



Balwyn Historical Society

March 2022

Newsletter - March 2022

This newsletter includes our past 3 presenters:

Gillian Yung

Topic: “Australian stories the history books don’t tell”

Dr David Hay

Topic: “A portrait and its journey home”

Brian Gunn

Topic: “Rottnest Island and its place in the history of South Western Australia”

Next meeting reminder Thursday 10th March 2022 at 8pm
Balwyn Evergreen Centre,
45 Talbot Avenue, Balwyn

We look forward to seeing members and friends for the interesting presentation by Matthew Ety-Leal on Cobb & Co. followed by refreshments.

Gillian Yung – July 2021

We were fortunate enough to hear this in person presentation between Covid restrictions and thoroughly enjoyed the following story of Mary Reiby.

Whenever one spends a \$20 Australian banknote, we can think of her story.

Gillian also spoke of Thomas Meagher.

Mary Reiby (nee Haydock) was born May 12th, 1777. As a child she was known as Molly and was taught to read and write by both parents who died early in her life. She was then raised by her grandmother. At age 12, she was put in service at a poor house. She did not enjoy being “downstairs” and ran away disguising herself as a boy called James Burrows. Unfortunately, she was arrested for stealing a horse and sentenced to transportation for 7 years. While on the Thames hulk awaiting transportation, it was discovered that she was a girl.

The voyage to Australia on the Royal Admiral had 209 men and 49 women transportees. The ship arrived on the 8th October, 1792. On the previous day on board, she had written a letter to her Aunt Penelope in which she says she was “here for life and was determined to make the most of things”, signing the letter “your dutiful niece Mary”.

At the time, Major Francis Grove a New South Wales army corps. Lieutenant was the acting Governor (Governor Phillips having returned to England due to illness). This Major Groves ignored Phillips’s instructions and gave land which was badly surveyed to his friends. Mary was assigned to the Grove family and at age 17 married an Irish junior officer, Thomas Reiby in 1794.

They were granted land on the Hawksbury River and built Figtree House in 1804. Between 1796 and 1808, Mary had 7 children, 3 of which died quite young. Her husband Thomas had a cargo business on the river in partnership with an Edward Wills and they imported goods from India and China. It was a flourishing business, so their house was quite grand. However, in 1811 Thomas Reiby died suddenly and Mary was only 33 years old. Another twist of fate, the partner Wills, died 1 month later. Mary took over the business and moved to Sydney, she was a tough business woman and often sued non- paying customers, and won. By 1812, she had bought more cargo ships and had made real estate purchases.

In 1803, Governor Macquarie took over the colony and imported 40,000 silver pieces of eight from Spain as currency, and from these the centre “dump” was punched out and was worth fifteen pence, the rest of the piece being worth five shillings. Macquarie made a profit from this process. A convict William Henshall was responsible for pushing out the dump.

1817, marked the first Bank with Mary Reiby, John Campbell, Darcy Wentworth and William Redfern at the helm. Their backgrounds were diverse: Campbell originally from Armagh, Ireland was secretary to Macquarie.

Darcy Wentworth an ex-convict was variously a surgeon, police chief and magistrate. Redfern, also an ex-convict was a surgeon and medical educator.

Mary Reiby now regarded as a respectable wealthy widow went back to England in 1820, returning to Bury, Lancashire where she had come from and discovered her grandmother's home was the same as when she had left. The following year, 1821, she returned to Sydney and in 1825 became the Governor of Sydney Free Grammar School commenting that on this return to Sydney she had arrived as a free person. She continued to buy houses and farms adding to her wealth. Mary died in 1855, survived by her 2 daughters, grandchildren and 2 sons in Tasmania. Mary Reiby was truly an amazing resourceful and entrepreneurial woman.

One can muse on the fact that Australia's first bank was run by a secretary and three ex-convicts.

Dr David Hay – December 2021

This was a thoroughly fascinating story and represented David's amazing perseverance in following up a small clue from an ageing newspaper clipping which resulted in a happy conclusion.

David, who worked as a CSIRO scientist, talked about a World War 1 soldier, Henry Wyndham Frances Blackburne Farrer. David went to an art auction in Kew in 2014 and was the successful bidder for a painting of Farrer by Frances Edwin Hodge. After being invalided out of the Army, Hodge became an official war artist, later focusing on portrait painting.

David noted there was a newspaper clipping taped to the back of the painting, later locating the original article in the London Times. Farrer volunteered for service on the 12th of August 1914 and joined as a 2nd Lieutenant with the 39th Brigade, Royal Field Artillery. He ascertained that Hodge painted Major Farrer, MC with 2 bars, at Le Chateau Vandencourt, soon before his death on 30 October 2018, 2 weeks before the war ended. One tribute: "I always considered him the bravest and most gallant officer I had ever known. We all loved him."

David's next major task was finding current members of the Farrer family, which he did. David later visited Europe and handed over the painting to them at a local church in England.

Brian Gunn – February 2022

Brian Gunn has been a guide with the Rottneest Voluntary Guides Association and President of the 300-member group which provides opportunities for visitors to this island to enjoy the many aspects of its history and environment. Brian's presentation gave us a wonderful insight into the Islands history far greater than any tourist pamphlet could.

Rottneest Island has 62 beaches and is one (19 kilometres from Perth) of seven islands off Perth. At one stage 25,000 Noongar people lived on the island when it was connected to the mainland until 6,000 years ago, and, not being boat people, they left. It is believed that they would have also retreated from the colder temperatures. The Dutch East India Company, which had a monopoly of the spice trade and particularly traded with India and Japan sometimes sailed their ships close to and explored the WA coast. The company moved more than 1 million Europeans to Asia between 1602 and 1796, during which time the company paid an average dividend of 18% per annum. Their base was Batavia now known as Jakarta (Indonesia). In 1696 Willem de Vlamingh reached Rottneest Island and in seeing quokkas, named the island believing the quokkas were rats.

In 1829 Captain (later Admiral) James Stirling visited Rottneest Island and in 1830 a settlement called Kingstown was established with 177 one-third acre lots. Between 1831 and 1839 people such as Robert and Carolyn Thompson and their 7 children unsuccessfully tried to establish farms, failing as the soil was so poor. As a consequence, they and other settlers wanted the Government to buy back the land but nothing transpired.

Between 1839-1903 a Prison Service was established. Henry Vincent was the first Superintendent from 1841-1864. The first prisoners were aboriginals who worked during the day and roamed at night often killing sheep. This practice arose because the Aboriginal people did not understand private ownership of land that they should not access. Their system was communal ownership and they hunted the native kangaroos. Now, however there were additional animals, sheep! 3,256 aboriginals served sentences, with 373 dying. Many died from influenza and measles. This prison was the site of the greatest number of Aboriginal deaths in custody. It is for that reason that Aboriginal people do not like the island. From 1902- 1931, the prison became an annex of Fremantle prison housing European prisoners too. Houses were built of limestone that will endure for up to 1,000 years. Some of these houses are part of the oldest unchanged streetscape in Australia. Government House was built in 1864 that is now a Museum and the Rottneest Hotel. A salt store was built in 1868 that is now an Anglican church. Rottneest Island has two saline lakes, that in

dry periods, became salt that was collected between 1835 to 1953 and was the only successful business as salt was a very important preservative in lieu of refrigeration. Prisoners helped run this enterprise in its early days.

A lighthouse just 19 metres tall, was built in 1851 with Aboriginal labour and a new tower was added in 1896 as there are many reefs around the island. 27 ship wrecks are scattered around the island.

Tourism became the major industry from 1911 with some Germans being prisoners on the island during World War 1. Barracks were also built housing 2,500 troops.

Woven into Brian's account were other stories of the early European seafaring challenges, as well as developments in the last century.

Here are some of them:

A major problem with the trading routes was the length of time spent at sea. Scurvy was rife amongst sailors and ships crews were depleted. A new course along the "roaring westerlies" (40s) was found to be quicker. The ships then turned north towards Batavia. North to south navigation could be calculated but east to west was not so exact. As a result, some ships turned north too late which took them closer to the WA coast.

One such ship, the Batavia, was wrecked near the Abrolhos Islands, some remains now residing in the Fremantle Maritime Museum (a must visit). Another ship, The Golden Dragon, was wrecked on 28th April, 1656 and was never found despite following search efforts of two other ships. It was at this time that crews on these ships noted 'a large island' with its furry inhabitants. The Ridderdschap van Holland went missing with valuable cargo in 1694 and three ships were sent to look for it. Crews landed on the island, also thinking that the Quokkas were giant rats. Their Captain, was Willem de Vlamingh who named it Rottnest. He thought the island "quite pleasant but no potential for farming". How right he was.

The French New Holland expeditions of Baudin and Hamelin were interested in the WA coast and carried out surveys of both the west and south coasts.

Much later, the British admiral Phillip Parker King, noted the Callitris trees, a conifer, which grew on the island to a height of about 25 feet however, it is interesting to note that none exist today, only typical low coastal scrub. Fine specimens can be seen in Perth's Kings Park.

Captain James Stirling arrived on the *Parmelia* in 1829 to establish the Swan River 'free' colony and had jurisdiction over Rottnest. With increased shipping numbers, a Pilot station was established on Rottnest Island in 1845 (until 1903). Whale boats took the pilot to board and guide the ships up to Perth. Better lighthouses became a necessity. The first lighthouse was at Wadjemup in the centre of the island. A new tower of 38.7 metres was built beside it in 1896 and in 1900, Bathurst Lighthouse was built on a northern point. Ships could use both lighthouses to navigate their way.

In 1930, the British government decided that their ships needed protection in the main ports. Fremantle was chosen and guns were mounted on the mainland coast and on Rottnest Island. The project was begun in 1937 and completed in 1938, a timely finish with the outbreak of WW2 the following year. Fremantle also became a major submarine base for both the British and the U.S navy.

These days the most frequent boats and ships moored in Thompson Bay are yachts both big and small, pleasure boats and fishing dinghies and of course there are the ferries plying thousands of tourists to Rottnest Island to stay, or walk and cycle for the day. There is even a landing strip for small planes. In 2019, there were 785,000 visitors and 132,158 of them hired bicycles!



Editor's note-

David Hills "The Great Race" is an excellent read that leads one to marvel at the amazing fortitude and skill of those early captains and crews particularly from Britain and France in the race to map Australia. Spain, Holland and Portugal also sailed their little wooden ships in search of the new frontiers of Terra Australis.

Another good read about the settlement of the Swan River colony, with its trials and tribulations of life so different from the genteel life of London is Mary Durack's "To be Heirs Forever".

*We offer good wishes to members who have been unable to attend recent meetings.
A special get-well message is sent to our long serving Secretary, Pat.
We also think of and miss the company of Clive and Val, but wish you both well.*