

# EVERY DAY IS BIG

THE FAMILY of  
JOE & MARGARET COLLINS



ENTREPRENEURS, FARMERS,  
COFFEE PIONEERS, ADVENTURERS

ABRIDGED VERSION



KEN GRAY

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Cover Image

Upper image: Horse riders at Kirrama on a trip to the Blencoe rapids in the late 1920s. From Doug Unsworth.

Lower image Left: Margaret and Joe Collins with Barry and Karin. From Sonia O'Brien.

Lower Image Right: 'Dad n me' taken from *Facebook* post July 2024 ... Joe Collins and daughter Sonia on a clay pigeon shoot. From Sonia O'Brien.

## JOE & MARGARET

Margaret and Joe Collins are part of an iconic Mission Beach family that started in Australia when Joe's grandfather, Edgar Collins, arrived in North Queensland as an 18-year-old seeking great adventure in 1887. He found it in bucket loads.

This family sits alongside our most notable pioneering dynasties like the Cuttens, Alexanders, Garners, Wildsoets and Porters. The story starts in West Yorkshire, England where their ancestors owned a cotton mill. They enter an utterly different world at Kirrama Station, inland from Cardwell, where only the fittest survive. Then Joe's parents had the first butcher's shop in Banyan (named Tully today) where the Collins kids worked tirelessly for their demanding father. Margaret Menzel was living nearby at Euramo on her parents' cane farm and it was there that she met the dashing young butcher boy, Joe Collins.

This story reveals how pleasingly simple life was when we look at how their marriage happened so quickly in the 50s, yet how tough life was at the same time. 'Every Day is Big' is a gross understatement in terms of the hard work done by this family. Much of the story is about Joe and his siblings, uncles and cousins and it is mainly about the boys. However, it would be folly to assume that the girls had it easy as they were pivotal to the considerable success that the family achieved. Margaret Menzel was revered by her family and community and earned everyone's deepest respect with her hard work, unending kindness and the loving support she provided to anyone in need.

The family spent 24 years in Tully then migrated to New Guinea for 24 years before living at South Mission Beach for almost 50 years. From humble beginnings, Joe and his brothers and cousins became timber millers, coffee growers, businessmen and farmers, living lives full of adventures.

In every endeavour they excelled. Nearing 97 now, Joe rues the loss of his wife, Margaret yet still leads a bold, action-filled life.

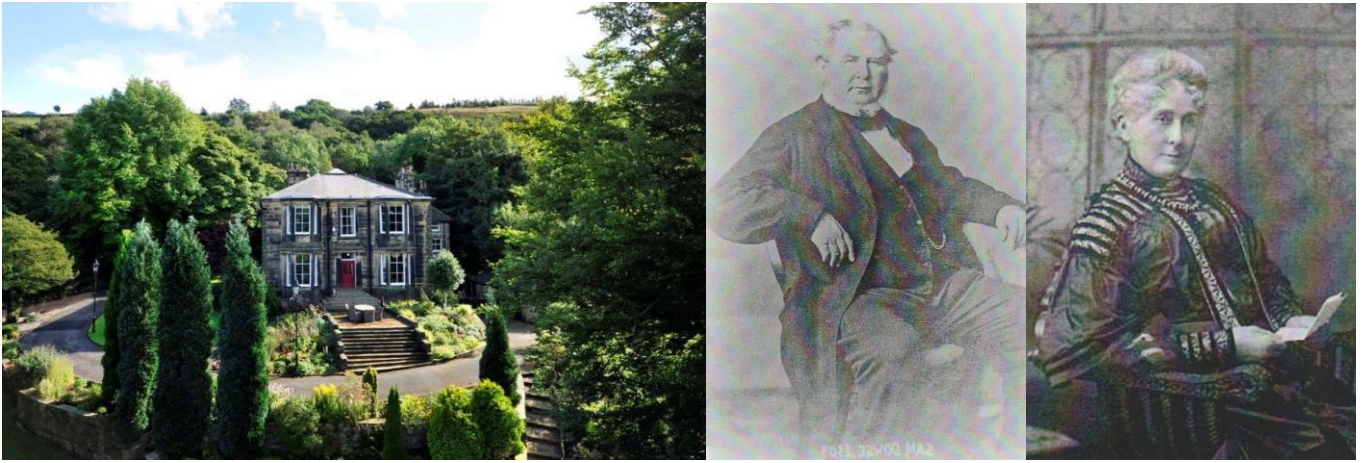
## COLLINS' ANCESTORS

When we wrote the family history for Joe Collins, he was 96 years old. Despite his sadness at losing his lovely wife, he was charmingly humorous and living a full life. On hot days, it occasionally got too much for him when he went out for a day shooting clay pigeons, but Joe was not slowing down anytime soon.

Joe gave me a fabulous family history to read, *Kirrama Collins and Families* by Doug Unsworth, his brother-in-law. This 707-page hard-cover book is well researched and documented with a host of images. However, it was published for family members only and was not for sale, so it is not yet available in libraries.

Joe has five Irish great grandparents and three English. His family tree can be traced back as far as 1578 to the Wrights of Essex. The Collins story starts in earnest in 1844 when Joe's great great grandfather, Samuel Dowse, purchases the Cellars Clough cotton mill in Marsden, West Yorkshire. This was a successful venture and Sam was in partnership with his son-in-law Joseph Collins after the marriage of his only child, Hannah. By the time Hannah died, however, the family fortune had evaporated and Edgar Dowse Collins, who migrated to Queensland as an 18-year-old in 1887, only inherited the name. Thereafter, family members had 'Dowse' as their second given name, acknowledging the status of Sam Dowse at the peak of his career.

Edgar Collins was born in Yorkshire on 13 October 1868 and boarded at the Anglican Rossall School in Fleetwood, Lancashire. Following school, one may have expected him to follow his father in textile manufacture, but early on, Edgar decided to venture out and be a jackaroo in northern Australia. One can imagine the family angst that idea caused.



Grander days: The Collins and Dowse Home: Cellars Clough House converted to units today. Sam Dowse and Hannah Collins, from Doug Unsworth.

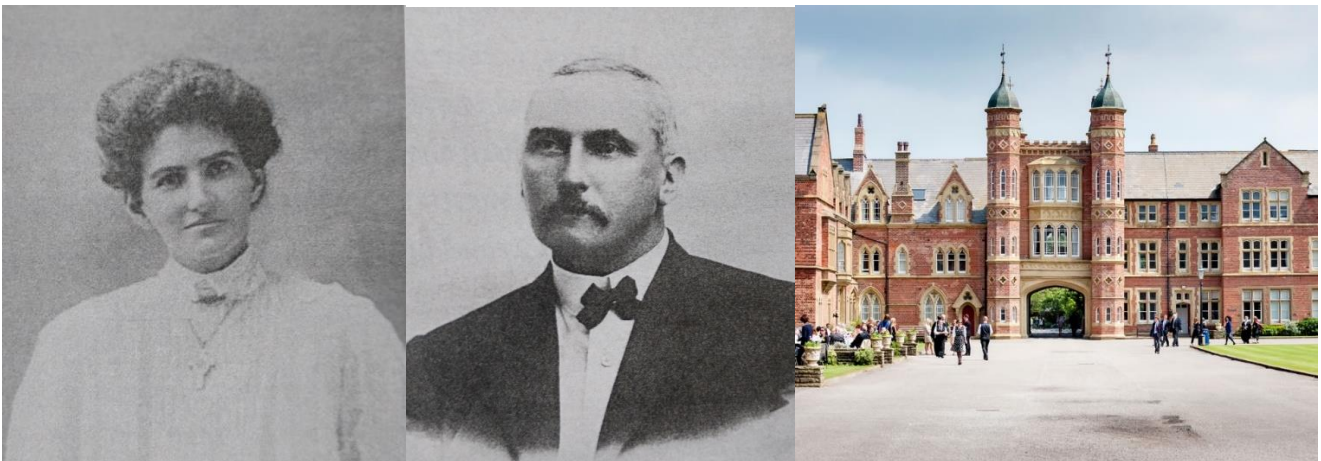
His family were good friends of the Scotts before they migrated to Australia and selected land at the Valley of Lagoons west of Ingham. Edgar had read correspondence from the Scott boys telling of their wild adventures in north Queensland and that was highly appealing.

Edgar had arranged to join them, but Walter Scott returned to England sooner than expected. Walter arranged for Edgar to work as an apprentice stockman with Harry Wilson, a highly regarded pastoralist and horseman who was the manager of Gunnawarra Station not far north of the Valley of Lagoons, which is inland from Ingham and near to Kirrama. This arrangement, as was the custom for migrants, meant that Edgar had to pay £100 to be provided with a job for three years and he would receive 'keep' without wages.

## KIRRAMA STATION

Harry Wilson was a larger than life character and when his eldest daughter, Mary, finished school at 17 years of age in 1893 she joined her father with her siblings. By then, Edgar was a skilled stockman and an overseer for Harry. Mary and Edgar were married in Herberton in 1896. They had planned to live on land Edgar had purchased at Lower Tully, but shortly before their marriage the bank had agreed to have Harry and Edgar jointly run their Kirrama Station which is near Gunnawarra.

The Queensland National Bank held the Kirrama lease due to the default of the previous owner. Harry had been dismissed from Gunnawarra Station in November 1895 and he and Edgar successfully applied to sub-rent the Kirrama lease starting in February 1896. After the wedding, the Wilson and Collins families, went to live at Kirrama Station and built a slab hut to live in. That was quite a different home from the Collins family home, Cellars Clough House back in England.



Left: Mary Wilson, 'Grandma Collins'. Centre: Edgar Collins c. 1915. 'Grandpa Collins'. From Doug Unsworth. Right: Rossall School Fleetwood, Lancashire.

In 1899, Harry and his family departed, leaving Edgar and Mary with their infant son Alwynne on Kirrama. Edgar built a new cottage at Kirrama. He and Mary worked hard to develop Kirrama Station and continued to pay the bank Stocking Rights, until they purchased the Pastoral Lease in 1928.

They acquired adjoining properties and Kirrama was almost 200 square miles in area by 1907, or 126,400 acres. Mary and Edgar had nine children. Alwynne was born in Herberton, Eric in Cairns and the others (Marsey, Sam, Lorna, Arthur, Marjorie (Jill), Ruth and Ronald (Bungie) were all born in Townsville. At birth time, Mary rode over the range to the coast to Cardwell and then took a three day boat trip to Townsville and returned with her baby packed on her back two months later. The children were educated by a governess and then went to boarding school. They returned to Kirrama after school and most of them worked there for a period.



A day out to the Blencoe rapids for the Kirrama family – 1920s transport. From Doug Unsworth.

Picnics were popular for the residents at Kirrama Station as were horse races at Gunnawarra where dances were held after the events. When at school, Alwynne and Eric learned new dances like the Maxina and Veleta, introducing them at Cardwell dances.

There were many visits from family members living on the coast. Grandson, Joe Collins was a regular visitor and stayed at Kirrama for extended periods. Harry Wilson (Mary's father) gave Mary a piano as a gift at the beginning which was hugely popular for singalongs at the station. The piano was shipped to Port Douglas and took three weeks to cart on a dray to Kirrama. There were no roads or bridges for much of the journey. Marsey was an accomplished pianist and often entertained the family.

Granddaughter, Jean Lauriston, wrote a memoir in 1940 recalling a three month holiday at Kirrama. She said that it was formal at meal times and children had to dress for dinner and pull out chairs for adults. She saw holes in the slab walls of the homestead and was told that they were used for rifles to fire at Aboriginal attackers in the early years. She and the others made good friends with the Aboriginal families, she fondly remembered Nora and her tribe and was heartbroken when they were taken to Palm Island.

Family member, Jo Rees also wrote memories of Kirrama after spending a number of years living at the station. She wrote that *Kirrama was like a small township with a tribe of aborigines in their own camp. It was the best place for kids. Up to a dozen cousins often came for holidays.* Children flocked to the station because Grandma Collins did not want to be interrupted in her work, she gave them great freedom, so they could go anywhere and do almost anything.

Mary's garden was by all accounts, a wonder to behold. Edgar had a large vegetable garden with a potato patch and orchard and they were virtually self-sufficient. Water was transported from creeks nearby using a tank on a sled that was hauled by a draught horse. Later, water was pumped using an engine.

Joe remembered Kirrama days fondly:

*Just as in Tully, there was much work to do at Kirrama even though it was our school holidays. Our first job every morning, they had no bathroom there; we had to empty all the pot chambers and wash all the dishes and fill all the water jugs. And we had to clean the shoes too. Everybody put their shoes*

*outside the room and we had to clean them and then grandma came along and asked, "You clean the shoes today?" and I said, "I'm not cleaning the shoes anymore". She said, "Yes you are" and I said, "No", so she gave me the strap – it didn't hurt much – I said "No, No, No", each time she hit me so she went out to the saddle room and brought in a sack paddle strap and I said "Yes, Yes, Yes" [laugh], so I cleaned the shoes - me and a 'Gin' called Nora, she was nice too. She was always nice Nora.*

*That used to take us to 'til 10 o'clock, we'd drink milk - and then we could muck around 'til lunch time and in the afternoon, we used to have to go and get the goats. You had to bring them home and lock them up otherwise the dingoes would kill them. So sometimes they were a mile away or sometimes two miles away so we'd bring them home every night and then we had some time to go fishing down at the lagoon. We'd catch turtles and eels.*

*They were good days at Kirrama, hard work but my brother Rod came with me most times and he enjoyed his time there too.*

Arthur Collins managed Kirrama until 1937 when his father, Edgar, died. He continued to manage it until his mother died in 1957 staying on until 1959. Ruth and her husband, Doug Farquhar, managed Kirrama for the family trust until they purchased the property in 1962. The trust was in the names of Arthur, Sam and Ronald. Kirrama was later sold to the Gunn family from Texas, USA. After that, much of the land was acquired in December 2000 for the Badjuballa Aboriginal Corporation and is now known as Badjuballa station.

Edgar and Mary are buried in the cemetery at Kirrama.

## TULLY | 24 YEARS

Molly Leahy moved from the Darling Downs to Banyan in 1923 to work as governess for Lily and Bert Barbet's four children. Bert was overseeing the construction of the Tully Sugar Mill. That year, Alwynne Collins also moved to Banyan where he was in partnership with his father, Edgar, and brother, Eric, in the butchery. He sold his Lower Tully farm to concentrate on the butchery. The butcher's shop was moved from Banyan to Tully and this was one of the early buildings on Butler Street.

Molly and Alwynne were married in December 1925 and had seven children, Joe (Alwynne), Rod, Denis (who died at only 26 months), John, Edgar, Michael and Jocelyn. Joe was born on 12 September 1927 in Townsville. He was called *Wjyn* initially. When asked how the name change occurred Joe said, *Well dad was a kangaroo shooter and when I was born, he said I was all arms and legs like a baby kangaroo, so he called me his little Joey.* The name stuck.



Alwynne, Tully 1924. Molly, Tully 1925. From Doug Unsworth.

Alwynne senior had the butcher's shop and slaughter yards until he sold them in 1951. He was involved in many community associations such as the Tully Branch of the Graziers Association (President), Tully State

School Committee (President), Tully Chamber of Commerce, Tully Gun Club (President) and was a cattle judge at many agricultural shows across the north. He was a member of the Volunteer Defence Force in WWII and served for one term as a councillor on the Cardwell Shire Council.

Joe went to the Tully State Primary School as did all of his siblings. It was a short distance from their Mars Street home. Joe remembers how he often had to work when he returned from school:

*Dad used to get cattle on the train, so we had to take them down to the slaughter yard [at Lower Tully] and he would pick us up at school at half past three. He'd take us down to the slaughter yard and give us a bit of bread, he'd say 'catch the horses and ride into Tully'. So, we'd get there about dark and mum would give us something to eat and send us to bed straight away. About 11 o'clock dad said, 'get up and saddle up the horses and go down to the railway' and the train would bring the cattle along and it was nearly always raining. Dad would give us a sack bag – he never bought us a raincoat. When we got wet, we just threw the sack bag away. We'd drive the cattle down to the slaughter yard and get there about daylight and dad would pick us up and bring us home and then we had to go to school. It wasn't easy. The teachers would see us go to sleep and they didn't care. They just let us sleep. I'd go to sleep on the desk.*

On completion of his education in late 1943, Joe worked for his father in the butchery business. He did that for six years and completed his refrigeration ticket so that he could maintain the freezers at the shop. He then spent two years at their slaughter yard in Lower Tully.

## NEW GUINEA | 24 YEARS

The decision to leave Tully was sudden. Joe:

*I was at the slaughter yard and Dad said I was bludging. So, we had a few words then I started leaving. He said, "Where are you going?" I said, "I'm going to Mt Isa, they are making good money there". Righto. So, I went into town and then to the barber – he had just returned from New Guinea. I told him that I was leaving the slaughter yard, going out to Mt Isa. He said, "Do you want to go to New Guinea? There's no income tax there". I said, "That'll do me". That's how I chose New Guinea. Left straight away.*

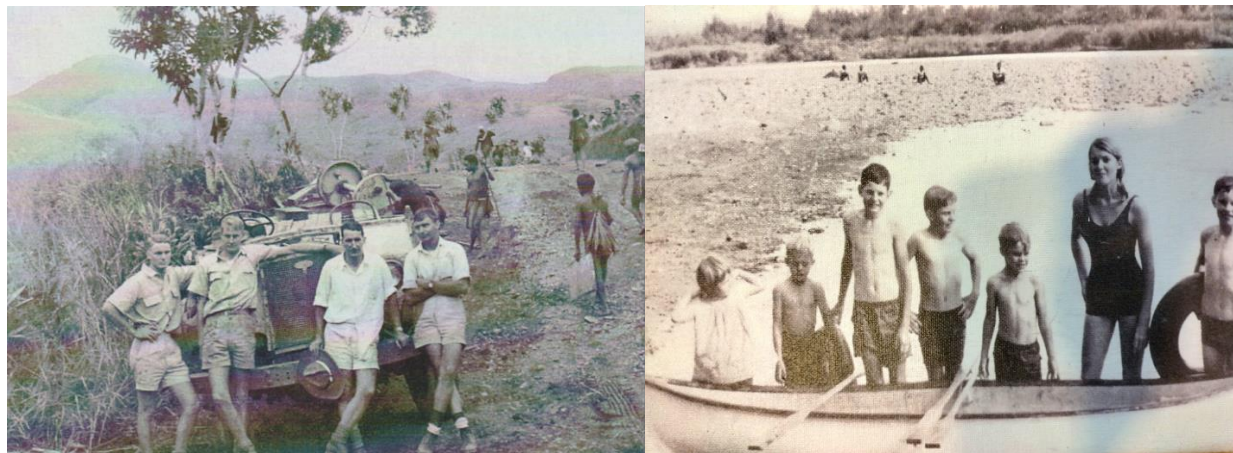
The odd thing is that Joe had several uncles and cousins from his mother's family, the Leahys, already in New Guinea, yet while he was united with them in time, it was the Tully barber who gave him the idea to go there. He started work driving a barge on the Markham River near Lae. Margaret joined him after the birth of their first child, Karin. He went fishing for a while and then worked for a gold company at Bulolo.

Margaret and Joe were married in November 1951 in the simplest of ceremonies with no fuss after Joe returned from New Guinea and proposed. They had seven children. Three were born in Tully, Karin, Barry and Peter, Roderick in Madang, and the other three Stephan, Malcolm and Sonia, were born in the Highlands of New Guinea at Goroka,. Joe:

*I am not sure where all the kids were born but know that Roddy was born in Madang because Margaret was going to go to the hospital in Goroka and the fella there was in the horrors. He had drunk too much and was a pilot from the 1<sup>st</sup> war, so, they put her on the plane and sent her down to the hospital in Madang. I was never with Margaret when she had a kid. She'd just leave the house, go to hospital, have the kid and come back in a few days.*

After two years at Lae, Joe in partnership with his brothers, Rod and Johnny, purchased a rundown timber mill at Kotuni from their Uncle Jim Leahy. Joe: *Everything was bugged, the bearings and belts, everything. Uncle Jim did not*

*run the mill himself; he had a manager in the business. Fortunately, Rod and I had expertise from the butchery so we knew how to repair and maintain belts and bearings.* It was a financial struggle initially but paid off long-term and when the timber became scarce, they moved further across the range to Marafunga. They also built a timberyard in Goroka to distribute the timber. John left the partnership after two years.



Left: Mike Collins, Fred Leahy, Rod Collins and Joe Collins in New Guinea with sawmill gear.  
Right: Margaret and Joe's children in New Guinea: Sonia, Malcolm, Barry, Peter, Stephan, Karin, and Rod.

Joe and Rod acquired land and eventually had 180 acres of coffee in a plantation at Numbia near Goroka. It remains in operation today under different owners. Their businesses employed 300 people but they had to sell it after independence came for PNG. They also owned the 55,000 acre Kangerong Station near Charters Towers for 22 years and sold that in 1987. They had a cane farm at Josephine Falls – just to keep themselves busy! Joe and his family moved there in 1976, before relocating to South Mission Beach.

## SOUTH MISSION BEACH | 49 YEARS ...

When I first met Joe, he explained how hard he and his family had worked throughout their lives: *Every day is big! We tried everything in New Guinea, we never stopped. Always doing something.*

Joe and Margaret purchased the old Mission Beach Surf Club site on the beachfront at South Mission Beach. They lived there for a brief period and then built their new home while staying in Rod and Jen's home nearby. Joe remains there today. They invested in several ventures such as commercial sheds, real estate and an avocado farm. Rod and Joe had a tennis centre at Everton Hills in Brisbane as well for a number of years.

Joe obtained a commercial fishing licence and spent some years fishing in his aluminium trawler, *Marjo* which he moored in the Hull River. Joe:

*When I got back, I built some sheds in Cairns. I sold some of them to my sons and the rents paid them off. I then got a trawler, went prawn fishing. I had to build it first, brought it over from Perth myself. I sold the prawns at the house. I wouldn't sell to others. I sold them all at the house. I brought a big engine down from New Guinea. We had plenty of engines up there. I brought a generator down because sometimes the power goes off. I didn't want to lose all my prawns because I had a big freezer. The big generator was really good. In the end, I could just start it up and we had power on tap. I still had the sheds then and they were making money.*

Joe always went to clay pigeon shooting competitions at the Atherton Club and he has travelled widely participating in veteran events in NSW and QLD. Margaret was happy visiting family and friends and in 1998 she travelled with her brother, Max Menzel, to visit cousins in Coswig, Germany. Joe explained that with such a big family most of their leisure time was taken up interacting with relatives rather than friends. Margaret travelled to Townsville, Charters Towers and Mount Garrett often for family and in her volunteering work.



In 1986, Joe had a heart attack and went in for open heart surgery. He has had a similar operation since then as well as a stent operation in 2023 ... hard to kill a Collins! Joe: *At that stage we had to sell our businesses and Rod and I were able to agree on suitable terms without any rancour or baggling whatsoever; after all that time.*



Joe and Margaret with son Barry and his wife Leslee and their four sons Patrick, William, Charles and Terrie and daughter Elizabeth in the 1990s

When asked about the places he was happiest living in his life, Joe was unequivocal:

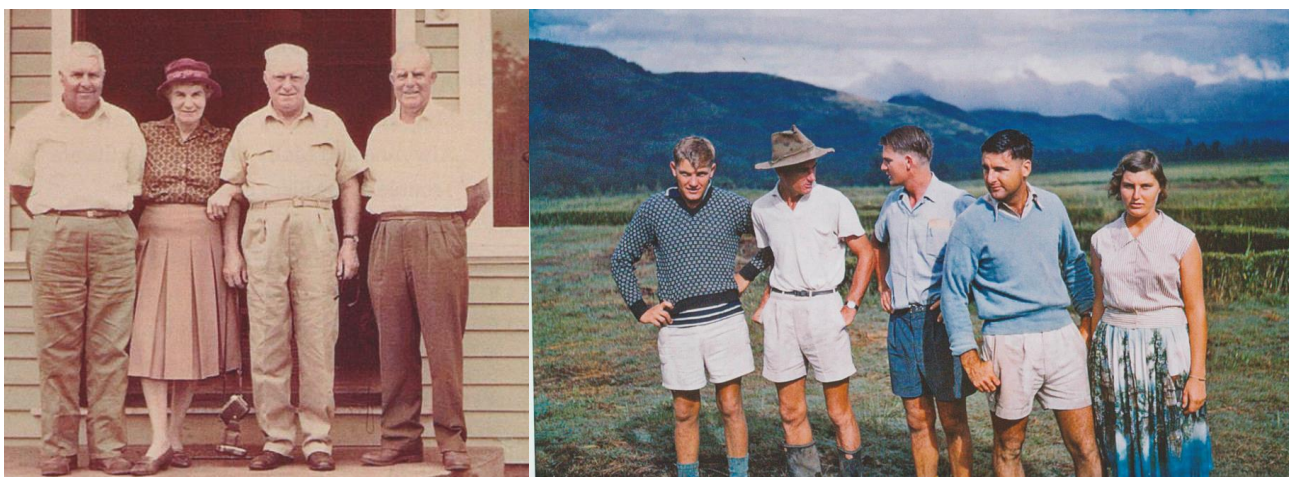
*Well, when my wife was alive, at home. That was the happiest times ever. Now I'm on my own, it's not really good. Not like it used to be.*

Yet life goes on and Joe is still shooting clay pigeons ... some days are not quite so big now perhaps.

## COFFEE IN NEW GUINEA

Joe's Mum, Molly Leahy, like her brothers, was a force of nature, and was widely respected. She came from an Irish Catholic family of 13 children. Four of her brothers, Paddy, Mick, Jim and Dan, went to New Guinea in the 1920s, playing a huge part exploring and opening up the New Guinea Highlands, then pioneering the coffee industry there. Later, they were joined by four of their Leahy nephews, Tom, Danny, Fred and Paddy, then by five of Molly's sons, Joe, Rod, John, Ed and Mike.

We could write a full book on Molly's family and several others have already done so.



Left: Dan, Molly, Jim and Mick Leahy. Right: Patrick (Paddy) Leahy (Joe's cousin) with three of Joe's brothers, John (Johnny), Michael (Mike) and Edgar (Edd or Eddie) Collins and Joe's sister Jocelyn Collins (later Unsworth). The photo was taken at John's Tigi Coffee Plantation. From Doug Unsworth.

It was Jim Leahy who planted the first commercial coffee plantation in the New Guinea Highlands in 1948. The success of that venture led to an influx of European farmers seeking the riches of *Green Gold*. His brother, Dan had another plantation thriving soon after that at Mt Hagen.

Cousins Ed Collins and Danny Leahy started a business named Collins and Leahy and that company had large interests in coffee trading and processing. The family businesses handled the coffee from farms producing more than 2,000 tonnes annually. The largest family holding was the 450 acre farm of John Collins at Tigi, near Goroko. In all, the Leahy and Collins family had over 2,000 acres of coffee growing with at least eight processing plants.

Some people dubbed the Cuttens of Bingil Bay, *Australia's Coffee Barons* after they created their successful 100 acre coffee plantation at Bingil Bay in the 1890s. Joe and Rod Collins had almost double that acreage in New Guinea and together with their brothers and cousins, these are our true coffee barons.

Rod Collins and Paddy Leahy vastly improved the productivity of coffee through advanced pruning techniques, better shading and the use of fertilizers. The family encouraged New Guineans to participate as shareholders in their produce company. Profits soared and that helped the locals enter the industry themselves.

The family had a strong and enduring impact on the PNG economy mostly through the coffee industry that employs vast numbers of PNG people today. Several of the family descendants remain in PNG, some working in the coffee industry.



LTR Jenny and Rod Collins, Margie and Mike Collins, Doug and Jocelyn Unsworth, Joe and Margaret Collins, Jennifer and Eddie Collins. C 1995.

### Further Reading

James Sinclair, *The Money Tree: Coffee in Papua New Guinea*, Crawford House Publishing, 1995.

Ken Gray, *Every Day is Big: The Family of Joe and Margaret Collins*, MBHS, 2024, available online at [mbhs.com.au](http://mbhs.com.au)

This story is an abridgement of *Every Day is Big*.