MARGARET WHITLAM

At last, her story

She was the PM’s wife who has refused to live in her husband’s shadow. David Leser talks to Margaret Whitlam about Gough, the Dismissal and growing old.

Margaret Whitlam, 86, at the Sydney home she shares with husband Gough, 90, Australia’s iconic former prime minister. Above left: Attending a ball in the 1960s.

Margaret Whitlam is sitting in her living room overlooking a glittering Sydney bay, the slanting winter light dancing in her thick silver hair and in the pools of her Pacific-blue eyes. She is laughing at the memory of that French farce nearly two decades ago, but offering up her own important clarifications.

“It’s true,” she says, “I did lose my skirt … but her description of my underwear is not exactly true. I was wearing the usual flesh-coloured tights, flesh-coloured pantyhose and flesh-coloured knickers on top.”

And no, she doubts she ever gave them the full Whitlam posterior either, perhaps an oblique angle, and she certainly didn’t say, “Onwards.” She said, “En avant,” which, in French, means roughly the same thing: “Let’s go.” A subtle, but important difference, she’ll have you know.

Furthermore, as Margaret points out gaily, Kathy Lette is in no position to gloat over other people’s misfortunes. After all, the Australian writer spent an entire evening with her and Gough in Paris once telling a French ambassador that his wife was “very frozen (très gelé) when she’d meant to say, “very pretty” (très jolie).”

FORMER AUSTRALIAN Prime Minister Gough Whitlam and his wife, Margaret, are arriving at the ultra-chic restaurant, Le Pré Catalan, in Paris’ Bois de Boulogne garden district, for a lunch at which they are guests of honour.

The year is 1985 and Gough Whitlam is Australia’s ambassador to the Paris-based scientific and cultural organisation, UNESCO. With them in the car are their daughter, Catherine, and a family friend, Australian writer Kathy Lette. The car has just pulled up outside the restaurant, where the head waiter and the maitre d’ have been expecting their distinguished guests.

“I don’t know whether she [Margaret] had lost weight,” Kathy recalls, “but as she got out, the elastic on the waistband of her skirt went and she was suddenly standing in a puddle of skirt and she was wearing these huge white step-ins, thigh-length down to the knees.

“We couldn’t move. We all just stood there, open-mouthed. The maitre d’ and his welcome party were frozen … like Stonehenge monuments.

“We were all staring at Margaret, waiting for her cue, to see what she would do. Out of the restaurant windows, the French elite are looking out at her, open-mouthed.

“I would have gone and jumped off the Seine Bridge, but Margaret just looked down and said, ‘Oh, hello’. That’s exactly what she did, she went, ‘Oh, hello’.

“She turned around and – she must have done this on purpose – with her bottom facing the window, towards the upper-class French voyeurs, and bending from the waist, because she’s not good at bending from the knee, she gave them the full view of the Whitlam posterior.

“Then she picked up the skirt, zipped it up, turned around and said, ‘Onwards.’ And onward we all cruised into the restaurant, as if to the chateau born. She was not fazed – not a blush, not a raised eyebrow from her. Nothing, just absolute calm. Gough was on the other side of the car oblivious to what had happened, but Catherine and I were in hysterics by then.

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FOTOGRAPHY BY INGVAR KENNE. HAIR AND MAKE-UP BY CRAIG BEAGLEHOLE. COURTESY OF MARGARET WHITLAM.
Margaret Whitlam gives a big belly-laugh at the thought of it and her eyes sparkle with mischievous delight. Her body might be crumbling from osteoporosis and spinal deterioration, but a lifetime with the Confucian figure of Gough Whitlam has refined an already natural gift for sharp ripostes and self-deprecating humour, not to mention warmth, kindness, curiosity and an absence of pomp or vanity.

And it is these qualities — among many others — that help explain why Australians have always loved this prepossessing woman and why their affections are only likely to deepen as the details of a new book on her life become known.

Not only was Gough a good lover, he actually read her poems by Keats, Shelley and Byron when they were in bed together — “I suppose you’d call it replayful and I just thought it was lovely,” she was to tell her biographer, possibly during one of their “phone sex” sessions.

As for the man she took a shine to, it was none other than the world-renowned American-born conductor and composer Leonard Bernstein, whom she met during his concert tour of Australia in 1974. “It was a bit like having a crash on somebody,” she says. “He was so congenial and, at the same time, interesting. And the sort of music he played had never been my absolute favourite … up till then. But since then … wow.”

“Would you have had an affair with him?”

“No, no, no. You know how you meet somebody new and you think, ‘I really like you … you have all sorts of imaginings and then you move on. It’s a frequent occurrence, I would say, with everybody throughout life. It’s a question of saying, ‘Oh, I like him better than my husband.’ It’s, ‘I like him, too.’”

Margaret Whitlam might just happen to be one of Australia’s more delightfully disarming public figures. The fact that she would scoff at such a notion only further proves the point. Yes, she is Gough Whitlam’s wife, but she is — and has always been — far more than that. She is the daughter of an upper-class Sydney family with a fierce sympathy for those less fortunate than herself. She is the pragmatist and the sensualist, the shy and awkward teenager who later in life, international tour leader. She is the Cabramatta-based mother-of-four who became the much-loved and revered figure on the Paris diplomatic circuit. She is the pragmatist and the sensualist, the traditional wife and the latter-day feminist.

She is all these things and more — warm-hearted and sharp-witted, proud, but deeply modest, grateful for her good fortune, but not ready in the slightest, as you know Sue [Mitchell] writes well. You like her. She’s a friend.

“I’m on my third pacemaker,” she says. “No, no. You know how you meet somebody new and you think, ‘I really like you … you have all sorts of imaginings and then you move on. It’s a frequent occurrence, I would say, with everybody throughout life. It’s a question of saying, ‘Oh, I like him better than my husband.’ It’s, ‘I like him, too.’”

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FOUR WEEKS after the Dismissal, Margaret’s anger and surprise transmuted into deep hurt when the Australian people turned their backs on Labor in favour of a return to Coalition rule. When Margaret heard the election results, she walked into the butter-fronted White House and sobbed. She was devastated for Gough, but also for Labor and for the country; for what she believed was theirs … and they, oh – they behaved so abominably.

“And also the way the Dismissal was acquired was appalling. It was so … I can’t think of the relevant word.”

Margaret scans the living room of her small apartment as she searches in vain for the words that might do justice to this truly exceptional, handsome face she has. If her face were a country, you’d want to go there for holidays, repeatedly. I ask her whether she still feels angry about the Dismissal. “No, no … can’t be bothered. If you ask me, yes, I was angry and, yes, I was angry for some time, and, yes, I felt that somebody had to be blamed other than us. His [Gough] wasn’t given a proper go because there was always this thing, ‘Oh, he’s just a fly-by-night’. And besides … supply would have passed. Bill Hayden [the then Treasurer] was really getting [things] on track. It would have been a fantastic budget.”

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MARGARET WHITLAM would have probably made a formidable politician. Certainly, there are people such as John Menadue, former head of the Prime Minister and Cabinet Department under Gough, who believe Margaret’s “strength, warmth and excellent common sense would have made her a better politician than Gough”.

His views are backed by Dame Leonie Kramer, the politically conservative former chair of the Australian Broadcasting Commission, who’s backings are backed by Dame Leonie Kramer, the politically conservative former chair of the Australian Broadcasting Commission.
Continues, “Gough would forget that I and beastly”. “Sometimes,” Richard tongue, his capacity to be both “marvellous people hated him, she would love him more.”

Equable. Where he would feel clearly that on things temperamentally, she would remain Richard says. “Where he would lose his grip in the months and years that followed.

How the Dismissal affected Gough and the private secretary to Gough, saw first-hand in the field of social services, the

Margaret Dovey first met Gough Whitlam shortly after the start of World War II, she was smitten. The two of them were at a party hosted by Alice Jackson, then editor of The Australian Women’s Weekly, when Margaret spotted Gough from a distance. At 193cm, she says now, “he was quite the most delicious thing I’d ever seen”. At times, she still thinks this is the case.

Margaret Dovey was just what the marriage doctors might have ordered for a brilliant, imperious, fiercely driven man such as Gough. As a teen, she’d learned to overcome her aching shyness — due mainly to her imposing height of 188cm — and concentrate on the things she could do well, which was practically everything.

She could play the piano, sing, dance, act and, of course, swim. (In 1937, at 18, she’d become the Australian breaststroke champion.) Plus, over time, she would also learn the fine art of conversation, which, in combination with her natural warmth and unflappability, would prove, arguably, Gough’s best political weapon.

Over the years, Margaret would sometimes hanker for her independence, so as not to feel like an appendage to The Great Man. That’s why she shared so many boards, committees and councils over the years in the field of social services, the law, opera, dance, international literacy … and why, at the age of 70, she started taking tour groups around the world — 18 trips to 24 countries. She wanted to contribute, to feel useful.

Besides which, how else could one survive 64 years with a man such as Edward Gough Whitlam? Despite all her tutelage over the years, he was less modest than she would have preferred, more prone to irritation, more dependent on her than ever and less accommodating of her wishes.

The purple cyclamens in the living room of their Sydney apartment are, today, a case in point. “He’d say they’re a nuisance to him,” Margaret says now, rolling her eyes. “If we’re sitting here, he’ll be sitting in that leather chair and he’ll want to put books and papers up here on the table, and I say, ‘Look, we can’t have an office everywhere’. When he comes home in the evening, the cushions are thrown around, his attaché case is put on the sofa … I’ve done without flowers in the bedroom forever because he always says they spill, but I say, ‘Well, I’ll put them on my dressing table, not on yours’. Doesn’t matter. So I’ve done without flowers in the bedroom and I’m not doing without them here [in the living room].”

So this is what we can all look forward to after 64 years of marriage. I suggest? “Quite,” she replies aridly. “A determination to have flowers.”

Having said that, the far deeper truth of the matter is that Margaret has never been in any doubt that she gave herself to the right man. No, it seems, has Gough ever doubted his choice of wife and lifelong companion. “It’s the longest prime ministerial marriage in Australian history,” he offers. “Whenever we’re talked about our marriage, we tell each other that neither of us could have done better. I think that we’re both happy that we married and have stayed married.”

“And if she goes before me, I’ve made arrangements for her to have a send-off in St Andrew’s [Cathedral, Sydney], which … will be big enough, as she’s very well-regarded in her own right. What’s amazing is that she has no enemies.”

Ask him — as his wife’s biographer finally does — whether he will speak at such an occasion, whether he can imagine his life without her, and this 90-year-old political colossus replies with brimming eyes, “I’d find it very difficult to speak at her funeral … It would be very difficult without her … I mustn’t get maudlin, but let’s just say … I’ve grown accustomed to her face.”

Indeed, as we all have.

Margaret Whitlam: A Biography by Susan Mitchell will be published by Random House on October 1.