



Balwyn Historical Society

JUNE 2024

Next Meeting
Thursday JUNE 27th, 2024 – 2.00 pm
(Arrival 1.45pm)

at
XAVIER COLLEGE
Entrance -
Charles Street Kew

Host Speaker: Catherine Hall – Archivist

This June meeting is not at Balwyn Evergreen Centre. Instead, we have been invited to visit the Archive's area of Xavier College.

It is in the school holiday time, so access to the grounds is not a problem. Afternoon tea (on site) will follow Catherine's talk and 'tour'.

As a courtesy, please respond asap if you will be attending.

***further enquiry and contact, BHS President, Matthew Etty -Leal**
ettyleal@bigpond.net.au M 0438 079 475 or balwynhistory@gmail.com

Dear Members and Friends,

In this newsletter, we hope you will enjoy the reports of our past three speakers especially those of you who were unable to attend and as a refresher for those of you who really enjoyed those guest speakers.

A member, Philip Mallis, has contributed an item which is a fascinating insight into Camberwell council in the early 1930s. These days we wish our councils would focus on "rates, roads and rubbish", well, this council was very focused on rates at least.....and elections! Ed. BR

March meeting Guest Speaker: Leigh Hay
Topic: Henry Lawson and his mother, Louisa

“I was born to write of the things that are!

And the strength was given to me.

I was born to strike at the things that mar
the world as the world should be!” (Henry Lawson)

Henry was born on the 17th of June 1867 near the Grenfell goldfields of western NSW. His father Niels Larsen, (b in Norway 1832) had arrived in Melbourne in 1855 to join the gold rush. He was an intelligent man, a linguist and musician, gentle but unambitious, content to live a simple life.

His mother Louisa was born at Guntawang station NSW on 17th February 1848, the second of 12 children in a struggling family. Her education, in which she showed much promise, was curtailed to care for the younger children in the family and she resented the drudgery. This experience probably strengthened her resolve to overcome later difficult times in her life.

Niels (known as Peter) had met her in 1866 when she was 18 and they married at Mudgee. Henry was born the following year and by this time they had anglicised his father’s Norwegian surname of Larsen to Lawson. Four more children were born between 1867 and 1877 including twins one of which had died at the age of 8 months. During this time Louisa hated the diggings especially as Peter was often away following the gold seeking or working as a handyman with his father-in-law. In 1873 they selected and settled on 40 acres of land at Eurunderee. Louisa was resourceful and hard working.



The Lawson family home at Eurunderee

Louisa firmly believed in education and agitated for a school. The school was a slab and bark hut, and the teacher was John Teirney. Thus, Henry began attending school aged 9.

*It was built of bark and poles,
and the floor was full of holes
Where each leak in rainy weather made
a pool;
And the walls were mostly cracks
lined with calico and sacks —
There was little need for windows in the
school.*

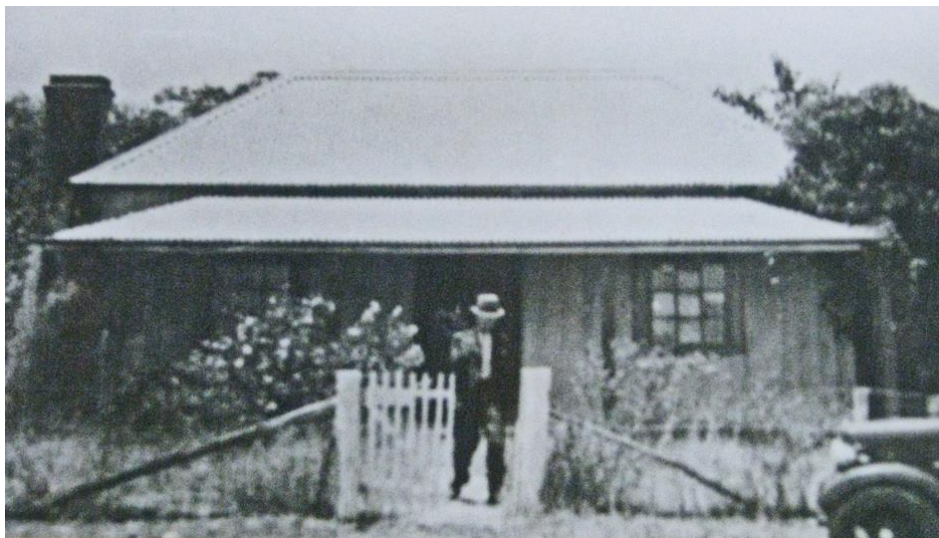
*Then we rode to school and back
by the rugged gully track,
On the old grey horse that carried
three or four;
And he looked so very wise
that he lit the master's eyes
every time he put his head in at the
door*

It was about this time that Henry, after an overnight illness, became slightly deaf and by the age of 14 his hearing was severely affected. This situation contributed to an isolated childhood and misery for a sensitive child which he later wrote that it had a major bearing on his life.

He then attended a Catholic school in Mudgee and the teacher there, Mr Kevan, encouraged a love of poetry and reading which became a more effective way for Henry to learn. He loved Dickens stories and other books like Rolf Bolderwood's 'Robbery

Under Arms'.

The boyhood home in Mudgee



He loved the bush and by 1880 he was working with his father and brother in the Blue Mountains.

In 1883, Louisa decided to leave for Sydney. Henry continued to work with his father and eventually, at Louisa's behest, the two boys went to live with her in Sydney. They lived in two rooms and Louisa took in sewing and washing and Peter very occasionally sent money to help support the children. Henry took night classes for Matriculation while doing an apprenticeship. He continued to write poems however he was bullied by workmates and consequently he failed his exams. He had treatment for hearing problems at the Melbourne Eye and Ear Hospital, but the hoped for treatment was not possible.



Bertha and Henry with his bushy moustache and “wonderful huge brown deep-set eyes” wrote Norman Lindsay

Louisa was a staunch feminist and Henry had become a ‘republican’. Louisa began to send Henry’s writings to The Bulletin, and they were first published in 1887. He was greatly encouraged by this publication but continued to work with his father in the Blue Mountains making friends with the other workers. Henry was a socialist all his life identifying with the underdog in society. In that same year of 1887 Louisa was introduced to journalism by purchasing a paper “The Republican” which was already failing! She and Henry wrote and edited most of the paper’s copy. This paper ceased in 1888 and Louisa started another “Dawn”, which she hoped would publicise women’s everyday battles and the negative attitudes towards them. She supported the suffrage movement in every way she could. “Dawn” was a success.

Dawn Newspaper Front cover of the 1st edition, 15 May 1888



The Final masthead used from the late 1900 until the final issue in July 1905

Peter died on December 31st 1888 and left her a little over 1100 pounds. This enabled her to extend her printing equipment as well as employing women who were printers. Father, Peter's death, also affected Henry as his relationship had become difficult with his mother.

In 1891, Henry gained his first real chance in journalism with both "The Brisbane Boomerang" although it too was failing, and "The Worker Magazine" however he did not stay long and returned to Sydney doing odd jobs and writing. His drinking with mates increased and the alcoholism led to him not being able to focus for long. Henry moved to Bourke and lived in an iron shed. It was a hard life, and it was here that he wrote of the dry unproductive land and the struggles of those who tried their best. Henry was appalled by the hardships suffered by many which was especially notable in the outback and bush towns. His writing and poems reflected the realism of life.

"Our Andy's gone to battle now
'Gainst drought, the red marauder.
Our Andy's gone with cattle now
Across the Queensland border.

He's left us in dejection now
Our thoughts of him are roving;
it's dull on this selection now
Since Andy went a droving."

On the other hand, Banjo Paterson's poems and stories gave a romantic view. There appeared to be a mock rivalry between the two and this kept the publications full. He walked everywhere inspired by what he saw and when he returned to Sydney yet again, he wrote "While the Billy Boils".

Louisa continued to print his articles on her printing press and especially in the magazine only for women. Henry took a brief job in "The Sydney Daily" but it folded soon after. By 1894 his relationship with Louisa had become very strained. His reliance on the drink helped his 'downs' and despite all, further books were well received however he found it hard to stay on track. He was now a recognised writer and a public figure.

In 1896, after a brief courtship he married Bertha Bredt, the daughter of a prominent socialist by the same name. Bertha became unhappy about his association with his drinking mates so they moved to New Zealand but that was not a success and so it was a return to Sydney after the birth of his son, Joseph, in NZ in 1898.

Unfortunately, he reconnected with his mates and his old ways. A stint in a home for inebriates in 1898 was an attempt to help him. Henry and Bertha went to New Zealand again where they worked briefly as teachers and where a daughter, Bertha, was born in 1899.

Wife Bertha Bredt



Son Joseph



Henry and his daughter Bertha



Interestingly, the alcoholism had abated in NZ but a growing unhappiness with living in Australia led to a family move to London with the financial assistance of Earl Beauchamp, the governor of NSW, David Mitchell and the publisher George Robertson.

Henry had an excellent agent in London and wrote some of his best works, “Joe Wilson and his Mates” 1901, and “Children of the Bush” 1902 but again, financial concerns and illness led to a return to Sydney. Bertha had mental problems and they parted ways. Bertha divorced him due to his alcoholism, cruelty and emotional and physical abuse. His personal and creative life was not going well. There were times in jail for his failings to pay child support.

Louisa was also suffering from mental problems after an accident in 1902 left her debilitated and less enthused for her paper “Dawn” which closed in 1905. Mrs Isabel Byers, herself a keen poet, took Henry under her wing and tried to keep him on a stable path. She contacted publishers and made sure that his children had contact with him but often to little avail. He however was grateful for all she did for him, and he left his papers and other items to her.

He spent some time in a mental hospital in 1907 and his life had disintegrated to wandering the streets at times begging for money for alcohol.



Henry Lawson and E.J. Brady at the camp at Mallacoota, March 1910.

In 1910, loyal friends arranged for him to live at Mallacoota and later in 1916, they organised a job for him in Leeton NSW where he continued to produce works throughout the war years. One of those friends was Mary Cameron (Dame Mary Gilmore) with whom he had a lasting friendship, a friendship of which his mother Louisa always disapproved.

Louisa died in 1920. Her exceptional encouragement and strong advocacy for women and their supporting organisations was inestimable for many years of her life.

The Commonwealth Literary fund granted Henry a one Pound a week pension in 1920. He suffered a stroke in 1921 but still managed to continue his writing. Henry Lawson died on 2nd of September 1922. He was the first person in NSW to be given a state funeral other than Governors and the like. It was as a “distinguished citizen”.

The Eulogy for Henry Lawson delivered by Australian Prime Minister William Hughes while decreeing a state funeral for Henry

He knew intimately the real Australia and was its greatest minstrel. He sang of its wide spaces, its dense bush, its droughts, its floods, as a lover sings of his mistress. He loved Australia and his verses set out its charms, its vicissitudes burning heat of the northerly and bitter cold of the westerly wind, the storm the calm, drought and flood, the endless plain shimmering beneath the summer sun, the dust of the travelling stock, the cracking of the stockman's whip, the roar of the flood waters, the matchless beauty of the tall saving sweet scented gums splashed with the yellow of the wattle, the melting blue of the distant mountains, the evening camp fire, the boiling billy, the damper and mutton of stockmen and swagmen, the humour, the pathos, the joys and sorrows and above all the dauntless spirit of the Australians. He was the poet of Australia, the minstrel of the people.



Some of the 250,000 people who watched on at his State funeral procession

His stories showed the tough character of those he encountered throughout his life especially in Bourke, and he had an empathy for women and their lot. He has featured on coins, postage stamps and banknotes.



There is a statue in The Domain in Sydney and a bronze statue in a Footscray Park where people gather to recite his works on the date of his death.

Further Notes:

The Henry Lawson Memorial and Literary Society Inc has an official newsletter for your continued reading about this remarkable poet – “the people’s poet”. The society was established in 1923 and celebrated their centenary last year. A book: *A Lawson Legacy-a Brief Chronological History of the Henry Lawson Memorial and Literary Society (1923-1924)* was compiled by Kathy Andrewartha and Leigh Hay, our speaker. who is also the vice president of the society and editor of the newsletter.

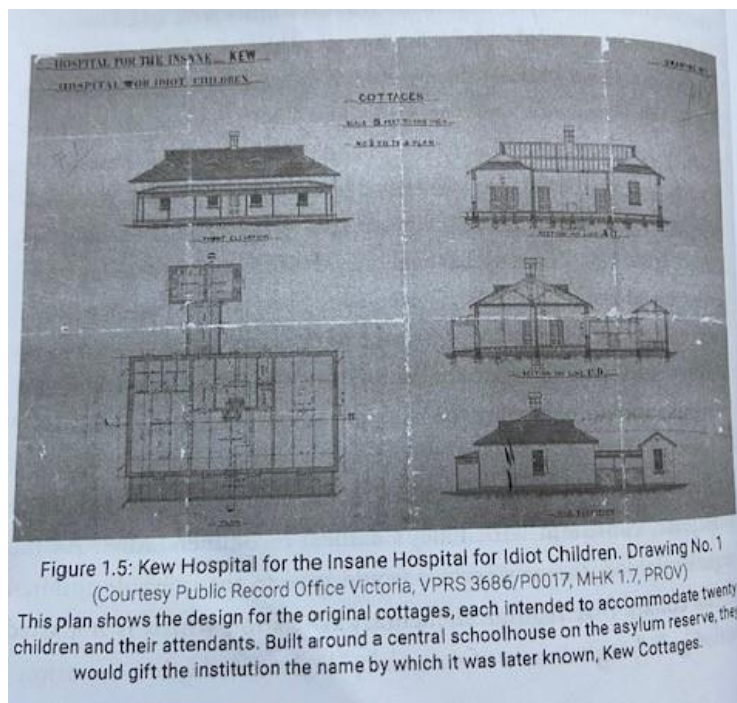
April Meeting: Speaker: Dr Lee-Ann Monk

Topic: 'Failed Ambitions: A History of Kew Cottages 1887-1950'.

Lee-Ann co-authored the book entitled *Failed Ambitions: Kew Cottages and Changing Ideas of Intellectual Disabilities*, with David Henderson. It was published in 2023, by Monash University Publishing. She wrote the first section of the book, which covers the period 1887-1950. Her talk was based on this section of the publication.

Before commencing the talk, she explained that she has used the terminology of the time, 'in inverted commas' but without sharing those assumptions and understanding that many of those terms are not in use today and can cause offence.

Lee-Ann traced the development of the Kew Cottages, the first purpose-built institution to cater for children with disabilities in Australia, from 1887 until 1950. It remained in existence until 2008 to become one of the largest in Australia.



It began with high hopes and expectations, but quickly deteriorated as the result of neglect and changing attitudes to people with disabilities. It received praise in its earlier decades as a great advance for these children who were previously considered to be ineducable. It aimed to 'train educable idiots.' Initially named the Kew Idiot Asylum, later the Kew Cottages, it followed the British example of education and training. The pupils learned to read, write and count and received moral and physical training. The boys acquired industrial skills, while the girls learned to sew and work in the laundry. They enjoyed entertainment such as concerts at Christmas, an annual fete and the asylum picnic.

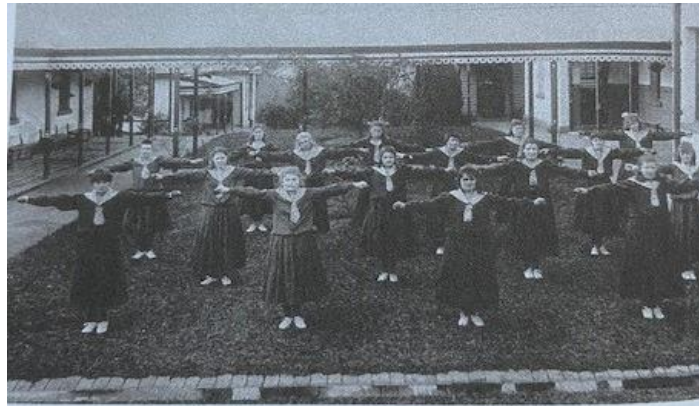


Figure 3.3: Girls provide a callisthenic display for the camera, Nicholas Caire, photographer, c. 1900
(Courtesy Wellcome Collection, Public Domain Mark)
In 1900, visitor Alexander Sutherland marvelled at a similar demonstration taking it as an example of the progress the asylum was making in the treatment of 'mentally deficient' children.

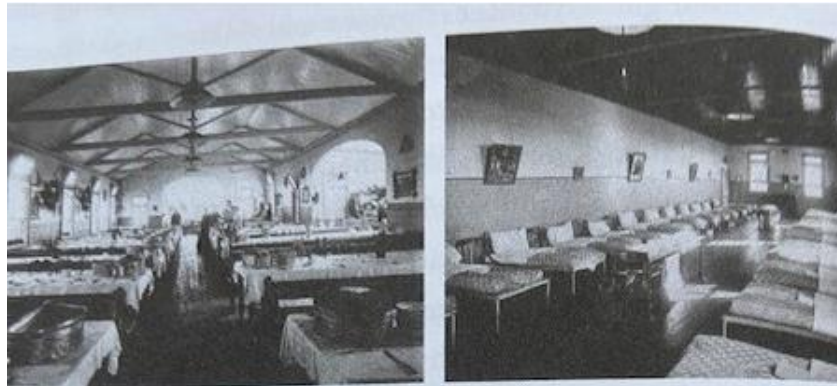
In 1896, as a means of providing evidence of their productive efforts, the residents submitted displays of their industrial work to the Warrnambool Industrial and Art Exhibition and in 1901 to the Victorian Golden Jubilee Exhibition in Bendigo. The journalist Alice Henry reported on the cottages in the *Argus* in 1898 and felt although the work in Australia was in its infancy, there was reason to be proud of the cottages.



Figure 3.5: Mat making, one of several industrial occupations that formed a key element of training, Nicholas Caire, photographer, c. 1900
(Courtesy Mrs Norma Sutherland)

By 1948, unfortunately, the condition of the Kew Cottages had deteriorated; they were in a run-down condition. In September of that year, journalist Rohan Rivett, after a visit to the Kew Cottages described it in an article in the *Melbourne Herald* as 'a hillside of sadness.' He told his readers that the cottages were not a pleasant place to visit. He noted the deprivation the residents endured.

The cottages lacked virtually every comfort or amenity to distract the inmates from their endless days. The dormitories were crowded and colourless. Rivett discovered over forty women and girls outside behind a wire enclosure. He saw nothing that reflected any credit on the current or previous government or on the department. Rivett's article prompted readers to respond with expressions of sympathy and offers of help. As a result, the *Herald* launched a weeklong toy appeal which resulted in many donations.



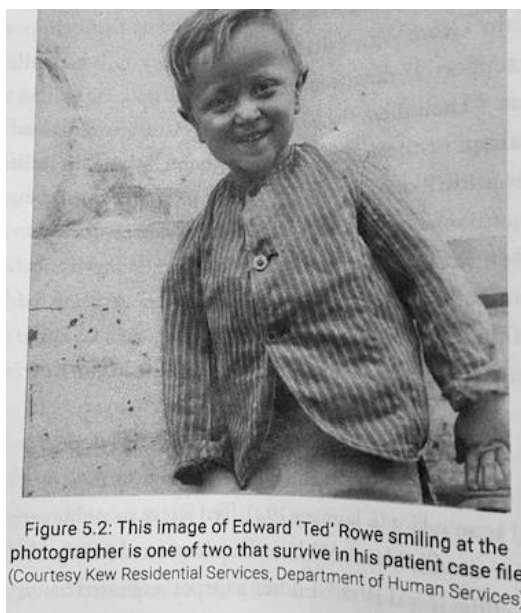
Figures 2.2 and 2.3: Kew Cottages communal dining room and male dormitory, Nicholas Caire, photographer, c. 1900
(Courtesy Royal Melbourne Hospital Health Sciences Library, incorporating the Victorian Mental Health Library and Photograph Collection)
Caire's photographs, such as these of the communal dining room and the male dormitory, show how different this new institutional world was from the family homes from which many residents were admitted.

Lee-Ann reported that in the ensuing fifty years, changing ideas of intellectual disability influenced government policy, which resulted in the neglect of the Kew Cottages. The science of eugenics was influential in universities and so-called feeble-mindedness was equated with evil. This attitude meant that anxieties developed about 'the feeble-minded', who needed to be controlled. The government opened other institutions such as Travancore and Janefield, ostensibly with the aim of closing the Kew Cottages. This did not occur, although the local community opposed its continuing existence.



Figure 2.1: Kew Cottages, Nicholas Caire, photographer, c. 1900
(Courtesy Royal Melbourne Hospital Health Sciences Library incorporating the Victorian Mental Health Library and Photograph Collection)
A decade after the new Idiot Asylum opened in 1887, prominent Melbourne photographer Nicholas Caire took a series of photographs illustrating the institution. By the turn of the century, several additional cottages had been added to accommodate the ever-increasing number of patients.

Lee-Ann explained that lack of the residents' voices had been a recurring problem for the authors of *Failed Ambitions*. Fortunately, in 2006, a former inmate, Ted Rowe shared his memories with historian Corinne Manning, providing a rare first-hand account of everyday life in the Kew institution. He was placed there in 1925 at the age of four and a half after the matron at the Royal Park Children's Depot requested his removal to the Kew Cottages. She considered that 'he showed no capacity for being taught anything,' an assessment which ultimately proved to be inaccurate.



He recalled bleak, overcrowded dormitories, rough clothing and bare playgrounds. On a more positive note, he made friends, and enjoyed participating in the sporting activities of cricket and football. The sexes were segregated. The children received corporal punishment for perceived misdemeanours.

Lee-Ann considered that his memories reflected the monotony and regimentation of institutional life. Each day began when the bell rang, signalling time for breakfast, which consisted of porridge, which was like 'glue', and ended with the children trooping back to the dormitories 'all in one like browns cows' to be locked together for the night. In 1933 Ted was transferred to the new facility Travancore, which he liked. Ted eventually left Travancore and found employment for the rest of his working life.

The story of the Kew Cottages offers a stark picture of the result of government neglect, flawed policy and inadequate funding of an institution which began with the intention to provide children with intellectual disability with education and training to equip them to contribute to their society. I recommend the book to you.

Thanks to Dr Rosemary Francis for this report.

* *Images are taken from the book, purchased at the meeting.*

May Meeting - Guest Speaker: Graham O' Rourke

Topic: Charles La Trobe

Who was this man and what was his impact on the Colony of Victoria?

Places and institutions bear his name: Latrobe Street, The La Trobe reading room at The State Library, La Trobe University, Latrobe River, La Trobe College, the electorate of La Trobe and Latrobe in Tasmania. There are several statues, one outside the State Library and another at La Trobe University, a statue standing on its head Interpreted that a university should “turn ideas on their head”.



La Trobe University statue.



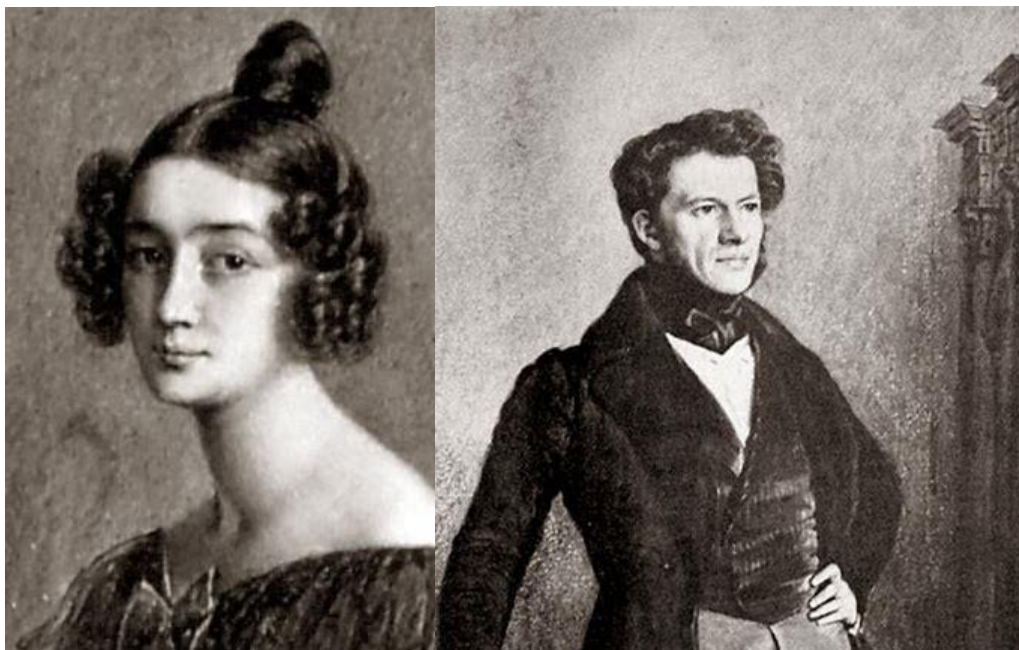
La trobe Statue outside the State Library

He was criticised unfairly in the newspapers especially in the Argus by its editor Edward Wilson, “weak, insincere, incapable, a vacillator, even corrupt” were some of the words despite no evidence of these descriptions!

La Trobe was born in 1801 in London into a family of Huguenot origins. His father was a minister of the Moravian church having performed missionary work in South Africa. He was also a friend of Haydn the popular composer and conductor. In his family it was a life of languages, education, art and music. He attended a Moravian boarding school near Leeds in the UK in 1806 at tender age. The school had an excellent curriculum which included literature, history and French and German languages. In the secondary years he attended another Boarding school “Fairfield”, still in existence today, and later spent 3 years as a teacher at the school.

He travelled to Switzerland to the Moravian community at Neuchatel and having been schooled in French he fitted in very easily. While he was there in the years 1820-25, he kept a diary and sketched and painted the countryside in watercolour. There was a distinct love of nature in these images and a book was published titled “Alpenstock” which included these scenic illustrations. He had thought of attending Cambridge, but this did not eventuate.

He again returned to Switzerland as a mentor and teacher in 1832 to a young Count Albert Pourtales. This was followed by a trip to USA with Albert where he stayed with his father’s brother Peter and travelled about. While there, he met Washington Irving which led to many adventures to far flung places which included Canada, the deep south of USA and Mexico. Books were published about these trips, “The Rambler in America” and “The Rambler in Mexico” were very popular and earned him dollars.



In 1835, he married Sophie in Neuchatel Switzerland. Sophie had 12 siblings but only 5 survived due to an inherent medical condition in the family. Even she had frail health.

La Trobe offered to go to the West Indies to report on the education of former slaves and especially their families. These former slaves were supposed to be “apprentices” to their former masters and their children were to be provided with an education courtesy of money set aside by the British Parliament. He was to report how the money was spent. These reports were very impressive, and he was called to the office of Lord Glenelg, the Home Secretary and requested to go to far off Melbourne as superintendent of the Port Phillip District of New South Wales.

In 1837, he set sail to Sydney where he was to meet with Governor Gipps. The governor’s advice was to preserve the peace and not to go into debt!

Once in Melbourne, La Trobe had to provide his own home on a modest salary of 800 Pounds. He purchased 12 ½ acres of land in East Melbourne and stayed with William Lonsdale for a time until his house was built in “Jolimont”, a French name he had given it. The house had been transported from London in sections.



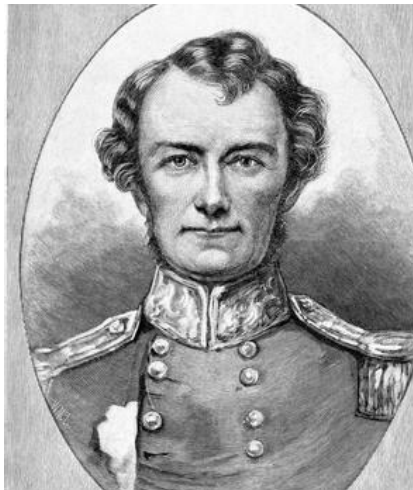
Governor La Trobe's cottage – facing north] [ca. 1913]. Gelatin silver photograph. H La Trobe Picture Collection.



The restored La Trobe cottage now situated in Kings Domain

He had no military background as was the usual case for administrators and governors. Land developers were making money from land sales and soon the population of Victoria expanded from 740 to 7000. A notable person who arrived in 1839 was Redmond Barry who would later make his mark. The population of the Melbourne district itself numbered 6000. It was said at the time that La Trobe was “playing second fiddle” to Governor Gipps. This was part of the criticism of him that he did not stand up to “Sydney”.

As a person, La Trobe had sound religious and moral expectations, that prosperity and happiness was a reasonable goal for everyone. During 1839 and 1840 he was faced with many challenges. He had to address grievances such as the apparent lack of a voice in the NSW Legislative Council, 6 members out of over 30. Revenue was imbalanced and thus lack of money meant fewer public buildings and poor streets. The Port Phillip District felt they were subservient to Sydney and La Trobe seen to be uncommitted and that his support for separation was not strong enough. He did not want any more convicts in the colony, but the Colonial Office pushed for more. On one occasion he refused a ship to dock and sent it on to Sydney.



He was concerned for the welfare of the Indigenous people as they were entitled to protection under British Law. Protector’s roles were supposed to be helpful but only one of the 4 Protectors was useful. There were disputed between the indigenous people and the white people. Bringing whites to trial was difficult because the “indigenous were not Christians”! La Trobe wanted the indigenous people to have the same education as the whites. He tried setting up missionary stations, but these were not successful.

There were issues of law and order where alcohol and guns were involved. The population of the Indigenous people numbered 10.000 according to Batman in 1835 and within 10 years the number had diminished to 2,500. Consequently, La Trobe was blamed for many problems that beset the colony. La Trobe’s low salary did not allow for him to ‘entertain’ “society” and this painted him as aloof and detached.

He had arrived with one child who had been born in Switzerland and then a further 3 children were born in Melbourne. Agnes the oldest was sent back to Switzerland for her education. His wife Sophie was educated and fluent in several languages and education was important to her. Sophie had a friend in Georgina McCrae. La Trobe enjoyed gardening, painting and horse riding. Putting together botanical collections and letter writing were other pastimes, all very much the interests of a genteel man. He made many trips on horseback as far away as the Murray River, The Grampians mountains and Cape Schank, engaging with the people in these areas.

John Fawkner was one of his critics, a painful person and a member of the Melbourne and Legislative Council. He described people as giving La Trobe very faint cheers and treated like a pickpocket on the occasion La Trobe's laying of the foundation stone of St James and St Peters church in East Melbourne, his parish church. Edward Wilson, the editor of The Argus, was especially vitriolic calling him an Arts traitor and an Incubus!

1851 heralded separation from New South Wales and the establishment of the colony of Victoria from the shackles of "Sydney". At the celebrations for the opening of Princes Bridge (old one), Wilson reported that there was "not one cheer for La Trobe", a horrible attitude Wilson continued to maintain towards La Trobe.

Separation meant the establishment of a Legislative Council with a 4-member executive, some elected members and some nominated members. There was still agitation that La Trobe should be replaced and, he would have happily gone. Gold discoveries in 1851 had a huge impact. Melbourne and Geelong emptied as people rushed to the diggings. Men left their employment and families, even the police went, soldiers and ships crews also joined in the rush. The scale of arriving numbers was overwhelming, they doubled in a year then trebled to 77,000.

The situation was a serious challenge with all those people. La Trobe was accused of being 'timid' as laws were repealed although he did manage to restore public order by 1852. However, this only served to associate him with oppression on the goldfields and the arrival of the police.



La Trobe's Land Grant during the Victorian Goldrush

A motion of no confidence in the Government distressed him and his health suffered. By the end of 1852 he wrote a letter of resignation and two months later, he took his family to Europe. On his return until a replacement could be made (Governor Hotham) there was further disquiet for his administration with petitions from his critics.

1854 was the last straw for him when a notice of the death of Sophie from British papers and not even from the family led to his departure from Melbourne dressed in mourning suit. He sailed home via the Pacific Ocean, then overland to the West Indies arriving in July 1854. He tendered his reports to the British Government and then continued to Europe to meet up with his children in Switzerland. He was now aged 54. The following year, in October 1855, he married his sister-in law Rose, who was a widow. They had 2 children, Daisy and Isabel, who sadly died of TB at the age of 15. He and Rose returned to the UK in 1861 where he hoped for a new appointment, but nothing emerged. In 1858 he had been awarded The Companion of Bath, but without a position, he was having to live off rent from land and other houses back in Jolimont. He was granted a pension of 333 pounds. It was a pittance compared to what was paid to Lonsdale and Hovel. He had lost his eyesight which he felt was "God's will". With the assistance of his daughter Nellie, who wrote for him, he kept up correspondence and entertained friends from Melbourne.

Charles La Trobe died in 1875. Rose had a chapel constructed to his memory at Neuchâtel. Melbourne was slow to recognise him. On reflection, he left substantial 'memorials' from his time as Lieutenant Governor: the Yan Yean reservoir, the Melbourne Hospital, the development of the wine Industry and wineries, the Botanic Gardens and many other parks and gardens on land set aside through legislated acts, the first bridge over the Yarra River, a dam in the Geelong Gardens and the beginnings of the Melbourne University Library. He supported the establishment and formation of institutions such as the Mechanics Institute, the Melbourne Cricket Ground and the Royal Philharmonic. His life as Administrator and Lieutenant Governor was a one of selfless commitment, firm principles and concern for the broader public.



The Magnificent La Trobe Reading Room in the State Library

Countbacks, councillors and challenge elections – the early 1930s at Camberwell City Council - Philip Mallis

The early 1930s were turbulent times for the City of Camberwell. The effects of the Great Depression were being acutely felt, development was beginning to transform suburbs like Balwyn from agricultural to residential districts, and the smell of political reform was in the air.

The beginnings

The controversies that shaped the council elections of the early 1930s can be traced back to 1931.

At the time the Camberwell City Council was built around a system of 'threes'. It was made up of nine councillors, three representing each of the three wards. These wards were inventively named North, Centre and South and had been so since Camberwell was declared a Town in 1905.

This meant that one councillor's term expired in each ward every year. Elections were typically scheduled for the third Saturday of August unless a by-election or other special event took place. This had the effect of making every year an 'election year', complete with campaigning and political manoeuvring.

In 1930 an increasing number of residents and newly elected councillors began to challenge the process of municipal property valuations. Changes recently introduced meant that many would pay more in property rates in years when their property was revalued.

This movement began to get significant traction in mid-1931 when the new valuations came into effect. While changes to valuations had happened before, this was more acutely felt than usual as the effects of the Great Depression made themselves known. Many property owners saw large increases in the value of their properties and thereby rates. This prompted several resident groups to organise themselves against the Council.

Some councillors were all too happy to lend their support to this cause. Councillor Norman Mackay appears to have been an early leader of this movement to challenge the system together with Cr Arthur Vine. Cr Mackay dramatically walked out of a Council meeting on 15 June 1930 in protest for being refused details on the proposed process of assessing appeals from the Council's valuer. He did have prior form for this, having done the same just a few months earlier in March 1930¹ and was to do so yet again in July 1930.²

1 "Scene at Camberwell Council Cr. Mackay Walks Out."

2 "Council Clash Member Says Mayor Insulted Woman - Leaves Room."

This and similar incidents led to many rowdy council meetings where walkouts and shouting matches were not uncommon. Cr Mackay continued his arguments, even though he was a valuer himself and had appeared in court representing private citizens appealing against their property valuations. Unsurprisingly perhaps, other councillors were not amused by this clear conflict of interest.³



Cr Norman Mackay as Mayor of Camberwell City Council, 1928-29

One meeting on 13 July 1931 was particularly memorable. Its proximity to upcoming elections meant that some councillors sought to obtain guarantees of rate reductions or other financial dispensation to shore up electoral support. Cr John D. Howie, possibly attempting to distance himself from his earlier support of the new valuation system as he was up for election in the following year, moved a motion to reject the valuation report. This was supported by other councillors, Mackay, Vine and McCamish, but with a casting vote from the mayor, the motion was rejected. Many other meetings during this year followed a similar pattern.

However, these activities didn't appear to do Cr Mackay much good, as he narrowly lost the Centre Ward election of 1931 by 33 votes to Walter. A. Fordham.

Despite his loss, these early activities appear to have been the beginnings of a wider movement across the City of Camberwell, particularly focused in the south and north, attacking the Council's financial and administrative management.⁴

The “challenge election” of 1932

This continued to escalate through to 1932. At one point, police physically removed a member of the public gallery, Alfred Thodey (who was to be a future unsuccessful election candidate), who interjected at and refused to leave a Council meeting on 29 February 1932 during a debate on responding to a letter of complaint about valuations.⁵ One person who emerged from this period was Henry Francis Crawford. He was an unsuccessful candidate at the 1931 election⁶ and a member of the “Reform” Movement.⁷

3 “Suburban News. Municipal Valuations. Discussion in Camberwell Council.”

4 “Camberwell Rates. Council's Unenviable Position. A Heated Discussion.”

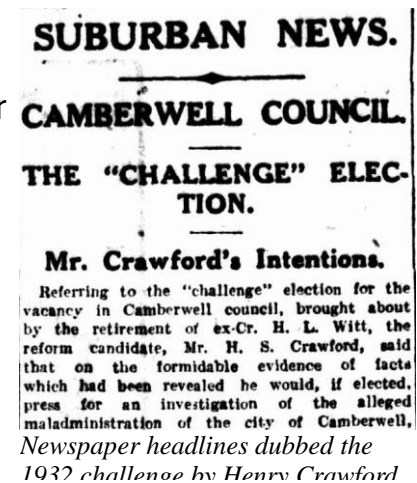
5 “Camberwell Council. Uproar At Meeting. Police Remove Interjector.”

6 “Mr H. F. Crawford To Stand For Camberwell Council.”

7 “Three Candidates For Seat at Camberwell.”

This Movement was an early and widespread network across Victoria that sought to reduce government spending and lower taxes.⁸ Crawford wrote frequent letters to local newspapers on this topic⁹ and attended many council meetings to voice his concerns at property valuations and alleged inconsistencies in council financial dealings.

Frustrated by what he saw as a lack of interest from Camberwell Council, he publicly challenged sitting councillor Henry Witt to a special election in 1932.¹⁰ Cr Witt famously called his bluff - it being dubbed the 'Challenge Election' by the local press - but Witt dramatically lost the election to Crawford who then became the newest member of Camberwell City Council. Crawford pledged to reduce costs by cutting mayoral allowances and reducing wages for office-based Council staff.¹¹



Calling for change

Immediately after taking his seat on the Council, now-Councillor Crawford raised motions at almost every subsequent meeting and quickly became a frequent and aggressive debater in the council chambers, especially on the subject of valuations.¹² This ranged from calling for a royal commission to rejecting almost any report that arrived from the Council's valuer. Valuations were not the only issue; contracts, the purchase of land for parks and other charges of maladministration were also frequent topics of debate.

Crawford sought to shore up support for his positions on Council and attempted to help other members of the Reform Movement become councillors.

One of these was Frederick Earl Clutterbuck, another prolific letter-writer, who stood in the South Ward by-election of 1932 but lost to William Warner. He stood again at the regular elections in August 1932 in North Ward but was comprehensively beaten by sitting councillor Arthur Ernest Vine 1746 votes to 920. Crawford though, was comfortably re-elected at the same time.¹³

8 "The Reform Movement."

9 "Suburban News. Camberwell Council. Mayor Replies to Criticism."

10 "Camberwell Council Election."

11 "Sitting Council Member Beaten."

12 "Camberwell Council. The 'Challenge' Election. EX.CR. WITT DEFEATED."

13 "Victorian Municipal Election Results."

Clutterbuck attempted again to gain a seat on Council during the by-election of 1932 to fill the vacancy left by the retirement of Cr John D. Howie but was defeated again – this time by Arthur McKenzie Hislop. Clutterbuck claimed electoral fraud following his defeat.¹⁴

Municipal Auditor's Report of 1932

It seemed at this point that the anti-council campaign had run out of steam, having only successfully elected one of their four candidates. There were calls for an inquiry or even a royal commission into the Camberwell City Council on this question, but none came to fruition.¹⁵

By this time other councillors had become so fed up with Cr Crawford's behaviour that every other councillor voted against almost any of his proposals. With this he had lost almost any of the little support he may once have had within the Council.

Then came a bombshell. The Government's Municipal Auditor published a report in December 1932 which contained several criticisms of the Council's financial management, including some of the items raised by Cr Crawford – mainly related to loans.¹⁶ He recommended they be investigated.

Cr Crawford was understandably delighted at what he saw as vindication of his years-long campaigns. He immediately called for the council to resign and for administrators to be appointed.¹⁷

But the other councillors did not support his motion and the mayor instead put forward a report rebutting the claims by the Municipal Auditor at the same meeting.¹⁸ Unfortunately for Crawford and his fellow Reform Movement, no significant changes appear to have taken place at this time.

The movement runs out of steam

By May 1933 the other councillors had had enough. Cr Latham representing North Ward and a resident of Deepdene, called Cr Crawford's "constant accusations...nauseating" and "they appear to be Cr Crawford's only theme".¹⁹

14 "Three Votes, But Not On Roll. Ratepayer Alleges Fraud At Election. Camberwell Query."

15 "Suburban News. Camberwell Council. Demand for Royal Commission."

16 "Council Finance Attacked. Auditor's Investigations At Camberwell."

17 "Report On Council Affairs Contradicted."

18 "Camberwell Municipal Affairs. Mayor Replies to Criticism."

19 "Camberwell Council. Angry Scenes. Council's Purchases of Cement."

This then, as with the 1932 elections, became the dominating theme of the 1933 elections. Arthur Latham, a long-standing member of the Council and supporter of the revised rating system, was narrowly defeated by Henry S. Leigh on these very topics.²⁰

But with his efforts continually failing and with little to show for his three-year term, Cr Crawford was defeated at the 1934 election by David Walker Watson. Due to the re subdivision of the municipality and creation of an extra ward, all councillors were up for re-election.

Several of the new councillors claimed that they had made progress in improving the Council's finances and administration.²¹ This appears to have dampened the protest vote somewhat.

Cr Crawford was clearly expecting his Reform movement to have significant success with this opportunity where all positions were up for election and following a second audit report, claiming that it would be the "death rattle" for the former administrations.²² Unfortunately for him, this did not eventuate.

Crawford lost his seat by 75 votes to David Walker Watson – even though he demanded a recount – the first in Camberwell for 14 years.^{23 24} He was also the only re-contesting councillor who lost their seat;²⁵ perhaps an indication of changing community attitudes.

Legacy

The loss of Henry Crawford from Council appears to have finally set the issues to rest. Although it seems that some changes were made on recommendations made by the audit reports, there was no royal commission or any drastic changes like those sought by Cr Crawford and his fellow Reform Movement members. By 1935 the election campaigns barely mentioned the rating system. They had moved on to other issues such as moving the Camberwell Town Hall or opening new libraries.

Although largely forgotten today, this period in the history of the City of Camberwell had implications for the future. The Council survived a concerted attack on its integrity and despite the short tenure of Cr Crawford, his agitation did result in some financial and administrative changes. The new rating system improved the finances of Camberwell City Council which was to become most important in future years with wartime and other factors putting pressure on its ability to govern.

20 "In the Suburbs. Camberwell Election."

21 "Camberwell Council Elections Municipal Reforms Claimed."

22 "Ex-Councillors 'Death Rattle' Commission Wanted At Camberwell."

23 "Recount of Votes Is Sought Camberwell Election Echo."

24 "Election Recount No Change at Camberwell."

25 "Municipal Councils Rearranged. Elections Bring Many Changes. Political Influence Waning."

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*A reminder of the Association of Eastern Historical Societies 2024 Conference

Saturday 29th June 2024 9 am- 5pm

Lilydale Lakeside Conference Centre, 1 Jarlo Drive Lilydale.

The conference has an excellent list of speakers.

Please refer to all the details and booking for this event , sent to your email on May 21st 2024.