

A woman with short curly hair, wearing a light green short-sleeved dress with a matching apron and a small green hat, stands in a kitchen. She is holding a large bouquet of orange flowers. The kitchen has a black and white checkered floor, a white cabinet with green canisters on top, a white refrigerator, and a clock on the wall. The title 'Housewife Superstar!' is written in a large, white, cursive font across the center of the image.

Housewife Superstar!

A small, gold, star-shaped sticker is placed on the top left corner of the sign.

ADVICE
(and Much More)
FROM A
NONAGENARIAN
DOMESTIC GODDESS

DANIELLE WOOD



*Danielle Wood and Marjorie Bligh at Marjorie's
Devonport home. (Photo by Bob Iddon)*

DANIELLE WOOD

Housewife Superstar!

Danielle Wood is the author of a novel, *The Alphabet of Light and Dark* (2003; winner of The Australian/Vogel's and Dobbie literary awards), and a collection of stories, *Rosie Little's Cautionary Tales for Girls* (2006). She lives in Hobart and teaches at the University of Tasmania.

HOUSEWIFE SUPERSTAR!

Housewife Superstar!

*Advice (and Much More) from a
Nonagenarian Domestic Goddess*

DANIELLE WOOD



Faber and Faber, Inc.

An affiliate of Farrar, Straus and Giroux

New York

Faber and Faber, Inc.
An affiliate of Farrar, Straus and Giroux
18 West 18th Street, New York 10011

Copyright © 2011 by Danielle Wood
All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America
Originally published in 2011 by The Text Publishing Company, Australia
Published in the United States by Faber and Faber, Inc.
First American edition, 2013

Selected material, including photographs and original text, has been provided with the express permission and courtesy of Marjorie Bligh. All copyright in such material rests with Marjorie Bligh. The views expressed in this material are Marjorie Bligh's, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the author or publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data tk

Designed by W. H. Chong

www.fsgbooks.com
www.twitter.com/fsgbooks • www.facebook.com/fsgbooks

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

*For my grandmothers,
Polly Hawkins and Barbara Wood*



Time is the greatest gift there is. When time is gone, nothing else matters, so you must never waste it. You can't hoard it, like money—you can only spend it. But once it's spent, you can't get it back. You must spend it wisely, the first time—for it is the greatest gift you have.

Seasoning tip: Keep salt and pepper in one shaker for seasoning. Saves time. (3 of salt to 1 of pepper.)

—*Marjorie Bligh*



Contents



Introduction 3

1.

Marjorie Pearsall 19

2.

Marjorie Blackwell 49

3.

Marjorie Cooper 105

4.

Marjorie Bligh 145

5.

The Edna Question 177

Coda 000

Books by Marjorie Bligh 000

Acknowledgements 000

HOUSEWIFE SUPERSTAR!

Introduction



M^{ADDEN} Street, in the north-west Tasmanian town of Devonport, is a placid stretch of modest brick houses, obedient lawns, and lace curtains that you might fancy to be prone to the odd twitch. At number 163—a red-brick bungalow with a white weatherboard second-storey extension and a backyard graced by a scale replica of the Tamar River's Batman Bridge—lives housewife superstar Marjorie Bligh. As I write, she is ninety-four years old, and almost certainly muttering into her coffee cup about the dire consequences that will befall me if I fail to finish this book before she dies.

Domestic goddess and pioneer recycler, author and self-promoter, Marjorie is a formidable character. Thrice married, twice widowed and once divorced, she has produced a library of books, including a signature household manual revised and published under each of her married names. Her self-styled career as a newspaper columnist and author began in the 1950s, when she was squeezed out of competing in the domestic categories of Tasmania's regional agricultural shows after many years of mercilessly blitzing the competition with her

jams, cakes, biscuits, bread, pickles, vegetables, flowers, knitting, sewing and crochet.

A queen of the household scene, Marjorie is the go-to girl when you have any manner of problem. She knows what to do when a goldfish has constipation (feed it Epsom salts), how to restore a crushed ping-pong ball (put it in boiling water), how to find the end of the sticky tape (hold it over a steaming kettle and wait for it to peel up) and what to do when you run out of rouge on your way to the ball (cut a beet in half and slap it on your cheeks). Raised in a time of privation, she knows how to unpick and lengthen the sleeves of children's sweaters, how to make mock oysters (it involves lambs' brains) and how to stretch butter from here to eternity. She knows that an old-fashioned corset-style brassiere can have a second life staked out in the garden as a plant protector and that you can glam up a pair of dull evening shoes with the addition of a pair of glittery clip-on earrings. Famous for never wasting a thing, Marjorie had her second-storey extension custom built as a museum to show off the items she has knitted and crocheted out of such unlikely materials as plastic shopping bags and used pantyhose. It also houses her handmade dancing gowns, souvenir teaspoons, toby jugs, scrapbooks, and the bottle collection that was the pride and joy of her third husband, Eric Bligh.

For Marjorie, less is never more. In her home there is a place for everything, and everything is in its place—but there is scarcely an inch of surface space that has been left free of objects: ornaments, trinkets, photographs, certificates, pot plants, cushions, books, bric-a-brac. In her backyard there is no lawn, since every square foot of space is needed for garden beds in which to grow the hundreds of species of plants that she knows and loves.

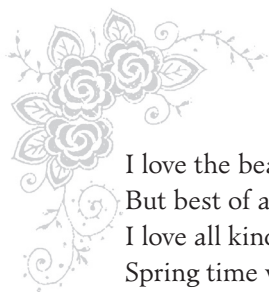
Though grass-roots in her subject matter, Marjorie has always



*Marjorie Blackwell produces a batch of scones in the kitchen
at Climar, her iconic Campbell Town home.*

had her sights set on the stars. Her books feature forewords that she has inveigled from such prominent Australians as Bob Hawke and Dame Enid Lyons. Marjorie has sent sets of her books for the edification of new prime ministers taking up residence at The Lodge, as well as to presidents of the United States. In the forecourt of Buckingham Palace she pressed a copy of one of her books into the hands of Queen Elizabeth's private secretary.

The assessment of her biggest fan, Barry Humphries, is that Marjorie is 'no slouch in the matrimonial department', either. During her first marriage, to the jack of all trades Cliff Blackwell, Marjorie had two sons and designed the family home that became the iconic 1950s Campbell Town property 'Climar' (the name is made up of the first three letters of 'Cliff' and the first three letters of 'Marjorie'). Today the house is famed for its wedding-cake curves and a wrought-iron fence studded with musical notes that sing out the opening bars of the schmaltzy standard 'Melody of Love'. Marjorie's marriage to Cliff was a sometimes violently unhappy one, and it sensationally



THINGS I LOVE

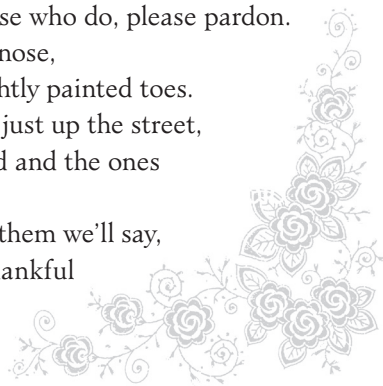
Composed by myself

I love the beautiful sunshine, the flowers and the dew,
But best of all in this wide world, I just love only you;
I love all kinds of music, new songs that are born each day,
Spring time with all its glory, and clothes that are bright and gay.
I love any kind of hobby, from knitting down to plastic;
I'm always making scrap books, I think they're so fantastic.
I love my roomy kitchen, with windows all around,
Where I can do my cooking with never ever a frown.
I love giving more than receiving—I hope you will agree,
And it's best to keep the golden rule and let your neighbours be.
I love the laughter of children ringing in my ears,
But few of us love the spoilt ones, they cause us too many tears.
I love both birds and animals, and of them I've quite a few;
I never get sick of sewing, or trying on something new.
In these verses I have written some of the things I love best,
But in the verses to follow are my hates, even down to my guest.

MY DISLIKES

—by me

I don't like morning visitors who never want to leave,
Or the ones who come with gossip—they really make me heave.
People who break promises, of that, I'll say no more,
Or the ones who say nothing, but yet they take the floor.
I just detest a windy day, doors creaking now and then,
Flies dirtying up the windows are worse than untidy men.
I don't like thoughtless people who enjoy making rows,
Or washing up a separator, or milking jolly cows.
Dusting is an awful job, I'd rather weed the garden;
I don't like working in good clothes, for all those who do, please pardon.
People late for appointments are really on the nose,
So are sockettes with high heel shoes and brightly painted toes.
Of people who think they're better than those just up the street,
They're the ones with their minds not occupied and the ones
I don't want to meet.
I've finished all my hates and likes, or most of them we'll say,
But whatever goes on before me, I'm always thankful
at the end of the day.



fell apart amid feverish small-town gossip about infidelity. One of Marjorie's sons has not communicated with her since she and his father divorced in the 1960s. Marjorie's second marriage, to the schoolteacher and former preacher Adrian Cooper, was punctuated with endless love notes, breakfasts in bed, and Marjorie's territorial sniping with Adrian's adult daughters. Following Adrian's death Marjorie met her third husband, Eric Bligh—a bus driver—while out and about on a CWA (Country Women's Association) excursion, snagging him with flirtatious glances in his rear-view mirror and promises of fruitcake.

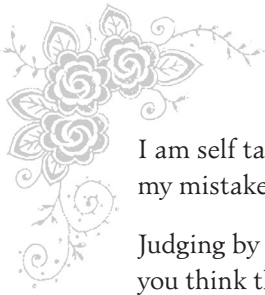
It has not, however, been enough for Marjorie to live a life filled to overflowing with gardening, knitting, sewing, crochet, embroidery, husbands, pets, cakes and jam. She has also documented that life with discipline and zeal. Her daily diary has been kept religiously, as has a torrent of handwritten correspondence. Into a scrapbook go all her sentimental items, along with every newspaper and magazine article that strikes her as interesting. She donated 191 of her scrapbooks to the Tasmanian Archive and Heritage Office, but retains nearly as many at home.

Since the publication of her first book, in 1965, Marjorie has maintained a profile in the local press. But while many people know of her, they do not necessarily know much about her. Some refer to her as 'the one with all the husbands', before making glib intimations about suspicious circumstances in the cookery department. Others know her only as 'that woman who knits things out of old stockings'. But in addition to the knitted-up pantyhose and the three erstwhile husbands, there is another thing about Marjorie that continues to fascinate. And that is a rumour as enduring and dogged as the woman herself: a rumour so stubborn and hard to shift that not even Marjorie would be able to get it out of a white tablecloth with a

mixture of methylated spirits, peroxide, lemon juice, cloudy ammonia and glycerine. This rumour has been so often repeated—in person, and in the Tasmanian press—that it has taken on the appearance of fact. Which is why many people will quite authoritatively tell you, when you mention Marjorie Pearsall/Blackwell/Cooper/Bligh, that she was the woman who inspired Barry Humphries' internationally celebrated housewife superstar, Dame Edna Everage.

Though it was the Edna question that piqued my serious interest in Marjorie Bligh, I soon found myself intrigued by Marjorie herself. Within her masses of blunt prose is an extraordinary record of social, cultural and culinary change in Australia. While never at the vanguard of food trends, Marjorie and her recipes moved with the times. Inclusions and exclusions in each new edition of her household manual chart the evolving repertoire of ordinary Australian cooks. The emphasis on thrift in the first edition gives a powerful sense of how earlier generations provisioned their households on limited incomes, finding ways to replace expensive eggs in cake recipes, supplementing butter with cheaper ingredients to make it go further, and devising 'mock' ham, turkey and cream.

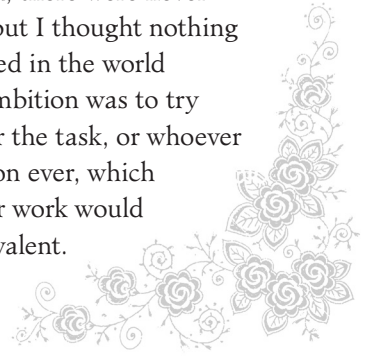
I also became interested in what Marjorie's life had to say about the circumstances and choices of women who lived through the twentieth century. I've heard it said that 'if Marjorie had put all that energy into politics, she would have been Australia's first female prime minister', and 'if Marjorie had put all that drive into being a doctor, she would have found a cure for cancer'. These backhanded compliments suggest that it has been a waste for her to spend her extraordinary energy and drive in the domestic sphere, on baking



I am self taught with everything, and have learned mostly by my mistakes.

Judging by your letters to me and verbal remarks, I think you think that I am a sort of freak, a dictionary or a doctor – someone who knows all the answers, but, my dear readers, I am only an ordinary person who has taught myself and learnt from my own and others' mistakes.

. . . the majority do not know the real Marjorie Bligh – the woman who has had to live in scanty clothes, with no father, little income, furnishings, amusement, playmates and strict discipline. In my younger days and beyond, there were never-ending demands on my time and energy, but I thought nothing of it. I have always observed that to succeed in the world one should seem a fool but be wise. My ambition was to try anything, and do everything well whatever the task, or whoever it was for. I never receive much appreciation ever, which to me is a great pity, for I think that better work would always be achieved if praise was more prevalent.



cakes, making dresses, starching tablecloths and removing stains—that energy and drive and intelligence ought to be spent in the public sphere, not the private, to be meaningful.

In recent years the Australian *60 Minutes* aired a segment titled 'Housewife Superstars', detailing a supposed trend for 'twenty-something Aussie mums' to return to the fixed gender roles of the 1950s. It was quintessential tabloid television: a handful of anecdotes construed into a social movement, a vague reference to a statistic that 'two-thirds of Australian women' would stay home if they could, a feisty cameo from Germaine Greer. The segment didn't convince me in the least, but it did draw my attention to the love-hate relationship



APRIL GIRL—ARIES

For all those born between March 21 and April 20

(My birthday is on the 14th April)

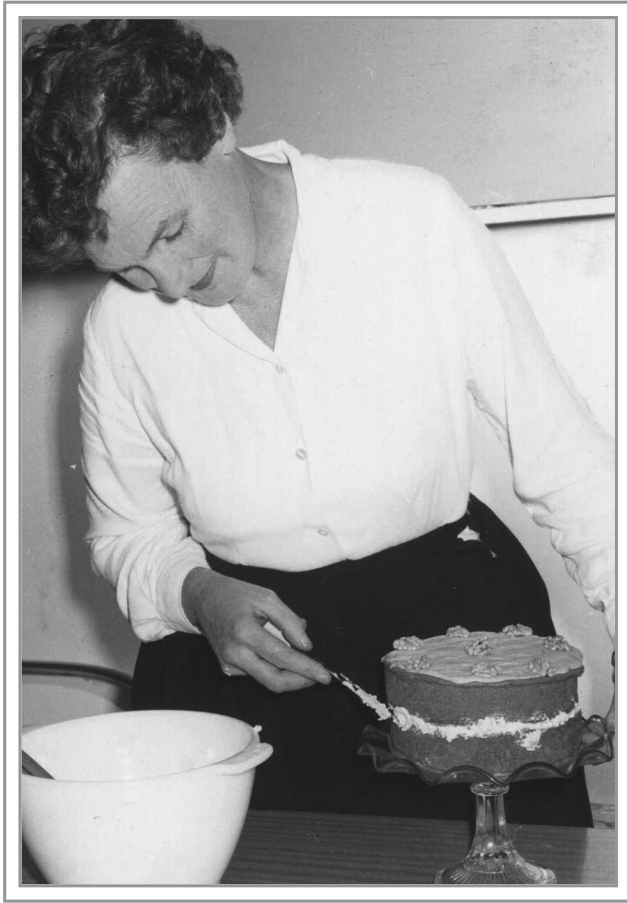
You are a leader born, and you will always Do or Die,
For you 'tis deeds, not words alone. Of work you are not shy.

Because all *Aries* have amazing energy, I am always a bit impatient with anyone who has not. I have a positive approach to life, am unpretentious and always in a hurry – striding instead of walking, and my whole attitude is one of openness and self-assurance.



my generation of women has with the domestic realm. While our grandmothers had Marjorie and others like her, we have Nigella Lawson, whose most famous book promises to teach us how to be a domestic goddess. Unlike Marjorie's books, though, Lawson's is addressed not to housewives but to working women with professional jobs who don't mind whipping up an impressive hazelnut torte on the weekend. A little extra accomplishment—not instead of, but in addition to, success in 'real' work. A frill, if you will. *How to Be a Domestic Goddess*, as Lawson says in her introduction, isn't about being a domestic goddess but about feeling like one, when the urge strikes. The book doesn't recommend that women return to the kitchen—only that it might be fun for them to holiday there.

Lawson is a success not only because she's a good cook and licks batter off her fingers in a decidedly come-hitherish way, but because she has capitalised on the trend for professional women to give themselves permission to indulge in domestic goddessery (on the weekends), provided they do it with tongue poked firmly in cheek. For the daughters of second-wave feminism, it's okay to knit



*Marjorie Blackwell demonstrates her
prize-winning cake presentation skills.*

and bake in the evenings after you've powered down your laptop. If you've got a profession securely in your pocket, you can spend your downtime in an apron without worrying that it's the thin edge of the anti-feminist wedge.

Amid this, Marjorie strikes me as an intriguing conundrum. She approached the job of housewife not without humour, but absolutely without irony. For her, professional housewifery is a serious and legitimate undertaking, unquestionably worthy of the highest levels of ambition. 'Being a housewife is a job, and I think I did a good

job of it. I believed in starched tablecloths and serviettes. I even embroidered the tea towels. I was a happy little housewife,' she told me. This does not make her unusual among her generation, but Marjorie has never been content to be a domestic goddess only within her own home. Through her fiercely competitive approach to show cookery, and later through writing newspaper columns and books, Marjorie strove to make the domestic the wellspring of public recognition and success. While *60 Minutes* stressed the contentedness of those young women 'forsaking the corporate catfight' so they could spend their time cooking and cleaning, Marjorie's approach to housewifery had nothing to do with complacent contentment, or with retreat from the wider world.



(from) **HINTS FOR HORS D'OEUVRES,
DRINKS AND SAVOURIES Etc.**

Cut some white or brown bread into finger lengths. Fry each in hot oil after being dipped quickly in cold milk. Drain on brown paper. Spread with mayonnaise and top with a sardine.

Frosted grapes make an attractive party dish. Wash and dry well, then dip in whipped egg-white, toss in castor sugar, and dry on a rack.

Imitation carrots look very realistic and a friend (the late Mrs. Knowles) gave me this recipe:— Take 1 teaspoon butter and 1 teaspoon Kraft cheese. Colour with cochineal. Shape in to a miniature carrot and put a tiny sprig of parsley in the crown. Place each one on a buttered savoury biscuit.

If you want coloured eggs for your savoury eggs or salad, boil them in the water that you have left over from your redbeet. What a colourful salad you will have.

Grill a piece of bacon that has been wrapped around a prune or ripe banana and held by a tooth-pick.

Another suggestion for the party table: Take oranges and cover with toothpicks. Make some cream cheese, mix with chopped parsley into a paste. Form into balls and push one on each tooth-pick. Soak some prunes in gin or sherry, then make a jelly with the gin or sherry and half water and gelatine. Dip the prunes that have been on a tooth-pick into the jelly and when almost set, take out and stick into an orange.

Cut Belgium sausage into slices (thinly). Insert a small coloured onion in centre of each slice and roll up. Push a small coloured onion onto a tooth-pick, then through the roll of sausage, then finish with another differently coloured onion. Place on plate.

Cut a pineapple in half lengthwise and scoop out pineapple and cut into squares. Put back in pineapple case and top with cream.

GLAD WRAP HINT: Glad Wrap is easier to handle and not so sticky if you keep it in the refrigerator.

Contact Lens

If you drop one, make the room dark, then shine a torch over the floor and the lens will sparkle in the light.

Coat Hanger from Bread Wrappers

Cut 4 bread wrappings into 20mm strips. Cast on 12 stitches with number 7 knitting needles and knit a strip the length of a coat hanger, then sew the edges together over the hanger. Makes a very pretty gift. Keep hands, needles, and bread wrap dusted with talcum for smooth knitting.

Carpet (small article lost)

To find a small object dropped on the carpet, pull a stocking over the vacuum cleaner hose, fasten securely and sweep over the area. The cleaner will suck the object into the stocking.

Christmas Wrapping Paper

Used paper can be made good again by spraying with spray starch and ironing with a warm iron.

Brassiere Renewed

A Mrs Dorothy Redburn of Burnie, who was 74 in 1986, sent me a sketch of a pair of bras she renovated, and asked me to pass the idea on. She said she cut away all the perished elastic at the back, and sewed on in its place some heavy duty elastic bandage that she once used for a sprained muscle on her leg. She now just slips the brassiere over her head like you would your frock.

Husbands Compared

(from *Life Is for Living*)

Cliff was strong, short, nuggety, but well proportioned (Adrian, short and slim, Eric tall, strong but wedge shaped).

Cliff never kissed me goodbye or good night (Adrian never forgot and neither does Eric).

If you asked Cliff to bring you some carrots he wouldn't know where they were (Adrian – and Eric – do the gardening and Adrian when asked to bring four carrots, brought four carrots, but Eric if asked, more than likely will bring you ten).

Adrian loved going to church and reading the Bible – he had been a minister – and Eric is happier at home. Cliff never turned up even for his own birthday parties I gave him every year on the 17th March.

Deodorant wasn't heard of in [Cliff's day]. Adrian used it in abundance, and when I first met Eric, he didn't think he needed it.

Cliff wasn't perturbed by flies, Adrian had screens put on windows and doors, but Eric will chase a fly till he is exhausted and look out fly if he has a spray can.



Eric Bligh, the bus driver who became Marjorie's third husband.

Sometimes [Cliff] would forget the detergent altogether. Adrian was sparing when he did [the washing up], and Eric is heavy handed and likes cool water.

Cliff was not the least bit interested in my first book, Adrian read it from cover to cover and Eric does not read much so does not know the contents of any.

Cliff was always noisy, even with walking, and his high pitched voice told you when he was about. Adrian's voice was clear and distinct, but Eric has a low, soft voice and does not open his mouth very wide, so quite often I do not catch what he says.

[Adrian] was very quick in his actions (Cliff strode about as if he didn't have a minute to spare, and Eric is just the opposite).

Adrian always controlled his temper because he used to say that anger was a short madness, but this day he lost it for a second he was so hurt. (Cliff had a violent temper, Eric a quick one, but he is soon over it.)

Clifford . . . means "brave" (he certainly was). Adrian's name means "pessimistic and hard to please" and Eric's name means "like a prince".

*Marjorie's favourite
picture of her second
husband, Adrian
Cooper, taken during
a holiday to his
home state of South
Australia.*





Marjorie Blackwell, resplendent in her 1950s dancing attire.



Marjorie's 1955 Campbell Town dream home, Climar, as it is today. The name is a combination of the first three letters of Cliff's and Marjorie's names.



163 Madden Street, Devonport, as it was in the 1970s, featuring the multicoloured triple-arched porch added by Marjorie and Adrian.



Marjorie, with Freda Fi Fi at heel, crosses the replica Batman Bridge that in the 1970s became a feature of her Devonport backyard. The concrete pond represents the Tamar River, and miniature picnic tables complete the scene.



The queen of repurposing, Marjorie crochets old plastic bags to create colourful hats, bags and coverings for disposable-but-useful containers.

MY DARLING



"I LOVE YOU"

**I DO
I DO!**



On a page of her 1976 wedding scrapbook, Marjorie is pictured with her third husband, Eric Bligh. The bride wore a princess-line gown that she made from blue embossed voile and white lace.



The style of glasses Marjorie favoured during the 1970s and '80s sparked comparisons to Australia's most famous domestic goddess, Dame Edna Everage.