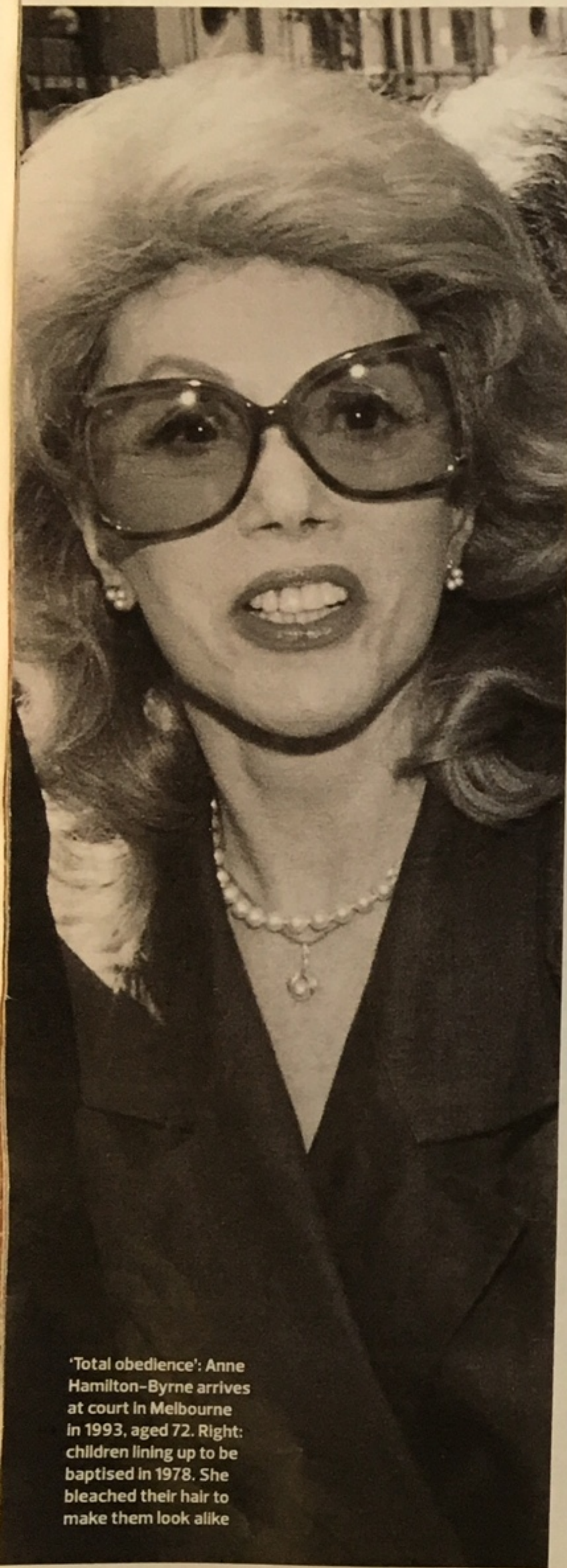


DOOMSDAY CHILDREN



Violence, LSD, brainwashing: life in The Family,
Anne Hamilton-Byrne's secretive cult



'Total obedience': Anne Hamilton-Byrne arrives at court in Melbourne in 1993, aged 72. Right: children lining up to be baptised in 1978. She bleached their hair to make them look alike

Mother of evil

Cruel and charismatic, Anne Hamilton-Byrne was the Australian leader of a doomsday cult who thought she was the Messiah. Abigail Haworth on the woman behind The Family

A

nne Hamilton-Byrne wore pearls and Chanel perfume. She played the harp and sang soprano. She had blonde hair, styled in waves that caught the light. As leader of

The Family, the Australian doomsday cult she founded in the 1960s, she claimed to be Jesus reborn as a woman. Much of her power, say her former followers, lay in her grey-blue eyes. "In ancient times we hear about enchantresses who could enslave people with one glance," says ex-acolyte Fran Parker. "She had eyes that looked through your soul." Hamilton-Byrne's ultimate tool of enslavement, however, was something she pinpointed herself in a rare radio interview after the cult's devastating abuses were exposed. "It was love. Just love."

One of the few female cult leaders in history – and apparently one of the cruellest – Hamilton-Byrne operated in almost total secrecy over two decades. Hidden away in the countryside outside Melbourne, The Family's motto was "Unseen, unknown, unheard". The police, acting on information from two child escapees, raided the cult in 1987. It emerged that over the years Hamilton-Byrne had collected 28 children through bogus adoptions and "gifts" from followers, dressing them in identical clothes and bleaching their hair platinum. To keep her eerie brood under her control, they say she subjected them to vicious beatings, starvation and emotional torture. >



> “Anne wasn’t giving love,” says Parker, whose young son was one of Hamilton-Byrne’s victims. “She was offering it and then taking it back. She broke people’s spirit.”

The glamorous guru used the same tactic on her adult followers, handpicking them from Melbourne’s wealthy professional elite with promises of spiritual fulfilment in the 1960s and 70s when new age seeking was all the rage. “I’ve been waiting for you,” she’d say on first meeting a potential recruit. “You are special.”

Preaching a mishmash of Christianity, eastern mysticism and apocalyptic prophecy, she allegedly forced followers, including children, to take dangerous amounts of LSD and other hallucinogenics as part of prolonged initiation rites. Once they had submitted, she’d dictate every aspect of their lives. “There was only one rule: do absolutely everything she said,” says David Whitaker, a former child survivor. “That included what to think, what to wear, what to eat, who to marry, who not to marry. Total obedience.”

A few years ago speculation emerged that Wikileaks founder Julian Assange had grown up in The Family. His hair colour didn’t help nor, possibly, his personality. Assange admitted that a man who was his mother’s boyfriend in the late 1970s had been a member of the cult. The man had been “a sinister presence” who sought to have “a certain psychological power” over his family, Assange said, and they eventually went on the run from him. But he said he never met Hamilton-Byrne or had any direct contact with the group as a whole.

By the time of the police raid, Hamilton-Byrne had broken up families, destroyed marriages and left her child victims with lifelong psychological scars. A number of followers tried to kill themselves, either during their time in The Family or after they escaped. Tragically, some succeeded. The cult leader amassed an estimated AU\$150m (£90m) through property, land and cash donated by followers. She hid overseas and was eventually arrested in 1993 on relatively minor fraud charges.

Together with her second husband, businessman Bill Byrne, whom one ex-follower described as “a handsome, rich, compliant handbag,” she received an AU\$5,000 fine, but no jail time. She has never been held to account for the appalling child abuse or long list of other crimes of which she was accused when the cult’s inner workings were exposed.

NOW 96, HAMILTON-BYRNE has advanced dementia and has lived in a Melbourne nursing home for the past 12 years. But her story, and those of her victims, won’t go untold, thanks to the efforts of Chris Johnston, a journalist with Melbourne-based newspaper *The Age*, and Rosie Jones, a documentary filmmaker. Johnston and Jones first met two years ago



Mother dearest: Hamilton-Byrne with one of her 28 children. The Family received copies of this picture

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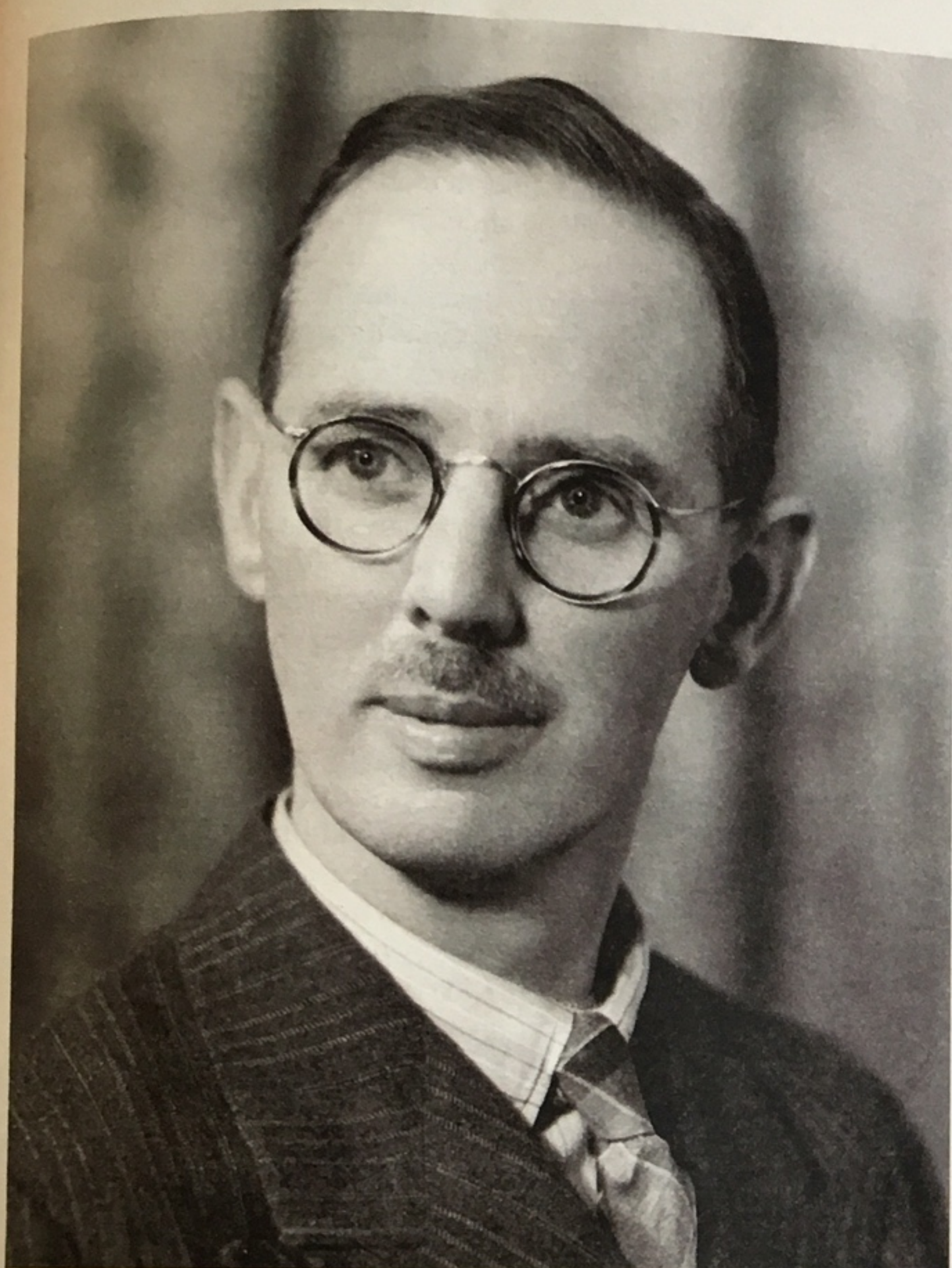
when they realised they were working separately on stories about The Family, both aware that its once all-powerful leader was nearing death. “I was mostly writing stories about what was happening to the cult’s remaining assets and structure, and Rosie was already two years into making a film about the experiences of the survivors and their long-term emotional trauma,” says Johnston.

Both New Zealanders, they discovered in a further coincidence that they came from the same home town. They decided to collaborate. Their co-authored book and Jones’s feature documentary, both titled *The Family*, are released in the UK this month.

Through one of the few followers who remains devoted, Johnston and Jones were able to visit Hamilton-Byrne at the nursing home. Her inability to give consent as a result of her dementia meant it was impossible to interview or film her. “It was an extraordinary encounter all the same,” says Jones. “She was dressed beautifully in blue and still had long silver hair.” Her hairline, however, was on the top of her head because of the numerous facelifts she had during her reign to maintain the illusion of youth and immortality. “Her speech was mostly incoherent, but she sat there nursing a plastic baby doll. She held the doll so tenderly, so gently. I found it incredibly powerful to witness,” says Jones.

There have been a handful of female cult leaders in modern history, but none to rival the destructive notoriety of men like Jim Jones, David Koresh or Japan’s Shoko Asahara. The closest is Houston-born Bonnie Lou Nettles, who co-founded the so-called UFO cult known as Heaven’s Gate with Marshall Applewhite in the 1970s. Like Hamilton-Byrne, Nettles believed she was on a divine mission, but she died of cancer 12 years before Applewhite and 38 other members committed mass suicide in 1997.

Most women founders are associated >



Follow the leader: co-founder Dr Raynor Johnson; the first children destined for Lake Eildon; and Bill and Anne with Adam, who remained loyal into adulthood

> with so-called new religions, such as Aimee Semple McPherson, who founded the Foursquare religion in Los Angeles in the 1920s, or New Jersey-born Elizabeth Clare Prophet who launched the Church Universal and Triumphant in 1975 and encouraged her followers to build fallout shelters to prepare for imminent nuclear war.

According to Johnston, one of Hamilton-Byrne's inspirations was Helena Blavatsky, a Russian-born medium who co-founded the Theosophical Society in New York in 1875. Madame Blavatsky, as she was known, was a champion of Tibetan esoteric wisdom. She described Theosophy as "the synthesis of science, religion and philosophy" and was instrumental in introducing Hinduism and Buddhism to the west.

Hamilton-Byrne first became attracted to eastern religions and mysticism when she took up yoga in her mid-30s in the late 1950s. Born Evelyn Edwards in 1921, she grew up in a one-road farming settlement two hours east of Melbourne. Her mother Florence was originally from Wandsworth in south London. Florence was diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia after setting her hair alight in the street, and spent 27 years in a psychiatric

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The children were initiated with ‘huge, relentless doses of LSD’ in trips that lasted for days

asylum until she died. Hamilton-Byrne's father was an itinerant worker and she spent time in orphanages as a child. “Anne married her first husband when she was about 20, but he died in a car accident,” says Jones. “It’s quite tragic, really. They had one daughter together and there have been rumours that she suffered a number of miscarriages after that. It’s only recently come to light that she and her husband were arranging to adopt a baby right before he died.”

Yoga became the young widow's salvation. The practice was just emerging in the west, and Hamilton-Byrne started teaching

it in the early 1960s, mostly to middle-aged women in Melbourne's well-heeled suburbs. “Anne was apparently a wonderful teacher, and these women became her first devotees,” says Johnston. “She was clever and intuitive. She knew how to find the chinks in people's armour. Often these wives were in unhappy marriages, their children had grown up, they were looking for new meaning.” Feminism was on the horizon, too. “It was a whole confluence of factors. Divorce was still not accepted, but she would encourage the women to leave their husbands to join her,” says Johnston. She also attracted gay male followers, offering them refuge from Australia's laws against homosexuality at the time.

Hamilton-Byrne's masterstroke, however, was to recruit an eminent physicist from Leeds, Dr Raynor Johnson, who was Master of Queen's College at Melbourne University. Spiritualism was gaining popularity in scientific circles and Johnson, nearing retirement, was eager to explore unconventional territory. He became besotted with the beguiling woman who claimed to have extrasensory perception. He even went one better and declared her to be the new Messiah. After experimenting with LSD – purely in the interests of >

> scientific research, he claimed – he recorded in his diary that “her face became divinely beautiful with sublime authority.” Later, he wrote that she was “unquestionably the wisest, the serenest and most gracious and generous soul I have ever met.”

Johnson and his wife bought a house in Ferny Creek, the hamlet where Hamilton-Byrne lived. The Family was born. The intellectual respectability Johnson brought to the mission enabled him and his high priestess to recruit many more wealthy, new age-seeking professionals, including doctors, psychiatrists, lawyers, nurses and social workers. They held weekly meditation sessions, and Hamilton-Byrne started giving sermons, or discourses as she called them, from a purple throne in a specially built lodge funded by donations.

The first children arrived in the early 1970s. Adoption was poorly regulated in Australia, and unmarried motherhood still carried social stigma. Through her network of followers, Hamilton-Byrne found it easy to procure infants. “You had babies born in cult hospitals, delivered by cult midwives, handed over to cult social workers,” says Lex de Man, one of only two senior detectives in the Victoria police force to try to bring charges against Hamilton-Byrne and her collaborators after the 1987 police raid. Cult lawyers would falsify the adoption paperwork. The attitude of his colleagues at the time, Man says, was that cases involving kids were “Welfare matters, not real policing.”

Hamilton-Byrne told most of the children whom she adopted fraudulently that she was their birth mother – she faked numerous pregnancies by wearing homemade smocks. She said they would survive the end of the world to become a new master race. “Everything [we wore] had to be polished and looking the same,” says Adam, a survivor in his 40s interviewed in Jones’s film, who was adopted into the cult as a baby. Naturally fair, his hair was dyed white-blond to match the others. “That was to implant in us that we were all brothers and sisters.” Yet the children knew nothing of Hamilton-Byrne’s real background until the cult hit the headlines in the late 1980s. In addition to being Jesus, she told them she came from royalty and owned castles in Europe. They not only worshipped her, they adored her, too. “We believed she was beyond the Queen of England,” says Adam.

Hamilton-Byrne housed the children in a sprawling wooden lodge at Lake Eildon, two hours away from The Family’s main base. The area was beautiful but isolated. Once a flood plain, the lake was filled with partially submerged trees jutting out of the water in dark, spiky formations. The children, whose numbers eventually grew to 28 and included a few babies born to sect members, were home schooled. Hamilton-Byrne wanted to be the



UNDER HER SPELL AN EXTRACT FROM 'THE FAMILY'

She is skeletal and pale, 95 years old and living in a nursing home in the outer suburbs of Melbourne, Australia. There are dense layers of secrecy surrounding her, as there have always been. Her followers have been told since the beginning to protect her and never to betray her. To these followers, Anne Hamilton-Byrne is a reincarnation of Jesus, a living god. But her story is one of betrayal upon bitter betrayal. Outsiders – ‘left-hand forces,’ according to Anne – are never to be trusted.

At first Anne’s cult was called the Great White Brotherhood. Then it became known as The Family, and it seemed that’s what she wanted: a family. She was glamorous and, of course, charismatic – a Kim Novak blonde who wore red to the parties the cult held. But she was cruel and ordered others to be cruel for her. She was able to make well-educated, ‘ordinary’ people do immoral things. The children she accumulated as her own allege they were abused and drugged.

Anne offered her followers a message of eternal life and hope. She took it all from many sources: Christianity, Hinduism, hatha yoga and new age journeys into crystals, auras, light, colour, LSD and magic mushrooms.

Her dementia means she can never again be challenged in court over her actions. During her life as a self-proclaimed spiritual master, her every word was taken as a glimmering truth. But now she talks only in dementia’s loop of echoes. And so... confused, rambling, and very old, Anne fields visitors from dwindling cult ranks in her tiny room, but can never properly know what has happened in her past or what might be in her future.

She pushes her protein drink away and rests her head again on her arms. She drifts in and out of sleep. When she wakes, those eyes dart around the room. ‘What’s that woman with children done?’ she says. ‘Done a bunk?’

The Family by Chris Johnston and Rosie Jones is published on 24 November by Scribe at £14.99. The documentary of the same name is on BBC 4’s Storyville from 29 November

perfect mother figure to a perfect brood, but she seemed to have no interest in raising them. If she was there when any of the children stepped out of line, they say she would often beat them herself – her weapon of choice was a stiletto shoe. But mostly she left it to the “aunties”, a number of middle-aged female followers, who feared for their own precarious place in her affections if they didn’t enforce punishments. As well as horrific beatings that make many of the cult’s now-adult survivors weep as they recall either witnessing or receiving them, the children were often starved for days for minor transgressions, such as getting their clothes dirty or forgetting to switch off a light. “Denial of food was a very large component of control,” says one survivor, who remembers being so hungry she raided bins and ate leaves. “It’s better to keep your victims weak so they have less ability to fight back.”

The survivors recall being given daily doses of Mogadon and Valium as children to keep them docile. Then, usually when they reached the age of 14, they underwent formal initiation into the cult by being given “huge, relentless doses of LSD” in trips that often lasted several days, says Chris Johnston. LSD was part of the cult’s fabric. The prolonged doses were harrowing, even for adult followers. The effects were catastrophic on some of the young teenagers, who suffered depression, personality changes, nightmares and social withdrawal, sometimes for months afterwards. And that was on top of all their other childhood traumas.

Rosie Jones says “the longlasting nature” of the emotional and psychological trauma experienced by the cult’s survivors shocked her the most during the making of her documentary. “It made me realise the critical importance of love in a child’s background.” For most of the children, Hamilton-Byrne was the only mother they had. In a police interview shortly after the 1987 raid, one rescued teenager tried to explain how she felt. “It’s hard to say how devoted we were to her; how we hung off her every look and every thought she had about us. We wanted so much for her to love us, but I don’t think she ever really did.”

Extraordinarily wealthy, with overseas properties in Kent and upstate New York, Hamilton-Byrne managed to hide her whereabouts for two years preceding her capture. She was eventually extradited to Australia from the US to face charges of conspiracy to defraud over fake birth certificates – the only charges dogged detective Lex de Man felt would stick, and his best hope of forcing her to face any sort of justice. Now she has dementia, her victims have had to come to terms with the fact that she will never be brought to account fully for her bizarre and unusual cruelty. It’s probably little consolation that all she has left to torment is a plastic doll. ■