

SAT **EXTRA** URDAY

# STAMPED

DAME QUENTIN BRYCE'S BOOK ON THE LETTERS SHE DEALT WITH AS GOVERNOR-GENERAL IS A RECORD OF RESPECT, WRITES **PHIL BROWN**

**Y**ou wouldn't expect a governor-general of Australia to receive letters from a pole dancer, would you? Depends on the pole dancer

though. Leslie "Bunny" Glover is an unlikely candidate. He's a World War II veteran, author of *The Boy From Bowen: Diary Of A Sandakan POW*. Dame Quentin Bryce met him when she was serving as governor-general of Australia from 2008 to 2014. After meeting them in Borneo she became friends with Glover and his mate, Russ Ewin. Both men survived the infamous Sandakan death marches. Dame Quentin, now 74, had a regular correspondence with Glover.

In one letter, reproduced in *Dear Quentin: Letters of a Governor-General*, published by Miegunyah Press on April 3, Glover writes to her of his health problems in old age.

"My health is slipping backwards now as I am on the verge of getting old. My

main problem is vertigo — bad balance problems. I will have to give up pole dancing as I am slipping off the poles now."

I quote the pole-dancing line to her as we sit chatting in her office in the chancellery building at QUT's Gardens Point campus in Brisbane. Her face lights up at the mention.

"He's the most adorable man," Bryce says. "He's the bravest Australian I have ever met. His book is a must read." In her own book, as well as

the letters, there are potted stories of the places she has visited and the people she has met and written to, from nonagenarians to primary schoolers. She has always, she explains, been an ardent letter writer.

On quiet weekends at Government House in Canberra — Yarralumla as it is best known — she and her husband, Michael Bryce, would relish time to themselves. It would give Bryce a chance to sit at her large Indian teak desk and catch up on correspondence. During her years in Canberra writing letters was a weekend escape from official duties.

"There would be nobody around but us and the security guys," she recalls. "I loved those days. I would go for long walks through the gardens — I know every blade of grass on that wonderful property — and then I would go to my office, turn on opera music quite loud, attend to the boxes full of work I had to finish. And then I would write letters."

She has always been a keen correspondent but when she became Governor of Queensland from 2003 to 2008 "something marvellous began to happen", as she writes in her book.

"Letters poured in: advice, ideas,

remembrances, photos from long-lost cousins. Many were handwritten, occasionally in that distinct, frail script of the very aged. I was deeply touched."

After then-prime minister Kevin Rudd announced her as the country's 25th governor-general, the first woman to hold the position, the correspondence increased.

Now a selection of the letters she received and wrote is between the covers of a handsome hardback. In the book there are photos from her busy life as governor-general, some of the people she corresponded with and reproductions of letters from her rich archive.

None of the letters was written with a view to publication. They might never have seen the light of day but for her former official secretary, Stephen Brady, 57, now the Australian Ambassador to France, who had the idea — and it turned out to be a good one.

"So often when Stephen would come into my room I would be writing letters," Bryce recalls. "It was his idea to turn them into a book. When I was writing them I had no idea they would be published one day."

She agreed that a book of her letters might work but insisted that it wouldn't be a vanity project, that it had to have a point. That's why she stipulated that royalties from the book be donated to the Murdoch Children's Research Institute (MCRI), which seeks to improve child



Dame Quentin Bryce, and (inset right) with Jean Carroll. Picture: David Kelly

SAT **EXTRA** **URDAY**

## WITH AFFECTION



From left to right: Dame Quentin Bryce and Mark Donaldson, VC, with Lex Arthurson, Tom Uren, Bill Schmitt and Cyril Gilbert, and with former United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon.

health through world-leading research and disease prevention.

Bryce is on the institute's council of ambassadors and says she is keen to help support it.

"So that's the purpose of the book," she says. "To raise funds for this wonderful organisation."

After Bryce agreed to go ahead with the project came the hard work of sorting through her letters, which took longer than expected.

"After coming back to Queensland I was busy after being appointed chair of the Special Taskforce on Domestic and Family Violence," she says. "I'm finishing that off now."

She says that role, which she took up in August 2014, has been one of her most important.

"But it has shaken me to the core," she says. "When I hear of these terrible cases of domestic violence, like everyone I feel immense distress and I ask myself again and again — what about the children and the long-term effects on them? I have spoken to a lot of women who have survived domestic violence and had counselling and

support. They have told me that it has taken longer for the children to recover."

She is still working through recommendations and the implementation of them with the Queensland government.

That has kept her busy but as a counterpoint she was working away on the side on her book of letters, which was a joyful, if occasionally exasperating, experience.

"It was a lot harder than I thought it would be," she says. "I had to sort through the letters for a start. I have metres of them in the National Archives of Australia. It was an enriching experience to go through them again. I have so many letters. Open any of these cupboards and letters will just fall out."

While there are letters to and from well-known Australians, including the odd prime minister, Bryce says she mainly wanted to include "letters that reflected Australian people and Australian society".

Some of the most charming letters were, she points out, from children like William and Brooke Weir, from Ammaroo Station, 320km northeast of Alice Springs, who sent letters with pictures of their farm animals. Another of her regular correspondents was Giordan Staines, a young South Australian, and there are several letters between them in the book.

"I have never known a more charming, fascinating letter writer than Giordan," she writes.

"He was six or seven when he and some of his classmates greeted me when I arrived at the Cooper Pedy Community School in that famous town full of romance and nostalgia and true 'Aussie' spirit. We have enjoyed many letters from each other since then. He is a remarkable boy, mature beyond his years, whose writing sparkles with joie de vivre, intelligence and insight."

There's a lovely

example of one of his letters adjacent to Bryce's introduction to their correspondence and in it he kindly gives his consent for his letters to appear in the book.

He writes that "if the funds raised make a difference in the life of just one child then that'd be a great outcome. If possible, could you please arrange for a copy of the publication to be sent to me as a keepsake? If I could get an invite for the launch I might even be able to see you there!"

Bryce says she has loved all his letters.

"Giordan was the dearest little boy," she says. "He's a big schoolkid now. It's lovely of him to let me use his letters."

She sought and gained permission for all the letters in the book.

Another favourite is a letter from Patrick Carpenter. You will see it in the book, his scrawly handwriting outlining a bold initiative that could revitalise Australian politics.

"Many of the children who wrote to me had great suggestions," Bryce writes.

In his letter, young Patrick Carpenter outlines his vision.

"Dear Mrs Quentin Bryce," he writes. "My Name is Patrick Carpenter. I am in kindergarten at St Christopher's Primary School Holsworthy. I would like to suggest to have a lucky dip to sort out the prime minister. Yours faithfully Patrick Carpenter."

Out of the mouths of babes, Bryce dissolves into laughter.

"I loved the letters I used to get from kids in the bush," she says. "One mother wrote to me when I was leaving Government House and said 'don't think you have to keep writing to Sean for the rest of your life!'"

It's the honesty of some writers that really appeals.

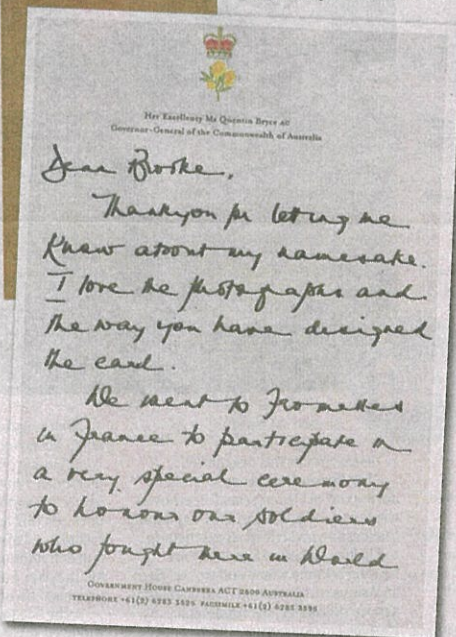
Norman and Muriel Grills, who became regular "pen pals", first wrote to Bryce in 2008 after she appeared on the 7.30 Report and was interviewed by Kerry O'Brien. "This one tickled me," she says. "Mr Grills and I subsequently became regular correspondents."

In his initial letter, Norman Grills writes that he and his wife had doubts about her as a suitable governor-general but that they soon warmed to her.

"And when you talked with pride and emotion of our Australian Defence Force and

“Thinking of you’ was all I needed to stiffen my spine when things went awry.”

Quentin Bryce



the farewelling of our troops on overseas missions, I felt my heart miss a beat as my wife did too. I think I mumbled 'well she's won me over', and I heard Muriel say, 'me too.'"

Bryce wrote back: "You have such an engaging style of writing if I may so say so, the words sound so conversational as I read them, reminding me of Mark Twain, who had much to say about the art of conversation."

There are letters to and from her friend, the legendary milliner Jean Carroll, who died in 2013, to soldiers and prime ministers, farmers and people she has met along the way.

The letters to prime ministers serve as field reports. There's one to Kevin Rudd reporting in after a visit to

Afghanistan in 2009 and one to Julia Gillard about a Vice-Regal visit to the South Pacific.

There's a funny little note from former prime minister Malcolm Fraser in November 2013, apologising for an indiscretion.

"I am very sorry that a comment appeared last week in *The Australian*, which appeared to criticise what you said in relation to the Governor-Generalship. I had not intended to imply any criticism, so I regret that. I think you have done a wonderful job as Governor-

Bartlett, who lost her family and was badly burned in the Victorian bushfires of 2009.

The letters build a picture of a governor-general's duties and travels, and to show she is moving with the times Bryce has also included some emails.

In her introduction to the book, an essay entitled *Letters ... An Art Form As Old As Time*, Bryce writes about the art of letter writing and its special place in her life.

"It was at boarding school that letter writing truly became part of my life," she writes. "Mine began 'Dearest Mother and Daddy' and reported the events of the week. I look back on them with happiness and delight, even the worries and warts."

The former lawyer, academic, champion of women's rights, mother of five and grandmother of 11, points out that her letters eventually changed ... "the personal became the political" and they were "less about babies and the chaos of family life, more about community engagement, working with others for the things we wanted in our neighbourhood and for social and legal reform".

Bryce says letter writing is a dying art but says she is happy to be from "a generation of letter writers".

"We write to our dear ones and people whom we admire to express our feelings on significant events in their lives. Some are dashed off, others are for keeping."

"I remember how much it meant to me in the tough gullies to receive a note of encouragement. 'Thinking of you' was all I needed to stiffen my spine when things went awry."

If her introduction reads a little like memoir material, well, that's no coincidence. Various publishers are snapping at her heels for a memoir and she says that one is beginning to take to take shape in her subconscious and she will start work on it soon.

*Dear Quentin: Letters Of A Governor-General*, The Miegunyah Press, \$45.

