

DOT BUTLER (NEE ENGLISH) AND MARY STODDART – WALKING PIONEERS

I have written previously on the feats of our first 2 Australian centurions, **Gordon Smith** (C1) and **Jack Debert** (C1A) who qualified by walking 100 miles within 24 hours at Centennial Park, Sydney, in October 1937.

Overall, 4 long distance walks were held in Sydney during the 13 month period from September 1937 to October 1938.

Sept 5,1937	NSW Amateur Walking Club 50 Mile Trial	Centennial Park, Sydney
Oct 10-11,1937	NSW Amateur Walking Club 24 Hour Trial	Centennial Park, Sydney
Sept 17, 1938	NSW Amateur Walking Club 12 Hour Trial	Centennial Park, Sydney
Oct 15-16, 1938	NSW Amateur Walking Club 24 Hour Trial	Bankstown Oval, Sydney

Smith and Debert were among a small but enthusiastic group of walkers who contested these events, with most of them members of both the NSW Amateur Walking Club and the Sydney Bush Walkers. However, what has been lost in the mists of time are the performances of two trailblazing female walkers, **Dorothy (Dot) Butler nee English** and **Mary Stoddart**.

What makes their performances so special is the fact that, during that period, long strenuous exercise was frowned upon for those of the “weaker sex”. The 880 yards walk was the longest racewalking event in which women could participate, a restriction which lasted until 1967, when women could finally race over a “long” distance like 3km. Female runners were similarly hard done by, with the distances just as ridiculously small.

Here is what happened.

NSW 24 Hour Trial, Centennial Park, Sydney, 10-11 October 1937

The second of the 1937 walks was a 24 Hour Trial, put on by the NSW Amateur Walkers Club and held over a 2 mile course in Centennial Park in Sydney. This was the race in which Gordon Smith and Jack Debert finished first and second, both walking in excess of 100 miles and both being retrospectively awarded Australian Centurion status. A *Sydney Morning Herald* article of Monday 11th October 1937 sums it up nicely: ¹

The placings were as follows:

1. Gordon Smith	110 miles 831 yards
2. Jack Debert	100 miles 266 yards
3. Dave Stead	80 miles 371 yards
4. C. N. Smith	retired at 20 miles (4hrs 11m 3s)

A 30-mile scratch race was also held and it saw 26 year old Dorothy English come third with a time of 7:11:45.

1. Bill Hall	5h 49m 55s
2. Max Gentle	6h 12m 45s
3. Dorothy English	7h 11m 45s

NSW Amateur Walking Club 12 Hour Walking Trial, Centennial Park, 17 September 1938

The first of the two 1938 walks was a 12 Hour Trial put on by the NSW Amateur Walking Club and staged in Centennial Park in Sydney. Like the other events in this period, it provided yet another record breaking opportunity for Gordon Smith who set a new Australian 12 Hour record of 65 miles and 781 yards (105.321km). It also saw 27 year old Dorothy English complete 40 miles in 10 hours and 20 minutes (most of it barefoot) and 22 year old Mary Stoddart complete 32 miles in 7:39:15.

1. Gordon Smith	65 miles 781 yards (50 miles in 8:50:25, 100 km in 11:21:30)
2. Harry Barrett	59 miles 1367 yards
3. Jack Debert	57 miles 781 yards
4. Max Gentle	54 miles 414 yards
5. M. Stannett	53 miles 1514 yards
? Dorothy English	40 miles in 10 hours and 20 minutes (barefoot)
? Mary Stoddart	32 miles in 7:39:15.

1 See <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/17418034>

Their efforts were captured in the Sydney newspapers *The Sydney Sun*² and *The Daily Telegraph*³ Extracts are reproduced below and make for fascinating reading. The main reason that the two women stopped was that they each had bushwalks planned for the next day and did not wish to do too much damage the day before!



Competitors in the New South Wales Walking Club's 12-hour marathon at Centennial Park to-day started off with zealous hearts and fresh bodies. Left, the only two women competitors, Miss Mary Stoddart (left) and Miss Dorothy English, who walked without shoes. Right.—Merv. Ray, warming up, doffs his coat and strides forward on a 65-mile "ambition."

She Walked Forty Miles in Ten Hours

A SYDNEY NURSE'S ANSWER TO MALE HIKER'S CHALLENGE

DOROTHY ENGLISH, a Sydney nurse, claims to be Australia's most enthusiastic woman walker.

Last week she walked 40 miles in 10 hours around Centennial Park. This is not bad walking in any man's shoes, but Miss English did it in her bare feet. She finds walking easier that way.

The occasion was the challenge issued by the men of the Sydney Walking Club to the women of the Bushwalkers' Club to join them in their annual walking marathon, nicknamed the "Bunton Derby," just to see if they were real walkers.

Dorothy English and a friend, Mary Stoddart, joined the male walkers in the long hike, and surprised them with their endurance.

Miss Stoddart dropped out after doing 33 miles in seven and a half hours. She wasn't tired, but she was really going walking the following day, and she didn't want to overdo it.

Miss Stoddart, by the way, is studying architecture, and has designed some beautiful homes.

Miss English walked 40 miles before deciding to call it a day.

Fair hair, blue-eyed, and sturdy, Miss English is a nurse at the Royal Alexandra Hospital for Children, where she cares for the little infantile paralysis victims.

"I suppose my nursing career got me used to walking," she says, "but I have always loved a hike. There is some sort of challenge to me in the test of endurance it offers."

"This young lass has done some amazing things. For instance, after completing her forty miles around the park she left for Faulconbridge, where, after a hike of several miles, she called a halt for the night.

She slept on a "bed of pine needles," to use her own expression, and was up at dawn for a walk with friends through the Grose River country.

She said it was very rough walking through the mountains, over rocks, and in the bush, but, as usual, she wore no shoes.

"It is preferable," she says simply, "I don't slip and slide about. I have a much firmer footing. No, my feet are never cut or bruised—I'm afraid they are too tough for that.

"My mother is a psychologist, and believes that her children should have complete self-expression. I have three brothers and it was natural I should enter into their games and outdoor sports.

All Athletic

"My brothers are all very athletic. One wins tennis tournaments, another excels in sailing. He has just recently built himself a yacht and has gone off to the islands.

"My third brother loves the water, too, but he prefers canoeing to sailing. He belongs to a canoe club.

"I have my own canoe at Balmoral, and often go out beyond the Heads in it.

"The only trouble I ever had was when a Mosman ferry hit me. How that captain did swear!

"Everything went to the bottom, but it came up again, and we retrieved everything, turned the canoe right side up, and paddled home again.



"I do a lot of bicycling. I really don't know which I enjoy most—that or walking."
"My first long trip alone was to Koochieko and back. I bicycled all the way, and did a lot of ski-ing while there. That was grand fun!"



DOROTHY ENGLISH (left) and her friend **Mary Stoddart** starting out on a marathon walk around Centennial Park. Shortly after this picture was taken Miss English discarded her shoes for her forty-mile walk in ten hours.

LEFT: Miss English, marathon walker, poses for the camera just to prove that strenuous exercise such as long-distance hiking does not result in muscles or masculinity.

"Next I did a three weeks' bicycle tour of Tasmania.

"Other than my fare to Tasmania and return, I spent only two shillings.

"I lived on biseberries and fruit which were given to me by the farmers along the way.

"I carried a small tent with me and camp equipment, but I slept in the open most of the time. The weather was beautiful.

"No, I'm never afraid. I have never been molested or even frightened."

Perhaps Miss English's most outstanding achievement to date is the

mountain climbing in the Warrumbungle Range. She and Dr. Eric Dark, of Katoomba, reached the crater of an extinct volcano—a feat of strength and endurance not many men find possible, for it has never been climbed before or since.

A member of this mountaineering group was Marie Byles, who has just gone to Western China, on the border of Tibet, where she will do some serious mountaineering. Miss Byles is a Sydney solicitor.

Dorothy English has a soft, well-modulated, cultured voice, rather a shy manner, and blushes easily. She is a vegetarian, and eats sparingly, even on long hikes.

2 See <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/230812732>

3 See <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/247356829>

NSW Amateur Walking Club 24 Hour Walking Trial, Bankstown Oval, 15-16 October 1938

A month later, the NSW Amateur Walking Club hosted a 24 Hour Walking Trial on the asphalt track around the Bankstown Oval in western Sydney, with all the main walkers back in action again. This meet provided another opportunity for Gordon Smith to improve his 24 Hour distance from 110 miles to 113 miles; he was as usual the star attraction.

The newspapers of the time reported on the race, which saw 5 men and 1 woman (Mary Stoddart this time) in action. Two such articles were in The Sydney Morning Herald ⁴ and The Sydney Sun ⁵. To quote:

The girl, Miss Mary Stoddart, a stockily built 22-year-old, had a reputation as a bush walker and hoped to establish a record for a 12 hours walk. ... At a steady pace, Stoddart went round and round the track until she reached the 50 mile mark in 12 hours 16 minutes 45 seconds. Not surprisingly, she suffered from blistered feet and fatigue.

When Stoddart completed her 50 mile walk in October, she took her sleeping bag to the centre of the oval and slept until 6am the next morning.

1. Gordon Smith 113 miles, 1309 ½
2. H. W. Barrett retired at 78 miles
3. **Mary Stoddart** **retired at 50 miles (12:16:41)**
4. E. Mitchell retired at 38 miles (144 laps) with cramps
5. D. D. Shead retired at 38 miles (143 laps) with cramps
6. S. Sheedy retired at 20 miles (3:06:32)

Girl Steps Out With Men In A Giddy Walk Round An Oval



Newspaper caption: Competitors in the 24 hours' walk around Bankstown Oval, who began their arduous task yesterday at 10:37a.m. Left to right: E. MITCHELL, whose face shows traces of the strain of the contest; S. SHEEDY, making good progress; H. W. BARRETT, accepting a drink; G. A. SMITH, who won the event last year, and covered 110 miles, 831 yards: MISS MARY STODDART, aged 22, the only woman competitor, eating fruit salad as she walks, objects to the camera, and another snap of MISS STODDART, refreshed and striding along. ⁶

It would not be until the early 1970s that another female walker, Adelaide based Lillian Harpur, would test herself out over longer racewalking distances but, even then, over 30 years later, she still had to battle officialdom to get her performances recognised. ⁷

⁴ See <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/17528674>

⁵ See <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/230814292>

⁶ See <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/230814292>

⁷ See <http://www.vrwc.org.au/tim-archive/articles/wa-lillian-harpur.pdf>

In the 1920's and 1930's, bushwalking was one of the few pastimes in which women could participate alongside men and in which they could break the barriers and norms that usually constrained the female 50% of the population. Bushwalking took off in the 1920s and the Sydney Bush Walkers, of which both Stoddart and English were members, was the first mixed gender bushwalking club in NSW.

Both women were early members of the club, which had been formed in 1927, and both were contributors to the monthly club magazine *The Sydney Bushwalker* and spent time on the Editorial Committee. Dot English was a wonderfully vivid writer. In particular, read *That's Why* to find out the background to her love of the bush. A selection of her articles follows

May 1936	<i>See Tasmania for Two Shillings</i> by Dot English ⁸
Nov 1937	<i>Breaking into New Country</i> by Dot English ⁹
Feb 1938	<i>Bush Walkers in New Zealand</i> by Dot English [Dot Butler] ¹⁰
Nov 1938	<i>A Scientist in the Mountains</i> by Dot English [Dot Butler] ¹¹
Feb 1939	<i>That's Why</i> by Dot. English ¹²
May 1940	<i>Easter Among New Zealand Snows</i> by Dot English ¹³

Further, Dot was one of only two women in the elite *Tiger Walkers* who travelled light and fast in their explorations of new areas for which topographic maps did not exist. They were among the main contributors who assembled information for the Myles Dunphy sketch maps of the Blue Mountains.

There is one very interesting article that describes a weekend walk of 82 miles in the Blue Mountains (very rugged Australian mountain range) outside Sydney by members of the Tiger Walkers. This long weekend walk was 2 weeks before the Sept 1937 event in which Gordon Smith and Jack Debert both walked 100 miles within 24 hours and Dot walked 30 miles. She comes across in this article as very much a free spirit! ¹⁴

Dot was also secretary of the NSW Ranger's League and her forthright views on the bush are captured in a wonderful indepth article in *The Weekly Times* of 4th January 1936 ¹⁵. She was certainly no shrinking violet when it came to environmental issues.

While Mary Stoddart was not a regular contributor to the club newsletter, she does get her fair share of mentions in archival photos or newspaper clippings

1940	Bushwalking Photo (Stoddart on far left) ¹⁶
1940	Bushwalking photo (Stoddart is third from right) ¹⁷
Jan 1941	Lost in a Cave ¹⁸

In summary, Dot and Mary were serious bushwalkers, part of that generation of outdoor Australians, tough and resilient and well ahead of the game in terms of women's rights and their ability to match it with the men.

But the story does not end there, as Dot English (or Dorothy Butler as she became known via her married name) had many strings to her bow. She was a wonderful climber (always in bare feet), a wonderful walker (again, always in bare feet), an avid environmentalist, a physiotherapist and nurse.

She wrote her autobiography, *The Barefoot Bush Walker*, in 1998 ¹⁹. I have ordered a copy and am waiting for it to arrive in the mail.

8 See <https://sbw.ozultimate.com/wiki/193605>

9 See <https://sbw.ozultimate.com/wiki/193711>

10 See <https://sbw.ozultimate.com/wiki/193802>

11 See <https://sbw.ozultimate.com/wiki/193811>

12 See <https://sbw.ozultimate.com/wiki/193902>

13 See <https://sbw.ozultimate.com/wiki/194005>

14 See <https://sbw.ozultimate.com/wiki/193801>

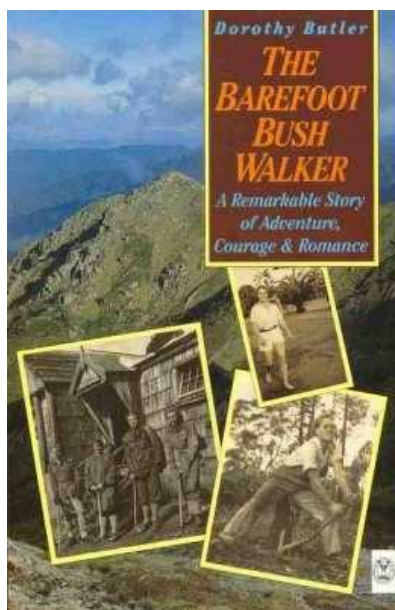
15 See <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/224861194>

16 See <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-136353495/view>

17 See <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-145885957/view>

18 See <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/118888319>

19 See <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/7566686-the-barefoot-bush-walker>



When she died in March 2008, aged 96 years, the various tributes painted a life well lived:

<https://www.australiangeographic.com.au/topics/2018/07/the-story-of-dot-butler/>

<http://www.bushwalkermagazine.org/dorothy's-tribute.pdf>

<https://www.strathfield.nsw.gov.au/blog-post/the-barefoot-bushwalker-dorothy-butler/>

Her wikipedia page (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dot_Butler) is amazing!

I finish with my two favourite photos of Dot:



Left: Jack Debert and Dot English enjoy ice creams while eating on the Kowmung River (early 1930s)

Right: Dot English climbing Crater Bluff (barefoot as usual) in 1936

I am sure that, if the Australian Centurions had existed at the time, both Dot and Mary would have been strong candidates.

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