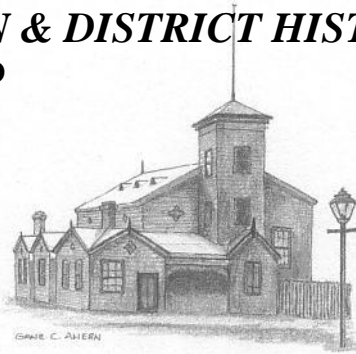


YARRA GLEN & DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY Inc.

A0030684D

ABN 68 883 314 408

PRESIDENT: Mrs. B. Cawte
Phone: (03) 9730 1801



Postal address:
c/o Post Office, Yarra Glen VIC 3775
Email address:
yarraglenhistorical@live.com.au

NEWSLETTER

August 2010 (Published occasionally)

Issue No: 36

Editor: Helen Mann Ph: 0429 006 152 helenmann02@gmail.com

FROM THE EDITOR

As we emerge from a colder and thankfully wetter Winter than we have experienced for some years it is invigorating to welcome the Spring. To get us out and about the Committee has organised an outing for our Spring meeting to the wonderful garden at 'Arden' in Toolangi. Yarra Glen has a special connection with C. J. Dennis because he frequently visited the Yarra Flats Hotel on his way home to Toolangi after travelling by train from Melbourne. Barry Watts, who has compiled and edited a couple of books on the work and life of the poet¹, has written an article for this issue of the Newsletter outlining the connections between C. J. Dennis and the 'Glen. (see page 2)

Helen



'The 'umble Den walking up from Yarra Glen to his mountain shack' – Hal Gye. By permission of the National Library of Australia

COMING EVENTS

Sunday September 12 1:30pm (meet at Yarra Glen)

Visit to 'Arden' – the Singing Gardens of C.J. Dennis at Toolangi

Afternoon tea in the cafe and a walk & talk through the gardens led by Jan Williams.

This event is in lieu of our September meeting. We will meet at the Yarra Glen Memorial Hall at 1:30pm and organise to pool cars for transport to and from Toolangi.

\$11.50 per person includes afternoon tea. Bookings and payment to Treasurer Jill Sheffield by Wed. September 1
Email: yarraglenhistorical@live.com.au
Telephone: 9730 1587

Sunday October 10 1:30pm

Annual General Meeting

A VIM (Very Important Meeting)

Put some vim into considering nominations for the all important election of office bearers for 2010-2011

Sunday November 14

Tetlow Talk

Guest speaker will be Deidre Hawkins whose topic will be *Kinglake: history and stories*

Deidre is a member of the Kinglake Historical Society and has published several books on the history of Kinglake

More details available closer to the date.

Apart from fair dealing for the purpose of private study, research or review, as permitted under the Copyright Act, no part of YG&DHS Newsletters may be reproduced without the permission of the Editor

¹ *The world of the Sentimental Bloke*, compiled by Barry Watts, Angus & Robertson, 1976

Selected works of C. J. Dennis, Introduction by Barry Watts, Angus & Robertson, 1988

Den and the 'Glen

by Barry Watts

Clarence Michael James Dennis was born in Auburn, South Australia on 7 September 1876 – the son of the local hotelier and first child of his father's second marriage. Following the death of his mother in 1890, two spinster aunts – known locally as 'Pansy' and 'Buttercup' – became chief guardians to Den and his two younger brothers. Den attended the Gladstone Primary School and St Aloysius' College at Sevenhill before being sent to Christian Brothers College in Adelaide as a boarder.

He left school at the end of 1892 aged 17 and took on numerous unrewarding jobs ranging from clerk, carpenter, insurance agent to photographer's canvasser. In 1899 he returned to work as a barman for his father but this also ended unsatisfactorily. "I lived the life of an idle young fool," Den recounted much later, "I did as I liked and I learned to drink."

In 1905 he linked up with 16-year-old Archie Martin in Adelaide to start a small literary journal they named *The Gadfly*. It lasted twenty-one months before floundering. Dennis took off to Melbourne to try his luck there.

His meagre savings were soon exhausted; he mixed with writers, artists and journalists, and participated in boisterous drinking parties; his prospect of gaining any work was minimal. One of his new friends was artist Hal Waugh who took Den to Toolangi for a two week camping trip. Here, among the towering mountain ashes and verdant fern gullies, was the ideal place to rest up and consider his lifestyle.

Dennis felt rejuvenated by the crisp mountain air, so he decided to stay at Toolangi and moved his few possessions into a deserted timber-cutter's cottage by the Yea River. He began concentrating on his verse writing and freelance journalism. In 1908 his tongue-in-cheek entry to the *Bulletin* magazine's national song competition won a special prize. The judge commended the author A. J Dennis (**sic**) of Toolangi, via Yarra Glen, Victoria, predicting his verse would "win its way to every heart in the back-blocks."

In those times Yarra Glen identity Charles Hicks Bath provided the mail delivery service to Steels Creek, Kinglake, Castella, Toolangi and Dixons Creek – hence the 'Yarra Glen' reference in Dennis's address.²

Den called his entry 'Australaise', a four verse poem with dashes for missing words which, he suggested, should be replaced with the adjective "blessed" or even "blooming" [most people substituted the great Australian adjective "bloody" as their word of choice!]. The first verse starts

*Fellers of Australia,
Blokes an' coves an' coots,
Shift yer ----- carcasses,
Move yer ---- boots ..."*³

² Mail contractor Charles Hicks Bath employed Dixons Creek-born L.R. ('Laurie') McKenzie on this route. McKenzie married his boss's second daughter and later set up McKenzie's Tourist Services - see *YG&DHS Newsletter*, Issue 30

³ Set to music by Albert Arlen in 1960, the 'Australaise' was selected by the Seventh Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment as their official regimental march in October, 1968

Den still enjoyed his alcohol and one of his favourite hostelries was the Yarra Flats Hotel on the corner of Armstrong Grove and Dixons Creek Road, Yarra Glen.⁴ It was a good refreshment spot before the long walk to Toolangi after arriving by train.



The Yarra Flats Hotel when R. J. Lithgow was licensee.

An Irvine Green photograph.

Later, when he could afford it, Den would be driven home from Yarra Glen by Charlie Bath in his jinker.⁵ The licensee R. J. ('Bert') Lithgow made Den and his cronies welcome. In 1910 or '11, after a male Lithgow heir had arrived on the scene, Dennis wrote an ode called 'Little Jack' extolling the virtues of the father and the bright future of the child. This poem, a cherished Lithgow family possession, remains unpublished. The original was shown to me by Jack Lithgow when he was in his mid-60s at the Grand Hotel, Yarra Glen, which his father Bert had purchased in 1932.⁶

Dennis worked spasmodically as a freelance writer sending material to the *Bulletin*, *Lone Hand* and *The Critic* in Adelaide. He mixed with the locals, but shared little in common with them. He clothing often attracted attention as schoolteacher Florence Mitchell later recalled: "Dennis arrived, arrayed in pink shirt and green tie. It was a bit much for Toolangi; the men dressed very conservatively there."

Florence Mitchell's first teaching appointment, in 1911, was to State School No.3237 (Toolangi) with a total enrolment of ten students. She boarded with Alf Smedley's family at 'Heathlands', a farm-cum-guesthouse, and several Smedley children attended the school.⁷ Alf was a younger brother of Joe Smedley of 'Happy Valley' Dixons Creek and his wife Bridget was the daughter of Thomas Young of Christmas Hills.

⁴ The Toolangi House Hotel, the nearest hotel to Den's home, was first licenced in 1913

⁵ Dennis's illustrator Hal Gye (pronounced 'Jye') drew an unpublished drawing 'The Author and his Illustrator Trudging Along the Road from Yarra Glen to Toolangi' (National Library of Australia)

⁶ R. J. Lithgow transferred the licence from the Yarra Flats Hotel to the Grand Hotel. In turn, the licence was eventually held by three generations of the Lithgow family. The poem 'Little Jack' is held by John Lithgow

⁷ Toolangi had two guesthouses at the time - Bassett's 'Glenora' and Smedley's 'Heathlands'

Florence joined Den on bushwalks to Mt St Leonard, with its quaint fire lookout tower.⁸ In the Yea River, upstream of Smedley Falls, he showed her the first platypus and the first lyrebird she had seen.

A small incident involving the pair was commemorated in verse. Twenty-year-old Florence was to play tennis with the thirty-five-year-old poet one afternoon but instead accepted a ride with local Charlie Demby in his brand new jinker. "Charlie was waiting for me when school got out at half past three," she retold many years on, "Like to come for a drive?" he asked. Of course, I couldn't resist". Faking jealousy over this event, Den wrote "The Flash Coot", which includes the verse:

*Out on the Yarra Glen road
Puttin' 'is prad thro' 'is paces,
Treatin' the tarts A LA MODE,
Talkin' right inter their faces,
Talkin' o' love n' such rot,
While they gets pinker & pinker,
'As 'em on strings all the lot.
'Im an' 'is jinker!*

The poem's reference to the 'Yarra Glen road' is to the old Toolangi-Yarra Glen road that links Dixons Creek via Cape Horn to Toolangi. This route, along the watershed that separates Dixons and Pauls Creeks, was the main link between the two towns before the building of Melba Highway in the early 1960s.⁹ The alternative road via Steels Creek and Mount Slide was far longer and more hazardous. Charles Demby, the 'Flash Coot', became Toolangi's first forest officer in 1921, and died in the catastrophic bushfires that swept the district, and Victoria, in 1939.¹⁰

During April 1912, the *Bulletin* published "Yarra Flats", a seven-verse rhyme by C. J. Dennis. It started:

*A spieler came to Yarra Glen upon the Yarra flats;
He wore a suit of noisy checks and something cute in
hats.*

The visitor showed them tricks with cards and thimbles, and invited the locals to place bets on the results. They declined, and offered an alternative wager:

*"We'll bet you fifty pounds," they said, "that we
produce a man
Who'll throw you clean across the river Yarra – and he
can –
Right where the stream is swift and wide
And land you on the other side."*

The city slicker called their bluff and accepted, thinking it was an easy way to make money. So they led him to the river bank and the local strong man took hold:

*He swung him once, he swung him twice – (The strong
man's grip was like a vice) –*

⁸ Mount St Leonard tower was originally a small cabin perched on a sawn-off mountain ash and held in position by cables. It was replaced in 1949 (MMBW), and superseded in 1988 (Telstra). The 1949 tower was reduced in height in 1991 and now has a public viewing platform

⁹ Toolangi was a rather isolated township at this time - the Chum Creek Road to Healesville was completed in 1928; the Myers Creek Road to Healesville was upgraded in 1934

¹⁰ Charles Demby was posthumously awarded the Royal Humane Society Award for Bravery for his unsuccessful attempt to save fellow forester John Barling during the fires.

*Then, with a flop, he let him drop – The stream was
cold as ice.*

*The spieler scrambled to the bank. "I've won!" he
cried. "I've won!"*

*"Get out!" the simple natives jeered. "Our strong man
hasn't done.*

*He's only tried it once, you fool! He's going to try
again. Keep cool."*

The visitor had had enough ("I've done my dash;/ You take the cash."), and was farewelled, his clothes dripping wet, to the shouts and scorn of the local lads. It was a harmless piece of Dennis nonsense, and typical of Den to have the city slicker outsmarted by his 'country bumpkin' cousins.¹¹

A Personal Link with a Yarra Glen Resident

Dennis was fortunate, during his period of impoverishment, to make the acquaintance of the Roberts family of Hawthorn and Kallista. In 1913 a friend introduced him to 'Garry' Roberts, his wife and family, and their group of creative friends. They provided the stimulating company (and home cooking) that Den was missing, and he was a frequent guest at both addresses.

John Garabaldi Roberts was manager of the Melbourne Tramway Omnibus Company and had several old tramway buses at 'Sunnyside', his country property. Roberts gave Den a small allowance so he could concentrate on his writing and provided a bus as a bedroom-study for his exclusive use. The writer alternated between his home at Toolangi and his 'bus' at Kallista – between bush solitude and kindred souls.

The Roberts invited many artists, sculptors and book-lovers to spend their weekends at 'Sunnyside', including Mrs Aeneas ('Jeannie') Gunn, of *We of the Never Never* fame, who rode over from Monbulk to join the festivities. They went on bush walks, played charades, gave recitations and enjoyed robust gaiety together.

In November 1913, writing from Toolangi, Dennis told Mrs Roberts: "I regard as one of the happiest and luckiest events in my life the sending of a copy of my book to Mr Roberts, thus paving the way to a more intimate acquaintance with him, and, if I may say it, to a friendship with his family ..."

The family consisted of 'Garry' and Roberta Roberts (Den addressed them as 'Dad' and 'Mother') and their three children Frank, Gwen and Bert. Frank, who was a berry-farmer when Dennis first met him, died in France during WWI. Gwen married Geoff Eastaugh, and with their son David lived on Steels Creek Road, Yarra Glen during the 1950s.

POSTSCRIPT:

Garry Roberts died in 1933. 'Sunnyside' was destroyed by fire 1935. Gwen Eastaugh died 1958.

¹¹ A copy of this poem, signed by C.J.Dennis, was shown to me by Mr Jack Lithgow, licensee of the Grand Hotel, Yarra Glen, in 1976. I was denied permission to copy it, and unaware it had been published 64 years earlier. Today it is available on the Internet.

By 1913 Den was feeling a little sorry for himself. "The loneliness of life in this humpy has never hit me quite so badly before," he wrote to a friend, "and I have to work like crazy to fend off the blues." But work like crazy he did; between 1909 and 1915 the *Bulletin* and *Lone Hand* magazines published a considerable amount of his work, and his popularity amongst readers was steadily increasing. The eccentric Melbourne bookseller E. W. Cole published a selection of this work as a book, *Backblock Ballads and Other Verse*.¹² It was noticeably unsuccessful; Den felt 'just like flat soda-water.'

Dennis's fortunes were soon to change. He submitted all his verses about his 'Sentimental Bloke', the central character in his work published in the *Bulletin*, to Angus & Robertson in Sydney on 23rd March 1915. "The stuff," he wrote, "while not having any considerable literary merit, is, I believe, extremely popular."

Three weeks later Den had signed a publishing contract with Australia's largest publisher and bookseller. His book was published on 14th October with a foreword by Henry Lawson. In the following nine weeks it was reprinted five times!

"This success is becoming monotonous," Den told his publisher, tongue-in-cheek. His success continued – *The Sentimental Bloke* sold over 66,000 copies in less than eighteen months – and he was working on other books to follow. Cashed up, he decided to purchase the mill cottage and the 3½ acres on which it stood between the river and the main road. He outlaid just £22 for it and felt a genuine sense of security for the first time. With the help of local tradesmen, Dennis extended the building and later added a first storey. He married Mrs Olive Price in 1917 and they subsequently changed the name of the property to "Arden".

A poem called "Yarra Glen" written by C. J. Dennis was published in the *Herald* in March 1934.

*Where the Yarra dreams along,
Now in shadow, now in sun,
Murmuring a drowsy song,
Here she rests, the placid one.
Here she rests and takes her ease,
Peaceful home of cattlemen;
Haste and hustle, things like these,
Touch here lightly – Yarra Glen.*

*Easy flow with little care
Flows her rich river-flats
'Mid the lush green grasses where
Roam the milkers and the fats
...
Well content to dream and drift –
Happy rustic, Yarra Glen.*

Contrast this pastoral view of Yarra Glen with the scene that befell the inhabitants at the end of the same year. The record flood of December 1934 was also described in the *Herald* by Dennis, this time in prose:

¹² E. W. Cole owned Cole's Book Arcade in Bourke Street, Melbourne (complete with caged animals and birds). He published many books he wrote himself including the popular *Cole's Funny Picture Book*

...*On Saturday some of us journeyed down to inspect the vast inland sea that covers the Yarra flats; and the elder men, long resident there, said that never before had they seen such, dark, earth-colored waters – "like pea-soup."*

*Certainly thousands, perhaps tens-, perhaps hundreds-of-thousands of acres, say four inches deep, have been filched from the State by the recent deluge – and the loss is irreparable.*¹³

C. J. Dennis died on 22 June 1938, aged 61, at a private hospital in St Kilda Road Melbourne and is buried at Box Hill cemetery. His wife Olive (known as 'Biddy') died in 1968.

Pat & Des Commerford



In the early 1940s a young teacher named Pat Dooley came to the Yarra Glen Primary School. It was not long before one of the young farmers had set eyes on her. Des Commerford lived with his family at Steels Creek and together with his brothers was a leading player for the Yarra Glen Football Club.

Des's great grandfather William Commerford migrated from Ireland to Victoria in 1840 and selected land on the Lilydale side of the Yarra. Some of his sons later had a selection next to the McPhersons on the Christmas Hills side. Des's parents, Michael and Mary Commerford farmed on the Tarrawarra flats (southern side of the river) until they were flooded out in 1934. They moved to 'Springvale' in Dixons Creek for a short period before buying the Steels Creek farm in 1940. As well as Des the family included Jack, Len and Margaret all of whom played active roles in the community.

Des and Pat made their home at Steels Creek on the family property. After Michael died in 1962 the farm was sold and Des and Pat moved to Mooroolbark. They had four children – Sharon, Paul, Majella and Annie and enjoyed their extended family of grandchildren and great grandchildren.

In recent times Pat had been ill and Des was helping to care for her. She passed away on 4 June 2010 and Des suffered a heart attack only three weeks later on 23 June. Both were 84 years old.

¹³ *Herald*, 5 December 1934, p.6