

Recalling a wartime childhood



A HANDMADE TOY TRACTOR IN THE MUSEUM'S COLLECTION

Do you remember what it was like to really, really want something when you were a kid? When you'd plead, pester and attempt to persuade your parents that you simply couldn't live without that latest gizmo or thingumywhatsit? When ten-year-old Brian Burns was cajoling his father in 1943, the focus of his desire was the tractor. And not just any old tractor either. The particular model which caught Brian's eye was the 9N Ford Ferguson, a quicker, quieter and easier to operate tractor that was dominating the market around this time. His father Mick suggested that if he wanted the tractor so badly, he should make one himself – and this gorgeous toy, which was recently acquired by the National Museum of Australia, is the result of Brian's efforts.

With timber salvaged from banana boxes, Brian fashioned a tractor in miniature, even going so far as to make a working steering mechanism using bits of steel, wire and string pilfered from the back shed. While little of the original paintwork remains, the tractor was originally painted grey, just like the Ford Ferguson 9N, which he was seeking to replicate. This was how ten-year-old Brian built his very own 'Little Grey Fergie' – by improvising and using whatever materials came to hand.

In 1943 when Brian was creating his toy, Australia was a nation at war. The country was boosting its war effort at this time. This not only created an unprecedented demand for raw materials but also meant that many everyday items became scarce. All Australians were urged to embrace frugality, and farmers were forced to deal with the added pressure of

meeting rapidly rising production targets. The tractor was touted by many as an obvious solution to this need for huge jumps in productivity.

Brian's father was not among the converted, however, and continued to use teams of draught horses. The reason for this was not simply economic. During the war years fuel was rationed and, while primary producers were substantial beneficiaries of fuel allocations, according to the tractor's vendor (and cousin of the creator) Mr John McNally 'if the fuel didn't arrive, then the tractors remained in the shed. Working a plough pulled by a horse was back-breaking work but at least you got a crop in.' In contrast with the tractor, horses were less expensive to purchase, reproduced themselves, could be fed with hay grown on site, and were particularly useful for slow-moving work. So it is understandable that Brian was captivated by tractors – as a kid growing up on a farm, tractors were both a visible presence and popular topic of debate and discussion.

A wartime childhood such as Brian's would have involved regular participation in air raid drills. Indeed, learning how to huddle beneath a desk or crouch in a trench was just as important as memorising your nine-times tables. Just like the adult population, kids were encouraged to 'do their bit' for the nation by collecting old tyres, newspapers, bottles and other materials which could be redeployed for the war effort. You didn't gobble sweets or have seconds, you savoured your food, and if you broke your toys, you'd follow the advice of the government slogan, and 'make do and mend'. This was Brian's reality in 1943, an experience which would have been coloured for both him and his family by shortages, rationing and the broader uncertainties of war.

The notion of 'making do' was promoted by the government in the belief that military victory could only be achieved through civilian deprivation and self sacrifice. This rationale also meant that commercial toy-making was deemed a non-essential industry: the operations of factories which previously produced such items were redirected towards the war effort. Toys grew scarce. So the innovative 'make do' approach Brian applied to the construction of his toy tractor was very much the order of the day.

Above all else, this toy shows us how children transform their surroundings, using little more than the magic of their imaginations. In a world where broomsticks are gallant steeds and mud pies are delicacies worthy of a queen, this tractor is a true 'kid toy' in the sense that materials have been taken from their original context and given a new and exciting form. In this instance, banana boxes and other discarded bits and pieces have been given new life as treasured childhood toys. So highly did Brian value this tractor, he kept moving it with him from house to house throughout most of his adult life. While it may not have been displayed on his mantelpiece, he just couldn't bear to part with this reminder of his life as a ten-year-old boy growing up on a farm during the second world war.

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