette in hand I am met by Spike Harrison. A man of my parents' vintage. A bit of a scallywag. Spike liked a drink, liked a bet, did not like work all that much and was well known to most of the town including ourselves. I invited him in and offered him a coffee. Before he sat down he asked. "Do you have a terrier?"

I nodded indicating Milligan who was staking out the kitchen. Spike did not look down and instead gestured at the ball of dough.

"Makin' bread. Jeez my Mum used to bake bread. Beautiful crusts. We used to fight over the crust"

And off he went. Like many of his vintage Spike had known scarcity. The mine attracted lots of men from big families who had left school early and had only labouring experience. Rosebery was a true working class town with good people and strong values and well paid jobs. Even for men like Spike who did not venture underground but still found a place - provided they turned up most of the time with a sufficient level of sobriety.

I made him another coffee. Our conversation then turned to football. We both supported the same town side. He was off again. Eventually I managed to return him to his mission.

"About the terrier?" I ventured

"Yes, yes. Well I am doing some work around the house"

This was a serious revelation. This was not in any way compatible with the Spike I knew. Reliability and industry having not even the loosest association with his character. Once having been joined by Spike in the dining room at the local pub I had witnessed him abscond without paying for his meal. The publican's wife Dulcie just sighed. "The bastard. He can't stay away. I will have to wring it out of him one way or the other." Which she undoubtedly did.

"Go on"

"Well there is this problem with the gully trap. I need to excavate around it and do up a fitting and..."

He saw my puzzled look.

"Go on"

"Well I was talking to Shep and Leo and a few of the blokes in the pub."

I got up to retrieve my dough from where it was resting. Shep and Leo I pondered, my back turned to Spike. Just like Spike not the kind of men I would associate with a mattock in the garden or up a ladder with a paint brush and a tin of Walpamur. Both would be far more familiar with the wood grain on the bars at the top and bottom pubs. Indeed Shep was notorious for sidling up to you at a footy do as the clock ticked on to midnight. With a glass in one hand and a cigarette in the other, eyes so heavily lidded he looked asleep, he would nudge you and say: "I wish they would play the national anthem so I could go home." Home for Shep was a place to recover from a hangover and very little else. D.I.Y. a mysterious acronym best left for others to decipher.

"Shep and Leo?" I queried

Spike continued. "Jeez they gave it to me. One of them even asked if I had made an appointment to see Patto (The local Doctor). Said I must be sick. Leo even asked to take me temperature. Shep told me that I needed a special tool. I said ok you've had your fun. Can I get this tool from the mine? Shep said the mine didn't have one but he knew where I could get one. He said you had one."

"Really." The dough was ready to knock down a second time by now. Spike was onto his fourth cigarette and third cup of coffee. "What sort of tool are we talking about Spike?"

"A terrier"

"A terrier?"

At which point a snuffle from underneath the table finally enticed Spike to notice a small puggish, snuffly dog.

"Spike?"

A nod and a puff of smoke

"Meet Milligan."

Our dog ever obliging at hearing his name put his paws up on Spike's knee.

"Spike?"

"That's a good boy. Who's a good boy?"

"Spike?"

He looks up.

"We have both been had."