

CHRISTINE'S CALL

CHRISTINE TOWNEND — AUTHOR OF *A LIFE FOR ANIMALS*

INTERVIEW BY ELIZABETH WALTON

THE COMING OF SPRING threw a blanket of colour over the gardens of late 1950s Sydney. From the city to the burbs the streets were humming. Post-war concerns had given way to a culture of domestic perfection, with the division

of men's roles from women's roles, and a fascination with hemlines, kitchen appliances, baking and such things.

In one such kitchen stood a young girl, whose mother was upwardly mobile and fashioned for conformity. Her father was endowed with a fairy godmother's sprinkle of artistic magic.

Though this girl may have liked to paint, her mother preferred her to be elegantly presentable. Though she may like to run wild with the horses, careless, carefree, uncontrolled, her mother preferred she lend a hand in the kitchen, hoping Christine could help her project a certain sophistication that would make the family appear not just memorable, but mentionable, in the best of circles. And though her mother may have preferred to see this girl engrossed in the glossy pages of *Vogue Style*, Christine would rather take the fashion magazines she found on display in elite restaurants and other establishments of influence, and replace them with her own copies of outlawed communist magazines. For this was not just any young girl, this was Christine Townend.

And this was not just any kind of life.

As the mother-daughter tensions see-sawed, Christine blossomed into a young woman eager to burst free of the constrictions of domestic Australian life. During her university studies she met Jeremy, the most loyal of life companions, and followed the footsteps of convention – from choosing a beloved, to making a home, and settling down to raise a family of two delightful boys. For a time, it looked as though this may have been the mid chapter of her narrative. Yet Christine's story had barely begun.

After strong success as an emerging writer in the 1970s, with a promising sideline as a visual artist, in 1975 Christine found herself immersed in a book that redirected her life.





Painting by Christine Townend

Animal Liberation by Peter Singer is a seminal philosophical work which developed the concept that humans practice a form of speciesism, believing their lives mattered more highly than those of “lesser” species.

The encounter was a pivotal moment, awakening in her a deep sense that beyond the role of artist, writer, mother, was a call to live by this essential code of respect for the life of all species, including animals, insects, and the natural world at large.

Buzzing with the possibilities a shift in attitude could bring, Christine's path brought her into contact with Milo Dunphy, one of Australia's pioneering environmental campaigners. The son of Miles Dunphy, this family had a long established role in initiating change in Australia's politically progressive landscape.

“It seemed to Milo as though it was perfectly simple what I needed to do,” Christine says. “As soon as we met he offered me space at the Total Environment Centre to set up an animal liberation organisation”.

Whilst this seemed like a fabulous and necessary idea, there were a few practical realities to consider; the first of which were her family responsibilities. Although Christine's husband Jeremy was a young lawyer with a busy legal firm, he accepted that what his wife needed to do was pursue her calling and the family quickly adapted.

After inspecting Australian farms and seeing the conditions livestock were being exposed to for the benefit of commercial gain and expediency, in 1976 Christine established Animal Liberation Australia. With kids in tow she fronted up to scenes most people could never face and began to challenge the core of the system until the faint trace of fault lines began to show, and it looked as though the Australian community may some day begin to embrace change.

Her personal choice changed overnight, and she decided to live in a way which is respectful to the life of all sentient

beings. “From the moment I saw the way animals were treated in Australia, I became a vegetarian. Right away. There was no such thing then really as a vegan. And I was seen as a radical because I refused to eat meat.”

Through Christine's work the lives of Australian farm animals gradually began to improve.

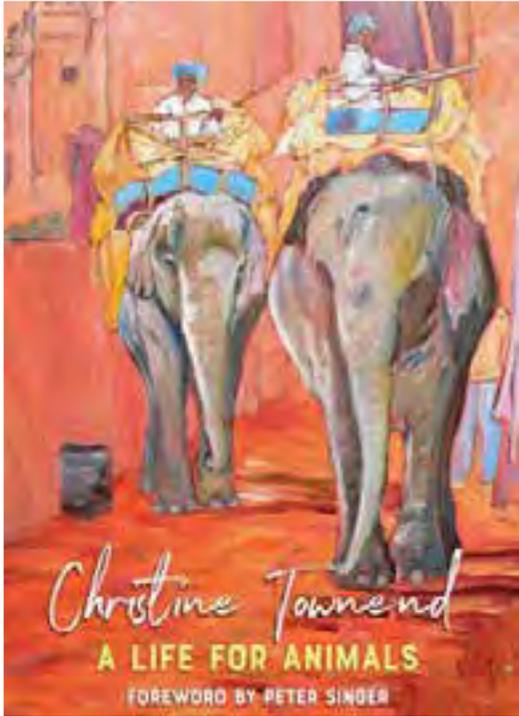
Australian interest in vegan food and lifestyle is growing by the day. With the rise of vegan food festivals, vegan cafes and a demand from consumers for genuine vegan food options, being vegan in 2017 is closer to mainstream than ever.

Yet these triumphs proved hard won feats. 1970s farming practices were backed by corporate profits and government endorsements which laid the golden egg of an affluent Australian lifestyle. A one woman initiated war against culturally entrenched lifestyle choices proved to be a mighty clash. By 1990, the battlefield of the Australian political climate had the better of her and Christine resigned from Animal Liberation.

While her family may have felt this would be the end of her campaigning, her greatest crusade was yet to begin. Though her resignation hailed the end of an era for a project that demanded so much of one person, and it may have seemed like a time for unravelling and licking battle wounds, an invitation to India began a whole new chapter of Christine's life which was to have an even more profound influence on the lives of animals and humans.

Arriving in Jaipur, Christine was shocked by the appalling conditions of street animals, working animals, and even the health of humans. She became a Director of an organisation that helped on many levels. Under her guidance, the Help In Suffering organisation introduced programs that inoculated dogs against rabies, desexed them and returned them to their neighbourhoods where they could live happily without infecting others or over-breeding.

To respect life, beings must be able to co-exist. “When I



first moved to India," Christine says, "there was a village, and outside the village were empty paddocks. Now the paddocks are all covered with cement and McMansions with no sight of a tree. The lack of planning has completely changed Jaipur and Rajasthan."

"Camels were an important part of the transport and they did suffer. But at least the human-animal relationship existed. Today, the breeders don't know what to do with their camels."

When our way of life turns in all the paddocks and rolls out all the cement, life is not served. Expediency attends an entirely different master. "There would always be a man ploughing a field with a bullock, just like there has been for all time, and they would work there together with love and affection. Now that has all gone and people buy packaged milk from the supermarket," Christine says.

"I personally am a vegan. Since the time I first saw the way farming animals were

treated in Australia, and I could never return to eating the flesh of animals, but there is no relationship better than the relationship between humans and animals. There must be some middle path in life, where animals live with respect and are farmed by small producers who are responsible for the lives of their herds."

To find the vein of life that is sacred is to live life as a complete artform. Few among us do it well. Christine's calling to work with animals and change their existence continues, both in India and Australia, where she continues to write and paint and revere all forms of life. And though she may not be eternally present to the fight for life on the once princely subcontinent, her artworks serve to remind us all where beauty lives in the hearts of divine creatures.

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Indian Cattle Walking, painting by Christine Townend





The animal shelter in India



There's a life, this thing called life. And it's a life that's inside you, and it's inside me. It's the life that's bursting and running and living and being inside every – living – thing. And in the living a dying, a decay, a departure from all that came before you and all that falls away. And in all that living is a choice, a moment, a call, the decision to flow within this form of life, to let it flow through you. Or whether to let it all float away.

Do we let it float away? Do we call upon this life and say 'I must obey you night and day?' And does that determination take us closely towards the path of those around us, so that we may follow in their footsteps along the path they have determined? Or does that path take us in our own direction, one our kin would barely recognise?

Who do we take with us as we follow along our way? Do we sacrifice another life in the dedication of our own? How do we choose when life is sacred, where we shall place our feet and where we shall cast our stepping stone?

Life is certainly an artform, this thing called life.

