



## TREE OF LIFE: past-future alternatives

*George had arrived at that point in time where he could claim some contentment with life; those early (and sometimes confusing) years being now behind him meant that he could take on board a new life that Australia had to offer. He had - more through good luck than sound management – navigated his way to ‘the lucky country’: ‘the land of opportunity’. But what might his life have been if those crucial decisions along the way had determined an alternative forward pathway?*

In a more general sense, how do the decisions we make affect our future being? Along life’s relatively short and meandering path to a supposed heaven or hell, we all stumble on a myriad of forks in the road, where choice dictates the chosen path, like the many branches of a gigantic oak, where we begin our journey from the base of the trunk and end up as a twig on its outer limits. Which endpoint twig we finally arrive at is self or otherwise determined, by the myriad of options along the way.

A few of us - a fraction of the almost eight billion – are born to lead and to rule; to prosper come what may. This legacy is bestowed through birthright (along with its connected education and upbringing). For this small grouping there is an unshrinking belief that destiny is established at birth. Essentially the futures of this minuscule portion of people on Earth are pre-ordained, but even for them there will be significant choices –

including inbuilt tussles to maintain their legacy – that have to be made as they graduate to their final twig. This is true for all parts of the planet, whether it be the USA, Europe, Asia or Africa; a certain few have distinct advantages over the multitudinous rest.

In stark contrast the futures for the remaining 99% plus of the planet's populace are not pre-determined but related much more to the choices they (and those around them) make as they navigate their branches. For those who exist at the lower limits of our world's economic pyramid, in Africa, Asia, or Latin America, it becomes a distinctly uphill battle and only a miniscule number are able to make the right choices that enable a bright and relatively prosperous future.

To illustrate this aspect of *Born-to-Rule* legacy in familiar British surrounds, we can refer to the life stories of two prominent politicians. For Boris Johnson, life's pathway to the top was to a large extent inevitable: born wealthy, educated at Eton and Oxford, then on to Lord Mayor of London and British Prime Minister; one could say he was anointed in the cradle. But for Margaret Thatcher, born a grocer's daughter, the choices to reach the summit were more stark, even including elocution lessons to enable her to speak and emulate those people who had in truth attended Eton and Oxford.

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In the case of George, those early branch choices were there even before he was born. Dorothy his mother – in the known circumstance of post-war England closely guided by her parents – had to choose between abortion or allowing her small foetus to grow and emerge into a Yorkshire Winter world. She made the pro-life choice, which George can now be very thankful for. That choice necessitated the baby being born in secrecy - behind the veil of doctor's surgery and away from the neighbourhood's prying eyes - before transfer to the family home and subsequent veiled announcement to the world that a *new wee bairn is born ...* to his maternal grandmother.

After that there was one major decision (along with many minor choices) made on George's behalf, by his immediate family. This foremost decision, effected at an early stage in his life, involved a monumental move for himself and family away from the grime

and graft of post-war Yorkshire, to the green valleys and fresh air of Cornwall, way to the far South West of England.

It was an interesting choice, because his father (in reality, his grandfather) had, on several occasions checked out a farm-island off the West coast of Scotland, which was thought to be the most likely destination. The family had close Scottish connections; George in fact could claim, by birth, to have three-quarters Scottish blood coursing through his veins. But In the end, Cornwall was judged a warmer climate, that would provide a healthier environment for the revered matriarch of the family (George's grandmother), who was seriously ill with cancer.

It was a marginal decision, but one wonders what might have happened if the throw of the dice had pointed to Scotland. George would have grown up with a heavy Scottish accent, rather than a slow Cornish drawl and because the island was so remote, he may have had to attend boarding school, thence on to university in Aberdeen, or Edinburgh. Because of this he most likely would not have chosen to move to Australia in his mid-teens, perhaps opting for a job after university in a field where he had shown aptitude, such as agriculture or architecture. It could have been a very different George who emerged in his mid-twenties to court and marry a young Scottish lass. They would become a professional couple perhaps following their wanderlust and travelling to Europe and Asia and eventually to Australia.

Thus George, would have chosen (or had chosen for him) a totally different branch of his life-tree; a branch that would deliver dissimilar connections to people and place, though the possibility is still there that he might have ended up in similar circumstances of life and work in the antipodes, because of his maternal relations.

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But assuming George had followed the reality of choice and moved to England's balmy South West, the next major decision would have come with his likely expulsion from secondary school and connected invitation to visit his sister's (in reality his mother's)

family in Australia. His inbuilt wanderlust and need to get out of a tight situation prompted George to accept the offer and ship out to Australia.

But what if he had declined? Then, with school in the past and no qualifications in sight, George might well have become an errant youth, with a poor mix of friends who would lead him down ill-chosen routes towards an unsociable, on-the-fringe lifestyle. But perhaps, being the swinging sixties, when Britain was emerging from the lethargy of the fifties to lead the world in fashion and flower power, it may not have been all doom and gloom. He was an inherently bright lad who had the potential to discard the surrounding influences and re-surface through fields such as music or art. Once the challenges of adolescence had worn thin, he may well have picked himself up and begun exploring the delights of Carnaby Street, rather than the doldrums of Cornwall. A personal choice of higher education in his twenties could have set him on course for a new and vibrant career, while that ever-present wanderlust might still have prompted him to pick up those recurring invitations to visit Australia.

When just sixteen, George had in fact elected to travel to Australia and had done remarkably well at school, contrasting vividly with his abysmal results in the UK. Then at the end of that first year of school another incredibly important choice loomed from the depths. His newly adopted Australian family wanted him to persevere at school and progress to university, but George would have none of that; in the UK he had developed an inbuilt hatred of everything to do with school and wanted out. Living for those formative years on a Cornish dairy farm had given him a love for, and some basic knowledge of agriculture, thus this became his focus in Australia: to become educated and build a career in the world of agriculture. In the event this set him on course as an agronomist, company representative and farmer advisor, through to his mid-thirties.

But then, what if he had followed the advice of his newfound family and completed schooling, probably with high grades, then graduated to a city-based (most likely Melbourne) university? He could have chosen agriculture, but he also had other talents such as art and architecture. Later in life he had moved towards journalism and

education; this might well have happened earlier if he had chosen university in the first instance. Instead of employment in rural areas, the most likely scenario would have been for George to emerge from university and take up a higher level position in agricultural research, journalism, education, or architecture. Ultimately, he may well have followed his calling to work with disadvantaged communities in developing countries - as happened in reality – but it would have entailed a different entry point and probably an alternative level of involvement. The *sons-of-lande-gentry* set that he met in reality at agricultural college, would have been replaced by more highly educated students, who in turn could have connected him to a range of more diverse, city-based individuals: an alternative lifestyle inhabited by very different personnel.

These branch choices on the tree of life follow George – and everyone else on Earth – as they each traverse the decades and decide, for better or for worse, what is the best way forward. The earlier decisions, which direct us along those major branches are probably the more important ones we make, but none-the-less some of the later choices in life can also be quite monumental in terms of their impact on our being.

After agricultural college George was directed (and accepted) to move for work, from the state of Victoria to South Australia. Before that move he was engaged to be married to a young teacher in Victoria, but after the move he met a new love and was married in Adelaide (again she was a teacher, but importantly also an immigrant from Britain). After a few years of life together they travelled back to Europe to re-unite with relatives and then on return to Australia, became a family of three in the mid-seventies. This tends to prove the theory that one’s destiny is governed by circumstance: where you are and whom you meet at any given time. If George had elected to stay in Victoria, marrying his original fiancée (whose parents did not hail from the UK), this could have underpinned a different-looking future that may not have included travel to Europe.

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And so, like all of us, the choices that George made continued through the years: major decisions crafting his *Tree-of-Life* branch selection as he progressed along the path

towards his final twig. But even some of the choices that occurred between the major options – seemingly minor in importance and countless in number - could mushroom to monumental size, such as the time where he almost drowned after floating out to sea off a beach in Australia, half-asleep on an airbed. Rescued by a strong swimmer he was forever after afraid of deep water and swimming pools.

Nevertheless, to a large extent the obviously more major decisions loom as the main indicators of branch selection. As we will discover, George opted to return to studies and complete a university degree in his thirties, which projected him towards a new career in education. Later post-graduate studies and the choice of a new partner in the 1980s consolidated this and sent him on a completely new trajectory, where he cut ties with a lucrative vocation in private industry and began working on sustainability issues with young people at home and in developing countries. His life became focused on North-South connections and shared perspectives on common issues. Eventually this change in direction brought about the end to residency in Australia.

Sustainable development thus emerged as central to George's work and after choosing to return to Britain in the late 1990s, he continued on the same track, which became increasingly focused, in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century on education related to climate change. By the time he retired in 2016, George had worked for more than thirty years in the field of global education, the final decade prioritizing work with schools and their communities related to tackling the climate crisis. This work, germinating in 80s Australia had had an influence on many thousands of young people, across three countries: the UK, India and Kenya.

And perhaps the main decision that George took in later life, was the one that involved his work in Africa. This began in the late 1990s, when he decided that schools he was involved with in England could connect to schools in Kenya. This choice was good for work but ended up having a detrimental impact on his private life, causing separation from his partner of twenty years. Then, after ten years of knowing Kenya, George chose to work, live, and eventually retire to that country's tropical seaboard.

Who can guess what branch choices are still to come and in which direction they might send him? In his later years, the choices for George will most likely be less consequential as he gets closer to that final twig on the outer extremities of his personal tree. He lives alone and focuses on writing related to life: his own and the world around him. Mostly, today's decisions involve where to eat and what to drink, but there are still some important branches – not just twigs – to decide upon. Will he continue to live in Kenya, or alternatively return to one of the countries where he retains the right to reside: Australia or Britain? Should he continue to travel to those countries with which he is most familiar - India or Italy - or does he, in later years, have the courage to strike out for new destinations, perhaps Vietnam or Greece: two of his bucket-list of places that he would still like to become acquainted with.

All being well, and for a few years yet, we trust that George will still be confronted by those relatively major forks along the way and will continue to navigate them according to choice. Eventually – as for all of us – he will reach that last deciduous twig, which in turn will turn yellow, then brown, and descend back to the earth below, next to the base of the trunk from where it first found life. Then, for George, the circle of life's tree, along with its accompanying multiplicity of choices, will have been completed.

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