



Six Years of Melbourne

July 2002 to April 2008

Maurice HT Ling

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122 images.

Forward

My first single recallable memory of science was in Gongshang Primary School arguing with my science teacher, Mrs Tay, on whether coconut has a seed. She said that the entire coconut is a seed but I remembered seeing a seed in a coconut. The following week, I got my mum to scout the market with me for a coconut seed to show her. I was 10 years old and in Primary 4 then. Perhaps that was where I really got interested in science – to learn the natural world. It is really interesting now that I really ended up as a molecular biologist / bioinformaticist.

I left Singapore on July 5, 2002, to Melbourne, Australia, in pursue of my tertiary/university education at The University of Melbourne – to do a Bachelor of Science. There was much trepidation and anxiety as the day drew close to leave Singapore. Little did I expect that very same feelings was felt when I moved back to Singapore on April 2, 2008. Almost 6 full years of my life was in Melbourne – it is a second home to me and I am very much at ease there. For the tribulations and gifts that it had given me, I am truly glad that I made this move.

I should have kept a diary when I was there or at least bring back the few journal entries that I made during my time in Melbourne. I did neither and regretted not doing so. Ronald Reagan expressed the same regret in his book for not doing the same.

The life in Melbourne is something that I do not wish to forget but the river of time is slowly grinding away the memories, except the most significant ones. To stem this normalcy, I decided to write down as much as I can recall into this autobiography, in hope for it to act as a reduced diary for the time I spent there and as a gift to the many people that I am indebted for to make this journey memorable.

Maurice Ling
November 14, 2011

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The Completion

Who developed a program for large-scale text analysis of protein-protein interactions from published literature to mine potentially novel hypotheses for the regulation of gene expression in the mammary gland of several experimental models. His work has examined the limitations of the existing text mining programs and now enables a generic and rapid survey of published data.

Walking towards the Chancellor to collect my testamur, every step is both heavy and light. Images of the 6 years in Melbourne streamed by – of fun, of happiness, of pain, of agony. I had been through. Standing here, 8 years from the day I laid my feet on Melbournian soils.

I am finally conferred my doctoral degree, dowsing my bonnet towards the Associate Dean of Graduate Studies as I walked off the stage, I am finally Dr. Maurice Ling. It is the morning of 21 August 2010 – a very chilly spring day as Edwin told me later.



My entourage from Singapore. Left to right: Cherelle (Melvin's ex-girlfriend), Elsie (my mum), Melvin (my brother), Sally (my aunt, mum's eldest sister), Michael (my dad).



Chin How (my first project student from Singapore Polytechnic who was there for his sister's convocation).



Phil Au, Mary (Phil's supervisor), Kevin and me outside Wilson's Hall.



My friends from poly days. Left to right: Joel, Gloria (Joel's eldest), me, Edwin, and Joly.



Christophe, Joly and me.

It is coincidental that I managed to get a break from school due to the Youth Olympics Games in Singapore and we had a 3 week break in the middle of the term. Hence, I managed to squeeze in this 9-day trip to Melbourne and get my testamur together with Phil – my old time friend back in Zoology.

There is nostalgia when I dragged the luggage across the university to University College when I arrived back at Melbourne on 19 August. However, there is also anxiety this time round. On the official side, I was back for my convocation but on the unofficial side, I was looking to relive some of the old times – to meet up the people that I know, as well as finding

potential career directions. So I will say that this trip is not one to unwind myself and I do not hope to return back Singapore feeling more tired.

It soon became obvious that reliving the old times was not possible – the same people had moved onto different chapters of their lives. Edwin is now working at Richmond. Joly is in Prince Henry's Institute with Monash. Phil is with Sydney IVF. Essentially, my daily coffee-mates are all gone – no longer can I ask them for coffee at Brunetti's or Blue Zone in between experiments. Even the honours and postgraduates in Zoology looks alien to me – nevertheless, I had physically left the department more than 2 years ago. Mentally and intellectually, maybe I had not left. Just as Derek Chan said to me about 3 years ago – at this stage, I will not leave totally and all I need is to touch base regularly. Kevin's hair and beard had greyed considerably.

Not only people had moved, environment too. Over the last 2 years, the rock formations at The 12 Apostles along Great Ocean Road had changed with at least 1 apostle crumbled into the straits below.

I booked a road trip to Grampians (about 200km west of Melbourne) the day before we were due to fly back to Singapore. It is a place that was reputed to be more fascinating than Great Ocean Road. Having been there this time round, I agree.

Of all the scenic spots, I vote for MacKenzie Falls, followed by The Balcony. Perhaps The Balcony was the last spot to see, the path to it was a bit audacious as it was drizzling and very cold when we were there. The entire path was filled with igneous rocks formations.

Standing at The Balcony and looking across the vast plains of mountain ridges, one cannot help but feel the insignificance of a single human. The sky cleared up for a few minutes for us to take some photographs. Our guide said that Grampians was created probably around 350 million years ago as trilobite fossils were found along the Grampians. Trilobites dated from the early Cambrian (525 million years ago) and extinct by end of Permian (250 million years ago). It was said that Grampian ranges could probably rival the current Swiss Alps which is about 4600 metres when it was created. Over the last quarter billion years, it had lost more than half of its height to the wind and rain.



Melvin and me at The Balcony, The Grampians, with the Jaw of Death behind me. These rocks were about 450 million years old. They were once the height of Swiss Alps but weathered to the current height of about 1100 metres.

Gentle waters can grind even the toughest rock and the Grampians had lost its massive top. What can I say about humans? Maybe the change of a person is just part of the natural order of things and holding on is not.

Bill Clinton did mention in his autobiography that a moon-rock in his Oval office to remind them to put things into perspectives. Looking at the vastness of this range, I find it difficult to reconcile the idea of losing most of its original majesty. Then again, am I just being obstinate even though I know very well about the impermanence of things?

Maybe it is much better to accept the permanence of impermanence, the perfection of imperfections, as things will change. Nevertheless, the Jaw of Death is a result of impermanence. New features can only be formed when the old collapse.

It is time for me to start a new life after my doctorate. As the sun rises each day, there will be a new step to take.

The Going

“I want to go to Melbourne!” came onto my mind loud and clear after a talk on Melbourne University’s admission, organized by Cecilia Huang, my genetic engineering lecturer back in 1998. Even before that, I knew that I will want to do part of my education overseas if I have the chance and had told my mum as early as 1996.

Between polytechnic graduation and Melbourne lies a 3 year stretch for national service and the waiting time flanking it. My mind had not waived since the initial intention. Melbourne seems to be a reasonable choice. For whatever reason, the name itself gave me a feel of gentle cosiness, less of the hassle of the Singapore city life, which I later found out to be quite true. I knew that University of Melbourne is a good choice as Adeline Koh (my plant lecturer) had highly recommended it to me. Other than this recommendation, I did not know anything about university rankings or even whether a ranking existed back then – it is an act of instinct.

I cannot remember when I applied for a place in university. It might have been around March or April of 2000. All I can remember was that it was a rainy Saturday and Joel (then we called him as Yeong Chit), my polytechnic final year project (FYP) mate, went to the education fair hosted by Australian High Commission in Singapore. It was there I came to know Alvin Chew, an adviser in Overseas Academic Link, helping people like to navigate the application process, and Penny Fairbank who reviewed my application. Penny was the international manager for science faculty in University of Melbourne.

The first letter from Melbourne was a shock – I was not given any credit exemptions when I had expected 2 years of exemption. I believe I had waited for a week before I called up the only person I can turn to – Alvin Chew – by chance, I saw his name card in my wallet. Alvin advised me to bring the package down to his office at Tong Eng Building in Shenton Way, which I did the following week. He sorted it out for me and I was granted 2 years credit exemption and only had to spend a year to get my bachelors. I believe my path might be very different if I had not kept the name card as I had already received 2 years credit exemption from Queensland University of Technology on the same day I applied to Melbourne. Since then, I kept all name cards.

It must be around October of 2000 or April of 2001 that Edwin, the other FYP mate of mine, applied to Melbourne as well. This time round, the event was held at Mandarin Marina and Edwin's application was received by Derek Chan, Deputy Dean of Science. Edwin got accepted with 2 years credit exemptions as well. I later came to know from Alvin that Melbourne only accepts polytechnic graduates with full exemptions or reject the application totally.

I decided to go for July 2002 intake as my national service ends too close to the February 2002 intake and kicked the ball rolling in December 2001. The pressure of doing well and knowing the financial burden this decision weighs on my parents, marbled into the excitement of fulfilling my dreams - I went on a roller coaster emotional ride since I got my offer. On my grandmother's birthday BBQ in July 2001, Uncle Derrick conversed with me extensively before delivering the verdict to my parents - I should have the emotional strength to leave Singapore and understood the implications of this decision. This declaration is like an auditor's statement - not much use on its own but cannot do without. Till that point in time, nobody had given me any form of assurance that I can handle it. On hindsight, this assurance did help to anchor down a few loose strings.

Sent Edwin off to Melbourne on either the 2nd or 3rd day of Chinese New Year of 2002. He had decided to go ahead a semester earlier than me and Joel, which is good - staggering out makes transition easier. Joel and I, together with Robin, were due to fly to Melbourne on July 6, 2002, on Quantas QF10. Robin is my friend in army and will be studying at Monash University.

As the day drew closer, the anxiety and pressure seems to be building up. I became increasing uncertain about my decision and the expectation is great. It is really a one-chance event. If I screwed it up, there will be no second chance. I think all of us, polytechnic graduates with modest financial support, felt the same to varying degrees. It is just that we never really spoke to each other about it. It was one of the "don't ask, don't tell" situations. To me, I just do not want to open up this can of worms and increase the anxiety in myself and others, for I know there is really no solution but to face head-on.

Between then and the fateful day, I wrote 3 poems - 5 weeks, 2 days and on the day itself.

Ongoing

Five weeks to the call
Of the summer dawn
I waited for long
To breathe frozen air
Under lighter skies

Is it cool as I may
I do beg and pray
Find a place where heart flows
Out of damn furnace
Of what?
I don't know

Doubting clouds overcast the skies
Paramountic pressures churning
inside
Silly as it seems
Out of usual raying beam
Consequent of slag
Months of cerebral depravity

Light on the end
Oncoming avalanch or fairy land
Slouthing insights from limbical
lord
Who knows what may I be prod
- 3/6/02

In 48 Hours

Tickling along little streams
Time goes by
In short brightness sun
I've been here twice

Seeing one when wake
No feel of late
That's eight rounds ago
Now to see another go
Depths of red sea
Bless them true and free
May time will see us glamour

Of spent sum
Next on list
Here sits me
Feel notes weird
Of what I wonder
Of unseekness I ponder
- 4/7/02

Churned Limbical Notes

Day to move
In grimness to prove
Wierdness of feel
That refuse to appeal
Sitting on bed
I look around late
Like firstness sail
Funniness can't be said
Anxiety reads the going man
Fearness lingers at plan
Not clearing the sight
Rushed blood with melacholy sees the
light
- 6/7/02

The theme is rather clear – anxiety – the anxiety of the unknown. I had asked Keith Ng about how he had felt back then, as he went to Melbourne a semester before me to do his degree in accounting. “It feels like going to

BMT all over again” he said, and he is right. This is almost the exact feeling – as mixture of an anxiety, pressure and numbness – as I board the fast-craft on that very day, 18th August 1999, my enlistment.



My family sending me off. Left to right: aunt (Jessie), Darren (cousin), me, (Yew Huey) grandma, mum.



My primary school teacher’s family sending me off. Mrs Fong Jee Lian, her husband and daughter.



Army friends. Left to right: Robin, Kenneth, me, Spencer.



Joly sending Joel and my off. Joly will be joining us the following year.

The Bachelors Year

I had nearly 2 weeks before enrolment start when I reached Melbourne during which Joel and myself were exploring Melbourne City. Joel was my roommate at Calton Melbourne College (CMC). I guessed there is a little apprehension having a roommate as this is the first time I have to share a room – too used to having my own room at home. Nevertheless, it was an interesting experience despite some differences in opinions and handling each other's pet peeves. For example, our bedtimes are really different; Joel can handle heat better than cold while I am just the opposite. The first night was especially interesting because we had a double-decker bed and originally, I was on the top deck but in the middle of the night, I was sweating profusely (it was winter and we had the heater on) on the upper deck while Joel is shivering in cold on the lower deck – decided to swap the very next day. It was around this time that I gave Joel his nickname – 谢爷.

We had Ian Ong (my army friend at 20SA) at Melbourne at that point in time. He went to Melbourne a semester earlier and was enrolled in RMIT. Lucky for us, he showed us the city. The next time I met Robin was a few days later. I was supposed to meet Tristan in Chapel Street and I stupidly thought that everywhere is walkable in Melbourne. Managed to get Robin to walk with me to Chapel Street (almost 90 minutes walk) and dumped him at the Virgin music store along Chapel Street when I was to meet Tristan. Well, Robin still remembers that incident – must be one of the things he will remember for life. Luckily, it was winter and cooling, so the walk is not that bad.



Me at my desk at CMC



Joel and Peter Noris (Manager, CMC) at the lobby



Joel and myself at CMC



Robin (taken at the Royal Botanical Gardens), along our walk to Chapel Street.



No idea where this shot was taken. Probably at Chapel Street.



Tristan (on the left). Meet at Chapel Street.

During those 2 weeks, Joel and I explored most of the university and Melbourne City by foot, walking to as far south as Melbourne Art Museum at St Kildas. It was winter. The temperature was manageable but the wind was demanding. For sure, I could not gel my hair as I usually did before – It will end up as a sculpture if I did. Melbourne is easy to navigate. The city is just 18 main roads – 9 of them running North-South, 9 running East-West. The problem is that you will have to tell someone the junction if you want to meet anyone. Daimaru just closed down and Melbourne Central was rather empty though it has its charm. Melbourne Central was built over the Shot Tower which was where they made pellets for rifles – by dropping molten lead at the top of the tower, gravity will shape the lead, cool it down before it hits the ground. I love Melbourne city for the mix of antique and modern skyline though it is terribly difficult to find a public toilet.

My first impression of Melbourne University was pretty good. I love South Lawn with the granite buildings overlooking it. There is a rustic mix of

granite buildings and brick buildings which have no bearing in the age of the buildings. For example, the building directly across CMC was called “1888 Building” as it was built in 1888 for education faculty, if I am not wrong. 1888 was less than 40 years since the foundation of the university but 1888 Building was brick. On the other hand, the buildings around South Lawn were granite. Walking into 1888 Building, I was able to see the convoluted passage ways, almost creaky floors that bear the agony of the weight and tight corridors that speak of antiquity. It was much later that I realized that the granite buildings around South Lawn, and South Lawn itself, were modelled after the Scenic walk and the Great Hall of Sydney University.



Department of Biochemistry and Molecule Biology. This building houses the Big and Small Russell Theatre but the building was demolished in 2006.



University House – located at the end of Professor’s Walk. This is almost like an academic club which I am never a member of.



In a corner between 2 buildings.



Joel standing at the entrance of Department of Biochemistry and Cell Biology. Small Russell Theatre is located at the right upon entrance.

CMC has a few interesting characters and stories. Both Joel and I were kind of “mature-aged” compared with most of the residents there who were doing their foundation year at Trinity College or their first year of university. And due to our eventual workload, we hardly clicked with anyone there. Personally, I found the communal kitchen to be a daily warzone and I do pity the cleaner. Over the year, I had seen egg exploding in microwave oven (someone tried to microwave an egg without de-shelling), pizza slices exploding in microwave (trying to microwave a stack of pizza slices). There were really good cooks and really bad ones. There was a Singaporean girl doing economics and had no idea what is bite-size. Some of the others had to help she sieve out broccoli after she had cut them and told her to cut certain pieces into 2s and some into 3s – they were just too large to stir-fry.

I did have my stupid moments in kitchen too. There was once when I tried to “fixed” printed ink onto paper to make it non-washable by microwaving, in an attempt to cross-link or cellulize the ink. It ended up catching fire instead but was put out quickly as I was watching the event unfolding in the microwave oven. Joel did not know about this at all.



Joel. This statue is located in front of Baillieu Library.



South Lawn – also in front of Baillieu Library. The clock tower area is the only granite structure in the university.



No idea where is this.



In front of Old Geology Building, where the Faculty of Science office is located.

Had decided to visit Sydney and Wollongong where Tristan was before I even left for Melbourne. It is a kind of holiday to put my nerves at ease before term start. Took a Greyhound bus to Sydney via Canberra. The entire journey was about 12 hours – about 900km. During the stopover along Hume highway, I had a bottle of chocolate milk – bad choice. Four hours after that, my tummy was churning. It was then I realized that the milk in Australia was not low-lactose milk as what I will get in Singapore. After some experimentation, I found that I can safely handle about 300ml of milk without problems. Anything more than that, I will have a stomach upset. By the time I left Australia in 2008, that was increased to about 600ml – a far cry from the litre of milk that I used to drink in Singapore.

By the time I reached Wollongong (about 100km south of Sydney), it was about 9am and got to Tristan's place. We took a walk at Wollongong beach and went southwards to Bombo and Kiama (120km south of Sydney) to look at natural rock formations there. The vastness of the Pacific Ocean before us was breath-taking. Looking behind us and seeing our own footsteps pressed into the soft, chilly sand – a realization, that's where we came from. The intertwined footsteps is a microcosm of my history – some people will come and cross my path; some will walk a distance with me and leave; at the end of the say, I start the journey alone and pretty much destined to end the journey alone. Time and memories might capture the steps but at the end of the day, all will be erased by nature itself. What's left of it all? Nothing. Suddenly, there was a sense of peace that I wanted but the peace was also a little disturbing on my psyche. It is a weird feeling – peaceful and yet too calm. Peaceful but impressionable; calm but erasing. What is really there? There is actually nothing.

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