



# *Isabel Of The Inland*

*Mark Smith*

Isabel Smith lived a life of faith, service, care and devotion as a surrogate mother to Aboriginal children from the time she married Percy Smith, Rector of Alice Springs, in 1943. Their grandson Mark Smith is making a film about their work with Aboriginal people in collaboration with accomplished actor and movie director Mark Webber.

A life in hot dusty Central Australia seemed unlikely for Isabel Almond born in Adelaide in 1914. Living in the nice inner suburb of Walkerville she studied music and in 1930 graduated as an Associate of the Victorian College of Music. She never saw herself as having a brass name plaque on the front door and settling into suburban life as a piano teacher. Isabel had a sense of adventure and during the Second World War she worked in a munitions factory. In the summer of 1940–41 she decided to visit her boyfriend who was stationed in Alice Springs with the army. Of course, on Sunday she went to church and met Percy Smith on the wooden steps of the old Church of the Ascension who she described as,

“Quaint. Unassuming. Gentle. Sincere. Loyal and reliable. A man of his word and he’d do it through thick and thin. He was unselfish and humble.”

Percy Smith invited her to “The Bungalow” at the Old Telegraph Station, a place he visited weekly since 1933, and she was appalled at the living conditions for the Aboriginal people. The sadness in the children’s eyes moved her deeply. The despair. Not a lack of hope, but a permanent absence, particularly for the mothers. It broke her heart.

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Aboriginal people.”

*Pictured above: The music teacher, Isabel Almond an Associate of the Victorian College of Music in 1930. Percy and Isabel Smith descend the church steps as man and wife on 8 June 1943.*



*Father Smith on the church steps with a group of St John's Hostel children in 1944. Group includes future St Francis House boys David Woodford, Bill Espie and Malcolm Cooper.*

Percy and Isabel then started writing to each other and a romance blossomed. Despite her father's failing health and concern for her safety as the Japanese threat of war intensified, she left her sedate life behind in Adelaide.

From June 1943 Alice Springs was her new home. She found the town itself backed against an endless red wall of the hills of the MacDonnell Ranges, which all seemed to be the same height. Everything else around was just flat, red desert.

Even before the wedding Isabel's new life began. No time for settling in, but straight to work at the children's hostel, St John's established by Percy Smith in 1941. She was soon cooking, serving, teaching, reading, cleaning and washing clothes. It was hard physical work, but she loved it.

Isabel did not expect her marriage to cause such great excitement, especially among the troops who told her most people thought Percy, aged 40, would never marry.

The soldiers gave Percy the proceeds of a dance evening as a wedding gift accompanied by these words of appreciation,

"We ask you to accept the proceeds of tonight's dance as a wedding gift from your Anglican Soldiers' Committee, and from many other friends, as a slight token of our affection and esteem, and in gratitude for the unfailing kindness and friendship which we have all enjoyed at the rectory."

June 2024 will mark 40 years since the opening of the rebuilt Church of the Ascension in Bath Street in Alice Springs. Percy Smith had raised the funds and found the land to build the original church in 1935-36.

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It was a special event, and Isabel wanted to make sure all of the children living at St John's Hostel were invited. For many of them it was the first time they were invited to a social occasion hosted by white people. An early morning service allowed the children to attend before school.

The church was decorated with bowls of shell pink gladioli and trailers of asparagus fern on the altar. The children sat on one side of the church and soldiers in uniform on the other, men who had come to rely upon the wartime chaplaincy of Percy Smith. Isabel was astonished to read a report in the Soldier's Magazine,

"Army padre and rector of one of the largest parishes in Australia, The Rev Percy McDonald Smith, was married to Miss Isabel Elizabeth Almond at the Church of the Ascension at 0730 hours on June 8. Soldiers representative of every State in the Commonwealth, beside New Zealanders and Englishman, were among the troops who packed the Church."

"As the rays of the rising sun flashed through the gothic windows, the bride – a charming, dignified figure, entered the church on the arm of an old friend, Mr N Cain. Appliqued with satin gardenias, her white tulle frock merged into a long train ... She carried a white kid prayer book and a trailer of forget-me-nots..."

As the war ended and the hostel children grew older, Percy developed a plan to bring a group of children to Adelaide, which he discussed with the Aboriginal mothers. Millie Woodford, Dido Cooper, Tilly Miller, Hetti Perkins, Edie Espie and Melva Palmer were keen for their sons to access education and a chance at a better future in the big city.

So, after the tumult of the life-changing move to Alice Springs, Isabel was to return to Adelaide, initially to a temporary home at leafy Kensington Gardens in Pembroke Street, a few streets from Holden Street where cricketer Don Bradman lived. The boys saw him practising in the nets on their walk to school as he resumed cricket after the war, training ahead the famous 1948 "Invincibles" tour of England.

Isabel had been baptised at St Bede's in Semaphore and her parents still lived at 77 Semaphore Road, not far from Glanville Hall, which became the location of St Francis House. Percy spotted the turreted stone tower from the tram on a visit to see Isabel's mother one day.

When it was time to leave in January 1945 Isabel received word her father was gravely ill and she had to fly ahead to Adelaide. When the plane landed at Parafield a flight attendant rushed up the stairs to tell Isabel that her father had passed away. Her heart sank. Percy's first official duty when he arrived in Adelaide by train with the first six boys was to conduct the funeral. Isabel's mother then moved in with Percy and the boys, so Isabel could care for her, her husband and the six boys. The first group were David Woodford, John Palmer, Peter Tilmouth, Bill Espie, Malcolm Cooper and Charles Perkins. Two more soon arrived, Gordon Briscoe and Brian Butler. Then a child of her own, John Percival McDonald, on 26 November 1946.

By this time Percy had purchased Glanville Hall on behalf of the Diocese of Adelaide and had it renovated to house more Aboriginal boys from Central Australia. Glanville Hall is an imposing Victorian stone mansion, built by merchant seaman Captain John Hart, who also served as Premier of South Australia and Treasurer on six occasions.

*To be continued. Part 2 will be in the next edition.*



*Quaint, humble and unassuming  
Father Percy Smith on the wooden steps  
of the original Church of the Ascension in  
Bath Street, Alice Springs.*

**Mark Smith** is the grandson of Isabel and Percy Smith and is collaborating with Hollywood Director Mark Webber and Live Heart Productions to make the film Finding Miss Almond. It is set in part in Central Australia, and recounts the history of Indigenous people in the care of Archdeacon of the Northern Territory, the Ven. Canon Percy McD Smith MBE and his wife Isabel E Smith OAM, many of whom achieved outstanding careers in government, business, academia, sport and the arts, and greatly advanced the cause of Indigenous affairs.

For more information and to support the cause please visit: [www.liveheart.com.au](http://www.liveheart.com.au)